

Cross Your Heart

Book 7 in the Broken Heart series

By Michele Bardsley

A Note from the Author

At the start of *Cross Your Heart*, the seventh book in the Broken Heart series, five years have passed since the Consortium vampires rolled into town. The parakind community has been attacked by Wraiths (rogue vampires with bad tempers), Ancient vampires who've gone all *droch fola* (soulless), a dark mage were-dragon, a secret military para-terrorist group, and a bitch demon named Lilith and her Pit-dwelling posse.

So, you know, it hasn't been easy. Our heroes and heroines have prevailed, and, with Queen Patricia Marchand ruling both vampires and lycanthropes and the Council running the town (along with the Consortium's input, of course), Broken Heart has managed to finally become a haven for parakind. Werewolves, vampires, fairies, witches, wizards, pixies, and hell, even zombies, are welcome in Broken Heart.

You'd think with all the trials and tribulations our citizens have been through, all the obstacles to love they've conquered, and hey, some of those vampire parents even managed to raise their mortal children to adulthood, that they would finally get some freaking peace and quiet.

Yeah. Not so much.

Evil isn't always an outside force trying to steal or smash its way in. It isn't always a pissed-off demon, a sociopathic mage, or a soulless Ancient. Sometimes evil is hidden within. This kind of malevolence has patience. And purpose.

It's just waiting, quietly, insidiously, to be unleashed.

The Curse of Broken Heart

It is said that beautiful and feisty Mary McCree drowned herself in the creek near her farm. She had loved her husband so much that his infidelity drove her mad with grief, and she could not live with his betrayal.

Before she waded into the water and met her death, she cursed this place and all who lived in it, swearing that anyone who dared to love would eventually know the depth of her own heartbreak.

Whether or not Mary McCree uttered such a curse is unknown, but she did commit suicide by drowning, and her husband was accused of infidelity. No one really knows if, as town lore indicts, that Mary's daughter shamed the founding fathers into naming the town Broken Heart, so that everyone would remember the suffering of Mary McCree.

Statistics have shown that Broken Heart had the highest divorce and unwed mother rates in Oklahoma. At least until the vampires arrived and took over the town, remaking it into parakind community.

And if harmony was fickle, at least romantic love prevailed.

The curse of Broken Heart was no more.

Or so it seemed.

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 as a human, he was a rarity in a town filled with paranormal residents. He was also 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 reduces the infected vampire to a crazed and rabid state. A cure had recently been discovered, thanks in large part to the revelation of its origins—demon poison. Our resident scientist, Dr. Stan Michaels, himself a Turn-blood, had figured out a real and lasting cure. The Taint was no more.

Every vampire got strength, speed, glamour, and, unless our heads were chopped off or sunlight got us, 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 had done 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 again and 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 was entrance to 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 neatly aligned on wall hooks.

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. "Never mind. I'm being silly."

"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.

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.

Queen Patricia, whom most of us knew as Patsy Donovan, had once been the town’s only beautician. Then Gabriel Marchand arrived with his band of outcasts and revealed a prophecy: Patsy would become queen of the vampires, effectively ending the reign of the Council of Ancients. And if that bombshell weren’t enough, she would also be given rule of the lycanthropes.

Patsy was no longer undead. I had never quite comprehended the process that had given her life. Magic—and there was a lot of magic in Broken Heart—was the only explanation. Not only did she wield seven of the eight powers of the Ancients, she had become like Gabriel: *loup de sang*. They were blood-drinking lycans—a true combination of vampire and werewolf. Most vampires could not shape-shift. I say most because previous attempts at Taint cures had given a very few vampires the ability to take wolf forms.

Broken Heart was a very interesting place to live.

I sipped my tea and watched Rand study the ring. He was smiling—and looking a little less green around the gills. I wondered if he might be imagining MaryBeth’s reaction. Would she scream? Shout yes and throw her arms around his neck? Kiss him senseless? I had to admit that my inner romantic loved the potential scenarios.

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. Or at least a century. Oh, that’s not cynicism. Vampires didn’t have one-night stands. Sex equaled an instant hundred-year commitment to our bedmates. 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.

“Well?” I prodded.

