

VAMPIRE WITCH

[Book One of the Vampire Witch Trilogy]

a novel by

Eileen Sheehan

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Notice** Portions of this story may prove too graphic, sexually explicit, or violent for sensitive readers. This novel is intended for the mature adult.

This book is dedicated to my wonderful readers. Your positive feedback and connection to my characters keeps my imagination flowing.

PROLOGUE

It's been over fifty years since the nuclear bomb was released during the war between the New World Order and the Brotherhood of Man. Some parts of the planet suffered more than others. A limited number of areas were fortunate to be only lightly kissed by the toxic radiation lingering over the earth's surface like a thick blanket of fog. Most of those areas were remote and of no interest to the powers that be. It was the more populated cities that captured their notice. The rapid cleanup of these cities was placed as top priority for all scientists employed by the Order. The remote areas were left to the whims of Mother Nature.

The majority of the planet didn't fare well under the nuclear onslaught, nor did its people. Those who weren't wealthy or connected enough to retreat to an underground facility when the bombs were released suffered bodily mutation of the most grotesque form. Plant life and animal life was also either mutated or destroyed. Food became such a scarcity that people took to eating each other.

Prepared for the devastation the nuclear bombing would cause, the New World Order outfitted its army with special gear and wearing apparel to patrol the earth's surface within days of the blast. It took a number of years and many lost lives before the mutants were finally driven underground.

The New World Order scientists stood ready to utilize their technology to reduce the radiation poisoning in the air to a safe level. It wasn't long before the majority of those who hid themselves below ground surfaced to rebuild their homes and resume their lives.

Science devised a way to clear the soil and water of contamination, but it was costly and done only in the most populated or valued parts of the planet. The lesser areas were left to the slow cleansing and purifying process of nature. The one thing they couldn't rectify was the damage done to the ozone layer. Precautions needed to be taken to protect skin and eyes from the intense rays of the sun, but otherwise they were able to slowly replant and rebuild.

Encampments were maintained by the New World Order near the entrances to the mutant's underground world. Battles broke out periodically as the Order sought to prevent them from returning above ground and scheme to seize control of the planet.

Earth was divided into sections, with a representative of the New World Order dictating each one. Our dictator, Bartholomew Muse, was younger than most and eager to prove himself by showing his strength and power over the people. He put a new meaning to the word tyrant. This resulted in rebellion. Many turned their support toward the remnants of the Brotherhood of Man.

My mother was one such person. My father served in Bartholomew's army and was killed in a skirmish with the mutants when I was just a babe in arms. Even sadder than the fact that we lost him, was knowing he wasn't a supporter of Bartholomew in his heart. He served because he didn't want to bring the attention and distress to our family that he knew Bartholomew was capable of.

Mother couldn't have been more opposite than my father. She possessed a bold, rebellious side that surfaced fully when the news of my father's death reached her. My father's body was barely cold when she rounded up a small band of rebels to fight alongside her against

Bartholomew's tyranny at every possible moment. It didn't take long to attract Bartholomew's full attention. He made it his mission to hunt them down.

I was eight years old when he finally managed to find and kill my mother. We were attending a concert in central park. Mother left me with my grandparents while she went to speak with a few people on the opposite side of the large green. I remember the way her white gauze dress caressed her ankles as she gracefully weaved her way through rows and rows of empty chairs awaiting an audience still mingling in small clusters until the start of the concert. The air was abuzz with laughter and joy.

Then it happened.

Typical Bartholomew style, soldiers armed with machine guns came out of nowhere and took down at least half of the crowd before they were able to scatter. It was a horror show. People ran willy-nilly while screaming and falling all around me. The once serene emerald grass was now a crimson sea of terror. I stood, frozen, while watching my mother's body flop like a rag doll as bullets pelted her slender torso. When the onslaught stopped, she lay motionless on the ground. Before I could get my feet to take me to my mother, my grandfather's vice grip pulled me from the scene.

We lived just a few blocks from the city park and had walked to the concert that evening. My grandparents must have been prepared for something like this to eventually happen because there was no panic or confusion in their actions. They shoved me into a car that miraculously appeared out of nowhere and whisked me off to a lone

cabin in a remote and desolate part of the country that was ready and waiting for inhabitants.

That was ten years ago.

Those years passed with little change in our daily routine as I grew and learned the basics of survival in our barren world from my grandparents. Other than what I was able to view on the internet, I had minimal contact with the outside world.

Then, I met Geo...

CHAPTER ONE

The ever-present warm breeze carried a hint of honeysuckle from the vines clinging to the decayed cinder block building. I slid my sunglasses onto my head and shaded my eyes from the blistering sun as I took in the wonder of a small butterfly cluster fluttering from one blossom to the next. Their graceful wings sported a brilliant kaleidoscope of colors that complemented the rich tangerine, trumpet shaped flowers. I looked through the view finder of my camera and adjusted the focus ring until I had a clear view of one of nature's surviving and exquisite works of art.

My finger hovered over the shutter release button. I started to sweat with anticipation. Scenes of this sort in this part of the world were highly sought after in the photographic art circle. I may not deal much with the world around my remote little nucleus, but my grandfather somehow managed. He had all the right connections to get my photos to the people who would pay top dollar. He'd done it several times over the last few years. What began as a hobby became somewhat of a profession for me. It helped us purchase the supplies we were unable to produce on our own for our daily living. It gave me a sense of purpose and made me feel useful within the family structure.

I regretted the waste of battery life my digital camera suffered because of the insignificant shots I'd taken of dull, lifeless nothing throughout the day. How was I to know I'd stumble upon such beauty in the middle of this deluge of destruction? I wagered I had enough

battery juice for at least one shot. I needed to take my time to make sure I got the best take first try.

