



# Guarding the Billionaire

**Author:** *Reba Bale*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** She's waited her whole life to find her fated mate, but this has to be a mistake!

**Teresa**

For years I've dreamed about finding my fated mate. She'd be a vampire like me, or at least a shifter. She'd be strong and adventurous and down to Earth. But the universe must have a weird sense of humor, because I've finally found my mate – and she's nothing like I expected. First, she's human, and a billionaire to boot. Second, she's more worried about breaking a nail than she is about the attempts on her life. And she's the girliest femme I've ever met.

**Flora**

I admit it, I've been a little sheltered. My parents were obsessive about my safety when I was growing up. As the only heir to the largest beauty company in the world, they had reason to fear for my safety. Now that they're gone, threats are coming at me hard and fast. That's why I decide to hire personal security from a company I can trust. My new bodyguard Teresa is grumpy and strong and so naturally beautiful she takes my breath away.

She says she doesn't want to act on the strong attraction between us, but I'm determined to wear her down. Now that I'm living life on my own terms, I'm ready to take what I want. And I want Teresa – forever.

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Prologue - Teresa

Six months ago...

“How did it go with your mate?” I asked my friend and coworker. Martha had recently found her soulmate, a human named Emily. It was every supernatural creature’s dream to find a fated mate, but this situation was complicated by the fact that there was a mob hit out on Emily and until the threat was eliminated, Martha and I were her bodyguards. My friend didn’t have the luxury of focusing on romance right now.

“I wish I’d had a chance to ask Wanda or Angie for some pointers on how to explain fated mates to humans,” Martha said. “I kind of blurted it out. Emily seemed kind of skeptical at first, but after we talked for a bit she seemed almost okay with it.”

“Of course she’s okay with it,” I reassured her. “She feels the mate pull too, even if it’s not as strong as what you feel. And you’re not exactly a troll. A lot of women would be glad to be your mate.”

Even I could hear the wistfulness in my tone. It wasn’t like me to let my emotions out, especially on the job, but then again, Martha was one of my closest friends, so I felt comfortable enough with her to be myself.

“You’ll find your mate someday too Teresa, don’t worry.”

I sighed deeply.

“For years I’ve dreamed about her, you know? She’s strong and tall, a badass vampire who likes to do all the things I do. I imagine us traveling the globe climbing mountains and bungee jumping off cliffs. But now I wonder if it’s all just a fantasy and I’ll never find her.”

Martha stopped walking long enough to meet my gaze.

“It’s going to happen for you Teresa, I promise.”

Teresa

“It was beautiful wedding, no?”

I looked up as my friend Boris sat next to me, his Belarusian accent still strong even after several years living in the United States. Boris was a huge, hulking man, probably because he was also a bear. He and his two bear shifter brothers ran a restaurant here in Seattle, but they also freelanced in private security. We’d worked together on several cases now and had also become good friends.

Today was Martha and Emily’s wedding and everyone from Sapphic Security was here, as well as Boris and his brothers. In front of us the newlyweds were dancing to a slow song, surrounded by other couples. They stared into each other’s eyes, looking deliriously happy.

“Yeah, it was a nice wedding.”

I sounded glum, and Boris picked up on it right away. When you spent countless hours on a stakeout with someone, you got to know them pretty well.

“What is this sadness?”

I sighed. “Nothing, I guess I’m just feeling like...”

“Like all of our friends have found our mates but we have not?” Boris filled in the blank.

“Exactly. And none of them even started off wanting mates.”

“I understand, my brothers and I feel the same. We thought when we move to U.S. of A. we find perfect women for us, but so far no luck.” He wrapped one beefy arm around my shoulder, nearly knocking me off my chair. “Is too bad you are liesbijanka.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. “Believe me Boris, if I liked dick I’d snatch you up so fast, fated mate or not.”

We watched the dancers in silence for a few moments until a waiter wandered by. I waved him down and grabbed two glasses of the signature cocktail. I wasn’t sure what was in it, but it was going down easily enough that I had a little bit of a buzz going despite my supernatural metabolism.

I held up my glass and tapped it against Boris’s. “To finding our mates.”

“To finding our mates,” he repeated.

“Taylor!”

I jumped as I heard my boss Lois practically yell out my name behind me. She clomped around to face me, clearly uncomfortable in the silky suit her mate had likely forced her to wear. Lois’s typical uniform was camouflage cargo pants, a tank top, and combat boots, no matter what the season. When Martha announced in our staff meeting that she and Emily were getting married, the first thing Lois had said

was, “I suppose I need to dress up for this thing?”

“Hey Lois, are you enjoying the wedding?”

It was hard to tell. My boss wore a scowl as her default expression, except when she was talking to her mate Monique. Then her face softened and sometimes she almost looked like she was trying to smile, although her facial muscles didn't seem to move in that direction.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“I was enjoying dancing with my mate until I got a call from headquarters sending us a new client. Good news. You’re needed on a personal protection case.”

I smothered a sigh. Ninety-nine percent of the time personal protection mean standing around while rich assholes did things they thought were important. Some of our clients had been more entertaining, mega superstar singer Tasha Blue came to mind there, but that was definitely the exception to the rule.

“I’ll need to see you in the office tomorrow at ten hundred hours,” Lois continued. “They’re emailing over some information for us.”

“Is the client in Seattle?” I asked, hoping that I wasn’t going to be dispatched to a job in New York City where our headquarters was. I hated huge cities, that’s why Seattle suited me just fine.

“Affirmative.”

“Then why did the call come through headquarters?” I asked.

Sapphic Security was one of the top security companies in the world. The company was founded by an ex-military shifter couple who were tired of dealing with prejudice against women in security work, particularly lesbians. You didn’t need to be queer or a supe to work at the company, but most of us were. I joined Sapphic Security after I was honorably discharged from the military. Like most vampires, I worked in the Seattle office. The rainy weather we had most of the year here suited me.

“The client’s lawyer knows someone at the NYC office,” Lois explained. “They didn’t even know we had a Seattle location.”

Lois’s face softened as her mate called to her. “Lois honey, enough work.”

My boss sent her mate a look filled with so much love it made my heart pinch.

“I’m coming sweetie.” Her voice hardened to its normal gruff tone as she turned back to me. “Ten hundred hours. Don’t be late, I hate working on weekends.”

I resisted telling her that I wasn’t a fan of it either. I didn’t stay at the wedding much longer. If I was taking a client on a Sunday, I figured I should be well rested. I’d been in this business long enough to know it was best to be prepared for anything.

When I got into the office the next morning it was eerily quiet. Normally we kept a skeleton crew going on the weekend, but with most of the team attending the wedding, there were only two people in the office when I came in, and they both appeared to be hung over.

I knocked on my boss’s office door, unsurprised to find her back in her usual attire. Judging by the shadows under her eyes, she and Monique must have stayed at the wedding much later than I had.

“Good morning, boss,” I greeted her. “I brought you a cappuccino.”

Lois’s eyes widened and her lips quirked as if they were trying their best to smile. Her love of coffee was legendary, and I figured I might as well take this opportunity to suck up a little.

“Thanks,” she said gruffly, closing her eyes briefly as she swallowed down some of her cappuccino.

I sat across from her, crossing one leg over the other as I sipped my own coffee. There was no sense trying to rush Lois. She'd tell me what was going on when she was good and ready.

"So this new client they sent us from HQ is kind of a big deal here in Seattle," she started.

"Aren't all of our clients a big deal?" I interrupted. We provided security service for rock stars, politicians, CEOs, movie stars, and their loved ones.

"Have you heard of Flora Meyer?" Lois asked.

I shook my head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"She's the new CEO of Meyer Beauty, and our new client."

At my blank look she explained, "Meyer Beauty is one of the world's largest and most successful beauty companies. They've been around for over a hundred years. After almost going out of business during the Great Recession in two thousand eight, they reinvented themselves with all natural products. They were one of the first major beauty companies to denounce animal testing and unnecessary chemicals. Or at least that's what my mate told me."

While Lois was super butch, her mate Monique was the opposite. She always looked feminine and perfectly put together, wearing the latest fashion. I wasn't surprised that Monique was up on the latest beauty news.

Monique was kind of a silent partner here. She didn't work in the security business, but she'd invested a good amount of her family's money to create a branch of the company here in Seattle, likely because she was from this city and she wanted her mate to have a job here. Lois had been working at the New York office when they



first met.

“So why does Make-Up Lady need a bodyguard?” I asked.

“Her parents died about a year ago in a car crash under what a lot of people think are very suspicious circumstances,” Lois explained. “Flora was their only daughter and sole heir to the company. Her parents were fanatical about her safety after an attempted kidnapping when she was a toddler, but unfortunately they weren’t as careful about their own security. Or someone slipped past their protection. Either way, the cops claim it was just an accident. Those lazy fuckers didn’t want to have to get off their asses and properly investigate, I’m sure.”

My boss was not a big fan of the cops. Honestly none of us were. We had too many clients who were put in danger because of disinterested law enforcement. Of course the cops didn’t like the work we did either.

“If she has security, why does she need us?”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“Her attorney thinks whoever came for the parents will be after her next and with good reason,” Lois explained. “She’s gotten some threats, and the other day someone cut her brake lines. I’m guessing her security team is not exactly stellar.”

“What’s the motive to kill her?” I asked.

“Probably the usual. Money. Someone wants control of the company and its assets,” Lois said. “There’s an entire cast of characters who stand to make a claim if Flora Meyer bites it.”

My boss was nothing if not sensitive.

“Who’s coming with me?” I asked.

“We don’t want to alert current security that we’ve got another set of eyes on her, just in case they’re involved,” Lois said. “You’re going in alone. You can be her new personal trainer.”

“How am I supposed to protect her at work if I’m a trainer?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to be her assistant or something?”

Lois shrugged. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out. Whatever you do, don’t pretend to be her girlfriend.”

“Why? Is she straight?”

“I have no idea. All I know is every time one of you idiots pretends to date a client

you wind up falling in love with them. Let's try to keep this one professional, okay Taylor? I'm running a security company here, not a goddamned matchmaking service."

Flora

"I don't know about this Henry. Are you sure it's absolutely necessary for me to hire a bodyguard?"

"Flora, we can't ignore the threats you've been receiving. And that business with your car..."

"I remember," I interrupted, not wanting to be reminded about the day last week when I pressed on my brakes at a stop light and nothing happened. I'd just narrowly missed having an accident in a major intersection before careening down a steep hill and through a city park before hitting a patch of thick shrubs that finally stopped the car. It was a miracle no one was killed. Especially me, given that we'd later found out that my brake lines had been cut.

"I already have a security team at home and the office," I reminded him.

"Yeah, and they let your car get tampered with, so right now you have to assume that no one can be trusted," Henry continued.

"Even you?"

I'd known Henry Shapiro my entire life. He was the best man at my parents' wedding and had been our family's personal attorney for as long as I could remember. He and his late wife were my godparents.

"Your father was my oldest and dearest friend. I'd protect you with my life and, as

you know, I have more money than I know what to do with, so I don't need yours. Even so, I'd be remiss if I didn't suggest you be cautious around everyone, including me."

I sighed. "Okay, when does this bodyguard arrive?"

"She should be there by noon. Her name is Teresa Taylor."

"What firm is she from?" I asked.

"They're called Sapphic Security. It's a well respected company with offices around the world. They're a bunch of ex-military types, primarily women, but every one of them is tough as nails. They have a great success rate, probably because most of them are supernaturals."

"Supernaturals? Wow, that's unusual. I didn't know they were allowed to serve in the military."

Unbeknownst to most humans, there was a supernatural world that operated alongside our own. Vampires, witches, and even shapeshifters lived as humans, except when they didn't. My mother had some shifter cousins, so we were a little more up to speed on the supernatural world than most humans. The average person was completely unaware of their supernatural neighbors, and my understanding was that the supernatural creatures preferred it that way.

"Oh yeah, they always have served. It's encouraged, actually. Some of them are embedded with humans, but most of them are assigned to special units working on covert ops or the types of assignments the military likes to pretend they're not involved in."

"How am I going to explain this person's presence if I can't say she's a bodyguard?"

I asked.

“She’s going to be your personal trainer.”

I laughed out loud at that. “Henry, you know I don’t like to break a sweat.”

“Well I figured you could get healthy while we’re figuring out who’s trying to kill you.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“I’ll have you know I’m a size two.”

“Your clothing size does not mean you’re healthy Flora. To be honest, you could stand to gain a few pounds of muscle. You’ve been wasting away since your parents passed. I’ve been worried about you, and this bodyguard is some kind of a health nut.”

I huffed impatiently. “If I gain weight I’ll never be able to find clothes that fit me.”

I was petite, but my hips and breasts were a little too big for my frame. When I gained weight I looked like a giant apple with arms and legs.

“You’re super rich Flora, you can have your clothes made special to fit you.”

“This is a ridiculous conversation,” I said. “Besides, maybe the cops are right and there’s some other explanation for what happened with my brakes.”

“If you suggest that mice chewed through your brake lines or something equally ridiculous I’m going to hang up,” Henry threatened.

I sighed. I knew Henry was right. I didn’t think my cut brake lines were an accident any more than I thought my parents slipped on black ice that night. But if I focused on the idea that someone wanted to harm us, kill us even, I just wanted to cry. And I never cried.

“And let’s not forget the threats you’ve been receiving the past few months.”

I was trying hard to forget that actually. Maybe vague threats about killing me just came with the territory given my wealth and stature in the company. There were a lot of crazies out there, that didn't mean that anyone would follow through on those threats.

Hopefully.

“Okay, so my personal trainer slash bodyguard is going to be here for how long?”

“As long as it takes for us to figure out who's behind these attacks,” Henry replied. “I've got an entire team at Sapphic Security running down leads on this. Hopefully they'll turn something up quickly and you can go back to living your normal life.”

“A normal life without my parents,” I reminded him sadly. “Keep me informed how things are going, will you please?”

“Of course. And please be careful Flora. You're like a daughter to me. I don't want to lose you too.”

After I hung up with Henry I felt out of sorts. I headed downstairs to the private gym in the basement and did some gentle stretches before getting ready for my new bodyguard to arrive. I might not like to work out, but I loved yoga and pilates. They kept me slim and flexible and helped center my mind.

By the time I was finished I was already feeling better. I headed upstairs to change my clothes and get ready for the day. I'd just finished my hair and make-up when I got the call from the guard stand at the front gate of my family's estate.

“Miss Meyer, there's a Teresa Taylor here for you. She says you're expecting her.”

“Send her through Bob, thank you.”

I headed to the front door, waiting as someone pulled around a nondescript sedan to the parking area on the side of the house. About a minute later a woman came striding towards me, looking everywhere at once. She was dressed in black jeans, a black tank top with no jacket despite the chilly weather, and black boots.

My breath caught as I saw her face. She was beautiful. Her features were perfectly symmetrical and smooth, her skin extremely pale, even by Seattle standards. Her plump lips were dark red, although I didn't see any evidence of a lip paint on them. Dark brown eyebrows curved over her wide, almond shaped eyes that were an unusually bright shade of blue.

She was tall and muscular but still feminine with high breasts and rounded hips. A large duffel bag was slung over one shoulder with something sticking out of it that looked like...

"Is that a sword?" I asked.

The woman's eyes snapped to mine. "Flora Meyer? I'm Teresa Taylor from Sapphic Security and... uh..."

She stopped in front of me, looking like she'd just seen a ghost. I stretched out my hand.

"Yes, I'm Flora. Nice to meet you Teresa."

When I took her hand I felt a weird little tingle, as if she were electrified. I guess she felt it too, because Teresa just stared down at our joined hands like she'd never seen fingers before.

She seemed to snap back to the present as I pulled my hand away.



“Why don’t you come inside and I’ll show you to your room?” I suggested. “Then we can have some herbal tea and get to know each other.”

“Do your guys do perimeter checks?” she asked.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“What? Perimeter checks?”

“Do they go around the edge of the property at least once an hour and check your doors and windows, that kind of thing?” She sounded impatient.

“No clue,” I shrugged. “Now let me show you...”

“I’ll need you to find out immediately,” she interrupted. “You should know what your security contract says.”

“There’s a contract?” I frowned.

“Of course there’s a contract, do you think they just show up here for fun?”

This lady was pissing me off.

“I realize I pay them for their work,” I said with exaggerated patience. “I just never thought about there being a contract. My parents used to take care of all that.”

“Your parents have been dead for over a year, haven’t they?”

I blinked rapidly to keep from crying. “Yeah.”

“Well, it’s time to learn how to take care of yourself.”

Teresa

I stared into the eyes of the woman my inner demon was insisting was my mate. This had to be a mistake. Maybe my mate was around here somewhere, one of the guards perhaps, and my vamp side was confused, focusing on the nearest person it saw.

There was absolutely no way that Flora Meyer was my mate. Surely the gods wouldn't be that cruel?

When I was a little girl, my best friend and I used to dream about finding our fated mates. Tracie was on Team Hetero, and her dream mate was some dude who was tall, dark, and handsome. Maybe a shifter or a powerful warlock, or even a good-sized human. My dream mate was always someone like me. A 'tomboy' as my mother used to call me. Adventurous. Smart. Curvy but fit. Strong.

This petite woman with her carefully styled hair, layers of make-up, and manicured nails was nothing like I'd imagined. She didn't even know her security team was under a contract, how the fuck was she running a major corporation?

No, this absolutely had to be some kind of a misunderstanding.

She was pretty, no doubt about it, although I preferred a more natural look. Her hair was dark and wavy, her eyes large and brown. She was on the thin side, with a flat stomach and thin legs, and although her breasts were full and natural looking, the rest of her was mostly angles, with no visible muscle tone. She was wearing a blue wrap dress and heels like she'd just gotten back from a luncheon at the country club. Maybe she had.

"Does anyone else live in the house with you?" I asked, tearing my eyes away from her breasts.

"Just my housekeeper, Patty."

Oh, maybe the housekeeper was my mate. “Is she here?”

“No,” Flora replied. “She went to Portland for a couple of months to help her daughter who just had a baby. Now I just have a temp service come in a few days a week.”

Okay, Grandma Patty was definitely not my mate.

It’s Flora. Flora is your mate!my vamp insisted. I ignored her.

“How many people are on shift for security?” I asked.

“Um? I think two or three. I’ve never seen more than three people here.”

I resisted the urge to sigh. “How many of them are female?”

“None. I’ve only seen men working here.”

Damn it, that meant my mate wasn’t on the security team. Fate had to know I was a lesbian.

