

My *Gay*

Sparkles

VAMPIRE
Romance
A Twilight Parody



Zoe E. Whitten

My Sparkly Gay Vampire Romance

A Twilight Parody

By Zoe E. Whitten

(Who is actually a huge fan of teh Sparkles)

The following story is a parody of the Twilight series, by Stephenie Meyer, and while significant changes have been made to the story, characters, and situations, copyrights and credits still go to the author for the creation of the original characters.

This story is considered a fan-fiction, and as such no profit may be made off of its distribution at any time. If you paid for a copy of this file, please email me at zoe_whitten@yahoo.com and let me know who charged you for the file.

Prologue

Isabella S. (Stephenie) Wong, or Bella to her father, sighed as her father laid out the printed digital photos from his trip to the apartment. It looked like a dump, and she said so: "It's a dump."

"It's a fixer upper," John C. (Chun) Wong insisted. "Your grandma Shun Yi passed on and left us her rent-controlled apartment. If we can move in, we'll have plenty of money left over for a bigger dojo."

"Dad, it's in the Bronx," Bella complained.

"Bella, it's rent-controlled!"

"And?"

"And?" John huffed, his face tense in an incredulous look as if his daughter hadn't been paying attention. "Do you understand how every time we sign on for another lease with these people, they jack up the price another hundred dollars? They don't offer us anything new for the extra money! As it is, we've been making our own repairs, and then they complain that we should have let them do it, so they fine us!"

John was panting now, but Bella remained nonplussed because this had become a familiar rant with him.

She could understand her father's anger, and she shared his frustrations. She'd helped him repair the lousy plumbing in the bathroom, and when they'd gone to the management with receipts for the work, they were fined instead of reimbursed.

But the Bronx was a long way from her sunny, arid Arizona home, and it was far, far away from her mother's ashes, which had been scattered in the desert six years before.

Bella was sixteen, used to hardships, and used to dealing with her dad's blustery temper. But after the latest rent hike and the problems with the plumbing fines, the letter from Shun Yi's attorney seemed like a godsend to him. To Bella, it seemed like a one-way ride into smoggy hell.

Bella nodded. "Yes, I understand. But will it be better to live in squalor with pet rats?"

"We'll set out little placemats for them," John said.

Bella smiled, but faked irritation by rolling her eyes. "Dad."

"We'll name them and get collars. We'll even take them to the vet for vaccinations. You can name the first two Pinky and Brain."

Bella giggled, shaking her head. "It's a stupid idea. We should get traps and name the first two Cut Bait and Too Slow."

"Bella, being that heartless, you'll never attract anyone."

"Ugh."

"I didn't say a man," John pointed out. "But you don't even have a girlfriend, and you claim to like the carpet."

"Dad!"

John chuckled. "What? I'm just showing that I have an open mind."

"Close it a little bit. You're freaking me out." Bella snickered. "And besides, I said I lick the carpet, not like it."

John laughed again, and then sat down at the kitchen table beside his daughter. "We'll have plenty of money for new drywall and paint, and you can decorate your room exactly like your room here, if you want." He looped an arm over her shoulders and squeezed. "Who knows? You might even meet some hot girls living in the same building."

Bella laughed, finally relenting. "Okay, fine. But it is a rent-controlled building, Dad. All the 'hawt' women living there are probably over a hundred."

She was right.

Chapter 1

Edwina Sullen watched the early sunset from the window of her apartment. The real sunset would not be for another three hours, but the tall buildings on either side of the street kept the neighborhood dim except for a brief span of time from somewhere around ten in the morning until four in the afternoon, or six during the longer summer days.

Now it was fall, and even at the peak of the day, smog kept the streets dim. This was why Edwina lived in the Bronx after all, because the smog made her stomping grounds dimmer during the day. So she could wander outside and get all kinds of daylight deeds done. She was even able to maintain a day job, an unheard of thing in her family.

But then they were always calling Edwina "the bold one." It was Edwina who had struck out on her own, leaving the coven to come to the Bronx. It was Edwina

who approached the local werecat slayer, and during every visit, he family marveled how she lived right next door to a werecougar without getting mauled. Such an act surely had to require the boldness of a lioness.

Which was funny, because Edwina just had a knack for saying "please" with the right tone of sincerity that people always seemed more inclined to see things her way. She didn't have to be bold to get her way. She just had to be polite.

From across the room, her dog, Fang, whimpered. The massive German Shepherd was hungry again, but then he always was. Being on a liquid diet, his stomach emptied soon after he ate, and he'd required three years of training before he wasn't always snappish. Now he fed on command, as was expected of a proper vampire dog, but he still whined in an effort to get permission for extra feedings.

Normally, Edwina was given to feel pity for his miserable theatrics, but her cupboards were barren, so to speak. They always were, given that she didn't eat solid food either. But this time, even the glass bottles in the fridge were empty. So there would be no sneaking sips to wait for nightfall.

"Sorry, Fang," Edwina said. "I don't even have anything for my own breakfast." She glanced down and saw a moving truck rumble to a stop in the alleyway, and she opened the window to walk out onto the fire escape.

The sunlight was dim, but without the tinting screen on the window, Edwina had to pull out a heavy pair of black wrap-around sunglasses. The frames hugged the hollows under her slightly protruding brow, a feature made more extreme because of her squinting scowl.

She hated sunlight. It made her weak as a human, and it stung, even this dim light filtered as it was by the shadows of the buildings. And of course, under direct sunlight, she was instantly marked as a vampire.

Out on the fire escape, she leaned over right as a teenage girl got out of the passenger side and glanced up. She was wearing dark sunglasses too, and with her pale face and silky black hair, she almost looked like a vampire. This was why Edwina stared instead of backing up, and the girl froze when she spotted the vampire.

The girl raised her hand to wave, and Edwina backed away from the window, swallowing thickly. The first word that came to mind was, *Tasty*.

That was bad, as that would completely blow her diet, not to mention her truce with the cats. And the last thing she wanted to do was let the cats out of the bag. They belonged locked away safely in a box, where they could silently confound Schrödinger and his morbid students. (Preferably with something highly radioactive inside to make sure the poison bottle broke.)

She didn't really mind the cats, so long as they left her alone, but then there was her neighbor, Jacqueline, who never left her alone. Which was not always a bad thing, and when Jacqueline wasn't being a smug bitch, Edwina could think of her as a friend.

The nearest vampires were the Sharks from the West Side, and she didn't care to dance to their tune. So it was either play nice with the pussies or go live with a bunch of snappish assholes who hated Edwina's guts and thought of her as a freak.

So, yeah, not really an option.

Fang went to the window and peered over the side. He thought, *Oh, she's tasty!*

"Fang," Edwina said, grabbing her grumbling stomach. "Not now."

Oh, right, Fang thought, but continued to watch the occupants of the moving truck begin working out their line of attack. *Yeah, she's not likely a criminal. Pity. She really does look scrumptious.*

"Fang!"

The dog heaved a sigh and came back into the apartment. *Can't we go nibble one of the bums? The city considers that loitering. That's a crime, right?*

"Not according to the cats, Fang," Edwina said. "You know the rules: no druggies, only dealers; no whores, only pimps."

But we've eaten all of those, Fang complained. *It's been two days since that last rapist, and he was a scrawny fucker. You drank most of him yourself.*

"I did not! I shared exactly half!" Fang huffed, and then so did Edwina. "You little ingrate! I give you half of everything I kill! Do you think your ass is so thick because I'm skimping on your meals?"

You're skimping now, Fang thought.

"I am not. There's just been slim picking in our stomping grounds."

So why not sneak into someone else's territory?

"Ugh, you're just thinking with your stomach, fleabag," Edwina's stomach growled, and she sighed. "All right, you win. Grab your leash."

The dog went to the kitchen cabinet and nosed open the door to pull out an eight-foot length of heavy steel chain. One end had a spring-loaded latch to fasten to Fang's heavy spiked collar. The other end had a black webbing strap reinforced with leather strips inside and out. It was no longer needed to keep him in line, but during his early training, he had broken many thinner chain sizes easily, even wounding Edwina with flying debris when he made multiple links explode at the same time.

The dog led the way out of the apartment, and Jacqueline Fourpaws, her next door neighbor, opened her front door right as Edwina stepped into the hallway.

Jacqueline's mouth stretched in a wide Cheshire grin. "Going out for dinner early?"

"We're...we're going off of your territory to look for something. It's been thin pickings for the last two days, and Fang is starting to admire our new neighbors."

"Oh, someone is moving in?"

"Yeah, I saw the truck out back, but I don't know much else about them."

"They'd have to be replacing Shun, bless her wrinkled dead ass."

Edwina snorted soundlessly, shaking her head. "I'm sure you'll nose around and come up with a field report. Or do you want to come with? We'll be hunting on the West Side."

Jacqueline made a grimacing expression of disdain. "No thanks. Those Shark assholes drive me nuts with all that snapping and dancing." She shuddered and shook her head. "No, I'll just wander downstairs and offer a little muscle to move the new people in. I can bring some bottled boar after you come back from dinner?"

Edwina's mouth watered at the mention of an exotic blood from Jacqueline's tribal relations on the Erie reservation. "That's fine, but make sure to get some juicy dirt on the new people. If you're too dull, we'll have to spike the blood."

"Yeah, whatever, Sparkles," Jacqueline said, and then sneered. "The smog's kinda light today. Are you sure you don't need to put on some sparkling sunscreen?"

Edwina rolled her eyes and headed for the elevators. "Come on, Fang. Let's go before she breaks into the other lame running gags."

I think she's funny, Fang thought.

"You would," Edwina said. "You're a stupid dog, and her lowbrow humor appeals to you."

When she pushed the elevator button, Jacqueline called from the stairwell, "It's out again, obviously."

"Obviously," Edwina said. She and Fang began heading down the stairs, and two flights below, Jacqueline caught up to the girl.

"Hi!" Jacqueline said, even her voice sounding sunny. "Well, aren't you a pretty thing?"

A soft voice, clearly pleased by the compliment, spoke next. "Thanks. I'm Isabella, but you can call me Bella."

"A most fitting name," Jacqueline said. "But you strike me as having an Asian heritage."

"Yes, my father is Chinese, and my mother was Italian."

"Ah, so the bun in her oven was made in *cucina Italo-Cinese*?"

Bella giggled. "Cute. I'll have to remember that."

Edwina came around the next flight of stairs, and both Jacqueline and Bella looked around.

The first thing Edwina noticed was that she couldn't read Bella's thoughts. Which was interesting because it had never happened before. But the second thing she noticed was that Bella had great tits.

It was hard not to notice with her tight white T-shirt being thin enough to show off her black demicup bra. She wore tight blue jeans and black tennis shoes that seemed hugely swollen around her dainty bare ankles.

Edwina moved to one side of the stairwell to walk past, and Bella stared at her with intense fascination. Edwina didn't have to guess why. Bella stared because Edwina was a very pretty vampire. All vampires were, *just because*, but Edwina was particularly exquisitely pretty. She even smelled pretty, and she gave blind men boners. Even blind gay men.

Edwina grimaced a closed-mouth smile as she passed Bella, trying not to breathe in her scent and taste her.

She nodded and said, "Hello," but quickly moved on without inhaling.

Fang was not so polite. The dog sniffed Bella's hand and made a strangled groan, like he was gargling a mouthful of sperm and couldn't decide whether to spit or swallow.

Edwina looked around at the dog. "Fang! Knock it off!"

Fang huffed a disappointed sigh and whimpered.

"Oh, poor thing is hungry," Bella said, starting to lean over and reach for the dog.

Edwina and Jacqueline both said, "You don't wanna—" They stopped when they realized they were speaking in stereo.

Bella looked back and forth between them and said, "So...roommates?"

"Next door neighbors," Jacqueline said, then gestured at Edwina. "But she's been here ten years, so we know each other well."

"Intimately?" Bella asked coyly.

"Tried it," Jacqueline said, and then shook her head. "Didn't work out. We have irreconcilable differences."

Edwina snorted, but regretted it when she got a good whiff of Bella. Then her stomach growled, and she was almost overcome with the urge to grab the teen and drain her right in the stairwell.

Bella's mouth fell open in a small O before she covered it with her hand. "You both must be starving."

"Yes, and we're just going out for groceries now." Edwina swallowed and started backing away fast. "So, we'll see you later."

"Sure, see you later," Bella said, and she turned to Jacqueline. "She's nice."

Quickly retreating, the last thing Edwina heard was Jacqueline's amused laughter.

Chapter 2

Bella scrunched up her face in a look of confusion when Jacqueline laughed. "What?"

"Edwina Sullen is many things, but nice isn't one of them. She looks nice, that much is true." Jacqueline shook her head, but continued to smile as if she was just passing along a little friendly gossip. "But not everything that glitters is gold."

Bella glanced back down the stairs that Edwina had quickly dashed down with her giant German Shepherd. Bella wasn't sure the breed was meant to get so big, and his eyes had seemed a bit...reddish?

Edwina's eyes had been dark, a graphite grey so dark as to almost be black. She was pretty; exquisitely, enchantingly, entrancingly pretty. If Bella had a dick, she was sure it would be hard. As it was, she was feeling a bit achy in the clitoral and breast departments.

Edwina also looked to be about the right age for Bella, in theory. She looked like she was in her early twenties, but if Edwina and Jacqueline had a history going back ten years, she was more likely closer to her late twenties.

Which was great, because Bella found herself most often attracted to middle-aged women. She had not yet acted on her impulses, but after telling her dad that she was a lesbian, he'd expected her to pick someone from school. She didn't find any of her classmates attractive, but it wasn't a matter of looks so much as a case of clashing personalities. Lots of girls were pretty, but they still had ugly, catty personalities.

Bella reminded herself that she was coming to a new school with new friends. So perhaps one of the girls among them might turn into a girlfriend. And if Jacqueline said Edwina wasn't nice, then maybe she knew something that Bella didn't.

She shrugged, and then leaned over to retrieve the box she'd been carrying when Jacqueline met her. The tall, russet-skinned woman reached out with both hands, taking away the box of books as if it was feather-light.

"Here, let me help," Jacqueline said, already moving up the steps. "Just tell me what floor to stop on."

"The seventh floor," Bella said. "My father and I are moving into my grandmother's old place."

"Ah, so you're Shun Yi's kid?"

"Yep," Bella said.

Jacqueline nodded, craning her head back to beam a wide grin at Bella. Bella found it enchanting, and she found the older woman's presence to be extremely comforting, like they had always been friends, and they were reuniting after being apart for a few months.

Her charming demeanor was also helped by her undecorated beauty. She had high cheekbones that gave her face a round moon shape. Her face was framed by two curtains of silky black hair, which showed not one stray strand as it cascaded down her back. The ends tapered off near her muscular waist. She had plenty in the breast department, but Jacqueline was a big and clearly athletic woman who could still make her size and strength look graceful and feminine.

She wore a white T-shirt with the sleeves torn off to make room for her well developed shoulders, and cutoff denim shorts that hugged her ass and told Bella she was a thong-wearer.

Jacqueline took Bella's mind off her ass by asking, "Have you got any of the old woman's moves?"

Bella smiled proudly and nodded. "Yep, Grandma Yi taught me both butterfly and sparrow forms, and my dad has taught me crane, tiger, and dragon."

Jacqueline whistled, her brown eyes widening with the proper level of respect that only a seasoned fighter could offer. Bella could guess she was a fighter just based on her graceful, soundless walk.

She asked, "What styles do you know?"

"Just one, the local art of my people. I guess you could say mine is cougar style."

"You're Native American, right?"

"Yep, we're from the Erie tribe."

"Oh, I don't know them." Bella realized this sounded stupid and made an embarrassed smile. "I mean, I've studied all the tribes in Arizona. I've even been to the Navaho reservation in the Painted Desert."

"The Erie are a local tribe, obviously. We have a reservation, but many of us have moved here."

"To find work?"

"To find food," Jacqueline said.

Bella wasn't sure why, but something about the tone of Jacqueline's voice made her shudder. "Isn't it the same thing?" she asked, trying to sound jovial.

"I guess so." Jacqueline set down the box in the living room floor. "Well, that's just one box, but I can—" She glanced around when John arrived through the door under a load of two boxes and dropped them with several inches between them and the floor. The thunderous sound banged like a gunshot through the still empty apartment, and through the uncarpeted hallway outside.

John looked at Jacqueline and nodded. "Heavy. Uh, I mean, hello." He smiled and offered his hand. "I'm John Wong."

"Jacqueline Fourpaws." She shook his hand and pointed up. "I live on the floor above you, but don't worry, I don't walk heavy. You'll never even know when I'm home."

"I guess you've introduced yourself to my daughter, Bella," John said.

"Yes, just now in the stairwell, and I was about to offer my help in moving you in."

"Oh, we couldn't impose," Bella said.

"You wouldn't be," Jacqueline said. "I like to be a good neighbor, and the first way I can do that is helping you move your furniture."

John said, "I'll accept that help, but only if you'll join us for dinner."

"That depends," Jacqueline said. "What are we having?"

John shrugged, and then looked at Bella. "What do you feel like?"

"Beef and broccoli?" Bella asked.

"Yep, that'll do it," Jacqueline said. She turned around to start heading for the door. "Right, so you can point me to the heavy stuff, and I'll earn my meal. But I have to warn you, I eat a lot."

"Duly noted," John said. "I'll make a trip to the market for extra meat and rice, just to be on the safe side."

As they headed back down the stairs, Jacqueline looked back around at Bella and beamed another wide smile. "Are you starting college this year?"

"Ha, I wish." Bella sighed. "No, I'm starting as a sophomore this year."

"A sophomore? So you're...what? Sixteen?"

"Yes, sixteen and a half, but nobody counts the half after three." Bella laughed a little at her mother's old joke, and then sighed when Jacqueline didn't. "Anyway, I don't guess you'd know much about what the local schools are like."

"Nope, I have no idea what any public education system is like. I was taught by my tribal elders, in the old ways."

"Campfire stories?" Bella guessed.

"No, daily hunting trips."

Bella shuddered again, and then laughed. "You can be very scary sometimes. Do you know that?"

"I *am* an Erie." Jacqueline grinned. "I have a tribal requirement to live up to our name."

Chapter 3

Edwina grimaced as soon as she heard the popping sounds of fingers snapping in perfect synchronized time. She didn't mind that the local vampires were so...artistic. After all, Edwina was a gifted musician herself, and a talented singer with a vocal range that could accurately be called inhuman.

But the Sharks, AKA: The West Side Story Gang, took their performance art just a bit too far, even dancing in synchronized steps when they moved around outside. They should have been considered a major joke, except they shredded anyone who dared invade their turf looking for easy prey.

Edwina had often seen the dancers whirling around someone, still snapping their fingers in time with whatever song was playing in their heads while their mouths snapped spouting bloody geysers from their victim. When they got finished, often the only thing left was a pink wet skeleton, picked clean of all but the tiniest bits of meat.

Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks, swayed over to Edwina while his cohorts hung back. At a single spoken command, they would attack, but for now they continued to snap their fingers and croon "Shoop-doo! Shoop-shoop-she-doop!"

Edwina smiled politely, avoiding baring her fangs. "Good evening, Bernardo. Just the man I was looking for."

Bernardo leaned his head over and sang, "You were looking for me? I'll contain my glee."

Edwina bit back an insult that it was a stupid rhyme. She could do a much better job if she had a clue what tune Bernardo was thinking. But it didn't sound like it was from West Side Story. Or if it did, Bernardo was mangling it. Again.

"Yes, I need to ask permission to hunt for a criminal on your turf."

"You search the Earth for a surf n turf?"

Edwina had to swallow a disgusted groan. "More like a scarf n barf, knowing your class of criminals. Still, I can't be picky right now. The cats aren't leaving me much to work with, and they've been fattening up for the winter." Edwina smiled, canted her head, and turned on the charm. "So, can I go hunting, please?"

Bernardo also canted his head at the same angle, unknowingly pulled into Edwina's charm spell. "Okay, sure, you can catch a snack, but then you and the mutt gotta go back."

Edwina offered a polite curtsy and said, "We'll be gone before midnight, unless the criminals are slim here too."

"Nope, no way, we've still got lots. We got way more crooks than vampires or cops."

Now that Edwina had the beat, she decided to show up the little chump.

She sang, "This night I feel fine, to know that I dine, with your given permission, on your criminal swine." Bernardo's eyes narrowed in a vain bid to hide his jealousy at her mad skills, but before he could come up with a response, she sang, "And now I digress, for I must confess, that my stomach is empty, causing me some distress."

"Ooh, you...you...show off." Bernardo huffed and danced back to his group.

Edwina watched them leave before looking down at Fang. "It's sad watching the amateurs stumble."

Fang whimpered and thought, *Don't you dare break into I Feel Pretty on the Sharks' turf, Edwina. You'll get us both killed!*

"You worry too much," Edwina said, and then smiled wickedly. "But you know that song is mine by birthright, not theirs."

She started to hum the tune, and Fang thought, *We're so boned.*

"I'm just humming it. It's not the same thing as singing."

Boned, Fang insisted. Edwina hummed the song louder, and the dog added, *Right in the bonehole, and without a lick of fat to make it interesting.*

But despite her efforts to make her dog nervous, Edwina didn't break into song. She still had to find something to eat, and if she sang *I Feel Pretty* and the Sharks heard her, they'd go into a frenzy and chase her all the way back to Erie lands. In fact, that particular slight might be so bad that they might cross territory lines. And wouldn't that be interesting to watch? Cat fur and vampire limbs flying every which way, and no one dying because it was just about as impossible to kill a vampire as it was to kill a were.

Edwina reflected on this, on how the humans thought both races had easily exploitable weaknesses. But weres had no problems with silver, and staking a vampire's heart didn't kill it. It just slowed them down. Even for a vampire, a tree branch through the heart is Mother Nature's way of calling a time out. But once the branch was removed, the flesh mended back together. Once a limb was fit back to stump, the torn flesh reconnected. And if said limb was lost, the body would rapidly grow another.

This was true of both races, and it was also true that both were immortal. But they weren't competitors by nature. Many movie people made up stories that weres and vampires hated each other, but in reality, they were just competing for the same food source. To keep in hiding, both races stuck to killing criminals, and rules had been established for getting rid of the bodies so as to avoid exposure for either race.

Under these guiding principles of mutual survival, both werewolves and vampires lived right under the noses of normal humans, their political factions sectioning cities into territories. Of course, there were more mystical races in the cities than just the weres and vampires, and in New York, there was a goodly number of fairies on the upper east side.

Phat pimp blimp at six o'clock! Fang thought.

Edwina looked around where the dog's snout was pointing, and then she saw the pimp in the dark alley, beating one of his women behind a dumpster. He was a whale of a man, easily worth two of the skinnier crack dealers from her hood, and probably a whole hell of a lot tastier.

Pimps liked to live on the finer things while forcing their hos to keep jumping johns for pocket change. They liked refined drugs too, so their blood wasn't as junky.

They still weren't clean, though, and even a well fed man like this pimp blimp would be full of drugs and alcohol.

Not like Bella, who had smelled so clean and virginal. But then Edwina hadn't been allowed to drink from a virgin since the 1800s ended during her thirties. Now being two hundred and eighteen, she'd spent a long time living on unclean people, on junk food. But sometimes, even with her impeccable self-control, she still longed for real food.

Blurring across the street and into the alley, Edwina positioned herself almost directly behind the pimp before she said, "Rough night, poppy?"

The pimp whirled around, and Edwina flicked a scalpel across his throat. She stepped around him, and her handiwork jetted blood across the alley and away from the cowering hooker.

Edwina offered the woman her free hand, hiding the scalpel behind her back. "Run along, dear. You didn't see anything, please."

"I didn't see shit," the woman slurred through her busted mouth. She took off running, never noticing that Fang was already lapping up spilled blood.

Edwina walked around the swaying pimp in time to catch him when he fell forward, and she closed her lips over his wound, sucking hard to pull blood from his dead body. She couldn't bite him, not without leaving behind evidence that vampires really did exist. She wouldn't even drain him completely, but she could drink enough to make the gnawing ache of hunger go away.

Dropping the body, she smacked her lips and made a face. "Cocaine. I was hoping for a pothead."

I don't care is he's smoking syphilis, Fang thought, moving closer to lick blood from the leaking wound. *I'm so hungry, I'd even eat a crack junkie right about now.*

Ignoring the disturbing thought to avoid recalling the awful taste, Edwina sat down on the dead man's chest, forcing a spout into Fang's waiting mouth. She rose up and dropped a second and third time, and then stood up to watch the dog lap at the puddle under the pimp's neck.

Once he'd had his fill, Edwina took the pimp's wallet and all his valuables, making the scene look like a mugging. It was, after all, and Edwina would make part of her rent up by her nightly hunts. Her day job was nice, but it didn't cover much. So she was forced to resort to crime to pay the bills. By her logic, it wasn't a real crime if she was mugging and killing hardened criminals. Hell, she was practically performing a public service for the humans.

She wondered if that defense would fly in court, but decided that it probably would not.

Chapter 4

Bella went to the living room and shut off the TV, turning around to smile at her dozing father. He snored on the couch, one forearm thrown over his eyes to block out the light from the lamp. She shut the lamp off and paused to let her night vision adjust to the change. Then she took the blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over him.

She padded to the door and pocketed her keys and a slim wallet. Both went in her hip pockets, and then she slipped on a black leather jacket, her armor. She checked her waist pockets for her mini-batons, which could telescope out to a full foot and a half in length with a flick of her wrist. In her inner chest pocket was the next step down, a canister of CS gas. Lots of junkies could laugh off pepper spray, but real CS gas was still much harder to ignore. If anyone could do it, she would go for the batons next, and then she would royally fuck them up.

She slipped out the front door and locked it behind herself. Her dad didn't like her wandering by herself at night, and never had. But Bella was a creature of habit, and her nightly walks were vital to her emotional well-being.

She slipped into the stairwell silently, almost running into Edwina as she was heading up with Fang.

Bella backed up fast, and so did Edwina. Fang remained pretty much where he was, his brownish red eyes glued to Bella. His mouth hung open, and his pink tongue lolled over the side of his lower jaw. It was a very typical dog pose, and yet Bella's mind nagged at her that something was missing.

She looked away from the dog and up at Edwina. Despite them both standing on the same step, Edwina still had close to a foot in height over Bella. At six feet and three inches, she was still shorter than Jacqueline's awesome height of six-foot-nine, but both women were towers compared to Bella's lowly height of five-foot-five.

Edwina was dressed the same as before, wearing black jeans and a dark grey blouse. A black waist cincher made the top of the blouse flair dramatically, and the outfit made her pale alabaster skin even more attractive for the strong contrast. Bella had the oddest thought about give Edwina a hickey, but stowed the thought.

"Sorry," Bella said, and beamed a warm smile. "I'm just sneaking out for my nightly patrol. Or, it's my first night here, so I'm just getting the lay of the land."

"That's nice." Edwina started up the steps. "Well, have a good night."

"Would you like to give me a tour?"

Edwina pouted like she was being put upon, and then glanced up the stairs. "Um...maybe Jacqueline might be better about giving you the tour. She can give you all the best local legends. I'm just a transplant, like you."

"A transplant," Bella said, and then laughed. "I like that. Like we're all vital parts of the city."

"We all serve a function." Edwina smiled and canted her head to one side. "What's yours?"

"Part-time vigilante." Bella blinked, wondering why she'd just blurted out the truth like that. "Uh, did I say that or think it?"

"You said it." Edwina glanced up the stairs again, and then started back down the steps, waving for Bella to come along. Fang trotted out ahead of the women, rattling his chain like a ghost haunting the stairwell.

"How long have you been a part-time vigilante?" Edwina asked.

"Only one year, and it's kind of a joke. I'm really just going out for walks at night. But when people see me, they think I'm a cute and easy little target. So they try to mug me, or rape me, or kill me." Bella sighed, indicating how very dull this was to her. "After a while, I just got used to the idea that the world is full of monsters looking to prey on cute people. In a way, I actually feel bad for the people who approach me. They have no idea how much trouble they've just stumbled across."

"You're a fighter?"

"Yes, I know many forms of Kung-Fu and Wing Chun."

Edwina nodded. "That's interesting."

"Do you know how to fight?"

"Mmm-hmmm"

Bella smirked. "You aren't going to tell me what styles you know?"

"All of them."

"What?" Bella laughed and shook her head. "No way. You'd have to be a really old geezer to study all the fighting styles of the world."

"I would, yes, but I...I'm a mimic, you see. Once I see a style, I know it intimately myself. After I see you move through any one style, I know your moves, and your weak points."

"Get out." Bella laughed, but her amusement was also mixed with disbelief. "You can't be that good."

Edwina shrugged. "Well, with you, I might have trouble getting a reading on you. So if you deviated from your standard forms or mixed moves, you'd still have a chance."

Bella laughed. "Oh, that's way too cocky for my liking. I think I'm going to have to take you down a peg or two."

Opening the door and holding it open for Bella, Edwina smirked. "How do you propose to do that?"

"We'll have to find a suitable place for a sparring match."

"Well if it's a pissing contest you want, how about we look for a schoolyard?"

"You are *so funny*," Bella said, stressing the last words to mean "so *not* funny." She nodded and said, "Sure, pick a direction toward a schoolyard."

Edwina looked up in thought, and then gestured right. "Let's go this way. Are you really sure you want to spar with me, though? I think you'd want to go for a walk to relax."

"Not me, no. I have to be extra alert during my walks."

"Oh, yes, good point."

Bella craned her head to stare at Edwina. "Why do I get the feeling that you don't like me?"

"Hmmm?" Edwina shook her head. "I'm not sure I know what you mean. You're the one starting our first date off with a fight."

"This isn't a date," Bella said, and then snorted. "On a date, two people go out and do something they really like."

"Right, and clearly, you really like fighting."

"No, I..." Bella considered this and then nodded. "Okay, maybe that's true." She stared at Edwina for almost a block in silence while she mulled her thoughts.

"Maybe it's your body language, but I just feel like you're intentionally closing yourself off."

"Oh, okay." Edwina shrugged. "Sure, maybe that's true, but it's not that I don't like you. I just keep my distance from most people."

"I don't see why. You're really pretty."

"Thank you, but that's got nothing to do with my problems. And I can't really talk about my problems anyway."

"I guess I can understand that. There's things I don't like to talk about either. I used to be distant from everyone too, but my dad bugged me to open up to people again."

"What about your mom?"

"She's one of the things I don't like to talk about."

"Oh." Edwina pouted and looked away. "I'm sorry."

"She's been gone six years," Bella said, and then sighed. Six years didn't feel nearly long enough or far enough away from the pain of her murder. "Anyway I guess you're right. If all we've got in common is fighting, perhaps it's best just to stick with sparring techniques."

Edwina glanced at Bella, then stared at the sidewalk for a few seconds. "Do you like music?"

"Sure."

"What kinds?"

"Lotsa kinds." Bella thought for any specific band she liked, and her brain went blankish. "Mostly rock and pop, I guess. I don't like rap, but R&B isn't bad. Country sucks."

"Tejano?" Edwina asked.

"Sucks." Bella glanced at Edwina. "You aren't in a Tejano band, are you?"

"I'm not in any band. I think Tejano is disappointing from an artistic standpoint."

"Are you some kind of music composer?"

"Yes. I record separate tracks one at a time and then synch them together using my laptop," Edwina said. She stopped walking and gestured at the school. "The playground is in the back, or we can spar in the grass."

"Playground," Bella said, already moving to cross the parking lot. "So what instruments do you play?" She held up a hand when she had a sudden thought. "No,

let me guess. All of them?"

"Yep, pretty much."

"And I'll bet you sing pretty too."

Edwina smile wider, and then sang, "I feel pretty. Oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and gay, and I pity any girl who isn't me today."

Bella stopped walking, her mouth hanging open as she stared. "Wow."

"Thank you." Edwina started walking again, but Bella didn't. "Um, did you still want to spar?"

"I'm not so sure now. It suddenly dawned on me, you really may know as much about fighting as you do about singing." Bella smiled a second later, and then shrugged. "Ah, what the hell? It's just a friendly sparring match, and even if I lose, I might learn something."

They wandered around the building, and as soon as Bella saw the playground, she nodded her approval. "Yes," she said, "this is a fine battleground."

Edwina laughed and went to the jungle gym to tie off Fang's leash. "I'm glad you like it."

Bella slipped off her jacket and hung it over the bars of the same jungle gym and kicked her leg straight up to rest her ankle on the top bar. She put her forehead on her knee, and then rolled her head to look at Edwina. She was not surprised to find Edwina in a matching pose.

Laughing, Bella said, "You're limber enough, but that doesn't mean you know how to fight."

Smirking, Edwina switched legs. "I'll try not to bruise your ego too much." She dropped her leg and walked to the swing set while she rolled her shoulders. A second later she exploded into motion, running deftly up the A rail frame to reach the top in four steps.

"Holy..." Bella shook her head. She could probably do the same thing. She just had to get enough speed in the first two steps to make the last two.

But while she could make the first two steps, her weight made her slide back down the rail before she could make the third.

She looked up at Edwina, who waved at the bar and said, "Still waiting."

"Oh, you want something fancy, huh?" Bella walked away from the frame, and then ran at the swing. She leapt and planted one foot in the seat, sinking into a crouch. Her momentum lifted her and the swing seat until she was almost level with the top bar. Bella uncurled, leaping and extending her hands to catch the bar. She swung her body around the bar and then set her feet. Rising up, she wobbled slightly, but managed to stand up straight.

