

Here in the Garden of Sin

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Edward has spent his entire existence longing for one thing. When he finally gets it, his careful control starts slipping. It doesn't matter to his savior, she's dying either way. Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it. ExB/AU/OOC/Dark

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Chapter 1

Summary: Edward has spent his entire existence as a vampire hearing the thoughts of others. Just when he feels he can't take it anymore, he discovers Bella. Not only are her thoughts a secret to him, but her presence silences the thoughts of everyone else as well. He decides the only way to maintain his mental peace is to keep her forever, but he quickly discovers that creating a vampire isn't as easy as he originally thought. Bella finds herself in the middle of a nightmare when she realizes that it doesn't whether Edward succeeds, she's losing her life either way. Along the way feelings change, and while Edward is struggling to secure his future, Bella is devising a plan of her own. Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.

Edward/Bella ~ AU ~ Rated MA/NC-17 for dark themes

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Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoy it. :D

Prologue

"Pick up, pick up, please pick up!" Alice chanted as she listened to her brother's phone ring. After what felt like an eternity, it dropped into voicemail. There was no greeting, only the beep indicating the

recording had started. "Shit," she mumbled as she hit the red button on her cell. She dialed again with the same outcome.

Not knowing what else to do, she called the only one who she knew could help.

"Alice, what's going on?" Carlisle's concerned voice came over the line. It was unusual for his family to call him while he was working at the hospital, and he was immediately worried that something was terribly wrong.

"It's Edward," she answered in a panic. "He's gone. His future just vanished!"

Chapter 1

"Come on, Edward. I don't want to be late."

"Have you seen the way I drive, Alice? You won't be late." Edward grabbed his car keys and met his sister at the door. "Why do you insist on me driving you to class, anyway. You have your own car."

"I like to be chauffeured," she said. Her mind, however, was honest.

If you see the campus, there's a good chance you'll decide to enroll.

"Sure you do," Edward replied to her verbal answer.

Alice knew Edward had figured out her ulterior motives for wanting a ride and shrugged. Trying to trick a mind reader was futile.

Edward sighed and wrapped his arm around her as they walked to his car. "I'm sorry, Alice, but I can't do it anymore. You know that. I need a break. I don't know if a vampire can go insane, but I don't want to be the one to find out."

I've never had to do this alone before.

Edward didn't like replying to things that weren't spoken aloud. During conversations like this, it was hard for him to tell whether the other person wanted to communicate their thoughts to him. Being a mind reader was a heavy burden, something that had become too much for him.

"You'll be fine. It's only for a couple years. Four at the most, right?" He nudged her shoulder playfully. "Besides, someone has to keep up appearances."

"I know," Alice sighed. "It's going to be boring by myself. Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"Honestly, Alice, I have no desire whatsoever to continue the human façade. I understand why we do it; it's important to blend in if we want the luxuries of society. But I'm tired of being something I'm not. I'm tired of the monotony of pretending to be a high school or college student. Besides, you know better than anyone what it's like to be burdened with a *gift*," he scoffed. "At least you can be selective about yours. I have to hear *everyone* around me. I know you wish you could turn yours off, too. I would do anything, *anything*, to be able to put a stop to it. You know that better than anyone."

Edward laughed humorlessly as Alice recalled the handful of visions she'd had of him putting an end to the voices. Putting an end to himself. With her gift of foresight, she had been able to intervene each time. It was a secret between the two of them.

You won't get silence at home.

"Listening to Jasper's and Esme's minds all day is a much better option than an entire student body. Emmett and Rosalie are gone, and with you in school and Carlisle working . . . I won't get another chance like this. Not unless I want to go off on my own."

They sat in silence for the drive to the university. Edward listened to Alice's internal voice process everything he had said. She understood why he wanted to be alone, why he wanted to silence

the voices that were forever plaguing his psyche, and she knew he wasn't bluffing about leaving. Or worse. Attending college by herself was a much better option than losing Edward.

"Thanks for understanding," he said as he pulled up to the main entrance.

You're welcome.

"Pick me up at two. I'd walk, but it's going to rain. I wouldn't want people to think I was weird," she said sarcastically.

Edward laughed as his sister got out of the car. He sped away, excited for the first of what would hopefully be many quiet days.

The only downfall of closing his mind off to others was the physical distance he had to put between himself and his family. He couldn't have both silence and companionship, so he would have to settle for a little of both.

The house was empty when he arrived home, and Edward relished the silence in his mind. After over 100 years of being privy to the thoughts of everyone around him, anytime he was wholly alone was a refreshing and much welcomed change. Their house was deep in the woods, too far away from civilization for his mind to pick up the thoughts of others—another reason he wanted to take a break now while they still lived here. He felt bad for asking Alice to attend college by herself, but it would be years before an opportunity like this would arise again.

He may only be getting part time peace, but it was better than nothing.

The afternoon passed quickly; two o'clock approached faster than Edward would have liked. As he drove back within city limits, the voices invaded his mind. It was always hardest for him to deal with his unique ability after getting a short reprieve.

As he waited impatiently for Alice to emerge, he was hit with the most delectable aroma he had ever experienced. Existing alongside humans always held a thread of temptation, but this was different. The burn in his throat extended outward, filling his entire body. His mouth began to water, the sickly-sweet venom doing nothing to squelch the flames burning inside him. His muscles coiled reflexively. His instincts took over, demanding he devour whatever was emitting such a powerful scent.

Without a second thought to what he was about to do, he flew out of his car—keys still in the ignition, engine running—and toward the scent he so desperately craved. He had enough wits about him to keep at human speed, although barely. He inhaled, sniffing the air and following the fragrance to its source. Deep down he knew what he was about to do was wrong; he just didn't care. He was letting his inner demon take over. The monster had been repressed for too long, and now it was demanding his attention, demanding to be allowed its true nature.

It didn't take him long to pick his prey out of the crowd. It was a female, slight, brown hair, and in the middle of a congregation of students exiting the building. Surprisingly, he had enough coherency to know he couldn't attack here; there were too many people. After years of keeping his existence a secret, it became second nature to him. He would lure her away from the others and drink in solitude so he could thoroughly enjoy the kill.

Edward filtered through the voices in his head, looking for the one that belonged to his prey. He had to know the right thing to say so she would go with him peacefully and not raise suspicion. The monster inside him itched to hear his victim's thoughts once she realized death was certain. The begging, the screaming, the *fear* ; it would be beautiful.

He concentrated harder as he approached, unable to pick the mental voice out of the crowd. He was mere feet away when he put every ounce of concentration into hearing it.

He was not prepared for what happened next.

The first day of college was a stressful event for Bella Swan. She got lost on campus, was late for her psychology course, and lost her most expensive text book. She also shared three classes with the sleaziest man she had ever met, who never wasted an opportunity to hit on her.

It was 1:50 when her last class of the day ended, and she couldn't wait to get home. As she approached the doors closest to the parking lot, she caught sight of Mr. Sleazy. She turned abruptly and headed in the opposite direction. She would rather walk outside than risk him flirting with her again.

When Bella stepped outside, she had to work her way through a large group that had gathered below the overhang. She quickly discovered why—it was pouring. She stood there and contemplated if becoming a soggy, wet mess would be better than the unwanted attention.

She decided she was tough enough to handle the rain.

As Bella stepped into the downpour, a man suddenly appeared in front of her. Under normal circumstances, she probably would have found him attractive. However, one look into his feral, black eyes sent a chill racing up her spine.

"Come with me," he demanded. His voice, smooth and velvety, caressed each word in a way that shot fear through her body. Bella was frozen, too terrified to move. The man's fingers wrapped around her arm tightly. "Now."

Bella wasn't naïve to the danger of the situation. She planted her feet firmly and took a deep breath, preparing to scream. A sudden rush to her head took her off-guard. When the dizziness subsided, she found herself in the middle of the woods, face to face with the

strange man. He breathed heavily as he stood before her, wearing a furious scowl on his face.

"What do you want?" She hoped to sound strong, but her voice was only a whisper.

The man shook his head slowly. "What did you do to me?"

"What?"

"How are you doing it?" he asked frantically. He started walking toward her. She immediately backed away.

"Leave me alone!"

Bella screamed as the man lunged at her. The pain was instantaneous. He held her tightly enough to push the air from her lungs, making breathing—and screaming—impossible. And when she didn't think the pain could get any worse, he leaned down and sunk his teeth into her neck.

Between shock and blood loss, Bella began slipping out of consciousness. She didn't have the comfort of her life flashing before her eyes. Instead, she only experienced intense pain while her mind repeated over and over again, *I can't believe this is really happening*.

As she was holding on to life by a thread, a strong vibration shook her body. She heard a loud growl like a large cat at the zoo. Something warm began trickling down her neck.

"Don't!" The voice from earlier threatened. It sounded muffled and distant, as if she were listening from underwater. "Don't come any closer."

There was another vibration, another loud rumble, followed by a long silence.

" *Speak* , Carlisle."

"Son," said a soft voice in the distance. "Alice said that your future vanished from her vision. What is going on?"

"I don't know."

"Give me the girl, Edward."

"No."

"Yes, Edward! You bit her; she's losing too much blood. I could hear her bones breaking from across the parking lot. She needs medical attention."

"You can't take her from me." There was another loud, ferocious growl. "I said don't come any closer!" the man holding her shouted hysterically.

"Edward, I would never hurt you."

"I don't know what you're thinking."

Bella tried to understand the voices around her, but what they were saying didn't make sense. It was too confusing, and her mind felt slow and weighed down. As everything faded to black, she heard the man holding her say one last thing.

"I can't hear you, Carlisle. I can't hear anyone."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"I'm perfectly capable of doing this myself, Carlisle. You're not the only one with a medical background," Edward spat as he wrapped the girl's ribs with a bandage.

"I know you're capable, Son, but you haven't fed. You've already lost control—"

"I'm fine," he hissed through clenched teeth. He couldn't afford small talk. The breath he had been holding since Carlisle convinced him to bring the girl back to their house for treatment was running out. "Just leave the blood and go."

Carlisle stepped toward him. A warning growl ripped through Edward's chest. "Okay . . . okay." Carlisle set the supplies for the blood transfusion on the floor in front of him. With hands raised in surrender, he slowly backed out of the room.

Edward felt horrible for the way he was treating his father figure. Rationally he knew the girl was safe in Carlisle's presence. He had spent the past 300 years honing his control and even worked in the hospital's emergency department. But Edward had become too dependent on his ability to read minds. For as much as he wanted the silence, the loss of his sixth sense made him uneasy.

It was uncomfortable for Edward not to breathe. He didn't need to because his body didn't need oxygen. The problem was that while he held his breath, he had no sense of smell. Losing one sense was bad enough, but two? Losing two was practically unbearable. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

But if he began to breathe, how much longer would *she* ?

Edward had hoped that in the girl's weakened state he would be able to hear her thoughts, that whatever power she held over him would be lifted. It would prove his theory that she was the cause of his mental hearing loss. She had to be. Everything was working fine until he had tried to pull her specific thoughts from the crowd and then everything stopped like a switch had been flipped.

The initial shock had been enough to pull him out of the haze of blood lust—saving her life.

"Is he going to be all right?" he heard Alice ask from the main floor of the house. Edward may not have been able to read minds anymore, but his traditional vampire hearing was as keen as ever.

"I'm not sure," answered Carlisle. *"He wouldn't talk to me. Can you see anything?"*

"Nothing about him. It's as if he doesn't exist at all. I can't see the girl, either. It's so . . . unsettling."

I know how you feel , Edward wanted to tell her.

"I'm going to call Esme. Maybe she'll have more luck with him. Perhaps Jasper will be of help, too."

"Warn them that there's a human here," Alice said. *"I don't want Jasper to come back if he's not well fed. I don't need to see the future to know it won't turn out well."*

Edward didn't like disrupting his family's schedule, and he definitely didn't like the idea of more vampires in the house. The more he thought of having others here—others he couldn't *hear* —the more paranoid he became. If this girl was enough to tempt *him* , how would they react?

And how the hell was he supposed to protect her?

Even now, he was afraid to take a breath in fear of what would happen. He decided to wait until the blood transfusion was complete before he would attempt to breathe again. Handling blood was difficult enough without a temptation such as her in the room.

It would be so much easier to resist if he hadn't tasted her already.

The very second his power had disappeared, Edward lost all desire to hunt his target. She was no longer his prey; she was a mystery, an anomaly, a solution. He may not have been in the throes of blood lust, but he still wasn't thinking clearly. As he dragged her into the woods, he was only certain of one thing—she was meant for him.

And he knew what he had to do.

A knock on the door made him flinch. Not knowing the intentions of others would take some getting used to. "Stay out," he growled.

"Edward," Carlisle spoke through the door, "I only want to clean up. Please, Son, don't torture yourself out of guilt. Let me help you."

"I'm not—" Edward wanted to say he wasn't feeling guilty. Selfish, perhaps, but not guilty. He wasn't sorry or regretful for what he'd done, either. But he couldn't say any of those things because he was out of air. "I'm not."

Carlisle opened the door slowly and stepped cautiously into the room. Edward remained hovered over the girl, tense and ready to defend her. If Carlisle wanted to remove the IV needle and dispose of the bloody medical supplies, he would have to work around him.

"I don't understand. Please tell me what's going on so I can help you."

Edward didn't respond. He didn't exactly understand what was going on himself.

When Carlisle was done tending to the girl, he silently exited the room. Edward followed him to the door. Once in the hallway, Carlisle turned, sighing when Edward protectively blocked the doorway.

"It's getting late," he stated solemnly. "We'll need to do damage control." Edward's only response was a nod. "This would be a lot easier to deal with if I knew your intentions."

At this point, Edward didn't know exactly what would become of the girl. The unknown was the only thing keeping her alive right now. If Edward could be assured that whatever she had done to him was permanent, he's not sure he would have the strength to let her live. Her blood smelled too good. The only thing he was sure of was that he would eventually stop her heart from beating one way or another. However, he didn't know how to tell that to the man who valued human life above all else.

Edward took a deep breath. The fresh air from the hallway dulled the girl's scent. He closed his eyes, too ashamed to look at Carlisle as he spoke.

"Deal with it as if she were dead already."

As Bella slowly regained consciousness, broken memories flooded into her mind. A confrontation with a strange man. Being dragged into the woods. Words that made no sense. Pain. Lots of pain.

Her eyes shot open. It took her a few moments to focus. When she did, she was horrified to see the same man from her waking nightmare crouched beside her. She took a deep breath, preparing to scream with every ounce of energy she had. The sharp pain in her side, however, took her by surprise, and her scream fizzled into a strangled sob.

"You might not want to do that," the man said indifferently. "You broke a few ribs. Well, / broke your ribs." He stared at her intently, his body remaining completely motionless.

Bella started to panic. Her breathing became harsh and shallow, adding to the pain in her ribcage. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to concentrate. She knew if she wanted to get out of this situation alive, she needed to stay calm, think logically, and create a strategy.

Opening her eyes once again, she took in the room around her. She had no idea where she was or how long she had been out, but she needed to be able to describe as much as possible in case she was able to get to a phone.

Bella could see three white walls, a high ceiling, and a door. A house? An apartment? She couldn't see a window and she was too afraid—of the man and the pain—to turn and look behind her. She was lying on a black leather couch. There was a shelf filled with books, but other than that, there was nothing else in the room.

She turned her head to look at the man—her abductor. Swallowing back her fear, she took a good look at his face, memorizing it so she could describe him in detail if she ever got out of here alive. His hair was golden brown, his features sharp and defined, and his eyes, so dark that his pupils were barely distinguishable, were pitch black. She tried to recall the things he'd said earlier. He had thought she did something to him. Clearly he either mistook her for someone else or was delusional.

Bella racked her brain trying to remember what kidnapped victims were supposed to do. She knew they were supposed to make small talk with their captor so they'd see them as people and not things. At least, that's what her father had taught her.

"Please, sir," Bella said pleasantly, "this is probably just a big misunderstanding. My parents will worry about me if I don't go home. My friends, too. And I don't want to miss too many classes, either." She knew that her phone was in her backpack, wherever it was. "Um . . . can I have my backpack? My homework is in it."

The man regarded her silently.

"Can I at least call my dad and let him know I'm okay? I won't tell him anything else."

Again, he said nothing.

"If you're looking for some kind of reward, he'll pay it. Just let me talk to him, please." Bella tried to remain calm, but her nerves got the best of her. "My dad's a cop," she said. "He *will* find me. And you'd better hope that he finds me alive and unharmed or you'll be sorry!"

The man smirked, and Bella caught a glimpse of stark white teeth. " *I'll* be sorry?" He laughed then, a sound so sinister that Bella's short-lived bravery crumbled.

"Please, just let me go," she begged as tears spilled down her cheeks. "I promise not to tell anybody. I swear! I don't even know who you are or where I am. You can bring me somewhere, *anywhere* ! I don't even care. It doesn't matter. I'll keep my eyes closed—"

"Quiet," he hissed. "For Christ's sake, stop rambling and please be quiet."

Bella kept her mouth shut and tried to silence her sobs. It was for the best, anyway. Pleading only made him angry, and the harder she cried, the more intense the pain in her ribs became.

"You have no idea how nice the silence is after all this time." The man closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. His body shuddered violently, and then he was absolutely still again.

Bella had just gotten her breathing under control when the door to the room swung open. So quickly that she didn't even see it happen, the man moved between her and the door. He crouched before her in a protective stance as an angry growl tore through his lips.

It wasn't the first time Bella had heard that sound. A memory flashed before her eyes—the same feral noise, teeth tearing at her flesh, the

crack of breaking bones. Her hand flew to her neck, but there was nothing there. No wound, no pain.

A tiny girl stood in the threshold. Bella instantly feared for her safety. She wanted to tell her to run. She wanted to scream for help. Instead she said nothing. Much to her surprise, the girl didn't seem frightened. Her face registered shock, hurt, and finally, anger.

"Fine, Edward. Have it your way." She slammed the door loudly, leaving Bella alone with the man once again.

Edward , Bella thought. She had a name now. It was familiar somehow. Suddenly she remembered the presence of another person in the woods, positive that the name was said at some point. She thought for sure it was another man, but maybe it was that girl. Her recollection wasn't all that great. After all, she did think . . . *Edward* . . . ripped her neck open with his teeth.

Edward sighed as he returned his gaze to her. Bella shifted uncomfortably from the intensity of his stare. "Please—"

"Shhh."

He sank to his knees at the side of the couch and dropped his head into his hands. Bella listened to his slow, labored breathing as she watched the rise and fall of his shoulders. The movement seemed odd after the absolute stillness he displayed when she first woke up. It crossed her mind that he might not have been breathing at all before, but she brushed off the thought. It made her feel crazy. There was something strange about him, though, something *wrong* . She just couldn't put her finger on what it was.

A light knock on the door cut through the quiet room.

"What?" Edward snarled.

"Edward, honey, may I come in?"

Edward knew that Esme had arrived home, and from having overheard Carlisle and Alice's conversation, he assumed Esme would try to intervene at some point. Carlisle must have explained the situation far away from the house where he wouldn't be able to overhear. He didn't know what, if anything, Carlisle had asked her to do. Esme was motherly and compassionate. The only question was whose side she would take in the matter?

He didn't believe she posed a direct threat to the girl, so he told her to enter the room. "Close the door behind you," he said. "And stay back. I mean it, Esme. I don't want to hurt you."

Bella watched cautiously as Esme entered the room. At least three people knew she was here, and so far none of them seemed overly concerned. Esme timidly approached the couch and smiled warmly. Bella's eye darted between the two people in the room. Their completely opposite demeanors only confused her more.

"So it's true." Esme finally broke the silence.

"What's true?"

"You can't hear anyone." When Edward didn't reply, Esme frowned. "She's terrified, you know?"

"She's fine," he said coldly.

In one smooth movement, Esme was next to Edward's side. His warning growl reverberated through the room.

"Edward," she said in a way that demanded his attention. She gave him a look, the kind of non-verbal cue that said to knock it off, before turning back to Bella. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm Esme. What's your name?"

Bella hesitated as she looked into the woman's eyes. They were kind, but the odd color—deep, golden butterscotch—set her on edge. Esme smiled at her encouragingly. "Bella," she answered.

"Well, Bella, it's nice to meet you. Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?" Bella shook her head, too nervous and frightened to think about something as trivial as food. "When you are, let Edward or me know, all right?"

Bella glanced nervously at Edward. The thought of asking him for anything sent a chill down her spine.

"Did you give her anything for the pain?"

"No."

Esme sighed sadly. "I'll get her some painkillers. And a blanket. She must be freezing. I'll have Alice buy her a bed, too. It must be uncomfortable to lie on that couch with broken ribs."

"A bed, Esme?" Edward asked incredulously.

"Yes, Edward, a bed. If you're going to keep her here you need to be responsible about it."

Keep me here? Bella thought in disbelief. *He can't keep me here!*

"Try to get some rest, sweetheart. Tell Edward if you need anything. He *will* get it for you." Esme gave Edward a pointed look before leaving the room.

When the door closed, Edward looked at Bella. "Don't let the presence of my family lull you into a false sense of comfort." He didn't bother to mask the hatred behind his coal black eyes.

Thank you for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Bella tried to stay awake, but stress and exhaustion finally got the best of her. She slept restlessly, her dreams plagued by things that happened in the woods and probably some things that didn't. In her dreams, Esme and the other girl attempted to save her, but every time they tried, Edward would appear out of nowhere and kill them both. She always woke up right before he attacked her.

Bella felt crazy; the things her mind conjured up were outrageous. It was probably a combination of fear and the fact that something about Edward felt wrong, inhuman even. It didn't help that every time she opened her eyes he was there. Sometimes he stared at her with curiosity, sometimes with anger, but his black eyes were always upon her. He never moved from her side.

Edward remained motionless as Bella drifted in and out of awareness. The scent of her blood became more potent in the room as the night wore on. He assumed she was most likely having nightmares because at times her heart rate would spike, causing her scent to become more concentrated. When it became too much, he would hold his breath until he was sure he could maintain his control.

He continued his efforts to pry into her mind. Not even in sleep did her mental guard come down. He wondered if her proximity was the key but didn't want to take the risk of leaving her side. He didn't trust any of his family; they could deceive him too easily now. She couldn't be left alone with them. They might free her or kill her or get caught in her blood's siren song and lose control. He couldn't risk losing her—his only form of peace.

Bella awoke with a start and cried out. The painkillers were beginning to wear off. Edward could smell her body slowly

metabolizing them. She looked to where she knew he would be and whispered, "Edward?"

He liked the sound of his name rolling off her lips, the frailness of her voice, the dependency. He remained silent and waited patiently for her to continue.

"Where's Esme?"

"Not here," he answered curtly. He knew he was less than hospitable, but it was disappointing that the first time she addressed him by name, she asked for someone else. He wanted her to need him the way he needed her. "What is it that you need?"

Bella felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She wanted Esme's help, but she couldn't wait any longer. The unexpected pooling of blood under her skin caused Edward to let out a low hiss. He held his breath again as venom pooled in his mouth.

"I need to use the bathroom."

"Oh," he said, surprised. He hadn't thought of that. Food, bathroom, blankets—these were things that never even crossed his mind. "I can help you." The situation made him uncomfortable. He hoped getting her there and back would be the extent of assistance she needed.

Bella tensed as Edward wrapped his arms around her body. "Please be gentle!"

"I will, but it's going to hurt."

Edward lifted her off the couch as quickly and gently as possible. The pain was excruciating. Bella kept her breathing shallow to alleviate the pain, willing away the tears. She didn't want to appear weak in front of him.

"You should breathe deeper than that," he cautioned. "Unless you want pneumonia or some other respiratory complication." Even as he said it, he knew it wouldn't be an issue. He doubted the girl—Bella—would be alive long enough for it to matter.

Edward walked to the door and held it open. "Bathroom's across the hall."

He frowned while Bella slowly hobble toward him. It was obvious she was in a lot of pain. He didn't want to give her more pain killers. They gave her blood an offensive medicinal scent—probably the equivalent of burnt food to a human. Still, he had lost control and crushed her body. He decided to give her more medication, but only if she asked.

Bella walked with tiny steps, not that it helped the pain. She watched as Edward dropped his arm from the door and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm going as fast as I can."

"Don't worry," he said dryly. "You're not keeping me from anything important."

After what felt like an eternity, Bella made it across the hall and into the bathroom. She looked at Edward apprehensively, concerned that he would insist on being in the room with her. He didn't protest as she closed the door.

She wasted no time getting to the toilet, wincing when she sat down and again when she stood up. She placed her hand over her ribcage where it hurt the most, surprised to find a bandage wrapped around her body. The thought of Edward's hands on her while she had been unconscious was nauseating.

Bella noticed a piece of paper with her name on the counter next to a plastic bag. She unfolded the note and read it to herself.

Bella,

Everything in the bag is for you. If there is anything that would make your stay more comfortable, please do not hesitate to ask.

Esme

Bella rummaged through the bag. "Tooth brush, tooth paste, soap, shampoo . . ." She continued emptying the contents onto the counter. "Some sort of weapon would have been nice," she mumbled.

"I can hear you perfectly, you know."

Bella turned toward the door, glaring with every ounce of hatred she felt for Edward. She didn't understand why she was here. She wasn't being forced to do anything against her will, and as far as she knew, they hadn't asked for a ransom. Esme seemed genuinely nice, but Edward was mean and seemed to hate her. Other than the broken ribs, he hadn't done anything else to hurt her . . . yet.

Sure, he hadn't exactly treated her kindly, but he could be a lot worse. She wondered how long it would be before he snapped and did something really awful. She didn't want to think about what that might entail or even what he was capable of.

It didn't matter who was nice to her and who wasn't. When she got out of here they would all pay. She hadn't lied to Edward—her father really was a cop. He would save her; Bella just didn't know when. She was fairly independent and wasn't very close to either of her parents, but surely they'd try to contact her to inquire about her first week of school. One of her friends from home was bound to call sooner or later. Her professors would be the first to notice she was missing, but it was college. If she suddenly stopped attending, would it even matter?

The realization that she might be here for a while started to sink in. Bella decided she might as well make the best of things, and brushing her teeth was a good place to start. She removed her new toothbrush from the package and loaded it with toothpaste. The mint

was refreshing, and she was thankful that Esme was thoughtful enough to buy her these things.

While she was brushing, Bella looked into the mirror, gasping when she caught sight of her reflection. The toothbrush clattered into the sink as her hand flew up to her neck. The skin there felt perfectly smooth just like it had the last time she checked. The vision before her, however, was anything but perfect.

An angry purple bruise covered the side of her neck. In the center was a cluster of red speckles surrounded by two crescent shaped marks. She leaned closer to the mirror, trying to get a better look. Her ribs throbbed, but at that moment, she was too terrified to care. Bella knew exactly what left the jagged red marks on her neck.

Teeth.

He did bite me!

Bella began frantically searching through the bathroom, hoping to find something she could use to defend herself or at least a clue as to where she was. To her surprise, the only thing she found was a set of bath towels. It was odd. Everything about this situation was odd.

The fear, the pain, the unknown—it became too much. She tried to hold back her sobs but couldn't.

Edward waited as patiently as possible outside the bathroom door. He heard her rummaging through the cupboards, most likely looking for "some sort of weapon," not that a weapon would do her any good.

Then he heard her crying.

"Hey." She didn't answer. Edward pulled the door open so forcefully that the hinges were torn from the frame.

Bella stood in the middle of the room, holding her neck and sobbing.

