

Hide and Drink

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Bella's blood was just too tempting to be ignored. In this version of Twilight, Edward takes Bella on a sadistic journey with his monstrous side. While Edward drags her around the world, barely keeping a step ahead of his frantic family, Bella battles the monster for possession of the gentler vampire inside her captor. EPOV. "There was no other blood like this."

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Chapter 1

Hide and Drink

Author's Note:

This story was originally published on Twilighted in 2010. It was my first voyage into the realm of Twilight fanfiction, and still very dear to me. If you have read it before, nothing has changed. Hopefully, you consider it worth a re-read! If you haven't read it, I hope you enjoy it! Do check my author profile for the overall disclaimer. There are no puppies or rainbows here! :D

Summary: Bella's blood was just too tempting to be ignored. In this version of Twilight, Edward takes Bella on a sadistic journey with his monstrous side. While Edward drags her around the world, barely keeping a step ahead of his frantic family, Bella battles the monster for possession of the gentler vampire inside her captor. EPOV.

"There was no other blood like this. Once she was gone, it would no longer be within my grasp. But if I stopped now, she would heal. Her body would make more. The blood would replenish. I could drink again. The promise of more – it was the only incentive that could have caused me to stop."

Story notes: This story is M because of violence and of course the sex is imminent. Just give it a while to get there.

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Chapter One: Bite and Run

Edward, you're losing it.

No kidding. I didn't need to see Jasper's face to know the look in his eyes. The brick walls of Building 3 stood between the two of us,

which meant whatever I was feeling – I had no name for it – was strong. But Jasper's talent left him at a disadvantage. He could only feel – not read, not see. If Alice had been with him, she would have understood more. She would have tried to stop me. Has she seen what I will do yet? Will she get there in time and stop me? I quickened my steps.

It's better this way, I told myself again and again as I walked away from the school and into the wooded area and the trails that would eventually lead me to that wondrous scent. No witnesses. No collateral damage. No innocents. *Except her.*

The unlucky doe that crossed my path in the woods between Forks High School and the house of the chief of police did nothing to slake the shaking in my hands or to take the edge off the need to have her blood inside me. It did take the tiniest slice off the thirst itself, though. I could make it last longer now. I could make *her* last longer now. I knew the one thing the monster inside me could not allow was a rush through this experience. Who was I kidding? He wasn't just buried inside me now. We had merged.

Her scent still clouded my mind, though it had been a good fifteen minutes since I was next to her in the office. Just walking past her was enough to let her smell permeate me. It was on my clothes and embedded in my skin. I could even smell her in my hair. I couldn't think anymore, because the smell was in my brain. I could only watch my body react to the deliciousness that was Bella Swan's blood.

Her truck was there in the driveway, the rusted out lump of scrap metal still irradiating heat from under the hood. It had been no more than two or three minutes since it was turned off. I inhaled deeply as I walked out of the woods behind her home, her tomb. I walked past the truck and the battering ram hit me again. Her pure scent, no longer twisted with my own crashed into me and I felt a growl rise out of chest. *Here it comes...*

I had gone over various approaches during the torturously slow biology class where I had first encountered her. I could offer to help her get caught up in her studies. I could ask her to take a walk with me – I would show her the trails through the forest. Maybe just a quiet knock at the door, her confused expression as I introduced myself politely and apologized for being so rude earlier. If she would only allow me in long enough to explain myself...

No. No pleasantries. They didn't matter now. Not with her scent wrapping around me so completely like soft, urgent silk ribbons – dragging me towards the house. Another snarl passed my lips and my feet hit the short set of steps to her door. I twisted the knob – it was still slightly warm from her touch – locked. Without a thought my foot came up and slammed into the wood next to the bolt. Splinters covered the floor and the knob turned sideways before falling to the linoleum with a metallic thud.

"What the..."

She was in the kitchen. I didn't need her voice to tell me where the luscious scent of her burning blood was concentrated. My hand was in her hair, pulling her head to one side and exposing the throbbing artery in her neck before her eyes could even register another body in the room. I paused, focused on that throb, and took a long, deep breath. My knees actually felt weak as I licked my lips. *Make it last...*

"Edward?"

My eyes met hers. They were so deep, such a rich dark brown – and total silence behind them. I inhaled involuntarily, and her scent washed over me again. When my breath came back out, her eyes glazed over and I could feel the muscles in her shoulders give out, just a little. She held her breath.

"I...I...I'm sorry, Bella," I couldn't believe I was actually begging forgiveness for what I was about to do to her.

My stone body was suddenly up against hers, pushing her against the kitchen counter. With my free hand I braced myself against the counter's edge, behind her back. I felt her body shudder under my cold touch as she finally took a breath. I dropped my head down close to her throat, running my nose along her skin. *Savor it...*

"Edward," her voice cracked on the last syllable and I felt and heard her quick gasp. "What are you...?" Her voice was nothing more than a whisper on her lips.

"Shhh...be still," I whispered back, my lips grazed her earlobe. "Please don't move. I don't want to kill you. Really, I don't. I just can't stop myself..."

My lips were on her neck again, the sweet throb of her quickened pulse met with the burning flow of venom as my teeth grazed against her paper-thin skin. *No, not that way...*

My hand slid through her hair, down to her neck, across her throat. She didn't move, her head still bent at that awkward, enticing angle. I raked the nail of my thumb across her skin, through the artery and her body jumped under my grip. The hot rush of her warm blood poured into my waiting mouth. She may have been screaming. I wasn't sure.

I had fed on countless humans during those years in my youth. I remembered well the taste, the ecstasy of their blood over my tongue. There was no comparison to the taste of her. It was warm, thick and sweet and when the hot liquid hit my throat the thirst was gone. Actually *gone*, for the first time since I woke up in from the change. No burning, no pain. *Not so fast...*

I was taking her blood in gulps. I had to slow down or she would be dead in seconds.

And when she dies, this blood will die with her.

There was no other blood like this. Once she was gone, it would no longer be within my grasp. But if I stopped now, she would heal. Her body would make more. The blood would replenish. I could drink again. The promise of more – it was the only incentive that could have caused me to stop.

My tongue slipped over the cut, sealing it.

The palm of my right hand rested on the small of her back, holding her against my body. The fingers of my left hand curled slightly behind her wounded neck. Her body was shaking in my hands. I hadn't noticed while I was drinking from her. I realized I was shaking, too. No – not me, just my pocket. Not shaking – vibrating.

I wasn't about to answer it. I knew exactly who it was and I knew approximately what she would have to say. A slow panic began to rise up, tingling across the skin of my chest and moving slowly outwards, down my arms and legs. I gripped the frail human tighter to me. I had to be gone before Alice figured out where I was.

I slowly moved my eyes to the girl in my arms. I didn't want to look – I didn't want to look down at her and see that I was too late – that I took too much.

Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was relatively steady. Her heart beat in a sluggish "thah-thum" that wasn't exactly a healthy sound, but also didn't cause me great alarm. I considered that she may have just fainted, and not passed out from the blood loss.

Move...

I tossed her over my shoulder and carried her out through the broken doorway. I listened quickly for any potential witnesses, but Bella's neighbors were lucky today. None of them were outside when I carried the unconscious police chief's daughter into the woods behind her house.

I didn't make any true decisions – I knew the danger in doing so. For a few minutes, I just ran, changing directions randomly. I heard

Alice's thoughts a few miles from me – in the direction of the Swan household and heading away from me. I turned with purpose, and headed across the highway in a flash. Soon enough, I came across the three-story Victorian that was our home.

I could hear Esme's thoughts in her study. She heard my footsteps, but wasn't alarmed. Good. Alice hadn't called her yet, but she would soon enough.

Even as my thought came to completion, I heard Esme's cell ring.

"Alice, how are...yes, he's outside," her voice was as clear as if she was standing next to me. Alice was a little more muffled, but clear enough.

"Don't let him leave!"

"Alice, what's going on?"

"Is anyone with him?" I never should have looked up, but I did. At the same time, Esme's pale face appeared in the window above the porch.

Through her mind, I saw my crimson eyes and the lifeless body across my back.

Dear God, no!

I didn't bother to listen any longer as I ran into the garage and tossed my burden onto the passenger seat of my silver Vanquish. A half second later, I was speeding away from my home, away from my family.

After we were several hundred miles from Forks, Washington, the panic of being caught by my family faded and was quickly replaced by panic over what I had actually just done. I had just fed from an innocent human and then kidnapped her so I could do it again. *Again and again...*

It had been more than 80 years since I had tasted human blood, and never before from someone like this. Always from the criminal, the evil minded – those I deemed deserving of such an act. Not like her. Of course, I had no idea what kind of mind lay behind her brown eyes, but it seemed highly unlikely that she was a murderer disguised as a teenage girl. Even if she was, I remembered Carlisle's disappointment from those years before. I remembered the shame he felt for me. I forced those thoughts from my mind. Whoever I was now, I wasn't the same person I was then. I wasn't even the person I was when I got to school today.

I thought about what had transpired since that morning.

When I dressed in the clothes Alice picked out for me this morning and sat in the driver's seat of my Volvo on the way to school my mind had been silent of my own thoughts. I was constantly so encompassed by the thoughts of others – my family, classmates, teachers – there just wasn't enough room for anything else anymore. I stopped trying to block them and just allowed it all to flow through me. I was slipping a lot – forgetting to answer just the words of humans, not their unspoken thoughts. Last week I found myself answering a teacher's question when the decision to call on me had been made, but before she had actually spoken the words. I knew I was making mistakes – I just didn't care.

Thoughts about the new girl surrounded me before we made it to the Forks High School parking lot. I didn't care if there was one more human in this town or one less, but thoughts of her, visions of her, fantasies of her filled my head until lunchtime. I had felt ever so slightly frustrated when I couldn't hear anything from her mind, but what shocked me the most was the realization that it had been my own feeling, not one I had picked out of someone else's head or one Jasper had pushed on me.

When her scent hit me in class I was suddenly and completely altered. I was no longer directionless. I knew exactly what I needed to do.

With the wind blowing across my shoulder and the highway speeding past, the new me began to plan. I needed an exact place to go, and it had to be a place Alice would not recognize and could not locate from random visions. I made a mental note of someone to call in a couple hours, when the time of day would be more appropriate on the other side of the world. Until then, I just needed somewhere remote. A hideout for just a couple of days until I could get us off the continent and somewhere safe enough to hide her for a long, long time. *Hide and drink...my new favorite game.*

I looked over to her unconscious form in the passenger seat. She hadn't opened her eyes in four hours, and had barely moved. I kept listening to her breathing and her heartbeat for any signs of distress, but hadn't heard anything alarming. All my original thoughts that she had just fainted instead of passed out were gone from my head, of course. I had tried to mentally calculate just how much of her blood I had taken at least a thousand times, but I had been simply too caught up in the moment. Two pints? More? Enough to change my eyes, that much was obvious. I had to be extremely careful with her. I couldn't risk anything happening to my blood supply.

She stirred in the seat, as she had several times over the past hour. This time a soft, strangled moan accompanied her movements. My hand left the steering wheel briefly to reach out to her, then quickly retreated. I shook my head and a quiet laugh escaped my lips. I wanted to reach over and touch her, to comfort her. Could I be any more ridiculous?

I let my eyes move over her instead. She lay on her side facing me, with her arms wrapped loosely around her knees on the reclined seat. Sometimes her eyes tightened and she would shift her position just a little and shiver. She shivered a lot. Of course, it was January, the car windows were down, and it's not like I stopped to grab her jacket on the way out, so I guess shivering made sense. I couldn't roll the windows up though – the scent was too intense, even though my thirst was completely and miraculously satiated – for the time

being, anyway. The scent was still overwhelming. I opted to crank the heater, but it didn't seem to make enough difference.

Her breathing and heart rate changed abruptly and she gasped. I looked up to her face and waited for the screams to start.

Her eyes met mine but only for the very briefest of glances before she cringed slightly and looked away from me. She looked all around the inside of the car, then out the window into the dark. She curled her shoulders into her body and shivered again, wrapping her arms around her chest. She tucked her face into the arms and whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Bella," I spoke only as loud as necessary to be heard over the wind. I didn't want to scare her. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," she said quietly, automatically. She did not look up to meet my gaze. I laughed sharply.

"Fine, are you?" Another laugh. I couldn't help myself. *What was going on in that head?*

She cringed into the seat even more than she already was, like she was trying to make herself smaller.

"What do you want me to say?" Her voice was nothing but the faintest whisper now. If I had been human, I might not have heard it at all.

"I want the truth," I growled. I wasn't even sure why I was so intensely angry all off the sudden. It was so silent here, driving on the quiet Canadian highway, heading steadily northeast at 150 miles an hour. The thoughts of those we past went by too quickly to register and from this girl I got...nothing. I had to admit the emotions I felt were my own this time. Quite a change from yesterday's Edward.

"A little sick to my stomach," she mumbled into her arms. I saw her fingers reach up to her neck and rub the spot near her carotid. "And cold," she added.

I looked down at my hands gripping the steering wheel and up my arms. I realized I still had my jacket, even if I hadn't taken hers. It wasn't heavy, but it was probably more useful than no coat at all. I leaned forward and slid my arms out, handing it over to her. She took it, and actually thanked me before wrapping it around herself.

"Where are we?" her voice was quiet, and still didn't hold the panic I kept expecting.

"Canada," I replied, still watching her and waiting for the screams to begin.

"Would it be ok if I..." she paused and wrapped her arms a little tighter, "closed the window?"

"No!" I snarled and she flinched. I took a deep breath. I hadn't meant to snap at her, it was just the thought of her scent becoming even more intoxicating than it already was. My throat was starting to itch, just a little. If I lost it now, I'd kill her quickly. I ran my hand through my hair. Stupid, nervous habit. She tucked her head back down into her chest and kept her eyes away from mine.

I tried to occupy my head with a list of things I needed to get for her - warmer clothes, blankets, boots. Did she need a pillow? She would need food and water, of course. Was she going to need medical attention? It occurred to me I hadn't really discovered out how she was feeling.

"I want you to give me a complete and accurate account of your physical well being," I said tersely, intending to leave no room for interpretation.

"Um," her head leaned back to the headrest. "I don't know, really. I'm tired and feel a little sore - achy."

"Where do you hurt?" I asked.

"Everywhere and nowhere in particular," she shrugged. "Maybe I have been sitting here too long."

"I can stop in Kelowna." I offer and then babble on for some unknown reason, "but not for long. I want to be in Yorkton before morning."

"Where is that?"

"The other side of Saskatchewan."

"Before morning?" she snorted. "Not unless you plan on driving a hundred..." My eyes darted over to hers and I could see them fixed on the speedometer, getting wider and wider before she abruptly squeezed them shut. "Oh my God..."

In another place, another time, her reaction would have amused me.

"My neck hurts," she whispered.

"That's not surprising," I said matter-of-factly.

"Edward," her voice was quiet again. "What's happening?"

I took in a slow, deep breath and let it out again. The fingers of my left hand pulled at the window controls and allowed them to come up half way, cutting down on the wind but still keeping her scent at bay.

"Bella – when you take a band-aid off, do you pull it off all at once or slowly?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just answer me!" Why did I keep snarling at her?

"Neither."

"Neither?"

"No – neither. I wait until I'm in the shower and let the soap and water dissolve the adhesive."

I laughed out loud. There was no way she could possibly make this any harder. She couldn't even help me out with the metaphor.

"I've been living a lie, Bella," I started to tell her, not having the slightest idea what was going to come out of my mouth next. I didn't see any point in lying to her. *I'm going to hide you away from my family and yours and slowly drink your blood until I accidentally lose it someday and kill you. I hope that won't be for a long, long time because you taste really, really good.* But the bare truth didn't seem very advantageous, either. My fingers were pulling through my hair again. I forced them to stop.

"I've tried to be something I'm not," I started again, "and I was faking it pretty well until you showed up in class today. When you walked in, I just couldn't do it anymore. I had to have you," my voice lowered a bit and I looked over to her. She was looking back into my eyes. After a long moment, she spoke and I felt my body go even colder.

"Are you going to do that again?" she asked. Her hand was back up on her throat, fingers pushing into the mark there.

I looked back to the road, unable to answer her. I could smell the warm, wet, salted tears flowing from her eyes, but I didn't dare look back at her again. My peripheral vision caught her pulling herself into a tighter ball and rolling to her other side, away from me. She stayed like that while I drove over the Canadian countryside and the moon slowly rose in front of us.

When we reached the lights of a small city I pulled up to a quiet shopping center. She jumped as the car jolted to a stop and looked out the window at the neon signs advertising check cashing services, manicures and tacos. I turned the ignition off and faced her again.

"Bella, I know there are some things I need to get for you," I stated. She wouldn't look at me. "I don't want you to be...uncomfortable," I couldn't believe such a word could escape me. "You'll need a coat, and a blanket, I think? What else do you need?"

She didn't respond or even turn towards me. I tried again, with a little more force this time.

"Bella, I'm going to take you inside that store there and get you what you need," I said. "I know this is going to sound utterly ridiculous but please try to see past that. I don't want to scare you, really – I don't. I can take you inside this store and get you anything you want, but please don't get ideas about escaping from me. If you try to expose us I will have to kill anyone who believes you. If you try to run I will catch you. Besides you are weak right now and probably couldn't even escape a human kidnapper right now, let alone me."

She whimpered again.

"I really don't want you to end up hurt and I doubt you want to watch me slaughter a store full of people so please, please don't try anything."

I didn't wait for a response this time. I reached over her and grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the glove compartment and got out of the car. I went around to her side of the car as quickly as I could without being noticed. The cold wind whipped around the building and blew gusts of powdery snow around my feet. She tried to get out of the car, refusing to take my hand for assistance, and began to fall as soon as her shoes hit the pavement. I caught her easily, and set her back on the seat.

"Dizzy," she breathed. Her heart was beating harder – trying to get more blood to her brain. I had taken too much from her. I licked my lips, the memory hitting me rather suddenly. *Worth it...*

I considered the warning I had just given her and laughed out loud. Escape me? She couldn't even put one foot in front of the other.

What a waste of my wasted breath. As long as I drank from her regularly, she couldn't even attempt to get away. I laughed again. How many times had I laughed since taking her away? How many times had I laughed in the ten years before I had taken her away?

I didn't have to concern myself with her wandering off, but I wasn't too fond of leaving her alone in the car, either. *Time for Plan B...*

I looked around the parking lot. A group of young men stood outside a convenient store, smoking cigarettes, spitting and making comments about my car in Spanish. I called over to them in their own language.

"I could use some help, if you have the time."

All three approached, but the biggest one came up closest. Before he could continue with car compliments, I stopped him with a handful of \$100 bills and a shopping list. His eyes got wide.

"I will double that amount when you deliver it," I added.

Within twenty minutes I was back on the road with Bella wrapped in a warmer coat and blanket. On the floor by her feet was a cooler of drinks and a bag full of take out Mexican food. I doubted it was the very best thing for her, but there wasn't a lot of choice at the moment. I'd try to increase the nutrition levels as soon as possible. I needed her body to be strong and healthy. There was a bag in the trunk with a few other items I thought could be useful later.

She sipped a cola and nibbled nachos and cheese sauce while facing the car door. I saw her test the handle, as if I would just let her throw herself out of the car. Tears continued to pour down her cheeks.

"Bella," I started, not knowing what I was going to actually say to her. Stop crying? That was bound to be effective.

"What are you going to do to me?" She cried out suddenly, loudly – almost violently. Bella looked up into my eyes and tried to choke back her sobs.

I didn't know what to say to her. Again, the whole truth and nothing but the truth didn't seem to be the best answer. Lying to her was pointless, at best. Half-truths it is, then.

"I don't know exactly," I stared back at her. "I haven't decided on the details. We'll probably stay in whatever hotel is available until tomorrow night. Then we'll go on to a little place I know up north until I can get us out of the country."

"Why?" She was quiet again. I wondered if she scared herself with her outburst.

"Because your blood is the sweetest thing I have tasted in a century," I said, giving up on subtlety. "Once wasn't enough. Twice won't be enough. I need to take you somewhere where my family won't find us and I will be able to..."

Her arms covered her head and loud, choking sobs racked her body. I stared straight ahead again, memorizing the imperfections in the double yellow lines.

"Please," her voice cracked. "Please take me back home."

"Sorry, Bella," I said. "You won't be going back there again." There wasn't any point in an explanation. It didn't change anything. Her cries weren't going to trump my selfishness. She couldn't beg me enough to reconsider my actions. Nothing could make me relinquish this gift I would take for myself over and over again. *All for me...*

So much for being a gentleman.

AUTHOR'S END NOTES:

It's been forever since I've even logged into FFN, and I really miss all of you! This is currently labeled as a WIP, but as many of you know, it's all written. Leave me a review, tell me if you want the rest, and I'll continue to get the chapters re-formatted and posted here when I'm able, hopefully at least once a week, until it's done. There are 35 chapters altogether.

Reminder – no puppies or rainbows here. I also can't guarantee it won't get kicked off again. :)

Chapter 2

Author's notes:

Who's still with me?

"I looked up into her eyes and glared. After all of my warnings, still she had tried to take her blood away from me. How dare she try to steal it from me? No one could take from me what was mine. And her blood was MINE. My muscles tensed for the tiniest fraction of a second, and before I registered what I was doing, she was thrown to the middle of the bed and I had her wrists pinned over her head."

Chapter 2 : Shop and Kill

There aren't too many decent hotels in Yorkton, so I went with a chain that was well known and at least had room service and valet parking. It was a little uncomfortable to be assaulted with all the mundane thoughts for the valets and bellhops after the silence of the car. I wasn't just getting used to it - I was enjoying it.

In order to get Bella out of the car and to the elevator I had to slide one arm around her and half carry her with me. I held my breath. Breathing her scent in while she was so close would be torture. Just being close to her was enough to tense my muscles and force my mind's eye into actual fantasies of drinking from her. I mentally reminded myself that I would have her again and again – I just had to maintain control, focus and patience. I could do that.

I slid the keycard through the lock, flipped on the light and guided Bella to the armchair at the far end of the room. She was still quite weak, and probably would be for a day or two. Fortunately, she didn't seem to be suffering from any problems other than the blood loss. Not any physical problems, anyway. Mentally, I was pretty sure she was in shock. Maybe even approaching catatonic.

Well, what exactly did you expect? I growled at myself. Day one of a new life in a new town she's bitten and hauled away from her father by a ravenous vampire who has made it pretty clear he's going to use her as a spigot until her body can't take it any more. A little mental breakdown is actually pretty sensible.

I dropped the bags I was carrying and picked up a room service menu from the coffee table. At least I could work on her physical state – which was most important to me anyway. Bella leaned back against the chair and watched me, unmoving. At least, her eyes were looking in my general direction. I wasn't sure if she saw me at all.

"What do you want for breakfast?" I asked. She didn't respond, so I ordered a dozen different things and waited for everything to be delivered. I tipped the delivery boy in the hallway, taking the tray from him and not letting him into the room at all. I pushed her chair up to the table and handed her a glass of orange juice. She complied, and reluctantly sipped at the juice before dropping it down to the table.

"You have to eat, Bella," I told her. "I need you to get stronger, get better." I thought about why I wanted her to get stronger and chuckled a little. I was talking to her like I was doing her a favor – looking out for her best interest. It was laughable, so I laughed. She cringed against the armrest.

She did drink and eat some of the food on her own. I was a little relieved I didn't have to force it down her throat, though I would have if I needed to do so. After a few minutes she pushed the plate away. It was enough for now, though, so I didn't push her to eat more. At least she finished the juice. Fluids were tantamount for recouping blood.

I took the tray off the table and dropped it outside the door. "Is there anything else you need?" She shook her head and stared at her lap, twisting her fingers around themselves. There was moisture forming in her eyes again. I walked over to the desk where a plastic shopping

back with a hardware store logo on it lay on its side. *Now for the unpleasant bit.*

"Bella," I said, pulling the nylon cording out of the bag. I kept my back to her for as long as possible. I didn't know if she was actually watching me or not, but I didn't want her to panic. If she panicked, she would fight. If she fought, she would end up getting hurt. If she fought a lot, well – I'd probably finish my earlier meal. "I have to go out for a while. There are some things I need to get – mostly for you. You need to rest – to sleep, so I'm not taking you with me." I could hear her muscles tense up.

I turned around and met her eyes, keeping the length of rope in one hand, slightly behind my back.

"Lie down on the far side of the bed Bella," I instructed. Her eyes widened and I could hear her breath catch in her throat.

"Why?" she asked. There was sweat forming on her forehead, threatening to bead up and join the salty wetness now pouring down her cheeks. I held up the nylon cord in my hands so she could see it. A little strangled whimper came out of her throat.

"Because I can't have you roaming around the halls or making any phone calls while I am out," I replied. "Long distance charges on hotel phones are pretty outrageous," I added with a half smile. "I will untie you as soon as I am back, I promise."

She opened her mouth and I waited for the argument and the promise not to do anything like that. It would be nice to be able to trust her, but we were nowhere near that stage yet. However, she didn't argue or panic. Instead she closed her mouth with a shudder and stumbled over to the side of the bed. I followed behind her.

She sat on the grotesque, flowered bedspread and looked down at my feet. I narrowed my eyes a little, looking at the top of her head and wondering inanely if a different angle would let me hear her thoughts. She was taking this with such calm – what was in her

head? Was she giving up, resigned to her fate? Was she strategizing? Was she planning to strike out at me? Not that she could hurt me, but I was used to knowing the thoughts of others. How do you plan around another's plan when you don't know what it is?

I took her wrist and tried to ignore the thrumming under her skin. I pulled her gently until she was lying on her side facing the wall. I wrapped the cord around both her wrists and tied the other end to the legs of the bed. Not the ideal situation but effective enough. I repeated the action with her ankles.

I stepped back and looked at her, lying on one side with her wrists tied together on a hotel room bed. An unexpected vision flashed through my head – Bella in a different room with a southern facing glass wall and gold colored carpet, her hands tied to either side of a luxurious four-poster. I shook my head to delete the image.
Entertaining, though...

Where did that come from?

I pulled my jacket back on and slid the TV remote next to Bella's hand just in case she wanted it. She was trying to hold back the remaining tears. What was going through her head? Our time on the road had been so quiet for me. Now I was surrounded by the dozen or so voices of hotel occupants. I could hear them all clearly, but not her. I left the room, closing the door silently behind me.

Once I was in the car, I flipped the phone back on and began to dial. The singsong voice on the other side of the world spoke first in Cantonese, then English. I responded with the former, one of the few languages Alice hadn't delved into just yet. I wasn't too sure if she could read lips in a vision, but I wasn't taking any chances, either. I had to hit "ignore" three times just to complete the call.

Ten minutes and fourteen digits of American Express Platinum later, I had bought a remote cabin north of Leaf Rapids, Manitoba and had the agent searching for three other equally remote locations around

the globe. I turned the phone back off, ignoring the seven separate texts that had appeared during the call.

I drove to a high-end mall and gave a sales clerk a description of Bella's physique and a hefty tip to do the shopping for me. I went to the other side of the store and picked out what I needed as well as some luggage. A week's worth of clothing for both of us ought to cover it for now. I found arctic-zone parkas, hats and gloves as well. She would need them where we were going. I had the clerk pile everything into the passenger's seat and drove back to the hotel.

Bella was asleep when I quietly slipped back into the room and seated myself at the desk chair. Against my better judgment, I turned my phone back on.

Forty-one new voicemails, eighty-six missed calls and a hundred and thirteen new text messages. *For the love of all that is holy...*

I took a slow deep breath, which was meant to be cleansing but ended up being just the opposite. The burn in my throat was back and her scent concentrated in the small room was too much. I was rising out of the chair before I even realized it. I had to force my knees to bend in order to sit myself back down. I held my breath for a few minutes, then breathed in slowly, forcing calm to wash over me before I dared get back up again. The phone would have to wait in my pocket a little while longer.

The window let out a squeak as I opened it with one hand and turned up the heat with the other. It was bitter cold outside, so I didn't think freezing would help her out much. The hotel heater was noisy, but efficient. For good measure, I also pulled the ugly blanket over her sleeping form.

I moved the chair closer to the window, partially because the air was less concentrated by her scent but also because I can see her face from there. It doesn't look like she has moved much during the time I was gone, but then again she really didn't have any ability to do anything other than shift around where she was. The cording

wouldn't let her roll over – I couldn't risk her reaching the phone. On the floor at the edge of the bed was the TV remote and one of those little pads of paper with the hotel logo on it. I picked both up, tossed the remote to the middle of the bed, behind her and the pad of paper back on the nightstand without moving my gaze from her face.

I sat for several minutes, just looking at her and wondering if she was dreaming. I thought about untying her, but I didn't want to wake her up. It was vital that she rest and eat and replenish her blood so I could have it again. I let myself inhale deeply, even leaning a little closer. The urge was there – take her, drain her – but knowing it would come soon, and it could go on indefinitely *if* I was careful kept the urge controllable. *Resist...*

After inhaling her scent for a while I yanked my phone back out and started with the texts. I flipped through, not reading all of them but feeling the general tone go from frank commanding to anger, to threats, back to pleading, then move into advanced coercion and ending with a more desperate form of pleading. There were dozens from each of them.

Alice - I know what you did! Get home right now so we can work on a plan to set it right.

Emmett - Esme is a mess since she saw you. Call now.

Carlisle - You can't do this Edward - she's an innocent human.

Rose – You're a complete idiot. Maybe you should think about someone other than yourself for a change.

Emmett - Her father is going nuts back here bro- he's been to the house twice and he's sure she's with you.

Alice - Edward please call back. Tell me something. Talk to me. We will work this out as a family – we always do.

Jasper - *The chief has contacts all over the place. Edward you must bring her back. We will all be implicated.*

Esme – *We love you, Edward. Please come home.*

I tapped a couple of keys and deleted them all. I cleared out the missed calls and wiped out all voicemail without listening to any of them.

The psychic doesn't miss a beat. The phone starts vibrating as soon as I hit delete. Slipping behind the bathroom door, I hit the green send key and put the speaker up to my ear.

"Edward! Thank God you answered! Where are you? I don't recognize the area. Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Of course I have, Alice," I answered. "What else would you call this?" I heard Carlisle in the background, demanding the phone from my sister.

"Edward, this has to stop now," Carlisle nearly yelled into the phone. Anger, fear, disappointment – I could hear it all in his voice. "You are going to kill her. Please, son..."

I hung up and turned the phone off before they could call back again. I couldn't listen to that voice – the same voice I heard in my head whenever I was doing something I knew wasn't what he would want me to do. I heard it before he ever spoke to me aloud – I could hear it while I burned during the transformation into my non-life as a vampire. It was the ultimate voice of reason – the voice of knowledge, of truth of what was just *good*. No matter what I did wrong – whether it was picking the answer to the question out of the teacher's head because I hadn't been listening or killing a human criminal before he had the chance to rape another teenaged victim – Carlisle's voice assailed me. The voice of my friend, my mentor, my *father* burned in my mind. *Please, son.*

I shoved the phone back in my pocket. I could deal with Alice, but not the rest of them. Definitely not Carlisle. Not now. I went back to the seat by the window and pushed my fingers through my hair. I forced myself to stop and just looked at my hands lying across my thighs lap instead. An image of Lady MacBeth trying to rub blood off her hands flashed through my thoughts. *Out, out, damn spot...*

Bella's breathing changed and her eyes opened, meeting mine almost instantly. I dropped to the side of the bed and untangled her wrists from the rope. She winced. With the cords gone, I could see the red marks left behind. She had struggled while I was out. A lot.

I looked up into her eyes and glared. After all of my warnings, still she had tried to take her blood away from me. How dare she try to steal it from me? No one could take from me what was mine. And her blood was MINE. My muscles tensed for the tiniest fraction of a second, and before I registered what I was doing, she was thrown to the middle of the bed and I had her wrists pinned over her head.

The force of the violent thoughts that ran through my brain in a fraction of a second washed over me like a tsunami. I drowned in them. I wanted to shake her, beat her, strangle her and rip her skin with my teeth.

"Do you *want* me to kill you?" I snarled at her. She shook her head, her eyes wide and her chestnut hair in contrast against the white pillowcase. "Then don't do anything that stupid again."

I managed to release her wrists and stand and back away from her, but only just barely.

I sat myself back down in the chair and gripped the armrests to hold myself in place. My eyes closed and I tried to squelch the fury inside. *Think of the blood, think of the blood*, I chanted. It has been nearly a full day since I tasted her. Two more and I could drink once more, as long as I kept my composure and didn't kill her before I could consume her again.

My hand found its way back into my hair and I breathed in that luscious scent again. Opening my eyes, I looked at her curled up into a ball, her arms wrapped around her knees, on the side of the bed farthest away from me. Her fingers rubbed against her wrists. I had been so focused; I hadn't even heard her move. I sat there and listened to her almost silent sobs leave her body in time to her tempting heartbeat.

Eventually, we both calmed and she pulled herself back up against the headrest, but never looked me in the eye. It was getting late, and we would need to leave soon. I told her as much and she nodded her acquiescence.

I showed her the clothing I bought and she asked for a "human moment," which made me laugh. She spent an entire hour in the bathroom, showering and dressing and whatever else it is human females do in bathrooms. I listened closely to her movements, mentally looking for any sound that could potentially jeopardize my blood supply. I also noticed the subtle difference in her scent as it mixed with the water from the shower. I drew myself away from the door long enough to pull on a new pair of khakis and a dark button down shirt. Then I packed both our suitcases with the new clothing and waited for her to finish.

She came out dressed in shapely designer jeans and a fluffy sweater. Much better for this climate than her other clothing had been. The jeans were tucked into wool lined leather boots with good traction on the soles.

Bella selected a chicken Caesar salad from the room service menu and I ordered her a steak to go with it. Mentally, I added iron supplements to my shopping list.

The cloud-masked sun was setting outside the window, so I called the front desk to checkout and ask for the car to be brought around. I tossed the remaining hotel soap and shampoo into one of the bags – we might not have the chance to get those kinds of things before

reaching our destination. I slipped the nylon cord into the outer pocket of my bag, just in case I needed it later.

The roads to the tiny mining town were not going to be easily traveled. If I had a beating heart, it would have stopped when I ditched my Vanquish in a long-term storage facility and bought an all terrain SUV. I loved that car as much as I loved anything, and if something happened to it before I could arrange to have it taken back to my home in Forks, I would be crushed. But my focus was different now – more singular. I traded my baby for her blood, and considered it an acceptable deal.

Bella was definitely better after a half-day's sleep and some decent food in her. After we had been on the dark road for about an hour, much to my surprise, she decided to strike up a conversation.

"Will you tell me about yourself?" she started.

"Yes," I answered, glancing sideways at her. "What do you want to know?" She paused for a few seconds before taking a deep breath.

"You're a...um...vampire?"

"Yes," I replied.

"How old are you?" I debate giving her the standard answer but don't really see the point.

"I'm one hundred and eight."

"What about the rest of your family? Are they like you?"

"In age or do you mean to ask if they are also vampires?" I didn't wait for her to clarify, and went ahead and answered both. "I am older than all my siblings except for Jasper. I'm technically older than Esme, too. And yes we are all vampires."

"Esme?"

"Carlisle's wife. She's my mother, of sorts."

"Carlisle is older then?"

"Yes, he made me like this. He made all of us except Jasper and Alice."

"Made you? You weren't always a..." apparently she couldn't say the word again.

"No, I used to be human, like you." She was silent again for a while.

"So how often do you...um...eat?"

"About every two weeks," I said. "We don't have to drink that often, but the thirst gets to be a little much by then." Again, she went silent, mulling over the information. I thought about telling her I wasn't planning on waiting that long for my next meal, but quickly advised myself against it.

"Where do you go? I mean – you can't eat...err...drink in Forks all the time. There aren't many residents in Forks and Charlie would notice something like that."

"We don't feed on humans," I actually felt a little defensive before realizing the ludicrousness of the statement. I added "usually" before going on. "We drink the blood of animals," I stopped and thought for a minute. "Yours is the first human blood I have had in eighty years," I admitted. Again, we sat in silence.

