



Malice
in the
Garden
by ooza

a Here in the Garden of Sin sequel

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a Twilight fan fiction by ooza



The sequel to *Here in the Garden of Sin*. After being changed against her will, Bella struggles to adjust to life as a vampire. The hurdles she faces go beyond bloodlust, and her new perspective leaves her feeling torn between old morals and new desires. Edward fights to win her over, but when his world is threatened, he realizes there's more to lose than her heart. Edward/Bella, Alternate Universe, Rated MA/NC-17 for dark themes.

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Chapter 1

Bella ran. Ruled by instinct, she zipped through the forest without a second thought to where she was headed. Her only concern was escape—to get away from the sights and sounds that overwhelmed her senses. She waited for exhaustion to kick in, but the pain in her lungs and the burn in her muscles never came.

She stopped.

The faint sound of footsteps advanced in the distance. She knew by the speed at which they approached that it was a vampire. She wondered which one had followed her.

It wasn't lack of energy that kept her from running. She was strong and didn't want to flee.

She wanted to fight.

Alice slowed her pace as she came within eyeshot. The newborn crouched, and a vicious snarl erupted from her throat. Alice rolled her eyes.

"I won't hurt you." Giving her a wide berth, Alice navigated to a fallen tree. She sat on one of the branches and folded her legs beneath her.

Bella stood a little straighter. The small vampire before her didn't seem threatening. She knew just by looking at her that she was stronger. As long as no one else joined the fight, Bella would surely win. She listened for the sounds of anyone else approaching, but all she heard were the noises of the forest.

"Why did you follow me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Alice waited for a response. Bella stared back with confused, red eyes. "We want you to come back."

"Why?" Bella didn't understand. None of them had wanted her. She would be nothing but a burden.

"We want to help you adjust to your new life. Believe me, I know how overwhelming the change can be. We all do. We may not have wanted this life for you, but that doesn't mean we want you to learn on your own."

Bella contemplated Alice's offer. Carlisle had told her as much. She'd even considered it. She might have even agreed to stay if it weren't for Edward.

Edward.

She shuddered at the memory of tearing his head from his body. Her fingertips tingled where they'd fractured, a subtle reminder of her transgression.

"Aren't you angry with me?"

"Angry?" Alice laughed as she slid from the tree. "There isn't a single one of us who doesn't think he deserved it. If I weren't so shocked that you actually followed through, I would have given you a high five."

Bella stiffened as Alice approached. Every instinct in her body was screaming to fight or flee, but she stood her ground.

"You're doing exceptionally well," Alice said.

"I am?" Bella didn't feel like she was doing well. She was uptight and stressed. The sound of everything around her grated on her nerves. Each new scent that wafted through her nose served as a distraction. Even her enhanced vision was aggravating. The burden on her senses almost nullified the burning pain that concentrated in her chest.

Almost.

“Considering you’re actually holding a coherent conversation with me instead of trying to kill me . . . yeah. Your control has come a long way in the past few hours.”

Bella hoped it wouldn’t take long for her to adjust. She yearned to feel like herself again.

“You’ll help me?”

“We all will.”

Bella nodded. “Okay. I’ll come back.”

As the Cullens’ house came into view, an uneasy feeling settled over Bella. There would be at least three other vampires inside. She struggled to remember their names. It felt like an eternity since she’d been there, and her human memories were beginning to slip away.

There was Esme, the woman who’d been the first to welcome her. She’d seemed the closest with Edward, and Bella wondered if everyone would be as forgiving as Alice implied.

And Jasper. Just thinking about him sent a surge of fear through her, but without blood pumping through her veins, she didn’t think he’d pose a threat.

Carlisle had been kind and welcoming at one point, but Bella’s last cognizant memory of the family’s patriarch was of him threatening her life, and it didn’t sound like he cared whether she was human or vampire. Edward had promised to protect her, but now he was gone. Surely Carlisle’s revenge for whatever Edward had done wouldn’t extend past the end of his existence. If it did, she knew at the very least she could outrun him.

There were more, but Bella didn’t recall seeing them in the house after her change. She hoped they wouldn’t be there. Being around one other vampire made her paranoid enough.

“We can go inside when you’re ready,” Alice said.

Bella steeled herself and made her way to the door. When she grabbed the handle, the metal groaned beneath her grasp. Shocked, Bella yanked her hand away.

“Gently,” Alice cautioned. “Try gripping it with your thumb and forefinger, like this.” She held up her fingers and made a pinching motion. “It will help you regulate your strength until you get a feel for it.”

Bella took Alice’s advice. The door opened without any further damage.

“Good job.” Alice gestured inside. “Go on. Everyone’s waiting to say hello.”

Bella entered the house first. Alice followed closely behind. When she reached the living room, she froze. She didn’t notice the bright smile on Esme’s face or Jasper’s stoic presence in the corner.

On the couch at the far side of the room, next to Carlisle, sat Edward. The dark black, ragged scar circling his neck stood out against his pale flesh. Fear gripped Bella, but it quickly gave way to shock and confusion.

“You’re alive.”

Edward tried to stand, but Carlisle’s firm grip on his shoulder kept him in place.

Beside her, Alice laughed. “It’s gonna take more than pulling off his head to kill him, Bella.”

“You lied.” She glared at Edward. “You liar!” Without a second thought, Bella lunged for him.

In Bella’s newborn state, it would have been hard for one vampire to overpower her, but Esme had surprise on her side. She took Bella to the ground with minimal effort. Alice and Jasper rushed to assist her. It took all three of them to keep Bella pinned to the floor.

“Don’t hurt her.” Edward’s voice was scratchy and barely louder than a whisper.

“Get off me!” Bella screamed as she thrashed beneath the others.

“Bella,” Carlisle said in a soothing tone. He stood from the couch but remained by Edward’s side. “You need to calm down.”

“You calm down!” she yelled.

Jasper chuckled. Esme shot him a warning look.

“I trusted you!” Bella used every ounce of strength she had to twist onto her back. She snapped her jaw inches from Alice’s face, but she was no match for the three of them. “Why are you doing this?” The growl building in her chest turned into a sob. She stopped fighting and went slack on the floor. Her body convulsed as she cried without tears. “What is happening to me?”

“Newborns,” Jasper said. “It never gets old.”

When it became apparent that Bella had calmed down, Esme helped her to her feet.

“Carlisle, she needs to hunt.”

“I know,” he agreed. “I wish there were more of us. I’d call Emmett, but I don’t think she can wait for them to get here.”

“I can help,” Edward rasped.

“No. You need to heal.”

Edward rested his head on the back of the couch. He knew he was in no condition to leave the house, let alone run and attack prey. He hated feeling helpless. He considered the girl his responsibility, and he hated pawning her off on the others.

“It’ll be fine,” Jasper assured them. “We’ll take her deep in the woods and stay close to her. We’ll be back before sunrise.”

Edward watched as his family left with the girl. *His* girl. He was thankful Alice managed to bring her back. By the time he was well enough to chase after her, her scent would have been long gone. That didn’t stop the jealousy from bubbling under the surface. He should be the one with whom she experienced the firsts of being a vampire.

At least he no longer feared for her life. His only concern now was that she would leave while he was helpless to either stop or follow her. After her initial reaction to him, he worried it would be sooner than later.

Lacking the energy to move, he lay down on the couch and curled on his side. The venom burned as it mended the crack in his neck. He’d have to hunt soon in order to keep his body functioning. If it weren’t for his family reassembling him and Carlisle using his own venom to jump-start the healing process, he probably wouldn’t have survived.

As it turned out, those few minutes he spent in limbo were miserable. His senses had been cut off completely, yet somehow he still existed. It was uncomfortable, a wretched state to be in. He wondered if that was the fate in which all vampires were doomed. Perhaps there was no true death after all, only perpetual awareness with no sound, vision, scent, or feeling.

He still wasn’t sure whether or not to be thankful for Carlisle’s intervention.

“I don’t know what to do,” Bella admitted.

“It’s instinct,” Alice chimed from behind her. “When you catch the scent, you’ll know. Your body will take over.”

“Close your eyes and take a deep breath,” Jasper suggested.

Bella did as she was told.

“What do you smell? What do you hear?”

Bella zoned in to her surroundings. One scent in particular caused her throat to flare with pain. She sucked in a stuttering breath.

“That’s it,” Carlisle said. “Follow it.”

Bella didn’t need additional encouragement. She took off in a run. The others followed at a reasonable distance. They didn’t want her to feel threatened once she made the kill.

When she came upon the solitary mountain lion, she didn’t hesitate to attack.

Edward heard his family long before they arrived at the house. Externally they laughed as they relived Bella’s first hunt. He watched their memories replay snippets of her taking down a massive cougar. She hadn’t toyed with the creature at all, instead opting to rip out its throat. She came out of the ordeal a mess of blood and shredded clothing, but she would hone her skills in time. Practice made perfect.

What he didn’t like were the visions of her dressed in Jasper’s button-up shirt.

Their faces sobered as they entered the house and saw him lying there. Between their pitying thoughts and seeing himself through their eyes, Edward became even more somber. He focused on the girl standing in the back of the group.

Bella felt a distinctive flutter surrounding her head as Edward slipped into the silent haven of her mind. It was slightly distressing, but it ended almost as soon as it began. Edward sighed as the mental voices and images disappeared.

“Make yourself at home,” Esme told her. “Let us know if you need anything.” She and the others slipped out of the room. Bella took one look at Edward’s lethargic form before chasing after them.

“Alice, wait,” she said, grabbing the vampire’s arm.

Alice stopped. She nodded for Jasper to go on without her. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stay here.”

“Why not? I thought you wanted our help.”

“I do.” Bella threw a glance over her shoulder. “I didn’t know he was still alive.”

“He can’t hurt you anymore. You know that, right?”

“That’s not it.” Bella dropped her voice to a whisper. “If I stay, he wins.”

Alice frowned. “This isn’t a game. It’s life. There are no winners. Get to know him. He’s actually a pretty nice guy.”

“How can you defend him after everything he did to me!”

“He treated you terribly. No one’s arguing that. You’re better off staying here. Trust me.”

Bella stood in the hallway long after Alice departed. She didn’t know what to do with herself, but she didn’t want to be on her own. Not tonight, anyway. Not while this life was so new.

Making herself at home in a place where she’d been held captive didn’t prove to be easy. She was only familiar with two rooms: Edward’s bedroom and the bathroom across the hall. She didn’t particularly want to occupy either.

Craving some form of familiarity, she returned to the living room, where Edward still occupied the couch. He held out his hand. Bella refused to take it.

“Stay,” he whispered.

“It’s not like I have anywhere else to go,” she deadpanned. “Looks like you win.”

“This isn’t a game. There are no winners.” The corner of his mouth curled into a smirk.

If Bella could have blushed at her faux pas, she would have. It was strange not to have her embarrassment manifest itself physically. “I should have known you could hear me. Nosy asshole.”

Edward cracked a smile. “No name calling, remember?”

Ignoring his attempt at humor, Bella gestured to his neck. “Does it hurt?”

“It burns like I haven’t fed in months. I suppose I feel a lot like you right now.”

The pain in her throat increased at the reminder of blood. Hunting had quenched the thirst somewhat, but the pain still bordered on unbearable.

“Does it get easier?”

“You’ll adjust.”

Sinking to the floor, Bella reached out and placed her hand on Edward’s neck. He sucked in a sharp breath, wincing at the pain. It made her feel powerful. Idly she wondered if this was the same way Edward had felt when she was at his mercy.

His skin was rough and indented where it had fractured. When she looked closer, she could see the individual fibers mending themselves from the inside out. It was fascinating.

“Will it heal like your other scars?” she asked.

“I assume so. I’ve never met someone who’d been decapitated and lived to tell about it.”

Bella fought the overwhelming urge to tell him she was sorry. She refused to give him the satisfaction. She told herself it was justified. He deserved it for everything he’d done to her. If he didn’t feel the need to apologize, then neither should she.

Edward studied the intense concentration on the girl’s face. No one else in the family had gained control over their mind so quickly after their change. For some it took weeks in order to focus with any intensity. Others months.

“You’re going to be an amazing vampire.”

Bella sat straighter, putting distance between them. “You said no name calling.”

“Now you want to play by the rules?”

“I thought this wasn’t a game.”

“Touché.”

Edward reached for the girl again. Once again she denied his silent request. If she was going to touch him, it was going to be on her terms. Edward dropped his arm, letting it dangle over the side of the couch. During his entire life as a vampire, he’d never felt so physically drained.

“I mean it,” he said. “Your control is quite impressive, and it’s only day one.”

Bella wasn’t used to accepting compliments from anyone, least of all Edward. It made her feel exposed and uncomfortable. She thought back to her arrival at the house and how she’d lost her composure so easily.

“It sure didn’t feel like I was in control earlier.”

“Emotions tend to run high, especially after consuming human blood.”

“News flash: I haven’t *consumed* any humans. Some of us still have a perfect track record.”

“No, but your own blood still lingers in your tissue. Right now you’ve got the highest possible concentration of human blood in your system. It makes you strong. It makes you volatile.”

“Sounds like vampires are fickle creatures.”

“Fickle? No.” Edward thought about his feelings for the girl, for . . . *Bella*. What began as a need for the reprieve she offered had evolved into something more. Even while knowing the minds of others, his desire for her transcended what he believed he was capable of feeling. For anyone. “Our loyalties, our affections, for the most part don’t change.”

“Good, because I’d hate to think one day I might actually like you.”

“You can’t hate me forever, little newborn.” Edward didn’t have much faith in his own words, but he refused to let his insecurities show.

“Watch me.” Bella sprang to her feet. Anger flickered in the corner of her mind. She pushed back the urge to scream and destroy everything around her. “The others are going to help me with my control, and once I know I’m not gonna run out and murder people, I’m out of here!”

“That’s not their job!” Gathering what little strength he had, Edward reached out and grabbed the girl’s shirt. It tore down the middle, and she scrambled to keep herself covered.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“They don’t get to help you adjust; I do! I’m the one who changed you. You should be coming to me for help. You should be wearing *my* shirt.”

Bella grabbed the tattered remains of Jasper’s shirt from his hand. “You’d better enjoy whatever freaky mind thing we have going on while you can, because the next time I leave, I’m not going to kill you.”

She turned and fled from the room before he could respond.

Edward remained on the couch, too tired to chase after her. He knew no good would come of following. While Bella had exceptional control considering the circumstances, she was still

a newborn. Her emotions would change on a whim. Reasoning with her was nearly impossible. As it was, Edward barely had a grasp on his own temper.

He listened as she ascended the stairs and entered his room. It offered him some comfort. She had an entire house to her disposal, yet she retreated to a room that was solely his. The bed creaked under her weight, and then the steady rhythm of pages turning became a metronome for the remainder of the night.

Chapter 2

During the long hours of the night, Bella managed to read each of the books on Edward's shelf that seemed intriguing, and even some that didn't. The speed at which she read, as well as her capacity to retain the words, amazed her. She could recite an entire book if she wanted. She knew the exact words on any given page. But eventually reading became old, and she found herself lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Although she wasn't tired, she wished she could sleep. At least it would alleviate some of the boredom.

Instead her mind replayed her first day as a vampire. Over and over again. It felt like a dream. The speed and the strength. The acute senses. The mountain lion she'd killed without experiencing an ounce of fear or guilt. How could this life be real?

The constant burn in her throat served as a reality check. This life was real. She'd been a college student for one day before Edward stormed into her world and derailed her entire future.

Bella sighed, and the pain flared. She stopped breathing, like she noticed Edward and the others doing while in her presence. After a minute, her lungs ached, and she gasped for air. She tried again with the same result.

“It’s all mental.”

Startled, Bella jumped to her feet in a defensive pose. She growled at the looming form blocking the doorway. Behind her, the window vibrated, reminding her of an alternate escape route. In the back of her mind, she knew it was Alice, but she still measured the danger of the situation.

Female. Small. Non-threatening pose. Alone.

When she deemed the situation safe, Bella relaxed her stance. Alice smiled.

“Three point eight seconds.” She skipped into the room and plopped onto the bed. “Very impressive.”

Bella was becoming agitated by the compliments. She wanted to exist without everyone evaluating her every move.

“I’m going to class,” Alice continued. “Would you like me to pick up anything for you while I’m in town?”

“Like what?”

“Anything you want. Clothes, makeup, books?”

Bella couldn’t think of anything she wanted. Her life had changed irrevocably in the past 24 hours. It seemed frivolous to desire personal belongings. Not only that, but she didn’t want to feel indebted to the Cullens over something as silly as a new pair of shoes when she didn’t even need them.

“No, thank you.”

Alice’s face turned somber. She remembered her own struggle adapting to the change all too well.

“Humans and vampires are creatures of habit,” Alice said. “You feel the need to breathe because for the past eighteen years your brain has been doing it automatically. Breathing brings us comfort, so we continue to do it. You should try doing other things, too. Take a shower. Do your hair. Play a game. We have a lot. I’m sure Esme or Edward would be happy to keep you occupied.”

Bella made a face at the mention of Edward.

“All I’m saying is you should do something instead of getting lost in your own head. It’ll help pass the time.” Alice stood and made her way to the door. “I’ll see you in a few hours. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Deciding to take Alice’s advice, Bella retreated to the bathroom. The items Esme had purchased for her while she was still human remained as she’d left them. Her eyes zeroed in on the toothbrush, and she ran her tongue across her teeth. They felt smooth and clean, and surprisingly sharp. There was no bad taste in her mouth. Alice had told her to do things that brought comfort, so she picked up the toothbrush and loaded it with toothpaste.

After a few sweeps of the brush across her teeth, she gagged and spat the vile foam into the sink. It tasted awful. She looked at the tube again, expecting it to be some sort of ointment or cleaning product, but the name on the packaging confirmed its contents.

She tossed both dental items into the wastebasket.

When she looked up, a pair of scarlet red eyes stared back at her. Bella yelped and jumped back, shocked at the image before her. Logically she knew it was her own reflection, but she couldn’t quite reconcile that the woman in the mirror was her.

Her dark brown hair was thicker, the natural wave enhanced. It looked like she’d just stepped out of a salon, not spent three days in bed. Long lashes framed her eyes, and not a single blemish or pore was visible in her porcelain skin. She still resembled the human Bella, but it was as though her features had all been fine-tuned, creating a more appealing version of herself.

The only flaws that marred her skin were the faint scars from Edward’s teeth. He’d bitten her so many times it was difficult to tell where one set of marks ended and another began, but the most recent bite—the one that changed her—stood out. The two perfect crescents were slightly raised and lighter than the rest. They screamed of the hold he had over her. Bella had to look away.

She undressed while the bathtub filled and then slipped inside. The water was hotter than her human body would have been able to bear, but it felt good now. Sinking below the surface, Bella held her breath. This time, when she was struck with the urge to inhale, she

refused to give in to her instincts. She remained in the tub until the bubbles were gone and the water became room temperature. Not once did she feel chilled.

Edward waited outside the bathroom, listening as Bella drained the tub. Giving her space all morning had been no small feat in self-control. He'd hoped she would return to the living room at some point. After all, she sought him out the night before. But his patience had been in vain.

"May I come in?"

Edward opened the door before Bella could finish saying no.

"Honestly!" she yelled as she pulled the towel tighter around her body. "What is it with your absolute disregard for personal space?"

"Relax, little newborn. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

If she didn't fear losing the towel, she'd have gone for his neck again.

Edward stepped behind her and angled their bodies toward the mirror. One arm wrapped around her waist, holding her body against his. With the fingers of his free hand, he traced the scars left behind by his teeth.

"They're beautiful," he mused.

"They're abhorrent."

Edward didn't understand her ire. He thought the bite marks healed fine. They were barely noticeable upon first glance, save for one. No vampire came out of the change unscathed.

"Well, I like them."

"Of course you do." Bella twisted out of his grasp, prepared to fight him off. Edward released her without a struggle. "I'm surprised you didn't drag me here by my hair."

"I don't think you would have enjoyed that with the broken bones."

"You broke my bones!" Bella hauled off and hit Edward in the shoulder. A crack split down his arm, and he gasped in pain. "You broke me, you abducted me, and you turned me into this scarred monster!"

She flew from the bathroom, returning to the room across the hall. Edward followed, albeit slower. He massaged his arm where the wound had yet to heal.

“I kill animals, and I hate the taste of mint, and my fingers don’t even prune!” Bella turned on him and held up her hand, revealing the perfectly smooth skin on her fingertips. “It feels like someone is sticking a red hot poker down my throat. When is it going to stop? I want it to stop!”

She sank to the floor and dissolved into sobs. Edward didn’t hesitate to join her. He encircled her with his arms and pulled her against his chest. Knowing better than to shush her, he let Bella get it out of her system. After a few minutes, she pushed him away.

“And I hate being a spaz.”

“Look on the bright side. No puffy, bloodshot eyes.” Edward reached toward her face. He moved slowly, expecting her to flinch away. When she didn’t, he took her cheek in his palm and swept his thumb beneath her eye. “No smudged makeup. You don’t even need makeup,” he added as an afterthought.

Bella smiled despite herself.

“It won’t be like this forever. I promise. One day you won’t be a slave to your emotions, your cravings.”

“What happens between now and then?”

“You do the best you can.”

Bella didn’t think her best was good enough.

“Carlisle’s on his way,” Alice assured the anxious group. “He’ll be here in forty minutes.”

“She can’t wait forty minutes,” Edward snapped. “Take her now.”

Jasper shook his head. “It’s not a wise idea. A Friday night at the end of summer? There could be campers. If she catches their scent—”

“What difference will one vampire make? If you can’t overpower her with three, you’re not going to do it with four. Take her!”

“It’s not a chance we should be willing to take.”

Edward knew Jasper was right, but he hated watching the girl suffer. If he had the strength, he'd probably take her hunting himself. Damn the consequences.

He looked to where she sat on the floor, rocking in pain. The constant clawing at her throat had shredded the front of her shirt. He wondered how much of her mind had succumbed to the monster that dwelled inside of her. It wouldn't be long before the bloodlust overcame her completely and she ran away from them all. Certainly taking her hunting now would be a better option.

Wanting to help Bella hold on to her humanity a while longer, Edward knelt and placed a hand on her shoulder. She hissed at him as she recoiled.

“Don't touch me, or so help me God, I will tear the head from your body again!”

Edward backed away. He tried not to take her reaction personally.

“At least we know she's still in there,” Jasper said. “Hang on for a little while longer, Bella.”

“I don't understand.” Esme stared down at the newborn with a confused frown. “She was fine all day. It struck her so suddenly. I should have known. I should have asked Carlisle to come home early. I should have—”

“Don't beat yourself up,” Alice interrupted. “None of us had any idea she would take such a drastic turn. She was doing so well.”

“Too well,” Jasper added. “That's the problem. In theory, she should be like this for the first few weeks. She has such great control we forget she's a newborn.”

The moment Carlisle arrived home, Bella sprang to her feet. “Let's go.”

No one was inclined to argue. They all exchanged glances, and for once, Edward didn't need to read minds to know what they were thinking.

Being the first whom Carlisle turned, Edward was able to witness the five other vampires adjust to their new lives. Not only did Bella behave more like a one-year-old than a one-day-old, she had a grasp on reason that far outreached what any of the others could comprehend at first—including Edward himself. The fact that she waited for Carlisle at the advice of the others was testament enough, but she also registered that the sound of his car pulling into the driveway meant it was time to go.

Edward watched the group follow Bella outside, wishing for the second time that he was the one taking care of her. He wanted to watch her in action. He wanted to feel proud of the creature he'd created. He wanted to be there to offer *his* shirt when hers was inevitably torn to pieces again.

His own thirst pricked at his throat, but he still didn't have the energy to hunt. The wound on his arm had set back his body's healing process, and he felt weaker than even the day before. He donned a long sleeve shirt to hide the injury from the others. It made him feel inferior. Moreover, it made him feel like a failure.

The hunting party returned sooner than Edward expected. He was happy to discover Bella wearing the same shirt as when she left. It was soiled with dirt and blood and remained mostly in one piece, leading him to assume they hadn't stumbled across any large carnivores.

Bella felt the same tugging at her temples as the night before, but stronger this time. Her eyes shot to Edward's. His intent stare softened, and she knew he had to be the reason behind the mysterious feeling. She half hoped whatever power she had stopped working and he was forced to listen to everything she thought of him. Instead, it was just another thing he took from her.

She didn't wait around to talk to Edward or listen to the others confer on how well she did. They spoke about her like she was an object. Some sort of pet. They acted like she wasn't even in the room. Ignoring everyone around her, she retreated to the bathroom to wash the dried blood from her body.

She couldn't quite grasp how the others drank from their prey without making a mess. It would be helpful if she could watch one of them kill something instead of them watching her like hawks the entire time. She had a feeling they wouldn't be letting down their guard any time soon.

When she finished cleaning up, she half expected Edward to be waiting outside the bathroom door. He wasn't there, and he wasn't in his room. She pulled a clean shirt from his closet and slipped it on. She didn't really want to wear anything of his, but she felt bad about ruining the shirt Alice had lent her. At least if she destroyed something of Edward's, she wouldn't care as much.

Lying on the bed, Bella stared out the window. She watched as the sky slowly began to darken, marking the end of her second day as a vampire.

“What took you so long? You knew they were waiting for you.”

“Edward,” Carlisle warned, “what would you have me do? I couldn’t leave in the middle of a surgery.”

“She was in pain.”

“Of course she was in pain! It comes with the territory. If you didn’t want her to experience the cravings, you shouldn’t have changed her.”

Edward knew he was being irrational. He wanted someone to blame for what he knew deep down was his own fault.

“What about Emmett and Rosalie. You called them, right? Why aren’t they here?”

At first, Carlisle didn’t understand how Edward didn’t know. Then he recalled that Bella blocked his gift. It was hard for him to remember he had to actually *talk* to him now.

“They’re going to stay in Alaska for now.”

“They aren’t going to help?”

“They weren’t ready to come back yet. I assured them we had everything under control.”

Edward couldn’t help but feel responsible for the pair staying away. “You told them about Esme, right? Emmett doesn’t need to worry about me. I’m not going to hurt anyone.”

“He knows,” Carlisle assured him. “It has nothing to do with you, Edward. This was their time away. Emmett assured me they would return when it was time for us to move.”

Edward had completely forgotten the family was preparing to move. Once again, guilt washed over him.

“Will we go soon?”

“It depends. Bella is doing remarkably well. We’ll have to leave before she can start going in public, but that won’t be for a while. With that being said, it would be nice to be somewhere more remote, where we don’t have to worry about rogue adventurers. She would be able to hunt whenever she wanted, and we wouldn’t need to worry about a repeat of today.”

“I hated seeing her like that,” Edward admitted.

“It’s hard to watch the ones we love suffer.”

“Love,” Edward scoffed. He may have wanted more out of their practically nonexistent relationship, but love? Half the time the girl drove him crazy. It was too soon to be speaking of love.

Carlisle smiled and shook his head. Reaching out, he gave Edward an affectionate squeeze on the shoulder.

Pain shot through Edward’s entire arm, and he cried out in agony. It felt like his limb was being torn from his body. Carlisle released his grip.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

Edward didn’t protest as Carlisle tore open his shirt sleeve. A fissure ran from his shoulder to mid-forearm. “How did this happen?”

“I said something that angered her. It wasn’t her fault,” he added quickly. “She doesn’t know her own strength.”

“When did this happen?”

“This morning.”

Carlisle stared, dumbfounded. The crack should have sealed almost immediately. He inspected the injury to Edward’s neck. The healing process was slow, but he could see a definite improvement.

“Perhaps you should stay away from Bella for a while, son,” Carlisle said carefully. Edward took a deep breath, ready to argue. Carlisle held up his hand. “I’m not saying you can’t be in the same house, but give her some space. At least until you’ve healed. You can’t afford another injury like this.”

Edward nodded in silent agreement. He didn’t know how long he could follow through, but he would leave her alone. For now. If for some reason the voices came back, he wouldn’t hesitate to be glued to her side.

“And you should really hunt sooner than later. At the rate your body is burning through venom, you need all the blood you can get.”

Edward didn't want to admit he was too weak to try.

Chapter 3

“Bella, may I speak with you?”

With a sigh, Bella set down the book she was reading and sauntered to the bedroom door. Carlisle stood on the other side. He greeted her with a warm smile.

“Sure. Come in.”

Carlisle glanced around the room as he entered. He was surprised she chose to spend time here considering everything she’d been through. Eventually, when Bella had her own belongings, they would need to figure out something else. Until then, as long as Edward didn’t mind her here, he wouldn’t broach the topic.

“Before I say this, just know that we’re all very happy you decided to stay with us.”

Bella frowned. For a moment, she swore she could feel the phantom beat of her heart pick up speed, but aside from her steady breaths, her chest remained eerily still.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No, no. Of course not.” Carlisle smiled, but Bella didn’t miss the grimace lying just beneath the surface. Whatever he was about to say, it was clear he wasn’t comfortable with

the subject. “Bella, I know you and Edward aren’t on the best terms right now, but I have to ask you to refrain from doing anything to further injure him while his body is healing.”

At first, Bella was overwhelmed with shame. While lashing out at Edward had felt great at the time, she’d never punched anyone before. Wrapped up in her own emotions, she never even thought to apologize. That wasn’t the person she wanted to be.

But she wasn’t a person now, was she?

Her remorse didn’t last long before it was replaced by rage.

“Seriously, after everything he did to me? Don’t injure Edward?” she hollered. “Where were you when he was hurting me? Where were you when I was a helpless human?”

Instinctively, Carlisle took a step back.

“Now that I can actually defend myself you want me to sit down and be docile? Maybe if you told him not to be an asshole, we wouldn’t be in this situation!”

“I never condoned Edward’s treatment of you,” Carlisle explained. “I advised him against turning you, just as I’m advising you to please give his body a chance to repair itself. I’ve recommended he keep his distance until you’re more in control of your urges.”

“I’m perfectly in control,” Bella hissed through her clenched teeth. “And for the record, I’ve been keeping my distance. *Me.*” She jabbed her finger into her chest harder than she thought possible. It took everything she had to keep from wincing.

Carlisle held up his hands. “I understand.”

“Good.” Bella plopped on the bed and crossed her arms over her chest. As far as she was concerned, this conversation was over.

“I’m leaving work early today so we can take you hunting. We don’t want a repeat of yesterday.”

Bella flinched when she remembered the pain she’d been in the evening before. It’d taken everything in her power to stay planted on the floor and not run out and kill anything that crossed her path. The venom from Edward’s bites had hurt, but it paled in comparison to her body’s need for blood.

“Thank you.”

No sooner had Carlisle ducked out of the room than Alice burst in.

“Hey, Bella!”

“Alice, look, I’m really sorry about your shirt.”

“That old thing? Don’t worry about it.” Alice waved her off and sat down on the bed. “Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I know you said you didn’t want anything, but I’m shopping after class anyway, and since you can’t walk around naked, I thought I’d pick out some clothes for you.”

Bella didn’t like the idea of the family buying her things, but Alice was right. She had to wear something, and having her own clothes was a much better alternative than wearing someone else’s. An image of Alice pulling a frilly, pink sundress off a clearance rack popped into her head. It had white polka dots and a bright yellow sash tied around the waste. Completely not Bella’s style at all. She’d almost rather walk around naked.

“No pink though, okay? Nothing too girly.”

Alice’s face fell a little, but she agreed. “Deal. I’ll see you later.”

The rest of the week passed without further incident. Alice provided Bella with an entire wardrobe of clothing, most of which Bella deemed acceptable. Edward kept his distance. Carlisle and the other able-bodied vampires took Bella hunting at least once a day. It helped to stave off any further hunger attacks but did nothing to solve her boredom. She was stuck in limbo. Her human goals and aspirations were gone. College, career, family—none of it mattered now. Even mundane things like doing homework, shopping for groceries, and decorating her new apartment no longer applied to her life.

Although her life as a human had ended, Bella had yet to take control of her life as a vampire. Carlisle advised her against leaving the house without being chaperoned, and while she wanted to run free and experience the world with her new senses, she didn’t want to be responsible for the deaths of innocent humans.

Part of her still hadn’t accepted what she’d become, even though the evidence was clear. More disturbingly, though, was that she didn’t hate it nearly as much as she’d expected. As a

human, she'd been adamantly against eating animals. Now she couldn't deny the thrill that went through her during the kill. She couldn't wait to do it again.

She still didn't know how to feel about that.

Edward, on the other hand, hadn't fed since before Bella was turned. He was weak, and his attempts at hunting had all been in vain. Not wanting his family to worry, Edward kept his failures a secret, but he couldn't hide his black eyes, and Carlisle's concern for his son's lack of healing continued to grow.

Bella paced the small room. She wanted a change of scenery, but she didn't want to venture to the main area of the house. She wasn't in the mood for Esme's niceties, and the way Jasper looked at her, as though constantly analyzing her, set her on edge. Pausing by the window, she looked out into the trees. She could see farther than when she was a human, and the detail still didn't cease to amaze her. If only she could be out there instead of stuck inside.