"You okay?" Edward asked uncertainly.

Bella steeled herself and spoke quickly before she could lose her nerve. "In the woods. The mark on my neck—you bit me! You were . . . sucking, and I was . . . bleeding. I remember. But it's—it's healed." She took as deep a breath as her ribs allowed. "You move too fast, you're too strong, and you growl, like, actually growl." Edward smirked and quirked an eyebrow, and at that moment, Bella knew she wasn't going crazy.

Edward wasn't human.

"What the hell are you?"

"Let's not go around name calling," he said nonchalantly. "It's rude."

Edward led Bella back to his room and helped her onto the couch. He laid a thick blanket over her and leaned in close. Bella felt his cool breath against her cheek as he whispered, "I'll be right back."

Within a few seconds he was back in the room. Bella wouldn't even have known he left had it not been for the icepack in his hand. Edward resumed his position at her side and reached under the blanket. She flinched when the cold touched her side.

"Stop squirming."

"Sorry," Bella replied.

Edward shrugged. "It's not hurting me any."

Bella tried not to think about what Edward may or may not be as he sat next to her, absolutely motionless. The hostility from earlier had somewhat dissipated, and Bella found her courage returning.

"Are you gonna hold that all night?"

"Would you prefer to hold it yourself?"

"No." Bella was thankful that he was being kind. She decided to take advantage of his less angry side. "Why are you doing this?"

Her question confused Edward. He hesitated before answering, "Because ice reduces swelling."

"That's not what I meant. Why are you keeping me here? What do you want from me? I want answers."

Edward took a deep breath. "Pass."

"You won't tell me why you kidnapped me?" Bella asked angrily.

"Kidnapped?" Edward couldn't help but laugh. He had never considered this to be a kidnapping before, and he found the whole scenario comical. So very human.

His reaction confused Bella. If this wasn't a kidnapping, then what was it? "Is that a no, then?"

"I said 'pass,' didn't I?" Edward asked sharply.

"Fine." She returned his attitude. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"Hate isn't the right word."

"You don't like me," she stated.

"I find you very . . . *infuriating* . But that's probably just because you're human."

"And you're not?"

Edward slowly shook his head.

"Oh. Then what—"

"We're not doing the name calling thing, remember?"

Bella worded her next question carefully, hoping his answer would tell her all she needed to know. "In the woods . . . did you drink my blood?"

"Yes."

A dreary, gray light filtered into the room as the sun rose. Bella lay quietly as she tried not to think about Edward's answer. He admitted to drinking her blood, but it couldn't have meant what she thought it did. No, there had to be another logical solution.

Edward remained by her side, diligently holding the ice pack against her. Every 20 minutes he would stop to allow her skin a break from the cold. They didn't speak.

Eventually, Bella stopped flinching when he touched her. She was grateful for his gentleness, for his help. It would have been uncomfortable for her to hold the cold pack herself, and it was too heavy to be laid on her.

"What day is it?" she asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Tuesday."

"Tuesday!" Bella exclaimed. It had only been a day—less than twenty-four hours—since this nightmare began. She had probably woken up this same time yesterday in her own bed, warm, comfortable, and safe. "How long am I going to be here?"

"That depends on your def—" The sound of a large truck fully captured Edward's attention. The house was tucked too far into the woods for traffic to ever be close enough to hear. There was no way anyone could have found out the girl was here. If he could hear what they were thinking, he would know how to react.

But he couldn't.

Bella watched as Edward became distracted, his eyes losing focus. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Someone's coming."

Bella had her first glimpse of hope since winding up here. Maybe someone knew her whereabouts and was coming to help her.

" *Esme, it's almost here!* " Edward heard Alice proclaim. He breathed a sigh of relief. Bella noticed his change of demeanor, and her hope immediately plummeted.

"Your bed is here."

"Oh," she said in disappointment. She couldn't care less about a bed. She wanted to go home.

Edward smiled at her deflated mood. "What, you didn't think someone was coming to save you, did you?" Bella didn't answer but looked away. "We wouldn't have stayed here if that were the case. I don't think you'd like being on the run in your condition."

Bella refused to look at Edward or even acknowledge he was still in the room. She tried to shut off her mind, not wanting to think about why she was here or what he wanted from her. She closed her eyes and pretended to be back in her own bed. It wasn't until she heard faint voices filtering through the house that she sprang into action. She couldn't understand what they were saying, but it had to be whoever was delivering the bed. If she wanted to be rescued, she needed to alert someone to her presence.

Edward heard her heart rate increase and knew she was up to something. "Don't do anything stupid."

Ignoring his warning, Bella took a deep breath and prepared to scream. Edward was faster. He quickly clamped his hand over her

mouth.

"What did I just tell you?" he hissed. Bella frowned indignantly. "If you want to scream, fine. But if they hear you, I *will* kill them. Then their blood will be on *your* hands."

Bella wasn't going down without a fight. This might be the only opportunity she had to be rescued. She wouldn't be intimidated by his threats. She bit his hand hard, but his flesh barely gave way to her teeth. Edward shifted his hand higher and pinched her nose closed.

"Have you absolutely no survival instincts?" His semi-pleasant mood quickly turned volatile. "You belong to me. I control you. Don't forget that."

Edward kept Bella's airways closed off until she started to panic. She wiggled against his hold. He knew it must have caused her great discomfort. Leaning closer, he pressed his cool lips against her ear. "Shhh."

He slipped his hand from Bella's mouth. She gasped for air but froze when his hand came to rest on her rib cage, whimpering when he applied a light pressure. "Just in case you need a reminder."

They remained motionless until the delivery men were gone. Bella didn't dare move in fear that Edward wouldn't hesitate to break her body further.

"Edward, we're coming in," Esme called through the door.

Bella watched in rapt fascination as Esme and the other girl quickly assembled the bed. They carried a queen sized mattress and box spring into the room as if they weighed mere ounces. At that moment, she knew that whatever Edward was, he wasn't the only one.

When the women were finished making the bed, it looked like it belonged in a home shopping catalog. Esme smiled at Bella before slipping out of the room, and the girl approached her excitedly.

"Hi, Bella! I'm Alice. I don't know much about beds, personally, but I did a lot of research, and this one is supposed to be really comfortable. I hope you like the colors, too. There's not a lot in the room, but Edward is quite particular—"

"Alice," he warned.

"—so I stayed with a neutral palette. The sheets—"

"Alice! She's trapped in a house full of vampires. I really don't think she's concerned about Egyptian thread count."

Bella's heart jumped into her throat as Edward confirmed her suspicions. The sound of her heart attracted the attention of both vampires. They turned and looked at her intently.

Alice's pupils dilated, turning her light, honey colored eyes mostly black. The only thing Bella could do was stare at her, frozen by fear. Edward noticed her alarm, focused not on him but on his sister. He turned his attention to Alice and emitted a deep snarl.

Alice snapped out of her trance-like state. "I should go," she said before disappearing from the room.

Edward looked down at Bella as she lay on his couch. Once again, her fear was making it difficult for him to maintain control.

"You are so rude," Bella said with a shaky voice.

He looked at her, dumbfounded. The scent of her blood and sound of her pounding heart all but forgotten. "You're seriously going to talk to me like that once we're alone?"

"What does it matter? You're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?" she asked hysterically. "Why don't you just get it over with? Kill the

helpless human already!"

"You know," Edward said thoughtfully, "I think if we were together in any other circumstance, I might actually like you." A genuine smile played at the corner of his lips.

"Well, I can't say the same about you."

"You're breaking my heart," he said in a mocking tone. "Do you want to walk to your new bed or would you rather I carry you?"

"I'll walk."

"Suit yourself."

Bella struggled to get in a standing position. Once she was on her feet, she made her way to the bed, but not without taking a side trip to the window. At first she was relieved when Edward didn't stop her, but once she looked out the window, she understood why.

The house was in the middle of nowhere. There were trees as far as the eye could see. She wouldn't be able to describe where she was, and even if she managed to get outside, she would have no clue where to go.

With a resigned sigh, Bella made her way to the bed. Edward propped up pillows, telling her it would be better than lying flat, before pulling back the sheets for her. She slid under the covers slowly, breathing through the pain. Once she was situated, Edward hovered over her.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"As comfortable as I can be, I suppose."

"Good." Edward climbed onto the bed next to her. "I need you to hold very still."

"What?" Bella asked in alarm. "Why?"

"Because your life depends on it."

Without another word, Edward grabbed Bella by the hair and bent her head back. He took a deep breath before bowing his head and pressing his teeth against her neck. They sliced effortlessly into her skin.

Bella wanted to scream, but she was too startled to do anything. Blood streamed down her neck as Edward remained completely motionless. Then he was sucking, pulling the blood from her body. The wound throbbed under the force of his teeth and lips, but it didn't last long.

Edward pushed away from her with a pained cry and with his hand covering his mouth, fled from the room.

Thank you for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Edward flew out of his room and down the stairs, stopping only half-way down. He was angry at himself, at his lack of control, his weakness. He was disgusted at his behavior. Ashamed. Repulsed. He could have killed her.

She could have died.

"Carlisle!" he called out.

It was Alice who appeared in front of him. "Carlisle's hunting." She regarded Edward carefully. He looked upset, confused, unhinged. Then she caught a whiff of the blood. "Edward! God, I hate not being able to see your future. I wouldn't have left the room if I knew you were going to lose it," she snapped.

"I didn't lose it," he said. "Not at first, anyway."

"Is she okay?" Alice screeched.

"She's alive and human, not that it's any of your business."

Alice stuck her finger into his chest. "Stop being an asshole, Edward. You are going to tell me what's going on."

Edward disregarded her demand. "Tell Carlisle I need to see him."

"I have been nothing but supportive of you!" she shouted. "Everyone has." Alice grabbed his arm, keeping him from retreating back to his room. "You were the one who asked to stay here. I'm going to school alone. Rosalie and Emmett had to make new plans. Jasper is out cleaning up your mess, too afraid to come home—to his sanctuary, to me—because there's a human here. And Esme . . . Esme had to hunt again because she's not used to being this close to blood."

Guilt washed over Edward. He felt horrible for what he was doing to his family, but he didn't have a choice. "I need her."

"What the hell does that even mean? How can you keep a human captive in the house and expect us to turn the other cheek?"

"You don't understand."

"Then help me! Help me understand!"

"What's the only thing I've ever wanted?"

Alice didn't have to think very hard to come up with the answer. "Silence."

"She did something to me, Alice. I don't know what, but she did, and everything's quiet. She's the solution. My cure! I don't ever have to go back to the way things were as long as she's with me."

It only took a moment for what he said to sink in. "You want to change her?" Edward's silence confirmed her assumption. "You can't just take her life away!"

"She's a human, Alice! She's going to die someday. I can't let that happen."

"You are a selfish bastard, Edward! She deserves a chance at life—the chance none of us had. She deserves to fall in love, get married, own a dog, make babies, get divorced, fall in love again. What does Carlisle say about this?" Once again, Edward's silence spoke volumes. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"I couldn't tell him." Alice opened her mouth to yell again, but Edward cut her off. "You really can't see my future?"

Alice shook her head. "You've completely disappeared from all my visions. At first, I thought you had died," she admitted sadly.

"Look, I have no logical explanation for how she essentially shut off one of my senses or how she's blocking your visions, okay? But I'm certain that if she has a power that's manifesting in her now, as a human, then it's bound to be a thousand times stronger once she's a vampire."

"Edward—"

"I ask for so little, Alice!" he hollered. "This is the first time I've asked to stay somewhere, the first time I've sat out of the school circuit, and it's the first time there's been a human casualty because of me. You've messed up, Emmett's messed up, hell, Jasper messes up all the time! I've never held it against any of you or complained when our lives have been uprooted because of it."

"Rosalie and Emmett go off on their own to get away. You have Jasper. Carlisle has Esme. Do you know what I get? I get to be the outcast. I'm alone, but I never actually get to be alone." Edward tapped his temple. "That girl in the room upstairs has the power to change my existence. She holds the key to my sanity. She is my savior and you want to begrudge me of that? Fuck, Alice!"

"It's not up to you to play God, Edward," she spat. "Besides, what makes you think she'll want anything to do with you after you rob her of her life?"

This brought Edward up short. He honestly hadn't thought of what would happen after her change was complete. But vampire or not, Edward was still a man and a stubborn one at that. "She belongs to me, Alice. Everything about her draws me in. This is meant to be."

But even as he said it, he wasn't sure who he was trying to convince.

Bella sat reclined in her new bed, staring up at the ceiling. She had long since stopped crying. She wasn't sure if she was in shock, denial, or downright crazy.

The entire situation was surreal. There were vampires in the world. They weren't some mythological being like everyone thought. Somehow, one managed to kidnap her and hold her hostage, apparently to have her for dinner. Repeatedly.

Bella had no idea how to process this information. She should be scared, frightened for her life, but she couldn't bring herself to feel anything.

She glanced at the door when it opened. Edward entered the room carrying a plate of food and sat on the opposite side of the bed. "You should eat," he said as he set the plate down next to her. There was a sad looking sandwich on it, cut in half. Bella eyed the offering warily. "What?"

"I don't eat ham," she answered simply. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Is that so?" Edward laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm kind of a vegetarian, too."

His odd words and light mood aggravated Bella. How dare he try to make small talk after what he'd done? "You drink blood. How does that qualify you as a vegetarian?"

"My family and I, we don't drink the blood of humans . . . typically," he answered with a shrug. "We survive on the blood of animals."

Bella eyed him in disgust. "That doesn't make you a vegetarian. That just makes you not a cannibal." Edward's mouth dropped open at her outburst. "What the hell kind of vampire are you, anyway?" she continued as her anger flared. "In case you haven't noticed, it's day time. And where are your fangs?"

"The sun doesn't hurt me, and for your information, I don't have fangs," Edward said, matching her ire. "Perhaps your human brain is

too inept to figure it out, but the reason I feed on animal blood is because I try not to be a monster."

"Yeah, well, you're doing a shitty job."

"Touché," Edward sneered as he grabbed the plate from the bed.

"Wait!" Bella reached out, realizing for the first time how hungry she was. She got carried away insulting Edward. She knew it was foolish to offend him when her life was in his hands, even if her days were numbered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Please . . . I'll eat it."

Edward said nothing as he set the plate back down. Bella removed the meat from the sandwich and tried to ignore the way Edward watched her as she ate. When she was finished, he took the plate and set it on the floor before scooting closer to her on the bed.

"How is your neck?" he asked. Bella flinched as he brushed cool fingers across her skin.

"It burns."

"It should stop soon."

Bella pressed her palm against her neck. She hoped it would sooth the pain, but she also wanted to prevent Edward from touching it again. His eyes remained fixed on her, even after she hid the raw looking bite mark.

"How does it heal so fast?"

"It's the venom, I think."

"The venom! You're venomous?" she asked. He answered with a nod. "Like a snake?"

Edward glowered at her. "Are you trying to piss me off? Because if you have a death wish, it can easily be arranged." He sprang off the bed in a graceful streak of fury. "You should clean yourself up. I'm

having restraint issues, and I doubt I'll be the only one if you're still covered in dried blood when the others come home." With a reproachful glare, Edward stepped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Bella shuddered at his words. She didn't understand his hostility toward her. After all, he was the one who hurt her. He was the one who was a direct threat to her life. She was surprised that Edward didn't respond violently when she pushed his buttons. He didn't attack her, didn't bite her, didn't cause her pain at all. All he did was yell and threaten her life and make a lot of noise when he left the room.

She took comfort in the fact that he brought her food. She was thankful, even if she hadn't expressed her feelings at the time. Apparently he didn't want her to die. Not yet, anyway.

Not wanting to tempt fate by being a bloody mess, Bella made the short, yet arduous, journey across the hallway and into the bathroom. Edward was nowhere in sight. She locked the door behind her, but it offered no comfort. If he wanted to come in, he would break down the door again.

Bella undressed, avoiding her reflection in the mirror, and unwrapped the bandage from her ribcage before stepping into the shower. It was hard to raise her arms above her head, so washing her hair was out of the question. Once the blood was rinsed away, she got out.

She dried off quickly. It felt good to be clean, but one look at the pile of dirty clothes on the floor dampened what little enthusiasm the shower had instilled. Begrudgingly, Bella put her soiled clothes back on. Not knowing what else to do, she decided to return to the room across the hall. She didn't think she'd be welcomed anywhere else in the house, and even if she were, it's not like she wanted to make a social call.

When she opened the bathroom door, Edward was standing directly on the other side. She was startled by his presence, even though it

wasn't completely unexpected, but what really caught her by surprise was the look on his face. He appeared bewildered, as if hadn't anticipated her being there at all.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Ah—" Bella let out an exasperated puff of air. She had cleaned up just like he wanted.

"You can't wear that shirt. The blood . . ." Edward's gaze was fixed on her collar, which had absorbed most of the blood. He swallowed back a mouthful of venom. Being near her was growing increasingly difficult. The short time they were separated, and the fact that he hadn't properly fed in a few weeks, didn't help to quench his thirst.

"Well, I'm not going to walk around naked!"

Edward rolled his eyes at her outburst. "Alice got a change of clothes for you. They're in my room." He placed his hand on the small of her back and stayed close as he gently guided her back to his room. "On the bed," he said, pointing to a stack of clothing.

Bella grabbed the small pile while Edward stood behind her. He was so close that she could feel his cool breath on the back of her neck. She looked at him expectantly. "Do you mind?"

Without a word, Edward turned around. When her bloodstained shirt fell to the floor, he picked it up and tossed it across the room, as far away as possible. Leaving it in here would make him uncomfortable, but it was his only option for the time being. He didn't want to put it anywhere else in the house now that his family was home, and he wasn't about to leave her alone to dispose of it properly.

Bella changed quickly and climbed onto the bed. Edward knelt on the floor at her side. He took slow, controlled breaths, trying to calm the monster inside him. He had to get used to her scent if he had any hope of being able to change her. Losing control and sucking the

venom out of her system every time he bit her wouldn't benefit either of them.

As angry as he was with Alice for not approving of his decision, he couldn't get her words out of his head. Whether he believed his decision was justified, he was still robbing Bella of her life. She was in college, so she must have had future plans. How long had she gone there? What did she want to be when she graduated? Did she want a family one day? A husband? Was she in love now?

The thought of her with another man caused jealousy to flare inside Edward. Although he didn't have romantic feelings for the girl, he felt possessive of her and didn't want anyone else to have her. He didn't want her thinking about someone else, either. He needed her, and he wanted her to choose him.

But would she?

Once her transformation was complete she wouldn't be able to go back to her old life. She wouldn't want to, not unless she wanted to kill everyone she loved. But would that be enough for her to stay? Would she stick around after he took everything—family, friends, future—away from her?

Edward knew he hadn't done anything to be worthy of her company. He had hurt her and for the most part, treated her cruelly. But he would not lose her. He would not exist the same way he had for the past 100 years.

"Hey, Edward." Bella's voice pulled him out of his musings. "Ever hear of a thing called personal space?"

He sat back on his heels, putting an additional foot of space between them. "And I'm the rude one," he mumbled.

"You've been hovering ever since I got out of the bathroom. Are you going to . . . bite me again?" she asked apprehensively.

"No, not right now," he answered. "My brother Jasper is home. He's not as disciplined as the rest of us, and I can't hear what he's thinking. I feel better being close to you. If I have to protect you . . ."

"Oh." This made Bella uneasy. Edward had allowed Esme and Alice to get within touching distance of her. Now someone new was in the house and he barely gave her two feet of breathing room. "Don't want to share, huh?"

Edward frowned. "Share?"

"Yeah. Is there not enough to go around, or aren't you a sloppy seconds kind of guy?"

"That's not why you're here."

"Then why am I?"

Edward didn't answer. He couldn't bring himself to tell the girl what his plans were. Besides, he had to be certain she'd stay first. Fortunately he didn't have to fabricate an explanation because Bella suddenly realized something he had said earlier.

"Wait, you said that you can't hear what he's thinking," she said. "And yesterday, Esme said you couldn't hear anyone . . . but you hear fine. Better than fine," she added.

"I can read minds."

Bella's eyes widened. She felt even more violated. Discovering she lived in a supernatural world and having a vampire bite her and hurt her wasn't enough, apparently. Her fears, plans, and desires were also on full display. "You what?"

"Or, at least, I used to. Until you came along."

"Me?"

"I don't know what you did. I couldn't hear your thoughts. Once I tried to zone in on you, all the voices in my head went quiet."

Bella sighed in relief, thankful that her mind was still her own. The fragmented bits of conversation she remembered from yesterday suddenly began to make sense. So this was what she supposedly did to him. "No wonder I infuriate you," she said. "If I had a gift and someone took it away, I would be upset, too."

"A gift? It's not a gift, it's a curse," he spat. Bella flinched at his tone. "Your ability is the reason you're here. The only reason you're still breathing. No, I find you infuriating because in my entire existence I had never lost control. Not once. Then you came along and completely undermined everything I've worked so hard to achieve. I have never once killed a human. I had never even tasted human blood. Yet the minute I caught your scent, I was more than willing to let my instincts take over, to become the monster that I've tried so hard not to be." Edward shook his head. It was difficult enough to keep himself in check without his emotions boiling over. He had to rein in his anger.

"I've alienated my family because of you. I've put their lives at risk. And for what? You are a human. Insignificant. Yet I need you. You silence my mind and I want it. I want it so bad, but I don't know how to live like this! I don't know how to function anymore, and it's all your fault!"

Edward squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to keep himself in control. When he spoke again his voice was quiet and reserved. "I would never wish this life on anyone. Still, here I am, forfeiting your life so I can have peace. Keeping you will be the most selfish thing I will ever do, and your company will remind me of that every day for the rest of my existence." Edward knew even before the words were out of his mouth that he was saying too much. This wasn't the way he wanted to present his intentions.

His rant caught Bella by surprise, and it took her a while to process the meaning behind his words. He was going to make her one of

them. "No," she whispered. "You can't." Edward nodded once, unswayed by her sudden uprising of panic. "No," she said more firmly, shaking her head violently. "No!"

"Yes, I can. I will."

Thank you for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Being in close proximity of a crying woman made Edward uncomfortable. Maybe it was because he didn't understand human emotions, or maybe it was because the women he lived with didn't cry.

Vampires never cried.

Edward had always assumed it was possible for a vampire to cry. Venom lingered in their tissues, preserving and healing their bodies. It flowed freely from salivary glands and lubricated the eyes through tear ducts. There was no reason why it couldn't escape these ducts in the form of tears. Perhaps their bodies were too efficient to waste the venom on such nonessential behavior.

Whether it was possible didn't change the fact that Edward, nor any of his family, had ever witnessed a vampire cry.

It took hours before Bella finally calmed down enough for sleep to overtake her. Edward remained crouched beside the bed. It was as close as he dared to get. The distance the bed placed between them gave him a sense of comfort, however false it may have been. It was a physical barrier—something he could lean against, something he could dig his fingers into. It was strange having a bed in his room, but its presence was a reminder of everything he stood to lose if he lost control.

He inhaled deeply, breathing in her intoxicating scent. The combination of being underfed and having tasted the girl's blood twice made resistance difficult. His throat burned—a dry itch that would never be fully sated. Especially not now. Not after knowing what her very essence tasted like, how it went down his throat so smoothly, cooling and soothing as he pulled the life from her body.

Edward opened his mouth slightly, her flavor amplifying as it washed across his tongue. He sucked in mouthful after mouthful of air and ignored the venom flowing in his mouth. Now would be the perfect time to bite, but he was struggling to stay in control as it was. He knew if he bit her now, he would fail.

Again.

Edward focused on other, less appetizing, things as he attempted to desensitize himself. The red puffy skin around Bella's eyes. The salty tracks on her cheeks. The reddening of her lips, swollen from biting them in her attempt to cry quietly. The way her stuffy nose wheezed with every breath. These subtle changes reminded Edward how fragile and vulnerable she was. He needed to be more careful with her.

He continued trying to tap into her mind throughout the night. Her thoughts, as well as everyone else's, were as silent as ever. The only thing he could hear was the sound of his family downstairs. No one said much, and when they did, the conversations were short and forced. There was none of the friendly banter that typically occurred. Their behavior was strange. It put Edward on edge.

Bella woke during the middle of the night. No longer able to sleep, she stared out the window. Not a star was visible in the sky. It made her current situation all the more dreary. She knew, even without looking, that Edward was still in the room. She was glad he let her lie in peace. No talking, no touching, no biting.

Her eyes misted over as she thought of her parents, her friends, the pain in her body, and what would become of her life. She made a promise to herself to be strong. No more tears. She would face her fate head on without fear.

"You can make me like you." Bella's nasally voice broke through the silence. "But if you think I'm going to stay here, you're wrong."

"What makes you think I'd let you leave?" Edward asked, his anger slowly returning. Aside from accidentally killing her, his biggest concern was her leaving. He would not change her only to lose her. "I have been a vampire for over one hundred years. Do you have any concept of how strong I am?" He lowered his voice and whispered, "You won't be going anywhere."

"So what? You're going to babysit me like this forever?"

Edward frowned at her defiant expression. "I won't have to. There are six others in my family. Even if you managed to get away, we would find you." He didn't know if his family would help him, but he had to tell her something to discourage her from running away the first chance she got. "The only reason I'm *babysitting* you now is because I don't trust them around you. Not while you smell the way you do." *Not while you're still human and they can save you.* "If only I knew what they were thinking . . ."

This confused Bella. She was under the assumption that he *didn't* want to read minds. "I thought you didn't want to know. Isn't that why you want me?"

"Yes, but it would be easier if I could hear them, at least temporarily." Edward dropped his head into his hands. "This is so unbelievably frustrating," he mumbled, more to himself than to Bella. "I've been trying to hear you for the past two days and . . . nothing. I wish things would just go back to normal until I've changed you." He inhaled deeply before letting out an angry sigh. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"Don't be mad at me because you can't impose on people's privacy anymore," Bella snapped. "Maybe if you stopped trying so hard to read my mind, it would come back to you."

Edward laughed loudly. "Is that your professional opinion? Stop trying so hard? Brilliant. Let me just pretend you're not in the room." He snickered as he turned his head away.

"You don't have to patronize me."

"I would never," he mocked.

"You're an asshole."

Edward quickly rose to his feet, causing Bella to flinch. "Just because I don't *want* to kill you doesn't mean I won't lose control. Don't—piss—me—off."

Bella closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands, blocking out the image of Edward hovering over her. She didn't want him to lose control. Part of her believed death was a better option than what he had in store, but she wasn't ready to give up yet.

Eventually Edward sank back down to the floor. He knew his outbursts weren't doing him any favors, but she made him so angry that sometimes he couldn't help himself. She might be human now—a human who continuously pushed his buttons—but eventually, if all went as planned, she would be a vampire, and his threats and mood swings wouldn't give him the upper hand anymore.

Edward closed his eyes, dropped his head into his hands again, and tried to block everything from his mind. *Great*, he thought, *now I'm humoring the human*. He ignored the girl lying before him. He tried not to think about what his family was plotting behind his back. He pushed out all thoughts of how he would summon the strength to change her, what Carlisle would say when he found out, and how he would cover his tracks to protect his family. Edward forced his mind to be as blank as possible.

. . . leave . . . hunting . . . blood . . .

. . . talk to him . . . plans . . . shouldn't do this alone . . .

. . . ridiculous . . . can handle . . .

. . . so boring . . . make him do my homework . . . owes me for what I've—Edward?