Deciding she must be done with her inquiries, I started adding things to my mental shopping list.

"Why did you change your mind?" she started up again.

"About what?" Bella hesitated before clarifying.

"Why did you decide to start drinking human blood again?"

"I didn't really decide," I said. I looked over at her and watched her fiddle with her fingers. Her teeth were sunk into her bottom lip. I wondered what it would be like – biting and drinking from that spot. I shook my head a little. "When you came into class and sat next to me, I was just overwhelmed. I've never experienced anything like it. Your blood smells so good, I can hardly concentrate on anything else when I am near you."

"Oh," she said. Then she added, "I'm sorry."

"Are you serious?" I laughed. "You're apologizing for tasting good?" She blushed then, deep red flowing up into her neck and cheeks. The smell of it assaulted me in the small, warm car. I licked my lips, the humor of her statement abruptly gone. My hands were shaking a little on the steering wheel. My muscles tried against my will to bunch up into a crouch. I slammed on the breaks and pulled to the side of the road.

She was under me in the back of the SUV, between the seats. The zipper of her parka was down and my lips were against her exposed neck before I realized what I was doing. The warmth of her blush felt like fire on the side of my face.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Bella was crying over and over again. Her warm little hands were against my shoulders, either holding on to me or trying to push me away – I couldn't really tell. I stopped breathing and held completely still for a long moment, fighting with the thirst that threatened to ruin my plans. I couldn't let that happen. Nothing could jeopardize my plan to drink from her form the rest of her natural life. Not even myself. *Must taste her...*

"Give me your hand," I grunted, pulling back from her a little. She released my shoulder and I took her shaking palm in mine, gently tracing one of the tiny veins on the back of her hand with my thumb. I increased the pressure a little and the red crimson liquid appears on her pale flesh as she tried to flinch away from me.

I licked the stream coming out of her, trying to satiate the monster with a tiny taste long enough for her to heal more completely. My venom sealed the wound, so a taste was all the ecstasy I was going to get unless I tore a bigger hole in her.

My senses registered Bella's heartbeat in her chest – so close to me – but not her breathing. I looked up to her face where her eyes were closed tightly with the tension in all her body's muscles. It occurred to me that she was trying not to scream, not to cry out against the pain of my attack.

"Bella – breathe," I said, and listened to her sharp intake. Her eyes flew open and met mine, staring straight into me. The color of her eyes – so rich and dark and warm – I didn't think I had ever seen brown eyes quite like hers before. They contrasted against her pale, soft skin and even matched some of the varying hues in her hair. My tongue darted around my teeth, looking for any missed remnants and I took a slow, audible breath.

She shifted under me and I became acutely aware of her body pressed beneath mine.

I was still holding her right hand in my left, poised just a couple of inches from my mouth. Her other hand was now, most definitely, *gripping* my shoulder, not pushing me away. A reflexive reaction to her fear, I surmised. My right hand held most of my upper body weight on the floor of the SUV, next to her head. My chest was raised up by that hand, but my abdomen was pushed flush against her stomach and my legs lay between her thighs. Her legs were bent at the knees on either side of my hips and the most interesting friction ensued as she moved. *Take her...*

I pushed back away from her heat, taken aback by the mental images creeping into my head. I went back to the driver's seat and ordered Bella to get her seatbelt back on.

I had to stop and fill the duel gas tanks every time I saw a gas station. The GPS was worthless in this SUV, and not knowing for

sure where the next place to refuel might be was more than a little dangerous with a living, warm-blooded human as a passenger. Even though I had lived amongst humans most of the time, I never really thought about all the different ways they were fragile. Bella shivered all the time, even though I had her dressed in multiple layers and wrapped in a blanket with the heated seats at full blast. Eventually, the sub-arctic winds were too much and I had to allow the windows to be closed.

"Drink something," I ordered as I opened the door to fill up the tanks.

"The cooler is empty," she said. "Do you think they have drinks in the store?"

I looked over to the small cement block building and glanced over the various notices – cigarettes, lager and fresh coffee. It was at least worth a look.

"What do you want?" I asked. "I'll go get it."

"Ummm..." she hesitated. "I'm not sure. What do you think they have? Should we fill up the cooler?"

"Probably," I said. I hitched the nozzle back on to the pump and replaced the gas cap.

"Would it be ok if I," she took a deep breath, "go in and see?"

Her eyes didn't meet mine. I guess my little tirade in the back of the car got to her a bit. She was about as nervous as she could be. A little part of me was sorry for scaring her, but another part wanted to make her blush again so we could end up in the same position. Most of me worried about her trying to get somewhere where she could call for help. If she tried to escape from me here, she would freeze in minutes, and Blood Popsicles were not on my list of favorite treats.

"Yes, if you stay close to me."

"I will," she promised. I went around to her side of the car and opened the door. She was a lot stronger now, despite my little snack, and could walk easily on her own. She pulled her parka hood up around her face and headed to the store.

A little bell clanged against the door as it opened, welcoming us into the shop. The burly man behind the counter smiled and offered a friendly hello. *I bet she'd keep a body warm tonight*, his mind raced. I moved myself between Bella and his vision until he looked up to meet my glare. He immediately ducked back under the counter to retrieve some paperwork.

Inside the store was warm enough, and Bella pulled off her gloves to pick out drinks and a bag of trail mix. I stayed within a couple inches of her while she made her selections. When she asked for another "human moment," I waited for her outside the door of the restroom and wondered if there was anything else here we might need. Shopping would become increasingly sparse until we got to Thompson – the only decent sized town in the northern part of Manitoba.

When Bella came back out, we went back up to the cash register where the big buy was comparing receipts to a ledger book. I put the pile of drinks and snacks on the counter so he could ring them up.

"I forgot to get the orange juice," Bella said glancing over her shoulder to the vertical refrigerators at the back of the store.

"I'll get it," I glided through the aisle, slid back the door to the refrigerated case and reached for the bottled juice. The cashier's mind was suddenly drawn away from a stack of sales slips to thoughts of the hotel where we stayed last night. Why would he be thinking of a hotel 200 kilometers away? In the second I considered this, the tone of his thoughts changed and I could see the pale hotel logo on notepaper through his eyes.

Please help me. I'm being kidnapped. Don't say anything or he will hear you. We are headed northeast on Highway 10. Please contact

police chief Charlie Swan at 360-555-7289...

" *Bel-la* !" A growl crawled out of my throat and I clipped her name into two distinct sounds. I wheeled around and stormed back over to the counter, snarling. Bella's eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open. "Get in the car!" I grabbed her arm more roughly than I had before. Her breath came out in a gasp.

"She doesn't have to go anywhere if she doesn't want to," the burly cashier had his hand on her other arm where it rested on the countertop. He was touching her. Not only touching her but trying to keep her from me. Trying to steal her blood from me. Every neuron in every muscle of my body fired at once.

I lost any semblance of reason when his beefy hand coiled rough fingers around her wrist. My hand came down on his forearm and the snap echoed around the silent store. I didn't let the snap slow my hand. There wasn't enough bulk behind him to stop me from crushing his arm - muscle and bone - from smashing flat against the counter, cracking the surface into two pieces. My fingers twisted around his flesh and pulled back, separating the elbow joint from its socket.

A wet, tearing sound filled my ears as his tendons, ligaments and muscles were torn away from the rest of his body. I flung the flesh across the store where it hit the glass front of the drinks case, ironically causing a dozen bottles of orange juice to smash against the tile floor.

Bella and the cashier screamed in tandem.

"Get in the car!" I yelled at her again, shoving her roughly towards the door and hearing the little bell ring – though not so welcoming this time – as she smashed into it. The man's pooling blood seeped into all my senses. Venom filled my mouth.

I was over the counter with my teeth buried in his neck in a quarter of a second. His blood filled my mouth as his dying thoughts filled

head. Memories of his wife, son, elderly mother and her nurse, with whom he was having an affair. His blood tingled down my throat with a sweet and musky flavor. The blood was nothing like *hers*, nothing else was, but still, it was human blood. Two humans in as many days. His mind went silent and his heart followed. I pulled back, satisfied for now.

There was lighter fluid on one of the cases and matches in a bowl on the counter. I covered his body with the liquid and tossed a lit match against his chest.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and looked over to the door. Bella was sitting on floor with her back up against a wire rack filled with snack-sized bags of potato chips and staring straight at me. I thought she had gone out to the car, but instead she sat there and watched me drain the man she wanted to help her. I bet that will keep her from trying that again. I pulled her to her feet and dragged her away from the blaze. *Lesson learned...*

So much for trust.

CHAPTER END NOTE:

Well, that was quite a nice welcome back! It warms my heart that so many of you are still here with me after all this time. So many familiar names! Rebadams and your review poems, and Pam reminding me about the "horny bipolar vampire" were highlights! Love it!

Everyone's feedback is always appreciated and so, so important to me! In fact, it's what keeps me going. Believe it or not, it's given me a little incentive to maybe write something new for y'all. I'll try to keep posting H&D chapters regularly so the new readers aren't waiting too long!

Speaking of new readers, this is your best chance to jump ship. If this was too much for you...well, it's just going to get more and more interesting, ya know? My writing isn't everyone's cup of tea (haha, UC fans), and that's okay. It won't hurt my feelings if you decide not to read. If you keep on reading, it's at your own risk.

Seat backs and trays to their upright and locked positions, twifans!

Much Love!

Savage

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 – Cry and Consume

For an hour straight, Bella sobbed on her side of the SUV. She kept her hands or arms over her face at all times, never looking in my direction. I didn't even try to say anything to her. Eventually she succumbed to sleep and I had a little quiet time to myself for some much needed, though unwanted, reflection.

I killed a human.

Not just tasted, though of course I had fully intended to kill Bella when I first walked into her house. Regardless of the intent, I hadn't actually done it. I came up with a better plan. She didn't have to die, but the store's clerk...I didn't have a choice with him. *Had to drink, did you?*

No, of course I didn't *have* to drink his blood. I could have killed him and left him on the floor without draining him. But feeding off him was the best plan – the safest one for Bella, the safest one for Bella's blood. The more well fed I was the less likely I would lose control with her. Feeding on humans was, without a doubt, a lot more satisfying than deer or bears or mountain lions. I had all but forgotten the taste, the *feeling* , of gorging myself on human blood.

Would I do it again? Could I? If it meant keeping myself in control around the siren in the seat next to mine, wasn't it worth it?

My fingers pulled on my hair, entwined in the strands as much as her scent entwined with my olfactory system. I cracked the window a little – not because I was thirsty, but because it was getting difficult to think about changing my dietary plan with her so close.

No , I decided suddenly. I'm not going back to killing people all the time, and I'm not going to kill Bella.

So how do I keep from killing her? I had already come so close twice since taking her away. The first when she tried to get out of her bonds in the hotel, and then again in the car when she...blushed. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

Well, let's eliminate the first one. She simply couldn't do anything like that again. I can't let her risk it. I will give her the rules she needs to follow and she will follow them. *Easy enough...*

The second one – that was going to be a little tricky. As much as I might like to give her a "no blushing" rule, enforcing it was going to be futile. So when and why do human's blush? I focused on the physical basics – stimulated vasodilators cause capillaries to expand, allowing more blood flow to the surface of the skin and manifesting in that lovely warm red tinge. *Mmmmm...*

Okay, I needed to stop thinking about that.

The more important question was the root cause of the stimulation – embarrassment or nervousness. When she blushed before, I had just laughed at her for making that ridiculous apology. That's what set her off. Okay – I should be able to avoid laughing at her. *Problem solved...*

She rolled towards me and her eyes fluttered open. They were nearly as red as mine, but at least she had stopped crying. She looked out the window into the cold, snowy darkness.

"Where are we?"

"Northeast on Highway 10," I snapped back at her. She cringed at the reminder of the note responsible for the charred body behind us. Where did all this anger come from? I thought everyone always considered me brooding, not angry. If anything, I needed to treat her with indifference. It was easier that way.

"How did you know?" she asked. "You weren't even looking at us."

"I heard him read it," I answered with a shrug, trying to harness my inner apathy.

"Heard him? He didn't say anything."

"I heard him in his mind," I admitted. She gasped.

"What...um...how...?" she stammered. "You can...read minds?"

"Yes." She pondered that one for a while.

"Then why didn't you take the note away from me?" she asked. "If you knew what I was going to do, why did you let me...let him...?"

"I didn't know what you were planning," I interrupted her. *Might as well come clean.* "I can't hear your thoughts. I've never run into that before, so you are quite the enigma," I looked over to her, feeling suddenly relaxed. "It's really peaceful, actually. Being out here with someone and not having the constant noise in my head is so different than what I have known. Ever since I woke up like this I have heard the thoughts of others all around me. The quiet is remarkably pleasant."

As if in answer, Bella was quiet for a long time. I kept staring straight ahead at the road to avoid her eyes. *Why didn't I want to look at her?* Ah yes, because I would be able to see my own eyes reflected in hers. There was a big difference between rationalizing my actions and the acknowledgement of the completed deeds in my red irises.

Time to go over the rules.

"Bella," she jumped a little in her seat. We hadn't spoken for some time. "We need to discuss something. We need to discuss some rules – rules that are going to keep you alive."

"I'm sorry," she started. "I didn't know you would...that you could..."

"I know you aren't going to try that again," a chuckle escaped me. *No – no laughing!* "I'm sure you don't want to be responsible for another

person's death," I let that thought sink in a little bit. I knew on whose hands the shopkeeper's death really lay, but maybe a little guilt would keep her more complacent. "There are other rules – rules you need to remember because if you break them, I won't give you a second chance."

Bella pulled her legs up and wound herself into her favorite little ball on the seat. I continued.

"First and foremost – if you run from me, you'll die. I'm a predator, and instinct kicks in if my prey runs from me. It's not something I will think about or consider – I will just act and I'll probably realize what I've done about the same time your heart stops."

Bella's eyes got wide and she dropped her eyes away from my face again.

"Second, you will take care of yourself. Eat, drink – I need you to be healthy. You are the most important thing in my life, Bella."

She looked over at me and the look of sheer disbelief was comical.

"I'm serious," I assured her. "I need you more than anything I have ever needed before. I will do anything and everything in my power to keep you safe and healthy. I will try to be...gentle with you...if I can. But if you fight me, I'll lose some composure. If I lose composure, you are going to get hurt."

"So no running or fighting? Eat right?"

"Correct," I nodded. "The last one is, of course, don't try to get away from me again. I can smell you a mile away. If you try to escape, not only is it not going to work, but someone will die."

The tears started again. I wondered if she could get dehydrated from crying so much. Would that mean she would take longer to heal?

"Please, don't cry," I said, sounding a little terser than I intended.

"I can't help it – you're scaring me."

"I know," I sighed. She swiped the back of her hand under her eyes.
"I'm sorry – I don't know how to make this any easier for you."

"Talk about something else?"

"Okay," I said. "What?"

"Tell me why you were posing as a high school student."

"We try to blend in as much as possible," I said. "If we start out in a new place young enough, we can stay there for several years before people start questioning us. Carlisle can do his work in the hospital and the rest of us can try to be as normal as we can be. Once people start questioning how we never change – always look the same – then we pick up and leave, change our names, start over in a new place."

"You don't, you know," she said quietly.

"Don't what?"

"Blend in," she responded. "You are all so beautiful, so graceful. I knew you weren't normal when I saw you in the cafeteria."

"Camouflage," I said, dismissively. "We attract our intended meals. At the same time, most humans feel a little nervous around us – a sense of self-preservation. You must be a little more observant than most." I considered the first impression of us I had heard in many people's heads when they saw us. Beautiful was a common theme, though I don't think abnormal came to mind before. Scary, maybe, but not abnormal. "Are you sure this conversation is going to make you more comfortable?"

"No," she looked down at her fidgeting hands. "I don't know what to talk about."

"Why don't you tell me about you?" I suggested.

Bella told me about her move to Forks, her parents, and her life in Phoenix. We talked about books, music and her favorite food and movies. It was strange, having to ask her so many questions in order to understand her – I was so used to being able to pick information out of people's heads. It was unnerving and strangely pleasant – like a difficult puzzle when the pieces start to come together and a clear picture is revealed. The silence in my head as we talked was beyond pleasant.

To my surprise, this girl was quite intelligent and well read, much more so than the other teenage girls at Forks High. To listen to her talk, she seemed much older than her years, but when I glanced at her, still curled up with red blotches on her cheeks she looked very young to me. And she was...attractive to me, I realized. At least, she was when the smell of her throat wasn't encompassing my thoughts. I swallowed back a mouthful of venom before I changed the subject.

The little town was nearly deserted, though it was almost mid morning when we arrived. The copper mine that had once made this a thriving little community was long closed, and only the remnants of a civilization remained. I pulled up to the address the agent gave me and told Bella to stay where she was, looking at her with narrowed eyes and judging her reaction. After her little stunt at the gas station and our talk, I didn't think she would try anything similar very soon.

Inside, the former caretaker of my new cabin greeted me.

"Hello," I walked up to the little counter and nodded to her. "I believe you have a key for me?"

"You're Mr. Cullen?" she asked, disbelieving. *Wow, he's quite the vision! So young...*

"Yes," I said, smirking just a little.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered. She pulled a notepad out and looked over it. "Everything you asked for is here and ready for you except the television. I couldn't get one that size delivered before

tomorrow. Sorry about that." *But if you were in need of some other form of entertainment, I think I could come up with something.*

"Tomorrow is fine," I assured her, my smirk changing to a scowl. She handed me a key and a stack of paper with the TV delivery information on the top. She gave me directions to the place and I thanked her before heading back to the SUV. Bella had not moved from her spot. *Good girl...*

The sky was darkly overcast and threatened snow. The drive up was treacherous, even for all-wheel drive and vampire reflexes, and it wasn't even snowing yet. Even with chains, the tires kept slipping. Eventually we made it up the drive and parked.

The cabin wasn't very big, but nice enough. There was a wrap around porch from the front door around one side of the house to the backdoor. Right off the porch was a neatly stacked cord of wood, as I had ordered. I hauled the suitcases out of the back of the SUV and ushered Bella to the front door.

Inside there was a kitchen and eating area to the left and a living area to the right. There was a bathroom and bedroom down the single hallway in between. It was furnished to my specifications, except for the empty wall where the TV should be. A large fireplace lined the wall to the right of a sliding glass door, which opened to the back half of the porch. The refrigerator and pantry was fully stocked. For my purposes, this place was perfect.

I deposited both suitcases in the bedroom, leaving the unpacking until later. The chest of drawers and closets were also fully stocked with clothing, just like the kitchen had been stocked with food. When I came back out, Bella was surveying the kitchen.

"There's enough food in here for a month," she said, closing the refrigerator door.

"Good, that's what I ordered," I responded. "Please – make yourself something to eat. I will start a fire."

She cooked while I stacked logs and set them ablaze. I knew how cold she had been throughout our journey so far, and I wanted her to be warm here – comfortable. Could this place feel like home to her, after a while? How long would we be able to stay? How long before I slipped up somewhere and Alice managed to track us down?

I sat across from Bella and watched her eat the salad and baked potato she had prepared for her lunch. I kept asking her if it was enough – didn't she need more to eat than that? I was definitely going to get her iron supplements, maybe a whole multivitamin. She promised to eat something more substantial for supper.

Once she finished she began washing the dishes in the sink. I watched her clean up, and then asked her to sit back down with me.

"Bella," I pulled my hand out of my hair and thought about sitting on it. "I know this is...hard for you," I looked up and saw her eyes glued to the tabletop. "Some things I can't make any better."

"Yes you can," she whispered, looking up into my eyes. "Let me call my Dad – please?"

"No, Bella – don't start with things you know I can't let you do."

"You can," she retorted. I moved around the table and next to her too fast, startling her when I put my hand on her arm. She flinched away from me, so I backed off.

"No, really – I can't," I shook my head. "I don't know how to explain it to you, but my body *needs* you, needs your blood. I couldn't possibly do anything that might take you away from me."

She looked into my eyes then and I didn't look away. I knew what she saw there – her blood, his blood, tainting me. I wanted to tell her this wasn't me – I wasn't supposed to be like this – but that me...he just wasn't there any more.

"I don't know if you are telling me the truth or not," she said.

"What could I possibly gain by lying?" I questioned. She nodded, conceding.

"What were you going to say when I sat down?" she asked. I almost laughed, but I remembered that could be hazardous to Bella.

"I was going to tell you to try to be comfortable here," I said, "because we'll probably be here a while. Most of the time you can do anything you want, within the rules. If there's something you need, I'll get it for you. I know how incredulous this sounds, but I don't want you to be miserable and crying all the time. As long as you are stuck here with me, try to make the best of it. Okay?"

She dropped her eyes from me then, letting out her own laugh. I didn't need to read her mind to know there wasn't any humor behind it.

"You are right," she nodded. "Complete incredulity."

The fire crackled when I threw another log in. In the wee hours of the morning, the wind had increased and there was a full-fledged storm going on outside. I watched the snowflakes buzz around in the air until she started screaming.

"Please! No, Edward, no! *Charlie!*"

I raced to the bedroom and found her twisted up in the sheets of the bed with her eyes squeezed shut. She was asleep, having a nightmare. I wondered if it was supposed to be dangerous to wake people up when they were having nightmares, or if that was sleepwalking. She was still yelling for me to stop whatever it was I was doing in her dream, so I knelt at the side of the bed and touched her shoulder, shaking her softly.

"Bella," I said, shaking her again. "It's just a dream, Bella - wake up."

Her eyes flew open and she gasped, pushing away from me and scampering to the other side of the bed. She eyed me warily.

"Just a dream," I repeated, holding my hands up and trying to appear non-threatening, despite my too-pale skin and scarlet eyes. "I won't hurt you." *Not right now, anyway.*

Bella looked around the darkened room and finally took a deep breath, closing her eyes again for a moment before looking back to me with a shudder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she answers – that useless automatic response of hers.

"Do you want to tell me about your dream?" I wondered if I really wanted to know. She shook her head, and I was rather grateful.

"How about some water?"

"No," tears started falling down her cheeks. *Not again...*

"Bella," I sat down on the side of the bed and reached one hand out to touch her arm. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I knew whatever was worrying her subconscious, I was responsible for it. I sighed, giving up. "Is there anything you need?"

"No," she whispered. "I just want to sleep."

Bella rolled back over on her side, facing away from me. I sat there for a few minutes, just until I heard her breath slow and become just steady enough to know she wanted me to think she was sleeping.

I stood back up and went back to the living room to tend the fire again, my head swimming with images of Bella lying in the bed, tangled in the sheets, her hair lying across the pillow. For some reason, I thought of her lying in the big four-poster that doesn't actually exist in my room back in Forks. *Interesting...*

Shaking my head and running both hands through my hair, I pushed myself off the couch and took note of how much wood I had gone through in the night. It would be morning soon, so I mindlessly

stacked more wood closer to the door and my eyes followed the paths of the snowflake on the wind until Bella woke up.

I had kept the cabin quite warm all day and all night, still trying to make up for the extended car ride. I turned the thermostat up and kept a fire going all the time. Bella had talked so much about the heat in Phoenix and how much better it was there than the cold rain and snow. I planned on making sure our next destination was somewhere warm. After all, it was bad enough that she had to live through all this in the first place, but to also endure a climate she hated...it just seemed like torture. I laughed at the insanity of my thoughts. *Yes, it's the weather that tortures her...*

Having the place warm had its advantages and disadvantages. Well, okay – having the place warm created one difference that was both a major advantage and a major disadvantage. Instead of coming out of the shower wearing layers of clothes to keep warm, Bella came out in a sleeveless tank top and shorts instead. I did ask for all variety of women's clothes when I told them to stock this place, but I don't know who thought those outfits would be appropriate here. I guess that's what happens when you give someone your credit card number accompanied with total control over the purchasing. *Ah well.*

Advantage – I spent most of my time entertaining myself by watching the blood course through her clearly visible arteries and veins in her arms, legs and neck.

Disadvantage – I spent most of my time entertaining myself by watching the blood course through her clearly visible arteries and veins in her arms, legs and neck.

It was driving me insane.

"I'm going hunting," I told Bella. She looked up from her breakfast, her eyes wide and her heart beginning to race.

"I'm not heading to town," I narrowed my eyes at her. "There's a herd of Caribou behind the cabin."

"I didn't see them," she half stood to look at the window

"In this snow, you wouldn't. I'll be back soon."

It was practically a whiteout between the snow falling and the snow blowing. I opened my mouth and let the smell-taste of the air lead me to my quarry. I took down two and they were good sized. I had fed on a human just the day before, but I planned on indulging tonight, and I needed all the control I could get. I trotted through the snowstorm and back to the cabin and the siren-call blood therein to wait until the time was right.

I spent the remainder of the day counting seconds. Minutes didn't advance fast enough. I wasn't even going to consider hours. I wanted my instant gratification.

I sat on one of the armchairs in the living area and watched Bella as she read a book, made herself some soup for lunch and then read some more. I listened to her heartbeat thrum inside my ears while she watched the newly delivered television and felt the heat from her body when she walked past me. At one point she turned and asked if I was planning to stare at her all day. I apologized and tried to focus on something else. It didn't last long, and soon my eyes and ears were drawn back to her.

Once she finished her final meal of the day and started to clean up, I decided I had waited long enough.

I inhaled deeply.

There was a difference in the scent from the day before, even if it was slight. It was a little darker, deeper, and more pungent. I watched it flow through the vein in her neck as she reached down into the sudsy water for another supper dish.

I stepped up behind her, my finger drawn there, to that spot just under her ear. I ran my finger along the bluish line and her body stiffened when I touched her.

"It's time," my voice came out in a hoarse whisper. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Time?" her voice was a strangled cry.

My finger moved over the skin of her neck, down her bare shoulder and arm, stopping at her wrist. I pulled gently, leading her out of the kitchen and down the hall, into the bedroom.

"Why are we in here?"

"So you can lay down," I answered.

"Why?" Her wide eyes bore into mine.

I sighed and pulled on her arm with a little more force. She always wanted everything spelled out for her, even though she knew it would just send her into another panic. *Why ask?*

"In case I take too much blood out of you," I snarled and stared right back into her eyes. "I don't want you to fall and get hurt."

And so the panic ensues.

She pulled against my grip, as if she could fight me off. I considered letting her go just so I could run after her and catch her, but I didn't think my control was quite that good. Instead, I pulled her towards me and wrapped the fingers of my other hand around her hip, pulling her closer to the bed.

"Please, no, no, no, Edward!" she tried to pry my fingers off her arm with exactly zero success. "Please, no, please don't do this!" She began to scream, as if there was someone out here who could hear her, or do anything about it if they did. Tears started drenching her face and she tried digging her nails into the back of my hand.

My body tensed. My prey was trying to escape. I felt the need to rip, to tear, to incapacitate and – above all else – feed.

"Bella," I growled, closed my eyes and tightened my grip on her.
"You must not fight me. It makes me...want to...unnnggh!"

I shoved off of her and hit the chest of drawers against the wall. She fell backwards, landing on her rear in the hallway just outside the door. I dug my fingers into the wood of the chest and held my breath for a moment before looking down at her.

"Bella," I started, "get up off the floor and lie down in the bed. Do it now, before I lose it."

"Edward, please don't do this," she repeated. "Don't hurt me."

"Do it!" I yelled. She let out a yelp and quickly complied, leaning her back against the headboard and wrapping her arms around her knees.

I began to breathe deeply and my whole body buzzed with the anticipation. I was going to have her again, but I had to keep myself together. She could not be allowed to distract me with that kind of behavior. It brought out instincts I had nearly forgotten were there, though the monster knew them quite well.

Brushing the crumbled piece of dresser drawer off my fingers, I crawled onto the bed beside her. I found I was unwilling to look at her face and her ever-present tears. I knelt beside her and reached across her body, taking her left hand in my right. I pulled it to me, and the scent of her blood pumping through her wrist while her heartbeat increased was intoxicating. I opened my mouth slightly as I inhaled so I could get the full flavor of her scent.

She was shaking so hard I could feel it in the mattress below me. I rubbed my thumb over her arm, following the path of the artery under her skin. My nail broke the skin on the inside of her wrist.

Oh God, the taste.

Exquisite. Indescribable. Utterly without comparison.

My leg wrapped around both of hers to keep her from kicking. Her feeble struggles barely registered against my skin, but I felt the urge to restrain her with my body anyway. I rolled over her, my free arm across her shoulders and chest, my fingers gripping her shoulder and pinned the rest of her down. I never took my lips from the gash in her arm.

I drank very, very slowly, savoring and even counting every drop. It was so much easier to break away this time - even easier than with the tiny taste in the car. With her secured under me, immobilized, and her heart pumping her blood down my throat I was in complete control of her, and of myself. When I reached the amount I knew wouldn't hurt her, I pulled back and sealed the cut, removing all traces of blood from her skin and my lips. Once again, I was intensely aware of her body under mine, just for a moment. *So soft...*

Her struggles stopped when I released her arm and rolled off of her, but her sobs just got louder. I sat up against the headboard and pulled her into my arms, holding her against my hard chest.

"Shhh," I crooned, stroking her back. She pushed her fists against my chest once, and then gave up her fight, her hands gripping onto my shirt as she buried her face in my shoulder. "It's over, you're okay," I told her. She was okay, wasn't she? I was sure I had only taken what she could give safely this time. It wouldn't be any different than if she had gone to a blood center to donate.

Physically okay or not, she was completely hysterical and clinging to me, even though I was the one who brought her to this. She was clinging to me because I was all the support she had.

Edward, what have you done? What are you doing ?

Carlisle's voice was in my head.

My eyes squeezed shut and I tried to slow my breathing down, but my body wasn't interested in listening to me. I tightened my grip, holding her a little closer and pushing my cheek into her hair.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I whispered into her ear over and over again.

I held her, repeating my mantra and rocking her until her cries slowed and then stopped, my shirt soaked all the way through. I shifted down, pulling her with me until we were both lying down, her head resting against my chest. Her breathing slowed with her heart rate and she slept in my arms. *So soft, warm...*

So much for indifference.

Chapter End notes:

Oh, Eddie boy. Sorry doesn't quite cut it, huh?

In case you missed it, I started another story – Out the Window. I have no idea where it's going, but check it out and let me know what you think!

Did I mention how much I love all your reviews and comments? Can I say it again? How about another time?

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 – Read and Bleed

It may very well have been the longest night of my life.

Bella's head rested on my chest and her arm sprawled haphazardly across my stomach. Both of my arms encircled her, one slightly higher on her back than the other. Her wondrous scent completely encapsulated me, but the thirst was, like the last time, completely gone. However, even though my throat didn't ache, my entire body felt tense and ready to spring. I couldn't have uncoiled a muscle if I wanted to.

I had never been so close to a human before, certainly not a human woman. Her skin was incredibly warm against the cold, hard vampire flesh surrounding me. She moved, not quite constantly, but more often than I would have expected. Sometimes her fingers would twitch, her nails grazing across the material of my shirt, near my hip. Often she would shift her head and her hair would brush over my neck. Once she pulled her knee up and rested it against my thigh.

Then she started talking.

She never spoke in a complete sentence, and most of the time I couldn't understand anything she said at all. But sometimes the single words were very clear.

"Please...no...it hurts, Edward..."

I shuddered, the tension in my muscles rippled through me and over me.

"I'm sorry," I heard myself say again, even though she still slept. The thirst was gone, my mind only contained my own thoughts, and the monster was sleeping. Maybe there was a heaven for my kind. *At what cost to her?*

I slipped out from under Bella and gently laid her head on the pillow and her arm next to her torso. I pulled the blanket up over her, though it was plenty warm in the room, and silently walked out to the living room. I took out a piece of notebook paper and a pen, and across the blank sheet I wrote:

I will turn the phone on in ten minutes. I will talk to you alone only , so get away from the others first.

The sliding glass door needed a little force to break the ice clinging to the bottom of it. I stepped out and kicked some of the snow and ice out of the way. I sat back against the porch rocker and let my thoughts wander to my family. I didn't need visions to come up with exactly what was happening right now. Alice would sit up straight and stare into space for a moment. Jasper would sense the change in her emotions as she reads my note and ask her what's up. She would tell him everything is fine and tell everyone she just needs a little time to herself, so she's going to go hunting. She will leave and Jasper will follow. She will tell him about the note, make him promise to be quiet and let him follow her into the woods.

I turned on the phone. It buzzed nine seconds later.

"Edward," Alice breathed into the phone. Was it relief in her voice, or remorse? "Oh, Edward, what are you doing?"

"I thought we already established that," I chuckled. "I'm losing my mind."

"That man's wife, his daughter..."

"Please, Alice – don't."

"What do you want me to say, Edward?" Her pitch got a little higher "That it's okay? Come on back when the well runs dry? You killed someone Edward, and you are going to kill her. I've seen it."

"If I was looking to have someone reason with me," I growled, "I would have called Carlisle." Alice was abnormally quiet for a few seconds. "Stop looking to the future for a minute, please. I just need to...talk to you."

"I'm listening, Edward," Alice's voice softened.

"Alice," I started, and then stopped, wondering what I was going to say. Did I expect her to understand? Agree with me? I realized I just didn't want her to hate me, so I babbled.

"Remember when we talked about the monster in us all - the one that wants to kill? The one that *needs* to kill? I can't keep it down anymore." I stopped and laughed, wondering what exactly I thought was funny. "I'm gone, Alice. The monster is the only one left." My laugh turned into a harsh, broken grunt in my chest. "I just...I can't stop myself," I confessed. "It's so much more, so different - I've never felt like this. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to come back."

"You tell me where you are," Alice said softly. "I will come – I will help you."

"No," I shook my head. "I can't do that. I can't let her go, and you can't let me keep her."

"Edward, you have to," Alice became more insistent. "Think about her father - she is all he has. He's going crazy out there – looking for her and looking for you. He started questioning everyone in town when he realized she was gone. The Newton boy said you were acting strange in class and once he came to the house and Carlisle had to tell him you weren't there...well, he went a little nuts. Esme's a pro at the worried mom thing, so he's talked to her a lot. Rose and Emmett are sticking close to him in case..."

She stopped, but I didn't have to read her mind to know where she was going. In case Chief Swan finds me before my family does. They are there to protect him from me.

"I can't hear her mind, you know," I told Alice. "It's so different, so peaceful. I've never been able to be around someone without the constant barrage, even for just a little while. I didn't realize how overwhelming it had become. Jasper probably understands, at least somewhat. Why don't you ask him what he would do for a little peace from everyone's emotions?"

"I know what I wouldn't do," I heard him mutter. Yes, they were a predictable pair. She shushed him.

"How long Edward?" Alice sighed heavily into the phone. "How long can you conceivably keep this up? She just a girl, and you are slowly killing her. You're torturing her to death! Edward, even if you can't see what it's doing to her now, how will you ever live with yourself when it's over?"

"I...I can't think about that," I told her. "My senses are full of her - her scent, her taste - I can't think past that."

"You have to," Alice said. As if it were that easily done.

"I'm sorry," my free hand found its way into my hair. "I'm sorry for all of this, for putting all of you through this...for putting her through this. Really, I am."

"Edward, she..."

I closed the phone and dropped it at my feet, into the snow. It began to buzz almost instantly, but I ignored it. I held my head in my hands with my elbows against my legs. I could still taste her even as I calculated the number of hours, minutes and seconds before I could safely drink again.

The rustling of the blankets in the bedroom let me know Bella was waking. I walked in with a glass of orange juice and a pair of Pop Tarts on a plate. I placed the plate on the nightstand, letting it make an audible thump. She sat up, rubbing her eyes and squinting at breakfast.

"You should drink this," I handed her the glass. "And eat. I toasted them, but I didn't know how long they should cook, so I'm not sure if it's right, "" I nodded at the Pop Tarts.

Bella sat up and took the glass from me, balancing herself with one hand on the mattress. She drank a little and then picked up one of the pastries.

"I thought you had a rule about health," she remarked, taking a bite.

"You need the sugar," my voice trailed off into nothing. She glanced up at me and then quickly away. I watched her eat a few bites.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," I said.