“Is anyone else here at your house regularly?” I asked, desperate to associate that tantalizing scent of my mate with someone else. Anyone else.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“Miguel our gardener comes once a week, but other than that, I don’t have a lot of guests,” Flora said. “No one else has been here in months.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on here with the mate thing, but I had a job to do so I told my inner vamp to calm down and resolved to figure this out later. That was one thing I’d learned in the military – how to lock all my feelings up in a box and save them for later.

“I’m going to need to sweep this place for bugs,” I said, looking around with distaste at the size of the mansion. “I think I’ll need to call in reinforcements, otherwise it will take all damned day.”

Sliding my phone out of my pocket, I sent a text to Boris. I knew the restaurant was closed today, so hopefully he and his brothers would do me a solid and come out to help me secure the building.

Boris texted back immediately.

“My guys will be here in less than an hour,” I said. “Why don’t you show me around, but don’t say anything about security until after we’ve cleared the house. Once we’re inside, I’m your trainer, nothing else. Assume someone is listening, and maybe watching us. Got it?”

Flora looked a little shellshocked and I resisted the strong urge I suddenly had to comfort her.

“One question,” she said, raising her hand like she was a kid in school. “What’s with

the big sword?”

I glanced down at the bag I'd set on the ground while we talked. I'd almost forgotten I'd brought it.

“That's Irma,” I said.

“Irma? Your sword has a name?” Flora's eyes were huge.

“Affirmative. Irma and I have been through a lot of battles together.”

Honestly, none of those battles were real, but she didn't need to know that. I totally could use Irma to defend myself or kill someone if I needed to. Not that I used it for work though, my gun was a little less obvious to carry around with me.

“Are your battles with the Knights of the Round Table?” she asked incredulously.  
“Who uses a sword in this day and age?”

“I do.”

“Wouldn't a gun be easier?” she asked.

“Yep.” I couldn't resist messing with her. “Now show me around this architectural travesty.”

As soon as we entered the house I assumed the role of personal trainer.

“Let's talk about your fitness goals while you show me around,” I said to Flora.  
“Then we'll look at what you have in your fridge.”

“Fridge?” she said blankly.

“It’s a big cold box in the kitchen where your servants keep the food,” I said snidely.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t have servants. Well, except the housekeeper I guess. But I certainly don’t think of her like that.”

“Do you cook for yourself?” I asked skeptically.

“Well, no. I’m not very good in the kitchen, but I have an excellent meal delivery service.”

Of course she did.

I followed Flora up a giant marble staircase to the second level. This entire mansion was pretentious as hell. I didn’t understand how anyone could live here, but I kept my opinions to myself.

“You have your choice of six bedrooms,” Flora told me when we got upstairs. “There are three on this side and three on the other wing.”

Her house had wings. I repressed a sigh.

“Which one is closest to yours?” I asked.

She looked surprised but didn’t ask any questions. “This one.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

She led me into a large comfortable looking bedroom. It had a queen sized bed with a comforter that was pure white, matching the carpet. Artfully arranged pillows gave it a pop of color. The room had a wooden desk in one corner, a television affixed to the wall across the bed, and a reading nook with a chair and table facing the windows overlooking the back yard. Two doors inside led to an in-suite bathroom and a walk-in closet with built in drawers and shelves. The room alone was about the size of my entire apartment.

“Does this work okay for you?” Flora asked as she watched me walking around.

“I’ve slept in worse,” I mumbled. “Now let me see your bedroom.”

Flora led me to the room next door, and I cataloged the difference in this space. Unlike the rest of the house, this room was filled with warm colors. The walls were painted a moss green, with a darker green carpet on the floor. Her bed had about a thousand throw pillows on it, all in a riot of color. The chairs near the window were upholstered in a gold fabric that worked perfectly in the room, and abstract art with bright colors adorned the walls. I felt instantly comfortable in here.

“No TV?” I asked.

“I don’t really watch TV,” Flora said.

I nodded. It was the first positive thing I’d heard about her since I got here.

I stepped into the bathroom, noting about a million jars of creams and potions on a shelf next to the sink. In my own bathroom I had two things: shampoo and soap.



“What’s in here?” I asked, pointing to the other door.

“It’s my dressing room.”

I frowned. What was a dressing room? Opening the door I realized it was basically a giant closet with rows of shelves, cabinets and drawers. There was some kind of fancy upholstered bench in the middle. On one side of the space was a brightly lit make-up table with shelves of cosmetics and hair products stacked on either side. A blow dryer, curling iron, and some other appliances hung neatly next to one of the shelves.

Jesus Christ. My mate had ‘high maintenance’ written all over her. I turned around quickly, not realizing that Flora was right behind me. She jumped back, then stumbled on one of her ridiculously high shoes. Fortunately for her, I had supernatural reflexes. I grabbed her arms and pulled her close to keep her upright. The motion made her brush against me, sending a jolt of awareness zinging through my body.

Flora’s mouth opened on a gasp as I stared down at her, my entire body vibrating with the need to claim her.

“Oh my God! Your teeth!”

Flora

I stared in shock as two of Teresa’s seemed to grow right in front of my eyes, pressing down over her bottom lip like something out of a cartoon.

She pulled away from me so quickly I almost fell over again. I thought we’d been having a moment there, but maybe not. It was too bad, because Teresa was a stunningly beautiful woman. I could look into the depths of those brilliant blue eyes

forever. But it was clear she'd made up her mind not to like me, which was fine. She could dislike me if she wanted. I would just do what my mother had taught me at a young age: kill her with kindness.

"Sorry about that," Teresa mumbled, pressing her palm over her mouth.

"But how did that... oh! You're a vampire, aren't you?"

I'd never met a vampire in real life, but I'd watched enough episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer to realize what was happening. Although usually in Buffy the vamps had their fangs descend when they were trying to kill someone. Teresa, on the other hand, looked like she was thinking about kissing me.

But then again, I had to be imagining it. Maybe the stress of everything going on was finally getting to me.

"You know about vamps?" Teresa asked carefully.

"I have shifters in my family – related by marriage not blood – so I'm aware of the supernatural world, yes. But to my knowledge, I don't know any vampires."

"Well, I'm sorry that happened," she said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"What causes it?" I asked curiously, waving vaguely at her mouth.

"It's, uh, a reflex sometimes."

I had the sense that she wasn't telling me the truth, but then again, it wasn't really my business.

"Well I knew that Sapphic Security mostly hired supernaturals, so don't worry, I'm

not freaked out. And your secret is safe with me.”

“It’s not really a secret,” Teresa said. “But there’s also no reason to talk about it in a professional capacity.”

“I get it,” I reassured her. “You want to see the refrigerator now? I’m pretty sure I can figure out what it is.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Teresa's eyes bugged out and I started laughing. "I'm kidding. Come on."

"Do you mind if I keep some blood in there?" Teresa asked. "It lasts longer if I can keep it cold."

I shrugged. "No problem."

After a brief stop to get the blood from Teresa's room we headed down to the kitchen. Returning to her personal trainer ruse, my bodyguard evaluated the contents of my refrigerator.

"This is all pretty good," she said. "I would like to see you eating more protein though. You need to sustain yourself during a workout, to ensure that you don't break down your muscles."

"Um, I don't really like working out."

I could practically see her straining herself trying not to roll her eyes. For someone who was only pretending to be my trainer, she was taking this pretty seriously.

"We'll see about that."

After perusing the refrigerator Teresa started searching the cabinets, giving me a running commentary on everything she saw there. Then she found my secret stash...

"What is this?" she said, pointing to a cabinet that was full of boxes of Rice Krispies, bags of marshmallows, and several tubes of Pringles potato chips.

“Looks like potato chips and marshmallows,” I said pertly, giving her a big smile. “And before you say a word, you’ll take away my Pringles over my cold dead body.”

“And the marshmallows?” she asked.

“I like to make Rice Krispie treats,” I said. “Sue me.”

Teresa shook her head. “You don’t exercise and you eat crap, I don’t understand why you’re so skinny.”

“I’m blessed with an excellent metabolism,” I shot back cheerily.

Just then my phone rang with a call from security.

“Miss Meyer, there are three very large men here for you,” the guard on duty said. “They said they’re helping you with training?”

“That will be my friends,” Teresa said, clearly hearing the conversation. “Send them back.”

A few minutes later I opened the door to three of the largest men I’d seen in my life. They were each at least a foot taller than me and twice as broad, with brown hair, brown eyes and adorable chin dimples. Bypassing me, they went one by one to Teresa, each of them gathering her up into a hug.

“You guys just saw me yesterday,” she protested with a laugh. “Come on now, get serious and meet my new... personal training client, Flora Meyer. Flora, these are my trainer buddies Boris, Yuri, and Alexsei.

Boris grabbed my hand, bringing my fingers to his lips. “It is pleasure, Miss Flora,” he said in an accent that was vaguely Eastern European.

We both froze as we heard what sounded like an animal growling. Boris looked over his shoulder at the other two men, and then fixed his gaze on Teresa.

“She is...?”

“No, she’s not,” Teresa snapped. “It’s all a mistake.”

“Yet you growl,” he said mildly as he took a big step away from me. “My brothers and I will show ourselves around and meet you in the kitchen when we are done.”

“Maybe you can check out the kitchen first,” Teresa suggested. “It’s something to see.”

Boris headed to the kitchen with us trailing him. He pulled out something that looked like a wand and systematically pointed it at every inch of the kitchen before turning back to Teresa.

“Is clear. I will continue in other rooms now.”

Teresa walked to the refrigerator and helped herself to a can of Coke before returning to the table. Pointing to a chair she said, “Tell me everything. Start at the beginning.”

I got up to get a bottle of water, then sat across from her. Looking down, I sighed.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“Oh no!”

Teresa was immediately on alert. “What’s the matter?”

“I broke a nail. I must have snagged it when I tripped earlier. I hope I can smooth it down, there’s no way my manicurist will be able to fit me in this week, she’s very in demand.”

My bodyguard gave me a look of distaste. “Can we focus, please? I want to hear about the threats.”

“My parents were always paranoid about security,” I started. “At least I thought they were paranoid. I only learned as an adult that someone tried to kidnap me when I was a baby,” I explained. “We’ve always had a small security team at the house here and at our office, but when I was a teenager my parents started insisting that I have someone follow me around all the time when I wasn’t at home. I refused, and it was a huge battle that I thought I’d won, but I later learned they were just more covert.”

“How so?”

“When I went away to college, I got suspicious that my dorm roommate was in every single class with me. I finally worked out that they were a bodyguard pretending to be a student. I confronted my parents, and that’s when they told me about the incident when I was a baby, but even still, I thought they were being ridiculous.”

Teresa nodded. “When did you start to think it wasn’t just paranoia?”

“When they were murdered.”

I coughed then took a long drink of water to clear the lump in my throat.

“What happened?” Teresa’s voice was suddenly gentle.

“I was supposed to be with them that night,” I said quietly. “They were going to a big event at the Seattle Art Museum, and we were all listed as co-chairs for the event. Except the night it happened I was in the middle of a really bad period – I have endometriosis and get pretty sick sometimes – so I stayed home. The police said they slipped on black ice, but I don’t believe it.”

“What do you believe?” I asked.

“Someone was chasing them.”

Teresa

The pain in Flora’s eyes made my chest hurt, which was really weird because clients telling me terrible stories didn’t usually affect me.

It’s because she’s your mate, the voice inside me pointed out. I ignored it.

“So the police said it was an accident, you think it wasn’t...”

“I know it wasn’t,” Flora interjected.

I nodded. “What’s happened since then?”

“After my parents died, the board of directors named me the CEO of Meyer Beauty. There was some grumbling of course, but I’ve worked at the company since I was a



kid. I've worked in every department in the company, and eventually I worked my way up to chief operating officer, the position I held before my father died."

Flora paused before adding, "There's no doubt that I benefitted from this being my family's company, but I also worked very hard to get where I am, at the expense of a lot of other things in my life."

I liked this version of Flora, strong and sure of herself. It was different from the way she'd been acting when I first got here. Then I remembered the shelves of make-up and skincare products in her 'dressing room' and felt a little less impressed.

"Tell me about the grumbling."

"It was the usual stuff. I'm a nepo baby. I didn't earn my position. I didn't take any of it seriously. The fact that I own eighty-five percent of the company isn't enough. I was grieving the loss of my family and trying to learn a new job. But then the letters started."

"What kind of letters."

"Like something out of a detective show. Step down now or you'll be sorry or Quit now, that kind of thing."

"I thought you didn't watch TV," I said, recalling what she'd said in the bedroom.

Flora frowned like she didn't appreciate my questioning her.

"I said I don't watch much TV, not that I've never watched TV," she corrected. "Anyway, I thought they were just harmless attempts to scare me until the car accident. I was driving home, and my brakes went out while I was going downhill. I managed to avoid other cars and steer my way into a park, where I drove into some

bushes to stop the car. Later I found out my brake lines were cut.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“Thursday. That’s when my lawyer suggested extra security.”

“And you trust this lawyer?” I asked.

Flora nodded. “He’s my father’s oldest friend. And my godfather. I’d trust him with my life. And before you ask, he’s as rich as I am. There’s no reason for him to off me.”

“Then the question is, who does have a reason to off you?” I replied. “Who benefits if you are out of the picture?”

Flora raised her eyes upwards, like she was accessing information from her brain. It was kind of adorable.

“The current CFO wanted my job,” she said, counting suspects off on her fingers. “There’s the guy who owns ten percent of the stock, an old partner of my father’s who had a falling out with him but kept his partial ownership of the company. I’ve never met him, but my father always talked about how pissed he was at my parents. I guess also my aunt and my cousins.”

“The shifters?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“What kind of shifters are they?”

“They’re some kind of foxes, I think. I’ve only met them a couple of times.”

That immediately put them up higher on my suspect list. Not to stereotype, but those foxes tended to be shady.

“Anyone else you can think of?” I asked.

“No. My circle is pretty small.”

“We need to think of a better plan than the personal trainer story to explain my presence,” I said. “I know your godfather suggested that to my boss, but it makes no sense for you to have a trainer in your office. I need to be able to follow you around at work, and also to have a reason to nose around looking for clues. Any ideas?”

Flora looked upwards again, something I was fast learning meant she was thinking.

“Oh, you know what? I only have a temporary assistant right now. The lady who worked for my father retired when I took over and I haven’t had time to find a permanent person.”

“In a year?” I asked incredulously.

“I’ve had a lot going on,” she said defensively. “I can tell the agency to end the person’s service.”

“Or you can say you need a second assistant,” I suggested. “That way that person can continue to keep your calendar and answer the phone, but I can come with you to meetings, and act like I’m taking notes.”

Flora shrugged. “Prepare to be bored.”

After the bears finished their sweep of Flora's gigantic mansion, I sent them on their way with a promise to call them if we needed any more help. I had a bad feeling that we'd need help sooner or later, but maybe I'd catch a break and this case would be easy to solve. While I was working the personal protection, my colleagues at Sapphic Security would be monitoring security cameras both here and at the office as well as researching everyone who came into contact with Flora. By the time they were done, we'd have a file on everyone from the guy who picked up the trash to whoever did her hair.

"What do you usually do on Sunday afternoons?" I asked.

To my surprise, Flora's face turned red and she avoided my gaze.

"What?"

"I, um, order Thai food."

"Every Sunday?" I asked.

She nodded. "I love Thai food."

"Your face is red, and I can hear your heartbeat speeding up, are you... embarrassed?" I guessed.

"You can hear my heartbeat?" Flora asked incredulously.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I tapped my ear. “Supes have better hearing than humans. I don’t understand, why are you embarrassed about ordering Thai food?”

“I’m not embarrassed about the Thai food,” Flora said slowly. “It’s what I do after I order the Thai food.”

My mind was immediately flooded with inappropriate thoughts that stuttered to a halt when she added, “I watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

“Buffy the Vampire Slayer?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“It’s a TV show that was super popular in the late nineties and early two thousands.”

I must have given her a blank look because she added, “It’s about this teenage girl who’s a vampire slayer. She was chosen by fate and there’s only one slayer. Well, most of the time there’s only one slayer, and she alone stands against the vampires. And demons and other creepy characters. She keeps pretty busy since she’s the only slayer in the world and her high school is on top of a hellmouth. I can’t believe you never watched it.”

“Do you really think someone like me would watch something about a vampire slayer?”

“There are some good vampires in it too,” she rushed to add. “Well, two good vampires.”

“And what do the good vampires do?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“They kill other vampires and some of the demons too,” Flora replied.

“Well, this I’ve got to see.”

Flora

As long as I could remember, Thai delivery and Buffy was my Sunday thing. I’d started the ritual right after I graduated college. I’d watched a lot of episodes of the show with my bodyguard/roommate while I lived in the dorms, and when I graduated and moved back home, I decided to watch all the episodes I’d missed by starting from the first season. Each week I’d watch four or five episodes and just relax.

Even though I lived with my parents, our house was huge, and I could go days without seeing them since they lived in a separate wing. They rarely used the game room in the basement so that’s where I’d set up for the afternoon.

Having someone join me was a new experience. Even when I was dating someone, I’d always protected Thai and Buffy night as ‘me time’. While I knew I could have easily told Teresa that I wanted to be alone and let her hang out somewhere else in the house while I went through my Sunday afternoon routine, for some reason I really wanted her to join me.

It was probably because I felt drawn to her for some reason, like I really wanted to get to know her. There was definitely an attraction between us, or at least I felt attracted to her, but it felt like more. It was almost like I’d just found someone I was looking for or something.

It was ridiculous of course. It was painfully obvious she thought I was an idiot, some vapid rich girl. She seemed super grumpy, which just made me default to cheerful, but I couldn’t help but notice that Teresa wasn’t like that with the three guys who’d come to help her today. With them she was smiling and friendly, unlike me.

I remembered the way she'd growled when Boris kissed my hand. What was that all about?

I watched her from underneath my eyelashes as she perused the menu from my favorite Thai restaurant. I'd pulled up the Door Dash page on my iPad and told her to order whatever she wanted. Her blue eyes were serious as she studied the menu options like it was a multiple choice quiz.

Teresa was stunningly beautiful with a coiled strength that gave her just a touch of danger. I looked down at her mouth, remembering when her fangs had extended in my dressing room, and wondering why that happened. For someone who seemed very in control, that change in her teeth had seemed to take her by surprise.

"Here you go."

Teresa slid my iPad back across the table, catching me staring at her but not calling me out on it. I added a few items to the order then pressed submit. Thirty seconds later my phone beeped with a text.

"The food will be here in forty-five minutes," I said. "Are you ready to watch your first Buffy episode?"

\*\*\*

"That's just bullshit."

I looked over at Teresa who was glowering at the screen, a container of drunken noodles in her hand.

"What is?"



“Killing vamps with a stake to the heart doesn’t work.”

