



Donor

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Chapter One

Too many trackers had fallen prey to the Dresdan. Their captives were young females and the victims, males. Few crossed over, while many others died.

Dresdan, an ancient species, damned by their gods and cast out by their creators, were among the deadliest immortals on the planet. The males roamed Earth in search of females who would relinquish their blood upon a moment's notice. A female human donor.

Dresdan were demanding. Death came swiftly to those who opposed them.

Elaina had once been a tracker herself until she made one false move that cost her the job. The betrayal to her organization earned her a death sentence.

Now, she was on the run. From those who might save her and from one who could destroy her. She refused to become a research rat, and she'd never welcomed death before.

"Ellen."

Elaina turned her head in the direction of the door. Her alias still sounded strange to her, even after all this time.

"Do you need any help with cataloguing?" The young intern she supervised stood at the door of the small inventory room and peered over her glasses.

Elaina proceeded to stack books onto a small cart. "No, Bridget, we're done for tonight."

"Okay, well, I'm gone. I have an exam to study for."

Glad to be free of her supervising duties, Elaina breathed a sigh of relief, rolled the cart of books into a narrow hallway, and lined them up next to the others. She'd better call it quits now. A lot of work would await her tomorrow morning.

As an acquisitions manager for a medical university in Seattle Elaina worked after hours many nights. She didn't mind. For at least ten hours every day, a massive collection of books surrounded her. The library itself was a

work of art, the shelves populated with leather bound, hardcover, paperback books and magazines.

It had been her sanctuary for a year and a half. The last place that anybody would expect to find her.

Elaina took the stairs up as others descended them. The library closed an hour ago, but few employees remained to take care of last minute duties. She retrieved her handbag from the locker and threw her wool pea coat across one arm. With keys in hand, she descended the stairs and exited the building.

The chilly night air nipped at her arms and legs. September weather in Seattle suited her tastes. Heck...the consistent, mild temperatures were why she made it a point to remain here. Although the forecast predicted rain for much of this part of the year, she still preferred living on the west coast.

Tossing the coat over her shoulders, she shrugged her arms through the sleeves. The black iron street lamps gleamed on the sidewalk. Her heels echoed into the night as they hit the asphalt. Gusty winds blew against her exposed face, lifting the hair off her shoulders. She pulled the wool tighter around her midsection and ducked her chin below the collar.

Elaina missed talking to family and friends. She regretted the distance she kept from her past life. It had been ten years since she'd last contacted her parents. Ten years ago, she had signed her life away to the one organization she thought could be trusted. She was wrong. District 5's management had become corrupted, and they murdered more humans than they'd pledged to save. By the time she found out the truth behind the organization's mission, it was too late. No out clause existed in the employment contract. You lived by the mission and died standing up for it.

She reached the parking garage and took the elevator up to the third level. Desolate. Many students had vacated the campus hours ago. Only a few cars remained, scattered about.

Another gust of wind whipped at her ankles. A loud thump followed by a faint rustle rebounded against the thick stone walls.

She froze. As she drew in a sharp breath, her skin tightened in alarm. She listened carefully. Cars whizzed by on the streets below. The quick rhythm of her heart beat against her breastbone.

Exhaling, she continued at a snail's pace. Clutching the handbag to her chest, she withdrew a small can of mace.

Elaina was tired of this. The hiding and the running. She wanted to live her life in peace, not with the fear that someone tracked her.

She picked up the pace, rushing to her destination. Safety was just a dozen feet beyond her in her Tahoe.

Another sound halted her in her pursuit, once again. This one was faint, distant, and as soft as a pebble drop. She spun on her heels, eyes darting around the dimly lit garage for the source of it. Parked cars cast shadows on the cement walls. She took cautious steps backward, keeping her eye on the path and shooting glances over her shoulder. Almost there. Turning back to face forward, she saw nothing. Only the lights beaming on the interior of the parking garage.

Maybe she had gone crazy. No one followed her.

Tucking the mace back into her purse, she swung around.

A statue—a large male blocked her path.

Her breath tripped in her throat. *Oh, shit.* Had the District finally caught up to her?

Her eyes leveled with the lower portion of his chest. Before she could raise her gaze higher to identify her stalker, he reached for her. He grasped her by the waist and lifted her off her feet. She opened her mouth to scream, but a gloved hand clasped over her lips.

He'd strangle her here if she let him.

Elaina kicked her feet—connected sharp-heeled pumps to her captor's shins. She might as well have been fighting with a sumo wrestler. His grip was firm. Her cries were muffled by his grainy leather glove and she focused on wriggling out of his grasp. No mistaking what he was now. The spicy ancient aroma gave him away.

Dresdan.

She should've been able to identify him long ago, but her tracker skills had slowly diminished over the past year. Without the drug, she was useless to the District and an easy victim to the Dresdan. Who knew this would be the day she would become prey?

Her captor lugged her around the parking garage and then stopped. Maybe he'd picked somewhere in concealment to drain the life force from her body. He lowered her heels to the pavement and his massive frame pushed her back into the metal pole behind her. The hard beam felt alien digging against her spine. Her eyes turned left and right looking for a savior. Someone. *Anyone*. Still, he pressed his palm to her mouth, preventing her speech.

Elaina strained to peer up at him, but the height of her captor prevented this. Only the black shirt stretched over his taut chest muscles was in her line of sight. He bent down farther, so close that his chin touched her forehead.

Oh, my God. She would die. Tonight.

"When I let my hand up, you keep your trap shut," her captor hissed into the side of her face.

She sucked in another breath and clasped her fingers onto the chilly metal behind her. Her heart drummed like the consistent cadence of a marching band.

"You got that?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and nodded her head.

"You scream...we'll both be executed."

His harsh warning tone frightened her, but she bounced her head in agreement once again.

Executed? Those were the only words that registered. So, they had come to kill her...

He straightened his posture and slowly lifted his hand from her mouth. She parted her lips, taking a gulp of fresh air. It burned her lungs as she recovered from lack of oxygen. Gradually, she lifted her chin, then her eyes to identify the brute. Red glowing orbs glared down at her. The rest of his face—a black shadow in the night.

On her next exhale, she released a belated scream.

Chapter Two

The high-pitched scream wrenched from Elaina's throat and echoed through the atmosphere. His hand clamped over her lips, this time with more force.

It was over for her. She had no chance of escape. Should she even try? Once a Dresdan got hold of something, anyone could bet on destruction and death. Always in that order.

He hoisted her up against his side and carried her like a log, darting between cars. She kicked her legs back and forth and managed to hook a heel to his ass. He never flinched. Just kept trudging while she thrashed around like a buck wild cat.

Maybe she only egged him on. After all, Dresdan savored resistance from their prey. They toyed with their snacks and meals before killing them. Captured, caged, and taunted them. Her blood boiled in her veins. The adrenaline running through her system served as a triple serving of dessert to them.

He stopped, turned her quickly away from him, and positioned her face to look in the window of a car.

"Is this your vehicle?" His voice was a forced whisper.

The bastard! He'd circled back to her Chevy Tahoe. He would drain her blood in there.

In the front of the SUV, she glimpsed a newspaper and a stack of books. A semi-automatic handgun lay hidden under the seat. This would be the first time she'd ever have to use it. Maybe if she got to it—

He shoved his hardened groin into her ass. "Is it?"

A jolt of pleasure swirled in her stomach. Confused at her body's choice of sensation, she nodded.

He brought his free hand around, producing her keys. Somehow, her captor must have snatched them from her. She couldn't remember anything, just the struggle she put up to break free. Of course, it was all in vain.

Opening the front door, he held her body against the car with his own. He used the controls on the inside frame to unlock the others, then led her to the back of the Tahoe.

Shit! She needed to get that gun so she could blow his brains out.

Commotion came from the other side of the parking garage and their heads whipped in the direction. Something headed their way. Hope tingled in her belly. *Thank God!* Maybe someone would see her being attacked. She took a deep breath, and tried to build up enough courage to fight off her captor so she could alert these people of her dilemma.

Dark figures moved about casting shadows against the concrete. Two of them.

“You hear that?” He hissed into the back of her hair. “They’ve come to kill you. Do you want to cross over this night?”

This brute is crazy. If two men were trying to kill her and he knew it, then why the fuck would he hold her hostage?

When she didn’t answer, he continued, “Get in the *damn* vehicle. Don’t make a peep.”

There was no time to accept or reject his demands. Feet shuffled and voices of the two men approached. He shoved her onto the back floor of the SUV and came down over her. Elaina had never felt more claustrophobic in her own space before.

Blazing red eyes burned into her gaze. He pressed his pointer finger to his lips and shook his head.

Strange. His hard dick pressed into her stomach, and that was all she thought about. It awakened a sexual urge that she thought had dissipated.

Her captor’s head snapped up as footsteps pounded outside on the pavement. While her heartbeat quickened, he remained still and calm.

The men’s hushed voices echoed throughout the garage, just beyond the SUV.

“You sure she was spotted here?”

Her heart skipped a beat. Were they talking about her?

“There was a positive ID on her around the campus.” They spoke in harsh tones. “Let’s move forward to the grounds.”

The men moved on until it seemed that there were no signs of their voices or presence nearby.

Elaina exhaled and looked at her captor. "What do you want from me?"

Fire eyes slowly turned on her, but the Dresdan didn't let her up. He lifted his hand and brushed sweat-dampened hair from her forehead.

She shrank back, confused at this stranger's actions. He stroked his fingers through her strands as if he admired her, had known her.

"Elaina." Her name rolled off his tongue like magic.

She gasped. She knew this voice. It couldn't be. No. Wasn't he dead? Executed. *Extinct*.

Glowing ruby eyes vanquished, turned to deep hazel. She knew them.

She had to be dreaming. This could not be possible, but past memories of those eyes matched this one.

"Vicq." She'd missed him.

"*Mi amor*." He bent his head as she glided her hands across the nape of his neck.

Delicately at first, he settled his mouth onto hers. Her fingers tangled with his hair and his firm lips molded desperately to hers. She parted her lips, inviting his tongue to tangle with her own. The taste of him was not forgotten. Delicious. Sweet. Comforting. It had been so long since she'd been embraced like this.

The dormant spark awakened in her torso and loins. It consumed all of her. Her body temperature escalated as he shoved his hand under her coat and smoothed it down her thigh. His fingers gripped her flesh, kneading the tension away.

Their lips fused and tongues flirted together while her memories flooded back to the day when Vicq lured her into his bed. She'd watched him for weeks, her very first target—the Dresdans' second in command. Her first mission, if it had been completed would've certified her induction into District 5. She'd disobeyed every rule. Had gotten to know Vicq too much. Stalled the agenda. Developed feelings for him...and failed her mission.

Even now he captivated her and made her forget why she left him in the first place. Elaina backed away from the kiss to gaze into his eyes again. Just to make sure that this was real...that she wasn't dreaming.

Vicq pressed a kiss into her forehead. "You've been thinking about me? You kept your memories all this time, *mi amor*."

He'd delved into her thoughts. For the strongest Dresdan, blood wasn't the only thing they used to know an ally or an enemy. The essence from a kiss, fear, and arousal had been used by Vicq to enter her mind many times before.

Her palms molded to a firm, solid chest, and confirmed that he was real. There was just enough light to admire his smooth olive complexion, and she ran a few fingers against the side of his face.

"Why are you here, Vicq?"

"I have protected you from the shadows too long, Elaina." He licked his lips, the way he always used to do when he craved her blood. "They're getting closer and closer to finding you. Your life is in danger. You'll come with me now."

Chapter Three

Elaina propped herself up on her elbows. This did not prove to be an easy task with the weight of a body builder on top of her.

Vicq helped her up and peered through the windows around the garage. His nostrils flared and his breath fogged the glass. "They're headed toward the main campus. Can you crawl into the driver seat?"

She nodded and shimmied herself to the front using the arm rest for support. "How much time do I have?"

Vicq climbed into the passenger seat next to her. "Your time ran out when you made that call to you parents' house last week."

Elaina's eyes widened. *How had he known?*

"I never left you unprotected. You thought my kind was hell bent on murdering the helpless? Look at the organization in which you entrusted your life. They won't stop until you're dead. You know this."

She had too much mental and physical knowledge about the inside workings of District 5. If she hadn't fled the home base over a year ago and paid for a new identity, she would've still been under their commands. Either that or in a research chamber. "There aren't many places you can hide from the District. They're everywhere."

"Well, they've found you, and we need to leave."

Certainly, he doesn't mean now. "When?"

"*Now.*" He turned and dug into the pocket of his trench coat.

"Th-that's impossible." She eyed him, her hands gripping the steering wheel. "I need clothes, and I have to make sure things are in order before I leave."

"What's wrong with the clothes on your back?"

Elaina huffed. "I change panties often, you know. I can't just ride around with you wearing the same clothes every day."

She couldn't leave solid evidence behind about the District's future research plans either. She needed this physical proof or no one would ever believe a word of it.

“We’ll pass some retail shops on the way to West Virginia. We can get what you need as we go.”

“What the fuck? West Virginia?”

“I have a coven there where you will be safe.”

“It’ll take days to get there and you expect me to just up and leave without my stuff?”

His lips set in a grim line and red sparks flickered around his irises. “We don’t have time for it. If they don’t already know where you live, they’ll soon find out.”