"Will you let me go now?" Bella asked.

"I can't do that."

"Will you let me call Charlie?"

"No." I shook my head and wondered if my phone would even work now. It was still lying in the snow outside.

"Then you can't be all that sorry," she spat back at me.

I thought about that for a few seconds. I was sorry I hurt her. I was sorry for all of this. Right now, I didn't even want her blood! Even with her so close to me, and the scent of her blood all around me, I had no urge to drink from her at all. *Oh, but I do...*

"I am," I said softly. "But the monster in me is not, and he's the one in control."

I walked back out into the living room and slid open the glass door. I flipped the phone open and looked at the blank screen for a moment before tossing the thing out into the snow. I saw Bella through the glass door as she walked into the kitchen and placed the Pop Tart plate and orange juice glass into the sink. I watched her move.

She didn't seem to be too weak this time. I must have done something right in calculating what I could take from her. I smiled while she washed her dishes and put them away. When she had to reach up high to place the glass back next to the rest of its matched set, she suddenly swooned.

I caught her before she hit the floor, cradling her with my arms under her knees and back. After a couple of seconds, she opened her eyes and squirmed away from me. I considered apologizing...again. Instead, I went back to the sliding door and closed it tightly, trying to figure out what I could do to make it easier for her.

A sign just outside of town informed us that Thompson was 218 kilometers away. With the roads the way they were, it would probably take four or five hours, even with my driving. I sighed heavily.

"What's wrong?" Bella asked.

"I hate driving slow," I responded. "And these roads don't cooperate. I miss my Vanquish."

"What's a Vanquish?"

I looked over at her, my eyes narrowed.

"The car we were in before."

"Oh," she said. "I wasn't really paying attention to the car. I was waiting for you to..." she paused, but then didn't finish.

"To what?" I pushed.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Kill me, I guess. I didn't know where you were taking me or what you were going to do with me."

There wasn't anything I could say to that, so I didn't.

"What exactly are we shopping for?" Bella asked.

"Anything you want – books, movies, whatever food you like, and I need a new phone," I said with a shrug. "Mine got a little wet."

"Wet?"

"I dropped it in the snow."

"Oh," she bit down on her lip. "You called someone?"

"My sister, Alice."

"Did you tell her where you were?"

"No," I answered, shaking my head.

"Why not?" Bella asked.

"Because she's pretty angry with me," I admitted. "I don't want her to show up here and beat the crap out of me."

"I thought you said she was a vampire, too?" Bella looked out the window, staring into the banks of snow along the road. Suddenly she nodded, and looked back at me. "You don't want to share."

"Share?" I realized she thought Alice would want to drink her blood, too. "No, she wouldn't do that."

"Why not?" Bella looked over to me.

"Because it's not the way we are," I said. In my peripheral vision I saw Bella raise her left arm and look at the mark on her wrist.

"It's not, huh?"

There wasn't anything I could say to that, either.

As we drove into town, I was hit with the barrage again.

I wonder where he was last night...could he really want to see me in that outfit?...is Jamie's play-date this afternoon, or tomorrow?... where did my lipstick go...

My knuckles tightened around the steering wheel as I tried to block some of it out.

He's the cutest little kitten, but Mom won't let me have one...I need to remember eggs and sour cream...ugh! I hate this song! ... they never have the brand that's on sale in stock...this ringtone sucks...

"Edward?" her voice called out to me, a single point in the sea of voices where I could focus.. "Are you...?"

"It's okay," I dismissed. "I guess I was just getting used to the quiet."

"Is it...other people's....um...thoughts?"

"Yes, they are hard to block when there are so many at once," I took a deep breath and pushed the sounds, as best I could, from the forefront of my head.

"What's it like?" she asked.

"Like being in a concert hall when the maestro is conducting your favorite piece, and the audience won't stop talking."

I never thought of it that way before. But then, the maestro wasn't playing my favorite piece before her voice joined the playlist, with her beating heart setting the rhythm.

"That sounds awful," Bella gasped.

"Sometimes," I said quietly. "It's also very useful, of course. I always know the thoughts of those around me. I can calculate what they will do next, so I am rarely taken by surprise."

"But not me."

"No, not you," I thought for a minute. "You surprise me."

"How do I surprise you?"

"You are very...brave," I said. Yes, that was the right word for her.

"You are holding up remarkably well, given the situation."

"Is that what this is?" she asked. "A 'situation'?" I snickered.

"I'm sure you have a stronger word for it."

"Yes, I do."

"I'm sorry," I said, for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was pointless – it could never be enough.

"I don't think I believe that," she started back out the window and refused to talk again.

I pulled into an expansive parking lot with a Wal-Mart, and wondered if Alice would become physically ill when she saw where I was shopping. There just weren't a lot of high-end mall kinds of places around here. There was a cell phone dealer next door, so hopefully "one-stop shopping" would go relatively quickly.

"Come on," I opened Bella's door and helped her out. She started to move towards the store but I blocked her way. "Bella," I touched the tip of my index finger to her chin, angling it up so she was looking at me. "Don't do anything...rash...okay?"

"Okay," she said and frowned at me. "I think you forgot something."

"What?"

"Umm...your eyes," she says softly. Her teeth sank into her lower lip, and I found I couldn't take my eyes from it. Venom pooled in my mouth, but I swallowed it down. The burn was only just coming back to my throat. My finger was still on her chin, so I reached out with my

thumb and pulled her bottom lip away from her teeth. My gut tightened in a strange, unexpected way.

Her heart started beating rapidly, filling my ears with the sound of her blood coursing through her body. I looked into her eyes, wanting to hear her mind, even if it was for just a minute.

"Thanks for the reminder." I retrieved my sunglasses from my jacket pocket and on impulse, reached out to entwine her fingers with mine before leading her into the cell phone store first.

I picked out one of the new models with lots of little extras I didn't really need, but it looked cool to my sometimes-still-seventeen-brain. The technician behind the counter activated it to my old account, and it immediately started beeping with the multitude of text messages and missed calls. *Popular guy, no doubt.* I smiled and shrugged. The tech blushed as she smiled back at me. *Wow, he's hot! What a smile!* I tensed up, thanked her and dragged Bella out of there.

I ticked things off of my mental list as we walked around the store. Bella frowned when I chose both a multivitamin and an iron supplement from the health food aisle, but didn't comment. She was very hesitant when I told her to pick out some movies to purchase.

"I don't know if I'm much in the mood for movies," she said.

"I don't know how long it will be before we get to another place where they will be available," I said. "You might be in the mood for movies later. Or what about TV shows?" I picked up season four of a popular sitcom from the end-cap.

"Ugh – I hate that show!" she laughed, and it was a musical, festive sound. I hadn't heard it before. "My mom made me watch the first three seasons."

"I like your laugh," I said, before I realized the words were coming out of my mouth. Bella looked down to her feet and blood quickly filled her cheeks.

I took three quick steps back from her.

"Geez, Bella!" I hissed, backing away again. "Don't do that!"

"What?" The coloring in her cheeks darkened.

"Just...pick something out, please," I groaned and walked down the aisle away from her.

Okay, I didn't laugh at her that time, but the response was the same. Why in the world would she blush now? I pulled at the hair on the back of my neck and leaned against one of the DVD racks, bending the metal a bit. There was a sale on a collection of Shakespeare works made into movies. After a few minutes, I steadied myself, took a deep breath and picked up the collection.

Bella was still standing at the end of the aisle with the DVDs she didn't want in her hand. I didn't look at her face, just in case. I could still hear her heart pumping a little faster than was usual for her. I traded the box in my hand for the one in hers.

"You said you liked Shakespeare," I glanced up at her. She was looking at the box.

"Yes," she answered. "I do...um...thank you?"

"You're welcome," I replied back. "How about books?"

Bella looked through a stack of New York Times Bestsellers while I looked at the trendy electronic gadgets. I asked the clerk to get an iPod with a touch screen out of the case for me.

"Here you go," the blonde salesclerk beamed up at me, fluttering her lashes. *Now there's someone's whose musical tastes I'd like to share!*

What the heck was that supposed to mean? I narrowed my eyes for a minute before it occurred to me this could be to my advantage. I

didn't understand the words in her thoughts, but the tone was clear enough.

"I'm a little hopeless with technology," I smiled back at her. "Do you think you could load it up with music for me?"

"Um...well," she stammered. "You have to buy the music on-line – we have the gift cards here..."

"Could it just be added to the bill?" I pressed.

"I guess so," she cocked her head to one side then looked back up to me. "Sure!"

"And you could still help me out?"

"I'd be happy to!"

I glanced over at Bella, who was now at least twenty pages into one of the books in the "Top Ten" list. The clerk went through the lists, asking me every once in a while if I wanted to give it a try, but I knew the screen wasn't going to respond to my touch, so I let her load a good combination of music onto the little machine.

"This is going to be a little pricey if you get it all," she told me.

"Don't worry about it," I responded. "Put it all on there."

"The customer is *a/ways* right," she winked at me.

I had to buy the iPod separately. When I was done, I collected Bella and we took the cart, a handful of books and the Shakespeare movies to the cashier.

Over the weeks, we fell into a routine, of sorts. After I drank from her I held her while she cried. Then I would spend the next two days trying to make it up to her, as fruitless a task as that was. It was asinine. It was insane, but I did it anyway because I didn't know what else to do.

I did my best to keep her occupied – movies, books, and then talking about the movies and books for hours afterwards. Sometimes she laughed, which I enjoyed. I tried to make her laugh, but sometimes she would blush when she laughed, which was always more difficult for me.

The third day – the most important day – was always a little more tense. I would hunt whatever local wildlife I could find so I would have the control I needed to be with her again. I knew it was coming. She knew it was coming. The monster rejoiced at what was to come and became very, very impatient as the day went on.

I was tense and frustrated, so I took a shower after I hunted. The thirst itself wasn't so bad, but the anticipation...I had to fight it every time I walked past her, just knowing I would have her tonight. I let the water stream over me and thought about what was to come.

I closed my eyes and pictured myself taking her to the bedroom – she didn't struggle anymore, not after the first time. I would tell her it was time, and she'd look at me with her wide, chocolate eyes and follow behind me. I had been alternating wrists, so she could heal more properly, but I thought tonight I would drink from her neck. It would not last as long though – the artery was larger and closer to her heart – but I wanted it anyway. I wanted my lips on her neck. I wanted to hold her head while I drank.

Afterwards, I would hold all of her.

She would be warm against my cool skin, and she would wrap her fingers around my shirt and bury her head in my arm and chastise me in her sleep. As she drifted off, the monster did the same. It was almost as sweet as her blood.

I turned off the shower, toweled myself dry and tightened the drawstring on a pair of really comfortable Wal-Mart lounge pants. I didn't think they were all that bad, even though they were covered with green and red M&Ms. Alice would be horrified. I smiled as I walked out of the bathroom.

Bella stood in front of the stove, turning a myriad of vegetables over and over again in a skillet. There was a covered pot on one of the back burners. The smell was positively revolting.

A small bowl to one side of the range top held a quantity of a dark brown sauce, which Bella poured evenly over the sauté. She flipped all the dials to off and dumped the saucepan of rice on one side of a plate and the vegetables on the other. She turned and gasped when she noticed me, the plate falling from her hands.

I caught it easily before it could spill and handed it back to her.

"You startled me," she said. Then she started laughing, almost dropping the plate again. I took it from her and placed it on the table. Bella sat down in front of it, trying to stifle giggles.

"What exactly is so funny?" I inquired.

"Those pants – they're hysterical." She laughed out loud again as her eyes moved from my bare feet up to my waist. Her eyes kept moving up, slowly, and she suddenly stopped laughing and turned bright red, looking quickly away. I didn't know what made her stop laughing, but I didn't like it. I wanted to hear her laugh again, even if it was at my expense.

"They were on sale." I gave her a half smile. Her eyes met mine and she laughed until tears formed at the edges of her eyes. I stepped forward and raised my hand up to her cheek, wiping the moisture away with the pad of my thumb.

She stopped laughing and her gaze shifted from my hand to my eyes. For a minute, I just looked at her, that strange tight feeling in the pit of my stomach, flaring out and down and tingling through my limbs. I felt the blood pooling at the skin under my hand. Her heart beat faster, calling to me. I should have been blown away by the scent, but I realized I wasn't breathing. Neither was she.

I pulled back and looked away from her, turning towards the window and watching the faint glow behind the clouds sink below the horizon. I heard her breath start again, but didn't dare take one myself. An understanding tried to force its way into the conscious part of my brain, but I pushed it back until heat from the monster's anger replaced the tingling in my arms and legs. I heard the scrape of a utensil against the ceramic plate.

"You're supposed to take the supplements with your dinner," I reminded her for the tenth time in as many meals.

"Heaven forbid I get anemic," she retorted. I turned back to her, eyes narrowed. She seemed to go a little pale, like she just realized she has spoken aloud.

Again, my temper flared, and I wanted desperately to know what exactly this young woman was thinking. Was she actually making a joke about this or even mocking me? A low growl started to form in my chest.

She obviously wasn't going to follow directions, so I grabbed the bottle of vitamins off the counter and slammed it down next to her plate.

"Don't forget," I hissed in her ear, and then stormed out the back door.

The cold air hit my bare chest and seemed to push back the anger that told me to go back inside and finish her off. I kicked at the clumps of ice that constantly formed around the door. I finally took some long, deep breaths, and caught the scent of something warm blooded on the wind.

I took off after it, drained it and threw it aside, not even paying any attention as to what sort of creature it was. It wasn't human – it wasn't *her*, so it didn't matter. *Just a few more hours...*

I licked my lips at the thought.

I sat next to the fire, poking at it languidly and trying not to count every second. Bella was still in the kitchen, reading an e-book on her iPod. Usually she read on the couch near the fireplace, but I thought she was staying away from me after my outburst. The extra hunt had calmed me, but her blood was still screaming at me from the other room.

I was trying not to think about earlier. Not the outburst, those were, frankly, pretty frequent towards the end of the third day. It was the other feeling that kept worming its way back into my conscious. I knew what that feeling was, even though I also recognized it was a completely new experience for me.

I wanted her, and not just her blood. I wanted her body. The monster drooled at the thought of taking both.

I shook my head, and my hair fell over my eyes. I swallowed back another mouthful of venom, stood up and walked silently into the kitchen.

She sat with her knees up on the bench seat, facing away from me. She stared at the iPod on the table with one finger jutting out, flipping pages on the tiny screen. Her hair fell over her neck and down her back. She was wearing a t-shirt and sweats – her normal nighttime attire.

"Bella," I said softly. She jumped a little, and then looked up at me, but didn't meet my eyes. She looked quickly away, and her heart began thumping again. She turned and put her feet on the floor, took a deep breath and then looked me in the eye.

"May I finish this chapter first? It's just a few more pages."

I blinked, trying to decide if she was making another joke or not, then determining that she was not. She was completely serious. The monster snarled at the back of my throat – he had waited long enough, but I spoke for both of us anyway.

"Yes, of course."

I stayed there, in the doorway next to the hallway until she finished her page flipping and stood up. She left the iPod on the table and walked over slowly.

"Thank you," she said softly, and made her way to the bedroom. I followed, venom flowing and gut tightening.

She climbed into the bed and sat with her back against the headboard, looking down at her hands in her lap. I tensed, fighting the urge to coil and spring, then climbed in after her. I inhaled, letting the scent flow over me. I pushed her hair off her shoulder so I could see the pulsing artery in her neck, and then lay my hand against her throat, feeling it throb in my palm.

"Lay down." I had to swallow venom to speak. Her eyes flicked up to mine.

"What? Why?"

I moved my hand to her shoulder and pushed as gently as I could.

"Just do."

She did.

I looked back to her slender neck and flawless skin at the base of her throat. I let the backs of my fingers slide from her shoulder across her collarbone. *Restrain her...*

I rolled over her, resting most of my weight on one elbow, so my other hand was free. Bella gasped. She was used to me holding her down, but not at this angle. My free hand moved back up her throat and wound in her hair behind her ear. I pulled her head up slightly and looked up into her eyes.

Her face was flush, and she was breathing rapidly now, almost keeping pace with her heart. Her teeth were nearly puncturing her

bottom lip. Her eyes stared back at me in...panic?

She's going to fight.

Maybe she would.

I shifted my weight lower, lifting my other arm up and cupping the other side of her face. The effect pushed my lower body into hers with a little more force, and I heard one of those little whimpers come out of her.

"Shhh, Bella," my fingers stroked her cheekbone. Her teeth were still firmly imbedded in her lower lip, and I acted on impulse again. I lowered my head just a little until my lips just barely touched her mouth. I took her lip in my teeth very, very gently, and pulled back, taking it away from her own teeth. When I leaned back, I could see the small marks both from her teeth and mine before they smoothed out and faded away. I felt my lips turn up a little, and my mouth moved down over her chin to the base of her throat.

Bella's arms pulled out from under me and I felt the skin of her hands coil around my shoulders. Warm hands against my cold flesh. I couldn't wait any longer.

My nail sliced open her skin, and I covered the wound with my lips, pulling her divine blood into me. At the same time, I felt her hands clamp down on me and heard her cry out. I pulled her head forward again, holding her against my mouth and keeping her from turning her head. Her hands were in my hair, tugging at it *and it felt good*.

And I knew I wanted to sink more than just my teeth into her.

My hand moved across her shoulder, over her ribs, and came to rest against her hip, pulling her against me.

Her blood was coming out too fast and thick and warm. I had to pull back much too soon. My tongue sealed the wound and cleaned the

blood off her neck. I was panting against her skin, and I rested my forehead on her shoulder while I tried to slow my breathing.

Bella's body shook with her sobs under mine. I looked up into her eyes, streaming with her tears. She covered her face with her hands, and my shoulders were suddenly very cold without her touch.

I let go of her and pushed back, a little confused. She didn't act like this anymore. She would cry a little, yes, but not like this. She didn't cry like this the first time I had her in this room. I moved off of her and lay on my back, pulling her toward me, like I always did, but instead of curling against me, she kept her hands over her face and wailed.

I hurt her - really hurt her this time.

"Bella, please," I pulled her hands from her face, but she just pushed back into the pillow instead. "Does it hurt?" *Edward, don't be so stupid.* "I mean, hurt more? I mean, your throat...Bella, tell me, please. Please, let me...let me...hold you."

I need to hold you.

I finally just wrapped my arms around her and pulled her to me. She fought against me, finally relinquishing when she turned in my arms and faced away from me, lying on her side. I kept my arms around her waist, holding her warm back against my chest and whispering my mantra into her ear.

After a while, her sobs slowed and she stopped shaking so much.

"Bella," I whispered into her hair. "Bella – why? Why are you crying... so hard?"

"I...I...thought..." her shudders rippled along my back.

"Thought what?" What could she be thinking that had her reacting like this?

"I thought...you were...going to...rape me," her sobs started all over again.

My body turned to ice.

"No, no, Bella," I held her against me a little tighter. "God, Bella – no! I would never, *never* do anything like that! Bella, please," I pulled her by her shoulders until she was facing me again and my hand palmed her cheek. "Bella, I would never force myself on you, believe me...I would never violate you..."

And like the sting of Carlisle's venom in the hospital, it hit me. Like the proverbial ton of bricks, it hit me. Like her scent that first day in biology, it hit me. *I am a monster.*

So much for denial.

Chapter end notes:

Instableward, indeed!

Love all the reviews and seeing new and old monikers! Keep it up! I'll get chapter 5 up here in a few as well! :D

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 – Touch and Take

I paced.

I paced and I tore at my hair and I caused destruction in a stand of trees east of the property. Well, what used to be a stand of trees.

I'm an idiot.

Yeah, you are.

What I was doing to her – it just never occurred to me that it could be...like she said...that it was like...or that she could think I would ... that I would do... something so base...I have killed people who did that ...I would never...ugh!

Is what I was doing truly analogous to...to that?

I couldn't think straight so I hurled uprooted trees into a ravine instead. When those were gone, I relocated a few trees and rocks by the lake and threw them across and into the ice. When those were gone I dropped down on my knees and just stared out across the frozen water, but there were no answers forthcoming from the ice.

I turned the phone on and it buzzed.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"Of course I saw it, Edward," Alice chided. "Do you feel better now?"

"No."

"Good, you shouldn't."

"You're very helpful," I replied, hoping the sarcasm would sting a bit.

"Not trying to be."

"Alice, what am I going to do?" I asked. "What can you see?"

"Edward, right now you are so messed up everything I get is just flashes," Alice said. "You know I can't see something you haven't decided. I know for sure you haven't decided to do anything sensible."

"I don't think I have any sense left." Alice agreed, and I held the phone for a minute in thought. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Edward?" Alice's voice was full of trepidation.

"What is it?"

"You weren't really wearing pants with M&Ms on them, were you?"

I hung up. Obviously I wouldn't be getting any answers from my sister, either.

The monster – the thing that had replaced me – slept now. I knew he would be back because even now – even after she thought I was going to...to... *rape her* – I wasn't going to let her go. I wasn't done. I still needed her blood.

You want her blood, that's not the same thing.

For the love of all that's holy, Carlisle's voice has to show up now?

I didn't even get to hold her last night. It seemed more prudent at the time to leave her alone, but touching her had become an integral part of drinking from her, and my body needed it just as much as the blood. Her warmth and her breath and her unconscious, murmured words against me were as tantalizing to my skin and my ears as her blood was to my throat. I missed it. It was what made the silence unique. Without that, I was just alone, and I had been there before. *Carlisle, you could at least bestow me that, couldn't you?*

I didn't get any answer from the voice in my head.

Even after she told me what she thought I was going to do, and knowing her reaction to the thought, I still...I still wanted more than her blood, too. I wanted to touch her, to be with her, to bury myself in her warm body and hear her call out my name.

But I wanted her to want it, too. *How's that for insanity?*

My thoughts were drawn to Denali and Tanya and her memories of human men she had seduced. There were the other weapons at our disposal, those that lead to the timeless legends of bloodthirsty, lust-driven demons – the succubae and incubi. Within a few seconds, I had mentally cataloged all the things Tanya and her sisters would do to make human men comply, to cause them to willingly follow them toward torturous, ecstatic deaths.

I dragged myself off the snow-covered ground and clambered over the last few broken pieces of rock back to the cabin. I sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, leaning against the couch, my legs stretched out in front of me, occasionally tossing in another log. After wreaking havoc on the local flora, I no longer felt like moving at all. Bella woke, spent some time in the bathroom, ate breakfast, read, and spent the morning looking over to me every minute, but never saying anything.

I spent the morning listening to her not speak to me. I didn't want her to say anything. Right now silence was my purgatory of choice. Not that I was really getting my wish - Carlisle's voice poked around in my subconscious, berating and annoying me.

You have to stop this, son.

No, I don't. I won't.

You sound like a petulant, spoiled child.

You raised me.

Not to be like this, I didn't.

I could hear her moving around in the kitchen, the clanging of metal against ceramic and glass as she made, ate, and cleaned up her lunch. She walked to the edge between the kitchen and the living room and stopped. I didn't turn to look at her, just listened as she walked away again, heading down the hall and into the bathroom.

Another log found its way into the blaze.

Bella walked back to the space between rooms, hesitated a second and then sat cross-legged on the couch behind me.

I'm pretty sure I would have broken out into a cold sweat had it been possible. I was reminded of walking up to an apartment in New Hampshire, the door opening and Carlisle staring intently into my red eyes before stepping aside and letting me in. *Welcome home, son.*

Even then I knew I hadn't deserved welcome or forgiveness.

Are you going to forgive me this time, too, father?

"Edward?"

I tilted my head slightly to one side, just to let her know I heard her.

"Did you want to pick out a movie?"

A movie? Now? We hadn't spoken a word to each other since last night, and the first thing she thinks to say had to do with mundane evening entertainment. The silence of her mind was extremely unwelcome all of the sudden – I really wanted to know what was going on in her head.

"You choose," I responded. She got up and put something in the player, then went back to the couch. An overture started, but I didn't listen closely enough to identify it. An hour into the movie, Bella spoke again.

"Look, Edward," she started. "I'm sorry I freaked out a little last night, okay? I didn't understand why you...well...I guess I just thought...I didn't know you were just going to...um...drink...differently. It just scared me a little."

I didn't want to talk about this. I didn't even want to think about this, because when I thought about it, I wanted her. A little part of the monster cracked open one eye and wanted to hurt her again, in any way possible. I wanted her to cry so I could hold her and comfort her and tell her it was all right.

"I didn't ...I mean...I'm sorry I thought..." she growled at herself, and then took a deep breath before continuing. "I was...scared, but when I realized you weren't going to...do that..."

Bella groaned, exasperated.

"I didn't mean to make you mad," she finally said. "I didn't know if you were going to come back or not, and I didn't know what I was going to do if you didn't."

"I didn't want to leave," I said. She was apologizing to me again, and it was such a welcome change from the voice in my head I didn't bother to correct her. "I thought you would prefer it if I was gone for a while."

Bella sighed and sat back against the couch, pulling her knees up to her chest. I looked into her deep brown eyes, trying to read her thoughts through them. She stared up at the ceiling.

"I think I got used to you being with me," Bella admitted. "I couldn't sleep. It was too hot in there."

"I'm used to being there," I looked up to her from the floor. "It's like I ...missed part of the...experience."

"I never knew why you stayed," Bella said.

"Because I hurt you," I said, looking back to the fire and shrugging my shoulders. "There isn't anyone else to comfort you when I make you cry. I have also become used to you...your warmth."

I turned back and moved to the edge on the couch too quickly - Bella gasped. I knelt on the floor in front of her, my hand resting on the couch cushion, next to her foot but not quite touching her. *Don't scare her...*

"I don't like hurting you Bella," I told her. "I know how insane that must sound to you, but I mean it. I can't stop what I'm doing to you, even though I think I have a better understanding now of what it's like for you. I knew there was...pain, of course. I never thought it would feel...like that. I never considered the comparison."

Bella's eyes flickered from the wall in front of her to her arms wrapped around her knees.

"I am a vampire," I reminded her, as if she had forgotten. "I can't stop drinking your blood. I don't know why you are different than every other human I have ever run across. Your scent, the way I can't hear what you are thinking...sometimes I think you were made just for me. Regardless, I know what I'm doing to you, Bella. I know now better than I did before, but that...knowledge isn't going to make me stop. Bella, I can't stop."

"I know you can't," Bella whispered.

I turned away from her, leaning back against the couch and looking towards the screen, at least, if not actually watching.

"It's still pretty hot in here," Bella said. "Will you sit with me?"

I stood and sat next to her on the couch. She leaned against my shoulder, and I wrapped one arm around her back. She leaned closer and watched the rest of the movie. The warmth against my body was wonderfully pleasant, and I could feel myself relax against her small frame. She was thoughtful and sensitive and quiet, and I

couldn't get enough of her. I watched her, not understanding her in the least, but accepting the warm, fragrant body in my arms.

The movie ended and the credits rolled up the screen. Bella's hand rubbed against the skin of her neck.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"No," Bella reassured me. "It usually doesn't by morning. I was just wondering..."

"What?"

"How does it heal so fast?"

"My venom seals it and keeps it from becoming infected."

"Venom?"

"Yes," I said, feeling strangely embarrassed at the admission. "We're venomous."

"Seems a little superfluous doesn't it?" Bella asked. "I mean, you are so fast and strong and everything. What do you need the venom for anyway?"

"We have many ways of incapacitating our prey," I told her, and my hand found its own way up her arm to stroke the spot on her neck.

"Venom is one of them, but it also serves another purpose. It is what changes a person from human to vampire."

Bella's heart rate increased, and I heard her breath catch. I took my arm away from her shoulders and my hand away from her throat. Talking about venom while touching her neck was a little too... enticing.

"Am I going to...change?"

"No!" I took her hand in mine and rubbed my thumb over her knuckles. "I've always been careful about that. I won't take that chance - it's why I never bite you." I wouldn't damn anyone to this existence, and I certainly wouldn't jeopardize her blood.

The credits ended and the screen went back to the menu. Bella stood and popped the disc out of the player, placing it back in its little rectangular box. She walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. I followed her and sat down on the bench seat at the kitchen table.

"So what would happen if you bit me?"

"The venom acts as an anesthetic, of sorts." I shifted around to face her as she moved about, gathering a pan and a box of spaghetti. "It would incapacitate you and if you didn't die, that is, as long as your heart continued to beat, it would flow through your veins, heal and change your body. It takes days, but when it was over you would be like me."

"So if you bit me, I wouldn't have any more blood, would I?" Her voice trailed off.

"That won't happen," I said, very matter-of-fact. "I would not take the risk."

"What other ways can you...um...incapacitate...?"

"Physically would be the most obvious." I grinned up at her. "I'm a hundred times stronger than you."

"That seems like plenty," she concluded.

"There are...other ways." I cocked my head to one side, but didn't meet her eyes. Images of Tanya's family invaded my thoughts again.

"Like what?" Bella's voice dropped lower.

"Hard to explain," I said and shrugged. Bella filled the saucepan with water, deposited it on the stove and flipped on the element before turning back to me.

"You're very vague."

"I could show you." My voice was soft, and I lifted my eyes to hers. She was staring right back into me, and I felt my hands and feet tingle, like they were going to go numb for the first time in nearly a century. My body acted without me, rising slowly from the bench seat and gliding over to her. Her hand released the handle of the saucepan and she took a step back, against the counter.

I kept my gaze locked on her beautiful brown eyes framed with subtly darker lashes. I reached out and let my knuckles graze lightly across her cheek, up the side and into her hair. I pushed it back, tucking it behind her ear and leaned towards her, opening my mouth and breathing quietly across her face. Bella stared with her eyes wide and her lips parted just a little as she breathed in, reflexively and deeply. I took another shuffling step, bringing my body a little closer to hers, gently exhaling again.

The warmth from her body was different... *more* ...than I had felt before with my arm tossed casually around her on the couch. It irradiated out of her and encompassed me inside and out. I wanted to be closer.

I moved my head down and stroked the side of her nose with mine, and then moved it across her cheekbone, over the line of her jaw and nuzzled her behind her ear. The fingers from my free hand reached up and cupped her face. My lips brushed down the artery at her neck, tracing the line to the hollow at her throat, then up to her chin, barely touching her skin. My eyes met hers again.

"Touch me, Bella," I whispered, my voice a strange, husky tone I don't recall ever hearing come out of my mouth before. Her fingers found my jaw, brushing my hard skin with a light, feathery touch. They were like fire against my skin and the tingling in my hand and

feet spread throughout my body. I leaned into her hand and mimicked her movements on her cheek.

Her thumb rubbed across my lips, and I parted them, breathing out and watching the strands of hair at her forehead move with the wind of my breath. She traced my nose, my eyebrows, and skimmed her fingers over my forehead and into my hair. I closed the gap between us, and lightly touched her lips with mine.

"Do you want me, Bella?" I mouthed against her lips. Her ragged breathing hitched in her throat. "Say it."

"Yes," I could hardly hear her.

"Say it," I repeated. "Tell me you want me."

"I...I want you, Edward."

I pressed my lips against hers, my tongue reaching out and tracing the line of her mouth. Her mouth opened to me, and her tongue touch mine ever so gently. The muscles in my stomach tightened fiercely as my torso came into contact with hers. My fingers slid over her shoulder and down her spine and back around her waist. Stepping back, I breathed against her face again.

"You see, Bella," I stroked one hand down her cheek again. "If I wanted you to, you would give yourself to me." I danced backwards two steps, but didn't break eye contact with her. Her chest was moving rapidly with her breaths and her heart pounded in my ears. To my right, a sharp hissing sound came from the stove.

"Your water is boiling," I said and took another step backwards before turning and retaking my place beside the fire.

Every time I looked at her, she blushed.

How exactly was I supposed to cope with that? Not only did she blush, but also her heart started racing in her chest, practically

calling to me to come and relieve her of her vital life fluids. It was a good thing I drank from her just last night, or the monster probably would have lost it and finished her off.

I was pretending to read, but hadn't actually read an entire sentence for at least an hour. At least it kept my eyes away from her so she wouldn't do that anymore. Though when she did, the color in her cheeks was absolutely stunning. It almost overwhelmed the scent. It definitely made that strange, awkward feeling in the pit of my stomach resurface.

Considering nothing else had changed, I could only assume she was blushing because I had inundated her with a little too much vampire charm. Had I embarrassed her? Afterwards, I mostly felt that I had embarrassed myself. I had no idea what came over me. I was thinking of Tanya's memories and apparently got a little caught up in the moment.

Her lips felt good and she smelled good, and I knew even wanting this was as wrong as it could possibly be. I could seduce her. I knew I could. I wanted to make her want me, but more - I wanted her to want me without having to make her feel that way. The ambivalence was staggering.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I turned another unread page and pretended I hadn't heard her, but she sat on the couch opposite my chair and waited for me to respond anyway. I finally looked up at her and nodded slightly, but kept my head still angled towards the book.

"How long are we going to stay here?"

"I don't know," I said, surprised by her question. We had been here a little over three weeks – I had tasted her blood seven times, six of those while we were here. I didn't count the small amount I had tasted in the car – it wasn't enough to count. "Probably not much longer."

"Then what?"

"I thought you might appreciate somewhere a little warmer," I informed her. "I have a place a little closer to the equator that should be ready for us in a week or so."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?" Bella sat up a little straighter

"I mean, after that place, what's your plan? How long are you going to keep me like this?"

"Bella, I..." I really didn't know what to say. I didn't realistically think I could keep her like this forever. How long would she last? Assuming I could keep the bloodlust at acceptable levels and not drink so much as to permanently harm her, could I keep her like this for years? Decades?

"You haven't really thought this through," Bella said, nodding either to herself or me, I wasn't sure. "Have you?"

"I'm a little more in the moment," I admitted, looking up and giving her half of a smile. "I have to admit that."

"I want to talk to my Dad."

"No."

"Edward," she pleaded, "please hear me out. I won't tell him anything...important. I just need to talk to him. He has to be going crazy. I'll tell him something so he'll know I'm safe and won't keep looking for me."

"You aren't safe," I reminded her.

"I don't think you are going to kill me," she said confidently.

"I might."

"Not intentionally," she said, and looked me in the eyes. "You want me alive."

"That's true," I scowled back at her. "But I'm only barely in control of myself. You are safe right now, because I fed from you last night and because I'm hunting constantly even though I'm not thirsty. As the days go by, your level of safety diminishes."

"You told me you didn't have to drink that much," she remembered. "You said every couple of weeks."

"I'm a little gluttonous of late, I admit it."

"You don't really need to drink that much blood, do you? You just like it."

"Your blood is different," I said, swallowing back venom. "It's like it calls to me. I've never felt anything more powerful than the draw of your blood, and it's probably best not to talk about it too much."

"Oh," Bella's eyes got a little wider. "I didn't think about that."

"It's okay right now," I reassured her. "It's probably not a great idea to dwell on it. Your scent alone in this room is enough to send me over the edge sometimes."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, looking down at the floor. I laughed.

"You apologize for the most ridiculous things."

"Why do you apologize?"

"What do you mean?"

"You say you are sorry to me all the time, especially right after..." her voice trailed off. She looked back up at me. "What are you sorry for?"

There were many things for which I felt some remorse. There were other things where I felt none.

"I'm sorry it hurts," I said finally. "I'm sorry it makes you cry."

"But you aren't sorry you kidnapped me, and you aren't sorry that you're living off of me."

"No," my voice was soft. "I'm not. I don't think I can't really explain that, though. It's not all what you think it is."

"What is it then?"

I wasn't sure if I could explain this to myself, let alone the poor girl who was caught in my darker nature. It was her blood, but it was so much more.

"I've been around a long time, Bella," I said. "Ever since I woke up to this life, I've been able to hear the thoughts of everyone around me. I could hear people as they constantly said one thing out loud, and their thoughts showed me their true intentions. I lived with my family and as the family increased in size I listened to them as they said one thing when they meant something else. They understood I knew the truth, though, and I knew it when they resented me for my knowledge of their inner thoughts."

