

20. GOODBYES

I did not like this plan. It violated all my instincts even to pretend to use Bella as bait. Not only that, but to set the trap, then abandon her to the care of others, appalled me.

My brother and sister were capable as long as they didn't drink her blood (Jasper), or change her to a vampire (Alice). It was so hard to control our kind, impossible really. Though I trusted my family with most things, I didn't trust even *myself* to keep Bella safe. But Bella was right. James knew she was mine and that we would stay together. Therefore, I served as a useful decoy. If I could get him to follow me, then Bella could escape.

These thoughts consumed me for the remainder of the drive to Charlie's house. Considering everything she had already been through today, Bella remained remarkably composed now that we had agreed to protect Charlie. Of course I cared about Charlie, because she did, but if it came down to saving him or her, there was no contest. Unfortunately for me, Bella felt the opposite, so I had to protect her from herself as well.

I parked the Jeep and scanned for any signs of James—no scent, no mental activity. Good. He hadn't been here. That gave us a little time to get Bella in and out of the house. Then he could pick up our trail.

"He's not here," I announced. "Let's go."

I didn't know what story Bella was going to tell Charlie. In truth, I didn't care. I only cared that we get her out of here and that she let us do it. If Charlie didn't believe her story and came after me or my family, we would deal with that. Keeping Bella safe was my only concern.

Emmett assisted Bella with the buckles in the back seat. "Don't worry, Bella," he said, "we'll take care of things here quickly."

That was Emmett, always confident, almost always cheerful. Bella had worried that Rosalie and Emmett didn't like her, so I was glad she'd had these moments with Emmett. He was impressed with her plan and happy to help, especially since he'd get the chance to "kick some vampire butt," as he would have put it. He complained constantly that his siblings wouldn't give him a fair fight and grizzly bears weren't challenging enough. The best wrestling he got was with Rosalie in the bedroom, if the noise they made and the destruction they wrought were any indication. I'd have chuckled at the thought if our current situation weren't so dire.

To my surprise, I smelled the salty scent of tears—Bella's tears. I didn't know what was causing them...fear? At any other time, alleviating her distress would have been my first priority, but right now, I had an overriding concern. Bella's life—and mine, come to that—was dependent on what happened in the next few hours, if not the next several minutes.

"Alice, Emmett," I instructed. They silently exited the Jeep and melted into the darkness. I helped Bella from the vehicle, then held her close to me while we hurried to the front porch. All the while I scanned the darkness for signs of James or his compatriots.

"Fifteen minutes," I reiterated at the door.

"I can do this," Bella sniffed through her tears. She cupped her hands ardently around my face and looked into my eyes.

"I love you. I will always love you, no matter what happens now."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Bella," I insisted.

“Just follow the plan, okay?” she said, confirming my resolve. “Keep Charlie safe for me. He’s not going to like me very much after this, and I want to have the chance to apologize later.”

“Get inside, Bella. We have to hurry,” I pressed. We would do our best for Charlie, but I wasn’t going to make any promises.

“One more thing,” she whispered fervently. “Don’t listen to another word I say tonight!” Abruptly, she pulled my face to hers and kissed me, pressing her body fiercely against mine. Caught unawares, I responded in kind before she broke away, turned to the front door, and kicked it open.

“Go away, Edward!” she shouted, stunning me to inaction as she slammed the door in my face. I stood frozen for a moment, gathering my wits, until I realized that getting away from me would be her excuse to leave town. Though Bella was presumably acting, I felt deflated and forlorn. With her tearful eyes and sharp words, her story was more than believable. But there was no time for dwelling on that.

I rushed to Bella’s window and entered her bedroom after she stomped up the stairs and slammed her door on Charlie. At least it wasn’t just me, I thought wryly. I opened the dresser and grabbed whatever clothing was within reach and tossed it to her as she stuffed the articles into her duffle bag.

Bella was crying for real now as she yelled back and forth with Charlie through the locked door. I heard the argument, but didn’t listen to it, as I did not need this script floating around in my head. I was vaguely aware that Bella was clearing me of any wrongdoing and that she was breaking up with me. I knew the former wasn’t true. I hoped the latter wasn’t true either, though I wouldn’t blame her for leaving me.

I grabbed some dirty socks and t-shirts from the floor and stuffed them into the bag, then I secured it and placed it over Bella’s shoulder.

“I’ll be in the truck—go!” I directed under my breath. Exiting through the window, I leaped into the truck, and ducked below Charlie’s sightline.