“It’s perfect,” Rand said. He dragged his gaze from the ring to me, and grinned. “Now, all she has to do is say yes.”

“How could she not, darling?” I looked into my tea cup and squinted at the leaves clinging to the ceramic. I knew nothing about reading tea leaves, but Rand didn’t really need me to. “I predict you will both have a long and happy life together.”

He reached across the table and took my hand. “What about you, Lizzie?”

“I will also have a long and happy life,” I said, looking away from his sincere gaze. The shadow of his concern for my own love life fluttered in my stomach. I had it good. I didn’t need a relationship to feel complete. Of course, this was not a concept Rand would understand. I squeezed his hand and let go. “When will you propose?”

“Soon,” he said. “I gotta make sure everything’s just right.” He closed the lid to the velvet box. “Thanks again.”

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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. Unfortunately, our attempts ended when I found out endometriosis had made me infertile.

We’d been discussing the possibilities of adoption when Henry felt compelled to confess that he already had a daughter.

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 those willing to cover up 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.

After that, Henry and I never again discussed adoption. We 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.

This was probably the point where a discerning woman would've filed for divorce and perhaps searched for a more suitable mate, if not a more suitable life. However, I was comfortable in my role as Mrs. Bretton, and for the most part, I enjoyed my life. If the kind of love found between the pages of my beloved romance novels was not mine to be had, then I accepted it.

I was the one who insisted Henry publicly claim his daughter.

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, or 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 found myself facing the prospect of creating a life all my own—without parental expectations to accede or husbandly indiscretions to ignore.

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. Mother plied me with martinis, and my father with portfolio advice. My parents loved me, but they weren't emotional people—so their suggestions were meant to fix me, not comfort me.

I think it was a relief for both of us when they took an anniversary trip to Europe.

When the family lawyers called to tell us about a generous offer for the old Silverstone estate in Broken Heart—and to make plans to inventory the home, I took on the project myself. It was busywork, but I didn't care. I needed to do something productive.

The mansion and its once luxurious gardens had been abandoned for nearly five decades, every since my Great Uncle Josiah Silverstone, my grandfather's brother, left Oklahoma for the Alaskan wilds.

My grandfather and his brother apparently had a falling out, but I had never been curious enough about the family drama to ask questions. Grandfather came to Tulsa, married, built his own home, and raised his family within it.

I recall meeting Uncle Josiah once. When I was eight years old, I accompanied my grandparents on an Alaskan cruise, and we met my great uncle for lunch in Juneau. He struck me as a very lonely man, but at the same time, he was prickly and unkind. I didn't much like him, which was another reason I didn't pay much attention to his life, or his death.

While Uncle Josiah lived, no one much paid attention to estate moldering in Broken Heart. It didn't seem to bother my grandfather that his childhood home might be going to rot and ruin, so no one else had cause to worry about it, either.

When my great uncle died, I remember how surprised my grandfather was about the will. Of course, I was still young, and didn't understand much about probates or trusts. Uncle Josiah left the care of his estate to the family lawyers, and in his will, he stated that no one of Silverstone descent be allowed to live in, or own, the home.

Of course, these were the details I learned as adult as I became familiar with the house and all its inherent problems. After a discussion with my father, we decided to take the offer by the mysterious Consortium, a powerful corporate think tank, but before they garnered full ownership, we—and by we, my father meant me—would inventory the place for whatever family treasures might be left.

The Consortium turned out to play an even bigger role in my life than simply buying the Silverstone house and lands.

I had never been told why Uncle Josiah abandoned the manse, or why he insisted no one occupy it. I was just grateful for a project—and I was nothing if not a woman who could organize.

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. What can I say? All the modern technology in the world—and still no machines that dispensed chilled vodka and green olives.

Ah, but I was talking about Lorcan. Violent and insensible from the Taint, he threw me against the wall, tore open my neck, and sucked every drop of blood from me.

It was not a pleasant way to die.

I woke up undead—courtesy of the Consortium, which turned out to be an organization created by vampires who wanted to better the world. The idea was that, eventually, the Consortium would reach out to the human world so that one day, parakind and mankind could live together—as they once had centuries ago. In the mean while, the Consortium's technological and medical breakthroughs were filtered to the humans via a complex network of businesses. Most humans employed by Consortium-owned companies would be shocked to know their real bosses were vampires, werewolves, and fairies.

