

## 24. AN IMPASSE

Standing under fluorescent lights in a white room with white blinds and white linens, I was in my element. If I took off my clothes and stood in a corner, no one would know I was here—except for the hair and the eyes.

I was going a little mad. Bella had been in the hospital under sedation for two days and two nights. I had already counted the tiny black dots in each linoleum tile on the floor of Bella's room—three times. I had translated the Gideon Bible into Farsi and Urdu in my head. (I could always use more practice with the Eastern tongues. Alice liked to throw riddles at me in unlikely languages during boring lectures or at lunch hour at school to help kill time.)

It was one of those days when I wished I could sleep. I would like to have avoided hashing and rehashing the disaster of the previous week and to escape the boredom of this place. But I couldn't sleep and I wasn't going anywhere. It was my fault that Bella was in this hospital, and I wouldn't be separated from her until she was well enough to go home. The saving grace was that James was dead and could never hurt her again.

After Carlisle had stopped Bella's bleeding and stabilized her broken bones, and I had successfully—*thank you, merciful God!*—extracted James' venom from her bloodstream, I carried her in my arms back to the hotel. It was necessary to devise our cover story. Alice constructed the perfect accident scenario... a loose carpet, a broken stair railing, and a shattered picture window, below which Bella lay, injured from her "fall." Carlisle was on the scene immediately, providing emergency care while we waited for an ambulance to carry Bella to the hospital. Every detail was perfect.

I rode with Bella while Alice and Carlisle followed in a taxi. We left Emmett and Jasper at the ballet studio where they finished covering our tracks, making sure the fire they started would take hold and destroy all evidence of our activities. They abandoned the Cadillac where it sat—Carlisle would send an anonymous envelope of cash to the owner for the broken door—and joined us at the hotel in time to see Bella driven away.

While Carlisle got Bella admitted to the hospital, the emergency room doctor started an intravenous blood transfusion. I couldn't watch. Knowing that he was replacing what I had taken was distressing enough without watching him stick needles into Bella's veins. It was even more distressing that—despite my revulsion at a stranger's blood entering Bella's body—my venom began to flow when the nurse hung up the IV bag. Now that I had tasted Bella's blood, the slightest reminder of the experience invited the monster to the surface.

Alice distracted me by relating the contents of James' video, since I couldn't bear to watch it myself. Even secondhand through Alice's memory, it was horrifying. I had never felt so helpless in my life. The easy death Jasper and Emmett had granted James was far too good for him.

To goad me and to prolong his fun, James had filmed the entire hideous episode—from Bella's courageous entry into the studio, to his taunting me on tape, to his hurting her. My brave, brave Bella had willingly walked into his trap, sacrificing herself to save her mother; then, even under torture, begged me not to endanger myself by avenging her.

I couldn't be angry with such a noble soul, but I would never forget the sound of her tibia and fibula snapping or the agonized scream that she couldn't contain. I would never

forget the blood streaming down her face or the death I almost dealt her trying to save her humanity. All of these memories would torment me for the remainder of my existence.

And poor Alice. The revelation of her origins was as hurtful to her as it was heartbreaking to me. A family, blessed with an extraordinary child who could see into the future, regarded her gift as a curse of the devil and consigned her to an asylum for the rest of her life. Who knows what had happened to her there? Her lack of human memories suggested that she may have been incarcerated in that dark cell as a mere tot, in which case she'd been too young to retain memories. Or perhaps more likely, and equally horrifying, she had been given a long course of electroshock—common in those days—which had erased whatever memories she'd had.

James' version of the story was that an old vampire had befriended Alice in the asylum, and when James set his sights on Alice's sweet-smelling blood, the creature changed her before James could take her life. If that were true, it seemed a poor kind of friendship to visit a young girl in her dark prison, no doubt filthy and cold, for years and never take a step to free her until forced to do so by James' threats. It was beyond comprehension. Knowing Alice, somehow she would turn these revelations into something worthwhile... though it might take time.

Carlisle and Esme had made up for a lot of what Alice had missed as a human and she'd been a treasured part of our family since she found us. By now, she'd had at least four times more lifespan as a vampire than as a human and, among all of us, seemed uniquely suited to it. She was not bogged down by human memories like Rosalie, and was not plagued by unrealized human dreams like Esme. I was certain she would overcome this sad knowledge.

While technicians were X-raying Bella and plastering her leg into a cast—Carlisle had set it perfectly, securing it to two broom handles—Alice had phoned Charlie to inform him of Bella's "terrible fall at the hotel." As Alice told it, she and Carlisle had accompanied me to Phoenix so I could plead with Bella to return to Forks. When Bella came to meet me at our hotel, she tumbled down two flights of stairs and fell through a window.

*"She's going to be fine, Chief Swan."* Alice spoke from the waiting area, while I listened from outside Radiology.

Alice paused for a moment, listening.

*"Thank you, Charlie. Yes, Carlisle was there immediately and got the bleeding stopped. She has a broken leg and some broken ribs and a cut on her head."*

She paused.

*"Carlisle stabilized her before the ambulance got there and Edward rode with her to the hospital. He's stayed with her every minute since the accident. It wasn't his fault, Charlie."*

Alice waited.