"I have always been constantly encircled by the voices of others in my head. Sometimes I didn't always know if the words in my head were my own or someone else's. I was surrounded at all times – day and night – and even when I could block it out for a while, it was always there, waiting for me to let my guard down."

"There were several times when I left, went out on my own for a while. Sometimes it was a long time, but usually just a few weeks or months. I didn't like being alone, so I would return, but then my head would be full of their thoughts, their worries, and their concerns about me. And of course, their pity."

"Pity? Pity for what?"

"My family consists of three perfectly matched couples – soul mates – and me. I couldn't be more out of place. For a while, I tried. I was first in the family, and Carlisle always felt a stronger bond to me than he did to my siblings. Over the decades, I didn't even bother to try and fit in anymore."

"Oh, I see." I didn't have to read her mind to know what she was thinking.

"I don't need your pity, too."

Her eyes flashed up to mine and back down again, and her cheeks turned pink.

"I didn't mean..." Bella stopped, and shook her head slightly. I decided to get around to actually answering her question.

"With you," I sighed, "you and your silent mind – everything has changed. I don't have to be alone, and I don't have to hear the voices. I can...be with someone and not have to hear what you really think of me. I'm sure that's quite a blessing in your case, anyway. I don't think I could stand to hear how much you must hate me."

"I don't..."

"Hush," I said. Even if I couldn't hear her mind, I knew what she was going to say would be a lie. "I've taken you away from your home, your father. I've isolated you, physically harmed and tormented you. I've...caused you to believe...I would do...worse."

The physical separation between us was too much for me, so I closed the gap. I was across the room now, kneeling before her and holding her face in my hands, her wide eyes locked with mine. I desperately needed her to understand.

"I wanted to do worse," I confessed. "Even when you said it, when you thought I would, and I denied it..." I couldn't finish, and looked away from her, closing my eyes. No – I started this and I had to finish it. If I didn't do it now I never would.

"I can't stop, Bella," I could hardly hear myself as I spoke. "Even the thought of letting you free is abhorrent to me. I crave your blood. I am a junkie and you are my addiction, and I don't think I will ever be able to get enough of you. I am selfish and I am horrible and evil, and someone will have to tear me to pieces to make me let you go. For all of that I am truly, truly sorry, because you don't deserve any of this."

My breath sounded strangled and hitched when I tried to breathe deeply. I felt her hands around my neck, reaching into my hair and pulling my head down to her shoulder, holding me there. Her fingers lightly stroked from the top of my head down to my neck and back again. I was overwhelmed with fuzzy images of my mother, holding me the same way when I had been thrown from a horse. My arms coiled around her back, wanting her heat against me. I swallowed venom and hated myself for having to do so.

Her blood was so close, right next to me, with her heart rhythmically pumping it through her arteries. The sound of her heart and her scent so close should have overwhelmed me, but all I could feel were her hands on my head, her fingers in my hair and the slow, steady pace she set as she stroked me.

After a few minutes, I was calm again. Perhaps more calm than I had ever been before. I felt warm and, strangely, safe. I didn't move, except for breathing, and felt I could have stayed right there forever.

"Will you please let me call my dad now?" Bella broke the silence.

"No." Another sudden hard gulp of venom coursed down my throat.

"If you are really sorry, then let me call my dad."

"No."

"Please, Edward." Bella cupped my face in her hands and pulled me up to look at her, her eyes burning into my soul. "I can't stand thinking about how worried he must be. He probably thinks I'm dead. *Please*."

I sat back on my heels, closing my eyes against her pleas. Sighing heavily, I pulled the phone out of my pocket and handed it to her. I rose from the floor and walked into the kitchen to stare out the window. If I stayed too close to her, I would likely change my mind. I could still easily hear both sides of the conversation.

"Charlie," she breathed into the phone. "Dad, it's me..."

"Bella? Oh dear God – Bella!"

"It's okay, Dad – I'm fine." There was that word again.

"Oh Bella, Bella!" I could hear the anguished relief in his voice. "Where are you?"

"I...I can't tell you, Dad," her voice just barely above a whisper.

"Can't tell me...sweetheart," I imagined a little switch flipping in his head as he went into cop mode. "Just answer yes or no, Bella. Is there someone there with you?"

"Yes, but Dad..."

"Are you hurt?"

"No! I'm fine!" Again with the fine. From his sigh, I figured she used it on him once or twice, too.

"Is it that Cullen boy from your school? Did he...take you away?"

"Yes, but Dad..."

"I knew it! I'll kill him!"

"Please, Dad – please listen." I could hear him breathing heavily.

"Okay honey."

"I just wanted you to know I was okay," Bella said. "I didn't want you worrying about me or thinking the worst."

"The worst? Bella, tell me what the hell is going on!"

"What's going on, Charlie, is that Edward and I want to be together, and there's no way I was going to live in Forks," Bella's voice was matter-of-fact.

"You *what* ?"

"We ran away together," Bella's voice lowered a little and she started biting her lower lip. "I just wanted to call you and let you know I'm okay, because I didn't want you to worry about me. I'll try to call you when I can."

"Bella, are you out of your..."

"Give Renee my love and take care of yourself, Charlie."

"Bella, wait!"

Bella closed the phone softly, placed it on the side table and dropped down on to the couch. She tilted sideways, laying against the arm and stared at the wall in front of her.

If I kept her for her entire natural life, I would never understand her.

The muscles in my arms and legs flexed repeatedly. I wondered if what I felt was Bella's blood being absorbed and used by my body. It was like it kept the nastier part of me physically incapacitated until it was time to taste her again.

Day three and I was in a foul mood if for no other reason than I wanted to drain her and drain her now. I was beyond agitated with everything I touched, whether it was the remote for the DVD player, which now needed to be replaced, or the damn wood for the fireplace, which kept toppling over no matter how I stacked it. I was ready to shred something to pieces.

Bella was tiptoeing around like I wasn't going to notice her if she was quiet enough. I snapped at her when she first rose the morning because she asked me where she had left the iPod, as if I could read her mind. Ha.

There was also another competing but similar feeling that fought for control along with the thirst. Since my little demonstration of vampire talents and Bella holding me on the couch, I had become more and more aware of her body. Every time she walked I watched her muscles lengthen and shorten in her legs. I watched her arms and hands when she turned the pages of a book or poked a finger at the iPod to change a song. I watched her tuck her hair behind her ear. Every one of her heartbeats was in my thoughts, and I cataloged every movement she made all day long, apart from when she was in the shower.

I definitely still thought about her then.

Ever since I kissed her, I couldn't help but think about how her lips felt against mine. Why did I do that? To show her...what? What I could do if I wanted to? That if I ever did give in to that kind of drive I could at least make it pleasant for her?

I didn't want to kiss her right now, though. Well, maybe I did, but the tension in my muscles was absorbing all my thoughts. It was taking every last shred of willpower to stop myself from springing at her and ripping her neck open with my teeth. I was a mess, and there wasn't any voice of reason in my head today – it was all monster and he was famished.

That's when Bella decided to play twenty questions. I didn't know if she just couldn't tell how bad off I really was, or if maybe she was trying to distract me. For the first time all day, I couldn't even look at her, and could barely control my voice enough to speak at all.

"Do you think we might be able to go back to that city again? I'd like to get some fresh vegetables and fruit."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"I was thinking about some of the TV shows on DVD as well – do you think there's something we would both like?"

"I don't know."

"How are we going to get to this island you mentioned?"

"By plane."

"How can I go? I don't have a passport."

"I had one made for you."

"You did? When?"

"Last week."

"How did you get my picture for it?"

"I tore it off of your driver's license."

"When?"

She kept going on and on until I was ready to literally explode. With each question she asked, anger boiled up from the core of my being until I began to shake with the physical exertion of not killing her. The last question, though – that one sent me spinning right over the edge.

"What do you think of me, Edward?"

"I don't understand your question."

"I mean, how do you feel about me?"

"I don't know, Bella," I finally snarled. "How do you feel about the burger you had with your fries last night?"

Bella gasped and flinched backwards. She curled her knees up to her chest, her eyes focusing onto the space on the floor by her feet. I stormed out of the cabin and into the melting snow. I needed to hunt now before I slaughtered her.

Caribou were everywhere around here, and I was sick to death of them. Predator blood was always more palatable than herbivores, but when my alternate meals consisted of Bella Swan's blood, drinking from a big deer was borderline disgusting. When I caught the scent of a bear, a grizzly at that, I took off after it.

It was really too early in the season. The grizzly should have still been in his winter sleep, but instead he thought picking a fight with me was a grand alternative. He was wrong, of course, but I was also wrong. He really didn't taste much better. I wondered how Emmett could consider the things so delectable.

I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth and tossed the bear's remains through a hole in the ice of the lake. The frozen water made for very easy disposal, and I was glad for it. I hunted so frequently now things might not have gone unnoticed in other circumstances. This little chilly corner of the world didn't have enough human inhabitants for those that were here to count the caribou herds.

I leaned back in the snow. It was quite a bit warmer out today, maybe even close to a comfortable enough temperature where Bella could come out of the cabin for a while. I knew she was tired of being inside, and we had watched all the DVDs from our last shopping trip. Maybe we would head out tomorrow.

I also needed to make some arrangement to get us to our next destination. I pulled out the phone and made a quick call. The new place was just about ready. We could plan on being there the middle of next week. Good.

The sun was nearly visible through the thin cloud layer, and no more snow was scheduled to fall for a few days. It was actually a pretty nice day if I cared about such things, but I only had one thing on my mind. There were still four hours and nineteen minutes before I could indulge with my favorite treat again, so I decided to take a little run.

I crossed the ice and ran up the northern edge of the lake, feeling the cool wind on my face and the steady, mindless thrumming of my feet against the tundra. It wasn't as peaceful as holding Bella, but it was a pretty decent alternative.

After I had run just a couple of miles, I came to the provincial highway and turned north, following its course but not too close in case a vehicle came by. I ran until I my head cleared of the anger and only thirst was left. I turned around and sprinted through the snow. Bella would be eating her dinner soon, and she had better remember the damn vitamins. I headed back to the cabin.

The red, luscious fluid slid over my tongue and down my throat as all the tension from my limbs that had been building there all day dissipated. Her warm body was under me, held close and safe from anything else except me. I was almost done, I had almost taken Bella's limit, but I knew I could stop now and be satisfied, because it wasn't over. I would be able to come back in just 72 hours to taste her blood again, and right this minute I got to hold her and comfort her.

My tongue graced her forearm, sealing the wound as I pulled back and held her against my chest. Bella's chest heaved with a loud breath before she settled against me, wiping the back of her hand across her cheek. I reached over to the nightstand.

"Drink." I handed her a glass of milk. She was starting to wrinkle her nose at orange juice. I wasn't sure which one smelled the most disgusting. She took it and drank a mouthful before setting it back on the table.

I felt relaxed and comfortable again, and was hit with the memory of what I said to her earlier. With the monster dozing, I didn't even understand from where the words came.

"Bella?" I looked up into her eyes, still a little wet but not overflowing. "What I said this evening...I didn't mean that. I don't know why I said it."

"I thought it was probably pretty accurate," Bella quipped.

"No," I said, shaking my head at her. "It's not. Maybe...maybe it was, but it's not now."

"What's different now?"

"It's not just your blood I want," I said, and felt her tense in my arms. I clarified, quickly. "I like being with you, talking to you and just... touching you. Like when I was...upset...and you held me. I don't think anyone's ever done that before, at least, not in this life. It was comforting."

"You seemed to need it," Bella said simply.

"I did," I admitted, "but if you hadn't done it, I wouldn't have known what I needed."

She nodded, and I felt her calm against my chest. I noticed the milk still sat on the table, barely touched and handed it back to her again.

"Shouldn't I get cookies with milk?" She half smiled at me, and I felt like I my inside organs were melting. I traipsed out to the kitchen and back again, handing her a pair of oatmeal cookies on a plate.

Bella finished quickly, placed the empty glass and plate on the nightstand and shifted down on the bed, looking up at me, expectant. I moved down and felt her warm fingers graze over my abdomen and her head rested on my chest. I wrapped my arm around her soft shoulders and let my other hand trace geometric designs on her forearm.

"That tickles," Bella squirmed a little.

"I'm sorry," I said, and moved my hand away.

"It's okay," Bella looked up at me. "It feels good."

I went back to tracing on her arm because anything I could do to make Bella feel good would be done. I felt her muscles relax around me and she inhaled slowly and deeply.

I put my head back and held the fragile, sleeping human girl in my arms with the taste of her blood still in my mouth. With the exception of her steady breaths, everything was silent around me - voices, no thoughts, no second hand visions of possible futures. There was just her warm skin against mine, the blood and the silence.

If I had known to ask for an existence like this I would have done so many, many years ago.

It's wrong, so wrong...she is just an innocent girl...

I mentally groaned. I was actually feeling good for a minute. Why did Carlisle's voice have to invade my subconscious now?

We must be close. The scent is weak, but it is definitely him.

The voice was definitely Carlisle. It was definitely in my head. But it wasn't in my subconscious this time. *They've found us...*

So much for isolation.

Chapter End Notes:

Uh oh. Eddie's in trouble now!

Hello all you new readers! It's great to have you here! Thanks to everyone for all the reviews! Y'all are awesome! Much appreciation to those who are still with me after all this time and those who have supported me and my original fiction! 3

Questions: someone asked if I'd be posting my other old FFs. We'll see. Depends on if this one gets kicked off again.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 – Fight and Flight

"Bella – get up, get dressed."

"Huh?" Bella rubbed her eyes and blinked repeatedly.

I ran over to her, her coat in my hand. For the love of all that's holy, she was in shorts and a t-shirt. I yanked open the dresser drawer, spilling the contents over the floor, and grabbed a pair of sweats. I pulled a sweater from the closet and threw them both at her.

"Get these on, and your coat. Now!"

Bella rose from the bed, stumbling a little before she sat herself back down on the edge. She looked up at me and her eyes grew wide. She reached for the sweats and started to yank them on over her shorts.

"What's going on? Where are we going?" Bella asked. At least she had the sense to move while she was questioning me. I tossed her coat, hat and gloves onto the bed next to her while she pulled on socks and a pair of boots. I listened intently, trying to gauge distance.

How could it ever have gotten this far? I cannot allow this. My son... this will not continue. It stops here and now.

They would be here in a matter of minutes.

I dragged Bella out the back door and onto the porch as she pulled her coat on. She cringed against the wind as she stepped outside. It had warmed up considerably, but was still quite cold to human skin.

"Edward, please tell me what's going on!"

"They've found us," I grumbled, glancing up at her out of the corner of my eye.

"Charlie?" Her mouth dropped open, and she inhaled sharply. Her head jerked around from right to left, searching.

"No." I shook my head. "My father, not yours."

Alice was blocking her thoughts from me, but I could clearly hear Jasper's calculating plans. The rest of them could not be heard. Either they were still too far away or they weren't all together.

"And my brother and sister, it seems."

"Are they going to kill me if they catch us?"

I thought about it for a moment. Bella was, strictly speaking, a liability. By vampire law, she should die. Having her believe my family might kill her was also potentially beneficial to me.

"They might," I shrugged and felt her shiver against me, but whether it was due to the cold, fear, or even relief, I wasn't sure. I turned to her and took her hands in mine.

"Bella," I started, and wondered what I even wanted to say to her. Apologize, again, for what I would continue to do to her, assuming I was going to get the chance? Tell her this is probably the end, and it's been fun? Place my lips against hers one more time, just in case I didn't get a future opportunity? Then I became distracted by how many seconds I could spend just looking in her eyes and thinking about touching her mouth with mine. In the end, my impotence got the better of me and time ran out. I gave her hands a little squeeze.

"Let's go."

We bounded down the stairs and into the yard. I heard the crunch of tires against gravel and a dark Mercedes loomed into view. Carlisle's thoughts tore into me – he was livid. His mind literally screamed

through my head. I was most of the way across the backyard, getting ready to run Bella across the frozen lake when I heard his footsteps close in behind me. I stopped, pulling Bella by her arm and twisting her behind my back, protectively. I crouched, baring my teeth, and hissed at my father. A low growl began in my chest and erupted as a feral roar.

Carlisle stopped in his tracks. Alice and Jasper were a couple hundred yards behind him – still near the cabin. All their voices were in my head at once.

Edward, this stops now. You can't do this to her. I didn't raise you to do this to anyone... There's nowhere else to go, brother – we'll fix it, but you have to surrender... We picked up your car, it's being trucked back to Forks... You can't fight us all at once, be reasonable... I will not let this continue, and you are coming back with us now...

And the visions... they flashed through my head as everyone considered their options.

Jasper coming at me from one side, Carlisle from the other, Alice yelling at them to stop as I attack Jasper, sinking my teeth into his neck, adding to his scars... Jasper's arms crushing my chest as they drag me away from her, from her blood... Alice comforting her as Carlisle and Jasper hold me, screaming... my father rushing me and I tear Carlisle's arm from his body... Charlie Swan in a dirty motel room, holding a stack of "Have you Seen this Girl?" posters... My Vanquish secured to a trailer, speeding down the highway... Esme sitting on my piano bench, her face in her hands... Bella caught in the middle as Jasper and I tear at each other, her blood seeping into the snow...

"Stop, stop, stop!" I screamed at them all. All this time with just Bella and the silence – I was no longer accustomed to all the voices in my head at once. I thought my head would explode from the volume of their thoughts alone.

Carlisle took another step closer, and I pulled Bella around in front, my arm around her waist and one hand clutching into the strands of her hair, my mouth close to her neck. "I'll kill her Carlisle – don't take another step."

Carlisle stopped and put his hands up in front of him. He tried to calm his mind, but the rage was so close to the surface he couldn't hide it. I had never seen him like this before, but then again, he had never seen me like this before, either. He took a breath and looked into my tainted eyes.

Edward, you can't do this. This isn't you.

"I'm not me," I responded, growling. Couldn't he see that? Weren't my eyes evidence enough?

Of course you are – you are my son. I know you are in pain, Edward, but I will help you. Son, I love you – we will work this out...

"No," I shook my head. "You can't help me – no one else can – only her." I pulled Bella's body back closer to mine, crushing her to my chest. She whimpered against me.

Edward, let her go.

"I will not," I snarled. "Now back off, or I will drain her. You can't get to me before I do."

"I don't think he can do it, Carlisle." Alice's visions continued to invade my skull. "One thing I do not see is Edward killing her."

Me running with Bella across the lake, tackled by Jasper and Carlisle...the four of us tearing and biting at each other as Bella runs off into the snow...Alice clambering on top of me, her nails clawing at my neck...

"Edward," Alice's eyes bore into me, "you don't want to hurt her. I know you don't. We can make this work. It will be all right."

I started to calm. Alice understood. She would tell Carlisle to let me go with Bella. We could work it all out. It all sounded so very easy, except for one thing – these were not my feelings.

I growled low in my chest.

"Get out of my head, Jasper!"

Let me help you, Edward. Let me help her. Please, I've never felt you so afraid...

"Get out!" I shrieked at him, and the calm dissipated as Jasper took a short step back, a little closer to Alice. I felt my rage and fear come back from him, amplified.

"He's very dangerous right now," Jasper confirmed, talking softly to Carlisle. "I can't calm him. Carlisle...we have to..."

... *take him out*, Jasper's mind finished.

"No," Carlisle said. *Please, Edward, please don't make it come to that.*

Alice's visions danced as everyone considered their options. I calculated the distance between the cabin and the lake, the lake and the SUV, the fastest route to town...none of it was fast enough. Every path I considered led to Bella being taken away from me.

Drain her and be done with it, my fingers trembled against her neck.

"Don't move – any of you." I took several steps back, dragging Bella with me. "I can read everyone one of you for miles. Don't follow me. I'll kill her. I swear I'll kill her if you follow. I have to be with her."

Son, you are being completely irrational. You can't run forever.

"You can't take her from me!" I screamed.

Jasper started running through options – back around the cabin, south first, and then northeast. He took a step forward.

"No, Jasper!" Alice warned. A vision of Jasper's head flying from his shoulders caused me to take a step back. I pulled Bella back behind me again.

"Please, Edward," this time the whisper wasn't in my head, but over my left shoulder.

"Shh," I hissed at her, and I felt her cringe against me.

Jasper flinched. *She's terrified, Edward – what have you done to her?*

I held Bella's arm tightly, gripping her through the thick layer of insulated material on her parka. Pulling her even closer against me, I crouched, glaring back into the eyes of my father.

Release her – now!

I growled back at Carlisle. I wanted to haul Bella on my back and run, but I knew I couldn't outrun Alice that way. Maybe the others, but she was nearly as fast as me. I backed up, a little closer to the lake. If I could get across...

Edward, I cannot let this continue. There's nowhere you can go now. It's over.

"No!" I screamed back, clenching my fist around her wrist. Bella cried out when I gripped her too tightly.

Jasper was closing the gap between us, dancing lightly over the wind-blown snow with Alice close behind him. They spread out, Carlisle moving to my right, Jasper on the left and Alice maneuvering until she was in front of me, still a hundred yards away. They began to move forward together.

"Stay back," I warned.

Alice's visions came at me all at once.

Jasper racing to me, colliding with my left side and pinning me to the ground...

I pulled Bella around to my left side, holding her around her waist, and the vision changed.

Alice rushed me from the front, with Carlisle on my other side, Jasper coming around to trap me from behind...

Let her go!

This can't go on!

Edward, listen to reason!

I couldn't focus. All of their voices screamed in my head, and I was rapidly becoming overwhelmed with a desperate feeling of hopelessness. It surrounded me and invaded my sense and my very being. I knew it was Jasper's doing. I knew it was an attack, but for a moment there was nothing I could do. My knees felt weak, and my grip on Bella loosened.

Jasper leaped and landed to my left, closest to Bella. He made his decision so quickly, and without warning, I almost lost my hold on her. I spun around and struck out, landing my foot in the middle of his chest. He flew across the field and Alice ran to him. He was back up, snarling back at me.

Alice grasped his arm, and I heard her murmur against his ear, "Wait, please."

I turned back to Carlisle, who had inched a little bit closer to me. The continuous low growl in my chest ratcheted up a notch.

Edward, let her go, son. You don't want to hurt her. I won't hurt her.

"No," my voice was strained. I moved her back behind me again. My words turned into a plea. "Carlisle, don't come any closer."

Jasper was on my left with Alice close behind him, moving slowly forwards. Carlisle took a step the other way. They were surrounding me. There was nowhere left for me to go.

Please, Edward, no more. I will help you. We will work this out

"Carlisle..." my eyes met my father's eyes, and I begged him to understand. "Please, don't try to take her from me."

I heard the tumult in his mind. He had always desired me to have my happiness, have my peace, and I could only hope he recognized that my sanctuary lived in the fragile human behind me. If he could at least be distracted by that for a moment, I could make my move.

"Hold on to me tightly," I instructed. I grabbed Bella's arm and started to pull her on to my back.

I saw the vision of them all coming at me at once just a second before it happened, but I couldn't move fast enough to parry. Carlisle tackled me from the right before I could even get Bella situated, and we both went flying to the ground. Alice's hand latched on to the fingers I had around Bella's wrist, twisting them and pulling them away from her. Jasper moved behind me, but I couldn't turn fast enough to avoid his not-so-loving embrace.

Alice pulled Bella away, and I immediately felt empty and lost without her warm touch against me. I snarled, grabbing for her again, and getting a hold of Alice instead, flinging her off to the side. Bella tumbled to the ground. Jasper pinned my arms, immobilizing me and throwing me face first into the powered snow. Carlisle tangled with my legs, holding me down while I snarled and fought against their restraining limbs.

I saw it in Alice's mind only a moment before I saw it with my eyes. I screamed.

"NO!"

Bella had gathered herself off the ground and was racing downhill towards the lake, sliding partway down the bank. She hit the ice running, but her forward movement halted when the ice below her gave way with an audible crack. There was a muted splash, and then she was gone.

The sounds from my throat deafened me as I threw both Carlisle and Jasper off and sped to the side of the lake, not even pausing before I threw myself into the hole Bella had created in the ice.

The freezing water flowed over my body as I swam quickly towards the faltering human shape under the ice. The current was still strong underneath the frozen surface, and Bella's arms and legs thrashed against it. I kicked against the water and grabbed for her ankle, my fingers just barely clenching around the edge of her boot.

I pulled her to me and slammed my fist through the ice above our heads at the same time, pushing her through the hole. Bella took in a gasping breath and her fingers, still warmer than my skin, clenched on to my shoulders. I clawed through the rest of the ice to the shore, dragging her with me. Alice's hands grasped Bella from the bank above me, hauling her frozen wet form from my fingers as Jasper got a grip on both of my upper arms. The feeling of complete loss overwhelmed me again.

"Get her inside and out of those clothes," Carlisle instructed.

"Quickly!"

I raised my head to watch Alice take Bella away from me, carefully wrapping her in her arms like a child and running back toward the cabin. I snarled and growled as Jasper pulled me up the bank. Carlisle stood facing me. I kept my eyes on Bella as my world was slowly removed from my reach.

I was so focused on Bella I didn't even see it coming when a fist hauled back and punched me in the jaw. Jasper and I both flew

backwards, me landing on top of him. I struggled against his unfaltering grip for a few minutes, and then surrendered to his grasp, panting.

"Did Carlisle just hit me?" I was pretty sure that's what had happened. I just couldn't quite believe it.

"Yep."

I lay there, staring up at the sky as the water on my skin hardened into ice. Eventually, I calmed, and Jasper's fingers slacked against my arms. He pushed me off of him, sending me rolling. I didn't offer any resistance, just rolled until I was facing skywards again. Jasper stood, looking down at me.

You are seriously screwed up.

No kidding.

He left me in the snow.

I tossed my arms up over my face and closed my eyes. I stayed that way, with my clothing slowly starting to freeze to the ground, listening to the conversation inside.

"Here are some dry clothes," Alice said. I heard the scraping sound of the dresser drawer opening and closing.

"She wasn't in long," Carlisle reasoned. "She should be fine if we can get her warmed up."

"She very frightened," Jasper said.

"Bella," Carlisle said, "will you let me look at you? I want to make sure you are all right."

"Stay away from me!"

"It's okay," Alice coaxed. "We aren't going to hurt you."

"You're all like him! Why don't you just get it over with and kill me?"

"No one is going to be killed," Carlisle insisted. He was using his "bedside manner" voice. "Please Bella, we need to get you warmed up. Alice can help you get into dry clothes."

Eventually, and with a little calming influence from my brother, I was sure, Bella acquiesced. There was a wet, muted thump as soggy clothing hit the floor, accompanied by more rustling and soft sobbing.

I wanted to go to her. I wanted to see she was all right with my own eyes. I wanted to talk to her and comfort her and tell her she was going to be okay.

I want to hold her!

I groaned and rubbed at my eyes. My fingers found their way into my hair, of course. I wondered if I would ever touch her, ever hold her to my chest, or ever taste the sweet, thick fluid from her veins again. I heard Alice's footsteps approaching, but I didn't look at her. I could hear her movements as she crouched down near me and huffed out a sharp breath.

"I'm sorry Carlisle hit you," Alice said. "I was really hoping to do that myself."

"Please, feel free," I responded. I saw her intent to kick me, and didn't bother to deflect it as her thought changed from decision, to vision, to truth. It did hurt a little.

"I thought I might come out here and try to reason with you," she said, "but I can see there's no point."

"You can't reason with me. I'm not reasonable."

"I'm pretty sure that's what I just said."

I grunted at her, not interested in her snarky comments or opinions on my psychotic behavior. When a lunatic knows he is a lunatic,

pointing it out to them serves no purpose other than to annoy him.

"Okay, Edward," Alice sighed. "How about another approach? You talk, I'll listen."

What could I say? Leave us and let me go back to what I was doing, because there actually seemed to be some point in my existence for the first time in nearly a century? Could I justify what I was doing because the idea of going back to strictly animal blood was as appealing as starting out as a high school freshman again? At least this way it was only her, no one else? What if I could keep her alive indefinitely? I could take her all over the world, take care of her and give her anything she wanted. Except the look in her eyes when I tell her it's time and lie her down in the bed was starting to hit me a little harder. It had been the same way the thoughts of murderers began to affect me so many years ago. The monster was not willing to stop, but the other part of me could no longer justify what I planned, and ached for I was going to do.

And if I didn't get her back – if they returned Bella to her home – would I still be welcomed back into my family? Without her, did it matter?

"You would end up killing her," Alice prophesied.

"She's all I have, Alice!" I yelled at her, my anger emerging without warning. "I can't be without her."

"Without her blood, you mean."

I could only respond with a growl. I didn't want to talk. My body ached for Bella. I would have raced in to see her, but every time I considered it, Alice's vision showed me the outcome. It was never in my favor. I refused to speak to her any longer, so she left me to wallow alone. There was only one female whose presence I wanted, and my sister wasn't her.

I lay there and barely perceived the change in illumination as the sun set and rose again some hours later. The night had brought back the bitter cold and more wind, but it had no effect on my preternatural skin. My body didn't ache from cold; it ached because I couldn't be with her. Every muscle was tensed, and I kept my eyes squeezed shut. If I couldn't open them to see her I didn't see any point in having them open at all.

I wanted to feel her skin on mine. I wanted to stoke up the fire in the hopes she would change into shorts. I wanted to watch an old movie with her and listen to her complain about the plot twist she didn't like. I wanted to watch her finger slide across the iPod touch screen to turn the page of a book.

I wanted my family to get the hell out of my life.

I needed a plan, but I needed a plan without actually deciding to make one. Otherwise, my annoyingly psychic sister was going to ruin it before it could come to fruition. While the sun rose and began to set again, I tried to come up with a non decision-inducing plan to get Bella back. I was unsuccessful.

Her scent hit me at nightfall when they brought her back outside and began to load up the car.

Once we get on the road she can call Chief Swan. We should be back in Forks in just a couple of days.

No. I couldn't let them take her. I rolled over on my hands and knees then took off like a sprinter on the starting blocks.

There was only one road into town, so I raced ahead of their path, running faster and with more purpose than I ever had before. I could stand in middle the roadway and physically stop the car, but they would still be able to overpower me in the end. Three against one were not the very best odds. I was not going to win based on physical strength or speed. I was going to have to be a little craftier.

Was there anything I would not do to get her back within my reach?
Was there any low to which I would not stoop?

No, there most certainly was not.

Whatever my plan was, it had to be something that would work regardless of Alice's visions. No, it had to work *because* of Alice's visions. I had to figure out how to use her visions to get Bella back. I had to do something, or at least be fully committed to doing something, so vile they would have to stop and treat with me. Just killing wasn't going to be good enough. I had to go for the truly horrific. Of course, what I really needed was some help, an ally. *No, not an ally – a hostage.*

I turned off on to a side street as soon as I reached the residential part of the little town. A low fence marked each individual property line, and I leaped over them in turn, searching. My mind reached out and listened to the multitude of voices in the little identical Cape Cod homes.

Finding what I needed was all too easy. He was about three years old with soft blond curls and wore Spiderman themed pajamas. He lay in a toddler's bed with the bedroom door closed and a radio playing a soft background tune. His parents watched television on the lower floor, oblivious to the vicious creature stalking their offspring.

I lifted him gently and quietly, careful not to wake him, and wrapped him in a blanket. It wasn't really warm enough, but it didn't matter. He would either be back in bed or dead within a few minutes. I debated taking his baby sister as well, but decided I could always return if necessary.

Alice's vision would be clear by now. I stood in the road where I knew they would come. They would find me, because if they didn't give me Bella back, I was going to tear this child into pieces in the middle of the road. Then I was going to return and slaughter the rest of his family. Then I was going to move to the neighbor's house. I

stood in the middle of the street, holding the soft little bundle out in front of me. *Here they come.*

So much for scruples.

Chapter End Notes:

So glad new readers are enjoying this as much as the re-readers are!

Love!

Working on chapter 2 for Out the Window, so hopefully that will be up soon, too!

Savage

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 – Calm and Control

There were no streetlights in this section of the residential side street. I stood in the middle with a foot on each of the yellow lines separating the left and right sides of the street. If someone looked out their windows and actually searched for me, they might have seen me, but the minds in the neighborhood had better things to do at the moment.

In my arms, the sleeping form of a three-year-old boy lay wrapped in a blanket. He was warm and fragrant, and his heart beat an enticing rhythm to the monster's ears. I took a slow breath to steady myself, reminding the monster there was a greater prize out there, and the child was merely a distraction for those who would take that prize from him. From me. They took Bella from me.

I heard the distinctive tread of the black Mercedes before it pulled around the curve and into my line of sight. The car pulled up and stopped just a couple of dozen feet in front of me. Through the darkened windows, I saw Carlisle and Jasper in the front seats of the vehicle, while Alice and Bella sat in the back.

Carlisle opened the driver's side door and stepped out cautiously. He walked at a slow human pace around the hood of the car with completely silent footsteps.

I couldn't meet his gaze, so I stared at the ground in front of his feet instead, tensed and ready to act. Carlisle was quite adept at blocking me from his mind, and his intentions weren't readily obvious.

This must end.

"I can't be without her," I told him, refusing to look up. "You took her from me. I have to do something."

A door on either side of the car opened up, and Alice and Jasper climbed out, one from the left and one from the right. Jasper slowly stalked around the car to stand a couple of yards behind Carlisle, but he did not attempt to control me with his emotional subterfuge.

Alice stayed next to the car, her hand on the top of the open backdoor. Bella scooted from one side to the other in the back seat until she was peering through the open door and around the car. I heard her gasp.

Alice's visions began to dance.

Carlisle confronted me, attempting to take the child, with the help of Jasper... the child's blood spilling over my hands from a giant hole in his neck... I was back in the boy's house, killing his parents and draining them each in turn...Bella and I ran with her on my back, through town, a gray car...

Then Alice started singing songs from *Oklahoma!* in French. If that wasn't blocking, I didn't know what was.

The back door of the car was pushed open a little more, and Bella came out. She only took two steps before Alice caught her around the waist and held her back. The breeze blowing now around the street brought her scent to me, and I was nearly consumed with my need for her.

The rich, dark scent of her replenished blood reminded me how long it had been. The monster was out in full force again. The tension in my limbs multiplied. I heard a growl erupt from my throat.

"No, Edward, no!" Bella lunged against Alice's grip around her midsection.

Edward, you can't do this. You are not this kind of creature.

"You are...mistaken," I growled. "This is what I have always been, Carlisle."

I know you, Edward. My son won't do this.

Carlisle took a step closer to me.

I finally allowed my gaze to meet his. I glared at him through narrowed eyes and let loose a louder, more definite growl.

This isn't you.

He took another step, and I tore the blanket from the child and held him up to my shoulder, placing my teeth against his neck.

"Oh God," Alice gasped as a vision of me ripping open the child's throat flashed in her head. "Carlisle stop! He'll do it."

Carlisle ended his advance. Back by the car, I could see Bella as she began to struggle again.

"Edward," Bella called to me. I looked to her as she fruitlessly fought against my sister to get closer to me. "Just listen! I will go with you, just please, let the little boy go, *please* ."

"No," Carlisle's voice was firm. He held his hand out as if to stop her from thinking such things. "You will not. Edward can't continue like this."

Edward, I can't let you do this. I don't even know who you are right now.

"I don't know who I am," I concurred. "I just know what I have to have. Nothing else matters. Not you, not him." I motioned down to the child with my chin.

I can't trade the life of one innocent for that of another.

"I'll keep her," I promised. "The boy will die if I don't get what I want. Once I'm done with him, I won't stop there."

"Edward!" Bella continued to struggle in Alice's arms. "Please don't do it! Let me go! I want to go with him!"

"Let her go!" I snarled at Alice.

Carlisle's thoughts were in tumult, trying to weigh the death of one with the slavery of the other, and unable to rectify either in his mind. I saw myself in his mind – newborn, young, feral – and still not as savage as the creature he saw in front of him now.

Jasper came up behind Carlisle's left shoulder.

"Our options are limited," he surmised. "Either we let Bella go with him, or we destroy him."

"All other decisions lead us back to this same position in the future," Alice agreed. "Some other place with some other victim, but the scene is the same."

