

Chapter 6: The Mullens

That night I dreamed about Edwart. We were having dinner at Buca Di Beppo again, except now there were some bleachers on the side that I hadn't noticed the first time. Oh—that was because my swim meet was being held in the restaurant's pool. My grandparents called me over to the bleachers to give me some last minute advice, but then the whistle blew and I had to go back to the table before I could hear what it was.

"Belle," Edwart said, "I've been thinking. We've known each other for so many days now, and—" Right then, the waiter came up.

"Excuse me, sir, but I've noticed that your companion hasn't eaten any of her wasp salad yet. Would you mind if I asked why?"

"Sorry, we've been busy talking. She'll eat it now."

"Edwart," I whispered, "*I don't think all of these wasps are dead yet.*"

"You're being crazy and embarrassing, Belle. You can't make a wasp salad with live wasps."

He was right, so I took a bite—but one of the wasps was still alive and it stung my throat! Edwart got mad and asked to speak to the manager. But the manager was angry at us.

"This establishment cannot be held accountable if a live wasp flies in to try to find his brother. We made it more than clear that you were to put protective netting over your bowl."

"Well, this is a disaster," said Edwart. Then I woke up, thankfully, ready to be mad at Edwart for his dream actions.

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That day was important—I was going to meet the Mullens, and Edwart, who was coming to pick me up, was going to meet Charles. We were going to murder all of them and run away and live in the woods in Canada. They would try to extradite us, but even the weakest American baby can overpower a Canadian man, so it wouldn't be a problem.

"But do you really think you can look your parents in the eye and then wield an ax against them?" I had asked.

"No," said Edwart. "As I've said, I don't think we should kill our parents."

"Any being that opposes our love must die."

"Oh, Belle," he laughed softly, "When you talk like that, I become afraid, and if you continue to do so, I will feel compelled to tell the authorities. Besides, they don't even know we're dating yet."

"That in itself is a crime worthy of death," I muttered, but not so loud that Edwart could hear. Where did his loyalties lie? Perhaps he too would have to be destroyed.

I had told Charles that Edwart would be coming over the night before.

"Dad, there's something I need you to know." I had said, taking his hands and looking into his eyes. "I'm in love. But it's not—it's not a normal kind." It was true. Unlike other love, ours was real. We had affirmed this on the phone the night before, when we said that we loved each other after painstakingly describing what each of us had done in our day. Charles was quiet at first and just stood there, fumbling with his hat.

"Well, heck, Belle, I...to be honest I don't know what to tell you," he had managed to say. "I mean, I guess I haven't really been your *dad* dad since you were a baby, and so I...but you, you have to understand, it isn't the traditional way...but, if you really think it's what you want..."

So *that* was why things had been awkward between us.

"Charles, I'm talking about Edwart Mullen!"

"Oh, me too! Me too. Edwart. Wait a second, you thought...? That I...? No! You didn't *actually*, did you? That's so hilarious! I can't believe that you thought that!"

"So," he continued, taking some few breaks to shake his head and laugh because it was funny, "Tell me about this guy! Gimme the scoop! Dish it!"

"Well, he's coming over tomorrow and he's a va—" But I had stopped right there, because suddenly I remembered the song Charles had sung to me every night back in Phoenix. It went

*"If you ever have a boyfriend
Who is a vampire
I will trick him into
Getting into a car
Then I will drive the car
Into a lake
And on top of the car
I will put some stones."*

I had had to think fast. "And he's a rapist." Leave it to me to say the exact wrong thing. Maybe it's because he's a police officer, but Charles has always been dead-set against rapists.

"Now, dad, I want you to give him a chance," I had said, trying to fix my blunder. "He's paid his debt to society."

"He was in jail?" I had done it again—Charles hates all rapists, but he hates the ones who don't try to escape from the courtroom after they get sentenced even more. "It's a matter of honor, Belle," he used to say. "They should provide us with the entertainment of a chase."