*"No, she's going to be absolutely fine. A few stitches under her hairline, some cuts on her hand and the broken bones. Nothing that won't completely heal. No big scars."*

Pause.

*"None of us has. They've kept her sedated so she won't move around too much and to make sure she rests. She lost quite a lot of blood."* I cringed. I didn't know how much she had lost from her head wound, but I suspected she'd lost more to me.

*"Probably two or three days before she's awake. We won't leave her alone, regardless. Also, I will call Renee and tell her."*

Pause.

*"You're welcome, Charlie. I'm just sorry that this happened."*

She hung up the phone.

"How'd he take it?" I asked Alice when she found me, though I'd already heard or extrapolated most of what he'd said.

"Rather well, considering. Now I will call Bella's mother."

The second call was much like the first, except that Renee panicked and Alice had to calm her down. When Alice rejoined me, she said that Renee was coming to Phoenix as soon as possible.

"Emmett and Jasper are flying back to Seattle tonight. Carlisle and I will stay until Renee arrives. Is that okay?"

"Yes, Alice, thank you for everything...and Alice..."

"Yes, Edward?"

"I'm very sorry about James. Of all the vampire baseball games in all the towns in all the world..."

"He walked into ours." She gave me a crooked smile.

"Yes, something like that."

"At least I know more about myself now. Genealogy—my new hobby." She was trying for upbeat, but I felt the well of loneliness and pain she knew she couldn't hide from me. Once again, I was glad she had Jasper—with all of his talents—to console her. I gave her an encouraging smile.

"I'm going back to the hotel to see Jasper before he leaves, but I'll be back tonight to check in with you."

"Okay, Alice...and Alice...?"

"Yes, Edward?"

"I love you, Alice."

"I love you, too, Edward." She twirled around, blew me a kiss, and was gone.

I followed Bella's gurney to her room, sat down in the plastic chair beside her bed, and listened to her breathe. She was covered in a spaghetti of tubes... tubes for breathing, tubes for nutrition, tubes for waste, tubes for medication, tubes for blood, and a wire attached to a clip on her index finger to monitor her heartbeat. It was devastating to be reminded so vividly of her human frailty.

I wanted to cry. Instead, I set my chin on Bella's pillow and breathed along with her, trying to ignore the disturbing scent of her adulterated blood. Carlisle found me there, one thousand, three hundred, and twenty-two inhalations later.

*Edward, how are you feeling?*

"Honestly, I've been better."

*It's been a hard week for you.*

"Truly, the worst of my life...and the best."

*That's what happens when you love someone in this way, Edward. The highs are higher, the lows are lower.*

"I wouldn't give back the good to avoid the bad, not for myself. But I would have to for her sake. I do love her, Carlisle."

*There's nothing wrong with pursuing what makes you happy, son. You have no reason to blame yourself.*

"Thank you Dad," I responded, though I didn't agree. "And thank you for saving

Bella's life.”

*No, you did that, Edward. Would you like me to stay here with you?*

“No, that's all right.”

*Call me, then, when Renee gets here or if you need anything. I'm going to check in with the hospital at home, and see off Jasper and Emmett. Alice and I will drive the Mercedes back here from the airport.*

“Bye, Carlisle.”

“Bye for now, son.”

\*\*\*

Renee had arrived in tumult around midnight Wednesday, disrupting the air in Bella's room and the tenor of my thoughts. She came fluttering in, escorted by a nurse, and threw both hands over her mouth with a gasp. Tears popped from her eyes. I was standing against the doorway wall in the corner, so she didn't realize I was there. I had been alone with Bella for hours, except for the occasional nurse checking the machine readouts and changing IV bags.

Standing alone watching Bella, I had relaxed my strict regimen for passing as human and had reverted to my naturally immobile state. The transition back could be a little jarring. Sometimes it took a moment to shift from neutral to first gear and reanimate.

Renee sensed my presence and turned to look. When she saw me standing motionless, she flinched reflexively and gasped.

“Hello,” I said in a soothing voice and flashed Bella's “dazzling” smile to appear less scary and unnatural. “I'm Edward Cullen. You must be Bella's mother.”

“Oh, hello! What are you doing here?” She was startled, but seemed to recover as she looked into my eyes. Her tears ceased.

“I don't want Bella to be alone if she wakes up.”

“So you've been here the whole time?”

“Yes. My father took care of Bella after the accident.”

“Your sister called me?”

“Yes, Alice.”

“Oh, Bella, my baby girl, what have you done?”

Now in possession of the essential facts, Renee abruptly forgot I was there. She moved to Bella's bedside and leaned over to touch her, discovering what I had been struggling with—Bella had virtually no exposed area of skin that wasn't bandaged or bruised. Renee's hands dangled uselessly in the air for a moment before she dropped them and curled her fingers around the bed rail.

Renee leaned over again and kissed Bella's forehead, though Bella was too heavily sedated to respond. Then she began speaking softly, continuously, saying nothing much, just hoping Bella could hear her voice. After a few minutes, she seemed to remember I was present and turned toward me, tears back in her eyes.

“So why was Bella in Phoenix?” she asked me.

“Well, she could tell you better herself when she wakes up, but she said she wanted to leave Forks.”