Just one good shot, I thought.

I took a deep breath as I steadied my hand and said softly, "Make it count."

"Make what count?" uttered a deep, masculine, and incredibly sultry voice from behind me.

I couldn't believe my bad luck as the camera flew from my startled fingers. When it bounced off my combat boots I could hear the click of the shutter releasing. My one shot was wasted.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" I shouted as I crouched down to retrieve my camera and inspect it closely.

Sure enough, the battery was dead.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too. My name is not stupid, it's Geordie. Geo for short," said the same deep masculine voice, whose allure I would have probably succumbed to had I not been so agitated.

I reluctantly pulled my attention from my camera to study the newly arrived stranger. His long shaggy hair billowed out from beneath a worn and dirt caked wide brimmed Indiana Jones fedora. It looked like under all the dust his matted locks of thick curls would be raven black when clean. He sported an equally unkempt beard that he either kept closely cropped or was relatively new. The stench of his sweaty body beneath a cotton turtleneck and cotton trench coat permeated the air as he bowed low in greeting.

He removed his sunglasses to display rich brown, doe-like eyes that were still protected from the piercing sun's rays by the shadows

of the fedora's broad rim. They danced with amusement when I threw my hand over my nose and mouth in response to his stench.

"I thought I was alone," I managed to say while practically choking on the words.

"I know," he replied.

I waited for him to elaborate his statement. When he didn't, I looked back at the picturesque scene of butterflies and honeysuckle with forlorn longing.

"Was it important?" he asked.

"Who are you?" I asked suspiciously.

"I already introduced myself," he shot back at me, "which is more than you've done."

"Anyone from these parts wouldn't have to ask if a shot like that was important," I said suspiciously. "They would know."

I figured if I stood and brought myself to full height he still had an easy eight inches on me. I guessed him to be over six foot tall. My five feet four-inch frame was slight and wiry, but I wasn't to be underestimated. My grandfather, who was still in phenomenal physical condition, took great pains over the years to teach me multiple forms of self-defense with and without the aid of a weapon. I could take down a man twice my size before he knew what hit him. There looked to be a considerable amount of bulk beneath the layers of clothing he wore, but if push came to shove I thought I could take him. The fact that I carried my grandfather's skinner strapped to my calf added to my confidence. I'd sharpened its blade just that morning. I decided to stay crouching just a little longer to assure easy access to the skinner if need be.

“You’re not from here either,” the stranger practically said with irritated defense, “so keep the hied.”

I’d never heard that saying and had no idea what it meant.

“Keep the hied? Where are you from?” I persisted.

“Where are you from?” he taunted.

I’d placed my sunglasses back over my deep brown, almond shaped eyes. It was as if he could see right through the dark lens as he locked his own captivating ones with mine for an easy thirty seconds. It had to be the longest thirty seconds of my life. He made a connection that was strangely alluring and I felt a fluttering deep inside me. When I was finally able, I looked away uncomfortably.

Standing slowly, I slung my camera strap over my shoulder and started down the once graveled road at a pace just below a jog. I was careful to keep my focus on the heat waves hovering above the ground in the distance while I waited for the fluttering to dissipate.

“Hey!” he shouted with obvious annoyance after me.

I didn’t turn around.

To my agitation, he was next to me in no time. I studied him through my peripheral vision as best I could. He sported the swagger of someone with confidence. It was odd for such a disheveled man. His sexy voice and alluring stare was rapidly overshadowed by his appearance and stench.

“You stink,” I growled.

“We all suffer this terrain, heat, and sparseness of water,” he said with a shrug.

Was he implying I stank? I’d been wandering the dusty terrain for the majority of the day so I was hot and sweaty, but did I stink like

him? I wanted to sniff my armpits or at least slap the dust from my pant legs, but I refused to stoop that low in front of him. Instead I smirked and kept looking toward the heat haze in the distance.

“How can you stand wearing all those layers?” I quizzed.

“Do you see that heat haze ahead?” he asked.

Was he kidding me? Of course, I saw the heat haze. Anyone with a pair of working eyes could see the heat haze. It completely monopolized the horizon.

When I looked at him like he was retarded he continued, “It’s like the carrot held just far enough away to remain unreachable. You walk and walk and walk toward it and never reach it, right?”

I grunted in agreement.

“Wrong,” he growled. “We’re in it right now. It’s our wounded ozone and it’s everywhere. It’s loaded with UVC rays. Do you know what they can do to you?”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said with a chuckle of disbelief as I looked around me for signs of the haze that looked so far away. If those rays were in our immediate environment I’m sure my grandmother would have come up with some form of protection for them. Come to think of it, she had created the balm I wore on my skin.

“Okay, so maybe it’s not everywhere,” he relented, “but it’s pretty damned near everywhere and you know it. I would rather cook inside these layers than fry under the onslaught of those rays. Besides, cotton absorbs the sweat and helps keep a body cool.” He looked me up and down and added, “You’re crazy.”

“Cotton also holds the stench,” I said in a low tone meant only for me.

