

Sneak peek at...

CROSS YOUR HEART

Broken Heart series, Book 7

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Chapter One

"You wanna make out?" asked the man standing on my welcome mat.

"You're rather young, aren't you?" I asked, fighting a smile.

"And?" He cocked a pierced eyebrow at me, and leaned on the doorjamb, tucking his hands into his pockets. The gesture flexed his muscled, tattooed arms and drew attention to the six-pack abs defined by his tight T-shirt.

He was gorgeous and youthful and impetuous.

"Rand, you make me feel old." I caved in to the smile flirting with my lips. "And I'm immortal."

His grin widened. "Aw, Lizzie. You're tops in my book."

"Don't call me Lizzie. It's puerile." I opened the door and gestured for him to come inside. "C'mon. It's ready."

Rand moved to Broken Heart when he was seventeen. Now he was twenty-two, and for a human, he was a rarity in a town filled with paranormal residents. He was the expert on the care and feeding of dragons.

I was forty-three when Lorcan O'Halloran, or rather the beast he'd become, attacked and killed me and ten other residents of Broken Heart, Oklahoma. He suffered from the Taint, a disease that only affects vampires. Luckily, a cure has since been discovered.

Every vampire has strength, speed, glamour, and, unless your head is chopped off or sunlight gets you, immortality. There were eight vampire Families, each with their own particular power. I was from the Family Zela, and our ability was to manipulate and control any metallic substance.

As a human, I hadn't been able to conquer my vanity about getting older. Going under the knife, taking the injection, getting the acid peel ... I did them all. However, becoming undead rid me of crow's feet, stretchmarks, cellulite, and forestalled other atrocities of the aging process.

"I'll make tea," I said as he stepped inside and shut the door.

"Earl Grey?" he asked.

"Of course."

Though I enjoyed my solitary lifestyle, I couldn't resist having a cuppa with whoever crossed my threshold. Thanks to an accidental fairy wish, vampires within the borders of Broken Heart could eat and drink again. That is, drink liquids other than blood. I had missed taking tea, and had been pleased to reestablish the routine.

The old Victorian opened into a wide foyer. Straight ahead was the staircase to the upper floor. On the left side, you could enter the formal living room. On the right side was a smaller room, the parlor, which was where I typically entertained visitors.

Rand paused by the antique hall tree. He studied it then glanced at me. "New?"

"Yes. It's French. Hard-carved oak. Circa 1870. See the hooks? They're cherubs."

The darkened wood had been polished with beeswax. I'd fallen in love with the piece merely from its picture. eBay was a glorious boon for vampires. "The bench seat opens." I flipped it up and we looked down into the emptiness.

Rand shook his head. "You've got a thing for old stuff."

"So do you." I tweaked his earlobe, and he laughed.

The kitchen was accessed through a narrow door at the back of the parlor. While Rand took a seat at the small table I used for tea service, I went to the kitchen and put on the kettle.

"Hey, I forgot!" Rand called from the parlor. "Patsy gave me something for you. Said they found it in the attic and it belongs to you."

I poked my head into the parlor. "I've told her a hundred times that whatever she finds, she can have or toss out."

He shrugged. "I'll go get it."

While Rand went to get whatever-it-was, I returned to the kitchen. I cleaned up mess I'd made earlier during a botched attempt at making scones. I heard the front door open and shut, and then Rand's steps in the foyer.

"Elizabeth."

The man's voice seemed to come from right behind me. It vibrated with fury. I swore I felt big male hands creep around my neck.

Startled, I whirled around, my hand pressed against my chest. My palm flattened over the spot where my heart no longer beat.

Nobody was there.

The kitchen was small. I'd kept it simple during the renovation, thinking it pointless for me to even have one. The cabinets were whitewashed, the countertops and walls a cheery yellow, and the floor, like the rest of the house, was polished oak. About the only place for someone to hide was the pantry. I opened the door, but only saw the fully stocked shelves, and in the back, cleaning equipment.

Unnerved, I returned to the stove, and opened the cabinet that held my tea stashes. I pulled down the tin and pried off the lid, looking down into the dark, loose leaves. It smelled strong and fragrant, like good tea should.