“So what were you doing here?”

“My father and my sister came here with me so I could try to change her mind. She

left very abruptly and I thought she was making a hasty decision.”

“I take it that you are Bella’s boyfriend? Did you two have a fight?”

“‘Yes’ to the first question and ‘no’ to the second. I think I should let her explain for herself, though.”

Just then, the door opened and Carlisle and Alice walked in.

*I saw that she was here, Edward. We came to help,* Alice conveyed to me.

I nodded slightly.

“Hello,” Carlisle offered his hand. “I’m Dr. Carlisle Cullen and this is my daughter, Alice. You’ve met Edward, I see. You are Bella’s mother?”

“Yes, call me Renee. I’m pleased to meet you. And thank you so much for saving my daughter,” Renee said as the tears started flowing again. “She lost a lot of blood, they told me. She could have died if you hadn’t been there, right?”

Carlisle smiled. “Shall we step into the hallway to talk?” He ushered everyone out. When he looked at me, I shook my head.

“I’ll stay with Bella.”

I listened as Carlisle related the entire fabricated story to Renee and detailed Bella’s injuries. I took the chair beside Bella, leaned over the rail, and began singing softly.

*How are you doing, Edward?* Alice asked a short while later, as she reentered the room.

“I’m okay.”

*Are you going to stay here?*

“Yes, I won’t leave her.”

*All right. We’ll go double-check the ballet studio, then head back to the hotel.*

“Did Emmett and Jasper return to Forks?”

*Yes, they flew out earlier. Esme called. They haven’t seen anything of the female, Victoria, since you left.*

“We didn’t find any fresh signs of her in Forks. Was Esme saying that they did?”

*Rosalie found a trail through the woods toward the airport.*

“Toward SeaTac Airport?”

*Yes.*

“So Victoria watched us leave. She would have known that we were coming to Phoenix.”

*And she told James...*

“But he must have been in Phoenix already, because he lured Bella to the studio before we arrived, right?”

*Yes. We checked the cell phone. He called Bella around five o’clock in the morning from Renee’s house. We thought it was Renee calling her. I could have sworn I heard Renee’s voice at the beginning of that phone call.*

Alice screwed up her face in puzzlement.

*After the phone call, the vision changed to James attacking Bella at the studio. And that’s when I called you.*

There was something about Bella’s running away to meet James that was bothering me.

“Alice, tell me again what happened at the airport...how Bella got away from you and Jasper.”

*Oh, Edward. We are so, so sorry about that! She wanted something to eat and*

*asked Jasper to escort her instead of me because she was so stressed out. Then she made a detour to the ladies' room and he waited for her at one exit while she sneaked out a different exit. Bella had obviously been there before and knew about that back door, but we didn't. I was seeing things change for the worse, but Bella was really good at hiding her deception, so we didn't realize it was her decisions that were making things go wrong...*

"Bella must have been terrified trying to keep her mother alive and having to trick you and Jasper to do it." It was a little frightening to realize that Bella had fooled Alice. That was something not easily done. *What had she been thinking?* I wondered. Didn't she realize that I and my family would have a better chance of saving her mother than she did all by herself? Probably, she was afraid one of us would get hurt. As if!

Alice interrupted my thoughts.

*I forgot something, Edward. Bella wrote a note to her mother, she said, that I was supposed to leave at Renee's house. After she dodged us, though, I opened it and found it was really a letter for you.*

"Alice, you read it?"

*Sorry, Edward. I saw my name. And then I was glad I read it, because it explained her disappearance. We were frantic!*

Alice searched her pockets until she found the crumpled envelope. By the time it was in my hand, I didn't have to read it. Alice had the image of it in her mind.

Edward,

I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alice and Jasper. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alice especially, please.

And please, please don't come after him. That's what he wants, I think. I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me, especially you. Please, this is the only thing I can ask you now. For me.

I love you. Forgive me.

Bella

It was so poignant. Bella *was* self-sacrificing and brave—and deluded, of course—but there was my answer. It was clearer than ever that I should not expose her to our world. It was far too dangerous, *especially* for Bella, because she didn't have even a nominal instinct for self-preservation. She put everybody else ahead of herself. How could I not love her?

"I don't blame you, Alice, in case you were wondering. My brave Bella. She seems determined to get herself killed. I don't know what to do with her."

*You're doing all you can do. She's alive because of you.*

"No! She almost died because of me! Twice!"

*But she didn't. And you did save her human life. You did the impossible, really. I'm not sure why, but you did, so be happy.*

"You did too, Alice, coping with all that blood. Thank you."

*Of course! I love her, Edward! You know that.*

I nodded and smiled.

*So...see you later, gator!*

When Carlisle and Renee finished talking, Renee reentered Bella's room.

"Are you going back to the hotel with your family?"

“No, I’ll stay here,” I said.

“I’m going to stay with her, so you can go get some rest if you want to.”

“No thank you. I can’t leave her.”

“Well, alrighty then!” she said with false cheer. She was thinking that I was a little odd and much too intense for a teenager—her mind wasn’t difficult to read. She was right on both counts, too. I was far too old to be a teenager and I would never be cavalier about my reason for existing. She’d just have to get used to me.