Kill my son?

Carlisle shuddered at the thought.

"If we try to...attack Edward, he will kill the boy," Alice confirmed. Her normally singsong voice was full of dread. "I don't see any way we can stop that from happening."

"That boy can't die because of me," Bella cried out. "Please, let me go to him. Edward will be all right with me, I know he will." Bella looked over to me, and I met her eyes, drowning in them.

"I can't ask you to do that," Carlisle's voice sounded strong and confident, but the tenor of his mind was anything but.

"You aren't asking," Bella said. "I'm making a demand here. Let me go with Edward. I can calm him down."

"I think he's beyond calming," Carlisle looked to her. "He might kill you now."

"No, he won't." Bella shook her head. Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "I know what he needs." Carlisle appraised her for a moment.

"Are you sure, Bella?" Carlisle asked. "If you choose this, we will no longer follow. I can't continuously put more innocents in jeopardy from my son. I won't. If you do this now, we will not make another attempt to bring you back to your family. You are resigning yourself to...to this," he said, waving a hand towards me.

"I understand what I'm doing," Bella assured him, and then turned to me. "You will let the boy go and not hurt him?"

"Anything," I whispered back to her. Daring to hope, I reached out my hand for her. "Anything you ask."

Carlisle's eyes closed for a moment, then he nodded sharply. Alice dropped her arms to her sides and Bella took a stumbling step forwards before Carlisle caught her by the arm and steadied her, glaring at me.

Edward, if you do this – if you take her in this way, I don't think I will be able to forgive you. You will be lost to us.

"I know."

When her hand touched mine, every part of my body seemed to let out a long held sigh all at once. Her fiery fingers closed around mine, and she came to stand at my side.

Let the boy go.

"Not yet." I turned to Bella. "You will really come with me?"

"Yes," she answered. "But you can't hurt him. Please Edward, please let him go now."

"Soon," I swore to her, and turned back to my family. Carlisle's eyes held three centuries of pain. I began to back up in the street, Bella's

hand grasped firmly and the boy's still sleeping form cradled in my other arm.

Alice let out a sharp breath, and I heard the words in her vision-mind right before Carlisle spoke them.

"You are no longer welcome in my family."

I stared into his golden eyes. Reflected in them, I saw every flaw, every failure in my pathetic excuse for a life, and his willingness to forgive each and every one of them.

Not this time.

I tore my eyes away, unable to speak. I nodded once, pulled Bella's feet off the ground and tossed her on to my back before I began to run.

I followed the straight route heading out of town to the south with Bella on my back and the boy in my arms. I couldn't run as fast that way, but the footsteps of my family were slow in comparison since they were not actually trying to gain on me. They had, with Bella's urging, given up. Still, I spurred myself on and attempted to go a little faster.

Bella gripped me around the shoulders and neck, holding tightly with her legs wrapped around my midsection. Under other circumstances, her touch would have been very distracting, but for the time being, I forced myself to keep focused.

Alice's vision flashed through my head, and I saw our escape.

A gray Subaru came into view, and I dove in front of it, waving one arm while the other one held the kid tightly. The car swerved and stopped with a screech, facing the opposite direction in the snow bank on the side of the road. I ran to the driver's side door, flung it open and yanked the driver from the car.

"Here," I said to the stunned man. I shoved the blanketed child, who was now wide-eyed for the first time during this entire ordeal, into the driver's shocked arms. "Hold this."

Bella dropped from my back, and I shoved her across the gearshift and into the passenger seat. We drove off towards the edge of town as my family stopped in the road behind us. I saw Alice take the child away from the human in the rearview mirror before we sped around a curve and were gone. Carlisle's mind was devoid of any words, just a sense of incredible loss and sorrow. I could see Alice through Jasper's mind, holding the child and looking down the deserted road. Jasper put his hands on her shoulders, trying to steady her. After a few minutes, I couldn't hear their voices anymore – we were finally too far away.

I thought once I was away with Bella I would be able to relax and get a hold of myself. I couldn't have been more wrong. Being in the closed up car surrounded by her scent when I had been without it all that time was making me worse, not better. My hands were shaking on the steering wheel. Every cell in my body craved her nearness, and wanted her closer than the sixteen-and-a-half inches she was away from me.

Unfortunately, even with my vampire mind ninety-nine percent focused on Bella's presence next to me, I couldn't keep the look in Carlisle's eyes out of my head. His parting words kept flashing back through my thoughts, haunting me.

"Edward?" Bella was turned in the passenger seat, with her body tilted towards me. "Are you okay?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The tension and shaking in my arms was spreading through my whole body. Her voice, her face, her smell, her blood...I needed it all so badly and right now. I couldn't even move. I felt a light touch on my forearm and heard my breath catch in my throat. I slammed on the brakes.

The car came to a skidding stop, right there in the middle of the road in the middle of the night. Bella lurched slightly forward, held in her seat by the shoulder strap. She yelped in surprise. I had managed to get my foot on the brake, but I still couldn't even move an inch to see if she was all right.

When they took her from me at the cabin, I didn't think I was going to get her back. I thought they were going to keep her from me. I didn't see any way I could be without her now. I was willing to do anything... *anything*... to have her back. I was going to kill a child, for the love of God.

Carlisle disowned me.

It was like a thousand years of pent-up adrenaline was going sour in my system. It may even have been comparable to the painful burning of transformation. I wanted to scream against the sensations, but I couldn't even do that. The monster screamed at me to take her, drain her, finish her. If we didn't do it now we might not get the chance later.

I tried to speak again, but the only sound I managed to make was a short, deep moan. I could hear Bella saying my name, but I still couldn't respond coherently. I stared at the deserted road in front of me, but didn't see it.

I heard the click of a seatbelt coming off, and felt Bella's hot fingers burning up my arm. I could see her in my peripheral vision as she turned and pulled her legs up underneath her on the seat. The hand on my arm moved down and started pulling on my fingers, which were still clamped to the steering wheel. I could barely feel the tug, but my fingers relaxed against their ministrations anyway, and I let go.

Bella took my hand and placed it next to my leg on the seat. Then she reached over my lap, her hand brushing my thigh. The heat of her touch actually managed to increase the tension in my back muscles and caused me to sit up a little straighter in the seat. Her

arm went all the way across my legs and she reached down between the driver's seat and door. I felt the seat slowly glide backwards, increasing the distance between the dashboard and my body.

Then she moved over the gearshift and crawled into my lap. My breath starting coming in short pants, and she situated herself on me and raised her arms up around my neck, twisting her fingers into my hair. She pulled my head down to her shoulder, and again, the muscles in my body responded to her touch, allowing themselves to relax and move. My body didn't seem to be capable of responding to my commands, but relinquished control to the warm human straddling my legs.

My forehead ended up on top of her shoulder, the tip of my nose resting on her collarbone. Her smell washed over me, and I closed my eyes against the sensation. I could hear and feel the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, and wanted to run my tongue along her carotid. If my body were listening to me, I probably would have. I was still shaking, and Bella was running her fingers across my scalp with my head cradled against her.

"Shh, Edward," she crooned at me. "It's okay...I'm here...shh..."

I realized I was still making the deep moaning sound. I took a ragged breath and noticed my arms had found their own way away from the steering wheel and around her soft, frail midsection. My breathing slowed, and the shaking stopped. My fingers curled against the small of her back, and I pressed her body against mine, sinking into the heat of her skin and letting my mind empty of everything except the feeling of her fingers through my hair.

For a moment, I remembered what it was like to fall asleep.

Bella had resumed her curl-up-in-a-ball pose in the passenger seat with her eyes closed. They had been open until she glanced at the speedometer. I wasn't going all that fast, really, but that was mostly because the Subaru would only go so fast. Shortly afterwards she fell asleep, her sweet hands clasped prayer-style under her cheek.

I could still feel the phantom feeling of her hands in my hair, her body pressed against my chest, and her legs across my lap. Even while venom flowed down my throat, all I could think about was her touch. I had probably been seconds from ripping the steering wheel off of the car and then damaging anything else I could reach. I might have even done it without being fully aware of what I was doing, but she changed that. I had been literally ready to explode, and her touch brought me back.

Pulling the phone out of my back pocket, I dialed and waited for an answer. I was greeted with a cockney accent, and the woman on the other end promised to get things set up the way I needed them at our next destination. I made another call to transfer an insane amount of money into her bank account to make sure the job was done right.

I ditched the hijacked car in the Thompson Municipal Airport. It didn't take too long to secure a flight to Winnipeg. Once we reached Winnipeg, we shopped downtown, in an area coincidentally called The Forks. There we purchased items from places that would not make my sister cringe in the least, but made Bella wrinkle her nose at the price tags. We purchased a couple of days' worth of clothing and toiletries for Bella, and then I hailed a taxi to take us to the airport, where I bought two plane tickets to London.

Bella's eyes actually sparkled when I told her where we were headed. Since we were scheduled for the next flight out of the country, we didn't have a lot of time to wait before our plane was ready to board.

So much had been spinning through my mind, it wasn't until we were comfortably seated in first class and Bella was ordering something to drink when the monster gave a nice audible tap on my shoulder to let me know he was famished and wanted his snack *now* .

I gripped the armrests as hard as I could without actually demolishing the leather, closed my eyes, stopped breathing and tried not to think about the sweet, fragrant blood in the seat next to me.

"Have you been to London before?" Bella asked.

"Yes," I said between clenched teeth.

"Does it rain there a lot, like Forks?"

"Not as much," I answered. I was running out of air and really didn't want to breathe at the moment.

"Edward?" I felt Bella lean closer to me, and her fingers brushed my arm. I pulled away from her sharply and hissed. "What's wrong?"

"It's... *time*, Bella." I tried not to snarl at her, I really did, but there just wasn't any way to avoid it.

"Oh," she said, and pulled back away from me. The next nine hours in the air were going to be downright painful. My fingers dug a little deeper into the leather armrests, and I closed my eyes. My head tilted a little, knocking against the closed window shade. I swallowed hard, venom burning down my throat. I hadn't hunted since before I had last tasted Bella's blood. Though I wasn't truly thirsty, the monster was definitely back and in full force.

Bella's fingers brushed at my temple, her knuckles grazing my ear. I tensed, forcing the muscles in my arms and legs to not reach out for her, to not drag her across my lap and bury my teeth in her neck. The heat in her hand pulsed in time with her heart.

"Don't," I whispered, my voice harsh. "Not now."

Bella took her hand away and sat back in her seat.

Once we reached Heathrow, I literally pulled Bella through the terminal and into a waiting cab, both of our bags clutched in my other hand.

I gave the driver the address, and we chugged out of the terminal waiting area and onto the M4, towards Kensington. Bella stared out the window, taking everything in. She occasionally looked over to

me, and I thought she wanted to ask me a question but didn't quite dare. My hands were shaking again, so I clutched them into fists.

The car came to a halt next to Holland Park. I threw a few bills at the cabbie before taking Bella by the waist and dragging her into the apartment building. I looked around quickly, also searching with my mind, but heard no one. I picked Bella up in one arm as she let out a little grunt, and carried her up the four flights of stairs as fast as I could.

I didn't have a key to the place with me, so I broke the knob off the door instead. Fixing it later would be easier than picking the lock would have been now. The apartment wasn't very large – just a small living area, kitchen, bath and two bedrooms. This was where Carlisle and I lived the year after my change. The large window in the living area overlooked Holland Park, which was, ironically, the location of my first vegetarian vampire indiscretion – a businessman on his way home. I had waited too long and the thirst had been too great. Carlisle had only left me for a moment, but when he returned my eyes were red and the man's body lay beneath me, cooling. Carlisle had blamed himself for pushing me too hard.

I shook my head clear of the memory.

I set Bella down on the floor, tossed our travel bags onto a small wingback chair, and shut the door within the first second of coming through the doorway. Bella was on her back on the sofa with me on top of her in the next second.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly, I chanted in my head, forcing myself to take her by the arm instead of diving into her neck, like the monster wanted.

The artery in her wrist pumped the luscious, warm, addictively sweet substance into my mouth and down my throat. It was like the first time, every time. The burning in my throat ceased almost instantly with the first gulp. After that first taste, I managed to slow down and count each succulent drop. Underneath me, I could feel every inch of

her warm body where it touched me. I could catalog every nerve ending in contact with her. I could feel her not-quite-silent whimper each time I sucked against her wrist, and the resulting trembling through her skin from the sound.

I released Bella's arm and rolled off of her, dropping to the floor beside the sofa. I knelt over her, slipped one arm around the back of her head and cradled it gently against my chest. Her shoulders shuddered, and I felt the vibrations through the material of the sofa and into the lower half of my body. Bella fisted her hand into my shirt, and I stroked her hair the same way she had done to me in the car. I found her ear with my nose and nuzzled her there. She smelled so good, especially with the taste of her blood still on my tongue.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly, not wanting to cause any hysterics. She nodded once. I went back to stroking her hair, remembering the calming effect it had on me.

"I'm going to find something for you to drink," I told her. "Will you be able to sit up and drink your orange juice?"

"I'm sick of orange juice," Bella said. I smiled.

"I'll see what else there is." I stood and went into the tiny kitchen, yanking open the ice chest and taking a quick survey.

"There's cranberry," I called back in to the living room. I opened a cabinet and selected a tall glass.

"I hate cranberry juice."

"You have to drink something." I filled the glass with the orange juice and walked back into the room. I traced my finger over her jaw line. "You need the liquid and the sugar. What else can I get you?"

"I'll drink the orange juice, as long as you let me sleep."

"It's a deal," I said. "When you wake up, we will go to the market and you can pick out whatever you like."

I found a blanket in a cupboard and draped it over her, tucking it gently around her neck. She must have been exhausted, because she had already dozed off. She was warm and smelled good, and her mind was so completely silent – I would do absolutely anything she asked of me. Well, almost anything. I touched my lips to her hair – just for a second – and then finally took a good look around the rooms I hadn't entered in eighty years.

All the furniture was the same timeless 18th century pieces that had been in this same apartment since long before Carlisle sired me. There was a tiny potbellied wood-burning stove in the corner of the room. I would have to have some wood delivered while we were here. The galley kitchen had barely enough room for one person to turn around in it and the only place a human might sit and eat was a little table up against one of the windows with a pair of straight-backed chairs.

Last week, I wouldn't have come to this place. Alice would have seen it – she would have recognized it and known right where we were. I didn't think it mattered anymore. They would no longer look for us. I wondered if Alice would even look for my future any longer. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, realizing for the first time that I hadn't turned it back off after my quick call back in Manitoba. I hadn't even turned it off during the flight. No calls. No text messages.

I walked into the room that had been Carlisle's and took inventory of his practical oak desk and chair, the four bookshelves reaching to the ceiling and the Victrola record player in its cabinet in the corner. I traced my finger over some of the leather bound first edition books on the shelf. Bella would like these, I was sure. It would help her pass the time until...well, it would help her pass the time.

The other room had been mine, and was home to another wingback chair and a short coffee table. In the back corner, next to the window overlooking the park, was my Boardman & Gray Victorian upright

piano. It was a beautiful instrument with front panels carved from Brazilian Rosewood. I immediately went to the circular piano bench and sat down.

I let my fingers feather across the ivory keys, stroking over the tops of them but not depressing them yet. This had been my first piano, the one on which I learned to play. I hadn't sat at a piano since before we moved to Forks, even though Esme had made a point of putting my grand in the most predominant place in the house. She always encouraged me to compose in an attempt at self-therapy. It had worked, too. For a while, anyway. I wondered if I would ever play for her again.

I pressed the keys in the beginning of a scale and cringed at the sound. I flipped open the phone and called back my cockney friend. She assured me a piano tuner would be out the next day. I went back out to the living area and sat in the wingback chair to watch Bella sleep. It occurred to me I was going to have to get her a bed or she'd be sleeping on the couch all the time, and there wasn't room for me on the couch. I couldn't hold her comfortably there. I flipped the phone open again and ordered one.

When Bella woke, she complained of lightheadedness. She talked me through making her a sandwich while she stayed lying down on the sofa. She ate it quickly and even managed to let me talk her into another glass of orange juice. Sitting up slowly, she put her feet down on the rug and shook her head a little.

"I think I'm okay," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yes," Bella said with just the hint of a smile that did not reach her eyes. "I have heard that before." I shrugged.

"I can say it again."

"That's okay," she told me. Bella met my eyes and looked at me with a definite look of determination. "However, we do need to talk."

For some reason, those words flowed through my ears, down my throat and lodged in a tight little ball in the pit of my stomach. I swallowed hard, though there wasn't any venom coursing through my mouth.

"Shall we talk a walk?" I offered, trying to keep the sense of dread I felt from sneaking into my voice. Thankfully, I was pretty practiced at such arts.

"Let's go."

I held a small black umbrella over Bella to keep the mist off of her as we walked through Holland Park. My stomach remained knotted as we chatted about the rain, the beauty of the gardens, and how long a walk it would be if we were to go see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. I wanted her to get whatever it was out so this feeling would go away.

Bella took a deep breath and looked at me sideways.

"We need to nail down some of the details about our relationship, Edward."

"Relationship?" I wasn't sure why that word struck me as so strange. Is that what we had? "What details?"

"Ground rules."

"You are instilling rules upon me?" I didn't think she could be serious.

"Yes, I am." Bella stopped and turned to face me. "I'm here willingly now, Edward. I don't understand why you think you have to be with me, but after that...display in the street, I don't doubt you." She dropped her gaze to the ground and took a deep breath. "I don't

want anything like that to happen again. I couldn't stand it if someone else got hurt because of me."

The idea that she was to blame for my actions was ludicrous, but my selfish nature didn't see a lot of advantage in correcting her on this point.

"I would kill anyone who got between us," I promised her.

"I know you would," she mumbled, and then looked back up, meeting my eyes with ferocity. "That brings us to rule number one. No human deaths. Zero. Zip. None. I will stay with you willingly, but you have to promise me you won't kill anyone else."

"What difference does it make?" I asked.

"I think it makes a lot of difference to their families!"

"No," I corrected. "I mean, what difference does it make whether you are with me willingly or not? It was needed temporarily to get you from away my family, but now that you are here and they are not, I'm not about to let you leave. It doesn't matter if you come with me willingly at this point. You will come."

"True," she admitted. "But if you kill anyone, you'll have to take my blood from me. If you follow the rules, I'll give it to you."

The burning knot in my stomach dropped lower. She was offering her blood to me. My Bella's blood on a silver platter. I looked away from her and gulped down a mouth full of venom, even though there was no fire in my throat.

"It makes a difference, doesn't it?" She moved her head so she was in my field of vision.

"Yes," I croaked, barely able to speak.

"I thought so." She nodded her head and turned back to the path, resuming our walk. I followed after her, still holding the umbrella to

shield her from the rain. I looked at her out of the corner of my eye, wanting nothing more than be able to pull any little tidbit from her mind I could reach. Of course, there was nothing to be heard.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her.

"I don't want anyone else hurt." She shrugged.

"But I will still hurt you," I reminded her. "Why would you make such an offer? I wasn't threatening your family or friends. I don't understand."

"If your family took me back, and you..." Bella shuddered, "killed that little boy...I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"Why not?" I didn't understand her at all. I'd been in the heads of far too many humans, and I knew one thing they were not was self-sacrificing. Maybe for a loved one, but for someone they didn't know? "Why do you care if someone you don't know dies? Especially when you know what's going to happen to you."

Again, she shrugged her shoulders. I debated telling her I would have gone after her family next, if it made any difference, but decided not to do so.

"It's not going to get any better, you know," I told her. "If anything, it's going to get worse. The control I have is...slipping."

"Well, I'll get to that in a minute." I raised an eyebrow at her.

"All right, go on then."

"Next rule," Bella continued. "No more keeping me locked up. As long as I'm with you willingly, I'm not going to try and get away from you. I do not wish to spend the rest of my life cooped up in a cabin, apartment, hotel room, chalet or anywhere else. I've never been out of the western half of the States before, and I'm in London. I want to be a damn tourist."

I felt my mouth turn up a little.

"Go on," I encouraged.

"There's only one more thing," she said, her voice dropping a little lower. "It's more of a request, but I want you to at least think about it."

"What is it?"

"I want to understand," she said simply.

"Understand what?"

"Why me?" she stopped again and tossed her hands in the air. "There's more to it than just how I taste. I don't think you really understand it yourself. Maybe if you think about it and explain it to me, we'll both get it. And maybe, if you understand it, it will help with your...control issues."

"So let me make sure I have all this," I said. "No human deaths, tourist activities and a little dive into my psychological motivations? Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

"And in return, you willingly offer me your blood on a regular basis, as much as you can give without permanent physical damage?"

"Yes."

She was completely serious about this. Again, I wanted desperately to know what was in her mind, and apparently, she wanted to get a better idea of what was going on in my head as well. I wasn't so sure that was a good idea. Maybe now that she had an inkling of the depths to which I would go to keep her, I could explain it to her better.

She was honestly offering herself to me. No charms necessary. All she wanted in return was something I would probably have given her regardless, given the increasing level of obsequious behavior I was exhibiting towards her.

"Would you like to start with a concert at Royal Albert Hall?" I asked, tossing a half smile her way.

"That would be lovely," she smiled, and slipped her arm through mine. With that touch and that smile, I knew I would relinquish myself to her. Whatever she wanted would come to pass. Anything I could give would be given. Every desire she made clear to me would be delivered to her feet. Right at that moment, if she had asked me not to drink her blood anymore, I would have had difficulty refusing her. *Anything for her.*

So much for subjugation.

Chapter End Notes

So, they've reached a bit of an understanding now, at least. I'm sure that will take care of everything, right? Right? Not buying it, eh?

-Savage

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 – Play and Pray

"It's beautiful."

Bella's hand slipped slowly across the keys of the piano, but didn't put enough pressure on them to actually make a note.

"At the time, these were the most sought-after pianos anywhere," I told her. "I hope it sounds a little better now."

The piano tuner had left only moments before. Bella hadn't actually come into my room before now, and was a little shocked when there was a knock at the door and the dusty old guy in overalls popped in to have a look at my beauty. He was there a good two hours, and I regretted not running out for a tuning kit myself. Though the images in his mind were relatively chaste, he thought Bella was a little too attractive for *his* own good. It was a good thing she spent her time in her room with a book instead of watching him work. I don't think I could have stood for that.

"At the time?"

"This one was built in 1884," I informed her. "The company was around until the 1930s though."

"So, you bought this one new?" Bella smirked.

"Are you insinuating I am that old?" Was she teasing me? I narrowed my eyes at her, but then smiled. "No, I did not buy it new. Carlisle bought it for me a couple of years after he changed me. It was...an outlet, of sorts. I was bored and couldn't go out in public very much. It gave me something to do."

"Why couldn't you go out in public?" she asked.

"Because I had a tendency to want to snack on the neighbors," I admitted.

"Oh." Bella looked down at her feet for a moment, a slight pink tinge starting up her cheeks. I swallowed venom and quickly thought about how soft her skin was and wondered if the temperature change in her skin when she blushed was measurable. "Do you still play?"

"I haven't for years," I said, glancing at her sideways. "I just haven't been in the mood."

"Maybe you will be inspired this evening," Bella smiled. "I'm going to get ready."

She shut herself in her room while I debated the sanity of accepting her list of rules, up to and including nights out on the town with her vampire kidnapper. I pulled a garment bag out of the wardrobe in the corner of my room and dragged the zipper down to reveal the tuxedo inside. Regardless of the year, this outfit never seemed to drastically change in style, and I didn't have to worry about whether or not it still fit.

After I dressed, I looked to the piano again, trying to decide if I did want to play and determining that I did not. I ran one hand up the keys, performing a quick half scale. I smiled internally at the rich tones. At least it would be in tune if I changed my mind.

The door to the other bedroom opened, and I heard Bella walk from there to the kitchen. I moved to join her.

When I decided to take her shopping for appropriate symphony clothing, she had initially protested. It took a little convincing, but once I mentioned that she couldn't really show up at Royal Albert Hall in her jeans, she sighed and agreed. Once she had acquiesced, I took her to one of the nicer department stores near Kensington, and slipped one of the sales people a few bills to help Bella find something. When she had it all picked out, I saw it folded in the bag,

and noticed it was blue. Beyond that, I really hadn't paid any attention.

The dress was midnight blue and hung from her pale shoulders with thin straps. The neckline dropped down in a deliciously enticing way, exposing all of her neck and down to the swell of her breasts. It gathered at her waist and flowed out and over her hips, ending gently right above her knees. Her short-heeled shoes were silver and matched a small clutch purse in her hand.

She was devastating.

I could clearly make out the vein from under her jaw down her neck, and also clearly see the small veins just under her skin across the top part of her chest. She had her hair pulled back, exposing more of her neck to my eyes. My hands literally ached to run over her skin.

When her cheeks brightened and her heart quickened, I noticed for the first time that her blush didn't end with her face, but warmed her delicious skin all the way down to where her flesh was covered by the neckline of the dress. She smelled divine. I wondered what brought on the sudden rush of blood, and I swallowed back the venom pooling in my mouth.

It occurred to me it could be the result of me staring at her, unabashed. Now that her blood pooled under her skin, I couldn't look away. I took a step forward and wondered why my feet were moving. I didn't think I had told them to. I stopped.

"Where did the tux come from?" Bella asked.

"The closet," I said, barely registering my words with my ears.

"You look...really nice." The color in her cheeks deepened. Instead of trying not to breathe, like I should have, I slowly inhaled, letting her scent cover me and overwhelm my senses.

My feet moved without discussing it with me again. I didn't stop them this time. I was a little too interested in what might happen if I just let them go where they wanted.

They took me to the spot directly in front of her.

I tried to keep my eyes from focusing on the pulsing artery running down her throat and instead, let them follow my finger, which seemed to have joined my feet and acquired its own willpower. My index finger touched lightly against her skin, right at the point where her throat met her shoulder, and traced across the top until it came in contact with the strap of her dress. My finger followed the trail of the dress sleeve until the tip rested above her beating heart. I leaned over and ran the tip of my nose along her throat, taking in her scent.

"You are stunning," I whispered when my nose reached her ear. I could feel the heat of her blush against the side of my face. I lightly kissed her jaw and took a step back.

Bella raised her head to look up at me with an embarrassed smile. She started to say something, but gasped when her eyes met mine instead. She took a step back away from me.

"Your eyes," she gasped. I looked quizzically at her. "They're black!"

My eyes only turned black when I was getting thirsty, as in not had anything for a couple of weeks. I had found a good supply of deer southeast of London and between them and Bella, my eyes had become a rather goldish orange. Not a very natural color, but one that could be shown in public without attracting a lot of attention. That's the color they were when I looked, unnecessarily, in the dress mirror to tie my tie. Why would they have changed?

She was correct, of course. I could see my eyes reflected in hers, and they were black. It didn't take an exceptional amount of consideration before I realized why. My breath quickened, and I let my eyes look over all of her – her beautifully shaped calves, the curve of her hips and breasts, the line of her neck – quickly enough

that I hoped she didn't notice. My finger itched to drop lower, and forcefully remove the dress I had liked moments ago. Now I only wanted it torn to shreds on the floor at her feet.

Using all the mental and physical strength I possessed, I stepped away from her, regretting it immediately, and shrugged.

"They change a lot." Bella seemed to accept this, smiled shyly, and walked into the middle of the kitchen. She started opening the ice chest, but my hand on her arm stopped her.

"I thought you might enjoy your evening meal out tonight," I said.

"Out?" Bella looked at me quizzically. "At a restaurant?"

"Of course," I responded.

"With you?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. Was she joking or being intentionally obtuse?

"Yes with me, obviously."

"But...you don't...you wouldn't...eat there." Did she think I was going to drink the waiter after he served us? It occurred to me she might just think that, and maybe with good reason.

"I won't be eating or *drinking* anything at the restaurant," I assured her. "I'll just order something and not eat it. Maybe if you have trouble deciding what you want, I can order something else you would like to try. You could have half of each." I smiled at her.

"Why do you want to take me to a restaurant?" Bella asked. I cocked my head to one side.

"It seemed the correct thing to do."

Bella looked at me, her forehead creasing in the middle while she seemed to consider my offer. *My offer*, I thought. *Did I just ask her out on a dinner date?*

"Okay," Bella finally said, before I could talk my way out of whatever it was I had apparently just talked my way into. "Let's go!"

The clouds in the darkening sky were beginning to part, providing a break from the rain and a peek at a few stars. The next day promised to be clear and sunny if the weather patterns continued, as they seemed to be. I tried not to stare at Bella outright, and was grateful to be able to watch her through the minds of others. At least, I was at first.

Other than very brief shopping expeditions, I hadn't been out in public with Bella, and hadn't really come across the thoughts of other males as they caught sight of her. With the extremely flattering dress she wore, the minds of the men we passed definitely focused on Bella. Most minds held a tolerable tone – brief glances and appreciative thoughts of her beauty. I couldn't deny them that, but I still didn't want them looking at her. Others were not innocent appreciation, but raw lust and desire. I wanted to snarl at them and prove to them they couldn't be with her.

"Edward, what the matter?"

Apparently, the growl wasn't just in my head.

"They are all *looking* at you," I said between clenched teeth. I shook my head sharply. "I don't like what they are thinking."

"Who?" Bella's voice was on the edge of sounding panicky. Red tinge flowed over her cheeks. "Who is looking at me?"

"Too many to point out," I grimaced as another one passed by.

Mmmm...nice legs...

I was grateful when we finally entered the restaurant, and were provided with a small private table near a glowing fire in the back. Bella said she loved Italian food, and ended up taking my suggestion when she couldn't decide which dish to order. She picked out two, one for each of us to order. Once the server left, Bella sat looking at her hands for a moment, then took a deep breath and looked up at me.

"Shall we get started?" she asked.

"Started on what?"

"Your explanation," she said, waving a hand at me casually. "Why are you doing all this?"

"Taking you to dinner?"

"No," Bella sighed. I knew to what she was referring, I just wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I will try."

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Bella suggested. "Tell me what you were thinking when I first saw you in the lunchroom."

I shrugged. None of this mattered. Nothing had mattered to me for decades. Nothing mattered before I smelled her blood. After that, nothing mattered except her. I told her as much.

"Why am I different?" Bella asked. "Why do I...smell so much better?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's not something I have heard of before. I've been around thousands upon thousands of humans over the years. None have been so...appealing."

"When you came to my house, what were you planning to do?"

"Kill you," I said simply. "I fully intended to drain you the first time. I was going to drink all of your blood, but then I realized I'd never smelled or tasted anything like it in a hundred years. I'm still not sure from where the thought came, but it occurred to me that if I killed you, your blood would be gone forever."

I looked across the table at her, where she sat holding a forkful of something coated in red sauce but not eating it.

"That's when you became more important than anything else in my world. There is nothing I would not do to keep you."

"Yes, I've noticed that."

"I'm sorry," I said, wondering if I should start counting how many times those words left my mouth. "I know you hate me, and I scare you. Sometimes I wish I could stop...for you."

"Edward," Bella frowned, and quickly switched plates with mine, having tired of the first dish she tried. "I don't hate you. You do scare me sometimes, especially when I think you are going to hurt someone, but I don't hate you."

"How can you not?" I asked, rhetorically. I looked up again, meeting her gaze and staring at her intently, as if I could make her understand with my eyes alone. I reached over the table and put my fingertips over her knuckles. "I will do anything... *anything* ...to make this better for you. I don't want you to hurt. I don't want you to fear me. I will take you anywhere you want to go, buy you anything you want. I don't want you to hate your life, even if you are stuck with me. I wish...I wish I could change what I am for you."

"Most of the time being with you is just fine," Bella said.

There was that word again - fine. I never used to hate that word.

"Don't patronize me," I said, feeling a little angry. "I know what I am, and I know what I do to you."

"I'm not patronizing you," Bella insisted, shaking her head. "I mean, I'm not going to pretend I like it when you..." she looked around to see if anyone might be eavesdropping, " ...*you know* ...but the rest of the time hasn't been so bad."

"Which part is that?" I asked, pulling my hand away from hers. "The part when I dragged you unconscious out of your home? Or the part where I tied you up? Maybe watching that store clerk burn up or hauling the sleeping kid..."

"Edward, stop it!"

I stopped, because she asked me to, and stared down at my hands on the table.

"Of course, that not what I am talking about," she hissed at me. "But other parts aren't so bad. I like all the old movies you showed me. A lot of them I had never even heard of before. I still can't believe I am in London, that's always been a dream of mine. And you got me that iPod, and I could download all those books. I liked that."

"I'll get you another one," I promised, still not looking up from my hands.

"I even like it when you...hold me...after..."

Now I looked at her, and she stared at her hands. Did she mean it? Her blush was back – did that mean she was being truthful or not? Again, I wished to see into her mind. Without my gift, I guess I would have to trust what she said.

"I like that, too." I whispered.

"It scares me...when you do that...when you drink." I could barely hear her words. "I wonder every time if this will be the time you don't stop. Will this be the time you kill me? The only thing that could be worse is being alone after that."

"I want to hold you," I told her. "I want to make you feel better, and you are so warm and..." I stopped. If I kept talking, I was going to say too much and scare her even more. She wouldn't like hearing what else I wanted to do with her – or to her, more accurately. She liked it when I held her. She really did. I wondered if she would let me hold her on the other nights.

"There is another good thing about this," she said, a hint of a smile on her lips.

"What would that be?"

"Not having to go to school is pretty cool, too."

I took pleasure in the sound of her laugh and the comfort of the moment, but still wondered how long it would last.

I bought tickets for the box seats to the left of the orchestra and above the patrons on the floor. It not only gave Bella a fantastic view of the hall and the musicians, it was also a private box, so I didn't have to put up with any other stray thoughts about Bella.

I was starting to reconsider our deal. I wasn't sure I could let her out in public and not kill anyone...or maybe everyone...who thought about her. I was holding myself in check, for the most part, until the concert was over and we were on our way back to the apartment.

He was young, but still a few years older than Bella, with short cropped hair and bright blue eyes. He didn't appear dressed for the show, but was standing near the street outside the hall with his hands stuffed deep in his pockets. His feet kicked at the gravel on the walk. When he looked up towards the entrance, he saw Bella.

Holy hell, what a hot piece of ass!

I tensed.

That hot little bitch will look fine on her knees...

I growled.

I'd love to bend her over and...

I lost it.

It took all my control to stay at human speed while navigating through the crowds emerging from the hall. Once I got to him, I shoved against his chest, catching myself at the last second and reducing the force. I didn't crush his ribcage and collapse his lungs, like I would have, but I still sent him flying. He lay on the ground, cursing at me for a moment, then pulled himself back up and came towards me.

"Stay away from her," I snarled at him.

The man made some wild speculations about my parentage and my sanity. I couldn't begrudge him the latter.

His thoughts told me when he was going to swing, though I wouldn't have needed that advantage with my speed. I let him take his shot, ducked and turned, pushing him in the back and sending him sprawling again.

Unfortunately, we had attracted a little attention.

Several other patrons from the concert, and probably a few just from the street, had gathered around to watch the brawl.

...this ought to liven up a night of hum drum musical nonsense...
what a couple of idiots...what the heck is this all about... that bloke looks seriously nutters...

"Let me through!" I could hear Bella behind me, shouting and trying to push her way past the circle formed around us.

The man was certainly angry now and feeling pretty humiliated as well. He cursed me both in his head and out loud. He dived at me, attempting to get his arms around me. I took one of his wrists in my hand easily, twisted it until I heard it snap, and then twirled him around, holding his broken wrist and pushing him away from me again. He fell to the ground, cradling his hand and screaming. It was hard not to break him further, but there was too much of an audience.

I wanted to break him. I wanted him dead.

"Please! Let me through!"

"Stay back miss, you don't want to get in the middle of this."

"Let go of me!"

I turned towards her voice, and saw a well-dressed man, obviously from the concert, standing between her and the fighting. He held Bella's arm with his hand, holding her back. My eyes met his, and I glared at him.

"Let me go, please...before he comes over here..." Bella's voice was barely a whisper, but the tone was loud and clear in the mind of the man restraining her. I heard his decision to let her go in his thoughts before he actually did so. It saved his life.