Edwina made a polite "golf clap," patting her fingers against her palm. "Not bad at all. So should I get this started, or—?"

Bella leapt and launched a perfect kick. Yet Edwina batted it away with more force than Bella thought was possible with her precarious balance. Bella spun around, landing on the rail with her back to the taller woman.

Instinct and her senses guided her to twist one way and avoid a punch, and she flung an elbow back to try and catch Edwina in the ribs. Instead Edwina's palm smacked the point of Bella's elbow in a loud block.

Bella slung a high kick, forcing Edwina to sway back and denying her the leverage to shove Bella off the bar. Bella spun on the ball of her foot, and her raised leg came down in a hard heel kick. Edwina met the attack with crossed wrists, catching Bella's ankle. Edwina raised her arms fast, trying to unbalance Bella. But Bella expected it and leapt off her stabilized leg, flipping back and away from Edwina.

Yet she'd barely landed before Edwina was moving in for a flurry of punches. Bella countered the blows, but her palms stung with her efforts, and she was being backed up. It wouldn't take much longer before she ran out of bar.

She sank under the next punch and spun a low spin kick, her hands flying to the bar to keep her balance. Edwina leapt up, predictably, and Bella stood up and grabbed her ankle, slinging the taller fighter to mess up her landing.

Edwina laughed as she dropped, landing in a crouch on the ground. "Nice. I didn't see that coming."

Bella dropped off the bar a few feet away from Edwina, and waved her fingers in a classic "Come get some" gesture. Win or lose, she was already beginning to enjoy this first date.

Chapter 5

Edwina laughed, impressed with the pint-sized teenager's balance and speed. Edwina was holding back a lot of her speed for the sake of Bella's ego, but she still hadn't expected to be thrown off balance.

The mistakes were hers for trying to show off and take the fight to "an impossible avenue." But Bella had taken the challenge in stride and found a way to rise to the occasion, pun intended, in her own unique way.

Fighting on the swing set had limited Edwina's options, but she'd been too confident in being able to overwhelm the teen. In other words, she'd gotten cocky and underestimated her opponent.

Now on the ground, Edwina got back into stance and stepped up to Bella with more caution. Even if she was holding back to move at human speeds, countering Bella's defenses would be a real challenge.

If only she could read Bella's mind to know what her plans were. But the teen's thoughts were a complete blank to her.

She was still contemplating a strategy when Bella flew forward and began a blazing flurry of kicks and punches. She seemed to be trying to overwhelm Edwina's defenses or get inside them for a body blow. But once she was inside Edwina's defenses, she changed tactics and dropped to the ground. Her legs scissored fast, with one leg blocking Edwina's shins while the back leg slammed into her knees. The move was so sudden and unexpected that Edwina literally fell for it.

But she was faster to float over Bella, and she pinned the teen's wrists over her head.

"You're so cold," Bella whined.

"And you're hot," Edwina said, though it sounded stupid.

Bella was panting from exertion. Edwina panted too, but not because she needed to. She was excited by this struggle, and now pressed over Bella's hot body, she was feeling terribly confused.

Humans, when pressed in certain dangerous situations, develop an FF response. That is, they either fight or flee. For humans, this FF combo is often called a fight or flight response. Vampires have something similar when dealing with humans, but their FF is known as a fuck or feed response. And the problem for Edwina was, just then, she was feeling both reactions.

Panting fast, she could taste Bella already, and her mouth watered. Her tongue ached, even her teeth did. But she also felt an ache between her legs, a response that she hadn't known in a long time, almost eight years. She felt a hollowness in her chest, a need to press her sore body on Bella's and revel in the joys of simple friction.

Edwina dipped her head, and Bella turned hers, baring her throat to Edwina. Panting faster, Edwina opened her mouth, and her fangs scraped lightly over pulsing,

hot skin. She felt heat on her tongue and knew she was mere millimeters from tasting virgin blood.

Fang's hungry whine brought her back to her senses, and she got to her feet quickly, backing away from Bella as she tried to think of an excuse to leave.

"I'm sorry." Edwina swallowed and tried in vain to stop panting. "I got carried away."

She didn't need to breathe at all, but she was too excited from the moment of forbidden contact. She wanted Bella in the worst way, wanted to take her, and maybe even to turn her.

But the cats would never allow it. They wouldn't let her so much as sip from an innocent human, and turning one would be grounds for her expulsion, if not her execution.

"It's all right." Bella got up and dusted her clothes off. She went to get her jacket, and then she said, "Shall we head back, or find a place to eat?"

"Oh, I couldn't. Actually, I have a bottle of wine waiting for me at home, and I've already finished dinner."

"Aw," Bella cooed. "What a shame. I was having fun, and now the date is already over?"

Edwina smiled at this, and then bowed her head. "I'm sorry it has to be over too, but if we keep wrestling around like that, I might do something really stupid."

Bella fell silent, and she remained quiet during the walk back to the building.

But the same was not true of Fang, who was a chatterbox goading his mistress with stray thoughts like, *She smells really good.*

Which was true. Bella smelled great, and tasted so very appealing that Edwina was clenching her teeth to avoid snapping.

She walked Bella to her apartment, where Bella turned and said, "It was a good match. I'm sorry I doubted your skills, but it did come across as bragging, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it was bragging." Edwina strained for a polite smile. "But then I didn't expect you to be so talented either." She stepped back and dipped her head in a courteous nod. "Have a good night, Bella."

"You too, Edwina."

Edwina went back to the stairwell and ascended another floor. She unlocked her apartment and unclipped Fang's leash. Leaving the leash by the doorway, Edwina shut her door and crossed the hallway to knock on Jacqueline's.

Jacqueline grinned as soon as she opened the door. "Close call, Sparkles. I almost thought I was gonna have to rush in and stake you."

Edwina sighed and nodded. "I knew you had to be watching."

"Of course I watched. If you screw up and eat someone innocent, I'll get punished for not keeping a closer watch over you." Jacqueline shut the door and wandered across the apartment to the tiny kitchen.

She opened the refrigerator and took out a green glass bottle that looked like it might contain wine.

While she set the bottle on the counter and went to the pantry, she said, "I've never had problems with you, Sparkles. You know that. But you were one nibble away from eviction tonight—"

"I know," Edwina said, sounding miserable. "I didn't mean to go outside with her, but...gah, I'm so mixed up now!"

"I know how you feel." Jacqueline took a pan to the sink and turned on the hot water. Once it was near scalding, she put the bottle in the pan and pulled the tap over far enough to stream water into the side of the pan.

She smirked at Edwina. "She's quite pretty, and I'm tempted to chat her up to see how she feels about kissing older women."

"It's not that she's pretty," Edwina said. "She's gorgeous, but my real problem is, she's clean."

"I'm not following you."

"Jacqueline, when was the last time you ate a criminal that wasn't using something? They smoke cigarettes, pot, coke, or crack. They shoot meth, or smoke it, or drop acid. Or they do ecstasy, or heroin, or—but nobody we eat is clean anymore. It's all junk food."

"Hell, Edwina, I don't like this conversation at all."

"You think I like it?" Edwina huffed. "I've been good the whole time I've lived here. Not one problem, not even when I had all my coworkers over for that party."

"I know, but Sparkles, you were ready to eat that girl, and not in the good way." Jacqueline leaned on the counter and rubbed her temples with her fingers. "Now you're talking about wanting clean food, and that can only mean you're giving in to your killer instinct."

Edwina wanted to argue that it wasn't true, but just the mention of eating Bella made her mouth water.

They both fell silent, unable to discuss the morbid topic any further. After ten minutes, Jacqueline shut off the water and poured out two glasses of red boar's blood. The hot water had warmed the fluid to near body temperatures, and although it tasted stale, it was clean.

Edwina tried to sip her drink slowly, but she pulled it back in three fast swallows and set down the glass. "More, please?"

Jacqueline refilled the glass, but held onto the bottle, already expecting another refill request.

Finally, on the third glass, Edwina was able to sip and really appreciate the flavor of the boar. The need for Bella faded, and she could think clearly again.

She leaned against the counter and stared at her glass while she whirled the contents into a little red vortex.

Jacqueline spoke up. "I'll have to watch over Bella, maybe try to steer her away from visiting you. But if she sneaks around me, you need to exercise better self-control."

Edwina nodded, and then took a sip from her glass. "Yes, of course you're right. Next time, I'll just have to be more careful."

No matter how convincing she wanted to be, she couldn't believe she could be so good if there was a next time. Therefore, it made sense to make sure there wasn't a next time.

Chapter 6

Bella tried to sneak as quietly as she could through the hallway, but she had just gotten out of the stairwell when Jacqueline opened her door and came out. Every day for the last week had been the same. If she came up to see Edwina, Jacqueline came out of her apartment instead. It felt like the husky woman was trying to distract Bella.

Jacqueline had a plastic bag in one hand, and she locked her door and pocketed her key ring with the other before raising it in a friendly wave. "Hey, Bella."

"Hi, Jackie," Bella said. "Is Edwina home?"

"Nope, she has a day job, like most normal people."

Bella smiled. "So, what's your excuse?"

"I'm not normal," Jacqueline said, and then grinned.

Bella returned it, even though she felt frustrated by the huge woman. Still, even if she was always distracting Bella, she was charming about it.

Jacqueline held up the bag. "I've been repairing garments, stuff that people throw away in the alleys. After I patch it all up, I take it to the local church to give out to the homeless."

"Wow, that's really nice of you."

"We all try to help in little ways, right?"

"I guess." Bella shrugged. "I never thought about helping anyone like that."

"Yeah, but you're a teenager. You're allowed to be self-centered at your age."

Bella snorted. "Gee, thanks."

"You're welcome." Jacqueline waved toward the stairwell. "So, do you want to walk with me, or would you like to hang around Edwina's door all day?"

"Um.."

Jacqueline laughed. "Oh hell, you have to think about it. The door is better company than me."

Bella felt guilty. She really did like Jacqueline, but she wanted to see Edwina again. She felt certain that as soon as Jacqueline pulled her away, Edwina would arrive and then leave again, and then Bella would lose another chance to see her.

Pouting, she said, "Well, maybe you could wait long enough for me to leave Edwina a note?"

"Sure, I'll wander downstairs and wait for you."

Bella unslung her backpack and sifted through her schoolbooks to find her notepad. She opened the book to a fresh page, and then her mind became as blank as the paper.

What did she really want to say? *Thanks for wrestling with me. Can we do it again?* No. *You made my heart feel funny when you were laying on me.* No, certainly not that much honesty.

And when she really thought about it, why was she hanging around Edwina? She was just sixteen, and no matter how old Edwina was, Bella was just young enough to get Edwina in trouble.

And yet...yet her mind flashed back to Edwina pinning her to the ground, her cool lips flittering over Bella's throat with the softness of butterfly wings. Just thinking about it, Bella's heart sped up so fast it was knocking in her ears, and she was on the verge of panting to relieve a strange ache in her chest.

It didn't matter if all they did was just talk. Bella wanted to see Edwina again. So she wrote:

Edwina,

I keep missing you at home, but I hope to see you again this weekend.

She paused, considered what she wrote, and then added:

Unless you don't want to see me. If so, just say so and tuck this note back in my door.

Bella

She considered the note, and almost scratched everything out. It was so stupid, like a love letter from elementary school: *Do you like me? Yes/No*

But then what else was there to ask? Bella tore out the note and folded it, slipping she sheet under the door. Then she pulled on her bag and went to the stairwell.

Jacqueline sat on the stairs with her elbows on her thighs. At the sound of the front door opening, she looked around and nodded to Bella. Then she stood up and raised her arms for a long stretch.

Jacqueline made a pleased groan when her back popped, and then lowered her arms. "So, how is school?"

"Okay, I guess." Bella moved down the steps to follow Jacqueline. "Most of the kids think they're so cool just because they dress nice, or because they have nice hair. But they're all just a bunch of posers."

"And you aren't?"

Bella looked at the taller woman, studying her curious expression. The question wasn't a challenge, or at least, it didn't sound like one.

"I don't know. I'm not trying to pretend I'm cool or interesting like them. I just be me, you know?"

"Sure."

"Sometimes I just want to tell the others 'it's okay to stop pretending. You can be lame like me, and it won't hurt.'"

"I don't really think you're lame," Jacqueline said.

"Sure I am. I can't keep track of the latest cool bands, and the other kids say my clothing is 'so retro.'" Bella sighed. "I hate school. I wish school could be like at our dojo, then nobody is cooler or more fashionable. All that matters is skill."

"Hmmm" Jacqueline glanced around casually, and then remarked, "Sounds to me like you've got low self-esteem."

"Doesn't everybody?" Bella asked.

"Not me." Jacqueline grinned. "But it does help that I'm super hot looking and unbelievably charming."

"And modest," Bella said.

Jacqueline laughed. "Yep, that too. Sometimes I think I'm too humble for my own good, and I'm preventing people from seeing how very awesome I am."

Bella made a gagging sound, and then laughed. "Some of us can't be as awesome as you or...or as Edwina."

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. "Ah, she's not so special."

Bella snorted. "Says you, and I think you're jealous. Have you heard her sing?"

"Yes, many times," Jacqueline said.

"She's a diva, and she can play any musical instrument. She can mimic any martial art she sees, and she's...she's like grace personified."

"I'm graceful too," Jacqueline muttered.

"You are," Bella agreed readily. "You're graceful and beautiful, and you have a nice butt."

This seemed to cheer up Jacqueline, who smiled broadly. "Thank you."

"But Edwina is...she's unreal."

Jacqueline sighed. "Yeah, I suppose so. But you know, even if she seems like a great person, she has a dark side too."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't say." Bella heaved a sigh, and Jacqueline shrugged. "It's a private matter, and I'm not allowed to discuss a lot of things with you."

“What kinds of things?”

“Tribal things.”

“What? Like Edwina is a part of your tribe?”

“No, but she lives here on a strict agreement with our tribe.” Jacqueline stopped and took Bella’s arm. “Bella, Edwina is...she’s a sexual predator. So she’s kind of like a sex junkie, and you’re her favorite brand of junk.”

“No, that’s not...” Bella thought about what happened in the park, and suddenly her objection felt foolish. Of course it made sense. Bella had just let Edwina slip past her defenses because they were neighbors. But if Edwina had tried the same things as a complete stranger, Bella would have taken them as a threat to herself.

Why then was Edwina different? Because she was pretty? Bella didn’t like thinking that, because then it made her seem just as shallow as the clique harpies and jock jerks in school.

Jacqueline said, “I know it’s hard to believe, because she seems so nice. But a lot of her charm is hiding her addictions, and if you get too close to her, you’ll force us to evict her.”

“What?” Bella stared at Jacqueline, unable to believe that she could be so insensitive. “You can’t just kick someone out over something so small.”

“We have to, Bella. It’s the rules that Edwina agreed to live by.”

“She agreed to become a reformed virgin?”

Jacqueline snorted a quiet laugh. “No, but her dates all have to be over eighteen, and you’re not even close to the right height to get on that ride.”

“What if I have my dad’s permission to see her, but just as a friend, though? Doesn’t that negate your rules if we aren’t doing anything wrong?”

“Maybe.” Jacqueline’s smile faded, and then she shrugged. “You just met her, though. It seems weird to me that you’d stand up for the right to see someone you don’t know, especially after I just told you what she really wants from you.”

“Well, I—”

“So are you really that desperate to get laid, or are you just stupid?”

Bella’s mouth flapped open and closed several times. “Excuse me?”

Jacqueline’s face had shifted, taking on a colder and darker aspect. Now her beauty was frightening, like it was a mask for a monster far worse than Edwina.

She stepped close to Bella, a clear challenge. But Bella flinched back rather than answer it, intimidated by the woman’s glare. “I just told you, all Edwina Sullen wants from you is one thing. I’ve known her for ten years, so I know what I’m talking about. You just moved in, and you don’t know a damn thing about how things work around here. But if you want to snuggle up to the person who wants to rape you, who am I to stop you from making a huge mistake?”

Bella couldn’t think of anything to say, and in the following silence, Jacqueline threw her hands out in a sign of giving up on the topic and stomped off.

Bella stayed put, watching the woman skulk away muttering about idiots and self-preservation. But she noticed that while Jacqueline’s grumbling was loud enough to be heard, her feet made no sound. But she was very obviously stomping. It seemed impossible, but not one footfall registered.

Bella stood in the same spot for almost an hour, waiting for Jacqueline to come back.

But she never did.

Chapter 7

Edwina read the note over, and then looked up at a knock on her door. That would be Jacqueline, probably.

It was, and the werewolf was talking as soon as she walked past Edwina. “We got big time problems, Sparkles.”

“You talked to her like I asked, didn’t you?”

Pacing in front of the couch, Jacqueline nodded quickly. “Yeah, I told her that you’re a big ol’ pervert, and she asked if she could get permission from her dad to see you.”

“Damn.” Edwina rubbed her face, feeling tired even though she never needed sleep.

“You really blew it,” Jacqueline complained. “She thinks the sun rises and sets in your panties. You might have to bail for a while to get rid of her.”

“Where am I going to go?” Edwina whined. “I can’t live like my family, Jacqueline. I can’t stand the gypsy life, always running from the humans. I like my job, and I like having a place to call home!”

Jacqueline raised her hand. “Yeah, okay. Calm down.”

“Well it’s not my fault I think she’s tasty!” Edwina gasped in exasperation and wandered to the kitchen. But of course the refrigerator was empty. The refrigerator was always empty lately.

Edwina slammed the door shut and fumed while she watched the refrigerator rock back and forth. “I’m so...we need a crime wave. I’m starving to death, and I’m having to hunt on the Sharks’ turf. Do you have any idea how irritating that is? Little pricks wouldn’t know a good rhyme from a hole in the ground, and none of them can carry a note in a bucket.”

“Hey, I’m sorry we’re running out of criminals, but in case you haven’t noticed, I’m relying on animal supplies shipped in from the tribe. This crime drought hurts all of us.”

“Damn it, why do so many humans have to be good?” Edwina complained. “Why can’t more of them take up violent crime?”

Jacqueline raised a fist to hide her smirk as she nodded. “Damn their consciences.”

Edwina sighed, bowing her head. “I’m just...I’m hungry for real food. I’m so tired of junk food, or drugs and alcohol. I guess you don’t understand.”

“No, I really do. But you know the rules, and you know why we have them. If we get exposed, we’ve got records showing how everyone we’ve ever eaten was genuinely bad. It’s not much of a defense, but it’s all we’ll have.”

“I know. I keep records too, but...” Edwina sighed. “Just, never mind. I have to get out of here and get something to—”

The knock on the door was soft and timid, but it had barely finished before Bella said, “I know you’re in there with Jackie. Can you please let me in?”

Edwina groaned and open the door. “Yes?”

Bella slipped under her arm, only needing to bow her head to get inside. She frowned at Jacqueline. “What you said today was crap, and I think Edwina told you to lie.”

Jacqueline looked at Edwina, and then sighed. “I may have exaggerated slightly.”

“And she told you to do it.”

“Not exactly.” Jacqueline scowled when Bella made an irritated huff. “I wasn’t kidding when I said you don’t know anything about us.”

"So there is something going on between you?"

"Yes," Edwina said.

Unfortunately, at the same time, Jacqueline said, "No." She looked at Edwina. "Or, there isn't anymore."

"But I want to get back together with her, and you're kind of screwing that up," Edwina said.

"Why?" Bella frowned. "I'm confused. I'm not trying to jump into your pants or anything. I'm just trying to be your friend. Is that a bad thing?"

"It...it could be."

"Why?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't say. Will you please leave now?"

"I don't understand you at all!" Bella rushed to the door, slamming it behind her.

Edwina swallowed and tried to unclench her teeth. They hurt bad, and even her gums throbbed. Her stomach gurgled, and she had the urge to rush into the hallway and grab Bella before she could run to the stairwell. Instead she stood watching Jacqueline with a sour scowl.

The first shakes surprised her, and she fought against them. She hugged herself, rubbing her arms as if she were freezing. She started to pant, and the idea of taking Bella grew stronger in her mind. Just a few steps and she could grab Bella's arms. The girl trusted her, would bare her throat willingly.

Edwina took a step toward the door, and Jacqueline blurred, moving to block her.

Holding up a hand Jacqueline said, "Sorry, I can't let you go."

"I need food," Edwina said, her voice getting deeper. "God, can't you taste her? She's so clean."

"Sparkles, you're going into bloodlust. I can't let you go until you snap out of it. Even if you don't take Bella, you're too messed up to wait for a criminal."

"So?" Edwina continued to shake, and she had to swallow another mouthful of slimy spit, even though it was making her nauseous with hunger. "I need real food.

I can't...I NEED FOOD!" She rushed Jacqueline, slamming her back into the door. A steel security door intended to withstand a battering ram, it still failed to stand up to their impact. The metal groaned and then bowed. The hinges snapped, and their momentum carried them across the hall.

Edwina hoped to stun Jacqueline, but the bulky shapeshifter held fast, not even surprised by the assault.

Edwina slung her head forward, catching Jacqueline in the bridge of her nose. She was released, but the werecougar blocked the stairwell. Bella was off the menu for the night.

Spinning on her heel, Edwina blurred to the window at the end of the hall. It was already open, granting her an easy exit to dive through.

She turned a flip in the air, slammed onto the pavement on her feet, and took off at a full run. Whoever she found outside first was going to—

Jacqueline flickered into view at the head of the alley and then leapt, tackling Edwina. They tumbled back through the alley, wrestling for dominance even as inertia and the paved road continued to pummel them both.

Their momentum died, yet they continued to roll over each other, both seeking a pinning position. The two snarling women rolled all the way to the other end of the alleyway, freezing when they heard the squawk of a police radio.

Jacqueline ended up on top, and she held Edwina's arms, leaning up and tilting her head.

Edwina did the same, and then grimaced when she saw the cop. She didn't have to guess if he was dirty because he stank of cocaine, marijuana and alcohol. He was so high, it was a miracle he was standing. And he was on duty as foot patrol, the city's finest, sharpest eyes on the street.

Edwina looked at Jacqueline, who exchanged an anxious glance before she looked at the officer again.

Jacqueline said, "Oh my gosh, officer! You totally caught us having hot lesbian foreplay!"

"Whoa!" the officer said, and then grinned with lewd interest. "Well shit! Don't stop on my account!"

"Oh ho ho ho!" Jacqueline got up and hauled Edwina to her feet. "I'm sorry, Mr. Man, but we don't like man meat."

Edwina, now calmed from her bloodlust, smiled. "Come, Jackie," she said, recalling Bella's nickname. "We have an important lesbian orgy to attend. So, no men allowed."

"Aw, dang. I wish I could be a lesbian," the officer said, and then shuffled off.

Edwina hunched over, resting her hands on her knees. "Hell...Jacqueline, I'm sorry."

"Naw, don't twist your panties, Sparkles. Hell, that was fun for me. But we need to find you something to eat, even if it is junk food. Then we'll see the landlord about a new door."

"Good thing he's one of your people, or he'd probably evict us both for fighting." Edwina dusted herself off, and then started walking back the other way through the alley. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Jacqueline. I can't keep my cool if Bella is going to keep showing up like that. Maybe if we weren't in a drought, I could resist her. But I'm starving, and...and I can't do this. You have to do something drastic to convince her to stop visiting."

"Me? Why can't..." Jacqueline walked for a block grinding her teeth before she heaved a long sigh. "All right, fine. You want drastic? How about this? I'll turn on the full cat charm and take her away."

Edwina grimaced, but forced the expression away quickly. She couldn't be jealous. After all, she wasn't thinking of Bella as a romantic partner anyway. And if Jacqueline did seduce Bella, at least that would ensure that she wasn't constantly knocking on Edwina's door.

"All right, fine. Try to seduce her."

"Hey, look." Jacqueline pointed to a black sedan full of young Chinese men in sharp black suits. "Isn't that a bunch of Triad assassins?"

"Oh, merry fucking Christmas! It's meals on wheels, and they're serving Chinese!" Edwina grinned wide.

Unlike their local criminal associates, Triad assassins were typically light drinkers who consumed nothing else. They weren't clean, but they were so damned close that the difference was negligible.

Huddling over, Edwina said, "Race you!"

Then she took off at full speed. She made it to the car in a quarter of a second and picked it up hood-first, rushing down an alley. Her hands clutching the hood and bumper, she shook the car to knock out the men without a fight, and then she set the black sedan down so gently that the shocks barely squeaked.

Jacqueline went to the passenger door, but held onto the handle. Gesturing to the driver's side, she said, "You can take first pick."

"No, you spotted them," Edwina said.

"But you're the one who wanted cleaner food. So you pick the cleanest, and I'll take the second cleanest."

Edwina nodded at this and opened the driver's side door. Taking out her scalpel, she sliced the driver's throat and leaned over catch the first hot burst. He was sober, and so close to clean that Edwina could barely taste a faint trace of nicotine.

Edwina closed her eyes and moaned as bloodlust took her. She drank deep from the driver and leaned back, feeling truly content for the first time in decades.

Across the seat, something wet and crunchy happened to the passenger. Edwina opened her eyes and watched the giant cougar chewing what had to be the passenger's missing face. While the cat made crunching noises, the passenger's remaining brains slipped out through the hole in his skull and into his lap.

Edwina looked back at the driver as she thought, *Cats are such messy eaters.* She was tempted to drain the driver, but Jacqueline wouldn't be able to eat more

than one person. That still left three other men to vent and drink from, all for Edwina.

Moving to the back door to open it, Edwina hummed *Jingle Bells* to celebrate this very early Christmas present.

Jacqueline finished her meal and shifted back to her human form. She pulled on her clothes and then took out a cloth from her pants pocket to start wiping down the car and remove fingerprints.

Edwina did the same, and they were almost done when Edwina had a random thought that made her frown. "You know, we've never seen the Triads here in our section of the Bronx."

"Maybe someone they were hunting came here to hide out," Jacqueline offered.

Edwina thought about this and nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. Those guys were really good, you know? Like...really clean. Maybe a little sake in the guys in the back, but the driver was almost pristine. I haven't eaten that good in at least fifty years."

"So what's your point, Sparkles?"

"My point is, that's a higher class of criminals than we normally see around here."

"Yeah, okay. It is a good point." Jacqueline belched quietly behind her hand, and then sighed. "Dang, my stomach is already emptying."

"Don't," Edwina said.

Jacqueline chuckled, feigning ignorance. "What? I was just going to say that Chinese never lasts long."

Edwina closed her eyes as she nodded. "I knew it."

Chapter 8

Bella listened to the news with one ear while she worked on her math homework. The other was connected to an ear bud, which was in turn connected to her generic MP3 player playing from a folder of punk music from the 70s and 80s. Just then she was listening to *God Save the Queen*. She wanted a fancier model, maybe something with a touch screen, but all she could afford was a lower level model.

The news came back from a commercial, and the news anchorman's voice was full of grim emotion. "Tonight, violence returns to the Bronx as police find a car filled with what appear to be slain Triad enforcers."

"Shit!" John hissed.

Bella looked up at her dad, and then at the TV.

The announcer went on. "Three bodies have been found, but police say there is evidence in the car of a fourth occupant who either fled or was taken from the car by force. The three men were found with their throats slit, but coroners say all three men had major contusions and fractures, which suggested that their vehicle had rolled over no less than twenty times. And yet, there appears to be no external damage to the car to corroborate this conclusion. Police are as baffled by the attack as we are."

The screen shifted to a police chief scratching the back of his head so vigorously that he was tilting his hat at a rather jaunty and drunken angle. "I dunno," he said. "Beats the *bleep*-ck out of me how they got the *bleep*-it beaten out of them like that. Those mother-*bleep*-ckers look like someone *bleep*-ed them up with their own car. We've got dents all over the interior consistent with a rolled vehicle, right? But the outside is honkey *bleep*-cking dory. It makes no *bleep*-cking sense!"

The screen returned to the news anchor sitting at his desk. "There's currently no leads for the killers of these men, or even for what the Triads were doing in the Bronx. I mean, the Bronx, for *bleep*-ck's sake!" The anchor's gaze drifted to something over the camera, and then he blushed. "Oh, right. Sorry folks, I think the police chief's salty language overwhelmed my sensibilities for a moment." He cleared his throat and straightened his power tie. "In other news..."

Bella tuned out the TV, looking at her dad. "Whoa. That's some crazy, stuff, how the car was..." She noticed how pale her father looked, and then she frowned. "Dad?"

"Hmmm?" He looked at her and blinked. "I'm sorry, I zoned out." He faked a smile, and Bella noticed how it was a badly faked grin that didn't match the terror in his dark eyes. "What were you saying?"

"Dad, is...are the Triads looking for you?"

"No! No, of course not!" John snorted. "Please, I'm just a lowly martial arts instructor. What would the Triads want with me?" He laughed, loud, hysterical and fake.

Bella studied his shiny face, watching sweat bead on his forehead even though the living room wasn't hot. "Dad—"

"Shit, look at the time!" John got up. "I've got to open the dojo and get ready for evening classes!"

"Da—"

"Don't wait up!" John said, and then rushed out the front door.

Bella rolled her eyes to stare at the ceiling and spoke aloud. "Two, three, four."

John burst back through the door and laughed loudly. "I forgot my keys! So silly of me! Hahaha! Silly me!" Then he dropped his voice as he scooped up his key ring from the arm of the couch. "Oh God, I am so stupid."

Bella opened her mouth to ask what the hell was going on, but her dad was out the door a split second later.

Sighing, Bella tried to get back into her homework. But it was a lost cause. All she could think about was her dad's strange reaction to the news.

She wanted to talk to him, but he was clearly brushing her off. So if she couldn't talk to him, who else could she go to?

She decided to visit Edwina. Of course Edwina wouldn't be happy to see her, but she could at least lend an ear, and maybe offer some advice for how to deal with the problem. She wouldn't even need to go into the apartment for that. So if Edwina wanted her to stay out, she could just hang out in the hallway and talk.

She went upstairs and knocked lightly on Edwina's door. After a few seconds, Edwina opened the door.

Bella started to open her mouth, but then she noticed Edwina's eyes were different. They'd always been dark, almost black, like her own. But now Edwina's irises were golden amber, a warm, bright color that drew Bella's gaze and held it in a vice-like trap.

Her mind blanked, and a fantasy formed unbidden. In the fantasy, she grabbed Edwina by the shoulder and pulled herself up for a kiss. Edwina was pliant, sinking over and closing her arms around Bella's waist to carry her off to bed.

Bella shook her head before the fantasy could move to the bedroom. "I...sorry for bothering you, but I've got a weird problem and don't know who else to go to."

"I'm not sure I can help either," Edwina said.

"I just need a sounding board." Bella pointed at the floor. "Really, I can even stay right here to talk, and I won't try to jump you or anything."

"All right, I'll try to help," Edwina said.

"Okay. First, do you know anything about the Triads who—?"

"Oh God!" Edwina shouted, making Bella jump. "I don't know anything about the Triads!" She slammed the door, making Bella jump again.

Baffled, Bella stared at the door for almost a minute, and then looked at the door more closely. Didn't...wasn't it a different style of door the last time she'd been up? Bella looked around at Jacqueline's door, thinking to ask her what was going on. She noted that Jacqueline's door was still the old style, but it had a fresh coat of paint. Moving closer to the door, she noticed a dent in the middle. It looked like something had struck the door hard.

Bella looked at Edwina's door, and then back at Jacqueline's door. Something had to be coming out of Edwina's place fast to make this kind of dent. Something big and metallic.

Bella's head swiveled back and forth as she thought, *What the hell is going on around here?*

Chapter 9

Edwina paced in front of the couch while she waited for Jacqueline to say something. But since her arrival, the werecougar had been silently sipping from a glass of elk blood. She stared at the floor, her mouth working like she was eating her lips.

"What do we do?" Edwina asked.

"First, you need to calm down," Jacqueline said. She leaned back on the couch. "Stop and think. Bella probably saw them on the news and wanted to ask about them. You made us look guilty, but maybe you can patch things up if you talk to her."

"You should talk to her."

"No, it can't be me this time. You were the one to panic, so you have to patch this up."

"Easy for you to say," Edwina complained. She broke from her back and forth pattern to go to the window and look down into the alley. "If I patch this up, I might encourage her to come around more often."

"You can't leave things as they are without making yourself look more guilty. Besides, since you've gorged on clean blood, it should be easier to talk to her. You could even go out and take a meal before you talk to her."

Bella knocked at the door. They both recognized her light, timid pattern, and they exchanged a glance. Jacqueline got up, her voice much lower. "I'll go hide in the bedroom. Remember, no nibbling."

"Right, no nibbles." Edwina swallowed to calm herself, and then went to the door. She offered Bella a weak smile. "Um, hello again."

Bella didn't return her smile. Her pout grew as she folded her arms across her chest. "Can I talk to you yet, or do you want to slam the door in my face again?"

Edwina grimaced, stepping back as she waved for Bella to come in. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't realize there had been Triads in our neighborhood. I thought you were talking about them in general, and I've had troubles with them in the past."

Bella stared at her for a moment before nodding. "All right, it was partly my fault for not phrasing my problem the right way."

Edwina moved to the couch and waved an invitation for Bella to sit, and then her gaze flicked to the half full glass of elk blood still sitting on the coffee table. She grabbed the glass and knocked it back in one swallow.

Closing her fingers around the sides of the glass to hide the last blood drops, Edwina waited until Bella sat down before she asked, "What kind of trouble do you have with the Triads?"