I paused the program, leaving the teenaged hero frozen in the midst of a roundhouse kick to another vampire. “Sure it does.”

Teresa shook her head stubbornly.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“I was in the military. I know lot of ways to kill a man. The chances of getting a stake in the exact right position to slip through the ribs and hit the heart? Very low.”

“But not impossible, right?” I countered, sending her a sunny smile that seemed to make her even crankier. “And then... poof!”

“There’s no poof,” she said stubbornly.

“You’d still be dead though right? Just like any living being, if you get stabbed in the heart you’re done for, but you’d be a corpse instead of a pile of dust is what you’re telling me, right?”

Teresa gave me a stern stare that made me get the tiniest bit turned on.

“Yeah.”

“So Buffy is right,” I said. “A stake to the heart is a great way to kill a vampire.”

“There are better ways,” she argued. “The heart is one of the hardest ways to do it.”

“Well, wait until you see all the other things she tries. Buffy is a very creative vampire slayer.”

I’d started the program at season one so Teresa could watch it from the beginning. Maybe I was mistaken, but it seemed like as we progressed through the first few episodes, she started to get into the show. Not that she would admit it. Whenever she sensed me looking at her, her face would get hard and she’d start to glare at the

screen like it had personally offended her.

“Okay, that’s my limit for this week,” I announced after we finished the fourth episode. If I didn’t pace myself, I’d sit here all night watching episode after episode.

“Oh. What are you doing next?” Teresa asked.

“Every week after Buffy I give myself a facial and take a long bubble bath.”

“Really?” she asked, that look of distaste back.

“Yes, a good skincare regime is the secret to a youthful appearance. And a bubble bath is a great way to take care of all my skin at once.”

Teresa just stared at me like I wasn’t speaking English.

“After that, I usually read in bed for a while and go to sleep early, so I’ll say goodnight to you now. Do you need anything before I go?” I asked.

“We’re leaving at oh eight hundred hours tomorrow, right?”

“Yes, I’m using a car service right now because of the accident. They’ll be here around eight and we’ll head to the office.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be ready.”

I got up, gathering my empty containers, and Teresa grabbed the rest of them, following me upstairs. Tossing everything in the trash, I paused awkwardly.

“Feel free to let me know if you need anything. Just make yourself at home and help yourself to anything in the kitchen.”

“I’m going to check all the doors and windows and do some work before I turn in for the night,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. Thank you though.”

I spent the next thirty minutes going through my skincare routine. Exfoliating. Putting on a face mask. Soaking my hands in paraffin. Then I filled by giant tub with warm bubbles and water, sliding down to enjoy the sensation of the warm water relaxing my muscles.

I did it all on autopilot, my thoughts focused on Teresa. It was ridiculous. I should have been thinking about my multi-billion dollar company. I should have been thinking about why someone was trying to kill me, the same way they’d killed my parents. But instead, I was thinking about how blue Teresa’s eyes were and how soft her skin looked, despite her obvious distaste for the idea of a skin care regimen.

I’d known the woman less than a day, and I already knew instinctively that my life would never be the same after meeting her. I just didn’t know what that meant.

By the time I got into bed, my body was too amped up to relax enough to read my book. I walked over to the bedroom door, straining my ears to hear any noises. Had Teresa come upstairs? Or was she still working downstairs?

Moving carefully, I slowly opened the drawer to my nightstand, retrieving my vibrator. I plugged it into the power strip next to my bed, then slid my nightgown up to my waist. At the last second I remembered how damned loud this vibrator could be. It was one of those giant wand vibrators that masqueraded as a back massager. Effective but noisy. I looked around frantically, trying to figure out how to hide the noise.

I clicked on some music on my phone, turning it up a little louder than I normally would at night, then slid underneath the blanket and pulled the comforter on top of that. I scooted down until only my head was visible, then widened my legs.

Moving a hand down my body, I slid my fingers between my lower lips, unsurprised to find that I was already wet just thinking about masturbating. Well, masturbating to the thoughts of my new bodyguard. I clicked the vibe on, relieved to find that between the music and the blankets on top of me, the sound was substantially muffled.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I moved the toy up and down my labia before slipping inside. I bit my lip, trying not to moan as I moved the head of the vibrator upwards, circling my clit. I was so ramped up already, it wasn't going to take much to get myself off.

Closing my eyes, I pictured the moment in my dressing room earlier when Teresa looked like she was trying to decide whether to kill me or kiss me. I remembered those intense blue eyes, and the way her plump lips had reddened as her fangs descended. Then I imagined her tossing me on the floor of the dressing room and using those fangs to tease my nipples and clit.

“Ah!” I gasped softly as my body started to tighten. “Teresa!”

My orgasm hit me harder than usual, making me shake wildly on the bed while I continued teasing myself with the vibrator. By the time I switched it off, I was drenched in sweat and my heart was pounding a mile a minute. I stayed still, waiting for my body to calm before I finally put away the toy and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Teresa

“Teresa!”

My mate's voice gasped my name, drowning out the low hum of the vibrator she was using. I sighed, pulling my pillow over my head in a vain attempt to drown out the noise. Damn this supernatural hearing!

This was torture. Pure torture. And I said that as a person who'd been tortured for

three days once when I got captured during a covert military operation. Then again, part of me was happy to know for sure that Flora was as attracted to me as I was to her, even if we could never act on it.

The buzzing stopped, telling me that she was finished with her self-gratification session. Thank the goddess that it had been relatively brief.

I wiggled on the bed, tempted to give myself a little relief of my own, but resisting on general principle. I was here as personal protection, not to fantasize about my client. Except for the inconvenient fact that my client was also my fated mate. I wondered if there was something in the water at work. One by one we'd all found our fated mates, and much to Lois's annoyance, every single time it was someone we were supposed to be protecting.

I thought back to when my coworker and friend Angie fell in love with Suzie. Like Flora, Suzie was as opposite as could be from my vampire buddy. And of course I'd had a front row seat when Martha fell for Emily, another unlikely couple. Damn it, I needed advice, and since Martha was on her honeymoon, I was going to need to talk to Angie.

Me:Hey.

Angie:What's wrong?

Me:Nothing's wrong. Why?

Angie:You're not a person who texts 'hey'. You're a very business-like texter. Unless you were texting a hook-up and you picked my number by accident?

Me:Never mind.

Angie: Tell me.

Me: Promise not to tell anyone?

Angie: Of course.

Me: I think I found my mate.

Angie: OMG that's awesome. Suzie says congratulations!

Me: Remember the part where you just promised not to tell anyone?

Angie: Suzie doesn't count. She's my mate, I can't keep secrets from her. Where did you meet your mate? At the wedding?

Me: No, I'm on assignment.

Angie: Your mate is your client? Lois is going to be pissed that this happened again.

Me: I have a question. How did you know?

Angie: That Suzie was my mate? As soon as I locked eyes with her, my vampire was going crazy. Every time anyone came near her, like those damned bears, I wanted to gut them like a fish. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Me: My mate is... not what I expected. She's nothing like the person I pictured spending the rest of my life with.

Angie: Do you think I planned on spending my life with a cupcake baker who wears dresses with cartoon pastries? No I did not. But fate is never wrong. This woman is perfect for you, you just need to figure out why.



Me:She's a high maintenance billionaire CEO who gives herself facials and watches some show about a teenager vampire slayer. We couldn't be more different.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Angie: External shit doesn't matter. It's what's inside that counts. And once you start the mating bond, you'll understand.

I was up early the next morning, doing an abbreviated workout in my room before taking a quick shower. By the time I heard Flora's alarm go off, I was ready for the day. I headed downstairs in search of coffee, messing around with the fancy coffee maker until I had an admittedly delicious cup of coffee. I drank it with a shot of blood and an energy bar I'd seen in the cabinet.

The clacking of high heeled shoes on the marble floors alerted me of Flora's approach. That and the way my inner vampire perked up the second her shoes hit the stairs.

"Good morning," Flora said, giving me a bright smile. The woman was consistently cheerful, I'd give her that.

She was wearing a dark red pencil skirt with a matching blazer, a black silk blouse, giant red earrings, and black pumps with red soles. Her hair was curled into soft waves, and she'd put on a liberal amount of makeup including a bunch of black shit that made her lashes spiky, and red lipstick that perfectly matched both her outfit and her earrings. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. She couldn't look more like a fussy, high maintenance femme princess.

"Is that what you're wearing to the office?" she asked.

I looked down at my black tank top, black pants, and black boots, then returned my gaze to Flora.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“It’s not exactly office attire.”

“Yeah well it’s perfect if I need to tackle a guy who’s trying to kill you,” I said defensively.

The truth was I knew exactly nothing about clothes. I’d been raised by a single father in a family where I was the only girl amongst all the cousins. My best friend growing up was as much of a tomboy as I was. I’d joined the Army right after high school, and they didn’t exactly encourage you to wear girly shit there either.

“Come with me, I have an idea.”

She took a few steps towards the door and inclined her head.

“I’m not wearing a dress.”

“You don’t have to wear a dress,” she said. “Come on.”

She led me up a stairway on the other side of the house. I followed her into a massive bedroom with a walk-in closet that was larger than most people’s houses. After flipping through some clothes, Flora emerged with a light blue jacket.

“Try this.”

I looked at the blazer like it was toxic.

“Whose clothes are these?”

“My mom’s,” she answered, her voice sad for an instant before she brought forth her

normal cheery tone. “She was flatter chested, like you.”

“I’m not flat chested,” I said indignantly, arching my back before I realized what I was doing. My breasts were on the smaller side, but that was no reason to insult me.

“My jackets won’t fit you, so you’ll have to make do with this.”

Sighing like she was torturing me, I pulled on the jacket over my tank top. Flora came close, arranging the collar, and I was overwhelmed by the subtle scent of her perfume. Or maybe it was her shampoo, I don’t know. Whatever it was, it had a slight floral scent.

“There,” she said brightly. “Now you can pass for a personal assistant. Plus the blue brings out your eyes.”

Taking my shoulders, she turned me so I could see myself in the full-length mirror. I had to admit that the tailored jacket fit me perfectly and dressed up my outfit nicely. Maybe I should wear more blazers, I thought.

I met Flora’s eyes in the mirror and froze. For a long, pregnant moment we just stared at each other in the glass, my heart pounding wildly. Inside me, my vamp was pushing me to tilt her head and bite her neck. I took a deep breath.

“We’d better get you some breakfast before we go.”

My mate blinked like she was coming out of a trance.

“I don’t eat breakfast,” Flora informed me.

“You do now.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Before she could argue I added, “And starting tomorrow we’re going to work out before we go to your office.”

Flora

I was quickly learning that bossy was Teresa’s default tone. Instead of responding to her, I just headed downstairs and grabbed my bag out of the closet. My phone beeped, letting me know that the car had arrived.

“Our ride is here,” I said, heading for the door.

As I put my hand on the knob, Teresa pulled me back.

“I need to go first,” she said firmly.

“Is that a vampire thing?” I asked in confusion. “Like how you can’t come in unless you’re invited?”

“No, it’s a bodyguard thing.”

Teresa took a step out the door, her head swinging from side to side as she looked around. Satisfied that it was safe, she gripped my elbow and led me to the car.

“Wait.”

She grabbed a small black device from her pocket, walking all the way around the car with it before tapping on the driver’s side window and exchanging a few words with

the driver. Completing her circle of the car, she moved close and whispered in my ear.

“It’s free of explosives but there might be listening devices, so keep things superficial.”

Good Lord, was this my life now?

I scooted into the car, greeting the driver as Teresa slid in from the other side. We rode in total silence to my office.

I took a deep breath as I walked into the familiar high rise that housed Meyer Beauty. It was twelve stories high, housing not only our corporate offices but also our product testing labs and classrooms. The outside of the building was shiny, making it look almost like a big mirror with the Meyer Beauty name and logo in large letters across the very top.

“Good morning, Miss Meyer.”

Both the men at the security desk stood up to greet me.

“Good morning Earl. Ben. This is my new personal assistant Teresa. Can you make her a security badge please?”

“What access level, Miss Meyer?” Ben asked.

“Unrestricted.”

Ben’s eyebrows rose slightly, the only hint that he was surprised by my response. We were fanatical about security here and very few people had full access to the building. Corporate espionage was very common in the beauty industry.

“Yes ma’am.”

After taking a quick photo of Teresa glaring, Ben handed her a badge and lanyard.

“Here you go, Miss.”

“Thanks,” my bodyguard grunted.

She jerked it over her neck like it had offended her and we headed for the elevator.

“My office is on the top floor,” I said as I scanned my badge to unlock the elevator.

As soon as I got off the elevator there was a flurry of activity. My assistant was standing near reception waiting for me, iPad in hand as she rattled off my schedule. I introduced them to Teresa as we strode towards my office.

“Um, Miss Meyer, are you unhappy with me?”

I sent Amy my assistant a small smile. “No it’s not that. I think supporting me is getting to be more than one person can handle, so you’ll continue with phones, scheduling, the mail, while Teresa will help with meeting notes, my personal tasks, and whatever else I need.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I had a flash of what I needed as I remembered that orgasm I had last night. Even though Teresa hadn't given even the slightest indication that she liked me – if anything, she seemed to dislike me – I had the strangest feeling that she was as attracted to me as I was to her. If so, maybe we could let off some steam while we were stuck together for however long it took to get to the bottom of these death threats.

Not that I could worry about that right now. I had a packed schedule to deal with.

Four and a half hours and five meetings later Teresa leaned over my desk and fixed me with a hard stare.

“You haven't eaten all day.”

“Uh huh,” I said distractedly, focused on an advertising layout that was spread across my desk.

“It's after one o'clock. What do you usually do for lunch?”

“I have yogurt in the mini fridge,” I said, gesturing at the small appliance slotted into a built in cabinet that also housed an espresso machine and an electric tea kettle.

She marched across the room and barked for Amy to come in. My assistant scurried in, sending Teresa a nervous look.

“You need to go get lunch.”



“No you don’t,” I contradicted. “I can have a yogurt.”

“I don’t mind, Miss Meyer,” Amy said timidly. “I can get you a sandwich from that deli up the street that you like. Turkey, right?”

“You know what Amy, that would be very nice if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all,” she said, sending another nervous look towards Teresa.

“Bring a second one for Teresa please,” I said. “And get something for yourself too if you haven’t eaten. You can charge it to your company card, just save the receipt.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Once the door closed behind Amy I stood up, leaning my hands on the desk and fixing Teresa with a glare.

“You don’t get to treat my staff like that,” I said firmly. “And for the record, I’m her boss, not you. Yours too.”

Teresa ambled closer, somehow reminding me of a lion hunting a gazelle. Her blue eyes darkened and I saw the tips of her fangs poking from beneath her lower lip.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re beautiful when you’re acting bossy?” she drawled.

I sputtered in shock.

“Excuse me?”

Teresa moved forward, her hands coming to my shoulders and pulling me forward

until our faces met in the middle, the desk still between us. Then she kissed me.

The touch of her mouth on mine immediately drained the anger out of me. Her lips were soft and a bit cold. She pressed a little more firmly and when I sighed, her tongue swooped in, exploring my mouth. Everything inside me seemed to burst into flames. Teresa lifted one hand to cup the back of my head, holding me in place while she dominated my mouth.

I moaned, trying to move closer but stymied by the desk. I don't know how long the kiss lasted -- it both seemed to last forever and seemed to be over much faster than I wanted – but by the time we pulled apart I was breathing heavily, and my heart was thundering in my chest.

Teresa and I just stared at each other for a long moment before she took a big step back.

“Damn it, my vamp is right.”

“Huh?” I was in no condition to be eloquent right now.

“Nothing,” she muttered. “I’ve got to use the bathroom. If something happens, scream.”

As soon as the door closed behind her, I fell into my chair, eyes closed and fingers pressed against my lips. Holy crap. I knew I was attracted to Teresa, but what had just happened felt different. It felt... life altering. I should know, I’d had a lot of life altering experiences over the past year.

By the time Teresa returned from the restroom Amy was back with our sandwiches. My bodyguard retreated to the conference room table where she’d set up shop this morning, using it as her work area when she wasn’t accompanying me to a meeting in

one of the conference rooms.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Other than the constant clacking of the keys with whatever she was doing, she was silent for the rest of the day. I ate my sandwich and the fruit salad that came with it, approved the advertising campaign, and participated in several video meetings before the day was over.

After Amy left at five thirty I started packing up my laptop and some files. I tried not to stay in the office too late, although I typically did a few hours of work at home after dinner.

“What have you been working on today?” I asked Teresa as we got into the elevator.

She held up her finger and mouthed the word “bugs”.

Out loud she said, “I was working on that report you gave me, boss.”

The town car from the car service was waiting for us when we stepped out of the building. After circling the car to check for explosives, Teresa and I got into the back seat and headed home. As we drove through the dark, rainy streets, I couldn’t help but daydream about that kiss and wonder what it all meant.

And hope that we’d do it again soon...

Teresa

Flora was quiet on the way home, giving me plenty of time to think about that kiss. I was such an idiot losing control like that. Now that my vampire had a taste of our mate, she was going to be insufferable. All afternoon the creature had been chattering

in my head, demanding that I officially mate her.

I couldn't decide what to make of Flora. It took her nearly an hour to get ready for work this morning, emerging with perfectly coiffed hair and flawless make-up. With her designer clothes and sunny personality, it would be easy to dismiss her as some kind of vapid socialite.

Yet that cheerfulness she wore like a mask disappeared when she was in boss lady mode. I'd watched her closely today as she encouraged her staff who were doing a good job and chewed out those who weren't. Her team respected her, and so did the suppliers and partners she met with on her video meetings.

So which version of Flora was the real one? I couldn't tell yet. I hadn't had much time to think about it at the office though. I had a job to do, and I'd spent most of the day running background checks on everyone she came into contact with at the office, from the security guards to her CFO, who I still hadn't met.

It had been shockingly easy to break into personnel files on the company's network. I'm sure Flora would have given me access, but it was more fun to do a little hacking. We'd have to help Meyer beef up its online security when this was all over.

By the time we got home I was going stir crazy from spending so much time sitting around. I preferred being active.

"What do you usually do now?" I asked.

"Put on comfortable clothes, heat up some dinner, and work for a couple of hours."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "You need to move a little. You've been sitting all day and that's not good for you. Put on some workout clothes and meet me downstairs in the gym."

To my surprise, when I scoped out the house last night I'd discovered a well-appointed gym in the basement as well as an outdoor swimming pool. It was a little cold for swimming, at least for humans, but a little bit of cardio and stretching would do us both a world of good.

"I don't want to work out," she said stubbornly. "I have a lot of work to do."