Bella ran to me, her hands immediately cupping my face, asking me what was wrong. I snarled and looked over to the man on the ground, now assisted by two other men. I felt my body starting to pull towards him, wanting to... *needing to* ...finish the job.

"Edward, you promised," Bella reminded me.

I felt her hand, heated and soothing, curl around my waist, pulling me to her as she walked backwards, away from the scene. She was like a warm bath that comes to you, rather than you having to go

draw it yourself. Her warmth slipped around me and encompassed me.

"Please," she called to me again. "Before someone calls the police."

Someone already had, of course. I could hear the minds of the authorities approaching us now, on bicycles with their domed hats drawn down to their eyebrows. Getting arrested would definitely attract more attention than was acceptable.

I let her pull me along, and no one tried to stop us as we quickly crossed the street and into Hyde Park. Once we were in the park, I pulled her behind the Albert Memorial, picked her up, and ran. It was dark enough now to avoid notice through the trees and flowerbeds, at least. I carried her as far as the other side of the park, then stopped and dropped her back to her feet. I turned west and lead her down the street and back to the flat.

I managed to keep myself together just long enough to get in the door. Then I picked up the wingback chair, remembering in the back of my head it had been Carlisle's favorite, and smashed it into the wall. Bella's hands were on me a second after the chair's pieces hit the floor.

I tensed every muscle, trying to keep myself from lashing out at her. I needed to break...to tear...to destroy...and she was putting herself between my fury and the rest of the furniture. Not a smart move on her part. I was shaking so badly I was surprised the vibrations didn't send her across the room.

"Edward," Bella whispered, her hands reaching up my back, over my shoulder blades and onto my shoulders. She stepped around me, one of her hands running across my neck and the other running down my arm, and then up my chest until it found the opposite shoulder. She stood in front of me, her hands on my shoulders and warm body pressed against my chest. I started straight ahead at the hole in the wall where the chair hit. "It's okay, Edward. We're back, we're alone now...just you and me."

How she knew just what to say to me, I will never know.

I crumpled against her, falling down to my knees with my arms coiling around her back and my forehead resting against her stomach. Her fingers wrapped up in my hair, stroking it and twisting it. I still couldn't stop shaking.

"He needs to die," I heard myself say, my words muffled into the fabric of her dress. "I want him dead."

"Why, Edward? Why did you attack him?"

I took a deep breath, trying to ease my trembling down a notch.

"He was...looking at you," I finally said. "The things he was thinking about you...he didn't see you for who you are, he just wanted to ... use you. He would have taken you from me. He deserves to die. I want him to die."

"Shh," Bella murmured, cradling my head against her body and running her fingers through my hair. I took a deep breath and tried to make my muscles stop their repeated flexing. After a few moments, Bella slipped one of her hands down my cheek and under my chin, putting just a little pressure there to get me to look up at her. I obeyed the urging of her touch and met her eyes.

"Edward," Bella started, "I'm right here with you, right?"

I gave her a very small nod.

"And I'm not going to go anywhere, right?"

I nodded again.

"I'm tired, and these shoes and this dress are becoming very uncomfortable," she said, her tone quite matter of fact. "I'm going to go take them off and get into bed. Give me five minutes of human time and then come to bed with me, okay?"

I felt my mouth open slightly, but I really couldn't have made a sound, even if I knew what to say. I closed it and nodded for the third time.

She stepped away from me, leaving me cold on the floor. I shivered when she walked away, then yanked myself up onto my feet and headed to my own room. I pulled the bowtie out of its knot while I walked. I stripped out of the tux, tossed it on the chair and pulled on a dark gray pair of lounge pants and a t-shirt instead. I wished I still had the ones with M&Ms, only because they had made Bella smile.

In exactly four minutes and fifty-nine seconds, I left my room and went to her door, knocking softly. Bella answered, standing in the doorway in a t-shirt and sweats, her favorite sleeping attire. She opened the door a little wider and took my hand, gently urging me into the room and towards the bed.

The bed was just a twin, since the room itself wouldn't have accommodated anything any bigger. It was wrought iron, painted bronze with symmetrical spirals resembling a butterfly's wings at the head and foot.

"Get in," she said, patting the mattress. I looked at her for a moment, and then crawled over the quilted bedspread, moving as far to one side as I could without falling off. I pulled the fabric down so she could crawl underneath. Once she was situated, she leaned against me with the blanket between us. Her arm trailed up my chest to my shoulder and into my hair again. When she started stroking my hair, I closed my eyes.

I reveled in her touch, the feeling of her fingers over my scalp and the warmth of her body through the quilt against my chest. I tilted my head against her hand, resting in her palm and taking long, slow breaths.

"How do you know what to do?" I asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"You know just what to do and say to calm me."

Bella's hand shifted against my cheek as she repositioned herself a little on the mattress. I opened my eyes to look at her.

"It's pretty natural, really," she said, looking back up at me. "You just get lost, Edward. All I'm really doing is reminding you where you are."

I turned my head back against her palm, inhaling her scent at her wrist. Was I lost outside the Royal Albert Hall in a street brawl wearing a tux? Yes, maybe I was. Bella found me and brought me back to her. It was natural – I was lost except when she was with me.

"Did you enjoy the music?" I finally asked.

"Oh, yes!" I could hear Bella's smile. "It was wonderful! I especially liked the Chopin. I used to listen to Chopin's Nocturnes when I couldn't sleep at home."

"Did you have a favorite?"

"Yes," she nodded. "It was the third one on the CD, but I don't remember what it was called."

"Hum it for me?" I asked. She giggled... *oh I loved that sound* ...and then hummed a few notes of Nocturne in F sharp major.

I nuzzled against her hand one more time, my lips brushing her palm, and then untangled myself from her and got up from the bed. I left her room, leaving the door open so she could see from her room across the hall into mine. I sat at the piano and began to play her favorite piece.

For a while, she sat up in the middle of the bed, just watching me play. After the F sharp, I switched to E flat major, and then to C minor before going back to F sharp again. She lay back down, her hands curled under her head and her eyes still on me for a few more

minutes, before her breathing became more regular. I played a little softer, repeating the F sharp a couple more times before slowing the tempo and then stopping altogether.

I went back into her room and sat beside her on the floor, just watching her sleep. At one point, I dared to reach out and stroke the backs of my knuckles lightly over her cheekbone. She sighed in her sleep and whispered my name.

The sun was shining on the dew-covered grass of the park outside the window. Bella still slept, though I could hear her moving around in the bed. She was usually a little restless right before she woke.

I went into the kitchen, thinking I could make her breakfast, but I really didn't know where to start. In Carlisle's entire book collection, there wasn't a single one on how to cook. I opted for something that seemed simple - eggs, bacon and toast - but I managed to burn it all.

"What is that smell?" Bella came out of her room and walked towards me, her hand running through her hair like the tines of a comb.

"Well," I said, "it was supposed to be breakfast, but I'm not so sure it's worked out like I intended."

Bella laughed, and I just stared at her, smiling at the sound and wondering what else I could do to make her laugh again. Maybe I should ruin lunch, too.

After Bella cleaned up after me and made her own breakfast, showing me how to flip the eggs at the right time without turning them black, I found her at the window, looking out over Holland Park and the bright, crisp morning.

"It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day!" Bella beamed. "I feel like I haven't seen the sun since I left Phoenix."

"You probably haven't," I said. "We haven't seen it since we left Forks."

"I want to get washed up and dressed and then we can go for a walk in the park!"

She bounced off to the bath before I could say anything.

We truly hadn't seen a sunny day since we left. The only sun we had encountered was while we were in the plane, and I had drawn the shade. She had no idea why. Now she had her heart set on a walk in the sunshine, and I couldn't let her have it.

When she came back out of the bath, she was scrubbed and glowing with her hair pulled back in a wonderfully chaotic bun, with little strands sticking out everywhere. Her smile outshone the morning sun, and I was about to destroy her good mood.

"Bella," I said, not really knowing how to start. Bella looked at me and tilted her head, questioningly. I finally just blurted it out. "We can't walk in the park today."

"Why not?"

"I can't go out in the sun." Bella gasped.

"It would kill you, wouldn't it?" Her eyes widened.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Nothing like that. I just...can't be seen...by humans."

"You're invisible in the sun?"

"No!" I sighed. I couldn't seem to say anything right. "I just...look different. Very different. People would know I am not like them."

"What's different?"

"It's hard to explain," I said. "The sun will probably still be out later this afternoon. It will come in the front windows. You'll see then. In the meantime, we'll have to stay here."

Bella's gaze met mine, and I couldn't comprehend the meaning of the look in her eyes. She strode right to me, looked up at my face, and raised her hand to stroke my cheek. I leaned into her touch automatically, drawn to her warmth. I blinked slowly, wanting to lower my eyelids, but not wanting to lose the sight of her chocolate brown eyes looking into mine.

"Edward," Bella murmured, her fingers tracing my jaw from my chin up to my ear and into my hair. "I need the sun. I am going to take a walk in the park in the sunshine. I won't go far, and you'll be able to see me from the window. I'll be back soon, and then I'll teach you how not to burn toast, okay?"

I think my resolve actually, *physically* , melted.

A few minutes later, I watched her close the door behind her. It felt like all my insides had turned to liquid and were now pooling in my feet. I went to the window and waited forever for her to walk out of the front door. I should have escorted her down the steps. I knew that was a mistake. She was already gone too long. Finally, she walked out of the door and into the sunlight.

And completely out of my reach.

Panic rushed over me. Did she intentionally trick me? Had she decided to leave me? What if she realized this was her best chance and made a run for it? What if she jumped into a cab and told them to take her away from me? I wouldn't be able to go after her until nightfall!

"Bella...no..." I barely heard myself. I pressed my palms against the window, as if I could reach her through the glass. "Don't leave."

My breathing had become ragged and my hands clenched into fists against the glass. I let my head fall forward, knocking into the windowpane. Why didn't I think? Why didn't I realize she could just walk away now? How long would it take me to find her again? How long would it be before I felt her skin against mine?

She was across the street, and I felt a lump in my throat as I waited for her to start running. She turned left and walked along the sidewalk until she met up with the trail leading into the park. Now she would go the opposite way, down the street and out of my view, or she would head into the trees where I could not see her,

"No..."

Part of my mind registered my words, but only as an aside. I wasn't aware of them until they hit my ears.

"Please stay...I need you...please..."

Bella turned into the park and followed along the trail that paralleled the street, just as she said she would. I swallowed past the lump and forced my fingers to extend.

I watched Bella turn her face up to the sky with her eyes closed and her lips turned in a beautiful smile. She was truly radiant under the sunlight. I watched her walk down the trail and around the soccer field, staying to the edge of the trees but still within my view. There were some younger children – maybe twelve or thirteen – warming up for a game. Bella circled the field and started back along the tree line.

Well isn't this a bit of luck...

Oh no.

A jogger, young and tall with a muscular build and dark hair was running towards Bella on the trail. He was in running shorts and a muscle shirt, though it really wasn't warm enough to warrant such

attire. He was running right towards Bella with every intention of stopping to talk to her.

I clenched my fists again.

"Hello there!" He called out when he was only a few feet from her. He came up to her side and started running in place. "You don't look familiar. Did you just move to the neighborhood?"

Bella was blushing. Blushing! Because of him. At him. *For him* . My chest began to vibrate with a deep growl.

"Um...yes, I mean..." Bella stuttered. "Kind of."

"You're American," the idiot said, as if it needed to be pointed out.

Of course she's American, you British bastard.

"I guess it's that obvious, huh?" Bella smiled. She smiled at him. *For him* .

"Well yes," he gave her a big smile right back. "But I promise not to hold it against you."

There is something I have I would like to hold against you...

My growl turned into a snarl.

Bella laughed at his pathetic excuse for a joke. I could hear the clear, beautiful sound through the window glass. She laughed because of him. *For him* .

"You know, I think I've probably done all the running I need to do today," the jogging buffoon stopped running in place and extended his hand to her. "The name is Tom. Maybe you would like to join me for coffee?"

And maybe a quick shower and shag...

I had to get to her. I had to take her away from Tom. She was so trusting, so polite, she would go with him. I had to stop him from taking her away.

No, no, no, no, no...

My head chanted to me. I couldn't focus. He was going to take her. He wanted her. What if she wanted him? What if she left to be with him?

She can't she can't she can't...please, God, don't take her from me...

"Umm... I'm Bella," she told him.

Come on, baby, you know you want to. A little wink, a little pec flex, you know you can't get enough, I can tell by the beautiful color in your cheeks. I wonder how far down that blush goes...

The windowsill crumbled under my grip. I nearly tore the door off the hinges as I ran out of the flat and down the stairs. Once I got to the bottom, I was stuck.

I had to get across the street and into the park, but I couldn't. They were standing in the direct sunlight. There was no way I could get to her without both of them seeing me in the sun. If they saw me, so would everyone else in the park. I'd risk exposure, which might have been worth it, even when the Volturi could end up at my doorstep. Except, when they arrived, they would find Bella. It would be blindingly obvious what I was doing to her, and that she knew of our existence. They would eliminate her, and probably me as well, just for the sense of completion.

So I just stood there, unable to walk through the doorway. I could hear their voices clearly, but Bella could not have heard me from this distance.

"So, what do you say?" Tom pressed. "Coffee sound good to you?"

God, no. Please, please, please, don't let her leave me...

"Thank you, that's really sweet."

I tore a chunk out of the doorframe. As if she could hear the sound of destruction, Bella looked in my direction. I wondered if the Volturi could find us in Antarctica, because I was two seconds from running over to her at top speed and damn the consequences.

"But I'm afraid I can't. Thank you for the invitation."

Bella turned on her heel and headed back across the street and towards the door to the apartment building. Tom the jogger was watching her walk away from him, shaking his head and thinking about her backside. I growled audibly, turned and grabbed the first thing I saw – the metal handrail for the stairs – and ripped it from the wall. I twisted and crushed the metal before throwing it into the wall. I could feel the metal shards stuck to my hands when I ran my fingers through my hair.

"Edward, stop..."

Her hands... *oh, her hands* ...they were on my hips, wrapping around me from the back. Her cheek pressed between my shoulder blades.

Don't leave me, please, God, don't let her leave me.

"I'm not leaving you, Edward."

I didn't realize I had said it out loud. I squeezed my eyes shut, as if that would block the images running through Tom's head and into mine. Coffee with Bella, and Bella for dessert.

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised. "I told you I would stay with you. Now come on, let's go upstairs."

I felt her hand run down my arm, and her fingers intertwined with mine. She led me by the hand back up to the flat and through the

cock-eyed door, which would no longer shut properly.

Once we were back inside with the door as closed as it could be, I turned Bella around and pulled her tight against me. Her hands reached up to cup my face.

"Sit with me," Bella commanded as she turned and went to the sofa. I followed behind, not allowing her to walk far enough in front of me to break physical contact. It was possible I would never break contact with her again. I just couldn't take the risk.

Bella sat on the corner of the sofa, against the arm, and pulled me down to sit beside her. As soon as I sat, she opened her arms out to me, and I obligingly curled into her embrace, my head on her shoulder and my arms circling her waist. I closed my eyes and tried to let her intoxicating smell calm me, but for once it wasn't working.

"Edward," Bella whispered. "I'm here, why are you so upset? Please tell me."

My muscles tightened and my grip around her did as well. The jogger's thoughts were still in my head, including all the images he had of Bella's blush for him, her smile for him, her laugh for him.

"What if you wanted him?" I babbled, nearly incoherent, even to myself. "What if you wanted to be with him? You could have gone with him...I couldn't get to you. I couldn't reach you...what if you wanted to be with him?"

"Edward, he was just a guy on the street." Bella took my face in her hands again, bringing me eye to eye with her.

"He wanted you," I told her, unable to keep the animosity from my voice. "He had your whole day planned out. From coffee, to dinner, to his bed."

"I wouldn't do that," Bella said, frowning.

"But what if you wanted to?" I pressed. "You could have gone with him. You could have wanted him the way he wanted you, and you'll never want me the way I..."

I froze, realizing the words that had just exited my mouth. I looked up into Bella's stunned expression and wished I could take them back. I felt her fingers move from my face down to my shoulders, her palms flat against me.

"I didn't mean..." I started, but didn't know how to finish. I took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to steady myself. Bella blinked a few times, and I heard her sharp intake of breath before her eyes became a little glassy.

"Bella?"

"Mmm hmm?" She looked right into my eyes with her lips just barely parted, still breathing deeply and completely stunned.

"I do want you," I said softly.

"You do?" Her voice sounded like it did when she talked in her sleep.

I pulled one of my arms from around her, and stroked her cheek with the back of my hand, like she did to me. I brushed stray hairs from her forehead, tucking them back behind her ear.

"I want you like that man outside the concert hall last night." The monster came out of the dark hole in my head where he usually stayed until he was hungry. "And like the jogger today."

My fingers traced down the curve of her neck, and down along her collarbone. I pushed the unzipped jacket she wore off her shoulder, showing her pale skin and strap of her tank top. I leaned over her, my lips coming into contact with her recently exposed skin. I kissed her softly up her shoulder, listening to her heart rate increase as I got closer to her throat.

When I reached her neck, I let my tongue draw across the pulsing vein under her skin. She shivered. I moved up to her ear, taking her earlobe gently in my mouth, tasting her. I whispered in her ear, that husky voice I barely recognized as my own coming out of my throat again.

"I want to bury myself in your body, Bella," I said. The cool air across her ear caused her to shiver again. "I want to feel the heat of you surround me. I want to use your body to satisfy my lust while I use your blood to satisfy my thirst. I'm not sure why I don't."

The monster smiled and used my hand to reach for the back of her neck. I exhaled over her mouth and nose while my fingers threaded through her hair. I pulled her lips to mine, placing the smallest amount of pressure against her, and feeling her mouth yield to me. My other hand moved to her waist, holding her closer.

Bella's body relaxed against my grip, and her back leaned against the arm of the couch. I opened my mouth against hers, letting my tongue caress her lips. Her mouth opened to me, and I knew my influence over her was total. My tongue reached into her mouth, and I discovered a completely new taste – different from her skin and her blood. She was magnificent – every part of her. How many more flavors could she have? I needed to taste them all. The hand at her waist moved up and my thumb came into contact with the bottom curve of her breast.

My body started reacting to her taste in ways I wasn't completely prepared to acknowledge. I was suddenly, acutely aware of my arousal pressed firmly against Bella's thigh. The monster grinned and growled in appreciation and anticipation, and I wasn't sure if I would be able to stop what I had started.

Not like this.

I hadn't planned this. I wasn't going to influence her like this. I wasn't going to do this to her. I wasn't going to tell her these things. I wasn't going to scare her even more into thinking I would take advantage of

her in this way. I didn't want her to know how much I desired her body. *Well, she knows now.*

So much for subtlety.

Chapter End Notes

Getting a little closet there, Edward. Is he going to blow it?

"Blow it" – hehehe.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 – Greed and Need

Sensations inundated every part of my body.

The scent of her skin, her hair, her blood – the feeling of her warm body under mine, the taste of her tongue – it was overpowering. I couldn't handle all the feelings in my body and my head, and at the same time I could not get enough. I wanted more of her. I wanted to touch her skin without all this fabric in between – everywhere. I wanted to feel her hands on my body – everywhere. I wanted her mouth on me – everywhere. Above all else, I desperately, desperately wanted to be inside her.

I had to find a way to get some kind of control back, but I didn't know how. I hovered above her, looking down at her face, her body.

Bella's back was bent slightly over the arm of the sofa, with the fingers of my left hand twisted into the hair at the base of her neck. The fingers of my other hand trailed along her ribs, dangerously close to her breast. I brought my hand up, my thumb daring to glance over her nipple. I could feel it harden against my cold digit. Bella whimpered, and I brought my lips back down to cover hers. I tasted her mouth with my tongue, running it along hers. My lips molded against her mouth, licking, touching, caressing, and tasting, tasting, tasting...

Part of mind kept screaming at me to stop what I was doing. Let her go, back away, run away – anything. Another part just wanted more, and demanded that I take her – make her mine. Stake a physical claim to her, and prove she wasn't to be touched by anyone else. But if I took her like this, would she ever let me hold her again?

With a grunt, I pulled my mouth from her and dropped my head down to her shoulder. My lips immediately latched on to her skin, kissing

her along her collarbone and back up to her neck. Her scent was everywhere around me - in the air, on my hands, in my hair, on my tongue. My throat burned, and I could taste the venom in my mouth mixing with the taste of her tongue.

I couldn't stop myself, and I couldn't do this to her. She didn't want this. She didn't want *me*. She was only compliant because I had made her so. If she didn't hate me before, surely she would now.
Stop breathing on her!

"Bella, tell me to stop," I begged. I kissed her neck, her jaw, around her chin and back down the other side. "I can't...I can't stop this on my own – *please!* "

"Edward?" Bella's voice wrapped around my mind, and penetrated it. "Edward... what...?"

"Make me stop," I could barely whisper the words into her ear. "I don't want to do this...not like this...please...tell me to stop."

"Edward, stop."

Because the words came from her lips, I did stop. I stopped everything I could. I stopped breathing. I stopped moving. I tried to convince my hand to release her, but my fingers wouldn't immediately respond to my mental commands. So I just froze with my fist tangled in her hair, my lips grazing against her neck and my palm against the underside of her breast. The monster reminded me that my erection was close enough to her center that I could tear through our clothing, and sheath myself in her in less than a second.

With a grunt, I hurled myself off of her, away from the couch, out the door and down the stairs, where I was just as unable to advance into the sunlight as I had been before. I resisted the urge to scream out a word that had rarely passed my lips during my existence. Instead, I ripped the remaining piece of handrail I hadn't gotten to before off the wall and pulverized it. Once that was done, I found myself sitting

on the ground in a dark corner under the stairs. It was a fitting place for a vampire, really.

I could hear Bella up in the apartment, through the din of voices and thoughts of other building residents. I could hear her rapid heartbeat slow back to a more normal speed along with each breath she took. I knew when she started crying, and when she stopped.

My fingers grappled with my hair and I wrapped my arms around my head. She had to hate me now. I had been so obviously ready to violate her body after I had promised her I would not. Her contempt for me was nothing but expected.

All she had done was try to make me feel better. My dead heart felt like it was tearing when I realized she might never do that again. I had felt peace in her arms, a peace unlike any I had ever felt under any other conditions, ever. Why did I ruin it? Because I'm a selfish, self-serving monster, that's why. That coupled with my complete inability to know a good thing when I see it, which made me an ignorant, selfish, self-serving monster.

Bella's footsteps approached the door of the flat, and I heard it open. I listened to her descend the stairs and peer through the doorway onto the street. She didn't see me back in the dark under the stairs. Maybe that was for the best. I didn't think I could face her, anyway.

I dropped my forehead to my knees and linked my hands in front of my calves. Bella looked back and forth outside the doorway, then turned and looked into the darkness of the corridor and the stairwell.

"Edward?" Her voice sounded hoarse. "Are you there?"

I sighed, both wanting to answer her and wanting to be left to my purgatory. From where did all of this constant ambivalence come?

"Yes," I said simply. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the concrete wall behind me.

She approached and knelt down beside me, her hand reaching out to touch mine. I pulled it away from her. I didn't want her to comfort me, and I knew that was what she intended.

"If you try to make me feel better about what I've done, I may tear this building to pieces."

"Will you at least talk to me?"

"No."

"You can be extremely frustrating, you know."

"I'm sorry." How many 'sorrys' was I up to now? Had I hit a thousand yet?

"Edward, look at me." I didn't move and kept my lids closed. I sensed her move closer to kneel down next to me.

I felt her hands cup my face, imploring me to do their bidding. I allowed her to shift my position, and I sat up from the wall a little. She pulled my head up at the same height as hers, but I turned my head to the side, eyes still closed, still not daring to breathe with her so close. I didn't want to look into her sensual, beautiful eyes and see the hatred there. I didn't want to hear her say she wanted to leave.

"Edward, cut it out," Bella chided. "I don't hate you and I'm not going anywhere. Stop thinking that."

I looked up at her, eyes wide and shock washing over my face.

"No, I'm not reading your mind, either," she said. "You really are just that predictable. Now come back upstairs."

"Come back?" Would she really let me close to her again?

"Yes," Bella said, motioning with her hand. "You're still upset. You just got a little...sidetracked."

Did she even realize what I had tried to do to her? Did my vampire brand of hypnosis rob her of her memory?

"Come on, Edward." Bella stood and extended her hand to me. My arm acted without my consent, which seemed to be an increasing trend where Bella was concerned, and reached out to accept her offer. I stood and followed her back to the flat, where she sat me on the sofa and, incredibly, pulled me back into her embrace.

All my muscles bunched up inside me, both craving and fearing her touch. It was her fingers in my hair that did it - that and her soft murmured words next to my ear. I slowly began to relax against her, taking slow deep breaths and letting her aroma envelope me again. I dropped my head against her shoulder and let her fingers work over me.

"I'm not exactly sure what just happened," Bella's voice hit me like ice. "But I don't want to talk about it right now. We will be talking about it later. For now, just relax."

"I'm sorry," I heard myself repeating. Bella shushed me and stroked her fingers from my head down my back. I could still feel the tension in her body, and it set me on edge. I lay in her arms completely still. I didn't want her to think I was going to try anything else.

"I'm sorry," I whispered again, tentatively letting my arms encircle her waist again.

"Hush," Bella said. "Not now."

I stayed there in her arms while her breathing slowed and she fell asleep. I wanted to look at her, but I didn't want to move and wake her up. It seemed to me that if she fell asleep in the middle of the day like she had, she must need to. Didn't she sleep well last night? Does stress cause a need for sleep? I wasn't sure, but it seemed plausible. I managed to tilt my head just enough so I could look at her face without jostling her awake. She didn't appear stressed, but around her eyes was still a little red.

I lay my head back on her shoulder, closed my eyes and pretended I could join her in slumber.

"Don't you have something to show me?"

Bella sat her teacup down on the kitchen table and looked at me with a wry expression. I didn't know what she meant until I saw her gesture towards the front window, bathed in the afternoon sunlight. I took a deep breath, wondering if I should really show myself to her like this. I hated the way our skin looked in the sunlight. It was truly repulsive, inhuman, and monstrous.

"Are you sure you want to see this?" I asked, hoping against hope she would suddenly change her mind.

"Pretty sure," Bella said. "Unless it's going to hurt you."

"No," I reassured her. "It won't hurt."

"I seriously doubt anything you show me is going to..." Bella began to mumble, but stopped in mid-sentence.

"Going to what?"

"Never mind."

What didn't she want to say? That I couldn't possibly scare her any more than I already do? Since she was obviously going to push it, I guess I was going to find out. I unbuttoned my shirt and shrugged it off, dropping it over one of the small kitchen chairs. I closed my eyes and moved into the beams filtering in from the window. I could feel the mild warmth - nothing compared to Bella's touch - on my chest and shoulders. Immediately after I felt the change in temperature, I heard Bella gasp.

My eyes remained closed. I couldn't stand seeing the look of horror on Bella's face when she saw how completely inhuman I really was. I

heard the sound of her feet shuffling towards me. The warmth of her fingertips on my chest eclipsed the heat from the sunlight.

"Edward," Bella gasped. "You are...breathtaking."

Apparently, even vampires could be hard of hearing, because I knew I hadn't heard that right.

Bella's fingers trailed down my chest, and I opened my eyes, fighting the urge to pull away. I didn't want her to see me like this, let alone touch me. I was monstrously inhuman.

Her hand grasped mine and I let her hold it up to the light, turning first the back of my hand to face the window, and then my palm. I watched her staring at my skin in wonder and fascination. Her other hand reached out for my shoulder, running down my arm.

"Do you mind?"

"No," I breathed. "That feels...incredible."

"It's like you are covered in diamond dust." Bella's fingertip traced the outline of my chest muscles, then moved down to the defined lines on my stomach. Looking down at her face, I could see her eyes following the path of her hand. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, biting down on it. I thought about how her lips and tongue had tasted earlier in the day. I stopped breathing and tried to force the images of Bella bent over the sofa arm from my head.

"There is no doubt," Bella marveled, her eyes turning upwards to meet mine. "You are the most beautiful creature that ever existed."

"Beautiful?" I echoed, disgusted. I shook my head.

"I feel kind of ridiculous next to you."

"Why would you feel like that?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Bella dropped her eyes back to my chest. "You look like... *this* . I'm about as plain as I could be."

Her remark made me angry.

"Bella, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You have the most sensual touch I have ever felt. Your eyes look into me and I think maybe you can find my soul. The smell of your skin, your hair - it's like spring in a meadow. You are gentle, and selfless and you gave up everything to save a child who will never know what you did for him."

"I kill. I have to hide the color of my eyes because they betray what I am. I am soulless and selfish and I have taken everything away from you. I apologize to you for what I have done to you, but I have every intension of doing it again and again. I am a monster. You should be embarrassed to be with me, just not for the asinine reason you believe."

"Edward," Bella reached up to stroke my cheek. "I know what you are better than anyone. I know how you see yourself. But you aren't really like this. You're just lost right now. I'm going to help you find your way back."

I wanted to believe her, but at the moment it was more important that she believe me. I reached up and grazed my knuckles over her cheekbone.

"Maybe we can help each other see the truth."

On the morning of the third day, I left Bella to peruse Carlisle's first edition of *The Professor* back at the flat, while I ran southeast to hunt. I needed the blood, yes, but mostly I needed to be away from her. I was agitated and thirsty. Every time I looked at her, all I could think about was the taste of her blood and her tongue.

There were plenty of red deer in the area, whose blood tasted absolutely foul, and grazing sheep were everywhere. The sheep tended to be guarded by dogs, which picked out my scent quickly and herded the flocks away. I considered going after one of the dogs, but something told me Bella wouldn't like that too much. There weren't any predators to speak of in the area, so I stuck with the deer. It was revolting. I was going to have to move us somewhere where I could get a decent meal. But was there anything I could consider decent knowing what awaited me back home?

It was late when I returned, and Bella had finished her book and her evening meal. She was busying herself washing the day's dishes. I grabbed some clean clothes and went into the bath, too tense to say anything to her. The monster was fully awake inside of me, and he was not the least bit impressed with his hoofed appetizers, despite the gluttonous number of them he had consumed. I filled the tub part way, washed myself off quickly, and then changed into more comfortable clothing.

When I walked out, Bella had finished her cleaning and changed into her sleeping attire. She wore dark blue sweatpants and a white camisole with lace around the neck and waistlines. She sat with her back up against the arm of the sofa – the same place I had nearly taken her yesterday. I had no words to describe how beautiful she was, or how wonderful she smelled. My throat burned, despite the resent meal.

"Are you ready?" Bella asked. She was actually smiling at me. It didn't look particularly convincing, but she was certainly making the effort.

"Ready?" I raised an eyebrow at her. As if there was ever a time when I wasn't ready for her. She blushed and I felt my hands curl into fists. It took some effort to force them open again.

"It's time, right?" Bella looked down at her hands. I realized this was it – she was really going to offer her blood to me, willingly. It was hard for her, it had to be terrifying, and I didn't think there was

anything I could do to make it any easier, because I was much to close to jumping on her right now. Venom flowed into my mouth and my muscles ached to reach out and restrain her against the couch cushions.

"Yes."

Bella placed a torn piece of paper between the pages of her book and lay it down on the end table. She stood and headed for her room, pausing next to me just long enough to take my hand in her shaky one, and lead me to her bed.

Bella dropped my hand when she neared the bed, sat on the edge and looked at the floor. She clasped her hands into the material of the quilt, but it only succeeded in making the fabric quake as well. She took a deep breath, and then looked back up to me.

It was her idea to offer her blood to me. I never would have asked. Now, I could see her fear more clearly than when I had taken it from her. It's not that I was surprised, the monster was simply too impatient to wait for her to work it out in her head. I needed her and the monster needed her *now*. Her visible fear drove the primal instincts within me to the surface.

"Bella," I began, but what could I say? I was going to take her blood, irrespective of her offer. I swallowed hard, but the flow of venom didn't cease. I needed her blood in me.

"No," Bella protested. "I said I would, and I will. I just didn't think it would be as..."

"Stop analyzing, Bella!" I yelled at her, and she jumped. I tried to soften my voice, but it just didn't seem to work. "It doesn't matter if you give or I take. In the end, I'm going to get what I want. Just stop analyzing."

"Edward," Bella's voice held a note of...warning? My hands clenched back into fists and I stopped breathing. "I told you I would do this

willingly and I will."

"Bella," I tried not to let my words sound like a snarl, "*I need you.*"

"I know...just give me a second, please." She took a deep breath and beckoned me to come to her. Her hand found my fist and pulled at the clenched fingers. She took one more shaky breath, and then raised her other hand, turning her palm up and exposing the vein on the inside of her arm.

Unable to pause for even a fraction of a second, I grabbed her wrist and my fingernail tore into it. I heard Bella's cry of pain, but the sound was overwhelmed by my other senses. As soon as her blood hit the back of my throat I dropped next to the edge of the bed, kneeling between Bella's legs. I held her arm to my lips with one hand, and snaked the other around her hips at the edge of the bed. I pulled her closer to me, and felt her trembling hand on my shoulder.

Every time was like the last time, which was like the first time. The fire in my throat disappeared. The ache in my muscles declined. The feeling of desperation that had been growing all day relinquished its hold on me and left me with an unquestionable sense of relief.

As the number of drops counted in my head neared the maximum I would risk, I became aware of Bella's hand on me, her fingers tightly gripping my shoulder. The last mouthful of blood flowed over my tongue and down my throat. I sealed the wound and tentatively glanced up.

Bella's eyes were closed tightly in a grimace. I raised myself up and took her in my arms, whispering my apologies and my thanks to her. I lifted her easily and pulled her into the bed with me. I lay my head back against the coiled wrought iron headboard and fought the urge to sigh in contentment. It didn't seem quite right when Bella was still recovering.

After a few minutes, I retrieved her snack and watched her finish it. Once she was done, she settled back into my arms. It felt like home

to have her there again.

Bella's hand graced over my chest, resting atop my dead heart. I turned my head to envelop myself in the scent of her hair, and relished the feeling of her warmth against me. I wondered if this is what it was like for the couples in my family...my *former* family, I reminded myself...when they touched. I wanted to call Alice and ask her, but I was afraid she wouldn't answer. I didn't think I could handle that. My phone was still devoid of any messages. Not that I would have responded to them anyway, but I didn't realize how much I counted on the messages to be there until they were gone. Now I didn't have the luxury of ignoring them.

Bella's voice broke the silence of my thoughts.

"Edward, we need to talk about what happened yesterday."

Oh no. I had honestly thought maybe I had gotten away with it, that maybe she didn't really remember what had occurred. I didn't know the particulars around our unique brand of olfactory hypnosis. I knew it created a sense of calm compliance and a heightened susceptibility to suggestion, but nothing about duration, side effects, or lasting consequences. I never needed to know.

"What did you do to me?"

"I promise you Bella," I couldn't look at her. "I swear to you I didn't mean to...make you...like that."

"Like what, Edward?"

I winced. I was starting to wonder if part of her probe into my psyche was purely sadistic. She wanted me to spell everything out for her, about topics I really didn't care to discuss.

"Our smell, our scent...it is like a neural chemical drug to your system. When we feed, it stops our prey from attempting escape, as if you could escape from one of us. That mild dose just from being in

our proximity is enough to make most people do exactly what we ask, but only if the action makes some sense."

"Explain that, please."

"Well, like Mrs. Cope, in the school office," I remembered. "I tried to get moved out of your biology class. I thought maybe if I just kept away from you, maybe I wouldn't kill you. She would have been happy to oblige, though my reasons were empty and didn't really make sense, she didn't question them. She would still have done it, but all the other classes were full. But what I did to you..."

"Go on."

"Our scent comes from inside, our essence, our very core. It is most concentrated in our breath. So when you inhale as I exhale, you get a much higher concentration. It can make you very susceptible to suggestion, like hypnosis. Even if it were something that doesn't make sense, or something you wouldn't normally do. Something you don't want to do."