"Elizabeth." The voice was stronger now, insistent. I had excellent hearing thanks to my vampire ears, but this wasn't someone speaking from a distance. The man calling my name did not like me. I had the uneasy feeling he wanted to hurt me. Foreboding sat in my belly, as solid and heavy as an iron weight.

Pain throbbed around my neck.

"Hey, you need help?"

I yelped, dropping the tin. It bounced and rolled, its contents spilling onto the floor.

"Shit," said Rand. "I didn't mean to scare you." He crossed to the mess and picked up the container. "I don't think there's much left."

"I have another one." I hesitated. "Did you hear anyone just now?"

He frowned. "Who?" He glanced around the kitchen, the same way I had earlier.

"You think someone's in the house?"

I shook my head, feeling foolish. "I'm just being silly. Never mind."

"You're a lot of things, Lizzie, but silly isn't one of 'em." He grimaced. "I mean, you know, that you're mature." He slapped a hand against his forehead. "I'm not saying you're not fun, just that you're serious."

His face went red. I swallowed my laugh, and reached for the second tin of Earl Grey so he wouldn't see my amused expression.

"Maybe you should stop complimenting me," I offered. "And go get the broom."

"Yeah," he said, sounding relieved. "I'll clean up the mess. No prob."

"Where's the all important thing?" I asked.

"I left it inside the hall tree."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"So you'd have a surprise to open."

I stared at him, but he shrugged and grinned. Then he went to the pantry, grabbed the broom, and busied himself with cleaning up.

Later, we settled at the table with our tea and conversation. However, I didn't want to torment Rand for too long. He'd come to my home for a singular purpose.

"Here." I slid the velvet the box across the table and Rand accepted it.

His face had a look of wonder, and if I wasn't mistaken, an edge of panic. I suppressed my smile as he flipped open the box. His mouth fell open and his eyes went wide.

It was gratifying to see his reaction to my work.

He plucked the ring from its silk confines and studied it. "I knew you did great work, Lizzie. But ... wow. This is art."

"Thank you," I said modestly.

Rand had procured silver and gold for me, and a small rare dragonfire gem deep purple in color, passionate in promise. Two dragons, one silver, one gold, stretched in a circle from joined tails to snouts pressing against the oval stone.

"It's perfect," he said. He dragged his gaze from the ring to me, and smiled broadly. "Now, all she has to do is say yes."

Rand was in love with MaryBeth Beauchamp, a vampire who'd been Turned at the tender age of eighteen. I suppose she would be twenty-three now, if vampires counted years. (Thank goodness they didn't!) She was a nice girl who was the official full-time nanny of Queen Patricia's triplets.

When Rand approached me about making an engagement ring for MaryBeth, I asked him about his concept of forever. He was human, after all. Then he explained that as a handler of dragons, he fell within their protection and one gift given was immortality. He said he'd probably stop completely aging around thirty human years, which was the same for dragon shifters.

So, he and MaryBeth would truly have forever. Part of the vampire curse, if you want to call it that, was that sex equaled an instant hundred-year commitment to your bedmate. Needless to say, most of us were very careful. In my case, I avoided dating all together, although I sometimes yearned for the emotional and physical intimacy of a relationship.

Ah, well. Love was for the young, and all that.

#

I stood on the porch steps and waved good-bye. Rand drove a white Ford truck, a rather mundane vehicle for a man with such a wild nature. Soon, he would give MaryBeth the ring, and his love. I hoped she returned the favor. It was a difficult thing to do, to entrust one's heart to someone else.

Or so I suspected.

I had never really been in love.

I married Henry Bretton when I was twenty-two, in the fall after I graduated from the University of Tulsa. Not for love, though I certainly enjoyed his company and found him an amiable companion. No, I married the man my parents picked for me because I understood the limitations of my own life, and certainly the figurative dangling scissors they held over the line to my trust fund.

In my late twenties, I discussed with my husband the possibility of having children. I wanted a baby, maybe even two, or three.

Henry had no choice but to admit that he'd had a vasectomy, and then he confessed why.