While I waited, I caught the first snatches of thought from the tracker’s mind. He was getting closer. Rather than hearing words, I was seeing pictures. He was in his “hunting mind” with his thoughts switched off, operating on instinct. The primary image in James’ mind was of a line extending in front of him, sometimes continuous, sometimes broken. Tracking required following a scent line—in this case, Bella’s scent—and traversing any gaps.

James had found a mixture of Bella’s scent and mine in Forks and was tracking her here just as we had expected. His timing was perfect for us, assuming he didn’t try to grab Bella between the house and the truck. The fresh scents of my siblings and me in the area should deter him. His mind revealed his preference for stealth and trickery over direct confrontation. It helped that we had him outnumbered.

James was close now, looking down on the house from some height. Judging from the angle of the image in his mind, he was in one of the tall trees in the woods behind Charlie’s house. He was watching and listening, and feeling very smug about how fast he had located Bella. He had not recognized that we were baiting him.

Charlie and Bella continued to argue, something about Renee coming back to Arizona next week. And then I heard Bella’s final words: “It didn’t work out, okay? I really, really *hate* Forks!”

Charlie’s front door flew open. Bella raced for the truck, threw her bag in the back,

scrambled behind the steering wheel, and started the engine. Charlie didn't try to stop her. When we were out of sight of the house, I insisted that Bella pull over and let me drive.

"I can drive," she argued through heavy tears. I nudged her foot off the gas pedal, then gently gripped her waist and scooted her across my lap while taking control of the wheel.

"You wouldn't be able to find the house," I said, wanting to keep this drive safe. Regardless of her dubious fitness to drive, I still had faster reflexes.

Bella jumped when Alice turned on the Jeep's headlights behind us.

"It's just Alice," I soothed, taking her hand.

"The tracker?"

"He heard the end of your performance."

"Charlie?"

"The tracker followed us. He's running behind us now."

She stiffened.

"Can we outrun him?"

"No." But I involuntarily pressed the accelerator until the truck's engine balked.

Emmett was watching our backs, running behind us. When he thought we were safely on our way, he leaped into the truck bed with a thump.

Bella, terrified, shrieked.

Ah, I should have warned her! I covered her mouth.

"It's Emmett!"

She quieted and I wrapped my arm around her waist.

"It's okay, Bella. You're going to be safe."

She remained rigid with terror and I momentarily regretted not whisking her out of town against her will. This side trip had put her in much closer proximity to James than I ever wanted her to be. I tried to distract her.

"I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life," I said. "It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well—especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you."

"I wasn't being nice," she said, ashamed, unable to meet my eyes. "That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt."

"Don't worry. He'll forgive you." I smiled in reassurance, but her wild eyes revealed her anguish.

"Bella, it's going to be all right."

"But it won't be all right when I'm not with you," she said in a tiny, frightened voice.

No, it will be dreadful for us both, I thought, but I didn't want to make it worse.

"We'll be together again in a few days," I promised, hoping desperately that it was true. "Don't forget that this was your idea." That reminder perked her up a bit.

"It was the best idea—of course it was mine."

I tried to smile at her little joke, an effort not entirely successful.

"Why did this happen? Why me?" Bella's voice was heartbreaking. Remorse and regret overwhelmed me.

"It's my fault—I was a fool to expose you like that."

"That's not what I meant," Bella continued. I was almost too distraught to hear her explanation. "I was there, big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did this James

decide to kill *me*? There're people all over the place, why me?"

I reviewed what I had heard from James before he set his sights on Bella.

"I got a good look at his mind tonight. I'm not sure if there's anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It *is* partially your fault," I said. "If you didn't smell so appallingly luscious, he might not have bothered. But when I defended you...well, that made it a lot worse. He's not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Suddenly we've presented him with a beautiful challenge—a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting the one vulnerable element. You wouldn't believe how euphoric he is now. It's his favorite game, and we've just made it his most exciting game ever." James sickened me. He was the vampire version of a hurricane...even if you could see him coming, you couldn't avoid him, or run, or hide. "But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then."

"I thought...I didn't smell the same to the others...as I do to you." Bella stammered out the words identifying her as prey.

"You don't. But that doesn't mean that you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you *had* appealed to the tracker—or any of them—the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there."

None of these nomads ever attempted to abstain when they were thirsty. In all probability, they wouldn't even think to try.

Bella shivered in fear.

"I don't think I have any choice but to kill him now," I uttered, thinking through any possible options. "Carlisle won't like it."