With a resigned sigh, she picked up the book she'd started the night before and plopped onto the bed.

"Hey."

The newborn jumped when she heard Edward's voice. She turned to see him standing in the doorway.

"I thought you were supposed to stay away from me."

He shrugged as he entered the bedroom and leaned against the bookshelf. "What are you doing?"

Bella held the book aloft in a silent answer.

"Hunt with me."

"No way," she said.

"Why? I need to feed. You need to feed. What more of a reason do you want?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Fine." Edward pushed away from the shelf. "Just don't think about the ache in your chest; it only makes the pain worse."

As if on cue, flames licked from Bella's stomach to her throat. A stream of venom filled her mouth.

"Oh." Edward stopped when he reached the door. He didn't look back as he spoke. "And don't think about how the blood cools as you swallow it down."

Bella clenched her fists as Edward disappeared around the corner. Her fingers ripped a hole through the cover of the book, and she dropped it on the floor before she did any further damage.

Edward paused in the hallway and waited. When it was clear she wasn't taking the bait, he backed up and poked his head in the room. "Definitely don't think about—"

Bella didn't give him a chance to finish his verbal torture. She charged at top speed, sending him crashing against the wall. Plaster rained to the floor at his feet. She didn't think she'd ever get used to her new strength.

She crouched, anticipating some sort of retaliation, but Edward remained against the wall.

"Hunt with me," he said again.

"I said no."

"I need your help."

"Get one of the others to help you."

"They aren't here. Hunt with me."

Bella listened closely, trying to pick out the sounds of Esme or Jasper, who were usually home during the day. The only noise came from the surrounding forest.

"Where are they?"

"Out," he answered vaguely.

"I'm not supposed to go without everyone."

The corner of Edward's lips turned up into a smirk. "I never took you for a rule follower."

Bella wanted to argue. Her desire to adhere to the request had nothing to do with obedience. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"I've got your back."

"You don't even have your own back."

Edward pushed away from the wall and strolled toward her. Bella remained in place despite her muscles itching to flee.

“We’ve lived here for five years. I appreciate their exercise in caution, but it’s pretty rare to run into a human if we go in the right direction.” Edward could see her internal struggle. He knew from experience that turning down a chance to hunt as a newborn was difficult. The fact that she hadn’t told him no again got his hopes up. “It’ll just be you and me.”

Bella snorted and rolled her eyes, breaking some of the tension between them. “Aren’t you supposed to give me reasons to *want to go?*”

Edward gestured to himself. “What better reason?”

Bella placed her hands on her hips and waited. Edward’s smile faded.

“Don’t you want to get out of here?” he asked. “I’ve been listening to you pace for most of the day. Vampires aren’t designed to sit around and do nothing.”

Despite her desire to do something, *anything*, Bella wasn’t sure hunting alone with Edward was a good idea. Though she didn’t trust him, it wasn’t fear for her own safety that made her hesitant. But the possibility of getting out of this house and away from the watchful eyes of the other Cullens was becoming more and more appealing.

The longer she took to answer, the more Edward feared she would give him a definite no. He didn’t want that. He needed to hunt, and he wanted to hunt with her. Alone. A chance like this might not arise again. Not any time soon.

“What can I do to make you say yes?”

Bella had only one condition.

“Take me back to that meadow.”

The vampires made their way deep into the forest. Around them the air was quiet and still, as though all woodland life had ceased to exist. Bella started to think they might never get a chance to feed.

Edward leaned against the base of a large tree. It wasn’t the first time he’d stopped during the journey, but it was the first time he sank to one knee on the forest floor.

“You should let me carry you.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Edward retorted in disgust.

“But you’re walking *so slow*.”

“Now you know how it feels.”

“I was never this slow as a human,” Bella mumbled.

“Quiet.”

Bella’s first instinct was to recoil and stay as quiet as possible. Then she remembered she was no longer a fragile human.

“No. You don’t get to boss me around anymore, Mr. Big Bad Vampire.”

Edward rolled his eyes, unfazed by her thinly veiled insult. “Quiet,” he hissed. “Listen.”

Bella pressed her lips together. She felt both anger at Edward’s rudeness and embarrassed by her childish reaction. She didn’t dwell on her feelings for long, as she became distracted by the sound of a herd of deer grazing in the distance. Venom pooled in her mouth. Her muscles coiled, preparing to propel herself in the direction of the noise.

Edward kept a cautious eye on her as he slowly rose to his feet. He needed her help, and if she bolted now, it wouldn’t do him any good. Taking a ragged breath, he closed the distance between them. It was enough to distract Bella from her trance-like state. She shook her head and regrouped her thoughts.

“So what am I supposed to do, kill one for you?”

“No,” Edward scoffed. “I can kill my own meal, thank you very much.”

“Then why am I here?”

“I don’t have the energy to run very far. Just . . . corral them over here or something.”

“You want me to corral a wild animal?” she asked in disbelief. “I didn’t grow up on a ranch, you know.” Looking at Edward, Bella doubted he had the strength to take one down, even if she could get the animals in his vicinity. “Besides, what good is it going to do? You can barely stand.”

“I’m conserving my energy.”

“Right.” Bella turned away from him and headed toward the herd.

“Don’t clomp so much. You’ll scare them away,” he called behind her. “Vampires are supposed to be sneaky and stealth-like.”

“I should scare them away,” she mumbled under her breath.

“I can still hear you.”

“I can still change my mind,” she snapped. “Be nice or I’ll go back to the house. Without you.”

Edward didn’t comment further. Instead he watched her lithe form disappear into the thicket. He smiled as he recalled the last time she’d traipsed through the woods. She had been slow and clumsy, practically tripping her way through the undergrowth. Now she moved with grace and confidence. It didn’t seem Bella noticed the change, but he did.

The newborn’s heavy footsteps vanished. Edward could still hear the wet heartbeats of the deer grazing their way through the forest. He waited. And he waited. He wondered if perhaps the girl was serious about leaving him there. He was about to sit again when the forest became eerily still. Then he heard the distinct sound of hooves bounding in his direction.

Edward braced himself as they approached. He knew he could muster enough energy for a short burst of speed, but he didn’t know how long it would last. He sprang forward, toward the doe that had strayed from the herd in the scuffle, but he underestimated the distance. By the time it came into view, it was running in the opposite direction. Edward fell to his knees and cursed.

“Did you get one?” Bella yelled.

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll send them back your way.”

Bella made a wide arc. Being the faster creature, she cut off the herd in record time. Their fear sang to her, and her body hummed in anticipation. She could taste blood and adrenaline in the air. She didn’t know how much longer she could focus on her task.

“Get ready!”

When Edward came into view, she fell back. The deer veered to either side of him. Edward launched himself toward the nearest one, and she observed as it seemed to slip through his fingers. He hit the ground hard and tumbled down the sloped terrain.

“Oh, for crying out loud!”

The prey had scattered; Bella could only follow one. She had every intention of directing the animal back in Edward’s direction, but her thirst became too much to manage, and instead of herding it, she attacked.

Bella tore away the deer’s throat with her sharp teeth, and it collapsed onto the ground. Blood misted over her face and arms as she bent to drink. Each gulp quenched the thirst that had been building since her last hunt.

In her blood-induced haze, she didn’t notice Edward’s silent approach. When a branch snapped beneath his feet, her defensive instincts kicked in. She positioned herself between him and her kill, a deep growl vibrating the air between them.

Edward had come to the conclusion that he wasn’t strong enough to hunt, even with assistance. His attempts to kill his prey had all been futile. He silently pleaded with the girl, imploring her with his jet black eyes. When he stepped closer, she growled again and lunged at him. He stumbled back, falling on his rear end.

He needed the blood. He was out of strength, and his body was no longer healing. He didn’t even think he could make the walk home. If he angered her, if she attacked him now, he wouldn’t survive, and there was no one here to help.

“Please,” he breathed.

Bella stood her ground. Logically, she knew she was here to help him, but not like this. This was *her* kill. *Her* meal. She didn’t want to share it. Not with him.

“Come on, little newborn.” Edward’s voice was thin as silk, barely more than a whisper on the air. “Don’t lose your cool now.”

Bella glanced between the slain creature and Edward, weighing her options. She told herself it wasn’t a big deal, that there were more.

Slowly, she straightened and stepped back, surrendering the deer to Edward. He remained on his hands and knees as he approached, keeping a close eye on the girl, gauging her

reaction. When it became apparent that she had regained her composure, he let down his guard and began to drink.

For as much as Bella had wanted to witness someone else feed, she had to look away.

Bella had no idea where they were, so it took her by surprise when the creek running adjacent to the meadow came into view. She gasped and scrambled to remove her shoes and socks. Beside her, Edward leaped, easily clearing the water. He glanced over his shoulder and gave her a smug smile.

After he'd drained the first deer, Bella helped him kill another. The blood gave him enough strength to hunt on his own again. His arm had healed almost completely, and his neck was once again on the mend. Much to his dismay, he could feel his newfound strength slipping away with every minute that passed. He would have to hunt again before returning to the house.

Leaving her shoes on the ground, Bella sprang across the creek. She jumped with too much force and landed in the middle of the meadow. She looked behind her, amazed at the distance she'd traveled.

Edward smiled as he sauntered toward her. "Nice job, little newborn. Maybe next time your aim will be better."

"I liked you more when you didn't have the energy to speak."

Edward didn't respond. He removed his T-shirt, leaving on the long sleeve thermal underneath, and offered it to her.

"What am I supposed to do with that?" she asked.

"You're covered in blood and dirt. I thought maybe you'd like to change."

Bella immediately bristled. She didn't want to accept his shirt. More importantly, she didn't want to accept his kindness, even as her nose stung from the residual blood. "I'm fine."

"It's clean."

"I don't want to wear your shirt," she insisted.

Edward shrugged and tried not to let it bother him as he slipped the shirt back on.

“I can find my way back if you want to leave.”

Panic set in, causing Edward’s breath to catch in his throat. “Leave? No. I—I can’t.”

“You said I could come back here, *alone*.”

“I know.” Edward internally cursed himself for his weakness when it came to the girl. “But . . . not yet. Not now. I can’t go back to the house without you. They’ll be worried and upset enough as it is. And I’ll have to *hear* them.” He knew he had to tread carefully. She could still overpower him. If she ran, he wouldn’t stand a chance at catching her. “We can stay as long as you want. I won’t hover, but I’m not going to leave you alone.”

Bella regarded him silently. She didn’t understand his sense of urgency, but she was sick of the constant supervision. After 18 years, she’d finally found independence only to have Edward and his family rip it out from under her.

“You can’t babysit me for the rest of eternity, you know.”

“I know.”

“The only reason I’m even putting up with you is because your family wants to help me.”

“So do I.”

“I don’t want your help! I don’t want anything to do with you!” Bella turned to leave. Edward grabbed her arm with so much force it caused her to wince. She managed to twist out of his grip, but instead of fleeing, she stood her ground.

“If you think I’m going to let you walk away, you’re crazy. I’m not letting you out of my sight. Not while I’m still breathing.”

Bella considered putting an end to his breathing once again, but she didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize her future, let alone the lives of those around her. “Someday,” she muttered to herself, and stalked toward the creek. She plopped down on the bank and glanced out over the water.

It was only her first week as a vampire, yet her human life seemed light-years away. Most of her recollections involved being Edward’s captive, but sometimes she would get a fuzzy glimpse of something further back in time. Whenever she tried to focus on one of those specific memories, she always got distracted by a new scent or sound, and it would disappear just as fast as it came on.

Across the creek, a fish jumped out of the water. It triggered a brief flashback. In her mind, a pair of dark brown eyes looked at her excitedly, and a smile, hidden by a thick mustache, formed on a familiar face. Bella jumped to her feet. Edward was instantly by her side.

“What’s wrong?”

“Charlie. My dad.” Bella’s eyes were frantic as she scanned the surrounding forest, as though she expected him appear in the tree line. “He’s probably worried about me. I need to see him.”

Edward didn’t want to tell her no. He had a feeling the girl would do the opposite of whatever he said. He could also tell she was on edge. He didn’t think reasoning would do any good, but he had to try.

“That’s not a good idea. You would probably leave a trail of bodies all the way to Forks.”

Bella didn’t want to admit it, but she knew he was right. She nodded, unclenched her fists, and shook out her hands. Then she froze.

“How did you know my dad lives in Forks?”

“You told me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Edward struggled with how much to tell her. He didn’t know how she would react, but the truth was inevitable; she would find out someday.

“Jasper did some research. We had to cover our tracks. If there were any loose ends, my family could be implicated in your disappearance.”

“Loose ends?” Bella’s eyes went wide. She clasped her hands over her mouth. “Oh, my god. You killed my dad?”

“No! Your dad’s fine. As far as I know, he doesn’t even know you’re gone. Like I said, we had to cover our tracks.”

Bella thought back to the fight they’d had. It had to have been close to a month ago, though she didn’t know for certain. Sure, they hadn’t been speaking, but how long would the spat deter Charlie from calling? How many times would the phone go unanswered before he started to worry?

“Please, Edward, I need to see him. I need to know he’s okay.”

“You know that’s not possible.”

Bella’s lips began to quiver. Edward was convinced that if she were still human, tears would be flowing as well. He reached out, and when Bella didn’t flinch, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest.

“He can’t know about us,” Edward whispered. “He can’t know what you’ve become. The knowledge of our world will put him in danger.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in any of that.”

Edward shrugged. “Whether I do or not, is it worth risking his life?” In his arms, Bella shuddered and shook her head. “Your dad is fine. Maybe one day I’ll be able to prove it to you. Until then . . . trust me? Please?”

Bella didn’t answer. Instead she pushed away from him and sank back onto the ground. She couldn’t help but wonder what her dad was doing and if he missed her as much as she missed him.

Chapter 4

Though he couldn't hear the thoughts of his family, Edward could sense the tension coming from inside the house as he and Bella approached. The sun was deep on the horizon, and the trees cast the house in shadows, giving an ominous feel to their arrival. Even though nothing bad had happened, Edward knew they would be upset with him for taking Bella out alone.

He heard all movement inside the house come to an abrupt halt, and he understood that they sensed his presence. Taking a deep breath, he glanced at the girl by his side. She watched him with a curious expression.

"You're nervous," Bella stated. "Why?"

"I don't think they'll be very pleased with me."

"Because of me?" she asked.

"I took you out alone. It goes against protocol." Edward dropped his voice to a whisper, just to make sure the others couldn't hear. "Don't worry. They won't be mad at you. Just let me do the talking."

It'd been a long time since Bella had any sort of ground rules, and she didn't like the feeling. She wondered if Edward was actually protecting her, if Carlisle would change his mind

about helping her if she disobeyed his rules. Then again, she wondered how Edward could possibly be in trouble for this when he'd been forgiven for everything else he did to her.

When they entered the house, they were met with four very relieved faces, four sets of eyes that darted between the two of them in a combination of bewilderment and concern. Esme broke the silence first.

“Thank God you’re both okay.” Rushing forward, she took Bella’s hands, squeezing them briefly before turning her full attention to Edward. She framed his face in her palms and ran her thumbs beneath his light gold eyes. “You hunted.”

Edward closed his eyes as she inspected his neck. Esme pulled him into an embrace.

“You had us so worried.”

“Everything is fine,” he assured them.

When no one else spoke, Bella slipped out of the room and headed toward the stairs.

“What happened?” Carlisle asked then. “Why did you leave?”

“She needed to hunt. No one else was here.”

Carlisle frowned. He didn’t understand. Bella had been doing so well. She hadn’t experienced another hunger attack as severe as the first. They’d made sure she was well fed, sometimes hunting twice a day.

“Was it so bad you couldn’t wait? Esme was only fifteen minutes away. At the very least you should have called and let her know of your plans. You know Alice can’t see your future anymore. You had us all fearing the worst.”

Unable to read Carlisle’s mind, Edward didn’t know what the worst entailed, but he imagined it was somewhere along the lines of Bella on the loose with bodies scattered like breadcrumbs in her wake. He felt bad making his family worry, and he felt even worse for lying. In the past, he wouldn’t have hesitated to tell Carlisle anything, but things were different now. Their relationship had been strained ever since Bella came into his life, and Edward no longer felt he could confide in him.

Edward refused to admit that his injury, which he rightfully deserved, had made him unable to hunt. In his decades spent as a vampire, he never needed assistance with anything. Even worse than asking them for help would have been explaining that he didn’t want their

help—he wanted *hers*. He wanted to reclaim the bonding time that they were stealing from him, as selfish and petty as he knew it to be.

No, the truth would only make Carlisle think worse of him than he already did.

“I must have panicked,” Edward said simply.

Carlisle sighed. “Next time please call one of us first. There’s no good reason for you to bring her out alone.”

Edward nodded noncommittally. He didn’t regret his decision, and he wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity again.

Anxious to be in Bella’s presence, Edward headed toward the stairs. Jasper cut him off.

“May I have a word with you?”

Edward glared, but he agreed. He followed Jasper out of the house, far enough so no one could hear them, but not so far that he wasn’t still protected by Bella’s gift.

“I don’t know why you left the house with her, but I know you’re lying.”

Edward didn’t acknowledge his accusation. He never assumed Jasper, with his talent for reading moods, would believe him. He wasn’t even sure Carlisle had, but unlike Jasper, Carlisle let it go.

“What does it matter? Nothing happened.”

“And what if it had?” Jasper snapped. “Do you have any idea what it would have done to her? Bella seems like a compassionate person. She would carry a death like that around with her for the rest of her existence. If you cared for her at all, you’d be doing everything in your power not to put her in that situation!”

Edward’s rage boiled just beneath the surface, and he took a sharp breath. How dare Jasper question his feelings toward the girl? He knew Edward had suffered through Hell to get to this point.

“I know what I’m doing, Jasper.”

Knowing that Edward couldn’t hear what he was thinking, Jasper braced himself and verbalized his deepest thoughts. “Maybe you don’t care. Maybe you don’t understand because you’ve never snuffed out anyone’s life.”

“You think I don’t understand?” Edward hissed.

“No. I don’t.”

“You think I don’t understand?” he repeated, louder this time. “I was there for each person you killed. You and Alice and everyone else! I know *exactly* what it feels like. I felt the guilt like it was my own, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, especially not her!”

“Then quit being so careless! It’s never a big deal—until it is. Don’t gamble if you can’t afford to pay. She already hates you. This won’t help.”

It took everything Edward had to keep his feet firmly planted on the ground and not attack his brother. As he held Jasper’s confident gaze, his anger slowly gave way to doubt.

“You can’t know that. You can’t sense what she’s feeling.”

“I don’t need to feel her mood. I can see it, Edward. She tenses every time you’re mentioned. She glares at you when you’re not looking.”

“You’re wrong,” Edward said with much more confidence than he felt. “She’ll come around. She’s a newborn; she doesn’t know what she’s feeling.”

“Well, you’d better hope she comes around before her opinion of you becomes cemented in time. Because that girl—” Jasper huffed out a laugh and pointed toward the house. “That’s no newborn.”

Unable to listen any longer, Edward turned and stormed back to the house, Jasper’s words churning in his mind. The girl despised him, certainly. She’d made her opinion of him clear on more than one occasion. It shouldn’t anger him so much to hear it confirmed by someone else.

But he didn’t want his family to see her contempt. He wanted them to notice the rare moments when she teased him and smiled at him and took comfort in his arms.

Jasper didn’t understand, and why should he? Edward hadn’t been honest about his reasoning. He wondered if Jasper would have been more understanding if he knew the truth.

Probably not.

When he reached his bedroom, the door was closed. He opened it. The girl stood in the middle of his room, wearing only a towel. She spun around to face him, sending drops of water flying from her hair. Her shocked expression turned to fury. She clenched the towel in her fists and took a step toward him.

“Get out.”

Edward immediately bristled at the demanding tone of her voice. He didn't know why she had such a strong effect on him, but he needed to take control of the situation.

“No.”

“Get out of my room!” she shouted.

“Your room? In case you forgot, this is my room.”

Bella pointed to the bed. “See that? Esme bought that for me. My bed, my bedroom. Get out.”

Edward looked at the bed, at the intricately designed cream comforter and mounds of pillows. Esme had changed the sheets and remade it after Bella's transformation. There was a crinkled spot in the middle where Bella had lain to read. Other than that, the bedding had gone undisturbed.

A bed. *Her* bed. What use did she have for it now?

He laughed at the absurdity of it all.

“What's so funny?”

Edward shook his head. The smile on his face disarmed her, and she stood frozen in place as he stepped closer. He reached out and swept the droplets of water from her bare shoulder.

She tensed.

He sighed.

“Thank you for helping me today. It meant a lot to me.” He pressed his hand against her cheek, feeling her smooth skin beneath his fingertips. She stared up at him with wide scarlet eyes. “Your eyes are absolutely striking.”

Bella looked away. She hated her eyes. They made her look monstrous.

One word played on repeat in Edward's mind.

Beautiful.

“I don't want your compliments.”

Edward wished he knew what she did want. There had to be something he could do to make up for everything he had done. Not for the first time, he longed to know what she was thinking.

Ducking his head, he skimmed his nose along the column of her neck and inhaled. He fought the urge to press his lips against her, to nip playfully at the skin below her jaw. He wondered what she tasted like now that she was a vampire.

“You still smell so good to me,” he said. “It’s a completely different type of torture.” He felt her throat constrict beneath his palm. “I’ve never been good at reading you, but I fear without your heartbeat or your blush, I’m utterly clueless. What are you thinking?”

A million thoughts swirled in Bella’s head, none that she wanted to share.

“I’d like to put clothes on.”

“I don’t mind the towel.”

“Edward,” she sighed, and pushed against him. He stepped back, but not without letting his hand skim down her arm before falling to his side.

“I’m tired of trying to stay away from you.”

Bella didn’t respond. She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. They were sharper than she expected, and the pain took her by surprise. She released her lip and made a mental note not to do that again.

“What are you thinking?”

“Sometimes I still want to hurt you,” she blurted out.

“I deserve it.” Edward smiled sadly. “At least I can handle it now. Just try to leave my head attached, please.”

Bella was surprised at how much the fracture circling his neck had healed since that morning. There was only a slight indent now, and it had faded from black to gray. She’d been amazed when he wanted to hunt again after leaving the meadow, claiming his strength was already wearing off. His eyes, which had become the lightest shade of butterscotch after he fed, were now a deep amber.

“Why do your eyes change?” she asked. “I’m so used to seeing them black, except for after you’ve eaten. The others—they’re eyes are always gold. I don’t understand.”

“They’re the lightest after we feed. They become black once our bodies metabolize the blood, creating venom. It’s about a two week cycle, give or take. Between changing you and healing myself, I imagine I’m burning through venom at a high rate.”

“Why are mine different?”

“The type of blood determines the color. Human blood turns them red. Animal blood turns them gold. Carlisle claims marine life turns them white—” Edward scrunched his nose “—but I’ve never cared for fish.”

Bella frowned. She had been drinking animal blood for almost a week, and her eyes were still the same bright shade of red.

“It’ll take about a year to burn through your human cells,” he explained. “You’ll notice a change in a few months.”

Bella’s face softened, and she nodded in understanding. Edward smiled, pleased that for once he was in tune with her thoughts.

“Have you been in the sun yet?”

“No.” Bella had almost forgotten the way Edward’s skin reflected the sunlight. The memory was fuzzy at best. She glanced out the bedroom window at the twilight sky. It’d been overcast for the past few days. Besides, her hunting excursions had all been deep within the forest. She wasn’t sure she wanted another visual reminder of what she’d become.

“I’ll ask Alice when the next sunny day will be. We can go back to the meadow,” he suggested.

“Won’t your family be mad?”

“I don’t care.” The fact that she didn’t shoot down the idea was all the encouragement he needed.

“I heard what you told them. I didn’t need to hunt.”

“I know.” A new wave of guilt washed over him. “It’s . . . complicated.”

Bella wanted him to explain, but she didn’t want to push her luck. In the past he’d often grown tired of her questioning. She had to admit life was much more pleasant when they got along. The last thing she wanted was Carlisle on her case for ripping off his arm or putting another hole in the wall.

“Thank you for taking me out today. It was nice to get away. Even if I had to put up with you,” she said, only half joking.

Hope swelled in Edward's chest, even as her words saddened him. She still didn't understand how much she meant to him. He would do anything to make her happy, to make her stay by choice.

"I'll do whatever it takes to help you adjust. If it means taking you out alone, if it means taking you away from here . . ."

Bella shook her head frantically and tightened her hold on the towel. She could handle spending the day with Edward if it meant a break from the others, but she didn't want to depend solely on him.

"I'll leave so you can change, but I'm coming right back." Edward stopped at the door and turned to face her. She wouldn't meet his eyes. "I'm not the bad guy, little newborn. I wish you could see that."

Chapter 5

As he'd said, Edward was tired of staying away from the girl. If she was in his room, so was he. If she moved about the house, he shadowed her. It wasn't that he needed to be in close proximity to be under her spell, and he wasn't worried about her leaving quite yet. He just wanted to be near her. He wanted her to acknowledge his existence in some way.

"Alice, what does the weather look like today?"

Alice's eyes glazed over as she peered into the future. "Overcast, high sixties, sprinkles around noon. Why?"

"What about tomorrow? Will it be sunny?"

"Hmm." She closed her eyes and after a few moments came up with a definitive answer. "No."

The news disappointed Edward. He was banking on it being sunny so he had an reason to bring Bella to the meadow. He wondered what excuse he could use to get her alone again, but he kept coming up blank.

"How are you feeling this morning, Bella?" Alice asked.

Bella resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Carlisle had already asked her this morning before he left for work, and Esme must have asked her ten times in the past 12 hours. The only ones who didn't constantly inquire about Bella's state of mind were Jasper and Edward.

"I'm fine."

"Good! I'm very proud of you. You really are doing great. I bet we'll have you around humans in no time at all."

A growl rumbled deep in Edward's chest. If looks could kill, Alice would be dead. She stared at him in surprise, and then matched his glare.

"What's your problem?" she asked.

Edward forced a neutral expression on his face. He knew his sister only wanted to help, but the sooner Bella could integrate with humans, the sooner she would try to leave. He wasn't ready for that; he needed more time.

"Don't push her, Alice."

"We need to push her. It's the only way to know if she's ready."

"Just because she's not overwrought with bloodlust doesn't mean she's ready. She's still a newborn."

"Jesus, Edward. It's not like I want to haul her into Seattle with me today or anything. I'm just saying she'll probably be ready way before any of us were."

"We shouldn't even be discussing this yet. It's too soon to be taking chances."

"Says the one who took her out alone when he was barely strong enough to walk."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not standing right here!" Bella shouted. Both Edward and Alice turned to her, apology and concern written on their faces. "On second thought, never mind. By all means, continue." She swiveled on her heel and headed toward the front door.

Edward chased after her. "Wait! Where are you going? Don't leave," he said in a rushed panic. He reached for her arm. She pulled it out of his grasp.

"I'm going outside, or is that not allowed?" The tone of her voice indicated the answer didn't matter.

"May I stay with you?"

"I don't care."

Edward followed her to the edge of the lawn, where she sat on an oversized landscaping rock. He knelt on the ground at her feet, becoming more nervous as each silent second passed. He'd honestly believed she was about to leave him, and the thought rattled him to his core.

"Do you remember when you made me promise not to bite you without warning?"

Bella eyed him warily. "Yes."

"May I ask you to extend the same favor?"

"Why would I bite you?"

"Don't leave without warning me," he clarified.

Bella considered his request. Sure, he'd held up his end of the bargain, but he wouldn't agree to any of her other terms. He wouldn't leave her human, and he wouldn't allow her to say goodbye to her father.

But he did give her one more day when she asked, and he'd brought her to the meadow to spend time alone. Perhaps she could use this to her advantage.

"Do you trust me, Edward?"

Edward was unsure how to answer. He didn't want to anger her by saying no, and he was afraid of what she might ask of him if he said yes.

"I want to," he answered honestly.

"How about this: I'll agree to let you know when I intend to leave, but you have to give me space. No more barging in on me. I want privacy."

Edward made a face, though he understood. Still, he hoped he hadn't seen her in a towel for the last time.

"I'll give you all the space in the world if you promise to stay."

"Edward," she sighed.

"Five years," he amended. "Promise me five years."

"Edward," she repeated more firmly. He dropped his head onto her lap.

It angered Bella that he was selfish enough to want more after taking her very humanity, her life. She shouldn't have been surprised.

"If I ask you something, will you give me an honest answer?"

“Anything,” he whispered.

“What do you want more—me or my silence?”

Both.

“You know what? Forget I asked. I should have known better than to assume you’d give me a straight answer.”

Edward lifted his head. “Give me more than three seconds to reply!”

“You said ‘both.’”

“I didn’t say anything.” He frowned and stared her in the eyes. A question formed in his mind: Can you hear me?

Not an ounce of recognition dawned on her face.

“If you had to pick one, which would you choose? Do you even like me, or am I just the answer to your desperation?” Bella’s lower lip began to tremble, and she cursed her stupid emotions. She didn’t care what Edward thought of her. It didn’t matter. He would have ruined her life regardless of his feelings toward her.

Edward didn’t deem their situation to be so black and white. Bella was his savior—the quiet to his constantly buzzing mind, the companion to an existence of never-ending loneliness. He couldn’t imagine forfeiting either. He didn’t even want to think about it.

“What difference does it make? It’s an all or nothing package.”

Bella nodded. She didn’t expect him to be forthcoming with his feelings.

“I’ll tell you when I intend to leave, though I don’t know why you deserve it. I can’t promise you more than that.”

Edward exhaled and closed his eyes. “Thank you.”

“I want to be alone now.”

It took everything Edward had to stand and force his heavy legs to carry him away from the girl.

Bella's appetite was practically nonexistent once she drained the first deer of the hunt. It dulled the pain in her chest but did nothing to please her palate. She pushed away from the carcass and wiped the blood on her shirt sleeve—yet another destroyed article of clothing.

She sensed the watchful eyes of the others and knew they were stationed in a careful perimeter around her. All but Carlisle, who was working late at the hospital, and Edward. He'd ventured out with them but had abruptly branched off to hunt on his own. Whether he was giving her space because she'd asked for it or for some other reason, she didn't know.

"I'm finished," she spoke into the silent forest. "I want to go back."

Alice appeared at her side almost instantly.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? After yesterday—"

"I'll be fine." Bella's sense of direction was instinctual now, and she started on a path to the house. Alice fell into step beside her. The other two followed, giving them a wide berth.

"What's wrong?" Alice asked.

Bella bit her tongue. She didn't want to say anything that might offend them. They hadn't asked to be thrown into this situation any more than she had. Then she realized she didn't care if she hurt their feelings. It was more important for her to say what was on her mind.

"I'm tired of everyone watching me all the time. I understand why you're doing it, but it drives me crazy. And I'm sick of eating the same thing over and over again every single day. It doesn't even taste good. Why can't I have another mountain lion?"

When Alice didn't respond, Bella sneaked a glance at the tiny vampire by her side. Alice had a thoughtful look on her face.

"Bears are good. I can find one for you," she offered.

"Really?" Bella asked. "How?"

Alice tapped her temple.

"I thought you couldn't see the future when I'm involved."

"I can't. That's why I'm hunting by myself. Maybe if something interesting pops up I'll invite you along." She turned to Bella and winked.

"Can you see if there'll be one tomorrow?" Bella asked in excitement. In her mind, she saw the sun shining bright, reflecting off a stream. Through the thick trees, a black bear emerged,

heading toward the water. It bared its teeth and reared onto its hind legs when it saw her. She could feel the wind on her face as she attacked, the coarse fur beneath her palms, the bone and sinew crunching between her teeth. The monster inside her shuddered with desire.

“Hmm.” Alice closed her eyes and peered into the future. “Sorry, no bears tomorrow. Besides, I won’t be able to hunt with you. I’m staying late for a group project.”

“Oh.” Bella couldn’t hide her disappointment. “Maybe next time.”

When they returned to the house, Edward met them with a concerned expression that didn’t vanish when he took silent refuge in Bella’s mind. She felt the pressure, the outward tug at her temples, and knew he was with her again.

“You’re back so soon. Is something wrong?”

“No.” Bella stared into Edward’s worried eyes. They were a muddy shade of brown. Unlike the black or gold, this color would undoubtedly pass as human without a second glance. She frowned. “I thought you were hunting.”

“I will. Later.” Edward looked her up and down. “How did you get so much blood on you in such a short period of time?”

Bella shoved him out of the way and stormed upstairs. Edward followed.

“Sorry, Mr. Perfect. Not all of us have had centuries to hone the art of murder.”

“I’m not perfect.”

She swung around and placed her hands on her hips. “No shit.”

“Don’t. Please,” he begged. He didn’t have the energy to fight with her. “Not tonight.”