"You'll thank me later," I said, putting my hands on her shoulders to get her started up the stairs. "Now be a good girl and change."

Flora's mouth dropped, but her pupils dilated and the pulse in her neck picked up, telling me that she liked being called a good girl just fine. I didn't want to analyze it too closely, but the more time I spent with my mate, the more I wanted to take care of her. I could tell already that she'd been working herself to death and not eating well. The least I could do while I was here was help her break those habits.

My vampire growled deep inside me at the thought that was my stay here was temporary. But really, how could this work? Even if I was starting to learn that Flora was more nuanced than she'd first seemed, she was a billionaire CEO, and I was a for-hire security agent who grew up relying on government food boxes. We couldn't be more different.

"Have you ever gone rock climbing?" I asked as we reached the landing to the second floor.

Flora shuddered. "Uh, no. I'm not a big fan of being outside."

I suppressed a sigh. It was definitely never going to work out between us. But that didn't mean I wouldn't help her get healthier while I was here.

A little more than an hour later Flora threw herself down on a mat on the gym floor

and cried, “Enough.”

“What’s the problem?” I asked from where I was running at top speed on the fancy treadmill while Flora worked on the elliptical.

“I’m exhausted.” She sounded pouty. “And I hate exercising.”

“You said you do yoga,” I reminded her, nodding to the corner where she had a little yoga area set up with a mat, straps, and blocks.

“I do gentle yoga,” she said. “Nothing that involves me sweating. I’m sweating!” She said the last part like it was some kind of travesty.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“You were barely moving on that elliptical,” I said, stepping off the treadmill.

I dropped to the floor a few feet away from her and started doing push-ups – on my toes, thank you very much.

Flora pushed up to seated, and from the corner of my eye I could see her watching me as I busted out twenty-five push-ups before lowering down into child’s pose to stretch my back.

“You need to do some cardio and strength work,” I said, rolling over to sit next to her and lifting her arm. “You have weak little spaghetti arms.”

Flora rolled her eyes. “I hate the elliptical.”

“Okay then, we’ll keep trying until we find something you like to do that gets your heart rate up.”

Her eyes flared and I knew she was thinking of something we could do together to increase her heart rate. My vampire was one hundred percent on board with that idea. I reminded her that I was Flora’s bodyguard, but even the threat of Lois getting mad at us didn’t make her settle down.

Speaking of Lois...

“I need to check in with my boss,” I said, popping up to my feet and reaching out a hand to help her up.



“I’ll put some food in the oven,” she said. “Let’s meet in the kitchen in an hour.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. “If anything weird happens, anything at all, scream. I’ll hear you.”

A little while later I was finishing a call with Lois when I heard Flora make a loud squeaking noise, followed by her bellowing, “Teresa!”

“I gotta go,” I told Lois, disconnecting the call and shoving the phone into my pocket as I raced downstairs.

Flora was standing in the entryway, staring down at a long, narrow box encased in bright red wrapping paper. It looked like the kind of box they used to send roses.

“What happened?”

She just pointed at the box. I squatted down, grabbing my knife from my ankle holster and using the tip to pry up the lid. I revealed the long, thorny stems you’d expect on roses, but as I lifted the lid more, I realized the flowers were dead.

That’s when I noticed the card tucked inside, with a message written in big, blocky letters.

You will be as dead as these flowers soon.

Flora

I stared over Teresa’s shoulder, the message no less frightening the second time I read it. Still squatting down by the box, my bodyguard pulled out her phone and pressed a button.

“Lois, yeah I’m going to need a team here.”

She paused, then added, “Dead flowers and a note.”

Another pause, then she looked over her shoulder.

“How did you get this? Was it left at the gate?”

I nodded. “Security called to say I had a delivery. I told them to bring it back.”

“Who brought it?”

“Um, I think his name is Tim? He’s the red-haired guard.”

“You got that, boss?” Teresa asked. “Okay, I’ll see you guys soon. Thanks.”

She stood up, grabbing my elbow in a grip that was surprisingly gentle. “Let’s get some tea.”

“Tea?” I repeated in confusion.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Teresa tugged me along beside her. “It helps when you’ve had a shock.”

When we got to the kitchen I smelled food, reminding me that I’d put something into the oven. I had no idea what it even was, I’d just grabbed the next two pre-prepared meals off the shelf in the fridge and slid them in the oven.

“Sit.”

Teresa helped me get into a chair, then hustled around making tea with an electric kettle I didn’t even know we had. She’d clearly searched the house thoroughly in the short time she’d been here. The kettle whistled, and she brought over two steaming cups of tea.

“It’s chamomile,” Teresa said, nodding towards my cup. “Very good for the nervous system.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, sipping our tea and waiting for the Sapphic Security team to arrive.

“What happens when your team gets here?” I asked.

“They’ll review surveillance footage. Check your house again for bugs or other hazards. Interview the security team. Try to trace the flowers.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the tea or the way she matter-of-factly ticked off the steps her team would go through to investigate what happened, but my heart rate finally slowed down and I felt like I could take a deep breath for the first time since I pried open the

lid of that box.

“This is the first time there’s been something besides the note,” I said.

She nodded. “He’s escalating.”

The oven timer dinged, and without a word Teresa got up, removed the dishes, and covered them with foil. My phone rang, alerting me of our ‘guests’.

“Let them through please. And... they will want to review security footage.”

Whichever guard I was speaking to started to protest, but I hardened my voice.

“Give them full access to whatever they want,” I told him. “We’ve had a serious security breach, and I need to understand what happened.”

“Yes ma’am.”

A few minutes later the doorbell rang. I stayed at the table, letting Teresa take care of it. It wasn’t like me to be passive, but I had to admit, I was shaken. Even after what happened to my parents, part of me believed that there was some other explanation for my brakes going out last week. I’d convinced myself it was just a weird accident, and that my godfather was being too overly cautious insisting that I add additional security.

Now I knew he was right. Someone was definitely trying to kill me. But why? Was it about my money or something else?

“Are you okay?”

I looked up as Teresa came back into the kitchen.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve got two people checking the house and the yard, and another one interviewing your guards and looking at footage. They took the... um, package with them. They’ll dust for prints or other clues.”

“Sounds good,” I answered.

“You should eat something,” she said. “It’ll take a while for them to check things out.”

I shook my head. “I’m not hungry.”

Teresa knelt next to me, taking my hand in hers. A little current arced between our fingers as I met those icy blue eyes.

“I know you’re upset, but you’re safe. I will keep you safe, I swear it. But I need you to keep your strength up, okay?”

I nodded. We both stilled, staring into each other’s eyes, the air between us heavy. When I chanced a glance down, I could see Teresa’s fangs descending again.

“Why does that happen?” I asked softly. “Your teeth?”

She hesitated and I thought she wouldn’t answer, but then Teresa said, “Our fangs descend when we’re in danger or we feel strong emotion. Fear. Aggression.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

She paused, then added softly, “Passion.”

“So you feel this too?” I couldn’t resist asking. “The attraction between us?”

“I kissed you, didn’t I?” she replied. “I know it was inappropriate but... I couldn’t help myself.”

“You didn’t see me complaining, did you?”

Acting on instinct, I put my free hand on Teresa’s shoulder. She was slim, but solidly muscled. “Since we both admit that we’re attracted to each other, maybe we could have some fun while you’re here. Let off some steam. If you’re single, that is.”

“I am single,” she said, “but...”

“Hey Teresa --.”

We both paused as someone walked in, skidding to a halt when she saw our intimate position.

“Um, I can come back later.”

Teresa popped up to her feet. “No, it’s fine Angie. What did you find?”

The other woman gave me a friendly smile. “Hi, I’m Angie, nice to meet you Flora.”

I gave her a little wave and she turned her attention back to Teresa.

“Perimeter is secure. No listening devices. Nothing in the box other than the flowers and the note. Wanda finished questioning the guards but there was nothing new there. We’re going to head back to the office to review the video feed and dust the box for prints.”

“Sounds good. Thanks Angie.”

“Sure, you take good care of your ma... client and I’ll talk to you later.”

Teresa went to the stove, dishing us up some of the food I’d heated up, then brought us each a plate.

“You pay someone to make these?” she asked in distaste. “This isn’t a meal.”

“They’re perfectly balanced in macros,” I said, poking at my salmon listlessly. “About eight hundred calories per meal.”

Teresa shook her head, but didn’t say anything, instead tucking into her own plate. I couldn’t decide if she was judging me or worried about me, but I was too tired and stressed about the threatening note to figure it out. Plus I still had at least two hours of work left to do tonight.

As soon as she finished she went to make herself a sandwich, eating it while I finished my own meal. I got up and retrieved a can of Pringles, helping myself to a generous serving of chips to supplement my bland food.

After dinner I retired to the library. When my parents were alive it was strictly my father’s domain, full of heavy law books and dark wooden furniture. I’d remodeled it, adding a smaller desk, better Wi-Fi, a seating area facing the windows, and cheerful art. I plopped down on the soft leather couch and pulled out a lap desk that I kept in the large wooden chest that I used as a coffee table, then fired up my laptop.

I couldn't concentrate though, despite my best efforts.

Pulling out my phone, I texted my best friend Julia.

Me:Hey girl, how are you doing?

Julia:I'm glad you texted, I've been meaning to reach out. What's new with you?

Me:I have a bodyguard now.

Julia:What happened?

Me:Too long to text. Any chance you're free for dinner tomorrow night?

Julia:Of course. How about Pedro's at six-thirty? I could go for a margarita.

Me:Sounds good.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Julia: Bring your bodyguard. Is he hot?

Me: She's a she. And yes, she is. See you tomorrow.

I finally gave up on the idea of working. Packing away my laptop and files, I headed upstairs. I wasn't sure where Teresa was, but I had no doubt she'd come running again if I needed her. She seemed to have great hearing.

After a short internal debate, I took a long, hot bubble bath, slathered my entire body in lotion, and then headed to bed early, falling into a deep sleep soon after my head hit the pillow.

Teresa

I was startled out of sleep by a high-pitched scream. I bolted out of bed, wearing only panties and a tee shirt, grabbed my gun from underneath my pillow, and raced into Flora's room.

She was in bed, thrashing around and making little whimpering noises. I blew out a breath as I realized no one was hurting her, she was just having a nightmare.

"No," she cried. "Please, no!"

I walked closer.

"Flora. Flora, wake up."

When she continued to sleep, I grabbed her shoulder, shaking her gently. She screeched, then stiffened before coming awake.

“What? What happened?” she said, peering at me. The room was lit by the light of the moon shining through the window and the light from the hallway, so I knew she could tell it was me.

“You were having a nightmare,” I told her.

“Oh.”

She pushed up to lean against the upholstered headboard and reached for the water bottle at the bedside table, taking a long gulp. She was shaking, I realized.

“Thanks for waking me up,” she said.

Her voice sounded so tiny. So sad. Almost defeated. My vampire was pushing me to take care of her and make her feel better. My human side was in full agreement.

“Do you want me to stay with you for a while?” I asked.

“Please.”

I sat on the side of the bed, intending to watch her until she fell back asleep, but instead she slid over, patting the bed next to her and giving me a seeking look. I got into the bed next to her and Flora grabbed the blanket, pulling it over the both of us. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, practically shaking with the effort of not touching her.

Flora had other ideas though. She scooted closer until the sides of our bodies were touching, her bare leg sliding against mine. Unable to resist her silent plea, I stretched

out my arm. My mate immediately snuggled in, resting her head on my shoulder. It was an intimate pose, one that I wouldn't mind repeating every night for the rest of my life.

I was getting in deeper with her, whether I wanted to or not. Then again, maybe it was true that there was no supernatural that could resist the mate bond. I'd seen it happen over and over again with my friends from work.

The funny thing was that out of all my female friends, I was the one who'd always wanted to find my fated mate. I'd watched as one person after the other paired up, secretly sad that it was them and not me. And now that I'd found my fated mate, what did I do? Look for reasons why it couldn't work.

As Flora slipped back into sleep I resolved to stop being an idiot. Fate had seen fit to bring me this woman. It wasn't a mistake. I just needed to figure out why.

I'd always been a light sleeper, even before I went into the military, but I slept better with Flora than I expected. I came awake much more slowly than I usually did, feeling her small hand rubbing small circles on my belly. My bare belly. Apparently my shirt had slid up while we slept.

I glanced down, seeing that my mate's eyes were closed like she wasn't totally awake yet. On impulse I grabbed the hand on my stomach, bringing it up to my mouth and pressing a kiss against her knuckles.

Flora stiffened before realizing where she was. She looked up at me with sleepy eyes.

"Good morning." Her voice was rough with sleep. "Sorry I'm all over you like some kind of a creeper."

I noticed that she made no effort to move away.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “To be honest, I kind of like waking up with you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

I hadn't meant to say that, but now that I had, I could feel the truth of those words.

Flora gave me a small smile, then she was in motion, sliding up and leaning over to give me a kiss. I stayed still, content to let her lead. Her soft lips pressed against mine for a few seconds, her hand coming up to cup the side of my face. She nipped at my lower lip and I opened, letting her tongue swoop in to tangle with mine.

Just like when we kissed in her office, everything in my body was immediately on alert. I could feel my nipples harden, and heat rushed to my core as my inner demon cried out, begging me to flip her over and sink our fangs into her neck to make her ours forever. But it was too soon. My mate was a human, and while she knew a little bit about the supernatural world, humans needed more time to adjust to being mates than we did.

Not to mention the fact that even though I'd decided to stop fighting against having Flora as my mate, we would still have a lot of complications to work out, like who was trying to kill her and why.

When Flora pulled away to catch her breath, I gave her a small smile.

"We should probably get ready for work, yeah?"

Her eyes clouded over for a moment before she caught herself.

"Yeah, I have an early meeting."

"I'll clean up and go make us some coffee then," I promised, hopping out of bed. I

pulled my shirt down to cover my underwear and hightailed it out of the room, wondering how I was going to protect Flora when I couldn't even protect my own heart.

Flora came down about forty-five minutes later, looking like Corporate Barbie, although for some reason I didn't find that annoying anymore. I found it adorable. After watching her in action at work yesterday, I had a feeling that the fancy clothes and perfect hair and make-up were her uniform, a kind of an armor for her more than anything.

"I brought you another blazer," she said, handing me one that was gray with little flecks of white in the fabric. It was nothing I would ever buy for myself, but it looked fine with my all black ensemble. Maybe Flora wasn't the only one who like to wear a uniform to work.

"I made you breakfast, have something to eat," I said, pointing at the table where I'd left her a bowl of yogurt and fruit and a cup of coffee.

"I don't --."

I held up a hand. "Quit arguing and eat."

She made an annoyed huffing noise but sat down and ate her breakfast while I sipped a cup of warm blood. When I placed the cup on the table, Flora's eyes widened.

"Oh. I, uh, forgot about the blood."

I studied her. "Does it bother you? It's basically like medicine for us. We get sick if we don't take blood."

Flora shook her head. "No, it's just... well, it's not something I'm used to. But then

again, some people probably think it's weird that I drink coffee."

She held up her cup to emphasize her point.

"Don't worry, I like coffee better," I confided. "Blood is medicine, but coffee is life."

She gave me a radiant smile, then glanced at her phone.

"The driver is here."

"Okay, let's go watch you take over the beauty world."

I stacked our dishes in the sink for the housekeeper, then grabbed my laptop bag and followed her to the door. I held her back so I could walk out first, watching for danger, then walking around the car so I could subtly scan the vehicle for explosive. The driver stared at me like I was nuts, but I couldn't care less. Once I'd circled the town car and determined it was safe, I opened the door for Flora and slid in behind her.

Today when we arrived Amy wasn't at the front desk. We soon learned why. As Flora entered her office we could hear an irritated male voice.

"Where is she?" the man boomed in a voice filled with irritation. "She's usually here by eight-thirty."

"I'm sure Miss Meyer will be here soon, Mr. Richardson."

Next to me, Flora stiffened her spine, her expression turning cold as she walked into her office.

"David. Did we have an appointment that I forgot about?"

Ah so this was David Richardson, the chief financial officer at Meyer Beauty and the man who thought he should be the CEO instead of Flora. He was an older guy, probably mid to late fifties, with gray and black hair and an unfortunate comb-over trying to hide his impending baldness. He was a few inches over six feet tall and wearing a designer suit that did little to hold his rounded gut. He looked soft. He looked like a prick.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

Hearing Flora's voice, he turned on his heel, his expression full of derision before he caught himself and neutralized his face.

"Flora. Did you know about the lawsuit?"

Flora

"Lawsuit? What lawsuit?"

David looked at me with his cold, hostile eyes. God, he was such a dick. Maybe he'd always been that way, but his behavior seemed to go from bad to worse after I became the CEO. For some reason he seemed convinced that he was more qualified to run the company than I was, and he made no secret of that belief.

"Pure Nature is suing us. They claim that we engaged in industrial espionage and stole their proprietary formula for our green tea anti-aging cream."

I shrugged, purposely making it look like the news wasn't upsetting to me, even though it was.

"Obviously it's a frivolous suit," I said calmly. "They've seen the success of that particular product and now they're cranky about it. We'll deal with it."

"At least your father was a lawyer," he sneered. "He understood the legal implications of these kinds of lawsuits."

"Well fortunately we have very good attorneys on retainer so I don't need to

understand the minutia. Now if there's nothing else, I'm sure I have a meeting right now, isn't that right, Amy?"

Amy stared at me like a deer in the headlights. I got it, Richardson was intimidating as hell, and he hadn't been nice to her. Not that it was personal. He treated all the support staff like shit.

"We need to review the ad layout with marketing," Teresa said, giving Richardson a pointed look. "If you'll excuse us."

David glared at her, then turned to me. "Who the hell is this?"

"David, meet my personal assistant Teresa. Teresa, this is our CFO David Richardson."

He pointed at Amy. "I thought this one is your assistant."

"I have two assistants now."

"Who approved that?" he demanded.

"Me," I said sharply. "The CEO and majority owner of the company. Now if you'll excuse us David, we have a very busy day ahead of us and I'm sure you have work to do as well."

His eyes blazed at the reminder that I was his boss.

He stomped out, not even pretending to be polite, slamming the door behind him. When I looked over at poor Amy she looked like she was about to cry.

"I'm so sorry Miss Meyer, I told him he couldn't just hijack you like that."

“It’s not your fault Amy. Could you please check in with Legal and get me a copy of the lawsuit, and set up a meeting for them to discuss options with me this afternoon?” I requested. “You might need to reschedule something else to make it work.”

“I’m on it Miss Meyer,” she said. “Anything else?”

“Could you please place a lunch order too Amy?” Teresa said, her voice kind and respectful. “I’d like to have us get a standing order to make sure that Miss Meyer gets her lunch every day.”