"Edward! I can see Edward!" Alice announced. "Edward, can you hear us?"

Edward sprang from his crouched position and backed up against the door. Bella took one look at his wide-eyed, distressed expression and became alarmed. "What? What's wrong? What's going on?"

The broken fragments of thoughts assaulted him. His family was confused and curious, but mostly, they questioned his sanity. This was not what Edward wanted at all. He wanted clear, concise thoughts. He wanted to know what they intended to do about the girl. He wanted to know if any of them intended on claiming her as their kill.

"Edward, what's going on?" Alice spoke through the door. She turned the handle, but the door wouldn't budge with Edward propped against it. "Edward?"

Edward didn't want to talk to anyone. They had questions, and he didn't have the answers. He didn't know how Bella's power worked. He didn't have an explanation for why he went about things the way he did. He didn't know the best way to fix his mistakes.

It didn't take him long to realize that the silence, no matter how inconvenient it was, was a blessing. He focused on Bella. She had climbed off the far side of the bed and was staring back at him, frozen in place and looking like she would bolt at any moment. As before, her mind was absolutely silent. Edward exerted every amount of his effort into hearing her.

"He's gone! Carlisle, he's gone again!"

"Edward?" Unlike Alice, Carlisle remained calm. "Son, is every all right?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "We're fine."

"May we come in?"

"No, not right now. I—I can't right now." Edward remained in front of the door until he heard their footsteps retreating down the stairs. When he was sure they were gone, he started slowly toward Bella.

"What are you going to do?" she asked as she backed herself into the corner. "Stay away from me. Don't come any closer." She held her hands in front of her as Edward made his way around the bed. He firmly gripped her shoulders. He wanted to have a physical connection to her, to know she was real. Bella placed her palms against his chest, trying to push him away. In her weakened state, it was nothing more than a soft nudge. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you. Please don't hurt me."

At first, Edward was confused by Bella's reaction, but then he realized she had no idea what just transpired. The part of the conversation she had heard wouldn't have made any sense to her. "It's okay," he whispered. He gingerly brought Bella's arms to her sides. Her skin burned hot on his palms, too hot. "Your body is trying to heal. You should be resting."

"What do you care?" Bella dug her teeth into her lower lip in an attempt to fight back the tears.

What do I care? Edward asked himself. The change would take place whether she was healthy or ill. He focused on her lip, white from the pressure of her teeth. "Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"You don't want any broken skin right now. Trust me."

When the sun finally rose, there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" asked Edward.

"It's me," Esme answered. She cracked the door open but remained in the hallway. "How are you feeling, Bella?"

"I'm fine," Bella answered weakly.

"Edward, sweetheart, can we talk?"

"Sure," he sighed. He couldn't say no to Esme, especially not after how understanding she'd been. "Close the door behind you."

"I thought, perhaps, we could talk downstairs. In private."

"I'm not leaving her."

"There's no one else here. She'll be safe without you for a few minutes. Besides, she'd probably like some time alone. Isn't that right, Bella?"

Bella didn't confirm Esme's suspicions. She wasn't going to do say or do anything that could potentially upset Edward.

"Fine." Edward stood from his crouched position and with a last look at Bella, followed Esme from the room. "Where is everyone?" he asked as they walked down the stairs and into the living room.

"Carlisle had a shift at the hospital. Alice went to class. Jasper is out as well. He's . . ."

"Fixing my fuck up, I know."

"Talk to me, Edward," Esme pleaded.

"I don't know what to tell you. I don't know why . . . how . . . I don't have any explanations."

"No, tell me how *you* are doing. Are you okay?"

Her line of questioning threw Edward off. He assumed everyone was concerned about the girl, not him. "I'm not sure, but I'm going to be. I think."

"So you're going to change her?"

"How did you—Alice," he hissed

"She told Carlisle; he told me. I'm sure Jasper knows as well."

"Great. Go on then, Esme. Tell me how ashamed you are. Tell me how selfish I am. Tell me how my rash decision has put the entire family at risk!"

"Edward," Esme said softly, "you don't need anyone to tell you what you already know." She grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the couch with her. "I'm not going to judge you or tell you whether you're making the best decision. Whatever you do, I will support you one hundred percent of the way."

Edward eyed her apprehensively. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do. This life is too long to spend it in misery. Right or wrong, you deserve to be happy."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." Edward was genuinely surprised by Esme's declaration. He had thought that if he couldn't even get Alice to understand, there was no way any of the others would see things his way. He felt better knowing he had an ally in this mess. "Will you still support me if I fail? If I lose control and drain her completely?"

"You won't. You're strong enough to do it."

"I don't think I am," he admitted. "I can barely breathe around her. I would have killed her the first time, you know. If Carlisle hadn't shown up when he did, I wouldn't have stopped. She'd be dead."

"Edward—"

"And yesterday I lost control, too," he continued. "I think the only reason I was able to stop was because her blood tasted odd from the transfusion and the painkillers. What am I going to do next time, Esme? I'm going to kill her."

Esme took Edward's face in her hands and traced the dark circles under his black eyes with her thumbs. "You need to hunt."

"I won't leave her."

"You can trust me, Edward. If it makes you feel better, I'll stay away from your room while you're gone."

"I'm sorry." Edward grabbed her wrists and gently pushed her away. "Please don't take it personally. I can't trust anyone right now. Anything could happen if I leave. It's a risk I'm not willing to take."

"But if you're thirsty—"

"It won't make a difference," he interrupted a second time. "Not with the way she smells."

"Talk to Carlisle. I'm sure he'd help you if you asked. Bella wouldn't be a temptation to him."

"No," Edward said quickly. "I could never ask that of him. Carlisle constantly struggles with the decisions he's made with us, although he'd never admit it out loud. We were all dying, Esme. He would never do this to someone who had another choice."

"She no longer has a choice. You know that, right?"

Edward didn't acknowledge her question. He knew he sealed the girl's fate the minute he dragged her into the woods. "It doesn't matter. She's mine. She belongs to me. I want *my* venom flowing through her veins, not anyone else's."

"I hope your stubbornness isn't her downfall."

"I need to get back," he said abruptly, ending their conversation.
"Thank you for understanding."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Edward paused as he considered her offer. "Actually, there is. Would you mind making sure she stays fed?"

"Of course."

"She, uh, doesn't eat animals. I wouldn't know what to feed her anyway."

"How ironic."

"I know." He laughed. "Thank you, Esme."

"Oh, Edward? One more thing." Edward stopped and looked at her curiously. He couldn't imagine what was left to say. "Emmett and Rosalie will be here this afternoon."

"What! Why?" Edward had a hard enough time keeping his sanity with four other vampires in the house. The last thing he needed was two more to worry about.

"Carlisle thought it would be best for all of us to be together right now," Esme explained. "He wants you to have whatever support you need."

"Support," Edward sneered. *He wants to be able to overpower me.*

"Yes, we are worried about you. We want to make sure you're okay."

"Right. We'll see about that." Edward turned and without giving Esme a chance to reply, ran up the stairs and back to the room where Bella waited.

Edward became even more protective of Bella in the evening when his entire family was in the house. He traded his position on the floor

for a spot on the bed.

Bella was beginning to get used to his silent presence. She pretended to ignore him while eating the salad Esme brought her. She was almost successful in completely blocking out his presence when he stiffened beside her.

"What?"

Edward held his fingers to his lips. For some reason, Bella felt compelled to comply with his request for silence. His expression darkened as his eyes met hers. He curled his lips back, bearing his teeth, and his low growl filled the room. She wasn't sure who it was directed toward.

"Edward?"

"My family is having a little discussion about us."

"What are they saying?"

Edward hesitated. A look of anguish briefly flashed across his face before he composed himself. "They want to kill you."

Thanks for reading! Please review. :D

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

"Thank you for coming home on such short notice," Carlisle said to Emmett and Rosalie. The two of them had traveled from Alaska to be present for what they were told was a family meeting concerning Edward.

"You said it was important," said Emmett. "And you said it was about Edward. How could we not—"

"What's going on?" Rosalie interrupted. "He's upstairs with a human. I can smell it. I can hear its heartbeat."

Carlisle looked at the five vampires in the room. Each of their faces held a different expression—anger, concern, sadness, irritation, distress. His eyes lingered on Alice a beat longer than the rest before answering. "Yes, Edward has a human upstairs. Her name is Bella. Alice has told me he plans on changing her."

Rosalie snapped her head in Alice's direction. "Does he succeed?" she asked in surprise.

"I don't know. I can't see him."

"What do you mean you can't see him?"

"He's vanished from my visions."

"So you've seen the girl as a vampire?"

"No. I can't see her future, either."

"Then how do you know that's what he's going to do?" Rosalie huffed.

"Because he told me."

"And did he tell you *why*?"

Alice glanced at Carlisle. He motioned for her to continue. "Because she makes his mind silent."

Rosalie shook her head. She was frustrated that Alice wasn't giving her straight answers. "Will someone please explain what is going on?"

"There's something about Bella that caused Edward to lose his mind reading abilities," Carlisle explained. "He can't hear anyone."

Rosalie frowned, still not understanding the correlation. "And?"

"He believes changing her will ensure that it stays that way."

Rosalie's eyes widened. "And you're just going to stand by and let it happen?" Emmett placed his hand on Rosalie's arm in a soothing gesture, but it didn't calm her down.

"That's why I've asked you all here. I'm not sure what to do."

"Gee, Carlisle, I don't know." Rosalie's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Tell him he's being an idiot and send the girl home?"

"It's not that easy. I've never seen him act this way before. He's irrational, selfish, he won't listen to reason. I don't know how to explain it. He's behaving—"

"Like a vampire," Jasper said bitterly.

"Then you march upstairs and you drag him out by his neck! Dismember him if you have to."

"Rose," Emmett reprimanded. He typically let Rosalie air her grievances without weighing in, but he wasn't afraid to say

something when she crossed a line. "This is Edward we're talking about."

"She knows, Rosalie," Alice interjected quietly. "He's bitten her twice. She can't go home."

"What does that mean for us?" Emmett asked anxiously.

"It means another move. Sooner rather than later," Carlisle answered. "She can't stay here once she's turned. Someone might recognize her."

"That's not fair . . . to any of us! Edward can move away with her if he's so hell bent on having her," Rosalie snarled.

"I know how difficult it is to control a newborn, especially with our lifestyle. Esme and I will stay with them. The rest of you are free to make your own decision. Keep in mind, though, that the more of us there are to help them, the less remote of a place we'll need to move, and it would only be for a few years. Of course, that's only if he succeeds."

"And if he doesn't?"

When Carlisle hesitated, Jasper jumped in. "No one has noticed that Bella is gone," he said. "I'm trying to keep it that way, but even if she is reported missing, there would be nothing to implicate us."

"Then we kill her."

"Rose!"

"Absolutely not!" Esme exclaimed.

A loud growl echoed from the second story of the house.

"Why do you propose that?" Jasper was curious to her reasoning.

"It's already difficult enough for you two to pull off having five foster children," Rosalie said to Carlisle and Esme. "We draw too much attention as it is. You want to add a sixth to the list?" She turned to Alice. "You can't see her, and she interferes with your visions of Edward and his mind reading ability. The entire family relies on your gifts."

"Their gifts aren't necessary to our survival," Carlisle pointed out.

"They're necessary to sustain our way of life."

"We can't take her life away for selfish reasons, Rosalie."

"Well, you can't let her go, either. You're letting Edward take her life away so he can use her for the rest of eternity. That sounds pretty selfish to me," Rosalie fumed. "The odds are against him, anyway; he'll probably end up killing her. Put the poor girl out of her misery so she doesn't have to live through his torture. Let's kill her now and be done with it. There are six of us and one of him. He won't even see it coming."

"You know he can hear us, right?" Jasper asked.

"But he doesn't know what we'll do. He's no match for all of us; he doesn't know how to fight fair." Rosalie stood. "Who's with me? Emmett?"

"I—uh—" Emmett waffled.

"Count me out," Alice said.

"Jasper?"

Esme interrupted before he could answer. "Carlisle, please!"

"Everyone, stop," Carlisle demanded. "I didn't call this meeting to organize a revolt against Edward. Rosalie, thank you for your suggestion, but I don't feel it's in our best interest to kill Bella. I think, at this point, it will do more harm than good."

"Why did you call us here if you don't want us to do anything about it?" Emmett asked sincerely.

"We need help preparing for Bella's transformation. We'll need to find a new residence, pack the house, get new identities, forge a paper trail . . ."

"We don't want to start anything until we know for sure," said Alice.
"We don't want to change anything if Bella doesn't make it."

"If she doesn't survive, Edward will need all the support he can get," Esme added. "I'm worried about how he'd handle it."

"He'll lose it," Alice said.

Jasper chuckled darkly. "He already has."

Edward grew more and more agitated as he eavesdropped on his family. He tried to regain control of his mind like he had this morning, but he couldn't free himself from whatever hold the girl had over him.

"I don't want to die," Bella whispered shakily.

"I won't let them touch you." Edward didn't have faith in his words. He could fend off one or two of them, but not more. He glanced at the window. He was fast but not fast enough to outrun them if he had to carry her.

There was only one solution. He had to change her, and he had to do it now.

"Oh, god, what are you going to do?" Bella cried as Edward climbed over her. He cupped her cheeks and placed his lips next to her ear.

"Listen to me," he whispered low enough so his family wouldn't overhear. "I need you to stay quiet. I don't want them to hear us, understand?" Bella nodded her head vigorously, unaware of what

Edward had in store. "Don't move. I mean it." Edward tilted her head back gently and pressed his cool lips to her neck. "They won't take you from me."

"No, no, no. Not again." Bella attempted to squirm out of his hold. She knew logically she wouldn't be able to get away, and even if she could, she wouldn't be safe. It didn't stop her from trying, though.

Edward pinned her against the headboard and covered her mouth with his hand. "You need to relax," he said. She fought against him harder. If he was going to have any success, he needed to calm her down. "Shhh, listen to me very carefully. It's very important that you hold still. This is incredibly difficult for me, and I don't want my instincts to take over. Look at me." He waited until Bella reluctantly met his eyes. "Don't fight me. If you fight me, you will die."

Tears spilled from Bella's eyes. She didn't want any of this. She wasn't ready for her life to end. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to feel more pain. Her body shook with silent sobs as Edward slowly released her. He buried his face against her neck and held his breath.

"Please," he pleaded against her skin. *Please don't move. Please be quiet. Please give me the strength to do this.* His teeth quickly pierced Bella's soft flesh. It was nearly impossible for Edward to remain still as her blood filled his mouth. *Don't drink, don't drink, don't drink.*

He knew he wouldn't get another opportunity to change her. This was it. If he failed, she would die. At this point it didn't matter if it was at his hands or his family's. The outcome would be the same. She would be gone.

He would not allow that to happen.

Knowing this was the last time he would have to face this temptation gave Edward the strength he needed. He forced his jaw open and

watched the blood stream down Bella's neck. It took only a few seconds for the venom to form a clot.

Edward couldn't celebrate his victory quite yet. The exposed blood was still a struggle to be around, especially with the taste so fresh on his tongue. Unfortunately, he had no other choice but to tolerate it. It was a shame for it to go to waste, but he knew he didn't have enough control to lick it off. Once it dried and the memory was no longer in the forefront of his mind, it would be easier to tolerate.

He hoped.

Bella gasped for breath as she brought her hands to her neck. The searing pain was amplified as she touched raw skin. She pulled her hand away—warm and wet and covered in blood. In a panic, she looked at Edward, who sat on the bed mere inches away. His eyes were fixed on her bloody body, simultaneously displaying a look of longing and determination. She wished he'd move away or even leave the room, but she didn't get her hopes up.

Still not breathing, Edward squeezed his eyes closed and dropped his head. He tried not to think about the way her blood looked warm and inviting. He wanted to savor every drop. He wanted to run his tongue along the trail on her neck and suck it from the spaces between her delicate fingers. If the others came for the girl now, he wouldn't stand a chance. He was much too distracted by his blood lust to be able to protect her. At this point, he wouldn't even be able to protect himself.

He listened for his family downstairs but heard nothing. If they were making plans to take him out, they weren't doing it verbally. Minutes passed, and still he heard nothing. He began to question if they were even in the house.

A sudden wave of nausea hit Bella. She collapsed back onto the bed, her whole body aching. Her stomach felt like it was doing summersaults. "I don't feel so good." She instinctively curled into a ball and rolled to her side. Her ribs immediately protested the

movement. She tried to reposition herself, but the pain wouldn't subside. If anything, it got worse.

Edward remained frozen in place as Bella writhed on the bed. He was relieved. He bit her without drinking. The transformation was beginning. He would never have to smell or taste her blood again. His family wasn't knocking down the door to kill her. His nightmare was finally over.

"It hurts! God, it hurts!" Bella screamed as burning pain centered around her torso. "What's happening to me?"

"Your body is fighting against the poison."

"Poison?" she forced out between clenched teeth.

"My venom."

While Bella cried in agony, the sun slowly set, shrouding the room in darkness. Outside Edward's room, the house remained silent. If anyone was home, they turned a blind eye to what was happening upstairs.

At one point during the night, Bella reached out toward Edward, surprising him. He moved closer, but when he made to take her hand, she began hitting him. "I hate you," she chanted over and over again. "I hate you."

Eventually her sobs quieted down and her body stilled. Edward watched intently as her breathing evened out and her eyes fluttered shut. He frowned. Everyone responded to the venom a little differently, but he had never seen a transformation like this. The girl appeared as peaceful as if she were sleeping.

"Hey," he said as he brushed the hair from her forehead. She stirred slightly. "Hey," he repeated, louder this time. Bella's eyes snapped open. "Are you sleeping?"

"Not any more," she mumbled.

"Aren't you in pain?" he asked in disbelief.

Bella blinked before wiping the sleep from her eyes. She took a quick assessment of her body. Her muscles were a little stiff, but there was none of the ache or burning sensation she had felt earlier. She brought her hands to her ribs, where the pain had concentrated. They felt sore, bruised, but not painful. She tested her limits with a deep breath, then a deeper one. Nothing.

"I feel . . . fine."

Edward was perplexed. The girl was fine—better than she was before. He didn't understand. The venom was working only hours ago. She should still be in agony, not lying there with a strong heartbeat, dozing off while he waited anxiously for the change to occur.

"This can't be happening," he said.

"What?"

"You're supposed to change," he bellowed. "The venom is supposed to change you!"

Bella gingerly shifted away from him. When she realized no pain came with her movements, she took the opportunity to slide to the far side of the bed.

"I can't do this." Edward tugged at his hair and cursed under his breath. He couldn't taste her again, the smell alone was driving him insane. "I need you to change your clothes." Bella didn't move. "Now!"

"But I don't have anything—"

"I don't care if you're naked. I don't care if you wrap yourself in a sheet. Take something from my closet if you want to just get out of

those fucking clothes!"

Bella scurried off the bed and across the room to Edward's closet. She opened the door, and with shaking hands, pulled out the first t-shirt she touched. She didn't bother to see if Edward was watching as she stripped off her shirt. No sooner did she have it over her head when he pulled it from her grip. He had already removed the sheets from the bed, and he balled the bloody fabric together before throwing it out the window along with one of the pillows.

"On the bed." He pointed to it as he drank in the fresh air from the window.

"I don't want to," Bella declared firmly. She had spent the past two days confined to the bed. It felt good to stand and move around pain free.

Edward glared at her. It only took two threatening steps in her direction for Bella to dash back to the bed. Satisfied that she would stay put, he began to pace around the room. He needed help, he needed answers, but he didn't trust anyone. He also knew he couldn't do it alone, and so he finally gave in.

"Carlisle, please," he called loudly. "I need your help."

His plea was met with silence.

Thanks for reading! Please review. :D

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

"Does this hurt?" Carlisle asked.

Bella flinched as his hands gently pressed against her body but not because of pain. "No."

Edward stood at the foot of the bed, eyes darting between Carlisle and the girl. He was still paranoid about letting anyone near her, but he honestly didn't believe Carlisle would be the one to snuff out her life. "Is she okay?"

"The fractures have all healed," Carlisle answered. "You're as good as new, Bella."

"Are you done, then?" Edward asked.

"Is that your way of telling me you'd like me to leave?" When Edward didn't reply, Carlisle turned toward the door.

"Wait." Edward followed him into the hallway, closing the door behind them. "May I have a word with you?"

"Certainly." Carlisle's tone was clipped.

"Where were you earlier?"

"I was out. Hunting. With my family."

Edward cringed at his words, at how he was so easily dismissed from the coven. "I needed you."

" *They* needed me. You cleared out the entire house when you bit her."

Edward looked away. He should have known better than to think her spilled blood would go unnoticed in a house full of vampires, no matter how quiet they had been. "I had to do it before someone tried to kill her," he explained accusingly.

"Edward," Carlisle sighed, "nobody is going to kill Bella."

"But I heard you." Edward frowned. "I heard Rosalie—"

"I would never entertain the idea of taking an innocent life. Maybe if you weren't so distracted by her, you could have eavesdropped on the entire conversation. Or better yet, you could have quit acting like a self-centered demon and joined us."

His words stung but only because they were true. "Carlisle, I know you don't agree with my decision, but please tell me what I did wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Edward." He tried to walk away, but Edward stopped him.

"Yes, I did! But I don't know what. I bit her and everything was working and then . . . and then it stopped."

"Things worked exactly like they were supposed to. Venom heals—that's what it does. It perfects what is broken, what is human. Your venom healed Bella's injuries."

"That doesn't make sense," Edward said. "When you found me, my injuries were a lot worse than a few broken bones, but I changed."

"Yes," agreed Carlisle, "they were." He hesitated before continuing. "I also gave you multiple bites."

Edward's last human memories were fuzzy. He didn't remember much aside from the all-consuming pain. "Multiple bites?"

"It takes a lot of venom to make the change, Edward. More than one little bite will introduce into the bloodstream. It takes incredible

control. You can't drink, or you're going to suck it out. And even if you don't, there's no way to guarantee that the venom will take. Everyone is different. Those with more to heal will require more venom. The healthier the person, the harder their body will fight it. Likewise, the body will build an immunity against it over time. Why do you think there are so few of us in the world? It is incredibly difficult to make a vampire—to create perfection."

Carlisle's words troubled Edward. How many more times would he try before he succeeded? How far had he set himself back with all of his failed attempts? How much venom would he have to pump into her body before it was enough to change her? And most importantly, would he kill her first?

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find hospitals that are hiring so Esme and Rosalie can start eliminating some of the new houses we're looking at."

Edward rubbed his hands over his face. He felt like a jackass. Everyone's lives were being inconvenienced because of him, but he couldn't bring himself to regret his decision.

"Spare a moment?"

Edward bristled at the sound of Jasper's voice and repositioned himself in front of the bedroom door. "Make it quick."

"I've done some investigating around the campus. There isn't any talk of Bella or anyone else missing. I checked admissions and found two Bellas, but both of them were present and accounted for. Are you sure she's a student there?"

"Positive . . . I believe so, anyway. I watched her exit the building." Edward paused as he remembered something Bella had said. "She asked about a backpack the other day. Think you can track it down?"

Jasper shrugged. "I'll look."

Edward's guilt began to get the best of him again. He trusted Jasper least of all. He was the weakest out of everyone when it came to resisting human blood and had slipped up the most times. Edward wanted him nowhere near the girl. He didn't even want him in the house.

Jasper knew Edward felt this way, and he didn't need to be told. He had his own gift—the ability to sense and manipulate the emotions of others. He could feel Edward's misgivings toward him, yet he had his back anyway.

"Thank you for helping me."

"I'm not doing it for you."

"I know, but it doesn't erase the gratitude I feel."

Jasper nodded and headed for the stairs.

"Jasper," Edward said, suddenly thinking of something. "Can you get a read on her? Do you know what she's feeling?"

"Nope."

"So I'm not going to be . . . like you?"

"Not yet."

"When?"

"Soon."

Edward sat on the foot of the bed, playing absentmindedly with the cuff of Bella's pant leg. The thin material felt soft between his fingertips, but what he was really indulging in was the heat radiating from her skin. It warmed his knuckles and gradually spread to the back of his hand. The feeling was unusual yet oddly comforting.

"Why didn't it work?"

"Not enough venom, I guess."

"How do you know how much you need?"

Edward shrugged. "Practice makes perfect," he said dryly.

Bella shuddered at the thought of him biting enough times to constitute practice. It was painful when he broke her skin, and the burning sensation it created inside her body was almost unbearable. "You've never done this before?"

He shook his head.

"Maybe you should get someone who knows what they're doing."

"No," Edward growled, causing Bella to start. "No one else is getting anywhere near you."

"Because they want me dead?"

Edward didn't want to tell her that wasn't the case. She seemed slightly more tolerable of him since he told her his family wanted to kill her—less combative and more accepting. He didn't want to give her a false sense of security, or any sense of security for that matter. "Yes," he fibbed easily. "But even if they didn't, I doubt they would succeed in changing you. The key is to not drink; it removes the venom. Your blood is too appetizing. There isn't a doubt in my mind they would drink you dry."

"You're better at controlling yourself than they are?"

"Hmph," Edward huffed, not about to admit the extent to which he struggled. "No, but I'm the only one with an incentive to keep you alive."

"Did that other—" Bella stumbled over her word choice of *man*. He wasn't a man, and she wasn't ready to use the term *vampire* quite

yet. It still seemed crazy, and she felt saying it out loud would somehow make it more real than it already was. "The one who was in here, did he want to kill me?"

"Carlisle?" Edward struggled with how much to tell her. "No, you can trust him. No one else."

"What about Esme?" Esme had treated Bella kindly so far, making sure she had amenities and was comfortable. Surely she didn't want her dead as well.

"I won't take chances with you." Edward clenched his fist, inadvertently ripping a piece of fabric from Bella's pant leg. It tore so easily. It wouldn't take much more effort to tear the leg from her body. Once again, he was reminded of how fragile she was. "I won't lose you now," he whispered almost inaudibly.

Bella wondered how long his miserable existence had been in order to want her so desperately. "How old are you?" she asked cautiously.

"I'm—uh—" Edward stalled. Answering with fabrications came naturally to him. It was difficult to break away from the habit and answer honestly. It wasn't every day he discussed personal matters with someone outside the family. However, there were some things he didn't feel the need to lie to the girl about, and this was one of them. "One hundred twenty-six."

Shock registered on Bella's face. The boy who sat in front of her was just that—a boy. He could have been 16. He may have been able to pass for 21. But nothing about his appearance gave his true age away. Then it dawned on her. "You don't age?" Edward shook his head "At all?"

"Never."

"Will you die?"

He shrugged again. "It's possible, but not likely."

Bella started putting the pieces together. He *could* die, but it didn't sound like something he was worried about. If the sunlight didn't hurt him and he didn't have fangs, then there was a good chance that other common vampire weaknesses—wooden stakes, holy water, garlic, crosses—were false as well.

"Can you be killed?"

Edward cocked his brow and smiled darkly. "Why do you ask, honey? Gonna try to off me?" he goaded.

"No." Bella would have laughed if she weren't so morbidly curious. "I just want to know. When I'm a—" Again, she couldn't bring herself to say it. "I deserve to know what to expect."

Edward became serious. He crawled to the head of the bed where Bella sat. She tried to discreetly shift away but froze when firm, cold fingers tightened around her neck. She swallowed against the pressure of his grip, and he slowly caressed the healing bite wounds with his thumb. "Decapitation is the only way to kill a vampire." He pressed his nose against her neck and inhaled deeply, fighting against his instincts as his senses were flooded with her scent and memories of her flavor. With a shaky exhale, he whispered, "So watch your neck."