"How can you kill a vampire?" Bella inquired.

I wasn't sure why she wanted to know, since there was no possibility that she could do it herself. It took a vampire to kill a vampire. I didn't want to tell her how, either, as the procedure was unpleasant and very rarely carried out—by our clan, anyway. It was not something she would ever have to witness. But looking at her inquisitive, frightened eyes, I knew I could hold back nothing.

"The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds and then burn the pieces."

"And the other two will fight with him?"

"The woman will. I'm not sure about Laurent. They don't have a very strong bond—he's only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by James in the meadow...."

"But James and the woman—they'll try to kill you?" Oh! She wanted to know how I could be ended! Silly Bella.

"Bella, don't you *dare* waste time worrying about me. Your only concern is keeping yourself safe and—please, please—*trying* not to be reckless."

"Is he still following?"

"Yes. He won't attack the house, though. Not tonight." James was methodical. He was busy assessing our strengths and collecting information. He was in no hurry.

I maneuvered the truck down our three-mile, winding driveway and pulled up to the porch, with Alice following behind in the Jeep. Emmett jumped out of the truck bed and had Bella in his arms almost before we were stopped. He held her close to his chest like a football and rushed into the house, his large body protecting her from every side. Alice and I flanked him.

I heard Laurent's French-accented inner voice just before I saw him. He was standing in our living room surrounded by the rest of my family. Emmett growled and set Bella down beside me to free his hands. He adopted a stance of protective menace.

"He's tracking us," I informed Laurent, as if he could alter the situation.

Laurent looked about as unhappy as I felt.

"I was afraid of that," he replied.

Alice stepped toward Jasper and whispered the plan in his ear before they hurried up the stairs together. Rosalie took her position by Emmett's side as if to reclaim him from Bella. She was as angry as I'd ever seen her. All of this upheaval over a human was beyond her capacity to understand. Bella's being *my* human made the drama almost intolerable. She'd just as soon see Bella taken by James and be done with it. Though I regretted her attitude, her self-centered view of life was unlikely to change.

"What will he do?" Carlisle asked Laurent. Due to our fixedness, predicting vampire behavior was not as difficult as predicting human behavior, especially if you knew the individual in question.

"I'm sorry. I was afraid, when your boy there defended her, that it would set him off," said Laurent.

"Can you stop him?"

"Nothing stops James when he gets started."

Emmett's muscles flexed and his chest broadened. "We'll stop him," he declared.

"You can't bring him down. I've never seen anything like him in my three hundred years. He's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined his coven."

Though the rest of us were given pause by these words, Emmett merely grunted his skepticism. Emmett's confidence, and at times overconfidence, was as fundamental to his personality as Rosalie's self-centeredness was to hers. As a human, he had always been the biggest, strongest male around, known throughout Clay County, Kentucky, as the man to beat in any physical competition. Laurent's words were nothing new to him, a dare, a rousing challenge.

Laurent was still trying to understand my family's response to James' threat. He shook his head in confusion and glanced at Bella.

"Are you sure it's worth it?"

A fierce growl tore through me. That *was* something he could understand. He flinched and took a step backward.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice," Carlisle stated, clarifying our position. Though Laurent could not comprehend our protecting Bella, he chose, nevertheless, not to cross us.

"I'm intrigued by the life you've created here. But I won't get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won't go up against James. I think I will head north—to that clan in Denali."

He thought for another moment, then added, "Don't underestimate James. He's got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. He's every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be, and he won't come at you head on...I'm sorry for what's been unleashed here. Truly sorry." He took another baffled look at Bella, then gave a brief conciliatory bow.

"Go in peace," Carlisle said, dismissing Laurent.

Everyone stood frozen while Laurent made his exit. The instant he was gone, Esme

moved to a keypad across the room and released the motorized security shutters that protected the glass wall.

“How close?” Carlisle asked me.

I’d been listening to James’ thoughts and keeping track of his position.

“About three miles out past the river; he’s circling around to meet up with the female.”

“What’s the plan?”

“We’ll lead him off, and then Jasper and Alice will run her south to Phoenix.”

“And then?”

I felt my jaw lock and my whole body tense.

“As soon as Bella is clear, we hunt him.”

“I guess there’s no other choice,” Carlisle said. Silently, he added, *I’ll join you and Emmett going north. Esme and Rosalie will take Bella’s truck and head west. With luck, James and Victoria will split up.*

I nodded once in assent and began to organize the troops.