"I don't, but I think my Dad had problems with them. When he saw the news last night, he freaked out. Since then, he's been avoiding me so I can't ask him why he's upset." Bella slipped off her backpack while she talked. "But, after school today, I went online to look up the killers in the car, and get this..." She pulled out a set of printouts and handed them over. "Every one of the guys in the car is practically a legend in the crime world. Were they just cruising around the Bronx on a lark?" Bella shook her head. "They had a reason to be here, and I don't think they were here to see my dad. He's right when he says he's too low-level for this kind of attention."

Edwina set the empty glass on the coffee table read the first report, and then frowned when she noticed the top of every page was marked INTERPOL. "How did you get these?"

"Don't worry, I used the library computer, and I didn't sign in for the computer. I just jumped on it with some programs from my memory key."

"You...you hacked INTERPOL from a library computer?"

Bella shrugged. "Maybe?"

"That's...that's pretty impressive." Edwina looked back down at the reports, and her admiring smile faded. "This is very strange, though. The Triads should know this isn't their turf, but if they were moving in, I doubt they'd do so with so many high profile killers."

"Right, so if they aren't here for my dad, maybe they're here for something or someone much bigger." Bella's frown grew. "Were they here for you?"

"Nope, I doubt I'd rank these kinds of names either. I have some old debts with them, but nothing that would warrant calling in these guys." Edwina flipped through the report again, but they didn't tell her anything useful.

Bella said, "So, you think it's a problem too, right? I'm not just worrying over nothing, am I?"

"No, this is big" Edwina said. "You've done some great detective work here." She looked up and saw that Bella's gaze wasn't on her. She followed her gaze to the bloody glass and repressed the urge to wince.

Bella asked, "That's pretty thick for wine."

Edwina picked up the glass and took it to the kitchen. "It's not wine. I had a mixed drink, a personal recipe."

She started to rinse out the glass, but dropped it in the sink when she saw Bella trying to open the refrigerator. Spinning around, she closed the door before Bella could look inside.

"Do you live here?" Edwina asked.

Bella pouted, but nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I was just curious if you had any soda."

"Nope, sorry."

"Juice?"

"Nope."

"Tea?"

"No."

Bella leaned her head over, her mouth pursing like she was sucking a sour candy. "Do you have anything for making a mixed drink with?"

"Erm, yes?"

"Hm-mm." Bella looked around the kitchen, and then turned to look around the living room. "You know, I just realized how barren your place is. There's no artwork or posters, just bookshelves and the CD towers."

"I don't need visual art on my walls. I enjoy visiting museums, but at home, I get my art from books." Edwina moved around Bella, hovering close by in case she was thinking to dive for the refrigerator.

But Bella followed Edwina to a bookshelf. Edwina took down a large hardcover collection of Monet paintings and turned the pages slowly, reverently. "This is one of my favorite collections."

Bella drifted closer to Edwina to admire the images, her warm arm brushing against Edwina's cold skin. It was only a little friction, an inconsequential amount, and certainly not something that could be taken as an erotic motion.

But no matter what the intent was, Edwina felt an ache between her legs, followed by a sharp pain. It was so sudden that she leaned forward and made an involuntary hiss.

"Something wrong?" Bella asked.

"Just a cramp." Edwina closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "I don't want to seem rude, but I should probably ask you to leave."

"Why?"

"It's not a good idea for you to stay here. I can't explain, but I'm not doing it because I don't like you. I'm just...I'm not a good influence, okay?"

"I guess." Bella looked around, her gaze falling on Fang, who lay on his side with his eyes closed. She stared for a moment, and then said, "I think he's dead."

"Who?" Edwina asked.

"Your dog. He isn't breathing."

Fang lifted his head and looked at Bella, raising both his eyebrows with intense doggy concern. But his expression was made a lie by his thought: *Holy shit, I'm dead?*

Edwina suppressed a snort.

"Oh," Bella said, and then shrugged. "I guess he was just breathing really shallow."

"Yes, he's a very shallow dog," Edwina said.

Fang dropped his head and thought, *Up yours, bitch.*

Bella laughed at Edwina's joke, and she offered Edwina a grateful smile. "Thanks. After the day I've had, I needed the laugh." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "This thing with the Triads is messing me up, and now I want to see everything as a conspiracy. The way you reacted before, I was thinking you were some kind of Triad killer too."

Edwina snorted. "If I was working for the Triads, I wouldn't need to live in a rent-controlled apartment in the Bronx."

"You may have a point," Bella said, laughing again. She started for the door. "All right, I'll go and leave you be. Thanks for putting up with me."

"Oh, your papers," Edwina said, veering toward the coffee table.

Bella put a hand on her arm to stop her. "I don't need them anymore."

"Okay." Edwina stood in place, feeling like an idiot. She thought how she should get Bella out the door. But instead she stood in place, her eyes wandering from Bella's hand on her arm to Bella's lips bowing down in an uncertain frown.

Bella blinked, and then stepped back. She shook her head and blinked again. "Uh, I...I should go."

And then she did.

Jacqueline opened the door and crossed the room to take the files from the coffee table. She said something, but Edwina didn't hear it. She was still staring at the door, still thinking of Bella's lips.

She shook her head, and said, "I didn't catch that."

Jacqueline sighed. "I said these guys obviously weren't here for Bella's father, so who or what are they here for?"

"I don't know," Edwina said.

"I don't think you're really thinking of—Sparkles, is that a hard-on?"

"A what?" Edwina looked down and scowled with dismay when she found a bulge in the front of her jeans.

She shook her head, not believing what she was seeing. She hadn't had an erection since she'd started taking human hormones, which had altered her body and taken away the dreadful and constant sexual urges she'd felt. Not even messing around with Jacqueline had gotten her hard.

"Oh, come on!" Edwina complained at her erection. "With all the other problems I'm having, now you want to stick your head in this mess?"

Jacqueline chuckled lewdly. "I don't think it's a mess it's looking to sink into."

Edwina groaned and tensed her hands into fists. "You're not helping."

"When it comes to your penis, I really can't help you. It's against my religion. First church of bull dyke-um."

Edwina rubbed her face. "There are times when I hate you, Jacqueline."

"Sorry you feel that way." Jacqueline shrugged. "But some hard problems like this are best if you handle them yourself. You just have to grasp the bull by the horny and—"

"Jacqueline?"

"Yes, Edwina?"

Edwina pointed at the door. "Show tits, or get the fuck out."

Chapter 10

Edwina had just finished taking a meal, and having disposed of the body in a dumpster, she and Fang made their way to the head of the alleyway. She stepped out and turned right, and Bella was right in front of her.

Bella looked up from her cell phone, the screen still open on a text message. Her fingers tensed around her phone like she planned to use it as a weapon. Then she recognized Edwina and relaxed.

Holding out the phone she said, "You caught me checking messages."

Edwina, not sure of what else to do, asked "Friends from school?"

"A friend, yes, Jessica. She invited me to a party tomorrow, so I guess I'll either have to go or politely turn her down."

"Maybe you should go," Edwina said. "If she invited you, she must like you."

Bella shrugged putting away her phone. "I like her too, but I think for both of us, it's just that."

They stated walking, and Edwina asked, "She isn't pretty enough?"

"Oh she's gorgeous." Bella smiled self-consciously. "I'm just...into older women."

"Ah," Edwina said. Trying to think of something to say besides "I'm waaaaay too old for you," she stared at the sidewalk. "Jacqueline is getting up in years."

Bella's laughter drew Edwina's gaze, and her chest felt funny when she saw Bella's coy smile.

Bella said, "She's gorgeous too, and she's about the right age, I guess. But she scares me sometimes. Like...like if I said she could eat me, she might not take it the right way."

Edwina frowned, looking away. "That's gross, Bella."

"I guess it is." Bella was silent for a block. "It's just, sometimes, I think the polite side she shows is a mask, and it's hiding something vicious."

Edwina debated with herself before she said, "There may be some truth to that. How do you see me?"

"How do you mean?"

"Do you see me as more dangerous or less dangerous than Jacqueline?"

"Oh...um..." Bella looked away, her mouth pressed in a thin line. "That's very hard to say, knowing what I do about your martial arts abilities." She let go of a little laugh. "If the question was, which of you scares me worse, she does, hands down."

Edwina smiled too. "She scares me a little bit sometimes."

Bella waved her hand. "I don't want to talk about her. I'd like to talk about you."

"About what?"

"Um..." Bella shrugged. "Crap, why is it when you ask me like that, my mind goes blank?"

"Probably for the same reason mine does when you say you want to know something about me." Edwina smiled, but thought, *Ugh, I sound like a moron!*

"Well...so tell me about your friends?"

"I don't..." Edwina looked around, feeling awkward. "I don't have many friends. I mean, I'm friends with my coworkers. I had them over for a party once. Then there's Jacqueline, and you and...and Fang. And I guess that's it." Edwina frowned. "That's kind of sad, isn't it?"

"I don't know, I'm not much better. If I include you, Jacqueline and Fang, I've only got four real friends at school. Everyone else is just so...fake."

"Yeah, I get that," Edwina said.

Bella smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah, some of my coworkers are like that, but those are the ones who usually don't last very long. They can't even fake charm for a tip, and they can't fake a work ethic. So they usually get fired in a month or two."

"Oh, good, it's not just me thinking lots of people are fake."

Edwina nodded her agreement because she knew for a fact that most people were fakes. She could read their minds and see how their thoughts rarely matched their outward appearance.

Before she could comment, Bella said, "But I feel bad for thinking it. It's like I'm saying I'm too good to hang around them. But I...I don't want to get to know someone only to find out they were lying to make me like them"

Edwina considered this for nearly a block before she could speak. "What about secrets?"

"You mean what if someone I liked was keeping secrets?"

"Yes."

"That's not really the same thing as lying." Bella waved around at the buildings. "Everyone keeps secrets for one reason or another. We talk about wanting honesty, but we can't be honest ourselves." She mused on this for a few steps and added, "We can't handle the truth when we get it. So we're kinda hypocritical asking for something we can't have, and don't really want."

"But maybe we ask because we want to believe in the lie that the truth will set us free."

"Yeah, maybe that's it." Bella stared at Edwina, looking uncertain. "Is there some terrible secret you can't share with me?"

"Yes."

"But Jacqueline already knows, because it's...it's part of the rules for you to live in our building."

"Yes." Edwina tried not to frown, but she worried that Bella was starting to connect the dots and recognize her for what she was. "Part of those rules I obey say that I'm not supposed to be around you."

"But we're just talking." Bella said. "And this time, we're really talking. I don't feel like you're trying to be fake with me. Is that really such a bad thing?"

Edwina made a face, something between a grimace and a smirk. "It's complicated."

"How is it complicated for us to be friends? What Jacqueline said about you being a sexual predator wasn't true, but she wanted me to believe so I wouldn't come around you. But if you told her to do that, I have to wonder why you need to keep your distance."

"I can't tell you," Edwina said.

"Because it's complicated," Bella said.

"Yes."

Bella doubled her pace to get in front of Edwina. She turned and stopped, pouting up at the taller woman. "No matter what your secret is, I'm not afraid of you."

Edwina scowled. "Maybe you should be."

"Do you keep everyone at a distance like this, or is there something wrong with me that—?"

"There's nothing wrong with you, Bella. I'm just...I'm messed up, and I don't want to mess you up too. I can do that even if I'm just a friend."

"Hey, I've got news for you," Bella said. "If that's all you're worried about, I'm already messed up. I've been messed up since I walked into my kitchen and found my mother's mutilated body when I was ten."

"I'm sorry," Edwina said.

"You don't need to apologize. You didn't do it." Bella looked down. "The cops never caught the person who did it, but they killed her on the table and gutted her. Then...then they took everything out of her and laid it all on the table." Bella's voice started to waver, and she bowed her head and swallowed. "Then they stuffed her full of leaves."

"Oh, Bella." Edwina hesitated, and then put a hand on Bella's shoulder. "I'm so...it must have been awful."

Bella nodded, and Edwina felt her tremble. “The only phone in the house is in the kitchen. I should have left, gone to the neighbors to make the call. But I went around the kitchen table, and then I saw her eyes...” Bella looked up at Edwina, and her tears spilled over her cheeks. “She was staring at me, and her mouth was open, like she wanted to say something. And I...even with all the blood, I called for her. I wanted her to get up and tell me it was all right, but she...she just stared at me.”

Bella started to cry in quiet sobs, and Edwina was so overcome by empathy that she couldn't stop herself from closing her arms around Bella in a loose embrace. She patted Bella's hair back, remaining quiet rather than try to placate or shush her. She'd just recently fed, and her only thoughts were regret for Bella having to suffer something so terrible at such a young age.

Bella calmed down and stepped back, suddenly making an awkward laugh. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost it like that.”

“It's okay. If I'd...you have good reason to be upset.”

“Yeah.” Bella sniffled and dried her eyes with the side of her hand. “Anyway, now you know what I mean about being messed up.”

“You aren't,” Edwina said. “You were traumatized by what you saw, but you're still a good person. After all, aren't you a part-time vigilante?”

Bella smiled and nodded. “Yeah, but some people say vigilantes are bad.”

“You haven't killed anybody, though.”

Bella stopped smiling.

Edwina did too. “You did?”

“A few times, yeah.” Bella looked down to avoid Edwina's gaze. “Somebody comes at me with a knife or a gun, and I see that as a situation of kill or be killed. And if I don't kill them, they might kill others.”

“How many is a few?” Edwina asked.

Bella shrugged. “I don't remember.”

“Then it has to be more than a few,” Edwina said.

“You know what? Can—? Can we just not talk about this? We'll just treat it as the subject I can't talk about, and then we're even, right?”

Edwina debated with herself before she said, “All right, we'll drop it. But it's late, so maybe we should head home.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bella stepped to Edwina's right, and then fell into step beside her as they started walking again. “But...you know you're the first person I've told about my mom since talking to the therapist.”

“When you started making patrols, was it to find your mother's killer?”

Bella sighed. “I thought we just agreed not to talk about this.”

“We agreed not to talk about how many people you killed.” Edwina saw Bella flinch and regretted her choice of words. Still she pressed on, hoping to lessen the damage somehow. “I'm just wondering if you went out for them.”

“No, I didn't. I just...the night calls to me.” Bella made a tiny laugh. “I sound like a moron.”

Edwina resisted smiling as she thought, *Oh good, I'm not the only one who feels that way.*

Bella continued after a moment of silence. “I'd gone out many times without attracting attention, and some nights, I get to walk around without problems. I like being out at night. The day world is so noisy and crowded, but after everyone goes to sleep, the night world is...it's home.”

“That's what I think too,” Edwina said. “But you know, there are many dangers in the night, and not just the kind of people who hunt you.”

“I know, but...but I'm a young monster, and one day, I'm going to be just as dangerous as them.” Bella laughed, but it was a forced sound. “Who knows? Maybe someday, I might be an even bigger monster than your or Jacqueline.”

Edwina's frown grew wider. “I sincerely hope not.”

This brought them to an uncomfortable silence, but neither broke it until they were in the stairwell on Bella's floor. Bella turned in the doorway and pouted at Edwina. She swept her hair out of her face and said, “I'm not naïve or innocent, so I know there's something bad about you. I know that's why you keep your distance. But when you let down your guard like tonight, you don't seem as bad as you think you are.”

Edwina didn't know what to say, but after a moment of thought she said, “Neither do you. Good night, Bella.”

Chapter 11

Bella left the apartment and went downstairs. She'd given up on trying to visit Edwina's apartment, since Jacqueline was sure to interfere if she tried. But if she went outside and wandered on her own, eventually she could spot Edwina coming back and “run into her.” Then she invited Edwina to go for a walk with her.

Jacqueline of course came over every day to bring this habit up. But once she got the lecture out of the way and they could talk, Jacqueline let her vent about school. When Bella got done, Jacqueline would tell her stories, legends from her tribal ancestors. Her stories were so captivating, and when she was in the middle of a story, her voice transported Bella's imagination to another time and another world, one where the lines between man and animal were not so clear.

Each day she spent with Jacqueline, but each night for the last month she'd found ways to meet Edwina while she walked Fang. Even if Jacqueline said she wasn't supposed to be around Bella, Edwina could not turn down her invitations, and so they had spent many hours of every night talking.

Whether the topic was art or martial arts, Edwina was always full of fascinating insights. Bella was often amazed by the depth of Edwina's knowledge, and she wondered how anyone could know so much and still be so young.

But there was a vast hole in their conversations, and Bella had noticed early on how Edwina didn't talk much about her life. She talked about things that interested her, but never once had she mentioned work. Bella talked about school, but Edwina didn't even say what she did at her day job. Bella didn't want to ask and find out she worked at a strip club, or something equally awkward for Edwina.

But Edwina didn't mention family either, nor did she talk about her past. Bella enjoyed Edwina's company. No, she craved it, and she found herself thinking about Edwina all day when she should have been paying attention to her teachers. And yet, she really didn't know anything about Edwina. She was still just as distant and cautious as she'd been the first time they'd talked.

Bella was pondering on this when she spotted Edwina walking with Fang and Jacqueline. They were across the street and didn't see her, so she slipped into a stairwell to hide. She crouched down, keeping just enough of her head up to watch the women stroll up the street.

As they got closer, Bella heard Edwina say, “But it's not fair to punish me, and you know it. I haven't done anything wrong.”

“I know, and I went to bat for you with the tribal leaders. You were there.”

“But...” Edwina flopped her arms. “It's not fair that I can't even have a normal friend. I won't hurt Bella. Can't I—?”

“No, Sparkles, you can't see her. That's why I'm walking with you, in case she tries to run into you again.”

Bella scowled, but her common sense pleaded with her to stay here. She didn't listen. Moving up the stairs, she caught movement at the corner of her eye and looked around. Then she yelped and fell back, barely missing the leather blackjack aimed for her head.

Rolling as soon as she hit the ground, she kicked hard at her attacker's shins, making him growl.

Behind her, Edwina called, "Bella!"

Bella ignored her, getting to her feet and leaping at the hulking man as he came at her again. She hammered her fist into his jaw, and before he had time to react, she looped her other hand behind his neck and drew him back in. She smashed her elbow into his nose, drew back and hit him again, and then again.

Hands pulled at her sides and she shouted, "Back off!" She stepped away from Edwina, and the man fell over, groaning while he clamped his hands over his ruined nose.

Bella glared at Edwina, and then Jacqueline. "You think I'm some dainty flower for you to protect?" Before either woman could answer, she kicked the downed man, breaking two of his ribs.

"Bella—" Edwina said.

Bella took a step, and then kicked the man's jaw, shattering it. He began to scream in agony, but no one flinched. Not Bella, nor Edwina, or Jacqueline.

Bella said, "Jackie, I don't know what your problem is with me, but I've had it up to here with your protective bullshit. Edwina is my friend, and you can't stop me from seeing her. If your stupid tribal elders have a problem with that, they can blow me!"

Bella reached out and grabbed Edwina's wrist. "Come on. We won't need a chaperone, will we?"

Jacqueline was suddenly in front of Bella. Bella hadn't heard her move, but she was just standing there, and she wore her worst, most menacing scowl.

Bella returned it, even baring her teeth. "If you're protecting me, then there's nothing you can do to hurt me, bitch."

"Bella!" Edwina gasped.

Jacqueline held up her hand. "It's all right. I'm not going to get worked up over this squirt." She smirked at Bella, but there was little humor in her expression. "Little girl, you think you're such hot shit cause you know a little something about fighting." She leaned over to put her face just in front of Bella's. "But you're still a sheltered brat—"

Bella slapped Jacqueline, almost breaking her hand. Jacqueline didn't react, and Bella covered her pain by hissing, "Fuck you!" She took a breath, and then her voice returned to its full shrill strength. "Sheltered! Fucking—you don't know a thing about me!"

She started to raise her hand again, but Edwina chose to step between them, grabbing Bella's wrist and laying her other hand over Jacqueline's shoulder. Then she used just the slightest effort to make them both back up.

"Please, don't fight like this," Edwina said. "Bella, you can't blame Jacqueline for what she does. By tribal law, she's supposed to watch me. It's her job, like a parole officer."

"But..." Bella clenched her jaw.

Edwina looked at Jacqueline. "You can't be mad at her either, Jackie. She isn't as sheltered as you think, and she isn't subject to tribal law. You can't boss her around like you do with me."

Jacqueline also clenched her jaw, swallowing before she nodded. "Fine, but if all you're doing is going for a friendly walk, then you wouldn't mind me coming along."

"I won't mind if you could stop being my fucking den mother," Bella grumbled.

"I wouldn't have to act like a mother if you didn't act like a spoiled brat."

Bella narrowed her eyes. "I'm going home. When I feel like seeing you again, I'll come to your apartment. But if I decide to visit Edwina, you won't stop me. You'll just piss me off and ruin our already shaky friendship."

Jacqueline opened her mouth, and then closed it. She grimaced a scowl and threw up her hands. "Fine! Go for a walk with Edwina alone! Just fuck me and my job!"

She turned and lashed a kick at the downed man's chest, sending him sliding down the stairwell before she stomped off with her eerily silent stride.

In the stairwell, the man began praying, though he said little coherent besides "Oh God."

Bella watched Jacqueline leave with her hands clenched, her breath rushing in and out of her in a furious pant. She glanced at Edwina, who watched her with a guilty frown. "That...she—argh!" Then she started to calm down, and she put a hand to her forehead. "When I talk to her and you aren't around, she isn't like this!"

"Yes, and there's a reason for that," Edwina said, speaking in a soft tone of voice. "She's not doing it because she doesn't like you. It really is her job to watch over me."

"But why? Why do you need a tribal babysitter to stay here? Can't you just move to another building to get away from all of this crap?"

"Not if I want to live here in the Bronx, no."

"But this isn't a tribal reserve. They don't have any authority to enforce their laws."

"They don't have authority from the government, no. But if I break their laws, they wouldn't call the police. They'd show up en masse, and they'd deal with me."

"What does that mean?"

Edwina shrugged. "It depends on what I've done. Maybe they might just tell me to leave and never come back."

"But...but Jacqueline might have to kill you if you did something wrong?"

Edwina stared at Bella for a long time, her mouth working back and forth in a silent internal debate. "If I did something to harm you, she would."

Bella thought about this, her scowl darkening. "Are you afraid of me?" She nodded without hesitation, and Bella asked, "Why?"

Again, there was a long silence before Edwina said, "Because sometimes...I want to be more than friends, and I can't."

"I don't understand."

"Bella, I can corrupt you if I'm not careful."

"I'm already corrupted—"

"No," Edwina said. "You have no idea how clean you still are. You can't see it because you think so little of yourself. But you also can't see how far you have left to fall. I don't want to be the one to pitch you over the side. I want you to stay good."

"None of us can stay the same forever," Bella said. She knew it was the wrong choice of words when Edwina closed her eyes, her face pinching in a pained grimace. Reaching out to take Edwina's hand, she said, "You tell me how I don't think much of myself, but you've let Jacqueline and her tribe convince you to hate yourself."

Edwina shook her head, and then opened her eyes to watch Bella with moist, pink eyes. "I hated myself long before I came here."

Bella stepped closer to Edwina and set her hand on Edwina's cheek. She drew it back a second later and made a face. "Maybe we should go back to the apartment. You're really cold."

Edwina looked like she wanted to say something. But then she nodded and said, "Yes, let's just go home. I think I've had enough of the night life already."

From the dark stairwell, the battered would-be mugger said, "Me too."

Chapter 12

Bella was on full alert as she returned home from an evening walk, though she hadn't been jumped or even looked at funny. But she also hadn't seen Edwina either, and she was still hopeful to meet her during the walk back to the apartment.

Passing a dark alley, she heard an old man call for help. Squinting into the darkness, she could just barely discern the outline of a dumpster, and she spotted a pair of legs sticking out from behind it. The man was laying face down, his legs moving weakly while he moaned "Help me" in a feeble croaking voice.

Bella looked up and down the block for a cop car, or even a foot patrol. But of course there was never one around when she needed one.

She took out her mace canister and walked cautiously up the alleyway. The man behind the dumpster heard her footsteps and raised his voice. Bella looked around for signs of his attacker and found no one. Her mace canister went back into her pocket, and she knelt down to roll the man over.

As she did so, something rustled inside the dumpster. Bella looked up just in time to catch a fist to the side of her head. She flew into the wall and slammed the other side of her head, dropping in a dazed stupor.

Someone hooted laughter and said, "Good job, Cletus! This time you pulled in some real sweet jail bait!"

The same bum who had been calling for help in a weak voice cackled. "Can't wait to get those clothes off! Then I'm gonna—ack!"

"Cletus? Did you choke on a tit?"

Bella heard someone jump out of the dumpster and laugh, and then their laughter ended in a strange choking cough and a wet splash.

She opened her eyes and saw Edwina embracing a man. His arms flopped back and away from her, but her arm looped under his and around his back, keeping him from falling. Or so it seemed, until Bella noticed Edwina pumping his chest. Her white face was buried in the side of his neck, and she drank nosily from him. Behind them on the wall, an arc of red stained the bricks, the bottom edge growing long tendrils to the ground.

Before they got to the ground, Fang set his front paws on the wall and started licking the lines, completely erasing them. Then, impossibly, the dog walked up the wall to clean the splash itself.

The man rolled his head away from Edwina, and his roving glazed eyes met Bella's, drawing her attention to him and away from the dog walking the wall. She saw the terror flooding out of his eyes with his dying tears, saw him mouth silently to her for help. She thought he would roll back his eyes or close them, but he did neither when he died. Yet she still knew the exact moment when he passed on because his eyes stopped flicking around. His pupils became huge, and his mouth hung slack.

Edwina dropped the man a moment later, and Bella closed her eyes.

The old man who had served as the bait for the trap voiced a wheezing scream as Edwina picked him up, and then he coughed a death rattle as his throat was slashed. Bella cracked open her eyes in time to see Edwina put away a scalpel, and then she guessed that the men's throats were slit, not bitten.

Fang had almost cleaned the first arc, and she had no doubt he would drink the second in due time.

Then Bella realized who had really killed the Triads. Edwina didn't have deals with them in the past. She and Fang had eaten the men. Because she was a vampire, and Fang was some breed of vampire dog.

She'd often thought something was off about Fang and the way he lolled his tongue with his mouth open, and now she recognized what was wrong about him. He never panted. He just kept his mouth open to let his tongue hang out. He didn't breathe anymore, because he was undead, just like Edwina. Which was the real reason Jacqueline watched over Edwina, to make sure she didn't eat Bella. The thought drove a shudder through her leaden limbs, but she quickly suppressed it.

Several minutes passed while Edwina helped the dog to feed. She picked the men's pockets and took their wallets, and then she started to look in Bella's direction.

Bella closed her eyes, trying not to breathe fast though she was terrified.

Edwina picked up Bella, and she thought, *Guess it's my turn.*

But Edwina cradled Bella to her cold chest, carrying her away from the alley. Fast wind roared in her ears, and her hair whipped her face. When she opened her eyes again, Edwina was back in her own apartment, settling Bella on the couch. But they'd been several blocks from their building only moments before.

Bella wanted to jump up and shout that she knew Edwina was a monster. But her head was swimming from a concussion, leaving her so addled that even speech wasn't possible for some time.

Edwina went to the bathroom and returned with a wet cloth, laying it over Bella's forehead. She sat on the side of the couch, scowling with concern while she applied the cloth. She remained on the side of the couch, staring into Bella's eyes as if waiting for her to react.

Nearly half an hour passed before Bella felt like she could speak. "I saw you."

"What did you see?"

"You slit their throats." Bella swallowed the lump in her throat. "You ate them. And your dog..he walked on the wall."

Edwina stared at her, but said nothing.

Bella felt sure she was nearing the final moments of her life, but she couldn't stop herself from babbling. "You killed those Triads the same way. You slit their throats and drank them too."

"You're in shock," Edwina said.

Bella shook her head. "I don't think so. I think you're a vampire, and Fang is a vampire dog."

Fang growled, and Edwina glared at the dog. "Quiet."

Bella asked, "Are you going to kill me?"

Edwina shook her head. "I can't. I'm only allowed to eat criminals."

"But who—? Did you make this deal to eat criminals with Jacqueline?"

"No, I made the deal with her tribal elders with her help. She's like my liaison with her tribe. I hunt by their rules, and they give me a stable place to live without always having to stay on the run."

"But why would you want to live in the Bronx?"

Edwina smiled weakly. "Smog."

"What? You like smog?"

"I suppose so, yes."

Bella shook her head. "I don't understand why. It stinks and it makes breathing..oh, I guess that's not a problem for you."

"No, not really." Edwina bowed her head to look at her hands. "The smog filters out the sunlight, I can go outside without anyone noticing that I'm different."

"So sunlight doesn't make you burst into flames."

"No. It does sting, and...and it weakens me."

Bella realized how this was a major sign of trust, an admission of a weakness that might be exploited. She sat up slowly, being careful not to set off her vertigo again.

Edwina scooted a few inches away and hunched over, seeming to flinch away from Bella.

Bella asked, "Are you avoiding me because you think I'm a sex object, or because you think I'm food?"

"Food," Edwina answered. "And not just food, but forbidden fruit. You don't use drugs or alcohol, so your blood is pure. I drink only from criminals, and most of them are dirty with drugs or other toxins. My other problem is, crime is at an all-time low in our neighborhood, and I've been on a strict diet."

Bella put her hand on Edwina's arm and stroked it once. "So you saved me tonight because you think I'm food?"

"No, I saved you because you're my neighbor."

Bella moved her hand up and settled it on Edwina's shoulder. "Really."

She used only the slightest pressure, and Edwina leaned over willingly. Their lips met and Bella tasted copper, the blood of the men who were going to rape her. This knowledge didn't disgust her, didn't even faze her. When Edwina moved in for another kiss, Bella closed her eyes and parted her lips.

Edwina's lingering kisses turned Bella on fast, and she scooted closer, laying her hand directly between Edwina's legs.

They both froze, and Edwina pulled away, quickly standing up.

Bella blinked, her brain coughing up a few mental gears. That Edwina was a vampire seemed more believable than her having a penis. "What the hell was that?"

"Um," Edwina said.

"But you're a...I mean, you don't look like—" Bella's eyebrows bunched together like two tawdry black caterpillars at a Roman orgy. She looked at Fang, the only other entity in the room. She stared at the dog for two seconds, her mouth open like she was about to ask him a question. It was still open when she looked back toward Edwina.

"Okay, I'm way too confused to have this conversation." Bella got up from the couch, rubbing her forehead when she felt a passing wave of vertigo despite her slow speed. "Thank you for rescuing me from those jerks. I...I'll be back after my brain can shift out of what the hell mode."

She left before Edwina could say anything, but she'd barely shut the door when Jacqueline opened her door to smirk.

Yes, of course she'd want to go.

Jacqueline chuckled, and then said, "Warned, you, didn't I?"

"You knew that too?"

"I told you we had a past. It ended right after she confessed to having mixed plumbing." Jacqueline heaved a sigh. "She's hot as fuck, but no matter how small it is, I'm dead set against dick." She grinned at Bella and leaned her head over. "How about you? Is that a deal killer or what?"

"It...it may be." Bella started up the hallway. "I'm going home now."

"You do that," Jacqueline said, closing her door.

The only thing that kept Bella from running down the stairs was vertigo.

Chapter 13

Jacqueline sat on Edwina's couch with her arm around the crying vampire. At her feet was a wastebasket littered with bloody tissues, and when Edwina soaked another tissue, she picked up the basket with her free hand to collect the stained red wad. She set it aside and retrieved a clean white sheet from the box and handed it over.

She didn't bother trying to comfort Edwina, as she wasn't great with finding comforting words. She knew her limitations at least, so she knew when it was better to shut her mouth and prevent her feet from slipping inside.

She thought back to when she'd found out about Edwina, eight years before. After two years of living next door to each other, it seemed like they'd been made for each other. Jacqueline ran hot, and Edwina was cold. Jacqueline's humor was brash and unapologetic, while Edwina's was sly and subtle. Their hunting styles had complemented each other's, and they'd shared many meals, with Edwina drinking the blood and Jacqueline consuming the flesh and bones.

Edwina did not move fast in relationships, and it had taken a long time before Jacqueline could break down her defenses enough to attempt a make out session. She'd made Edwina shake and pant. But Edwina panicked when Jacqueline tried to undress her, and she exploded in a spontaneous confession. Stunned by the revelation, Jacqueline had been forced to bow out.

The thought occurred to her that she'd handled seducing Edwina much better than Bella, but then Bella was only sixteen, and Jacqueline had been one hundred and ten. So she'd had a few years to mellow out. At sixteen, Jacqueline supposed she probably would have made the same moves on Edwina.

Edwina stopped crying, and she whined, "She knows I'm a vampire. What am I going to do?"

"You will sit here and wallow in grief." Jacqueline patted Edwina's arm. "After you calm down, I'll go have a talk with her and find out if you need to start packing."

Edwina sighed. "I should have—"

"Don't," Jacqueline said firmly. "There's nothing down Shoulda Way that you ain't seen and done before."

Edwina sighed again.

Jacqueline hugged her tighter, reminding herself that even though Edwina was the older of them, she had much less experience in relationships. In fact, aside from Jacqueline herself, there had only been one other, an attempt at a "gay" relationship with an older male vampire that ended disastrously when he caught Edwina wearing dresses and scolded her for "freakish behavior."