I picked up a magazine and went to sit in the chair by the door, giving Renee space to be closer to Bella. She could stay, but I wasn’t leaving. At some point, I knew, she would fall asleep in the big, turquoise, lounge chair.

Renee and I danced politely around each other for the rest of that day—actually, I was polite and she was wary. *Who is this boy who won’t be separated from my daughter? What are his intentions? Does she share them? Bella’s been holding out on me!*

I was relieved when she fell asleep on Thursday night, though I would have been happier if she had gone home to sleep. I was tired of pretending to take bathroom breaks and eat food and sleep. I could relax my vigilance when Renee left to call Phil, or run some errands, or get something to eat. She kept inviting me out for food, but I made excuses, as usual, and avoided the uncomfortable social interaction.

Renee was nice enough, but she was far too perceptive for my comfort. I had to stay sharp and practice my poker face when she made startlingly accurate assessments of me and my feelings for Bella. It wouldn’t surprise me if she eventually figured out that I could read her mind.

I did enjoy picking images out of her head when she thought about Bella’s childhood. Judging from Renee’s recollections, Bella had abandoned childhood at a tender age. Was that because Renee herself was so childlike and Bella had compensated, or was Bella just particularly mature? Did her parents’ early divorce have something to do with it? It was difficult to know.

Alice and Carlisle had said their goodbyes Thursday morning. Carlisle needed to get back to the hospital in Forks, as this fiasco had kept him away for a week. He planned to call Charlie when he got home and update him on Bella’s condition, though it hadn’t changed much. She was still sleeping.

As for me, I was staying for the duration. I would not let Bella out of my sight, not even in the hospital—except when I had to fake some activity for Renee’s benefit. I hadn’t heard what Carlisle said to her when he left, but she didn’t question my continual presence anymore.

Renee was in the cafeteria and I was sitting in my usual spot beside Bella, singing softly to her, when I saw her eyes begin to flutter. After a moment, they opened slowly, then she squinted them shut against the bright fluorescent lights. Her fingers groped at her face and curled around her breathing tube.

“No, you don’t.” I took her hand in mine, overjoyed to see her eyes. The doctors had reduced her medication in order to talk to her and check her pain level.

“Edward?” She turned her face toward mine. The beginning of a smile stretched across her slack cheeks, then morphed to an expression of guilt and remorse. “Oh, Edward, I’m so sorry!”

“Shhhh. Everything’s all right now.”

“What happened?” she was dazed and groggy. Her question brought it all back, the

fear, the mortification. My voice came out barely a whisper.

“I was almost too late. I could have been too late.”

“I was so stupid, Edward. I thought he had my mom.”

“He tricked us all.” We’d thought he was in Canada when he was on his way to Arizona.

“I need to call Charlie and my mom,” she said, a little foggy.

“Alice called them. Renee is here—well, here in the hospital. She’s getting something to eat right now.”

“She’s here?” In her surprise, she tried to sit up. I pressed her shoulder back down to the pillow.

“She’ll be back soon. And you need to stay still.”

“But what did you tell her?” She was starting to panic. “Why did you tell her I’m here?”

“You fell down two flights of stairs and through a window.” I smiled to myself. “You have to admit, it could happen.”

Bella glanced down at herself to take inventory of the damage.

“How bad am I?” she asked.

“You have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises covering every inch of your skin, and you’ve lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I didn’t like it—it made you smell all wrong for a while.”

“That must have been a nice change for you.” Huh? What was she *thinking*?

“No, I like how *you* smell.”

“How did you do it?” Bella whispered, uncertainty shading her words.

“I’m not sure.” I held her fingers gently in mine, but I could not meet her eyes. I knew it had been touch and go and it could have gone either way. I sighed at the reality of that.

“It was impossible...to stop,” I whispered. “Impossible. But I did.” I gave her a crooked smile. “I *must* love you.”

“Don’t I taste as good as I smell?” she teased.

“Even better—better than I imagined.” I groaned inwardly, remembering.

“I’m sorry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of all the things to apologize for.”

“What *should* I apologize for?”

“For very nearly taking yourself away from me forever.”

“I’m sorry,” she offered again.

“I know why you did it.” I paused. “It was still irrational, of course. You should have waited for me, you should have told me,” I chided.

“You wouldn’t have let me go.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

She shivered and winced. I was instantly concerned. “Bella, what’s wrong?”

“What happened to James?”

Of course! She needed to know that or how would she feel safe? What was *I* thinking? “After I pulled him off you, Emmett and Jasper took care of him.” If she hadn’t been broken and lying in a heap on the floor, I would have done it myself.

“I didn’t see Emmett and Jasper there,” she commented, confused.

“They had to leave the room...there was a lot of blood.”

“But you stayed.”

“Yes, I stayed.”

“And Alice, and Carlisle . . .”

“They love you too, you know.” They had proved that over and over these past few days.

Bella’s face looked pained. “Did Alice see the tape?”

“Yes.” A wave of anger and revulsion hit me.

“She was always in the dark, that’s why she didn’t remember.”

“I know. She understands now.” I involuntarily replayed the tape in my head.

“Ugh,” Bella’s groan brought me back to the present.