“No one knows my exact address. I phoned my parents from a pay phone miles outside of campus.” Elaina couldn’t stand the loneliness anymore. She had only wanted to hear their voices. All she had gotten was an answering machine, but that had been good enough.

Vicq eyed her suspiciously.

“Please, Vicq. There’s something there that I need to get.”

He unfolded his palm and produced her keys. “Let’s go. Get what you need. One bag, then we get the fuck out of town.”

* * * *

Vicq had always had a soft spot for Elaina. Always gave her what she wanted the moment she asked. He’d never loved anyone so much as he did her. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for her.

The drive to her home wasn’t far, but her brain worked overtime with a deluge of questions. Vicq caught glimpses of anguish and frustration, but she worked even harder to keep her thoughts hidden from him. She had always been very smart and strong for a human. The fact that she could bury her thoughts by not thinking about anything at all but the highway ahead stunned him.

The very first day he’d met her, he’d been infatuated with the minute details that made up Elaina. Her beauty would forever remain with him as precious memories. A soft brown curl draped over her forehead. Her hair swept below the nape of her neck, falling over her shoulders. Long eyelashes

tapped the top of her toffee cheeks as she pretended to focus on the highway while trying to mask other thoughts from him.

She'd become sheltered while in hiding. Those times when he sensed she needed someone to talk to the most had also been the roughest times for him. How did one reach out to someone when doing so would only put that person in grave danger?

He'd wanted to come out from the shadows many times and reveal himself, but knew they would never be able to live in peace. When she'd attempted to contact her parents, she'd blown her cover. He had no choice but to come to her aid.

"Have you eaten?" he asked as she bit at the tips of her fingernails. She only did that when she was nervous, in trouble. Since he'd met her, she'd been in a whole lot of it.

"Two hours ago. Yes." She gave him a quick glance. "Why? Are you going to feed me?"

Her quick remarks and saucy temper had never left her. He grinned. "If that is what you need, I'd be willing to supply."

A weary glance back at the road told him she worried. He had to get them far away from this town before it was too late.

"If you found me so easily, Vicq, it will be a matter of time before the other trackers do."

"I never left you."

Her eyes etched with confusion. "Then why lead me to believe that you were dead?"

He'd hidden himself from her just as she hid herself from District 5. Over the years, he'd learned to feed just enough to gain energy, but not so much that her tracker nose could detect his aroma. "If you'd known I was alive, what would you have done?"

Elaina turned away, her gaze focused on the highway. "I would've wanted to see you."

"Exactly. They think I'm extinct. The District hunts me without knowing I was once a prime target."

Elaina took the ramp onto the bridge leading to Portage Bay. The glistening waters beat gently against the shoreline where a few boats had docked for the night.

“What about the other Dresdan? Are you still hunted by them?”

“They don’t know I exist either.”

“How do you manage that?”

Vicq grinned. “There’s a coven in West Virginia called the Outcasts. We denounced the Dresdan leadership, but one of our main goals remains to expose District Five.”

“I suppose this coven is kept secret from the others.”

Vicq nodded. He regretted that the coven was not yet equal in size and strength to the current Dresdan population, but with time and proper strategy, it would only be a matter of time before the majority converted willingly. Those who weren’t converted still believed that attacking humans ensured survival. The coven of outcasts had proven this theory was ludicrous. Targeting humans only brought unwanted attention to their existence.

“Then who leads the Outcasts?”

“I do.”

* * * *

Elaina stashed her keys in her handbag and maneuvered around the parking rows of cars leading out to her home. Vicq followed closely behind. No wonder he’d caught her that fateful day two years ago when she planned to kill him. He moved around like a cat, silent as his boots barely grazed the gravel.

“Remember when you told me you were eighteen before you could swim?” He laughed under his breath. “I never thought you would choose to live on a houseboat.”

What a sheltered teen she had been. Her parents had never allowed her luxuries and freedom like her classmates. When she was old enough to move out, she’d made the drastic decision that held her in this predicament. They’d

always taught her that her upbringing as a child would mold her into the adult she'd become in the future. They were right. However, this future wasn't what they had in mind.

She grinned. "Becoming part of District Five is like joining the Marines. They push your ass in the deep end of the pool. If you want to live, you learn to swim—*immediately*."

"You've managed quite well on your own for the past year. I had to keep in mind that you were once my tracker and to keep a certain distance from you. You had a great nose, even before they started injecting you with their drugs."

"I always had the feeling I was being watched. Ironically, I thought it was the District."

The full moon reflected off the river, creating an eerie silver gleam. As they neared the dock leading to the row of houseboats, short bursts of wind brushed the water, causing ripples to form at the surface. As always, no one greeted her when she crossed the threshold into her home. Aside from the maintenance crew that came to do repairs every quarter, no one had ever been invited inside. Vicq would be the first.

Elaina had always leaned toward cozy, small living spaces rather than large mansions. Many of her ex colleagues at District 5 had earned their stripes in no time and moved on to live extravagantly and without worries by day. At night, when they were given their assignments, they took on a different persona. Being alive the next day was never promised. She had chosen to live well below her means. A rented room on the highest floor of a condominium had been her sanctuary.

The houseboat she now called home was smaller than most efficiency apartments. She didn't require much, only a place to sleep, eat, and clean. This place allowed her to do all of that.

Vicq picked up a leather bound book, held it in his palm, and thumbed through it. His gaze roamed over the interior of her living space. "Why do you bring your work home with you?"

"I don't bring work home." Elaina knelt to pull several duffle bags from under the bunk bed. "These are my own personal books. I've read most of them."

"Why do you hoard so many?" He stalked across her room and peered out the small window over the kitchen sink. "Seems that if you've read most of them, they wouldn't be collecting *dust* in your home. Why not donate them to your library? You were always stingy, you know." He chuckled.

Elaina feigned a laugh. "Fuck you." She lined up each duffle bag and began to unzip them one by one. What did he know anyway? She only kept books that she planned to read again.

Vicq's breath swept the back of her ear and she tensed. He nuzzled her, holding his moistened lips to her heated skin. "Is that what you need, *mi amor*? We can arrange this."

She swept her eyes closed and parted her lips. Vicq's fingers gripped the expanse of her hips and he nudged his nose against her vein, inhaling deeply. The insides of her thighs grew warm from her heated arousal. Her pussy clenched at the thought of his cock, smooth like leather and hard as steel, thrusting into her wet sheath.

She bit her bottom lip, squeezed her eyes tighter, and tried to rid herself of the image. The hand that grabbed her waist glided downward until his fingers slipped past the waistband of her jeans. He stroked her mound with hot, roving fingers, and she cursed silently. She couldn't deny that she wanted this, wanted him, even if it killed her.

His fingers slid between her wet slit and found her bud of pleasure. Elaina hissed as he stroked and flicked gently over her clit. Fear and tension were replaced with lust as she arched her back to press her ass to his cock.

"You see, Elaina, I can give you whatever it is you need." He smoothed his cheek against her hair.

This was why it was too lethal to be with him. District 5 research proved that the Dresdan male could seduce any female with the potent pull they had on one's body and soul. His kind thrived because of these traits. They had no problems enticing a potential meal into a dark alley or abandoned building. They feasted on the weak and helpless to live. Some overindulged and killed

their prey by draining them of life. It didn't help Elaina that she'd given her blood to him.

Once she'd let him inside her mind through the blood, it was compromised forever. She'd become his donor. Her blood, his addiction.

He teased her clit with fingers until she craved an ending to the torture—her release. She wanted it so much...but at what price?

Her eyes flew open, and she pulled from his grasp. "No, I don't need a quick fuck."

He laughed under his breath. "You have me mistaken with someone else. I have always taken you long and hard."

A sharp tingle raced up her spine and her knees grew weak. She couldn't concentrate on this escape if she thought about what he could do to release the sexual tension throbbing throughout her body. Elaina shook the vision of sex with Vicq from her head. "Make yourself useful." She started toward the tall, wicker chest on the other side of the room. "Help me dump my clothes into these bags."

Vicq caught her forearm and pulled the duffle bags from her grip. "I said *one* bag. Pack five days' worth of clothes—that is all."

"That would be two bags." Not surprised by his stubbornness, Elaina jerked away with her bags. "My shoes go in their own bag."

"Fine! Pack it in two and let's be on our way."

She glanced over her shoulder and rolled her eyes at him. "Besides, if we part ways, I'll need more than five days."

He moved behind her before she got the complete sentence out. "What do you mean...part ways?"

"If they catch up to us, I want you to leave me."

"What? I came to you for a reason. I'm not leaving you anywhere."

His eyes changed to a deep red, a sign of his aggression—his nature as a killer. How could she even think of him in that way? Elaina couldn't meet his gaze anymore, so she looked away. "They'll kill you, Vicq. They only want to study me."

"You'd let them?"

"To save you, yes." She sighed. "If I give them what they want, I'll have a chance to live."

"What do they want?"

"The blood in my veins, Vicq." She turned and searched his swirling red eyes. "Part of District Five's research is to create a human with superior abilities much like yours. They've tried mixing the blood before, but the results were futile. The agent in the Dresdan blood never lasted long enough in the human to complete the tests. It has lasted longer in me."

"How do you know?"

Elaina bit her bottom lip. "I know, Vicq. I've sensed you with me every day." She looked down at the patterns on the area rug. "That's probably why they're still looking for me after two years have passed."

"That could've been because I was near you, watching you."

"No, Vicq." She shook her head. "You infected me with your blood, but not enough to change me."

"So, this is your plan to go back? To your *mafia organization* so they can study you? Is that your choice?"

"There is no other option. I bear the mark of a tracker. Even if another Dresdan found me, they'd kill me." Elaina swallowed the fear rising in her throat. "I can't stand to think of what will happen to you if you are caught."

District 5 followed a set of procedures she knew all too well...

Capture. Torture. Observe. Execute. Salvage. The mission ensured depletion of the Dresdan...and the enhancement of the human race.

Vicq grabbed her hand and snatched her to his body. He circled around to stand behind her. Her back pressed up against his chest. His hand brushed the hair away from the nape of her neck. He breathed cold and heavy against the top of her spine.

She knew it was there, emblazoned into her flesh, the mark... *The five*.

The palm of his hands smoothed down her bare arms. His fingers, cold at the tips, soothed her heated skin. The edge of his nose nudged the sensitive area behind her ear. His lips grazed the cartilage.

"There is an option."

Yes, she knew about that option, the one that would turn her completely...into the undead. It was why they hunted her in the first place. She'd given up the protection of District 5 to save the one man she couldn't live without. If they aided each other now...if she took the Dresden bite, they would both be hunted for eternity.

"I don't think I can stand being Dresden." She didn't want to be hunted anymore. Why not just give District Five what they wanted? Maybe, just maybe—

"What is it about me that disgusts you?"

"You exist off humans."

"You forget some of us are not human killers." His breath blew against her hair. "Have you forgotten about your Vicq? Who I am?"

"Only a small percentage leave humans alone, so what have you been feeding on these past years?"

"Not the weak and helpless, but perhaps the unruly and murderous. I feed to stay alive, as my promise to you. Do you forget?"

Crossing over to join his new Dresden coven couldn't be the only answer, but it was the only way she could be with him. "Once the bite is delivered, there is no guarantee that I will live through the change."

"You will live. Didn't you already say it? My blood lives within you. Even your mafia knows it now."

They'd found her the night of Vicq's attack, aiding him. The sniper had missed her heart and the poisonous arrow pierced her shoulder. She would've been dead within hours had Vicq not been by her side.

"They are not the mafia! There is a mission, Vicq. It is to ensure human survival. Scientists estimate that if we don't do what we can to preserve the human race, then we can become extinct, just as dinosaurs and so many other species have." She shrugged from his grasp. "You think I will accept your bite and become reliant on human blood as my only food source?"

"Once we are bound and you are turned, you will only require my blood."

"Liar! Their research shows that you need human blood to stay healthy and strong!"

“They misunderstand us. Some of us, anyway.”

Vicq swallowed, the red disappeared from his eyes, and normal color returned. Elaina didn’t need to ask him if she’d offended him. The pain in his expression explained it all. She slid her palm up the side of his face. “Vicq, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you a liar.”

He shrugged. “I deserve it. I promised that I could keep you safe and now you’re in even more trouble.”

“No, I’m not your responsibility.” She kissed the dimple that riddled one of his cheeks. “You’ve never seemed to understand that I gave my life to District Five when I signed up.”

“No...”

His head dipped low so that their lips leveled with each other’s. Butterflies swooped low in her belly as Vicq took her into his arms. He beckoned her lips open and meshed his tongue with hers. Passion ignited in her chest and she forgot everything, even the fact that her life was in danger. Time floated just above them as Elaina let her needs overcome her doubts. They delved deeper into the kiss. This was peace, and she wanted this feeling forever. It was too late to shut her thoughts off from him now. She’d left her mind open too long, and he might have already seen her vision.

A hard thud resounded on the roof.

They tore apart from the kiss.

Shock lodged in Elaina’s throat.

Running footsteps pounded the dock just beyond her door.

Vicq jerked her to the furthest corner of the room just as a spray of bullets shot down from the roof.