I wasn't sure if he was trying to goad me into a confrontation or if he really thought I was crazy for dressing like I did. Unlike my new-found companion, I sported baggy faded jeans and an equally faded, loose fitting tee shirt that was complete with a hole or two in places where modesty didn't matter much. I suppose if I was to be concerned about the effects of the UVC rays then what I wore would be completely inappropriate, but I wasn't concerned. What he didn't know was that my body was protected with a homemade sunscreen concocted by my grandmother who happened to be a master herbalist. I didn't know much about who was left out there practicing herbology and herbal magic but I was sure she was amongst the best of the best. She claimed her concoction was potent enough to protect me from anything the sun could dish out. I'd been wearing it for over ten years without so much as a tan, so clearly, she was on to something. I often thought about how unfortunate it was that we were stuck so far away from society. She could make a killing on the formula if she and my grandfather weren't such hermits. When I suggested he sell her sunscreen over the web like he did my photos he said the delivery would be too complicated. I suppose he was right.

"Okay, so you protect yourself from the sun with those stinky clothes," I grumbled as I did my best to move past the insult he'd just lashed at me. "How do you explain that disgusting matted mop on your head?"

"I may not know your name, but I certainly have a handle on your manners," he said laughingly.

I scowled, but said nothing. Since I was a babe in arms, it was drilled into me that strangers were not to be trusted. Any one of them

could be one of Bartholomew's men. Even though he killed my mother, the sick tyrant swore to kill her offspring as well. I occasionally encountered a stranger, but only in passing. They never stuck around to exchange niceties like this character was trying to do. I was a little lost on how to deal with him. My grandparent's warnings about Bartholomew bellowed inside my head like an enormous, annoying bell in a belfry. Was this stranger one of his men?

"Why are you here?" I demanded.

It was a fair question. We were traveling in one of the most desolate parts of the country. I'd wandered a little further from home than normal because I was determined to find that one photo that would give me and my grandparents a comfortable cushion for the better part of the year. Had I not wandered, I probably would have been spared his irritating and stinky company.

"I'm searching for someone," he replied.

"Here?" I gasped in disbelief as I looked around to emphasize exactly where we were.

"Yep," he replied.

"Good luck with that," I said mockingly as I picked up my pace.

I was about twenty feet away from him when I heard him say, "You look like you might fit the description of who I seek., Are you Casey Merker?"

I stopped in my tracks.

"What do you want with Casey?" I asked nervously, while refusing to turn and look at him.

"She's who I search for," he explained impatiently.

"Why?" I continued, still not looking at him.

“Are you Casey?” he asked suspiciously. “I believe you are.”

“I didn’t say that,” I said briskly. “Why do you want her?”

“If you aren’t Casey, you know her,” he persisted.

“I didn’t say that either,” I said.

“Casey could be the name for either a boy or a girl, yet you asked if I knew her,” he goaded.

I said nothing. He’d trapped me with my own stupidity. I hastened my step in hopes he’d fall behind and give up.

It didn’t happen.

He had to be one of the most annoying people on the planet.

“I really wish you’d leave me alone,” I grumbled.

“Tell me where I can find Casey Merker and I will,” he said flatly.

“Tell me why you want her and I might,” I said.

“It’s a private matter,” he said with hesitation.

“Well then, so is her whereabouts,” I blurted before I was even aware I’d said it.

What an absolute moronic thing to do. There was no way I could claim ignorance of Casey Merker now. I’d be stuck with this foul smelling, nasty looking character until I fessed up what I knew.

He shrugged his shoulders, stuck his hands in the pockets of the dust ridden, baggy jeans that hugged his slender hips and lowered his head as if he was forging through a storm. His body language alone told me all I needed to know. When he bluntly informed me that he was going to stick with me like glue until I told him where to find Casey, it came as no surprise.

We walked in silence for the next forty-five minutes. True to his word, he hung close.

We were almost to the road that led to my home when I decided I had to say something to get rid of him. The last thing I wanted was for him to know where I lived. Besides the fact that my grandparents forbade strangers in our home, they'd be particularly unhappy if I happened to arrive with this unsavory looking character at my heels. What if he was a scout for Bartholomew? Even if he wasn't one of Bartholomew's men, he was clearly a nut case.

"Well," I cleared my throat, "this is where I leave you."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear back there," he said.

His arrogant tone filtered through a grin that bordered on mischievous as it displayed a row of perfectly formed and well cared for teeth. They looked an odd contrast to the rest of his appearance.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," I responded with equal arrogance and far more authority. "This is where I leave you."

We locked eyes once again and that uncomfortable flutter deep within me returned. I quickly looked away, shuffling from foot to foot in a display of impatience.

He pulled an envelope from within his filthy, smelly overcoat and waved it in my direction.

"I've searched for Casey Merker for the better part of a month. I'm fed up, dirty, and exhausted. I was about to give up and return a failure when I stumbled upon you. You at least know of her. Can you please be decent enough to point me in her direction?" A long silence passed between us before he continued, "Without your help I may never find her." When I continued to remain silent he shrugged and,

in a tone so deep it resembled a growl added, "If you want to be the one to tell Casey Merker that her mother sent her a letter, but you wouldn't help me get it to her, then so be it. Let it be on your head, not mine."

If I hadn't already been aware of his irritation, the way he stuffed the envelope back into the inside pocket of his trench coat and turned on his heels certainly made it clear.

My mind reeled. My mother was alive? How could that be? I saw her die with my own eyes. Had she survived and my grandparents whisked me away without realizing it? Was that letter really from her or some imposter? The desire to know far outweighed the caution I knew I should always take with a stranger.

"I'm Casey Merker," I bellowed as I stretched my hand out for the letter. "Give it to me."

An angry snarl consumed his reddening face as he turned toward me and lifted his feet up, one by one to display the soles of his dust riddled boots.

"You made me walk all that way in these pathetic boots when you could have told me who you were from the start. What kind of person are you?" he asked.

The genuine distress on his face caused a tinge of regret within me. I shook it off quickly. I needed to keep my head about me and not succumb to whatever power this stranger possessed where I was concerned. That fluttering was just not normal.