“What is it?”

“Needles.” She had noticed one sticking out of her arm and was trying to avoid fainting. We’d been through this before.

“Afraid of a needle.” I shook my head in disbelief. “Oh, a sadistic vampire, intent on torturing her to death, sure, no problem, she runs off to meet him. An IV, on the other hand . . .”

“Why are *you* here?” she asked suddenly.

I was stunned. She didn’t want me here? It took a moment to collect myself. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No! No, I meant, why does my mother think you’re here? I need to have my story straight before she gets back.”

“Oh.” My relief was greater than was warranted, given that I *should* leave.

“I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to come back to Forks.” I put on my sincere face, as if to convince her now. “You agreed to see me, and you drove out to the hotel where I was staying with Carlisle and Alice—of course I was here with parental supervision—but you tripped on the stairs on the way to my room and . . . well, you know the rest. You don’t need to remember any details, though; you have a good excuse to be a little muddled about the finer points.”

She absorbed the tale for a moment.

“There are a few flaws with that story. Like no broken windows.”

“Not really. Alice had a little bit too much fun fabricating evidence. It’s all been taken care of very convincingly—you could probably sue the hotel if you wanted to. You have nothing to worry about.” I stroked her pale cheek with my fingertips. “Your only job now is to heal.”

The heart monitor which had been beeping in the background jumped into high speed when my fingers met Bella’s skin. I smiled.

“That’s going to be embarrassing,” Bella said to herself, disgruntled.

I chuckled as a thought occurred to me.

“Hmm, I wonder . . .”

I bent to kiss her. As my lips approached hers, the beeping became frenetic. I paused there for a moment before leaning in closer and pressing my lips to hers. The beeping stopped altogether! *Yikes!* I jerked my head away from her and, with great relief, heard the beeping resume. It was extremely disconcerting.

“It seems that I’m going to have to be even more careful with you than usual.”

“I was not finished kissing you,” Bella piped up. “Don’t make me come over there.”

Talk about idle threats! I grinned and leaned over to kiss her again, gently. The monitor went crazy. As distracting as that was—and fun!—I needed to compose myself.

“I think I hear your mother.”

“Don’t leave me!” Bella cried in a panic.

“I won’t,” I promised her. “I’ll take a nap.” I grinned and darted to the turquoise recliner at the foot of Bella’s bed. I laid it back as far as it would go and allowed my head to loll sideways. I shut my eyes.

“Don’t forget to breathe,” Bella mocked. She could tease me all she wanted to—I was ecstatic to have her back. I inhaled an exaggerated breath to satisfy her criticism, but remained “asleep” with my eyes closed.

Bella’s mother was complaining to a nurse’s aid outside the door about the lack of comfortable facilities for relatives who want to stay overnight with their loved ones. She had had a rough night on the recliner. It wasn’t that comfortable.

“Mom!” Bella called in a whisper when her mother entered the room.

“He never leaves, does he?” Renee was puzzled and perhaps a bit irritated. “Bella, I was so upset!”

“I’m sorry, Mom. But everything’s fine now, it’s okay.” Bella was comforting her mother while she herself was lying in a hospital bed, mangled and in pain! She was a caretaker, obviously accustomed to mothering her mother.

“I’m just glad to finally see your eyes open.”

“How long have they been closed?” Bella seemed to panic again. I tensed.

“It’s Friday, hon, you’ve been out for a while.”

“Friday?” She *was* panicked. I should have told her about the days she had lost.

“They had to keep you sedated for a while, honey—you’ve got a lot of injuries,” Renee told Bella.

“I know,” she replied dully.

“You’re lucky Dr. Cullen was there. He’s such a nice man...very young, though. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...”

“You met Carlisle?” Bella seemed surprised.

“And Edward’s sister, Alice. She’s a lovely girl.”

“She is,” Bella confirmed.

“You didn’t tell me you had such good friends in Forks.” Renee was digging.

Bella moaned and I snapped my eyes open.

“What hurts?” Renee asked anxiously.

“It’s fine. I just have to remember not to move.”

I got it...Bella was trying to distract her mother from asking about me.

“Where’s Phil?” she asked, apropos of nothing. She was *definitely* trying to change the subject.

“Florida—oh, Bella! You’ll never guess! Just when we were about to leave, the best news!” It might be big news, but the ease with which she was distracted from her concern for Bella convinced me of her self-absorption.

“Phil got signed?” Bella, of course, was instantly ready to listen.

“Yes, how did you guess! The Suns, can you believe it?”

“That’s great, Mom.” Bella wasn’t all that enthused, I could tell.

“And you’ll like Jacksonville so much. I was a little bit worried when Phil started talking about Akron, what with the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the

cold, but now Jacksonville! It's always sunny, and the humidity really isn't *that* bad. We found the cutest house, yellow..."

I stopped listening, having lost interest. Was Bella moving to Florida? I couldn't stop her, of course, if that was what she wanted. She'd be much safer far away from me. I felt a stab of sadness.

"Wait, Mom!" Bella finally interrupted her mother. "What are you talking about? I'm not going to Florida. I live in Forks." Oh. I wondered if she was trying to spare my feelings. I'd have to make sure she did what was in her own best interest.