“Not any night.” Bella ducked into the bathroom and slammed the door in his face.

She stripped off her clothes and stepped into the shower, watching as the blood and dirt swirled down the drain. Stupid infuriating vampire. What was his deal, anyway? He was acting strange, and she didn’t like it.

Bella groaned when she realized she had no clean clothes with her. Turning off the water, she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself. She contemplated staying in the

bathroom all night, but there was no point. Edward would invade her privacy regardless of how much she was wearing or what room she was in.

Surprisingly, she found the bedroom empty. She listened to the noises in the lower level of the house, but she didn't hear Edward's voice. In the corner of her eye, a light came on, capturing her attention. She crossed the room and picked up a cell phone, which was plugged in to the wall charging. The screen was illuminated with a single message.

Carlisle: On my way.

Frowning, she swept her finger across the bottom, unlocking the phone. A conversation initiated by Carlisle appeared on the screen.

Carlisle: He knows.

Edward: What should I do?

Carlisle: We'll talk when I get home.

Carlisle: On my way.

The timestamp of the first message was right around the same time they'd left to hunt. This was why Edward left them, though for the life of her she couldn't figure out why. She pulled on the first set of clothes she touched and headed downstairs to find him.

The television was on. Alice and Jasper lazed on the sofa in each other's arms. Esme sat on the recliner and beamed at Bella, like she always did when she joined them in the family room.

"Would you like to watch a movie with us?" she asked.

"No, thank you. Where's Edward?"

Esme frowned. "He went hunting. Didn't he tell you?"

"Don't worry," Alice chimed in. "Your bear is safe."

Bella made her way to the front door and stepped onto the porch. She waited for someone to stop her. When no one came, she returned to the rock she'd sat on earlier that day.

She liked it there—on the edge of the forest with the house in plain view. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine herself in her dad's backyard in Forks, with a blanket spread on the grass and a book in her hands, the warmth of the summer sun seeping into her skin.

But she wasn't in her backyard. She could never go back. Her family and friends, her future, they were all gone. No, not gone. Forbidden. Because even if she left this place, she could never have her old life back.

Bella considered it then—running into the forest and never looking back. Freedom was within her reach if she really wanted it. She could easily fend for herself. She didn't need a roof over her head or clean clothes. She could steal from hikers. She could practice her control, and if she killed them . . . well, they had to taste better than deer.

She didn't know why she agreed to warn Edward when she decided to leave. Chances were he would track her down one way or another. Obviously ripping off his head didn't work. Perhaps she would have to smash it into a million pieces instead.

Behind her, the brush rustled, interrupting her fantasy. She slid from the rock and waited for Edward to appear in the clearing. When he did, their eyes met. Even in the dark and with the distance between them, she could see the different hues of warm honey swimming in his irises. His face softened as she continued watching him, and he ducked his head to hide his smile as he approached.

“Hey,” he said once he was at her side. “Everything okay?”

Bella nodded. “Did you have a good hunt?”

Edward raised his eyebrows in surprise. “It was fine,” he answered cautiously.

“Good.”

He smiled, and he frowned, clearly puzzled by her questioning. He opened his mouth to speak, but he was at a loss for words. Bella picked up on his confusion.

“In my experience, you're always in a better mood after you've eaten.”

Understanding dawned on him.

“I don't mean to be in a bad mood. There's something about you. Sometimes . . .” He didn't know how to explain his reactions to her. He didn't understand them himself. All he knew was that he felt possessive, and protective, and when she went against him, his instincts demanded he take control of the situation.

“We're not compatible,” she finished for him.

Edward begged to differ. He'd never been much of a believer—of anything. Yet he believed with his entire soul, with every fiber of his being, that fate brought them together. Because she *was* the answer to his desperation. The role she played in his life was clear. He just had to figure out where he fit into hers.

And perhaps he never would. Perhaps the struggle he faced was the price he paid to have her.

The headlights of Carlisle's car shone on them like a giant spotlight as he pulled into the drive. Edward clutched Bella's hand, and the troubled expression returned to his face.

"We need to go inside," he said.

Something in the tone of his voice caused her brewing argument to fizzle, and she allowed him to lead her into the house.

Carlisle nodded when they met on the front steps. His face was somber. He opened the door and gestured for them to enter. Bella was on full alert. It didn't help matters when the rest of the family joined them. There were no smiles, none of the usual banter that accompanied his arrival from work.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Edward squeezed her hand.

"Bella," Carlisle began, "something came to my attention today. Before I tell you, I want you to know that we hoped it wouldn't come to this for quite some time."

Her first thought was that she'd done something wrong, and they were going to send her away . . . or worse. She didn't know why that conclusion scared her so much. Edward wouldn't let anything bad happen to her, of that she was certain. She looked at him for reassurance, but his face had hardened into an expressionless mask.

"I'm sorry we couldn't avoid it completely," he continued. "There's only so much we can do."

Carlisle offered her a newspaper. Despite her nerves, Bella took it with a surprisingly steady hand. Today's date was printed in the upper right-hand corner. She flipped it over, only to be shocked when her senior picture smiled back at her.

She stared at the paper in disbelief. A thousand thoughts assaulted her mind as she tried to process the words before her. Missing college student. Grieving father. A reward for information. It all started to make sense then. The text messages, Edward's brief disappearance, the concern that hadn't left his eyes all day. Her dad knew she was gone, and he was looking for her.

"The evening news picked it up. People were hanging fliers all over the campus tonight. I'm afraid this means we'll have to set our move into motion now. Everyone will be looking for her; we can't risk her being seen."

"What are the chances?" Esme asked. "We haven't brought her anywhere near the general population."

"It's not a risk we should be willing to take. The mailman, a door-to-door salesman, a hiker—if anyone sees her and lives to tell about it . . ."

"The last thing we need is unwanted attention," Jasper added. "We've tempted fate for too long as it is. If she kills someone because we chose to stay, we only have ourselves to blame."

"We can go to Alaska," Alice suggested. "Emmett and Rose's cabin is in the wilderness. We could stay with them until we find a new house."

"You want to take me to Alaska?" Bella asked. She knew they wanted to move away from people, but she didn't realize it would be that far.

"Alaska or somewhere in Northern Canada," Jasper said. "Maybe Esme could design something large enough for the eight of us."

"I can do that, but what will you do for work?" she asked Carlisle.

"I may need to take a year or two off if we live that far out. It's not like we need the income. Besides, it's about time I start over. My extensive work history is bound to raise some suspicion soon."

"I'm sorry," Edward told him. He hated that Carlisle was giving up the career he loved, even if only temporarily.

"There's no need to apologize, Edward. Family is more important to me."

The words were intended for comfort, but they only made Edward feel worse. He'd taken the girl away from her life, and now he was taking his family away from theirs. His selfishness knew no bounds.

"You don't have to do this," he told them. "I appreciate everyone wanting to help, but this is my doing. There's no reason you should all make sacrifices for me. I'll take her to Alaska myself."

"No!" Bella protested.

Edward looked down at her and squeezed her hand again. "It will be fine. I'll help you adjust."

"I can't go to Alaska, Edward! My dad!" She shook the newspaper still clenched in her fist.

"It doesn't matter where you live. He'll have to accept that you're gone."

"I have to let him know I'm okay!"

"It's too risky," Carlisle interjected. "We don't want to put your father in danger. I know it's hard, but it's better this way."

"Edward, we're all going with you," Esme said. "You've made more than your fair share of sacrifices for us. It's time we return the favor."

"I'll get new documents forged," Jasper said. "Our IDs will be expiring soon anyway." He looked at Edward. "Did you have a name in mind?"

"Masen," he answered without hesitation. "Make us both Masens."

"You're changing my name?" Bella yelled.

"To be on the safe side."

"I'm not pretending to be your wife!"

Edward turned on her, rage filling his eyes. He was stressed. The last thing he needed right now was to deal with her continual resistance. "You can be my sister if you can't stand the thought of a fake union to me, but you're changing your name, and you're going to Alaska."

She pulled her hand out of his and stepped back. Anger charged the air around her, so palpable the entire room seemed to come alive with it.

"It's just a piece of plastic, Bella," Alice said, desperate to defuse the situation. "It doesn't change who you are. Carlisle is the only official Cullen, but we all use the name from time to

time. He's even used ours. We do what we can to blend in, and right now you need a different identity."

Bella slowly relaxed her stance. She was still livid, but she no longer wanted to kill everyone in the room. She needed to be alone so she could process everything that was happening.

"Fine," she said. "I'm going upstairs."

She tried her best to tune out the other vampires, but it was hard, knowing they were making decisions that directly concerned her. It was clear they had done this before, and she had a feeling they weren't interested in her input.

Thoughts of her dad kept her adequately distracted. Poor Charlie. Bella couldn't imagine what he was going through. She wanted to cry. For his loss and for hers. For her mom. For the months they would spend worrying and grieving with no resolution. What kind of terrible daughter was she to allow them to go through that? Who was Edward to tell her what she could and couldn't do? She refused to let this experience change her, refused to become cold and uncaring like him.

Bella wondered if they were paying any attention to her, if they would hear her if she whispered. Snatching Edward's phone from the desk, she dialed the number that had been a constant throughout her entire life.

Chapter 6

During the night, the Cullens discussed their moving options. It wasn't as easy as packing up their belongings and skipping town in the middle of the night. Arrangements needed to be made for the house: whether to sell it or seal it up for a period of disuse. If they were to return to this place, it wouldn't be for another lifetime. They leaned toward the former option.

Furniture would need to be sold or shipped. A moving truck would need to be rented, as they were unable to fit what they owned in their cars alone. The most difficult plans to make would be transporting Bella. Air travel was out of the question. Driving was an option, though it would be impossible to avoid humans. Traveling on foot would be fastest and guarantee them passage through non-populated areas, but that would mean taking multiple trips if they wanted to keep all their vehicles.

"We don't have to do everything at once," Carlisle said. "We can hold on to the house until spring. Then we wouldn't have to worry about selling it or storing things until we find a new place. I would also like to give a formal notice at the hospital so I don't leave them short-handed."

"How long were you thinking?" Esme asked. "Surely a few weeks can't hurt."

“It depends on how long before they can replace me. I’d like to get Bella out of here as soon as possible. It will be better for her, for all of us. If I have to stay back and tie up the loose ends, so be it.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Alice volunteered. “I can keep going to class. I’ve got a big group project due this semester, and I’d hate to let anyone down. And I can shop the sales to make sure Bella has enough clothes. She burns through them like they’re napkins, and I’m sure there won’t be any decent stores where we’re going.”

The hopeful look on Alice’s face nearly killed Edward. He didn’t need to read her mind to know why she wanted to stay as long as possible. For all the snide remarks she’d made throughout the years about being a perpetual student, she liked the social interaction. She liked making new friends and pretending she was something else. She liked spending her allotted money on clothes and makeup because, as petty as they were, it made her feel good about herself, about what she’d become. Alice would have been right at home in a place like Los Angeles or New York City, but Jasper would never last in such a densely populated area. Now Edward was forcing her even farther away from society.

“We’ll wait to see what the hospital says before we decide. I want as many of us to stay with Bella as possible. I don’t know how she’ll react to new surroundings. Newborns and stress are a dangerous combination.”

“Edward, sweetheart, maybe you should check on her,” Esme said. “She had a rough night. She may want some company.”

Edward glanced toward the stairs. He highly doubted she wanted company, and if she did, he was sure she didn’t want his. There hadn’t been much noise from his room since she’d retreated there. He hoped if she needed something, she would seek someone out, even if it wasn’t him.

“Let her be. She’ll come down when she’s ready.”

The group decided to hold off on definite plans until Carlisle came home from work the next day. It wouldn’t take long to pack once Jasper picked up boxes, and with Carlisle staying behind, they could get Bella to Alaska in record time. Esme insisted they wait until they had somewhere to stay—at least somewhere remote for Edward and Bella. The others could stay

in a nearby motel if push came to shove. They all agreed remaining in Seattle a week or so longer was preferable to living in the wilderness.

By the time dawn broke, Edward and Alice found themselves alone on the couch. Alice gazed out the window, lost in thought. A small frown graced her face.

“I’m sorry,” Edward said. “I know you don’t want to leave.”

Alice gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s what’s best for Bella. We all make sacrifices for the ones we love.”

“Love her? You don’t even know her.”

“No, but I love you.” Leaning closer, she nudged him with her shoulder. The smile on her face faded. “And you love her. That’s good enough for me.”

Edward stared at his sister, an argument bubbling in the back of his throat. He couldn’t love her; he barely knew her. It was a sentiment not meant to be thrown around carelessly, applied to anyone of importance in his life. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to verbally deny it.

“I wouldn’t be mad, you know, if you decided to stay.”

“Edward,” she sighed, “there’s not much I can do to show you how much you mean to me. We don’t get sick, so I’ll never need to take care of you. You’re physically strong enough to do anything on your own. You’ll never need help with homework. Even though I am smarter than you,” she added.

Edward rolled his eyes.

“I know you feel bad because we’re uprooting our lives, but it’s our choice to do so. We want to help you, just like you’ve always helped us.”

“But this isn’t the same,” he argued. “Those were accidents. I made a conscious decision to change her. She shouldn’t be anyone else’s responsibility.”

Alice sighed and returned her gaze to the horizon. “I don’t know how else to explain it, but you shouldn’t feel bad. You deserve to be happy.”

The sun peeked through the trees, casting a ray of light through the window. Alice frowned as it hit their skin.

“Why is it sunny?”

Edward couldn't keep the smirk off his face. "Because it's daytime. That's what happens as the Earth rotates on its axis." He realized then that she didn't react to his joke. She didn't crack a smile or even smack him on the arm. "Alice?"

"It's supposed to be overcast today. My visions of the weather are never wrong."

He thought about how the girl's presence affected Alice's visions. How she replied to something he was certain he hadn't said. "Do you think it's her?"

"Why, is she controlling the weather now?" Alice snapped.

Edward didn't respond. Alice always became unsettled when her visions didn't work correctly. She hated being wrong. "Maybe. Or maybe she's blocking you somehow."

"It's the weather. It's not subjective. It doesn't have anything to do with her."

"It did yesterday. When I asked you to look, I wanted it to be sunny so I could bring her somewhere."

"But I didn't know that," Alice argued. "I don't know what's happening, but if it's going to be sunny, I'm going to wear a dress." She sprang to her feet and disappeared from the room.

Edward was eager for Bella to see herself in the sunlight for the first time. Moreover, he wanted to make sure he was there to experience that particular first. He'd already missed her first hunt. He hadn't even been the first one she'd had a conversation with after the change.

He recalled how she'd looked at his skin in awe the first time she saw him in the sunlight. She was curious enough to put her fear and contempt for him aside and touch him. His only hope was that the girl would be as marveled by her own skin, that she could at least find something positive about the life he'd given her.

When Bella descended the stairs later that morning, Edward beckoned to her. She approached him with wary eyes, but she didn't take his outstretched hand.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

“Come here.” Taking her by the wrist, Edward pulled her to the window. She resisted as he tugged her arm into the light. He watched her in anticipation, but she kept her eyes diverted.

Edward’s stomach dropped. She didn’t want this, like she didn’t want anything else he had to offer.

He released her.

She wrapped her arms around her torso.

“I used to hate my skin. It was ugly. It made me a slave to the sun. But then you saw it, and you touched me, and I thought, maybe it’s not so bad after all.”

Beside him, Bella remained silent. He observed her eyes dart around the room, focusing on anything but him.

“Look at me,” he said finally. Her eyes shifted to his. They looked anxious and filled with worry. “Are you concerned about moving? Don’t be. You’ll have more freedom.”

She looked away again. Edward couldn’t figure out what had her so on edge if it wasn’t the impending move.

“You’re not leaving,” he said uncertainly. “You promised.”

“No. I’m not leaving.”

Edward breathed a sigh of relief. He entwined their fingers and once again brought her arm into the light. The sunbeams scattered off her skin. She didn’t smile. Her eyes didn’t hold any of the amazement they had when she’d seen Edward like this. He didn’t know what to say, so he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him.

She put up no fight as their bodies came together, as he cradled her head against his chest. He breathed in her scent. Even now, as a vampire, everything about her drew him in.

“I was afraid your skin would be hard and unyielding after the change, but it’s not.” He squeezed her tighter, feeling how she molded against him.

Bella understood what he meant. Somehow, his chest seemed softer now. His arms didn’t make her feel like she was locked in a steel cage. She placed her hand on his shoulder, but instead of pushing him away like he’d expected, she gripped his shirt in her fist and held on tighter.

And for the first time, Edward thought maybe, just maybe, things would turn out okay.

Alice was in a much better mood when she returned to the living room. She wore a pink sundress with white polka dots and a yellow belt made of silk. The edges were adorned in frilly white lace.

Edward cocked his brow. “A little fancy to wear around the house, don’t you think?”

Bella looked over her shoulder, frowning when she saw the dress. She swore she’d seen it somewhere before. Fashion had never interested her, and she was fairly confident she’d never even stepped foot in a store that would sell such a girlish atrocity. She chalked it up to television or a magazine ad.

“Well, I can’t very well wear it to class.” Alice rolled her eyes. “It’s out of season. I found it on clearance, but I just can’t wait until next summer to wear it.” She twirled in circles. The dress flared out from her legs, making her look like a fluffy pink ball of polka dots.

“You’re not going to class?” Bella asked.

Alice stopped spinning. “No. It’s too sunny.”

“But Carlisle. He went to work.”

“Carlisle’s Mercedes has illegally tinted windows, and he parks in a garage,” Edward explained. “He would never be able to keep his job if he stayed home every time the sun was out.”

“But . . .” Bella looked at the sunlight, which had crept around the room as the sun rose. “It doesn’t hurt you, right?”

“No. Come on. Let’s go outside.” Edward took her hand and led her toward the door. He gave Alice a look that clearly warned to leave them alone.

Once outside, he guided her to the rock, which was now washed in sunlight. Bella sat and tilted her face toward the sun. Even in the early morning hours, she could feel its warmth. She realized then, that though she sensed the heat, she didn’t feel warm. In fact, over the past week, she hadn’t noticed her temperature at all. She hadn’t overheated when she ran, and even when her clothes were tattered, she never felt a chill. She simply existed.

Never having been to Alaska, she had no idea what the winter would bring. For all she knew, it was a frozen tundra of white, with polar bears or penguins or whatever inhabited the area.

“Will it be cold in Alaska?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Bella grimaced.

“Don’t worry. You’ll feel the cold, but you won’t be cold. You won’t even need a jacket. The only reason we wear them at all is to not raise suspicion. It’s likely no one will see you all winter, so we don’t have to worry about getting you outerwear yet. I’m sure Alice will be more than happy to pick out something for you next year . . . if we’re still around.”

Bella didn’t miss his use of the word *we*. She wasn’t naive enough to believe his intentions had changed in light of her failed attempt to kill him. When she left, he would go with her, even if it meant his demise. She didn’t know if she’d still be strong enough to take him out when the time came.

His neck had almost completely healed. A thin jagged line a shade lighter than his skin was all that remained. It had vanished so quickly. Bella reminded herself that he never would have healed had no one—herself included—helped him.

“What’s bothering you?” Edward asked.

“Nothing,” Bella answered quickly.

Too quickly, he thought. The way she’d been acting all morning made him uneasy. She seemed distant, but not in the angry, spitfire way to which he was accustomed.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me. We’ll work through it together.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she insisted.

He couldn’t read her mind, but he had enough experience with others to know that she was hiding something. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.” Bella turned her head away, refusing to meet his eyes.

Edward hated being left in the dark. He was sure he could help her if she would only talk to him. Presuming she wanted time alone, Edward decided to return to the house. Halfway across the lawn, the sound of an approaching car captured his attention.

It wasn't unusual for cars to pass on the road near their house, but this particular car was slowing down, and there was no other turnoff within a few miles on either side of their driveway.

Alice burst onto the porch. "Edward, do you hear that?"

"Get inside," he yelled toward Bella. "Now!"

Bella was barely to her feet before Edward had an iron hold on her upper arm. He all but dragged her into the house at top speed.

"Jasper! Esme!"

He pushed her down onto the couch in the living room. The approaching car drew closer.

"Sit here. Don't speak." Edward leaned in, his lips mere millimeters from her face. "Don't breathe."

They barely had time to convene before the car came into view. Edward couldn't fathom why a cop car would be pulling into their driveway, but then he read the words on the side.

FORKS POLICE

He turned to Bella, his face livid. Dangerous.

"Is this what you were hiding?"

Bella couldn't answer. All she could do was stare at the car as it rounded the house and left her line of sight. The engine killed, and the door opened.

"You stupid girl!" Edward seethed. "Do you realize what you've done? Do you want him dead?"

If Bella had a heart in her chest, it would undoubtedly be beating loud enough to drown out the sounds around her. Instead she listened with painful clarity to each step her father took. Tiny bits of dirt and grass crunched beneath his boots as he moved closer to the door. She could hear his ragged breaths, doing nothing to disguise his nerves. She could hear the fast paced *lub-dub* of his heart as it pumped blood through his veins.

Even from inside the house, Bella was instinctively drawn to him. Venom pooled in her mouth. This was her dad, and she wanted to kill him. She wanted to sink her teeth into his neck and suck every last ounce of blood from his body. She hadn't even smelled him yet.

The realization paralyzed her with fear.

Edward stood by the door. The others spaced themselves in a semi-circle behind him, away from view of the door and in Bella's path. When Charlie Swan knocked, Edward opened the door.

"Good morning," he said in a pleasant voice. "May I help you, officer?"

"Are you Edward Cullen?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm looking for Isabella Swan. Have you seen her?"

Edward feigned confusion. "I'm sorry. The name doesn't sound familiar."

Charlie's entire demeanor changed. He stepped into the threshold, one hand on the door, the other on the frame, so that if any normal human wanted to close it, they wouldn't be able to.

"Oh, I think it does."

Edward regretted not having his gift at this moment. It wasn't the first time he had to bluff about someone's whereabouts, but it was the first time he had to do it blindly. It would be so much easier if he could be one step ahead, if he knew what Charlie was thinking so he could play into his doubts. He wished Bella would have been forthcoming about whatever happened prior to his arrival, but it was too late for that now.

"You must be misinformed, sir. I don't know anyone named Isabella."

"Listen here, kid. I know you know my daughter. She called me last night from a number registered to you, and if you think for one moment I'm going to stop searching for her, you are gravely mistaken."

Edward didn't know how to counter his accusation. If Bella had indeed called him, he must have had the number traced. There would be no reason for her to give him Edward's name. It wasn't like she was being held against her will. At least not anymore. There was only one option left to talk himself out of the situation.

"I haven't seen my phone in nearly a week," Edward lied. "I lost it camping. I was going to look for it this weekend. My father would be very upset with me if he knew it was gone."

Charlie eyed him in disbelief. Uncertainty started to cloud his features, but then his face hardened in resolve. "I am not leaving until I talk to my daughter." He enunciated each word

slowly. “No amount of brief, hushed phone calls in the middle of the night will suffice. I need her to tell me she’s okay to my face. I need to see her with my own eyes.”

Edward’s facade was slipping. Without knowing Charlie’s thoughts, he had no idea what to say to get him to leave. He weighed his options. If he tried to scare him away, it would send up a red flag, but he couldn’t continue playing dumb. Perhaps his best bet was to lead Charlie elsewhere under the guise of seeing Bella. The rest of the family could vanish, as though they’d never existed. First and foremost, they had to keep their secret safe.

“Dad?”

Edward spun around at the sound of Bella’s voice. Using the distraction to his advantage, Charlie pushed past Edward and into the house.

“Bella?” he called.

Bella could stay still no longer. She sprang to her feet and stepped around the corner. As her dad came into plain view, she noticed the broken look on his face.

“Oh, Dad!” she sobbed, but the minute she gasped for breath, the scent of his blood infiltrated her senses.

Pain like she’d never felt before blazed in her throat, a fire that threatened to incinerate her entire being. Her instincts took over. With a mighty growl, she surged toward him. Jasper grabbed at her, tearing her clothing. She elbowed Alice out of the way; a crack reverberated around the room as she made contact with the vampire’s nose.

In her focused state, she didn’t register Edward putting himself between her and her prey. With every ounce of strength he had, he threw his shoulder into her gut, knocking her off balance. It was just enough of a hindrance for Esme to put her on the ground. Bella snarled. Her jaws snapped viciously in Charlie’s direction. Hands and knees pinned her down as Alice and Jasper joined the struggle.

Bella’s tunnel vision expanded, and she was able to comprehend the scene unfolding in front of her. Her dad, her kind and loving dad, stared down at her with a look of sheer terror on his too pale face. She stopped struggling. What had she done?

Edward climbed to his feet. Before Bella could finish composing her thoughts, he grabbed Charlie by the neck.

“Edward!” she screamed. Her voice was broken and rough, weak from the pain and the effort it took to inhale. “Edward, please!”

Edward said nothing. With a look of apology, he dragged Charlie’s shocked form outside and into the woods.

“Edward!” she screamed again. “Edward!” Too shaken to form coherent words, she begged and pleaded in her mind, praying that just this once he would be able to hear her. She kept calling to him, but no matter how many times she said his name, he didn’t turn around.

Chapter 7

Charlie's head spun. One minute he was standing in the house staring at his daughter, and the next he was in the middle of the woods on his hands and knees. Hovering above him was the boy from moments ago, only now he didn't seem so young. An air of power emanated from him, menacing and dangerous.

"What the hell just happened?" Charlie asked. He pressed his hand to his forehead as the world around him lurched.

Jasper appeared at Edward's side. They gave each other a careful look. When Jasper nodded, Edward turned his attention to Charlie.

"Your daughter is a vampire."

A sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff erupted from Charlie's throat. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Think about what you just witnessed."

Charlie recalled Bella rushing at him with unnatural speed. The sound of her snapping teeth still echoed in his mind. He shuddered at the memory of her blood-red eyes.

"No," he argued, despite having seen the evidence. "That can't be. There's no such thing."

"Jasper?"

Jasper vanished, reappearing fifty feet to the left. He uprooted a small tree with one hand and threw it, sending it flying in Charlie's direction. Charlie cowered, covering his head with his arms. He heard how far away the tree landed, but he couldn't bring himself to turn and look.

"How is this possible? Who did this to her?"

"I did," Edward said, offering no apology.

"You? You're a vampire?"

"I am."

Jasper approached the man and knelt on one knee so they were face to face. Charlie's entire body began to tremble.

"Charlie, I need you to listen to me very carefully. Are you listening?"

When Charlie nodded, Jasper continued.

"No one can know what we are. No one. Not your friends, not your coworkers, not even Bella's mother. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said, his voice weakened by fear and shock.

"If you can keep our secret, you'll be able to see Bella again someday. But if you tell a soul what you learned today, you will die. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You're going to call off the search. Tell everyone she came forward, that she dropped out of school and was afraid to tell you. Tell them you're not going to talk to her until she stops acting like a rebellious teenager. Don't elaborate. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I swear. I won't tell anyone," Charlie promised.

Jasper rose to his feet. "We need to get him out of here without bringing him near Bella."

"I want to see her," Charlie said.

"Maybe you don't understand," Edward snapped. "She can't be around you right now. The scent of your blood causes her physical pain. Is that what you want? Do you want her to suffer so you can see her? When you already saw her trying to attack you? It was a miracle we were able to stop her. Next time you might not be so lucky."

"Is she okay? Is she . . . happy?"

Edward considered the best answer for Charlie to hear. Telling him she was changed against her will was out of the question. He also decided to spare him any mushy sentiments about how the girl meant the world to him and how he would always keep her safe. It wasn't the time nor place, not that the matter concerned him.

"For now she's still adjusting. One day the world will be at her feet. She will never suffer sickness or death. There is no better life for her than the one I have given."

Charlie didn't respond.

"I'll take him east to the old highway. You get his car and meet us there," Edward said.

"I'll take him. You get the car."

Edward shook his head. "I need to make sure he's not going to tell anyone about us, but I'm still too close to her to hear him."

"No," Jasper said with finality. "He's about to go into shock. I'll keep him calm. Besides, you left Bella in quite a state. You need to tell her that he's okay before she decides to hunt you down. I don't think she would handle it well if she made two attempts on his life in one day."

Bella stared out the window. Her eyes darted between the trees, searching for any sign of her dad. She wanted nothing more than to go in search of him, to save him from whatever fate Edward had in store, but she knew her presence would only add to his detriment.

She realized now how selfish she'd been. She'd contacted Charlie because *she* couldn't bear him being in pain. She thought it was the right thing to do. She thought if she told him she was okay and that he shouldn't worry, everything would be fine.

She was wrong.

In an attempt to spare his feelings, Bella failed to protect him from the most dangerous thing in his life:

Her.

Now he was out in the woods with Edward, and she had no one to blame but herself.

Edward emerged from the trees, making a beeline toward Charlie's car. There was no sign of her dad. She barged through the door.

"Edward!"

His footsteps didn't falter. He shot her a steely glare before climbing in the car.

All of her anger vanished. "Where's my dad?"

Edward crooked a finger, and Bella raced to the vehicle. When he rolled down the window, Charlie's canned scent hit her like a wrecking ball. It almost brought her to her knees. She doubled over, gasping as she clawed at her neck.

Edward showed no emotion as he watched her struggle.

"He's fine. Go back in the house."

He said nothing more as he put the car in gear and tore out of the driveway.

Instead of going back into the house, Bella returned to her rock and tried to ignore the way the sun bounced off her skin.

Edward was angry with her, and for the first time since her change, she was worried about what it meant for her future. If he turned against her, she had no idea how the others would react, if they would continue to help her.

The experience with Charlie was eye opening. Any delusions she'd harbored about running away fizzled. She wasn't ready to be on her own. If she'd killed her dad—anyone, for that matter—she never would have forgiven herself. She hated her involuntary reaction. She hated being out of control. Anyone who inadvertently crossed her path wouldn't last three seconds.

If she came upon a city, she wouldn't be able to resist. She'd murder everyone in sight without a second thought. What if people discovered what she was, and the clan of vampires Edward told her about came after her? She never wanted to be immortal, but that didn't mean she wanted to die.

Bella wondered what her dad must think of her. He might have been able to accept what she'd become had she not attempted to rip out his throat. Now she'd never know. He probably wanted nothing to do with her. His terrified face would be forever ingrained as her last memory of him.

She heard Edward's footsteps long before he reached her. He stood behind her, not saying a word. Bella didn't acknowledge his presence. She was embarrassed and ashamed. If she'd been stronger, she could have thrown his own lack of control in his face. Now she didn't have a leg to stand on. She was a monster. Just like him.

"Are you here to gloat?" Bella asked when the silence became too much. "Are you going to tell me how I failed? Rub it in my face?"

"No, but I hope you have a better understanding of why we want you to stay."

"That's not why you want me to stay. You don't care if I kill people. I'm just a means to an end."

"If I didn't care, I wouldn't live this lifestyle. I told you already. I don't want to be a monster." Edward reached for her, but he wasn't sure what to do. He settled for pinching a lock of her hair between his fingers. It was soft, much more so than when she was a human. He sighed and let it slip from his grasp. "I intend to be by your side for the rest of your existence, or at least for what's left of mine. I don't want to see you overcome with guilt. I don't want to give you a reason to hate me even more."

Though Bella felt the familiar sting in her eyes, no tears came. Of course he'd make this about himself. Everything was always about him. She wished whatever connection they had would stop working so he wouldn't want her anymore, so he wouldn't care about her or if she stayed. But even if by some miracle that happened, she couldn't leave. Not yet. She was stuck here, at his mercy. She needed him, and she hated it.

"Do you need to hunt?" he asked.

Though the burn in her throat now was nothing compared to what it had been earlier, Bella still craved blood. She craved the reprieve it brought, no matter how briefly.

"Come on." Edward stood and headed away from the house.

"The others?" Bella didn't want to take any chances, especially now that she'd experienced the allure of human blood. She threw an anxious glance over her shoulder, but no one came to join them.

"It'll be fine. I covered a lot of ground on my way back. There's no one out there."

Bella stood with reluctance and followed Edward into the woods. They walked in silence, their steps measured and deliberate. She wasn't sure which of them was responsible for the slow pace. All she knew was that she was in no hurry to return to the house.

Edward's hardened expression had her on edge. Before she could stop herself, Bella blurted the one question on her mind.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No. I'm not mad at you, but I am upset. I wasn't keeping you away from your father to be an asshole."

"But you *are* an asshole."

Edward pushed away the anger that flickered in his chest. "Maybe so," he said. "That doesn't change the fact that it's in your best interest to obey me."

"Obey you!" Bella scoffed. She stopped walking and whipped around to face him.

"Yes, obey me. This life is new to you. I understand you don't want to listen to anything I say, but I know what's best for you. When you make bad choices, people die. Your father could have *died*."

Bella's brewing argument dwindled. As much as she didn't want to admit it, Edward was right.