The month before Henry married me, he had a one-night sexual romp with a Las Vegas showgirl named Trinie. Nine months and one DNA test later he was the reluctant father of a baby girl. His solution to this problem was to throw money: at Trinie, at the baby girl she named Venice, at whoever promised to help with such a delicate situation.

I was aware my husband enjoyed extramarital activities, but he'd always been discreet. It was a terrible blow to learn he had a child, one he'd kept hidden not only from me, but the world.

I was the one who insisted he publicly claim her.

After that, Henry and I kept separate bedrooms and though he continued having affairs, I never took a lover. I kept busy with planning parties, chairing committees, heading charities, and mixing martinis. According to my mother, a dry martini and a good cry could fix damn near anything.

It's understandable that Venice grew up with a skewed sense of self-esteem and a damaged moral compass. She was embarrassed to have a showgirl mother, and desperate for the attention of the wealthy father who'd emotionally abandoned her.

The drama started in her early teens. Kicked out of boarding schools. Arrested for underage drinking. Photographed with a lifted skirt – and no panties.

Henry was mortified by his daughter's behavior. He shipped Trinie and Venice off to Europe. Any time Venice ended up in the tabloids, he'd pack them off to another country.

When Venice was seventeen, her mother died in a car accident in France. Henry had no choice but to bring the girl into our home.

Venice never realized she didn't have to compete with me for her father's affection. I wanted so much to be a good stepmother. Every time I reached out to her, she ignored me, and worse, she viciously rejected any show of kindness.

Venice became the fashionable club girl. Famous only for being famous. With her father's money, she started a perfume line and then a clothing line. She acted in a few bit parts of low-grade horror movies. Henry financed her return to France, and she left without so much as a good-bye.

Not long after my forty-third birthday, Henry died of heart failure. I left New York after the funeral. I dropped every obligation, abandoned every project. I spent the next couple of months at my parents' home, completely out of sorts. They took an anniversary trip to Europe, and asked me to inventory the old Silverstone estate in Broken Heart. It was busywork, but I didn't care. I needed to do something productive.

The Silverstones had long since moved away from the town they'd helped found, all but my grandfather's brother. He was a greedy man, somewhat lecherous, too, and he liked his privacy.

Then Great Uncle Josiah just ... left. He never told a soul why he abandoned the manse. He went off to the Alaska wilderness, where he later died. In his will, he stated that the house could not be occupied by, or sold to, any member of the Silverstone family.

On my first evening in town, Lorcan found me outside Broken Heart's one and only motel (now demolished). I'd been trying to coax a can of Sprite from the

uncooperative soda machine. The beleaguered beast threw me against the wall and sucked me dry.

I woke up undead – courtesy of the Consortium, an organization created by vampires who wanted to better the world. It moved into Broken Heart, ousted most of the human residents, and created a parakind community.

I donated the Silverstone mansion to the town. Officially. It was already abandoned by my family, and my parents could care less what I actually did with it. Now, it belongs to the vampire queen and her lycanthrope husband, and their three darling four-year-old triplets.

My parents were surprised when I told them I wanted to stay in Broken Heart, but they didn't question my choice. They certainly don't know that I'm a vampire. I found a lovely old Victorian that I renovated to suit me, and settled down into the life of a well to-do bloodsucker.

I very much wanted to be a mother, and I will always regret never knowing the experience, the joys or the sorrows. I think, maybe somewhere, deep inside, I had hoped to have a little piece of it with Venice. No matter how small the slice of motherhood she might've allowed me, I would've been so much the happier for it.

Alas, motherhood was no longer option for me.

I was not holding out for romantic love, either, and certainly not the giddy, passionate, moon-eyed kind that seemed to afflict so many of Broken Heart's residents.

What was that saying? Oh, yes. We were the sum total of our experiences. Sometimes, I felt more subtracted from than added to.

I shook off my pensive mood. Sunrise was in less than two hours. Like everything about my un-life, I embraced the sudden sleep that affected all vampires. I usually prepared for bed earlier than necessary, and read until I passed out.