"But you don't have to anymore, silly. Phil will be able to be around so much more now...." I lost interest again.

"Mom," Bella clarified to her mother and maybe to me. "I *want* to live in Forks. I'm already settled in at school, and I have a couple of girlfriends—"

Suddenly, I felt at least one pair of eyes on me.

"—and Charlie needs me. He's just all alone up there, and he can't cook *at all*."

Why did I get the feeling that Bella didn't want to tell her mother about me?

"You want to stay in Forks?" Renee seemed flabbergasted by the idea. Then her tone changed to suspicion. "Why?"

"I told you—school, Charlie—ouch!" Bella was trying to distract her mother again. I was on to her tricks.

"Bella, honey, you hate Forks."

"It's not so bad."

Renee paused and I could only assume she was choosing her words carefully or making a face of some kind. "Is it this boy?" she asked.

"He's part of it," Bella said grudgingly. "So, have you had a chance to talk with Edward?"

"Yes... and I want to talk to you about that."

"What about?"

"I think that boy is in love with you." She was still speaking softly in case she might wake me, I supposed.

"I think so, too." Bella was not going to give her mother *anything* without Renee's dragging it out of her, as usual.

"And how do you feel about him?" Aye, there's the question. I waited anxiously for her reply.

"I'm pretty crazy about him." I was not sure what I thought about that response. It didn't sound quite serious somehow.

"Well, he *seems* very nice, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking, but you're so young, Bella..."

I had to give Renee credit. She was beginning to discern, despite Bella's efforts to hide it, that Bella was serious about me too and that concerned her. Renee's mind was very childlike—innocent, immediately responsive to external stimuli, unable to focus on logical analysis, operating almost exclusively on intuition—but right on target every time. Interesting.

"I know that, Mom. Don't worry about it. It's just a crush." A crush? What a strange thing for Bella to say. Was she trying to keep her mother calm? To protect her from what?

"That's right." Renee was easy to lie to, I saw, easily mollified.

“Do you need to go?” Bella asked. I must have missed some cue with my eyes closed.

“Phil’s supposed to call in a little while... I didn’t know you were going to wake up...” She seemed a little regretful, but not willing to put him off. Self-involved, certainly.

“No problem, Mom. I won’t be alone.”

“I’ll be back soon. I’ve been sleeping here, you know,” she said.

Yes, which required me to be on my best human-like behavior at all times. It was getting old, but I’d do it for Bella for as long as necessary.

“Oh, Mom, you don’t have to do that!” Bella protested. “You can sleep at home—I’ll never notice.”

“I was too nervous,” Renee admitted. “There’s been some crime in the neighborhood, and I don’t like being there alone.”

“Crime?” Bella was frightened for her mother, having not caught on yet.

“Someone broke into that dance studio around the corner from the house and burned it to the ground—there’s nothing left at all! And they left a stolen car right out front. Do you remember when you used to dance there, honey?”

“I remember,” Bella winced. I opened my eyes to see if she was okay. She seemed disturbed by her memory of the place. I didn’t blame her. She was remarkably composed considering everything she had been through. Again, she was trying to protect her mother.

“I can stay, baby, if you need me.”

“No, Mom, I’ll be fine. Edward will be with me.” It felt good to be needed.

“I’ll be back tonight,” Renee promised. It sounded more like a warning. Could she possibly think that Bella and I would get up to—what was the word?—“hanky-panky” in her absence? I clenched my jaw to keep from breaking into a smile.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Bella. Try to be more careful when you walk, honey, I don’t want to lose you.”

It was no idle comment. Bella’s mother *did* have to worry about Bella walking around safely. She was so accident-prone that she *could* hurt herself this badly just by getting out of bed in the morning. I couldn’t restrain my grin.

As Renee left, somebody else walked into the room. “Are you feeling anxious, honey? Your heart rate got a little high there.” I peeked at the nurse checking the monitor.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll tell your RN that you’re awake. She’ll be in to see you in a minute.”

As soon as the door shut, I leapt to Bella’s side.

“You stole a car?” Bella raised her eyebrows and made me smile again.

“It was a good car, very fast.”

“How was your nap?”

“Interesting...” I let my voice trail off.

“What?” Bella asked, suspicious.

I hesitated. “I’m surprised. I thought Florida... and your mother... well, I thought that’s what you would want.”

She seemed utterly confused. “But you’d be stuck inside all day in Florida. You’d only be able to come out at night, just like a real vampire.”

She was trying to amuse me, but I was serious. It was necessary that I push this option. Though it wasn’t what I wanted, it *would* be best for her.

“I would stay in Forks, Bella. Or somewhere like it. Someplace where I wouldn’t hurt you anymore.”

She seemed at first to be fighting her way through a fog trying to understand what I was saying. Only slowly, very slowly, did she start to make sense of it and as she did so, her heart rate sped up. I waited for her to say something.

A nurse must have been monitoring Bella, because she walked into the room, clearly intent on checking the equipment. I sat completely still, pretending I wasn’t there.

“Time for more pain meds, sweetheart?”

Bella did seem to be in pain, but of course, she would deny it.

“No, no, I don’t need anything.” Her voice was tight and the heart monitor was beeping rapidly.