"So you tried to hypnotize me into having sex with you."

"No!" I cried. "I mean, I wasn't trying to...to do that. I mean...I didn't do it on purpose. I only wanted to be close to you. It just...happened."

"Your mouth just happened to cover mine?"

"No," I said softly. I obviously hadn't gotten away with anything. She knew exactly what I had done to her, or at least, tried to do to her. There wasn't any reason not to admit my guilt. "It didn't. I just couldn't help but...take advantage...of the situation."

I met her eyes for the first time in a while, but the look on her face caused me to turn away in shame.

"I thought you might want to leave. The idea that you might be lost to me...I can't even think about it. I would go mad. I needed to be closer to you. I was...I was scared. I wanted to..." *be inside you* , my mind finished, but I couldn't utter the words, not now. I still wasn't sure how much she remembered.

"Edward," Bella sighed and tilted my head to look at her, "I know I have said this before, but I guess I'll keep saying it. I am not going anywhere."

"Why not?"

"You've asked this question before."

"I know," I said. "I have never received a satisfactory answer."

"I don't want you hurting anyone else," Bella dismissed, looking away from me.

"There is more to it than that," I chided.

"Yes, there is."

"What is it?" If I had to beg her to explain it, I would. She paused for several seconds before she answered.

"You need me, Edward," Bella finally responded. "You really physically and emotionally need me. You don't just need someone, you need *me* , specifically. I don't really understand why, but I know it now even more than before. If I left you, you would suffer." She shrugged, like that was all there was to know.

"But now you suffer," I pointed out.

Bella rolled on her other side, and I dared to slide my top arm around her waist, crossing with my other arm, which was now pinned underneath her body. I didn't think it could feel very comfortable, but until she complained, I wasn't going to move. Holding her like this was simply too exquisite. I frowned against her neck, wishing again

that I knew her thoughts and loving the silence of her mind all at once.

"It's better than the alternative."

Better than the alternative? What could be better from her standpoint? She would rather suffer herself than to think that I was suffering? She didn't make any sense. I couldn't accept this. She had to understand where this would eventually lead. Didn't she know? Did I have to spell this out as well?

"You do realize, someday I'm going to kill you."

"Probably," Bella said. Bella nestled her head into the crook of my arm, both of her arms wrapped around mine. "Maybe if you hold off killing me long enough, someday I'll have sex with you."

I lay there in shock, unable to process her words, let alone respond to them. Every time they echoed through my head, it brought such a confusing series of emotions I couldn't cope with the influx of mental data.

Her back lay to my chest with its wondrous, soft warmth pressed tight against my cold, hard flesh. I listened to her breathing regulate in sleep. There was so much more I wanted to say to her – words that seemed unable to come out of my mouth when she questioned my motivations. Not because I doubted them, but because I was too cowardice to utter them. Now I found I wanted to tell her.

"Bella," I whispered to her sleeping form. "I never knew what it could be like. In a hundred years I never knew anyone like you. You are so unlike every mind I have ever heard. You continually keep me guessing and I never know how you will react. I've only seen through the minds of others, never their hearts. I never imagined what it could be like just to have someone hold me, or to hold someone. I never knew I could feel like this."

"I wish I could take it all back, erase the pain I have caused you. I wish I could go back to your first day of school and be the person who had the control to resist your scent. Maybe if I had, I could have stayed away from you and you could live a normal life."

I thought about that for a moment.

"No, I probably wouldn't have been able to do that, either. Maybe I could have at least been a friend to you, or even...courted you. I wish I were good enough for you. It's you - only you – that could ever have made me feel the way I do right now."

"Your selflessness staggers me. I take from you in the most hideous manner, and it's totally unforgivable. But instead of loathing, you give yourself to me in a way no one should ever have to do. My family...my *former* family...may never forgive me for what I am doing to you, and they shouldn't. And I find that it doesn't matter as much as the idea that you will never forgive me for what I have done. If I thought somehow that you could, I would find a way...somehow...to be worthy of you. I would find a way to stop hurting you. I don't want to hurt you anymore. I would find a way to be worthy of you, because I...I..."

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes.

"Bella, I love you."

I hadn't realized it before that moment. Only when the words actually left my mouth, did I know. *I'm in love.*

So much for rapacity.

Chapter End Notes

There! He finally said it.

Do you think Edward understands love?

Do you think Bella realizes how he feels?

Again, I'm thrilled by the response to reporting this. Y'all are amazing! It's almost as fun as it was posting it originally!

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 – Know and Tell

I lay with her, lightly kissing her hair, listening to her mumbled words and basking in the understanding that I held the woman I loved.

In all of my many, many years I had never felt such contentment as I did the moment I realized I loved her. All of my life had led up to that point, and I understood everything I had accomplished during my life had all been for her. The first few years with Carlisle when I had learned all the self-control I could learn – it was so I didn't kill her that first day. Attending high school over and over again wasn't purely purgatory – it was my opportunity to find her and be with her. Even learning the piano wasn't just a distraction to occupy my mind and hands – it was so I could later play for her.

Mumbled words came from the sleeping woman beside me, but nothing that made any sense. I stroked my hand over her arm and hummed Chopin's Nocturnes softly in her ear. She seemed to relax back into sleep, though I was sure she would wake before too long. I longed to see her beautiful eyes open again and to hear her soothing voice speak my name.

Would this day be different than the others? I knew I was different, but would there be any difference to Bella? Would she know how I felt about her? Would I tell her? *Should* I tell her? If she knew how I felt, how would she react?

She would go running and screaming out the door, most likely. That would be the only rational reaction to having your vampire tormentor declare himself to you. I cringed at the thought. No, I would not tell her, not until I was sure how the words would be received. Maybe it would be best to show her instead. I would do everything in my power to make her happy today. If I could do that – if I could show

her I loved her – maybe, just maybe, she could find some way to forgive me for everything I had done to her.

Why would she? Are you planning to stop ?

Would I stop drinking her blood? *Could* I stop? Or would loving Bella cause more problems than it solved?

Of course, the problem wasn't that I loved her; the problem was the monster loved her, too. We both wanted her blood, and we both wanted her body. The only difference between the monster and me was that I didn't want to hurt her, and he couldn't care less. At the moment, he slept, so I pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind, deciding I would deal with him only when it became necessary. I knew this line of thinking was a grave mistake, but I was far too interested in my newfound revelation to dwell on it too much.

The soft form in my arms swirled slowly around until she was curled against my chest with her head tucked under my arm. Bella's hair was everywhere, wrapped around her face, tangled in the blanket, and tickling my nose. Her natural scent mixed with the smell of shampoo and sleep. I resisted the urge to hold her tighter, but not the urge to press my lips into her hair.

Bella sighed and her arm stretched out over my torso, coming to rest across my abdomen. She was almost awake. I focused on her heartbeat and breathing – two of my most treasured sounds. When her eyes opened, I felt the corners of mouth turn up. I looked down at her with an overwhelming sense of joy.

"Good morning, Bella," I said, smiling wider.

"Good morning, Edward," Bella responded, looking at me with suspicion. "You're in a good mood this morning."

"Yes," I said, realizing I must have a completely ridiculous grin on my face. "Can I make you breakfast? I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"All right," Bella said, her eyes narrowing at me. Then she smiled and I had to struggle against the impulse to hug her to me. "But I'm going to find a fire extinguisher, just in case."

"There's one in the broom closet," I said, laughing. I lightly pecked her cheek and went to make eggs and bacon. I felt lighter somehow, like the amount of effort it took to raise my feet was less than it had been yesterday.

The bacon might have ended up a little more crisp than when Bella made it, but at least it wasn't black and she claimed the over-easy eggs were perfect. I coated her toast with orange marmalade, which made her go *mmmm* when she bit into it. I watched her lick a little bit from her bottom lip, and had to swallow back the venom pooling in my mouth.

"Where shall we go today?" Bella asked, brushing crumbs from her lips with a napkin. I envied the small square of cloth for a moment before glancing out the window to the sunny patches of grass in the soccer field across the street.

"It is supposed to cloud up this afternoon," I said. I felt the first twinges of panic in my gut. I would not, could not let her leave without me again. I just couldn't stand it. I resisted the urge to drag her back to the bedroom and tie her down, and instead uttered a half-demand, half plea. "Please stay in with me this morning?"

"Stop torturing yourself, Edward," Bella said. She shook her head a little. "I'm not going to go anywhere without you."

"Torturing myself?" I felt instantly more at ease on hearing her words, despite the commentary on my masochistic tendencies. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you were about ten seconds from flipping out thinking I was going to go outside and meet another jogger."

Yes, I had been.

"How do you understand me so well?"

"From Alice, mostly," Bella admitted. "Carlisle also had a lot to say about you, but mostly you are just extremely predictable. They told me a lot about you, though. I think they were trying to get me to understand you weren't normally like that, and that they weren't like that. Carlisle didn't want me to tell Charlie or anyone else what had really happened."

"I see." I thought about this for a while, remembering that they all had talked extensively, but I had made a conscious choice not to listen at the time. I hadn't wanted to hear Bella recount all the horrible things I had done. I hadn't wanted to hear her cry anymore. I didn't consider all the things my family may have said to her. Did they defend my actions? For the first time since we had driven away from them, I thought about calling Alice.

"What did they tell you about me?" I asked, morbidly curious and also pretty sure I didn't want to know.

"Which one?"

"All of them."

"Well," Bella started. "I believe Jasper's sentiments included the words insane and self-absorbed. Honestly, he didn't offer a lot of insight. Alice was more helpful."

"What did my helpful sister tell you?"

"That you had always been alone," Bella's voice dropped a little lower. "And that it was hard for you to be there with the rest of them, always knowing their thoughts. She said you tried hard to give them privacy, but you couldn't turn it off. She said it made you sad to hear your mother worry about you. You tried to please her with music, but after a while, you couldn't bring yourself to play for her anymore."

"She didn't need to bother herself," I shrugged. "Worrying wasn't going to change anything."

"That's what parents do," Bella said. "Worry about their kids."

"I don't think it's quite the same," I told her. I smiled, but didn't really feel it. "After all, I am older than Esme."

"I don't think that matters. Carlisle thought you were punishing yourself."

"Did he?"

"He said you had always had a temper," Bella admitted. "And that you were more likely to direct it at yourself than anyone else. He was afraid you would end up lashing out at me, confusing it with...um...the bloodlust. He also said your control was without compare. He was surprised you couldn't resist me."

"He doesn't understand how you smell to me," I told her. "If he knew...how drawn I was to your blood...well, he still wouldn't condone, obviously, but maybe he'd understand. He has been afraid I would do something like this for a long time. Well, not quite like this. He thought I would leave the family though. He was afraid of how Esme would take it. She didn't react well when I left them before."

"You care for her."

"Esme is very important to me," I said. "I don't remember my birth mother very well. I never wanted to hurt Esme or Carlisle. When I went off on my own, she blamed herself. She thought she had interfered in my relationship with Carlisle. She was right, but of course it wasn't her fault and I never blamed her for it. I was glad he found her. She was so good for him. If he had found her first, he could have saved himself the trouble of changing me. I wouldn't have been in their way."

"I don't think he feels that way."

"Carlisle has always been good at hiding his thoughts from me," I dismissed. "It would have been easier for everyone if I had stayed away, but you may have noticed I'm somewhat selfish. I was lonely, and I wanted a family again. I should have known better."

"Known better than what? Wanting to be with your family"

"I didn't fit in," I said. "They pitied me and I resented them for it. It couldn't work."

"They really love you, you know."

"They did," I said softly.

"I don't think love changes quite so quickly."

"I think Carlisle was pretty clear about his feelings," I sighed, eager to change the subject to anything else. Recalling my father's rejection was not a memory in which I wished to indulge. "Besides, it doesn't matter now. Tell me what you would like to do later today?"

"Maybe it's best if we stay here?"

Oh please, yes . I didn't want to take her to see the sights of London. I wanted her to myself. I wanted to spend the day exploring a hundred different ways of showing her how much I loved her.

It suddenly occurred to me I didn't have the slightest idea what that might entail. I hadn't courted a girl in...well, ever. Not that I remembered. Several things sprung immediately to mind, none of which seemed like the appropriate place to begin. If I was as adept at trying to win her affections as I was at making breakfast, I was going to end up screwing it up and possibly make things worse. My stomach tightened again.

So, what was I supposed to do? Send for flowers? All I really wanted to do was touch her, and have her touch me. What could I do or say that would end up with her holding me? Just come out and ask her

to? Be subtle about it? Maybe I should help her with her dishes, and in the act of changing from rinsing to drying, surreptitiously brush against her arm...

Or maybe I was much better off being completely honest and straightforward. *Bella, I love you, and I'd really like to discuss what you said last night about having sex with me, because I really, really, really want to do that...*

"Edward," Bella was looking at me from across the table. "What are you thinking?"

I swallowed hard.

"I was thinking that I wanted to ask you something," I told her. Of course, once I had opened my mouth, I didn't have the slightest idea what words to release. "And I wasn't sure how to say it."

"Just say it."

"I don't think it would be...appropriate."

"Appropriate?" Bella laughed, and it sounded bitter. "Edward, most of what's going on here is as inappropriate as it could be. I don't think one inappropriate question is going to tip the scales too much."

I looked down at my hand, which appeared to be forming a tight little fist against the tabletop. She was right, of course. What had had been my proper actions? That would be a much shorter list. Irrespective of my past actions, I couldn't just come out and ask her to touch me.

She was looking at me, waiting for my response. I didn't know what to say.

Just say it.

"I wanted to ask you about what you said last night."

Well, now you're stuck with it.

"Before or after you said you were going to kill me?"

"Um...after." Bella looked down at her hand in her lap, her cheeks slowly changing to bright pink. I closed my eyes and stopped breathing, trying to ignore the increased burn in my throat. She was quite for a good long time. I couldn't bring myself to look.

"I don't want to die, Edward," Bella finally whispered. "I mean, I thought about it in the beginning...that maybe it would be better if you just killed me. But I don't want to die."

"I don't want to kill you."

"But you think you will." It was a statement, not a question. "If you kill me, you wouldn't be able to...um...do anything else...with me. And you want to."

"Yes," I said softly.

"And you said you wouldn't...make me...do that."

"I crave your body almost as much as your blood," I admitted. "But I will never, never force myself on you, Bella, I swear."

"I believe you. I'm also pretty resigned to what's going on here. I have the feeling I'm going to be with you a long time. Regardless of when I die or how, I know one thing..."

"What?" I said, when the pause became too much for me to bear.

"I don't want to die a virgin."

Bella asked me to come to bed with her that night and the next, but we didn't talk like we had after I drank from her. That was okay with me, though - I was perfectly satisfied just holding on to her and feeling her body against mine. I considered bringing up our breakfast conversation, but I thought the very best thing I could probably do

was wait for her to decide to talk about it. I would sit back and be patient.

I wasn't very good at patience, especially feeling the heat of her skin so close to me. My mind wandered on more than one occasion. As soon as I started thinking about how soft her lips were, the taste of her skin, or the way her nipple responded to my cool touch, venom flowed into my mouth and drove the thoughts to other pleasures. The first night it was tolerable. The second night, the monster woke up and taunted me with the scent of her blood until I had to leave the room. I went hunting early that day, trying to focus my mind on anything but Bella.

I wasn't very good at that, either.

I took my frustrations out on any decent sized herbivore that got too close to me, but I didn't feel any more satisfied afterwards, just sloshy. Walking back into London in the early afternoon, I found myself peering into the minds of the people around me, looking for something, but I didn't know what it was.

Oh yes, you know. You were looking for someone violent, because you wanted to drain them.

I wouldn't do that. I promised I wouldn't. She would know. Bella would know by my eyes.

At that point, they were more caramel brown than the strange orange color that had become my norm, caused by the mixing of my mostly vegetarian diet, with a small dose of Bella's blood on the side. If I completely drained a human, my eyes would be crimson very quickly.

Just a taste...a taste...

No!

I managed to argue with myself long enough to return to the flat without doing anything to cause Bella to deny me her blood. I didn't want that to happen. I'd take it anyway, but to have her offer was so much sweeter. It did make a difference to me that she was willing, though it seemed to have upset her just as much as when I just took it.

I walked through the door and up the stairway, pausing about half way up the four flights. I was listening for Bella's heartbeat, her breathing, her feet moving across the floor or the pages of a book turning. I heard nothing. I quickened my step and entered the flat, calling her name. No response.

Every muscle tensed. I fought back the urge to scream. My breathing came quicker, searching out her scent and finding it stale. She had been gone for at least an hour. *Where? Why?*

I whirled around and back into the hallway, locating her scent and mine. There was another human smell, also stale, but no older than hers. It was less concentrated. Had someone taken her? Did she leave on her own? Did she just go to take a walk in the park and I hadn't seen her? My mind raced over a hundred possible reasons for her absence, each one bringing me into a higher state of panic.

I raced down the stairs and to the street, pausing long enough to collect myself and slow my pace to a more human level. It took a lot of effort not to go at top speed. I captured her scent and followed it down the street. The other, unknown human's scent was with her. I felt a growl begin in my chest, but pushed it down. The monster called for human blood. Whoever was with her was going to die for taking her away from me.

I moved as quickly as I could without drawing any suspicious looks from humans on the street. After about seven blocks of tracking, the trail ended at the entrance to a corner store. I just barely kept from ripping the door off the hinges to get in, my eyes darting around, searching for my love.

I saw her almost immediately – to the left of the door, near a cash register. She had a small grocery bag under one arm and was speaking to the cashier, laughing.

She's safe, she's safe, she's safe, my mind chanted. I tried to focus on that fact, and not the urge to kill everyone in the store.

"You will have to come back and visit Martin," the cashier said with a smile. "I think he's quite taken with you!"

"I would love to!" Bella grinned and laughed again. "He's so cute!"

Who the hell was Martin? *Cute?*

"Bella," I said, trying to control my voice, but it came out as a growl anyway.

"Edward!" Bella's eyes moved quickly from me, to the cashier and back again. She started moving towards me with a look of trepidation. Through the cashier's mind, I could see my black eyes blazing at her. "You're back."

Oh my, the cashier looked me over with a combination of attraction and fear. She took a small step backwards, putting more distance between us as I approached Bella.

"I got back a few minutes ago," I told her. "I wasn't expecting you to be...gone."

Bella reached out with her free hand and stopped my forward movement with her palm on my chest.

"I thought I would get back before you," she said. "We were just talking, and she said I could pay for the groceries later since I helped..."

"You were *gone*," I interrupted with a snarl.

"Let's head back home and I'll explain on the way," she said, looking straight into my eyes and putting a little pressure against my skin. I focused on the minds in the store, looking for this *Martin*. There was someone in the back of the store, someone I couldn't see. In his mind, images of Bella holding his hand in hers and walking with her down the street delighted him. My fingers clenched and I took an involuntary step towards the door leading to the back of the shop. *How dare he touch her!*

"Edward," Bella repeated my name softly until I looked to her. Bella placed herself between the cashier and me, pushing as hard as she could against my chest. Her hand vibrated along with the growl housed within me. "Please, let's go. I'll explain."

"It was good to meet you both!" Bella exclaimed over her shoulder before I let her push me towards the door. She stayed between us while I allowed her to direct my movements out of the shop and onto the sidewalk outside.

"Edward," Bella started. "Relax."

"*Relax*?" I yelled. I stopped on the sidewalk and grabbed her arm, turning her around to face me. The sack of groceries tumbled to the ground. "*You were gone*!"

"Ow! Edward, let go!"

I wasn't about to let go, not now that I had her back in my reach. I absolutely was not going to take the risk she would be gone again. How was I going to hunt if I couldn't leave her alone? If I didn't hunt often, I could lose control with her. I couldn't take that risk, either. How could she leave? *Who the hell was Martin?*

"Don't ever, ever leave like that again!" A couple across the street looked over to us, quizzically. I reached down and grabbed the grocery sack by the handles, then started down the sidewalk with Bella in tow.

"You're scaring me," I could hardly hear her whisper. "Please, stop."

I looked back at her, and saw there were tears in the corners of her eyes. I was still holding on to her arm, tightly. I relaxed my grip and she winced as the pressure released. What was I doing? *I could have easily broken her arm...*

I had to focus – I had to stop, but I kept replaying the scene in my head – walking into the flat and knowing she wasn't there, the unfamiliar scent in the stairwell – *Martin's scent* . I heard myself growl. I led her back into the hallway of the apartment building, backed her up against the wall and released her arm. I put my hands on either side of her face, looking into her eyes.

"Don't leave me!" It came out a plea as much as a command. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to regain some level of control over myself. *Don't hurt her, don't hurt her...*

"Please calm down," she whispered, her hand reaching out to touch my cheek. I trembled under her fingers and tried to do as she said.

"Who is Martin?" I snarled, not really meaning to, but it just came out that way.

"A seven-year-old boy who couldn't find his way back to his mother's store," Bella said. "Now will you please relax?"

A seven-year-old? I took a deep breath, trying to wrap my head around her words as we stood there by the doorway. The sun was setting behind the clouds, and a cool breeze blew through the opening. It smelled of coming spring and Bella. I touched my forehead to hers and tried to slow my desperate breathing.

"Please," I begged. "Don't leave again."

"Edward, let's go upstairs, okay?"

I felt myself nod and made sure I was touching her as we ascended the steps. Once inside, she took the grocery bag from me and headed into the kitchen. I stayed right behind her, my hand reaching out and touching the small of her back. She put the items from the bag into the icebox and turned back to me.

"You are a mess," she said simply. I dropped my eyes to the floor, unable to argue with her observation.

"Did I hurt you?" I asked quietly.

"Yes," she responded. "But I'm pretty sure I'll be fine."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Bella," I said, shaking my head. What had I been thinking? Her bones were so fragile, and I had held her arm too tightly. "I don't know why I reacted that way."

"Edward, you're jealous."

"What?" How could she possibly think that?

"That's why you react that way," she said, like I should have already known. "You don't like the idea of sharing me with anyone."

"Share you?" I shouted, again, realizing as I did it that I was only confirming her speculation. Is that what this feeling I had was? Jealousy? I hated it.

"Edward, think about it." Bella reached up and placed her palm against my jaw. My eyelids lowered and I leaned into her touch. "When do you get the most upset?"

"When you're gone," I said immediately. "I think you aren't coming back. I don't want to lose you. You are the most important thing to me."

"You mean drinking my blood is the most important thing," she corrected me.

"No," I looked back up into her deep brown eyes. "I mean, it is, but not just your blood. I need *you* ."

"I know you do, Edward." I closed my eyes and she started to stroke my cheek.

"Will you...." I hesitated, not knowing how to ask for what I needed.

"Will I what, Edward?"

"Hold on to me," I said softly, ashamed to be asking. I almost hoped she would deny me. I needed it, but I didn't deserve her touch.

"Come on," Bella said, without hesitation. She took me to the sofa and pulled me against her, her hands went into my hair, pulling my head down to her shoulder.

Home.

"Am I really jealous?" I asked her.

"Well, let's see," Bella held up one finger, and then added more as she ticked off her list. "First it was the man outside the concert, then the jogger, then a little boy. What do you think?"

"I think you forgot the piano tuner."

"I didn't know about the piano tuner."

"He thought you were beautiful. I wanted to kill him."

"Edward," Bella snapped. I heard the anger in her voice. "We made a deal – no deaths."

"I don't know how many more times I can apologize to you," I said. "I can't control myself when it comes to you. I can't focus. When I think someone wants to take you from me..."

I shuddered.

"If this is jealousy, it is the most horrible feeling I have ever known." I raised my head from her shoulder and looked at her. "Deal or not, if someone tried to take you from me, I would kill them."

"Edward, you promised..."

"I can't let anyone take you from me – I can't be without you, Bella. I honestly don't know if I could survive."

"That's why I think we probably ought to leave," Bella said decisively. "You didn't have this problem when it was just the two of us in the cabin. I think we should go somewhere more private."

"You would do that?"

"Of course, if it will help. Didn't you say something about an island somewhere?"

"Yes, I can make a call." I started another mental checklist. "We could leave tomorrow and it would be ready by the time we get there in a couple of days."

"Let's do that, then."

How did she know exactly what I needed? Why did she even attempt to give it to me? I wanted to tell her right then how much I loved her, but everything was so perfect, and I didn't want to mess it up.

Bella held me, stroking my hair for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, only pausing long enough to get her book from the end table. She even held the book open with one hand while she comforted me with the other. I got up and made her dinner, when it was time for her to eat, but as soon as she was finished, I crawled back into her arms.

"Have you noticed something?" Bella asked.

"What's that?"

"You are usually quite a bit more...tense about now," Bella said quietly.

She was absolutely right, of course. This time three days ago I was near hysterics needing her blood. Now I was ready for it, wanted it, needed it just as much, but not hysterical. I looked up at her from my favorite position, and smiled. Bella blushed, and I reached up to lay my hand on her cheek

"You are so beautiful when you blush," I said, and the color in her cheeks deepened.

"It's time you know."

"I know." I continued to stroke her cheek.

"We can just stay here on the couch, if you like." I nodded in agreement.

"Will you allow me to try something?"

"What?"

"Don't be afraid," I whispered. I moved up her body until we were eye to eye. My fingers caressed her jaw and down her neck as I leaned over to exhale across her face. Bella's eyes got wider for a moment, and then she blinked rapidly a few times. Her breathing slowed and she stared into my eyes. I felt her muscles give out below me, and I lightly kissed her forehead before breathing over her again.

When she seemed sufficiently dazed, I quickly tore into the vein at her neck and drank. She flinched, but only a little. As her blood poured into my anxious mouth, I felt her hands on my back and her arms wrapping around me, holding me to her. I closed my eyes, relishing the sensations her body and her blood brought to me.

I sat back against the soft leather seats and tried to ignore the mental voices of the flight crew and passengers around me. I was truly looking forward to being alone with Bella, and no one's thoughts in my head except for my own. So far, all had been a smooth and easy trip. Bella packed up a few things from the London flat in the morning while I made the flight arrangements and we left before lunchtime.

Bella looked out the window at the workers loading luggage onto the plane. When the flight attendant asked if we needed anything, Bella jumped a little, and then politely shook her head. She settled back in her seat, reaching out and lightly stroking the top of my hand with her fingers.

Right before the flight crew closed the doors, I smelled him. It wasn't a scent I recognized, but I knew one of my kind was about to step on to the plane, and the woman with the sweetest blood in the world sat next to me. If he realized she was with me, she would be in significant danger. He would want her, too. He would want to take her from me.

And that wasn't just the jealousy talking.

"Bella, listen to me." I pushed Bella's hand away from mine and looked straight into her eyes. "I need you to pretend you do not know me. Understand? You don't know me."

"Why..."

"No time for questions!" I snapped. "Do you understand?"

"All right..."

"Don't even look at me," I muttered, looking towards the door as an all-too-attractive, pale skinned individual with eyes made to appear lavender by the blue contacts he wore. His eyes met mine and he raised his eyebrows briefly before walking past.

Must not be doing too badly for himself if he's in first class.
Interesting. I wonder where he's headed?

I sat a little too stiff and unmoving until after the plane rose into the sky. I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to steady myself and listen to his thoughts.

Should I try to speak with him? He looks to be alone, unless he's meeting someone in Hong Kong. I haven't traveled with anyone for a long time. I wonder if he'd want a hunting comrade?

At least his thoughts were, at this point, relatively benign. He toyed with the idea of speaking with me until we were half way through the flight.

"Staying in Hong Kong," the whispered voice inquired at a tone and speed imperceptible to human ears, "or just passing through?"

"Passing through," I replied, but did not offer any other information.

Curt, isn't he? Should I press? Or is this his way of telling me to get lost?

"Are you meeting someone there?"

"No," I said.

Maybe I should just be blunt?

"Need company? I've been without a coven for some time. It gets a little tiring."

"No," I said. "Sorry – my plans do not include any company. Perhaps some other time."

Well, I guess that answers that question.

"Some other time, then."

He began to brood about a lost coven member from decades ago, wondering why he hadn't managed to form any relationships since then and if he was destined to be alone. I tuned him out, mentally reminding Bella not to speak to me, to make a move towards me. If he saw her with me...I had no idea what his reaction might be, I only knew it wouldn't be good.

I fished a pen out of Bella's bag and wrote on her napkin.

There is another like me on the plane. He cannot think we are together. No matter what, do not look at me or speak to me. Leave the plane first and head to the Air New Zealand counter. I will follow you there.

She read the note and nodded, then tore it to pieces before discarding it inside a half full glass of water. The flight attendant removed it from her tray.

Once we landed, Bella did as I had instructed, picking up her carry-on bag and heading up the ramp and to the airline counters. I followed a good distance behind her, though I never let her leave my sight.

"See you around," the lone vampire said in parting. I didn't turn around, but gave him a nod before he went in the opposite direction, towards the baggage claim area.

Got to love the overly friendly ones.

Mental sarcasm. What was the point of that, anyway? At least he was gone now and I could continue my way to Bella.

I found Bella near the Air New Zealand counter, right where I told her to meet me. We already had our tickets purchased and boarding passes in hand, so I took her and led her back through the terminal where we had already been. There were still a couple of hours before our flight to Auckland, so I bought Bella a snack and we found two seats by the terminal gate.

"Is it okay to talk now?" Bella whispered.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you okay?"

"Mostly," I said, and wondered if it was true. My hands were still clenched into fists around the luggage handles and I had to force myself not to growl. "I think so. There are so many people here – so many minds. It's very hard..."

I felt her hand against my cheek and leaned into it, closing my eyes. Her other hand cupped the other side of my face and I basked in the warmth of her skin. Focusing on her touch, her smell – I could nearly block out all the sounds around me, mental and physical. I was like we were really alone, even if I knew it wouldn't last. Our island would be like this – perfectly peaceful and quiet, just the two of us without the distractions of other men wanting to violate her, and the minds of everyone else violating me.

I heard Bella shift in her seat, but didn't pay any attention to it until I felt warmth against my lips for the briefest of moments. My eyes flew open as she backed away, taking her mouth from mine.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I've been wanting to," Bella shrugged. "It seemed like as good a time as any."

"Will you do it again?" I barely got the words out. She leaned close, and her lips touched mine. Soft, warm, and coupled with the touch of her hands on my face. I couldn't stop feeling long enough to reach out and touch her back. Still. I could have stayed in that position for a very, very, long time. It was so comfortable, so simple to be with her. Everything in my life fell into place and made sense.

"Well, now I understand why my company was not so appealing."

I backed away, glancing up into the face of the vampire from the flight. He had followed me after all, and there was no doubt as to what he just saw. His mind reveled in the possibility. He had been insulted and angered at my rejection, and now that he knew the reason was a human, his thoughts were no less than murderous.

So much for simplicity.

Chapter End Notes

I think jealousy is one of the most destructive forces out there. It certainly is for Edward! What do you think?

Who do you think this new vampire is?

Until next time!

Savage

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 – Confront and Expose

"I knew you were hiding something," the vampire sneered at me. He ran his hand over his head, reminding me of my own nervous habit, except his near crew cut didn't provide enough hair to grip.

She's obviously amiable to the situation. I bet sharing isn't too far out of the question.

I growled at his thought and stood, putting myself between him and my love.

"You will not touch her." Each syllable was its own guttural threat.

Intuitive...wait until he finds out about my connections with the Volturi.

"You've broken a lot of rules, you know." He glanced at Bella and raised an eyebrow. "I can make things pretty hard on you."

"Edward..."

"Shh," I hissed, holding a hand out behind me. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't make this worse. I could only be thankful that we were in a very crowded public place. The vampire drew in a slow breath.

"She has a very enticing scent, hmm?" He made the decision to move to his left so he could get a better look at her. I moved to my right at the same time. He took a step back, peering around me.

"Hi there," he smiled at Bella and raised his eyebrows. "I'm Samson. And you are...?"

"She is *mine* ," I snarled at him. "Back off. Now."

He smirked at me, meeting my eyes and deciding I was beneath him, unworthy of a willing human blood donor. He licked his lips once, imagining her taste, wanting her blood for himself. He hated me for having something he wanted.

A voice came over the loud speaker, announcing the start of boarding for first class, those traveling with small children and anyone in need of assistance. I had to get Bella out of his line of sight or we were going to be tearing each other a part in the middle of the terminal. Perhaps that was fitting, to end his existence here. He couldn't take her from me; I wouldn't even think of the possibility.

"Bella," I said, not taking my eyes from Samson. "Pick up your bag and get on the plane. Your ticket is in the front pocket. Go now."

"Edward, no..."

"Go now," I repeated with a little more force. I moved to stay between them as she pulled herself out of the chair, fished the ticket out of the pocket and moved to the line forming near the gate.

I wonder what kind of gift this one possesses.

"You'll figure it out, *Samson* ," I snarled.

You know my thoughts, even from a distance. Impressive.

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"This isn't over," the vampire promised me.

"It's in your best interest for it to be," I threatened. "If you ever come near her, it will mean your destruction. I will know you are there long before you see me. Don't doubt that."

"You aren't the only one with gifts."

I glanced quickly over at the departure gate to verify Bella had entered the plane. What kind of gift did this Samson have? Was he

bluffing? I glared back into his eyes, focusing on his thoughts.

She is lovely, and you are obviously quite attached to her. Does she keep you warm at night, hmm? Her body or her blood? Both, perhaps...

Images of a human woman, dressed in peasant skirts with long hair tangled in her face, came into his mind. He was holding her down – forcing her and draining her simultaneously as she screamed.

A growl tore from my throat as the face in his memory changed to have Bella's beautiful eyes. I took a step forward, and was instantly met with intense pressure against my shoulders, keeping me from moving towards him. The pressure shifted, pushed downwards, and I felt my knees begin to buckle, but there wasn't anyone touching me.

"Once you are dead, I will drink from her," he promised. "She will get used to another's hands on her in time."

I tried to struggle, but could barely move. Unseen hands gripped every limb, held my shoulders, my hips – I couldn't even turn my head. I nearly dropped to my knees right before the pressure was suddenly gone.

"I could have crushed you, but this is not the place. I *do* follow Volturi law," Samson sighed. "I'll just have to wait until next time."

He was gone before I could gather myself long enough to retaliate. My insides felt... *compressed* . It was difficult to take in air, not that I needed to, but the sensation was still profoundly uncomfortable. I quickly picked up my travel bag and boarding pass and made my way onto the plane.

Bella was shaking in the plush airplane seat. I looked around the rest of the cabin to make sure he hadn't followed us on to the plane, and that Bella's anxiety wasn't bringing any unwanted attention. The other passengers were far too busy stowing their carry-on bags to

notice us. I dropped down into the seat and wrapped my arm around Bella's shoulders.

"It's okay," I told her, wondering if it really was. "I would never let him touch you. Never."

"What does he want?" Bella asked.

"You," I admitted.

"Why?"

"Because I have you," I told her through my clenched teeth. "He doesn't understand why. He thinks if he can take you from me, he will understand why you are with me – why I protect you. He also knows I'm taking your blood, and sees that you are...willing. He wants to know what it would be like...to have a human...give..."

I shook my head, unable to finish the sentence. The image of the other woman in his mind taunted me. Bella shuddered, and I regretted being so upfront with her. I made the decision not to tell her about his gift. The knowledge would only frighten her and not serve as a benefit. I held her a little tighter, and smelled the salt from her tears before I felt them collect on the shoulder of my T-shirt.

"I will protect you," I whispered, wondering if I was going to be capable of fulfilling my promise. I pulled her tighter against me and buried my face in her hair. I would defend her. I would not let him take her. Even if I were destroyed, she had to be protected from him. I could never, never take a chance with Bella. I had to have a guarantee, even if it meant swallowing my pride. I opened my cell phone and pulled up a new text message.

Emmett – I need your help. Please.

I had to turn off the phone when the flight attendant scolded me. Once the plane arrived at our destination, I turned it back on and flipped to the inbox.

There was no response.