My guilty pleasures were romance novels. Though I didn't even dream of finding that kind of love in my own life, I very much enjoyed reading about it. Every happily-ever-after gave me such a thrill of satisfaction. Each novel was like a Godiva truffle. I enjoyed every one, and when finished savoring, I was eager for the next.

I heard thunder crack. Startled, I looked up into the cloud-swirled sky. It was nearing mid-September, and still warm by Oklahoma standards. The suddenness of the storm didn't concern me. The attitude of Oklahoma weather could be summed up thusly: *I'll do whatever I damn well like.* Come to think of it, that was also the attitude of the state's residents. Especially the ones in Broken Heart.

The rain began in earnest, and suddenly chilled, I went inside.

I paused by the hall tree. Thinking about Rand's silliness of hiding whatever family heirloom Patsy had discovered, I tugged up the seat.

Foreboding shot through me like a poisoned arrow. I knelt down and picked up the silver box. Uneasiness quelled my admiration of its simplistic beauty. As strange as it sounds, I felt like I was touching something evil. Something wrong.

I removed the lid.

Empty.

It was only a small square, maybe a couple inches around, its dark blue silk lining pegged it as a jewelry container. I imagined it had once held a ring.

Then I saw my name was engraved on the lid. Mine and another's: Lucas.

Seeing the names made me shiver.

Elizabeth was a family name passed down through generations. It was likely that this item belonged to my great-great-great grandmother, who was married to Jeremiah Silverstone. She'd died not long after their second child was born.

I was fuzzy on family history, though curious enough now that I might call Eva, who was our resident expert on the town, and chat about it.

The box was tarnished, obviously old. I stared at the lid, and frowned. If the "Elizabeth" on the lid referred to my ancestor, to the wife of Jeremiah ... then who the hell was Lucas?

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The storm raged with a ferocity that made me distinctly uncomfortable. I lay among my pillows with the covers pulled up to my chin, like a child frightened of closet monsters. I tried to focus on the novel, but my gaze kept wandering to the flickering light of my bedside lamp.

We vampires didn't do coffins, but crypts were another matter. I had created my bedroom in the basement of the house as a precaution against sunlight. I added a full bathroom down here as well, with a Jacuzzi tub and a steam shower. Everything was luxurious, from the rich green, gold, and bronze colors of my décor to the Egyptian cotton sheets and towels.

Beautiful interior design and luxuriant materials, however, did not offer the kind of comfort I currently needed. I was too much the woman alone in her creaky old house – a horror-movie heroine stalked by an axe-wielding maniac.

I gulped.

I couldn't shake off my trepidation. No amount of self-lectures about my maturity, my vampire traits (as my friend Jessica would say, I totally kicked ass), or security reminders (werewolves, Invisi-shield, neighbors) helped. Granted, my neighbors weren't exactly close. I lived on three acres, two acres of which were all woods. I had blazed my own trails hiking through there numerous times, but now, the closeness of the forest merely represented optimal hiding places for the nefarious.

I badly wanted to hear another person's voice, but I would feel utterly ridiculous if I gave in to such an urge. How would I explain such a phone call to my friends?

It was still an hour away from sunrise.

I decided to make some jasmine tea to calm my nerves. I gave in to cowardice and used vampire speed to zip from my bed to the staircase, which led directly into the kitchen.

The rain pounded like a hundred fists against the windows. The storm was unsettling me. I set the water to boil, and wandered around downstairs flipping on all the lights.

I stopped in the parlor, my gaze falling on the little silver box. I'd left it on the table where Rand and I had enjoyed our tea.

"Elizabeth!"

I whirled around; the man's angry voice didn't emanate from any obvious source. I reached out with my vampire senses and felt no one, nothing. My own powers didn't include communing with the dead-dead. The very idea of a spirit roaming my house gave me the willies.

I snatched up the box, thinking I should just toss into the trash. Would doing so end this nonsense? I was disturbed by its presence, and equally disturbed by my fear of it – and that voice.

“Elizabeth!” The scream pummeled my ears. “You betrayed me!”

“Who are you?” I cried.

I felt a pair of big, male hands encompass my throat, and squeeze.

Chapter Two

I choked, backing away.