"You want me to trust you?" he continued. "Then trust me. Please. Despite what I've done, you know I wish you no harm. You know there's nothing I can do to you now."

Without another word, Bella continued in the direction they'd been walking.

Edward brushed his fingers across the scar on his neck. He was powerless when it came to her. He needed to find a way to gain the upper hand. Bargaining hadn't worked out well the last time. If only he knew of something she wanted, something only he could give her.

I'd give her anything.

Groaning under his breath, he trudged after her.

Bella glanced over her shoulder. She thought she'd heard his voice, no more than a whisper on the air, but his lips were pressed into a thin line, his glaring eyes focused on the ground. Whatever Edward had muttered, it must not have been for her ears.

She walked, not giving much thought as to where she was going. The bubbling of running water captured her attention, and she followed the sound until she came to a narrow stream. The sun beat down from overhead, sending a ripple of shimmer across her skin with each movement. It was impossible for her to ignore.

“Do you hear that?” Edward was at her side, his eyes wide with barely concealed excitement.

Bella followed his line of sight. She didn’t see anything, but she heard something. She didn’t know what it was, but she could tell it was big. Each massive footstep displaced brush and newly fallen leaves. A large heart pumped loud and steady. She sniffed, taking in the new scent coasting on the wind.

“What is it?”

Her question was answered when a black mass emerged from the trees. It paused halfway to the water and looked directly into her eyes. The beast snorted, showing off long fangs, and stood on its hind legs.

“It’s your bear.”

Bella’s stomach dropped as realization struck her. This wasn’t a random bear in the woods. She had seen this bear. This entire scene had played out in her head. Alice didn’t predict it, but she did. She saw the bear, and she saw the sun, and she saw that stupid pink dress Alice wore earlier that morning.

Bella dropped to the ground and wrapped her arms around her legs. Edward glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and then did a double take.

“What are you doing?” His smile faded when the girl didn’t respond. “Are you afraid?” he asked in disbelief. “You’re a vampire.”

Bella didn’t acknowledge him. Edward looked between her and the bear, his worry increasing. He didn’t know what to think of her strange behavior.

The bear dropped down onto all fours and barreled toward them. Edward stood straight and squared his shoulders, releasing a growl from deep in his chest. Though he could have the animal drained in a matter of seconds, he didn’t want to waste time. The girl was his first priority.

The bear stopped in its tracks. After a few moments of indecision, it turned and fled.

Edward knelt by Bella's side.

"Hey," he said, trying to get her attention. When she wouldn't look at him, he cradled her face in his hands. "What's wrong?" He tried to turn her head toward him, but she remained as immobile as a statue. "What can I do?" he asked. "Do you still want to hunt? Do you want to go back? Say something!"

Edward's panic escalated with each silent minute that passed. He contemplated calling Carlisle, but he didn't want to bother him at work again today. Besides, he wasn't sure what good it would do. They were in the middle of the woods. Edward smoothed his palm down the girl's neck.

I don't know what to do.

Bella flinched.

"Okay," he said more to himself than her. "I'm bringing you home."

Edward braced himself for a retaliation as he brought one arm around her back and the other beneath her knees. Instead of lashing out when he lifted her from the ground, she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him with everything she had. His scar burned from the pressure, but he didn't dare tell her to let go. He held her tightly and ran back to the house at top speed.

After depositing the girl on the bed, Edward paced his bedroom, phone in hand. He was slightly more relaxed now that they were back at the house, but she still hadn't spoken, which concerned him. It wasn't like her not to have a snarky reply, or at the very least glare at him.

"Screw it," he muttered, and dialed Carlisle's cell.

"Edward?" Carlisle answered after two rings. "I only have a minute. Is everything okay?"

"I'm not one hundred percent sure."

"Is Charlie all right? Did something happen after we spoke?"

"He's fine." Edward wasn't sure how to explain without sounding trite. It wasn't as though the girl hadn't ignored him before, but this time was different. At least, he thought it was. He

didn't want to waste Carlisle's time over something trivial, but he couldn't sit and wait for something to happen. "Can vampires go into shock?"

"Is it Bella? Has she been harmed?"

"No," Edward assured him. He hated the accusatory tone in Carlisle's voice.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. There was a bear . . ."

"A bear?"

"Yes, and she just . . . shut down. She's like a statue. She won't move or talk to me. I don't know what to do."

Carlisle was silent for a few moments. Edward imagined the pensive look on his face as he processed the information. He wished Carlisle were with them so he could see the girl for himself. Edward wanted an answer. He wanted to know everything would be okay.

"Have Esme or Alice tried talking to her?"

"No. But I don't see what good—"

"Edward, the two of you don't have the best relationship." Carlisle's words were stern but not unfriendly. "Perhaps she'll open up to someone else."

"She's not giving me the cold-shoulder, Carlisle. Something is wrong!"

"I wish I could be of more help, but without seeing her, I don't know what to do. I promise to give her my full attention when I get home. Ask Esme to talk to her. I'm sure she'd love to help. I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Edward did his best to hide his frustration.

"Good luck."

The call disconnected. Edward spiked his phone on the bed. It bounced and landed on the floor with a muted thud. He didn't want Esme's help. He didn't want to know if he was the reason for her strange behavior. If she reacted to Esme and not him, a part of him would die.

He crawled on the bed and took her hands in his.

"What's wrong?" Edward wasn't surprised when she didn't answer. "Talk to me, please. I can help. Tell me how to fix this and I will." He took her chin in his hand and forced her face up. Her eyes remained downcast. "Is it me? Was it something I did?"

Say something. Anything. Please, Bella.

Bella heard the fluid timbre of his voice, even as she witnessed his lips remain perfectly still. She swallowed and lifted her gaze to his.

“Say my name,” she whispered.

Edward’s mouth dropped open. His brow furrowed. He hadn’t actually thought she’d speak, and of all the things she could say, that was the last he expected. He stared into her eyes. Fear and sadness swam behind her red irises.

Edward cleared his throat, her name teetering on the tip of his tongue. He was afraid of using it. Afraid of making the girl real, of making everything he’d done real. But he couldn’t tell her no. He was done telling her no. He swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Bella,” he said slowly, feeling the way his tongue caressed each syllable. He liked the way it sounded, the way it felt on his lips. “Bella.”

The girl closed her eyes. Edward rested his forehead against hers. Relief flooded through him. She was okay, and despite everything that had happened, she was still there. She hadn’t left him.

“My Bella.”

Chapter 8

Bella refused to discuss her reaction in the woods. She was quiet but seemed okay otherwise, so Edward dropped the subject. He kept an eye on her for the remainder of the afternoon. He thought perhaps it had something to do with her dad, that the events of the morning had finally caught up with her, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something had happened out there. He was determined to discover the truth, no matter how long it took.

When Carlisle arrived home from work, the family gathered in the living room.

"I've agreed to stay at the hospital for four more weeks." Carlisle smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "With the missing person situation cleared up, I don't see why we can't take this time to prepare. I'm sure the last thing any of us want is to arrive in Alaska with a full moving truck and nowhere to stay. A month should be more than enough time."

"Rose will help us find a place," Esme added. "The sooner we have an address, the sooner Jasper can get our papers in order."

"Do we have to leave?" Bella asked. The others exchanged cautious glances. "If I'm not missing, then why do you have to hide me?"

“Wouldn’t you like the freedom to be able to hunt whenever you want?” Carlisle asked. “Your chances of running into someone here are much higher. If today was any indication, you’re not ready for the challenge.”

“I don’t want to go to Alaska. It’s so far away. I want to stay in Washington.”

“Staying is an unnecessary risk,” Jasper explained. “It’s only a matter of time before you kill someone.”

“Jasper is right,” Esme said. She reached out and patted Bella’s hand. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. We’ll all help you adjust, and once you’re ready to be around people, we can go wherever you want. Time will fly; you’ll see.”

“But my dad is here!”

Edward squeezed her shoulder. “You know you can’t see him, right? It’s too soon. Maybe someday we can come back, but for now . . .”

“I just don’t want to be that far away from him.”

Edward’s heart clenched. He looked at Bella’s saddened expression, and for the first time, he saw her for what she really was: a young woman who wasn’t ready to leave her family.

“Do you think Charlie will keep our secret?” Carlisle asked.

“It’s hard to tell. He seemed agreeable at the time, but his thoughts were too jumbled for me to get a good read.”

Jasper sighed. “It won’t matter. If he talks, we’ll be long gone. People will assume Bella disappeared and his grief drove him insane.”

“I think we should stay,” Alice added softly. “Bella is doing extremely well.”

“Were you not here today?” Jasper snapped. “She almost killed her dad. What do you think would have happened if it were someone else? Someone whom she had no incentive not to kill?”

“The mere fact that she didn’t kill him speaks volumes. She could have broken away from us if she really wanted to. She could have chased after Edward, and he would have been powerless to stop her. But she didn’t.”

“Alice, think logically. I don’t want to leave either, but it would be foolish of us not to.”

“We wouldn’t even be discussing this right now if she hadn’t been reported missing!”

“It was a wakeup call. There’s no excuse for our inattentiveness. We have to base our decision on what’s best for Bella, not what we want. Right?” Jasper looked to Carlisle, imploring him to talk some sense into Alice.

“We do . . . but maybe moving isn’t what’s best.”

Jasper threw his arms in the air. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Alice has a point. Bella’s self-control is impressive. For the most part she’s kept her temper. She hasn’t knocked down any walls or uprooted any trees. She hasn’t drawn unwanted attention to us.”

“She’s still a newborn,” Jasper argued. “We shouldn’t let her be this close to humans.”

“We also shouldn’t force her into a situation that makes her uncomfortable. We’ll continue this discussion when emotions aren’t as high. Until then, let’s go forth with our plan to move. Maybe once we show Bella something more concrete she’ll have a different outlook.”

Shaking his head, Jasper stormed outside. Alice chased after him.

“We’ll get things figured out,” Carlisle said to Bella. “I heard you had an incident today while hunting.”

“It was nothing.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

Bella nodded.

Carlisle glanced at Edward. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed.

Edward shrugged. He understood there was nothing Carlisle could do now. As Carlisle and Esme left the room, he turned to Bella.

“No matter where we are, I’ll be there for you. You know that, right?”

“Yes. I’m painfully aware.” The hint of a smile tugged at her lips, softening the blow of her words. “Did you really—” Bella gestured to her head “—read my dad’s mind?”

“Yes.”

“Was he thinking about me?”

“Um . . .”

Bella grasped the front of Edward’s shirt. “Is he appalled by what I am? Does he hate me?”

“No, of course not.”

“What was he thinking? Please tell me!”

“Bella . . .”

Hearing her name calmed her, and Edward easily pried her fingers from his shirt. He chose his words carefully. The last thing he wanted was to upset her more than she already was, or to cause a repeat of earlier.

“I didn’t get many specific thoughts. He was on the verge of shock. But he wasn’t thinking ill of you.”

“I don’t want him to hate me.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t.” Edward didn’t think it was best to give her too many details. He didn’t want her to conjure any absurd plans of running off to visit him. But upon seeing her dejected face, he knew he had to say something to lift her spirits. “He asked about you. He wanted to know if you were happy.”

“He did?” Bella looked up at him with eyes that should have been glassy with tears. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him . . .” Edward thought back to his conversation with Charlie. He hadn’t given a straight answer, but he hoped his words had comforted him. “You were.”

Bella nodded, grateful Edward told her dad what he wanted to hear, even though the words weren’t true. It wasn’t something she thought him capable of doing.

“I don’t want to leave,” she whispered.

Edward pulled her into his arms and brushed his lips across her temple. He breathed her in, grateful she allowed him the liberty, even if she didn’t hold him in return.

“I know.”

In the week that passed, Bella remained more withdrawn than usual. She didn’t complain about the lack of variety in her diet. The constant presence of the others didn’t seem to faze her. She even remained polite to Edward, despite his constant hovering.

Jasper wasn’t around as much in the evenings, which in turn meant Alice’s absence. Bella was fine with that. Without Alice in the vicinity, she hoped she wouldn’t see any more visions.

She analyzed the two events she'd predicted, but she couldn't figure out what set them apart from idle daydreams. She attempted not to think about the future, but the more she tried to shut off her mind, the more it conjured possible outcomes. So far none had come to fruition.

Sometimes she would get glimpses of Edward's thoughts. It was never longer than a few words, and always seemed to be about her. She did her best to keep her reactions in check, but it was hard, especially whenever she heard her name. At times he would watch her, scrutinize her, and she was convinced he must know. If he did, he wasn't broaching the subject, and neither was she.

Bella had become so good at ignoring Edward's presence that at first she didn't notice when he'd left the house. It wasn't until he was standing at the bedroom door, one hand hidden behind his back, that she became suspicious of his whereabouts.

"What are you hiding?"

Edward approached, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. He gave her a nervous half-smile and held out a small box with a large silver bow on top.

"Happy birthday."

He stood, arm outstretched. Bella looked around the room, searching for anything to clear the confusion in her mind.

"It's my birthday?" she asked finally.

Edward nodded. "September thirteenth."

"Oh." Bella couldn't believe it. With everything that'd happened to her, she completely lost track of the date. She swallowed, her eyes locked on the package. "What's that?"

"It's your gift." He took her hand and placed the box on her palm. "Open it."

Bella hesitated. She didn't want to accept any gift, especially one from Edward. But curiosity got the best of her, and she untied the ribbon securing the lid. Inside was a sleek black cell phone. The screen illuminated when she tapped a button.

"Um . . . thanks. What exactly am I supposed to do with it?"

"You can use it to call me," he suggested.

"That implies you'd actually go away," she muttered.

A grin spread across Edward's face. "Why don't you make sure I saved my number."

Swiping her thumb across the screen, Bella easily navigated to her contacts list. Only one name appeared.

Charlie Swan.

Bella gasped, her free hand flying to her throat. She stared at Edward, trying to decipher if this were some sort of cruel joke.

“I thought you didn’t want me talking to him.”

“I don’t, but he knows what you are.” Edward took the phone from her hand and saved his own number. He kept a firm grip on it as he handed it back, his fingers brushing Bella’s as she tried to take it from him. “It’s still important to remain discreet. Don’t talk about what we are. If he wants to be in your life, he’ll have to accept there’ll be unknowns.”

Bella extracted the phone from his fingers. She cradled it in her hands and reread the two names on the screen. Her dad had always been the one she called when she needed something—a flat tire changed, directions, an extra twenty dollars when she mismanaged her allowance. She had no idea what type of assistance she’d need as a vampire, but chances were Charlie wouldn’t be able to help.

She glanced at Edward, who was watching her closely. She supposed he’d be the one she’d call now if she ever ran into some sort of problem. He promised to be there for her, to give her anything she needed. Suddenly, her situation seemed a lot better than navigating the world alone.

“Thank you,” Bella said. She hesitated before throwing her arms around his shoulders.

Edward stiffened, half expecting her to go for his neck again, though for the life of him he couldn’t think of a reason why. When she pressed her body against him and squeezed, he allowed himself to relax. Afraid that any sudden movement would interrupt her rare display of affection, Edward inched his hands to her waist and tugged her closer. He nuzzled his nose against her neck. It took everything he had to keep his lips from parting and sucking on her delicate skin. He bet she tasted sweet, just like she smelled.

The chill of the room hit him as her arms slid from his shoulders.

“What was that for?” he asked as he relinquished his hold on her waist. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I don’t know. Moment of weakness, I guess.”

Bella backed away and took a seat on the edge of the bed. Edward followed.

“I’m not sure the next thing I have for you will garner the same reaction.” From his pocket, he pulled a small manila envelope. “It’s not a gift, technically. Just a coincidence.”

Bella took the envelope and shook the contents into her palm. “My license!” she said at first glance. When she read the name, she frowned, realizing it wasn’t hers, but the one he’d discussed with Jasper.

“Isabella Marie Masen,” she read in a hollow voice. The address was the second thing she noticed. “Washington. Is that this address? We’re staying?”

“Surprise,” Edward said uncertainly.

Bella continued to inspect the card. The photo was the same one on her own license. Aside from her name and address, all the other information—height, weight, birth date—remained unchanged. Even her signature was an exact replica.

“How did you know all this? Did you look it up? Hack into the DMV?”

The accusation in her voice caused Edward to cringe.

“We had your old ID.”

“What do you mean, you had it?”

“Jasper found it . . . at the school.” Seeing her confusion, he added, “He recovered your backpack.”

“You have my things? My wallet, my old phone? Where are they?”

Edward didn’t understand why she was getting so excited. Everything could be replaced. She had no use for any of her human belongings.

“We destroyed everything.” When her face fell, he rushed to explain his actions. “We had no way of knowing how things would turn out. It was evidence we didn’t want lying around. Your phone could have been traced, and the last thing we needed was someone from your old life contacting you.”

“What about my license? You must have kept that.”

“It’s gone. I’m sorry. We don’t keep old documentation.”

Bella turned the ID back and forth in her hand. “You do a thorough job of erasing your pasts.”

“They’re just things. Your past will always be there. All we erase are the visual reminders.”

Bella nodded but made no further acknowledgment.

“Hey,” she said as she examined the back. “I don’t have a motorcycle endorsement.”

Edward leaned closer and peered over her shoulder. “Jasper must have added it because I have one.”

“You ride a motorcycle?”

“Not for a long time.” He smiled at her shocked expression. “Does that surprise you?”

“A little.” Bella shrugged. “Can I see your license?”

Edward produced a wallet from his back pocket and removed his ID. Bella snatched it away with the excitement of a kid at a candy store. He didn’t expect the intensity at which she scrutinized it, and it made him self-conscious.

“Edward Anthony Masen. Is that your birth name?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“It says your eyes are brown.”

“All of ours do. It’s the closest match.”

She looked into his golden eyes, wondering if anyone ever bothered checking the finer details.

“Were they brown?”

“Green.”

“Hmm.” Bella twisted her face into a scowl and shook her head. “No. I can’t picture you with green eyes.” She pointed to his date of birth, which was listed as June 20, the same year as hers. “Is this your birthday?”

“Yes. Well, not the year, obviously.”

“How old are you?”

Edward nodded to the card. “Nineteen.”

Bella rolled her eyes and fixed him with a no-nonsense glare.

“I told you before. I’m one hundred twenty-six.”

“No, dummy. I mean, how old are you going to be . . . for the rest of eternity or whatever?”

Edward raked his teeth across his lower lip. His eyes dropped from hers. “Seventeen.”

Bella had assumed he was somewhere in his late teens or early twenties, but now that she knew for sure, he appeared younger somehow. She wasn’t that much older than him. She knew age was just a number, but she couldn’t imagine never officially becoming an adult.

“So . . . I’m older than you?”

Edward scoffed, but he couldn’t disguise his smile. “You are not older than me.”

“Yes I am. You just said.”

“Never. I have over one hundred years on you, and I have documentation that proves I’m older than you by almost three months.” He plucked his license from her hand and stuffed it into his wallet.

“Well, maybe I’ll have to talk to Jasper next time he has documents forged.”

Edward was too elated by the prospect of next time to argue. If she were still around when they needed new identification, he would let her be any age she wanted.

“Is he mad?”

Edward pulled himself from his fantasies of the distant future. “Who?”

“Jasper. He didn’t want to stay.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“He doesn’t like me.”

The statement was so absurd Edward wanted to laugh. “Jasper has nothing against you. He’s just jealous.”

“Jealous! Of me?”

“We each adapt to this life differently. You’re doing exceptionally well, it’s true, but Jasper did exceptionally bad. The way you were around your dad—that’s how Jasper was for the entire first three months. It was miserable.”

Bella brought her hand to her throat. The pain, the craving, never fully went away, but for the most part she’d been able to put it out of her mind. There had been moments when it became an all-consuming fire, and she couldn’t imagine suffering through it for any extended length of time.

“He struggles the most out of all of us. The only time he isn’t the weakest link is when someone new joins the family. So, you see, your strength only accentuates his weakness. On second thought, I take it back. He probably doesn’t like you.” Edward winked to let her know he was teasing, but it didn’t spare him from being punched in the shoulder.

“Everyone is staying, then?”

Edward nodded. “Carlisle is keeping his job. Alice will stay in school. And you and I can do whatever we want.”

“As long as we stay away from humans,” she added.

“As long as we stay away from humans,” Edward agreed.

Bella glanced at the phone still in her hand. “Do you think my dad wants to talk to me?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Chapter 9

With a deep breath, Bella dialed her father's number and held the phone to her ear. She hoped it was still early enough to catch him before he left for the station.

"Swan here," Charlie answered. It didn't matter whether he was at home or work; he always answered the same way. Only now, Bella could hear the strain in his voice. He sounded fatigued, as though the last of his spirit had been drained.

"Dad?"

There was a moment of hesitation. When Charlie finally spoke, it was with barely concealed excitement. "Bella, is it really you?"

"Yep. It's really me."

"You sound different."

Bella smoothed her hand down her neck. She didn't think her voice was any different. Then again, everything else about her had changed.

"I've been thinking about you all day," Charlie continued when she didn't respond. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Dad."

“It seems like just yesterday I was changing your diapers, and now . . .” Charlie took a ragged breath. “I miss you, kid. God, I’ve missed you so much. I almost had you back and then . . . and then I find out you . . . you’re a—”

“Don’t say it,” Bella interrupted. “Please don’t ever say it. Not even to me, okay?”

“Yeah, okay. Right.”

Silence fell over the pair. Neither had ever been good with sentiments, and in light of recent developments, it was all the more awkward.

“Those boys treating you all right?”

Bella smiled despite his overbearing tone, grateful that he was still looking out for her. “Don’t worry about me, Dad. I can take care of myself.”

“I know, I know. You’ve always been a strong young woman.” Charlie huffed out a sigh. “That Edward fellow, he rubbed me the wrong way. It doesn’t matter where or how old you are—*what* you are—you’ll always be my little girl.” His voice broke on the last word, sending a surge of pain through Bella’s chest. Her grip on the phone tightened, causing the metal frame to groan in protest.

“I’m fine, I promise. Edward’s helping me. He’ll keep me safe.”

The words were meant to be a comfort to her dad, but the truth Bella felt behind them overwhelmed her. She registered Edward’s sudden presence, his hand on her shoulder a silent vow. Her body slowly relaxed under his touch. She took a deep breath and glanced at him over her shoulder. One corner of his lip quirked into a smile, and she found herself smiling in returning.

“Will I, uh . . . be able to see you soon?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah,” Bella answered, returning her full attention to her dad. She didn’t know how long it would be until she was ready, but she didn’t want to dampen his mood any further today. “Just don’t make any more surprise visits. It’s too dangerous.”

Charlie scoffed into the phone. “Nothing in the world could keep me away if you needed help. But it sounds like you have everything under control.”

“If I don’t, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Are you going to call your mother? She’s been asking about you.”

A wave of guilt washed over Bella. She hadn't spoken to her mom since before school started. She didn't know what Charlie had said about her disappearance, but it would be hard to blow her off today.

"I don't know." Bella looked to Edward once again. He worried his lower lip between his teeth but gave no indication of how she should answer. Even if her mom didn't notice the change in her voice, she wouldn't know what to say. She didn't know how to explain her whereabouts or why she dropped out of school. With all her luck, her mom would insist on paying her a visit, and then what would she say? Bella never had been a good liar. "Can you buy me some time? Tell her I lost my phone."

"Bella," her father warned.

"Please? I'm not ready. This is hard for me, Dad," she added, hoping his protective instincts would kick in.

Charlie sighed. "Fine, but the sooner you call her, the better."

"Thank you," she said in relief. "Look, I have to go."

"Oh, okay. My shift is starting soon anyway. Promise me you won't be a stranger."

"I won't. I'll call you soon. Love you, Dad."

"Love you too, kid."

Bella disconnected the call before any more awkwardness could settle in. She shoved the phone into her pocket and turned to face Edward.

"Was I okay?" she asked.

You're perfect.

"You did perfect."

Bella's eyes dropped to the floor. She felt anything but perfect. "I'm a terrible daughter."

"No." Edward brushed the back of his hand over her cheek and down onto her neck where the faint scars from his teeth protruded. He traced the two half-moon shapes with his fingertips and then lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "You're doing what you have to in order to keep them safe."

"I know."

"Let's get out of here. Spend the day at the meadow. We can hunt on the way."

Bella nodded in agreement. She led the way without a second thought as to how to get there.

The weakened summer sun shone on the meadow, causing Bella's skin to shimmer as she entered the clearing. She was becoming accustomed to the strange phenomenon, and she held up her hand for a closer inspection.

It was grotesque.

It was beautiful.

Edward captured her hand in his and brought it to his lips. Closing his eyes, he skimmed his nose across her knuckles.

Beautiful.

“Stop,” she said, and pulled her hand away.

Edward refused to look at her as he rocked back, falling to the earth with a loud thud. Bella stood alone for a few minutes, and then lay down next to him.

The breeze whispered through the trees, carrying with it the scents and sounds of animals in the distance. Bella closed her eyes and listened. All around her there was life, a constant cycle of birth and death. She couldn't decide whether her immortality made her an outsider or gave her a perspective she wouldn't have otherwise known.

She shifted, sensing each individual blade of grass scraping against her exposed skin. It itched, but it wasn't unpleasant. She wondered what it would feel like to lie on the snow or a sandy beach. She rolled on her side to face Edward.

“Are there any secluded beaches nearby?”

Edward lolled his head toward her. A lazy smile spread across his face. “If you want to go topless, you can do so here. I don't mind.”

Bella scoffed at the idea of taking her clothes off. “You're such a pig”

“I'm a man.”

“You're a boy.”

Edward sat up, leaning over her slightly. “Would you rather I be disgusted by the mere thought of your body?”

Bella’s mouth dropped open.

“That’s what I thought.” Edward lay back down, sporting a smug expression. He crossed his arms behind his head and hummed in satisfaction.

“Well,” said Bella, trying to gain her composure, “my mere touch makes you purr, so . . .”

“That won’t be happening again, little newborn.”

“You shouldn’t be so sure of yourself.”

He shrugged. “It was a one-time thing. I was ill-prepared.”

Edward forced his face to remain neutral as Bella began combing her fingers through his hair. She’d fallen right into his trap, and he wished it was always so easy to get his way. He held back a sigh as her nails scraped across his scalp.

He thought it wouldn’t feel as good as the first time, when her touch was new and filled with human warmth, but it was—better even. He wanted to moan and hum and purr. He wanted to pull her into his arms and never let go. His desires got the best of him. He pushed Bella onto her back and hovered above her. His eyes locked on her lips, but before he could make his move, he found himself flying through the air.

Edward hit the ground hard, his wounded ego turning his shock into fury. He leaped to his feet and lunged at Bella, taking her down and pinning her to the ground. His strength was no match for hers, and she easily tossed him to the side. Edward kept his grip on her arms, whipping her body over his and using the momentum to regain his position on top. Without a moment’s hesitation, he bowed his head and pressed his mouth to her neck.

Bella froze as his teeth pierced her skin. Pain radiated throughout her body. She brought her hands to his shoulders and made a weak attempt at pushing him away. Edward tightened his jaw and jerked his head side-to-side. Bella rocked beneath him like a rag doll, groaning as his teeth tugged against her flesh. A blank calm washed over her, causing her fear to subside and her body to relax. Her eyes closed, and her arms fell to the ground as she surrendered to him.

Edward growled, long and low, before releasing her. He lowered his forehead to hers, panting as he took deep breaths. Bella remained beneath him, unmoving. She looked into his eyes, seeing her own confusion reflected there.

“What the hell was that?” she whispered.

Swallowing, Edward moved his lips to her ear. His voice was weak when he spoke.

“Instinct.”

Edward sank down, covering her body with his. Bella imagined his lips on hers, his hands skimming over her body, her legs wrapped around his hips—but it wasn't her fantasy she was seeing.

It was his.

“Stop,” she said again.

“Stop what?”

Not knowing what to say without giving away her secret, Bella kept silent.

Edward dragged his lips across her cheek, pausing at the corner of her mouth. He wanted her to offer him some encouragement to continue, to tilt her head toward his or put her arms around him.

To make the first move.

Kiss me.

Bella pushed against his chest. He moved off her, and she sprang to her feet.

“Don't do that.” She wanted it all to stop—his control, his advances, even his voice in her head.

“Bella . . .”

“You have to stop.”

“Bella.”

“I can't—”

“Bella!” Edward's voice was stricken with panic. When she looked at him, his expression reflected the same urgency. His eyes scanned the forest behind her. His nostrils flared, and his lips parted as if tasting the air.

As the wind picked up, Bella caught an unfamiliar scent.

“What is it?”

“Vampire.”

Bella scanned the horizon. She saw nothing, but she could hear the steady footsteps of someone approaching.

“You have to go,” Edward pleaded.

Bella turned to him and frowned. “Go?”

“Yes, go! You need to leave so I know what he’s thinking.”

Any curiosity Bella felt about the newcomer faded away as Edward’s worry rubbed off on her. “Where am I supposed to go?”

“Go back to the house. Make a wide arc. I don’t want him catching your scent and changing his course.”

“But what if there are people?”

“There won’t be.”

“You can’t know that.”

Edward grabbed her by the arm and gave her a firm shake. “Fuck the people, Bella! Go!”

“No!” She yanked her arm from his hold. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Damn it!” Edward paced along the edge of the trees, tugging his hair with both hands. “I don’t know how to fight fair, and you don’t know how to fight at all.”

“Fight? Why would there be a fight?”

Edward moved directly in front of her, arms to his sides and fists clenched. “Because he and I are males, and he’s alone and I have you,” he spat through clenched teeth. “Go, please.”

Bella’s worry was replaced by a blinding rage. She straightened her spine and placed her hands on her hips. “I’m not a prize to be won, and I’m certainly capable of taking care of myself.”

“You don’t know the first thing about taking care of yourself.”

“Taking off your head was easy enough.”

“I didn’t fight back!”

“I’m not leaving you alone when I can help. And I’m not risking running through the woods by myself.”

Edward wanted to argue, but it was too late. He angled his body toward the creek and stepped in front of Bella in a vain attempt to shield her from view.

The strange vampire appeared 100 feet downstream, halting when he saw the pair. He stood just over five feet tall, but his broad shoulders and muscular arms made him appear much larger than he actually was. His jet black hair was long and wild, tangled and dirty. His clothing was tattered and weathered. His feet were bare. Sure signs of a nomad.

The only sound was the low rumble of Edward's growl. The stranger remained silent, his red eyes studying them both.

Bella was on edge. She could practically feel the anxiety rolling off Edward, and the newcomer with eyes as unsettling as her own was too calm. She could tell he was planning, calculating, and she didn't want their silent standoff to turn violent.

"Hello," she called over Edward's shoulder.

Edward hissed.

"Hello there." The vampire cocked his head and formed his lips into a smile that was anything but friendly. "Pardon me for intruding. When I caught your scents, I had to investigate. It's not often I come across others, especially females."

The suggestiveness in his tone caused Bella to recoil. It took every ounce of self-control for Edward not to attack. He growled again, loud and angry.

"Calm down, my friend. I just wanted to say hello."

Bella detected the hint of an accent, though she couldn't place from where. She leaned around Edward to get a better view.

"You've said it. Now leave." Edward stepped to the side, shielding Bella again.

"You seem very protective of your . . . friend," the nomad said. "Yes." He chuckled. "How interesting. You aren't a mated pair, are you? Tell me, do you know she holds no allegiance to you? If I were to attack, I'm not even sure she would take your side."

Edward glowered as his biggest insecurity was thrown into the open. He held no illusions that Bella was with him for any reason other than the help of his family. He tried not to think about the day when she'd prefer solitude, or the company of another, over him. But now it

was something he had to face. Their paths had crossed this strange vampire's, and suddenly Bella's options increased. Another feral growl tore from his lips.

The red-eyed vampire threw his head back and laughed.

"It's fascinating, really. I've never seen anything like it. Such indifference on her behalf. Absolutely no loyalties to you whatsoever. But you? You are very fond of her, I see. Very much in love. Too bad she doesn't return the sentiment." He directed his full attention to Bella. "What is your name, *agapi*?"

Edward stiffened.

"Isabella," she said flatly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Isabella. My name is Theodoros. And your friend here is . . ." He gestured toward the other male.

"Edward."

Edward bared his teeth.

"Tell me, my friend, would you fight for her?"

Edward took a step forward, but Bella's firm grip on his elbow held him in place.

"I am not a piece of property. Fighting won't do you any good."

"Fair enough." Theodoros held up his hands. "Interesting choice of words considering the fresh bite on your neck. Does Edward assert his dominance over you often? It appears this isn't the first time. It's a very bold move, going for the neck. Is that how he keeps you in line?"

Self-consciously, Bella covered her neck with her hand. The wound had since closed, but it still throbbed, a combination of the injury and the venom seeping into her system.