Bella gasped as he released his grip. He hadn't cut off her air flow, but his proximity had unsettled her. Once her heart rate returned to normal, she found the courage to speak again. "That's it?"

" *That's it* ? It's nearly impossible. You have to be very, very strong—which you won't be for an incredibly long time so don't even think about it—and you have to be a better fighter than the one you're trying to kill. It's not like he's going to wait patiently while you rip his head off."

"Have you ever killed . . ."

"Yes." Bella recoiled slightly at his answer. "Look at me." When she refused, Edward grabbed her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I was protecting my family," he explained. "I look after those who are important to me. Understand?" She nodded and he dropped his hand. "I'm not a monster."

"So you've said."

They sat quietly awhile. Bella was bored. Talking to Edward wasn't at the top of her list of fun things to do, but her options were limited. She wanted to do something—anything—outside of this room.

"If you're not a monster, then will you let me take another shower?" she asked reluctantly.

"Of course." Edward frowned. Did she think he wouldn't grant her request? After all, between him and Esme, all her human needs had been met so far. "Anything you need."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Can I go home?"

He laughed. "No."

Edward escorted Bella to the bathroom. He kept his arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders, and she felt a faint vibration in his chest as they entered the hallway. They moved quickly. Edward closed the bathroom door behind them before letting Bella wiggle from his hold.

"I wasn't going to try to escape, you know."

"Believe me, you making a run for it is the last thing I'm worried about."

Bella stood awkwardly in the center of the bathroom. "You're not going to stay in here, are you?"

"I'm not leaving you alone."

Edward turned around. Bella quickly stripped off her clothing and got in the shower. She wouldn't go as far as to say she trusted Edward, but being naked behind the curtain was the least of her concerns. If he wanted to take advantage of her, he would have done it already.

She sighed as the hot water cascaded over her body, and she stretched under the steady stream. It felt fantastic after three days of being bedridden. She was thankful to be healed, even though she suffered through the process, and ecstatic to finally be able to wash the grease out of her hair.

"Do you shower?" she suddenly thought to ask.

"Is that an invitation?"

"No!" Bella answered quickly.

Edward snickered. "Occasionally. My skin doesn't have oils, nor do I sweat, so I only shower when I get dirty." He laughed again before adding, "Why, do I smell?"

"No." As much as she didn't want to admit it, Edward smelled good. His scent wasn't something she could describe; nothing about it could be specifically labeled. He smelled clean, crisp, like laundry detergent or fresh air, with a distinctly sweet undertone. It would make a great cologne, not that Bella would ever want to smell him again.

"You're blushing."

"No I'm not!" Bella looked in the direction his voice came from. The cloth shower curtain was completely opaque. There was no way he could see through it. *How did he know?*

"If you say so."

Bella scrubbed her body vigorously as her anxiety increased. "How can you tell?"

"I can smell it."

"You can smell me blush?"

"The scent of your blood becomes stronger when it's drawn to the surface."

"It makes that much of a difference?"

"Yes."

"What's stronger, your hearing or sense of smell?"

"I don't know. What does it matter? They're both a billion times better than yours."

"Is your vision really good, too?" She threw another glance at the shower curtain.

"What's with the questions?" Edward finally snapped. "Your incessant chatter is grating on my nerves."

Bella's eyes stung with unshed tears. Why did she have to be stuck with someone so mean? It was his choice to cut off her contact with everyone but him. He was going to change her into a . . . *vampire* against her will, keep her forever, and he didn't even have the decency to be friendly.

Edward sighed. "Don't cry." It came out sounding more exasperated than comforting.

"I'm not," Bella said before squeezing her eyes shut and sticking her face under the water.

Edward sniffed the air exaggeratedly. "Smells salty."

Bella remained in the shower until the water ran cold. When she turned off the faucet, Edward hung a towel over the curtain. She took it and quickly dried off. When it became apparent that he wasn't going to offer her clothes as well, she shyly stepped out of the tub.

Edward's eyes scanned her body hungrily, and she shivered as his black stare focused on her neck. He moved toward her suddenly, and she shrieked as he silently grabbed her from behind and turned her to face the mirror. Once again, his hand closed around her neck, gently this time, and he tilted her head back so they had a clear view of the deep purple marks there.

"Look at that," he said reverently. "See those marks?" His fingers danced across the varying shades of black, purple, and red, and the faint pink, crescent-shaped indents that covered her neck. "I love knowing I put them there, that they will always be there, marking you as mine." Bella stiffened at his words. "When they are fully healed, human eyes won't be able to see the scars, but ours will."

Bella hated the idea of wearing a permanent reminder of Edward, and she would never accept being his, as if he owned her. She kept her mouth closed, not wanting to upset him again. Arguing about it would be pointless, anyway. In her heart, she knew she would never belong to him.

Edward bowed his head and buried his face into her neck. He breathed in her scent over and over, desensitizing himself to her blood's perfume. He wrapped his free arm around her waist and held her against him tightly, allowing her overheated, practically naked body to warm his own. Parting his lips, he gently sucked on her skin, tasting the bruises just under the surface.

"Wait!" Bella cried. "Wait! Please don't bite me yet."

Edward pulled back slightly. He wasn't going to bite her; not now. He wasn't ready.

"Will you warn me next time?"

"Warn you?"

"Yeah. Give me, like, a fifteen minute warning or something?"

"Why?"

"I just—I think if I have time to prepare, mentally, I'll be able to relax, and maybe it won't hurt as much."

Edward could appreciate preparation. Perhaps, if she were more at ease, it would help him to better control his instincts. "Okay," he obliged.

Bella was surprised by his easy acceptance of her request.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Thanks for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

"So did you mean what you said about getting me anything?"

"Yes. Well, within reason. Why, what do you want?"

"There's something, but I don't know—"

"Spit it out."

Bella felt uncomfortable asking, even though she knew she shouldn't. Edward owed her for what he was putting her through. At the same time, she didn't want to feel indebted to him. "There's a little café across from campus. Oh!" She suddenly realized that she had no idea where they were. They could be miles, states away from the school.

Edward remembered seeing the café when he drove Alice on Monday. "You want breakfast," he guessed. "What do you want?"

Bella breathed a sigh of relief. They weren't far away after all. "Coffee. Um, the dark roast with a little bit of sugar. And a bagel. An everything bagel. With cream cheese."

"Okay."

"And a plate of fruit. And . . . can I have an egg salad sandwich? For later? They're premade. You just have to grab it out of the refrigerator."

Edward nodded. "Anything else?" he asked slowly.

"That's it."

Bella watched Edward expectantly, but he didn't budge. Disappointment washed over her. He wasn't going to leave her side, she knew that, and she doubted he would bring her along for a food run. In fact, he never actually said he would get the food food; he only asked what she wanted. "You're not going," she stated.

"Me? No, Jasper is."

"Jasper?"

"Alice's husband. She's going to drop him off on the way to class. He'll bring it back for you."

"Oh. How—"

"They heard you."

"Oh." *Right. Vampire hearing.* "What do you mean 'on the way to class'?"

"Alice is a student. We usually all are, but things are a bit different this time around."

"This time around?"

Edward let out a loud breath of air. "We're not starting the *Ask Edward a Thousand Questions* game again, are we?"

"Sorry," Bella mumbled.

They sat in silence. It took Jasper longer to return than Edward had expected. To be on the safe side, he left Bella with a threat to stay put and met Jasper at the bottom of the stairs

Jasper was holding a paper bag, a cup of coffee, and to Edward's surprise, an orange backpack. "Ta-da," Jasper exclaimed smugly.

"Is that hers? Where did you find it?"

"Lost and found," Jasper answered with a cheek splitting grin. "And check this out." He pulled a wallet from the front pocket and flipped it open. " *Isabella* Swan. Forks, Washington. That's over three hours from here. I managed to pull her records and did a bit of research. Her parents are divorced. Her father works for the Police Department in Forks, and her mother has a Florida address. No brothers or sisters. She's renting a small studio apartment near campus."

"Nice work, Jasper. What do you propose."

Jasper was typically the one who made sure the family's paperwork trail was in order. He was also good at covering tracks when there was a human casualty. Because it was typically at his hands, he felt obligated to assume that particular role.

"I say you should pay the rent for September, maybe longer, but don't do it ahead of time. It will look suspicious. We don't want it to look like she's disappeared. At some point, we should notify them that she wants to terminate the lease. Someone should also withdraw her from her classes. Speaking of withdrawals, we should use her bank account for a little while. I'll find out how much money she has and what her spending patterns are so we can duplicate it. Her father will most likely check these things when he starts looking for her. I don't think anything will lead him to find *you* , but if he thinks something has happened to her, it will be more difficult to bring her in public . . . not that she'll be in any sort of condition to be around humans anytime soon."

"Okay." Edward was overwhelmed. Under normal circumstances, he would have no problem with any of these tasks. But these weren't normal circumstances, and his mind was already refocused on the girl upstairs.

Jasper picked up on his mood. "Rose, Emmett, and I will take care of it." He handed Edward the food. "But don't forget what it's like to be on this end, *Brother* ."

Bella wolfed down her breakfast like she hadn't had a meal in days. "Will you thank Jasper for me?"

Edward bristled. She had yet to thank *him* for anything. For all she knew, Jasper wanted to kill her. He probably would, too, if Edward would allow him within close range of the girl.

"Would you like to thank him yourself?" Edward asked coldly.

Bella shook her head quickly and popped the last piece of bagel in her mouth. Within a second, Edward had removed the food containers from the bed and positioned himself in front of her with his nose against her neck. She froze briefly as fear surged through her. Her mouth was dry, and she chewed vigorously to choke down the last bite.

"You promised," she forced out in a shaky whisper.

Edward didn't acknowledge her. He continued to take steady breaths. Each cold exhale left a fresh trail of goose bumps on Bella's skin. He pulled away after a few minutes, swallowing back the stream of venom that was flowing freely.

With distance between them, Bella's panic subsided. She looked at the floor. Scattered remnants of her bagel covered the white carpet—poppy seeds and dried onions and . . . garlic?

Bella's curiosity got the best of her again, and the question flowed from her lips before she could stop herself. "Hey, doesn't garlic bother you?"

Edward eyed her warily. He wasn't in the mood to entertain her curiosity, but it was a slight distraction from his blood lust. "No."

"Holy water and crosses?"

"No."

"Can you turn into a bat?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Edward cracked a smile. "No."

Bella scowled. She didn't like his sense of humor, especially when it was at her expense. "Wooden stake through the heart?" she asked indignantly.

This time, Edward frowned. "I told you already. Decapitation."

"What if someone does stake you?"

Edward grabbed her hand and held it to his chest. From the outside, it would look as if they were sharing an intimate moment. "It would never penetrate my skin," he said as he pressed her hand down firmly. "Nothing *can* penetrate my skin."

Touching Edward was like touching a piece of cloth-covered marble. Bella knew he wasn't human, but being able to see and feel proof of it unsettled her. She roughly tugged her hand away once Edward released it.

Edward smiled, clearly entertained by her reaction. He took her hand again and brushed his nose and lips over the inside of her wrist. He slowly skimmed his nose up her arm, taking in her scent with parted lips. Bella tensed when he stopped at her neck, afraid that he might bite. Again, he didn't, and after a few moments, she began to relax. Bella didn't trust him, but so far he hadn't broken his promise. At this point, she would take what little comfort she could get.

Edward continued breathing her in. His cool breath was jagged at times, steady at others, and sometimes gone completely. He gradually leaned against Bella, pushing her onto the bed and pinning her down. His arms curled around her, holding her tightly. Bella braced her arm against Edward's shoulder. She knew she'd never be able to push him away, but her instincts were screaming to defend

herself. She felt, more than heard, a low hum in his throat. It didn't seem like a warning, but she dropped her hand to the bed anyway, not wanting to push her luck.

Keeping one arm around Bella, Edward used his other hand to rip apart the neck and shoulder of the t-shirt she wore. He opened his mouth and lightly pressed his teeth to the smooth skin below her ear. He pulled away and repeated the action slightly lower. He continued this, lower and lower on her neck, over her shoulder, down her arm. Bella wondered if he was marking potential places to bite and which spot he would choose.

She didn't know he intended to choose all of them.

He worked his way back up to her neck. With a single nod, Bella understood what would happen soon. She closed her eyes and tried to stay calm by thinking of things that made her happy—dinner with her father, postcards from her mother, late nights with friends over the summer, curling up with a good book, the new found freedom from having her own apartment.

Her apartment. She had only lived there for a couple of weeks. Charlie, Bella's father, had been worried about her living in the city alone. When she first moved in, he called her at night to make sure she remembered to lock the door. Little did they know the danger was nothing that a locked door could keep away. After a few nights she got snippy, telling him the worrying was unnecessary and that she didn't need a safety lecture every night. That was the last time they spoke.

Tears pooled in Bella's eyes as she thought about the last conversation she had with Charlie. He was stubborn and probably waiting for her to make the next call. She would give anything to be able to speak to him one last time, to give him some sort of closure.

"Can I call my dad?" she asked, choking back her sobs.

Edward pulled his face away from Bella's skin. She had been so engrossed in her memories that she had completely tuned out the uncouth way he was handling her. "No."

She was about to argue, to beg, but the look in his eyes made her forget all of the problems outside of this room. He looked wild, his black eyes feral as they focused on her. In her entire life, Bella had never seen anything look as dangerous as Edward did at that moment.

If Edward had thought he could desensitize himself, he was wrong. It had been too long since he last hunted. He was starving, and the scent of Bella's blood had him struggling with his instincts more than ever.

He made a mental list of where he would bite. He would place three bits on her neck, one on her shoulder, and a few down her arm until he reached her wrist. If he worked quickly, it could be over within seconds. Hopefully it would introduce enough venom into her system, and he wouldn't have to do it again.

But . . .

All those bites would surely be sufficient. Would it hurt to draw a little bit of blood in the beginning? *It would make the subsequent bites easier for me*, he reasoned. *Just a mouthful to soothe the ache in my throat.*

He gently turned Bella's head to the side, exposing the spattering of bruises on her neck, and moved one of her arms for easy access. She didn't resist. Edward enjoyed her sudden display of submission. The beast inside him fed off it, craved it. His body was wound tightly, coiled as if to spring. He took deep breaths, trying to relax, but it was to no avail. Venom flowed past his lips as he bowed his head and prepared for the first bite.

Bella thought being ready for his attack would make it easier, but as his teeth sank into her neck, she realized no amount of preparation

would ever help. The pain of her skin breaking was overshadowed by the fire of his venom, but a third type of pain was introduced as she felt a familiar pulling sensation.

Edward was drinking.

With her free arm, she pushed against his shoulder. He didn't budge. She moved her hand to his neck and tried again. It was like trying to move a brick wall.

"Edward," she squeaked out. "Please. Stop." The last word came out in a whisper. Bella didn't have any fight left in her, and she knew there was nothing she could say or do that would make any difference. *Maybe I should close my eyes and welcome death .*

The door to the room swung open as Carlisle and Emmett rushed in. Sensing other vampires in the room, Edward's defense instincts took over. He tore his mouth away from Bella as a loud roar erupted from his chest.

Before she understood what was happening, Bella found herself standing, pinned between the wall and Edward's back. The combination of blood loss and sudden motion left Bella in a daze, and if it weren't for Edward's support, she would have surely collapsed.

Although she was dizzy and her vision was a bit fuzzy, Bella was still aware of everything going on around her. Carlisle moved toward them slowly. An unfamiliar, dark-haired vampire stood by the doorway. He was large and looked strong, and he made Edward look slight in comparison.

"Son," Carlisle said, "no one is going to hurt you." His voice was calm and soft. Bella had to strain to hear him. Edward growled continuously as he kept Bella sheltered behind him. Carlisle closed in on them, capturing Edward's full attention. That was when Emmett struck.

It happened so fast, Bella didn't see it coming. One minute she was standing behind Edward, and the next, Edward was face-down on the floor with the large vampire on his back. He fought against the attack violently, thrashing his body, snarling like a trapped animal, snapping his teeth. But it was too late. The other vampire had Edward's arms pinned behind his back and was much too heavy to be thrown off.

Edward didn't stop his struggling, though. The inhuman sounds he was making unsettled Bella so much that she backed herself into the corner in an attempt to distance herself from the altercation.

Carlisle looked at Bella warily. He approached her with exaggerated slowness, holding his hands out palms forward. "Bella, are you all right?"

"Stay away from her!" Edward growled through his teeth.

Bella tore her eyes away from Carlisle to look at Edward. His expression alarmed her. She had never seen him looking so panicked, so . . . *terrified* . She flinched as Carlisle's cool fingers inspected her neck.

Edward didn't take well to Carlisle touching the girl. He mustered every ounce of strength he had and threw Emmett off balance. He only made it a few feet before finding himself smashed against the floor again. Emmett, enraged by Edward's aggression toward Carlisle, twisted his arm too hard. A loud crack filled the room, followed by a guttural yell.

Bella stared, shocked, at the vision before her. Edward's face was turned away from her, his body completely still. He let out another pained moan before falling silent.

"Easy, Emmett," Carlisle spoke calmly before turning his attention back to Bella. "You're healing okay. There's just a little blood. Can I get a damp cloth, please?"

Bella wasn't sure who he was asking, but a few moments later, Esme breezed into the room. She handed Carlisle a wash cloth and offered Bella a tight lipped smile before leaving. Bella didn't understand why she was acting so strange. Her body language was off; she was too rigid, too still. Bella looked back at the floor where Edward was still pinned below the large vampire. Emmett's eyes were alight with excitement, but he held the same tension in his body as Esme had. It was the same way Edward appeared when he wasn't . . .

They aren't breathing , she realized.

Edward's warnings began trickling through her mind. *"I don't trust them around you . . . Your blood is too appetizing . . . They want to kill you . . . There isn't a doubt in my mind they would drink you dry."* Bella's heart rate spiked as Carlisle gently cleaned the blood from her skin.

"Oh, Edward," he sighed, too quietly for human ears to hear. "What have you done?"

Although Carlisle wasn't Edward's biological father, he had served as a father figure from day one of Edward's transformation. Edward, always the overachiever, had never been a source of disappointment to his mentor. He kept his face buried in the carpet, unable to look Carlisle in the eyes. He didn't have to read his mind to know how much of a letdown he was.

"Carlisle, please—" Edward stopped. How could he ask Carlisle to let him carry on with the girl like this? It would be the equivalent of a child begging to keep the butterfly whose wings he already tore off.

"Do you have yourself under control now?" Carlisle asked.

"Yes," he answered defeatedly.

"Emmett, let him go."

Emmett gave him a look that asked, "Are you sure?" Carlisle nodded. Slowly, Emmett stood. When he was positive Edward wasn't going to retaliate, he released his arms. Edward pushed back onto his knees, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor.

"Do you have something to change into?" Carlisle asked Bella.

She looked down at herself for the first time. Her shirt—Edward's shirt—was covered in blood and hanging off one shoulder. She adjusted the fabric shreds and shrugged. "I think so."

"Are you going to have a problem dealing with the blood? Do you want me to dispose of her clothes now?" he asked over his shoulder. Bella tightened the hold on her shirt.

Edward swallowed thickly and shook his head. Carlisle had done enough already. The girl wasn't his responsibility.

"If you're sure." He turned back to Bella, torn between doing what was right for her and what was best for Edward. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. Whoever is here will hear you." He gave her an apologetic smile before slipping from the room, leaving her alone with Edward once again.

Thanks for reading! Please review. :D

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Edward sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. Bella was on the floor in the corner with her arms wrapped around her knees. They were quiet in the aftermath of what had happened, both reflecting in their own way.

Edward felt shame for disappointing Carlisle. He was frustrated with his lack of control and scared because he had been so close to losing the girl. He was also angry with Emmett for being so rough. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his shoulder where the fissure was healing.

"Did he hurt you?" Bella asked.

Edward twisted his body around and looked at her with wide eyes. "You're asking if I'm hurt?" He shook his head, laughing to himself. "You are either amazingly benevolent or incredibly foolish." When Bella didn't reply, Edward looked away. "You shouldn't be concerned for me."

"I never said I was."

"Touché."

"So I guess that was a practice round, huh? Better luck next time, I guess," she said flatly.

Edward smiled. He never expected half of the things that the girl said or did. Sometimes, he wished he could read her mind. He wanted to know what she was thinking. His smile quickly faded. "You are quite blasé for someone who almost died. Do you realize if they hadn't shown up when they did—" He sighed and dropped his head into his hands once more. "I wouldn't have stopped."

Bella had assumed as much. But how was she supposed to act? She didn't want to cry or beg for her life. She didn't stand a chance at running away. Screaming wouldn't help. If she treated the situation as serious as it was, she would go insane. "It's how I cope," she said simply. "Maybe you should loosen up a bit. It might be good for you."

Edward's lip twitched, but he couldn't bring himself to smile again. He admired the girl's strength in the face of death, in the face of a monster such as himself. "It's how I cope," he echoed.

"I don't understand why it's so hard for you."

"You don't understand a lot of things," he snapped.

She wasn't going to let his bad attitude intimidate her. If he was going to continue violating her body with his incisors, he was going to give her answers. "I mean, I know you said I smell good and all, or whatever, but I can be in a room full of food without going all rogue and stuffing my face."

He swiveled around to sit completely on the bed, facing where she sat on the floor. "You think that you're the equivalent of food to me?" he asked in disbelief.

Bella shrugged. "It's what I am, right? You're supposed to eat people even if you choose not to."

"It's so much more than that," he said quietly. "Imagine being dehydrated. Lost in the desert for days without a drop of water. Your throat is dry and itchy. Your body hurts. You're teetering on the verge of sanity. Then you come across a canteen of water. How well do you think you'd fare if you had to put it to your lips but couldn't drink?"

Bella didn't know what to say. When he put it that way, it sounded like he was attempting an impossible feat.

"It's like that for me every time I am near you. Do you remember what it felt like when my venom was healing your ribs?" Bella shuddered at the memory. "That's what your scent does to me. Every breath I take burns my throat, all the way into the pit of my stomach. Your blood is the only substance that relieves it."

"You hurt like that all the time?" Bella gingerly touched her neck. The burning sensation was nearly gone. The venom had healed the bite and was almost completely out of her system. She didn't even want to imagine what it would feel like when Edward was successful. Would her whole body be on fire?

"The ache is always there. Most of the time it's dull . . . when we're away from humans or after we've fed. The smell of human blood always triggers it, though. Some people, like you, affect us more than others."

"You mean I'll have to feel like this forever?" Bella exclaimed. "No! No way." She stood and began pacing the far side of the room. "If it's going to feel like this all the time," she pointed to her neck as she paused, "and if I have to drink *blood* , then I'd rather be dead."

"Be careful what you wish for." Edward's temper flared. She was acting as if she had a choice. He didn't like it. "At the rate we're going, you probably will be."

Bella's breath stuck in her throat. His remark caught her off-guard. She quickly shook off her anxiety. This wasn't the time to be weak. "How can you do this to me?" she asked defiantly. "You were human once. You were *alive* . Don't you feel bad about what you're doing? At all?"

"Honestly?" he asked. When Bella nodded, he patted a spot on the bed. She crossed the room reluctantly, sure that if she didn't comply, he would stop talking. "Yes and no," he said as she sat. She waited expectantly for him to elaborate. "I do feel bad for the pain I am causing you, but it's only temporary, so I'm really not all too concerned with it."

"And the 'no' part?"

"There are certain things you won't be able to experience once you're a vampire. You may hate me for taking those options from you now, but I've existed long enough to know that you'll feel differently about it one day."

"I don't understand."

Edward reached out slowly and placed his palm against the healed wounds on her neck. Bella struggled not to flinch. She didn't think he would appreciate it if she showed her disgust, and she wanted him to continue. Besides, his hand was cold and helped to offset the lingering sting.

"After Carlisle changed me, I was angry for a long time," he began quietly. "I believed he robbed me of my life. I never got to grow up, never got to make anything of myself or have a family. He found me on the verge of death and thought he was doing me a favor. I hated him for what he did to me. I would have rather had a chance at life, as slim as it might have been, than be doomed to an eternity of drifting from place to place without purpose, of having to listen to everyone's thoughts, of struggling with the thirst."

"What changed?" she asked.

"After about sixty years, I realized it didn't matter anymore. None of it mattered. If I had remained human, I probably would have been dead along with most of the people I had known. Even if I'd had a family, they would all die one day. There would be no one left to remember me. It would be as if I'd never existed. It never mattered that I couldn't do anything with my life. Life means *nothing*."

"That's a depressing way to look at it."

"Depressing or not, it's how I feel." Edward shrugged and dropped his hand from Bella's neck. The feel of her steady pulse had become too much for him to handle. "Eventually I stopped blaming Carlisle

for my predicament. He did me a favor. I cheated death, and I'm fortunate to be living on borrowed time."

Bella quietly absorbed his words. She hadn't given much thought to her future. She had only been in college for one day before Edward found her and stole her away. Getting married, having a family, growing old—everything she always assumed she'd have was being taken away from her. Would she be able to forgive him one day?

She didn't think so.

What good was a life if she couldn't make something of it? If she couldn't have the things that made life worth living, then what was the point?

Bella couldn't help but think that, maybe, she really would be better off dead.

Around noon, Esme brought lunch upstairs. She wanted to see how Bella was holding up, but Edward wouldn't allow her in the room.

"Esme says hello. Here." He set the plate on the bed. Bella immediately pushed it away. "Aren't you hungry?" She shook her head. "Fine. You can eat it later."

"I'm not going to eat."

Her statement confused Edward. "This is the sandwich you wanted. Is there something wrong with it?"

"I'm not going to eat anything. *At all*," she clarified.

"What, you're trying to starve yourself to death now?" He was only half-joking. Bella didn't answer, choosing to glare at him instead. "Great," he grumbled. The girl was undermining everything he wanted to achieve with a suicide attempt. He pushed the plate toward her. "Eat it," he hissed.

"No."

"Eat it or I'll make you eat it."

"No!"

Edward picked up the plate and flung it across the room with so much force that it hit the wall and shattered. Chunks of ceramic and egg salad showered onto the carpet. He took deep breaths, trying to rein in his anger. His heavy breathing only fueled the fire in his throat. He needed to get away from the girl before he lost control. "Stay," he commanded before fleeing from the room.

Esme met him at the base of the stairs. She was concerned, having overheard their conversation. "Edward," she sighed. She tried to pull him into a hug, but he evaded her.

The girl's scent was less concentrated downstairs, and he found it easier to collect his emotions when he wasn't in her immediate presence. "I don't know what to do anymore," he said in defeat. "She is constantly pushing my buttons. I'm not even sure if she's doing it on purpose!" He groaned and tugged at his hair. "We just don't get along."

Esme rubbed soothing circles over his back. This time, he accepted her comfort. "It's about time someone challenged you," she said, her spirits high. "I think the two of you will be good for each other."

"It's not like that," Edward said defensively. He took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut as he thought about the constant struggle she posed. Would a lifetime of arguing with her and trying to hold her captive be worth her gift of silence? Would she be easier to deal with once his blood lust was no longer a factor? When— *if* — they got through this, it was going to be a long eternity.

"She'll never forgive me for what I'm going to do. She's already threatened to leave once."