"Um, no, no...it was the kind of rape where you don't have to go to jail...the lower kind."

Luckily, Charles's brain had gotten overworked from too much talking time, so he had passed out into a little coma, and I had gone up to bed.

Now that I was up, I would go down and move his head off the radiator I had left it propped against. But before that I had to deal with the side-effects of living in Switchblade. Every morning, the first thing I did was to get rid of the mold that had grown on me while I was sleeping. Most of the time I could scrape it away with a knife, but this time some had grown in my sinuses. I tilted my head back, poured in the numbing solution the government issued to us, and then the boiling fat. I couldn't help feeling bad after killing the mold like that, though—it was a living creature too, after all, and judging by the scientific treatises from the fifteenth century I had read, was actually made up of very small men who wore green caps and played tricks on housewives before the sun rose. So every day I would put some crushed up food in there, to give them a chance.

When I went downstairs, Charles was already up.

"Seizure got from hot...place," he said. And it was true. Half of his face was paralyzed, and the words I just wrote him saying are nothing at all like how he sounded.

As we were eating breakfast, I heard a knock at the door. My heart leapt—Edwart! But no, it was only stupid old Tom.

"Hi Belle, here are those bricks you asked for," he said, pointing to the crate on his back.

"Oh. You can put them in a corner, I guess." I had wanted something to hammer, so I figured why not bricks—and Tom seemed willing enough to bring them to me every day. It was like he was some kind of disgusting dog.

Just then, Edwart's car pulled in. I leapt up, made out with Tom just enough to keep him under my power, and rushed outside.

"I don't know why you think you need to ask Charles's permission to take me on a date," I told Edwart. "He lets me do whatever I want. Twenty bucks a pill, take it or leave it. Or what, you think you can get this shit somewhere else?" I said to the woman who had come by to get some oxycontin.

"Well, Belle, let's just say I'm a little...old-fashioned." So we went inside together, and Edwart showed my father the agreement that the learned man the next town over had drawn up for him. It said that in exchange for one date, Edwart would provide my father with four laying geese, a bundle of barrel staves, the use of his largest scythe in three weeks time, and rights of jus primae noctis for the peasant girl Margaret who worked in his fields. That arrangement pleased both of them, so they made their marks and shared a couple pints of gin. "Only two pints for me, Mr. Goose," said Edwart. "I'm driving."

As they drank, we listened to the radio, since I forgot to mention this book is set in an alternate universe with slightly less technology than the normal one. It was around the time Roger Federer had joined that new extreme tennis league, the XTA, and one of his matches was being broadcast.

"Federer serving, and...fault," said the announcer. "And will you listen to the ruckus those ball boys are making! They've got thundersticks like nobody's business!"

"Mr. Goose, I have a question," said Edwart.

"Federer serving and...fault two! The ball boys are heckling and now they're shooting tiny pieces of metal at him with peashooters. Federer is not pleased."

"Shoot, Ed."

"Federer goes to serve...AND THEY GET HIM RIGHT IN THE THROAT! He plucks the metal out but the man is in obvious pain, folks, and the ball boys are celebrating in their hovel! But, oh, their celebrations are cut short as the loose ball rolls to a stop right in front of Federer's feet."

"Do you know anything about Mormons? I've heard a lot about them recently, but I'm not sure what I think."

"Now, by league rules, the ball boys do have to get that ball...but they are allowed to bring one melee weapon with themt, and they've chosen the tripping rope. It's not

quite a normal-sized rope, a bit smaller for a smaller breed of man, but its serrated edges should do the trick. The boys are doing their weave...they're doing their weave...Federer is brandishing the sharp end of his racket, the look on his face says he's ready for anything."

"I myself am not a Mormon, Edwart, but I'll tell you something—some of the best men I've known have been followers of the teachings of Joseph Smith. As far as I can tell, the things that fellow said had a lot of truth in them."