And so, Edwina remained a virgin despite being two hundred and eighteen years old. At times, Edwina had seemed asexual, but Jacqueline had lived close enough to her to know that she wasn't. She'd repressed her sexuality because she didn't understand her feelings.

Jacqueline could understand that much. Edwina was a woman with a penis, and yet she was also a lesbian. Most folks would call that a serious conflict of interests.

No, Edwina wasn't asexual, but she was waiting for the right person to explore her feelings with, someone who didn't freak out over what she was. And though she hadn't tried to show it, she'd desperately hoped that with enough time, Bella might be that person. She didn't need to say it out loud, either. Her devastated reaction

was proof enough.

Except, Bella jumped the gun and found out that Edwina was packing heat. Well, a derringer, really.

Edwina made a tiny laugh at Jacqueline's thoughts, and she rested her head on her neighbor's shoulder. "I think I'm probably good for more than one shot."

"Yeah, but the hormones mean you're packing blanks anyway." Jacqueline rubbed Edwina's arm. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Eh, what are friends for?" Jacqueline patted her arm a final time and got up. She couldn't stay so close to Edwina without thinking about trying to comfort her in other ways. But that wouldn't work, and Jacqueline didn't want to be a tease, turning on Edwina only to run away at the last moment. No, better to just leave that problem alone.

Jacqueline gestured back toward the door. "I'll just check up on Bella. If she's not going to say anything, I'll go out for a hunt. But if you need to pack, I'll come back up."

"Okay, sure." Edwina wiped at her eyes and tossed away the blood streaked tissue. "Jacqueline?"

She turned at the door. "Yep?"

"Thanks, really. For letting me fall apart on you like that."

Jacqueline blanked on what to say. She knew it was a bad time to crack a joke, so she just nodded and left.

Bella opened her door, but she didn't look up at Jacqueline as she stepped back. Jacqueline looked around, and then asked, "Is your dad home?"

"Nope, he's still panicking over the Triads."

Jacqueline nodded and shut the door. "Listen, Bella, I need to talk to you about Edwina."

"I hurt her feelings. I know." Bella sighed. "I snuck back upstairs to try and get past you, only I heard her crying. I didn't...I wasn't trying to make her cry, you know? I just..."

"You panicked," Jacqueline said.

"Yeah."

"I get that, but I'm not here to talk about that revelation."

"Huh?" Bella's eyes lit up with recognition. "Oh, right, the vampire thing. No, I don't care about that. I understand that she's eating criminals as part of her agreement with your tribe."

"Yeah, and she's been a peach about following the rules, until you showed up. You almost broke her, Bella, and I mean she wanted to kill you."

"I know."

"No, you don't know anything. If you rub up against me and make me horny, the worst that can happen is, I'll rip your clothes off and fuck you stupid. But if you provoke Edwina at the wrong time, she'll rip open your neck and drain you dead. And you don't come back as a vampire if she drains you. You still need a decent supply of your own blood to make the change. So if she kills you in an intimate moment, how do you think she'll feel about that?"

Bella didn't answer, but she nodded and bowed her head.

Jacqueline started to pace. "And, now that I think about it, it was really tacky of you to just grope her after a few kisses."

"I know," Bella said.

"You don't work on her tits, or play with her ear. You just leap on her crotch like a lion on a gazelle." Jacqueline smirked at Bella's dumbfounded stare. "The next person you hook up with, at least rub their thigh for a half a second before you manually examine their genitals."

Bella smiled awkwardly. "Um, you're not very good at lectures."

"Who said this was a lecture? I'm just making fun of you for being so clueless."

"Oh, you did so much better?" Bella huffed. "I seem to recall you saying things didn't work out between you."

"They didn't, but it wasn't my foreplay skills that ended things. It was Edwina's confession. And, by the way, I had to be told the truth, because I didn't go probing for an early answer."

"Okay," Bella said, and then rolled her eyes. "Jeez."

"And furthermore, while we were making out, I had her panting like a teenager without touching her crotch, and she doesn't even need to breathe. In fact, I'll bet I could have made her come just playing with her nipples."

Bella folded her arms over her chest. "Finished?"

"Not quite. I got to play with her tits, and while small, they're quite lovely."

"Okay, now you're just showing off," Bella said.

"I am, so I should go. I have to grab something to eat, and then I'm off to the local gay bar. The guys are hosting a leather night, and they make me laugh when they try to act all hard and tough."

"Have a good time," Bella said, and then gestured back at the dining room table, where her books and notebook were scattered. "I'm stuck with the exiting world of public eumacation."

Jacqueline shuddered. "Yeah, good luck with that." Then she left quickly to get away from the vile textbooks.

Chapter 14

Two weeks passed without a visit from Bella, and while Edwina thought of her constantly, she wouldn't pursue Bella and corrupt her. She liked her quiet life, and she couldn't give it up. Not for anything, not even love.

Besides, it wasn't really love yet, and probably never could be. It had been teen lust in Bella's case, and a combination of hunger and loneliness for Edwina.

In Bella's absence, Edwina had fallen into back into a comfortable pattern of hunting with Fang. She was also having a good run of luck in finding decent criminals, which is to say large pimps with low drug use habits. Edwina had no idea where all the pimps came from, but with her eating so many, she had to agree with the sentiment that pimping wasn't easy.

Or maybe it was easier in towns where the pimps weren't a part of a vampire's balanced breakfast. Then she giggled when she thought, *But by getting rid of all the pimps, I might have to settle for a bowl of cheery-hos.*

Edwina was just coming home from finishing off a very drunk pimp, and so she was feeling a bit inebriated herself. Fang was not affected so much. He was in a good mood, and he sang in his thoughts. He had a deep gravel to his mental voice, a perfect voice for signing Kenny Rogers, and he was in the middle of a stirring

rendition of *the County* as they made their way up the stairs.

But he stopped when he saw Bella waiting on the next flight of the stairwell. He stopped singing to ask, *You want I should bite her?*

"Fang," Edwina said, her disapproving tone making her answer clear.

Bella looked around at the sound of Edwina's voice, and then closed the pocket novel she'd been reading and put it away in her bag.

She descended the steps, but stopped when she noticed Edwina's pout. "Jacqueline told me off for groping you. I'm sorry that I got carried away. Can you forgive me, or should I get lost?"

Edwina thought this over before she nodded. "All right, we can try again. Um...how's your father?"

"Good. He's finally calming down now. I'm not sure what he did in the past, but I don't want to bring it up. I don't want to find out he was helping to do something evil."

"Um"

Bella blinked, and then smirked. "I mean like human slavery or organ harvesting evil, not eating to survive evil. They're really very different things, really."

Edwina let go of a short laugh. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"What's wrong with your voice? Have you been drinking?"

"Duh?" Edwina said.

"Huh? Oh." Bella snorted. "Okay, I'll rephrase. Have you been drinking a drunk?"

"Just a little bit," Edwina said. She pointed up the stairs "Actually, I'm kinda needing to sit down, so if you want to talk, we'll need to move this conversation to my couch."

Fang thought, *Bow-chicka-bow wow!*

Bella was obviously confused when Edwina kned the dog in the side hard enough to make him yelp. "What was that for?"

"You can't read his thoughts, so I'll spare you," Edwina said.

She walked up the steps with Fang limping theatrically behind her thinking, *Oh, my aching spleens!*

"So you can read minds?" Bella asked.

"Yep, everyone, except you."

"What?"

"It's true, I don't have a clue what you're thinking."

"That's what my dad says too, but he can't read anyone's mind." Bella smiled at Edwina. "So you have no idea what I'm thinking now?"

Edwina stopped at her doorway and studied Bella's lewd smile. "I may have a clue, but I should tell you that I prefer to move slow. I'm...I'm very old-fashioned that way."

Bella nodded, but held her tongue until they were inside the apartment and Fang had been released from his leash. "So how old are you?"

"Two hundred and eighteen, but the person you know as Edwina is only fifty years old. I started taking female hormones back in the sixties, and over time my body changed. It took longer than it would with a living human, but within a decade, I looked pretty much like you see me now."

"Wow," Bella said, settling on the couch. "I never would have thought hormones could do so much."

"They didn't do so much. Even before I was turned, people called me pretty rather than handsome. I was teased as a child by my parents and friends for being too pretty and soft for farm work. I was seventeen when the plague came to our village, and my family was consumed one by one, until only my mother and I were left. She took me to a traveling medicine man, but she died during the night after explaining how we were the last of our family line.

"That gypsy was a vampire named Carlisle, and he bit me and turned me into one of his adopted family. To keep us safe from suspicion, Carlisle killed only criminals, and he mixed their blood with different blends of animal blood, to help spread it out to all of us. He had his wife, Esme, and his other 'kids,' Jasper, Alice, and Rosalie. I think I was supposed to be partnered with Rosalie, but we didn't hit it off. So Carlisle made another vampire, Emmet, and they became a couple. Rosalie never forgave me for spurning her, so our family life was always tense."

"Why don't you still live with them? Do they have trouble accepting you?"

"Oh, no, not at all. In fact, Carlisle was the one who taught me how to use hormones to change myself. I just...I drifted away from my family often because they liked being gypsies, and I didn't. Carlisle moved us from one hospital to another every four years, sometimes sooner if we'd raised suspicions. I wanted a stable place to stay and call my own. Maybe my little hovel isn't so fancy, but I know I have a place to come back to, and that comforts me. The open road...it frightens me."

Bella smiled. "I didn't realize a vampire could get scared."

"Some of the more evil vampires will try to convince their victims that they don't know fear. But if that's true, why do they live quietly in hiding? Because they're afraid of dying."

"Yeah, that makes sense. But why does the open road scare you?"

"I don't know. I suppose I don't like having an uncertain destination. The future being hazy is okay. I can live with that. But not knowing where I'm going bothers me. No place ever feels like home, and I've always felt this...yearning. It's like my whole body aches for something, but I don't know what it is."

Bella scooted closer, smiling coyly. "Maybe you were just lonely."

Edwina sighed. "Bella, cool it. I'm drunk, and I'm likely to do something stupid if you aren't careful."

"Really? Like how stupid?" Taking Edwina's hand, Bella rested the vampire's cold palm on her blushing cheek. "You've just fed, so I hope you don't need a nightcap."

Edwina brushed her thumb over Bella's cheek, marveling at how hot and soft she was. She was like a living flame wrapped in meaty squishy stuff.

She forced her thoughts back to the more practical and said, "I don't know what you're thinking. You know I've got...um, plumbing problems."

"Well, it didn't seem like a very fat pipe," Bella said in a playful voice. "I think one of your fingers is probably longer."

Edwina laughed and raised her other hand to extend her thumb. "Here, this is like a free preview. I think my thumb is a little thicker at the top, but they're pretty close."

"Hmmm" Bella curled her fingers around Edwina's thumb, pulling her hand down to Bella's lap. "That doesn't seem so big to me."

"No, it's not, really." Edwina sighed. "But it is a bit too much if you're a dedicated lesbian."

She was about to crack another joke when she noticed Bella stroking her thumb in a suggestive way. Her smile melted at she gazed into Bella's deep brown eyes, and her imagination tried to conjure a fantasy of what Bella's hot hand would feel like if it weren't being symbolic. The fantasy made her groin throb instantly, and she let out a shaking breath.

Bella lifted Edwina's hand and kissed the tip of her thumb.

Edwina panted once, and then said, "Bella—" But her mind blanked when Bella slipped her thumb into her mouth. Edwina started to pant faster, tasting Bella's clean perfection. She wanted to pull her hand away before she got really stupid, but she was frozen in place, mesmerized by Bella's wet mouth puckered around her

digit.

Bella lowered her hand and asked, "So, that was the free preview. What did you think?"

"Cold shower," Edwina said. "And baseball scores. And Margaret Thatcher naked."

"I don't know her," Bella said.

"You're lucky," Edwina smiled, but it was more of a grimace. "She looks terrible naked."

Bella laughed, and then raised up to kiss Edwina. At first, Edwina wasn't sure if she should return Bella's intense affections. But with the image of Bella sucking her thumb still firing her alcohol-addled brain, common sense was in short supply.

Bella became more enthusiastic the longer Edwina let her go. She broke the kiss to climb into Edwina's lap, and her fingers started to fumble with the buttons of her blouse.

All at once, Edwina was possessed by the urge to bite Bella, and she was so scared by it that she shoved the amorous teen out of her lap and over the coffee table. Bella turned an ungraceful somersault, landing with her shoulders and head on Fang's flank.

Swallowing, Edwina tried to stop panting. "I'm sorry, I can't...I'm drunk, and I was going to bite you. I can't do this." Edwina pointed at the door. "Please, just go."

Bella got up without argument and left. She opened the door, but hung in the room for a long moment, as if she wanted to say something. In the end, she said nothing, not even offering a good-bye before she shut the door.

Edwina lay on her couch and hugged her chest as she curled up. She'd been good. She'd done the right thing and sent Bella away.

But, if it was the right thing, why did she feel like a monster?

Chapter 15

Bella fanned herself with the brochure from the museum. She wasn't going to read it, not with the tour guide going on and on about the various modern art paintings. She wasn't the only one looking bored, and her classmate, Mike, leaned over to groan, "Sooo dull."

Bella laughed under her breath and nodded. "You said it. If this tour doesn't pick up the pace, I'll explo—"

The blast stunned Mike into action, and he jumped into Bella, causing both of them to drop to the floor. For a few seconds, they both lay together in shock from the pain of hitting an uncarpeted floor.

Then Mike got up, shooting an apologetic look at Bella. He said something, but Bella didn't hear a thing. She cupped a hand to her ear and then shook her head. Mike pointed to his ears and nodded.

Bella looked behind him as a group of masked men in black suits stormed into the building through the hole they'd just blasted. Two of the men went straight to a painting and took it down, while the other two took out Uzis.

Bella leapt on Mike and dropped him to the floor just before the gunmen opened fire. They continued to fire bursts, taking down anymore who dared rise to their knees. Bella shut her eyes, feeling certain she would be shot.

But when she wasn't, she looked up just as the men carrying the painting shifted positions and brought the canvas around to face her. Then she saw that they were taking a map. It was an abstract art piece, one they'd already seen. But now standing much farther back, Bella recognized the various symbols from her cartography studies.

But a map to what? And why were they stealing it?

Bella didn't know, but she decided to lay over Mike until the men were gone. She was only a part-time vigilante, and gosh darn it, she was still on the clock as a student just then.

When the men left, Bella sat up. Mike did too, and they both sat and stared at each other. When Bella started to hear the alarm sirens and the wails of injured people, she got up and began looking for ways to help. Here a woman needed a belt applied to her leg to keep her from bleeding out. Mike stayed with her to keep the belt tight and keep the woman talking.

Bella moved onto a man with a chest wound, but he died a moment after she had taken his hand. He squeezed her fingers hard, and then closed his eyes. His grip relaxed, and his last breath gurgled out of him slowly. She let him go, forcing herself not to think. She couldn't save him, but there were others who she could help.

The next victim was the tour guide, bleeding from a bullet wound high in her shoulder with no exit wound. Bella looked around, and caught the attention of a jock by snapping her fingers. "Get over here, and take off your shirt."

The jock responded to the confidence in her voice, already grabbing the hem of his shirt as he walked over. He took it off and wadded it into a ball, guessing what purpose it would serve. He let Bella take his wrist and show him where to apply pressure, and like Mike, Bella told him to talk to the guide. So the jock started rambling in a wavering voice about football to keep the woman from slipping into shock.

The police and paramedics arrived and took over, and Bella collapsed on a padded bench in the middle of the gallery. She closed her eyes and bowed her head to rest her face in her palms.

In front of her, Mike said, "You saved my life."

Bella looked up at his stunned expression and nodded. "Yep, I did that."

"But I...I mean, you just saved a bunch of people."

"Yeah. Guess those classes hosted by the paramedics last summer didn't go to waste."

Mike stared at her, and then looked around. "Unbelievable."

"That's what I was thinking. Who blows a hole out of a museum just to steal a painting?"

"Huh?" Mike looks at Bella, "Who stole what now?"

Bella sighed. "It was all behind your back, Mike. You missed the whole thing. Damn shame, really. The pyrotechnics were spectacular." She stared at Mike's stunned expression, and then asked, "What were you saying was incredible?"

"That you just saved me, and you act like it's no big deal." Mike smiled at Bella. "Are you some kind of superhero?"

"No, just a vigilante," Bella said, smiling when Mike laughed. "And then only on the nights and weekends."

That distracted him enough for the time being. He sat down on the bench beside her, falling silent while he watched the chaos around them

Bella stared at the floor, but her senses were turned inward. The outline around the map symbols was a border, and a shape that Bella thought she should know already. But even though she could recall the shape with lucid clarity, she had no idea what it was. Or more accurately where it was.

She tried to push the thought aside. She was just a part-time vigilante, and the men who blasted the hole in the museum were pros. They were probably trained just as much as the Triad enforcers in her neighborhood.

Thinking of these two seemingly unrelated events, Bella developed a hunch that she knew what the outline was after all. But she would have to wait until she could get to the library to check and see if she was right.

Chapter 16

Edwina had just got home from hunting with Fang when Bella knocked on the door. Edwina turned around to open the door, and Bella was already across the hall, knocking on Jacqueline's door.

Bella turned around to frown at Edwina. "You're not going to believe the day I've had."

Jacqueline opened her door, rubbing her eyes. Her hair was tousled, and she looked annoyed to be awake. "Did you blow a test or something?"

Bella laughed derisively. "No, I almost got blown up at the Museum of Modern Art."

"Do what?" Jacqueline straightened up, now looking more awake. She waved for Bella to come in. "I've got coffee and food in my kitchen."

Bella turned and went with her, so Edwina whistled to Fang and waved for him to come along. She shut the door after him and crossed the hallway.

While Jacqueline made a pot of coffee and some toast, Bella explained her trip to the museum. Both Jacqueline and Edwina listened intently, their faces both set in concerned scowls.

Bella finished describing the rougher half of her day, and then paused to sip some coffee and munch a slice of buttered toast before she went on. "Once the cops let us go, we went back to school for like ten minutes. They decided we were too traumatized to go back to regular classes."

"Were you traumatized?" Edwina asked.

"Maybe, but I'm trying not to think about that."

Jacqueline spoke over Edwina, who was about to suggest that Bella needed to let it out sooner rather than later. "All right, so obviously you didn't go home just yet."

"No, after they let us go, I went to the library to look up the piece of art the men stole, and get this, the piece is called *Ode to the Bronx*. Only, I'm not so sure it's an homage. I think it's really a map."

Taking off her backpack, Bella took out a black and white printout of the painting and handed it to Edwina. "Here, see those broken lines?"

"These hash marks?" Edwina asked.

"Yep, those are actually subway lines, and the lines with all the cross marks are a map symbol for railroad tracks. The straight gray lines are streets, and those green circles correspond to the parks in the area. All the lighter grey squares are either buildings, garages, or parking lots, depending on the shade, and the boundary of around all those symbols is the property line that makes up the Bronx."

"So?" Jacqueline said.

"So?" Bella gasped to vent her anger at Jacqueline's nonchalant challenge. "Somebody blasted a hole in the Museum of Modern Art and killed almost a dozen people to steal this map. I think it points to something really important, something so important that the Triads are willing to commit an army to finding it."

Raising her head to stare at Edwina, Jacqueline drummed her fingers on the counter, her mouth bowed in a tight frown. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but if these people are so high profile, don't you think you're out of your league?"

"Hell, I know I'm way out of my league, but what bothers me is, I know the Triad enforcers that Edwina killed were looking for the same something. They seem to think whatever it is, it's near us. So...so we need to figure out what it is they're searching for and take it first."

"And?" Jacqueline asked.

Bella pouted, but this was an expression of uncertainty, not anger. "And...then we take it somewhere else for safe keeping?"

Jacqueline nodded and returned to the coffee machine for a refill. Bella put another slice of bread in the toaster, and then leaned on the counter to watch Jacqueline.

Edwina noted how Bella was deferring to Jacqueline because she was playing the skeptic. Bella felt she had to convince Jacqueline, so Edwina, being silent, was completely ignored.

Trying to be useful, Edwina asked, "Do you have any theories about what they're looking for?"

"No, nothing," Bella said, and then pointed at the printout Edwina still held. "The clues to the location are in that art. That's why I wanted to bring it to you. Maybe there's some hidden symbolism in these other symbols, but I don't recognize it. It all might as well be gibberish to me."

Edwina examined the image closely, and then she noticed that a row of the symbols near the middle of the map were vaguely familiar. "Jacqueline, I think some of this is Iroquoian."

"What?" Jacqueline strode around the counter and looked at the printout over Edwina's shoulder. She squinted, and then made an exasperated groan. "Okay, maybe you have microscope eyes, but I can't see to read any of that shit. We need a better image if I'm going to read and translate it properly. Maybe someone at the museum has made an electronic copy for the web site?"

"This is the image from the web site, but I did have to shrink down to print it."

"We could use my computer," Edwina said. "It's a slow laptop, but we can use it to get online."

Jacqueline waved at the door, "Lead the way." The four moved across the hallway, and Jacqueline said, "It's just not the same without *Yakety Sax*."

Edwina smacked her forehead. "Oy."

Bella looked at Jacqueline with confusion. "What's *Yakety Sax*?"

Jacqueline made a pained face, and then sighed. "Christ, I knew it. I'm no longer hip."

"Were you *ever* hip?" Edwina commented in a sarcastic voice.

"Good point," Jacqueline said.

Edwina went to her room and got her laptop and DSL modem out of the closet. She put the modem on the floor beside the couch and plugged it onto the wall jack. After it had warmed up and connected to the net, she set up the laptop on the arm of the couch and got out of the way to let Bella pull up the image.

When Bella did, Edwina pointed out the row of symbols to Jacqueline. "See? Can you read this now?"

Jacqueline leaned in close, resting her hand on Bella's shoulder. "Uh...yeah, I can." She shook her head as her frown grew. "But if that's a statement of fact, I really don't like what it says."

"Why?" Bella asked. "What does it say?"

Jacqueline's scowl became darker. "Loosely translated? Here, there be a dragon."

Chapter 17

Edwina sat on one end of the couch, and Bella sat on the other. They both stared at the map on the laptop screen, now placed on the coffee table. Jacqueline had gone out to meet with her tribal elders, hoping that they might have some explanation for the presence of a dragon in the Bronx.

She had been gone for ten minutes, and Edwina was wondering if perhaps she should ask Bella to go home. But she didn't want Bella to leave. But she did. But she didn't.

Obviously, she was feeling a bit conflicted.

Bella looked away from the screen and toward Edwina. "Can I have a glass of water?"

Edwina marveled at the question. Was there some subtle subtext she was meant to pick up, or was Bella just thirsty? Because Edwina was.

The admission sent her to her feet and into the kitchen. She got out two glasses and filled one with water. She went to her refrigerator and took out a Styrofoam container full of pig blood. She poured herself a glass and then got out a pan and filled it with hot water. She set her glass into the pan and left the hot water running.

By then, Bella was leaning on the kitchen counter, watching with intense interest. Edwina handed her the glass of water, and then leaned again the sink while she waited for the blood to warm up.

"You can't microwave it?" Bella asked

"No, the radiation damages the cells and makes it worthless to me. Plus, it tastes awful." Edwina gestured back at the tap. "This way, I can warm the blood up until it's almost body temperature."

"So that's a big deal for you? Having the blood hot?"

"Some of my adopted relatives can drink cold blood, but I find it disgusting."

"So, kinda like me and cold eggs," Bella said.

"Yes, something like that."

Bella glanced at the glass in the pan, sipped her water, and then looked at the glass again. "So, the reason you're keeping your distance now is because you're thirsty, right?"

Edwina shook her head. "No, I'm keeping my distance because you and I shouldn't be together."

Bella pouted. "Why not?"

"Because you're sixteen and I'm two hundred and eighteen. If that's not a good enough reason, how about the fact that I'm at risk of killing you every time we kiss?" Bella started to say something, but Edwina spoke over her. "And if that's not good enough, I don't have what you're looking for."

"Well, but there's surgeries for that, isn't there?"

Edwina sighed. "I can't have a surgery. As a vampire, I'd regenerate my genitals back to the old form. I know because I attempted castration once."

Bella made a face. "Ouch?"

"Doesn't even begin to describe it. The worst part is, it grew back in less than a day. After that, I just tried to ignore that I had it. It's not so hard, really. I don't need to use the toilet, and I don't decompose or sweat. So I don't have to get naked very often, except when I'm showering dust off at the end of the week."

Bella laughed. "Getting rid of the dust bunnies, huh?"

"And belly button lint too," Edwina said. She shut off the hot water and turned around to look at Bella. "I've had a long time to get used to who I am, and once I got on human hormones, I stopped having sexual urges. I can't tell you what a relief that was. Only...only now they're back, and I'm not sure how to feel about that."

Bella set down her glass on the counter and closed the distance between them. "I brought them back?"

Edwina nodded, unable to find her voice.

Bella raised her hand and closed it over the back of Edwina's neck, pulling her down. Their lips fastened together, then separated with a soft smack. Edwina really liked the sound, and she kissed Bella again, making another smack as their lips parted.

Each kiss they shared grew more intense, until Edwina's mouth moved to the side of Bella's jaw. Bella leaned her head to offer herself, and Edwina opened her mouth. She froze, her teeth mere centimeters from Bella's throbbing jugular. She panted, tasting Bella and finding the teen's aroused pheromones to be as intoxicating as a drunk's alcohol-infused blood.

The animal need in her pleaded, *Just try a little taste; just one tiny bite. Or just, just lick her.*

The tip of her tongue snaked out to sample Bella's skin, and the teen writhed against Edwina in response, having no idea how close to dying she was.

Edwina started to shake, and she panted faster. "Bella, I can't..." She wanted to say she couldn't control herself, that Bella needed to run. But she couldn't form the words because her hunger swallowed them.

Bella whined, "It's okay."

The door opened, and Bella stepped away from Edwina just before Edwina's teeth could close.

Jacqueline looked at the couch, and then turned toward the kitchen. Her gaze locked on Edwina, and her face froze in a look of horror. "Bella, get away from Edwina."

Bella said, "It's okay, we—" Then she looked around at Edwina, and her mouth fell open as she started to back out of the kitchen.

Edwina shook and panted, trying to keep herself under control. Through Jacqueline's thoughts, she knew that her eyes were blood red, and that her brow had become distorted and monstrous. Her face was set in an ugly scowl that turned even her pretty features into a nightmare landscape of wrinkles and shadows.

"The pig's blood is warm," Bella said.

Edwina looked at the glass and grabbed it, knocking back the drink in one pull. It wasn't nearly enough to fill her, but her face relaxed as the urge to kill left her. She went to the refrigerator and immediately refilled the glass, returning it to the sink.

She leaned over the sink, unable to look at Bella or Jacqueline. "I think you should leave."

"Yeah, okay," Bella said. She was gone a second later.

Jacqueline moved to the kitchen without a sound and put her hand on Edwina's shoulder. "You okay?"

Edwina shook her head. "No."

Jacqueline sighed. "All right, fine. I'll go take care of it."

And then she was gone, the door clicking quietly behind her.

Chapter 18

Bella yelped as a hand closed over her arm and she was spun fast and pushed against the wall. She saw Jacqueline and started to complain that she didn't need her nerves jangled any worse, but the taller woman leaned over and kissed her hard while her mouth was open.

Bella tried to push her back, and Jacqueline raised her arms over her head, pinning her wrists with one hand. Jacqueline's kiss was far more forceful and urgent than Edwina's, and Bella found herself responding, even panting as she returned the kiss.

Jacqueline's other hand slipped around Bella's waist, drawing her body against Jacqueline's. Bella whined, and then Jacqueline abruptly stepped back.

When Bella opened her eyes, the imposing woman again wore a frightening scowl. Bella asked, "What was—?"

"Is that all you need? Just someone to keep your hormones in check?" Before Bella could answer, Jacqueline said, "Because if that's it, you should bug someone who won't kill you."

Bella's temper rose, and before she could swallow her bitter comment, it was spilling from her lips with haughty force. "You think that's all I'm doing? Just bugging her for a quickie?"

"No, I think what you're doing is torturing my best friend." Jacqueline stepped closer and leaned down to put her nose just inches from Bella's. Bella hated when she did it, felt that she was being "talked down to" every time Jacqueline sank to her level. "I'm not protecting you from her, you self-centered baby. I'm protecting her."

"Self-centered?" Bella huffed. "I'm just—"

"You're just reminding Edwina what a monster she really is!" Bella flinched at the angry tone of Jacqueline's voice, but the red-faced woman showed her no mercy. "Before you came along, she could almost feel normal. But you make her want something she can't have, and you don't even care how badly you hurt her just now."

"I..." Bella looked back up the stairwell. "Oh, no."

"Ugh!" Jacqueline smacked forehead. "*Now* she sees!"

Bella's angry scowl melted as she watched Jacqueline fuming. "You never stopped loving her."

Jacqueline's scowl softened, and she looked down. "It doesn't matter what I feel for her, and you shouldn't change the subject. If all you're looking for is some older woman to cuddle with, then knock on my door, not hers. Just..." Jacqueline turned to walk back upstairs. "Just leave her alone, Bella. It isn't fair to torture her like this."

Bella thought of a thousand objections, but she remained silent as she watched Jacqueline leave. She'd thought she loved Edwina, but then she'd responded to Jacqueline just as enthusiastically as she did to Edwina. So, did she really love Edwina? Or was it all just hormones and lust? Was she just as shallow as the other girls at school who went on and on about how "hawt" their guys were?

She stood in the stairwell for the longest time, unable to decide on a direction. She wanted to go to Edwina, to apologize and find some way to take away her guilt. But if she returned to the apartment, she would only make things worse.

She wanted to talk to Jacqueline too, but to ask what she'd learned from her tribal elders. But she hadn't taken long to get back, so it was likely they needed time to investigate the map theft, and perhaps the map itself.

She didn't want to go home. She didn't want to go downstairs to her mundane, boring life. This thought brought a thin smile to her lips. She had grown up fighting, sparring, or training to fight. But everything she'd done before meeting Edwina and Jacqueline was mundane, human, and petty. Her supernatural neighbors offered Bella a glimpse of a hidden world, one that made the human world seem bland and fake by comparison, even with all the constant fights, explosions, and drama. Edwina and Jacqueline offered her something better than mundane human drama, something like...superdrama.

Still, she forced herself down the stairs to her crappy normal life. When she opened the door, she found John already dozing on the couch with the newspaper over his chest.

Sighing, she went to the couch, intending to fold the paper and pull the blanket covering the couch down over her dad. But when she leaned over, she read the headline:

Second Major Art Theft Strikes in New York

Bella picked up the paper and looked at the full color image of the painting that had been taken. An abstract piece, it featured many horizontal lines in various colors. Most of the lines were broken by circles, and near the center of the image was two larger circles that broke up several layers.

Layers. Once Bella had the thought, she realized the lines were layers of soil. At the bottom of the painting was a bright red swirl, looking like a coiled flame. The dragon.

Bella rushed out of the living room, up the stairs, and straight to Jacqueline's door. She pounded on it, but it was Edwina's door that opened.

Bella spun around and held up the newspaper before Jacqueline could shout at her. Pointing to the photo, she spoke in a loud, excited voice. "It's a three-dimensional map! They're going to steal a third painting, and then they'll find out where the dragon is!"

Chapter 19

Jacqueline shut the door behind Bella and looked around at Edwina, who sat on the couch with a thoughtful frown working at her pale lips. Jacqueline was sure her expression was similar just then, because Bella had given them a lot to chew on.

Bella had pointed out the circles and offered explanations for each as symbols for pipes or cables, depending on the size. The two bigger circles had to be subway tunnels. If the map had some reference to how it attached to the first image, Bella didn't know. But her theory made sense.

So, somewhere in New York, there was likely a third modern painting, an abstract piece that would act as the final coordinates. Which was x , and which was y ? And how did the three images join? Were they hung from the edges, or would they intersect in the middle?

Jacqueline crossed the room and sank to pet Fang, who quickly rolled over to let her scratch his chest. The act of petting the dog didn't help her think better, but at least she could feel like she was accomplishing something while she spun her mental gears.

"She's smart," Edwina said out of nowhere.

Jacqueline didn't need to guess who she meant. "Yes, she is. I can't wrap my head around this map, and she's already planning to tour the museums to find the third painting."

Jacqueline looked back over her shoulder, and then sighed when she noticed Edwina's whimsical expression. "Would you stop mooning over the kid and think about the dragon?"

"Huh? Oh, right." Edwina shook her head. "I don't know what to tell you. Without the third coordinate, all we can do is wander around the subterranean levels of the neighborhood."

"No, I don't like that idea," Jacqueline said. "There's too much risk that we could get lost and wander into the lair of a giant alligator."

Edwina snorted. "We're looking for a dragon, and you're worried about the alligators. Your priorities could use a little work."

"Yours could use a bit of therapy too. You should be worrying about what kind of dragon it is, and instead you're still thinking about Bella."

"Hmmm..." Edwina pinched her lower lip, her eyes becoming glazed again. "If the Triads are putting all this effort into finding it, I would suspect it's a Chinese dragon."

"Okay, but what are you really thinking about right now?" Jacqueline asked. Edwina's eyes lost their glazed look, but then she looked away as she pouted guiltily. "Well?"

"I was just wondering what she tastes like."

"You can't bite her," Jacqueline said.

"No, not that kind of taste," Edwina said.