What was going on? Why were the sensations so strong? No one was in the room with me. But I'd lived in Broken Heart too long to discount even the craziest explanation. Ghosts. Demons. Invisible men.

Panic fluttered.

"S-stop!" The violence of the act terrified me. I couldn't die from strangulation. I didn't need to breathe. My windpipe could be crushed, and my neck broken. Healing from such injuries would be terribly unpleasant.

"Elizabeth." My name was a despairing sob, and the hands squeezed harder.

I backed out of the parlor and into my foyer. I couldn't turn around, I couldn't run, I couldn't escape.

I put my own hands to my throat and felt nothing, not even the barest outline of fingers. Nails dug into my flesh, and my throat threatened to collapse against the tremendous pressure.

I dropped the box.

Instantly, the strangulation ceased.

I fell to my knees and rubbed my bruised throat. I couldn't quite ease the ache, or the terror.

Then I heard another voice, and with it an urge so fervid, I rose to my feet.

I'm here, said a weeping female. Please find me. Please.

The detailed image pierced my mind: Ringed by pine trees, an irregular stone marked the spot. Nearby, was a fallen oak, and there, a path I often walked.

I knew this place.

I had to go.

Yes, cried the female voice. Hurry. Find me.

I turned blindly for the front door and wrenched it opened, stumbling onto the porch.

The sunrise. How long did I have? Forty minutes? Less? Not long. Probably not long enough.

I felt compelled, almost as if my legs were obeying someone else's commands. Rain slapped at me, cold and stinging. Thunder cracked and lightning zig-zagged from the roiling black clouds.

I used my vampire speed to go around the house, and make the trek to the woods. I had to slow down because the path was strewn with fallen logs, stones, and holes. I went as quickly as I could, grateful my vampire eyes let me penetrate the thick darkness.

It took at least ten minutes to find the area, and another five to determine the exact location. The storm was relentless, but I ignored its brutality. I dropped to my knees and started to dig.

Faster. Faster. *Faster.*

Mud flew in all directions, spattering me. Wet soil assaulted my mouth, and rain stung my eyes, but I couldn't stop.

The female voice muttered in my mind.

"Find her," I murmured. "Find her before he does."

Then the earth gave up its secret.

The female voice faded away, and I was left alone in her grave.

"Oh, my God." My fingers slid over the skull. No vampire could cry – and I mean this in a literal sense. But even without the satisfactory discharge of tears, I found myself dry-weeping. I did not know the woman, but I felt a soul-deep sorrow for her death.

Her murder.

I heard a low, long growl. The disturbing noise came from my right. I would've pegged it as one of the lycanthropes who often did security rounds in their wolf forms. Yet, it sounded cat-like.

Why would a were-cat be out here? There were only a few who lived in town, and they mostly kept to themselves. Turned out cats weren't social creatures, whether pet or shifter.

Then I heard other noises, and these came from the left.

Still the storm raged, giving cover to those who were apparently sneaking up on me.

Why? Who?

Someone else was in the woods with me. The violent spirit? My heart skipped a phantom beat. I would have to ask Patsy for help; aside from all her other duties, she was also the resident ghost whisperer.

The rain dampened my senses; all I had was my instincts, and they were telling me to run.

More bones were being washed clear, but I couldn't take them all with me. I estimated that I had about twenty minutes to return to the house before daybreak. I kept my prize close, and struggled out of the pit I'd dug.

I hurried to the path, but my foot caught on debris, and I tripped.

I landed on my side, splashing into an icy puddle. I spit out the nasty water as the skull rolled out of my grasp. I crawled to it and scooped it up. Then I rose unsteadily to my feet.

I stilled.

A cat, and my goodness was *that* an understatement, crouched on the path four or five feet away from me. He, and I could help but think of it as "he," was massive. He

had sleek black fur and green-gold eyes. He growled; a warning to me to stay put, or so I assumed. It wasn't as if I could move. *Be calm, Elizabeth.* A shifter, I hoped. Otherwise, I would have to believe a jaguar had been living in Broken Heart without anyone noticing. His muscles rippled under that glorious coat as he moved into a pouncing stance.