“Of course Teresa. Thank you.”

I sat down in my chair and unpacked my laptop, letting out a long breath. “I guess it’s going to be a good day.”

Teresa and I went to our respective workstations, both of us getting down to business. At one point I looked over and she was scowling at the screen. As if she felt me watching her, she looked up, her face softening as soon as she glanced in my direction.

“I’m doing a deeper dive on that asshole Richardson,” she told me. “I don’t like that guy.”

“He’s a good CFO,” I said, not sure why I was defending him. “At least that’s what my father always told me.”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure that I agreed but I’d been too busy learning how to run this company on my own to worry about finding a new CFO. If he kept acting rude and insubordinate, I was going to have to address that problem sooner rather than later.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“He’s involved in something shady, I can sense it,” she said. “Just give me some time, I’ll figure it out.”

The rest of the day passed quickly. I was in meetings most of the day, and other than when Flora forced me to eat the Cobb salad that Amy brought me, I didn’t take a break all day. My last meeting of the day was with our attorneys, who agreed that the lawsuit seemed frivolous.

“We should be able to get it thrown out pretty quickly,” my chief legal counsel Abraham Jacobson assured me. “Honestly I’m surprised that their counsel even agreed to this. They have zero evidence of espionage.”

“Let’s make sure,” I said.

I looked over at Teresa who was pretending to take notes. “Can we run some searches to see if any of our employees have any connection to Pure Nature?”

Abraham sent me a surprised look, but didn’t comment.

“On it, boss,” Teresa reassured me.

It was funny, she’d only been with me for three days now and I’d already come to rely on her. I wondered if she’d be interested in leaving Sapphic Security when this was all over, then immediately dismissed the idea. A woman like Teresa would never be content to be some woman’s assistant sitting in an office all day. She was coiled energy and had an adventurous streak that I could never hope to satisfy with some boring office job.

The truth was I liked her. I was attracted to her for sure, much more than I'd ever been to any other woman, but I also liked her as a person. I trusted her implicitly, although I couldn't say why. It was like I knew her somehow, not as an employee or someone I thought was hot, but like we'd been friends for a long time. It was totally weird, but the more time I spent with her, the more connected I felt.

I'd loved waking up next to her this morning, and that kiss... I didn't even have words to describe it. If Teresa hadn't reminded me that we needed to get to work, I would have been tempted to see how far we could go.

My phone beeped with a text from my friend Julia mid-afternoon, reminding me that we had dinner plans. I looked over at Teresa.

"I'm having dinner with my friend Julia tonight," I said.

Her brows lowered and she glared at me. "Who's Julia?"

For a second I wondered if she was jealous, as ridiculous as that was.

"She's my best friend."

"I haven't run a background check on her. What's her last name?" Teresa demanded.

"You're not running a background check on my best friend," I said. "We've known each other since the first grade. She's very wealthy in her own right and engaged to the CEO of Tech Express. Trust me, she has no reason to murder me."

"She's engaged?" Teresa confirmed.

Her fixation on that one detail made me wonder if what I'd seen before really had been jealousy. I felt a rush of pleasure.

“Yeah, and straight. I told her you were coming with us.”

“Good girl.”

God help me I should not like it when she said that, yet I did like it. I liked it a lot. Teresa raised an eyebrow and gave me a tiny smirk, telling me that she’d cued into that fact as well. I ignored her and returned to my computer.

We left the office around six and headed over to Pedro’s. It was a hole in the wall Mexican restaurant that we’d discovered years ago when Julia lived in this neighborhood. I was often recognized when I went out in Seattle, so it was nice to be some place where no one knew who I was. Pedro’s was a place where I could just enjoy a meal without someone trying to convince me to invest in their company or let them handle my portfolio.

Julia was already seated in our favorite booth in the back when we arrived. Teresa looked around, then pulled out her phone, tapping out a quick message.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as we crossed the bar.

“I want another set of eyes here,” she said. “There are too many variables.”

I wasn’t going to argue. She knew this stuff better than I did.

“Flora-Bora!” Julia jumped out of the booth, pulling me into a tight hug that made all the tension of the day immediately drain out of my body. “I’ve missed you babe.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I said, giving her a squeeze. “This is my... this is Teresa.”

Julia shook Teresa’s hand and gave her a smile. “Wow, you look way different than any bodyguards I’ve worked with.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

When she looked back at me, her gaze was teasing. “This reminds me of that book we read in book club last year. You know what they say about life imitating fiction.”

I knew exactly what she was talking about, a book where a super hot bodyguard fell in love with an heiress he was providing security for. The book had been steamy enough that even as a lesbian I’d enjoyed it immensely.

“Shut up.”

Teresa

I watched Flora and her friend as they caught up on each other’s lives. Julia gasped when she heard about the car accident and the threatening note, seeming genuinely horrified about the news. I didn’t sense any duplicity in her. Vamps weren’t as good at sussing out lies as some of the shifters were, but it was still obvious to us if people’s heart rates increased, or they had other indications of lying like avoiding eye contact.

As they talked, I watched as Boris and Wanda pretended to be a couple a short distance away. Wanda was mated with rock star Tasha Blue, someone she’d fallen for while in charge of Wanda’s protective detail. Now that I thought about it, she and Tasha had a lot of similarities to my situation. Tasha was one of the most famous musicians in the world. With more money than God, she was about as opposite from Wanda as she could be. But they’d somehow been able to work it out. Although they hadn’t gotten married they were officially mated and in a committed relationship.

If they could work things out, maybe me and Flora would be okay. Once I eliminated

the threat against her of course.

“So Teresa, tell me about yourself.”

Julia’s attention turned to me, her eyes dancing between me and Flora like she suspected there was more to our relationship than employee and client. When I glanced to the side, a flush rose up Flora’s face, making Julia smirk knowingly at us.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said gruffly.

“Where are you from?” Julia asked. “Did you grow up in Seattle?”

I shook my head. “No, I grew up in Wenatchee,” I said, referring to a town in northern Washington. “Then I joined the Army when I turned eighteen and did my twenty before moving here for my job.”

“Your twenty?” Flora asked in confusion.

“You’re eligible for retirement if you do twenty years in the service,” I explained. “You get retirement income and much better benefits than veterans who were in for shorter tours,” I explained.

“So you’re... forty-something?” Julia asked.

“Forty-four,” I confirmed.

“Six years older than Flora.”

“And you,” Flora reminded her, giving her a look that clearly threatened harm if Julia didn’t back off.



Julia ignored her.

“Are you single?” Julia asked.

“Yes,” I said shortly.

“I assume you like women,” she said, giving Flora a significant look.

“I’m a lesbian,” I confirmed.

“Interesting. Our Flora here is also a lesbian.”

I’d picked up on that the first time I met her, although I couldn’t say why. Maybe it was the mate bond.

“Julia stop!” Flora sent her a glare that just made Julia laugh.

“Okay, okay, I’ll back off,” she said. “But I just want to be clear. Flora has been my ride or die since we were six years old. You’d better take good care of her.”

“I will,” I promised.

“Don’t hurt her.”

The message there was clear. Julia said, ‘don’t hurt her’ not ‘don’t let her get hurt’. Even though she was a full human, Flora’s best friend was clearly very perceptive.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“I won’t,” I promised. And I meant it.

The rest of the work week passed uneventfully. I went back to sleeping in my own bed, as much as it killed me. Flora hinted the first night that she’d slept better with me by her side, but we both knew that I was here to do a job and needed to avoid distractions.

My mate was the biggest distraction though. The more time I spent with her, the more I liked her. Despite her fascination with all things girly I enjoyed spending time with her. She was hard working, smart, and much funnier than I expected, plus she made a mean Rice Krispie treat, although I would never admit how much I liked the marshmallow filled treats. I never lost sight of the fact that I was here for a job, but I was having so much fun with Flora that it didn’t really seem like work.

At least until Friday night.

“You want me to go with you where?” I asked in horror.

“We’re going to get a manicure,” Flora repeated. “I go every other week.”

She waved her perfectly polished red fingernails.

“And no offense but your cuticles are a disaster.”

I looked down at my hands in confusion. “Huh?”

She stepped closer, pointing at the tissue around my nails. Cuticles presumably. I

tended to pick at them when I was bored, which was often.

“We’re going to get those cleaned up and add a touch of polish.”

When I opened my mouth to argue she said, “You can get clear polish if you really want to,” she reassured me. “Although it would be a waste. Now come on. Kim promised she’d work you in with me.”

Kim, as it turned out, was a tiny Vietnamese lady who was somewhere between fifty and ninety years old. I’d had drill sergeants in the Army who were softer than this woman.

“You sit,” she ordered, pointing to chairs she’d set up side by side for me and Flora.

Flora immediately stuck her fingers into two small bowls of scented water on the table in front of her. I was considering if I should do the same when Kim barked, “Give me hand!”

She grabbed my hand and examined my nails critically.

“Is no good,” she said, shaking her head like I was a grievous disappointment. “You must stop pulling on skin!”

Next to me, Flora stifled a giggle.

A younger Vietnamese woman came by, offering us both a flute of champagne. I was surprised by how good it was. Of course this was a super fancy upscale nail salon, not one of those drop in places you saw in strip malls.

Then I did something I never imagined I would do. I got a manicure. And to my shock, I didn’t hate it.

Chastising me the entire time, Kim trimmed my ragged cuticles, smoothed the rough surfaces of my nails, trimmed them nice and short the way I liked them, and then somehow convinced me to let her try “a nice peach” shade of polish on my fingers.

The polish was a few shades darker than my skin, just enough to tell that I had a manicure if someone looked but not enough that it was super obvious. By the time she was done, the skin of my hands and wrists were soft from the soaking before the manicure and the lotion application and hand massage afterwards.

I watched as Kim worked on Flora’s nails, the two of them chatting like old friends. Kim was just as rude and bossy with my mate, but there was an undertone of affection that made me like the old Vietnamese woman even more.

After giving Kim a generous tip equal to one hundred percent of the price of our manicures, Flora gave her a hug and we headed out to where the town car was waiting for us. I was so distracted by the experience that I totally forgot to scan the vehicle for explosives.

“How committed are you to this car service?” I asked Flora as we entered the house after our manicures.

She shrugged. “I used to drive myself – at least to work – but my car is still getting fixed.”

“I’m going to get us a car from Sapphic Security,” I said. “They’re bullet proof and have some high tech features that will keep you safe. I’m actually disappointed that I didn’t think of it earlier.”

I didn’t think of it earlier because I was distracted by my mate. I really needed to tell Lois about my relationship to Flora, but I knew that my boss would push for me to get off the case or at least have another agent here. Selfishly, I wanted to keep this

alone time with Flora.

I just hoped I wasn't making a big mistake.

Then something happened that made it impossible to keep my feelings a secret anymore.

Flora

Taking Teresa for her first manicure had been an interesting experience. She'd seemed really uncomfortable at first – although she'd done her best to hide it – but by the end, I think she really enjoyed herself.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

Teresa looked up from whatever meal she'd ended up with tonight. Mine was roasted chicken with vegetables. I already knew she'd make herself a bowl of cereal or a big sandwich when she was done. Maybe it was her vampire blood, but my bodyguard seemed to have a super fast metabolism.

“What?”

“Do you have sisters?” I asked.

“No, only boys in my family,” she responded. “I'm the only girl in my generation, all my cousins are male too.”

“And your mother?”

“She was female,” Teresa said seriously, but her eyes sparkled with humor at her own joke.

“Was she, um, girlie would you say?”

“I don’t know,” Teresa said. “She died the day after I was born.”

My hand flew to my mouth. “Oh my God, what happened?”

“Internal bleeding,” Teresa said. “I guess I tore her up on the way out, or maybe it was something the doctor did. My father said she was complaining about pain and weakness and they kind of blew her off, like they thought she was just trying to get pain meds or something. It must have been bad for her to say anything, because supes have a high pain tolerance.”

She shook her head. “The U.S. healthcare system is a nightmare, as you know, and maternal mortality rates are worse here than they are in some underdeveloped countries.”

“Your dad raised you then?” I asked.

She nodded. “My dad and my older brothers, yeah. Why?”

“Oh I was just wondering about how you’d never had a manicure before, and the way you seem to not understand why people wear make-up.”

“I was raised like another one of the boys,” she said. “I ran around behind them, trying to keep up. They taught me to fight and be wild. It was a great childhood.”

She seemed nostalgic. “But you left for the military as soon as you turned eighteen?”

She shrugged. “It’s what people do in small towns when they have no money and no prospects.”

I could tell she didn’t want to talk about it, so I changed the subject.

“Is someone coming to relieve you this weekend?”

Teresa frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, they don’t make you work every day, do they?” I asked. “This is your sixth day in a row on duty.”

“It’s not unusual for us to stay the length of the assignment,” she explained. “It depends on whether we’re undercover or not. When the threat level is higher we might also alternate. Like a while back we were on a personal protection case for someone on the run from the mob, and there were two of us, one for days and one for nights.”

“Did you save the person?” I asked.

“What person?”

“The one on the run from the mob.”

Teresa gave me a small, wistful smile. “Yeah, we kept her safe and now our client just married my coworker, Martha.”

“You’re allowed to have personal relationships with your clients?” I asked in surprise.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

“Not technically but sometimes you can’t help it...,” she paused before asking, “Do you know about fated mates?”

I shook my head.

“In the supernatural world, there’s this concept of fated mates. It’s like there’s this one person who’s your perfect match. They might be human or a different kind of supe, but somehow – no one knows how – when you meet that person there’s an immediate attraction, a sense that they’re who you’ve been looking for your whole life.”

To my surprise, Teresa’s voice turned almost dreamy as she spoke.

“That’s what happened to my friend Martha. As soon as she met our client, she knew that Emily was her soulmate. They’ve been inseparable ever since.”

“That sounds a little like a fairy tale,” I noted, hoping I wouldn’t offend her.

“A lot of supes don’t believe in fated mates until they find theirs. But not everyone finds their person. Like my parents, they weren’t fated mates,” she continued. “I’ve heard they had a good marriage though. You can love someone who isn’t your fated mate, it just isn’t the same.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you believe in fated mates?”

Her blue eyes fixed on mine. “I do,” she said softly. “I used to dream about finding my mate, wondering what she’d be like, but the reality was even better.”

“You have a mate?” I asked in surprise. “But you kissed me!”

I felt indignant. How could Teresa kiss me the way she’d done – twice now – if she had someone back home waiting for her.

Her expression shifted from almost nervous to resolved.

“That’s because you are my fated mate, Flora.” Her voice was soft, but full of conviction.

“What? I don’t understand.”

Or maybe I kind of did.

“When I first saw you, my vampire started going crazy inside me, telling me that you were the one. Then the first time we touched, I knew it was true. It’s hard to explain, but I feel this connection to you that’s different than just someone I’m attracted to.”

When I didn’t respond she said, “I know that’s a lot to dump on you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. Not yet.”

It explained a lot, but my analytical mind couldn’t make sense of what she was saying. My heart however knew what she was saying was true.

“Is this why I feel so connected to you?” I asked.

Teresa nodded. “Humans don’t feel the mate pull as strongly as supernaturals do, but what I’ve heard is that humans typically feel something akin to a strong crush or love at first sight.”

“So what happens now?” I asked.

“For now we stay just friends,” she said firmly. “We should avoid kissing and touching and anything that will distract me from my primary mission of keeping you safe. Once this is all over, we can talk about what happens next.”

“Can’t you keep me safe and still add in some kissing and touching?”

“I shouldn’t get distracted from my mission,” she said stubbornly.

I got out of my chair and walked around the table, shoving it away with my hip so I could stand in front of Teresa’s chair. I put my hands on her shoulders and leaned down until our lips were only an inch or two apart.

“Would it distract you if I did this?” I asked right before I pressed my lips against hers.

“Yeah.” Her answer came when I pulled back.

“I think you’re skilled enough to keep me safe and have a little fun.”

I threw my leg over her so I could sit in her lap. I’d never been this forward in my life, but now that I knew that there was a reason I was feeling this way, and more importantly, now that I knew Teresa felt it too, I didn’t want to wait any longer.

Her hands came to my waist, but otherwise she stayed still, waiting for me to make the next move. This time when I kissed her I slid my tongue into her mouth, exploring. Teresa’s tongue tangled with mine as the kiss turned rougher.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

It was like lighting a match to newspaper. Heat immediately flared between us. I scooted closer, rubbing my hips against hers, desperate for more contact. I'd never felt this needy before, but for some reason it felt completely natural to straddle my bodyguard and rub up against her like a cat in heat.

Teresa's fingers went to the buttons of my blouse, parting the fabric to expose my lace covered breasts. She broke this kiss to run her mouth down my neck and across my collar bones. I arched my back, giving her access as she sucked one of my nipples into her mouth through my bra, biting down softly.

"Teresa! Oh my God!"

I gripped her head, holding her closer as she sucked on first one breast and then the other. When she was done she returned to my mouth. This time Teresa was the aggressor, claiming every part of my mouth until I felt almost dizzy from lack of oxygen.

We pulled apart slowly, reluctantly.

"Do you want to come upstairs with me?" I asked. "This would be more comfortable in a bed."

A myriad of emotions crossed her face. "No, we need to stop. I shouldn't have let that happen. I can't let myself get distracted from keeping you safe."

My disappointment must have been evident in my face because she pressed a quick kiss against my lips and whispered, "I'm sorry. I want you more than I can say, but I

have a job to do here.”

I pulled back and slid off her lap, wincing as I realized how damp my panties were.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” I said. “Good night.”

Teresa

I watched Flora leave the kitchen, trying to decide if I should follow her. Then I reminded myself that what I said was valid. I needed to keep focused on protecting her. I could spend the rest of my life loving her if we could just figure out how to eliminate the threat first.

With that in mind, I called my boss.

“Taylor!”

I winced and move the phone away from my ear. My boss was a bellow. Or as Angie liked to tease her, she barked like the wolf she was.

“Hey boss, checking in. Did you find anything yet?”

“I damn well would have called you if we found something, or do you think I don’t know how to do my job anymore?”

I rolled my eyes but knew better than to respond.

“How’s it going there?” she asked.

“The client is fine, but I need to tell you something.”

“What?”

“Flora is... well, she’s my mate,” I forced myself to say.

“Christ on a cracker! Did you just figure this out today?”

“No.”

“Then why am I only hearing this news now, almost a week after you got the assignment?”

I looked down at the table that was still pushed away from my chair from the make out session with Flora a few minutes ago, then jumped up and hustled away as if Lois could see it through the phone.

“I thought it was a mistake or something. She’s not... what I was expecting.”