"It's surprising, really," Theodoros continued. "The scar on his neck hints at weakness. It's very contradictory, don't you think? Perhaps it's related to his strange eye color. He seems like an inferior member of the species to me."

"What do you want?" Edward snarled.

"What do I want?" Theodoros asked as though the answer were obvious. His eyes widened, and he splayed his hands across his chest, portraying innocence. "I want to make sure this young vampire is treated with the respect she deserves. And since she's not bound to you . . ." He trailed off, leaving the suggestion hanging in the air.

“She doesn’t want to go with you.” Even as he said the words, Edward could hear his own uncertainty. He glanced at Bella, looking for some sort of reassurance. Her face was unreadable.

“Are you sure about that? Would you stop her if she wanted to leave?”

Edward remained silent and as still as stone. Of course he would stop her, and by the knowing look on Theodoros’ face, he was well aware of that fact. He wasn’t sure exactly what power this strange vampire possessed, but having his feelings put into words made Edward feel vulnerable and exposed. What Theodoros said regarding Bella’s feelings was hard for him to accept.

“I have no desire to go with you,” Bella said.

Edward relaxed slightly.

“And you couldn’t be more wrong about my feelings toward Edward.”

“No.” Theodoros shook his head. “I can sense it.”

“I’ve been told I’m difficult to read.”

“Hmm.” Theodoros narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin with his forefinger. He’d never had an issue identifying relationships before. Then again, there must have been a reason he was drawn toward this pair. “Perhaps you are.”

Bella found herself shrinking further behind Edward as Theodoros continued to scrutinize her. She knew she was strong, but she wasn’t interested in an altercation. She didn’t want to get hurt, and she didn’t want Edward to get hurt. He told her once that he had killed to protect his family. He promised to protect her. She knew he would try, but that didn’t mean he’d be successful.

“I must have misread the situation.” Theodoros held out his arms and plastered a smile on his face. “Please accept my sincerest apologies.”

Bella didn’t think there was anything sincere about him. She wished she’d taken Edward’s advice and ran when she had the chance. She gripped the back of his shirt, silently willing him to take her away from this place.

“Don’t let it happen again.” Edward reached behind himself and wrapped his hand around Bella’s wrist. He squeezed, both in reassurance and possession. “I hope you don’t plan on staying in this area for long.”

“Not to worry, my friend. I certainly won’t encroach on your . . . territory.”

A chill ran down Bella’s spine as his eyes shifted back to her. She was ready to flee, but Edward’s tight grip kept her feet planted firmly in place.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, *agapi*.”

Theodoros nodded to Edward in parting. He turned his back on them and retreated in the direction from which he’d come. Bella let out the breath she was holding.

Edward turned and pushed her in the opposite direction. His fingers dug into her wrist, but she didn’t care.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 10

Edward guided Bella away from the house. When he was convinced they weren't being followed, they doubled back to the meadow and followed Theodoros' trail until Edward was satisfied he'd left.

At least for now.

Bella watched as Edward paced. The stiff set of his shoulders and abrupt changes of direction gave away his agitation.

"I should have killed him."

"Why?"

"I didn't like the way he spoke to you."

Hearing the fury in his voice, Bella's eyes widened. She'd imagined what it would have been like to kill the nomad in the event of a fight, but to end someone's life for no real reason seemed wrong. But it was over. There was no sense in irritating Edward further when he was already seething over the run-in.

"I wonder where he's from. He said something that didn't sound English."

Edward stopped pacing.

"It was Greek."

“You know Greek?”

“A little.”

She ran to his side and grasped his arm. “What was he saying? What did he keep calling me?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Edward!”

Edward shook off her hand. He turned to face her, prepared to tell her to stop asking so many questions, but the words got stuck in his throat. Bella looked up at him with awe and excitement, and for a moment, he felt as though he mattered to her. As though everything Theodoros said had been wrong.

“He called you ‘love.’”

I should be the one calling you love.

Bella’s initial discomfort was overshadowed by Edward’s silent aspiration. She’d thought the other vampire had been spewing nonsense about the feelings Edward harbored, but now she wasn’t so sure. Her face fell. Her focus shifted to the ground.

Seeing her reaction, Edward nodded to himself. “I should have killed him.”

He brought his palm to her neck. Bella flinched but didn’t pull away as he traced his thumb along the most recent scar.

“Does it hurt?”

Bella shook her head.

“I didn’t mean to bite you. It just happened. I’m sorry.” *I’m sorry for everything.*

Bella hesitated, not knowing how to reply. Though she could usually tell the difference between his voice and his sporadic thoughts, it was hard for her to compartmentalize the two when it came to an appropriate response.

She shrugged. “What’s one more mark?”

“It’s barely visible.”

“It’s still there, and apparently it makes me look like a pushover.”

“No. Don’t listen to him. It makes you look desirable.”

Bella shot him a dubious glare.

“Biting is not uncommon among couples,” he explained. “It’s not always a display of control. It can be a very passionate act.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t the context you bit me in.”

Edward didn’t need the reminder.

“Context doesn’t matter. This—” He traced the line along the front of his neck. “This labels me as weak, but I didn’t obtain it from a fight. I can use the assumption to my advantage.”

“You think he considered you an easy target because you’ve had your head ripped off?”

“Most definitely.”

Bella pondered the implications of her action for a moment. She hated the scars Edward had given her, but she had scarred him too. Maybe, in some twisted way, they were even.

“Don’t bite me again. Ever. I mean it.”

“I won’t.”

Bella searched his eyes. She found nothing but sincerity.

“May I ask you a question?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“If he attacked, would you have fought with me?”

Would you have let him kill me?

Bella considered the question he left unspoken.

There was a time when she wanted Edward dead. When she awoke after her turn, she was scared and overwhelmed with her new world. Her only thought was escape. She attacked out of instinct, doing the one thing she believed would kill him.

But Edward was no longer a threat, and as unpleasant as she found his company at times, she had no desire to see his life come to an end.

Bella elbowed him playfully in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Someone’s gotta keep you from losing your head.”

Edward cracked a small smile. He didn’t know if she was being honest, but he wanted to believe it was true.

“Let’s go home. We should let the others know about this.”

When all the Cullens were together later that night, Edward told them about the mysterious nomad they'd talked to in the woods—minus the more personal details he didn't want shared.

"It sounds as though he was just passing through. It's probably nothing to be concerned about."

"I don't know, Carlisle. There was something about him. He seemed very interested in . . ." Edward paused, rethinking his words. "He seemed curious. I'm not convinced he won't be back."

"Well, that's to be expected, I suppose. Once he discovers there are more of us, I doubt he'll cause any trouble. Two to one is risky enough, but six?" Carlisle shook his head. "No vampire in their right mind would take on that many opponents."

Jasper, sensing Edward's desperation, wasn't as quick to dismiss his concern.

"Carlisle's probably right, but we'll keep alert for a while, just to be on the safe side. You two should stick close to the house. Esme and I will do the same during the day. Strength in numbers and all."

"Great," Bella muttered. Now she *and* Edward were being babysat.

"We appreciate it. Thank you."

"I'll keep a lookout for something too," Alice said. "But with Bella being involved . . ." She gave an apologetic grimace.

"It's fine, Alice. Let us know if you see anything."

"Edward," Jasper said, "do you want to do a perimeter run? Just an added precaution."

If Edward could still read minds, he'd have known why Jasper wanted to get him alone. Instead, he could only imagine what thoughts lie behind his pointed look.

"Of course."

Jasper leaned in to Alice and gave her a kiss. Alice smiled, giggling as she returned the favor.

Edward regarded Bella, standing by his side with her arms crossed, looking like she wanted to be anywhere but there. He slung his arm over her shoulders and bent down to place his lips on her cheek.

She tensed.

He sighed.

“I’ll be back soon, okay?”

“I’ll be here.” She didn’t sound happy about it.

Edward followed Jasper outside, dreading each second that brought him farther from Bella and closer to hearing Jasper’s thoughts.

“Just spit it out, already.”

“What are you talking about?” Jasper asked.

“There’s obviously *something* you want to say, so say it.”

“I’m not sure why you felt the need to lie to everyone. I thought, maybe, you’d tell me the truth.”

“I didn’t lie,” Edward argued.

“You edited.”

“Barely.”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Jasper stopped walking. “You run into a lone vampire in the woods, he goes on his way, and yet you have this scarcely contained fury. And a sort of . . .” He sucked on the back of his teeth. “Anguish. It’s strange. Bitter. I can almost taste it.”

Edward stopped walking too, but he refused to turn around.

“Something happened out there. If you don’t think the information is relevant, fine. But I’m asking as a friend. What’s wrong?”

Come on, man. I’m worried about you.

Edward sighed and plopped down on the forest floor. Jasper joined him.

“He . . . knew things.”

What kind of things?

Closing his eyes, Edward took a deep breath. He could barely own up to his own feelings, let alone confess them to someone else. “He knew exactly how I feel about her. It’s like he plucked the emotion right from my body and said it out loud for the entire world to hear.”

So you admit you have feelings for her?

Edward growled.

“It’s not that far-fetched,” Jasper said, ignoring him. “Two vampires alone in the woods. It’s a logical conclusion.”

“He knew she wasn’t my mate. He said she was indifferent, that she ‘holds no allegiance’ to me,” Edward mocked. He picked up a stone and launched it into the air. It disappeared from sight, annihilating the leaves and branches that were unfortunate enough to be in its way. “He wanted her.”

“Edward, I know you’re head over heels for Bella, but that doesn’t mean everyone who crosses her path feels the same way.”

“He wanted to take her from me! I could see it in his eyes. He was coveting her.”

The way you coveted her?

Edward sprang to his feet. “Damn it, Jasper!”

“Sorry, man. You know I can’t help it.”

“I just want things to be normal. No,” he amended. “I just want things things to be *okay*.” Edward sank to the ground once again and buried his face in his hands. He tried to ignore the different scenarios that played through Jasper’s head.

“What makes you think he was right about her?” Jasper asked at last. “She’s evaded all of our gifts so far.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s right, isn’t he? You’ve said so yourself: she hates me.”

“Exactly. I said she hated you. He said she was indifferent. Do you honestly believe she feels nothing toward you, not even animosity?”

“That’s so much better.” Edward’s laugh contained no trace of humor.

“The point I’m trying to make—” Jasper paused until he was sure he had Edward’s full attention “—is that he’s probably wrong.”

“He wasn’t wrong about me.”

Your feelings are written all over your face.

Edward groaned.

“And maybe I’m wrong too.”

“I can read your mind, Jasper, remember? I know you don’t believe that.”

“Screw what I believe. You were right. I can’t possibly know what she’s feeling. I don’t know her at all. It’s unfair of me to make assumptions.”

Edward did his best to focus on the words and not the contradicting thoughts behind them.

“Come on.” Jasper stood and pulled Edward to his feet. “Let’s make a loop and get back to the house. I don’t need you getting all broody on me.”

“How did it go?” Esme asked when they returned to the house.

“Fine,” Edward said with a shrug. “There was no trace of him.”

“That’s good.” She beckoned for him to join her on the couch. Edward sat down next to her, even though all he wanted was to see Bella and remove his family’s thoughts from his head.

“You shouldn’t worry so much. Everything will be all right.”

Esme’s thoughts agreed with her words. Edward wanted to take comfort from them, but that’s all they were—words. They didn’t mean anything.

“I hope you’re right.”

Bella stepped around the corner. In her arms she cradled a change of clothing. Their eyes met, and the voices and images in Edward’s head faded until he was left with only his own. He looked between Bella and Esme, who wore a big smile on her face.

“What’s going on?”

“I told Bella she could use the whirlpool tub. Are you ready, dear?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I’ll show you to it.” Edward pushed off the couch and placed his hand on Bella’s lower back. “It’s this way.” He guided her through the bedroom that Carlisle and Esme shared and into the en suite bathroom.

“Wow.” Bella looked around the two adjoining rooms. “You got the short end of the stick.”

“I had the master bedroom once, but it was a long time ago. Bubbles?” He offered Bella a bottle of bubble bath, and she took it from his outstretched hand. “I don’t feel right taking it, being the single one,” Edward continued. He wondered if that would change now that Bella was with them. Probably not. If she stayed, she’d probably get her own room. Hell, maybe they’d offer *her* the master bedroom next time. “In our last house, my room was the unfinished basement. My leather couch was the only thing in it.”

“That sounds unpleasant.”

“Not really. It’s not like vampires use beds. Well, not for sleeping, anyway.”

Bella’s jaw dropped, and then snapped shut. She turned away from him and placed her clothes on the counter. Edward turned on the water and began filling the tub.

“Would you like some company?”

Edward hoped she’d say yes. He imagined her in the bathtub, thick bubbles covering her body from view and her rich brown hair spanning out over the water. She would look so peaceful, so at ease as she tilted her head back to rest on the edge, exposing the creamy column of her neck. He wondered how she’d react if he surprised her by jumping in. Would she giggle and splash him? Pull him into her arms? He could practically hear the displaced water as it hit the floor and feel the warmth as it enveloped his body. Skin against skin. His hands sliding down her body. His teeth sinking into her neck.

Next to him, Bella dropped the container of bubbles, pulling him from the fantasy. She was flustered as she bent to pick it up. She opened the bottle and squeezed a copious amount into the bathtub.

“No. I—I want to be alone.”

“Is everything okay?” For the first time, he realized that maybe the events of the day had affected her as much as him.

“Yeah, fine. I’m just not feeling very well.”

Edward watched her secure the lid and set the bottle on the tile next to the tub. She ran a hand through her hair and straightened her shirt, looking anywhere but him. He narrowed his eyes.

She was acting so strange. And she was lying. Vampires felt fine all the time.

She couldn’t have known . . .

Bella?

Bella glanced at him over her shoulder. Her eyes widened and she quickly looked away.

She can read my mind.

In a panic, Edward tried to recall everything he ever thought about the girl. Anything unfavorable, anything she might find offensive. Anything too favorable. Then he realized if she could read his mind, bringing up those memories was the last thing he wanted to do. He tried to keep the thoughts at bay, but the more he tried to push them from his mind, the more they sprang to the forefront.

Bella had no reaction.

“Can you read my mind?”

“No. Why would you think that?” She answered too fast and sounded too dismissive, but it still planted a seed of doubt in Edward’s head.

“Sometimes you look at me like I’ve called your name.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Bella faced him, looked him dead in the eyes, and planted her hands on her hips. “Can I be alone now?”

“Yes.” Edward turned off the water and pointed to a panel on the wall. “The jet controls are there. Towels are in here.” He opened the cabinet above her head. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Edward exited the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He waited, hoping she would change her mind and call for him to come back.

She didn’t.

Esme took one look at Edward and was on her feet. She wrapped him in her arms and pulled him down on the couch. “Oh, sweetheart, what’s wrong? What happened?”

As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Edward was convinced the girl could hear his thoughts. It unsettled him to the core. He always knew his ability made the others uncomfortable, especially when they first found out, but knowing how they felt was nothing compared to experiencing the invasion of privacy first hand.

Edward felt awful. Not only had he taken away Bella’s family and future—her life—but he also cursed her with the very thing he used her to escape from. He wondered when it began, and if she could hear the others as well. He hoped their thoughts had been kind.

About her.

About him.

He didn’t know if he could ever look Bella in the eye again now that she was privy to his deepest feelings. How long would she be able to live this way? How long until she cracked? He refused to let her suffer as he had for so many years. She would resent him even more for placing this burden upon her. It wasn’t hers to bear; it was his.

He had to fix it.

The voices returned when he wasn’t around Bella, and logic told him the opposite must be true for her. The only solution would be to leave and never look back. To destine himself to a lifetime of solitude. A nomadic life. A life where he couldn’t hear the thoughts of others or make the people around him miserable. It was what he should have done in the first place, what he should he should have done years ago. His ability was unfair to everyone around him.

But he didn’t want to leave his family, and he couldn’t bear to let her go. He wouldn’t survive without her. The mere thought of being separated sent a pain tearing through his chest.

He deserved to be alone after everything he’d done to the girl, but he was selfish, and he knew it. Leaving wasn’t an option. He could never speak of it, never suggest they go their separate ways. He refused to put the idea in her head.

But if she could read his mind, it was already there.

Edward closed his eyes and rested his head on Esme's shoulder. She ran her hand up and down his back, and he wished it was enough to soothe him.

“I think I made a huge mistake.”

Chapter 11

Bella couldn't get Edward's daydream out of her head. Each time she closed her eyes, she imagined him jumping into the water and pawing at her exposed body. She didn't want to think about what would have happened had he acted on his desires. She wanted to believe she had the strength to fight him off, but after what happened between them earlier, she worried all it would take was one bite and she'd surrender to him once again.

Edward was going to kiss her in the meadow; she could see it in his mind. He'd kissed her in the same spot once—when she was human. At the time, she couldn't have stopped him if she wanted to. She didn't even try. Now she evaded his advances, but it wasn't out of fear or disgust.

Part of her was curious about what it would be like.

She blamed him, of course. It was his fault for putting the thoughts in her head. Had she not gotten small glimpses of his desires, it would never have crossed her mind. Bella didn't want to think of him like that, but the harder she tried to push it from her mind, the more she dwelled on it.

Bella closed her eyes and focused on the vibrations in the water. Even over the jets, she heard the bubbles sizzle and pop around her. She sank lower, until her chin was submerged. She thought of Edward again.

She should find him offensive, repulsive, but she didn't. That bothered her more than anything. She didn't want to admit that she was more put off by her own inexperience than she was by him.

Unable to be alone with her thoughts any longer, Bella turned off the jets and stepped out of the tub. It took only seconds for her to dry off and change into clean clothes. She slipped out of the bathroom as silently as possible, hoping Edward wouldn't notice she was done.

Instead of going upstairs to her room, she wandered down the hallway, drawn toward the sound of scribbling coming from Alice and Jasper's room. She peeked inside and found Alice hunched over a desk, pencil in hand. She was so focused on the paper in front of her that she didn't notice she was being watched.

Bella cleared her throat.

"Oh!" Alice tucked the pencil behind her ear and stood to greet her. "Bella, come in. Is everything okay?"

Everything was far from okay, not that she would ever admit it.

"What are you drawing?"

"Uh . . . visions, mostly." Alice swept the drawings on her desk into a pile, covering the one she had been working on. She sat back down on the stool and crossed her slender legs. "Would you like to see one?"

Before Bella could answer, Alice dug through the pile and produced a half completed drawing of a woman. Her face and hair had been outlined, but her eyes were shaded in, bringing her to life despite the monotone color.

"Wow, that's amazing. Who is she?"

"I don't know," Alice answered. "I had a glimpse of her, but I don't know why or what it meant." She frowned as she placed the drawing on her desk.

"So . . . how does that work, exactly? Your talent."

“It’s subjective. Things like the weather are usually easy. It’s either going to be sunny tomorrow or it’s not. People are harder to read. I see the paths they’re on while they’re on them, but it can always change. The future is very rarely set in stone.”

“How do you know if you’re seeing the future and not, I don’t know, making it up on your own?” Bella hoped her questioning came across nonchalant. She didn’t want her sudden curiosity to raise any suspicion.

Alice, ecstatic that Bella had taken the initiative to have a little bonding time, was more than happy to oblige her.

“At first it was really hard to tell. I didn’t even know what was happening. I thought it was a coincidence, but the more and more visions I had, the easier they became to distinguish. It’s kind of like a dream.” Alice smiled as she stared wistfully toward the ceiling. “You probably remember them better than me. It’s been years since I’ve had one, but it’s the same principle. Sometimes they feel real, but there’s a sort of fuzzy haze surrounding them. The details aren’t all there. And sometimes you just know. It’s similar to that. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“And they come to you randomly?”

“Yes and no. The closer I am to people, the more often their futures pop into my head, though I’ve gotten pretty good at blocking out the mundane things. I can look for specific things too, but it’s an exercise in concentration. That’s why I sketch. It helps to clear my mind so I can focus on the visions without altering them with my own thoughts.”

“It sounds complicated.”

Alice shrugged. “I’ve had decades of practice.”

“But you can’t see my future.”

“No.”

“And you can’t see Edward’s future when he can’t read minds.”

Alice shook her head.

“Why do you suppose that is?”

“I don’t know. You must be blocking us somehow. I don’t think Edward has ever met anyone whose mind was silent to him. Whatever wall you have up in that head of yours, it must be pretty powerful.”

Powerful was never a word Bella would have used to describe herself. She didn’t try to block Edward’s gift or read his mind. She hadn’t even tried to intercept Alice’s visions. It just happened, like the pushing and pulling she felt in her head when Edward was near.

If Alice’s foresight began in the same way, then perhaps she, too, would get better at deciphering the visions. Maybe with a little concentration of her own, she could take control of what was going on in her mind. Maybe all she needed was a little practice.

Edward squeezed his eyes closed as the whirlpool jets turned off. He pushed all thoughts of Bella out of his mind, forcing it to be as empty as possible. It was easier said than done. For the first time, he gained a new appreciation of the strength it took for his family to block their thoughts around him.

Without making a sound, Edward sprang to his feet and bolted out of the house. The cool night air whipped against his face as he ran farther, not stopping until he was certain his thoughts were his own. His legs crumbled beneath his weight, and he fell to the ground, his head in his hands.

He didn’t know what to do.

More than anything, he wanted to go to Carlisle, but this wasn’t something that could be fixed. Carlisle was nothing if not logical, and Edward would find no sympathy there. He didn’t want any more reprimanding. He didn’t want to hear “I told you so.”

He groaned as he heard footsteps approaching.

Esme’s worried about you.

“She shouldn’t be.”

What’s wrong, brother?

“Nothing.”

The nomad?

“No.”

Bella rejecting you in the bathroom?

Edward smiled despite himself. “She always rejects me.”

Talk to me.

Edward hesitated, deciding what—if anything—to say. If Bella could in fact read his mind, there was a reason she didn’t admit it. Who was he to spill her secrets?

“Do you ever notice Bella paying attention to you when you’re not speaking?”

“All the time. You jealous?”

Edward fixed Jasper with a glare. “I’m serious.”

It took everything Jasper had to neutralize his smile. “Not really. She seems to avoid me if anything. Why?”

Edward shrugged. “No reason.” He listened in as Jasper processed the information he’d been given, trying to decipher Edward’s reasoning behind it. He flinched when the correct thought passed through Jasper’s mind.

“You think she can read your mind?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.” He sighed and shook his head in resignation. “She can. She won’t admit it, but she can. I know it.”

“All of us?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Wow.” Jasper crossed his legs and sank to the ground next to Edward. “It’s not as mortifying with a second person as I thought it would be. Still. I was kind of getting used to knowing there wasn’t anyone in my head.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” *Well, actually it is.*

Edward waited for him to say it out loud, to get angry, but he didn’t. He took a deep breath.

“It’ll drive her away,” he said at last. “I’ve asked her not to leave, but she will. I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I’m not convinced she doesn’t hate me. I don’t even know

why she's still here. She'll never stay now. This will drive her insane. This will make her hate me even more. This—"

"Edward, stop."

Edward clenched his jaw.

"If Bella wanted to leave, she would have already. And it took a long time before you snapped. She's a strong girl. She can handle it."

"She shouldn't have to."

What's done is done, Edward. You can't change the past.

"I wish I could."

Jasper laughed. "What would you do? Go back to being miserable?"

"I'd have left her human. Taken her up on the offer she made. Let her live her life and come back to me at the end of the day."

"You did what you had to do."

"I didn't understand the price!"

You changed her, and now you have to accept the consequences. The universe will always find balance.

Edward didn't respond. There wasn't anything left to say. He hadn't been thinking clearly at the time, but with clarity came guilt. He wanted to allow his instincts to take over again, but he knew that would ruin any chance he had at a future that included Bella.

"I wish I knew what was going to happen. I wish I could hear her thoughts."

"Oh, the irony." Jasper reached out and lightly punched Edward in the shoulder.

Edward ignored his teasing.

"I just wish I knew how she felt about me."

The silence stretched on between them. Jasper's thoughts flitted between memories of Bella and speculation of what was special about her. Then his mind became too silent. Jasper typically wasn't one to edit. Edward found himself listening harder.

"Why are you blocking me?"

"I'm not."

"Then why did you begin reciting *Romeo and Juliet*?"

“I’ll talk to you later, Edward.” Jasper stood and turned in the direction of the house. “See you at home.”

When Edward returned to the house, he ran into Bella as she was returning from Alice’s room. He didn’t even have to try reading her mind for the mental voices to melt away. Relief and guilt washed over him, and he gave her a timid smile.

Bella felt the familiar tug against her temple. She pushed against it with her mind, sending a ripple through her head. It wasn’t something she felt or saw, more of a sixth sense she was unable to explain.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, yes.”

“You know, if there’s anything you ever want to talk about . . .”

Bella shifted her weight and crossed her arms over her chest.

“You can come to me. Or Esme,” he added, though it pained him to suggest she seek advice from someone else. “We’re here for you.”

Come to me.

“I—I know.”

“Okay.”

Bella uncrossed her arms and shoved her hands in her pockets. “I’m gonna go upstairs.”

Edward watched as she disappeared around the corner and listened to the sound of her feet padding up the stairs. He sighed.

Jasper appeared at his side. He gestured for Edward to accompany him, and then followed in Bella’s footsteps. Edward gave his brother a questioning look, but he didn’t speak. Whatever was up his sleeve, it must have been what had him guarding his mind outside.

Jasper didn’t knock as he shoved the bedroom door open.

“That’s it! Time to go!”

Bella sprang from the bed. Surprise was clear on her face as she looked between Edward and Jasper.

“What?” she asked.

“Your presence is a liability to this family. Pack your things. You can keep what we’ve been generous enough to have given you.”

Edward was too shocked to respond. He looked at Jasper and then to Bella. Her expression morphed to one of indifference.

“Fine.”

She made a beeline toward the door. All Edward could do was watch, mouth gaping, as she stormed past them. Before he could move to stop her, he was hit with crippling agony. He gasped as the emotional pain struck him. Jasper staggered backward, coming into contact with the wall.

Bella glanced over her shoulder. She frowned as she took in the state of the two men. Jasper pulled himself together first, but Edward looked as though he’d been punched in the gut. The despair he felt gave way to confusion, and he shook his head as he tried to make sense of everything.

What is happening? Make it stop.

“Jasper, what are you doing? Stop.”

Jasper stayed strong. He wanted to make sure Edward felt every ounce of Bella’s emotions.

“Stop!”

As suddenly as it began, it ended, and Edward’s emotions were his own once again. Jasper breezed out of the room, past Bella, and down the stairs. Edward grabbed Bella by the shoulders.

“Don’t leave, okay? Promise me.”

Bella nodded, and Edward took off after Jasper.

“What the fuck did you do?” he yelled when he caught up with him. “What was that?”

“Remember when she first woke up as a newborn? I tried to manipulate her emotions and it backfired. We all felt her fear. It’s a loophole. You wanted to know how she felt. I showed you.”

“I wanted to know how she felt about me, asshole! And what was the point of lying to her? Did you want to hurt her?”

Jasper bristled. He stepped forward, getting right in Edward’s face. “No, I wanted her to have a strong emotional response so we could be certain it worked.”

“You couldn’t think of *anything* else to say to her?” he spat.

“I said something that would be useful. Now you know how she feels about leaving.”

Realization dawned on Edward. He took a step back as the fight drained out of him. Jasper was right. He could have shared Bella’s feelings at any time, but it wouldn’t have been helpful. It wouldn’t have told him anything other than her emotions at that moment. It might not have answered his question of how she felt about him, but it did show how she felt about staying with the family.

“And based on her reaction,” Jasper continued, “she’s not reading my mind.”

Edward returned to the bedroom at top speed. Bella sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed. Her lips turned down into a pout as she looked at him. The sight tore at his heart. He pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her petite body.

“Edward?”

“You’re staying,” he whispered into her ear. “He didn’t mean it, okay? He didn’t mean it. I’ll never let anyone separate us. I promise.”

Chapter 12

As usual, the night dragged on for Bella. She heard Alice's bubbly voice coming from the living room, drowning out the low murmur of the television. Every now and then, Jasper got in a word. Sometimes Esme or Carlisle would interject something into the conversation from another room. They laughed and joked around, much like they did during the day.

Outside, the world around them quieted and slowed. Traffic dwindled until it was practically nonexistent. Even the forest, bustling with wildlife during the day, stilled during the long, dark hours of the night.

Bella despised the nighttime.

As a vampire, she didn't need sleep or rest, yet a pesky voice remained in her head, telling her night was for sleeping. Night was for quiet. So Bella lay on the bed in Edward's room, facing the window, and gazed up at the dark sky like she had during so many of her sleepless nights as a human.

The sky was clear and washed in a sea of stars. Bella couldn't remember a time when she'd ever seen so many. A perk of vampire vision, she supposed. She was unable to pinpoint exactly when she'd adjusted to her new and improved senses; it had just happened. Loud sounds no

longer pounded inside her head, new scents didn't distract her, and the finer details of the world didn't capture her eyes like a neon flashing sign. Somewhere along the line, she'd learned to compartmentalize everything she experienced, to prioritize and only pay attention to the things that were important. The rest didn't go unnoticed or forgotten but was instead filed away for future reference.

Even now, as she counted every bright speck in the sky, she eavesdropped on the voices downstairs, listening for any mention of her, for any indication that they wanted her gone.

Edward had explained what happened the evening before. He also made it perfectly clear that he wouldn't allow his family to separate them, and though it wasn't the first time he'd done so, it was the first time she found comfort in those words.

If tonight had taught Bella anything, it was that she didn't want to be alone. She didn't want to be by herself, with no one to talk to and no place to call home. With nothing but the night to break up the monotony of the day. Every day. For all of eternity.

And Edward and Jasper knew exactly how she felt.

So far, no one downstairs had mentioned her or made any inclination that they wanted her to leave.

She sighed and turned her attention to a loose thread on the bedspread.

"Why are you ignoring me?" Edward's whisper pulled Bella from her thoughts. She rolled onto her back to look at him. He sat crossed-legged beside her, refusing to meet her eyes as he focused on his fidgeting hands. His expression gave away nothing, though he was unable to disguise the sadness in his voice.

"I'm not."

"I've been talking to you all night."

Edward hadn't spoken a word since vowing to never leave her side. So he must have figured out her secret. She'd expected as much.

"I know you can hear my thoughts. Why won't you admit it?"

Bella swallowed back her nerves. Edward had taken everything from her. Everything but her own thoughts. This gave her the upper hand. It was something only she knew, a piece of herself. She didn't want him to have it.

But as he dropped his head into his hands, as his shoulders slumped forward in defeat, Bella's first impulse was to comfort.

"Sometimes I can hear things."

Edward's head snapped in her direction, his eyes wide in surprise. A smile threatened at the corners of his lips. He took a deep breath. "Yeah?"

Bella nodded. "I don't think I can hear all your thoughts, though. Was it like that for you at first?"

"No. I heard everything right away. All at once."

"Oh." Bella had hoped for another situation like Alice's, where practice made perfect. If Edward was born into this life with his talent fully developed, it didn't leave her much hope for improvement.

"It's probably a good thing."

"You don't want me in your head?"

"I don't think you want to know some of the things I think about you."

Bella recalled hot bubbles and his teeth pressed against her neck.

"That bad, huh?" she tried to joke.

Edward shook his head.

"Not at all."

Bella pushed herself into a seated position. Edward leaned closer. He kept his voice low, creating their own little bubble of privacy. She was opening up to him. He didn't want to blow it.

"How long?" he asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. A little while. I didn't realize it was happening at first."

"Can you hear anyone else?"

"No."

"Hmm . . ."

"What?"

"You're stealing my gift and using it against only me even though I can read everyone's mind. But you can steal Jasper's gift and use it against everyone he's trying to affect."

“I wouldn’t say I’m *stealing* anything.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Edward placed his hand on Bella’s arm in an attempt to calm her. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

She opened her mouth to tell him about seeing the future—both Alice’s and her own—but she stopped. Telling him would lead to more questions, more analyzing. Maybe her presence really was a liability. If the rest of the Cullens knew what she could do, they might want her to leave after all. Or worse. It wouldn’t be the first time someone suggested to forfeit her existence.

“What?” Edward asked. “Tell me.”

Bella struggled to think of something else to say. “I don’t want Jasper doing that to me anymore.”

It hadn’t been Edward’s idea, but he didn’t want to start a fight. “I’ll tell him not to do it again.”

“It’s cheating. If you want to know how what I’m feeling, just ask me.”

Edward smiled.

“What?”

He shrugged. “It’s not the first time I’ve heard that. I just never thought I’d hear it from you.” Edward slid his hand down to hers, taking it in his own. He squeezed as he leaned in yet closer. “Will you be honest with me if I ask?”

“Maybe.”

Edward’s grin widened.

“How about, will you promise not to lie if I ask?”

“Yes,” Bella agreed. She didn’t consider omissions to be lies, technically. “Why are you so happy right now?”