"Show me the envelope," I demanded.

He pulled it slowly from his inner pocket and held it out for me to see. My name was clearly written on it in a style of handwriting I knew all too well.

“My mother’s alive,” I gasped.

“That she is,” he said with a smile, “and she’s waiting for you to join her.”

“How can this be?” I mused. “I saw her die with my own eyes.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“My grandparents stood next to me,” I explained. “We all saw it. She was shot in the chest at least ten times before she went down. No one could survive that... no one. They got me away from the chaos before Bartholomew could discover I was there too.”

“So, you saw her fall, but you never checked her body?” he asked incredulously.

“I was eight years old,” I scoffed, “and, like I said, she was peppered with bullets to the chest. Even at such a young age I knew she was dead.”

“Yet, she wasn’t,” he mused. “Her parents should have...”

“Stop,” I cut his words off with a brisk command. “Don’t ever criticize my grandparents. Leaving her body lying there in order to save me was one of the hardest things they ever had to do.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment and nodded.

“It probably was,” he said softly.

With my hand still outstretched I wiggled my fingers to indicate I wanted the envelope.

“I can see the resemblance between you and your mother on more ways than one,” he said wryly. He hesitated only briefly before

handing the envelope to me. "I'll be glad to be rid of it," he said. "The next time her majesty asks for volunteers I'll be hiding in the back of the crowd. I can tell you that."

"Her majesty," I repeated his phrase, clearly confused.

"Your mother is the leader of our little society. Somewhere over time she came to be known as majesty," he volunteered. With a quick wink and a broad smile, he added, "That makes you our princess."

My fingers trembled as I opened the letter while my mind tried to wrap around the wild story Geo was spinning. None of this sounded plausible. Yet there I stood, holding a letter written in the handwriting I knew as well as my own. It was the same handwriting that recorded days gone by in the pages of my mother's journal. That journal was one of the few remaining things I possessed that belonged to her. I read it almost daily.

My eyes blurred as I eagerly consumed her message. She wrote how she'd barely survived the gunshot wounds she suffered during the slaughter of concert goers by Bartholomew's gang. Left for dead with the faintest of heartbeats, she was discovered by a band of renies and taken to their underground city.

"Renies," I mused aloud. "What are renies?"

"That's slang for renegades," Geo offered. "After the nuclear blast wiped out half the Eco system and the Order took over what was left of the lands, small groups of renegades banded together and went underground to escape their rule."

“I knew about the groups. My mother was part of one. I didn’t know they called themselves renies,” I said softly as I continued to read.

She went on to tell me about how the renies nurtured and cared for her during a tortuous and lengthy recovery. Once sufficiently healed, she immediately sought out my whereabouts. My grandparents prepared a cabin in one of the remotest and hardest hit parts of the country. They opted to endure its lonely desolation for my safety’s sake, should anything happen to her. She knew of the cabin, but not its exact location. Not realizing she survived and would be looking for me, my grandparents did a thorough job of hiding our whereabouts. She wasn’t able to discover our exact location, but she did learn I was alive, well, and safely hidden away. That was enough reassurance for her mind to be focused completely on the task before her.

Confident that I was in good hands, she put all of her attention into repaying the tiny group of renies for their kindness. A former chemist for a pharmaceutical company and a master herbalist trained by my grandmother, she created ways to cultivate and nurture their food source and ecological surroundings. Word of the thriving underground community spread rapidly and soon renies from other underground groups found their way to their tiny village. It wasn’t long before that tiny underground village expanded into a rather large underground kingdom. Along with this growth came the need for order and a leader to enforce it. The vote to make her their sovereign leader was unanimous.

The first few years propagating the new kingdom were fruitful and rewarding. She was kept busy from arising to retiring and the years flew by. Then one day she woke up and looked around at the beautiful world she'd helped create and realized that it meant nothing if she couldn't share it with me. She begged me to return to her, with Geo as my escort. She assured me Geo was more than capable of guiding and protecting me if the need arose.

I crumpled the letter in my hands until my knuckles were white. My mother was alive. She'd left me and my grandparents to struggle in this desolate hell for the last ten years while she nurtured and cared for perfect strangers. Now that she was done playing mama to them she wanted me back. What about my grandparents? She made no mention of wanting them with her. After all the love and nurturing she'd had from her parents right up until the day she was shot, this came as a genuine shock. My blood was boiling and it wasn't because it was about one-hundred degrees. I felt like I was about to explode with rage.

Geo must have sensed my emotions because he backed up a considerable distance while silently studying me.

When I finally felt like I could talk again, I looked him squarely in the eye and said with a controlled tone that surprised me, "You delivered the letter. You can leave now."

"I'm supposed to bring you back with me," he said hesitantly.

"Well, that's not happening," I said, "so go."

He looked at me long and hard and then gave a curt nod.

"If you change your mind, I'll be camped up in that green for a few days," he said as he pointed in the direction of a mountain in the

distance. "I need a good meal, a refreshing wash, and a little rest before I start back."

I studied the mountain from where we stood. There was a small visible patch of green that looked to be a clearing with vegetation. Knowing the area like I did, it was a wise choice. Much of the water in these parts was still toxic, as was the soil; which was why the soles of his shoes were in the condition they were in.

I was lucky to have the benefit of my grandmother's wisdom. Without her concoctions, we would have mutated long ago. Those little patches of green were the only safe havens in this land of destruction. I had no idea why they weren't hit, but I was thankful when I did happen to stumble upon one, because it didn't happen often.