“Fuck!” Elaina rushed forward. Her pistol lay just beyond reach, if she could make it—

“What are you doing?” Vicq yelled over the thumping at the door. He kept a heavy grip on her arm. He scooped up her bathtub with one arm and held it vertical to the floor.

The door rattled violently as the would-be intruders tried to jimmy it loose. Bullets continued to penetrate from above, and one ricocheted off the porcelain tub, piercing his side.

“Argh...fuck!” He flinched slightly, but held a steady grip on the bathtub. “Hide here.”

“Vicq...” She reached out to his wound, but the padlocks on the door faltered as the attackers barreled it down.

“Now!” He pleaded with bloodshot eyes.

Elaina knelt on the floor on her hands and knees, and the tub descended over her.

“Don’t get out until I tell you!” Vicq spoke with fangs dropped in full attack mood.

She sensed his rage. Her own blood rushed through her veins in panic. Was it the frantic heartbeat against her ear drums or the loud pumping of bullets that wracked her nerves the most? Both. She’d given up on that life because of this.

There was no way in hell she would emerge from under the tub. It wasn’t because she didn’t want to bust a cap in the ass of the tracker who dared encroach on her home. It was because the damn thing would be too heavy to lift.

Vicq roared in fury at the same time the door crashed to the floor.

Chapter Four

Fresh blood.

Metallic fumes steamed out from the enemy's pores as the adrenaline ran through their veins. The aura floated up his nostrils and between his slightly parted lips.

Vicq inhaled deeply as his empty stomach clenched and taste buds swelled. Four hearts pulsed at a frenzied pace. One tracker noisily climbed down from the rooftops to meet the other two at the entrance. Their eyes focused in the dark behind their night vision goggles. The last heartbeat belonged to the woman he'd pledged to protect.

"Why, hello." Vicq grinned as their gazes darted toward the corner of the room where he stood. "You never even gave me a chance to open the door."

"Dresdan!" The tracker shouted his warning to the others.

They lifted their revolvers. Aimed. Fired.

Vicq teleported from one side of the room to the other as the bullets tore through everything that couldn't move from its path. Dishes shattered and crashed. Metal tore through the walls. A large jug of water on the countertop burst open and spilled onto the tiles. A bookshelf toppled over, sending her books in a heap on the floor. All that ruckus just to shoot one vampire. *How amateurish.*

It confused him that the District would open fire among civilians. Then again, they were always sloppy in their execution.

They would have to stop and reload soon. *Oh, yes.* One of these motherfuckers would pay for the bullet still lodged in his gut.

Vicq stood on the outside of the door. "Are we done yet?"

The trackers swung around toward the direction of his voice, frantically reloading their weapons.

He rushed one of them and grabbed him by the throat, lifting his feet off the ground. The redhead's eyes threatened to burst from his sockets and he opened fire.

Several more bullets joined the one already in Vicq's side. Blood leaked from his midsection and his cells worked to dispel the bullets and close the

wound. Vicq clutched his fingers tighter around the shooter's larynx. His neck snapped and his head lolled forward. He tossed the near lifeless body over the rails behind him into the dark, murky waters below.

Vicq stepped over the threshold into the home again. "Anyone else care for a swim?"

The lights flickered, dimmed, and then went out. He lunged at the men and jerked one of their weapons by the barrel of the gun. The shots fired missed his toes by a hair. He tossed the pistol across the room where it skidded out of reach.

He positioned the shivering male's body in front of his own and glared at the other, who pointed the gun toward them. "Go ahead. Pump him with bullets. He'll die tonight anyway."

"Where is she?" The gunman's finger shook on the trigger.

"Why should this concern you?" Vicq squeezed the back of his captive's head for a firmer grip.

"Shoot him," the captive yelled through clenched teeth.

"I can't!" The gunman leveled his pistol, and then shook his head in frustration. "I don't have a clear shot!"

"Pitiful." Vicq laughed. "You have ten seconds to tell me who sent you." He clawed the captive's neck with a fingernail.

A scream curdled in the man's throat as the blood dripped down Vicq's fingers. "Shoot him, you idiot!" The captive writhed beneath his grasp.

Vicq bent his head, eyeing the gushing blood and the open passage in the man's neck. "Lots of memories reside in the blood, you know. I can take information willingly"—his eyes shot to the gunman—"or unwillingly.

The gunman began to back away and leveled his pistol again. "I'm sorry, John. I can't let him do that." He blinked and exhaled deeply. "You know the rules."

The gunman opened fire.

The captive never got what would have been his last words past his lips. *No.*

The bastard killed his colleague as protocol to keep his memories hidden. *How clever. How stupid.*

The shooter turned and high-tailed it down the docks.

Vicq allowed the lifeless body to drop from his hand to the ground. He teleported in front of the escaping gunman, and stopped him in his haste. After grabbing him, he carried the struggling male back to the cabin.

Vicq bashed the human male's head against the wall. "That was a dirty thing you did, *traidor*. You killed your partner in crime."

"Vicq!"

His head jerked to the tub where Elaina hid.

The traitor jerked his head in the direction as well, but Vicq grabbed the tracker's chin, forcing his face forward so he could stare into the human's fright-filled eyes.

"Please. They only want her. Just hand her over and you are free to go."

"You're telling me what I am free to do?" Vicq laughed. "*Idiota*. What do they want with her?"

"We know about her infection." The male held up his hands. "Please. We only need one good specimen and then they have plans to leave you vampires alone."

"*Mentiroso!*" He shook the male hard. "You lie! What will they do with her after they have the specimen?"

"K-keep her. What do you care? You need human blood. She is no use to you now."

The human's heart beat in panic. His breath labored and his body quivered. District 5 had come for her. Probably knew all along that her blood brewed with the vampire agent. Now that they knew where to find her, they'd be back, but he wasn't going to give them the head start they needed.

The human's eyes widened in realization only moments before Vicq's teeth sank into the thick jugular pulsing with life. He feasted on the human's blood. The memories of his meal repulsed him. District 5 was a grimy organization, now hiring scum of the earth to do their dirty work. This man, a rapist, would die tonight.

Before the criminal's last breath exited his body, Vicq extracted his fangs. The body slumped over. His eyelids fell shut. The pulse within the neck ceased.

“Get me from under here!” The little tiny voice belonged to Elaina.

He raised the tub from over her with his mind. “Grab your shit. Let’s go!”

Vicq didn’t have to tell her twice. Elaina’s gaze swept over the home only once before she grabbed the duffle bags and stuffed them with her things.

He tossed the bodies into the river while she worked. Some of her neighbors peeked outside with terror in their eyes, cell phones gripped in their palms. It would only be a matter of time before the cops swarmed this place.

“We gotta go.” Elaina darted past him with her bags in tow.

They rushed from the houseboat, never looking back.

Chapter Five

The sirens blared from all directions as they threw her baggage in the backseat of the Tahoe. They made haste to the main highway away from the authorities.

Elaina would never be able to return to the houseboat. The evidence would be at the bottom of the lake before the police got to it, but wouldn't take long for the bodies to float to the surface and be discovered later. Then she'd be wanted for questioning...or murder. On second thought, it might never get to that stage. District 5 had their way of covering up the mess they made. Their involvement would never make it to national headlines. That included paying off investigators with inside connections to ensure evidence and files were promptly destroyed, putting Elaina back at square one...hunted by the District.

Minutes passed before her pulse slowed and her erratic breathing subsided. "I'm running on a quarter tank of gas. We'll need to stop." Elaina glanced into her rearview mirror and saw nothing but darkness. People were in their beds sleeping, like she should have been.

"How long should that last us? An hour?"

She nodded. "We'll need to get rid of the Tahoe soon."

Vicq slipped his hand into the inside of his trench coat. "Yes, but keep driving."

Elaina turned her head just in time to see the painful flinch etched on his face. "You're still hurt?" The SUV swerved off the road as she focused on him.

"Watch the road. You're driving."

"You need more blood, don't you?" Her fingers gripped the steering wheel tighter. She'd stop and feed him if she had to. "The bullet's lodged inside, isn't it?"

"Elaina, just drive." Vicq's fingers dug into the seat. "I can endure at least an hour until we reach cover."

"No, you can't. I'm gonna stop at the next rest stop." She looked ahead in the darkness at the interstate signs. "You could catch infection—"

“Go thirty more miles. We’ll ditch the SUV and catch a trucker to a hotel.”

Dresdan were difficult to kill. Just like humans, only with more effort, they could be destroyed one of two ways—shoot ‘em in the head or a major artery. One ensured instant death. The other was slow torture, draining whatever life force they had from their veins.

“Look at you, Vicq. Why don’t you just go there and tell me where to meet you. I will follow. I promise.”

“I’m not leaving you!”

His lips were set in a grim line against his teeth. There was no mistaking he was in pain. The familiar smell of singed vampire flesh filled her nostrils with each breath.

After tugging on her seatbelt, Elaina pressed the gas pedal harder and kept her eyes on the dark path.

“You’re trying to get yourself killed one way or the other, aren’t you?”

“I should’ve been dead a year and a half ago, Vicq.”

He chuckled. “I’m trying to keep you alive.”

“You won’t succeed if you become a dead vampire carcass in my passenger seat.”

The grin disappeared from Vicq’s face. “Just drive and don’t stop until you see the eighty-ninth mile marker.”

An extinct Dresdan was what she thought Vicq had become. Was he so invincible that he could escape death, once, twice...three times?

“How is it that you’re still alive? I thought the other Dresdan found out you’d deserted your responsibilities and ordered your execution.”

Vicq leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “The execution failed. My master sentenced me to starvation and exposure to the sun. They estimated it would have taken three weeks to get rid of me. One day for every decade since I was created.”

“So, they wanted you to burn slowly under the sun?” Elaina cringed as a visual came to her of the District’s use of UV rays to interrogate captured Dresdan.

He nodded. "They fed from me, draining me just enough to subdue my energy, but they didn't take into account that a male victim held for blood would untie my shackles."

"A human untied you?"

"The cells were so overrun, they had nowhere to put them all. They could have also thrown him in to taunt me. He was a clever human. He'd made a key from a piece of scrapped wire. Instead of using it to unlock the prison doors, he unlocked my shackles." Vicq rubbed his wrists as if he were still bound by chains. He chuckled. "I guess he knew he could break free, but wouldn't get very far. He needed help and so did I."

"If you escaped together, then how did you get the Dresden to believe you had burned to death?"

Vicq lowered his head to gaze at her. "He was a clever human, but he is an even wiser vampire."

Elaina gasped. "You turned him!"

He shook his head. "It wasn't that easy getting out of the prison. He was bitten by the time we made it through the gates. We had to kill a few more guards to escape. Like you, he survived the vampire infection, but it wasn't enough to turn him."

"Why do they think you're extinct?"

"We set fire to one of the Dresden on duty, shoved him in the cell, and escaped disguised as guards."

They'd fooled the Dresden leaders to escape.

"The male victim who helped me escape had a price."

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "What was it?"

"That one day we would infiltrate District Five research labs in search of his twin sister."

"Did you?"

"The perimeters are heavily guarded. Their lasers are engineered to detect our movement, even when invisible. The only way to get in is to have inside knowledge about how they operate. We've been in contact with others like you willing to help us, but they are always discovered and murdered."

"So, you need more help?"

“Yes. More importantly...the evidence.”

Elaina swallowed, thinking back to the contents of her bag. “I might be able to help with that.”

* * * *

The rest stop sign couldn't have come soon enough. With Vicq fidgeting on the passenger seat and the blood slowly leaking from his ruptured side, it was enough to send her stress level soaring. He needed more blood than what he'd taken from the tracker back at the houseboat to heal. It would've been easier for him to teleport to his coven to recuperate, but he'd always been one stubborn Dresden.

Less than a half hour after Vicq busted the tires on the Tahoe to make it appear as if they had encountered a flat tire, three truckers passed them before one stopped to answer their hitchhikers sign. The trucker, a big burly man with a Santa beard, was too friendly, asking too many questions. Elaina let Vicq do the talking. He'd always been a smooth talker.

The trucker dropped them off at a quaint bed and breakfast miles from the interstate. Vicq wiped the trucker's memory clean and sent him off with sizable chunk of cash, and they checked into a room with no problems.

Elaina hadn't eaten since lunch and the complimentary popcorn and chilled bottled water waiting on the kitchenette counter had her stomach grumbling. Vicq made a show of checking the outside perimeter before retrieving a steak knife from one of the drawers. His tanned skin had turned a murky gray, indicating his blood levels were low. He should have been healed by now, but his body simply didn't have the energy needed to purge the bullet.

Vicq took the knife with him to the bathroom where he discarded his shirt. Darkened older blood curdled around the wound, but the bright blackened liquid still leaked from the injury.

“Did you get hit in the artery?” Certainly the bullet hadn't gone that far...

"No, close. My body's too weak to purge this last bullet." He poised the knife over the wound. "It needs to come out."

Elaina grimaced and turned her head. She'd seen injuries like these before, but the self-inflicted cut he prepared to make in his gut sent her stomach rolling in revulsion. How many more bullets would he take for her?

The bullet clanked and bounced against the tile floor just before landing near the shower. Vicq pressed a towel to the wound and dropped the bloody knife on the counter next to them.

"I need to sleep." His eyes fluttered closed and he rested the back of his head on the wall.

He's lost too much blood.

"Vicq" Elaina fell to her knees and attempted to pull the blood-soaked towel from his middle. "When will it stop?"