“I like talking to you.”

Bella lowered her gaze to their joined hands. She swore blood filled her cheeks even though she knew it wasn’t possible. Talking to Edward did feel nice when there was no arguing, no power struggle. Even though the urge to tell him no was overpowering at times, he was so much more agreeable to be around when she compromised.

She jumped as his lips pressed against her forehead. Edward sat up straighter, putting distance between them.

“I warned you,” he said.

“And I told you I can’t always read your mind!”

“Try.”

“You want me to know what you’re thinking?”

“Not particularly. I don’t want you to be burdened with this curse at all. But I want to understand it better.”

“Okay . . . so what do I do?”

Edward shifted, squaring his shoulders to face her. He took her free hand in his.

“You aren’t getting a read on me, right?” he asked. Bella shook her head no. “I’m going to think of something, like I’m telling you. See if you hear anything. Are you ready?”

Bella took a deep breath and sat up straight. Edward stared into her eyes.

“Anything?” he asked after a few minutes.

“No.”

“Okay, let me think about something else.”

Again he stared at her, concentration burning into his expression. Again, Bella heard nothing. No words. No images.

She thought about Alice, and how she had to clear her mind in order to focus on the visions. She closed her eyes and tuned out the voices downstairs. She tried to ignore the pressure of Edward’s hands holding her own.

“Red. I see red,” she said, and then shook her head. “No, never mind. I’m probably imagining things.” When she opened her eyes, Edward was still watching her. His lips parted as he exhaled a shaky breath. “What is it?”

“I was concentrating on the number five, but then I became captivated by your red eyes.”

Bella looked away.

“What were you thinking before?” she asked.

“About how much I want to kick Jasper’s ass.”

Bella stifled a laugh. “Don’t do it on my behalf. He doesn’t need another reason to dislike me.”

“I told you, he doesn’t dislike you.”

“Right. He’s jealous.”

“He is,” Edward insisted. “Actually, you should kick his ass. Make him admit it while he’s in a headlock.”

“Oh, great idea. That would score me a lot of brownie points.”

Edward’s heart soared. Bella wanting to be on his family’s good side was a positive sign. More than he would have dared to ask for.

“You don’t need brownie points. You’re with me.”

Edward held his breath as he waited for the backlash. He’d been pushing her with his questions and his touch. It would be wise to stop while he was ahead, but he couldn’t help it. Things were moving forward. They were making progress, and he didn’t want to err on the side of caution. Not when, sooner or later, she would hear these types of declarations anyway.

“Am I?”

“Aren’t you?” Edward didn’t fail to notice her hands were still in his. She hadn’t pulled away from him yet. “You choose to be in my room—”

“My room.”

Edward grinned. “You choose to allow me in your room,” he amended. “You could easily opt for the company of anyone else. Or be alone. For as much as you claim to hate me, you do spend a lot of time in my presence.”

“I don’t have the widest selection of options.”

“Do you make it your life’s mission to break my heart?”

“I didn’t think you had one.”

“Touché.” Edward’s smile faded. All traces of humor vanished. “You chose me over that nomad.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

Bella wasn't a prisoner. She didn't need a knight in shining armor to save her from Edward or this life or anything else. But Edward had her best interests at heart—even if they were a product of his own—and she couldn't deny the comfort in that.

She opened and closed her mouth in a few false starts.

“Don't lie. You promised.”

“I know I'm safe with you.”

It was an acceptable answer, though Edward would have preferred something more personal. That she trusted him, or that she wanted to be with him. At the risk of hearing something he didn't want to, he pressed on.

“What if he could protect you just as well? And for argument's sake that he wasn't such a douche. Would it change anything? What if he had a family like mine? And you didn't have to worry about any weird gifts. Or bad memories. What if he could offer you everything I could and more? What if—”

“Edward.” Bella freed her hands from his. She took his face between her palms and forced his attention to return to the present. “Honesty, right?”

Edward nodded.

She hates me.

“I don't hate you.”

“You'll grow to hate me.”

“Why?”

“Because you have a right to. Because I'm me. Because of everything I've taken from you and this whole mind reading thing.”

“I'm here, aren't I? Just like you said.”

“For now.”

“And I think you know how I feel about leaving. You can thank Jasper for that,” she grumbled.

“I never want to lose you.”

Bella had an infinite number of years ahead of her. She refused to promise him eternity, even to spare his feelings. Besides, even if she did, Edward was smart enough to know she was saying it only to appease him.

“I’m here, now. Okay?”

“With me.”

Bella wasn’t able to tell if it was a question or a weak demand. She didn’t have the energy to fight with him anymore. She didn’t understand the point.

“With you.”

Edward wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her against his chest. He buried his nose in her hair, allowing himself the pleasure of breathing in her scent. “You and I would make a great pair, little newborn.” His voice was muffled, but Bella still heard it perfectly clear.

“Don’t push your luck.”

Edward squeezed her tighter.

It was hard to tell whether it was working, but the more Bella attempted to open her mind, the more thoughts she seemed to pluck from Edward’s head. As she heard more, a pattern began to emerge.

She could only hear the thoughts about her.

When daylight broke, Bella made her way downstairs. She knew in which room she’d find Jasper, but it didn’t lessen the surprise when he turned the corner and they came face to face. Her sharp intake of breath—a leftover human instinct—gave away her nerves.

“May I speak with you? In private.”

Jasper nodded and followed her outside. She stopped on the front lawn, but Jasper kept walking. Bella didn’t question him, only fell into step behind him as they wound their way through the forest.

Bella was thankful to be out of his sight. She needed a moment to compose herself. Intimidation was never a personality trait she wanted to show anyone, least of all Edward and his family. Of all the Cullens currently residing at the house, she knew Jasper the least. Neither

had made much of an effort to get to know the other. Whether he was standoffish or their lack of communication was a product of her own survival instincts, Bella wasn't sure. She reminded herself that he wasn't a threat, that she was still the stronger creature.

She stumbled as a strange sensation pulled at her head. It felt like her skull was a rubber band, being stretched in the direction of the house. It wasn't painful, nor was it unpleasant, but it wasn't like anything she'd felt before. She placed her hand against her temple, as if she could somehow hold her head together.

Ahead of her, Jasper stopped and turned to face her. She straightened her spine and dropped her arm. As she began moving toward him, the tugging came to an abrupt stop. A cold void filled her head, and somehow she knew Edward was no longer there.

"You okay?" Jasper asked.

"Yeah, fine."

"This is far enough. What did you want to talk about?"

Bella took a deep breath.

"I don't want you doing that to me again. Whatever it was . . . yesterday."

"I won't."

She didn't expect his reply to be so immediate. Or so sincere.

"Even if Edward asks you again," she added.

"Edward didn't ask me. It was my idea."

"Oh." His response stopped Bella short. She didn't know him well enough to tell if he was lying to cover for Edward, or if he even would.

"Is that all?" Jasper asked.

"Um . . ." Bella shifted her weight to one foot and then the other. She forced her hands to stay at her sides instead of fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "How do you do it? How do you affect people's moods?"

"I project my own emotion onto others. It's hard to explain. I feel it, like an aura. Over the years I've learned to push it out from myself. I can even control the shape, so I can influence certain people while leaving others to their own devices."

"And they feel whatever you're feeling?"

“They feel what I want them to feel. It’s hard sometimes. If everyone is upset, I’m usually upset too. I have to take control of my own emotions first.”

“And yesterday?”

“That was your emotion projecting onto both Edward and me.”

“So with practice . . .”

Jasper pursed his lips. He hesitated for the first time since they began their conversation. “You could control people’s emotions with my assistance, yes.”

“So let’s say I gave you permission to do that again. Would it be rude to ask you to help me? I don’t know anything about vampire etiquette when it comes to stuff like this.”

“Neither do I. I can’t say I’ve ever been in a situation like this one before.” Jasper traveled a few paces away from her. He kept his gaze trained on the distance as he spoke. “Feeling others’ emotions isn’t something I can help. It’s like Edward’s mind reading. The manipulation, however . . . I don’t take it lightly. Changing how someone feels—even momentarily—well, it’s still an invasion.” He turned and looked Bella directly in the eye. “Do you mind if I ask why?”

Bella froze. Anxiety twisted in her gut. It almost made her feel human again.

As always, she warred with how much information to share. Jasper may have wanted a reaction out of her the day before, but he’d been very convincing. The less information he had to use against her, the better. She wrung her hands, wishing she’d never even asked to speak with him.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, Bella.”

Bella’s first instinct was to deny his assumption. But he was right, and she was tired of pretending.

“I thought you didn’t know what I was feeling.”

“I don’t.” Jasper offered her a smile. “People like Edward and Alice, they rely too heavily on their gifts. Edward had an insight into everyone, yet he has no idea how to read people without it. Maybe it’s different for him than it is for me, because thoughts can be very erratic by nature. I’ve always tried to find a correlation between how people act and how they really feel. I see the way you look at me. The way your body language changes when I’m near. I don’t need to experience your emotions to know how you feel about me.”

Bella didn't know how to respond. She didn't want to be responsible for hurting Jasper's feelings, but his delivery was so calm and matter-of-fact that she couldn't bring herself to feel bad. If anything, she was embarrassed at being so clearly read.

"You're family now," he continued. "I'm on your side. For what it's worth, I won't repeat anything you tell me. I mean, if Edward specifically asks something when we're alone, there's a possibility something may slip through, though I don't know why he'd have a reason to.

"After everything you've been through, I have no problem helping you. But you have to understand, Bella, whatever it is you want him to feel, it will only be temporary."

Bella shook her head. "I don't want to make him feel anything."

Confusion crossed Jasper's face. He thought he had a good grasp on what she wanted. "Then why do you want my help?"

"I just feel like . . . I have this gift, right? And I have no idea what it is or how it works or how to control it. If I can strengthen my mind, then maybe . . . I don't know. Maybe I won't be such a liability."

Jasper had a feeling there was more to Bella's gift than she was letting on, but he didn't want to push her. Being a newborn came with enough pressure as it was. Edward wanted her with the family for the long haul, and if she was agreeable to staying, then it was good that she started associating with others. He didn't want to be the one responsible for driving her away.

"I don't have a problem working with you. I think it would be good for you to have a better grasp of your own emotions." He clapped his hands together. "Let's start now."

"Now?" Bella asked in surprise.

"Why not? What else are you going to do?"

Bella thought of her unlimited time and open agenda. Edward hadn't chased after her yet, even though he surely noticed she was gone. Jasper was right. What else was she going to do? It seemed like a nice break from Edward's smothering presence.

"Okay, what do I do?"

"What are you feeling?"

"Um . . . nervous, I guess? Overwhelmed?"

“I want you to close your eyes and think of the happiest memory you have. Tell me when you’re ready.”

Chapter 13

“You look in a much better mood this morning,” Esme said.

Edward smiled and returned her half hug. “I’m feeling much better. Thanks for putting up with me last night. I know I’ve been difficult lately.”

“You’ve gone through a lot. It’s understandable.”

Edward had been through a lot, but he had Bella to show for it. He tried not to be overly optimistic, but after their conversation the night before, he felt more at ease. Lighter.

Hopeful.

For the first time since changing Bella, Edward didn’t worry she would run off if he turned his back for too long. He didn’t fear rejection over inviting her on his next hunting trip. He tried not to think about Bella’s ability to hear his thoughts and what it would do to them both. Whether or not he liked it, there was nothing he could do about it now. Edward was determined to keep her in his life, and that meant relinquishing his privacy.

... so long since he’s looked this happy. I hope they can work it out.

“Damn it.”

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“Bella’s gone.”

Esme gasped, her hand flying to her chest. Her thoughts conveyed sheer panic. “What?”

“No, not for good.”

Momentary doubt crept into Edward’s mind. It wouldn’t be the first time he misinterpreted the girl. He listened for any sign of her or anything amiss. Jasper wasn’t in the house either. It always made him uneasy when Bella was with someone else, though he couldn’t quite pinpoint why. He didn’t fear for her safety any longer, and he didn’t think his family would say anything to discourage her from being with him. He didn’t want to admit to himself that he was jealous, that he was worried she’d like someone else more than him. “She’s with Jasper. I think she wanted to talk to him about something that happened yesterday.”

“Ah.” Esme’s thoughts went to their exchange the day before. Everyone noticed, of course, but after living together for so long, they’d learned to mind their own business. She didn’t press for more information. “Do you think they’ll go far?”

“I hope not.”

The overwhelming urge to chase after them struck Edward. He strode to the window that faced the forest and scanned the horizon for any sign of them, knowing if Bella couldn’t block him, she was too far away to see. There was no sign of her or Jasper, or anyone else for that matter, but it did nothing to ease his nerves.

“If they aren’t back in ten minutes, I’m going after them.”

Esme tsked. “Edward . . .”

“There is absolutely no reason they need to be gone longer than that. They don’t even know each other. It’s not like they’re friends.”

Bella would probably like a friend.

Edward growled. He knew he was being stubborn, but Jasper knew how worried he was about the nomad returning.

“He has my girl, Esme.”

“And he won’t let anything happen to her. He would never put the family in jeopardy.”

Esme was right, but it didn't do much to put Edward's mind at ease. Ten minutes turned into thirty, and then an hour. Edward paced. His breaths came hard and fast. He forced himself to stay in the house.

He had just resolved to give them five more minutes when Esme's thoughts fizzled from his head. He glanced around, looking for Bella, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Esme, you okay?"

"Fine, why?" she called from another room.

Edward bolted outside. He heard them approaching before they came into view, their light conversation and easy laughter preceding them. They fell silent when they reached the edge of the lawn.

"Where have you been?"

Bella flinched, her smile fading. Jasper gave him a warning look.

"We were getting to know each other, brother."

"You're supposed to stay close to the house."

"We didn't go that far," Bella argued. "We could have been back here in a minute."

Edward sighed and shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he muttered.

Bella wasn't ready to drop it.

"Of course it does! Besides, Jasper was with me. And I'm stronger than everyone, anyway."

"Just forget it." Edward turned and stalked away.

"No, I won't forget it!"

"Bella," Jasper interrupted. Edward froze mid-step. "It isn't so much concern for your safety as it is—"

"Jasper," Edward warned.

"—jealousy."

Edward turned around. Fire blazed behind his eyes. Jasper shrugged.

"Now you're even," Jasper said to Bella. He turned his attention to Edward. "And so are we."

Edward closed his eyes as Jasper breezed past him. He couldn't bring himself to watch Bella's reaction. A minute passed. He listened to her footsteps as she moved to stand in front of him.

"Why?" she whispered. "Alice . . ."

Edward shook his head. "Not like that."

"Like what, then?"

She doesn't laugh like that with me.

"It's nothing."

She didn't even like him four hours ago.

"Okay." Bella tossed her hands up in surrender. "I don't know if I'm supposed to address your thoughts or ignore them or what, but I actually had a really nice morning and you're ruining it!"

"Bella . . ." Edward grabbed her arm as she tried to pass him. She made a half-assed attempt to twist out of his grasp, but he didn't release her.

"Jasper was easy to talk to because there was no expectation. He didn't hover. He wasn't obsessed with how to keep me from leaving. I didn't have to listen to his thoughts about kissing me and *biting* me!"

Edward cringed and dropped her arm.

"He didn't treat me like a delicate flower that needed protection!"

"Bella—"

"No!" She stormed past him and into the house.

Edward couldn't bring himself to move, even though he wanted nothing more than to chase her and make everything okay. Bella had made it perfectly clear that his company wasn't welcome.

He sank onto the front steps, wondering how he could ever fix all the damage he'd done.

"What are you doing out here?" Carlisle took a seat on the stairs next to Edward.

"You're home early."

“They sent me home. Said I’d worked too much this week and I should get some rest.”

Edward laughed quietly.

They sat in companionable silence. Carlisle always lingered when he thought someone had something on their mind. Without hearing his thoughts, Edward didn’t know if that was Carlisle’s purpose for staying. He didn’t want to presume Carlisle wanted, or cared, to hear about his problems. After all, he’d brought them upon himself.

“Carlisle?”

“Hmm?” His response was curious, eager.

“Are you disappointed in me?”

Carlisle smiled as he rested his hand on Edward’s shoulder. “It would take a lot for me to be disappointed in you, son.”

Edward buried his face in his hands.

“I would have preferred you handled things differently, but I can’t expect everyone to make the same decisions as I would, nor should I. I can’t begin to fathom what it was like to live with your particular gift.”

“Really fucking hard.”

“You can’t beat yourself up over one indiscretion.”

“It’s a pretty big indiscretion.”

“I’ve created six vampires, and I’ve questioned myself every time. I still do. You know that.”

“I was dying. We all were. She—”

“Bella was changed against her will. Just like you. You hated me, remember?”

Edward smiled as Carlisle laughed at his expense.

“I destroyed our first three houses.”

“And half of our fourth.”

“You never once lost patience with me. Ever.”

“I asked you to stay, and you did. You lived this lifestyle at my request. I know it isn’t without struggle, and you’ve done exceptionally well. I will always support any decision you

feel is best for you. I'm not disappointed, Edward. I'm proud of you. That wouldn't have changed whether this happened after one year or one hundred."

Edward breathed a sigh of relief.

"It feels good to hear you say that."

Carlisle patted his shoulder and stood.

"I'm going to change and say hello to my beautiful mate. Come inside when you're ready."

The living room was empty when Edward entered the house. He didn't quite feel like socializing, so he took a seat on the couch.

Bella appeared in the doorway almost instantly. Her expression was serious, set with determination and resolve. Edward attempted a smile, but he was sure it came out as a grimace, because his insides were flipping and he was certain she didn't seek him out for a good reason.

Bella slipped into the room and sat down next to him.

"Edward, I'm sorry."

Edward waited for her to continue. To break the terrible news. She was leaving, or something worse. Something he'd never even considered. Reluctantly, he met her eyes. She stared back expectantly.

Realization dawned on him.

"You're apologizing. To me. Why?"

"I didn't mean to blow up at you earlier. It wasn't fair. Especially what I said about . . . your thoughts should be your own, and I used them against you. I just had a really emotional morning and . . . I'm sorry, okay?"

"Okay." Edward's first instinct was to get upset with Jasper and whatever he did to upset Bella. He pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind. He couldn't believe Bella was apologizing—to him of all people. He didn't deserve it; he'd been an asshole and he knew it. An apology wouldn't even do it justice. He wondered what Carlisle would say, what he would have done if he'd been in this situation. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Bella shook her head and slumped against the couch. Then her eyes lit up, and she turned to him. "I called my dad again. Before we came back to the house."

"Oh, yeah? How's he doing?"

"Good. Better. He still misses me, but he's glad I'm okay."

"Did you put in a good word for me?" Edward kept his voice light and nudged her with his shoulder.

"What is there to say about the man who took his little girl away?"

Maybe it was her teasing tone. Maybe it was her smile. But Edward couldn't resist leaning closer.

"So you admit I'm a man." He began to wrap his arm around her shoulders and then stopped himself. Sitting up straight, he rested his arm on the back of the couch. "Sorry, I can't help myself sometimes. Being near you feels, I don't know, natural."

"Yeah?" she asked, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Yeah."

Bella shifted closer, until their sides were almost touching. She pulled her knees into her chest.

"I'm trying," he said.

"I know."

Edward leaned his head back and closed his eyes, smiling at the nearness of her. Enjoying their time together, no matter how brief this period of camaraderie might last. He'd dwelled on the future enough for one day. Bella was there, beside him. He didn't want to ruin it by his mind being somewhere else.

It took him completely by surprise when Bella curled into his side and rested her head on his shoulder. He tried to look at her, but his chin hit the top of her head.

"You're giving me whiplash, little newborn."

"I'm just trying it out."

"You break it, you buy it." He laid his cheek against her hair and brought his arm around her waist. "If you keep doing things like this I won't know what's off limits."

He held his breath as he waited for a response. Sometimes it was so hard to be around her. Everything out of her mouth could either make or break him, and he never knew what was coming next.

“I miss my dad.”

Edward blew out his breath. He didn’t want to talk about Charlie; he wanted to talk about them. But he knew he’d never get anywhere if he continued to be selfish.

“You’ll get to see him soon.”

Bella perked up. She pulled away from him only far enough to see his face.

“How soon, do you think?”

“It depends. Probably a year or two.”

“Oh.” Bella’s face fell before she tucked her head under Edward’s chin.

It was not the reaction Edward had hoped for.

“Two years isn’t that long in the grand scheme of things. You’re just unable to comprehend it.” Once the words were out of his mouth, Edward realized how bad it must have sounded. “I’m not saying that to be an asshole. You don’t have a frame of reference yet. You’ll see him again before you know it. You just need to find a distraction.”

“A distraction? Like what?”

Edward pretended to mull it over. “Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps there’s an intelligent, young, attractive vampire out there who might be worthy of your attention.”

“Let me know if you see any.”

“I was talking about me.”

Bella laughed. Edward swore if he had a heart it would have started to beat again.

“Yeah, I know.”

She patted his chest, and for a moment he let himself believe that it really was his heart. That they’d met during a different time under different circumstances. Human circumstances. There’d have been no mind reading, no jaded centuries spent alone, no bad blood between them. He would have asked her to dinner and properly met her father. Movie dates and curfews and a stolen kiss in the backseat of a car.

“I think I like this way better.”

Edward groaned. “What did you hear?”

“Enough.”

“I’m never gonna get used to that, am I?”

“Did your family get used to it?”

“They didn’t have a choice.” Edward combed his fingers through Bella’s hair. She sighed and closed her eyes. “Besides, I wasn’t lusting over them. How can you possibly like this disaster better?”

“I don’t know. I guess I can’t reconcile you with being a human.”

“Why? I was one.”

“I know, but you’re too . . . I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like picturing your parents as children. You know they were your age once, but it’s like another world. Another lifetime.”

“Well, I’m from both.”

Bella let that sink in as she leaned against him, her palm still splayed on his chest. Edward listened to her steady breathing, timing the rise and fall of her chest with his own. What he wouldn’t do to be able to do silly, inane things with her, like lay her down on the couch and kiss her senseless. Watch television in a tangle of limbs. Take her out for ice cream.

It was so ridiculous he had to laugh. He’d never even liked ice cream.

“Do you ever think anything bad about me? Or do I not receive those thoughts?”

“Are you eavesdropping *again*?” Edward asked.

“You know I can’t help it! God knows I don’t want to.”

Ever since Bella had cuddled up to him on the couch, it was like the floodgates had opened and all his thoughts about her came tumbling out. She sat up and pushed away from him.

“Come on. I’m only teasing.”

She thought the distance would make the words and images go away, but it didn’t. She still heard him. Wishing she’d come back, that he could feel her warmth, touch her, smell her. Hold her close. Kiss her.

Edward reached for her and timidly pulled her back into his embrace.

“I don’t think I’ve had any bad thoughts about you. Not since you were an insufferable human, anyway,” he teased.

“Who’s the insufferable one?” Alice chimed as she entered the room.

Edward groaned as Jasper entered behind her. Bella tried to wiggle out from under his arm, but he held her tightly. She settled for twisting around so she was at least facing the other two as they took seats across the living room.

“Edward definitely wins the award for being the most insufferable housemate,” Jasper said.

“Now you guys are just being mean,” he mumbled.

“You know we love you.” Alice blew a kiss. Edward made a show of flicking it away with his thumb and middle finger. “Hey, that was for Bella!”

“Yeah, that was for me!” Bella looked at Edward and pouted.

A knot twisted in his stomach. His chest felt like it was being crushed by a giant weight. Unexplainable, overwhelming sorrow filled him, all over an intangible kiss. It wasn’t even real, yet somehow it felt like he’d destroyed her most prized possession.

“Bella, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay.”

When Bella smiled, Edward was filled with elation. He scooted to the edge of the couch, excitement bubbling in his chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t find the words. He had no idea why he was so worked up.

His mood plummeted as quickly as it had built. He didn’t want to be here in this stupid room with his family staring at him. He wanted to be alone. He wanted the entire world to go away.

Edward shook his head. Something wasn’t right.

“Jasper, what are you doing?”

“It’s not me.”

Edward giggled, and then he snorted, and then he giggled so more. He glanced at Bella, who was covering her mouth with her hand, her eyes alive with mirth.

“It’s you,” he said between laughter. “You’re doing this.”

Bella nodded. Jasper released the power he held over them, and Edward's amusement abruptly faded. His arms shot out, and he grabbed her by the face. Bella gasped and clawed at his wrists.

"That was . . . amazing."

Bella froze. "It was?"

"How did you do that?"

"I was practicing today. With Jasper."

Edward didn't think he could feel like a bigger asshole than he already did over their argument earlier, but he did. While he was being petty and jealous and upset that she was spending time with someone else, Jasper had been helping her.

"I know how hard it is to change your core emotion." Edward shot a look at Jasper. He hoped the apology was clear in his eyes. "Do it again."

"Edward . . ."

"Do it again. Make me feel something else."

Bella nodded at Jasper, and Edward was suddenly filled with apprehension that was not his own.

"Okay," she said. "Um . . ." With Edward's hands still cradling her face, Bella closed her eyes.

She knew he couldn't hear her thoughts or see the images in her head, but she hoped he would catch on to everything she was about to share with him. She cleared her mind and imagined her first day of college. The nervous anticipation of a new classes and new faces. Never-opened books, binders still in tact. The promise of an anything-is-possible future. A dark stranger—the curiosity and trepidation. Fear followed by pain and disbelief.

Edward curled his fingers into her hair. He swallowed audibly as a chill ran up his spine.

Bella continued. More pain and hopelessness as she was held captive. The anxiety of never knowing when his bites would come—when her life would end. Sheer hatred. Disgust.

Edward choked out a sob.

He'd figured out why she wanted him to feel those particular emotions. He didn't want to. It was too much, knowing what he put her through. Knowing what he was capable of deep

down inside. He sucked in a sharp breath. He wanted to beg her to stop. To tell Jasper to knock it off.

But then some of the agony gave way to curiosity. Hope colored the edges. Bravery kicked in, followed by anger. It was all washed away by a sense of awe.

“My skin?” Edward asked.

“Shh.”

There was happiness, relief, and despair. More fear. Acceptance and, if he didn’t know better, Edward would say trust. There was more pain, a sudden blast of panic, and then everything was gone.

Across the room, Jasper let out a ragged breath.

Edward kept his eyes closed, his forehead pressed against Bella’s, his hands still wound in her hair.

“Where did you stop?” His voice sounded weak and frayed with nerves.

“When you changed me.”

Edward nodded. He licked his lips and released her.

“Why? Why that?” Edward tried not to whine. He deserved to feel every moment of the Hell he put her through. It didn’t make it any less difficult to swallow.

“Because I wanted to share it with someone. So I can put it behind me.”

At some point, Alice and Jasper had sneaked out of the room, leaving the pair to a conversation that was best held in private. Edward reached out, slow and calculated, and took Bella’s hands. He liked this—knowing she was willing to make a connection with him despite their past and everything he’d done. He struggled to find the right thing to say, but he was at a loss for words. How could an apology ever make up for everything he’d done to her? Everything he took? They would only be words. Whether or not he meant them, they could never erase the past and the feelings that went along with it.

But Bella wanted to move on. She wanted the past gone, or at least a distant memory. One she didn’t think about or relive. She was ready to let go.

“Bella—”

Bella tugged her hands out of his, her palms flying to her head as she was assaulted by an image that didn't make sense. In the adjacent room, Alice cried out.

Edward was on his feet, and Bella followed him to the kitchen.

Jasper kept Alice on her feet with a tight grip on her shoulders. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes were wide and empty.

Carlisle and Esme raced into the room.

“What’s going on? What wrong?” she asked.

Edward felt so helpless. He wasn't used to not having an inside perspective on situations like this. He wanted to scream at Alice, to tell her to hurry up and tell them already! But he knew she was processing the vision, concentrating and trying to make sense of it.

After what felt like an eternity, Alice returned to the present. She looked at Jasper, surely seeing her own horror reflected on his face.

“Alice!” Edward hissed.

She turned her head then, surprised to have an audience.

“Our futures,” she said in a small voice. “They’re all gone.”

Chapter 14

Once the shock wore off of Alice's declaration, the family tried to make sense of her vision.

"Tell us everything you saw," Carlisle said.

"It's not very clear. We rush outside. We're waiting for something. We're just standing there, and then it's gone. Everything is gone!" Alice's hysteria rose with each word she spoke. Jasper placed his hand on her back.

"Is there anything else?" Jasper asked. "A date or time?"

"It's light out. Morning. Early morning. Two days from now."

"What leads up to it?" Carlisle asked.

Alice shook her head. "I don't know. It isn't clear."

"Where are we?"

"On the lawn. In front of the house."

"Who's there?" Jasper added.

"All of us. Well, minus Edward and Bella. But that doesn't mean they aren't there too."

"Anyone else? A third party? Emmett or Rosalie?" Carlisle asked.

"No, just the four of us."

“Could it have something to do with Bella?” Esme asked in a cautious tone, hopeful there was a simple explanation to Alice’s vision yet not wanting to upset either Edward or Bella. “She blocks Edward’s future. Perhaps she starts to block ours.”

Bella glanced at Edward, worry coloring her expression. This was what she feared—being detrimental to the family, being asked to leave. Edward wrapped his arm around her waist and gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

Alice shook her head again. “Possibly, but I don’t think so. Maybe if we were all just sitting around, then yeah, it could be Bella. But *something* draws us outside. We’re all standing there.” Her eyes widened. “It’s like when Edward came back from hunting, before . . .” She trailed off, gesturing to Esme. “I saw that there would be a confrontation; I just couldn’t see what happened because it concerned Bella.”

“Maybe it’s something similar to that. I’m sure everything will be okay,” Esme said.

“But your futures didn’t disappear then. Now they do. Every one of us!”

“Alice,” Edward interrupted. “When Jasper was helping Bella earlier, could you see his future?”

“Yes.”

“So the only future she affects is mine?”

Silence fell around the room as everyone absorbed that piece of information.

Jasper cleared his throat. “You realize you’re telling us we’re all going to die?”

“I never said that.”

“But you’re saying it can’t be her, which only leaves one option!”

“Calm down, Jasper,” Carlisle said. “There could be any number of reasons Alice sees what she does. It doesn’t mean we cease to exist.” He turned to Alice. “What about Emmett and Rosalie?”

Alice zoned out as she peeked into the future. “I see them. They’re in Alaska still. They’ll be fine.”

Carlisle retrieved the phone from his pocket. Everyone stared at him as he hesitated, thumb hovering over the screen.

“Carlisle?” Alice asked.

“I have to let them know.”

“Why, so they can die with us?” Jasper snapped.

“What would you have me do?” It wasn’t often Carlisle raised his voice, but when he did, he demanded attention. Jasper closed his mouth mid-protest. Alice jumped. Even Edward stood a bit straighter. “I would never ask any of you to die for me, or for anyone else. I may have given you this life, but I don’t expect you to give it up for me. I owe it to them to let them make their own decisions. I won’t ask them to offer support, but I will explain what Alice sees.”

“But Carlisle—”

“How would you feel if you found out we were all gone? What kind of guilt would you live with knowing you may have been able to help?”

Jasper looked at his feet.

“That’s what I thought.”

He dialed and held the phone to his ear.

Edward tightened his hold on Bella.

But I just found her.

“It’s that nomad,” Edward hissed. “I know it. It has to be.”

“Do you really think one vampire could be detrimental to us?” Esme asked.

“Maybe it was naïve of us to think him alone,” Jasper said.

“You don’t think . . .” Esme gulped and looked around. She lowered her voice to a whisper, as if someone could be eavesdropping, listening undetected from afar. “We violated the rule with Bella. Could we have been found guilty of some sort of capital offense?”

“She’s a vampire now,” Edward said. “What would it matter?”

“Her father’s not,” Alice said.

“Is my dad going to be okay?”

Alice’s eyes glazed over for a split second. She gasped as the future changed.

“What is it?” Jasper asked.

“Carlisle, tell them not to come, please,” she begged. “Their futures are gone now too!”

Carlisle opened his mouth to speak. No sound came out. He closed his eyes and hung his head. "Okay, see you both tonight." He disconnected the call and pocketed the phone. "They said they don't care. They're leaving right now." His voice was hollow, sad. He believed telling them was the right decision, but he wished they would have made a different choice.

No one commented. No one said anything at all. Bella waited for someone to blame her, to tell her it really was time to go. Edward, too, if he wanted to argue.

"What do we do now?" Esme asked.

"We wait, I suppose. What else can we do?"

Bella didn't know what to do or what to make of Alice's vision. All she knew was that in two days' time, she would still be alive. Because when Alice had seen their futures vanish, Bella saw herself running into the woods, carrying a lifeless body in her arms.

"You seem nervous."

Bella stopped pacing and eyed Edward, who sat sideways on the couch. She took in his easy expression and relaxed posture.

"You're not?" she asked.

"Should I be?"