As he walked away, he stopped and turned to me.

"You know, not all the world is as toxic as here," he said before continuing on his way.

Yeah, some is worse, I thought.

I stood watching Geo until he disappeared over the knoll of the dirt road before heading in the direction of home. I'd calmed down enough to allow myself to think more clearly about the words my mother scribbled on the extremely thin parchment I still clutched.

It was another fifteen minutes before I felt the softness of the grass surrounding our homestead beneath my feet. I stopped to inspect the area. Our cabin was nestled between the two oak trees my grandfather planted almost immediately after our arrival. With the help of my grandmother, they grew at three times the normal rate they would have if left to nature. Their thick foliage caressed the slate

roof that protected us from the unforgiving rays of the sun. It made a peaceful and inviting view.

One hundred feet to the left of the cabin and about twenty feet to the right of my grandfather's work shed was my grandmother's herbal greenhouse with an attached vegetable garden. The neat rows of plants, that thrived in the soil she'd treated to make sure the earth's toxins wouldn't penetrate it, made a colorful canvas against the bleakness of our exterior world. I shook my head as I once again thought of how much the world could benefit from her wisdom and skills. I wished I knew what to do to convince her to venture out and share.

I smoothed the letter, folded it back up along its creases, and returned it to the envelope before tucking it beneath my shirt in the back waistband of my jeans. The sharp edges of the envelope scratched at the small of my back like a knife, reminding me of its presence with every step I took.

My grandfather stepped out onto the porch sporting a wave and a broad grin. I smiled at the love he so clearly held for me. It felt in stark contrast to what I now felt for my newly resurrected mother. My hand flew to my back and touched the letter thoughtfully. Should I tell them their daughter was still alive?

CHAPTER TWO

I lay in my narrow bed that butted against the wall of my small, but cozy, bedroom and focused on not vomiting my dinner. My conversation with my grandparents hadn't gone as expected and my entire body was reacting. I practiced the controlled breathing method my grandparents were such strong advocates of whenever a stressful situation occurred.

It wasn't helping.

I was about to give in and let it all purge forth.

I was sitting up and holding a bucket to my chin when I heard a light tapping on my door. I recognized the tap. It was my grandmother.

My emotions were mixed. I wanted nothing more than to be left alone, but I also knew the distraction would take my mind off my stomach's rebellion and possibly quell it. Besides, there was no sense in delaying the inevitable. When my grandmother set her mind on a topic, getting her to drop it was like trying to get a dog to give up a juicy bone. I heaved a deep sigh; partly out of resignation and partly to control the urge to vomit. I put the bucket onto the floor and beckoned her to enter.

Long white hair fell across her still smooth, oval shaped face as she peered cautiously around the door. Even in her advanced years, her beauty couldn't be denied. Deep brown eyes twinkled with mischief like that of a young girl's as she smiled that pearly white, toothy smile I knew so well.

For the most part, my grandmother was a happy sort. The hardships we endured living in such a remote and barren part of the world didn't dampen her inherent jovial spirit. The clouding of her face during our conversation at dinner was the first scowl I recall in a long, long time. As I watched her five feet, six-inch-tall, slender frame glide into my room with such self-assured stateliness, I was reminded of a regal queen entering court.

"Are you up to a little chat, dear?" she asked, sweetly.

I knew saying 'no' would be meaningless so I simply nodded.

"I want you to understand the reason I withheld the fact that your grandfather and I knew your mother lived," she continued while positioning herself in the oversized chair next to my dresser. "As you know, your mother was seriously wounded. We all saw the bullets enter her chest. She gave your grandfather and me clear instructions to make sure you were safe, should she be killed. She made us promise to follow them to the letter. When we saw her go down, we honored that promise and scooted you out of there as fast as we could. We couldn't bear the thought of leaving her body there since we knew mutants were spotted in the area. Your grandfather sent men back for it, but it was gone. It took the better part of a year for us to discover the truth of what occurred. We contemplated telling you, but you were so young and... well, your mother was no longer herself. We felt it best to leave things as they were."

"She explained what happened in her note," I choked out softly.

"Did she now?" my grandmother said with a raised brow.

My throat was so strained from trying to control the hurt I felt over my mother's abandonment of us -and perhaps my grandparent's

apparent abandonment of my mother- that I could barely swallow, let alone speak again.

“Then you understand why we think it’s best to simply go on as normal,” my grandmother said as she stood up to leave.

“She knew where I was and didn’t want me. She didn’t want any of us. She left us here in this devastated hell while she lived in a lush underground kingdom,” I said. “I hate her.”

My grandmother moved to my side and held me close.

“Your mother hasn’t been the same since the shooting. Try to remember that. The mother you knew and loved is no more. Remember her, love her, but don’t expect her to return. She’s gone,” she said with soothing authority.

“She wants me to go with her now. After all these years, she’s finally decided she wants me with her,” I moaned.

“That can’t happen,” my grandmother said with a shake of her head and an icy tone. “Forget about it,” she continued insistently as she patted my cheek. “Now, get some rest. Tomorrow is a new day and all will look differently for you.” As she started to leave, she stopped with her hand on the door and looked at me. “We’ll work in the garden tomorrow. I have some new lessons for you.”

“Did you ever contact her?” I asked, wistfully.

“Your grandfather has had a few dealings with her,” she replied.

“She said she doesn’t know our whereabouts,” I mused.

“There’s a good reason for that, my child,” she said.

“How can you contact her and keep our whereabouts a secret? I don’t understand,” I said.

“There’s a force field of sorts around us,” she explained with reluctance. “If she really wanted to find us, she would. She has the ability. Now get some sleep.”