I could run faster than him, but not in the woods. There were too many obstacles. I took a step back, and he yowled.

I stopped.

The rain continued to pound at me. My nightgown was plastered against me, offering no shield, no warmth. My toes sunk into the slick, cold mud. My hair lashed my face and neck.

Seconds were ticking by. I had to risk the jag's attack or risk roasting in the sunlight.

Then the cat roared: a terrible, fierce sound that sliced right through me.

Something hard smacked me on the back of the head.

Pain spiked all the way down my spine, and I went down to my knees, my gaze on the beautiful, angry jag.

He tore down the path toward me.

My vision grayed as I fell forward.

The cat launched over me, and I marveled at his grace, at the power he so wonderfully exhibited. He knocked something, no, someone, over, and I heard sounds of struggle.

Then I passed out.

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“Lady? Aw, hell. C’mon, sweetheart. Wake up.”

As I assimilated the unfamiliar male voice, I felt the sting of a light slap on my cheek. My eyes flew open.

“Stop that immediately!” I demanded.

His hazel eyes widened, and then he grinned. “No problem, princess. You wanna get up now?”

“Certainly.” I took his proffered hand and struggled to my feet. I felt dizzy and light-headed. It had stopped raining, although the sky rumbled ominously. “Where’s my skull?”

“Attached to your neck.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I snapped. “I mean the one I dropped.”

One brown eyebrow winged upward. I realized several important things right then. One, I didn’t know this man. Two, he was quite handsome, and three, he was unaccountably naked and very, very well built.

And endowed by the gods.

Did I just look at his ... his ... package? Embarrassment shot through me, and I averted my gaze. Ah. I spotted the skull at the edge of the path. I scooped it up, and turned. “Thank you for your assistance.”

I marched away.

He followed.

"You're welcome," he said lazily. "Anything else I can ... assist you with?"

His sexually charged question nearly made me trip again. I stopped, and turned to glare at him. "Are you a nudist?" I asked in a frosty tone.

"With the right person."

His gaze let me know that I could be the right person. Was he insane? I was muddy, my hair was a mess, and my clothing ... oh! I looked down and it was exactly as I feared. My satin nightgown was plastered to my body, outlining every curve and showcasing my turgid nipples. Oh, sweet heaven. If I waited long enough, maybe lightning would strike me.

I felt suddenly woozy, and for a moment, I wondered if the man had rendered me nigh unconscious with his virility. Then I realized that was not the case at all.

Sunrise. "H-how long was I out?"

"Five or six minutes," he said. "You didn't even ask about the creep who whacked you. What were you doing out here?"

"These are my woods. I can go wherever I like." I paused. "What creep?"

"I didn't get a good look. But he just about kicked my ass." Fury lurked in his eyes. "That doesn't happen too often."

Someone had followed me. Or had been here already. Had they known I was looking for ... well, whoever I found? Were they compelled by the same intuition, the same sorrowful begging? If they'd arrived for same purpose I did then they wouldn't have struck me. Could a ghost do such a thing?

No. My rescuer had fought someone. This someone was either in the woods to find the grave, or to hurt me, or for some other reason. Had I been mistaken for the predator?

The very idea was laughable.

However, now I knew who, or rather what, this man was.

“Most women I know collect purses and shoes.” He glanced at the skull then at me.

“I’m not most women.” Alas, I did love shopping for shoes. “You’re the jaguar.”

He hesitated, as if considering whether or not to admit it, and then he nodded.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“New in town, aren’t you?” The wooziness made me sway. The man grabbed my elbow to steady me. “I must get home before the sun rises.”

“Why? You turn into a pumpkin?”

“I die.” I felt sluggish. It occurred to me that as a shifter, he seemed to have a limited knowledge about parakind. Did I risk telling him I was a vampire? “I have a severe allergy to the sunlight.”

We hadn’t even made it out of the woods. It was too close to sunrise and I felt as weak as a newborn kitten. “I do hate to ask a favor so soon after you saved my life,” I said, “but would you mind terribly helping me to my house?”

“You always talk so prissy?”