Not only had the Consortium purchased the mansion, they'd also been secretly buying up homes and businesses in town. Part of their motivation had been to create a parakind community, but magic and prophecy had brought them to Broken Heart. Odd, isn't it, how a small town in Oklahoma became so important to creatures most humans believe are mythological? In any case, the Consortium ousted most of the human residents, and did indeed create a haven for

paranormal beings. However, it didn't seem we were any closer to bridging the gap between humans and ourselves.

For a while, my friend Jessica and her husband, Patrick, as well as their children, lived there. Eventually, they moved back to Jessica's old house on Sanderson Street. Now, the mansion is occupied by Patsy, Gabriel, and their three darling four-year-old triplets.

After I was Turned, I could hardly return to Tulsa or even to New York. Aside from the Consortium's encouragements for new vampires to stay within its protection, I found myself rather intrigued by the idea of being part of this new community. 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. My parents travel a lot, and even when they're in town, they have many societal obligations. When I do manage a visit, I do so at night, and only for a little while.

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 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 had never really been an 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 a thrill of satisfaction. I enjoyed every novel, and when finished with one, I was eager for the next.

Thunder boomed.

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 object 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.

Seeing the name made me shiver.

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

The box was tarnished, obviously old. I stared at the lid, and frowned. If the "Elizabeth" on the lid referred to my ancestor, and this was family heirloom ... then why did it feel like holding plutonium? It didn't belong here. It wasn't mine. And I had the strangest urge to chuck it out the front door.

Instead, I left it on the tea table in the parlor, and fighting off a rousing case of the heebie jeebies, I locked up the house and retired to my bedroom.

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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 fists against the windows—making them rattle. 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. There it was, 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, and yet it felt as if nails dug into my flesh. 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.

My gaze fell on the box, and I scrambled back from it. Whatever was trying to hurt me was using the jewelry container as the connection.

I sat there, trying to gather my courage, and I heard another voice, and with it an urge so fervid, I scrambled to my feet.

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

A 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 supernatural vision let me penetrate the thick darkness.

I'm not sure how long it actually took to find the area, maybe ten or fifteen minutes. I snaked through the trees, slipping through mud and puddles, as I finally found the exact location. The storm was relentless, but I ignored its brutality. I dropped to my knees and started to dig.

Faster. Faster. *Faster.*

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

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

Then the earth gave up its secret.

The female voice muttering in my mind 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 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. If the ghost, or whatever it was, had followed me into the woods then my theory about its connection to the jewelry box was incorrect. If this was someone, or something, else, then their purpose was unknown. I owned this land, including the wooded area, and I wouldn't expect anyone to be out here—and certainly not in this storm.

More bones were being washed clean, but I couldn't take them all with me. I estimated that I had about twenty minutes before daybreak. I'd have to hurry to make it back to my house. I loathed leaving the rest of this poor soul here, but I'd return in the evening and make sure the rest of her was retrieved.

I kept the skull close, and struggled out of the pit I'd dug.

The rain dampened my senses, but I could still hear something big moving in the woods. Most large animals in Broken Heart were shifters. A security lycan wouldn't try to hide its presence from me. Another series of cat yowls interrupted my ruminations.

I didn't know what was going on, all that my instincts were screaming at me to get going. I hurried to the path, but my foot caught on debris, and I tripped.

Oh, perfect. 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 really was the heroine in a horror movie, waiting for the axe-wielding maniac to cut me down. What kind of moron left the safety of her home to follow a ghostly voice to a grave? At night? In a bloody storm?

So long as I was making idiotic choices, I decided I wouldn't leave the woods without the skull. I needed something to show for my efforts, and by God, the woman deserved whatever

closure I could give her. I saw my ghoulish prize at the edge of the path, lodged into a scraggly bush. I crawled to it and yanked it out. Then I rose unsteadily to my feet, triumphant.

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.

His unstarling gaze looked beyond me, his nostrils flaring.