"But they're too fast! The ball boys duck between his legs and he falls to the clay with a mighty roar! Roger Federer is out like a light!! His head hit first, it seem, and the crowd cheers as blood and clay mix together...The ball boys approach cautiously...they're twenty meters away...fifteen meters...ten meters...five meters away...they're reaching for his power pack..."

I piped up. "We may disagree about some things, Dad, but I agree with you there."

"AND IT WAS ALL A RUSE! Federer is fine! He's up on his feet and he's got the leader by the neck! One! Two! Three whacks and the little fellow is dispatched. Without their head honcho the smaller boys are panicking and Federer has managed to get two of them at the same time!"

"I too agree with this," said Bill, who had just wheeled in. "Hello, everybody."

"But now the umpire is off his chair, and he's calling unnecessary cruelty! Federer isn't having any of it, he just keeps on mashing! The umpire is swinging his weighted net, he's yelling the final warning! The net is swinging...faster, faster! Federer is beginning to gorge and the net is still swinging...HE'S DOWN! THE UMP IS DOWN! THE UMP IS DOWN AND FEDERER'S ASKING WHO'S NEXT!!"

"Go on a mission," said Charles, not to anyone in particular, just outwards. Then the game was over so I decided it was time to go. On our way out, Edwart bumped into a big thing covered with a sheet that I hadn't noticed before. The sheet fell off, revealing an old woman in a cage who spat at us and shook her rags.

"A curse upon you!" she shouted, rattling the bars, "A curse upon you and all those who give you sanctuary!"

"Don't worry, that's not a real witch," said Charles, bringing the cage out back and pushing it into the river that flowed through our yard. "It's only a freak in a cage I bought to scare you. But that was before I knew how respectful you are."

"Thank you, Mr. Goose. I'll try to bring your daughter back in one piece."

"Succeed," said Charles, shoving a gun in his mouth.

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"I'm worried about meeting your parents," I said when were in the car.

"Because you're scared they'll judge you, or because you're scared they'll ask you if you want a shiny new penny

and you'll say yes, and then when you grab the one they're holding out it's red hot?"

"A bit of both, I guess. I'm also worried they won't be able to control themselves when they catch my scent."

"You don't need to worry about that. My family, we're not like other vampires. We're civilized."

"So you've done some experiments and found out which components of blood you need to survive, and you buy large quantities of the ones you can buy (which must be most of them), and have found a humane way to get the few you can't?"

"Basically. We hunt deer and grizzly bears and tear them apart with our hands while they're still alive," he said. "Occasionally we relapse and kill humans, by tearing them apart with our hands while they're still alive."

"How did all of you come to be vampires?" I asked, my opinion of Edward unchanged even though if you think about it he did the kinds of things that only the most dangerous psychopath imaginable could do.

"Carlisle was the first one turned. That was back in London in the 1600s. He's the one who turned each of us. He found us when we were on the verge of death and he saved us. It's thanks to him that we're still here, living forever as a group with no connections apart from Carlisle being near us as we were dying. We never get to sleep or have children."

"It must be amazing to live forever and never sleep! You have an opportunity to accomplish things that nobody on Earth has ever had!"

"I mean, right now we mainly go to high school over and over, but yeah, there's a lot of stuff we're thinking about doing."

Then Edwart told me about some incredible and ancient European vampires. I guess I could tell you what he said, but instead you're going to get some teenagers talking about love. This is the first story I've narrated out into nothingness, without acknowledging whether I'm writing it down or saying it or what, or who I'm doing it for, or what year it is, or anything, so bear with me.

"The point is, I love you, Belle Goose. I love you so much."

"I love you so much too," I said.

"I don't know, it's like...I just—I love you. That's all there is to it. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Damn I love you. And don't worry—my family won't do a thing to harm you. Still, I might try to do something about that open wound, if I were you," he said with a grin.