"They're the ones who wanted to kill me. I drove them out of their own home."

Bella continued wearing a path in the carpet. Edward held up his finger.

"Technically, Rosalie suggested to kill you, and it was me who drove them away, not you."

"Comforting," Bella muttered.

"It should be. They didn't leave because of you. They left because I was . . ." Edward shook his head. He lowered his voice. "Crazy."

Bella approached the couch. Edward swung his feet to the floor and patted the spot next to him. She sat, and he slung his arm across her shoulders.

"What's done is done," he continued. "They'll accept you. They'll do it for me."

It wasn't until he said the words that Bella realized acceptance was exactly what she was worried about. It was ridiculous. She shouldn't care about anyone's opinion of her, especially people she didn't even know.

But she did.

Ever since her change, she'd felt scrutinized by everyone. Every move she made, everything that came out of her mouth, even the way she acted toward Edward—she'd been under a constant state of judgment. She was finally becoming comfortable in her own skin, finally felt like she wasn't under a microscope. She wasn't ready to start over again with someone new.

She didn't want Edward's family to dislike her, whether she was here against her will or of her own accord. And she absolutely abhorred the idea of making anyone feel uncomfortable in their own home.

"Maybe so, but what if . . . what if whatever is about to happen is because of me?"

"Don't be silly." Edward smiled as he tugged a lock of her hair.

"I'm serious. Do you really think it's Theodoros?"

"I don't know, but I hope so."

"Why?"

"So I can finish him off. Besides, if it's not him—" Edward shook his head. "I don't know what else it could be."

"What do you think he wants with us?"

"I'm not sure," Edward lied.

He won't take her from me.

Bella's mouth dropped open. Edward's eyes widened in response.

"You think he wants me?"

"No," Edward answered before the question was completely out of her mouth.

"Yes, you do!" Bella argued. "You think he wants me. Literally. I heard you."

"Bella—"

"Let go of me!"

Edward hadn't realized he'd taken her by her upper arms. He loosened his hold, but he didn't release her completely.

"You know I won't let anything happen to you. As long as I'm breathing, you belong to me. I will protect you or die trying."

Bella thought about Alice's vision. All of their futures stopped. Every single one of them. All but hers.

"Maybe that's what I'm afraid of."

Edward's face softened. He slid his hands down her arms, until his fingers encircled her wrists.

"I don't know what makes Alice's talent work, but I know she's been wrong before. I've seen it. And now, with her emotions so high, she's probably missing something."

"So you don't believe everyone is going to die?"

"I refuse to accept that outcome."

Bella pushed away from him. "That doesn't mean it won't happen, Edward!"

"Bella, stop."

The defeat was clear in Edward's voice, in his eyes. Bella's heart sank. This was a man she should rightfully hate, but all she could feel was sorrow. She might not have wanted this life when she was human, but now that she had it, she didn't want to lose it. She couldn't imagine living for over a hundred years in pristine health—as a superior being—only to be faced with the possibility of dying.

She would end up alone after all, but the thought of that didn't have her as upset as the thought of Edward being gone.

Actually gone. No longer of this world.

Edward reached for her. Bella didn't hesitate to move closer, to let him fold her in his arms and hold her like it might be the last time.

"How does a vampire die?" she asked. "I know you lied before."

"Bella . . ."

She couldn't tell if it was a warning or a plea for her to stop.

"Please. I want to know."

Edward took a deep breath and expelled it through his nose. Bella closed her eyes as it fanned across her hair. She didn't want to know the answer, but she had to.

"I didn't lie, technically. Decapitation is the only way to immediately incapacitate a vampire. Arms, legs . . . you can break them down, but it takes longer that way. A vampire ceases to function without a head. There's a sense of awareness, but nothing else. No sight, sound, smell. It's quite miserable, actually."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm glad once was enough to get it out of your system." Edward's teasing mood didn't last long. He sighed. "We heal quickly, but Carlisle believes there's a window for reattaching body parts. He's seen too many vampires with missing arms or hands to assume they were human injuries. And unless the body part is destroyed, what else would keep it from adhering?"

"So how can you be sure if you've actually killed someone?"

"Well, for starters, not many vampires who lose their heads have a companion to reattach them. I'm probably a rare case. None of us have ever seen anyone with a scar like mine. But if you want to be absolutely sure, you have to destroy them. We like to use fire. It removes all evidence of life."

"Got it. Next time I leave, I'll take your head with me."

Bella waited for Edward to laugh. He didn't.

"I've told you, little newborn." He spoke so softly, Bella found herself straining to hear. "You'd better find a way to kill me when you decide to go, because I can't live without you."

"You would rather die than hear the voices? If you were a human, they'd lock you up."

"I'm being serious, Bella."

Bella shifted in his arms. Edward allowed her to reposition herself and then held her tighter.

"I wish I'd been strong enough to handle things differently when I found you. I let my instincts take over, and I fear I've ruined any chance at having a meaningful relationship with you. I used to think if I could keep you, if I could have your silence, then nothing else mattered. I thought you'd forgive me in time. Bella, you mean more to me than anything else on this

Earth. I would take it all back if I could. I would gladly listen to every thought for the rest of my existence if it meant you would be happy.”

“Edward, don’t,” Bella interrupted.

“No. I have to say this because I might not get another chance. I’m sorry. For everything. I’m not sure if I could have resisted taking you that day, but I shouldn’t have kept you like I did. I shouldn’t have forced this life upon you. You were willing to compromise, and maybe you wouldn’t hate me as much if I’d agreed. Maybe we’d have a better relationship. Maybe we wouldn’t have one at all; I don’t know. I do know one thing, though: I didn’t deserve you for the span of your human life, and I sure as hell don’t deserve you for the duration of mine.”

“Please just . . . don’t,” she said again.

“Why not? I’m trying here, Bella. Or does my apology mean nothing to you as well?”

“I don’t want your apology!” Bella pried his arms from around her and stood. She resumed pacing the same path she had all afternoon. “I don’t want you to be sorry. I don’t want you to wish you’d made a different decision!”

Edward frowned. He couldn’t imagine why she wouldn’t want him to be sorry for what he’d done.

“I don’t understand.”

“I forgive you, Edward! I forgive you because you made me believe you didn’t have a choice! You were the one who said we were meant to be together, that it was fate. Now you’re telling me you were wrong?”

Bella’s eyes pricked with invisible tears. Her throat even tightened like it had when she was human.

“What was the point?” she continued. “What was the point of everything if you decide now that you made the wrong choice? That *I* was the wrong choice?”

Edward cursed and rubbed his face with his hands. He wanted to scream and cry and break everything in the house. He couldn’t do anything right by her.

“You asked me once which I wanted more, you or your silence.” He looked at Bella, waiting for her to interrupt, to tell him to stop again. She paused mid stride and met his eyes. Edward took a deep breath and swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I want you. But I don’t get

to choose one or the other. I get all or nothing, and I would rather you be happy than be with me and be miserable.”

“But you tell me all the time you don’t want me to leave.”

Edward cracked a sardonic smile. “Haven’t you learned? I’m a selfish man. I’ll take whatever I can get.” He lowered his eyes, and the smile faded from his face. “Don’t misunderstand. I meant every word I said. We were destined to be together, one way or another.”

“Wow, just when I start to think maybe you aren’t as creepy as I originally thought, you go and say something like that.”

“Damn it!” Edward punched the arm of the couch, leaving a dent where his fist made contact. “Do you ever take anything I say seriously?”

“Not typically, no,” Bella said without missing a beat.

“If I told you to jump, you’d sit your ass down on the floor.”

Bella turned away so he couldn’t see her smile. “Just because I agreed to stay doesn’t mean I’ll make it easy on you.”

“So I’ve gathered.” Edward dropped his head back until it rested on the couch. The girl was still as infuriating as ever.

And he liked it.

He felt his lips curve into a smile.

“Do you really forgive me?” he asked.

“I do.”

Edward didn’t know what the immediate future would hold, but for the first time, he was confident that things between Bella and him would be okay.

Chapter 15

Alice tiptoed into the living room. She felt bad disturbing Edward and Bella when they'd finally started communicating, but she couldn't put it off any longer. They both looked at her as she stood in front of the couch.

"Emmett and Rosalie will be here in five minutes."

Bella took a deep breath and sat up straight.

"Okay," Edward said. He gave a reassuring squeeze to her knee.

"You should go meet them," Alice said.

Edward was about to ask why but stopped himself. Alice wouldn't have asked if she didn't have a good reason, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know what it was.

"Ready?" he asked Bella.

"Alone," Alice clarified.

Edward looked at Bella. She nodded.

"All right," he said, and stood. "I'll be right back." He made his way to the door and gave Bella a longing glance over his shoulder before disappearing outside.

"What was that about?" Bella asked.

“I have to know what’s going to happen to him. If he’s not a part of the vision, it means the two of you are going to leave us.”

Bella already knew she wouldn’t be going anywhere. Not yet, anyway. She kept her mouth shut. She hadn’t seen enough to get an idea of the big picture. The last thing she wanted to do was negatively influence the future with incomplete information.

Alice’s eyes lost focus, and a distant look crossed her face. She shook it off as she returned to the present. Bella couldn’t tell if her sad smile was one of relief or acceptance. She didn’t need to ask if Edward would be with them.

Once they reached the house, Emmett was the first through the door. He rushed toward Bella. Instinctively she crouched, ready to fight or flee, but the wide smile on his face distracted her. The next thing Bella knew, she was in his arms.

“Little sister!” Emmett proclaimed as he swung her around like a rag doll. “I’m so happy you survived!”

“Emmett,” Edward warned.

Emmett set Bella on her feet. He kept his hands on her shoulders and leaned down. As a human, she had seen him a handful of times, but never this close. She didn’t remember him being so large.

“I hope you’re not letting this one get away with his usual crap.” He inclined his head toward Edward, ignoring the way he hovered next to them.

“Trying not to,” Bella said.

Edward clutched Bella’s arm, right below where Emmett’s hand rested. He pulled her away from Emmett and to his side, slowly yet deliberately. Emmett gave him a strange look.

Rosalie joined their small circle.

“Hi, Bella,” she said.

“Hi. Look, about the whole trying to make you kill me thing . . .” Bella looked down at her arm where she’d cut into her skin with the shard of broken plate. There was no scar. Edward’s venom had healed the wound completely. “I didn’t understand the position I put you in. I do now. I’m sorry.”

“You did what you had to do. Let’s leave it in the past.”

See? I told you so.

Edward closed his eyes and pressed his lips against her temple. Bella flinched, but she didn't push him away. She didn't even protest as he squeezed her against his body. All Edward could do was smile.

"So . . . you two are getting along, I take it?" Emmett tried to maintain eye contact with Edward, but his gaze flitted to Bella.

Edward bristled. He hated the way Emmett was gauging Bella's reaction, looking for signs of distress so he could swoop in and rescue her. She didn't need protection against him. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. Besides, if anyone was going to be her protector, it was going to be him.

For once, Edward wanted someone, *anyone* to see them as something other than what they were. Friends, a couple—anything was better than the reality of the situation. He hoped Emmett and Rosalie, not having witnessed their rocky beginning, would see a different side to their relationship. But even if they did, it wouldn't matter. They'd seen how he treated Bella when she was a human. They'd seen him act like a monster.

The tight set of his shoulders softened as Bella placed her hand on his back.

"Edward has been nothing but a gentleman since my change," she said. "We're still working through some things, but we'll be okay."

Edward tried to hide his surprise as he stared down at her. She was covering for him, which meant only one thing: she had heard all his insecurities. He didn't know whether to be grateful or horrified.

Have I told you how amazing you are?

"Not today." Bella wore a smile when she looked up at him, but it faded when she realized she'd answered one of his thoughts. One look around the room made it clear it hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Bella can read Edward's mind," Alice blurted. She gave an apologetic shrug.

"Just Edward's?" Rosalie asked.

As if on cue, Jasper strode into the room, followed by Carlisle and Esme. "Yes, but that's not all she can do."

“Bella’s got party tricks?” Emmett clasped his hands together. “Excellent.”

While Bella and Jasper distracted everyone with her newly discovered talents, Edward pulled Alice to the side.

“Do I want to know what you were looking for?”

Alice gave him a sad smile. “You stay with us. Your future disappears along with ours. It gives me hope, though.”

“Why on Earth would *that* give you hope?”

“The only reason you’d still be here is if Bella is too, which means she could be interfering somehow. There’s still a possibility this could all be one giant fluke.” Alice lowered her voice so they wouldn’t be overheard. “If she wasn’t here, I would know for sure.”

Edward shook his head. He wanted to believe it was all a misunderstanding, but he honestly didn’t think it was. He wouldn’t separate himself from Bella, and he refused to abandon his family in the face of danger.

“Just a thought,” Alice added.

“It sounds like things are getting serious over here.” Carlisle kept his voice light as to not be too much of a distraction to the others, but too quickly their laughter faded, and their attention was no longer on Bella’s gift.

“I just want to make sure I don’t miss anything,” Alice said. “So far I haven’t been able to alter the future.”

“You said the altercation happens in front of the house. What if we leave?” Esme asked.

Everyone paused, staring at Alice as they waited for an answer.

“Someone actually has to make the decision first.”

The vampires looked at one another expectantly. Finally Emmett spoke.

“I’m not running away.”

“Neither am I,” added Jasper.

“I’m not suggesting we run, only that we leave and see how it affects the outcome.”

“The only threat to us is another vampire,” Carlisle said. “If we’re being sought out for punishment, they’ll track us down. If Edward is right and it’s the nomad they encountered, well . . . another day isn’t long enough to erase our path.”

“Either way, I don’t want to spend my life on the run,” Emmett said. “We didn’t get this far in life because we backed down every time we were threatened.”

“But I always saw that we would win!”

“There’s no reason we won’t win now. There might not even be a fight. Look at Bella! Maybe someone like her is out there.”

“It’s a good possibility, Emmett,” Carlisle said. “Half of our family is gifted. Who knows what other powers are out there.”

Alice kept checking on the future, but the outcome wasn’t changing, which meant no one, herself included, planned on leaving.

“You should call your dad.”

Bella glanced into the distance where the sky was beginning to lighten with the rising sun. The scent of blood from their recent kill still lingered in the air, serving as an unappealing distraction.

“Right now?” she asked.

“Maybe not this instant, but sometime today. Just in case . . .”

Edward didn’t need to finish his sentence. Bella heard the thoughts behind his confident facade.

“You don’t think we’ll live past tomorrow.”

Edward pursed his lips as he toyed with a blade of grass. He didn’t like his thoughts not being his own. What good was he if he couldn’t even offer her comfort?

“Bella, I don’t know what will happen tomorrow, but I can promise you one thing. I will fight for us with everything I have. I will do whatever it takes to save you. All of you.”

“I know you will,” was her simple reply.

Edward reached out and swept an errant lock of hair from Bella’s face. He expected her to tense, to recoil like she had so many times before.

She didn’t tense.

He sighed as she closed her eyes and pressed her cheek into his palm. He was almost afraid to move, afraid of breaking whatever spell they seemed to be under. But her skin was silky smooth beneath his fingertips, and he couldn't resist brushing his thumb across her cheek.

"Tell me about human Edward," Bella said without opening her eyes.

"It was a long time ago. I don't remember him very well."

"Then tell me about newborn Edward."

"Let's see." He chuckled. "Ravenous. Difficult. Burdensome. Carlisle had to take me into the wilderness of Canada to keep me from killing every human in a fifty mile radius."

"Why didn't you?"

"I probably would have, but hearing his thoughts . . . I knew how much it meant to him. I didn't want to let him down."

"What about your family? Were you able to say goodbye? Make up a story?"

"I didn't have to. My mother knew."

"What?" Bella gasped.

"She worked at the same hospital as Carlisle. She was a nurse. I guess she'd seen him working too long of hours, never appearing tired, never eating. I don't know. These are all things I've pulled from his head over the years. She confronted him the day I was brought in. She said, 'I know you aren't like the other doctors here. I know you have the power to save my son's life.' So he did."

Bella swiveled to face him and scooted closer. "What happened to you?"

"Car accident. Rare in those days, I know. The details are a bit fuzzy, but a tire blew and the car flipped. It crushed me." Edward placed his hand on his chest, barely remembering the pain of the incident. It paled in comparison to the pain that had followed. "By the time I arrived at the hospital, I wasn't breathing. They couldn't even find my pulse. Carlisle could, though. He took me that night and never returned."

"Did you ever see your mom again?"

"No. My human memories faded too quickly. She was a stranger to me, and going back was a risk we didn't want to take."

"What about your dad?"

“He died earlier that year of influenza. That’s why I was driving the car in the first place. I was going into the city to find work. My mom was heartbroken that I’d dropped out of school, but I was the man of the family. It had to be done. If she only knew how many times I’ve graduated since then.” Edward shook his head. “Talk about misery.”

“Why did Carlisle change you? Why didn’t he just heal you, like you did to me?”

“At the time, I don’t think he knew it was possible. I was his first. Besides, it’s not like there’s a formula for success. Healing substantial injuries takes so much venom it would be hard to avoid a change. And if he didn’t introduce enough into my bloodstream, I would have died before it did much good.”

“It probably would have looked suspicious if you arrived as a human pancake and walked yourself out the next day.”

“Probably.” Edward laughed. “Even if he could have healed me, I’m not sure he would have. I was one breath away from death, and he was lonely. I think that’s why he questions himself. He didn’t change me as a favor. We are all selfish creatures deep inside.”

“Is it hard for you, knowing he has second thoughts?”

“At first it was, but I’ve learned not to let it bother me. You can’t take those kinds of thoughts to heart. People . . . their minds wander. They envision different scenarios and analyze things by nature. Just because they think it doesn’t mean they want it to be the truth.”

“What about the things you think?”

Edward diverted his eyes.

“You already know the answer to that.” When Bella didn’t reply, Edward pushed to his feet. “Another deer is approaching. You coming?”

Bella clutched her stomach and groaned. “How can you possibly hunt again?”

“Not all of us are blessed with newborn strength.” Edward brushed pieces of dried grass from his pants. Secretly he hoped Bella would join him for the hunt, even if she didn’t partake, but she remained on the ground at his feet. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he said before vanishing into the woods.

They returned to the house early in the evening. The windows were dark. Not a soul was inside.

Edward led Bella to his room and took a seat on the bed. She sank down beside him and pulled out her phone. She called Charlie, but there was no answer. A quick call to the station confirmed he had the night off work.

“He’s probably at his friend Billy’s, fishing or playing poker.”

“Do you know the number? What’s his last name? I can look it up.”

“No, don’t.” Bella grabbed Edward’s arm as he reached for his phone. “He’ll think something’s up. I don’t want to worry him.”

“Something *is* up. This could be the last chance you get to talk to him.”

Bella shook her head. “If he thinks I’m in some sort of trouble, there’s no way he’ll sit back and do nothing. He can’t come here again, Edward. I’m not ready!”

“I don’t want you to be robbed of talking to him one last time.”

“You had no problem robbing me of talking to him forever before he knew,” Bella snapped.

Edward kept his expression in check, but his pain was clear as a bell in his mind.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, you’re right,” he conceded.

“I just want to keep him safe.”

“And I just want you to be happy.”

“I know.” She sighed and glanced around the room, already cast in shadows from the setting sun. The house was eerily silent without anyone else milling about. “Where is everyone?”

“They’re spending time with their mates.”

Bella frowned, not understanding why they wouldn’t be at home.

Edward picked up on her confusion.

“Alone.”

“Oh!” she said when it finally dawned on her.

“Nothing is guaranteed after tomorrow. Tonight might be the last they have together.”

Edward acted on impulse. He took Bella's head in his hands and pressed his lips against hers, moving with so much speed that she didn't see it coming. He was prepared for her immediate retaliation—a broken arm or jaw, maybe even another swift decapitation. When she didn't lash out, he pulled away.

His body remained unscathed, but Edward was afraid to open his eyes. He didn't want to see her anger, her disgust. He'd never wanted anything like he wanted her. Knowing she didn't feel the same made the memory of the kiss almost too painful to bear.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and met her gaze.

Edward didn't see anger or disgust. There was no fear in her eyes. No resentment. She hadn't even inched away from him. Ever so slowly, he leaned toward her. Bella didn't stop him as he closed the distance, and when their lips met again, she kissed him in return.

God, please, just this once.

Edward parted his lips, tasting her. It was easier now than when she was a human, but it didn't make him burn for her any less. When he felt her hand slide along the back of his neck, he pulled her close and gently laid her down. She didn't resist. Knowing he couldn't hurt her, Edward allowed his full weight to press her into the bed.

His imagination ran away as his lips moved to her throat, and Bella wished more than ever that she wasn't privy to his thoughts. She didn't want to see herself through his eyes. She didn't want his opinion of her, no matter how positive it might be.

Bella could feel his presence in her mind, like a gentle caress along her temple. The more she focused on it, the firmer the sensation became. She honed in on it, feeling how it rippled against her skin with each thought she picked up.

And then with her mind, she pushed it away.

The pressure subsided to a light flutter. Edward's voice faded until there were nothing but single words and broken images. She smiled as her mind quieted, but the moment she took down her guard, his thoughts flooded back to her. She tried again, building a mental wall until she could no longer hear him.

Physically, however, Bella was very much aware of him.

With a groan, Edward pushed onto his hands and knees. He turned his head to the side, ashamed of his body's reaction, embarrassed by his lack of control. He didn't want to look at Bella, even as she tugged his chin in her direction, but he managed a sheepish smile before burying his face in her neck.

Edward took deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He'd never been this close to her before. At least not while she'd been agreeable. Now that he was, he didn't want to feel shame for something he'd desired for so long. Guilt still crept in, nonetheless.

He brushed his lips across her neck. Not as a kiss, but deliberately enough to gauge her reaction. Bella nudged his cheek with hers, and then her lips were on his.

She felt the stuttering of his breath with each exhale. There was a tightness in his body that wasn't there before. An uneasiness that radiated through him as his hand wandered along her side. It was so unlike his usual demeanor that she wasn't sure what to make of it.

Each pass of his hand brought her shirt higher, until finally he gripped the material in his fist. Edward paused as he hovered above her. He swallowed, and then pulled the shirt over her head.

Edward was afraid to look in fear he might stare, so he closed his eyes and kissed the exposed skin of her chest. His arms shook with the weight of his body, something he'd never experienced as a vampire. He'd also never been so overwhelmed by his senses.

Something inside of him ignited when Bella slid her hands up his stomach. Venom pooled in his mouth. When she tugged on his shirt, he sat back on his knees, straddling her, and ducked out of the fabric.

The edges of Edward's mind grew fuzzy, and he swallowed back the venom. Despite his recent hunt, his eyes were black as he stared down at her. She was beautiful. She was everything he ever wanted and more than he deserved, and for now, she was his.

Bella watched his eyes roam over her body. She took in the strained rise and fall of his chest with each breath. The bobbing of his throat with each swallow. It reminded her of being human, of being helpless and at the mercy of a monster.

But she wasn't helpless, and now she was at his mercy by choice.

Despite his threatening appearance, Edward remained uncertain as he gripped the waistband of her pants. He hesitated, unsure of how far to go. One flick of his wrist tore the denim. When she didn't protest, he slowly peeled the material from her legs as if it were nothing more than tissue paper.

Edward placed his palms on Bella's bare thighs. He slid them higher, until he was gripping her by the hips. His thumbs toyed with the edges of her underwear, but his courage quickly dissipated, and he dropped his hands to his sides.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what she wanted. Lust and fear swirled inside him, making it practically impossible to focus on anything. He would never forgive himself if he forced her into yet another thing she didn't want. But he would never live it down if he tried and failed.

Bella watched as he stared at her in indecision, his hands hovering just above her body. She wanted to do something; she just wasn't sure what. When it became clear that Edward had choked up, she reached out and placed her hand on his stomach.

His muscles clenched beneath her touch. He sucked in a sharp breath.

She dragged her hand lower and took hold of his waistband, just like he'd done to hers. She braced herself, preparing to rip off his jeans, but her moment of bravery disappeared before she could go through with it.

Instead she dropped her hand lower and flattened her palm against him. Edward's eyes drifted closed for a split second. She slid her hand back up to his stomach.

Edward swallowed.

"Is it . . . okay?"

"Yeah."

Their breaths fell in sync in the otherwise quiet house. Edward covered her hand with his and moved it lower until she was touching him again. A small sound escaped from the back of his throat as she flexed her fingers.

Bella smiled then. She exhaled a small laugh as her trepidation melted away. Edward smiled in return. He took a deep breath before tearing off what remained of his clothes. Bella diverted her eyes as he positioned himself between her legs and lay on top of her once again.

Their lips met. Despite the expectation behind their actions, they both felt more at ease. Bella's hands roamed over his arms and shoulders, down his chest, feeling his muscles as they flexed and rippled. He was strong. Safe. At that moment, their past no longer existed. There was nowhere she would rather be.

Edward broke off the kiss and dropped his forehead to hers.

"Are we really doing this?"

Bella nodded.

In one swift motion, he reached between them and turned her undergarments into nothing more than scraps of cotton. Her body felt soft, a perfect contrast to his own. His heart clenched as he realized this might be the only time he would experience this with her.

Bella closed her eyes as he began to push.

Edward stopped.

"Look at me," he whispered.

Bella kept her eyes on his as he entered her. She gasped at the sensation, the intensity too much for her to remain focused. The wall she'd put up in her mind came crumbling down. Whatever she was experiencing, Edward was experiencing too, because his thoughts were a tangled mess that she couldn't understand.

Edward closed his eyes. No sound came when he parted his lips. When Bella ran her hands up his spine, his entire body shivered.

Bella couldn't believe how good it felt. Her body was wound tightly, like it was ready to erupt without warning. Each second that passed brought a new level of euphoria, a new level of torment.

Edward skimmed his teeth along her neck, leaving behind a trail of venom. It burned on her skin, amplified with each cool exhale of his breath.

She held him tighter.

He nipped at her flesh.

His jaw ached at the thought of claiming her again. A voice in the back of his mind warned him against it, but his instincts encouraged him otherwise. When Bella twisted his fingers in the back of his hair, Edward lost all control.

She hissed as his teeth plunged into her neck, but the pain was overshadowed by the pleasure that exploded throughout the rest of her body. For one brief moment, her senses were dulled. Sights, sounds, smells—everything faded into the background until there was just her and Edward.

Edward shuddered before rolling off her. He covered his face with his hands, his chest rising and falling with labored breaths. Bella was breathing heavily too. Then she remembered it was completely unnecessary. She held her breath until the urge to fill her lungs with oxygen subsided.

Gathering the blankets around her naked body, Bella rolled onto her side, turning away from Edward. He was at her back immediately, hovering over her.

“What’s wrong?”

Bella closed her eyes.

Edward’s stomach dropped. Of all the things to screw up, this couldn’t be one of them. Not something so perfect, so beautiful.

“Tell me?”

She promised not to lie.

“I . . . that’s not . . .” Bella shook her head. “It wasn’t how I expected my first time to be, that’s all.”

“I’m your first?” Edward couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. His elation didn’t last long. “Did I do something wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Like what, then?”

Bella pulled the blankets tighter and turned her face into the pillow.

“I don’t know. I always thought there would be a candlelit dinner. Flowers.” She shook her head again. “It’s all stupid fairytale stuff, anyway.”

“Well, it’s a little late for a candlelit dinner. How about hunting by the light of the full moon?”

“It’s fine, really. I don’t feel like hunting again.”

Bella's reaction didn't dampen Edward's spirits, because he caught sight of the smallest smile gracing her lips. He wrapped one arm over her body and pulled her against his chest.

"You know, I've experienced it through other people's thoughts a million times, but it pales in comparison to the real thing. I had no idea it would be so amazing."

Bella's eyes shot open. She looked over her shoulder. There was nothing but sincerity on his face. She turned over and propped herself up on one arm, being careful to keep the blanket around her.

"You mean you've never . . ."

Edward shook his head.

"But you've been alive for so long. How didn't it happen before now?"

"I guess I was waiting for the right girl."

Edward leaned down and ghosted his lips across Bella's cheek. He brushed the hair away from her neck, revealing broken skin.

"Don't be upset with me, please," he whispered. "I know you told me not to. I couldn't help myself."

"It's okay."

Edward kissed her neck in a silent apology.

"It's not too late, you know," he mumbled against her skin.

"Too late for what?"

"Alice hasn't seen your future. You still have a chance. You could leave now. Avoid this whole thing."

Bella pushed against his chest until he released her. She sat up straighter.

"You want me to leave?"

Edward wanted to scream. He wanted to grab a hold of her and not let go until the bitter end. He wanted to kiss away the pain on her face.

"What I want is a happily ever after with you by my side, but I'm slowly realizing the impossibility of that dream. I've begged you not to go for so long, but I won't ask you to stay here and die with me. If you want to leave, no one will stop you. You still have a chance at a long and happy life. *That's* what I want for you."

“Will you come with me?”

Edward smiled sadly. As much as he wanted Bella in his life, he would never be able to forgive himself if he left the others now. He had a hard enough time forgiving himself for the decisions he'd made regarding her as it was.

“I want to. More than anything. If things turn out for the better, I'll come for you. But I have to see this through. I won't abandon my family.”

Bella took a moment to consider her options. She might have seen a vision of herself running away, but it didn't guarantee she would live. If she left now, she could escape whatever fate threatened the others. She could ensure her own survival.

But the thought of leaving Edward pained her.

“And I won't leave you.”

Edward closed his eyes. It was the response he both hoped for and dreaded.

“I'm too selfish to argue with you. Besides, you wouldn't listen to me anyway.” He lay back on the bed and tugged her down with him. She curled against his side and rested her head against his shoulder. “We're going to win tomorrow. I'm going to save us all if it's the last thing I do.”

“Maybe I'm going to save us all tomorrow,” Bella retorted.

“Newborns.” Edward planted a kiss on her forehead even as she scoffed at him. “Fine. You can save us all. Then someday you and I are going to have that happily ever after.”

Chapter 16

Edward refused to release Bella from his arms. All night they lay side by side, nothing between them but the sheet. His fingers combed through her hair and memorized each curve of her body.

Edward was grateful that sleep was impossible. If he could sleep, he'd never believe the night hadn't been a dream. It took everything he had to keep his thoughts focused on the present. Whenever his mind wandered, he found himself dwelling on what their future together would hold, and then whether they would have a future at all.

He held her tighter and breathed her in.

Bella blocked his thoughts as often as possible. She could tell he was editing. She believed he was doing it to spare her from hearing his desires. Tucking her head beneath his chin, she closed her eyes.

Guilt overwhelmed her. Not for what they had done. Not even for enjoying it. But because she was still there. Still taking comfort in his arms. Edward had won, and she had no intentions of reversing the path they were on.

As dawn broke, Carlisle and Esme returned to the house.

Bella sat up, but Edward covered her body with his, pushing her back onto the bed. His lips covered hers. It wasn't a lover's kiss. It held no trace of romance. When he pulled away, Bella knew what it had meant.

Goodbye.

Edward leaped from the bed. His clothes were on, and he was out the door before Bella could take her next breath.

Bella couldn't bring herself to move at the same pace. She took one look at the torn fabric lying on the floor before making her way to the closet. Her body gave no indication to her inner turmoil as she dressed. Her hands were too steady, her breathing too even. It all felt wrong.

Everyone had arrived home by the time she joined Edward downstairs. They greeted Bella with soft smiles, small waves, and head nods. The atmosphere remained somber.

"Today's the day," Carlisle said. "How long do we have, Alice?"

"I'm not sure. Not long."

"Should we wait outside?" Emmett asked. "Let them know we're ready?"

"The vision showed us rushing outside. We aren't waiting there."

Jasper hugged Alice to his side. "What will it hurt? It's not like the current outcome is favorable."

Alice nodded. At that moment, the sound of footsteps approaching at a fast pace had all eight vampires racing toward the front door. They said nothing as they dashed from the house, coming to a stop on the front lawn, just as Alice had predicted.

In the distance appeared a familiar vampire—a stocky vampire with tangled hair and distressed clothes.

"Theodoros," Edward growled under his breath.

The nomad slowed his pace as he approached, stopping at the edge of the property. His gaze narrowed on Bella.

"My friends," he cooed in a deceptively friendly voice. "It's so very nice to see you again."

"I take it you two have met?" Carlisle asked under his breath.

Edward growled.

“Let’s spare the pleasantries,” Carlisle called to the newcomer. “Tell us why you’re here.”

Theodoros held up his arms. At first it appeared to be a gesture of surrender, but then with one hand he pointed at Bella.

“I’m here for her.”

Edward stepped forward. “She’s mine.”

“Edward, is it? I see you’re still using your teeth to assert your control. Perhaps your dear Isabella is capable of making her own decisions.”

Edward’s entire body shook with rage. Every muscle told him to attack. To rip Theodoros apart piece by piece for even entertaining the idea of taking his girl. He was glad he couldn’t hear Theodoros’ thoughts about Bella. If he could, he’d never be able to remain in control.