“Yeah yeah Taylor, my mate wasn’t what I was expecting either you know, but fate knows what it’s doing. Monique makes me very happy, unlike my irresponsible staff who think they should hide crucial information from me!”

As she spoke, Lois’s voice got even louder.

“I’m sorry Lois, but you have to understand that I can’t leave someone else to protect her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:16 pm*

The sigh seemed to come from the depths of Lois's soul.

"I'm not going to ask if you claimed her, but if you haven't, I'll remind you that once you do it's almost impossible to stay detached enough to do your job. Just because your coworkers lucked out doesn't mean that you will. If you feel yourself slipping at all, you tell me immediately and I'll send back up. Do you copy?"

"Yes ma'am."

"All right, anything else?" Lois asked.

"Yes, I'd like to get a Sapphic Security car. Relying on a car service to get us around town is making me twitchy."

"Good thinking," Lois agreed. "This guy's been quiet for a few days now. My spidey senses are telling me he'll try something soon."

"Agreed. I'll pick one up in the morning."

"Sounds good. And Taylor, remember what I said. The minute you feel compromised I want a call."

She hung up the phone before I could respond.

Little did I know that I'd need back up in less than twenty-four hours.

We got up on Saturday morning and after drinking a protein shake I made for her, I

suggested that Flora come to the basement and work out with me. We'd been working out together most nights after work – a compromise since Flora liked to sleep as late as possible -- and although she would never admit it, I thought Flora was enjoying it. Especially when I told her I'd teach her sword fighting.

I'd learned sword fighting as a young girl. It was a weird weapon choice in this day and age, but my father had belonged to a Renaissance Fair group, and he'd traveled to fairs across the country during the summer months re-enacting sword fights for the crowds.

Dad had given me a full-size sword when I turned ten, and other than when I was in the military I'd practiced with it regularly. It helped with both my reflexes and balance, and more than that, it was an enjoyable way to work out.

I'd gotten Flora a smaller sword and put a guard on mine to make sure I didn't accidentally hurt her. It had only been a few days, but Flora was really getting into it, enough that she readily came downstairs to work out with me.

We did some stretching, then sparred with the swords for a while before doing some bodyweight exercises. By the time we headed back upstairs we were both feeling the burn of a good workout.

"My arm feels like lead," Flora complained as we entered the kitchen. "It's crazy how heavy that sword feels after a while."

"But your arms are getting stronger, so that's pretty cool," I reminded her.

With her face flushed from her workout and her hair pulling out of the long braid she was wearing she looked young and almost carefree. I liked her better like this, no makeup, looking totally natural, and wearing casual clothes. It was a look I knew she never showed to the rest of the world, which made me appreciate it even more.



It was early in the day, and since it was Saturday Flora wasn't going into the office. After eating breakfast, I suggested that we call for a ride over to Sapphic Security to pick up a car.

We were halfway to the office when I heard the driver swear.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The jerk behind me is riding my bumper," the driver grumbled. "Every time I speed he just increases his speed too."

"Get down," I ordered Flora. "On the floor, make yourself as small as you can."

To Flora's credit, she complied immediately, curling up into a ball on the floor behind the passenger seat. Slipping my gun out of my waistband, I lowered myself until just the top of my head was visible over the back seat and looked out at the car behind us. The windows were dark tinted, darker than was allowed by law, making it hard to see anything other than a general outline of the driver.

Traffic cleared and the car swung alongside us. Instincts kicked in.

"Go!" I shouted to the driver. "He's going to side swipe us!"

The driver floored the gas pedal, making the town car shoot up just enough that when the other driver turned the wheel, he only clipped the back panel. Flora screamed as the guy hit us hard enough that the driver struggled to stay in his lane from the impact.

"Damn it," the driver yelled. "My boss is gonna kill me."

"We need to lose him. Turn right at the next intersection," I instructed. "Don't signal,

don't slow down, turn at the last possible second."

The driver complied, jerking the wheel to the side with a squeal of rubber, and I continued my instructions.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Go left. No signal. Now right. Now pull into that alley and stop.”

I opened the door the instant the car stopped.

“Lock the doors. If I don’t come back in five minutes, drive directly to the police station. Don’t stop for anyone or anything. Keep her safe.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Teresa, what are you doing?” Flora called from the car floor. “It’s dangerous.”

“I’ll be right back. Stay down Flora, and don’t move.”

I crept down the alley, exiting onto the sidewalk in just enough time to see the now-dented SUV driving slowly down the street, clearly looking for us. I pretended to look in a shop window, watching their reflection in the window until they drove out of sight. I waited another full minute to make sure they weren’t coming back before returning to the town car.

After making sure that everyone was okay I directed the driver up the back roads until we reached the Sapphic Security offices at the edge of town. I entered my code for the car to drive into the garage, then gave the driver a Sapphic Security business card to call to get his vehicle fixed.

“Have your boss call us, okay? We’ll make sure he knows it wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.”

I helped Flora out of the car, then waited for the town car to exit the garage again before pulling her into my arms. Flora's face was blank, but her slight body was shaking from the adrenaline dump.

"Are you okay, baby?"

"Yeah." Her voice was small. "Someone is really trying to kill me, but I don't understand why."

"We're going to get to the bottom of this," I promised. "Whoever this guy is, he's escalating now. That will make it easier to catch him. We're going to widen our net and end this."

Flora

I couldn't stop shaking. For some reason today's incident freaked me out more than the other two. Maybe because other people were involved. I know it was her job, but I'd been terrified when my bodyguard had run away from the car.

"Let's get you upstairs," Teresa said, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. "I need to get the keys to a car and report this incident to my boss."

As we walked to the elevator, she kept her arm around me, her other hand thumbing out a message on her phone.

The offices of Sapphic Security were tasteful but not fancy. The lobby looked like it belonged to a law firm or accounting company, with a hallway full of offices and conference rooms. Teresa brought me back to a windowless conference room near the back, directing me to a chair before making me a cup of tea from the little coffee station against the wall.

“Some of my team will be here soon,” she told me. “We’ll figure out next steps.”

Teresa’s boss Lois arrived first, soon followed by Angie and Wanda, the two agents I’d met at my house last week, and another woman named Bella. I sat quietly next to Teresa while she briefed them on the incident.

“They were too close for me to get the plates,” she told them. “But it was a steel gray SUV, probably a Honda, with a very dark after-market window tint.”

“Well that narrows it down,” Lois said sarcastically.

“I’ll start pulling the traffic cams,” Wanda said. “See if we can get a clear picture of what happened.”

“We should get you to a safe house, Miss Meyer,” Lois said, her voice much softer than the tone she used with her team. Not that it seemed to bother them.

“No,” I said firmly. “I’m not going to let this guy scare me and I’m certainly not going to leave my job. People are counting on me.”

“Who do we like for this perp?” Angie asked.

“I’ve been looking at that asshole Richardson the CFO,” Teresa told her. “But I’m not finding much to tie him to this, other than the fact he’s a misogynist who clearly thinks the Flora doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

“Anyone else?”

“I did some prelims on the rest of the family. There are a couple of relatives who might be hoping to cash in, but no one raises any flags. None of them have regular contact with Flora, but they don’t have any animosity either, as far as she knows,

right?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Right,” I agreed. “I mean we exchange texts on holidays but that’s about it. They live over in Spokane and rarely come to Seattle, at least as far as I know. I’ve never seen any of them show any interest in my money. I’m not even sure that they know how wealthy I really am.”

“We should send someone out to talk to them just in case though.” Teresa looked around. “They’re shifters so we might want to send one of the wolves.”

“On it,” Lois said, loudly tapping away on her laptop.

“There must be someone that we’re missing,” Teresa mused. “Besides your friend Julia, who do you spend time with?”

I shook my head. “Just my godfather Henry.” I looked around the table. “He’s my attorney and the one who hired you. He’s been really worried about me ever since my parents died. He doesn’t believe it was an accident either.”

I could see the wheels turning in people’s minds.

“I already checked him out,” Teresa announced. “He’s clean.”

I looked at her in surprise. “You ran background checks on my attorney?”

She shrugged. “I’ve learned that you can’t be too careful in this business. The person closest to you is often the one with the biggest axe to grind.”

“Henry has no axe to grind,” I said indignantly. “He’s like a father to me.”

“Well, there’s nothing in his background to say that isn’t true,” she told the team. “Good credit. No gambling or addictions issues. No criminal history, not even a traffic ticket. He has a shit ton of money, all wisely invested. All indications are that he was a true friend to Flora’s father and has no reason to resent her.”

“Well someone does,” Lois said. “We need to wrap this up before someone gets hurt.”

“Agreed.”

Lois stared at Teresa for a long moment, and I had the strangest sense like they were having a silent conversation. Teresa looked down and tilted her head, almost like she was submitting to Lois, then turned back to me.

“We should head back to your place,” she said.

“I want a second agent on duty when you’re at the mansion,” Lois said. “I want them patrolling whenever you’re there. I don’t think your security crew can find their assholes with their elbows.”

I looked at Teresa in confusion.

“She thinks they’re incompetent,” Teresa translated.

“We’ll set up a rotation. I’m down an agent while Martha is on her honeymoon so I’ll see if the bears can do some freelance work.”

Lois sent me a stern look. “Since you won’t go to a safe house I’m going to strongly encourage you to avoid going anywhere but home or work while we’re wrapping this up.”



When I didn't respond immediately she glared at Teresa. "Stay focused and keep your mate safe."

By the time we got back to my house one of the guys I'd met last weekend was waiting for us.

"Hey Boris, thanks for coming," Teresa greeted the bear shifter with a hug.

"Is no problem," he said, giving me a little bow of greeting.

I loved these guys, they were so courtly.

Teresa rolled her eyes. "Let's get in the house. I don't like having Flora out in the open like this."

The rest of the day passed quickly. I had some work to do, so I holed up in my library while Teresa and Boris prowled around the house like they were expecting an ambush from a mob of angry marauders at any moment.

After a while I didn't hear them anymore, so I went looking to see what they were doing. I found them in the kitchen. Teresa was leaning against the island while Boris dug through my cabinets.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Boris is going to cook dinner for us," Teresa said. "You're in for a treat, he's a great cook."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

I must have looked surprised because she added, “He and his brothers own a restaurant.”

“I make Vereshchaka,” he said proudly. “Is short ribs and sausage, and also I am making Draniki, potato pancakes. You will like.”

“I’m sure I will,” I said. “I so rarely have fresh cooked food. How can I help?”

Boris put me to work chopping up root vegetables that he was going to roast as a side dish. While we prepped the food, Teresa did a tour of the house, inside and out, looking for issues.

“All clear,” she said when she returned a full forty-five minutes after she left.

“We eat in one more hour,” Boris told her. “I am here all night. Now I take nap like cat, you wake me in sixty minutes, okay?”

“Will do.”

“Oh, I should show him a bedroom,” I said, starting to follow after Boris.

“Trust me, that guy can sleep anywhere. He’s probably cuddled up under a table right now.”

I didn’t know whether to believe her or not, but when I went back to the library I caught a glimpse of Boris sleeping in my entryway, sitting up with his back against the door. Shaking my head, I got back to work until it was dinner time.

After enjoying a delicious meal of Belarusian food, I headed upstairs. I put on a nightgown and settled in bed, thinking that I'd read for a while until it was time for bed, but I was super restless. That close call with the SUV had freaked me out more than I wanted to admit, and now that I was alone, I couldn't seem to calm my restless mind.

Finally, around nine o'clock I exited my room and knocked softly on Teresa's door. I'd heard her come up a while ago and knew she was in there. She opened the door immediately, like she'd been waiting on the other side.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I can't sleep. I just keep replaying what happened today," I told her. "I just... I don't want to be alone."

"Do you want me to come in with you until you fall asleep?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, I want you to come in with me until morning. Nothing has to happen, but can you do that? Will you stay with me tonight?"

"I'm not sure if I can keep my hands off of you if we spend another night together," she told me, her expression conflicted.

"I don't want you to keep your hands off me," I said softly. "I want you to make me forget."

Teresa

I couldn't resist the pleading look in Flora's eyes. I didn't want to resist it. But I also didn't want her to regret it later.

“Are you sure Flora?” I asked, placing my hands on her shoulders and waiting for her to meet my eyes. “Once we’re intimate, even if I don’t mark you, it’s game over for me. I won’t be able to be with anyone else ever again.”

“Explain.”

“For supernaturals, when we find our fated mate, there’s this bond that forms, drawing us to them. It’s possible to reject the bond, even though it’s painful, when the relationship is new. But once we are intimate, the bond starts to connect us, and with every touch, every kiss, the bond strengthens until it becomes impossible for us to not complete it.”

“How do you complete it?” she asked.

I lifted a finger to touch the juncture of her neck and shoulder. “I would bite you, here.”

Her eyes widened. “You have to drink my blood, like on Buffy the Vampire Slayer? Will I turn into a vampire too?”

I laughed. “No, there’s no turning. Vampires are born not made. As for the blood, technically we can drink human blood, but it’s strictly forbidden unless it’s an emergency, like one of us is dying or something. The mate bond is a different kind of bite. It’s a kind of sealing of the magical bond and blending our essences so other supernaturals know that we’re both taken. There is a little bit of bleeding during the process, but the bite wound heals almost instantly. Then we are the supernatural equivalent of married.”

I expected my mate to be horrified at that idea, but instead she looked almost fascinated.

“And we have to do that tonight if you sleep with me?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But the closer we get, the harder it will be for me to hold my vampire back from fully claiming you. And the harder it will be for me to let you go.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Maybe we can just snuggle then.”

And maybe I can just stick a stake through my heart, my inner vampire responded sarcastically. It would be hard to just hold Flora and not do more, but she was hurting, I reminded the vamp. We had a responsibility to help her feel better.

“Sure, we can do that,” I said, trying to make my voice convincing.

After a quick stop to use the bathroom and brush my teeth, I headed into Flora’s room. She was sitting up in bed, a book in her hand, but clearly not reading it, given that she was holding it upside down. I got into bed with her and spent the next hour listening to her as she tossed and turned next to me. Despite her agitation, I could also smell her arousal, which increased every time she brushed up against me. She might be stressed out, but she was also horny. I could help with both of those things.

“Flora,” I said. “I have a proposal.”

She flipped over to look at me, her eyes glowing in the darkness. “What is it?”

“How about I make you come? That will release the tension so you can get some sleep.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, I find orgasms very helpful for curing insomnia,” I said in my most serious voice.

She lightly smacked my shoulder.

“I know orgasms help, doofus. I meant, are you sure you want to do that.”

“I’ve never wanted anything more than to give you pleasure,” I said honestly.

She stared at me in the darkness for a long moment before flopping over onto her back and throwing her arms and legs wide like she was a starfish.

“Have at it.”

“Wow, I always knew you’d be a romantic,” I teased.

I leaned over her, giving her a long, claiming kiss that left us both breathless. While we kissed, I inched her nightgown upwards, freeing her breasts so I could tweak her nipples with my fingers.

When my hand slid down her sternum toward her belly, Flora moaned against my mouth.

“This feel okay?” I asked, pulling away.

“God yes,” she said. “I think I could come just from you kissing me.”

“Let’s test that theory another day,” I suggested. “Right now I’m dying for a taste of this pussy.”

Flora gasped as I cupped her fabric-covered mound. Slowly, I slid her panties down her thighs and then the rest of the way down, tossing them in the direction of the hamper I knew was in the corner. Sitting on my heels, I just stared down at her for a few seconds. It was dark in the room, other than the light of the moon through the

window, but fortunately I was descended from a long line of creatures of the night, so I had excellent night vision.

“So lovely,” I whispered as I pushed her legs wider and settled between them.

The first lick of my tongue made Flora’s hips pop off the bed. I grabbed her hips to hold her still, then licked her labia a few times before sliding my tongue inside her slit. She was dripping with arousal, and I lapped it up like it was my favorite ice cream. Over and over I explored her folds, ramping up her excitement with every pass of my tongue.

When Flora was making little moaning noises and begging me to make her come I released her legs and slid one finger as deep inside her as I could reach. I began pumping in and out with a steady rhythm, relishing the sensation of her inner muscles clenching against my finger.

I moved my head upwards so I could focus on her clitoris. I slid it back and forth with the tip of my tongue until I felt the first tremors of her orgasm around my finger. Then, and only then, I sucked her swollen bud into my mouth, using one of my fangs to add a little bite.

That did it. My mate detonated like someone had set off dynamite. She thrashed beneath me, moaning and panting and crying my name over and over again. I ground my pelvis against the bed, seeking some pressure of my own, pleasuring us both until Flora finally collapsed against the bed with a long sigh.

I lifted my head, licking her essence off my lips. Flora’s head was thrown back against the pillow, her eyes screwed shut as she tried to catch her breath. I slid upward, pulling the blanket over both of us so my mate wouldn’t get cold when the sweat covering her skin cooled. By the time I snuggled up against her again, she was half asleep.



“That was great,” she mumbled sleepily. “I’ll return the favor... in just... a minute.”

By the time she finished her sentence she was fast asleep, not moving again until morning. I lay next to her, willing my body to calm down enough for me to sleep as well. By the time the sun rose I was wide awake, having only slept in fits and starts. Figuring I might as well relieve Boris, I slid out of bed, stopped at my bedroom to wash up and put on some clothes, then headed downstairs.

My bear friend was sitting at the kitchen table, studying something on his laptop.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“You want coffee?” he asked. “There is fresh pot. Your mate buys nice high quality coffee beans. Very good.”

I smirked. Boris and his brothers were terrible food snobs for three guys who grew up in the woods of Belarus and spent most of their lives working first for the Belarusian military and then as secret operatives for the CIA.

“Thank you. Any problems last night?” I asked.

“No, it is very quiet. Angie is coming soon for relief, but first I must show you this that I found.”

I sat on the chair next to him and he angled his laptop next to me. I frowned as I looked at a reddit post railing against spoiled society princesses who had everything handed to them on a silver platter.

“I don’t understand.”

“This is discussion thread for a news article about the death of your mate’s parents,” he said. “Userdisgruntled589seems to have anger for your mate.”

“I’m sure a lot of people do, Boris. Billionaires aren’t exactly popular right now. And people who don’t know how hard Flora works probably assume that she’s just some spoiled nepo baby who got her job because of her last name.”

“Nep-po baby?” Boriss sounded out the word. “What is this?”

“A person who gets a job by nepotism.” At his blank look I explained, “It’s when your parents are rich and famous and you only have a job because of them, not because of your own merits.”

“Ah, yes I see.” Boris shot me a look. “I do some search on disgruntled589 and find his ISP is in Seattle. More research and I find that this account is for a Jacob Shapiro.”

“Shapiro? Why do I know that name?”