"I just need to rest." He cupped his hand over hers. "Keep pressure to it."

Panic shot through her veins, as his hands went still over hers. She rose to her feet and shook him. "Vicq!"

He reached up to grab her waist and lowered her to straddle his thighs. His eyes opened. The deep hazel had turned pale. "Elaina." His colorless lips stretched across his teeth in a forced smile. "You know how this works already." His fingers caressed the back of her neck and she brought her forehead down to meet his cold, clammy one.

"Sometimes you sleep and I never know when you'll wake again." Dresdan slumbered to regain strength in the absence of blood, but they didn't rise and shine like humans. When they willed themselves to sleep to recover, it sometimes took days before they rose again.

He chuckled. "Are you referring to that time when you left me in slumber after I saved you from your traitorous posse?"

She smiled. "Yes, I thought you'd left me alone. If I hadn't come back to check on you, you might never have risen."

"See, that's all there is to it. Just kiss me and I promise I'll rise." His lips brushed softly against hers. She parted her own in invitation and their lips meshed together. Pressing her fingers to his bare chest, she reveled at the

sweet taste of him. He thrust his tongue against hers, and his fingers dragged softly through her hair in a gentle caress. Elaina didn't want to pull away, but he rendered her breathless.

"What if you don't wake up?" she asked as his fingers traced her hairline.

"Head to West Virginia. Remember how you always told me about your dreams of escaping to the mountains? You'll be welcomed by my coven members. They know who you are." His breath tickled her face. "Black Mountain—"

"No, I already told you. I'm not leaving you. Never again." She lifted the steak knife from the bathroom counter and slit the skin just above the vein in her wrist. Blood pooled immediately.

Vicq jerked upright. "Elaina!"

"Drink, please."

His eyes widened at the sight of the thick, red fluid draining down her forearm. "You know what happens if I become too reliant on your blood."

"I don't want to be without you. I've never wanted that. I'd be your donor for life if you asked me."

"It has been your heart I have wanted all this time, not just your blood." He lifted her wrist to his mouth and licked the wound. His eyes closed and forehead creased in concentration as he savored the puddle of blood collected there. The regenerative properties in his saliva healed her split skin. "I need sleep. When night falls, we'll journey again."

"You refused me?" The sip was not enough to give him the strength he required.

"One of us must stay strong. You do understand that, right?"

If he took what he craved, she'd be weak and helpless, but he needed the help now, more than she did.

Before she could voice her protest, Vicq rose on shaky legs, cradling her in his arms. He carried her into the bedroom and laid her across the covers, then stretched out beside her and stroked strands of hair back from her face. As his eyelids fell over his irises, his facial features hardened and his hand grew slack on her cheek. He'd willed himself to slumber with arms wrapped around her.

Elaina was too tired to care about food. She closed her eyes and followed her lover into a deep sleep.

Chapter Six

Her eyes flew open and deep hazel ones stared back at her. The adoration in them brought her back to reality, but so did the feet shuffling and people moving about on the outside of their doors. Her memories came back to her in flashes. The night before and escaping with Vicq. An attempt by District 5 to capture her. Their escape.

Vicq grinned. "You still snore when you sleep."

How long had he been awake staring at her, listening to her snore? "It's not funny."

He made a straight face. "I wasn't laughing."

The wound in his torso had healed completely. New skin covered where the deep gash had disappeared. She reached out to touch it. "It's gone."

He moaned as her fingers slid across his soft, tight skin. "The pain is gone from there, but I ache in other places."

Her cheeks grew heated at the same time she caught sight of the erection behind the zipper of his jeans. It had been so long since she'd been with him, yet she remembered how it was. How generous of a lover he could be. He was skilled in the ways of giving her pleasure from their past endless nights of practice. Her body had never known any other but his.

Vicq drew her closer and his kisses rained down on her forehead. His lips pressed to hers and she accepted his kiss and returned it with love. Their breaths came in pants as their tongues entwined in a sensual frenzy. His fingers played in her hair, coaxing her deeper into the kiss.

He dragged her against him, then over him. Her thighs fell into place around his waist as he lifted himself from the bed. His lips flirted along the edge of her face, chin, and finally found the crevice of her neck. His heated tongue laved against her skin, pausing at the vein pulsing with blood. Her stomach clenched in hunger for the release she knew he could offer. Tingles rose up through her spine and her chest grew heated with lust. Her body had been neglected too long. Now it craved Vicq's caress like never before.

“Vicq.” Elaina lifted her chin as he nipped at the underside of her jaw. She wanted this so much, but... “You won’t want me anymore if I don’t stay human.”

Vicq pulled back and narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think this?”

“You need human blood. I am no use to you without the human part of me...my humanity.”

“The District may have used you, but I will only cherish you. There is no other for me.” His gaze drifted down and then back up at her. “We’ve discovered a way for Dresdan to live without large amounts of blood from humans. An earlier mentality still exists that we need to kill to survive. Outcasts have rejected these notions.”

“So, you do need it?”

A lump rose and then disappeared on his throat. “Our scientists may have found a link. We’ve always shared our blood with each other in the past. The agent in the vampire blood is even stronger than human blood. This is why Dresdan who murder their own kind, drain them until the last drop.”

He took a deep breath and pressed his eyes closed for only a second.

It was one reason why the District thought Dresdan so heinous. Because many of them killed their kind to grow stronger. Was he suggesting that all Dresdan live off the blood of their kind?

She shook her head. “What does it mean?”

“We have a bonded couple in our sanctuary. They’ve not taken an ounce of human blood since they were mated.”

“So, they feed off each other?”

Vicq nodded. “There is a taste for the blood, but for them, it is no longer needed to survive. Do you remember how I told you that I grew up on a farm in Columbia?”

She nodded. He’d been a migrant worker with no family or friends, trying to feed himself with whatever he earned that day. He had labored as a crop harvester until he’d befriended a shady vampire who inducted him into the Dresdan lifestyle. The same one who later became Master and sentenced Vicq to burn under the sun.

“There is a saying...you make do with what you have because you are completely satisfied with it, and you never long for anything else. Contentment. Leo describes his feeling as not only love, but contentment.” Vicq stared at her with sincerity. “Like knowing that something else might taste better, but you still crave what you have.”

“Who’s Leo?”

Vicq smiled. “The human male who I met during my time in the Dresdan prisons awaiting execution. He found a soul mate in Leila, one of the few females at our sanctuary.”

“Is it still a struggle to resist feeding from humans even when you share?”

“The will to resist is what sets us apart from the others.”

Biting her lip, Elaina glanced at him. “Was that your other option? You think we can share a bond.”

“We share something now, Elaina. Whether it is a true bond or not, I don’t know. Leo was fully turned when they bonded.” He lifted his hand to push hair back from her forehead. “You’re still human.”

“What if I remain human? What if I stay this way?” The frustration in her voice alarmed her. “What if the postponement drugs stay in my system forever? Will you leave me? Would you give up on me then?”

“Elaina, I love you.” He cupped her chin with his palm. “I first loved you as a human and I will continue to love you no matter what you are or become.”

“I love you, too.” Everything made sense about what he said. They could be together, live among his coven without feeling like killers reliant on human blood.

Vicq grabbed her waist with both hands as she leaned in to kiss him. He devoured her lips hungrily, pulling her closer into his embrace. Her center grew heated on his lap and she gasped when he slid his fingers down into her jeans.

“Vicq?”

He continued to nibble softly at her lips.

“We both need a shower. There’s blood all over us.”

They both looked down at the tail end of her bloody shirt and the dried blood on his side.

He grinned. "You're right."

Before she could move, he lifted her and placed her on her feet. He lured her to the bathroom, pressing his lips to hers, forcing her to walk backwards. His legs moved forward and she moved backward. His breaths were rushed and she could almost smell the bloodlust surrounding them. It always happened this way. Nothing was more sought after by the male Dresden than a female whose blood ran wild with sexual lust. Even though he'd denied it last night, he needed her blood more than ever.

In the bathroom, he yanked her from her feet, pressed her back against the wall, and pushed his pelvis against hers. He ground his cock into her and her pussy clenched, wanting something more. Fumbling with her button and zipper, he peeled her pants open. He slipped his hands down against her stomach and abs. His fingers flirted with the curls covering her source of arousal. She bit into her lip, closed her eyes, and lolled her head back on the wall.

Vicq's teeth scraped against the vein in her neck. His dick grew rock hard against her. Her heart pulsed erratically against her breastbone, threatening to pounce from her chest. Her blood raced in arousal. He pulled back slightly to slip a finger between her heated folds. Her breath hitched as he teased her silky wetness, stroking upward to tease her aching clit.

"Vicq, I need it. *Now*." She didn't know how else to tell him that the years without him had been so hard.

He carried her, placing her next to the shower, and turned on the water. The jets pounded against the floor of the stall and it took only moments for hot steam to rise up. They started with her shirt, raising it over her head. His tongue ran along his bottom lip, and then he bit one corner of it as his gaze swept her body. She reached behind her back and unclipped her bra. The fabric stayed molded to her breasts, but he slowly peeled the material away, revealing her to his inspection. Her nipples thrummed with pleasure under the sensitive touch of the pads of his fingers.

“*Me encantas*,” he whispered, leaning forward to cover her nipple with his lips.

Elaina felt as though her legs melted beneath her and she grabbed onto the back of his head as he stroked her lovingly with his tongue. He sucked and molded her nipples until they were firm to the touch. She needed to feel him in her grasp, without the clothes covering him. She pushed him against the nearest wall just outside the shower and peeled the pants down his legs. His cock was erect throbbing and pulsing with arousal. On the way back up, she stroked the length of him in her palm. The veins trailed along him, pumping with his excitement. She wanted him to bury his rod deep within her and take away the emptiness.

Elaina knelt down and took in the taut head, rolling her tongue in the salty, sweetness of him. He groaned out loud and brought his hand to lead her into a rhythm. His balls tightened and constricted against her fingertips as he pumped within her mouth, millimeters from the back of her throat. She pulled away to remove the last article of clothing, leaving him panting, his back still against the wall.

Stepping into the shower, she beckoned him to join her. The warm water cascaded through her hair and down her back. She lifted her face to the stream and ran her hands through her tresses, gliding her palms across her cheeks and down her neck. The water did nothing to cool her heated core and she opened her eyes to find him enjoying the show from the outside.

He joined her under the stream. As the water beat down their bodies, he took her lips once more in a kiss. “It’s been so long...”

I know. Elaina turned around in the shower and swiped her hair away from her neck.

He grazed the back of her shoulders and neck with his nose and lips, breathing deeply. His fingers splayed against her stomach from behind, and he pulled her gently against his hardened groin. He licked her neck as if preparing it for what she so desperately wanted. Feeding had become a part of the sex for them. He needed this, wanted this—she was sure of it. Now that she understood his plan, all the options led to one path—love her as his

donor or as his mate. A choice given to her years ago. It was hers to make, and she knew what had to be done.

Vicq bent down, showering kisses along her spine. He glided his palms over the curves of her ass, molding and massaging. Her position didn't allow for her to view the show, but she did glimpse his look of appreciation. His lips and tongue felt hot against her curves and she grabbed at the slippery tiles in front of her, pressing her forehead against the porcelain. He kissed the bottom of her spine, just above the rounded globes of her ass—where he knew he would find a weak spot.

Her body shivered in arousal. “Vicq, please take me.”

He rose, brushing his rod against her. “As you wish...”

Elaina readied herself, bracing her forehead against the stall. Small droplets of water collected on her skin, but they did nothing to calm her rising desire. His hand gripped her waist to prop her up for his entry. Fingers played with her clit and his cock slid against the folds of her sex. She shivered uncontrollably as he teased her and sent hot breaths to the back of her neck. A hand came around to press next to hers on the tiles.

“Please—”

He pushed up into her pussy with one deep stroke.

She gasped and then pressed her lips together to hold back a scream. He was outrageously large, just like she craved.

He thrust upward again, burying himself to the hilt. She bit into her bottom lip and grabbed onto nothing but slippery tiles. A shudder ran through her core as he rocked his pelvis, adjusting her to his size. Liquid warmth flowed over his cock and the beginnings of an orgasm stirred within her.

He pounded into her without warning, gradually increasing the speed and tempo. Jolts of pleasure ran from top of her spine to clit and back again. Promiscuous hands traced along the front of her body—nipples, stomach, mound, clit. She couldn't hold back any longer. The release was long overdue. He conquered her body and soul and, in that moment, she forgot about the predicament they were in.

“Elaina. *Amor verdadero.*”

She felt his control burst apart and his hands tightened around her hips. Cold fangs connected with the flesh on her back. So near. Her climax danced just beyond the entrance of ecstasy.

“Do it!”

He groaned out loud, his rhythm now agitated, but fierce. His groin slapped against her wet ass as he rode her from behind. Fangs pierced deep into her neck, and she cried out in pleasure-pain. She shuddered in release to join him in climax. He siphoned her blood, and sucked the tension out of her. It gave him the sustenance he needed. His thick rod pumped hot seed inside of her. He gave and took, shivering in pleasure against her back. The wrenching orgasm flowed through every nerve ending in her body. Her toes curled under her as his feeding began to wear off.