“No need to be brave, honey. It’s better if you don’t get too stressed out; you need to rest.” Bella shook her head, not speaking.

“Okay,” she said reluctantly. “Hit the call button when you’re ready.”

She gave me a dirty look, as if I was to blame. I was, of course, for everything. When the nurse left, I was at Bella’s side again immediately. I smoothed my cool hands across her cheeks trying to comfort her.

“Shhh, Bella, calm down.”

“Don’t leave me.” Her eyes were frightened.

“I won’t,” I reassured her. “Now relax before I call the nurse back to sedate you.”

She seemed completely unable to settle down. What had I done?

“Bella. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here as long as you need me.” I was pleading with her now.

“Do you swear you won’t leave me?” she rasped.

I cupped her face between my hands and leaned in very close. “I swear.” I gazed deeply into her eyes until she seemed to enter that semi-entranced state I’d seen many times before. I was entranced myself. Her sweet floral scent and the rushing of the blood beneath her thin skin brought back the memory of pulling her blood into my mouth, letting it roll down my throat—the most seductive, luscious blood in the world.

I hadn’t hunted since when? I was suddenly so thirsty...and she was *so* delicious. But I kept my head, of course I did. My eyes trapped hers until the heart monitor slowed. I exhaled in relief, both for her lessening anxiety and for my release from the frantic pounding that inflamed my thirst...and my desire.

“Better?” I asked, my voice husky.

“Yes.” But she was still on edge.

I complained to myself too softly for her to hear. *All I said was that you’d be safer away from me. What an absurd overreaction!*

“Why did you say that?” She was calmer, but still unsettled. “Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you *want* me to go away?”

“No, I don’t want to be without you, Bella, of course not. Be rational. And I have no problem with saving you, either—if it weren’t for the fact that I was the one putting you in danger...that I’m the reason that you’re here.”

“Yes, you are the reason. The reason I’m here—*alive*.”

“Barely,” my voice became softer as my self-disgust rose. “Covered in gauze and plaster and hardly able to move.”

“I wasn’t referring to my most recent near-death experience. I was thinking of the

others—you can take your pick. If it weren't for you, I would be rotting away in the Forks cemetery."

I was still stuck on the ghastliness of that horrific day.

"That's not the worst part, though." My voice was so soft now, it came out a whisper. If I *could* cry, I would be crying now. "Not seeing you there on the floor... crumpled and broken. Not thinking I was too late. Not even hearing you scream in pain—all those unbearable memories that I'll carry with me for the rest of eternity. No, the very worst was feeling...knowing that I couldn't stop. Believing that I was going to kill you myself." I suddenly wished that I could throw up and rid myself of the revulsion for what I was that churned in my stomach.

"But you didn't."

"I could have. So easily." If it weren't for the blood transfusions, she *would* have died.

"Promise me." Bella's voice was determined now.

"What?"

"You know what."

"I don't seem to be strong enough to stay away from you, so I suppose that you'll get your way...whether it kills you or not."

"Good." She was becoming more stubborn by the minute. But I was shocked, astounded, by what she said next.

"You told me how you stopped...now I want to know why," she finished the sentence almost angrily.

"Why?" I stretched the word out, afraid to hear her next words.

"*Why* you did it. Why didn't you just let the venom spread? By now I would be just like you."

*Alice!* I cursed her in my mind. Of course she didn't keep her mouth shut. Why had I ever thought she would? I could not think straight—I certainly couldn't compose a reasonable, calm reply to Bella's statement, so I said nothing at all.

At my silence, Bella continued.

"I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships. But it just seems logical...a man and a woman have to be somewhat equal...as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other *equally*."

I had calmed down enough to soften my face and hide my fury from Bella. It wasn't her fault, after all, that Alice had led her this way. I crossed my arms on the bed rail and set my chin on top of them.

"You *have* saved me," I told her softly. It was true. She had given me a reason to go on living.

"I can't always be Lois Lane," she continued. "I want to be Superman, too."

"You don't know what you're asking."

My mind reeled off all the implications of her becoming one of us. For me, it would be ideal, the next best thing to my being human again. But not for her.

"I think I do," she insisted.

"Bella, you *don't* know. I've had almost ninety years to think about this, and I'm still not sure."

"Do you wish that Carlisle hadn't saved you?"

"No, I don't wish that." I thought about how to explain the difference. "But my life

was over. I wasn't giving anything up."

"You *are* my life. You're the only thing it would hurt me to lose." She couldn't understand, of course she couldn't.

"I can't do it, Bella. I won't do that to you."

"Why not? Don't tell me it's too hard! After today, or I guess it was a few days ago...anyway, after *that*, it should be nothing."

It probably would be even harder to stop a second time, but she was completely missing the point, anyway. Maybe it would be more convincing to focus on the tangibles.

"And the pain?"

That worked. She paled to my color, reliving the pain of James' bite. And she'd been on morphine then.

But she was still being stubborn. "That's my problem. I can handle it."

"It's possible to take bravery to the point where it becomes insanity."

"It's not an issue. Three days. Big deal."

*Alice again!* Damn her for making Bella even more determined to become a vampire! I would deal with her later.