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s just kinda hot, is all.”

“Hot?”

“You know. Sexy.”

“My way of speaking has never been described in quite that way.”

“Better stop talkin’ all fancy, princess, or I just might kiss you.”

I don’t know how he managed to turn “princess” into an endearment that offered both complaint and compliment. I was surprised to find I didn’t mind it at all. My gaze dropped to his mouth, and I watched his lips curve into a delicious smile. A dark yearning wound through me, and I looked up at him, feeling rather stunned.

“Promise you’ll look at me that way tomorrow,” he said.

“I’ll do no such thing.”

He laughed, and the sound vibrated all the way through me. “By the way, I’m Tez. Tez Jones.”

“That’s the most suspect name I’ve ever heard,” I said, which garnered another laugh from the so-called Tez. I bristled. Then I straightened and inclined my head. “I’m Elizabeth Bretton.”

“Perfect name for you. Sounds *prissy*,” he said. “You live in the Victorian house up the hill, right?”

“Yes.” It probably should’ve disturbed me that he’d done enough snooping around to realize my house wasn’t too far. Yet, he hadn’t known that I lived there. I simply had to trust him. Either that, or risk being exposed to the sun. I was too weak to use my powers to get home.

He scooped me into his arms, and I yelped.

“Better hang on, Ellie Bee.”

“Ellie Bee!” I repeated, horrified. I looped one arm around his neck, and clung to the skull with my free hand. “That’s a terrible nickname. Don’t you dare call me that again.”

“Seriously. I’m gonna kiss you.”

He ran all the way to my house.

Tez refused to put me down, not until he’d tucked me into bed himself. No amount of protests would make the man leave or do as I bid. I had no choice to but to accede to his wishes, which I must say was rather unusual. I was used to being fully in charge of my own life; not even Henry had argued with me.

I was filthy, but I had no time to shower. I wouldn’t let Tez take the skull, so he propped it ghoulishly onto the pillows next to me.

It was too late to worry about Tez or his intentions.

Muddy, confused, and exhausted, I fell into dreamless vampire sleep.

#

When I awoke in the darkened room, I was met with the gaping stare of a dirt-crusted skull.

I screamed.

“Princess!” I heard Tez’s cry all the way from upstairs. Then he was hurrying down into my room, where he smacked into something and cursed a blue streak.

“Damn it! Where’s the light switch in this mausoleum?”

Trembling, I flipped on my bedside lamp and saw Tez rubbing his shins.

"I thought cats had excellent night vision." Oh, dear. I sounded terribly rude.

"Screaming women tend to make me panic." He grinned. "Okay, not all screaming women." His gaze flicked to the skull sitting on the pillows. "You having morning-after regrets?"

"Your humor leaves much to be desired, Mr. Jones." I leveled him with a suspicious look. "If that's your real name."

"My real name is Tezozomoc Abraham Elvis Jones."

I blinked. "I see why you prefer Tez."

He laughed. He started to cross the room, but I held up my hand. "I'm sure you understand my need for caution, Mr. Jones. I don't know you, or your purpose. And I only have your word that you —" I took a good look at what he was wearing. "Is that my robe?"

"I didn't want to leave you alone. I ditched my clothes in my car, which is still outside of town. And I didn't want to dig through your stuff," he said. "Well, except your panty drawer. I couldn't resist. Nice undies, Ellie Bee."

"Mr. Jones!" I struggled to regain my composure. The man was wearing the matching robe to my destroyed nightgown. It fit atrociously. It didn't even close at the top; he had too much chest and too many muscles. On me, it swept my ankles, and on him, it barely reached his knees. The belt cinched around his waist just added to the ridiculousness.

"Did you really go through my underwear?"

“Yep. I even picked out a few of my favorite pairs. I put ‘em on top.” He shook his head. “I was a little disappointed with the available colors. No red?”

“I refuse to discuss my lingerie with you. And I do not appreciate your assumption that you’re going to see me in my undergarments. Ever.” I paused and tried to gather my wits. “Could you find no other appropriate attire?”