Bella reached out and squeezed his hand. It did nothing to calm him.

Theodoros narrowed his eyes as he took in their display of unity. The bond between them was the same. Edward was utterly devoted; Isabella was completely aloof. To everyone. He assessed the rest of the coven. Their relationships ran strong—to their mates and to each other. It was all the confirmation Theodoros needed. His gift hadn’t failed him. Isabella was special. Whatever she was, he looked forward to expanding his talents.

“There’s something special about you, *agapi*. I have a rather extensive collection of gifts, myself. What do you say? I intend to head south from here. The company of one such as yourself would be quite enjoyable.”

“I’m not interested in being your companion.”

“Are you sure?”

Bella didn’t like his cocky attitude. Holding her head high, she nodded.

“How unfortunate. Is there anything I can do to change your mind?”

“Nothing.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain.” Theodoros was careful not to look away as he called over his shoulder. “Charmion!”

Carlisle and Jasper exchanged a concerned glance. Emmett shifted his feet, standing to his full height.

“We should kill him,” he said only loud enough for the other Cullens to hear. “Now.”

Edward wasn't about to argue.

"Wait," Carlisle said. "He's not alone."

Bella picked up the sound before the scent—a heart, beating wildly. She let out a small gasp.

Emmett's hand came down on her shoulder, firm and heavy, pulling her back. Bella hadn't even noticed the way she'd instinctively leaned forward. Edward squeezed her hand to the point of pain. He would apologize later. Right now, his main concern was distracting her from the blood. He'd never be able to restrain her, but he hoped the pressure was enough to keep her grounded.

Bella took a deep breath and held it. She wasn't about to let Theodoros lure her away with human blood. She focused so hard on remaining in control that the wall keeping out Edward's thoughts came down. His mental voice was a jumbled mess, his thoughts jumping around too fast for her to get a read, but the underlying panic was as clear as day.

She glanced at him, frowning when she saw the horror on his face.

"Oh, shit," Jasper said under his breath.

"What is it?" she asked.

When no one responded, she followed Edward's gaze into the forest. Another vampire emerged in the distance, but it wasn't her familiar face that captured Bella's attention. It was the body she carried under her arm.

"Dad?"

Edward wrapped his arms around Bella's waist as she took a step forward. Emmett tightened his hold.

"Let go of me," she growled. "Dad!"

Charmion released Charlie. He fell to the ground and looked around in a daze.

Bella took a deep breath, not knowing if she was going to scream at Theodoros, at Edward and Emmett, or for her father. The scent of Charlie's blood burned through her nose and mouth. She doubled over in pain, her thoughts conflicting with her desires.

"It's her," Alice said. "I saw her in my visions."

"What is she going to do?" Jasper asked.

“I don’t know.” Alice had never felt so helpless. “It must involve Bella.”

Theodoros never removed his eyes from Bella. He smiled, triumphant before them.

“What do you say now, *agapi*? Come with me, and Charmion will see to it that this man is returned to his home.”

Carlisle stepped forward, his fists clenched by his side, his teeth bared. “I don’t take threats to my family lightly. You will not coerce her into leaving.”

Theodoros’ eyes darted to Charmion. He nodded.

“Let her leave, Carlisle,” Alice said. “She’s the reason we’re in this situation. If you would have taken control of Edward in the first place, this could have been avoided.”

Esme’s jaw dropped. She turned to Alice. “You’re the one who chased after her for him. This is your fault.”

“Says the one who coddled him the entire time!” Jasper snapped. “If you hadn’t interfered with Carlisle’s plan, she probably wouldn’t even be here. At least then Alice’s visions would work.”

Emmett released his hold on Bella and stalked toward Alice. “If it weren’t for your stupid vision, Rose and I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Don’t blame my wife!” Jasper shoved Emmett’s shoulder. He didn’t back down as the larger vampire towered over him. “It wasn’t her idea to call you.”

“I didn’t force you to come home,” Carlisle said.

“Like we would have said no.”

“You abandoned us when we needed you, and now you want to step in and be the hero?” Esme asked. “You had no problem saying no to running away. Your pride is the only thing to blame.”

Edward kept his focus on Theodoros as his family continued to bicker. He didn’t understand what was happening. His main concern was keeping Bella safe.

“Time is running out, Isabella,” Theodoros said.

“If I go with you, you’ll spare his life?”

“Of course.”

She began to pull away.

“Bella, no. You can’t.”

“It’s my dad.” Bella tried to free herself, but Edward held her tighter. She considered using force. One sharp twist was all it would take to break his hold, but she didn’t want to cause him more pain. Bella closed her eyes, unable to look at him any longer. A lump formed in the back of her throat. “Last night you told me I could leave.”

“Not like this.”

“Edward, let go.”

“That’s enough!” Theodoros’ voice boomed through the clearing. “You”—he pointed to Bella—“come with me. If your friend so much as moves an inch, your human won’t live to take another breath.”

Bella gave Edward a look of warning. He slackened his hold, but reached for Bella’s wrist before she could leave his side.

Don’t do this.

Bella didn’t stop. Edward felt her hand shaking as it slipped through his.

Bella, please. It’s not too late. We can fight this, please. Please!

Though Bella heard his plea, she paid him no attention. She was determined to save Charlie’s life.

Goddamnit, Bella. I know you can hear me!

Edward watched as each step took her farther away from him, farther away from the future he’d imagined for them. A future where she was his companion. A future filled with her smiles and laughter. Her touch. An eternity without the fear of separation, of ever being alone.

I love you.

Bella paused, and for a moment, Edward’s heart soared.

I love you. Please don’t leave me.

When Bella turned to face him, the hatred on her face made his stomach drop. She braced herself as she used the remainder of the breath she’d been holding.

“Get out of my head!”

Bella pushed with everything she had. She felt the mental barrier expanding outward, like an invisible balloon inside her head, driving away everything in its path until there was nothing left.

Edward winced as the thoughts of the other vampires assaulted him. He didn't understand the anger and aggression of his family. They were fighting with each other for no apparent reason. He wanted to help, but he couldn't focus on them. He had to stop Bella.

Edward tuned into Theodoros' thoughts. The images flashing through his mind sent a chill down Edward's spine: Bella being led to her death. Theodoros killing anyone who dared to follow them. Charlie's lifeless body hitting the ground.

But it wasn't *his* Bella in Theodoros' mind. It was a scared, timid version of her. A girl who would not struggle. A girl who would allow herself to be sacrificed to save her father.

He refused to believe Bella wouldn't fight for her own life.

"Bella, don't! It's a trap!"

Bella kept walking.

"They'll kill you both! They'll kill us all!"

Beside him, his family continued to feud. Jasper and Esme argued. Carlisle and Emmett had gotten physical. Even Rosalie and Alice were in the middle of a screaming match. Their thoughts were angry and irrational, unfocused to anything except their own fight.

Edward knew he needed everyone's help to save Bella. He turned his attention to Charmion. She stared with intent at the group quarreling beside him. To anyone else, it would look like she was watching them with morbid fascination, but her thoughts gave her away.

"It's her," Edward said. "She's doing this. She's turning them against each other!"

"A mind reader?" Theodoros' eyes lit up. This whole time, he'd assumed Isabella's gift was the sole reason he'd been drawn to them. It pleased him to discover he'd be walking away with two new gifts today. A new plan unfolded in his mind. He would eliminate Edward first so he wouldn't get in the way, and then he'd kill Isabella. With the human still at their mercy, he didn't think she'd put up a fight.

Edward had never lost a fight, but that was about to change. As beneficial as his gift was in combat, it couldn't save him from the fate that was in store. But he'd made a promise to protect Bella. He didn't intend to give up.

“Kill the woman!” Edward screamed to anyone who would listen. “She’s the key! Take her out! Take her out!”

The Cullens were too distracted by their own brawl to pay him any attention.

But Bella heard.

It went against every one of her instincts to do what Edward told her, but she couldn't ignore the desperation in his voice. He'd asked her numerous times to trust him. She wanted nothing more than to do the opposite, but something deep in her gut demanded she obey.

Bella didn't want to endanger her father, but if Edward was right, she wasn't going down without a fight.

Charmion shifted her eyes between a still screaming Edward and the newborn approaching her. She wasn't a fighter, and she'd be no match for Bella's strength. An altercation would distract from her task, and if the coven's bonds returned, it would be eight against two.

She began to panic.

In a swift movement too fast to be seen by the human eye, she picked up Charlie and snapped his neck. He fell to a heap at her feet, his head resting at an unnatural angle.

“Dad!”

Bella rushed to her father as Charmion fled the scene. She hovered above him, afraid to touch him. Whatever bloodlust she experienced dwindled along with the beat of Charlie's heart. She never would have guessed it was Charlie's body in the vision. She reached for him but hesitated, wondering what would happen to the others if she left with him now.

Theodoros approached Edward with outstretched arms. Edward couldn't believe this was how it would end. He lunged for the nomad. As they made contact, a painful, electric-like jolt coursed through his body. Though he had expected it, nothing could have prepared him for the pain. His muscles coiled and ceased, and he collapsed onto all fours.

Edward's body went into shock. He couldn't move or feel anything except for the blinding pain. He opened his mouth to speak, but his lungs wouldn't work. Through his blurred vision, Edward saw Theodoros kneel in front of him. He was unable to defend himself as a set of hands closed around his neck.

A loud crack reverberated off the surrounding trees. Bella looked over her shoulder in time to see Theodoros tossing Edward's head onto the grass. His body lay motionless on the ground, mirroring her father's in the same twisted, broken way. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She had to look away.

"Hey, what the fuck, man?" Emmett was beginning to come to his senses. He gave up fighting with Carlisle and charged Theodoros. His hulking form was almost twice the size of the smaller vampire, but the minute they made contact, Emmett dropped like a fly.

Before Rosalie could defend her mate, Theodoros took her down as well. He turned to the rest of the Cullens, who were beginning to realize what was happening around them.

"Charmion!" he called. "I need you!"

Charmion didn't return.

Thanks to his newfound gift of telepathy, Theodoros knew Jasper was the next to regain his wits. He made his way toward the vampire, arms outstretched.

It was too much for Bella. Anger swelled in her gut as she held her father's lifeless body in her arms.

Alice had once told her that the visions were subjective. Bella didn't know if she could win a fight, or even change the outcome of the future, but she wasn't going to allow Theodoros to kill both of her families.

Bella took a deep breath, felt her chest expanding with the air that filled her lungs. She clenched her fists and screamed with everything she had, pouring out every ounce of pain and despair and anger in a deafening roar.

Theodoros turned to her then, a wicked smile on his face. Then she felt it—the fluttering at her temples. He was attempting to access her mind.

She welcomed him in.

Confusion crossed Theodoros' face. He couldn't read her mind, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. Jasper came up behind him, and Theodoros turned to meet him.

A white-hot pain shot through Bella's hands. She jumped, gasping as she looked down. Electricity crackled through the tips of her fingers.

Theodoros slammed his palms against Jasper's chest. Jasper staggered backward from the pressure but remained otherwise unscathed.

"What the hell?" Theodoros muttered.

He tried again, but it only angered Jasper more. The other Cullens closed in around him, focused on a new enemy, the fights with each other forgotten.

Theodoros was strong, but without his powers, he was no match for six vampires. The current flowing through Bella's hands faded with each blow Theodoros received. She'd borrowed his power, just like she had done to everyone else. Her window of opportunity would last only as long as his life.

She brought her attention to her palms, feeling the electricity within them. With everything she had, she focused on building the current. Static pricked her skin. It burned hotter as the charge increased, radiating outward and up her arms. Holding on to that power, she sprang to her feet and chased after Charmion.

The vampire had covered a lot of ground, but she was no match for Bella's newborn speed. Charmion turned to fight, but one touch from Bella had her flat on her back. Bella screamed as the pain traveled through her palms and into Charmion. She refused to stop. This woman killed her father. This woman was responsible for whatever fate awaited Edward. She wouldn't stop until she was dead.

When the electricity sputtered and vanished, Bella took hold of Charmion's head and ripped it from her body.

When Bella returned to the house, the first person she noticed was Jasper. He scratched his head as he took in the scene surrounding him, no doubt feeling everyone else's puzzlement

as well as his own. Carlisle seemed to have recovered. He knelt beside Charlie, a somber look on his face.

Bella raced to his side.

“You have to help him!”

“It’s too late, Bella. I’m so sorry.”

“No.” Bella shook her head. She refused to accept that he was gone. “You’re a doctor. You’re a vampire! Do something!”

“The venom won’t work if his heart isn’t beating. Besides, his injury is too severe. Even if it was possible, I’m not sure I could heal him without . . .”

“I don’t care,” Bella said through dry sobs. “Change him if you have to!”

Carlisle looked at her with pity. She hated seeing that expression on his face. She forced herself to look away. Anywhere but him. Anywhere but her father. Anywhere but Edward.

“Try. Please just try.”

Carlisle nodded. He straightened Charlie’s crumpled form and placed his hand on his chest.

“I have to break his skin. You should go.”

Bella didn’t want to leave her father’s side, but Carlisle was right. She stood on protesting legs and took a step back, gathering the strength to leave.

A fire burned at the edge of the lawn. A plume of purple smoke billowed from the pyre. The scent was suffocating. Sickening. It smelled of death like she’d never experienced before. Esme and Emmett emerged from the trees, carrying Charmion’s remains and adding them to the blaze.

On the opposite side, Alice sat, cradling Edward’s recently attached head in her lap. She stroked his hair and whispered in his ear, too quiet for Bella to hear.

She approached them.

“He’s not waking up,” Alice said in a rush. “He’s not breathing. He’s not doing anything. Can you hear him?”

Bella shook her head.

“I can’t see his future. Oh, god, Edward.” Alice’s body shook with long, racking sobs. “It wasn’t like this last time. He regained consciousness right away. I could see his future. What if we were too late? What if his body isn’t strong enough this time?”

Bella had to leave; Carlisle was waiting on her. Yet she couldn’t bear to be alone. She reached down and scooped Edward into her arms.

And then she ran.

Chapter 17

Bella ran.
She ran until she reached their meadow and stopped by the creek, placing Edward on the sand. Stepping back, she studied him, waiting for some sign of life.

He lay still. His heart silent. His chest motionless.

Without normal human attributes, it was impossible to decipher the severity of his condition. Bella sank to the ground for a closer inspection. Edward's neck had been torn along the seam of his original injury. Tiny fractures webbed from the healing crack. She skimmed her fingers over the fissures and along his jaw, half expecting him to flinch or open his eyes.

He didn't move. He didn't even breathe.

Bella wondered if he'd always been so pale.

"Edward?"

She cleared her mind and searched for his thoughts. If he were locked inside his head, he'd be thinking of her.

Nothing.

"Come back to me, please."

Careful not to injure him further, Bella pulled Edward onto her lap. He was hard as stone, yet his broken body appeared fragile. She ducked her head and brushed her lips across his neck. The cloying scent of his raw flesh caused a surge of venom to fill her mouth. Instinctively she parted her lips and swept her tongue over Edward's wounds. She didn't know if it would help, but she didn't know what else to do.

Becoming a vampire had left her feeling powerful. Invincible. Now all she felt was helpless. She didn't know how to help Edward, and there was nothing she could have done to save her father.

Charlie's fate would have played out by now. Bella didn't know if Carlisle was successful in healing him.

Or changing him.

Bella understood the impossibility of the situation. She wouldn't allow her hopes to rise. She knew what they'd find when they returned to the house.

Then a terrifying thought struck her: What if she had to return to the house on her own?

Bella pulled Edward closer, rocking as she cradled him in her arms.

"Don't leave me here alone."

Time slowed as she held him on the forest floor. The only sounds surrounding them were that of the bubbling creek and the breeze rustling through the trees. No animals foraged for food in the underbrush. No birds sang from the treetops.

There was no warning before Edward awoke. His eyes flew open, and he gasped as air filled his lungs. He flew from Bella's lap, swiveling in midair and landing in a crouch, a defensive growl on his lips. It would have been intimidating if it weren't for the way he swayed. He placed one hand on the ground to steady himself.

Recognition crossed his face as he stared at Bella. A smile formed at the corners of his lips, and then his expression turned solemn.

"Is this Heaven?"

Bella laughed to cover her sob. "No, dummy. We're alive!"

She flung herself forward and wrapped her arms around him. Edward collapsed against her.

“It’s over?”

Bella nodded against his shoulder.

“My family?”

“They’re okay. They’re back at the house.”

Edward struggled to make sense of the events that occurred. Everything had happened so fast: Bella leaving, his family fighting with each other...

“Your dad?”

Bella didn’t answer.

Edward wished he had the strength to hold her tighter.

Edward was content staying in the meadow all day and night if it meant being close to Bella, but sooner or later they had to return to the house. Bella was the first to pull away.

“Let’s go back. They’re probably worried about you. We can hunt on the way.”

Edward didn’t need to ask for help. Bella shared her kills with him until he had enough strength to hunt on his own. He gorged on blood until his eyes were light gold and he was too full to take another drink.

They spent the walk back to the house in silence. Edward followed a few paces behind, lost in thought. He’d come so close to losing her. So close to losing everything. Now that the immediate threat was gone, he wondered where it left their relationship. He wasn’t naïve. What they shared the previous night wouldn’t have happened had there not been a threat to their lives. What he didn’t know was whether they would pick up where they left off.

Edward wanted to ask, but every time he opened his mouth, no words came out. He was embarrassed and afraid of rejection. He wanted Bella to spare him the awkwardness and tell him what she wanted. He called to her in his mind, pleaded with her to put him out of his misery, but she didn’t acknowledge him.

As they reached the clearing around the house, Alice came to meet them.

“I’m so glad you’re okay!” she said as she gave Edward a gentle hug. “I was so worried.”

Edward didn't miss the way her eyes darted to Bella. He didn't like the suspicion he saw there.

"What's wrong?"

Alice shook her head. Edward glanced at Bella. She looked at him with concern, having noticed Alice's strange behavior as well. If it was about Charlie, she wasn't ready to hear it.

"Tell me, Alice," Edward said.

"I've been able to see your future for a while now. I thought Bella left. Everyone worried about what you'd do, but I could see you coming home."

"I would never have left him out there," Bella said in defense.

"We didn't think so, but it was the only logical explanation."

"You can see my future?" Edward asked. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know. Bella must not be blocking you anymore."

For the first time since Edward regained consciousness, Bella noticed the silence. She'd not heard his thoughts once, nor was she actively blocking him.

"I can't hear your thoughts," Bella said. "Try to read my mind."

Edward focused on her, attempting to pick up on her mental voice as he'd so often done before. Bella felt nothing.

"Can you hear me? Any of us?" Alice asked him.

"No." Edward thought back to the fight, to the final moments before Theodoros beheaded him. He'd wanted Edward because he was a mind reader. No—he'd wanted to be a mind reader. "It was him. Theodoros. He must have taken it from me. That's why he wanted you." He looked to Bella. "He was going to kill you so he could have your powers. He didn't even know what they were." Edward fought back the rage he'd felt earlier in the day. The nomad would have taken everything from him.

"He tried to read my mind," Bella said. "I could feel it. And then..." She looked at her hands. Phantom sparks still crackled through her fingers. Edward had once told her that he'd killed to protect his family. At the time it upset her, but now she understood. Killing Charmion had been easy. There was no guilt attached to ripping off her head. She hadn't even hesitated. "Once he died, everything was gone."

“And if he took your power...” Alice added.

Edward understood what they were saying, but he had a hard time believing his telepathy was gone for good.

As the three vampires made their way to the house, Jasper intercepted them. He placed his hand on Bella’s shoulder, stopping her before she could proceed.

“You should probably stay outside. We did our best to clean up the blood, but whenever a human is in an enclosed space, especially with a fresh wound, things can get a little potent.”

Bella stared at Jasper in disbelief. She must have misunderstood. Carlisle said it was too late. She had convinced herself he was humoring her demands. But even as she told herself Jasper must be mistaken, she heard the labored rhythm of Charlie’s heart drifting from the house.

“My dad’s alive?”

“It was close, but Carlisle didn’t give up. Charlie had a rough couple of hours; I’m sure you can imagine. He’s resting now.”

“I need to see him.” Bella started for the door. Edward took her by the elbow.

“Bella...”

“I’ll be okay,” she insisted. “I know what bloodlust feels like, and thinking he died because of me is a thousand times more painful. I can handle it.”

Edward slid his hand down to hers. He gestured to the door. Jasper sighed before stepping aside.

The sound of Charlie’s heart led them down the hallway and to the master bedroom. Bella clutched the doorknob and took a shaky breath.

“You don’t have to do this,” Edward said.

“Yes, I do.”

Bella opened the door. Edward squeezed her hand as they entered the bedroom. In the center of the king size bed, Charlie slept peacefully. The blankets were twisted and

crumpled—a sure sign of the suffering he’d experienced. Bella remembered the agony of venom all too well.

She let out her breath and inhaled slowly. Pain seared her throat, but she felt no urge to attack. Edward wrapped his free arm around her waist and hugged her close.

“You’re doing well. I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“This is all my fault. You were right. He was better off thinking I disappeared. If I’d gone to Alaska like everyone wanted... if I didn’t insist on keeping in contact...”

“Stop,” Edward whispered. “He’s safe now.”

“But for how long?”

Charlie stirred. The vampires quieted, but it was too late. Their voices had already woken him from his slumber. “Bella?” He tried to sit, but pain shot through his body. He winced as his head fell onto the pillow. “Bella, is that you?”

“I’m here, Dad.” She approached the bed. Edward reluctantly dropped her hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I went on a date with a firing squad.” Charlie reached for her. Bella looked over her shoulder, waiting for some sign of what she should do. Edward stared back, hands shoved in his pockets. He looked exactly how he felt—like he was intruding on a moment that should only be shared between the two of them. Bella turned back to her father and placed her hand in his.

Charlie opened his mouth to speak, but he froze once he squeezed her hand. He applied more pressure, observing how the tissue, which had once been soft and forgiving beneath his touch, refused to yield. Bella held her breath, waiting for shock or disgust to kick in. Charlie’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, and then he tucked her hand against his chest. His heart pumped wildly against her palm.

“I don’t want to know what happened, do I?” he asked.

Bella smiled in relief.

“Trust me,” she said. “You don’t.”

Charlie looked past her, to where Edward stood in the corner. Even after everything he’d been through, he refused to fear the boy—the vampire—who’d stolen his daughter away.

“You taking care of her?”

Edward thought about his answer. He’d promised to protect her, but after everything that had transpired, he didn’t feel he was doing a very good job.

“I believe it’s more accurate to say she’s taking care of me.”

“Humph.” Charlie laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. “Some things never change.”

When Charlie slipped in and out of consciousness, Edward guided Bella from the room. He could tell by her infrequent breaths and stiff posture that being around a human was taking its toll.

“Let’s take a break. Get some fresh air.”

They stepped onto the porch. The crisp night air came as a relief, and Bella sucked it deep into her lungs. “Where is everyone?” she asked.

“Giving us privacy.” Edward gave a general nod to the woods surrounding the house.

Bella gazed into the trees. She didn’t see or hear anyone. “How can you tell?”

“Because I’ve been on that side before. They’ll come back later.”

The stress of the day was catching up to Bella—the not knowing, the helplessness, the fear and anger and guilt. A sob built in her chest. “Is it really over?”

Edward wasted no time pulling her into his arms. He crushed her against his chest with all his strength, knowing there was no chance of harming her in his weakened state. It was as much for his own comfort as for hers.

“I can’t believe we’re still here,” he said. “You saved us.”

Bella shook her head. “I couldn’t have done it alone.”

“If you hadn’t chased off Charmion, Theodoros would have killed us all. She was breaking our bonds. Without you...” Edward suppressed a shudder. “I can’t believe Alice never saw her coming.”

“She did.” Bella stepped back, forcing Edward to release her. His face clouded with confusion. “Alice saw Charmion, but she didn’t know what it meant. I guess my involvement obstructed her vision. She even drew her.”

“You saw it?”

Bella nodded.

“Show me.” Edward started for the door.

“But it’s in her room!”

“So?” He said it like privacy was a silly concept, and for the skill he used to have, she supposed it was.

Bella followed him to Alice and Jasper’s room. Once inside, Edward looked at her expectantly. She crossed the room to the small desk. Haphazard piles of loose papers, colored pencils, and graphite sticks were strewn across the surface. Bella flipped through the collection of drawings on the corner.

“Here it is.”

As she slipped the drawing from the stack, another slid out and drifted to the floor. The colorful sketch against the stark white paper captured Edward’s attention, and he bent to pick it up, the picture of Charmion forgotten.

“What is it?” Bella tugged on his arm for a closer look. On the page, a couple stood in a loose embrace. His chin rested on the top of her head, her cheek against his chest. Their eyes, both a brilliant shade of gold, stared forward. The detail was perfect, as though the background had been cropped out of a photograph. The subjects were unmistakable. “I thought Alice couldn’t see my future.”

Edward couldn’t take his eyes off the drawing. He didn’t think he could bring himself to return it to the desk. It embodied everything he wanted them to be. The emotions behind their faces felt so real, and maybe if he threw logic out the window, he could believe this really had been one of Alice’s visions. She wouldn’t mind if he kept it. Besides, one day it would be nothing more than a pile of dust.

“It’s not a vision,” he said. “It’s wishful thinking.”

“How does it feel, being the world’s only vampire to get killed twice?” Jasper asked.

Edward’s fist thudded against Jasper’s shoulder in a weak attempt at a punch. “I feel fine,” he lied.

“Are you sure about that?” Emmett teased. “You look like something the cat chewed up and spit out before dragging in.”

“I think he looks good, all things considered.” Rosalie gave Edward a giant hug, an unusual show of affection for the two of them. “I’m glad you’re okay,” she whispered in his ear. “I’m sorry about what happened earlier.”

“Don’t be. It was out of your control.”

“I know, but I still feel bad. We all do.” She stepped back, looking him up and down. “Is it true? Your gift is gone?”

Edward’s eyes scanned the surrounding forest. Bella would be far enough away by now, and still—nothing. He had spent years resenting his ability. Good or bad, it affected every aspect of his life. It was as a part of him; it defined him. He wished for it to be gone, knowing the benefits that would be forfeited. Now, as he stood among his family with Bella nowhere to be seen, the silence was surreal.

He took a deep breath, preparing to confirm what his mind had yet to accept.

“It’s gone.”

“Are you happy?” Esme asked.

Edward thought about Bella, and whether he could ever be happy in life without her.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think so.”

“He’s happy,” Jasper said. “He’s just too busy processing everything to realize it.”

Edward shot him a dirty look.

“Jasper, be nice.” Rosalie spoke sternly, but playfulness danced behind her eyes. “It must be hard for him to be a plain, old, boring vampire after all these years. Don’t rub it in with your ability.”

“You’re lucky I don’t have the strength to hit you too,” Edward threatened.

“You won’t hit me, because you know I’ll hit back.”

“Bella would kick your ass when she gets home!” Emmett laughed.

Rosalie’s mouth dropped open. “And you’d let her?”

“I ain’t messing with no newborn, babe. You’re on your own with that one.”

Edward’s smile faltered.

“She would, you know,” Jasper said, picking up on his brother’s apprehension. “I think deep down she’s protective of you.”

Edward shook his head and opened his mouth to argue.

“She took you out of my arms and ran away with you,” Alice interjected.

The information took Edward by surprise. “She did?”

“Yes. She didn’t ask, she didn’t hesitate. I’m certain she’d defend you against Rosalie.”

Edward smiled again as he let that knowledge sink in. He’d given little thought to how he ended up alone in the woods with Bella, only that she didn’t want to be near the house while Carlisle worked on Charlie. He looked toward the tree line again. “I wish they’d come back.”

“Give them some time,” Esme said. “You know how hard these things are for Carlisle. He needed the escape. They’ll come home soon.”

Edward understood better than anyone. Tasting human blood was taxing—physically and emotionally. The only time he’d ever seen Carlisle frayed was after he’d changed someone. Healing Charlie had been no exception. He hated letting Bella go, but he could tell she wanted to talk to Carlisle in private, and their separation was the perfect opportunity to test his gift.

Jasper placed his hand on Edward’s shoulder, pulling him out of his thoughts. “You should hunt.”

“I’ll hunt with Bella.”

Wanting to be alone, Edward retreated to his room, unprepared for the scene before him. Rumpled sheets and tattered remnants of clothing served as evidence of the night before. He approached the bed and smoothed the wrinkly sheet with one hand.

Her bed, her bedroom, she’d once said. For the first time, it felt that way. Her scent surrounded him. He couldn’t imagine having the room to himself, without her in it.

Edward removed Alice's drawing from his back pocket and flopped on the bed. He unfolded it and flattened the creases, taking one last look before letting it slip from his hand and onto the floor. He closed his eyes and lay back, waiting until he could see her face once again.

"Thank you so, so much," Bella said, not for the first time. "I owe you. I don't know how I'll repay you, but I will."

"You aren't indebted to me, Bella." Carlisle grabbed hold of a low hanging branch in their path and pulled it out of the way, allowing Bella to pass. She ducked beneath it and waited on the other side for Carlisle to join her. "You're family now. We help and protect one another. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have lived to see another day. I did it because it was important to you. It was the least I could do. I'm glad I'd assumed wrong. There's still so much we don't know about the effects of venom on the human body."

Bella recalled how she and Edward had found Carlisle in his study, hunched over the desk, head in his hands. Tension radiated from his body. He jumped when Edward asked if he was all right. As she watched them talk, she was fascinated by the reversal of their roles. Carlisle had always been calm and collected. Even when he and Edward had fought, Carlisle emitted an air of authority. It was strange, seeing the way Edward consoled him as though it were second nature.

"I know it wasn't easy for you," she said.

"Being a vampire isn't always easy. Our heads and our desires don't always agree. And neither do our hearts." Carlisle gave her a knowing smile. "Despite the circumstances that brought you here, I'm glad you are. Wherever you and Edward take your relationship is up to you, but thank you for choosing us."

When they returned to the house, Bella thanked Carlisle once again. She returned to the room where Charlie slept and stopped outside the door. His breaths were slow and even. She smiled to herself, knowing he would be okay. Tomorrow he would be on his way home, good as new. They'd be able to see each other now that she knew she was strong enough to be around him. Maybe she'd even be able to hug him before he left.

Bella continued up the stairs. The door to Edward's room was ajar, and she pushed it open. He lay on the bed, eyes closed, hands clasped behind his head.

"What are you doing?" Bella approached the bed. She picked up Alice's drawing from the floor before sitting on the edge.

Edward sat up and scooted closer, propping himself on one arm. "Waiting for you." He watched her face as she inspected the drawing of the happy couple. What he wouldn't do to kiss her at that moment, to take her in his arms. But he didn't want to overstep any boundaries. Memories of last night would have to be enough until he figured out where they stood.

Bella peered at him out of the corner of her eye. "Why are you smiling?"

Edward pursed his lips as he thought of what to say. He gestured to the sketch in her hand. "When you first saw that, you thought it was our future."

"Right." Bella frowned in confusion.

"You wouldn't have made that assumption if you didn't think it would happen."

Edward was right. Her first conclusion was that Alice had seen a glimpse of their future. She accepted it without question. Without argument. Without apprehension. Forever was a long time, but deep inside, she knew she would spend it by Edward's side. A weight lifted from her chest as she acknowledged it, and the anxiety about her future dissipated.

Edward leaned closer and nudged her cheek with his nose. Bella giggled as he nipped at her jaw. The sound warmed what was left of his heart. He pulled the drawing from her hand and tossed it on the floor before pulling her down next to him on the bed. Their arms wound around each other, and he breathed in her scent.

Bella tilted her head to look at him. Bruises marred the otherwise perfect skin beneath his coal-black eyes. "Do you want to hunt?"

"No," he said. "I have you in my arms again. I'm not moving from this spot. We have plenty of time to hunt."

"Forever," she murmured.

"That sounds right to me." Edward placed his hand on Bella's cheek. "Do you remember when you asked me which I wanted more, you or the silence?"

Bella nodded against his shoulder.

“I guess I get both after all.”

Edward closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers. Bella welcomed the kiss, and he knew it was just the beginning of their small but perfect piece of forever.

The End

Author's Note

First of all, I'd like to thank everyone who joined me for this story. Thank you for reading, reviewing, and messaging me on Twitter and Facebook. Your support means the world to me.

Hobo, Joo, KB, and Liv (in alphabetical order because I love them equally)—you guys are awesome. Thanks for everything.

And a very special shout-out to jeaboo1. May you never move.

When I finished *Here in the Garden of Sin* almost 4 years ago (zomg where does the time go?), there was so much of these characters and their world that I wanted to explore, but I didn't know where to begin. I decided to write this sequel not knowing if anyone would read it or even care, but you guys came back for more torture. I hope you enjoyed reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.