"Maybe you should be nicer to her. She doesn't know you, not the real you. Talk to her, get to know her, ask her about herself. What does she like? How can you make things easier? Give her a reason to want to stay. She'll come around. You'll see."

Edward snorted. "The only thing she likes to do is make me miserable by talking back and asking too many questions. For having such a silent mind she sure does prattle incessantly."

Esme *tsked* and was about to reprimand his attitude when Jasper, Emmett, and Rosalie entered the house. As they filed into the room, Edward puffed his chest slightly and inched toward the stairwell.

"Well, well, well. The reclusive vampire captor has descended from his mighty fortress," Emmett whispered forebodingly before breaking into a grin. "Sorry about the arm, bro. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Edward's answer was stiff.

"Hi, Edward."

"Rosalie," he acknowledged bitterly.

Jasper could feel the anxiety rolling off him like swells in the ocean. "I'm surprised to see you down here, Edward. Is something wrong?"

Edward opened his mouth to tell him off but was distracted when the stairs above him creaked. He turned around to see Bella standing at the top. While upstairs alone, she had decided she wasn't going to wait around for Edward or starvation or anything else to kill her. It was time to take matters into her own hands. If it was as hard to resist her blood as Edward claimed, then at least one of the five vampires in the room would take the bait.

Bella raised a triangular shard of the broken plate to the crease of her elbow. Edward's eyes widened in horror as he watched it slice down the length of her arm. Blood immediately ran from the cut, coating her arm in rich crimson. In that moment, Edward didn't know

what to do. He wouldn't have time to get her back to the safety of his room. He would have to defend her here.

Once the scent of her free-flowing blood filled the room, it was all over.

"Bella, run!" someone yelled, but it was too late. Edward had already made it to the top of the stairs. Protecting her was no longer an issue. Only one thought repeated in his mind.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

Bella closed her eyes and waited for the attack, but it never came. There was a loud crash. She jumped and looked behind her. Emmett and Jasper were trying to subdue Edward. There was a large crack in the plaster where they must have pushed him into the wall. This time, he didn't put up much of a fight. He gave Bella what appeared to be an apologetic look before collapsing under the weight of the other two vampires.

"Someone has to stop the bleeding." Rosalie's voice was strained, weak from conserving the air in her lungs.

"I'll call Carlisle," Esme whispered before flitting from the room.

Bella looked down at her arm. The cut wasn't as deep as she'd hoped. Definitely not bad enough for her to bleed out. She looked around again. The two males were still occupied with Edward, but the blonde vampire at the bottom of the stairs was fixated on her. Bella held out her arm and approached her.

"Don't!" Rosalie said sternly. "You stay away from me." She turned abruptly and followed in Esme's path.

It didn't work, Bella thought. Why didn't it work? She looked behind her again. Edward's eyes were closed, his eyebrows drawn together, his jaw clenched. He was completely motionless, yet the other two

had him restrained as though they weren't taking any chances. She could tell none of them were breathing.

She glanced at her bloody arm again. The sight of the jagged flesh nauseated her. She sank to the floor, wrapped her arms around her knees, and cried.

"You need to hunt," Carlisle demanded.

Edward sat in the hallway, self-exiled from the room that Bella occupied alone. He shook his head slowly. He felt lethargic. Even keeping his eyes open sucked the energy from his body. "I can't leave her."

"You will leave her."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Edward muttered.

"You're starving. How long has it been?"

"A couple of hours."

Carlisle sighed, exasperated. "How long since you've had a proper feeding?"

"I don't know. Not long. Three weeks, I think." His memory was becoming fuzzy. He rubbed his eyes vigorously, as if it would somehow help.

It didn't.

"Edward, you're going to kill her. I know you don't want that."

"I don't want her to die, but I can't . . ." He groaned. "I've never felt so out of control."

"It's the blood."

"What blood? *Her* blood?" he asked in disbelief.

"Human blood," Carlisle clarified. "It's making it difficult for you to separate yourself from your true nature. It's why you've been irritable and making rash decisions."

"I am a monster."

"No you're not, Son."

"Yes, I am. I lost it, Carlisle. I completely lost it. I let my instincts, my desires, take over. And that was *before* I drank from her the first time. Everything I've worked so hard to be—"

"Hunt, Edward. I won't take no for an answer."

"What about her?" Edward nodded to the door behind him.

"Bella will be fine. No one will bother her."

"No! Will you stay with her, please? I don't want her to be alone, and I don't trust anyone else."

"I will look after her if that's what it will take to get you to eat."

Edward stood begrudgingly. He knew he should trust Carlisle, but without being able to hear anyone's thoughts, he had become paranoid. This could all be an elaborate plan to take the girl away. Or kill her. What would he do if he came home and she was gone? What would he do without her silence? He didn't want to go back to the way things were. He couldn't!

"I'm going to let her know I'm leaving." Separating from the girl was going to be difficult. He didn't want to go, but he had to feed. There was no way he could taste her blood again without killing her. He could barely be in the same room with her anymore. Just the thought of opening his bedroom door caused venom to pool in his mouth. He knew it was best to go now, to get out of the house as quickly as possible, but he couldn't leave without saying goodbye.

He might not get another opportunity.

Carlisle sensed his hesitation. "Everything will be okay." He squeezed Edward's shoulder reassuringly. "I'll be right here if you need me. You'll be fine."

Edward nodded, comforted by Carlisle's encouragement. He inhaled deeply and took a moment to mentally prepare before entering the room. Bella was curled up on the bed. She quickly wiped away her tears. He approached cautiously, making sure he could keep himself in check, and sank onto his knees.

"I need to hunt."

She pushed herself up to a seated position. "You're leaving?"

"Only for a little while." He took her arm and gently traced the sterile, white bandage with his fingertips. "If you keep bleeding all over my clothes, I'm going to have to walk around naked," he tried to joke, but it fell flat. He slid his hands down to her wrist before dropping her arm. "I'll be back by morning. Carlisle is going to stay with you while I'm gone. If—if that's all right," he added, recalling Esme's advice to be nice.

Bella gave him a quizzical look. She wasn't sure which was more unexpected, Edward asking for her approval or leaving her in someone else's care. "Okay."

"Don't get any crazy ideas while I'm gone." He grimaced, her unsuccessful suicide mission still fresh in his mind.

"Are you hunting animals?"

He nodded. "Don't worry. Bambi won't feel a thing." His attempt to lighten the mood failed again. Bella's eyes glossed over with tears, and her mouth turned down into a quivering pout. Edward felt a clenching where his heart used to be. He did this to her. He might not have killed her, but her spirit was broken. Suddenly, he missed

her argumentative attitude and snarky comments. He missed the way she stood up to him and didn't take his shit. He missed her defiance. As much as he didn't want to fight with her, he also didn't want her to be a shell of the person she was.

"I have to go." Edward stood quickly. For the first time, it wasn't blood lust that drove him from the room. He passed Carlisle in the hallway.

"Now, Edward." His tone left no room for argument.

"I'm going," Edward retorted. "And I'm taking Jasper with me."

Happy holidays!

Thanks for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Edward ran through the woods behind the house with Jasper in tow. He looked back, frowning when he caught a glimpse of Jasper's expression. "Wipe that smirk off your face," he hissed.

"Sorry." Jasper attempted to sound serious. Edward scowled as he picked up the pace.

. . . being so sensitive . . . Alice . . . upset when she . . .

Edward groaned as he was assaulted by his brother's thoughts. Jasper, sensing Edward's sudden irritation, easily guessed what the cause was.

So you're back, huh?

"Something like that," Edward answered the unspoken question.

Guess it's not permanent. That's too bad. I know how important it is to you.

"Tell me about it."

We'll be back before you know it.

"Not soon enough."

The sound of a ringing cell phone stopped both vampires in their tracks. Edward knew it was Alice before Jasper's mind confirmed it.

"Hey, sweet pea," Jasper answered. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

Alice's voice was clear to Edward, both through the phone and in Jasper's mind.

I can see Edward again. I can't believe he's leaving Bella. Is she okay?

"Bella is lucky she's alive."

Edward growled.

What happened?

Jasper proceeded to explain the turn of events that led to Edward's decision to venture from Bella's side. Edward winced as he relived the memory of the girl's blood-coated arm. He couldn't believe how wild—how evil—he appeared through Jasper's eyes. He was surprised his family dared to come near him.

I'm coming home!

"No, Alice. Everything's under control," Jasper assured her. "Bella is safe. Edward and I are on our way to hunt. There's nothing to worry about."

That's so sweet of you to take him hunting, Jazz.

Jasper laughed dryly. "Oh, I didn't have a choice."

He doesn't trust you after everything he's done?

Edward rolled his eyes at her overly-dramatic tone. "Alice—"

No, you tell him to be quiet. Edward, I know you can hear me. You just stay out of this! Jazz, it's not fair for him to treat you like this when you're obviously not the one with control issues.

"Alice, it's fine. I don't mind." Jasper did mind. He was hurt by Edward's lack of trust. At the same time, Jasper wasn't as confident in his own control as Alice seemed to be. These were both things he didn't want to admit. Unfortunately, one of the people he didn't want to admit them to could read his mind.

Turning abruptly, Edward took off at a full run. He couldn't escape Jasper's thoughts, but he hoped putting physical distance between them would lessen the some of the awkwardness.

Carlisle entered the bedroom shortly after Edward left. Bella watched warily as he approached. She didn't trust anyone any more. Strangely enough, she felt an odd sort of vulnerability without Edward nearby.

"Good evening, Bella. Your arm has stopped bleeding. That's good."

Bella looked at the bandage. It was thick, layered over gauze pads, and showed no signs of what was going on underneath. "How do you—" *Right. Vampire senses.* "Never mind."

"I don't want to disturb it now. We'll take a look at it in the morning." He sat on the corner of the bed. "Edward asked me to stay with you while he's away. If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you about your impending change. Would that be all right?" Bella nodded. She didn't want to think about the inevitable—whether it be death or becoming a vampire—but she didn't want to be left in the dark either. "Has Edward told you about us? Given you any idea of what to expect?"

Bella tried to think of the things Edward had said, but recalling their conversations over the past few days was like looking through a thick fog. "That my throat will hurt when I smell blood."

"Is that all?"

"Um . . . he said you don't *typically* eat people."

"That is correct," Carlisle said with a nod. "We don't believe it's right to *eat* humans. We value life and do what we can to protect it." Bella rolled her eyes and snorted. Obviously Edward wasn't living by the same standards. Her reaction didn't deter Carlisle from continuing. "Our way of life is a big part of who we are as a family. It bonds us together and keeps us civilized. It gets easier to abstain over time,

but the thirst will be quite unpleasant in the beginning. The first few months are the hardest, especially when you're not giving in to your natural urges. If you choose our way of life, you will have a support system. We'll take you somewhere without temptation until you can get yourself under control. When you're ready, we'll help you adapt back into society."

For the first time in days, Bella's spirits were lifted. "Will I be able to see my family and friends again?" she asked hopefully.

Carlisle shook his head. "The risk would be too high. You'll look different, you won't age, you'll have to make excuses for where you've been, why you didn't come forward when people were looking for you . . ." He sighed and smiled sadly. "It's better to start over. I know it sounds hard now—to leave your loved ones without a final goodbye—but it gets easier over time."

"Because everyone I know will be dead," she stated solemnly, remembering Edward's words from earlier.

"Yes."

"Why are you doing this?" Bella's outburst took Carlisle by surprise, and he stood from the bed. "You're a doctor. You help people. You've helped me!" Her anger got the best of her, and tears of frustration poured down her cheeks. "How can you let him do this? You were there! Why did you let him take me?"

"Let him?" Carlisle was suddenly defensive. "Don't let Edward's outward appearance fool you. He may appear young to most, but in his day he was a man, and in our lifestyle he is more than capable of making his own decisions. We are equals, he and I. I am only stepping in now because, quite frankly, if he were to actually kill you, I'm not sure he could handle the aftermath. Edward is not . . . *stable* right now."

"He's not stable? Great." Her voice shook, but she remained strong. "Just leave me with the crazy vampire so he can use me as his chew

toy. I've really enjoyed being an appetizer. Hey, I have an idea! Maybe you can hook up an IV and he can sip on me. Or better yet —"

"Bella," Carlisle said sternly, pulling her from her hysterical rant, "I apologize for what you're going through; it must be awful." He backed across the room and sat down on the leather couch. He dealt with enough emotional humans every day to know that hovering in the center of a room made them uncomfortable, and he didn't want Bella any more worked up than she already was. "That day, in the woods, I couldn't have rescued you without endangering your life. I did what I could to keep you alive."

"What about now? He's *gone* ! Why won't you let me leave now?"

"I'm sorry." His apology was sincere, but it meant less than nothing to Bella. "My family is my first priority, and I won't do anything to jeopardize Edward's emotional state. Besides, if you left right now, nothing would stop him from finding you and bringing you right back. Or worse. If he ran away with you, then none of us could help. Your best bet for survival is to stay right here."

Carlisle's words slammed into Bella like a freight train. They left no room for argument. He wouldn't help her, and if he tried, it wouldn't matter. "Why even bother?" she spat. "What was the point of saving me? You all want me dead, anyway."

"Nobody wants you dead, Bella," Carlisle said. "We want you to have a second chance at life, even if this life isn't your first choice."

Bella looked at Carlisle apprehensively. Edward had said they wanted to kill her. Had he lied? What would have been the point? It's not like she was running to any of them for help.

"I understand if you don't want to live with us after what you've been through. I can't imagine what you must think of us. Just know that, if you choose to stay, you are more than welcome to be a part of our family."

His words confused Bella. She was under the impression that she didn't have a choice. Edward had made it very clear that leaving was not an option. "If I choose to stay?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Regardless of what Edward may tell you, it is ultimately your choice."

"He's never going to let me leave," she argued. "And you've made it clear that you won't help me."

"No, I won't," he said apologetically. "You have to help yourself."

"But I can't," she shouted. "It's not like I can overpower him!"

Carlisle struggled with how much to tell Bella. He didn't want to betray Edward, but he wanted to be fair to her. She would find out eventually, and it would be better if she had time to mentally prepare while she was still capable of making rational decisions. "When you become a newborn vampire, you will be volatile, irrational, and driven almost entirely by your instincts," he began slowly. "You will also be incredibly strong. There is nothing in the world stronger than a vampire in its first year of life. If you want to leave, Edward can't stop you."

Bella frowned as she processed his words. What Carlisle said didn't make any sense. Edward was older, stronger, or at least, that's what he had said. He wouldn't let her leave, and there were others who would help him.

Sensing her skepticism, Carlisle explained further. "No one can force you to stay here against your will once you've been changed. No one will be able to."

She studied his face carefully, but nothing she found there led her to believe he was lying. It had to mean that Edward had lied. In a way it made sense. He didn't want her to leave, so of course he wouldn't be truthful. That simple fact alone supported Carlisle's honesty. But why

would he tell her this? Was he really trying to help or did he have ulterior motives?

Is this my only way out? she thought. *Become a vampire and escape?*

"Like I said before, we will help you adjust to your new life. You can stay for as long as you'd like. Our door will be open to you while you're actively participating in our lifestyle. However, if you leave, I hope you'll consider abstaining from drinking human blood."

Bella didn't know what to do. Carlisle was nice enough. She liked Esme. Even Alice seemed pleasant the few times she had seen her. They wanted her to stay, they wanted to help her, but Bella wasn't convinced. She shook her head, dispelling the thought. They weren't on her side, they were on *his*. She couldn't stay with them, especially not while Edward was around. Even if he became easier to deal with when he wasn't constantly attacking her, she still didn't want anything to do with him.

I don't want to stay, but if I leave, I'll be completely alone.

Bella wasn't sure which fate was worse.

At least their condition for acceptance wasn't bad. Bella didn't want to drink human blood. She hated the thought of people dying because of her. Of course, the thought of blood in general made her stomach churn, but that was now. She saw the way Edward reacted to her, the way the others cautiously kept their distance and held their breaths.

"What happens if I mess up?" she blurted out as the thought crossed her mind. "What if I kill someone?" Bella shuddered. She didn't want to think about it, but she had to ask. Obviously some indiscretions were allowed seeing as no one had kicked Edward to the curb yet, but she didn't know just how far their family bond went.

"There are times when mistakes are made, and we regret them deeply. Each and every one is a learning experience. We remember the lesson and move on. Would you understand what I meant if I said we were only human?"

Bella nodded.

"Aside from Edward and me, everyone in the family has produced at least one human casualty. Until you came along, he and I were the only two who had never consumed human blood. We have never killed a human in the true sense of the word. We may not have the first in common any more, but I pray to God that the second won't change. Unfortunately for the both of you, changing someone is an incredibly difficult task with a very low success rate."

"Is that why he went to . . ." Bella trailed off, not knowing how to finish her question. Eat? Feed? Kill Bambi?

"Hunt?" he guessed. Bella nodded. "Yes. He hopes it will help, and it may. He's out of options at this point. He would never have been successful in the state he let himself degrade to. At any rate, it should help him restore some control." Carlisle looked down and shook his head infinitesimally. A look of sadness washed across his face. It resembled Charlie's expression the few times that Bella had let him down.

"Are you disappointed in him?" she asked curiously.

Carlisle's head snapped up. He smiled questioningly, surprised that Bella was perceptive—or cared—enough to ask. "He thinks I am, and . . . I was, but I have no right to be. I hold Edward to a higher standard than I do the others because of his track record, but sometimes we can't help what's in our nature. Sometimes we all do things for reasons unbeknownst to others." Carlisle paused to give Bella a knowing look. "I don't know your motives for trying to invoke my family to attack you. I imagine it's either because you didn't want to suffer any longer or you didn't want to become one of us." This time Bella looked away. Carlisle nailed her reasoning on the head.

She didn't want to die—not really—she just didn't want to settle for the options that were before her.

"I could change you right now, Bella," he proposed. "Your blood isn't a temptation to me. I have successfully changed all six of my family members without a single lapse of control. It would be over before your brain even registered the pain. But I won't do it without your permission."

Bella considered Carlisle's offer. She didn't doubt that he possessed the necessary control. After all, he had been in close proximity to her exposed blood multiple times and never once showed any traces of strain. Not to mention Edward trusted him, which said a lot.

At the time of her suicide attempt, Bella believed she only had two options: become a vampire and be stuck with Edward for the rest of eternity or endure painful suffering until he finally killed her. If she accepted Carlisle's offer, it would end her prolonged suffering at Edward's hand. Now that she knew she didn't have to be trapped there forever, the prospect of becoming a vampire was slightly more appealing.

The only problem was that Bella didn't want to be a vampire.

"I don't want you to change me."

"Are you sure you won't reconsider? There won't be another opportunity like this once Edward returns."

"I'm positive. Thank you for the offer, but I don't want your life. No offense or anything," she added quickly. "I want to be human, and if I give up now, that option will be lost."

"That's true; once the change begins there's no turning back. Do you understand there's a good chance that Edward will fail and you will die?"

Bella knew it was a possibility. A good possibility. Maybe she was brave, maybe she was stubborn, but she was going to fight to the bitter end. "I'm willing to take the chance."

Carlisle was thoughtful for a moment. He understood why she felt that way, and he admired her courage. She was stronger than any of them could have imagined. He wanted to help her, but his options were limited. If he could reason with Edward, perhaps they could come to an agreement. Edward wanted Bella because she gave him silence, and if she could do that as a human, there was no reason why she couldn't stay that way for a while longer—at least long enough for her to consent to the change.

"I'll talk to Edward when he gets back. He'll be well fed and thinking clearly. Perhaps he'll listen to reason and we can keep you human for a little longer."

Bella appreciated Carlisle's efforts, even if it wasn't the help she wanted. It didn't really matter what he did at this point, though.

She had a plan.

I love hearing theories. What do you think Bella's plan is?

There's a poll for this story on my profile: Whose side are you on?

Thanks for reading! :)

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Bella remained silent for the rest of the evening. Carlisle, sensing she was deep in thought, didn't disturb her. It was late when there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an invitation, Alice poked her head into the room. "Sorry to interrupt," she said cheerfully. "Jasper and Edward are on their way back; I can see them. They should be here in twenty minutes."

Carlisle stood and headed toward the door. "Alice, I'd like to have a conversation with Edward. I'm not sure if it would be better to involve the whole family or speak to him one-on-one. Can you see anything?"

Alice's eyes glossed over as she tried to envision the future. After a few agonizingly long moments, she squeezed them shut and shook her head. "It's about Bella, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered.

"It's the strangest thing. In every scenario I see a standoff of sorts. Just the two of you staring at each other. There's no conversation and no resolve. I can't see your futures beyond that." Alice looked away and pouted. She wasn't accustomed to feeling useless.

Carlisle sighed. "It's fine, Alice. Thank you. I think I'll ask Emmett and Rosalie to stand by. Edward needs to see that we are here for him. Both of them," he added with a nod to Bella. He lowered his voice so she couldn't overhear. "He doesn't want her to be alone. Will you stay here while I speak to him?"

"Oh." Alice looked over Carlisle's shoulder. Bella didn't appear to be paying attention to them. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" she

asked, remembering Edward's reactions when she had last been in the room. "Maybe Esme would be a better choice."

"Esme will be with me," he stated finally. "I think he'll be more willing to listen if she is involved."

Alice tried unsuccessfully to look into their futures once again, but the outcome was the same. "If you think it's best," she agreed.

Carlisle exited the room. In a flash, Alice was on sitting on the bed next to Bella.

"Hi." Bella shifted uncomfortably from Alice's sudden presence. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm around people all the time. Just don't start bleeding again." She winked.

"Uh . . . okay," Bella said uncertainly. "Look, you don't have to stay here. I'd like to be by myself if you don't mind."

"Oh." Alice frowned. "I can't leave. Edward doesn't want you to be alone. He's afraid something will happen to you." She gave her a pointed stare.

Bella sighed. "I'm not going to try to off myself again if that's what you're worried about."

"I wish I could believe you. I can't see your future, so I'm going to stay here just to be on the safe side."

"You can't see my future?" If it were five days ago, Bella would probably be shocked to hear something like this. She didn't think anything would surprise her any more. "Talented family," she murmured. "You're probably happy I'm here, too, huh?"

"No," Alice answered honestly. "I wish you weren't. I wish I had never asked Edward to drive me to class. I'm so, so sorry."

"You're sorry?" Bella was unconvinced, but it was hard to ignore the tiny, dejected-looking girl in front of her, vampire or not. "It's not your

fault," she conceded reluctantly. " *You* didn't do anything wrong."

"Please don't be too upset with Edward," Alice beseeched. "I'm not condoning his behavior, but he's really been struggling lately."

"Edward Schmedward," Bella retorted. "If you're looking for sympathy from *me* , you're barking up the wrong tree. I don't give a shit about what Dracula's going through."

"He's not a bad guy," Alice said in his defense. "It's been hard for him. The last few years especially. He hears every thought of those around him, which ninety percent of the time is of high schoolers." She scrunched her face in disgust. "The rest of the time he's around us, and we're all paired off. You've changed *everything* , given him the only thing he's ever wanted. I know he's been terrible to you, but he's desperate, and I think he's scared. It's the first time he's had to form a relationship without his gift to guide him. You have no idea how lonely this life can be, even surrounded by family. If you just give him a chance—"

"Save it," Bella snapped. "When he tries to tear out *your* jugular, then we can talk."

"If it makes you feel better, I'm not happy with him right now either."

"It doesn't."

Alice squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples. "I wonder what it is about you . . ."

"Lucky me." Bella was sick of talking. She was tired of the constant supervision. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts.

"When Edward tried to read your mind, he couldn't hear anyone," Alice mused, mostly to herself. "His future disappeared, but everyone else was still there. Everything in my visions happens as if you aren't involved. And now that Edward's away, I can see him again." She looked into the future again with the same result.

Carlisle, Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett stood in a loose half-circle, blocking the stairwell. Edward faced them with Jasper standing in the background. They remained motionless, their faces blank, as if they were actors waiting for stage directions.

Alice shook off the eerie vision. She had never experienced anything like this before. The situation unsettled her. She didn't like not knowing the outcome.

Bella did her best to ignore Alice and the odd way she was acting, but she didn't miss the way Alice suddenly froze and sat up straighter. "They're back."

Alice remained completely motionless, listening to a conversation too quiet for human ears. The only thing Bella could hear was her own ragged breathing. She wished Alice would at least give her a running commentary of what was happening downstairs.

"What's going on?" Bella asked impatiently.

"Esme!" Alice gasped suddenly, causing Bella to jump. She was on her feet and out of the room before Bella could blink.

"One more?" Edward asked.

"I can't." Jasper winced as he rubbed his stomach. "I'm so full."

"Come on. Just to be on the safe side."

"No way. I've hunted every day since you brought Bella home. Besides, I'm too sloshy to move right now." *I'm not the one who should be taking extra precautions.*

Edward shot him a dirty look.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You're right," Edward conceded. "It's just . . . she smells so good, you know? I don't want anyone taking chances." He caught the beginning of a dispute in Jasper's mind, but his thoughts changed direction before Edward could get a grip on them. "What was that?"

Jasper shifted uncomfortably. "Nothing."

"No, it wasn't. Tell me," he demanded.

She doesn't smell that good.

Edward immediately became defensive of the girl. "What do you mean?"

She's better than average, but nothing to lose your shit over.

Edward stood abruptly, tugging at his hair as he paced the forest floor. While he understood the words behind Jasper's thoughts, he couldn't comprehend the truth in them. Dropping his arms, he looked up at the sky. For the first time in his vampire life, he felt small.

Jasper sensed Edward's hopelessness and confusion and chose to speak out loud. "Edward, none of us feel the pull you do. We don't understand why you struggle so much to be around her. When she's not bleeding, of course," he added. "She's no more of a temptation than any other human."

"That's impossible."

"It's not," Jasper said firmly. "She only smells that way to you." Tension filled the space between them until Jasper's thoughts formed a silent question. *Are you sure it's really her scent and not her silence that makes her so appealing?*

"I smelled her first."

Fair enough.

Edward sank to the ground and covered his face with his hands. He didn't want to be here any longer. He longed to be back in his room with her—seeing her, smelling her, falling into her protective bubble and blocking out the world.

"You miss her."

"I don't miss her," he scoffed. "I'm just paranoid that she'll find another creative way to commit suicide or that someone will free her." Edward inhaled sharply. "Or eat her."

"Whatever, Edward. You can lie to yourself all you want, but you can't lie to me. Admit it," Jasper teased. "You enjoy her company."

As much as Edward wanted to argue, he couldn't. "I guess I'm somewhat fond of her."

"It makes you anxious to be away from her. The thought of being separated is painful to you, isn't it?"

"I'm concerned something will happen to her."

"Because you don't want to live without her."

"I can't live without her. I won't."

"What are you going to do once Bella's a vampire? If you think you'll be able to keep her, you're in for a rude awakening."

Edward closed his eyes. He had focused so much on the change itself that he hadn't put much thought into what he would do after. Other than scare tactics and intimidation, he had no solid plan for making her stay. Esme had suggested kindness, but he worried it was too late. Besides, he couldn't think of anything she'd see in him anyway.

"How does that saying go? 'If you love something, set it free; if it comes back—'"

"She's mine!" Edward shouted. He was on his feet within a fraction of a second.

Jasper raised his hands. He could sense that Edward was about to snap and didn't want to push him over the edge. "I know you're confused." He spoke softly, yet confidently, rattling off emotions Edward would never admit to having. "You're scared. You feel remorse, doubt. Pain. Longing. Loneliness. But more than anything, you have hope."