I watched her gently pull the door closed and rolled onto my side with my back to the room. It had been a long day. The hunt for that perfect picture proved grueling and arduous. That alone would have been enough to exhaust me, but the stress of running into Geo and receiving my mother’s letter on top of it put me over the edge. I was tired, cranky, and unreasonable. My grandmother was probably right. Sleep was what I needed. Tomorrow was a new day.

The morning proved my grandmother to be correct. I felt like myself again.

It was my intention to destroy my mother’s note, but something nagging at me in the recesses of my mind stopped me. Instead, I tucked it in the back of my underwear drawer. I was determined to forget about it.

I did fairly well at keeping the note and my mother out of my mind for the majority of the day. My grandmother filled the morning with botany lessons, which helped tremendously. I found the world of horticulture, botany, and herbology vastly interesting. I marveled over her ability to make things grow in such a barren and decrepit environment. Our little patch of home was a lush oasis in a vast desert of destruction.

I've been my grandmother's student for as long as I can remember. I know the names and can identify plants that are, for the most part, long extinct in the world around me. Although, I have no idea why that would be something she wanted me to learn. She even taught me how to mix them to bring out their medicinal qualities.

When I asked her why she focused on teaching me about plants that were extinct in the world outside of our little cocoon, she simply shrugged, smiled, and said, "You never know when it will come in handy."

My grandfather made certain we kept contact with the rest of humanity via the world wide web. It miraculously managed to survive the two minor and one major nuclear wars that occurred within the time span of fifty years. In fact, it improved. Since the minor wars occurred long before the major one took place, it gave time for the geeks of the world to prepare and create ways to save or salvage what they considered most important. The world wide web was top on their list.

Underground communities with methods of communication and transportation that exceeded that of the surface world were also created after the minor wars took place. There was speculation that the planet would be destroyed to the extent that life wouldn't be able to exist on the surface if there was a nuclear war. Of course, that wasn't true. The war did, however, alter the composition of much of the planet's life. It destroyed or mutated the plants that weren't hardy enough to withstand the toxic onslaught. This created a domino effect and the majority of the animals that remained on the surface either mutated at various intensities or were lost. In turn, this affected the

survival methods of humans on the surface whose DNA was also affected by the radiation. Not only did they lose much of their humanity, but they turned to cannibalism.

The fact that the New World Order prepared in advance for the effects the nuclear war would have on the planet's surface and were able to clean it up to the point it was livable again in a relatively short period of time was fortunate for the poor and middle class who survived the toxic onslaught without or with little mutation. The cost of retreating to an underground haven that those 'in the know' managed to have ready was astronomical and something only the wealthy could afford. It was this fact that made me curious about my mother. We were far from wealthy before we were separated in battle so how did she manage to live below ground? Did she have a wealthy benefactor? Were these renies wealthy protesters? Since I had no idea who saved her, there was no way of knowing.

Or was there?

Could Geo provide me with the answers that were grilling in my head? I wanted to know how my mother survived. Her letter left a lot unclear. From where I stood during Bartholomew's army invasion, her chest was riddled with holes. How could anyone still have a heartbeat, even a minute one, after such an onslaught of bullets? Where did the renies take her when they found her? Who found her? Who were these renies? Who healed her? How did they heal her? How did she become the queen of a subterranean community? Was it simply because of her skills with horticulture and biology?

I smiled to myself at the thought of anyone being labeled a Queen. I didn't think that antiquated type of monarchy still existed. Apparently, it did. Underground, at least.

As angry as I was over my mother's abandonment of her own flesh and blood, I was equally curious about her. I wanted answers. I needed answers.

I knew I was going against my grandparent's wishes and instructions but I just had to have these answers. I went to bed early and arose a few hours before the rest of the house. Packing a few necessities, I set out for the mountain to find Geo. I patted my bag as I carefully strapped it to my back. I hoped I'd find him within the day, but just in case it took longer I'd have a little water, a few toiletries, and a compact sleeping tent to get me through the night.

I had a stomach that rarely demanded sustenance. Because of this, I not only forgot to eat breakfast, I also forgot to pack food. I'd been walking about three hours when it woke up and spoke to me. Food was always plentiful in my household so hunger wasn't something I was accustomed to. I didn't like the sensation as I continued my search for Geo. If the drive to know more about my mother hadn't been so strong I'd have returned home for a good meal.

It was early afternoon before I found him sitting in the shade of a thick foliaged tree on a large boulder near a clear, slow traveling stream. He had his feet submerged in the cool liquid. He was so clean I almost didn't recognize him. In fact, if he hadn't hailed me I might have walked right on by thinking him a stranger to avoid.

He'd removed the white soot-like dust from his body. His clean rich raven curls shone brilliant in the sun's rays and he'd

removed the hair from his face. His lack of that filthy trench coat and stinky turtleneck displayed a perfectly buff upper torso. His pants were rolled halfway up his strong, shapely calves. What an incredible transformation. Had I not grown so familiar with his sultry voice from his incessant talking while following me the other day, I think I would have refused to believe him the same person.

“You’re starting to tan,” I said uncomfortably instead of what I wanted to say, which was ‘You’re a hunk!’

“I see that,” he scowled. “This feels so good I hate to load up with all of those layers again, but at least I gave them a good wash.”

I shuffled uncomfortably under his scrutinizing gaze. His perfection magnified my imperfections to me. Because of my aversion to food, I was slender to the agonizing threat of being considered scrawny. The only things that saved me from such a stigma were my curvy hips and well developed bust. I suddenly regretted ignoring my grandmother’s pleas to eat more often and in larger quantities.