Vicq extracted his fangs slowly and gasped like a runner after a sprint. He rested his forehead against the back of her neck. It took a long while for them to regain their strength. The shower stream, once steaming hot, was now chilly. As she expected, his dick pulsed to life again against the folds of her pussy. It had been this way since day one with him. He was only just getting started.

Chapter Seven

Elaina glanced up from her plate for the tenth time. Each time the chime rang over the door of the quaint restaurant, her heart fluttered. She ran in fear and she was tired of it. They both had a clear view of the entrance. As a tracker, she'd learned to keep eyes focused for threats, and it was in Vicq's nature to observe.

"You have quite an appetite."

A glass of chilled water sweated on the placemat in front of Vicq.

Elaina's gaze trailed to her food. She'd ordered an assortment so she could choose which omelet she preferred, but she had succeeded in eating more than half of each one. "I think you know why."

Vicq fidgeted with the salt and pepper shakers. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken you so many times."

"Don't apologize." She met his calm hazel eyes. "I enjoyed it." It had been just what she needed to forget, if only for a moment, her plight.

A glint of sharp fangs flashed against his lips, and then disappeared. "I wish I had been there for you these past couple of years. I just didn't know how without putting you in danger."

Guilt rose up in her throat along with the aftertaste of the last bite. She lifted the cool glass to her lips and took a long sip. "You were never dangerous for me, Vicq. I'm the one who made you believe that."

"You were brainwashed by District Five. You signed up for a mission that was formed to ensure human continuity, but you had no idea at what lengths this organization would go to succeed. Their experiments have become out of hand. After taking so many lives, human or otherwise, in the name of scientific research, you would think someone inside their management would step in."

"Unfortunately, the corruption has reached the management level and beyond." Elaina shook her head. "They teach recruits and experienced trackers that the world would become overrun with vampires, and that it would eventually lead to human extinction. They believe Dresden have no working brain and no real conscience. They think you are animals."

Vicq's fingers gripped the salt and pepper shakers. "So they assume we are good for using only as lab rats?"

She nodded. "When there are shortages of Dresdan, they resort to experiments on humans. Every recruit is led to believe that Dresdan are not to be trusted because we are at the top of your food chain."

"You believe all of this?"

"I did." How could she have been so stupid? She should've known something was wrong when they'd prevented her contact with her parents during her training period.

"What happens to the recruits who don't believe or follow orders?" He pushed the issue, but already knew the answers.

Elaina averted her gaze to the door where the bell rang as a couple walked out. "District Five doesn't tolerate weak links."

"What happens to the weak links?"

She swallowed. "The District employment contract is lifelong. The weakest links work in the labs...as the experiment."

"That's why I chose not to make contact with you. As long as the District left you alone, I forced myself to do likewise."

It was why he'd led her to believe that he'd been dead and gone forever. The reason why he'd watched her as she remained on the run all these years. Why couldn't he have left that decision up to her? Why leave her to feel as if she were alone in the world?

Elaina swallowed down the hurt and outburst she would not allow herself to make in public. She picked up the last piece her omelet with the fork, pushed it into her mouth, and then stood. "I think we'd better leave."

The place became too crowded for her. She needed to get away. Without waiting for his reply, she made a beeline for the door.

Rain pellets curtained her as she hurried across the parking lot. Only one of the street lamps worked. The glass globes that should've covered the light bulbs were cracked, as if someone had intentionally thrown rocks at them. The scent of the rain was of salt and acid, and the clouds were dark gray against the evening sky. Music from the adjoining club behind her invaded the night.

Elaina maneuvered her way through the cars until she reached their borrowed Trailblazer. She ignored Vicq, who leaned on the SUV, and opened the door.

“What is the reason for your attitude?” He wrapped his fingers loosely around her waist, forcing her to turn and look at him.

“You’re here for me now, Vicq, but we can never be content. I am on the run and so are you.”

He lifted a finger and pushed wet hairs from her face and lips. “I am content now that you are with me. We can’t let our past run our lives.”

He was right. That was exactly what she was doing. Had Vicq not come for her, where would she be? Sitting in her houseboat with little connection to the real world? How long would she have to run and hide? Until she was old and gray? Until she was dead?

She met Vicq’s gaze. “How long do I have to run because we know too much? How long will you hide because you have too many enemies?”

“I don’t know, Elaina. As long as we have to.” He leaned in and pressed his forehead against hers. “I can protect you, but don’t run from me. Trust me.”

She lifted her lips to meet his. They were soft and inviting, and before long, they were wrapped in each other’s passion. The rain drenched their clothes and plastered hair against their faces. Her body meshed with his and she gripped his arm as ripples ran up her spine. She wanted too much of him, but was afraid to lose him again.

The past two years had been a roller coaster ride for her. Afraid she’d be stripped again from those she loved, she never trusted anyone. She withdrew from friends who wanted to become too close. Vicq was different. He demanded her intimacy. Even if she wanted to, she could do nothing to deny him. She wanted this just as much.

Vicq lifted her onto the seat and she moved closer, pulling him between her thighs. His rod, already hardened from his excitement, nudged her heated center and he groaned. She arched her back and her pebbled nipples scraped against her damp shirt. He dipped lower and pressed his warm lips to her neck. Her fingers became tangled in his matted hair as she accepted his

roving tongue. The hot trails were like silk against her skin. Her body didn't shiver from the cold and rain, it vibrated from the pleasure.

"Don't ever make me leave you again, Vicq."

He stepped back to look at her. "I do what I can to protect you. I promised you that."

His meaning was clear. He would protect her, no matter the cost. Chills ran up her skin and she hooked her fingers into the waist of his jeans, pulling him closer. She unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, and his cock strained against the cloth of his briefs. He didn't protest when she stroked him, but let his body respond in acceptance.

"Take me again," she whispered. "Now."

Vicq glanced over his shoulder, then back at her.

"Yes, right here." Elaina wiggled her feet and allowed her heels to drop on the asphalt at his feet. The parking lot was empty, only rows and rows of cars preventing them from viewing the main attraction—the eatery they'd just left.

He leaned in and kissed her, fidgeting with the buttons on her jeans. She lifted to help him as he peeled them from her hips and down her legs.

Pressing his ear to her chest just over her heart, he breathed in deeply. "Your heart is racing. Is it from the anticipation of feeling me inside of you, loving you deeply? Is it because you fear we will get caught out here with your legs wrapped around my back as I plunge into your soft pussy?" He chuckled and lifted his head to trace the outline of her chin with his lips. "Do you love it when I take you in two places at once? When I feed from you, does it give you as much pleasure as it does me?"

"Yes." Her core twisted in the pleasure and agony of waiting to grasp her lover between her pussy and thighs.

His fingertips sneaked up her shirt and grazed her belly until he cupped both breasts. He kneaded them, igniting a flame deep within her belly. Moans escaped her lips and the rain drizzled lightly on the hood of the car. She gasped when his fingers smoothed against her mound. Her clit throbbed as he slid past it to reach her moist warmth. He held their gaze and his irises swirled with red hot intensity.

Elaina's hips moved on their own accord, encouraging his wicked fingers to dip in and out of her. He added another finger and stroked at her clit with his thumb, nearly taking her over the edge. His digits were slippery with her juices, and her heart pulsed erratically as a pending release danced throughout her loins.

Ready for him, she released his cock from the confines of his briefs. She admired the hard, leathery contrast against her smooth, toned skin. Licking her lips, she reminisced on the way the thick head of his rod felt inside her. Slightly bent, just enough to stroke her to orgasm.

Vicq hardened even more in her palm. "I want you now."

He gripped her thighs and pulled her closer so that his dick poised near the entrance of her pussy. With her ass to the edge of the seat, he guided himself inside of her. Her muscles clenched around him, adjusting to his width. Dropping kisses to her lips, he rocked his pelvis back and forth. Her body burned with pleasure and, before she knew it, she'd fallen back onto the seat.

Elaina screamed in ecstasy when the tip of his cock plunged deeper. He grabbed her waist and pumped into her long and hard. His gaze never roamed from her. He loved watching her as he took her into a climax. Even now, he paid keen attention to her body's responses to him.

He lifted his hands to grab the roof of the SUV and drove into her intensely. She grabbed at the hard seat cushions and held her heels to his back as her orgasm rushed through her. Her body shuddered and pleasure coursed inside her, causing blood to rush through her veins.

Vicq's fangs ripped from his gums, but he did not bend to feed from her. It would have been too much, even she knew this. So, he gave. He slowed his pace, prolonging his release. Her clit pulsed still as the remnants of her orgasm stayed with her. Gripping the undersides of her knees, he opened her wider, thrusting deeply. The Trailblazer rocked, the metal frame squeaking to the rhythm. The sound of flesh connecting filled the interior. Their breaths were synchronized and their pulses like crescendo.

He tilted his head upward and groaned through clenched fangs. His cum seared her insides on contact, taking her over the ledge once more. She

arched her back off the seat and joined him in his receding cadence, milking him.

She had not fully regained her strength when Vicq helped her into her jeans and slipped on her heels. Without saying a word, he carried her to the passenger side and set her on the seat. There was no doubt now that she belonged with him. Damn the consequences. She'd never had an easy life and she didn't expect it to get any easier.

"I'll drive. I want you to rest."

"Wait!" Elaina grabbed his hand before he could close the door. "Promise me one more thing."

"What is it, *mi amor*?" His brows creased together as he focused to give her his undivided attention.

"The other option you were talking about...I want that. District Five has regulated so much of my life and my decisions, but I want to make this choice for myself. I want it to happen in peace, not while we're on the run."

Vicq squeezed her hand. "I will get you to the sanctuary as soon as I can. You will know peace one day, no matter what your choice."

Chapter Eight

The intimacy they shared and his feeding caused her more harm than good. His seed wasn't as potent as his blood, but would infect her in the same way. How many more times could he take from her before he relied *only* on her blood? How many times could he give to her before she crossed over as Dresden? Although she'd confided in him that this was what she wanted, he felt that he regulated her choices just as the District did. Damn, but he needed her in every way possible.

Elaina snored lightly in her sleep with her cheek pressed into the pillow and face turned toward him. Vicq tightened his grip on the steering wheel and gnawed at the inside of his bottom lip. He wanted her so bad, but how could he ask her to sign her life away again? She'd essentially be repeating the same path. This time, she wouldn't be pledged to hunt the Dresden...she'd be Dresden. Fully turned, they would have no use for her. They would kill her if she were caught, just like they did all of his kind.

When he'd been with her—inside her—he'd sensed the hunger pounding in her gut, the anticipation in her veins. It must've been easy for her to mistake her blood hunger with sex hunger, but Vicq knew a deprived soul when he saw one. She had the vampire agent in her veins and still resisted the urge for blood. Perhaps her still-human anatomy balanced Elaina's cravings to her advantage.

Vampire DNA existing in an unturned human. It was what District 5 had been trying to achieve all along. Taking human recruits daily in the hopes of finding a candidate whose immune system could withstand the vampire agent without a complete change. From what Vicq knew, District 5 had yet to accomplish what they'd started. They were fools. There would never be a hybrid between the Dresden and humans.

Sooner or later, Elaina would not be able to withstand her blood hunger. Sooner or later, the vampire agent running through her veins would demand that she cross over. Why hadn't the change already happened? There could only be one reason. Had the Outcasts been wrong? Had District 5 found a

way to subdue the Dresdan transformation? Were their drugs still lingering in her system as she'd said? Would they always be in her system?

Elaina's snoring fell silent as she hitched in a deep breath. Her eyes fluttered behind the lids before she settled back down into a deep sleep.

Vicq knew Elaina had love for him, but he'd seen the doubt in her eyes. He was still a killer.

* * * *

Elaina piled a handful of hotdogs, several bags of chips, and an assortment of snacks on the counter at the convenience shop. The man behind the register gawked at her as she slid two gallons of water next to them. Being on the run entailed fast, quick, unhealthy drive-up-and-go food. She didn't know when they would stop again. Vicq insisted on taking the less traveled road where they would encounter fewer people. He claimed they were near a safe harbor for the Dresdan, but she needed restroom breaks, and pissing on the side of the road wasn't her thing.

Elaina handed the man a fifty. "How far is the nearest town?"

"Nickels is fifty miles northeast. After Nickels, you reach the mountains."

"The mountains, huh?" Black Mountains, the Outcasts' sanctuary. They were close.

He handed her back a few wrinkled dollar bills. "Yeah, are you a tourist? Where are you from?"

"Yes, I'm a tourist." She averted her eyes, stuffing the bills into her pockets.

The clerk's eyes swept over her items. "Do you need a bag?"

Elaina widened her eyes in disbelief. No shit! He'd seen her struggling down the aisles trying to carry all the food in her arms. Vicq had instructed her to bring back lunch only, but instead, she'd treat herself to a picnic. What she really yearned for was another meal at a table. "Sir, yes. Of course I need a bag."

After thanking the clerk for bagging her items, she headed for the door and braced herself for another hour or so in a cramped car. She'd forgotten how inviting east coast weather could be. The humid mist wrapped around her skin, providing her with comfort, if only for a few seconds. In this type of climate, her Texas-native parents would've been stretched out on hammocks in the shade.

She grinned. Her gun-toting dad would have been riding around on the lawn mower in an attempt to keep the grass on his two acres of land in check. Had she listened to their warnings and remained in small town Texas like the rest of her childhood friends, she might not have been in this situation.