"Save your psycho-babble bullshit for someone else."

"Just because you don't know how to look at yourself objectively doesn't mean it's bullshit."

Edward shook his head.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Jasper challenged. Edward remained silent. "You can't because you don't understand what you're feeling. You don't even remember why you want her anymore. You just do."

"I want the silence."

"Oh yeah? What would you do if we got back and it stopped working, huh? Would you kill her? Drain her? Let her go?"

Edward opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

"That's what I thought."

"You don't understand," he whispered.

"You're right; I don't."

Edward didn't fully understand it himself. There was something more than just the silence that drew him to the girl. He truly believed she was meant for him in some way, even if he didn't have a clue as to what it was.

Let's leave. I know you want to be with her.

Wordlessly, they ran home, entering the woods that bordered the house twenty minutes later. Jasper sensed the shift of mood from inside, and they both stopped.

Something's not right.

Edward quickly scanned his family's minds.

. . . such a stupid idiot. I should be in Alaska right now, not dealing with your stupid ass . . .

. . . remain calm, Son. We just want to talk with you . . .

. . . Bella's okay, Bella's okay, Bella's okay . . .

"They're trying to block me," he whispered.

"How can you tell?"

"They're talking to me. That and Emmett is picturing Rosalie naked."

"Oh!"

"Yeah."

Edward found Alice's thoughts. He briefly saw a vision of the family standing in the living room, but became distracted when he saw Bella. His breath shuddered.

"What is it?"

"Alice is with Bella. Why is Alice with Bella? Damn it, Carlisle, what the hell is going on?" he yelled.

Everything is all right, Edward. Come inside so we can talk.

He took off at a dead run with Jasper following close on his footsteps. Emmett met them at the door, opening it before Edward had an opportunity to tear it from the frame. The others held their position, blocking the stairs. Edward stopped in front of them.

"Let me through." His voice shook, a combination of fear and anger. His stomach churned. He felt sick—something he hadn't experienced since his human life.

"Not until you're thinking clearly," Carlisle reasoned.

"How can I think clearly when you're keeping me away from her?"

"We want to talk to you first."

"We can talk upstairs."

"Edward, you can't be around Bella until you calm down. Alice, Esme, and I will take turns watching her for the time being. She's going to stay human while we figure out what to do." *You need time and space to really think about what you want. Until then, give the girl a break. You need to stop hurting her.*

Panic set in. "I know what I want."

"All we ask is that you step away from the situation and take some time think about it. Now that you've fed you may look at things differently. There are other options available to both of you. You must consider them all."

They were still guarding their thoughts. The only thing Edward could assume was that they were lying. They were trying to remove him from the picture so they could take her away.

"Esme, please. Reason with him," he begged. "He can't do this!"

"You need to *listen* , Edward." Esme was visibly upset, but not for the same reason as the rest of the family. Her mind screamed her opposition to the intervention. *I don't agree with this. I'm so sorry. I*

didn't have a choice. They were adamant. You need leverage. I want to help. Use me if you must. Do what you need to do. I'll forgive you.

Edward acted so quickly that the others didn't have time to react. There was no resistance when he pulled Esme into his iron hold. One arm held her tightly against his body, the other gripped her neck firmly.

The mood in the room shifted as everyone processed what was happening. Confusion, disbelief, dread—everyone's emotions were running high. Not even Jasper could tame the charge in the atmosphere as they watched the matriarch of the family become nothing more than a strategic pawn.

"Edward, what the hell are you doing?" Carlisle's thoughts were a jumbled mess, racing so fast they were indecipherable.

"Let—me—through."

"If you don't let her go, I swear to God, Edward, I'll—"

Edward dug his fingers into Esme's flesh, creating a fracture running the length of her neck. She cried out as a loud pop echoed through the room. "I don't want to hurt her, but I will. I fucking will. Get out of my way."

Carlisle crouched, ready to spring. The vicious snarl that ripped through him surprised everyone in the room. Edward held his ground as he watched various plans of attack play through Carlisle's mind. The others stood by in disbelief, too shocked to react.

"Carlisle, don't!" Alice appeared on the stairs behind him. "He's not bluffing; he'll do it."

He processed what Alice said while Edward waited. His thoughts were still scattered, but he pulled himself together enough to realize that fighting posed too much of a risk. In one smooth motion, he stood up straight. "Go then!" he barked.

Edward gently stroked his finger across the injury he inflicted and squeezed Esme appreciatively, a silent "thank you" for her voluntary sacrifice. He pushed her into Carlisle's waiting arms and flew up the stairs.

Bella was still in shock from Alice's sudden departure. Her heart pounded furiously, filling her head with a deafening *lub-dub* . Through the sounds of rushing blood, she heard heavy footfalls coming up the stairs. She knew it who it would be.

The relief that washed over Edward when he saw Bella through his own eyes was indescribable. Rushing to her side, he knelt on the bed and held her face in his hands. The world faded effortlessly into the background as the girl's silence wrapped around him. He felt safe even after losing the vindictive thoughts of those downstairs.

Despite his recent hunt, there was no relief to the bloodlust. Flames licked up and down his throat with each breath, and he swallowed back the venom. This time, it was easier to push the pain and desire to the back of his mind. He was still in control.

"Are you okay? Did anyone hurt you?" He searched for anything out of place—a scratch, a bruise, evidence of tears—but aside from her shocked face, he found nothing amiss.

"Your eyes," she whispered.

"My eyes?"

"Your eyes . . . they're not black. They're gold like everyone else's." Bella had always been unnerved by his charcoal colored eyes, but the unexpected change was even more unsettling. The flat black was constant, familiar. It didn't show the depth that the liquid butterscotch did, and she didn't know what to make of the intense emotion she saw there.

Edward laughed breathlessly. Of all the things she could say, she never said what he expected. He slid his hands into her hair, closing

his eyes as his forehead dropped to hers. He allowed himself to indulge in the moment. He took in everything. Her softness and warmth. Her scent and the burning fire it caused in his chest. The steady beat of her heart. It wasn't enough. He wanted to be closer, to feel more.

Ever so gently, he tilted her head back and brushed his nose across her heated skin until he came to her neck. He parted his lips, letting her scent fill him completely. The burn was euphoric. He welcomed it, knowing it had an expiration date.

"Tomorrow," he whispered against her skin. "First thing in the morning. I'm not ready to do it now."

Bella took a deep breath. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. She knew she only had one chance to play her cards right. "No." The single word, spoken so confidently, caused Edward to stiffen. "I'm staying human."

Edward put enough distance between them to look into her eyes. Anger flared in the corner of his mind, but he was able to push it back. "That's not for you to decide," he stated calmly.

"I'm not going to decide it," she said. "You are." Edward shook his head, but Bella ignored him. "I want to make a deal."

"A deal."

"A compromise," she clarified. "I understand why you want me, but there are things I want, too. I want to see my family and go to school and live my life. If you let me stay human, I promise to come back to you at the end of every day."

"That's not acceptable."

"Why not?"

"You don't get to call the shots." Edward's irritation got the best of him. "Your future isn't up for debate. Humans are fragile, mortal. I'm not going to risk losing you!"

"Fine. But if you change me, I'll leave."

"That's not an option either."

Bella squared her shoulders and kept her voice steady. "Carlisle told me I'll be stronger than you. You won't be able to stop me, and no one is going to help you. Either you work with me on this or you don't have me at all. Your choice."

Edward felt a stab of betrayal for the second time today. Not only had Carlisle attempted to separate him from the girl, but he undermined everything Edward had worked toward. "You can leave, but I'll follow you," he said slowly. "You can run as far as you want. When your strength wears off, I'll be there."

"Then I'll kill you."

Edward couldn't help it; he laughed. "Oh, really? And just how do you intend to do that?"

"I'm going to rip your head off." Edward's smile fell, and his eyes darkened as Bella repeated his words from the day before.

"Decapitation is the only way to kill a vampire. You said so yourself."

"Do you have *any* idea what I just went through to be here with you?" Edward growled menacingly. He clenched his fists and held his arms to his side to keep from physically lashing out at her. "Am I really that bad? Is the prospect of being with me so awful that you feel the need to run away? I fed you, took care of you, protected you, and this is the thanks I get? This is how you react? I want you here and safe, not out wandering around like some savage," he shouted.

"Better that than a savage pretending to be human!"

"You think you're smart because you have a little bit of information, but you're not. Be careful. If you don't know what you're doing, it's going to come back and bite you in the ass one day."

"I won't believe your lies anymore." Bella crossed her arms and stood her ground.

"Just wait. You'll see. You say you're going to kill me?" Edward smiled darkly and looked her directly in the eyes. "I'm calling your bluff."

HitGoS is up for two Walk of Fame Awards! It's listed under both the Dark Angel and Coven Empress categories. Thank you so much for nominating it! Voting begins January 15th. You can view all the nominated stories at twinklingswfa.blogspot.com

Are smutty lemons your thing? Check out Southern Fan Fiction Review next week for a little one-shot written by yours truly.

Thanks for reading! :)

Chapter 12

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After tossing and turning and inching her way across the bed to be farther from Edward, Bella finally succumbed to sleep. She slept soundly for the most part. Whenever she moved enough to dislodge the blankets, Edward would fix them. He watched her all night, longing to experience the type of peace sleeping brought her.

When her scent became too strong, he went to the window and opened it. He enjoyed a few deep breaths of fresh air, but it wasn't long before he was crawling back onto the bed and sitting beside her. Being next to the girl, even with the torture of her blood's song, was far easier than standing on the far side of the room.

He needed to be as close to her as possible. Something about her presence was comforting. After everything that had happened the day before, he needed all the comfort he could get.

"Knock, knock," Jasper called quietly. Edward didn't move as he cautiously entered the room. "She sleeping?" he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper. Edward nodded. "How are you feeling?"

"More like me."

"Is it any better?"

"Her scent is still painful. Thanks for reminding me," Edward said as he swallowed back a mouthful of venom. "But I don't feel like I'm going to lose control."

"That was a bold move down there."

He turned to face Jasper. "It's bad, isn't it?" Jasper shrugged. If he had been privy to what had happened in the aftermath, he wasn't going to share. "How's Esme?"

"Alive."

Edward winced at the word. He didn't think Carlisle would ever forgive him for what he had done. If the roles had been reversed, if Carlisle or anyone else had hurt *his* girl, he would have fought until the only things remaining were broken pieces of what was once a vampire. "Is Carlisle going to ask me to leave?"

"I'm not sure. He's beyond livid right now. Guess we'll have to wait till he gets back."

"He's gone?" Once again, Edward felt guilty for driving his family away.

"Yeah, I think he needed to destroy something. Burn off some steam. He took Esme and Alice with him." Jasper hesitated before adding, "Rose and Emmett went home."

Edward laughed under his breath. "Go figure. She was angry with me from the moment they arrived."

"Actually, it was Emmett's decision," Jasper explained carefully. "He didn't want Rose getting hurt."

"I would never hurt Rosalie," Edward scoffed.

"Why not?" he asked, a slight edge to his voice. "You hurt Esme."

Edward looked away. He had hurt Esme—the only person who sided with him, the one who had his back from the start—and he felt awful. The damage he inflicted must have been painful; he was all too aware of what it felt like to be broken apart. "I wasn't going to do it."

"Yes you were. Alice saw you tear her limb from limb."

Edward shook his head but gave no further argument. His decisions had been based purely on instinct. He would have done whatever it took to get back what was his, the one thing he couldn't live without. But even though he would have done it without a second thought, it

hadn't made the task any less difficult. "That was the hardest thing I've ever done," he admitted. "I felt her body breaking under my fingertips. For the rest of my existence, I'll never forget what that felt like. My attempts to change her," he said, nodding toward Bella, "pale in comparison to what I did to Esme."

"You know, it's strange," Jasper said suspiciously. "I get why the others think you used Esme. You could overpower her easily. She was the logical choice for bartering with Carlisle. But I think they're missing something."

Edward became completely still as silence fell between them. He didn't move, didn't blink, didn't even breathe. This was a conversation he had hoped to avoid.

"She was in on it, wasn't she?"

"Why would you think that?" Edward laughed it off.

"I could feel everything in that room," Jasper stated firmly, not buying his act. "Whatever Esme felt, I felt, too. She experienced a lot of emotions when you had her." He frowned and looked Edward hard in the eyes. "Fear wasn't one of them."

"Of course she was frightened." Edward stood from the bed, careful not to disturb the girl, and began pacing the room.

"No, she wasn't. She *trusted* you when you sure as hell didn't deserve it. How could that be if the two of you didn't have some sort of communication."

Edward clenched his fists at his side to prevent him from physically lashing out. "You are a perceptive son of a bitch, you know that?"

"Comes with the territory." Jasper smiled smugly.

"You can't say anything."

"Why not?" Jasper's irritation was clear in his tone. "They are blaming you for this, Edward! If that was some stunt you two conspired, you have to tell Carlisle. I don't want to see you ostracized from the family."

"I'm not going to put Esme out like that." Edward didn't know why she hadn't stood up to Carlisle, but he wasn't going to call her out. Whatever her reasons, he couldn't fault her for her devotion.

"Edward, stop being stupid about this. I want the family to get through this as a whole, but it's not going to work if no one takes your side."

"No," he hissed. "Don't you see? Don't you see what her presence has done—what I've done—to this family? If we're going to be divided, I'm not taking Esme down with me. She deserves better than that."

Bella stirred in bed, causing both vampires to freeze. Edward breathed a sigh of relief when she settled back down.

"I don't want to wake her," he said softly. "She hasn't slept this well since she's been here." Jasper raised an eyebrow questioningly. Edward shrugged it off. "It's her last night."

"You still plan on changing her?"

Edward knew no one except for Esme agreed with his decision. He wasn't looking for approval, but he didn't like the way everyone tiptoed around the situation. He knew what his family was like. Their thoughts often betrayed their words, and for once, he wished they would just voice their opinions out loud.

"I don't have a choice."

"You do have a choice. You're not alone in this. You need to talk to Esme, and the two of you need to—"

"Carlisle can kick me out if he wants. If it makes him feel better, fine. At this point, it doesn't matter." Edward thought about the girl's threats to leave. He recalled Jasper's words while they had hunted. "You were right, okay? She's not going to stay here, and if she doesn't, then neither am I. I'm not going to start a war and jump ship."

"Are you talking out of your ass, or are you being serious?" Jasper asked angrily. "Is your life here so miserable that none of it is worth salvaging? Do you honestly believe that Bella will be enough to replace the relationships you've spent the past hundred nine years forming?"

"You don't understand."

"So I've been told," Jasper spat. "I've tried, Edward. So help me, I've tried. You're too bullheaded for your own good." He stormed toward the door before turning around. "I want to help you, but I can't if you won't let me."

Edward didn't bother replying. He continued to watch the girl's sleeping form until Jasper left the room.

It was morning, and Bella was stuck in the odd limbo between sleep and full consciousness. She was aware of where she was, whose bed she was in, and who was sure to be beside her, but she was still too blissful inside her own mind to care.

A cool summer breeze washed across her body, beckoning her to wake. The trees rustling outside the open window captured her waxing attention. It had been too long since she'd been outdoors, and she basked in the fresh air and unseasonable sunshine.

Bella wanted to fall back to sleep, but it was too bright. The light danced across her eyelids. She squeezed them closed a little tighter, knowing once she opened her eyes, everything would become real once again.

She wondered if Edward was watching her. Would he bite her if he knew she was awake? She didn't want him to; she wasn't ready. Her mind had been too jumbled yesterday to mentally prepare for what was in store, and she hoped he had seriously considered her offer.

The room was so quiet that, for a moment, Bella thought she was alone. Edward didn't make a lot of noise. He could go hours without breathing or moving. But surely his vampy sense was keen enough to pick up on her awakened state. Either he wasn't in the room or he didn't care that she was awake. Both options troubled her.

Ever so cautiously, Bella peeked with one eye. She didn't notice when her eyes became round as saucers. She didn't feel her jaw fall open. She definitely didn't tell her body to sit up. Yet all these things happened.

In a way, the vision before her was normal. Expected even.

Edward kneeled at the side of the bed, a position she had been well accustomed to seeing him in. His forehead rested on the mattress; his crossed arms were folded above his head. If she didn't know any better, she would think he was asleep.

But he wasn't sleeping; he couldn't. He wasn't even human. That fact had never been as visually obvious as it was at that very moment.

As the early morning sun streamed through the window, covering most of the bed in sunlight, it also spilled across Edward's folded arms. His pale skin looked almost translucent in the light, but it didn't resemble the normal human flesh Bella was used to seeing. Instead, his skin appeared to be composed of tiny gemstone-like facets. What was most shocking was the way the light reflected off him, casting a spectrum of colors on the wall and ceiling. Without thinking, she reached out and swept the tip of her finger across his arm, trying to reconcile what her eyes were seeing with the memory of how his skin had felt.

The contact took Edward by surprise. He couldn't recall one time when the girl had touched him of her own accord. He sat up and pulled his arms to his sides, moving so quickly that he gave Bella a start. She flinched at the abrupt movement and pulled her hand back as well. They stared at each other with mirrored expressions of shock on their faces.

There was a moment when nothing happened. The only noise in the room was from Bella's racing heart. Edward didn't understand why she had touched him or what had put her on edge. But as her gaze flickered down to the bed where he had been resting, it became clear.

Slowly, so not to startle her, Edward placed his arm out and held it under the beam of sunlight. He sat motionless while Bella stared at his shimmering skin. After a few minutes had passed and her heartbeat was almost back to normal, Edward flipped his palm up and extended his hand to her, silently beckoning her to touch him again.

Bella watched him cautiously as she closed the small distance between them and lightly traced a tentative line across his palm. Despite the shocking appearance, his skin felt normal. She took his hand in both of hers and brought her face closer for a better look. He didn't resist as she flipped it over and back again, and together they watched as he refracted the light like a life-sized prism.

Bella slid her hand up Edward's arm, still in awe of the vision before her. His skin was cool to the touch and soft as satin. She squeezed his bicep gently, but unlike his silken skin, the muscles and tissue beneath were as hard as stone.

Edward held his breath as her hand continued to travel up his body. By the time she reached the exposed skin of his neck, he was ready to ignite from the heat of her touch. He leaned forward until he felt the sun warm his face and closed his eyes as the girl ran her fingertips over his jaw and onto his cheek.

Seeing Edward in the sunlight was a shock, but Bella was almost more surprised by his docile behavior. She didn't want to upset him by crossing a line, but she couldn't help her curiosity, especially while he was allowing it. She trailed her fingers across the smooth skin of his cheek, over the bridge of his nose, and across his brow. His hair was soft as she brushed it from his forehead. When her nails dragged across his scalp, a low rumble came from his chest, and she quickly drew her hand away.

"Why'd you stop?" Edward asked quietly. His strikingly golden eyes were confused as he looked at the girl.

Bella didn't understand why he was so perplexed. "You growled at me."

"I didn't growl at you."

"Then what was that noise?"

He frowned. "What noise?"

"I don't know. The noise you just made." Bella wondered if she was really starting to lose it. There was no way she heard something that Edward didn't. But she had heard it. She'd felt it, too. He had to have growled at her. Unless—

"Did you just purr?"

Edward snorted, and his frown turned into a giant grin. "I don't purr."

"Well, I heard *something*," Bella said with certainty.

Edward shrugged, not knowing what else to tell her. He may have been lost in the moment, but he wasn't so out of it that he would miss something as threatening as a growl. If there had been a noise, he would have heard it.

Edward made no move as Bella hesitantly reached toward him again. His hair was soft—inhumanly soft—and she idly wondered if

his features had held such perfection when he was human or if they were a product of what he had become.

The same low noise filled the space between them. It abruptly cut off as Edward stiffened. His eyes widened at the girl while she sat frozen, her fist still gripping a handful of his hair. Again they stared at each other, unmoving, until Edward cleared his throat.

"Huh. I guess . . . I guess I do." If vampires could blush, Edward would be beet red. "That's very emasculating, actually."

Bella smiled and began running her fingers through his hair again. "It's cute."

"Great," Edward said sarcastically. "I've always wanted to be cute." He dropped his head to the bed once again. This was a side of himself he didn't want to show anyone, let alone the girl. He needed to show her that he was strong or else she would walk all over him.

Bella teased the back of his head, trying to get him to make the noise again. Edward was careful not to repeat his transgression. Not once during his time as a vampire had anyone touched him the way she was. He would never admit how much he enjoyed it.

"This doesn't change anything, you know. If you change me. If you try to follow me . . ."

"I know." Leaving his head down, he placed his palm flat on the girl's chest, over her heart. It began to beat faster as she sucked in a deep breath. "This is going to stop one day." He let the words hang heavily in the air before whispering, "Let me do it."

"No." Bella's voice shook.

"I will take care of you," he promised. "I'll keep you safe. I'll protect you."

"I don't want your protection." Although Bella's hand stilled, she didn't remove it from Edward's hair.

"You were made for me," Edward mumbled.

"What?"

"You were put on this earth to be mine," he said a little louder.

"Okay, that's creepy."

"You quiet my mind," he continued, ignoring her comment. "You came when I couldn't take another day. I was meant to find you. Your scent calls to me. No one else."

"My purpose in life is not to belong to you."

"You were meant for me."

"No."

Edward lifted his head and smiled. "You're so stubborn."

"You're so pushy," Bella retorted.

"What do I have to do to convince you to stay?"

"I've already told you my terms."

He shook his head. "I have to change you."

"Why?"

"I can't risk leaving you human. You're too fragile." Edward's voice broke. The seriousness of their situation weighed down on him more than ever. "There are too many dangers to you—accidents, illnesses, *me*. I can't protect you from myself. It would just be a matter of time before—" He took a ragged breath. "Stay. I'll do anything."

"I can't."

It wasn't that Bella *couldn't* stay. In fact, she had taken it into consideration more than once during the previous evening. Her hatred for Edward aside, it wasn't a horrible option. She didn't want to spend her eternity wandering the world bloodthirsty and alone. But if she gave in now, she would relinquish any chance she had to remain human.

"I hope you meant what you said last night." Edward spoke through his teeth. His voice was laced with pain. "If you leave, then you'd better kill me. I can't continue living like I was. I don't want to exist in a world without you."

"You won't have to. Give me more time! Just try. Let's see what happens."

Edward slid his hand up to the girl's neck and gently wrapped his fingers around her throat. "We're out of time."

"One more day!" Had Bella's voice not been so weak, it would have come out as a yell. "Please, one more day." She looked toward the open window. The sun shone in the bright blue sky, and she longed to be out there with it. "I want to go outside."

"You'll have all eternity to be outside."

"I want to go outside now," she repeated sternly. "I want to get out of this house. I want to be alone. What if I don't get another chance? What if you kill me?"

"I am *not* going to kill you." The words were meant to convince her just as much as himself. They stared at each other, wordlessly waiting for the other to back down. Edward was the first to avert his eyes. "I know a place we can go. If I take you, will you promise to stay?"

"No," Bella answered, "but it would make me very happy."

"Fine," he sighed. "Let's go."

Guess what! HitGoS has a thread on Twilighted! I'll be posting teasers there from now on. Go check it out. Big thanks to Elusive for starting it. xoxo Link: [bit\(.\)ly/eAKv3I](http://bit.ly/eAKv3I)

HitGoS is nominated for two Walk of Fame Awards. You have until January 31 to vote for your favorites! Link: [twinklingswfa\(.\)blogspot\(.\)com](http://twinklingswfa(.)blogspot(.)com)

Thanks for reading! Please review. :)

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Edward led Bella down the stairs with his arm wrapped firmly around her waist. Traveling through the main floor was not only awkward for them but for the rest of Edward's family as well. He paused as he entered the great room and tightened his grip.

Carlisle stepped in front of Esme defensively. A fire of rage burned behind his darkening eyes. They quickly flashed to Bella before focusing on Edward. His lip curled up, showing off sharp, white teeth. Esme placed a calming hand on his back, but he shrugged it off and moved to block the path to the door.

Edward pulled the girl closer to his side. She winced from the pressure of his arm. He looked around the room quickly, hoping Alice or Jasper would step in if things got out of hand. Their faces were unreadable.

"I'm taking her out for some fresh air." His voice didn't come out as strong as he had hoped. "We won't be gone long." Edward wanted to diffuse the sudden power struggle between him and his father figure. It didn't seem like Carlisle was willing to let them pass, but Edward wasn't about to ask for permission. For the first time in his vampire existence, he actually felt like the teenager he pretended to be.

Carlisle's hand shot out and grabbed his shoulder roughly. Instinctively, Edward wrapped his other arm around the girl as well, protecting her in his iron hold. Bella turned her body and buried her face in his chest, wishing she was anywhere but there. She wasn't sure how to interpret Carlisle's strange behavior, and Edward's reaction wasn't helping the situation. He had said to trust Carlisle, but right now, trust seemed to be the last thing on Edward's mind.

"You *will* live to regret what you did," Carlisle hissed through clenched teeth.

"Carlisle!" Alice pleaded.

In a flash, Jasper was between them, holding Carlisle at arm's length. He sent a calming wave over the room. Even though Bella couldn't feel the direct effects of his talent, she was able to sense the change in Edward's demeanor. The tension left his body, and his arms dropped, circling loosely around her waist.

"Don't do anything rash," Jasper said as he eyed Carlisle cautiously. "Let them leave."

Bella kept her eyes closed while Edward pushed her past the others and to the door.

"Edward," Carlisle called after them. "If you do anything to hurt my mate, if you so much as look at her funny—" He inhaled sharply, reigning in his anger. "Yours will pay."

Edward didn't stop. He didn't even turn around. Guiding the girl out the door, he led her to his car, where it had been parked in the driveway for the past week.

"Get in," he said as he opened the passenger door and all but pushed her inside. He circled the car and was in the driver's seat before she even had her door closed.

"What did you do?" Bella asked shakily.

Edward hesitated before answering. "Nothing that couldn't be repaired." She didn't seem to be listening as she struggled with the seatbelt. "Here, let me." Reaching across her body, he gracefully untangled the mess she had made and fastened the belt securely over her waist. Next, he opened the glovebox and removed a baseball cap, sunglasses, and leather gloves. He donned the

accessories quickly, shielding his skin from the sun before peeling out of the driveway.

They hadn't made it very far before Edward realized something was wrong. The girl's heart was beating wildly, yet she sat completely motionless beside him. She stared out the windshield in a daze, and he could see the slight trembling of her hands where they sat clasped in her lap.

"Hey," he said, trying to get her attention. She didn't answer. "Hey." He poked her thigh, but she didn't respond. "Are you going into shock?"

Bella let out a choked sob.

"Shit," he muttered. "Shit, shit, shit." Edward pulled the car to the side of the road as the girl started to break down. Her heightened emotional state was causing her scent to become stronger, and he couldn't concentrate on both driving and not killing her. He cracked the window and took a deep breath. "It's okay," he said. He wasn't sure whom he was trying to convince. "Everything is going to be okay."

Bella's sobs changed to hysterical laughter, and she clutched her stomach as tears rolled down her cheeks. Edward didn't know what to make of her sudden mood swing. There was a part of him that seriously considered fleeing from the car. Without warning, her hysteria gave way to anger.

"Okay? Everything is going to be okay? Everything is *not* going to be okay, Edward!" she snapped. "You're going to kill me. I'll never see my mom or my dad or my friends again. I can't go outside without looking like the Unabomber. I'll have to drink . . . *blood* ." She shuddered. "What part of that sounds *okay* ?"