“I check, he is son of lawyer, the one who hires us to protect his goddaughter Flora.”

My eyes widened. “Holy crap, Henry has a kid? No one ever mentioned that.”

“There is more,” he said. “I run background check. Jacob is often in trouble with the police. He has several arrests for fighting and assault, but none are convictions. His father’s law firm has gotten him, how you say...scott free every time.”

“So we have a hothead son who’s not a fan of Flora? My God Boris, that’s the first lead we’ve had since we took this case. Good job!”

I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him in for a hug. “I owe you a nice bottle of vodka.”

“Make it expensive.”

Flora

I woke up with my nightgown tangled around the top of my breasts and my bottom half totally naked. It took only a second for me to remember what happened last night. The conversation I had with Teresa about mating. Me asking her to stay with

me and snuggle. Her offering to take the edge of my restlessness. And me falling asleep right after one of the most powerful orgasms of my life.

I hadn't even stayed awake long enough to get Teresa off. That was definitely bad form. Since she was no longer in my bed when I woke up, I guess that part would have to wait.

Despite sleeping later than I usually did, I was still dragging when I woke up. I took a long hot shower and threw on some yoga pants, a tee shirt, and a hoodie, too exhausted to worry about how I looked right now. Besides, this was how I would usually dress for a Sunday at home – if I was totally alone that is.

My mother had taught me at an early age that appearances were everything. As one of Seattle's wealthiest families, and scions of the beauty industry, how we looked mattered. You never knew when some eager photographer was waiting to catch you looking like crap.

I liked to look nice, but I wasn't as strict as my mother had been. Even for a day relaxing at home Mom would have a full face of make-up, not a hair out of place, even her casual outfits carefully pressed and stylish. I'd learned when I was away at college the value of loungewear, much to my mother's horror.

When I got downstairs Teresa was at the kitchen table with Boris, both of them tapping away at their laptops keyboards.

"Good morning," I said.

Teresa gave me an intense look that made me blush. Boris's gaze swung between us and he looked amused, although he didn't say anything.

"I make coffee," Boris said in his accented voice. "You tell me make myself at home,

so I make myself at home. You have good coffee.”

“No problem,” I said, pouring myself a cup and coming to the table. “You two look like you were doing something intense.”

Teresa gave me a long look. “Why didn’t you tell me about Jacob Shapiro?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Jake? What about him? I think I’ve seen him like once since I went away to college.”

“Tell me everything you know about him,” she instructed.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Boris spent the night investigating online comments about you.”

I reared back in surprise. “Online comments about me? What do you mean?”

“I look through new articles that mention your name, then read the comments,” Boris explained.

“Oh no, don’t read the comments online, everyone knows they’re terrible. I’ve heard those comments are all a bunch of incel trolls hanging out in their parents’ basement trashing people for fun.”

“Well, one of your incel trolls is your godfather’s son,” Teresa informed me. “So I’m going to need to know everything you can tell me about him.”

“Hm. Wow, okay. Well, Jake is about five or six years younger than me, so we never hung out or anything, even though our fathers were good friends,” I said. “He came to my parents’ funeral with Henry, and I talked to him briefly. I remember being so surprised because the last time I’d seen him he’d been in junior high, you know how when you see someone as a kid it’s almost jarring to see them and realize they’re all grown up.”

“What did you talk about at the funeral?” Teresa asked.

“Um, I don’t know, the usual funeral stuff, sorry for your loss, that kind of thing.” I paused, trying to bring up anything unusual about the interaction. “I remember he was kind of twitchy.”

“Twitchy?”

“Yeah, I remember he was ADHD as a kid, and I was surprised he still had such a hard time being still. I mean, if I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was on drugs or something.”

“How did you know he wasn’t?” Teresa asked.

“Oh, well I guess I didn’t know for sure. I just assumed that he hadn’t grown out of his ADHD. There were so many people to talk to that day, I don’t think I spent more than two minutes with him, although Henry stuck by my side the entire time.”

I allowed myself a smile, appreciating the gentle support of my godfather.

“Did you know that Jacob has been in and out of jail since he was fifteen?”

My eyebrows rose. “No, Henry never mentioned that. I can’t believe it.”

“He gets in trouble many times, but has good lawyer,” Boris told me. “Charges do not stick.”

“Do you have any idea why Jacob would be hostile towards you?” Teresa asked.

“I doubt that he is,” I replied. “We’ve never been friends or anything, but I never got any bad vibes off him. I don’t even know the guy.”

“Explain this then.”

Teresa slid her laptop over to me, pointing out an article about my becoming CEO of Meyer Beauty.

“Read the eighth comment down.”

I scanned the online comments until I found the one she wanted me to read.

“This cunt stole everything from me. I hope someone rapes her until she dies. Maybe I’ll do it myself.”

My hand came to my mouth as I read the vitriolic comment out loud. “God, that’s awful, why would someone write that?”

“The real question is, why would Jacob Shapiro write that?”

I looked at the username. “You think thatdisgruntled589is Jake Shapiro?”

“I don’t think, I know it. Boris traced this username to his ISP.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

I spent the rest of the morning in a daze. Reading those horrible things Jake said about me was a shock. I had no idea how I was going to talk to Henry about it. For now, Teresa and Boris didn't want me to say anything, not when he was their prime suspect in the attacks against me.

I didn't believe Jake was trying to kill me though. He had no reason to. Although I was surprised by what he'd written, Jake was raised in a good family with parents who loved him. He had everything he could ever need, including a generous trust fund. His mother died of breast cancer when I was in high school and Jake was still young. As the only child, he was undoubtedly due a nice inheritance when his father died.

Even if he hated me for some reason, there was no reason for him to want me dead. Then again, I couldn't think of any reason why he'd write all those hateful comments about me online either. I'd never been anything but polite to him.

The news made me restless and out of sorts. It was an unseasonably warm spring day, so I finally put on my swimsuit and ventured outside. It was only seventy-five degrees, but our in-ground pool was heated year round, making it convenient to take a swim whenever the mood struck us. I hadn't been in the pool since last summer, uneasy about swimming alone with no one else in the house, but since I had a pair of bodyguards here, I figured I was safe.

As I swam laps, I tried to put Jake out of my mind and just focus on the feeling of my body gliding through the warm water. By the time I was done swimming, my body was tired, and my mind was much more relaxed.

Boris had been replaced with Angie while I was outside in the pool. While I swam, she and Teresa worked out with their swords on the grass nearby, having a vicious looking mock fight that lasted until they were both covered in sweat.

I wondered how Teresa felt about what happened last night. This whole fated mate thing was wild, yet it seemed to be true. I couldn't say why, but I just felt it in my bones. Having sex with Teresa last night had only solidified my feelings for her. Well, at least one of us had sex. I really needed to return the favor.

As I dried off from the pool, I realized that I had fallen in love with Teresa. I wasn't sure how she felt about me. She'd told me that I was her fated mate, but that was some primal biology thing, right? When she'd first come here – my God, was that only a week ago? – she'd seemed to dislike me. We were very different people, that was certain. But was the mate bond just some kind of chemistry? Or could we make it work long term?

For some reason, I'd never really imagined having a partner. Even as a little girl, I'd known that I'd grow up to run Meyer Beauty. I'd expected that to happen years later than it actually did, but it was the job I'd been born to do, groomed my entire life for.

I remembered the day I'd come out to my parents. I'd dated several boys in high school and my first two years of college, but it hadn't been until I went on a date with a woman that I truly embraced my sexuality. My parents had been very accepting of my coming out, but my mother expressed sadness that I'd never be able to get married and have kids. I told Mom I wasn't interested in any of that.

Of course that was long before gay marriage was legalized here. My options were different now, but when I tried to picture Teresa and I getting married and having kids, it was difficult to imagine. Would she even want kids? And would they be vampires or human or both?

Then again, we'd known each other for eight days. Maybe I was getting ahead of myself. Teresa hadn't claimed me yet, and we still had a mystery to solve. I just hoped that they were wrong about Jake, because if he was the person who'd been trying to hurt me it was going to kill my godfather. I just knew it.

Teresa

Since it was Sunday, I encouraged Flora to stick to her Sunday routine of ordering Thai food and watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I did it to keep her calm though, not because I wanted to know more about the mysterious Angel who kept showing up to warn Buffy about danger.

We sat on the couch while we watched the show, but unlike last weekend we sat side by side instead of having a cushion between us. After a while, Flora scooted a little closer, laying her head on my shoulder. My vampire sighed happily.

"Is this okay?" she asked.

"Yes."

I really wanted to tell her that I would gladly sit in this exact spot for the rest of my life with her cuddled up against me, but I didn't want to put more pressure on either of us. The news about Jacob Shapiro's animosity for her had thrown Flora for a loop even more than the attempts on her life.

Something about this didn't make sense. With their age difference and lack of contact over the years, it wasn't immediately obvious why he would have so much animosity towards my mate. It was a puzzle, but I loved a puzzle. And so did my team.

Flora shifted, her small hand coming to my thigh, and I stifled a groan. I knew we shouldn't have sex again, but I was dying to. My vampire had been pushing me about

it nonstop, demanding that I throw caution to the winds and take what was mine, and for once the human side of me was in complete agreement.

When that hand slid between my thighs, I didn't protest, I just opened my legs enough to allow Flora to run her fingers upward. When her pinkie pressed against my mound, she looked up at me, her eyes wide in question. I nodded in assent, and she twisted her wrist and began to stroke me over the fabric of my pants.

"Flora," I groaned out her name as I scooted down on the couch enough to widen my legs.

"You know what I'd really like right now?" she asked.

I just looked at her, unable to form words knowing that she was stroking my pussy. Even through the fabric of my clothing her fingers singed me with heat.

"I'd like to get you out of these clothes, then I want to suck on your tits while I fuck you with my fingers until you come all over my hand."

My mouth dropped open and arousal flooded my core at her words.

"I had no idea you were a dirty talker, mate."

"Just wait," she promised.

Her hands went to my waistband, unzipping my pants. I lifted my hips, allowing her to remove my pants and underwear, taking my socks with them.

"Lose the shirt," she ordered.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

I pulled my tank top off, then struggled for a second to remove my sports bra in my eagerness. Once I was fully naked on the couch, Flora took her sweet time looking me over from head to toe.

“You’re so beautiful,” she whispered. “The perfect combination of lean muscle and womanly curves.”

She knelt on the cushion, leaning forward to give me a kiss. Happy to let her take the lead, I relaxed into the sensation of her soft hands sliding over my shoulders and down to my breasts.

Her fingers circled my breasts, following the line of my areolas until I was ready to beg her to quit messing around a pinch my nipples. As if she heard me, Flora grabbed a nipple between her fingers and gave it a firm pinch that practically made me levitate off the couch.

She pulled away and slid down until her mouth replaced her fingers. I pressed her head closer as she suckled me, her tongue teasing the edges of my nipples in between leaving little bites. It was the perfect combination of pain and pleasure.

Flora’s hand moved down my body slowly, stroking the soft skin of my flat belly.

“You have soft skin for someone who doesn’t believe in moisturizer,” she teased.

“It’s the nutrients in the blood I drink.”

It was quite possibly the least romantic thing I’d said in my entire life, but Flora

didn't seem to mind. She chuckled against my breast before moving to take the other one in her mouth.

By the time her hand reached the outer edges of my pussy I was wound up tight from anticipation. Who knew that this sweet little princess was going to be such a tease? Her fingers moved up and down the outside, stroking my labia several times before she finally slipped inside.

"You're so wet already," she said. "Is that for me?"

"For you," I agreed, past the point of constructing full sentences.

"Naughty girl," she teased, playfully smacking my pussy.

"Not my fault you fell asleep last night. I've been wet ever since."

I gasped as she started sliding her fingers up and down my channel, circling my opening at one end and tapping my clit at the other. The combination of what she was doing with her fingers and the way her mouth was teasing my breasts was exquisite.

My fangs pressed against my lips, my vamp pushing me to bite our mate and mark her as ours even while I reminded my demon side we needed to wait. It was one of the last cogent thoughts I had for a while.

I'd always enjoyed sex, with both men and women, but never once had the physical act been so transcendent that my mind shut down. Right now the building could blow up around me and I wouldn't even notice it. I had a vague thought that this was a problem, but I was too focused on what was happening with my mate to remember why.

Flora slid a finger into my opening, then added another one. Her hand turned so that

she could tease my clitoris with her thumb. In and out, she set a steady pace as she fucked me with her fingers, her thumb pushing against my clit with every stroke. My hips rolled up, chasing her fingers and seeking more pressure.

Her teeth snagged on the skin of my breast, a few inches above the nipple, and then she was biting me. My vampire crowed with joy at our mate marking us, even if her human teeth couldn't make anything permanent on our skin.

“Flora! Mate!”

My entire body felt like I'd touched a live wire, zings of electricity humming through my nerves and filling my veins with heat and pleasure. My breath was coming in rapid bursts, and my heart was pounding so hard I almost felt dizzy. I dug my fingers into the couch, searching for a way to remain a little bit grounded.

“Let go,” Flora growled against my breast. “Come for me. Now.”

Somehow that was all I needed to let go. My eyes closed as I growled, “Mate!”

Then my body was shaking wildly, waves of pleasure rolling through me, rocking me to the very core. When I finally came down, my body felt boneless, replaced only with the warm pleasure of being with my mate.

When I looked up at the TV, Buffy was just learning that the mysterious older guy she had a crush on was really a vampire. I stared at Angel's bumpy forehead and jagged teeth, glad that vampires didn't really look that unattractive when we released our beasts.

Flora shifted to straddle my lap, her mouth crashing down on mine as she started rubbing her groin against my thighs, trying to get herself off. I was too exhausted and sated from my orgasm to do much to help, but I forced myself to slide my hands

down the back of her yoga pants, cupping her ass to grind her down harder until Flora screamed her own release and collapsed on top of me, her head resting on my shoulder.

“Wow,” she said. “This mate sex is another whole level of hot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I panted. “Supposedly it only gets better with time.”

“It’s going to get better?” she said in a shocked voice. “If it gets any better it might kill me.”

“At least you’ll die happy,” I teased.



## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

We stayed there a few minutes, Flora draped over me with her head on my shoulder, until my phone beeped, bringing me back to the present. I dug into the couch cushion where I'd hidden my phone, knife, and gun for safekeeping while we watched TV. It was a message from my boss.

Lois:Shapiro is MIA. Neighbors haven't seen him for weeks, but we found this at the apartment.

I opened the photo attached to the text, enlarging it so I could see what it was.

“Oh my God, is that us?” Flora asked, looking down at the photo.

It was a computer monitor, the screen filled with a picture of my mate and I walking to a black town car in front of her office building.

Flora

Teresa told us we couldn't do anything about Josh until the next day, so we watched two more episodes of Buffy. I couldn't concentrate on the show -- not that I needed to when I'd seen every episode a dozen times or more -- because I kept seeing the photo on Josh's screen.

I didn't know if he'd taken it or paid someone else to, but clearly he was watching my whereabouts. There was no explanation for that I could think of, nothing that wasn't sinister anyway.

After we were done with Buffy, I transitioned into my Sunday night ritual: a long and

luxurious bubble bath, an extended skincare regime, and an early bedtime. Teresa came up to join me shortly after I got to bed, but other than a quick kiss, neither of us initiated anything more.

She was distracted, and definitely concerned, although I couldn't say for sure how I knew that. My bodyguard's expression was as impassive as ever. I realized that I could somehow intuit her emotions, something that had been more frequent since we first started being intimate. Maybe it was the mate bond that Teresa had told me about.

The next morning I woke up alone. When I came downstairs Teresa was in the kitchen with Angie, who'd stayed on the night shift but was heading home when we left for the office. Without a word Teresa sat me down at a table in front of a bowl of yogurt and fruit, then brought me a cup of coffee.

I had to admit, it was nice having someone take care of me. I'd been close to my parents but neither of them had been particularly nurturing. They'd always been preoccupied with the business, and they'd raised me to be self-sufficient.

We exited through the back door to the garage where Teresa had parked the Sapphic Security SUV. It was black and shiny, like you'd see the FBI driving on a TV show, and according to Teresa, bulletproof. That was more comforting now than it would have been a few days ago.

"Any news on Jake?" I asked as we pulled past the guards at my front gate.

Teresa shook her head. "He's in the wind, but we've got a team looking for him. If he uses a credit card or pings a cell phone tower, we'll know."

Once we got to the office, the day fell into its normal rhythm. As usual, Amy met us at the reception desk, rattling off my schedule as we walked down the hallway.

Although she'd been a little scatterbrained when she first started, Amy had turned into a decent assistant, I thought. I made a mental note to talk to Human Resources about extending her an offer of permanent employment.

I pushed through all my morning meetings, Teresa by my side, then took a break to eat the lunch Amy brought us. I felt a little awkward making my assistant get me lunch every day, but I realized that Teresa was right. I need to focus more on healthy eating. Skipping breakfast and lunch and then nibbling on snacks after dinner wasn't making me feel my best.

Around three o'clock I realized that I hadn't used the restroom all day.

"I'm going to use the ladies room," I told Teresa.

She looked up from her computer to remind me, "Call me if you need me."

"I've been peeing on my own since I was a toddler," I teased. "I think I'll be fine."

When I exited the office, Amy stopped me.

"Did you need something Miss Meyer?"

"Just taking a break," I reassured her.

"They're doing some repairs in the ladies room on our floor," Amy told me, pointing at the door to the stairway. "A maintenance man was just here, he said to use the ladies room one floor down."

"Okay, thanks."

I stepped into the stairway, the heavy door swinging behind me, and suddenly a hand

clamped on my mouth, another one circling around my waist.

“You’re coming with me.”

When I tried to scream, the hand tightened on my mouth. “I have a weapon. Do what I say, and maybe you’ll live.”

The voice was muffled, like the person was wearing a mask or something. He pushed me up against a wall, my face to the concrete, and out of my peripheral vision I saw the man pull at a strip of silver duct tape that was hanging from the wall.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

He pressed the heavy tape over my mouth, then I heard the tearing of another strip of tape. My hands were pulled behind my back, secured with more duct tape. Once he was satisfied that I was secured, the man started leading me down the stairs. It was painfully slow with my high heeled shoes, and I debated whether to ditch them or not.

“Hurry the fuck up.”

When we hit the next landing I pushed off one shoe, then kicked the other one out, sending it down a few stairs below us. Unencumbered by fashion, I was able to move a little faster. The man brought me all the way down to the lowest level, leading me into the bowels of the building. I’d never been down there, but I knew it was where the boiler and electrical boxes were, as well as file archives and other storage.

I was relieved he wasn’t taking me out of the building. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but if we stayed here surely Teresa would find me here before things went awry.