“Why aren’t you tanned? You’re as white as someone living below ground,” he said

Phew! That was a lot better than if he’d ask why I was built like a curvy scarecrow with boobs. I smiled and reached for the small tub of my grandmother’s concoction I’d been sure to stuff in my sack.

“I use this daily,” I said as I handed it to him. “Put it on sparingly, but thoroughly.”

He reached for the tub with a nod of thanks and sniffed it as if it was something to eat. I raised my eyebrow in surprise when he mumbled the names of a few of the plants to himself before smoothing a thin layer of the goop down his arms and across his chest.

“You have to rub it in really good,” I added.

“Could you make this on your own?” he asked.

“I’ve never thought to try, but I’ve seen her do it often enough that I could probably manage,” I replied.

“This is like gold, you know,” he said as he shook the container in my direction for emphasis.

I did know. Between my grandfather’s insistence that it would be too difficult to distribute and my grandmother’s fear that it would bring too much attention to us and destroy our little world of peaceful living... or worse, bring Bartholomew’s attention to us... I’d stopped pressing the issue.

“I’ll need your help with my back,” he said matter-of-factly as he turned his back toward me and held the jar for me to dip my fingers into.

My hands trembled to the beat of my heart as I did his bidding. I’d never been this close to a man who wasn’t my grandfather. The fact that he cleaned up so well didn’t help matters. I picked up the faint scent of whatever it was he’d used to wash with. It smelled vaguely familiar. Was it Frankincense perhaps? I couldn’t tell for sure, but it blended well with his body’s inherent musky scent and left me a bit heady for a brief moment.

I shook my head as nonchalantly as I could to clear it and adjusted my waist long hair over my shoulders to help camouflage what I was actually doing. With a sigh of determination, I willed my hands to steady themselves while I smoothed my grandmother’s sunscreen all over Geo’s broad, muscular shoulders and down his narrowing back. His skin felt surprisingly cool, soft, and smooth as my

palms gently pushed and kneaded the ointment into every exposed inch.

“It’s been a long time since I have been touched,” he moaned.

I pulled my hands back like they’d been burned on hot coals.

“Take it easy, princess,” he muttered with a sexy, gravel-like chuckle, “I didn’t mean anything by it other than the fact that it felt good.”

“I’m not accustomed to touching people like this,” I admitted.

He slowly surveyed our surroundings and beyond and with a quick nod and said, “I’m not surprised.” As if by second thought he continued, “How do you get it smeared all over you each day?”

“I have a... Oh no, I forgot my applicator,” I said with genuine dismay.

Without my applicator, I’d have to have assistance getting the ointment in places I couldn’t reach.

“Does that mean you’re coming with me?” he asked, hopefully.

“I came for answers,” I said, firmly. “Tell me about Sybil.”

“Sybil?” he asked with raised brow. “Do you mean your mother?”

“My mother died ten years ago. This woman is a stranger to me,” I patiently explained. “I can’t think of a woman who would abandon me for so many years without so much as a ‘how are you’ as my mother. Her name is Sybil. Sybil Camron-Merker.”

“Now, that’s a mouthful,” he said thoughtfully. “I had no idea what her real name was. No wonder everyone just calls her Majesty.”

I let out a groan and motioned for him to start talking.

“Wouldn’t you rather ask your mother?” he asked, softly.

When I vehemently shook my head, I thought I detected something in his eyes. Was it guilt? Sadness? Disapproval? I didn't know enough about him to be sure of the emotion, but there was definitely something going on within him.

With a sigh of resignation, he invited me to sit beside him and dip my feet in the cool water while I hammered him with one question after the other. Although he answered each one as it was asked, there were times when his hesitancy made me wonder if I was getting the full truth or just a portion of it.

I discovered Geo wasn't originally of my mother's people. Until recently, he'd lived above ground in one of the surviving parts of the country. He made it clear that his home was far less affected and more habitable than mine. He was a member of a group that opposed Bartholomew's tyrant ways. It was a small band of rebels that attacked and sabotaged his acts of tyranny whenever possible. One-day Geo's band of rebels fell into an ambush. He was the only one left alive, and then just barely. His story sounded similar to my mother's.

I outwardly winced when he lowered his waist band far enough to show me a super faint mark that he said was where a bullet passed through his gut. I inwardly battled jealousy when he informed me that one of the rebels who fought and died alongside him was his fiancé.

Silently chastising myself for being ridiculous, I continued with my chain of questions. He told me it was Sybil and a small band of her followers who found him and took him back to their underground community. Although she didn't personally tend to him, she oversaw the treatment he received. He attributed his being alive to her wisdom

and knowledge. When he was finally healed and given the go ahead to return to his home, he opted to remain and serve in her army since they seemed to be fighting for the same cause. He'd lost those he loved in the ambush and felt there was nothing to go home to anyway.

Geo freely answered my questions about what it was like to live underground. He explained how it took his eyes a while to get used to the unique lighting and his lungs to grow accustomed to the denser air. He freely admitted he preferred it on the surface and sought every opportunity to perform a task that required he spend time above ground.

It made no sense why he would remain in service to my mother below ground when he preferred it on the surface. Sure, she healed his wounds but did he owe her his life? I questioned him about it but he remained stubbornly elusive. I finally gave up and moved to a different topic.

We spent the next hour or so talking about life in his native home verses his new underground home. His land was spared much of the devastation that crippled the rest of the planet, so they didn't have to rebuild or adjust as much. They also escaped the ordeal of dealing with mutants. I sat in awe as I listened to him tell me about the lush landscape and potable water there for the taking. It wasn't just in small, elusive patches. It was everywhere. It didn't sound real, and if it was real I wanted to know why they weren't bombarded by the survivors to the point of overcrowding.