Edward closed his eyes and rested his head back against the seat. He wouldn't feel bad for what he was going to do. He needed her.

Time healed all wounds. She would come to accept his decision one day. She had to.

Her anger slowly turned into quiet tears. Edward waited until she calmed down completely before pulling back onto the road. "It will be okay. Trust me."

But even he knew that he had no right to ask for her trust.

"You should let me carry you."

"No. Absolutely not." Bella held out her hands defensively. "An hour of your crazy driving is enough for one day. I'd prefer to take my life in my own hands from here on out."

Edward frowned but decided not to press the issue. "Fine, have it your way." He turned and stepped into the thicket, vanishing quickly in the dense shrubs and branches.

Bella stood next to the car, shocked. *He just left me*, she thought. Glancing around, she took in her surroundings for the first time. Edward had parked in a tiny clearing barely larger than his car. It was as if he drove right into the middle of the forest. The trees made a canopy over the narrow dirt road they came in on, nearly blocking it from view. Suddenly, she felt very alone and very vulnerable. Any relief she had felt at his absence gave way to panic.

"Coming?" Edward's voice echoed in the distance.

Bella scrambled to the edge of the forest where Edward disappeared and tripped over a fallen branch almost immediately. She hit the ground hard, her hands breaking her fall. Edward was before her in an instant and wordlessly pulled her to her feet. He brushed the dirt from her hands and checked the scratches carefully. If she was going to bleed, he wanted to be prepared. The scrapes were shallow, not deep enough to draw blood. He sighed, mostly in relief, but partially in longing.

"Sure you want to walk?" he asked. His cold hands soothed her torn palms and she hummed before nodding fervently. "Come on then."

At first, Bella declined any help maneuvering through the woods, but as the hike wore on, she found herself more than willing to accept Edward's assistance. He grabbed roughly at her elbow every time she became off balance, which was often. After a while, Bella became more steady on her feet and would reach for Edward's arm or hand willingly. She was hot and sweaty, and when she was just about ready to give in and ask to be carried, Edward stopped walking.

"We're here."

Bella looked around at the surrounding woods, which looked exactly the same as the woods where they started. "We're . . . where?" He placed his palm on the girl's lower back and gave her a little push. She walked through the thick ferns and into a half-moon shaped clearing. "Oh!"

The clearing was small, but size had no bearing on its beauty. The tree line was met with waist-high grass and wildflowers. Opposite from where they stood was a sandy beach that ran parallel to a creek. The forest came to meet the water on the other side.

"Edward, it's beautiful." She took a few more steps, stopping half-way between the trees and the beach. "How did you find it?"

Edward stayed in the shadows on the edge of the meadow. He had left his protective accessories in the car and was suddenly feeling very exposed. "I came across it one day when I was trying to get away. It's far enough away that I can't hear anyone's thoughts, but close enough that I can come whenever I want."

Bella nodded in understanding. She kicked off her shoes and stepped onto the sandy beach before turning to look at Edward. "Aren't you coming?" she asked, confused. It wasn't like him to keep his distance.

He shrugged. "You wanted to be alone."

"Oh."

"I'll be nearby." Edward backed up slowly, once again disappearing into the forest.

"Thanks," Bella whispered. She knew he could still hear her and probably wouldn't be too far away. The illusion of independence was nice nonetheless.

She was right; Edward didn't go far. He stayed on the outskirts of the clearing, using her heartbeat as a beacon. He knew she'd be safe. No bears or other threats to the girl would enter the area while a vampire was there. And if any trouble did arise, he could be next to her in a matter of seconds. He wasn't worried about her running. It would be easy enough to catch her or follow her until she was so lost she called to him for help. He had to admit that the latter was very appealing.

Bella had no intentions of running away. She'd had enough experience with Edward to know it was pointless. Instead, she spent the day relaxing, trying to enjoy her time alone. She waded in the shallow stream. She lay on the beach, letting the sun warm her. She tried not to think about what Edward would do to her later, but she was unsuccessful.

She wondered if he was bringing her back to the house first. Tensions seemed to be running high there. Maybe he intended on changing her here. Would he be successful or would he fail? If he failed, would he kill her or would they be in this situation again a day from now? A week? A month? She winced as she remembered the burning sensation his venom caused. The pain was what she feared the most at the moment. Part of her didn't even care what the outcome was anymore; she just wanted it to be over.

A shiver ran through Bella's body. The sun was setting, and the temperature had started to drop. She looked around; there was no

sign of Edward. She wondered if, wherever he was, he was watching her. It was tempting to stay in the meadow for as long as Edward would allow, but she was tired of putting off the inevitable. It was time to accept her fate.

"Edward?" she called quietly.

He instantly appeared across the meadow. Wildflowers blocked the lower half of his tall frame from sight. He regarded her cautiously for a moment, then he was before her, wrapping her in his embrace and pressing his nose into her neck. Bella brought her hands to Edward's shoulders and pushed gently; he didn't budge. She relaxed in his arms, trying to remain calm as he inhaled deeply, sucking in breath after breath.

Her eyes closed.

His lips parted.

When his teeth graced her neck, Bella's self-defense mechanism kicked in again. She pressed her palm against Edward's face, and this time he allowed her to push him away.

"Do all vampires have a thing about personal space, or is it just you?"

At least he had the decency to look abashed.

"Do you like it here?" He purposefully avoided her question.

"Yes," Bella answered honestly. "It would have been nice to have a book or something though."

"I have books. I have lots of books. You can read them. We can come back anytime you want," Edward said quickly, hopefully. "No one else knows about this place. Just us."

Bella looked down and bit her lip.

"Or . . . you can come back alone," he offered.

"I'd never be able to find it."

"You will when you're a vampire." Edward hooked his finger under the girl's chin and forced her to look at him. "Once I show you the way, you'll always be able to come back."

Bella attempted to smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. Edward's chest tightened. He still didn't know if she would stay.

"How can I make you happy? How can I make up for forcing you to stay with me for eternity?"

"You know what I want." She closed her eyes to hold back the tears and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Are you cold?" he asked. Bella shook her head, but it didn't matter. Edward had already removed his hooded sweatshirt and was pulling it over her head. She put her arms into the sleeves, surprised that the thick cotton wasn't warm like she expected. He rubbed her arms before cupping her cheeks. An escaped tear slipped down her face, and Edward wiped it away with his thumb. "Stay with me," he pleaded.

Bella squeezed her eyes shut tighter, forcing out more tears.

"I'll do anything." Edward dropped his forehead to hers. He knew showing her his vulnerability was a bad idea, but he didn't know what else to do. "Please. I need you."

Edward pressed his lips to her forehead. Venom pooled in his mouth, the heat from her skin intensifying the fire in his throat. He took a deep breath. Then another. Then his lips were on hers.

The kiss took Bella by surprise and she froze. She didn't know how to react. For whatever reason, she allowed his advance. His lips were cold and firm, but they were gentle as they moved against hers.

He opened his mouth slightly and ran his tongue across her lower lip, tasting her, breathing her in. Her warmth and blood and pulse proved too much. He pulled away with a pained sigh and let his hands fall from her face.

Edward's venom left a tingling trail in its wake. Bella covered her mouth and stepped back.

"I—"

"Don't," she stated firmly. "This doesn't change anything."

"I know," he sighed and took a step toward her. "I'm—"

"Stop!" Her voice shook with unshed tears. "Just stop. It's not fair. All you do is take. There's going to be nothing left."

"Please don't—"

"I want to leave now."

"Fine," Edward said defeatedly. Bella brushed by him as she walked toward the trees. "You're walking?"

"Yes."

He looked up at the sky. "It's getting late. It'll be dark by the time we get back to the car."

"I don't care."

"You're going the wrong way," he called.

Bella stopped and dropped her head into her hands. With a deep breath she turned to face Edward, crossed her arms over her chest, and waited. He approached slowly and offered his hand when he was a few feet away. For a moment, neither of them moved. Finally, she reached out and took his hand. He gave it a small squeeze,

hoping to convey that he would do his best to make things okay, silently begging for her trust.

"Ready?" he asked as he once again led her into the woods.

"I'll never be ready for you."

**Thanks for reading! Please review. Don't forget to visit the
Twilighted thread. :) bit.ly/eAKv3I**

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

The house was dark when they returned home. To Bella, it seemed no one was there. Edward knew better. He approached the door slowly, unsure of the mood inside. He kept Bella tucked safely under his arm.

The walk to the car and drive home had been spent mostly in silence. Other than pointing out treacherous objects along the path—fallen branches, rocks, holes—Edward didn't try to initiate any conversation. The silence wasn't awkward, though. There just wasn't anything left to say.

But now, as Edward paused before the door, Bella felt the need to reach out.

"Is he going to hurt me?"

"No," Edward answered without hesitation. "I'll never let anyone hurt you." When he opened the door, no one came to greet them. He stepped inside quickly and brought Bella up to his room.

"When are you gonna . . .?" She let the question hang in the air.

"Tonight." Edward crossed the room and sat next to her on the bed. "I need to talk to Carlisle first. We may need to go somewhere else, and I don't want to move you once the change has started."

"Okay," Bella whispered.

"Hey," he said, taking her chin delicately between his fingers. "I promise everything will be all right." She didn't answer, but her stomach rumbled loudly. "I didn't feed you today," he observed out loud. "Do you want something to eat?"

Bella shrugged. "Can I make it myself?"

"In the kitchen? With knives? Absolutely not." Edward laughed humorlessly. "I'm not letting you anywhere near sharp objects after the stunt you pulled yesterday. In fact, you're getting paper plates from now on." He took her arm and lightly ran his fingers over the bandage.

"I probably won't do that again." She winced at the memory of her failed suicide attempt—the pain, the blood, the look in Edward's eyes as he lunged at her. "Please?"

"I don't think so." His smile faded when he realized Esme probably wouldn't be helping him take care of the girl any more, not that he would have to meet her human needs much longer. "I'll make you something myself."

"That's what I'm worried about."

"Ouch." Edward pouted. "That hurts."

"What? Have you ever eaten anything you've made?"

"Touché." He stood from the bed and made his way to the door. "Any requests?"

"Oh, just the usual," Bella said airily. "Caviar, lobster, filet mignon. Maybe a bottle of Dom Pérignon. I'll share." Edward raised his brow. "It is my last meal, right?"

"How about a sandwich?"

Bella pretended to contemplate his suggestion. "That'll do."

"I'll be right back."

Edward left the room and closed the door behind him. He moved quickly, not wanting to be away from the girl for long. When he entered the kitchen, he came face-to-face with Carlisle. His presence

took Edward by surprise—something he wasn't used to—and he crouched defensively. Both vampires regarded each other cautiously. Edward, not wanting to start a fight, waited for Carlisle to make the first move.

Carlisle held out his palms and stepped back. "Edward?" Slowly, Edward straightened his body. "Esme told me what happened yesterday."

"What?"

"She said she told you she wanted to sacrifice herself. She said you were just doing what she asked."

"She did?" Edward couldn't believe what he was hearing, and he tried his best to hide his shock. After Esme's initial silence, he didn't expect her to tell anyone the truth. And he definitely never expected her to cover for him as well.

"I understand why she did it although I don't agree with her decision. Or yours for that matter. I would have expected more from you. What you did was unforgivable."

"I did what I had to do."

"Edward, do you honestly believe I was going to hurt Bella?"

"I thought you were taking her away from me."

Carlisle shook his head and ran his hand over his face in frustration. "You make me wish that I had." Edward looked away. It upset him that Carlisle didn't think he deserved the girl. "What are you going to do now?"

"Change her."

Carlisle nodded thoughtfully. "Are you prepared?"

"No, I don't think I'm strong enough," Edward admitted. "It's still hard to be around her." He took a deep breath. "Where did you find the strength?"

"I was alone for a long time, Edward. You know this."

"Will you do it?" he asked. "Will you change her for me?"

"Excuse me?" Carlisle couldn't hide his surprise.

"Look, I know I've gone about this all wrong. If I could do it all over again I would, but I can't. Please," he begged. "I was foolish to think I could handle this on my own. It was stupid of me to think that it makes a difference who changes her. It doesn't! The only thing that matters is that she survives. You're the only one I trust to do it."

"I'm sorry. I can't change her for you."

"Why not? She's the most important thing in my life. I've asked you for so little over the years. If this is because of Esme . . . it's not the same thing. You could *kill* her."

"This isn't about you, Edward, and it's not about Esme, either. It's about Bella," he said pointedly. Edward opened his mouth to plead more, but Carlisle cut him off. "I already offered to change her. She doesn't want to be like us; she wants to remain human. I won't change her against her will."

Edward's anger began to escalate. "You did what?"

"I didn't want to see you continue to hurt her. Besides, someone had to tell her what to expect."

"You never told me what to expect!" Edward hollered. "You never gave me a choice!"

"We all learn from our mistakes, Son."

"No," he said crossly. "You don't get to call me that anymore."

"Edward—"

"How could you do this to me?" Pain and anger laced his voice.

"She's going to leave because of what you told her."

" *Bella* is not an object to be owned," Carlisle said sharply. "She has a name, Edward. She is a living, breathing human being with thoughts and feelings of her own. She is young and beautiful and could have had a great life. If you want her to be one of us, then *you* will be the one to change her."

Edward couldn't listen anymore. He turned and fled the kitchen. When he reached his room, he slammed the door behind him. It startled Bella and she jumped off the bed. One look at Edward's livid expression had her wanting to run. Unfortunately there was nowhere for her to go.

"Edward?"

"Why didn't you tell me Carlisle offered to change you?" he seethed.

"I—I don't know. I didn't think it mattered."

"God damn it!" Edward pushed the bookshelf over. The heavy volumes each fell to the floor with a loud thud.

"I told him no," Bella said quickly. She didn't know the success rate of reasoning with an angry vampire, but she didn't want Edward to make any rash decisions when the end was so near. "I knew you'd be mad if I said yes."

"Bullshit," he spat as he paced the room. "You don't give a shit about what I want, so don't pretend your decision was based on me."

"Edward, calm down."

"Calm down? *Calm down* ? Everything is fucked and you want me to calm down?" He looked around the room frantically. His fists

clenched at his sides as he resisted the urge to punch something. Bella knew she needed to do something before he turned on her.

"Come here."

Edward froze and looked at the girl uncertainly. He wasn't sure he had heard her correctly. Bella's heart raced in her chest, but her eye contact never faltered. She held out her hand. He eyed it warily and took a slow step toward her before stopping.

"Come here," she repeated in a whisper. He approached her cautiously and sat on the edge of the bed. Bella took his hand and placed it over her heart. With her other hand, she teased the hair on the back of his head, mirroring their position from that morning. He had been calm then; she hoped the contact would help him relax again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"What do you care if I'm upset?" Edward's voice was quiet, defeated.

Bella's first instinct was to lie, to tell him that she did care, that she didn't like to see him angry. But if her last lie was any indication of how he would react, she didn't want to find out how he would handle another one. She decided honesty was best. "I don't want you to lose control and kill me."

"You don't get it, do you?" Edward asked. His face hardened to an unreadable mask. "I need you in my life. I feel very . . . protective of you. I'm not going to kill you if you piss me off or you'd have been dead already. Believe me."

"What if . . ." Bella looked away from his golden eyes, breaking their gaze first. "What if whatever this is stops working once I'm like you? What's going to happen to me if I'm not of any use to you?"

The silence that followed her question seemed to drag on. Edward watched intently as she shifted uncomfortably, and he waited to speak until she met his eyes once again.

"Changing you isn't something I take lightly," he answered seriously. "I will be devastated if the voices come back, but I won't go back on the promises I've made to you."

"I'm not sure you'd want to protect or take care of me if you could hear my thoughts." Bella didn't elaborate. Edward didn't need to read the girl's mind to know she didn't think well of him, and it didn't surprise him, either.

He dropped his hand from her chest and slid his arms around her waist. When she didn't oppose to his embrace, Edward pulled her close and buried his nose in her neck. He inhaled deeply, welcoming everything about her into his senses—the appetizing scent of her blood, the burn of venom it invoked, her warm, soft skin, and most importantly, the silence.

"You have no idea how lonely this life can be," he mumbled against her pulse. "I live with a family where everyone has a mate. And if that isn't alienating enough, I have to hear their every thought. Sometimes I think I would feel less alone if I were by myself. But it doesn't have to be that way anymore."

Bella wanted to ask him what he meant by that statement, but her throat was suddenly dry and the words seemed to get stuck. She twisted, trying to escape his arms. Edward was too strong; he held her firmly in place. After a deep breath, she tried her voice again. "Wh—what do you *really* expect from me?"

"I don't have any expectations. Only that you stay," he amended. "If you want to avoid me, if you never speak to me again, I'll understand. But . . ."

"But?" Her voice shook. She wasn't sure if the answer was something she wanted to hear.

"I want us to get along. I want you to be someone I can turn to. I want a consort, a confidante. Someone to hunt with when everyone else is coupled up. Someone who has my back, who is always on

my side." Edward pulled back slightly to look at the girl's face. Her eyes were wide, and he didn't know if she was shocked, scared, or experiencing some other emotion.

"I want someone to need me," he continued. "I would do anything for Esme and Alice, Rosalie even, but I'm not the one they turn to when they need someone. I can be that for you." Bella didn't move as she processed his words. The silence became too much for Edward after a while. He wished he hadn't been so honest. "But those aren't expectations," he said quickly. "I'll take whatever you're willing to give."

Although he didn't use the actual term, Edward was describing a friend. Bella wasn't sure if she was the best candidate for that. He was tolerable when he wasn't being a controlling asshole, but could his niceties now make up for the way he had been treating her? He attacked and kidnapped her, broke her bones, caused her pain, and drank her blood. He would be taking her life away soon. Even if he had a change of heart, or even if he *couldn't* do those things to her in the future, giving in to his request would mean only one thing.

He wins.

There was something else bothering her as well. Edward had presented his desires as purely platonic; however, his kiss in the meadow was anything but. She had her suspicions, but she wasn't comfortable bringing up the subject directly.

"What happens if I find someone someday? You'll be alone again. Then what?" She believed his reaction would give away his true feelings, and she braced herself for his outburst.

The question brought Edward up short. He wasn't sure what he expected her to say, but it definitely wasn't that. The thought of her with another man—human or vampire—actually made his chest hurt. Edward had been well aware of his jealousy the first time he wondered about her relationship status, but this time it was different. He had since experienced her voluntary touch, tasted her lips,

accepted her comfort. This time the silence alone wasn't enough; he wanted her to accept him as something *more*. Edward was convinced that, if not now, someday she would come around. The girl had no idea what kind of life was in store for her. Sooner or later, whether driven by attraction or loneliness, she would pick him. There was no way he could tell her that now, though. Her change would be happening soon. He didn't want to say anything that would jeopardize their potential future. So instead of telling her *his* truth, he offered her information of a different type.

"If you expect this life to bring you a vast array of friends, you are going to be sorely disappointed." Edward kept his tone indifferent. "I don't know the exact number of us in the world, of course, but in the next ten years you may come across one, maybe two other vampires. And even then . . . with a coven the size of ours, they will probably keep their distance. We mean them no harm, but survival is our strongest instinct."

Bella frowned. For a moment she wondered if he was lying. How rare could vampires be if there were seven living right outside of Seattle, commingling with society? They weren't victims of the same dangers as their fictional counterparts. Sunlight, stakes, holy symbols—no weapon wielded by a human could harm them. So why weren't there more? Bella was so wrapped up in this new information that she completely forgot the topic that led to it.

"How can that be?" she asked suspiciously. "You're practically indestructible. Even if there were only a few created each year—"

"*Only* ? Maybe you haven't noticed how much of a struggle this has been for me," he snapped. "In case you haven't figured it out yet, my family is a bit untraditional. Vampires don't typically socialize with humans, they eat them." He pulled his arms away from the girl, and she took the opportunity to move to the middle of the bed, out of his reach. "It is incredibly difficult to stop feeding once we taste blood, as you've probably noticed, and most would rather have a meal than the burden of a newborn. The most efficient way to deal with them is to take them far away from large populations so they won't go on a

rampant killing spree and expose our existence. I think you're intelligent enough to figure out why that method is unappealing."

"Do you plan on taking me far away?"

"Yes," he answered. "Fortunately for us, we'll be moving closer to our food source."

"Wait . . ." Bella cocked her head in confusion. "Why does it matter whether people know about you?"

Edward hesitated before turning and crawling onto the bed. He pushed Bella down on her back and pinned her beneath his body. Dipping his head, he ghosted his lips across her cheek. His voice was a whisper when he finally spoke. "There is rumored to be a clan of vampires who insist our existence be kept a secret. Supposedly they destroy those who breach the law—no questions asked. Some believe they have special powers, ways of knowing when a violation is made."

"But you don't?"

He shrugged noncommittally. "It seems far-fetched, and if anyone has seen them, they haven't lived to tell about it. Besides, where are they now? Not here with us." Bella swallowed nervously as her eyes scanned the room. "Regardless of proof, we still obey the rule. Like I said, survival is our strongest instinct."

"So there's no solid evidence that they exist?" she asked. Edward shook his head. "Sounds kind of like religion to me. Believing in something you can't see, following rules so you don't go to hell. Who knew that soulless demons could have faith?"

Edward bristled. "What makes you think I don't have a soul?"

"Do you?"

"I don't know. I'd like to say yes, but it's probably just wishful thinking. Maybe one day I'll find out."

"Maybe."

Bella assumed he was talking of his own death, and she wondered if he was thinking about her threat. She still didn't know what she was going to do. The thought of being alone was frightening, especially if she was going to be as wild as everyone said. She also didn't want to go on a city-wide hunting rampage and kill a bunch of innocent people. She wanted to think, but her time was running out.

"Can I have one more day?" she asked hopefully.

"No. I already gave you today."

"Please, Edward? I'm not ready! It doesn't have to be a full day. Just give me one more night. You can change me in the morning; I promise not to ask for more time."

Edward didn't bother bargaining with her. He knew she'd never promise to stay with him, no matter what he offered in exchange. But if he was being truthful with himself, he wasn't ready. He could use the hours that she slept to immerse himself in her scent and mentally prepare for the change.

"Fine," he said. He rolled onto his side, keeping the girl trapped under half of his body, and buried his nose in her neck. "You can have until morning, but I'm not moving."

Thanks for reading! Please review. :)

My website has moved to **gardenofsin [dot] net** .

Don't forget to visit the HotGoS thread on the Twilghted Forum! **bit [dot] ly/eAKv3I**

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

The morning came too quickly for both Bella and Edward. He wasn't ready for the change, but then again, he didn't think he ever would be. The girl had been with him for a week. He feared he would never be more acclimated to her scent than he was at this very moment. The flavor of her blood served as too much a temptation, and he was terrified that he'd lose control again.

Bella just wasn't ready. She was no closer to being at peace with her future now than when Edward had granted her more time. During the night she had tried to rest but was too distracted by the vampire at her side. His body was hard and didn't give way as he pressed himself against her. He was constantly moving—grazing his nose along her neck and collar bone, brushing her hair to the side, pulling her closer. At least she hadn't been cold. When she had shivered for the first time, Edward drew the blankets over them, and her body heat had eventually warmed them both.

"Good morning," Edward whispered as she began to stir. His breath was cool and sweet as it washed across Bella's face, and she found herself struggling to collect her thoughts.

"There's nothing good about it," she retorted.

Edward disagreed but decided not to challenge her. The girl was breathing, she was there with him, and his mind was peaceful.

"Would you like something to eat before . . .?"

"No." Bella shook her head. "I'm not hungry." Her lack of appetite disappointed Edward. He had hoped to stall the inevitable a little longer. True to her word, she didn't ask for more time. Still, there was one last thing she wanted to do. "Can I call my dad first?"

"What?" Edward looked at her like she sprouted a second head.
"No!"

"Please?"

"That's not a good idea," he warned.

"But he's going to be worried about me. It's been a week. He probably already knows I'm gone. I can't just disappear."

"It's not necessary for you to contact him," Edward said. "We already have a story for your disappearance."

"Well then let me help!" Bella said quickly. "You can tell me what to say. Just let me talk to him."

For the first time, Edward realized he wasn't aware of the story Jasper had fabricated. The girl had monopolized his attention, and he wasn't used to asking for information. In the past he always just *knew* what was going on.

"No."

"Why not?" she demanded. Edward looked at her guiltily. "Edward, why not?"

"I don't trust you."

Bella's jaw dropped. "You don't trust *me*?" she screeched. "What am I going to do?"

"You know humans can't know about us. If you tell him—"

"You don't even believe that crap! And why would I tell him the truth anyway? There's no doubt in my mind you would kill him. I wouldn't endanger his life like that. Please, Edward," she begged. "You have to trust me."

"No, you have to trust me! We've done this before. It's worked every time."

"You were covering up murders," she hissed. "This is different. He's going to be alone. He's going to miss me."

"He's going to miss you regardless," Edward snapped. "He's losing you whether he figures it out today or months from now."

Bella thought about the last time she spoke with her father. Was he still mad? Was he hurt by her words? She would do anything to take back that day. Briefly, she thought of what might have happened if she hadn't gotten angry with him for checking in with her every night. He would have continued to call, he'd have the comfort of knowing he did everything in his power to protect his only daughter, and she wouldn't feel guilty. But he would have also noticed she was missing right away, and Charlie wasn't the type to sit back and do nothing. Surely Edward or his family would have done damage control, possibly resulting in the end of her father's life. Maybe it's better that things happened the way they did.

"Please?" she asked again. "I need to say goodbye. At least tell him I won't see him for a while. Tell him I'm sorry. Get some closure."

"I know it seems like it now, but it's not as big a deal as you think it is." Edward thought carefully about his next words. "Your mind is going to be occupied with other things. You'll be busy adjusting to your new senses and instincts. It's going to be a while before you feel like yourself again. The blood lust alone will be enough to distract you from your surroundings. You aren't going to be concerned with your father."

Bella held back her tears as she glared at Edward. She would never forget what was important to her, and she refused to act like the monster he was turning her into. Taking a deep breath, she put as much bitterness into her words as she could muster. "I hate you."

Outwardly, Edward appeared unaffected. He suspected she felt that way, but hearing the words caused an ache in his chest that had nothing to do with his venom. He didn't bother disguising the pain in his voice. "I know you do."

They were interrupted by the bedroom door opening slowly. The movement caused them both to freeze. Edward gasped when he realized it was Esme. He was off the bed faster than Bella's eyes could process his movements. "Stay," he commanded gently.

Esme opened her arms and pulled him in to a tight embrace.

"I'm sorry," he chanted over and over again. "I'm sorry." Esme shushed him as she stroked his hair. "Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, sweetheart," she whispered. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy."

"I never meant to hurt you." He pulled back slightly and traced the faint fracture on her neck. "I shouldn't have done it. I was so scared. Esme, I—"

"Hush. It's over now," she said and placed a kiss on his cheek.

Bella watched in astonishment as Edward collapsed into Esme's arms again. She had trouble reconciling this version of him with the one she had spent time with for the past week. He had never appeared so vulnerable, so innocent, so young. It was strange to see him interacting with someone so intimately.

"I just wanted to wish you luck." Esme glanced over his shoulder at Bella and smiled softly. "We'll be out for the day. We won't interfere."

"No . . . I can't—"

"Yes you can. We have faith in you. All of us," she stressed.

"How can you say that? I've failed so many times."