Fear pulsed through me, but I couldn’t get my legs to move. Even if I could, I knew I could run faster than him, but not in the woods. There were too many obstacles. I took an unsteady step back, and he yowled.

I stopped.

The rain pounded 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 ticked by.

The dawn was coming—I could feel it in my waning strength and rising panic. I had to either risk the jag’s attack or risk roasting in the sunlight.

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.

#

“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, with skin the color of caramel, 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 grinning up at me from a shallow puddle. I scooped it up, and

turned to the gorgeous nude man. For a moment, I couldn't get my throat to work. Finally, I managed a crisp: "Thank you for your assistance."

I marched away.

He followed.

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

His sensually charged question nearly made me trip again. What the—really? Sexual innuendoes *now*? And why did I feel like my cheeks had been dipped in lava? Vampires didn't blush.

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. As a shifter, he seemed to have a limited knowledge about parakind. Or at least at recognizing my undeadness. Did I risk telling him I was a vampire? I think I'd risked enough already. "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 hate to ask a favor so soon after you saved my life," I said, "but would you mind helping me to my house?"

"You always talk so prissy?"

"Excuse me?" 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. 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 vampirc speed 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—and I’d rather walk into the dawn than allow Tez to undress me while I was passed out. So, there I was, caked in mud, hair wet, and gown ruined, and I didn’t even care. I hadn’t even the merest second to shed my nightie.

Tez pulled the covers up to my chin and tucked me in. I refused to give up the skull, so Tez propped it ghoulishly onto the pillows next to me.

Then it was simply too late to worry about Tez or his intentions.

I fell into dreamless vampire sleep.

#

When I awoke in the darkened room, I was met with the gaping stare of a dirt-cruste 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.” I flinched at the rudeness of my tone, but I was off-kilter. At least he wasn’t naked anymore. No, he was wearing the matching robe to my ruined nightgown. I tugged the covers back up to my shoulders. I felt grimy. My sheets were now as ruined as my clothing. I wanted a shower. And blood. And to regain some control.

“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 couldn’t get over what he was wearing. “The only suitable attire you could find was my robe?”

“I didn’t want to leave you alone. I ditched my clothes in my car, which is still parked by the Thrifty Sip. 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 robe 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. I tried to stop staring at his chest, but I’m afraid I wasn’t successful. Of course,

the natural progression of my line of sight led me straight to his groin. I had excellent recall. He certainly was gifted in that particular area.

“You keep looking at me like that, princess, I might forget my manners.”

I wouldn't pretend I didn't know what he meant, and I couldn't deny that a small part of me wanted to shuck off the covers and led him into the shower with me. It had been rather a long time since I'd been in a relationship, but I was, much to my own shock, thinking of sex. Hot, sweaty, oh-my-God sex. I couldn't recall ever being seized by pure lust before. It was exhilarating.

“That's it. I'm coming over there.”

“Don't you dare!” I glared at him, but he hadn't moved. He was giving me a smoky look, though, one edged with amusement, so he knew I was flustered and thought it was funny. What was wrong with me? I didn't even know this man!

“Did you really go through my underwear?” I asked tartly.

“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. And tone down my ... well, lust. My gaze meandered along the robe again. Wow. He was really built. “Could you find no other appropriate attire?”

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

“You're insufferable.”

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

Would nothing stop his rampant flirting? I had the insane urge to smile at him, but instead I rolled my eyes. I did not want to encourage his bad behavior. Much. “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. I tried to think of anything else I could offer him to wear, but I wasn’t a sweatpants kind of girl—and I had no men’s clothing. Aside from Tez draping himself toga-style in a table cloth or sheet, the robe was the best option. I swear it had nothing to do with the way the material clung to his rather impressive buttocks.

Tez 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. More than I should given we had just met and under the oddest circumstances. 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 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 near the stove with his arms crossed. A bruise bloomed on his cheek and a cut slivered the skin above his eye. My robe was torn across the shoulders, too.

Damian sat on a barstool by the 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 closest to Tez. I turned and glared at Tez then at Damian. I hadn’t heard the ruckus, so it must have been a brief, if brutal, altercation.