"Oh." Jacqueline drifted off, and then groaned when she realized that she was letting herself be distracted by thoughts of oral sex. Shaking her head, she scowled. "Never mind Bella! Gah! I liked you better when you weren't so freaking horny!"

"Oh, that's nice." Edwina glared at Jacqueline. "You sleep around with whoever will let you into their pants, and I haven't ever...where do *you* get off telling *me* to ignore my libido?"

"Will you stop it? You told me to keep Bella away, so you can't get mad at me for doing what you wanted."

"You..." Edwina got up from the couch. "Fine." Then she went to her room and shut the door.

Jacqueline sighed and muttered, "Yep, screwed the pooch." This caused Fang to raise his head and utter a pleased grunt. "Not you, smartass. You're not even the right gender." Fang made another grunt, this time in disappointment, and then he flopped his head back on the floor. "Or species," Jacqueline added, and the dog snorted.

Jacqueline went to Edwina's door. "Edwina."

"Go away!"

"Come on, don't be like that." Nothing. "While I was out, I got a bottle of otter."

"Otter?" Edwina opened the door. "Is it pure otter?"

"Well, Grandma might have slipped a beaver in there, but you like beaver."

Edwina smirked. "I can't be sure. I haven't had the chance to sample it before."

Jacqueline made a soundless laugh and backed up, heading for the door. "Fang, you want to come with? It's a big bottle, so I'm willing to share."

"He says he prefers human." Edwina shrugged. "He's always been a finicky eater. Sometimes I can't even get him to touch crack dealers." The dog huffed, and Edwina did next. "Well, I'm sorry, but we can't have pimps every night! The world isn't made of pimps, you know!" She waved off the dog and walked to the door. "Whatever. I'm off to have a nice hot drink, while your supposedly starving ass rots here."

Jacqueline grimaced when Edwina slammed the door. "Easy, Sparkles. It's not the dog's fault that he's an idiot."

Edwina's scowl relaxed, but she didn't smile. "I just get tired of him complaining that I don't feed him enough. He's three times the size of a normal German shepherd, but somehow, I'm starving his fat ass."

"Yes, you're a good mom, and he's just an ingrate," Jacqueline said. She knew the use of mom would please Edwina, and while it was a cheap tactic, she hated to see Edwina angry.

Sure enough, the compliment made Edwina smile. Jacqueline stepped closer to her and put a hand on her arm. "Tell you what; since the dog isn't drinking with us, why don't I spike the bottle? We'll play drinking games until we pass out or until the bottle is empty."

Edwina's smile brightened, making her whole face glow. "Okay, sounds good."

Jacqueline went to the kitchen and got a huge glass bottle from the refrigerator. Setting it on the counter, she got out a smaller carafe and a pan. Making another trip to the pantry, she returned with a bottle of moonshine. She splashed in a generous amount of the booze into the carafe before she mixed in the blood. Then she moved the carafe to the pan and turned on the tap.

"What do you want to play?" Edwina asked. "Something involving the TV?"

"Sure, we'll watch Jerry Springer and drink whenever anything is bleeped out."

Edwina made a scowling face. "Pass. How about quarters?"

Jacqueline drummed her fingers on the counter as she considered it. "All right, sure. You set up the shot glasses, but you have to take a handicap chug before we start."

"If I have to, so do you."

"I planned on it."

"Good." Laughing, Edwina reached up to open a cabinet and take down a shot glass. She went to the coffee table in the living room and began making practice shots, with each bounced quarter landing in the shot glass.

With every clink of metal to glass, Edwina declared, "Ha!"

"Laugh it up, bitch," Jacqueline said. "We'll see how your aim is after I fuck you up with Grandpa's moonshine."

She brought two tall glasses to the couch and handed Edwina one. "Knock it back and I'll go do refills."

Edwina started to drink, and her face scrunched up. She continued gulping until she emptied the glass, and then she inhaled deep and blew out a long, loud breath. "Oh, fuck you, Grandpa. Old bastard needs to back off the antifreeze."

"It builds character," Jacqueline said, and then tilted back her glass. Still, her face scrunched up too. She gasped a deep breath and shuddered. "But it's a good thing it's Sierra antifreeze. So it can't kill anyone...I hope."

Edwina laughed and fanned her face. "Wow, that shit kicks in fast, though." She reached for the shot glass, tipped it to retrieve her quarter, and reset the glass.

Jacqueline turned away to go to the kitchen, and when she returned to then struck the floor, she crowed, "Ha!"

Edwina laughed, "Whatever. Let's see what your aim looks like, pussy."

It turned out, her aim was piss poor, and both she and Edwina were soon down to the bottom of their second glasses. Jacqueline refilled them, and they tried again, with unsurprisingly predictable results.

With three glasses of spiked blood, both women were also three sheets to the wind. They were pleasantly blotto, and Jacqueline saw no point in going for another round. She flopped back on the couch and thumped her head on the wall.

Edwina laughed, but covered her mouth to hide her pink teeth. "You are *so* shitfaced."

"I am." Jacqueline rolled her head over to grin at Edwina. "You are too. You've even got pink cheeks. You almost look like a blushing teenager again."

Edwina's smile spread, and her face glowed at the compliment. She waved a floppy drunk hand at Jacqueline. "Stop it."

"I mean it," Jacqueline insisted. "I've always thought you were such a pretty little thing."

Edwina rolled her eyes. "Little. Whatever."

Jacqueline sat up and puffed out her chest to make the differences in their sizes more apparent. She looped her arms around Edwina's and said, "There, look at how tiny your arms are compared to mine." She grinned at Edwina. "If you're in my arms, I can get away with calling you little because it's true."

Edwina tittered soft laughter. "If you say so."

Jacqueline admired her laugh and her smile. She was always beautiful as far as Jacqueline was concerned, but when she was beaming like this, her beauty was truly inhuman. She was elevated to the status of a pale goddess, a work of art crafted from living granite.

Jacqueline cupped Edwina's cheek, and the vampire closed her eyes and shifted her head to rub her face against Jacqueline's palm. Jacqueline pulled Edwina closer, guiding her by the cheek into a kiss. Their lips lingered together, and Jacqueline let her hands wander.

Within minutes, she had Edwina panting, and when she leaned over, Edwina lay back on the couch without resistance or protest. Jacqueline unbuttoned Edwina's blouse and cupped her breasts making Edwina pant faster. Interpreting her silence as consent to explore, Jacqueline took off her bra and dipped her head, and Edwina jutted her chest up, excited to be touched and tasted. Her voice rose in a soft moan as Jacqueline explored her body with her mouth.

Jacqueline started to slip a hand into Edwina's pants before she thought, *What am I doing?*

She froze, and Edwina shifted her hips, pleading, "Please, don't stop."

Jacqueline sat up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Edwina pleaded, "Jacqueline, please, can't we just—?"

"I'm sorry, I can't." Jacqueline pouted at Edwina, trying to convey her guilt for forgetting herself. "I didn't mean to...I'm sorry."

Edwina got up from the couch and gathered her discarded clothes. She slipped on her blouse, but didn't bother with buttoning it. She left without saying goodnight, without looking at Jacqueline again.

Jacqueline hung her head in her hands and muttered, "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Chapter 20

Looking away from a painting at the sound of a long sigh, Bella found Mike stifling a yawn behind his fist. She'd asked Mike, Jessica, Ben and Ashley to go to the museum with her, but she was the only one paying attention to the artwork.

Mike noticed her attention and commented, "Uh, I think I made it clear that these places are boring."

"This one might explode too," Bella said. "That's potentially exciting, right?"

"Shhh!" the tour guide shushed.

They moved on to another picture, where Mike said, "Hey, Bella, on the next date, can we go to a movie?"

"Oh...um, sorry this isn't really a date."

Mike frowned and stuffed his hand in his pockets. "So, you don't like me?"

"Well, I...oh, heck with it." Bella lowered her voice. "Mike, I'm a lesbian."

Jessica and Ashley both gasped and backed up a step. Bella sighed and said, "You can relax. I only go for older women." This caused the tour guide to gasp and cover her chest. Bella sighed again and said, "You can relax too. I've got higher standards."

"Oh, burn," Mike muttered behind his fist.

The tour guide huffed and said, "Well, I never—"

"That makes two of us, because I've never either." Bella smirked at the guide. "But I'll bet I do it before you do."

"Double burnbow, all the way!" Mike said, and then guffawed at his lousy humor. "But what does it mean?"

Jessica says, "It means no nookie for you either."

The tour guide pointed and shouted, "Out! This is a family establishment."

"Yet we can't discuss making babies," Ben said, and then smacked his lips. "So hypocritical."

Bella giggled as she and her friends began walking away from the tour group. "Okay, that was interesting."

"Thank you," Mike said, "I'll be here all wee...no, screw that, I'm outta here for good. Asta mine taco, baby."

"You're uncultured swine, Mike," Jessica complained with a fake tone of haughty dismay. "Why can't you just shut up and appreciate the ambience?"

"Oh, fine, let me soak up the culture. I'll practically be a culture dish." Mike turned to look at a painting and said, "Oh, this is nice. It's like...like Donkey Kong?"

Bella glanced at the picture and saw first the sets of brown diagonal girders that Mike must have been commenting on. Sandwiched between the girders were levels of black ants performing various human tasks. On one level, the ants waited for a sub, while on another, they worked to move leaves and twigs out of a drainage tunnel. On the next level, they wove a net, and on the final level was a little green lizard covered in fire ants.

Bella blinked, stepped back and really looked at the image again. She laughed with instant delight and said, "Mike, I love you."

"You do?"

"In a totally platonic way," Bella amended.

"Damn," Mike said.

Taking her dad's digital camera, Bella flicked the switch to put the camera in movie mode, and then she turned it on. Starting a recording, she made a slow pass of the painting as she said, "But if I ever straighten up and fly hetero, you'll get dibs on the first ride."

"Hmmm...unlikely, but still worthy of a whoooo!"

A security guard approached Bella and said, "Ma'am, we don't allow the use of cameras on the premises. If you want a copy of the image, you should go to the museum gift shop and request a print."

"A what?" Bella blinked. "Like a poster size, or maybe something bigger?"

"You can get it printed in any size you like, but you can't—"

"I understood you the first time." Bella put the camera away. "Which way is the gift store?"

"Just keep heading that way, ma'am"

Bella smiled gratefully, realizing that she had a way to get copies of all three images without resorting to thefts. "Thank you."

As she walked to the shop, she wondered if it had even once occurred to the thieves to buy a print for a few dollars instead of wasting thousands on a major assault operation. Then again, they probably got off on the power trip of taking the original in so bold a manner.

But it didn't matter what they did, because Bella had a way to assemble the map before the Triads. The only question left was, what would she do when she found the dragon? Would she be able to talk to it? Would it be big and fearsome, or small and lizard-like?

After she'd purchased the poster and they were leaving the shop, Mike asked, "So was that the reason we had to be cultured?"

"No, the reason you had to be cultured is because I wanted to hang out with my friends. But since the museum was such awful torture, I'll treat all of you to dinner at my place. Obviously, I'll be making..."

"Chinese?" Ben guessed.

"Oh, so close, but I'll make lasagna." Bella laughed at her friends' baffled expressions. "My mother was Italian."

"Was?" Mike cringed and shook his head. "No, forget I said that."

"It's okay." Bella smiled wider for Mike's sake. "She died six years ago."

Talking in a quiet voice, Ashley asked, "Was it something like cancer?"

Bella's smile fell. "No, she was murdered. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Totally understand," Jessica said. "My mother is a whiny hose monster, but I'd still miss her if she died."

Mike said, "Actually, I know how it feels, cause...my dad isn't my real dad. My real dad died when I was eight."

Bella took his hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry."

Mike waved his other hand. "Nah, like you said, it's okay now. My step-dad is great, so I only miss my dad when I'm thinking about something we did together. I got my sense of humor from him."

Bella snorted. "Now, Mike, it's not nice to blame the dead for your faults."

Chapter 21

Jacqueline came downstairs to check on Bella and see if she'd learned anything else on her trip to the museum. Only two seconds after she knocked, Bella opened the door and beamed a bright smile.

"Hey! You've got great timing." Bella leaned out to take Jacqueline's wrist and pull her inside. "Come in, and you can meet some of my friends from school."

In the living room was a group of teenagers sprawled out in a clear post-food glut.

Bella waved to one teen boy laying on the floor, though he sat up as she said, "This is Mike."

Mike had a short spike haircut that suited both his dirty blond hair and his boyish and square face. He wasn't quite handsome, but he made up for his plain looks with a great smile. He wore a baggy grey and white striped polo shirt and loose blue jeans with frayed heels from Mike's efforts to walk off the excess length.

Bella waved to the other boy as he sat up, a Chinese teen with long black bangs that almost covered his eyes. He wore a black concert shirt with a Guns N' Roses logo, dark blue jeans, and black hiking boots. "This is Ben, Ashley's boyfriend."

She waved to another Chinese girl flopped back on the couch. Unlike the boys, she didn't bother getting up. She was literally too stuffed to move.

Her long black hair splayed around her head like a messy dark halo, but when she raised her head, her shorter bangs flipped back down to cover part of her forehead. Her dark eyes gleamed with good humor, and her thick lips bowed in a friendly smile. She was dressed almost the same as Ben, but her concert shirt was a simple set of stripes, the logo for Black Flag without the band's name.

"And that's Ashley," Bella said. She faked a worried look, but ruined it by laughing. "Can you at least wave so we know you're okay?"

"Yo," Ashley said and flopped her hand in a weak wave. Even this tiny move set her off in a loud belch, and she covered her mouth and giggled embarrassed laughter. "Sorry!"

Jacqueline sniffed the air and said, "Mmmm, garlicky!"

Bella laughed and pointed to the other girl, who was sitting up slowly. She had hair as dark and long as Ashley, but her skin carried a copper tan that made her blue eyes seem unnaturally bright. Of all Bella's friends, she was the closest to Bella in terms of looks. She wore a denim skirt, denim sneakers and a white short sleeve top.

"And this is Jessica," Bella said.

Jacqueline asked, "Is she Mike's girlfriend?"

"He wishes," Jessica said.

"It's true," Mike said, and then shrugged. "But then I'm a desperate and lonely man."

Bella laughed and waved at him. "And one day you'll meet the perfect woman for you. Anyway, guys, this is my girlfriend, Jacqueline."

"Whoa!" Mike's head bobbed back and forth before he snorted. "I'll bet your dad doesn't know this."

Jacqueline said, "Hell, it's news to me." She looked at Bella with a smirk. "I kiss you once and that seals the deal?"

"Yep, and now I own you," Bella said, grinning wide. "Same goes for Edwina. She's mine too."

Jacqueline sighed. "Bella—"

"And I want to get in a three way cuddle session tonight, just as soon as I get rid of my over-stuffed friends." She tugged Jacqueline down and whispered, "I know how to assemble the map."

Jacqueline straightened up, her eyes wide with excitement. The little stinker really had the answer already. Brat or not, she had brains to back up some of her attitude.

Jacqueline realized her expression might look strange to Bella's friends, and she said, "Kinky, but I'll try anything once."

"That's the spirit!" Bella said. "Now you run along and get Edwina warmed up for me."

"Um..yeah." Jacqueline backed up and went to the door. "I'll jump right on that." She waved to Bella's friends. "Nice to meet you."

She went to the stairwell, but hung out there for some time. She hadn't been to see Edwina since the disaster drinking game fiasco a week ago, and she still didn't know what to say. "Sorry I got your hopes up" didn't cover how guilty she felt.

Edwina deserved an apology, and Jacqueline's honor demanded that she give one. But her honor was feeling just as cowardly as she did, so it was all for procrastinating a little longer too.

But at last she went up the stairs and knocked on Edwina's door. No answer.

Jacqueline blew out a long breath and thought, *Dodged that bullet.*

She wouldn't be able to dodge it forever, but with Bella and the paintings providing a distraction, maybe she could just skip saying anything for a week...or three.

Chapter 22

Edwina looked up the stairs at the approach of what sounded like a herd of elephants, but which turned out to be a pack of human teenagers. Bella was at the back of the pack, but as soon as she saw Edwina, she raced around her friends.

"Edwina!" Bella stopped in front of Edwina, examined her eyes and then stepped closer for a hug. "I was worried that you wouldn't get to meet my friends."

The friends in question gawked at Edwina's unearthly beauty, both boys having dirty thoughts about her and sporting half chubs that they leaned over to attempt concealing.

Bella introduced each of her friends, and then said, "Guys, this is Edwina."

"Your other girlfriend," Mike said.

Edwina smiled at Bella. "What have you been saying about us now?"

"Nothing bad. In fact, I barely said anything at all about you, only that you're my girlfriend, and that we've kissed."

Mike said, "You did hint at the museum about still being a virgin, so from that we can infer that Edwina is a proper lady."

"Indeed she is, and very old-fashioned," Bella said. She smiled at Edwina and winked. "As soon as I get these guys escorted to the bus stop, I'll come back up to your place. Jacqueline is supposed to come over too."

"Oh." Edwina pouted, and then tried to cover it with a poorly strained smile. "Okay, see you then."

"Did something—?" Bella shook her head. "Never mind, I'll ask when I get back."

Edwina nodded and continued up the stairs.

Two flights down, Mike spoke under his breath, unaware of Edwina's sharpened senses. "Both of your girlfriends are smokin', but damn, that's a big dog. What does she feed it?"

"Whoever he wants," Bella quipped.

Edwina smiled briefly. Bella had introduced Jacqueline as a girlfriend too. So perhaps it was a playful title. Or perhaps it was a way to let Mike down as gently as possible. This was Mike's theory, mainly because he couldn't believe that Bella was so lucky to have two hot girlfriends.

Just before he drifted out of range, Mike thought, *Damn, I wish I was a lesbian. But I'll bet they don't go for the dick.*

Edwina sighed and muttered, "No, they really don't like the dick."

She climbed the last few steps to her floor and glanced down at her crotch. Then she drawled, "I wish I could quit you."

Her penis did not have an adequate defense for existing, and so chose to remain quiet.

Edwina went to Jacqueline's door and knocked lightly, almost hoping that she wasn't home. But she was, and she opened the door wearing a guilty frown.

Edwina had to look away, but not to hide the hurt in her eyes. If she looked at Jacqueline too long, the temptation to move closer would be too great. Every day for the last week, she had found herself distracted by thoughts of her neighbor's hands and mouth roaming over her body. At work, her coworkers were asking if she was okay because she kept panting for no apparent reason.

Jacqueline said, "Um, Bella is supposed to be—"

"Yeah, I met her in the stairwell." Edwina looked into Jacqueline's eyes and panted in and out once. She dropped her head and thought, *Stop it. She made a mistake. Don't make it worse with another mistake.*

Swallowing, she said, "Anyway, I want to apologize about last week."

Jacqueline groaned. "Oh, hell. Edwina, don't you dare apologize to me. It was my fault, and I should have kept my hands to myself."

But you don't have to, Edwina thought, but she couldn't say it out loud. She wanted so badly for Jacqueline to take her to the couch and...and do something. She had no idea what to do. Sex between straight people was so simple that everyone was able to do it without a tutorial. But Edwina was a sexual paradox, a lesbian woman with a penis. Straight people were likely to think *And, how does that work?*

Which was a great question, in Edwina's opinion. She just hadn't found a lesbian willing to help her sort out the answer. Not that she'd been looking too hard. Aside from Bella, Jacqueline was the only other lesbian she hung out with. She just felt weird hanging out with women who most likely wouldn't have anything to do with her if they got their hand down her pants.

Jacqueline pulled her from her thoughts when she said, "While we're waiting for Bella, I have a bottle of seal pup."

Edwina's eyes shot wide open with disbelief. "You're kidding."

"No, baby seal blood is never good material for a joke." Jacqueline grinned at Edwina's groan. "Oh, you know you love it."

Edwina came inside, and when she turned around, she was overcome with stupidity. She stepped into Jacqueline and fit her cold body against her superhumanly hot neighbor.

She looked up, expecting Jacqueline to object. So she was pleasantly surprised when Jacqueline kissed her hard. Jacqueline turned her against the door, crushing her weight against Edwina in a smothering embrace. Jacqueline's mouth wandered to Edwina's throat, and her voice rumbled in a low growl. She ground her pelvis into Edwina's, causing the vampire to moan, "Yeah."

Then Edwina started panting, and Jacqueline knew she was pressing her luck. Still she bowed her head to suckle the side of Edwina's neck. She scraped her teeth over the cold white skin, knowing that it would make Edwina buck against her even harder.

Fang made a pleased groan, clearly enjoying the show. Jacqueline then started to purr when a devious idea popped into her head. In the bottom drawer of her

bedroom dresser, she had a strap-on dildo that hadn't been used with any human partners. It was smaller than the others, and probably just the right size for taking Edwina's virginity.

Edwina read her thoughts and wondered if she had any objections to Jacqueline's plan. She didn't, and she hoped Jacqueline could work up the nerve to go through with inviting her to bed.

Then Bella knocked on the door, and Jacqueline grimaced. "Shit. I knew I was forgetting something."

They both moved away from the door, and Jacqueline waved Bella inside. "So, you have news?"

"News can wait." Bella shut the door and pouted at Jacqueline. "I noticed earlier that you weren't happy about the idea of seeing Edwina, and then she reacted the same way." She looked at Edwina and frowned. "And now you're panting." She looked at Jacqueline. "Did something happen between the two of you?"

"Yeah, something happened. An aborted attempt at drunken sex," Jacqueline said.

"Oh!" Bella blew out a long breath. "Oh, good. I thought you'd had a fight or something bad."

Jacqueline smirked and asked, "You wouldn't mind if we were fooling around?"

"Of course not," Bella said. "I'd be happy for you and Edwina. Why should I be jealous when I want both of you as my girlfriends?"

Jacqueline laughed quietly. "It's very generous of you to be willing to share."

"Nah, you were in Edwina's heart first." Bella's gaze moved to Edwina, and she smiled wider. "I just hope there's also room in there for me too. Vampire hearts are supposed to be pretty tiny."

Edwina laughed and shrugged. "We don't use them, so they shrivel up. But they are kind of stretchy, so maybe I can squeeze you in."

"I think I could make room for both of you," Jacqueline agreed.

"Great," Bella rubbed her hands together. "So, it turns out, the Triad are idiots, and they could have just bought poster prints of the paintings. Today, I found the third painting, and I got the print. Tomorrow I'll go to the other museum gift shops and pick up prints."

"But how is the map assembled?" Edwina asked.

"That's a bit complex, and I'll need some paper to explain."

"I've got a notebook," Jacqueline said. She went to a bookshelf across the room and took out a spiral bound notebook. Flipping to the blank pages, she asked, "You need three sheets, right?"

"Yep," Bella said.

Jacqueline tore out the pages, and Bella took the two to the counter. "Right, on both of the side profile paintings, there are subway lines, but if you look at the ant image, you see how there's one half with the subway train head on, and the other side is the terminal shown from the side. That's because you have to fold the third image and apply it to second like this."

She folded one paper horizontally and fit the bottom corner of both page. Then she set both over the third sheet and said, "The same subway line is on the top-down map, so it's pretty easy to sort out that the second image is the y coordinate, and the third painting with the ants is x."

Edwina patted her hands in a light spattering of golf claps. "Bravo, Bella!" Her smile faded, and she added, "But now that we know how to find the dragon, what are we supposed to do with it?"

"Um..." Bella looked up in thought. "Okay, here's what I'm thinking. If the Triads get the dragon, all kinds of bad stuff will happen. That's pretty much a given."

"Granted," Edwina said.

"But I don't know what kind of dragon to expect. Okay, it's probably a Chinese dragon, but it could be good or evil. If it's evil, I think our plan may be 'die in a fire.'"

Edwina nodded. "Yes, that sounds close to my thoughts."

"But...but, it could be a good dragon, in which case we might convince it to move somewhere else and keep the Triads from finding it."

Jacqueline said, "Bella, I'm all for going dragon hunting with you, but we're racing the Triads, and we don't even know if this dragon is a real dragon or just some super valuable statue."

"Oh, good point. It could just be a dragon from one of the shrines. They were thought to be lucky, and whoever was in possession of a shrine statue was believed to possess the power of the dragon too."

"And it could be a dragon that likes extra crispy barbecue," Jacqueline said. "Which is why we should go in armed."

Bella's eyes got huge as she gasped in excitement. "Really?"

Jacqueline stared at Bella for a moment. "That wasn't supposed to be a good thing."

Edwina laughed and stepped over to Jacqueline to pat her shoulder. "If it's any comfort, I'm hoping for a friendly dragon."

Chapter 23

Bella skipped school and went to the museums to pick up poster prints of the two stolen paintings. While waiting for the poster print to be delivered from the stock room in the gift shop of the third museum, she also read a book on one of the art pieces. It listed the school the artist had graduated from, and this information inspired her to check a hunch. With the poster secured, she went to the public library to sneak onto one of the computers.

Her hunch was quickly confirmed, and she returned to the apartment to get the first poster print. She left and climbed the stairs to Jacqueline's apartment. Edwina would still be at work, but this news was too big not to share with someone right away.

Jacqueline opened the door rubbing her eye. "This better be good."

"Prepare to be wowed," Bella said, walking inside. She rested the poster tubes on the counter and then turned around to face Jacqueline. "All right, obviously if these three images line to form a map, it means the artists must have all collaborated together, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"They did, and all three came from the same art studio in China. And these guys aren't famous either. This artwork is only twenty years old, so this dragon isn't something planted long, long ago. This was a recent move. That doesn't strike me as being possible if they were moving Godzilla."

"But he's a mutated Gila monster, so he's not really a dragon."

"I did not know that." Bella rolled her eyes. "Anyway, my point is, this dragon is probably small, maybe even portable in some way. Also, I think the only reason we should take weapons is if we're worried about the Triads showing up."

"All right, we have a small dragon, or potentially a shrine dragon, and it was hidden here in the Bronx. The clues to how to find it are all in nearby art museums."

Why?"

"Because the puzzle could only be assembled by someone who knew to look for the system. And the thing is, I looked up the artists, and two have disappeared under mysterious circumstances over the last three years. The third artist went into hiding, and no one knows where he ended up."

"So the bad guys may, or may not have the knowledge of how to construct the map once they get the third piece."

"Yes, but I know for sure that we can assemble it and find the dragon before they complete the map. If we move the dragon, they'll just find an empty chamber and assume the whole thing was a hoax."

"You make it sound so easy."

"That's because it is." Bella's stomach growled, and she patted it. "Easy. We can worry about lunch soon."

"Do you want to go out to eat?" Jacqueline smiled wide. "I know a great place not far from here, they have fantastic pizza and buffalo wings."

Bella's mouth watered. "Ooh, you had me at pizza."

Jacqueline got her keys and her wallet, and they left the building and walked almost nine blocks. Even in the full strength of the early afternoon sunlight, the street seemed dim because of the smog. It was so dim that Bella didn't need her sunglasses, and she hung them from the collar of her T-shirt.

The pizza parlor, Luigi's, was dark but crowded. They found a table in the middle of the main room. Bella sat with her back to the kitchen, but she noticed Jacqueline grinning and waving a gesture for someone to come to the table, and she turned around.

She saw Edwina working behind the counter, and her mouth fell open. "No way."

"Humbling, isn't it?" Jacqueline chuckled. "She ought to be a super model, but her people have rules about living too exposed. So she's stuck working a regular job just like all the human schmucks."

Edwina finally came to the table, and she took a pad out of her apron. "What can I get you?"

"Bella can order," Jacqueline said, and then grinned. "I'm just here to admire the view."

Edwina smiled, clearly pleased by the compliment.

Bella noted this and decided to chime in with, "I may need a moment to admire the view before I can order."

"Oh, stop it, both of you. I'm on the clock."

"Right, so no fanny smacking," Jacqueline said.

Bella giggled and then said, "I don't need the menu. We'll take a large double pepperoni and black olive on a thin crust. I'll have a Coke."

"And I'll have a beer," Jacqueline said. She smiled at Bella. "Good call on the pizza too."

"Thank you." Bella turned her attention back to Edwina. "By the way, we have the map now."

"Ix-nay on the ap-may," Jacqueline said. "We can worry about that stuff after Edwina finishes her shift. Maybe if we're lucky, we can talk Edwina up on the roof before sunset."

Edwina's gaze shifted from Jacqueline to Bella and back again. "Oh, I don't know. It's just so...embarrassing."

Jacqueline waved a dismissive hand. "You know she'll love it."

"What are you talking about?" Bella asked.

Jacqueline winked at her. "Wait until we get to the roof, then you'll see."

Bella nodded, not sure what Jacqueline was talking about. But if it involved Edwina, it was bound to be interesting.

Chapter 24

Edwina opened the roof access door, and at the far end of the roof, Bella and Jacqueline both sat on lawn chairs. Bella stood up when she saw Edwina, and she started to cross the roof. Then Edwina stepped out of the doorway and under the full light of the sun, and Bella froze mid-step.

On the roof, fully sixteen stories high, the smog thinned out and allowed the full light of the sun to hit the vampire. But instead of smoking or bursting into flames, she sparkled.

"Whoa," Bella said.

Jacqueline waved to Edwina. "Come on and hang out with us."

Edwina shook her head, and then gestured at the other buildings. "I can't. Someone might see me."

She started to back up for the safety of the shadows, but Bella rushed forward to take her hand. "Wait. Just...stay with us a minute?"

Edwina felt terribly conflicted, and her gaze again swept over the other buildings. She felt certain someone would be staring back. Every window was empty, and yet she felt as if the windows were themselves unblinking, staring eyes. She felt the buildings stare her down, almost heard them say, *Go back where you belong, vermin.*

She tried to pull her hand away, and Bella held on, taking a step back.

"Bella," Edwina said, but she couldn't think of how to explain how scared she was. "Please, if someone sees me, I'll be forced to move."

This worked, and Bella released her. Edwina backed up into the stairwell, and then pouted at Jacqueline. "Are you happy now?"

Jacqueline got up from her chair and cross the roof to stand beside Bella. "She'd have to be shown someday." Jacqueline draped her arm around Bella. "You think being a vampire is so cool, and that Edwina's got some great life just because she gets to live forever. But the truth is, she's got a sucky job, and she lives in constant fear of exposure."

Edwina's pout grew deeper. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because she wants to be you, Sparkles. She's a dumb, mixed up kid who sees the glamour and the glitter, but not the harsh reality that you live with. I'm doing it because it's my job to protect her from you, even if you are my best friend." Jacqueline looked at Bella. "There's something else you should know. If you somehow talk Edwina into biting you and changing you, our truce is off."

"What?" Bella asked, almost shrieking.

Edwina groaned, "Jacqueline."

"I didn't make the rules, but it is my job to enforce them. Edwina's never been a problem for me, and I...I've come to care for her deeply. But if you push her to change you, I have to evict her. I'm sorry."

Jacqueline dropped her arm and then stepped around Edwina to go downstairs. Edwina watched the shapeshifter's retreating back, her chest aching with anger and guilt. After all, everything Jacqueline said was true. Her life was wretched. It wasn't all sexy and glamorous like the Hollywood vampires made the lifestyle seem.

"Bitch," Bella muttered.

Edwina nodded. "She is, but she's also right. I want to be mad at her, but she's only doing what I asked her to."

"You told her to break us up?"

"There's nothing to break, Bella. We've kissed a few times, but that's it."

"So, you don't feel anything for me?"

Edwina closed her eyes unable to bear the pain of watching Bella's wounded pout. "Of course I do. If I didn't, I'd have eaten you already and been done with you."

Bella drew in a shaking breath. "Edwina, I—"

Edwina shouted, "Why can't you just go away and stop torturing me?"

She stepped to the side, and Bella dashed down the steps, sobbing hysterically. Edwina wanted to go after her. What she'd done had been terrible. Monstrous, even.

Instead, she turned her head and slipped her hand outside. She turned it over, watching the light scatter over her skin as if she had flecks of silver and gold embedded in every pore.

Edwina thought, *I am a monster, and I'm not fit to be with someone as good as her.*

Chapter 25

Jacqueline locked her door and turned to stare at Edwina's door. Edwina had quit work, and only went out to hunt very late at night to avoid running into Jacqueline or Bella. Jacqueline had no idea where she was hunting or who, and she hated having to do her job to ask.

She went to the door and knocked. "Edwina?"

"Go away."

Jacqueline pouted, her chest aching at the sound of Edwina's thin and miserable voice. She knocked again. "Edwina, please. This isn't healthy. You can't just give up on life."

"Why not? All I had was a sucky job and this stupid apartment."

Jacqueline sighed. "Okay, I handled things badly. I'm sorry."

Nothing.

"Edwina?" Jacqueline knocked again. "Come on. Please, open the door."

Fang whimpered at the door, but Edwina was silent.

Jacqueline gave up, walking to the stairwell and down two flights of stairs. She hesitated there, and then decided to go back up to check on the other casualty of her big mouth.

When she knocked on the door, it opened. But it was John who answered, and the moment he saw Jacqueline, he scowled. "What do you want?"

"I...wanted to check on Bella."

John folded his arms. "She's at school, in theory."

"In theory?" Jacqueline asked.

"She's been skipping school. The cops found her in the park again. She won't talk to anybody, so they had to search her bag for her ID."

Jacqueline sighed. "Damn. Listen, when she gets home, can you—?"