"You haven't failed, sweetheart. Bella's still alive." Esme gestured to the girl. "That alone is enough for me to believe that you have the strength." She released him from her hold and patted his cheek. "I have to go. They're waiting. I'll see you two tonight."

Edward nodded. He wished he had as much confidence in himself. So far, half the bites he had inflicted on her would have been fatal had his family not intervened. And that didn't include the time he tried to attack her when she sliced her arm open. Slowly he turned toward Bella. She was sitting on the bed, the blankets still covering her body. The expression on her face looked exactly how he felt.

Defeated.

"This is it, isn't it?" Bella asked.

Edward didn't answer as he sluggishly crossed the room and sat next to her. They remained silent as minutes passed. He kept his gaze down, avoiding the girl.

"Lie down?" he said finally. It came out as a question. Bella didn't argue or resist him. She simply sank back onto the bed.

He hovered over her body and focused on the artery in her neck. This could be over so quickly if he stayed focused. If he could just bite, if he could just not drink the blood. The smooth, warm, delicious blood. She smelled so good.

Bella watched his pupils dilate, covering the darkening gold of his eyes in pitch black. It was too familiar of a scene. Her heartbeat picked up as she recalled the multiple times he had bitten her—the fear, the pain, the horrible ways he had treated her throughout the week.

"Wait!" she cried in a panic. "Wait, wait, wait!"

Edward pulled away, and his surroundings came back into focus. His memory from the past minute was fuzzy at best. It didn't leave him

with much confidence in his control. "What is it?"

"Do you have a plan?" Bella was terrified. She didn't want to be a vampire, but more importantly, she didn't want to *die* .

"A plan?"

"Yeah, you said you needed to use more venom. Do you know how much? Can you just, like, use a lot? Is it possible to OD?" She rattled off the questions quickly.

Edward hid his smile. The girl was observant. It was one of the many things he liked about her. "I have a plan."

"What is it? I'm sorry, I just—" She took a deep, shaky breath. "I want to know what to expect."

"I can't control the flow of venom; it's similar to salivating," Edward said quietly. "But I'm positive I can introduce enough into your bloodstream as long as I don't drink." He placed his hand on the girl's chest and pressed gently. The steady beat of her heart offered him comfort. "Carlisle told me to place multiple bites, but . . ."

"But?"

"I think I can get away with one, as long as I can keep it open."

Bella didn't know what that entailed, but she didn't want to hear any more. The mere thought of her broken skin nauseated her. "What's it gonna be like?"

"You already know how it will feel," he answered. Bella whimpered as she remembered the fire that consumed her body the one time he bit and didn't drink.

"How long will it take?"

"I honestly can't say. It's different for everyone. Alice is so tiny—her transformation was over in a day. Emmett's took nearly a week."

When Bella's jaw dropped, Edward was quick to soothe her anxiety. "But Emmett is huge and his injuries were horrific. I'm sure yours won't take nearly as long."

"How long did it last for you?"

Edward winced as his own change came to mind. "I'm not entirely sure. A few days? I don't think the time matters when it's actually happening; it feels like an eternity."

"That's not helping!" Bella shouted.

"I'm sorry." The words felt foreign on his tongue. He had never done so much apologizing in one day. "I'm not sure what to tell you. I don't recall specifics about my own change. It's part of my human memories, which have long since faded. As for the others . . . well, it was too difficult for me to witness theirs." He tapped his temple. Bella nodded but didn't seem any more at ease. "I won't leave you, though. Even if the barrier comes down and I have to experience everything with you, I'll stay by your side the entire time. Sometimes . . ." Edward struggled with how much to tell her.

"What? Tell me, please."

"Sometimes it's hard not to get lost," he said carefully. "If you can't see me, if you can't hear me . . . try to remember you're not alone."

"It gets that bad?" She couldn't imagine anything worse than what she had already experienced.

"It's bad, but it ends."

"Don't stop!"

"Pardon?"

"If you give in to your desires. If you start drinking, don't stop," she clarified. "I can't go through this again. I'd rather be dead."

"No," he said firmly. "I won't kill—"

"Promise me! Promise me that this is the end. You'll either change me or kill me."

Edward hesitated. He didn't want to think about losing control, and he didn't want the idea in his head to keep going if he did. It was a promise he didn't want to make, but like before, he found himself agreeing because it was what the girl wanted.

"This is the end," he said grimly. "I promise." He dropped his head and rested his forehead against hers. Her skin was hot and covered with a light sheen of sweat. The scent of her fear lingered in the air, fueling Edward's instincts. It took everything he had to keep the monster inside him at bay.

Bella tentatively placed her hands on Edward's shoulders. She would do everything in her power to relax him and remind him that she was a person, not a meal. He melted into her warm touch.

"Stay with me," he pleaded one last time.

"Let me stay human and I will."

A high-pitched whine came from Edward. Even at the last moment, she wasn't giving in. "So where does that leave us?"

"I believe it's called an impasse," Bella said as she fought back tears.

For a moment, Edward closed his eyes and allowed himself to really think of what life would be like if he had to go on living without her. It didn't matter whether he killed her, she left, or he let her go—the outcome would be the same. He would be alone, or at least that's how it would feel. She wouldn't be there to talk to. She wouldn't challenge him any longer. He'd never feel her touch again, never receive her comfort. The opportunity to win her over would be gone. Surprisingly having to live in a world where he could hear everyone's deepest, darkest thoughts wasn't what concerned him the most. For

the first time, he acknowledged that he wouldn't be upset if her power stopped working as long as he could keep her.

Bella felt the tears slide down her cheeks, but it wasn't until the wet trails started tingling that she realized they weren't hers. She looked up at Edward. His brows were furrowed, and his eyelashes were darkened with moisture. She gently smoothed out the crease between his eyebrows with her thumb. Trapped tears streamed from his eyes once he opened them.

Edward looked at the girl, completely in awe of the emotions she invoked in him. She brushed her fingers beneath his eyes, sweeping away the tears. With a shaky hand, Edward grabbed her wrist and stared disbelieving at the tiny drops of venom on her fingertips. He wiped them off quickly before pinning her arm against her side. Bella's breaths became shallow as the weight of his body pressed down on her.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

Bella didn't hesitate to comply, and she waited in nervous anticipation. She felt him press a kiss to her cheek. Then her jaw. Then her lips. Edward continued on a path down her chin and across her neck until he came to the kaleidoscopic of purple, green, and yellow where the other bites had been placed.

It will all be over soon , he thought. This will be the last time .

Edward slid one arm under her neck and nudged her head to the side with his nose, fully exposing her throat. He paused, allowing the venom to build in his mouth; he wanted to collect as much as possible before he bit her.

Bella slipped her free arm under Edward's side and wrapped it around his back. He was hesitant to allow any of her body to be unrestrained, but he was greedy and wanted her touch. If she wanted to hold on to him, he wasn't going to deny her. He pulled her other arm around his waist before releasing her wrist.

He placed his closed lips on her neck, took one last deep breath, and then his teeth broke through her skin.

The first few minutes were the hardest. Edward locked his jaw in place, but it was difficult to ignore everything that naturally triggered his instincts. Venom flowed out of his mouth and blood flooded in. The fluids pooled on the girl and soaked into the sheets. Bella was shaking. Her breaths came in short bursts as she fought through the pain. She tried to stay still, knowing it was important, but she couldn't help the way her body squirmed beneath him.

The pain from his bite transformed into an intense burning sensation that slowly radiated outward. Bella couldn't keep her cries of pain inside any longer. Edward paid close attention to her reactions, and when he was certain he had introduced enough venom in her system, he released his jaw.

The relief Edward felt was overwhelming. He didn't kill her. He stopped. It was over. He pushed back onto his knees and studied the girl carefully. She looked miserable. Unlike the last time she was in pain because of him, when he offered his hand, she took it.

Bella remained completely coherent, much to her disappointment. She had hoped that she would mentally check out for a while. Instead she remained painfully aware of the changes taking place in her body. She screamed. She cried. She alternated between squeezing Edward's hands and punching his chest. Suddenly her stomach churned. She sat up abruptly, but Edward placed his hand on her shoulder and pushed her down firmly.

"Stay down," Edward demanded. He had no idea what to expect, never having witnessed a change before. He wasn't sure when her strength or new born mentality would kick in, and he knew Carlisle wouldn't be pleased if he lost control of the girl and she tore the house apart.

"I'm gonna be sick."

"You're fine."

"Edward, I'm going to throw up!" She was lying in dried blood, sweat, and venom. She didn't want to add vomit to the list.

"No, you're not," he said firmly. "It's an effect of being *poisoned* . Besides, there's nothing in your stomach to expel." Bella struggled to sit up again. "Don't!" He punctuated the word with a growl.

"When do I stop being able to see and hear you? I'd rather think I was alone!" she yelled.

Edward bit his tongue to keep his temper in check. Her verbal lashing shouldn't be a surprise. It was to be expected in this situation, especially knowing the girl's personality. "You can hit me again if it makes you feel better," he hissed through his teeth.

"I don't want to touch you. I don't want anything to do with you."

"Fine." He pulled away from her and moved to the far edge of the bed while she continued to writhe in pain. The next few days were going to seem longer than the memory of his own change.

It wasn't very long before Bella started talking to him again.
"Edward?"

"Huh?"

"How do I know when it's ending?"

"The pain will slowly start to subside," he answered. "When your chest is the only part that hurts, it's almost over."

"Are my feet the first to stop hurting?"

"Yes. Feet, legs, arms. Why?"

"Because I can't feel my feet."

"What?" Edward reached out and squeezed the girl's foot. It felt human. It was hot and her flesh was soft beneath his fingertips. "That's impossible. It's too soon. Are you sure?"

"No, Edward, I mean my feet are numb." If she weren't watching his hand manipulate her toes, she'd have no idea he was even touching her. Edward shook his head. It didn't make sense. He was positive she got enough venom. Bella held her hand in front of her face. "My hands too."

Edward crawled to her side and quickly inspected her. She was hot, feverish. Her heartbeat was labored. Everything seemed to be going perfectly.

"My legs." Fear started to overwhelm her. "What's happening? Is this normal?"

"No. I don't know." Edward began to panic. He didn't know what was normal, but he knew this hadn't happened to anyone else in the family. "I don't know what to do." He wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her onto his lap. Bella tried to grab his shoulder, but her coordination was off and she smacked him in the face instead.

"Oops, I'm sorry." Her apology was slurred. "Edw . . ."

"Shit!" The girl's body relaxed in his arms. Her jaw went slack, but he could still see the terror in her eyes. "Everything will be okay," he assured her uncertainly. "I'll be here with you the entire time, I promise. Just please come back to me." Venom tears flowed from his eyes once more. "Please. I need you. I—I . . ."

Edward's voice vanished as everything faded to black.

Eep!

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

The moment Edward's future reappeared in Alice's vision, the family raced back to the house. They weren't sure what they'd find when they returned, so they prepared themselves for anything. Carlisle was the only one who could tolerate entering the bedroom. He found Edward on the bed, rocking Bella's limp body in his arms. He approached him cautiously, unsure of the welcome he would receive.

"Edward?"

He looks horrible.

Edward looked up. His eyes were hollow and glossy, and his face and shirt were covered in dried blood. "Do something, please," he choked out.

For the first time since he entered the room, Carlisle observed his surroundings. The bed was unmade, the covers strewn about wildly. There were traces of blood everywhere. The scent of venom hung thickly in the air.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," Edward cried. "I bit her and everything was fine, and then . . ."

"Did she lose consciousness right away?" Carlisle pictured Bella, writhing and screaming on the bed before suddenly passing out.

"It wasn't like that. It didn't happen right away. Her body—she went numb. She knew it was happening. God, Carlisle, she was so scared."

"Fear is a normal reaction."

He was never concerned with how she felt before.

"This was different!" he shouted. "She looked at me like . . . like she wanted me to do something, like I could help, but I couldn't do anything!"

Carlisle, wanting to examine the girl more closely, envisioned his intentions.

May I?

Edward hesitated briefly before nodding. He sat up straighter and repositioned the girl in his lap for better access, but he refused to let her out of his arms. Carlisle skimmed his hands across her body, noting her temperature and pulse. He held her eyelids open, and they watched as her pupils dilated.

"Everything else seems to be normal. She's running a fever and her heart rate is sluggish—both to be expected. Her pupils were responsive to the light in the room which is a good sign."

"What do you think happened?"

"I'm not sure. Everyone reacts a little differently. Maybe it has something to do with whatever power blocks you, Alice, and Jasper." Carlisle tilted Bella's head back and inspected the most recent bite wound.

One bite?

"Yes. I didn't release her until I was sure she got enough venom," Edward answered his unspoken question.

I wonder if he introduced too much venom.

Edward's head snapped up, and he looked at Carlisle. "Is that possible?" he asked optimistically.

"I honestly don't know. Perhaps."

"What can I do?"

Carlisle placed his hand on Edward's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. "You wait." It wasn't the encouragement Edward was looking for. "We need to clean everything, including her. She can't wake up in this environment, and the rest of the family is struggling to be inside."

Carlisle began to strip the bedding, and Edward carried the girl into the bathroom to clean her up. When he was almost done, Alice knocked on the door.

I'm not coming in, so don't panic. I'm setting a T-shirt and some sweats out here for Bella. They're yours—I hope that's all right. She'll be more comfortable in them than anything of mine or Esme's.

"No, I don't mind," he said quietly. "Thanks, Alice." When Edward was finished cleaning the blood and venom off both the girl and himself, he brought her back into his room.

"I'm going to dispose of the linens," Carlisle said. "I'll take the soiled clothing, too."

"Thank you." Edward laid Bella on the clean bed. She looked peaceful. If he tried really hard, he could almost imagine that she was sleeping.

Or dead.

"She's so still," he whispered. "Do you think she can hear us?"

"Anything is possible," Carlisle answered. "You should talk to her."

She may find it comforting.

Edward frowned.

"Only if it will make you feel better," he quickly added before leaving the room.

Edward hadn't thought about talking to the girl. His eyes scanned the room quickly. He was alone, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be overheard. He looked at her once more. He hoped she was still numb and couldn't feel his venom poisoning her. He also hoped she remembered what he told her—that she wouldn't be alone during the change.

"Hey," Edward began shyly. "I don't know what's happening. I wish there was something I could do." He took the girl's hand and squeezed gently. "I'm going to be right here until you come back to me."

Bella didn't make a noise or move, not even a small twitch. The only sounds in the room were of her ragged breathing and struggling heart.

"Please come back to me."

"Do you have a read on her yet, Jasper?" Carlisle asked.

"Nothing."

"Alice, do you see her?"

"No."

"How about Edward. Any change with his future?"

Alice sighed. "Nope. He's still just sitting there. On the floor. By the bed. Forever." It was frustrating for her not to have answers, and she was irritated by Carlisle's persistent questioning.

"I wonder why that is," Esme mused.

"Because it concerns Bella," Jasper snapped. The wide range of emotions in the room were beginning to wear on him. "It's just like

before when Edward tried to tear your head off. Alice couldn't see anything beyond the confrontation, so quit harassing her now!"

"It's not the same, Jazz," Alice said. "Edward is the only one without a future outside of this room. The rest of us go on. Tomorrow I'll be at school, Carlisle will go to the hospital, you and Esme hunt. You'll find bears."

"Nice," said Jasper, his mood lifting slightly.

"Could it be possible she never wakes up? That she stays like that and Edward never leaves her side?" Esme's voice cracked as she asked. She hated the thought of something happening to Bella and what it would mean for Edward.

Carlisle wrapped his arms around her comfortingly. "Perhaps Edward is so focused on staying by her side that he hasn't made any decisions concerning his future."

"That makes sense," said Alice. "He is very focused on her at the moment."

"Will you please stop talking about me like I'm not right here?" Edward hissed.

Sorry, Edward.

Woops.

The room quickly fell silent, but that didn't stop their theories from reaching Edward anyway.

Maybe she dies and he's too depressed to move from that spot.

She must have done something to permanently interfere with Alice's visions of his future.

Her power probably consumes him again once she wakes up and that's why I can't see him.

"Stop, please," Edward begged.

"Hey, let's get out of here. Just you and me," Jasper suggested. He needed a break and could tell that Edward did too.

"I'm not leaving her."

"Come on, man. Not even for a little while?"

Edward shook his head.

It's not like she's going to be alone. She probably doesn't even know you're—

"No!" he roared. "I'm not moving from her side."

"Fine." Jasper stood and fled the room. Alice was quick to follow.

"I'll be back. I'm going to check on them." Carlisle patted Edward's shoulder on his way out of the room. "Try not to dwell too much. We'll know more once she wakes up."

Hang in there, Son. I have faith that everything will be okay.

Esme kneeled by his side once they were alone. She nudged his shoulder playfully, and Edward cracked a smile. "How are you holding up?"

He shrugged. "Fine, I guess." Esme wrapped her arm around Edward, and he laid his head on her shoulder. She placed her free hand over his, where he held tightly onto Bella's. "Do you think she'll resent me for everything I've done?"

Knowing it was pointless to sensor her words, Esme answered honestly. "I think it's going to take a lot to earn her forgiveness and her trust, but you have all of eternity. She'll come around. She just needs time."

"I just want her to stay."

"She'll stay," Esme reassured him. "Where else is she going to go?"

Edward held a vigil by Bella's bedside through the night. And the following day. And the day after. She remained silent and unmoving. His only comfort came from her slowly changing scent and the subtle morphing of her appearance.

He did his best to tune out the outside world. For the most part, his family left him alone. Esme took it upon herself to check in with him occasionally, but for the most part, Edward just wanted to be alone with the girl.

He wasn't sure exactly how much time had passed when he realized the house was quiet. Oddly quiet. At first he assumed everyone had left to hunt, but then he heard the distinct sound of a chess piece making contact with the game board, followed by an irritated sigh. He felt better knowing he wasn't alone.

Bella's heartbeat became erratic, struggling to pump what little blood remained in her system. She was barely breathing. Edward reached out and touched her arm. The temperature of her skin was only slightly warmer than his. He squeezed. Her flesh was firm, the feel matching his own. He watched closely for any signs that she might wake.

Nothing.

Edward took a deep, shaky breath. "Carlisle," he forced out. Within seconds, Carlisle appeared at his side. He could sense the others in the room as well, but they kept their distance, and he was too focused on the girl to acknowledge their presence.

"You did it, Edward." Carlisle patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Any minute now the change will be complete."

"No," Edward said as dread set in. "She's unconscious! What if she doesn't wake up like Esme said?" He glanced at Carlisle and was

met with a frown. "What?"

Carlisle waited as he concentrated on his own thoughts. "You can't hear me," he stated.

Edward was ready to snap. "Of course I can—" He stopped mid-sentence as he realized what Carlisle meant. He whirled around to look at Esme, Jasper, and Alice. The only thoughts in his head were his own.

"Be patient," Carlisle said softly. "She's coming back slowly."

Edward exhaled harshly, feeling relief for the first time since biting Bella. The change was almost complete. She was still unresponsive, but Carlisle seemed confident that she'd come around. Apparently she still had the power to silence his mind, which was more than Edward had hoped for over the past few days. He still didn't know what to expect once she woke up.

It felt like an eternity had passed before Bella's heart came to a stuttering halt. Everyone watched her. No one breathed. No one moved. Edward tried to speak, tried to say her name, but he couldn't seem to get the word past his lips.

Tensions were running high, so everyone flinched when Bella sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes flew open. Blood red irises darted around the room, trying to take in everything at once. Edward reached for her. The sudden movement took her by surprise, and she sprang from the bed, landing against the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Trapped.

It was the first coherent thought her mind could process. There were five others, and they were blocking her path to the door. The window. She could go out through the window. She squinted as she looked toward it. Too bright.

"Bella?"

Her head whipped back toward the noise. A name. Her name. The man who spoke it stood closest to her. Tall and blond. Familiar. He had helped her. She shook her head, trying to focus.

"Bella?" he repeated and took a step in her direction. Without taking her eyes off of him, she moved to the side and hit another wall.

Cornered.

Bella crouched defensively as a feral growl slipped through her teeth. Carlisle stopped walking and brought his hands in front of him, palms out, showing he meant no harm. The motion circulated the air in the room, and she felt the breeze from it as it swept across her face. With it brought his scent.

Sweet. Too sweet.

She began to notice all the scents in the room. The other vampires, the wood, the paint, the carpet, old food. She could smell the dust particles floating in the air. Even the trees and grass from outside. Each one was distinct, but they all blended together in a way that overwhelmed her senses.

Bella wrapped her arms around herself and clutched her waist, jumping as her hands came in contact with her shirt. She could feel every fiber of the fabric; it felt foreign under her fingertips. Looking down, she took in her appearance and frowned. Her clothing didn't look familiar. She tugged at the hem, inadvertently tearing off the lower half of her shirt. She dropped the scrap of fabric and her hands covered her ears.

Too loud.

The sound of shredding cloth faded but was replaced with an onslaught of other noises. Air moving through the cracks in the

house, the ticking of clocks, the buzz of electronics, a bird flying outside, the breathing of those in the room.

Bella's senses were overstimulated; it was too much for her to handle. She closed her eyes to block out everything—sites, sounds, scents—and concentrate only on herself. But what she felt inside was no better.

Pain.

It was excruciating. It concentrated in the center of her body and radiated up her throat. She didn't know what was causing it, but she knew she had to get it out. Frantically, she began clawing at her chest.

"Bella, sweetheart," said a familiar voice from across the room. "You're okay. Please don't be afraid."

Bella froze, the burning forgotten as she took in the five other forms in the room. They were all focused on her, their stances hinting at danger. It put her on edge. She crouched again.

"Jasper, do something," Alice whispered.

Jasper didn't think that he'd be able to manipulate her mood, but he tried anyway. He took a deep breath, calming himself as best he could, and pushed a wave of serenity into the room. Instead of calming Bella, it had a completely opposite effect.

A chorus of hisses and snarls broke out as the five vampires took on defensive positions mimicking the newborn. For a few intense seconds, they were all prepared to attack, but confusion inhibited their decision of whom to turn on first. Carlisle was the first to gather his wits.

"Jasper, stop," he demanded. Jasper hesitated. He wanted to listen to Carlisle, but he felt paranoid and high-strung. "Stop!" Carlisle's forceful tone was enough to interrupt Jasper's concentration, and

everyone breathed a sigh of relief as they regained control of their emotions.

"What the hell was that?" Alice exclaimed.

Jasper staggered backward until his back hit the wall. "I don't know."

"It's a defense mechanism," Carlisle said, slowly putting the pieces together. "We felt her emotions instead of Jasper's. Alice can't see her future or any of our futures directly involving her. Edward loses his ability to read minds completely—even disappearing from Alice's radar altogether. It's more than an immunity; she incapacitates all of your powers."

"Do you really think that's it?" Esme asked.

"It's just a guess, but it fits."

Bella wasn't listening to the conversation. She was unable to focus on it long enough to follow along. Now that everyone in the room had relaxed again, she felt calmer. Her eyes flashed between them as their faces and voices triggered memories. She recalled speaking to the man who seemed to be in control now. A vision of a needle stitching her arm crossed her mind, the red crimson of her memory causing the burn in her throat to flare. The woman closest to him was smiling at her kindly. She felt least apprehensive toward her but wasn't sure why. She wasn't as comfortable with the two in the back of the room.

They were all smiling and talking animatedly. All but one. He kneeled, motionless, with one arm stretched across the bed. He had yet to say anything but gave her a nervous smile as their eyes met. His were as black as coal, a strong contrast from the golden hues of the others. It took a moment, but their time together slowly filtered to the forefront of her mind.

"Edward," Bella rasped as she used her voice for the first time.

He nodded and flipped his hand palm up, silently beckoning her to join him. She stood from her crouch but made no move to approach the man. He wasn't being threatening, yet her subconscious labeled him as dangerous anyway.

Something about Edward was different. His appearance wasn't that of the perfect being in her hazy recollections. What her human vision had interpreted as flawless was a far cry from what she saw now. Crescent-shaped bite marks marred the skin on his arms and neck. Hairline scars appeared where cracks had been.

Bella suddenly had a vision of Edward standing behind her, one arm holding her firmly against him while the fingers of his opposite hand traced a healed wound on her neck. His words, spoken low and reverently, echoed in her mind.

" When they are fully healed, human eyes won't be able to see the scars, but ours will."

She looked at the others then. They all bore the same types of marks. Her hand flew up to her neck, covering the area where Edward had bitten. Broken images fired rapidly through her mind, and she tried to put an order to her memories.

Her body being crushed while his teeth tore into her neck. His eyes fluttering closed as she traced the planes of his face. The way he pushed on her ribcage, threatening her to keep silent. Whispered promises. His hate-filled black eyes focusing on her as he attacked. His remorseful expression as he was pinned to the ground. The way he held her face tenderly and kissed her. The searing pain of broken flesh. Over and over again.

Bella focused as hard as she could, but her mind was going in too many directions. She could no longer compartmentalize her new senses. Now that she had processed everything, she was inundated with information.

Carlisle, sensing that Bella was quickly becoming overwhelmed, ushered everyone except for Edward out of the room. "See if you can calm her down enough to hunt," he said before closing the door.

Edward nodded, never taking his eyes off the girl. He couldn't find his voice, and even if he did, he wouldn't know what to say. She was standing in front of him—alive and very much a vampire. She was no longer a delicate human; nothing could destroy her now. Without the scent of her blood, she wasn't a temptation to him or his family. His mind was silent once again. He had never felt this at peace in his entire existence.

Until she bolted for the door.

"No," Edward called out in alarm.

Bella had barely made it to the center of the room before Edward stood and jumped in front of her, blocking her path. He braced himself as she collided with him, her hands instinctively going for his neck. She tightened her grip around his throat. Unexpectedly, the pads of her fingers began to crack from the pressure. It was unpleasant, like nails scraping across a chalkboard. She released her hold and backed away from him.

Although their reasons were different, their expressions mirrored each other's sheer panic.

With a gasping breath, Edward dropped to his knees. His fingers quickly found the small fracture on his neck. It was nothing that wouldn't heal on its own. He hadn't expected her attack, and he was even more surprised that she was able to stop.

"You're staying?" he whispered hopefully.

Bella didn't want to stay. Her surroundings were stressful. She had to get away from the house, away from the others, away from everything that was adding to her already overstimulated senses. It

was apparent that Edward wasn't going to let her leave, but she needed to.

Survival was her strongest instinct now.

Without thinking about her actions or their consequences, Bella lunged at him once again. Edward didn't move from his spot on the floor. He didn't bring his hands up to defend himself. He didn't even flinch. He looked into Bella's terrified eyes as her hands tightened once again around his neck. This time she ignored the uncomfortable feeling of her fingers breaking against his flesh, and with a sickening crack, she tore his head from his body.

For how fast she fled, everything should have been a blur. However, she saw with perfect clarity the shocked faces of Edward's family as she ran past them and out the door.

The End

Author's Note - 2/14/14

Want to know what happens next? Check out the sequel, **MALICE IN THE GARDEN** .

Sequel: Malice in the Garden

The sequel is here! It's called **MALICE IN THE GARDEN** , and you can find the link on my profile.

Please note : When I decided to write MITG, I removed the last two chapters from HITGOS. Both chapters were set in the future, and as far as I'm concerned, they never happened. If you read the original version, just forget everything that happened after Bella ran out of the house. Use the back button and reread the ending if you need a refresher. Trust me, it's better this way. :)

Catch you on teh flip side.