"But I want them to know the real me," I said, "And this wound is just as much a part of me asfaasd...." Then I passed out. I had a little longer to wait, anyway. Before we went to his house, Edwart said he wanted to drag-race a Japanese driving gang that was making its way through Switchblade.

"Does that mean you'll be driving fast?"

"No," he said. A few minutes later the car was lying upside down in the bottom of a ravine. We had lost.

"You took our time, so now we must take your woman," one of the bikers said, swinging a chain around. Edwart paced back and forth.

"That's...that's pretty fair," he said, running his hands through his hair. "That's pretty fair."

"Why do you drive so fast?" I asked later, after we had escaped from that situation.

"Let's just say I have...enhanced abilities."

"Because you're a vampire?"

"No—because I'm a teenager. Think about it. As teens, our senses are the sharpest they'll ever be. That means it's okay for us to drive faster than older people."

"Besides," he said, "it's fun!"

I had to agree with him there. It was probably the most fun I'd ever had, and the faster we went, the more fun it got. In fact, the faster we went, the greater amount of fun we got out of each individual unit of increased speed. I turned to tell Edwart how I felt, but he was busy opening his door into the side of a motorcycle.

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Suddenly, we were there. Before us stood a vast stone mansion, which, if more people had known about it, would have gone a long way in dispelling that harmful notion that vampirism is solely a lower class phenomenon.

Edwart rushed around to open the door for me. At that moment, I realized something about him. I didn't know why—and I was I aware I might never know why, as long as I lived—but for some reason, as I stared at his extremely beautiful face and the gigantic house behind it, I knew for certain that I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

As soon as we were inside, Edwart's family rushed to greet me. What seemed like thirty people started circling around me, chattering away.

"Oh my god, you smell good."

"Good smell, good smell."

"(She really does smell good.)"

"Do you mind if I put my nose right on you? Right on your arm?"

"More smelly smelly please."

"If I could destroy every part of my brain except the part that smelled your smell, I would do it. I would do it in a second."

"Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah."

Eventually, Edwart made his way in through the crowd and pried me away.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I don't know any of these people. This isn't even my house. I don't know why I thought it was." Then we drove to a much bigger mansion.

Of course, as soon as I set foot inside, I tripped. Typical.

"Clumsy old Belle," Edwart said, stroking my hair. He swung me up in his arms and cradled me like a baby, as if I were a tiny baby that he was romantically in love with.

"Careful," I said, my cheeks burning. "You might not want to get too close to me—who knows what sort of accident might befall you..."

"Belle, I'm far more worried about what might happen to *you* because of *me*,"

But when I looked up at him, it seemed like he was actually pretty scared, and trying to find a place to put me down.

"Belle, can you stop that—that *jerking*?" he asked. He was talking about my body jerks. Ever since I was a little girl, I've been unable to control the movement of my limbs for prolonged periods of time. I guess that was part of the reason I was so clumsy all the time. But having an

explanation didn't make it any less embarrassing—when the jerks weren't shaking off all my clothes at once, they were doing things like making me be the first responder to a heart attack and putting the paddles right on either side of the old man's head. "No!" the paramedics would scream. "NO!"

The point is, I have a hard time controlling my body, and I told Edwart so. Then, because we were in love, we kissed. I'm not sure how, but the contact of our lips made me trip—like, a side-trip out of his arms. I can't even begin to describe what happened next, because it's too boring to try to make a string of accidents sound funny—you can only hear about me crashing through big sheets of glass so many times.

Anyway, the next thing I knew it was seventh months later, and I was taking my first steps since the accident. *And they said I'd never walk again, I thought, and that the skin grafts wouldn't take. And that I would never fly!*

I had missed a lot of school, but the mayor had made it so that everything was picking up exactly where I had left off.

"Because you are the daughter of a man who lives in this town, we can do no less," he told me.

"But now Switchblade is seven months behind the rest of the world," I said.

"No, I worked it out with the other mayors. We're all on the same time now."

"Oh," I said, and then I flew off to go find Edwart.