He grinned at me, his gaze molten, and my stomach took a peculiar dive. “I love that mouth of yours, princess. Go on. Talk pretty to me.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Aw. I bet you say that to all the jaguars.”

I rolled my eyes to keep from smiling. I did not want to encourage his bad behavior. “Please go upstairs, Mr. Jones. We’ll talk after I take a shower.”

“You need help scrubbing your back?”

“No,” I said primly. He opened his mouth and I lifted my hand in a “stop” gesture. “Nor do I need help washing any of my other parts.”

“My morning is really starting to suck.” He sighed at me then turned, deliberately sashaying away.

I couldn’t quell my laughter.

He flashed another grin at me over his pink-clad shoulder. Then he took the stairs two at a time. After I heard the door shut, I went up and locked it. I must admit, at least to myself, that I rather liked Tez. However, continued trust was another issue. It had to be earned.

I put in a call to Damian, a lycanthrope who was in charge of town security, and asked him to drop by. Then I took a scalding shower.

Mud caked my skin and my ruined nightgown. It took three tries to get my hair clean. By the time I finished up, nearly half an hour had passed. I dressed in a pair of top-pleated beige pants and a cowl neck top in dark brown. I blew my hair dry and then pushed back the mass of blonde curls with a tortoiseshell headband. I put in my diamond earrings, and I slipped on a pair of beaded mules.

I gently picked up the pillow where the skull rested and carried it upstairs.

Tez and Damian were in the kitchen.

Tez leaned against the kitchen counter with arms crossed. A bruise bloomed on his cheek and a cut slivered the skin above his eye.

Damian sat on a barstool by the kitchen island. He had a shiner, and a sullen expression. He rubbed his knuckles, which were scraped and swollen.

"What happened?" I put the pillow with its cargo onto the counter.

"He hit me," answered Damian. "So, I hit him back, *Liebling*. His skull is like marble."

"Tez!" I marched to him and studied his banged-up face.

"I didn't know who he was," he said. He squinted at me. "Still don't. He says you called him."

"Of course, I did." I made up two bags of ice, and gave one to Damian. I slapped Tez's hand out of the way and pushed the bag onto his bruised cheek.

"Ow! Careful, princess."

I ignored him. "Damian is the head of security. We must tell him about the skeleton I found, and the attack, and introduce you."

"You wearing the black ones?" asked Tez, as if he didn't even hear me. His gaze dropped to my waist. "'Cause I really liked those."

Damian cleared his throat.

"Must you insist on embarrassing me?" I hissed.

"I dunno. Are you really embarrassed?"

I wasn't. Well, not much. I was actually caught between feeling annoyed and thrilled that he flirted so outrageously with me and didn't care who was watching.

"Granny panties," I said plopping the ice bag into his hand. "Beige. With an extra wide waistband."

"You are a cruel woman."

I sniffed, and turned toward the lycanthrope. If I didn't know better, I'd say something like amusement sparkled in Damian's eyes. But he smiled so rarely and seemed to take everything so seriously that everyone had decided he didn't have a sense of humor.

"I have quite the story to tell," I told him.

"You want to call a Council meeting?" he asked.

"It may necessary later," I said, "but for now, I would like to speak with Patsy."

"What about him?"

We both turned to look at Tez.

"I heard some rumors about the town," said Tez. He winced. "I wanted to check out things for myself."

"Before you revealed yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah. I didn't realize there were others out there like me." He gave me a once-over. "You're not a shifter."

"I'm a vampire."

He absorbed that news rather calmly. "Okay."

"And what are you?" asked Damian. "Not wolf. And you do not smell like other shifters."

"He's a jaguar," I said, and oddly, I sounded rather proud, as though his other form were mine to gloat about.

"That's impossible." Damian stood and felt his fingers clasped my wrist. I got the impression he planned to yank me behind him and do something silly. Like hit Tez again.

Tez leaned against the counter, looking unaccountably masculine in my pink satin robe, and pressed the ice bag on his cheek. His expression was inscrutable.

"Damian—"

"No, Elizabeth. I don't care what he told you. He's a liar." Damian pulled me back and I glanced at him, surprised at the fury in his gaze. "Jaguar shifters are extinct."