John slammed the door in her face. Jacqueline clenched her fists, but she bled her temper quickly with the thought, *This is my fault.*

It wasn't entirely her fault, of course. Bella had some of the blame to bear, as did Edwina. But it was Jacqueline forcing them to stay apart. They were miserable, and knowing that her friends were suffering, Jacqueline was too.

But what other option was there? If Bella got too close to Edwina, she would either end up dead or a vampire, and Jacqueline knew Edwina well enough to know that both outcomes would upset her. Unlike many other vampires, she had no desire to sire another. Even her goody two-shoes adoptive father had no problems making more vampires, and he'd been training them to feed on a mixed diet of animals and human criminals.

Thinking of Carlisle reminded her; she had his cell phone number "for emergencies." This was not exactly a dire case of life or death, but Jacqueline figured that Carlisle could pull Edwina out of her funk, even if no one else could.

She went back to her apartment and into her kitchen, digging through her junk drawer for a few minutes before she found Carlisle's card.

She dialed the number and waited through three rings before the line clicked. "This is Dr. Sullen."

"Um..Carlisle, it's Jacqueline."

"Oh no," Carlisle said, sounding ill. "Is Edwina—?"

"She's not dead," Jacqueline said.

Carlisle blew out a long breath. "Okay." He heaved a short laugh. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry for calling, but I could really use your help. I've screwed up big time, and now Edwina...I think she's trying to waste herself to death."

There was a slight delay before Carlisle said, "I have to finish a set of vaccinations, but as soon as I can, I'll bring the family for a visit."

"I'm sorry, Carlisle."

"Don't be. I gave you my number for important—"

"No, that's not why I'm apologizing. This depression Edwina's in is my fault." Jacqueline told Carlisle about Bella. She explained how both women were so taken with each other, and she described how they'd stopped functioning after being separated.

Carlisle listened without interruption, and when Jacqueline finished, he made a thoughtful hum. "Well, I'm sorry, Jacqueline, but I don't see how I can help. I can stop by with the wife and kids for a visit, but that doesn't address the problem."

"There must be something you can do," Jacqueline said.

"No, I'm afraid not. Try to appreciate what she's feeling. If you had to stay away from someone you loved, even for a good reason, wouldn't it tear you up?"

Jacqueline bowed her head. She knew exactly what that felt like, and it was tearing her apart not being able to see Bella or Edwina.

Her voice low and jagged, she said, "Yeah, I guess it would."

"I'm willing to come by, of course. I haven't seen Edwina in ages. But I don't want to get your hopes up."

"Sure, I understand. Thanks."

"See you tonight," Carlisle said, and then hung up.

Jacqueline hung up, and then picked up the phone again to call her tribal elders and let them know there would be extra vampires in the building for the night. The rules had to be obeyed, after all.

But she got halfway through dialing before she hung up. *Screw the rules*, she thought. *What's the worst that could happen?*

Chapter 26

Bella walked home with Mike and Jessica, though they walked ahead of her, talking to each other rather than try to pry words out of her. Bella didn't want to feel so depressed, had grown tired of the oppressive weight of her emotions.

She had already come to realize that some of her depression wasn't even over Edwina, but over her own mortality. For a brief time, she had caught a glimpse of a life without the boundaries of time, a life lived without aging or decay. She could almost see herself as Edwina's eternal partner, until Jacqueline decided to "be helpful."

Still a block from Bella's building, Mike stopped mid-sentence and said, "Whoa."

A second later, Jessica said, "Oh, wow."

Bella looked up, and standing on the front steps was a vampire. Bella didn't recognize her, but she could understand why Mike and Jessica had both reacted to her. She was gorgeous, yes, but she was also dressed quite strange, with a pair of old style breeches and riding boots, a high-waist grey jacket, and a white blouse with a high frock collar. Her dark coppery auburn hair was cut short, and the locks gathered in chaotic waves that somehow still appeared as a neat hairstyle.

She wore sunglasses, but as Bella and her friends drew closer, she slipped the down to reveal bright amber eyes. She'd fed recently.

The vampire smiled as she descended the steps. "You must be Bella," she said, stepping between Mike and Jessica to take Bella's hand. "I can see why my sister is so enchanted by you."

Bella saw that this vampire wasn't so tall, and she only had two inches over Bella. The vampire's other hand came up to caress Bella's cheek, and Bella leaned her head, suddenly eager for contact with her cold hand because it reminded her of Edwina.

The spell was broken when Mike commented, "Yeah, nothing creepy about this scene."

The vampire blinked, then stepped back and laughed. "I guess a handshake might have been a better greeting." Her smile warmed as she said, "I'm Alice, Edwina's crazy big sister."

"Crazy?" Mike asked. "Like chop up teens crazy?"

"Not recently," Alice said, laughing when he grew pale. "Sorry, that was a joke."

Mike blew out a long breath. "Okay."

"I'm just eccentric, which is what you call crazy people with money."

Bella frowned at this. "Wait, you aren't all flat broke like Edwina?"

"Of course not." Alice sighed, but her smile remained. "My sister feels guilty using the family funds, so she insists that she can earn her own way without us."

Mike waved to get Bella's attention. "Uh, we're gonna take off, unless you needed our protection."

Bella smiled at that, at the idea of Mike trying to be protective. "I'm okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Uh, tomorrow is Saturday." Mike smirked, though there was some genuine irritation in his expression. "We can't wait for you to come back from whatever trip your brain went on."

Bella didn't know what to say to that, but fortunately, Jessica rescued her by slapping his arm. "Don't be a jerk," she scolded him, and then smiled weakly at Bella. "See you Monday?"

"Sure, Monday, then." Bella watched them walk away before returning her attention to Alice. "Are you here to visit Edwina?"

"We are, yes, but I'm also here to visit with you." Alice beamed a secret smile. "I couldn't say so in front of your friends, but I've had visions about you. That's how I knew you right away."

"You see visions?" Bella asked, and then felt stupid for it.

"Yes, it's my one special trick. We all get one. Like Edwina's is telepathy and Jasper's is cunnilingus."

"Oh my," Bella said.

"I know! Hit the jackpot with that one, I did." Alice tittered wicked laughter. "But I kid. Jasper has some kind of pheromone release that makes people calm down."

"That doesn't seem very useful."

"It's helped us more times than you might think. We might have had our homes burned to the ground a dozen times over from frightened locals, except he went out to speak to them and send them away."

Alice took Bella's arm and started to guide her up the steps. "Why don't you come up with me? I'm sure the others will want to meet you."

Bella held fast on the first step. "Oh, I don't—I mean I can't."

"Oh, don't worry about Jacqueline. She called us here."

"Then, you know about the terms of the truce?"

"I do, and I know how you will get around them."

"I...I will?"

"Mmm-hmm." Alice tapped the side of her head. "I told you, I've seen visions of you. But in all my visions, you're a vampire." She reached out with one finger to push Bella's chin up and close her mouth. "The rules of the truce say that Edwina can't bite you—"

"But you could!" Bella said, suddenly feeling more excited than she had in weeks. She was so excited that she leapt at Alice, who laughed as she returned Bella's enthusiastic hug.

"Oooh, good thing I don't need lungs," Alice joked, and then laughed when Bella back up fast.

"I'm so—"

"No need to apologize," Alice said, reaching out to pat Bella's cheek. "To you, we're just strangers, and that was awkward. But I've known you a while, almost five years now."

"Really? You've had visions of me for that long?"

"Yep."
"But you didn't tell Edwina?"
"And spoil the surprise?" Alice laughed and then shook her head. "That would be like telling what will happen when you meet the dragon."
"The dragon!" Bella smacked her forehead. "I'd forgotten all about it."
"Worry about it later." Alice again took Bella's arm to guide her. "For now, you've got a family reunion to attend."

Chapter 27

Carlisle was the first vampire Bella noticed in the living room. Part of it was his light blond hair, which made his pale skin even more apparent. He turned away from his scratching offer of affection to Fang, but his fingers kept moving until he saw Bella.

He rose then, and he was just as tall as Jacqueline. Alice was at least closer to Bella's size, but Carlisle Sullen was a tower of a man. If he scowled, he would have made for a very imposing figure.

But his amber eyes shone with a keen intellect, and with instant fascination when he saw Bella.

He was dressed in a suit, and Bella thought instantly of a doctor. His jacket was closely tailored to his athletic frame, and his slacks were so neat that the creases were straight from his hips to his ankles.

He came to Bella and offered his hands. He took Bella's hand in both of his and his smile warmed. "Bella, so good to meet you. I'm Carlisle, Edwina's father. Edwina is—"

But Edwina's arrival interrupted him. She was laughing at someone, looking over her shoulder. Then she looked around and saw Bella standing between Alice and Carlisle, and she pouted. Her gaze moved to the other vampires in the room, and then she looked at the vampire behind her as he entered the room and shut the door.

Like Carlisle, he had blond hair. But his was a messy haystack compared to Carlisle's neatly parted hair. He wore a brown suit, an older style that must have come from a secondhand shop. On someone older, it would have looked dumb. But he somehow managed to pulled off the look and make it stylish.

Carlisle pointed to the new arrival and said, "Bella, this is Edwina's brother, Jasper." He gestured to the other male in the room, a stocky looking teen with short brown hair and a charming roguish smile. He wore jeans and a skin tight grey shirt to show off his bulky chest.

"And this handsome devil is Emmet," Carlisle said. "You've already met Alice, so that leaves the two lovely ladies in the kitchen."

Bella turned around, noticing them for the first time. The older of the two women came forward to take Bella's hand in hers, but the younger vampire fixed Bella with a petulant scowl.

The older woman wore an elegant one-piece dress in a navy blue color. Her dark hair was almost the same shade of auburn as Alice, and Bella could see them passing easily as a mother and daughter.

The scowling vampire was a blonde, and she looked like she could be a daughter to Carlisle and a sister to Jasper. She wore a bold red dress that made her look stunning, and if she weren't scowling, Bella would have found her attractive. She looked as much a teen as Emmet did, and Bella had to remind herself that the "girl" was over two hundred, being sired before Edwina.

Seemingly ignoring her sulking, Carlisle said, "This is Esme, my wife, and the young lady is Rosalie."

Bella pouted at her and asked, "Have I done something to offend you?"

"Not yet," Rosalie said.

"What do you—?" Edwina started to ask. She stopped and looked at Carlisle. "What's going on?"

There was a soft on the door, and then Jacqueline opened it, looking around. "Okay, everyone is here."

Edwina scowled. "Jacqueline, why did you call my family?"

"She got desperate," Carlisle answered for her, his voice full of sympathy. "Please, don't be mad at her. She wanted to cheer you up."

"But I have to ask for permission for you to be here," Edwina said.

"I'm granting the visit, obviously," Jacqueline said. She still stood in the open doorway, as if she expected to leave soon.

Carlisle waved for her to come in. "Please, come in, and let's all try not to crowd the door."

Edwina looked at Bella, "But why is she here?"

"My fault," Alice said, raising her hand. "But don't worry, everything is going exactly according to plan."

"What plan?" Edwina asked.

"The big plan. Fate. Destiny." Alice leaned head over and smiled impishly. "You should check in more often, Edwina. I could have told you long ago that Bella was your soul mate."

Edwina shook her head. "No, that can't be right. My soul is damned and hers is safe."

Bella made a face at that. "What are you talking about? I don't believe in souls."

"No?" Carlisle made a small laugh. "You know vampires are real, and that werewolves are too. But the idea that you have a soul somehow stretches your disbelief to the breaking point?"

"But I don't believe in were..." Bella looked at Jacqueline and blurted, "Oh shit."

"Thanks, Carlisle," Jacqueline said.

Carlisle winced. "I'm sorry."

Recovering from shock, Bella said, "Well...but then, you don't have any proof of an afterlife any more than you could point to the location of the soul."

"No, but some things simply must be taken on faith." Carlisle took Bella's arm and moved her to stand beside Edwina. "For instance, Edwina will swear up and down that you will never be a vampire, and that may upset you. But you must have faith that one day, you will become a vampire."

"No," Edwina said.

Alice spoke up then, touching her sister's arm. "Um, you're misinformed. My visions are pretty clear on this one. Oh, and in advance, I'm really sorry. But the upside is, you won't break the truce." Alice made a face and shrugged. "You'll be moving either way, but you'll leave on great terms with the cats."

"Oh...well, that's just ducky," Edwina said.

"Who's ready for a drink?" Esme asked. "I was just about to take the chill off a nice bottle of moose blood." She paused to smile at Bella. "And we brought a bottle of root beer for you."

Laughing, Emmet said, "I could use a double. Bells, don't take this the wrong way, but you smell way too tasty."

"Um," Bella said, and then grimaced. "Is it okay if I'm creeped out by that?"

"Go, ahead," Edwina said. "It's a natural reaction to being called food."

"Calm down, dear," Esme said. She kept talking as she returned to the kitchen to warm of the bottle of blood under the tap. "You know very well that none of us would eat Bella. We've all sworn to uphold the code by eating only criminals and lower animals."

"Do all vampires follow the code?" Bella asked, following Esme.

"No, many will eat whoever they please," Esme said. "But they still have to obey one simple rule. They cannot expose us to the humans without forfeiting their life. Even the smallest risk of exposure is taken seriously, and the ruling class sends out assassins to deal with anyone who crosses the line."

"How do you mean?"

"It's not enough to stay hidden, you see. There cannot even be a hint that we exist. So we're not allowed to drain bodies completely, or to bite our victims. Of course we can ignore the rules when feeding from animals, because no one examines bite marks on a dead animal as closely as they do on a dead human."

"I guess that makes sense. So, this ruling class of vampires are really powerful?"

"Yes, they're the oldest and most powerful among us, and they recruit the most powerful vampires and train them to be superior fighters."

Bella swallowed audibly. "They sound scary."

"First smart thing she's said," Rosalie commented.

"Oh, you ignore Rosalie," Esme said, and then patted Bella's hand. "She just being her usual bitchy self."

"Mother!" Rosalie groaned.

Emmet snorted, and when she turned her scowl on him, he held up his hands. "Babe, I love you, but it's true. From the day you were made, you've been a grade-A cunt."

Rosalie narrowed her eyes at him, but he remained unflinching, still smiling with amusement. Rosalie stomped off to Edwina's bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Carlisle stared at the door for a moment, and then looked around at Esme. "Dear, I believe I'd like my drink spiked, please."

Chapter 28

Edwina looked around and noticed that Bella and Alice were gone. This troubled her, but she couldn't leave to check on them. She still had to clear up a few things with her father. "I can't allow you to turn Bella."

Carlisle smirked, but his eyes were full of irritation. "You know the rules, Edwina. If a human learns the truth about us, they must either be killed or converted."

"But maybe—"

"You know the Volturi do spot checks on you, don't you?"

"Wh-what?" Edwina sat up. "But I didn't sense them!"

"They can read you without being in your range. This vigilante lifestyle you have here in the Bronx has always worried them because you don't migrate like a proper vampire should. I've always convinced Aro that the cats would make sure you didn't expose yourself. But if he makes another spot check and sees you consorting with a human..." Carlisle paused, frowned, and then shook his head. "You risk so much more than Bella's life, Edwina. You could bring about your own death too."

"Maybe I deserve to die."

"For what? For being what you are?"

"I exposed myself to Bella. It's my fault that her life is in danger now."

"Nonsense," Carlisle said. "You rescued her from an awful fate at the hands of those two men. You know they didn't plan to let her live after they were done."

Edwina closed her eyes. "I know."

"So don't doom her to a different needless death at the hands of the Volturi."

"Carlisle I...I can't turn her."

"And you won't. Alice will." Edwina looked around, and he said, "No, not tonight. Alice already considers Bella a sister, and she was so pleased when she found out that she would be the one to sire Bella."

"You know when this will happen?"

"Not exactly, no. But I know that unless you do it yourself, it will be Alice to turn her."

"I can't. I...there's too much risk that I'd kill her." Edwina put her face in her hands. She should have been happy to know that Bella would become a vampire. She would be safer then, but then her soul would be damned too. Should she be killed after being turned...

But Carlisle was right, and by not changing her, Edwina was putting Bella in mortal peril. She was damned if she did, and damned if she didn't.

Esme sat down beside Edwina and lay an arm over her back. "Dear, why must you tear yourself up so much over this? Ask yourself these questions with yes or no, and don't over think things. Do you love Bella?"

"Yes."

"Do you want her to live?"

"Yes."

"Then you must turn her, or let Alice do it when the time comes," Esme said. "You know that if you interrupt the process once Alice begins, you'll kill Bella."

"I know," Edwina said.

"So what's the problem?"

"The problem is, she's good, Mother, truly good. I don't want to take that away from her."

"We can always take her somewhere and keep her in isolation," Emmet said, speaking up for the first time. "It's how we kept Rosalie clean, and she's as healthy as the rest of us despite never drinking any human blood." Emmet shrugged. "She would have to go away, though. No way could you keep a fledgling, Fang and yourself fed without raising suspicion."

Edwina gnawed at her lower lip, and then looked at Rosalie. "What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should just leave with us," Rosalie said. "If you came with us, and we told the Volturi you'd gone, they wouldn't scan you anymore. So they wouldn't know about Bella, and she could live a safe, normal life."

Jacqueline snorted, "Lady, you clearly don't know damn thing about Bella. Poor girl can't go a week without finding trouble. Maybe if Edwina leaves, Bella will be safe from vampires, but that still leaves her in mortal peril."

Jacqueline looked at Edwina. "I know what you're thinking, so let me ask you to think about what Bella will do if you leave. She'll crash, and you will too. You'll both be miserable for the rest of your lives, and for you that can be a very, very long life."

Jacqueline got up and crossed the room to kneel in front of Edwina. "Honey, I know you're a vampire, but at some point you gotta give up the Louis impersonation and work at being Lestat."

Edwina smiled faintly. "Ugh, I hate that bitch's books."

"Then you should stop acting like her whiny ass vamps," Jacqueline said. She took Edwina's hand. "I didn't fall in love with a meek little whiner, Edwina. I know the real you, and damn it, it's about time you start acting like you again."

Edwina's smile grew, and then she nodded. "All right, you're right. I'll stop moping. Are you happy now?"

"Not just yet." Jacqueline pointed toward the door. "You go up on the roof and tell Bella that she can stop moping too. If the two of you come back and you're still depressed, I'll kick both your asses until you're happy."

Edwina leaned over to hug Jacqueline. "Thanks, bitch."

Jacqueline chuckled. "Love you too, Sparkles." She leaned back and nodded toward the door. "Now go on. Your princess is waiting to be rescued from her tower of despair."

Edwina went upstairs and found the roof access door wide open. Through the open door, she heard Bella talking in a low and whimsical voice. "Then, maybe after I'm turned, we can move to Canada and get married."

"Um, Bella, you can't get married after becoming a vampire," Alice said in a gentle tone of voice. "You can't expose yourself to the humans."

"But Canadians aren't human," Bella said, making Alice laugh. "Obviously you don't watch South Park."

"I may have missed it," Alice said. She looked around at Edwina as she came out onto the roof, and she pivoted on the ledge of the roof to face Edwina. "Hallo, Sis. You look like you're in a better mood now."

"I am, thanks." Edwina smiled at Bella as she crossed the roof. "Are you already planning out our eternal life without me?"

"Just the first six months," Bella said, standing up and walking away from the ledge. She slipped her arms around Edwina's waist to hug her. "After that, we can sort out forever together."

Chapter 29

It was very late when the Sullen family finally rolled out to their hotel, leaving Jacqueline on the couch with Bella and Edwina. Bella was near the point of passing out between the two taller women. Her legs draped over Jacqueline's lap while she leaned back on Edwina's side. Edwina had an arm draped over Bella's chest and stomach, and both of them looked so content that Jacqueline didn't have the heart to break things up and send Bella downstairs.

But John solved the problem when he began knocking loudly on Jacqueline's door. Groaning as she got up, Jacqueline stepped around Fang and went to the door.

John spun around, scowling when he saw Jacqueline. "Bella didn't come home tonight."

"Nah, she's in here," Jacqueline said, waving John across the hallway. "You've got good timing. I was just about to suggest that she go home before she passes out."

Jacqueline was trying to give Bella enough time to sit up, but she hadn't moved an inch when John came in.

She looked up at her father and waved. "Hey." Then she held out her hand. "Help me up? I think my butt's grown roots."

John looked like he had a dirty comment come to mind, but he stepped around Fang to help Bella to her feet. He asked, "Did you have dinner?"

"Yep, we ordered a pizza," Bella said, and then yawned. "Edwina's family was here."

"Why?"

"To meet me," Bella said, and then smiled wider. "I guess now would be a good time to mention that Edwina and Jacqueline are my girlfriends."

"Oh really." John looked at Edwina. "And how old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-seven," Edwina said, then shot a dirty look at Bella when she snorted.

John ignored them both to glare at Jacqueline. Jacqueline was having none of it, and her eyes glimmered unnaturally, drying John's voice in his throat.

Bella noticed and squeezed his arm. "Dad, it's okay, really. Neither of them has done anything besides kiss me, and I started that, not them." Trying to calm him down, she added, "And I am seventeen now. It's okay for me to kiss at this age, right?"

John didn't smile back. He continued to stare at Jacqueline, recognizing her now as something more dangerous than a meddling neighbor. "Bella, I don't know if I like you hanging around either of these women. They're just...they're too old for you."

"No, dad, they're just right for me." Bella sighed. "I've never been sure how to explain this to you, but girls my own age don't really do much for me."

"Bella," John groaned.

Bella sighed. "I'm sorry. I wish there were an easier way to put this. I don't think the three of us will be hopping in bed anytime soon. These two might, but they've been moving together over the course of ten years. Ten years, Dad. So they won't be jumping me tomorrow. Next month isn't looking so good either."

John glanced around at Edwina. "Are you making her part of some devil worshipping coven?"

Edwina smiled. "No, there's no devil worship. I actually swing the other way."

"Ah," John said.

Edwina gestured to Jacqueline. "She's a filthy Pagan, though."

"Hey!" Jacqueline said, and then chuckled.

John smirked and said, "So am I. I'm not sure whether to be offended or amused."

"We'll sic our gods on her."

"My dog will protect me," Edwina quipped, and Fang made the appropriate whimper and covered his snout with his paw.

John put his arm around Bella to guide her to the door. She leaned on him, her head riding on his shoulder.

John paused at the door and said, "Good night."

Jacqueline closed the door, and then looked at Edwina. She was about to comment that she should go, but Edwina's smile stopped her. "What?"

Edwina shook her head, her smile growing ever so slightly. "Nothing."

Jacqueline laughed, moving to the couch. "That look isn't nothing."

Edwina shrugged, nibbling at her lower lip. "It's just...you know I don't sleep."

"Yeah?"

"So I don't have a bed here."

Jacqueline leaned over Edwina, bringing their faces closer together with hesitant slowness. "I gathered that."

"Well, if...if you wanted me to share your bed..." Edwina trailed off as their lips met.

Jacqueline kissed her deeply as she closed her arms around the thinner woman. Laying on the couch, she fit Edwina to her body, and then rolled over to cover her.

When she raised her head, she wasn't sure if she could keep going or not. Jacqueline saw sadness in Edwina's eyes.

But Edwina swallowed and said, "It's okay if you can't."

Jacqueline's heart felt like it snapped. Edwina was a beautiful woman who wanted someone to notice her and love her in spite of her flaws.

She rolled onto her side, and said, "I'm going to try something, all right?"

Edwina nodded, and Jacqueline laid her fingers on the zipper of Edwina's jeans. She patted around the area, feeling more baffled.

Giving up, she asked, "Um, where is it?"

Edwina made a weird huff that wasn't quite a laugh. "Between my legs, silly."

Jacqueline slid her finger down along the crotch seam, and then made a disbelieving laugh. "Goodness, that's tiny."

Edwina smiled, but her expression shifted, her lips parting in an uncertain pout as Jacqueline stroked her off through her clothing. She started to pant, and then she lay back her head and closed her eyes.

Jacqueline dipped her head to kiss Edwina's throat, her voice a husky whisper. "Does it feel good?"

"Uh-huh," Edwina moaned. She started to shift her hips, and then she reached out to touch Jacqueline, trying to return the pleasure that she was feeling. Yet her hands often froze as Jacqueline grew more confident.

When Jacqueline leaned down to nip her collarbone, Edwina shivered, and then whispered, "I want you inside me."

Jacqueline thought of her strap-on harness, and then she tried to conjure a fantasy of what the two of them would look like together. But her mind couldn't get Edwina out of her panties without going blank. She lost the whole fantasy and had to start over.

"Don't stop," Edwina whispered, her voice full of breathy urgency.

Jacqueline petted Edwina's tiny sex more firmly, and the vampire's hips bucked harder until her body drew taut. She couldn't quite reach a climax, and her voice rose with her erratic mewling.

Jacqueline bit her collarbone hard, and Edwina yelped, writhing and squirming in confused movement. Her body didn't seem sure if she needed to shift closer to Jacqueline or further away. Her voice shifted to a softer whine, but the sound was almost lost under the sound of Jacqueline's growl.

"Jacqueline..." Edwina drew in a shaking breath, and then gasped, "Oh, God." She rolled to fit her body against Jacqueline's, her legs drawing tighter together.

Edwina sobbed, and then started to shake. Her voice left her as gasps until Jacqueline withdrew her hand and pulled the shaking vampire into a tight embrace.

Just then, Jacqueline felt a terrible conflict. She wanted to take Edwina to bed that night, to feel her bare skin sliding under hers. But she couldn't, and knowing that the hang up lay with her made her angry at herself.

The words rose unbidden to her lips, "I want to fuck you."

"Yesss," Edwina hissed, writhing against Jacqueline to coax her.

Jacqueline shook her head. "I'm...I'm not ready yet, but..."

Edwina stilled, quelling a pout before she said, "It's okay."

Jacqueline clenched her jaw, shaking her head again. "No, it's not. It's not right that a pretty little thing like you is begging me to take you, and I do want you. I want you so bad I can...but I can't. It's...I'm supposed to be the one with a penis, not you."

For a moment, they stared at each other. Until just then, Jacqueline hadn't been able to pinpoint what was wrong in their relationship, but at last she'd stumbled onto the truth.

Edwina smiled, a patient, warm expression full of a sympathy that Jacqueline hadn't thought was possible. "I know."

Jacqueline had a thought that drained her temper and made her laugh. She didn't need to voice it before Edwina laughed too.

But Jacqueline still gave voice to the observation, "Holy shit, Sparkles. We'd be a straight couple if we both could just swap parts."

"Would you really be a man?" Edwina asked. It wasn't a mocking question, and her voice was full of sincere curiosity.

"I might like it." Jacqueline considered the idea more and shrugged. "I dunno, I kind of like my boobs, but a penis sure would come in handy right about now."

Edwina said, "I'd loan you mine..."

This caused them both to laugh until they were near tears.

When they calmed down, Jacqueline said, "Okay, I know you and the mutt don't really sleep, and I can't offer you sex tonight." This caused Fang to make an interested grunt. "And I'm never offering you sex, mutt."

Fang groaned, and then made what sounded like a disappointed sigh.

Snorting, Jacqueline continued, "But I could invite both of you over if you wanted to spend the afternoon in my bed."

Edwina nodded. "I'd like that."

"I won't be great company."

"Sure you will. I'll listen to your dreams. Who knows? Maybe inside your dreams we can figure out how to swap parts."

Taking Edwina's hand, Jacqueline started to sit up. "We can give it a try, at least."

Chapter 30

Bella giggled as soon as she saw Edwina's eyes gleaming. She shut the front door and took both of Edwina's hands. "Something happened."

Edwina looked down. "We didn't have sex."

"Aw," Bella moaned.

Edwina smiled coyly. "But she touched me."

"Get out!" Bella squealed jumping up and down, and then Edwina copied her. "Did she really?"

"She did, and oh my gawd, it felt soooo good!" Edwina stopped bouncing, but Bella could still feel her hands trembling with excitement. "I knew it was supposed to feel good, but I didn't realize it would be that good!"

"Wow," Bella said, and then laughed as she leaned forward to hug Edwina. "I'm so happy for you."

"And she took me to bed."

Bella gasped as she backed up. "Get out!"

"Both me and Fang, actually."

"Kinky."

Edwina laughed. "While she was dreaming, I closed my eyes and slipped inside her head. It...it's not really sleep, but it felt nice."

Bella pulled Edwina toward the couch. "Tell me all about it, but start with the touching part, and go slow."

Edwina laughed. "Perv."

"Okay, so I am, but I'm also taking notes to make sure I know what you like." Bella scooted close, at times rubbing Edwina's forearm in a rather excited way.

When she noticed Edwina panting, Bella giggled. "Oh my gosh, you're even turned on now."

"I know!" Edwina laughed. "It was so sexy, and then she bit me."

"Ow!"

"I know, but it was like...like it was just the right kind of pain to push me over the edge."

"Ooh, very kinky!" Bella giggled, and Edwina laughed with her. "I'll try nibbling on you, but maybe you should hold off on returning the favor."

Edwina laughed harder. "You think?" Then she gasped and added. "Oh, wait, I forgot about this morning!"

"What?" Bella bounced on the cushion. "Did she make you breakfast in bed? Cause for you, that's pretty easy."

"Shush, you," Edwina said, and then snorted. "Well, there *was* breakfast, but that came after, um...I'm not sure what to call it. When Jacqueline woke up, she kicked Fang out of bed. And then she rolled over on me."

"Ooh, this sounds fun."

"Keep in mind, Jacqueline was naked, and I only had on my panties. So she's rubbing her breasts over mine, and then she...she started pumping her hips."

"Oh, wow, so you were dry humping?"

"Um, I guess that's it, yes. Only this was really slow and *really* intense." Edwina shivered, and then let go of a huffing laugh. "I'm not sure I can describe how good it felt. I didn't think anything could feel nicer. But then Jacqueline thought, *I'm making love to her.*"

"Oh," Bella cooed, covering her mouth. "That is so sexy."

"I know, right?" Edwina made another short laugh.

Bella was surprised when a blood tear slipped from the corner of Edwina's eye. "Oh my gosh, don't cry!" She laughed and dug through her bag to find a packet of tissues.

While she searched, Edwina said, "I can't help it. I'm just so happy. I don't know if I deserve to be this happy."

"Oh, that's just crazy talk," Bella said. "Of course you deserve a chance to be happy. Everyone in life deserves that, even the evil bastards in the Triads." She dabbed a tissue at Edwina's cheek to mop up the tear trail without leaving a red streak. "But you really deserve this. You've only been waiting two lifetimes to find someone."

"Yeah, and then I find two someones in the same lifetime. Maybe I'm being greedy."

"How so?" Bella smirked. "I don't think I'm greedy for wanting both of you."

"Some people might say you are."

"Yeah, and those people are all uptight prudes who wouldn't know a good time if it bit them." Bella laughed. "I know you're a good time, so please don't bite me."

"Whatever," Edwina said.

Her smile softening, Bella cupped Edwina's cheeks with both hands and urged her to lean over for a kiss. She broke it and then laughed at a stray thought. "I always thought the older woman I fell in love with would seduce me, not the other way around."

Edwina's smile became apologetic. "Sorry, but I've been screwing up other people's expectations of me from the day I was born."

Bella laughed and said, "And I wouldn't love you any other way."

Jacqueline opened the door without knocking, and she smiled when she saw Bella. "I was just downstairs looking for you. But good, you're both here."

"Is this good news or bad news?" Bella asked.

"Date news," Jacqueline said, "My uncle runs a nightclub, nothing big or fancy. But tonight, he's hosting a rave. I asked him if I could invite company, and he said sure, it's an open club night. Everyone is welcome, even Edwina."

Jacqueline sat down, and then grinned at Edwina. "So, last night, I met your family, and tonight, you can meet mine. Of course, you've seen my family often, but tonight I actually get to show you both off."

Bella asked, "Do you think they'll be okay with this?" She looked back and forth as Edwina and Jacqueline both laughed. "What?"

"I think you'll find my family is quite tolerant of you and I, Bella. My uncle has two wives, and the younger of his wives has another husband. They all live in the same house."

"Oh," Bella nodded. "I guess we're almost par for the course?"

"No, we're not even on the golf course. We're somewhere over on the tennis courts. But my point is, no one will freak out over there being three of us. Where they might freak out is when I announce that you and Edwina are my partners. It's obviously quite taboo for me to be laying down with the enemy, so to speak, even if she has called for a truce. But if that isn't bad enough, they're going to figure out sooner or later about your plans to become a vampire, and I predict someone will try to talk you out of it. Possibly several someones."

"They can try. But if I've got a shot at forever with both of you, I'll take it."

"Even if it means breaking your old man's heart?"

"What?"

"Bella, when you turn, you'll have to leave suddenly, and you won't be able to come back here. You won't be able to see your father again, and he will have to think you're dead. Or, you could come back and risk getting him killed by the Volturi."

Bella had never considered this part of the deal, and she pouted once she did. She wanted to say it wasn't fair, but no deal was completely fair, not even immortality.

Now that she knew her time with her father was short, she also knew it was precious, and she would have to treat it accordingly.

“How about this?” Bella asked. “How about I leave him a letter explaining that I’m moving somewhere isolated. Then, he won’t ever see me again, but he can still take comfort in the fact that I’m alive...relatively speaking, I mean.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Okay, I could see that, and you’re right. It would make the separation easier on your dad.”

“I couldn’t just disappear on him, not after he lost my mom. He shouldn’t have to lose me too.”

Jacqueline sighed. “It’s a shame you want to be a vampire so badly. Edwina is right, and you’re far too good for them.”