Vicq knelt to replace the air cap on a tire just as she walked out of the store. Dusk had settled less than an hour ago and she had suggested he stay in the SUV to reserve his energy. How on earth did they put up with one another? They were both stubborn and did the opposite of what the other asked. Still, she loved him and wondered how she'd ever managed to be without him for so long.

Elaina sighed. She knew she'd met her match when he succeeded in talking his way out of his execution. That was something he seemed to be very good at.

As if by coincidence, he looked in her direction. Even now, his gaze showed desire for her. It didn't take making love to her to prove that there existed a passionate, loving soul inside. Because of what he was, he had to develop a thick skin. There were those who would see him dead, and it took a determined fighter to live. Vicq was that fighter.

Elaina stepped out onto the curb. A van lurched out of nowhere.

Dust rose up and blinded her. She jerked back onto the walkway and a bag slipped from her fingers. Something snatched her by the waist. In one blink of an eye, she knew what had happened. She'd been caught. They drug her body into the interior of the van and threw her against the side panel.

"That Dresdan dude is out there!"

"Close the fucking door!"

Their shouts drowned out the blood rushing through her veins. Panic set in as her heart fluttered in her chest. The door slid closed. They'd locked her up like a prisoner in a cell.

Elaina opened her eyes just in time to see her captor—three of them. District 5 recruits. The mark emblazoned on their necks told her that. The biggest one lurched toward her and she thrust her boot out at him, smashing it against his face. The other grabbed her arms and legs as the man she kicked groaned out in pain, holding his bleeding nose.

In the struggle to break free of their hold, the van pitched forward. Her heart dipped down into her stomach. They'd finally found her. She wasn't ready to die. Not today. Not when the one person she wanted the most promised a lifetime of happiness.

She broke loose and jumped for the sliding van doors.

"Are you gonna open the doors and jump? Elaina?" The gruff voice of the big one she kicked in the face stalled her actions. "Out of a fleeing van? You want to die, don't you?"

Elaina swung around and glared. The interior of the van was so small, they were hunched over, but they still stood on the ready to subdue her. One of them had a long, thick rope.

"Where are you taking me?"

Bloody Face guffawed and snorted. "I think you know the answer to that question. Don't you know where you belong? Don't even act like you don't know the rules, babe." He turned to his colleagues. "Tie her up."

She sidestepped the man with the rope and thrust him head first into the door.

"Grab the guns," the maniac who drove spat.

Certainly they didn't mean to shoot her to death.

The van swayed as it sped down the road at unsafe speeds. If she could get to the driver, maybe...

Catching her off guard, one of the men shoved her against the panel.

"Why are you fighting? There's no escaping now." Bloody Face picked up a needle from a suitcase. The other drew closer with the rope.

If by choice, she would never die in the presence of an enemy. She wouldn't allow them the victory of watching her slow death. It may have been easier for her sake if they'd shot her dead on sight back at the store.

"I'm not a dog, and you won't tie me up." She backed away until her ass hit the opposite wall.

He thumped the needle, readied it for insertion, and held it up for his inspection. The pale yellow liquid inside would render her unconscious for hours.

"Well, we won't tie you up, then. We'll put you to sleep."

A loud boom sounded overhead. They all looked up to see the dent in the ceiling of the van.

"Vicq!" Her scream pierced her dry throat. God, she hoped it was him. She thought she was ready to face the District, but boy, was she wrong.

The van swerved again and their bodies plummeted to the floor. A string of curses flowed from her attackers' lips.

Elaina stumbled forward on her knees to the front of the van. Before she could reach the driver, Vicq thrust his arm inside and grabbed hold of the steering wheel. The driver yanked the cigarette lighter from the burner with one hand on the steering wheel.

Elaina cringed at the sizzle on contact with Vicq's arm. Burnt vampire flesh filled the air. She rushed forward and grabbed the driver by the neck. He held his body firm in the seat as she tried to impede his control of the van.

"Get her off me." The driver attempted to shrug her off. Even bent his head to try and bite her arms.

Her scalp burned as one of her captors grabbed a fist full of her hair from behind. He yanked violently, pulling on her ponytail. She turned around and elbowed him across the chin. Teeth and blood flew up into the air, but she didn't have time to finish him off. They were trying to kill Vicq. She wanted out of the van.

Vicq stood atop the hood and punched through the front windshield, shattering the glass. His eyes had transformed to blood red and the fangs

shot through his gums in attack mode. The driver sat stunned without trying to escape.

Vicq tugged the driver by the hair. "Stop the fucking van!"

A rope circled her neck and jerked her back. Her wrists were then tied behind her back so that the more she yanked, the more she choked herself.

The van halted abruptly. Elaina wasn't sure why until she saw Vicq's hand around the man's neck. The driver's chin hit his chest and he slumped over. Another struggle broke out as Bloody Face rushed forward and fought with Vicq to keep him out of the van.

Scraping sounds across the floor directed her line of sight away from Vicq. The one who'd tied her with a rope lifted a small launcher from its case. "No!" She kicked her feet, out trying to trip him. He swung his arm back and her body flung across the van. Pain crept through her back as her heart fought to start up again.

Elaina locked eyes with Vicq. *Go*. She wanted to tell him to flee, but no words would escape her lips. Her mouth filled with fluid, but it wasn't the water she so desperately needed. The thick liquid tasted of metallic and salt.

Time suspended as Vicq stood atop the stalled van. His eyes seemed to shoot from her to the mini rocket launcher that was sure to kill him.

Go! Now! Her mind screamed and pleaded with him.

"Put a bigger whole in his gut this time!"

The explosion from the propeller rocked the van. Her eyes opened just in time to see Vicq's form tumble from the van, smoke surrounding him.

God, no! Please don't let him be hurt. Gun powder crept up her nostrils. The tears burned her eyes and her head swirled like a tornado. A roaring engine thrummed through her eardrums. Too much chaos had erupted, and she could barely keep her eyelids from closing.

The back of her head hit hard metal. Someone stabbed a needle in her neck. Her veins grew frigid and cold. The voices grew distant...

Chapter Nine

Vicq came to in a ditch. Mud and dirt caked the side of his face. He gritted his teeth as pain coursed through him. The launcher had barely grazed his side, but the heat from the blaze scorched him enough. He teleported from the ditch to the highway. Elaina and the van were long gone. He estimated that almost an hour had passed. She could be anywhere by now. Bile rose up in his throat and he bent over to catch his breath.

The dog tags he'd snatched from the driver's neck dug into his palms. He uncurled his fingers. A scar existed where the metal scrapped into his flesh. Lifting the chain with his finger, he held it high for his inspection. Nothing but numbers embedded the surface...coordinates and a series of digits followed by dashes.

Let this be what I need to find Elaina. She'd slipped from his grasp enough times already. He didn't mean for this to happen. *May it be the last...*

Vicq glanced down the road, noting the car that passed slowly to observe him standing on the side of the road in muddy clothes. He needed to get away from this area before he attracted attention.

His gaze turned to the sky. Eight hours left until sunrise, but how much more time did he have until he lost Elaina again? Just as he prepared to teleport, the small suitcase she'd brought along flashed in his mind. He had yet to ask her what it was, but knew that it had to be something important he should retrieve.

* * * *

Thick trees and boulders heavily guarded the sanctuary. Black Mountain was a favorite attraction to tourists, but few ever crossed over to the small region where the Outcasts called their home. The mountains were too steep, and edges too rough for climbing. Cougars were too ravenous, black bears were too aggressive, and the mountain lions too blood thirsty.

Vicq barged through a wooden door to enter the cave. A few of his men were huddled over computer screens when he teleported into the main study.

They hissed, revolting at his condition. Maybe he should have taken a dip in the lake first, but he simply didn't have time for such niceties.

"What happened to you?" Brandon stood first, rushing over to offer aid. The red-haired, green-eyed geek had been a doctor in his human life. The life-saving surgeries he'd performed hadn't been enough to escape from his unexpected fate—life as a Dresdan.

Vicq shook his head and held up his hand to ward off Brandon's attempt. "I'm fine. Three District bounty hunters have Elaina. I need your help."

Mark, the youngest scientist in their sanctuary, looked up from the keyboard. "You mean the woman you've been protecting?"

"Yes. The woman I will bring here to live safely." His head swam with so many flashbacks and images, he thought he was hallucinating. He reached out to grab the edge of a table to keep from falling over.

"Do you need assistance?" This time, Brandon placed a supporting hand to his shoulder.

"Yes." He diverted his eyes away from Brandon. Admitting to defeat was something he'd never been good at.

"Mark, can you call an aide to get my bags?" Brandon pressed at Vicq's injured side.

"Not that kind of assistance." Vicq cringed as the former doctor probed at him. The singed flesh on his right side burned like a blaze, but he ignored the pain. Instead, he focused on how he'd get Elaina back.

Taking in a deep breath, Vicq jerked away from Brandon. He slammed the dog tags down onto the table in front of Mark. "Can you get me these coordinates on a map?"

Mark lifted the tags from the table and held them up to his inspection. His eyes moved from the inscription to Vicq. "I suspect these are coordinates to a District research facility."

"Then get me the address. Now!"

"You don't mean to go there, do you?" Logan, who'd been gawking all along, shot up from his seat. "That's ludicrous. They'll burn your ass like chicken grease. We've got plans underway to attack in two months, but they're premature plans. We're not ready to stand up—"

Vicq glared at him through narrowed eyes. "I don't give a damn about plans underway. I need to find her tonight."

"They could be anywhere, Vicq." Mark turned to his computer station and drummed at the keyboard.

"If I can catch them before they reach base..."

"You're running after a District recruit. How do you know she isn't against us?" Logan rushed around the table to stand between him and Mark.

"I know she isn't." He growled in warning until Logan put some more space between them.

"If I have the right location, it seems to be two hundred miles south of here." Mark swung around in his chair, his eyes widened. "Washington, DC. One of District Five's recruit centers."

Vicq's heart jumped with hope. It wasn't her exact location, but at least he knew where they were headed. That would send him in the right direction.

"The chances of finding her are one in a million." Brandon came around the computer screen to join them.

"You forget, brother, that my chances are increased. Although not completed, I share a bond with her. I can find her if I'm close enough."

"That human female will be the death of you," Logan said through clenched teeth.

Vicq flashed fangs. "Then I won't stop looking for her until I am dead."

Logan lifted the mike from the table and held it close to his lips. "Gather up your men. We have a human to find."

"You need to feed," Brandon said, rolling up his shirt sleeve.

Vicq bit the inside of his bottom lip. He craved Elaina, not one of his brothers. Just as he thought, his system relied on her more than ever.

"I do." Without strength, he would not be able to bring her back safely.

Chapter Ten

Elaina opened her eyes and peered up at the lamp overhanging from the roof of the van. Her pulse throbbed uncontrollably as if she'd awakened from a bad dream. A filthy aftertaste of blood and dirt remained in her mouth. She tried to straighten her arms to relieve the cramp in her shoulders, but the ropes still bound her. She focused, and the voices of her kidnappers grew louder and louder. Her body shivered—an aftereffect of the drug they'd used to put her to sleep wearing off.

"Well, well, look who's awake." Rough hands hooked under her forearms. Bloody Face braced her up in a sitting position against the wall. "Obviously, that dose wasn't strong enough."

Elaina swallowed hard and the only thing that came of it was her parched tongue scraping against the top of her dry gums. A gallon of water sat opened and half empty in the center of the van between the men. It appeared to be the same gallon she'd bought back at the convenience store.

"You're good for something, huh?" Her second kidnapper unwrapped a hotdog and took a bite. "Yum. Fresh and hot, just like you."

What a pig! She had to find a way to get out of here.

"Oh." He giggled like a lunatic. "Are you hungry? Were these your hotdogs?"

Elaina hoped he choked to death on them. Her stomach rumbled in hunger as the van traveled on the bumpy roads. Chances were, they kept her alive to take her to the research facility. If they wanted her dead, they would've killed her already.

"Give it a rest, will ya, Roy? That's no way to treat a superior officer." Bloody Face leered at them.

Roy chuckled again, bits of bread and meat falling from his mouth. "She's not superior anymore. You really thought you could hide out, didn't you?"

He held out a piece of hotdog to her face and she cringed. She wouldn't eat anything he'd touched, even if it was the last morsel left to save her.

“So, how does it feel, Elaina?” Bloody Face drew his knees to his chest and propped his forearms on his knees. “To be the first hybrid?”

Her headache raged as confusion set in. “I’m not a hybrid.”

“Why do you keep hiding it?” Roy asked. “We knew you were hiding the disease in your blood, but could never find you.”

Had they been watching her too? Had they intentionally let her get away?

When and how had they found out that the vampire agent roamed in her blood? It seemed the District knew more than she’d wanted them to discover. “Why are you only just now coming to get me?”

Roy lunged forward and grabbed a fistful of her hair. “Because you hid, you treacherous bitch!”

Her scalp stung like hell as he pulled her strands. This lunatic had a serious temper. Hands still tied behind her back, she pushed off against the inside of the van, flung her boot out and kicked him in the gut. He sputtered and choked on the piece of hotdog. She rose to her feet and ground her boot heel into his neck, impaling him to the floor. His face grew red, the veins popping up from his forehead. The color slowly left his face and he clawed at her jeans with his fingers.