He admitted that, although many of the cities were packed beyond capacity, there were a few remote areas in the country that were still undeveloped. The majority of the people found this

remoteness not to their liking or didn't even realize it existed. It was in one of these areas that Verso was located. With a population of one thousand or so, it lacked the opportunities, conveniences, and amenities of a large city. Hamlets like Verso were often overlooked as a choice of places to live since they offered little opportunity for work and social life. Since Verso was the place of his birth, he much preferred it to that of a large city and would have happily lived out his life there.

He went on to describe my mother's land.

Where life in Verso sounded like paradise, life in my mother's subterranean society sounded sterile and restricted in comparison. Water wasn't naturally potable for those who were still adapting to living underground. It required treatment before it could be consumed by newcomers. Those who were born below or lived there for a lengthy period of time were able to tolerate the high mineral content in it, but a newly arrived surface dweller, like Geo, required it be treated before he could ingest it. When I asked him what would happen if he just drank it like the natives did, he explained the excess in minerals was too much for his digestive system to tolerate and it made him ill; sometimes to the point of vomiting.

Lighting was artificial, at a premium, and found only where the main populous lived. There were places where only candles or oil lamps provided limited illumination.

My mother managed to grow foliage of all varieties, but again it could be found only in specific places. This was for several reasons. First and foremost, oxygen was a precious commodity that they couldn't afford to spare on plant life. The artificial environment wasn't

exactly conducive for the plant life my mother cultivated and it consumed oxygen in a manner similar to a human, rather than like a surface plant would do. Residents were actually competing for the oxygen and water with the plants. My mother called the situation a necessary evil. When I heard his description of her world, I once again was plagued with the question of why he would want to abandon life above ground for it, but I knew better than to think I'd get an answer if I pressed the issue.

Since I was a student of the same women who taught my mother the base of everything she knew about horticulture and who had encouraged her to go on to school to become a biologist, I was admittedly curious about the plant life she managed to cultivate in her subterranean world. Geo said it was similar to what was found in his land and more what was found in the world before it was hit with nuclear toxicity. She'd even managed to stumble upon some fossils of extinct plants and bring them back into existence. I wondered if any of these plants were ones I'd studied with my grandmother.

"I'll admit I'm curious about it all," I said, softly.

"Come back with me and quench that curiosity," he urged.

"I don't know if I can tolerate being underground like that," I admitted.

He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked off into the distance toward my home and smirked.

"It can't be any worse than here," he said with haughty honesty.

My immediate reaction was to take offense, but I quickly put myself in check. He was right about my home. I'd often referred to it

as the 'armpit of the planet' when begging my grandparents to move closer to civilization. It was ridiculous for me to be offended for him making a comment that I heartily agreed with.

I listened to myself tell him that I would go back with him while he held me in one of those captivating eye connections that sent my body into a tailspin. What was I thinking?

I clearly wasn't.

Just what was it about this man that got me all twisted up inside? I felt like I was going when I should be coming and coming when I should be going. It was damned difficult to keep my head clear enough to manage the situation with caution. He'd told me just enough to peak my curiosity and now I didn't know if I could prevent myself from following him home even if I was to listen to that nagging warning deep in my gut.

The loud grumbling from my stomach brought such color to my face it could have been mistaken for sunburn. It was well into the afternoon and I still hadn't eaten. On top of that, I'd merely picked at my dinner the night before. I was seriously hungry.

He spared me more humiliation by saying nothing about my boisterous belly. Picking his feet from the cool stream he snickered at his water wrinkled skin, wiggled his toes, and announced he was hungry. With as much ado as one would expect to be showered on a guest in a grand home, he helped me to my feet, offered me his arm, and asked that I join him.

I was hard pressed to walk as regally as I could with my hand on his arm when all I wanted to do was shove him out of my way and race to the fire where a rabbit was roasting on a spit. Rabbits were a

rarity in these parts and considered a delicacy. How he'd managed to acquire one was beyond me. At that particular moment, I didn't care. My hunger overrode my curiosity.

It was almost painful holding myself in check. The aroma of spigot roasted rabbit permeated the air as we walked closer to his cooking camp. I wiped the saliva escaping the corners of my mouth as inconspicuously as possible. If he noticed, he was polite enough not to mention it.

Comparing the rude way I told him he stank when we first met to his polite ignorance of my loud stomach and drooling made me feel small and petty. It magnified the isolated life I'd led. I had a lot to learn about socializing with people.

"The sun will be at its hottest in a bit," Geo uttered with a yawn. "I think it would be better to travel at night, don't you?" Although he'd cooked the rabbit for me, he ate none of it. Even so, his hands were greasy from preparing and serving. Without waiting for me to reply he stood up and poured some water from his travel canteen over his hands and added, "Do you nap?"

I couldn't remember the last time I slowed my body down enough to take a nap in the middle of the day. I shook my head to indicate 'no.'

"Well, try," he said. "I'm going over there under that tree." He pointed to a tree thick with foliage that would provide sufficient shade during the sun's hottest peak and then moved his finger toward the rocks behind us. "There's a small overhang up there that should work for you. It should catch the breeze as well."

He handed me the canteen so I could follow suit and clean my hands before heading off for his afternoon siesta. I shrugged my shoulders as I carefully replaced the cap over the canteen's opening and set it down next to his supply pack. It suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't noticed this pack when we'd met on the road. I made a mental note to ask him about it and then headed off toward the spot he indicated.