“So after I’m turned, I’ll be the nicest, prettiest, most specialest vampire ever,” Bella said, pretending to ignore Edwina’s gagging.

Chapter 31

Even on the crowded dance floor, Edwina could still easily read Jacqueline’s mind, allowing her to stay in step with her partner as they danced. The tribe of cats were naturally graceful, but many of the normal humans hanging out at the club had frozen on the dance floor, forming a small ring of spectators around Edwina and Jacqueline.

Edwina was glad they’d already gotten the awkward announcement out of the way before the club opened to the public, but it turned out Jacqueline had worried over their reaction to Edwina for nothing. Grandma Fourpaws called for a round of moonshine to celebrate, and Billy, Jacqueline’s father, stunned everyone by offering Edwina a glass of himself to spike the moonshine with. He’d sliced himself with his own knife, and then bled into a very tall glass. With the moonshine added, it was a very, very potent drink, and Edwina was feeling pleasantly smashed.

Edwina spun in Jacqueline’s arms, fitting her ass to Jacqueline’s hips and moving in perfect time with her. To the humans, it looked as if their clothing had been glued together. They were even catching the admiring attention of some of Jacqueline’s graceful cousins, though the weres continued dancing even as they watched the mixed couple writhing in time to the fast techno beat.

The arrival of another vampire drew Edwina’s attention as quickly as it did Jacqueline’s. But then, most of the werecats casually glanced toward the dimly lit entrance. The fan spinning over the door pushed her scent through the room like an advance warning, which was precisely why the fan was there.

Jacqueline leaned her head in close to Edwina to speak. “She’s not one of the Sharks.”

“Not unless they recruited someone recently,” Edwina said, still smiling though she was tense and ready for trouble. She turned her head to follow the vampire’s path to the bar, and then relaxed when the new arrival ordered a dirty cop, the local name for pig blood and vodka.

When the bartender set down her drink, the vampire sipped from the straw, and then turned around to survey the dance floor.

Edwina looked away, feigning sudden interest with Jacqueline’s earlobe. “She’s just passing through, coming south from Canada.”

Bella parted the crowd, grinning wide as she tapped Jacqueline’s arm. “Excuse me, ma’am, but may I have the next dance with this gorgeous stranger?”

Edwina smiled, but more because Bella’s silly act would confuse the vampire, who didn’t have the gift of telepathy.

Jacqueline laughed and said, “All right, but I’m just resting for one song.”

Bella said, “Oh good, because I want to dance with you next.”

Dancing with Bella was a vastly different experience, as they both needed time to find a common groove. Once they found it, their dancing became less sultry, but faster and more frenetic. They whirled toward and away from each other, dance magnets that attracted and repulsed over and over in synchronized orbits.

It felt to Edwina like the song had barely started when Jacqueline returned. But she bowed out gracefully and went to the bar to order herself a drink. Leaning over the bar, she said, “I’d like a clean cop, please?”

The bartender, Leah Firewater, was a distant cousin of Jacqueline’s, and she grinned at Edwina’s request. “Grandma Fourpaws’ moonshine was a bit too strong for you, huh?”

“It was almost a triple,” Edwina said.

Leah poured Edwina’s drink and passed it to her. She winked at Edwina, and then moved on to another customer. The club was packed, and the bar was a flurry of drink orders to keep her too busy for conversation.

The other vampire approached her with a coy smile, stirring her drink with her straw. “I thought I smelled a friendly in here. Are you visiting from a local turf, or just passing through like me?”

“Neither. I live here on the cat’s turf.”

The other vampire’s dark eyes drew wide. “Really.”

“Yep, I’ve been here a little over a decade now.”

“Whoa, a decade in one place?” The vampire shook her head, as if she couldn’t wrap her head around the concept. “I’ve never lived anywhere longer than a month.”

“I’ve lived that way too, but I made my truce to live someplace quiet for a few years. I will probably need to move soon, but not because I’m not welcome here. It’s just, the territory’s crime rate has been dropping recently. So it’s not so good for regular feedings for one vampire, much less me and my dog.”

“You can keep a vampire dog in the Bronx?”

“Yep, a German Shepherd,” Edwina said, “And he eats like a horse, if horses drank the blood of criminals.”

The vampire laughed, and then said, “I’m sorry, where are my manners?” She offered her hand. “I’m Victoria.”

“I’m Edwina. Pleased to meet you.” They shook hands, and then Edwina looked toward the dance floor. Bella and Jacqueline were dancing close, but not nearly as close as Edwina and Jacqueline had. They were both grinning, both of them enjoying themselves.

“You want to step out back for some fresh air?” Victoria asked. “This place is a sauna, and it reeks of pussy.”

Edwina laughed and nodded. It was pretty hot in the club, so much so that the humans were dripping sweat, and even the weres had begun to shine with perspiration. She waved for Victoria to follow her, but they were still in the back hallway when Victoria grabbed Edwina’s arms and drew her back fast.

Her thoughts became violent a moment before she attempted to bite Edwina, who was too drunk to react properly. Fortunately, Victoria’s teeth missed their mark, scraping lightly over Edwina’s skin because Jacqueline grabbed a handful of her fiery red hair and yanked back hard.

Drawing the shorter woman’s head up to her mouth, Jacqueline said, “Let go of my girlfriend, or you’ll be leaving as cat shit.”

Victoria raised her hands. “Easy, I was just going for a little nip.”

“She’s lying,” Edwina said, scowling as she backed up to get more space. “Bitch is a vamp-killer.”

Victoria leaned forward and bent over, resting her weight on one foot while she drew up her other leg and kicked Jacqueline in the gut. Jacqueline was still flying back when Victoria leapt for Edwina.

But Edwina had time to see it coming and fell back, letting the hissing redhead fly over her and through the back door.

She barely reacted to the impact and rolled out of the dent as soon as the door hit the ground. Then she turned and flickered, pouring on the speed to get away from the club before Jacqueline could summon backup.

Edwina didn't take the bait to follow her either. She stared out the open doorway until Jacqueline closed a hand over her shoulder and pulled her into an embrace.

"Are you okay?" Jacqueline asked.

Edwina shook her head. "I think I'm ready to go home."

"I'll make our goodbyes," Jacqueline said, pulling on her waist. "Come back to the bar."

Edwina turned and walked with her, her body trembling as she thought of death's teeth brushing over her jugular.

Chapter 32

Jacqueline held Edwina while Bella paced in her living room. Both Bella and Fang would have had the same plans whether they were in Jacqueline's apartment or Edwina's, but then the same was true of Edwina, whose plan for the night had become "shake a lot."

She shook with rage and fear, and Jacqueline could understand both sentiments. Edwina was coming close to two hundred and nineteen, and she'd almost been killed not by the humans, or by the Volturi she so rightly feared. She'd been under no threat from the weres despite them supposedly being sworn enemies. No, the menace that had almost ended her long life was a wandering leech, a predator feeding from her own kind while posing as a friend.

Edwina had explained her feelings, and since then, she had resumed shaking while she leaned on Jacqueline. This was a position that filled Jacqueline with conflicting emotions. It felt right that she should be the one to comfort and support Edwina, but her rage boiled, demanding that she go hunting for Victoria.

Still, it wasn't like no one was looking. The Fourpaws family took it as a personal insult that Edwina had been attacked in their club, and they were out searching the entire state for the treacherous vampire.

Jacqueline wished she could transform so she could at least listen in on the family's progress. But Edwina hadn't let go of her for more than the few minutes she'd taken to call and get a report from Leah. But since no one had anything to report, Jacqueline didn't see a reason to try again.

Jacqueline looked up at Bella. "Hey, shortstop, relax. You've walked six miles in the last hour, and you're still no closer to Victoria than I am. How about you get over here and assist in Operation Cuddle and Aw?"

Bella sighed, but went to the couch without arguing. She sat on Edwina's lap, resting her head on her girlfriend's trembling shoulder.

Jacqueline looked at Fang and said, "You can help too, mutt. It's about time your fat ass earns your keep with some sympathy for your mom."

Fang huffed and moved to climb on the couch. He lay down and wedged his head under the hand of his mistress, and she curled her fingers to scratch the top of his head. Which was as far as he could go with Edwina being doubly occupied.

Jacqueline smiled at a thought. "If you like, I can call over some of my cousins to add to the pile. I've seen Leah's tits, and I can tell you, they're fantastic."

Edwina laughed soundlessly. "They looked good in her work vest, but then your whole family is pretty. Even the men are gorgeous."

"I know it!" Bella said, and then laughed. "Every time I got pulled off for a lecture, I kept thinking about making out with whoever I was with. Guy or girl, they're all so pretty. Leah's little brother Seth is three years younger than me, and he already towers over me. Knowing he's just a kid, I felt evil watching him dance."

"Gee, I dunno, Bella," Jacqueline said. "If you're thinking about guys, we might have to revoke your Carpet Diners' Club card."

"But I don't really like guys...or, okay, maybe I like a few, but it's just like, not *like*, like."

"Okay, no more Facebook for you," Edwina said.

"And, if you wander off to play with Seth, at least wait until he's old enough to drive," Jacqueline said.

"You just wish you were funny." Bella stuck out her tongue, and then turned her head when she heard knocking. "Over here, Dad!"

"Will you three just pick a location and stick with it!" John grumbled. He tried the knob and stepped around the door as it swung open. Spotting the crowd on the couch, he said, "Even the dog is involved this time. You really are getting depraved, Bella."

Bella laughed, and then pecked kisses on Edwina and Jacqueline's cheeks before she got up and went to hug her dad. "How were the students tonight?"

"Great, except for that Gruberman guy. I wish he'd move back to his old dojo. He's so disruptive!" John sighed. "Anyway, how was the party?"

"It was great! Jacqueline and Edwina are both great dancers, but that was true of just about everyone there." Bella grinned at her dad. "I even danced with boys."

John clutched his heart, and then gave Jacqueline and Edwina a wide-eyed look of shock. "What have you people done with my real daughter?"

Jacqueline chuckled and shrugged. "I'm as shocked as you are, since she just started gushing about the men in my family like she just discovered males existed."

"She gushed...over males?" John got genuinely misty-eyed, and he squeezed Bella against his chest. "Oh, daughter, this is the happiest, happiest day of my life."

"Why? Because I danced with boys?"

"No, because there's a chance my grandchild's father won't have an awkward name like Sperm Donor."

Bella, blushing furiously, pulled her Dad toward the door. He chuckled, waving to both of the women laughing on the couch. "Have a good night, ladies. Thanks for keeping my kid's clothes on."

"Dad!" Bella groaned.

"Our pleasure!" Jacqueline waved to John before Bella pulled him out of the apartment and he shut the door. She sighed and looked at Edwina. "Better?"

Edwina nodded, leaning over a few inches before she hesitated. Jacqueline did the same move, mirroring Edwina's uncertainty if this was too soon for either of them. In the next few seconds, nothing was said between them, but much was discussed. Their eyes silently communicated their needs, fears, and desires for each other.

Jacqueline wanted nothing more than to take away Edwina's dreadful memories of Victoria. That was her reason for moving closer, and Edwina followed her lead. They kissed with languid, exploring tongues while Jacqueline's fingers walked over the contours of Edwina's form fitting blue dress. Finding the zipper, she eased it down and leaned back to admire the results of her affections.

Edwina was trembling again, but it seemed more like anticipation than fear or anger this time. Jacqueline stood and pulled Edwina up to peel off the clinging dress.

Edwina drew Jacqueline to the room and helped shed her vest and jeans. Jacqueline took off her own bra, and then Edwina's, and they drifted back to the bed with halting steps. Jacqueline's head leaned her head to the side of Edwina's neck, and she nipped a slow trail of kisses up until she was suckling Edwina's earlobe. She was rewarded by Edwina writhing against her, and by her voice murmuring in sounds of encouragement.

Jacqueline lay Edwina back on the bed and covered the vampire's cool body with her own. She thought, *This is my wife*, and the idea pleased her in ways she'd never known with any of her human partners.

But then she knew why without thinking too long about it. The women she dated were just after a good time, and every encounter was a study in inspired lust.

Which was loads of fun, and totally worth exploring every now and then.

But lust was a pale and flickering candle flame of an emotion compared to the fire of love blazing inside Edwina, and each time Jacqueline stoked that cold fire to arouse Edwina, she felt her own blood boil too.

Jacqueline spoke in a low whisper, "Would you marry me, Edwina?"

Edwina's eyes widened. She was taken by surprise, as Jacqueline had spoken the words as soon as she'd thought them. She couldn't answer, and Jacqueline misread her silence as hesitation because of Volturi law.

"Not like a human wedding," Jacqueline said, "just a family ceremony with my tribe."

"Okay, yes," Edwina smiled. "But what about Bella?"

"I'm allowed more than one wife, and of course I'll share her with you fairly," Jacqueline grinned, but it softened as she brought her hand to Edwina's face. "I love you, Edwina."

"I love you, Jacqueline," Edwina said.

They kissed, and then lay together until sleep took Jacqueline.

Chapter 33

Bella shuffled her feet as she slipped through the door, trying to sneak to her room without waking her dad. But John turned on the living room lamp, demonstrating that he'd been awake and waiting for her.

Bella turned to face the couch, trying to fake a concerned pout. "Um...you waited up for me?"

"You haven't been in the apartments with your girlfriends, but then, they haven't been home either." John got up and moved to take back his sword. "And wherever you're going, you seem to think you need this."

"Actually, Jacqueline thinks we need it. But the rats really aren't that big." Bella raised her arm to let him lift the scabbard up and over her head. "Nothing else has tried to mess with us, and I think the rats were just bored."

"Which rats?"

"Sub-rats, those dog-sized bastards who scurry around the subway tunnels," Bella said, and then unzipped her jacket. "We already tried visiting the sewer rats, but they mostly ignored us. Disappointing, really. You always hear about giant crocodiles in the sewers, but you never see them."

"Bella, what on earth are you doing these days?"

"Nights," Bella corrected him, entering to the bathroom to relieve herself. She shut the door, but raised her voice while she went about her business. "And actually, I'm looking for the secret tunnel to a hidden subterranean cave, which was apparently dug by recent Chinese immigrants looking to hide a dragon."

"A dragon?" John asked. "Like a statue, or a real dragon?"

"Don't know that part. But you know those Triad killers who got whacked here in our hood?"

"Yeah?"

"They're looking for it too. Only, they still haven't stolen the last third of the map, so they don't even know as much as I do." Bella sighed, and then grabbed the roll of toilet paper. "Of course, I don't know nearly enough to find the entrance to the tunnel either. I'm sure it has to be in one of the subway lines, but I don't know which one. We can only search in short jogs before we have to duck into an alcove for a passing train."

"What will you do if you find a real dragon?" John asked.

"That's why Jacqueline wants us armed, in case it's a real dragon. But I don't know if having a sword will do much good against a dragon." Flushing the toilet, Bella went to the sink and washed her hands.

She shucked her jeans and picked them up, and then her boots to carry them to her room. She opened the door, and John followed her to her room while she talked. "My theory is, it has to be a statue. I mean, three art students from a Chinese studio put together a nifty art puzzle map, and at the end of the line, they added some little shrine statue as a prize for sorting out the answer. That makes a lot more sense than them hiding a real dragon in the Bronx, right?"

"In theory, sure."

Bella tossed her pants in the dirty clothes hamper and went to the door to kiss her dad's cheek. "So, be honest. Are you mad or disappointed to find out I haven't joined a gang?"

John chuckled. "I'm relieved. In fact, I think I'm more relieved knowing that your gang is crawling the subways looking for art instead of prowling the nightclubs looking for cheap thrills."

"No, if I want cheap thrills I can go upstairs and ask Edwina to dance topless." Bella grinned tiredly while her dad laughed again. "And that's my last decent joke of the night. If you want to lecture me, it will have to wait until breakfast."

"No, I guess we can skip the lecture." John started to close the door, but stopped. "Bella?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Next time, just take the sword instead of sneaking it out. I thought you had real problems and stayed up worrying all night."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Bella said, really meaning it. "But don't worry, I won't take it again until next weekend. The rest of the week, I'm too busy for swashbuckling."

John chuckled as he closed the door.

Bella flapped face-first into her pillow, laying still for a few seconds before she began the effort of rolling onto her back. She didn't understand how she could be so tired from walking. She'd done worse to herself from dancing and didn't feel so sore or exhausted. She'd worked out with her father sometimes and come close to this level of fatigue, but even then, it felt more justified.

But she knew why she was so beat up. It was the weight of the family sword pulling her down for the whole night. A double-edged long sword of almost three feet, Bella had needed to go on a weightlifting regimen at fourteen just to pick it up. She'd been trained in several sword forms since then, and she could hold the sword out and away from her body with one hand without the tip swaying. But only for ten minutes or so, and after that, she had to switch arms.

So carrying the blade strapped to her back all night, even for a casual walk, was much, much harder than she'd thought it would be. And she'd been carrying it every weekend for no good reason. But if she needed to find a silver lining, it was *great* training for her stamina.

She fell asleep still thinking about the sword, and this led to a dream in which she was carrying the sword through a tunnel formed naturally by water flow. The stone walls were smooth yet irregular. They were also dry, and Bella waved the sword in slow strokes to clear the cobwebs from the tunnel. She walked alone, but she

felt calm, even happy.

A light glowed through the cobwebs, and then a booming voice rose, making the webs pulse with the rich bass tone. "What is your name?"

"Isabella Wong," she said, but paused in venturing forward. She turned her blade point down and rested the tip on the dusty ground.

The booming voice returned, asking, "And what is your quest?"

"I seek only knowledge." Bella bowed her head. "Glory and riches are illusions that cannot bring true happiness. Only knowledge and wisdom can bring bliss."

"And what is your favorite color?"

Bella raised her head and blinked. "I don't think you're taking this very seriously."

"It's a perfectly legitimate question," the booming voice insisted.

"No, this is a very silly dream, and I'm going to wake up now," Bella said.

"Oh, come on—" the booming voice tried to plead, but Bella rose up out of the dream and back into the waking world.

She sat up and went to her window to look outside. Smoggy and grey, just as she suspected. But at least Edwina would be able to go to work. She'd been accepted back at Luigi's without question, apparently being very popular with her patrons and coworkers.

Bella pulled out her schoolbooks to check her homework one last time and make sure she'd really done it all. She was just finishing when John knocked on the door.

He looked toward the bed, and then around at the desk. "Oh, you're already up." He held out a mug of coffee. "I thought you might like something to lift the fog."

"Sure, leave that here and bring an IV." Bella leaned away to let him set down the mug. Then she leaned back in to hug his waist. "Thanks, Dad. You're the best."

He hugged her neck, and then waved at the books. "Are you just playing catch up now?"

"Nope, I'm double-checking my work, and it's all here." Bella beamed a wide smile. "You raised me better than that."

"Damn right, I did." John ruffled her hair, and then chuckled as she tried to make a dismayed face. He stepped back toward the door. "I'm making breakfast.

Cinnamon toast and oatmeal?"

"Sure, sounds great," Bella said.

She finished packing her books in her bag and went to the bathroom to shower and get ready for school, and as she did, she thought of how hectic her life had become. She had to deal with high school, and with hanging out with her friends from school. She had to balance her social life with them with her life with her "girlfriends," a title that didn't sound right to her at all. But she also had to spend time with her dad, devote time to finding the dragon, and still come out with time to think for herself.

No, something had to give, so for the time being, she would just cut out "me time." There would be plenty of that once Alice showed up to turn her into a vampire.

In the kitchen, John stopped her from sitting down. "Hold on, let me get a look at you." He smiled and nodded his approval. "You're really quite beautiful."

"Aw, thanks."

"How both your girlfriends keep their hands off you, I don't know."

Bella laughed. "Their lips are a different story. I'm like a lesbian lip magnet." She noticed her dad's absent gaze. "What are you thinking?"

"I saw Edwina and Jacqueline kissing just now." John snorted and turned away from Bella to fetch her breakfast from the counter. "It was very hot, and I think I'm ready to become a lesbian now."

"Ooh, bad news, Dad. Your application is being declined. You're still a man"

John snapped his fingers. "Well, damn."

"Oh, and actually, I had more potentially straight thoughts." Bella smirked, adding, "So I might lose my lesbian card in exchange for the bi option."

"Really, you had a straight thought?"

"Friday, Mike mentioned kissing me as a joke, and I didn't gag."

John laughed as he went to the counter to refill his mug. "Mike's a good kid. Maybe a bit thick, but he's a good friend."

"He is," Bella said. "I think he's hopeful that I become straight and be his girlfriend, but my love life is already complicated enough without his help."

"So true," John said, sitting down at the table beside Bella.

The conversation ended while they ate, and then Bella had to rush to get on her shoes and finish brushing her hair before she could pull on her jacket and backpack.

She was heading for the door when John called, "Bella?"

She turned around, watching him in the cramped kitchenette. "Yeah?"

"What happens after you find the dragon?"

"Oh...um, I don't know." Bella really paused to consider this. "I guess it depends on what kind of dragon we found. If it belonged to a shrine, I'd imagine a trip to the shrine would be in order."

"What I mean is, are you going to just vanish somewhere with Edwina and Jacqueline?"

Bella thought about her answer before nodding. "Yes, probably. We'd try to move back here in a few years. You've finally got yourself into a rent-controlled apartment, so I always know there's a home to come back to. But I don't want to be pinned down to any one place just yet. I still want to explore, you know?"

"I know." John smiled. "You're not so different from me. I had to go exploring, just like you, and I left home at seventeen too. That's how I ended up going to Italy. It's how I met your mother in Volterra."

Bella laughed. "That's right. I'd forgotten."

John sighed, his shoulders slumping. "I know you're leaving soon. I won't tell you not to go. I wasn't much older than you when I set out on my own, and I've done my best to train you. Just...remember to call home sometimes."

Bella crossed the room to hug John, patting his back before she stepped back. "I'll call every chance I get. But I'm not leaving forever, not just yet. Right now, I'm just trying to make the morning sub on time."

John laughed and waved her off. "Right, go on. I'll see you tonight."

Chapter 34

Jacqueline woke up and became aware of the cool body next to hers, a body which began to stir as soon as Jacqueline came to. She opened her eyes and raised her head from her pillow to look at Edwina.

Edwina tilted her head back, beaming a smile so warm the sun might find it fitting competition if she wore it outside. Jacqueline stroked Edwina's cheek, evoking a pleased hum from her pale lover.

Edwina said, "Good morning."

"It's almost sunset," Jacqueline said, and then grinned. "I know you love your day job, but I love Saturdays so I can sleep late with you."

Edwina awarded her with a long, lingering kiss before she got up. "I'll start a shower and the coffee."

"Perfect," Jacqueline said, pulling herself up onto the headboard and swiping her hair out of her face.

Perfect was a great choice of words, in Jacqueline's opinion. And life would be even better when Bella came of age, then they could all...do something.

Jacqueline sighed, wondering how things could be going so great, and yet she'd never felt so confused. She'd stopped sleeping around with other women, had put up her strap-on collection and come home every night to cuddle with Edwina and sleep.

But it wasn't quite right, and the problem wasn't just that Edwina was wrong. For the first time in her long, long life Jacqueline had to admit that she didn't feel right either. She hadn't ever felt completely right as a woman, but her options weren't exactly varied.

At least the tribe was open-minded. They hadn't just tolerated her interest in women and male activities. No, they'd encouraged her, even training her to be one of their best warriors. The tribal elders had taken her aside her and told her how to please women, just as they'd done for the male warriors. There was nothing that they denied her. Long before the white people had learned tolerance, the Erie had given Jacqueline true acceptance.

And because of this acceptance, Jacqueline had never given much thought to being in "the wrong body" because her people had made so many accommodations for her. But along came Edwina, who was not happy with her body to the point that she'd started taking hormones. She'd been on hormones over fifty years now, and in most ways, she was a beautiful woman.

She was still wrong, and by being wrong, she reminded Jacqueline that she was wrong too. The gods had called a community meeting, and they'd decided that two people who should be together would have one final hurdle to overcome.

It shouldn't have been so hard. She'd bedded hundreds of women, and the strap-ons worked for them. The strap-ons would work fine for Edwina too, and when Jacqueline made out with Edwina, she pleaded to be taken almost every night. She couldn't be anymore ready than she already was.

Except, it wasn't right. Jacqueline groaned at this thought and thumped the back of her head on the wall. It wasn't ever going to be completely right, so she should just accept the situation for what it was and take Edwina.

Except, it wasn't right, not yet.

Jacqueline wondered what else could possibly be missing. They'd met each other's parents, and they slept together...well, they lay together every night. When Jacqueline put her mind to it, she could reduce Edwina to a shaking animal desperate for release. Every lesson that Jacqueline had been taught to please a woman worked on Edwina, and if Jacqueline could just get over one tiny discrepancy, they had the perfect relationship.

Taking a breath, Jacqueline muttered, "It's not a discrepancy. It's a dick, and I'm the one who should have it, not her."

Which was a stupid thing to say. It didn't change anything, even if it did sum up the problem succinctly.

Jacqueline closed her eyes, and a fantasy came to her mind unbidden. In this waking dream, Edwina returned to the bedroom nude. But somehow she and Jacqueline had swapped parts. Jacqueline pulled Edwina down on the bed and their bodies fit together like puzzle pieces.

The vision was so intense that Jacqueline's hand drifted down, attempting to locate a hard-on that wasn't there. Her fingers curled and closed in an empty fist twice before she finally recognized this and growled her frustration.

She got up to go to the bathroom, and she growled again as she passed Edwina.

"What?" Edwina asked, wounded deeply.

"You confuse me," Jacqueline said, and then gasped in frustration as she looked down and realized she was standing in front of the toilet. She growled again, and then turned around and sat down. "There, that's what I mean. I've had no troubles being me until you came along. I was happy being a woman for a century."

Jacqueline had more to say, but then she looked up at Edwina. The vampire held a shaking fist over her mouth, and she watched Jacqueline with dark, wounded eyes.

Jacqueline looked at her knees, taking a breath to calm down. "I'm not saying it's your fault, or that you do it on purpose. I'm not mad at you. I'm...I'm mad at me. You're a wonderful woman, and you deserve better than me. You deserve someone like Bella, someone who accepts you as you are."

"But you do," Edwina said.

"Not in this one place." Jacqueline pouted at Edwina. "When I take you to bed and you wiggle against me, I want to...but it doesn't seem right that I should put on a strap-on to have sex with you. But I guess that's what you want."

"How should I know?" Edwina's shoulders rose in a weak shrug. "I've only got two girlfriends, and the other won't even get past second base with me."

"Yeah, I'd try for a home run, but there's a man on third, and he's confusing the hell out of me."

"How do you think he makes me feel?" Edwina asked, her voice shaking. "It's just two inches of useless skin to me, but to the rest of the world, it's all I am!"

She walked out, and Jacqueline groaned, "Edwina—"

"I'm taking Fang for a walk," Edwina called. "I'll be back in a few minutes, after you've calmed down."

Jacqueline listened to her leave with the mutt, and then she sighed and put her head in her hands. A great morning ruined because she didn't have a penis. Which was hardly fair to Edwina, who had done nothing wrong at all.

Jacqueline grabbed the toilet paper to dry herself, and then she got into the shower to rinse off. She looked down at her body. She was stocky, but still definitely a woman. It had never bothered her before, until Edwina. And it seemed the closer to Edwina she got, the more she became aware of her wrongness. Being wrong made her mad, because there wasn't supposed to be a problem at all.

Jacqueline growled and punched the wall, and then growled louder when she realized she'd just busted a set of tiles. "Idiot!"

Chapter 35

Bella opened Edwina's door, and then sighed when she saw the pile of stained tissues on the table. "Oh no. Now what's wrong?"

Edwina shook her head, waving toward the pile at the same time. "That's from this morning. I'm over it now. I'm just feeling too lazy to clean it up yet."

"So what happened?"

"Jacqueline got mad at herself, I guess."

Bella crinkled her face in a confused scowl. "Do what?"

"That's what I was thinking too. But apparently my having a penis makes her want to be a man. And somehow that's my fault."

"Well, that's stupid," Bella said.

"I concur," Edwina said.

"So, is it just the two of us on the dragon hunt tonight?"

"No, we're bringing the jerk along." Edwina sighed and got up. "We'd never hear the end of it if we found the dragon without her. And seeing as how you've opted to go the immortal route, when I say never, I mean never."

"When you put it like that, it almost sounds like punishment."

"Which one?" Edwina smirked. "Immortality or Jacqueline?"

Bella giggled. "Both, I suppose."

Edwina swept the tissues into her wastebasket, and then she returned to the kitchen to get Fang's leash. "Come on, Fang. We're off to find the dragon. You won't want to miss that would you?"

After a moment, she said. "Oh. Well then, good luck with that."

Bella waited for an explanation, but Edwina went out of the apartment without giving one. Bella let her lock up the apartment before she asked, "Well?"

"Hmm?" Edwina slipped her keys in the waist pocket of her leather trench coat. "Oh, he's going out on the fire escape to see if the downstairs neighbor will leave her window open. Apparently she's watching a friend's dog."

"A poodle?" Bella asked.

"No, a pit bull, and she's in heat. Fang says he's feeling horny enough to break the window if she can't come out. That's what I was wishing him luck with, because he can't break the glass without an invitation to come in."

"Oh. Poor guy," Bella said, and then turned around to knock on Jacqueline. "But then he's just like his mistress. Both of you are in dire need of getting laid."

"Yes, and preferably not with each other," Edwina said.

"Ew!" Bella said, giggling in peals of disgusted laughter. "I am so not French kissing you if you slip that mutt the tongue."

"I wouldn't blame you," Edwina said. "His breath is atrocious."

"Please, his breath is non-existent."

"Okay, you got me there." Edwina knocked on Jacqueline's door. "Come on, jerk. Time to go hunting."

"We should rename her Jerkie," Bella said.

"We should," Edwina agreed. "After all, she makes fun of me with my nickname. Why shouldn't I make fun of her?"

Jacqueline came out of her apartment carrying what looked like a walking stick until she uncurled her fingers from around the slim ax head.

She hung the ax head over her shoulder while she locked the door, and then she glanced back at Bella's laughter. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just, you look good in the all-leather outfit. Like a Native American superhero."

Jacqueline smirked, taking down the ax. "You're looking good too, a regular kung fu movie star."

She swung her ax like a walking stick, which apparently was so she didn't look suspicious. But given that she was an Erie walking around in brown buckskins and carrying a leather-wrapped walking stick, she looked more than a little suspicious.

Bella looked even more suspicious, dressed in a black leather jacket and black jeans with the bottoms tucked into black combat boots. And then there was the three foot sword strapped to her back.

Edwina's weapons were kept under her trench coat, but a tall pale woman in a black trench coat was not exactly inconspicuous. Had they gone out in broad daylight, they would have been stared at. But they chose to venture out in the middle of the night, when the vast majority of people outside were either drunk, crazy, or a combination of the two.

Bella thought all of this, and she resisted laughing despite the follow-up thought that her life had become a badly written paranormal romance novel. She couldn't even claim that she was immune from the effects of the writer, because here she was, an Asian martial art master. Of course. And Jacqueline was the stereotypical Native American pack animal, and Edwina was the stereotypical white woman.

Or, she would be, if she didn't have a penis.

Bella snorted, and then moved closer to Edwina to put an arm around her. "Thanks."

"For what?" Edwina asked.

"For breaking the mold." Bella squeezed her again, and then asked, "So, what's our plan for tonight? Which line should we try? The five, or the two?"

"Five," Edwina said. "It feels like a lucky number tonight."

"Good enough for me," Bella said, and then glanced at Jacqueline. "Are you playing the stoic one tonight?"

"I'm still chewing humble pie," Jacqueline said.

"Is that it?" Bella shook her head. "Because you look like you're eating your face. Like, with a side order of lemon wedge."

Jacqueline shifted the ax head to her other hand and took Edwina's hand. "You know I'm an idiot."

Edwina nodded. "I do."

Jacqueline squeezed her hand. "And you deserve someone better."

"Maybe," Edwina said, "but I've decided to stick with you."

Chapter 36

Edwina noticed the puddle as the train was still rumbling in the distance. She noticed it then because the surface was still even though she could feel the vibrations of the train through her legs.

She tapped Bella's arm, and then pointed to the puddle. "Look at that. It's some kind of optical illusion."

Bella walked over to the puddle, and then hopped into it. She sank through the puddle with a yelp, and her diminishing cries could be heard for several long seconds before she grew quiet.

Edwina walked to the edge of the puddle and called, "Bella?"

"I'm okay," Bella called. "There's a slide, but it's dry stone. Your coat is gonna be ruined."

"I can live with it," Edwina said. "Is it safe to jump yet?"

"Yep, go ahead."

Edwina did, falling almost seven feet before the round tunnel sloped to catch her. Then gravity and the steep angle of the hole shot her down another twenty feet before the slide opened into a much larger chamber.

Edwina stood up and got out of the slide chute, calling, "Go ahead, Jacqueline!"

Jacqueline arrived clutching her bloody elbow, her face set in a pained grimace when she slid to a stop. "Fucking ow."

"Oh, sorry," Edwina said as she moved to help Jacqueline up.

"Nah, it's my fault for going sleeveless." Jacqueline looked around the tunnel. "It looks natural, but that can't be right."

"So, it has to be magic," Bella said.

"I think so," Edwina agreed. "All of this was recent. The puddle illusion and slide were made after the subway lines, so no way is this tunnel the result of nature."