“You assault me again and I’ll kill you.”

Bloody Face thrust her back against the van into a sitting position.

“Roy, you jackass.” He helped up his lunatic buddy. “Do not underestimate her. We’re to hand her over in one piece.”

Roy shot daggers at her with his eyes and she shot them right back. She may have been tied up like a dog, but he’d learn to respect her, even in her vulnerable state.

“How do you know I have the vampire agent?”

“You left—”

“Don’t tell her, Ace.”

“Roy, shut the fuck up,” Ace yelled toward his colleague, and then glanced at her. “The two of you left a trail of blood from your injuries at your condo.” He chuckled. “When there is no match, the blood separates when combined, like oil and water. With a match, the blood infuses together. By the time we figured it out, you had skipped town.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. Ace more than likely referred to the night the bullet had grazed her side during their very first attempt to capture her two years ago. Had Vicq not offered his blood to help her with her own loss, she would have died. He gave an adequate amount to save and heal her, but not enough to turn her.

Ace cracked his knuckles—all eight of them. “You and your little vamp boyfriend left just the right amount to take back to the labs to study. Why’d you run, Elaina, if you knew your DNA was a match?”

She’d run because it had been her only option given her circumstances at the time. His Dresdan leaders had found out he’d involved himself with a District member and left him to die. Letting Vicq die was something she wasn’t prepared to do, so she’d nursed him until he recovered. The other trackers discovered she kept him in her condo. Word got back to the Heads, and her capture was ordered. In the process of trying to gain entry to her condo, a poisonous arrow that they intended for Vicq pierced her shoulder. The images flowed through her head like a VHS tape on rewind.

She cringed against the bile that rose to her throat. Even after their escape, the Dresdan hunted him down until they captured him and laid his verdict out for him. Execution. The words still haunted her. She should have stood up for him, but she’d hidden behind a city bus until her lover was gone.

“Why did you hide, Elaina?”

“I skipped town because I thought I was on a hit list.”

Ace laughed. “You were, but not anymore. If you cooperate with the Heads, you will most likely be allowed to live.”

“Allowed?”

He nodded.

So, they wanted to study her. She would take pleasure in making them work for it. Elaina grinned. “A dead hybrid won’t give them what they need. What do they want with me now, anyway?”

“They can’t figure out what’s in your blood that makes you a match. Even after years of finding people with the same blood type, we’re still unable to create another hybrid.”

Vicq's words drifted back to her. *Our scientists may have found a link...* No matter how small, the bond they shared was likely the reason her blood was a match.

"Have you idiots stopped to think that finding a match has something to do with more than just a blood type or DNA?"

Ace's lips spread into a smirk. "Obviously, you know something we don't. We've got you now."

Elaina dug her fingers into the insides of her palms and jerked her wrists against the rope. She wanted to punch him and wipe the smug smile off his face. "I refuse to participate in any experiments. I don't wanna be a mutant."

"Your body belongs to District Five. You signed your life away. Shoulda stayed on our side and you wouldn't have anything to worry about."

She glared at him. "You're all murderers. You've killed innocent Dresdan and even humans you've experimented on."

Ace laughed. "Why should you worry about the others? Casualties are the price of victory. You're prime property. All you have to do is cooperate and you'll be the baddest bitch in the District. The first hybrid..."

Elaina huffed and she molded her lips together to keep from screaming out. He'd probably collect millions from the Heads for her capture and return. They were all motivated by greed, lust, power, and money. The training upon recruitment created this type of mentality.

Most any member of District 5 would have traded places with her. She'd had the world and lost it, all because she wanted to stop for snacks. A coveted title as the first hybrid didn't sound as appealing as being with Vicq. Now she'd have to spend another eternity as a puppet, wanting someone who was gone. All her years of gathered evidence needed to expose District 5 was lost. The love of her life...gone.

What had she been living for all these years? What reasons were there to live now?

She hung her head in defeat and rested her forehead on her knees.

Chapter Eleven

Two hours left until sunrise and he rode toward it. Most Dresdan would have thought him a complete fool. Playing the guessing game to track down the van with his true love inside was like solving the maze to escape the realms of hell. He'd be damned if he let District 5 get away with his mate.

Vicq lowered his chest in line with the handle bars of the motorcycle and sped up. Derrick and Brad probably thought he'd kill himself...and them in the process. Still, they followed him into what seemed like the pathway to Hell.

His blood throbbed in his veins with anticipation. He sensed that his mate was near. Every part of his body guided him. The resident doctor back at sanctuary told him that if he believed, then fate would guide him. Just like it had when she'd left her life behind as Elaina and started a new one as Ellen. Just like it had when she had been assigned to assassinate him so very long ago.

What would civilians do if they knew District 5 had reverted to experimenting on humans despite the danger involved? They should've been exposed long ago, but unidentified high profile government officials funded the mission. To expose District 5 meant revealing to humans that they shared the same oxygen with blood thirsty vampires. Was the world ready for such a revelation? Probably not.

The back of a van appeared as he revved the bike to get over the top of a hill. Dusty gray with the last three digits of the license plate 515. It surpassed the speed limits, but remained within a safe range. How like them to keep a low-key appearance to avoid attention.

He flipped the visor on his helmet up and adjusted his irises to focus on the van. His fangs threatened to escape his gum line, but he took deep breaths despite the excessive speed, holding his frustration inside. They wouldn't get away again. Not with his mate.

Vicq adjusted to a standing position and jumped off the bike to lunge for the van. He grasped the metal ladder attached to the back, his boots only centimeters away from hitting the pavement. The unmanned bike flipped

onto its side and skidded across the highway. Bright white sparks lit the path before the bike collided with a road sign and exploded. Flames shot up, illuminating the night sky. The van swerved sharply and he gripped the bars firmly with sweaty palms. After steadying himself, he lifted the helmet from his head and thrust it out into the field. Derrick and Brad moved forward on either side of the van.

Vicq climbed up onto the top and crawled across it until he reached the middle. There was no doubt that Elaina's kidnappers knew they'd been found for he heard their frantic voices on the inside. The dent he put in the van in his first attempt to save her remained as a reminder that he'd failed.

He grinned. Ripping it in half would suit his mood, but no...Elaina was inside. The driver sped up and swerved into the southbound lane. A sharp jerk threw him across a lane. An eighteen wheeler came in the other direction and the trucker blared his horn as it sped past.

He slid down the side of the van until his boots connected with the metal support bars on the bottom. Gripping the handle, he shoved the sliding door to the side with no regard to what met him on the other side.

"What the hell?" Two sets of eyes widened at his presence.

"Always remember to lock your doors." Vicq's gaze shot from the two men to the corner of the van where Elaina was bound and tied to the interior. His heart twisted and writhed in his chest, and he ground his teeth together. He'd never wanted this for her...to be tied up like a prisoner. It brought back memories of his assault in the prisons from his own kind. Now her own organization turned against her, treating her like she'd never worked for them.

Elaina mumbled what he thought was his name from behind the cloth sealing her lips. Her eyes swirled with confusion and panic.

It looked like she'd literally given up with her shoulders slouched over. How unlike Elaina. He jumped in the van just as the slim man crawled across the floor and reached for the rifle lying amongst some duffle bags. Vicq lunged toward him and grabbed the back of his head, holding him up and vertical to the floor.

Vicq willed the rifle to gravitate toward his outstretched hand. “You plan to shoot at me again?” After snapping it in two, he tossed it out of the van. “Didn’t work last time, won’t work this time either.”

The van heaved forward, sending everyone but Elaina in a tumble across the floor. They came to a stall on the freeway as the driver fought through the window with Derrick as he tried to get in. Brad entered the van through the passenger door, lunging himself at the driver. The young Dresdan had already dropped fang well past the feeding mode.

Vicq turned back to the man who’d wriggled from his grip to find that he held up a metal pole. The man swung at him, missing his face by a hair. Hissing, he took a fighter’s stance. He simply didn’t have the time or patience for this shit. Teleporting behind the man, he jerked the pole away and used it to hold the man immobilized. He pulled the pole tighter against his throat.

“You’re a lousy batter.” Vicq used powers to life the rope from the floor to his grasp and proceeded to tie the man’s arms against his sides.

“You stupid blood sucker.” He thrashed against the ropes.

Vicq cringed and tossed him face first onto a pile of luggage.

Two bullets whizzed by his ear and he ducked out of the way so the third would miss him. The burly man crouched behind Elaina while firing shots. Elaina wriggled against the rope, but it had her bound to the panel. When the gunman realized all the rounds had been fired, he chucked the empty gun aside.

“Come any closer”—the burly man posed a large needle near her neck—“and I’ll inject her with poison. Even you won’t want her blood then.”

Vicq stopped in his tracks. Elaina shook her head. There weren’t many times he’d seen fear in her eyes, but this time, it existed in abundance. “You don’t want to do that, I’m sure. Why don’t you get up and fight me instead...like a man?”

The gunman’s face reddened. “I’m certainly not gonna sit around and let you kill me.”

“Who said anything about killing you?” Killing had never crossed his mind. He only wanted Elaina back safely. “What are you waiting for? Sitting around as you are doing now won’t earn you freedom.”

“Vicq, we’ve gotta make moves,” Derrick said from behind him. “The other maniac just notified more trackers.”

Vicq ignored Derrick and the protest from the tied up humans, keeping his eye on the fool threatening his mate. “Hand her over to me willingly and I’ll leave you alive.”

“Liar!” The gunman’s hands shook uncontrollably.

“Maybe you didn’t understand.” Vicq’s hands clenched at his sides. “Hand her over to me. If you harm her in anyway, I’ll make sure that from this day forward your life is worse than a nightmare.”

This only angered him more and he brought the needle closer to Elaina’s neck. A helicopter overhead distracted the gunman. Vicq took that opportunity to teleport toward Elaina. The gunman was quicker and it took him two seconds to inject the needle. He grabbed the man by the forearm and threw him across the van like a ragdoll. Bones cracked on the other side of the vehicle just before he landed on the floor in a thud. Kneeling down beside Elaina, he carefully extracted the foul needle from her neck, untied her hands and uncovered her mouth.

Elaina caressed each side of his face with both palms and pulled him down to her face. “Vicq.” Her eyes flooded with relief, but her grip was lax, not firm the way she always touched him. “I thought you were...” She initiated the kiss, snaking her fingers around the nape of his neck.

Vicq moved his hand around her back to support her body, elated that he was with her, but angry that he’d come close to losing her again. Their lips meshed and tongues danced lithely together. He breathed in her flowery scent as their kisses grew demanding.

“Vicq,” Brad yelled from behind him. “We need to go. Right now.”

If that wasn’t enough distraction, the helicopter’s rumbling engine appeared closer than before. He parted from Elaina, but when he did, her body fell limp within his arms.

“Elaina.” He pressed a hand to her forehead, and then bent to bury his face into her neck. Her pulse still fought to thrive, and her heart thumped slowly in her chest. His breath caught in his throat and he turned his gaze to

the needle on the floor. Green-colored liquid remained in the syringe, but some of it had apparently gotten into her blood stream.

“Let’s go!”

He rose with Elaina in his arms and moved toward the exit where the ladder to the helicopter above waited. Hissing against the nominal sunrays that escaped above the distant horizon, he shielded his eyes with his forearm. He took a deep breath before he dropped his arm again and grabbed hold of the ladder.

“Vicq.”

He turned to see Derrick standing over the three humans and pulling the rope tighter around them, trapping them like worms in a cocoon.

“What do you want me to do with them?” the six foot tall Dresden asked.

Vicq swallowed, and then glanced down at Elaina, whose head lolled back against his forearm. The rhythm of her heart slowed. Her once red, soft lips were now pale. “Check their clothes for wires, then bring them. They will serve time for what they have done.” He used his remaining strength to teleport into the helicopter, where he laid Elaina out on a soft mat.

Brandon pulled the ladder up as the first helicopter took them away. The young doctor rushed to Vicq’s side, and glanced down at Elaina. “They’ve given her something to kill her. I can hear her pulse slowing. If you’re going to turn her, you need to do it now.”

“I know.” This wasn’t the way they’d wanted her transformation to happen. She wanted to do it in peace, not when she was on the brink of dying as a last resort. He couldn’t lose her now...wouldn’t let her die without living a life absent of fear.

He slit himself across the vein in his neck with his fingers and brought her body up, pressing her mouth to the fissure. Still, she didn’t move, but he hoped his blood could save her once again before it was too late.

Vicq rested his back against the wall of the helicopter and pulled her against his chest. He prayed this would be over soon and that he and Elaina could be together without worry.

Chapter Twelve

Elaina opened her eyes to silken cloth hanging overhead. Her fingers dug into the softness beneath her. A motor ran nearby and her gaze landed the fan swirling on a dresser. The cool breeze fanned her face and neck as she lifted her head off the downy pillows. Unfamiliar smells surrounded her. Freshly cut grass, not the asphalt she was used to. Spring water...and lavender.

A sound from the corner of the room caught her attention.

Long black hair cascading down past the shoulder blades held her gaze. It seemed a startling contrast to the thin white dress the woman wore. She was also the source of the lavender scent she'd detected earlier.

"Should I close the balcony door?" Her voice was soft yet firm.