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

“Tez!” I 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 supposed it might’ve helped matters if I’d thought to inform Tez about Damian’s imminent arrival, or had told the werewolf to expect to meet a were-jag. It didn’t occur to me that Damian would arrive so quickly. I really was off my game today.

Well. Enough was enough. I needed to get control of the situation—and myself. 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.” I glanced up at him. “I’m sorry I forgot to tell you,” I paused to look over my shoulder and sent an apologetic look to Damian, “or you about each other.”

“You wearing the black ones?” asked Tez, as if he didn’t even hear me.

I whipped around and gaped at him.

His gaze dropped to my waist and he spent an inordinate amount of time perusing my southern region. “Cause I really liked those.”

“Must you insist on embarrassing me?” I hissed.

“I dunno. Are you really embarrassed?”

I wasn’t. Well, not much. I was actually both irritated and thrilled that he flirted so outrageously with me and didn’t care who was watching. Then I had another flash of insight: He was letting Damian know of his interest in me. It was the testosterone-filled equivalent of yelling, “Dibs!”

Now, I was completely irritated.

“Cotton panties, full cheek coverage,” 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 found a dead body last night,” I said.

Damian’s eyes went wide.

“Bones,” corrected Tez. “Old bones. Buried in the woods.” He reached over and patted the top of the skull. “See? She brought back a souvenir.”

“Oh. That’s different,” said Damian. “You know we find graves every now and again—usually family plots that are unmarked or lost their headstones. Eva told us that sometime in the nineteen-twenties, the town moved its cemetery to its current location. Not every body made it.”

Tez snorted a laugh.

I slanted him a look.

“What?” he asked. “I like gallows humor.”

Damian frowned, as if he didn’t quite get the joke. I sighed. “I think I should talk to Patsy.” I explained to him about the disembodied voice and the choking incident. He looked concerned, but I’m almost positive it was because he was worried about the security issues of an unknown and violent assailant. Damian was very good at his job, and didn’t let pesky emotion get in the way of performing his duties.

“What about him?” asked Damian.

We both turned to look at Tez.

“I have an invite,” said Tez. He turned around and bared his shoulder, revealing a tattoo: a red heart with double swords piercing it.

“It’s a temporary tattoo,” said Damian. “Brady and Dr. Michaels created them. It allows prospective residents to pass through the Invisi-shield, but after ten days, the tattoos dissolve.” He sent a narrowed look to Tez. “And so does the invitation.”

The Invisi-shield was a creation of technological genius and old-world magic. All the residents’ DNA codes were programmed within it, which allowed us to go in and out without

problems. Anyone who didn't belong in Broken Heart couldn't get through the shields and set off alarms.

"You didn't come to the checkpoint," accused Damian. "Who sent you the tattoo?"

"Alpha Calphon," said Tez, referring to the leader of the were-cats. He shrugged. "Believe me, I was just as surprised as anyone to find out there was a whole town full of paranormal beings in the middle of nowhere Oklahoma. I wanted to check out things for myself."

"Before you revealed yourself?" I asked. "You're not anywhere near the were-cat commune. It's on the far side of town, well past the main living areas of the other residents."

He tapped the side of his nose. "I followed this ... straight to you."

Well, what did that mean? His gaze was dark and intense, and I felt branded by the heat of those hazel eyes. Mine, he seemed to say.

How ridiculous.

I pressed a hand against my stomach to still the feeling of butterflies taking wing there. He made me crazy, that were-jaguar.

He gave me the once-over. "What exactly are you, princess?"

"Vampire," I said.

"Really?" He studied my mouth, probably to see my fangs, which only appeared when I fed. Or got really angry. I pressed my lips together and glared at him.

He grinned. "Didn't figure vampires were real."

"But shifters are normal?" I asked, amazed he knew so little about the paranormal world. How could he believe shifting into a jaguar was stranger than meeting someone undead?

"Always been a shifter," he said. "Never met anyone else like me."

“And what are you?” asked Damian. “You do not smell like the other cats.”

“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 wrapped his fingers around 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. He’s a liar.” Damian pulled me, but I resisted. I glanced at him, surprised at the fury in his gaze. “Jaguar shifters are extinct.”