The man led me through the basement and into a little room with a desk and a single overhead light. I had no idea what it was used for, but it was clear that no one had been down here in a while. My nose itched from the layer of dust that covered the surfaces.

I was shoved into a folding chair, and then my kidnapper turned to face me, taking off the ski mask he was wearing. I gasped against the tape on my mouth.

Jake! What the hell was he doing?

He was wearing overalls with the logo of a plumbing company on the front, telling me that he was the one who'd told Amy to send me downstairs to use the bathroom. He leaned on the desk, and that's when I saw the large knife in his hands. He made a bigshow of using the very tip to clean under his thumbnail before looking back to me.

Just like the last time I saw him, he seemed twitchy. I wondered if he was on drugs or just nervous.

"You took something of mine," he said, his voice conversational. "You've got two choices: get it back for me or die."

I stared at him, unsure what he was even talking about. After staring back at me for a few long, unnerving seconds he came closer.

"No one can hear you down here anyway, that HVAC system makes a shit ton of noise."

He leaned forward, pulling the tape off my mouth and making me gasp.

"Jake. What's going on? What are you doing?"

"You took something of mine," he repeated.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've seen you, what, once in the last fifteen years?"

"Do you know what my father always says about you?" he asked, his voice turning hard. "Ever since I was a little boy he's said to me, 'Flora is the daughter I never had', as if his son doesn't count. As we got older there were the lectures."

He lowered his voice to mimic his father. "He'd say to me, 'Why can't you be like

Flora?’ or ‘Flora has a steady job why can’t you do that?’ as if he didn’t know you got the job because your mommy and daddy gave it to you.”

“I worked hard for my job,” I said hotly.

He leaned forward again, landing a sharp crack across my face that made my eyes water.

“I was talking, bitch.”

“I don’t understand what you want. What do you think I have that’s yours?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know about the will.”

“What will?” I asked in confusion.

“My father’s will,” he enunciated like I was a particularly slow thinker. “He cut me off. All his money’s going to you. Like you don’t already have more money than God, but no, you need to take my money too. I want my inheritance back, and if I have to kill you to get it back, I will.”

Teresa

I looked up from my computer, realizing that Flora had been gone for a while. I couldn’t imagine what was taking her so long in the restroom. It wasn’t uncommon for people to stop her in the hallway and ask her a question, but usually she’d be back by now. Hopefully she didn’t have food poisoning or something.

Closing my computer, I stuck my head out of the doorway of the office.

“Hey Amy, did you see where Flora went?”

“She had to use the ladies, but the one on this floor is closed, so she headed down to the next floor.” Amy frowned. “Seems like she’s been gone a long time though.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Which way did she go?” I asked, suddenly having a really bad feeling about this.

“She took the stairs.” Amy pointed to the metal door at the end of the hallway.

I thumbed a message to Lois, then pushed through the door. I stopped on the landing, closing my eyes and drawing in all my senses. Vampires didn’t have the same scent tracking ability as the shifters did, but our senses were enhanced enough that if someone had been around recently, we could generally get an idea of where they’d gone.

I caught the scent of Flora as well as a faint musky scent of a human male. It could be someone who just came through, but my gut was telling me the male scent was somehow related to Flora.

Then I saw the roll of duct tape on the floor of the landing and my heart lurched. My instinct was right: my mate was in trouble.

I went down a few flights, stopping every few steps to try to smell my mate. Then I saw it: Flora’s shoe on the landing. I picked it up, looking around, then seeing its match a few stairs down. They’d clearly been heading downstairs.

Crap, where had they taken her?

Just then my phone rang. I saw Lois’s name flash on my screen.

“Taylor, Wanda picked them up on the video feed. Your mate was grabbed in the stairwell and taken to a room in the basement. There’s one male, evidence of a knife

but we couldn't tell if there are other weapons."

I started racing down the stairs as Lois continued, "Wait for back up when you get to the basement, Taylor. Repeat, wait for back-up. You are not thinking clearly enough to keep your mate safe."

"I'm thinking fine," I snarled, even though I was out of my mind with worry.

"Stand by. That's an order."

Lois infused all her alpha energy into the command and while I wasn't a wolf, I also wasn't immune from wanting to comply. My boss's voice softened as she added, "Don't do anything stupid. We are less than five minutes out."

When I got to the basement I paced around, trying to get a bead on where the man had taken my mate. Between the HVAC scent and the musty smell, it was impossible for me to pick anything up. True to her word, Lois and the team arrived in less than five minutes, creeping into the basement to avoid alerting anyone to their presence.

"They went this way," Lois said as she sniffed the air. "Taylor, you're with me. Diaz and Henderson, watch this area in case they loop around, and be prepared to provide backup if needed."

"Copy," Angie responded.

As we started down the hallway Lois gave me a hard look, "Don't kill him. We don't need the paperwork."

"No promises," I said.

Lois sighed, but I knew she understood the blood rage coursing through my body

right now. Her own mate had been attacked years ago and Lois had wolfed out on the guys who hurt her. Rumor had it there was nothing but bones left by the time she was done with them.

Lois tapped my arm. “Here,” she mouthed, pointing to an unmarked door. As a wolf, her sense of smell was much better than mine.

We pressed our ears against the door, listening.

“I don’t understand how killing me helps you get the money, Jake,” Flora said, her voice remarkably calm. “You know how wills work, right? Your dad has to die for you to get the money.”

“Yeah but after his perfect almost-daughter is out of the picture, the old man will have no choice but to let me back into his good graces. And once the will is changed and I’m named as his sole beneficiary, well, Dad’s got a bad heart. Things happen.”

Flora gasped. “You’d kill your own father? Henry has been a devoted father to you.”

“Shut up, cunt. You don’t know anything about it.”

“I know this,” my mate said stubbornly. “There’s no one to blame for your criminal record and your debt other than yourself. You had every chance in life, and you threw it all away. Don’t blame the rest of us for not doing the same.”

My fangs descended as I heard the sound of a slap, followed by Flora crying out.

Lois moved in front of the door, motioning for me to back her up, then counted down from three on her fingers. When she got to zero, she lifted one of her ‘shit kicking boots’ as we all called them and plowed her heel into the door right below the handle.

The door flew open with a bang and we headed inside, weapons drawn.

With a surprising swiftness, Jacob Shapiro unsheathed a knife and pressed the tip to my mate's throat. For someone less than an inch away from getting a knife in the jugular my mate was pretty calm.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

“Stay back or I slit her throat,” he yelled.

I rolled my eyes. “Try it and I’ll rip out your entrails and feed them to my wolf.”

Jacob’s eyes widened as his gaze landed on my fangs. When I let my inner vampire out my lips turned blood red and my body seemed to grow and emanate power. This guy was confused by what was happening, but smart enough to be scared.

Lois growled loudly, going into a half shift. Most shifters didn’t have enough control over their animals to do that, but Lois had such ironclad control that even her wolf didn’t dare cross her. Her arms turned furry, claws extending from her fingertips, and her face elongated as her own fangs appeared. She snarled menacingly.

Jacob made a choking noise, staring at my boss.

“What’s wrong with you freaks?” he cried in a high voice.

While he was distracted, Flora threw herself to the side, landing on the floor with the chair between her and Jacob. I leapt forward, knocking him onto his back, and straddled his waist, punching him in the face repeatedly while he whined like a baby. He didn’t even try to fight back, much to my annoyance.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lois help Flora to her feet, moving behind her and using her claw to cut the duct tape from her wrists. The bruise on Flora’s cheek made me see red.

“Are you all right?” Lois asked while I continued to sit on Jacob, vibrating with

barely suppressed violence.

When he tried to scratch me I gave him another hard punch that made blood come pouring out of his nose. My fangs ached with the desire to rip out his throat.

“Don’t kill him,” Lois reminded me.

She grabbed her phone, calling the rest of the team to join us before calling her contact at the police. Diaz and I rolled Jacob over to his belly, zip tying his hands behind him, then I went to my mate. Well, after giving him a sharp kick in the ribs that made him scream in pain.

Like it was my fault he had such fragile ribs.

“Quit whining you big baby,” I snarled. “Those broken ribs will heal while you’re in jail. You’re lucky I didn’t kill you for hurting my mate.”

I took Flora in my arms, giving her a hug. “Are you okay baby?”

She nodded. “Apparently Henry made me the beneficiary of his will,” she explained. “I had no idea.”

“Your boy Jacob has a gambling problem,” Angie told us. “He owes a lot of money to the wrong people.”

Jacob just groaned.

“Don’t worry Jacob,” Lois told him. “Those guys will find you in jail, then your ribs will be the least of your worries.”

Flora

It seemed to take hours for the cops to interview me and finally take Jake away. By the time we got back up to my office, I'd been gone so long that Amy was hysterical. I sent her home for the day, then canceled the rest of my meetings so I could leave too.

"Let's go home," Teresa said as I closed the laptop. "I'll run you a nice bubble bath."

I shook my head. "I need to go see Henry first. He should hear it from me."

"I'll go with you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to protest, but then I realized that it would be nice to have someone with me. I could handle it myself, but with Teresa around, maybe I didn't have to.

"I need to tell you something," I said, leaning my hip against my desk and looking her in the eye. "I love you."

Teresa's eyes widened. "Are you sure? It's not just the adrenaline talking?"

I shook my head. "I never believed in love at first sight before, but the fact is, I fell a little bit in love with you the day we met, and it's just gotten stronger every day since then. I know it's crazy, especially when we've known each other for such a short time, but you're it for me, Teresa. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter what it takes."

Teresa opened her mouth to speak, and I held up my hand to stop her. "Don't feel like you have to say anything back. I know you've got the physiological connection to me because of the fated mate thing, but I hope someday you'll have an emotional connection too."

She stalked closer, her expression tender. “I already have an emotional connection, Flora. I love you too. It’s not just because of my vampire,” she placed her hand over her heart. “I feel it here too.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

She stepped closer, pressing her lips against mine, and my entire body relaxed. When I'd been with Jacob I'd been scared, no doubt about it, but I'd also been strangely calm because I'd known in my heart that this woman, this vampire, would do everything she could to find me. I never doubted it.

I had no idea how we were going to make things between us work with our very different lives, but I didn't doubt we'd figure it out. Together.

I shifted on the desk, opening my legs so Teresa could step between them, deepening the kiss. I gripped her ass cheeks in my hands, pulling her closer and tilting my head to give her better access.

We just stood there for several long minutes, arms around each other, kissing like we had all the time in the world. There was a world of emotion in that kiss, and a promise of what was to come. When we pulled apart, I looked into those icy blue eyes and took a quivering breath.

"I want nothing more than to lay you on that couch and lick your pussy until you come all over my face," I told her. "But I need to go talk to Henry. He should hear what happened from me, not the police. And when we're done there, I'm going to fire you as my bodyguard."

"Fire me?" Teresa asked in confusion.

"It turns out I don't need a bodyguard anymore," I told her. "I do however have an opening for a girlfriend. Do you think you might be interested in the job?"

Teresa shook her head. “I think I’m more interested in the job of spouse.”

I pretended to consider her words. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s see how you do as a girlfriend and if things go well, I’ll promote you after we do your performance evaluation.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

For all my big talk, after spending a few hours comforting a distraught Henry we were both too exhausted to do anything when we got back to my house. I texted Amy to let her know I was taking a sick day tomorrow. Then after I started nodding off during my bubble bath, Teresa wrapped me in a towel, helped me find a nightgown, then put me to bed.

When I woke up again, it was just after one in the morning. I sat up and took a drink of water, then used the restroom. By the time I returned, Teresa was awake too.

“Sorry to wake you,” I whispered. “I was both dying of thirst and dying to pee.”

She smirked in the dim glow of the bedside lamp she’d turned on. “I’m glad you feel comfortable enough with me to share your bio functions.”

“I feel comfortable enough with you to do almost anything,” I said, taking a little flying leap and landing on the bottom of the bed. I tore off the blanket, then made my way up between her legs.

As usual, Teresa was wearing only a tank top and panties to bed. I slid her panties down, baring her pussy, and immediately lowered my head for a long, leisurely lick. She made a cute little noise, and I did it again before separating her lower lips with my fingers to slip inside her channel. I kept up my slow pace, licking up her arousal as I explored her folds. When I sucked her clitoris into my mouth, Teresa’s hips

punched up and she let out a growl that was decidedly not human.

“Wait,” she gasped.

I stopped immediately. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, I...”

She sat up, and I pushed back so I was sitting on my heels, watching her carefully.

“I want to claim you,” she said. “I want to bite you and give you the mate mark, so that we’re joined forever. But if you’re not ready, we can wait.”

“I don’t want to wait,” I said. “I know all I need to know. You are the woman I want to be with forever, Teresa.”

In a flash she grabbed my hips and spun me around so I landed on my back on the bed. I opened my legs, and she straddled one of my thighs with both of hers. Her fingers went to my channel, sliding in and out. When she found me dripping wet and ready for her, Teresa slid two fingers deep inside me without preamble.

As she started fucking me with her fingers, Teresa lowered her head, kissing me deeply. Her tongue slid against mine, the kiss turning rougher as she ground her pussy against my thigh. Wanting to help her along, I slid one of my hands between us, sliding up underneath her shirt and finding a nipple. I gave her a hard pinch and Teresa cried out, picking up speed.

When she curled her fingers deep inside me, I lost control, crying out Teresa’s name as the waves of pleasure crashed through me. She moved my head to the side, and then I felt her teeth sinking into the skin at the base of my neck.

I cried out, first in pain, then in pleasure. White hot energy filled my body, quickly followed by what could only be described as excited euphoria. Teresa licked at the wound, sealing it, then her hips picked up speed as she ground against me almost frantically.

I bent my knees, pressing my feet into the mattress and flipping us so I was on top. I slid my hand down, pressing my thumb firmly against her clitoris, sliding it back and forth until Teresa found her own release.

When she was finished we lay side by side, both of us gasping for breath. As crazy as it sounded, I could feel the first tendrils of the mate bond taking effect, connecting me with my mate in a way I never imagined.

“I can... feel you somehow,” I said in wonder. “It’s almost like your presence is in my brain, and I can feel your emotions.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s hella cool, huh?”

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

I slid down to wrap her in my arms, hugging her close.

“It’s really cool, mate.”

Epilogue – Teresa

Eight years later...

“On guard!”

I watched as my seven year old daughter Luisa brandished a sword at Boris’s son. He was only five and a half, but as the son of two bears shifters, Elmo could easily pass for twice his age. Built like a linebacker, he towered over my daughter and was twice as broad.

The two kids played with their plastic swords, both of them dancing around and attacking as if they were really in battle. Elmo got past Luisa’s defenses, then pulled his sword at the last minute, trying not to hurt her.

My daughter pouted. “Don’t go easy on me, Elmo!”

She smacked the flat edge of her sword against his shoulder in emphasis.

“Papa says I can’t hurt a girl!”

“I’m not a girl, I’m a vampire!” Luisa ran toward me. “Tell him, Mommy!”

Before I could answer Flora interjected from the seat next to me. “You’re both, sweetie, a girl and a vampire.”

Satisfied, Luisa went back to her battle, viciously stabbing her sword towards Elmo, just like I’d taught her. She’d make a fine fighter someday. Then I noticed something...

“Is she wearing lipstick?” I asked Flora.

She shrugged. “Probably.”

“And why is there glitter on her eyelids?”

“It’s part of Meyer Beauty’s spring glitter eye shadow line,” she said proudly. “It’s our top seller of the year.”

I suppressed a smile. Sword fighting and make-up – our daughter was the perfect blend of the two of us.

Over the last eight years, Flora had continued to thrive in her role as CEO at Meyer Beauty. She’d implemented higher levels of sustainability and carbon neutral production that had increased profits while producing ethical products.

I’d moved into the mansion not long after we were mated. At first I’d hesitated, but after seeing my one bedroom apartment in downtown Seattle, Flora put her foot down. She’d made several excellent points about the security levels of her mansion and the convenience of the basement gym and outdoor pool. She’d even agreed to build me a basketball court. I couldn’t argue with that.

The nice thing about having a giant house was that we always had space for guests or the occasional strays we seemed to pick up.

My job at Sapphic Security still kept me busy. We'd had so many kids between us that Lois had finally agreed to rent out some space on the bottom floor to a daycare company that specialized in caring for supernatural infants and toddlers. I wouldn't say that Lois had softened over the years, but she definitely believed in taking care of her agents, trying hard to ensure that we'd stay with the company.

Flora groaned next to me, her hand coming to her enormous belly. She was eight months along in her second pregnancy, and soon we'd be welcoming another daughter, who we planned to name Henrietta after Flora's godfather. Henry had passed away last year. His son Jake was still in prison after being convicted of a myriad of charges from drug possession to stalking and kidnapping.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "You're not having contractions are you?"

Flora shook her head. "No, your little vampire child is kicking on my spine."

She was totally having contractions. Sometimes Flora forgot that with the mate bond I could always tell when she was lying.

My mate had been eager to carry our children, but she didn't have a lot of viable eggs, so we'd extracted mine to mix with donor sperm for implantation in Flora's womb. We had a few friends who'd done the same thing and been happy that they did. It made the baby feel like they were biologically part of both of us.

We'd worried that her endometriosis would prevent Flora from carrying a child, and I'd been ready to step up and do it, even though I wasn't super excited about carrying the baby myself. But her illness had improved dramatically after a laparoscopic procedure she had shortly after we got together, and the doctor cleared her to carry our children.

The chair next to me creaked as Boris dropped into it, his hair slicked back from a

shower.

“Where have you been, Boris?” I asked. “The party started an hour ago.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:17 pm*

When his mate arrived with little Elmo all she'd said was that he was tied up at work.

"I help Angie with bad guys," he said. "She is coming after she drops off at police. Brothers too."

"Well your son has been a perfect guest," Flora told him with a sunny smile. "We sent your mate to take a nap."

Like Flora, Boris's mate Elena was heavily pregnant, although she was much more miserable about it than my own mate. Probably because she was carrying twin bears.

Over the years the original Sapphic Security team had stayed good friends with Boris and his brothers, and any new members were immediately adopted into the fold by the bears. We all made one big messy but happy family.

Flora groaned again, and then I saw the liquid seep out from between her legs.

"Damn it, my water broke."

"Boris?"

"I watch your cub my friends," Boris said, knowing immediately what I was going to ask. "You go have baby now. Make me godfather."

After telling Luisa goodbye and extracting a promise that she would listen to Boris and his mate, it was time to go to the hospital. I pulled Flora up out of her chair, putting my arm around her and leading her around to the garage.

“Come on Mama, let’s go expand our perfect little family.”

\*\*\*