“Get her upstairs and trade clothes,” I ordered Rosalie. Trying to lead James off Bella’s trail in two directions from the start was worth a try.

I was already turning to brief Emmett when Rosalie hissed at me, her eyes blazing with fury.

“Why should I? What is she to me? Except a menace—a danger you’ve chosen to inflict on all of us.”

“Rose...” Emmett protested. Rose shook off his hand when he tried to calm her.

I’d gotten so used to ignoring Rosalie’s raving that it took only a fraction of a second to block any visible reaction I may have had to her outburst. I wasn’t going to encourage any more airing of her grievances in front of Bella. And enforcing civility from Rosalie was not my place.

“Esme?”

“Of course.”

Esme swept Bella into her arms and rushed up the stairs with her.

I spoke in a quiet tone. Bella did not need to hear the details of our tactics.

“Emmett, grab a traveling bag from the garage, plus a tent. Carlisle and you and I will lead James north for as long as we can, then ambush him.”

I reached into Bella’s duffle to locate the unwashed items from her bedroom floor that held her scent. We would use them to convince James that Bella was with us.

“Rosalie, you and Esme will drive Bella’s truck west as a secondary diversion,” Carlisle directed.

She opened her mouth to protest, but Carlisle interrupted.

“Bella is with Edward and that makes her a part of this family. We protect our family.”

His voice rang with the authority of the patriarch that he was. Rosalie closed her mouth, though her eyes burned with resentment. Her mind was not quiet, but I was used to that.

Carlisle continued speaking at a speed and volume that Esme would hear from upstairs, but Bella would not.

“We think James will assume Bella is with Edward and will follow him. We hope that Victoria splits off and follows the truck. She will have no reason to attack or engage

you—this is James’ game. Esme, if you are followed, keep driving west as far as possible until Victoria stops tracking you. Then return to Forks and take up watch at Charlie’s house. She may go back there to look for Bella when she realizes Bella isn’t with you. We need to keep Charlie safe.”

Alice reappeared at the top of the stairs with a small leather bag, no doubt full of cash, credit cards, and current identification. The latter was something we had to replace every decade or so to update our birth years.

I walked to the bottom of the staircase and issued my instructions in the low, fast cadence that humans could not decipher.

“Alice, you mustn’t let Bella out of your sight for one second. She’s a magnet for danger and acts irrationally when she’s frightened. She has an impulse for self sacrifice that defies logic. You have to stay with her at all times. *At all times!*”

I’ve got it, Edward. You don’t need to worry. She’ll be safe with us.

“Alice, I’m trusting you. If anything happens to her...”

Nothing will. Try not to worry.

“And don’t forget that she needs to eat *several* times a day and drink more often than that.”

I’ve got it! I’ve got it! She will be fine, I promise.

Esme and Bella had finished exchanging clothes and joined Alice in their ill-fitting attire. My mother and sister then took an elbow apiece and lifted Bella down the stairs at near vampire speed. Jasper joined them with a duffle bag over his shoulder. It would contain changes of clothes, including items used to hide the skin: hats, sunglasses, gloves, scarves, and hooded jackets were the usual items.

Carlisle doled out untraceable cell phones, one for Esme, one for Alice, and one for us. We would use them to coordinate our efforts when our adversaries were outside of hearing range.

“Esme and Rosalie will be taking your truck, Bella,” Carlisle said. Bella nodded and glanced surreptitiously at Rosalie, who was wearing a sullen expression.

“Alice, Jasper—take the Mercedes. You’ll need the dark tint in the south.” They both nodded.

“We’re taking the Jeep,” Carlisle added.

He looked around the room at each of us, pausing for any questions. There were none; we were ready.

“Alice, will they take the bait?” he asked.

We all stood in silence while Alice shut her eyes and focused inwardly. When she opened them, she was sure.

“He’ll track you,” she answered Carlisle. “The woman will follow the truck. We should be able to leave after that.”

“Let’s go,” Carlisle said to Emmett and me, as he headed for the back door.

Our moment of separation had come. A heavy weight of dread, anxiety, and loneliness settled in my chest, making it hard to breathe. I moved to Bella’s side, lifted her from the floor, and pressed myself—lips and body—desperately against her. Just for that moment, I forgot where we were and what we were facing, as all of my tangled emotion burned between us.

Then I set her down. I touched her face in farewell and stared into the deep wells of her eyes, willing her to be safe. I didn’t know how I could possibly let her go...but I did,

my stone heart breaking as I released her. Then I shut the door on my emotions and turned to face what was to come.