Squinting, Bella said, "I wish we had better lighting."

Which caused the walls to glow with warm white light. The three ladies spun, and Jacqueline said, "Whoa."

Bella asked, "Did I just make a—?"

Jacqueline cut her off with a guffawing laugh. "I wish Edwina and I could swap genitals!" Her face filled with a sudden look of pain, and Edwina gasped, doubling over as she crossed her legs.

"Motherfu..." Edwina straightened up, and then patted her hand over her crotch. She gasped, and then put her fingers between her legs. "Oh...that's...wow."

Bella gasped too, and then exclaimed, "Edwina! The dragon grants wishes!"

From the tunnel, a deep booming voice declared, "Yes, I can grant you one, and only one wish."

Edwina said, "I wish—"

She stopped when she heard someone enter the slide. She turned around in time to see the first of the Triads arrive, but they arrived in waves, one right after another.

When there were fully twenty men in the tunnel, one of the men shouted, "Great dragon, I wish to be the ruler of the world!"

The dragon declared, "You have to wait your turn in line, as this vampire was already making a wish."

"Vampire!" all the men shouted in unison, and then they drew weapons.

The leader of the Triads said, "Vampire, if you know what's good for you, you'll wish to be transported somewhere safe from us!"

Edwina considered this, and then said, "I wish the dragon would move to a safe location where the Triads will never find it."

"Very well," the dragon said, and the walls of the tunnel rumbled. The ground shook beneath their feet, but after many long seconds, all was quiet.

Jacqueline called out, "Dragon?" No answer. She thought about her wish, and then untied the cord cinching her leather pants to her waist. "Whoa."

Edwina leaned over, and then covered her mouth. "Oh my. That's quite a bit larger than I recall, but that definitely was mine."

Bella stepped over, asking, "How can you tell? Does it still sparkle?" But once she looked into Jacqueline's pants, she covered her mouth. "Wow. That's...wow."

Edwina snapped her fingers. "Right. That's what it looked like *before* hormones. I'd forgotten how impressive it was."

"Jeez, it might be too much cock for me," Jacqueline said. Then she grimaced, "And this is totally going to fuck up my reputation as a lesbian."

Edwina laughed and nodded. "Yeah, they really don't like the dick."

"Ahem?" said the lead of the Triad assassins.

Edwina, Bella, and Jacqueline all looked up in unison.

Jacqueline asked, "Yes?"

"We're going to kill you, you know." The leader drew his sword and laughed evilly. "Are you ready to die?"

Jacqueline also laughed evilly, and her laugh was more evil than the leader's.

When her laughter became an animal growl, four of the men shit themselves. Jacqueline shifted forms, her leather clothing popping apart at the seams.

"I'll translate," Edwina said. "She just asked you the same thing. Are *you* ready to die?"

All of the men drew swords, and the leader stammered. "S-stay buh-back or we'll kill the girl!"

Bella also laughed evilly, and then said, "Oh, that's cute. You think I'm the safe one." Then she drew her sword, and three more men soiled their shorts. As she wound the sword around her body, Bella said, "Both of you work slow and leave some for me."

"Fair enough," Edwina said, reaching into her jacket to draw her weapons, a pair of machetes with black plastic handles.

She forced herself to work slow, and she only killed seven of the men. None of them had a chance to block her, and they were still standing, still staring at the place they'd last seen Edwina. They tried to turn around, and then toppled like gory dominoes, falling apart without a scream.

Bella groaned and cried, "Three? You left me three?"

Edwina looked at Jacqueline, who had already shifted forms again. "I thought you would save a few for her."

"I didn't make any such promise," Jacqueline said.

Edwina sighed melodramatically. "How do you like that? Jacqueline hasn't had a penis five minutes and already she's being a dick!"

"Well, now that we've dealt with the dragon and the Triads—" Bella stopped when she noticed the other vampires walking toward them from the other end of the tunnel.

Edwina turned and spotted the vampires next, and she scowled.

These vampires were dressed in heavy grey cloaks, their long hoods hanging over their faces and hiding their features. Yet even with their faces hidden, Edwina knew these vampires and their uniforms.

Though she'd hope never to see them, the Volturi had arrived.

Chapter 37

Bella swallowed hard as she watched the vampires lower their hoods. The man leading the two rows of multicolored vampires looked to be in his mid-thirties, and his face was full of a deceptive calm.

Bella heard a hissing noise and couldn't identify it at first. Then she recognized the sound of someone sliding into the tunnel using the hidden entrance.

Alice slid to a stop and got up to dust off her all-leather outfit. "Sorry I'm late," she said, and bowed to the Volturi. "My apologies for disturbing your meeting, but I believe I can clear up a potential misunderstanding."

She went to the lead vampire and offered her hand. When he took it, she clasped both hands over hers, and then smiled. "Alice Sullen. So good to meet you at last. Tell me, how is Carlisle?"

"Doing great, thanks for asking." Alice looked around. "Bella, allow me to introduce you to Aro, the leader of the Volturi."

Bella swallowed thickly, and then attempted a formal bow similar to what Alice had done. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Yes, I'm sure it is," Aro said, then looked at Edwina with a stern frown. "You know our rules, Edwina. After you had been exposed to Bella, you should have killed her or turned her yourself."

Aro moved to stand in front of Edwina, and then put his hand on her cheek.

Bella watched him with a timid expression, worried that he might hurt Edwina. But after a few seconds, he smiled and released a quiet laugh. "How interesting. It seems she led you to a cure. You could have wished for your humanity back instead of sending the dragon away. But if you'd done that, I would have killed you."

Trembling, Bella couldn't stop herself from speaking. "Please, don't. If you have to kill someone, please kill me."

"Bella," Edwina said.

She stopped when Aro held up his hand, signaling for silence. Aro spoke in a calm, even voice, addressing Bella though he stared at Edwina. "I am tempted to kill you, Bella Wong. But Edwina feels that you are so unique that you deserve a chance to live."

Aro turned looking down on Bella. He raised his hand partway to her cheek, and then paused. "May I?"

Bella had no idea what he wanted, but she nodded and tensed, ready for anything.

Aro cupped her cheek, his face tensing in a thoughtful scowl. Yet only a few seconds passed before he said, "Very interesting."

"What do you see?" Bella asked.

"Nothing at all," Aro said. He laughed again and stepped back. "Really quite remarkable."

One of the male vampires stepped up behind Aro, and he spoke in a gravelly voice. "The girl cannot be allowed to leave alive."

"No," Aro said. He looked at Bella, his smile vanishing. "Your life is in your hands, child. You may choose to become one of us, but by doing so, you may not return to your home in the Bronx. You must leave for a minimum of five years, and we will be watching you. If you fail to follow our decrees, we will kill you."

Bella knew there was no choice. She wanted to see her dad one last time, but that wouldn't be possible. She took a breath and said, "I want Alice to turn me."

Aro backed up and nodded to Alice. "You may proceed."

Alice stepped up close to Bella, whispering in her ear. "I'm really sorry about this."

"It's oka—aaaaaaaah!" Bella screamed, trying to pull away from Alice.

Her sharp teeth sliced through Bella's skin and flesh, but Alice didn't close her bite to cut the jugular vein. She didn't draw back to feed from the wound, and instead sawed her lower teeth back and forth to pump more of her venomous saliva into Bella.

The venom spread, and with it, fire blazed Bella's every nerve ending. She screamed over and over, making her throat raw and sore.

Still, Alice clung to Bella, her left hand holding the side of Bella's neck with her right arm clamped around Bella's waist. If she had let go, Bella would have taken one step before she fell over and writhed in agony. There was no escape from the pain, no passing out to flee from the burning.

When at last Alice released her bite and eased Bella to the ground, she felt the fire inside shift to ice, and she began to shake. Her chest hurt, and she fought for every breath.

"Alice?" she whined, her voice shaking with her convulsions. "What's happening to me?"

"You're dying," Alice said. "It won't feel good, and I'm sorry it has to be this way. But don't worry. You're a Sullen now, and we'll take good care of you." Alice stoked Bella's cheek. "It hurts less if you don't struggle."

"Help me," Bella pleaded, breathing faster.

"Do you really want help?" Alice asked.

"Please," Bella whined, her eyes bulging when Alice covered her nose and mouth.

She continued to struggle for another minute, and then her lungs stopped. She thought she should feel herself drifting away from her body, but she still felt dreadfully cold and sore. There was nothing else.

No, no there was something new. There was hunger, a need to feed so intense that her whole body throbbed.

Aro stood up and nodded. "It is done. Take her away to feed her." Aro glared at Edwina and raised a stern finger. "This night could have ended in tragedy because of you. We will be watching you closely, and there will be no return trips to the Bronx for at least five years. Are we clear?"

"Yes," Edwina said, bowing to show respect. Then the vampires blurred out of the room at almost the same time.

Alice helped Bella up. "Come on. They're using the back door out. It's not as much fun as the slide, and we have to climb a sheer cliff face or take a swim in the East River."

Chapter 38

Edwina chased down the deer and snapped the beast's neck. Holding the body up by the lifeless head, Edwina offered the kill to Bella, and she ripped at the throat with animal abandon. It was her third meal, and yet she still drank in deep, greedy gulps.

She took down three long drinks, and then she fell back, as if drunk and unsteady on her feet. She panted with excitement, but she knew she didn't need to breathe. It was an act based on her need to express emotions. She knew this, and she forced herself to stop.

The blood on her lips tasted good, and the liquid sloshing in her stomach felt nice. At last she felt like she had control over her body, had gained it back from the animal that had taken over when she died.

At last, the true horror of what she'd done settled over her. She was dead, and if she had a soul, she had somehow corrupted it. She had trapped her soul within dead flesh, and to keep herself animated, she would have to kill.

But a rational part of her mind rejected this simplistic accusation. The compromise for all life was that something had to die. Even vegans had to kill plants to feed themselves. Bella had eaten all kinds of animals, and there was a chance that she could live completely off of animal blood. She could be the vampire equivalent of a vegan, not touching human blood even if she craved it.

And she did crave it, even if she had not tasted it before. She understood why she would have to stay away from the Bronx for the first few years of her life. She would be too likely to jump people on the street, and no amount of personal conviction would stop her from killing someone and exposing the vampires.

So she would not be able to speak to her dad, or call him to explain where she was. Her old life was over, and her new life had just begun.

Alice knelt beside Bella and clasped her shoulder. "You should be ready to run with us. We're going to go to a nice cabin in the middle of the Canadian Rockies. They have these moose so big, you only need one to feel full."

Bella grinned, her blood red eyes shining with a mad sheen. "Mmmm...sounds nice."

Edwina leaned over to offer her hand. "We can make it there in half an hour if you trust your feet and just let yourself go."

Bella let Edwina pull her along at what felt like a slow jog, and then she decided to lead the way to show how fast she could be. But as she was trying to pass Edwina, her partner matched her speed stride for stride. She moved faster and faster, trying to pull into the lead. But Edwina was always in step with her, moving at a matching pace.

The "cabin" in the woods turned out to be more of a rustic mansion, with two floors of rooms arrayed around a wide open main room/den.

Alice shut the front door and gestured through the back. "Right, that's the kitchen. Not really a food place for us, but we do take hot meals using the tap in the sink. There's plenty of elk and moose bottled in the refrigerator, and everyone else is out hunting to bring back more for the backup refrigerator."

"I'd love some moose," Bella said.

Alice smiled wide and took her hand. "Come on, I'll pour you a big glass, and then I can show you to your room. Or, rather to Jacqueline's room. She's the only one who really needs the bed."

Bella followed Alice obediently, eager to get another glass of blood. Running had emptied her reserves, and while she wasn't hungry, she didn't like having an empty stomach. It made the newfound animal in her nervous.

As they walked to the kitchen, she had a thought. "Why don't I have any urges to bite Jacqueline? She's a living creature, so shouldn't I be thirsting for her?"

"No, her blood is cursed, so your natural instinct is to avoid biting her," Alice said. She took a bottle from the refrigerator and carried it to the sink to warm it while she talked. "Jacqueline is perfectly safe here, being that she's Edwina's partner, and yours."

Alice's gaze shifted to the werecougar, and she wrinkled her nose. "It will take some time getting used to your...unique aroma, but if Edwina considers you family, so do I."

Chapter 39

Dear reader,

Hi, I'm the narrator of this tale, and I'm taking a moment to alert you to the very naughty contents of the next chapter. I realize that some of you like a good tease of a story without ever getting to the nookie. Some of you may believe a little romance is fine, but you don't want to see any pornographic, vulgar descriptions of sex.

And if you are that sort of prude, that's okay. Far be it for anyone to force you to read about a natural act occurring between the heroines after they have suffered so much for your entertainment. Nay, they should indulge your puritan needs for modesty by denying themselves their raw animal urges.

Well, with all due respect to you prudes, fuck that shit. I didn't just spend 38 chapters tormenting my characters in this ultra-queer fan-fiction slash production just to back down at the end. No siree bob, I gave Jacqueline Edwina's dick because I wanted to see someone get fucked hard, and pardon my French. Cause otherwise, what's the point of doing this at all, right?

I will happily indulge your sensitive tendencies with a warning to avoid the next chapter and skip straight to the epilogue, because in this next chapter, there will be sex, in many positions, and with much enthusiasm on the parts of all parties involved. There will be dirty words used, and deeds may occur that cause pulses to race, pants to tighten, and breasts to heave.

This sort of chapter is not for everyone, and if you are too lily-livered to read bold and tawdry descriptions of raunchy transsexual transgressions, no one will blame you for flipping past these hot and incredible acts between three beautiful and wanton women.

For the rest of you, please, turn the page, and try to keep the voyeuristic giggling to a minimum.

XOXO,

Thea Narrator

PS: I'm going to be typing this next chapter with only one hand. Just FYI.

Chapter 40

Jacqueline sat on the bed and bounced twice to test the springs. They were responsive and whisper quiet, suggesting the mattress was brand new.

She nodded her approval, and then grinned at Alice. "Sure, this will work just fine. Now, I don't mean to be rude, but by a strange twist of fate, I find myself in possession of a penis for the first time in my life."

"Ah," Alice smiled. "And where did you find this penis?"

"It was hers, actually," Jacqueline pointed at Edwina. "Before you arrived, I wished we could swap genitals."

Alice grimaced. "That sounds painful."

"It wasn't pleasant," Jacqueline said. "But listen, the thing is—"

"I can figure out what you're getting at." Alice was already backing toward the doorway. "You won't want to be disturbed for the next few hours."

"No," Jacqueline said, and then grinned when Bella giggled. "I may send the wee one out for sips of blood between rounds, but we'll all be very busy for at least the next five hours."

"Oh, my," Alice said, and then laughed. She paused at the door to wink at Edwina. "I'll keep my family out of the room until you've worn yourself down."

"Thank you," Jacqueline said. As soon as Alice shut the door, she got up and went to Edwina.

Pressing Edwina back into the wall, Jacqueline ground her hips against Edwina's, for the first time discovering the sensation of rubbing a hard-on against a willing pelvis. Jacqueline felt an ache in her shaft that moved along her point of contact with Edwina. The ache moved from the tip of her cock to the base, and there it hurt so good that she shivered.

Edwina panted, her eyes going wide. She opened her mind to Jacqueline so the werecougar knew exactly what effect she had on her vampire lover.

She ground herself against Edwina again and groaned at the powerful throb this produced in her newly acquired cock. She'd known it was supposed to be so

good. She'd heard men say they were getting the better end of the deal. She'd often thought they were full of shit, but now she wasn't so sure.

Jacqueline felt a hand on her hip and looked down at Bella trying to back her off of Edwina. "What are you doing?"

"Distracting you," Bella said, untying Jacqueline's pants to lower them. "Before you play hide the cock, I was hoping to sample Edwina unsoiled, as it were." She stroked Jacqueline's hard-on, her eyes gleaming with lewd interest. "I'd think you would too, so I'm appealing to your curiosity."

"How so?" Jacqueline groaned, mesmerized by the sensation of Bella's cool hand stoking her hot, hard flesh.

"Don't you want to know what a blow job is like?"

"Please?" Jacqueline asked. Bella complied and sank down over the top of Jacqueline's uncircumcised sex. Bella rolled back the foreskin with her lips, and then lapped at the exposed head with her tongue.

The sensation was incredible, unlike anything Jacqueline had imagined. Instinct brought her hands to Bella's hair, but she restrained herself from trying to force her full length into Bella's soft, wet mouth.

Bella suckled at Jacqueline's rigid flesh, her head bobbing with timid speed. Jacqueline opened her eyes and saw Edwina had knelt beside Bella. She closed a hand over Bella's shoulder and whispered, "Let me try."

"Yeah," Jacqueline groaned, finding the idea really kinky. She was going to make Edwina suck her own cock.

She took a handful of Edwina's hair and guided her head forward, and she eased a quarter of her length into the vampire's cool wet mouth when she began to suck. Jacqueline's mouth fell open, and she groaned in pleasure.

Edwina's amber eyes stayed locked on Jacqueline's as she bobbed her head according to Jacqueline's not-so-subtle direction.

Jacqueline urged her to speed up a little more, and then she thought, *I'm fucking her mouth*. Then she had to stop and back away. The thought was so sexy that she almost came right away.

Jacqueline panted, petting Edwina's cheek. "Hold on a sec."

Edwina bit her lower lip, trying to look sexy and succeeding. "Did I do it right?" she asked.

"You're doing great," Jacqueline said, and then pointed her cock at Bella. "I have to take short turns with both of you, or I won't last long."

Bella opened her mouth, letting Jacqueline use her. But Jacqueline could only last a few strokes before she had to back off again. She was too eager, and she knew Bella was right. She needed distraction.

She pulled Edwina up and said, "Let's get you out of these clothes. I want to see what you look like with my pussy."

Edwina stood up and helped to shed her clothing quickly. Bella didn't wait for assistance, and she was naked when Jacqueline looked over.

"Oh, dang, I wanted to help," Jacqueline said.

Bella giggled. "We've got forever to try longer strip shows. Come on and take her to bed. I want to taste her."

Jacqueline's mouth watered at this comment. She did too. She wanted to lavish attention on Edwina until she was screaming.

Putting her hands on Edwina's hips, Jacqueline walked her lover back to the bed and sat her down. Jacqueline knelt, and when Edwina lay back, she found herself presented with a sight both familiar and alien. She had quite often see the same vagina in the mirror while she trimmed her bush. But the skin was frost white, and all the parts that had been violet between Jacqueline's brown labia now had taken on a light blue tint.

Jacqueline parted the folds of Edwina's virgin sex and lapped her tongue over the cool ridges of skin. She was rewarded by Edwina's shaking breath, and by her voice escaping as a quiet whisper. "Oh, God."

Edwina squirmed on the bed, so overwhelmed by the experience that her telepathic connection with Jacqueline became unstable.

Jacqueline gripped Edwina's hips to hold her down, and she opened her mouth wide to push more of her tongue inside Edwina. She finally got Edwina to hold still, allowing her the chance to raise her hand and cup Edwina's breasts one at a time. She found them just big enough to fill her palm, and the little nipples were like hard erasers under her exploring fingers.

She felt like she'd barely started when Bella lay a hand on her shoulder. Jacqueline backed off reluctantly, but once Bella was working on Edwina, the thought occurred to Jacqueline that she could also get the first taste of Bella. Laying back on the floor, she angled Bella's hips a bit and then urged her to sit on Jacqueline's lips.

Bella moaned, but her voice remained muffled. It mingled with Edwina's, who continued to moan and gasp.

Jacqueline had to admit, Bella had a sweet little snatch, and she was enjoying making Bella squirm. But for as much fun as eating her was, Jacqueline felt a dreadful need to be inside her, or inside Edwina.

Edwina apparently read her thoughts, because she moaned, "I want you inside me."

At this comment, Bella backed away and stood up. Jacqueline got up with the same speed and urgency as she crawled onto the bed.

Edwina rolled her arms, looking like she was swimming a backstroke on the bed. Jacqueline let her wander closer to the middle, but her patience ran out and she grabbed Edwina's leg.

Her other hand went around the base of her new cock, and she fit herself into Edwina, her eyes glued on their merging bodies. This was right, like it was always meant to be this way. It felt perfect, like a key and lock finally meeting.

Edwina started to pant, and she lay her head back and moaned, "Yeah."

Jacqueline froze as she fought against the urge to explode. This was so much better than the strap-ons. She suddenly knew why so many guys had trouble coming too fast. How could anyone withstand such incredible pleasure and not be overwhelmed?

Edwina's put her hand on Jacqueline's hip. "It's okay. I want you to come inside me."

Jacqueline stopped thinking and pumped her hips, prining herself and exploding only a few seconds later. She panted like she'd just run a marathon, and her legs felt like loose jelly.

"I'm sorry," Jacqueline said.

"Don't be sorry," Edwina said. "Just rest up and try again in a few minutes. While you're resting, I can finally get a chance to play with Bella."

Jacqueline laughed and rolled onto her side, watching with a lewd smile as Edwina lay Bella back and parted her legs. She closed her mouth over Bella's snatch, and then she had to hold Bella's hips to keep her from wriggling away.

Jacqueline marveled at the scene in front of her, and she thought, *They're both mine forever*.

When she got hard again, she moved to lay behind Edwina and slip inside her again. Then she slipped her finger between Edwina's legs to feel her cock sliding into her partner.

Edwina started to mewl, and Jacqueline pulled her close to mutter in her ear. "I'm going to fuck you hard."

"Uh, yeah," Edwina said.

Jacqueline pounded herself into Edwina, repeating herself. The vulgarity of the words turned her on just as much as the act did, and it had just as profound an effect on Edwina. She started to shake, and then her tunnel became slick and tight.

As Edwina settled into gasping whimpers, Jacqueline noticed Bella rested against the headboard. Bella rubbed herself as she watched the two women writhe

together, her red eyes glazed with lust.

Jacqueline growled low in her throat as she grabbed Bella's ankle and pulled her down and across the bed. Bella giggled, but the sound died when Jacqueline rubbed her swollen cock head over Bella's slit. Her mirthful encouragement changed to a whimpered humming, and she shifted her hips to grant Jacqueline easier access.

Jacqueline sank into Bella, a pleased growl rumbling from her chest. Bella responded with a loud moan, and she raised her hips, helping Jacqueline fit herself all the way to the base with her first stroke.

Jacqueline put a hand over Bella's breast, rolling the perfect orb and feeling the nipple slipping under her palm.

Bella hummed, "Mmm-hmmm" and pushed her chest up, encouraging Jacqueline to keep going.

Edwina chose to help please Bella by going to work on the other breast. Watching her efforts turned on Jacqueline even more, and she didn't think such a thing was possible by that point.

Jacqueline needed little time to adjust to Bella, and soon the room echoed with their slapping bodies. Bella's cries rose in volume with her climax, and then Jacqueline returned to Edwina. She felt so close to coming, and she hoped to ride Edwina over the edge. But Edwina went over the peak too soon, and she became so sensitive that she had to beg Jacqueline to stop.

The werecougar returned to Bella, who was still laying on her stomach trying to recuperate. Jacqueline mounted her and gripped her shoulder, drawing back Bella for every popping connection.

Bella began to cry out, "Fuck, Jackie!" Over and over. Her fingers curled in tense fists, and she clasped the covers so tightly that the fabric started to rip. Her legs clutched at Jacqueline's hips, and her ankles locked over Jacqueline's thrusting ass.

Jacqueline repeated herself with every thrust. "Almost."

The knot lodged in the tip of her cock resisted her, but she was determined to come a second time, even if it killed one of them. Bella was reduced to a screaming mess, so Jacqueline moved Edwina onto her back, parting her legs with urgent speed.

Her gaze locked with Edwina, and she clasped her partner's hips, grinding into her every thrust. Animal need reduced her to one function and one goal, and she fucked Edwina with mindless abandon.

The knot grew stronger and more painful, and soon Jacqueline was grunting with every thrust. Edwina screamed under her, and her abused sex splashed with every connection of their bodies.

But Jacqueline didn't stop because Edwina continued to scream, "Fuck me!"

At last Jacqueline exploded, and her whole body seemed to flood out of her cock in a torrent of flame. Dripping sweat and panting far louder than her vampire lovers, Jacqueline collapsed on Edwina and closed her eyes.

Her limp sex hurt. It was sore and raw, but it felt so very good too. She hadn't known sex could be so fantastic. Surely she was cheating Edwina out of something by taking her penis away.

Jacqueline asked, "Was it good for you?"

Bella and Edwina both answered, "Yes."

Jacqueline nodded and closed her eyes. "Oh, good."

She was asleep a moment later.

Epilogue

Five years later...

Bella knocked on the door of the apartment and tried to keep herself calm. She knew what was about to happen, and she had to be very careful. She'd avoided eating two days to give her irises the perfect dark look, one which almost matched her old eye color.

John opened the door, and he had barely set eyes on Bella before he pulled her into a tight embrace. "Thank God," he said. "You're alive."

Bella gingerly returned his hug, trying not to sniff at her dad, though he smelled great.

After half a minute, John said, "You're cold."

"Yeah, this is normal for me now." Bella finally had to push her dad back to avoid temptation, and she offered him a soft smile. He didn't look so different from the last time she'd seen him, aside from the stripes of grey on the sides of his head. But he wore the same old pocket T-shirt, the same relaxed fit slacks and the same white deck shoes.

"Hi, Dad," Bella said, and then grinned. "I guess I don't have to ask if you missed me."

John made an annoyed laugh. "I thought you said you weren't going to just up and disappear on me?"

"That was the plan, in theory." Bella looked down to avoid his glare. "But the plan got changed."

"What changed?"

"Um...would you believe we found the dragon?" Bella pouted as she tried to think of how to explain.

"Why would that explain you disappearing for five years?"

"It doesn't, but then I can't properly explain why I disappeared, not without you thinking I've gone crazy. But the main thing that's going to sound crazy is what happened to Jacqueline. See, I made a little wish, and it came true. Jacqueline didn't fully appreciate that the dragon could grant one wish per person, so she made a wish in a half-joking manner..."

Bella turned and gestured toward the stairwell just as her partners stepped into the hallway. "Uh, so Dad, this is Jacob."

Jacob Fourpaws grinned wide at Bella as he walked up the hall with Edwina trailing behind him carrying a bag. It wasn't that he asked her to walk behind him, only that with his increased size, there wasn't room for them to walk side by side in the corridor.

Jacob's long hair fell like a black waterfall over his shoulders and down both of his huge pectorals. His rock hard body stretched his grey T-shirt taut over his chest and abs, rendering the most boring color in the world into an exquisite work of art.

Bella let her gaze wander back up to meet his dark, piercing eyes, and then she returned his smile.

Beside her, John grabbed his chest and said, "Holy shit, that's one gorgeous man!"

Bella laughed and nodded. "He is, yes."

Then John gasped and his eyes bulged. "Wait, that's Jacqueline?"

"Yep, they were. Now he's Jacob."

"How?"

"I just told you." Bella leaned into Jacob's side when he stopped beside her. "See, the dragon grants one wish per person, and Jacqueline ended up with a penis and testicles."

"And this was a joke request?"

"Half a joke, yes. It's a long story," Jacob said, and then shook his head. "Trust me, it's not worth repeating."

Bella rolled her eyes. "Anyway, having testicles gave Jacqueline a natural boost of testosterone, and about a month later, Jacqueline decided that he wanted to be called Jacob instead."

"But your..." John looked at Jacob's muscular chest and scowled with confusion. "I mean, what happened to your chest?"

"I had a double mastectomy to lose the boobs," Jacob said. "It just didn't feel right for me to have breasts anymore." He laughed and added, "I was worried they might grow back, but with my lower plumbing being different, my upper body changed as well."

"But...but if you're a man." John looked from Jacob to Bella. "Then you're straight?"

"I'm bisexual." Bella smiled, adding, "I enjoy spending time in bed with Edwina, but I love being with Jacob too."

John noticed Edwina once Jacob turned sideways. "Wow, she's a little bit preggers."

Edwina smiled and glanced down at her stomach, which was swollen in the final stages of her third trimester.

"No, she's a lot preggers," Bella said, and then put her hands over her stomach. "I'm a little bit preggers, actually. But this is my second kid."

John swayed in the doorway. "What?"

"You've already got a grandkid," Jacob said. "And the second is on his way this year."

John waved the trio into his apartment, laughing as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, this...this is incredible!"

Bella smiled, thinking how he would never understand how accurate his words were.

According to Carlisle, female vampires weren't supposed to be fertile. But Jacqueline being endowed with Edwina's genitals somehow made her fertile for all vampires.

Which had pissed off Rosalie to no end, until Jacob offered to provide a sperm donation. Carlisle was able to assist with the artificial insemination, as Emmet flat out refused to let Rosalie get sexed up by Jacob.

So Rosalie was also working on her second baby, and having resolved her one complaint about being a vampire, she stopped being such a grouchy bitch.

Which made Emmet eternally grateful to Jacob.

Having Edwina's genitals also made Jacob highly aggressive and competitive, and he frequently challenged Emmet to wrestling matches in the front yard. He had a sexual appetite that could only be called dizzying, and Bella and Edwina had often found themselves overwhelmed by his needs.

Jacob took to being male with natural ease, as if he had always been meant for the role and his body just hadn't been willing to play along. Once he had a set of testicles pumping him full of "man juice," his body had filled out and become harder, more defined. But his face had retained the round moon shape that was common to all of his relatives. It was this roundness that made him into a gorgeous man, so gorgeous that even straight men had a tendency to profess attraction to him.

So Bella was not that surprised that she was attracted to Jacob. It helped that she was bisexual, but then almost everyone she knew was attracted to Jacob. Emmet had even commented after a wrestling match, "Listen, I'm no homo, but I'd still like to do him in the butt."

Which wasn't happening because even if Edwina and Bella were bi, Jacob was not.

Which *also* made Emmet eternally grateful to Jacob.

Life with the Sullens had been fantastic, far better than Bella would have expected. She drank animal blood exclusively, and she had come to like moose blood so much that she preferred it over most other animals. Jacob could eat the better part of the moose's flesh after she and Edwina had drained the blood, so there wasn't much that went to waste with their happy family.

John pulled her from her thoughts by asking, "If you're working on the second kid, why didn't you bring the first for a visit?"

"Um...he's horribly disfigured," Bella said.

"Bella," Jacob groaned.

Bella rolled her eyes. "Okay, he looks okay, but he's a biter."

"Is he teething?"

"No, his teeth already came in. He just has a tendency to bite a lot. We're trying to break him of it, but he's not safe to be in public. And he probably won't be for a few years," Bella shrugged. "So, there's the bad news. We seem to be pumping out evil bastards, and you can't visit them until they're older and saner."

"Or at least slightly less insane," Jacob added.

"Right, that might work too, in theory," Bella said.

"But I do have a grandson," John said.

"Yes, Dad," Bella said, "you have one extremely thick-headed and potentially suicidal grandson."

"Then I can die a happy man," John said.

Bella pouted at Jacob. "Is there something about the sound of the female voice that makes males incapable of picking up all the details?"

Jacob grinned and shook his head. "I'm not sure. Half the time I'm staring at your boobs and lose track of the conversation."

Groaning, Bella returned her attention to her dad. "I hope that's not the problem with you."

"No, I was distracted by the thought of a grandson playing football."

"Football?" Bella grunted when he grinned. "Are you fucking serious? Dad, you don't even watch football!"

"I've started watching since you left. I had to do something with my Mondays, as the dojo is always dead."

Jacob said, "I really doubt that Billy is going to play football. He'd probably eat the other team for lunch."

Bella groaned. "Poor taste, dear."

"No, football players are typically pretty flavorful," Edwina said.

"Juicy, yet firm," Jacob said.

"Juicy, yes," Edwina said. "And of course, being teens, they're at a tender age."

While John chuckled nervous laughter, Bella bowed her head to rub the bridge of her nose. "You know, dears, when we exchanged vows in front of the tribe, we agreed till death do us part. So please, don't make me kill both of you in front of my dad." She sighed and added, "I swear, I can't take you anywhere."

"So anyway, we brought baby pictures," Jacob said, getting the conversation back on track.

Bella took out a thick stack of printed photos, and she passed them over one at a time to give John enough time to coo shamelessly over each shot. Billy was a

round baby with thick limbs, and he looked like a baby-shaped blimp with a shark's grin.

Mixed in the stack were photos of Edwina's first child. When they got to her first photo, Edwina said, "This one is my girl, so she's probably not as cool to you."

John shook his head taking the picture just as eagerly. "You're all married, so she's my grandkid too." He smiled after examining the photo of a girl with light brown skin and bright grey eyes. "She's gorgeous. What's her name?"

"Rene," Edwina said.

John nodded. "It's a good name." Grinning, he passed the photo back to swap it for the next. "You must be very proud of her."

"I am," Edwina said.

The rest of the photos often led to stories and tangents, and everyone bantered back and forth for the better part of four hours before John suggested that they stay for dinner. They declined the invitation, claiming a prior engagement with Jacob's tribe.

John was reluctant to see them off, but he was more willing to say good-bye knowing that they would be visiting more often. He was also happy to know that the first stack of photos would soon have companions.

At the door, John stopped Bella, offering her an impish smile. "So, you've been playing around with Jacob's team, and for Edwina's. But which one do you really prefer?"

Bella laughed and shook her head. "Dad, I'm not for Team Jacob or Team Edwina. I'm for Team Do Them Both at the Same Time."

The End