Elaina waited for her to turn around. Loud clanking noises beat against a glass. The woman's delicate hand grabbed the pitcher from the dresser. The ice made cracking noises as she poured the water over it. The sounds were too loud, but clear.

"I thought you might need fresh air." The woman set the pitcher down. "I was right. It seemed to be the only thing to wake you up."

Elaina lay on a large, comfortable four-poster bed. The curtains were swept back and tied to the posts. Silk drapes on the balcony door swayed with the evening wind, sweeping against the marble floors. Dresser, nightstand, and chest were all made of marble. Enough visual to confirm that she was in some bedroom. A rather large one. The walls were a neutral beige color and abstract paintings hung throughout. Where was she? Why was she in this room?

Where was Vicq? Had she been dreaming about Vicq coming to rescue her? No, it had to be real. Her body still felt restless from the struggles. The ropes binding her wrists. The cloth tied tight around her lips. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed the memories away.

Elaina propped her elbows into the plush mattress and raised herself up. "Can you tell me where I am?"

The woman turned around, smiling, with a glass of ice cold water in her hand. Her perfect features stunned Elaina. Her blue-black hair was a strange trait indeed, but her bright silver eyes were even more atypical. "I'm Leila." She slowly approached.

"Leila," Elaina whispered. She'd heard the name before.

"You're at a sanctuary for the Outcasts." She extended the glass out to Elaina. "This should help settle your upset stomach. I was certain that all those nasty drugs were out of your body, but you still look dehydrated."

"D?" Elaina accepted the glass, and its chilly temperature brought relief to her heated palms.

"Our resident doctor. You were still unconscious when he came to take samples. You and Vicq are a match, by the way." Leila sat on the edge of the bed, her voice consoling and eyes innocent. "Do you still crave food?"

Elaina wrinkled her nose. What an odd question. "I'm not hungry." She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten, but food wasn't on her mind right now.

"You haven't eaten in almost two days."

Leila reached out, but Elaina jumped back on instinct and some of the water spilled over the top of the glass onto the sheets covering her.

Shame washed over her as Leila's lips turned down in a frown. "I'm sorry." She didn't know who this Leila person was, but she needed to find out why the heck she was here. "How long have I been here?"

"Two days."

Elaina's eyes swept over Leila again. Her sun-kissed skin appeared smooth and flawless just like her well-manicured fingernails. Too perfect. "Are you Dresden?"

Leila chuckled softly. "My mate asked the same thing when he met me, but does it really matter?"

"You're very pretty, that's all." Elaina dropped her gaze to the sweating glass in her grasp. She'd been rude. Perhaps, a show of gratitude for the water instead of demands for answers would have been more polite. She sighed. "Th—"

"So are you."

“Thank you.” Elaina swallowed. She lifted the glass to her lips and let the water flow down her throat. It only acted to soothe her rising fever, but it wasn’t enough. There was something else she needed. “Have you been...tending to me?”

This time Leila looked uncomfortable. She nodded. “I’m one of three women in the sanctuary. I offered.”

“You’re Leo’s mate.” The words came to Elaina’s lips without warning, but her memories came back to her in flashes. “First mated pair at sanctuary, right?”

Leila smiled, showing small but sharp fangs. “So Vicq did share the story with you?”

“Where is he?” Elaina sat up straighter.

“He left your bedside a couple hours ago. He didn’t even trust me to be alone with you. It took a while, but he finally left.” Leila wrung her hands in her lap. “He won’t feed either. You hadn’t eaten or taken any blood...so he refused what we offered as well.”

Guilt pinched at Elaina’s heart. She’d never wanted Vicq to feel pain and hunger just because she couldn’t keep low profile like he suggested. Everything was her fault. Why had she gone into that stupid store for snacks?

“Thank you, Leila, for helping me.” Elaina reached out to grab the other woman’s hand. “Will you let him know that I’m better and that he can feed now?”

Leila laughed, the soft tone echoing throughout the room. “You don’t get it, do you?” She shook her head. “The two of you are so closely bonded now that he’d think twice about feeding from anyone else but you...even on his death bed.”

Elaina swallowed. “So, it’s true. Dresdan mates rely on each other to feed and to survive?”

Leila smiled. “Yes. The exchange between mates is very intimate as most of the feeding between a Dresdan couple is done during sex. When you bite him...when you complete the bond, you won’t crave anyone else but him.” She leaned in and placed a gentle hand against Elaina’s forehead. “At least you’re not running a high temperature anymore.” Standing up, she ran her

hands down the front of her dress. “I think I’m done here. The thing that you need, I can’t give to you.” She turned to leave. “I’ll let Vicq know you’re awake.”

“Thanks, Leila.”

The dark-haired beauty paused at the door and grinned. “We’ll talk later about how you can repay me?”

Elaina laughed under her breath as Leila disappeared back through the door.

In the far corner of the room, she spotted her gray duffle bag. It was the bag with the research papers and contracts she’d managed to swipe while employed with District. She sighed in relief. This wasn’t over. As hybrid or Dresdan, she’d need to help all those people who were stuck at research facilities against their will.

How would Vicq take this decision? How would she tell him that she didn’t plan to stand by and watch while others attempted to take down District 5, but she planned to be right there with them?

Elaina ran her tongue along her gums and then over her top row of teeth. They were sharper than usual. She should have known her transformation was inevitable. The changes had begun years ago when she accepted Vicq into her body. She was grateful for Vicq for giving her another chance to help others whose lives have been compromised by the District.

Glancing about the room, she focused on several objects and noted that her vision was enhanced. She held her hands up to the light...

* * * *

Vicq stood just outside the balcony doors on the patio where he watched Elaina. She lifted her hands to the light and squinted as she examined them. There was no doubt that she observed and felt the changes in her body. Yet, she was still on the verge of transformation and she would remain that way until she accepted his bond by taking his blood. They’d have to cope with the series of changes in her body overtime. It would be his job to teach her how to live like the Dresdan.

Breeze picked up behind him, drying the droplets of water on his skin. The swim in the river had done nothing to rid him of the need to be with Elaina. She was awake now and it was time to claim his mate. No more waiting behind shadows.

She lifted her nose to the air, then jerked in his direction. "How long have you been standing there?"

He grinned. "Not that long."

"Well, I've been waiting for you long enough."

As he crossed the room in long strides, her lips turned up in a smile. Elaina threw the covers away from her and met him at the foot of the bed. He snaked his arms around her waist as she edged closer on her knees. Her palm slid against his neck, caressing him. She lifted her eyes to meet his. "I've missed you so much, Vicq. I wanted to tell you..."

"I wanted to come to you sooner, but I was certain you would reject me. It was easier to protect you from the enemies...and also myself." Red flickered around her irises, love and desire blazing in them. He lowered his head, enticing her lips into a kiss. His fingers flirted with the edges of her silk night gown and brushed against the soft skin of her thighs. He stepped forward, bringing his body closer to hers, pressing his cock into her belly. His erection stirred the moment he sensed her heat and smelled her desire.

A soft moan escaped from her mouth against his lips. "I want to complete the bond." As the words flowed from her mouth, his heart filled with exhilaration at her acceptance. Elaina was who he wanted to spend eternity with. With him was where she belonged. Fate had brought them together.

"There is nothing else I want more than to complete our union."

Their lips parted as they delved deeper into the kiss, taking and giving equally. It started off slowly, igniting a passion within him. Her body grew pliant and the uneasiness he sensed before dissipated. She pulled him to her chest, her palms pressing into his back. He grabbed her by the hips in response, bringing them even closer together. It didn't surprise him when small fangs nipped his tongue. It would take some time for her to get used to them. Their tongues flirted and danced, fighting to keep rhythm.

Vicq only pulled back for her sake. He lifted his hand to take her chin between his fingers and examined the small fangs peeking out from the corners of her lips. "You're cute with these. They suit your feisty side."

She ran her tongue along the bottom of her top row of teeth, as if assessing the sharpness of her newly acquired teeth. "How do I keep them from dropping? Like yours are?"

"That will take time. They won't retreat involuntarily until after the complete transformation." He kissed her lightly on the chin, breathing in her flowery scent. "You're only halfway, but your body wants to accept this change just as my heart wants to bond with you now."

Elaina covered his hands with hers and placed them onto her thighs. "I think I'll enjoy biting you for a change."

Vicq grabbed the edges of her gown and pulled the fabric up and over her head. He sucked in his breath as his gaze roamed over her lovely body. Her creamy skin resembled brown sugar and honey. The delicate curvature of her neck lured him, the vein pulsing thick with life. Her breast heaved up and down with each breath and her nipples were already taut, ready to be licked. He wanted—no, needed—to drape her across the bed and have a snack.

Her fingers danced along the edge of her panties and she dipped her hand down into them. His fangs burst his gums, all control lost. This was what Elaina did to him. How in the hell would he teach her self-control if he gave in to these desires every moment he was with her?

He unbuckled and unzipped his trousers, letting them fall at a bundle around his ankles. Her pink tongue glided across her berry red lips and her eyes danced from his bare chest to the rod pulsing with his seed. Stepping out of his shoes and pants, he grabbed her hips, dipped his head, and took a pebbled nipple between his lips.

Elaina hissed and shivered against his touch. She arched her back, pushing her breasts toward him, allowing him access to fill his appetite. He couldn't get enough of her, and he switched from one breast to the other, nipping with his teeth and flicking with his tongue. Moving up her chest, he kissed along her collarbone and then reached her jugular. Her blood rushed

through her vein like the waves of an ocean during the storm. His tongue and mouth grew parched and he swallowed. He licked her neck, soothing her skin, readying it for the feeding as he always did. She purred beneath his touched and wriggled her hips against his palm. He would have his fill of her, but first, he wanted an appetizer.

“Vicq,” she protested when he pulled away.

He lifted his knee to the bed, sending her backwards. The flimsy panties she wore tied at the waist, allowing him to easily pull them away to reveal her pussy to his greedy eyes. Easing her back on the bed, he pressed kisses to her belly. She urged him on, tangled her fingers into his hair as he moved lower past her stomach and abdomen. He glanced up just in time to see her thick eyelashes sweep down across her cheeks. Pressing his shoulders against her thighs, he readied her for his exploration. The folds of her sex glistened with her arousal and her clit peeked out from under its hood. He pressed a finger into her and she moaned and lifted her hips for more.

“Please, Vicq. No teasing. Not tonight.”

“Believe me, *mi amor*, I intend to give pleasure tonight.” He blew against her wet, pink opening and grinned as she dug her nails into the mattress. Thwarting her attempts to close her legs together, he sunk his tongue into her folds, licking at her soft pussy and sweetened juice. Her moans encouraged his libido and he took in her caramel apple taste before he sucked softly at her clitoris. Her pearl throbbed lightly against his tongue just as the blood throbbed against his veins.

Elaina screamed out her climax and he reveled in her release. Feeding on her essence was the next best thing to feeding on her blood.

She lifted herself and brought him down over her, kissing him. His hardened cock brushed against her belly and she thrust her pelvis forward to meet his. Her legs wrapped around him and he guided his dick to her moist opening. She pressed kisses into his neck, mocking his routine prior to feeding. He sensed her hunger, her bloodlust.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she whispered.

Out of breath, he could not muster a laugh, so he grinned. “Does it hurt when I feed from you?”

She shook her head, lifting her hips, begging for his entry.

“There is your answer.”

He dove deep into her and nearly peaked into climax as a look of ecstasy etched across her face. Her fangs distended, sharp and white against her lips. It was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. As he pumped into her with firm, long strokes, he lowered himself, offering his jugular. He’d never offered himself this way to anyone, but this came natural to him. Vicq would give anything and do anything for Elaina.

Her sharp fangs pierced him, slicing through the virgin skin on his neck like a knife. He groaned against her shoulder, trying to hold back the pending release, but as she drew the blood from his vein, the seed inside his dick surged to the head. Biting into his lip, he pounded her while she fed on his blood. Their heartbeats joined together in rhythm as she drank. Time had somehow stopped for them and visions of Elaina, his mate—beautiful, carefree, no worries—swarmed his head. It dawned on him that this was Elaina’s wish. She’d always wanted to live a life without fear.

“You have nothing to fear, Elaina. I’ll protect you forever.”

She extracted her fangs from his neck and cried out, her orgasm claiming her, traces of his blood smearing her lips. This image took him over the edge and he followed her in release, erupting like a geyser. His body shook uncontrollably, the slightest touch from her sending him into tremors of pleasure. Hot seed still pumped within her as he regained his strength.

Her breathing slowed. “I think I have a toothache.”

He laughed. “Oh, yeah? Well you just bit the hell out of my neck, toothache and all.”

She smiled. “I learn from the best.”

Elaina had once been a tracker until she made one move that had led her into his arms, and now he’d love her for an eternity.

The End

About the Author

Ambrielle Kirk lives, works, and plays in Atlanta, GA. She has a serious addiction for reading and writing great stories. Romantic fiction is how she defines her preferred genre, but specializes in writing paranormal, urban fantasy, and erotic romance. She loves alpha-heroes, probably because she married one. Her demanding day job keeps her busy and on her toes, but her characters fill her imagination and keep her up at all hours of the night. For more information, visit her website at www.ambriellekirk.com or email her at ambrielle.kirk@yahoo.com.