"Charlie? Renee?"

Silence was her response. I waited. Bella's mouth dropped as if to speak, then closed again. She had no answer for that.

Finally, she managed to speak, but she was unconvincing. "Look, that's not an issue either. Renee has always made the choices that work for her—she'd want me to do the same. And Charlie's resilient, he's used to being on his own. I can't take care of them forever. I have my own life to live."

"Exactly. And I won't end it for you."

"If you're waiting for me to be on my deathbed, I've got news for you! I was just there!"

Would she never stop? "You're going to recover."

We stared each other down for a while before she said, "No, I'm not."

Now I was confused. "Of course you are. You may have a scar or two..."

"You're wrong," she pressed. "I'm going to die."

"Really, Bella. You'll be out of here in a few days. Two weeks at most."

"I may not die now...but I'm going to die sometime. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I'm going to get *old*."

*Ahh*, she was giving me a headache!

"That's how it's supposed to happen. How it should happen. How it should have happened if I didn't exist—and *I shouldn't exist*."

Bella snorted. Snorted! Completely dismissing what I had said. I stared at her.

"That's stupid," she informed me. "That's like going to someone who's just won the lottery, taking their money, and saying, 'Look, let's just go back to how things should be. It's better that way.' And I'm not buying it."

"I'm hardly a lottery prize," I snapped.

"That's right. You're much better."

I was out of patience for this argument. We shouldn't be arguing anyway. She would never get well at this rate.

"Bella, we're not having this discussion anymore. I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it."

“If you think that’s the end, then you don’t know me very well. You’re not the only vampire I know.”

Fury gripped me. “Alice wouldn’t dare,” I said in my most dangerous voice.

“Alice already saw it, didn’t she?” Bella accused. “That’s why the things she says upset you. She knows I’m going to be like you...someday.”

“She’s wrong. She also saw you dead, but that didn’t happen, either.”

“You’ll never catch *me* betting against Alice.”

We were at a standoff. I glared at her; she glared at me. Neither of us wanted to give in first. Eventually, the glare-fest became a little funny.

“So where does that leave us?” Bella asked finally.

“I believe it’s called an *impasse*.” I chuckled without mirth.

Bella sighed, then said, “Ouch.”

It seemed to hurt her just to breathe.

“How are you feeling?” I had been neglecting her best interests. I should ring the nurse.

“I’m fine.” Why did I even bother to ask?

“I don’t believe you.” I was frustrated, but I spoke gently.

“I’m not going back to sleep.”

“You need rest. All this arguing isn’t good for you.”

“So give in,” she suggested.

“Nice try.” This was degenerating. Now I *would* summon the nurse. I pressed the Call button.

“No!” Bella protested.

“Yes?” from the wall speaker.

“I think we’re ready for more pain medication.” I was being imperious and it irritated her, but I ignored that.

“I’ll send in the nurse,” the voice answered in a monotone.

“I won’t take it.” So, so stubborn.

“I don’t think they’re going to ask you to swallow anything,” I said, touching the bag of fluids hanging by her bedside.

Her heart monitor started accelerating and her eyes went wild with alarm. She was frightened to sleep. Was it because of James and the trauma she’d been through, or was she afraid I would leave? I wouldn’t. Not now.

“Bella, you’re in pain. You need to relax so you can heal. Why are you being so difficult? They’re not going to put any more needles in you now.”

“I’m not afraid of the needles. I’m afraid to close my eyes.”

I flashed her favorite crooked smile and took her face between my hands.

“I told you I’m not going anywhere. Don’t be afraid. As long as it makes you happy, I’ll be here.”

She smiled at my words. “You’re talking about forever, you know.”

“Oh, you’ll get over it,” I teased. “It’s just a crush.”

She shook her head. “I was shocked when Renee swallowed that one. I know *you* know better.”

“That’s the beautiful thing about being human,” I told her. “Things change.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

I laughed at the idea of holding my breath until she changed her mind. She knew

that I could if need be.

The nurse entered the room with a syringe full of fluid.

“Excuse me,” she said to me, a bit rudely.

I moved to the other side of the room out of her way and waited, holding Bella’s gaze, trying to reassure her.

“Here you go, honey.” The nurse injected the medication into Bella’s IV drip bag. “You’ll feel better now.”

“Thanks,” Bella muttered, more to please than because she was pleased. It took only a moment before her eyes started to close. I stepped to her side and placed my hand on her cheek.

“Stay,” she breathed to me.

“I will. Like I said, as long as it makes you happy...as long as it’s what’s best for you.”

“S not the same thing,” she slurred.

I laughed at her. “Don’t worry about that now, Bella. You can argue with me when you wake up.”

She was fading away, but tried to smile. “Kay.”

I moved my lips to her ear. “I love you,” I whispered.

“Me, too,” she answered groggily.

“I know,” I repeated the words she’d said to me after James’ attack. It made me smile.

She turned her head toward me, leading with her lips. I indulged her by pressing mine against hers lightly.

“Thanks,” she breathed.

“Anytime.”

“Edward?” It was difficult now for her to speak.

“Yes?”

“I’m betting on Alice,” she slurred before dropping off to sleep.

The irony almost made me smile.