Creative flight booking kept me inside airports during the day, and our eventual final destination arrival was late in the night. Though the timing worked well for avoiding the sunlight, my paranoia grew as we changed planes in Auckland and spent many hours sitting and waiting for the last flight to Fiji. I sat and watched everyone who went by, keeping my breathing steady and trying to catch the scent of vampire. I kept sensing something, certainly one of our kind, but never anything definite.

Mostly what I found was various males appraising Bella as they walked by. It infuriated me. One in particular slowed his pace down as he walked by, and then turned around as if he had forgotten something just to walk past her again. A growl began deep in my chest.

"Edward, please behave," Bella said. I stared straight at him as I reached over and took her hand. I knew I was being possessive, staking my claim, and I didn't care. The young man looked to me, then quickly looked away.

"If he walks by again, I may have to have a snack," I growled.

"No!" Bella pulled her hand out of mine and sat forward in her seat until she blocked my view. "Edward, stop saying things like that."

She reached up and cupped my face in her hands until I focused on her instead of her admirer. Her dark brown eyes dug into my consciousness until I could see only the light reflected in them. Her touch on my skin was comforting.

"If I kiss you, will you stay with me and not attack every male in the airport?"

"Yes." My breathing increased immediately. How could I pass up an offer such as that?

Bella's lips brushed mine, and I closed my eyes to the sensation. *So warm, so soft and all for me, only me.* It ended much too quickly, and Bella sat back in her seat.

"The employee at the ticket counter keeps thinking about your legs," I said. "I might have to kill him, too."

Bella narrowed her eyes looked straight into mine. I tried to give her my most innocent look. The same one I had occasionally used on Esme when Emmett and I forgot to take our fighting outside and broke something.

"I suppose that means you want another kiss?"

"It might distract me," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I may forget what I was planning to do."

I felt her lips once again, and couldn't help but smile against her touch. Her hands found their way into my hair, and I reached around her waist, pulling her as close to me as I could with the interfering armrest between us.

"There's a man at the magazine stand," I whispered against her mouth. "He wishes your lips were on his."

Hanging around airports was suddenly not as bad as it used to be. I spent quite a while mentally daring any man who walked by to look at Bella so I had an excuse to kill him. When she saw me eyeing the occasional college frat boy, she would shove against my arm, give me a wry smile and touch her lips to mine. After some time, Bella fell asleep with her head on my shoulder and didn't wake until our flight was finally called.

It was quick, and the next flight was even shorter. I had never seen Bella smile so much as she did when we reached the islands. Her entire face lit up as she gazed out the windows of the airport to the palms blowing in the night's warm breeze.

We flew in a puddle jumper from Fiji to Kandavu, where I decided purchasing suitable watercraft was more practical to having someone take us to the small island northeast. It was amazing what kinds of places would open up at midnight for the right price. Bella shook her head in disbelief as we were shown our new boat, all gassed up and ready for departure. I helped her in, and we sped over the water to Bella's Island.

If Carlisle can buy an island for Esme, I can buy one for Bella.

The house had been prepared in a similar fashion to the cabin in Manitoba. Bella had all the food she could eat and a brand new, tropically appropriate wardrobe. I had a completely new set of clothes as well.

Bella decided on a shower after our long sojourn. I hadn't realized how much she preferred showers to a bathtub, but she literally squealed when she saw the huge walk-in shower with a rainstorm showerhead. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up involuntarily. She was breathtaking.

I quickly surveyed the house to make sure everything was in order. It seemed to be. The cabana style house had a large porch with French doors opening into a grand foyer and living area. There was a formal dining area as well as an eat-in kitchen. A hallway led to two bedrooms connected by the huge bathroom, which was complete with a Jacuzzi alongside the monstrous shower.

I ventured into the dining area, which was graced with a grand piano instead of a dining table and chairs. I ran my fingers over the smooth keys and tested the tone with a couple of scales. It would have been perfect if it hadn't reminded me a bit too much of my piano at home in Forks. I still hadn't received a response from Emmett, despite resending the message a half dozen times.

Footsteps brought me out of my thoughts, and Bella walked down the hallway wrapped in a soft green robe, drying her hair with a towel

wrapped around her head. As soon as I saw her, all the tension left my body as I realized we were completely and totally alone again. No more random admirers, joggers, vampires or *children* trying to take her from me. She was mine again – all mine. I could be with her, watch her read, listen to her voice and burn her breakfast. *No one else – just me.* I felt the corners of my mouth turn up again.

"Wow, that piano is huge! Will you play?"

"I will if you like," I told her. I nodded to the large glass doors leading outside. The darkness demonstrated the hour of the night. "But you ought to get some sleep. It is the middle of the night. I could play while you are in bed."

"That sounds wonderful, but I'm really not at all tired."

"We have traveled half way around the world," I reminded her. "Your circadian rhythm is still set to London time."

"I guess you don't have to worry about that," Bella said.

"Not as much, no," I said. "I don't get jet lag, obviously. But I do feel a little...off for a day or two. I won't sleep any worse than I did before."

I offered her a smile, but Bella was staring out the glass doors to the beach and water beyond.

"Do you like it?"

"It's incredible," she said. "The reflection of the stars off the water is mesmerizing."

"We can go out, if you wish."

"I probably need to put something on then."

"Suit yourself," I said. "There's no one on the island but us."

"How did you manage that?"

"I bought it."

"You bought what?" she asked, and then her eyes grew wide with understanding. "You bought a whole *island* ?"

"Yes," I said. *For you* , I thought, but didn't say it. The expression on her face made me smile yet again. It was almost becoming a habit. "I wanted somewhere where we could be alone. I don't want anyone coming here. I don't want to hear everyone's thoughts, and I don't want to...feel...jealous."

There, I admitted it.

"And if Samson decides to make an appearance, I want to be somewhere where I can tear him to pieces without attracting anyone else's attention."

"Please don't talk like that," Bella said, dropping her eyes to the floor.

"He's not human," I growled. "Killing him doesn't break our deal."

"What if it did?"

"Bella, he wants you for himself," I explained. "There's no telling what he might decide to do to you if given the chance. I'm not going to let that happen. If he gets anywhere near you, I will kill him, regardless if how you feel about it. I will not risk you."

I stood up from the piano bench and walked over to her too quickly, startling her.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled as she caught her breath and bit down on her lower lip. I found my eyes drawn there, unable to look away. I reached up with one hand and lightly touched her jaw. My thumb came up to her chin and pulled at the skin there, loosening the grip her teeth had on her lip. I considered kissing her, but really wanted to bite her more than anything else. I wanted to sink my own teeth into that bottom lip. I swallowed hard, forcing venom back into my throat.

"You should sleep," I heard myself say, and immediately regretted not adding "with me" at the end of the sentence.

"I don't think I could if I tried," Bella responded. She was looking down, maybe trying to focus on my hand against her chin. I tilted her head so she could meet my eyes.

"Midnight walk on the beach, then?" Bella's smile caused all the muscles in my stomach to contract at once.

"I think that would be lovely!" Bella raised herself up on her toes, and her lips grazed the corner of my mouth before she bounded off, calling over her shoulder. "I'll go put on something more appropriate."

I don't know if it was appropriate or not, but she was astonishingly beautiful in a cream tank top and loose-fitting skirt flowing all around her in the warm tropical breeze. Once we walked far enough away from the house, there were no lights to guide Bella's steps apart from the moon and stars, so she took my hand and let me lead.

The beach was wide and open, with the trunks of palms reaching out towards the sea from more heavily packed flora off the beach. The water was warm against my feet.

Bella kept stopping and letting the waves curl around her ankles until her toes sunk into the soft sand. My eyes traveled from her sand covered feet up her bare legs to the brightly colored skirt and the curve of her thigh. The skirt looked to be tied on – wrapped around her waist and held up by a knot at her hip. Bella pulled her hand out of mine and put it on the same hip.

"What are you thinking about, Edward?"

The pale color of her skin next to the bright colors of the skirt drew me in, and my gaze now ran up her arm to her bare shoulder. My legs tried to bring me a step closer, but I stopped them.

"Just you," I said softly, bringing my eyes to hers. "You seem very... natural here. I think the climate agrees with you."

Bella's eyes narrowed a bit, scrutinizing me. There was something about the look in her eyes that made me think she was about to call me out on eyeing her inappropriately. If she did, what would I say? *Yes, I was up to your shoulder and thinking about ogling your breasts next...once I'm done checking you out there, I might go into full-fledged fantasies about dropping you down on the sand and sliding my...*

My mind raced through the fantasy though I hadn't really meant to take it that far, not even in my head. Although I had thought about her in that way, I had never *really* thought about her in that way. I had considered it intellectually, I knew I wanted it physically, but I hadn't let my mind wander into imagining myself with her in any specific way.

Until now.

My body tensed, and I couldn't look away from her. I realized my muscles were trying to bring me into a crouch, to get me ready to spring at her, hold her down in the sand with my body pressed against hers. The monster was out in full force, and I hadn't expected him just yet. He was screaming for body and blood. I focused on keeping myself still, and therefore keeping the monster contained just long enough for me to get some control back.

Bella was talking again, looking out over the waves and prattling on about the color of the water. Venom filled my mouth, and my eyes were darting back and forth between the apex of her thighs and the pulsing cord running down her exposed neck. I swallowed again, and the burn brought forth a reflexive inhale. Bella's scent enveloped me, and I could feel myself getting hard.

Due to my creative nighttime flight plans, we had been on planes or in airports for nearly fifty hours, and I hadn't hunted since the day before we left. I wanted the taste of her blood in my mouth, and I

was hungry on top of it. I was going to kill her. I wasn't going to be able to stop myself this time. *No, you can't...*

"Edward?" Bella's hand reached up to me. A growl reverberated through my chest. She took a step back. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't answer her; I could only smell the luscious, thick fluid flowing through her arteries. Memories of the taste of her blood invaded my thoughts and coupled with detailed mental pictures of Bella's skirt pushed up around her waist while she lay on her back in the sand. She took another step backwards, and I couldn't stop my legs from following. She took another step, and then another before she turned on her heel to run.

Oh no, no, no, Bella! Don't run from me!

I was in front of her before either of us realized I had moved. Bella let out a stifled cry and stopped short.

"Edward? Edward...please...talk to me..." The pitch of her voice raised an entire octave.

All I could do was look at her and try not to breathe. I swallowed back venom over and over again.

"It's time, isn't it?" Bella said. "I didn't realize it with all the traveling. You haven't hunted either, have you?"

I don't know how, but I think I managed to move my head just enough to tell her she was correct. Even that movement took too much of my control away. I willed my muscles stationary.

When Bella reached up for me, I nearly came undone. I squeezed my eyes shut as her fingers drew over the sides of my face, around my ears, into my hair.

"It's okay, Edward – you don't have to wait."

She doesn't understand. I have to warn her...

"Bella," I grunted, hardly able to control my voice. "If I...do that... now...I won't...be able to...stop."

"What should I do?" Bella asked, dropping her hand.

"Back away...slowly," I closed my eyes. "Just turn and walk back to the house. I have to hunt...now."

I could hear her moving away from me, but I kept my eyes closed and my breathing nonexistent, waiting several minutes before I would dare try to move again. When I did, I ran at top speed in the opposite direction.

Dolphins. I never really considered them as a decent food source, but once you get past the thick skin and blubber, they were relatively satisfying. Well, for not being human blood, anyway. They put up a better fight than a grizzly, too, which surprised me. When I was finished, I just left the corpses of the marine mammals in the water, making disposal easy. I was sopping wet, of course, so I sat on the beach and let the nighttime wind dry me a bit before I started back. While I walked slowly, I tried to gauge my ability to be near her again without tearing her apart.

My thirst was relatively quenched, at least as much as it was going to be on the blood of animals. That fact coupled with the knowledge I would drink from her within minutes was all the reassurance I needed from myself. I headed back to the house before additional mental pictures of her naked, wet body lying in the sand invaded my thoughts again.

When I walked through the sliding glass doors, through the dining room and into the great room, I found Bella sitting on the edge of the couch with her legs drawn up to her chest, staring at the television. It was playing an "infomercial" about the best way to dehydrate fruits. I could smell the warm salt water, and I could see the red around her eyes, though she had wiped her tears away.

I inhaled slowly, letting the scent of her blood cradle me and bring the monster's desires to the forefront of my brain. I was well fed now, and in control again. Well, to some extent, anyway. I started walking towards her.

"Don't cry," I whispered, my hand reaching out and caressing her face. "I don't like it when you cry."

"You scared me," Bella said.

"I scare me sometimes, too," I admitted, laughing. I let my fingers drop down across her chin and brush against the artery at her throat, involuntarily licking my lips. "I'll be okay...soon."

Bella's eyes closed, and I could feel the movement in her neck as she swallowed. I felt my own breathing increase as I sat next to her curled up little form and waited. *Patience, patience, patience*, my mind chanted. I knew if I were patient this time, she would give, and having it offered was so much sweeter than taking.

She did offer her blood to me, and I fed from her, my serenity in our new environment suddenly and violently complete.

Bella was either close to sleep or passing out afterwards, so I picked her up and carried her to her room, bathed in soft yellow light. I placed her gently on the bed and pulled back the cool, satin sheets, covering her up to her chest before I got in behind her, on top of the blanket. My arms claimed her body, and I could hear the slow, rhythmic breathing of her sleep. After I held her for a few hours, I disentangled myself and went to the piano to play for her, as I had promised.

If we never left here, that would be okay with me.

The next afternoon we sat on beach chairs in the sand under an overcast sky, watched the waves, and let Bella's body get used to the new time zone. She woke early in the morning, after only a

couple hours of sleep, and had already napped once before lunch. Bella looked up from her book without warning and started peppering me with questions.

"Why was that other vampire so hostile?"

"I'm not entirely sure he was stable," I said. "It happens, especially to older ones or those who are without companionship. I don't know if it's the years or the loneliness, but some of us can't cope with this life, and suicide is pretty much impossible."

"How can you be...um...killed?"

"Not without difficulty," I sighed. "Carlisle tried, in the beginning, when he realized what he was. Nothing he tried worked. We can be...torn apart – burned. That will do it, but that isn't an easy task to accomplish without some assistance."

I tried to smile and make light of it, but I couldn't quite pull it off.

"I guess it is pretty easy for us, then," Bella remarked. "Humans, that is. Romeo and Juliet had various methods from which to choose."

Something in her eyes worried me.

"Bella," I started, but wasn't sure how to continue when she didn't look up at me. Her eyes were back on her book. At the moment, I hated not being able to hear her mind. "Tell me what you are thinking."

She just shrugged and stared at the sand in front of her chair. The wind chose that time to pick up and start blowing beach debris all around the base of our seats.

"Would you like to go back inside?" I asked. I nodded towards the horizon. "It looks like we're going to have a storm tonight."

We went inside, and I made sure all the windows were covered. The clouds were getting dark quickly, and I didn't want any rain getting

through the openings. Once we were storm ready, Bella pulled me into the kitchen and taught me to make lasagna. I tried not to breathe too much – inhaling the scent of the dish made me cringe.

When Bella finished with her dinner, she decided to take a quick shower and change. The storm was in full force and making a lot of noise outside. I watched the waves crash against the beach until she came out of her bedroom, casually dressed in a silky pajama top and boy shorts. We opted to sit on the couch and watch something. Bella wanted to see a weather report, and seemed pleased that the storm should be a brief one. I promised to take her on a walk around the island in the morning, if she was up for it.

Bella slid a DVD into the player and sat down next to me on the couch. As she sat, her bare thigh rubbed up against mine. After she settled into the seat, she didn't move it. I heard the credits for one of the Harry Potter movies start, but I could only focus my eyes on the place where our legs were touching.

"Edward, you okay?"

"Yes," I whispered, clearing my throat. I managed to tear my eyes away long enough to look up at her. Her eyes looked straight into me, and I was sure if I had a soul she would have been able to see it. Her hair was still a little damp from her shower, and she smelled divine – all Bella and strawberries and fresh spring dew. My next words just slipped out. "You're so beautiful."

Bella narrowed her eyes at me, just enough for me to notice.

"I thought you had super vampire vision," Bella scoffed.

"I do," I said.

"It must be broken," Bella laughed. "I've always been plain - I'm okay with that."

"You are far from plain, Bella," I told her. "You are extraordinary – your eyes, your hair, your scent, your mind. You are incredible."

Bella smiled, and her cheeks turned crimson. I felt her leg against mine grow warmer as well.

"You are very sweet, sometimes," Bella said. Then she quickly and unexpectedly leaned over to place her lips against mine.

At first, I could only focus on squelching the desire to bite - to feed. I couldn't move, I could only watch as she closed her eyes and brushed her lips against my mouth. Her hands found my shoulders, gently gripping me through my t-shirt.

When she ended the kiss and backed away, I felt cold and lost. I wanted her to kiss me again. I wanted her hands on me. I wanted to kiss her and touch her back, her hips, her feet – all of her. I wanted to tell her how much I wanted her, but I couldn't form any words.

"Are you okay now?" Bella asked, giving me a half smile.

"No," I responded. I was breathing heavily and completely unable to take my eyes from hers. "I don't think so."

A hundred years of viewing the sexual exploits of people in their heads, and here I was with absolutely no idea what I should do, even in the beginning. My body sang out with the monster's wants - take her, strip her, enter her, bite - but I had to push those thoughts away or Bella was going to be in serious trouble. Besides, I wanted more than that. I needed to give her more.

Just kiss her back.

Okay, I could do that.

I leaned forward, sitting up straighter and keeping my feet planted firmly on the floor. I braced myself against the cushions of the couch with one hand and raised the other one up to her face, lightly

stroking her cheek. The texture of her soft skin entranced me, and I drew a line with my finger over her jaw and up to her ear. Bella shivered under my cold touch, and I pulled my hand away.

"I'm sorry," I said, but before I could back away Bella's hand found mine and held me still.

"It's okay," she said. "You don't have to stop, if you don't want to."

If I don't want to? It's all I want to do.

I reached back up and placed my palm on the side of her face and slowly moved towards her as her scent enveloped me. I tried to ignore the pulse point at her neck as her heart rate increased the closer I was to her lips.

"Don't move, please," I whispered, suddenly afraid she was going to come to her senses and run from me. She didn't, and I felt the touch of her lips on mine. Warm, soft and just a little wet against hard unyielding flesh. I let my eyelids close this time, focusing entirely on the feeling of her mouth against mine. Her mouth molded around mine, and I felt her fingers on the back of my neck.

It hurt, kissing her like this. The fire in my throat magnified to a level I had never experienced, though I was well fed. I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to concentrate on the sensation against my mouth and stopping myself from grabbing her and bending her over the arm of the couch. I also wanted to keep kissing her, maybe even look into the possibility of never moving my lips from her mouth again. But I realized Bella still needed to breathe, and pulled back an inch, allowing her breath and myself distance from the temptation. I didn't dare open my eyes, but dropped my forehead to hers.

"May I do that again, please?" I asked, fearing her answer, whether it was yes or no.

"Yes," Bella said softly.

I brought our lips together again, with a little more pressure. I could feel the tips of her fingers moving slowly up the back of my neck and over my scalp.

I felt a change in the pressure against my lips as Bella opened her mouth, her tongue reaching out and stroking my lips. I heard a muffled groan that may have come from me as I reciprocated and felt the tip of her tongue touch mine.

My arms wrapped under hers and back around her shoulder blades, and I pulled my feet onto the couch and rose up on my knees. I eased her backwards against the cushions, my tongue touching and tasting her lips, her mouth, sliding over her teeth and dancing with her tongue.

The fire coursing through my body was nothing like the transformation to this un-life. It licked around every limb, every muscle of my body, with glorious, tingling heat. It started everywhere our bodies touched - from our lips to my hands on her back and her fingers in my hair and flowed in a stream of molten lava down my torso and focused all its powerful heat on my groin.

I pulled away from her lips, breathing fast and forcing back the images of tearing her clothes from her. I relaxed my grip around her shoulder blades and watched my hands as they trailed down her sides and came to rest on her hips. This also gave me a lovely view of the tops of her breasts encased in the light silk fabric of her top. I licked my lips, wondering what they might taste like. *How many flavors?*

"What are you looking at?" Bella placed her index finger under my chin and applied pressure. I tilted my head to meet her eyes.

"Your breasts," I blurted out, without thinking. Obviously. At least I can't blush.

"And I was all prepared to call you out when you lied to me about it!" Bella laughed.

"So, you were setting me up?" I smiled and noticed the curved indent under her chin, and decided to see if her skin tasted different there, too. It didn't, but I pressed my lips into it anyway, making a trail of lighter kisses across her chin and jaw, and then up to her ear and back down to the hollow of her throat.

"You can, you know," Bella said quietly.

"Can what?"

"Look at them." Her cheeks turned scarlet. I swallowed hard, taking in her words and coming to terms with their implications. My eyes dropped down again, focusing on the flawless shape of the round mounds. My hand slid around her middle and rubbed across her stomach before heading up. I wanted... *needed*... to touch them.

My hand stopped just below where her flesh thickened and rose away from her body. I looked back to her eyes, looking for any sign that she wanted me to stop. Bella met my stare and smiled shyly.

I looked back down and watched my hand continue its journey upwards. My thumb arrived there first, lightly brushing in a smooth, perfect arc across her skin. I moved the rest of my hand up, lightly cupping her breast and brushing over the nipple, which hardened at my cool touch – just like it had before. The muscles in my stomach tightened reflexively. *Keep it together.*

Bella's sharp intake of breath made me stop and look up into her eyes. I must have hurt her again, because that's what I did all the time. *How can I do this if I keep hurting her?*

"I'm sorry!" I pulled away and pushed myself back off the couch. "I didn't mean to hurt you!"

"No! Not at all!" Bella held out one of her hands, reaching for me. "It was just...cold...a good kind of cold."

"Good?"

"Yes," Bella looked down at the ground for a minute, composing herself. "Come back? Please?"

I didn't hesitate, but decided to back off a little. I still had no idea what I was doing, and was terrified I would frighten her, and she would run away screaming. I fell back over her, my hands on either side of her, holding me up. Her arms wrapped around my middle, meeting against my back. I kissed her again, and again, then moved down her chin, feathering kisses over her skin and down to her collarbones – first one side, then the other.

Bella's hand trailed down off my back and pulled at my fingers. I gave her my hand and watched as she brought it back up to her breast again. My breath quickened as she placed my hand over her soft little mound of flesh.

Our eyes met. I slowly circled my thumb around her nipple, watching her reaction this time. Her breathing was heavier, and her heart was pounding so close to the place where my hand lay, tracing shapes over her. I shifted my weight so I could bring my other hand up – slowly, watching Bella's eyes – to cup her other breast, mimicking the movements of my thumbs on both sides.

Bella reached down to her sides, brushing my hands away and gripped the hem of her shirt. She pulled it up over her torso, past her shoulders, over her head and tossed it onto the floor. Then she reached behind her back and unfastened her bra, which quickly joined the other garment beside the couch.

I froze, gaping at the even paler skin that was now exposed to me. They were perfectly round and symmetrical and pink from her blush. They were exquisite. She was exquisite. And she was inviting me to... *Oh dear God...*

So much for composure.

Chapter End Notes

Before y'all get started – yes, dolphins. Why wouldn't Edward eat dolphins? They're mammals. I remember getting all kinds of shit for killing dolphins in this story back in the day, and I'd like to remind everyone that no real dolphins were harmed in the writing of this bit of fiction.

Regarding Samson, I have to be honest here—I have no idea where that name came from. I actually googled twilight vampires, and I guess I must have just made him up.

It's great to hear from everyone! Please don't stop! Even the random guest reviewers who want to point out the various typos still hanging around. :D

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 – Desire and Defend

I couldn't react or move for what seemed like hours, or at least minutes. Okay, it was probably only a few seconds, but in those seconds something inside of me came very, very close to snapping. I forced my mouth closed and tried, unsuccessfully, to look Bella in the eye before speaking again.

"You're perfect."

"I am not."

"Bella," I said, my voice sounded a little huskier and a lot shakier than it normally did. I was still unable to move my eyes away from her chest. "Don't argue with me on this one. I may not be human, I may not have any experience, but I am a man. I know a perfect pair of breasts when I see them."

Bella giggled, and the sound brought me out of what could only be called an undignified stupor. I finally looked back into her eyes before capturing her lips again. The taste of her glorious mouth was almost enough to keep my full attention, but the call of the offering a little lower was much louder. I pulled back, looking into her eyes once more before dropping my attention back down to the beautiful pale skin that had been hiding under various shirts all this time.

My fingers started at her bare shoulder and ran in four parallel lines across her collarbone and to the top of her chest. I hesitated, feeling strangely cautious, like I was about to embark upon a dangerous journey of some kind. I had a brief, and slightly insane, mental image of breaking a Champaign bottle against her. *Full speed ahead.*

After only a moment of hesitation, my fingers continued on, gliding over the glorious mound of silken flesh, and I could feel it contract

under my chilled touch. Bella shivered, and then gripped my shoulders with her hands. I shifted my weight, and used my other hand to repeat the action of my fingers over her other breast, making them even. I leaned over and kissed each breast near the top. Then I tilted my head lower, and kissed each one at the bottom, not quite daring to touch her nipples with my mouth just yet. I planted another kiss between them both, and looked up at Bella with absolute adoration.

Her eyes were half closed, and her mouth open just slightly as she took her breaths in short pants. Keeping my eyes on hers, I snaked my tongue out and touched the tip of it to the skin between her breasts, slowly licking from the bottom of her sternum back up to the top. I turned my head just enough to plant a kiss on the inside of her left breast, then on the inside of the right. I took a deep breath, steadied myself and planted a nearly chaste, closed mouth kiss on each nipple.

They both hardened even more at the touch of my lips. Venom invaded my mouth in a tidal wave and my body clenched. I took a ragged breath and forced my muscles to relax. The intensity of the feelings coursing through me took over, and I couldn't wait anymore. I had to know how her nipples would taste.

Exquisite.

A new flavor of Bella, all for me.

My tongue traced around each nipple before I sucked them, each in turn, gently into my mouth. Bella arched her back, gasping and pushing her breasts against my eager lips and tongue, and I had to close my eyes to fight back the incessant desire to bite. Thankfully, the other desires coursing through me overwhelmed my vampire nature. I wrapped my lips over her darkened areolas and swirled my tongue around them. I was pretty sure I moaned again, but maybe it was Bella this time.

The hands on my shoulders moved to my lower back, light fingertips caressing the material of my shirt. I released her perfect breasts and twined my fingers in her hair, my tongue darting over her lips and quickly comparing the tastes – tangy and sweet...a touch of salt, and all Bella. The fingers at my waist found the gap between my shirt and khaki shorts, and traced the line between them. I could feel her tugging at the hem.

"Your turn," Bella voiced against my lips. I released her long enough to let her pull the shirt over my head. She tossed it on the floor along with her clothing and ran her fingers over my shoulders and down my chest. All the muscles in my torso constricted against her fiery touch. She traced every line on my stomach with one finger, and all I could do was close my eyes attempt, unsuccessfully, to keep my breathing moderately controlled.

When her fingers grazed up my sides, I actually shuddered. It took me a minute to remember she was half naked underneath me. That's how good her touch felt. I opened my eyes and forced myself to look up at her. I watched her eyes while she watched her fingers draw patterns on my pectorals.

"What did you mean – ' *I may not have any experience* ' ?" Bella asked, still running a finger over my chest and stomach. My tongue darted out across my lips.

"I've never done this before," I said.

"Never done *what* ?" Bella put all the emphasis she could on the last word of her sentence.

" *This* ," I said, rolling the tip of my finger in a small circle around her nipple. "Any of this. I've never been with a woman before."

"You mean a *human* woman?"

" *Any* woman." I traced an identical circle around her other nipple. It seemed very important to me that they both receive equal attention.

Bella laughed.

"You can't be serious."

I tore my eyes – painfully – away from her chest long enough to look up at her, curious as to what was funny.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're over a hundred years old!" Bella stopped the movements of her fingers against my skin. "You can't tell me you've been around all that time and not had sex!"

"I haven't had sex before," I confirmed. "Why would I have?"

"Because...because..." Bella stammered. Then finally bellowed at me, exasperated. "Well... *why not* ?"

"I've never wanted to," I told her. I didn't understand her reaction at all. Didn't she understand I'd never felt this way about anyone before? How could I possibly have even considered actions such as these with another? *Oh wait, I haven't told her any of this.* "No one was ever...desirable to me. Not before you."

Bella's eyes were wide, staring at me in a way that wasn't dissimilar to the expression on her face when I first invaded her kitchen in Forks. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, just staring up at me and shaking her head a little. Did she really think I would do this with just anyone? I narrowed my eyes a little in concentration, still desperately and futilely trying to read her mind. I had to make her understand, but something inside of me didn't want to utter the words I knew I should say. I went for something close instead, hoping she would discern the true meaning of my whispered approximations.

"No one but you, Bella." I kissed her mouth, my hand gliding lightly over the top of one breast. "Ever." I kissed her chin and switched hands, tracing over the other breast. "Not before now." I kissed up

one side of her jaw, found her ear and gently licked the outline of it with the tip of my tongue. "Not after now." I kissed the spot behind her ear, and then continued down her neck. "Only you."

"Edward," Bella breathed into my hair as she wrapped her arms around my head and held me against her gloriously bare neck. I closed my eyes and sighed against her skin, marveling how this girl could hold me in such a position, knowing full well what I was.

I kissed her pulse point on her throat, mentally thanking her for her trust in me, and then slowly began to move down again. Both of my hands found both of her breasts before my lips made it down that far, so the hands continued their exploration while my mouth traced between her breasts, then lower. The little dip of her navel intrigued me, and I nuzzled against it before kissing her there as well, and even dared to lick her there. I continued with small, light kisses down to the waist, where her bare skin met up against the edge of her shorts. My mouth followed the hem across her stomach and back again.

I rubbed my cheek against her stomach and looked up. My arms were stretched above my head and my fingers still lightly stroked each of her nipples. I smiled as they hardened just a little bit more every time I touched them. Bella's stomach muscles tightened against the side of my face and I could see her teeth sunk into her lower lip. Her brows were furrowed and I noticed her hands were now clenched at her sides.

"Bella?" I rose up to look at her face from a better angle. "Bella, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry..." she stammered. "I'm not sure...I mean..."

She's not ready.

"Bella, shh..." I quickly moved back up her body and kissed her forehead. She looked like she was about to bolt, and I just couldn't let that happen. While I tried to mentally and physically rein in my

thoughts of taking her right here and right now, I also had to keep her from seeing how badly I wanted her. I had to go at her pace or... heaven forbid...not at all. I swallowed hard and tried to get my voice back under control. "I'll stop, it's okay."

I stroked the hair off her face and leaned my forehead to hers.

"You don't have to stop," Bella said. "I think I'm just a little nervous. Really – I'm fine."

There was that hated phrase again. Every time she used it, I knew she was exactly the opposite of *fine* .

"I don't think I should try to do anything else tonight anyway," I confessed, giving her the easy out. Besides, there was another reason I needed to stop. The venom was flowing into my burning throat again, and I could feel the stirrings of the monster inside. "I think it would be best to do continue this after I...um...after I have been... *satiated* ."

"Oh." Bella looked away, no longer willing to catch my eye. "So, the day after tomorrow, then?"

"Only if you are ready, Bella," I stroked her hair off her face and leaned my forehead to hers. "Only if you are sure you want to. I don't want you to think it has to be that soon...or at all. I just meant it might be a good idea for me to be in the best mind set possible. I don't want to...get overwhelmed." *Oh yes I do...*

I moved up her body and took her face in my hands.

"Only if you want to," I repeated, and then went back to planting soft, closed mouth kisses against her temple, down her jaw and back up to her ear, whispering to her that everything was all right. I captured her eyes with mine. "I want you to be sure you want to. I've already taken too much from you. I have to know you want this. You don't *have* to do this, Bella."

"I do want to. I just...I thought I was ready," she whispered back. I found my way back to her lips.

"I will wait as long as you want, Bella." I said. My lips brushed against her forehead. "May I please just hold you now?"

I could feel her muscles relax against me and she nodded, her eyes closed. I lifted her up and positioned us so my back was against the back of the couch, and Bella's back was against my chest. Part of me was terrified if even this was too much, Bella would feel pressured into giving in to me. Part of me was terrified she would *not* feel pressured, and not give in to me. Ambivalence won and I chose the safe path, quite happy to stay right where I was and hold my half naked beloved Bella against my skin. I was extremely pleased the warm tropical winds were cooperative enough to blow through the open door and keep Bella from being too cold against my icy touch.

"This is my favorite part," Bella said when she had settled back into the movie. I glanced up at the screen to see a bunch of people running around in a maze after some prize or other. I tried to find a nice balance between running my lips over her skin and actually allowing her the opportunity to watch the movie. Bella jumped and whimpered when the main bad guy killed one of the contestants off. I pulled her tighter into my arms and nuzzled at her neck until she relaxed completely against me.

I was content to stay there throughout the rest of the film, holding her, touching her and kissing every part of her skin I could reach. Bella sighed and moaned and laughed when I reached her sides and a particularly ticklish spot. Having the skin of her back pressed against my bare chest was about as close to bliss as I had ever encountered. I could wrap both arms around her, kiss at her naked shoulder, and I could easily reach and tease her beautiful, perfect breasts – both equally, of course.

"I love you, Bella," I murmured against the back of her neck, so softly she couldn't hear me.

Coward.

I walked out onto the beach in the bright early morning sunlight. Stopping at the edge of the water, I looked out over the rocks and reefs that spread northward and eastward. Seabirds screeched and dove for fish around the reef and far off on the horizon I could see a large ship – probably a cruise liner heading towards Fiji. After a brief pause I waded out into deeper water, and swam lazily to one of the larger rocks. I pulled myself up on to the surface and stared out over the water from my new vantage point.

I stood silently and still as the sun continued to rise. The wind blew my hair back off my face and pushed gently on my chest, reminding me of Bella's fingers – light and playful against my skin. I had a sudden ache in my stomach and considered going back inside and curling up against her warmth, still asleep in her bed. But my throat burned and reminded me why I was here instead.

I spent some time intensely watching the sea, and soon a pod of dolphins near the horizon came into view. I dove into the water.

Dolphins are fast – really fast. I was still faster, even in the water, and much more dangerous. They also defend each other, which I hadn't expected. While I drained one, another locked on to my arm with its sharp but ineffective teeth. As I tossed the first one away and dragged the arm-biter to my teeth, I felt a pang of...sorrow. It ceased when the beast's heart stopped, which was my first indication that the feeling had come from the dolphin, not me. As the rest of the pod scattered, I realized I could hear their fear, their sadness at the loss of their sisters. It wasn't in words – I couldn't truly read them, but it was disconcerting, to say the least.

I drained one more before considering my breakfast complete. I didn't like the muddled view into their minds, and the taste was still... substandard. I didn't want to hear the minds of any creature, and there was only one flavor of blood I wanted. My deal with Bella was

currently the only reason I didn't head to one of the populated islands to find a couple of tourists for dessert.

I really needed to stop thinking like that.

What happened to Carlisle's voice in my head? I had always heard his chastisements when my thoughts turned to such deeds. When he abandoned me, did his voice leave me, too? I couldn't really believe that – he didn't abandon me; I had given him no choice. So where was my voice of reason now? Gone? Replaced by the monster's idea of conscience?

Or had Bella now taken up enough residence in my dead heart to take the place of Carlisle's voice? Her words and her touch brought me back when I was lost, especially her touch. When she touched my face, I calmed. When she touched any of the rest of me, I burned.

I found myself back on the same rock near our beach. It was still early, and Bella would likely not wake for breakfast for another hour or so. I looked up at the sky, and then lay on my back across the rock, letting the sun warm my skin. I closed my eyes and felt the dolphin blood course through my system, bringing me just enough strength to resist killing the one I loved.

I laced my fingers together and placed them behind my head, looking up into the cloudless sky. The sun was warm against my cold skin, and when I closed my eyes I could almost feel the memory of Bella's hands against my arms, my back, tracing my abdominal muscles. The corners of my mouth turned up as warm waters from the returning tide lapped at my feet.

Is this what it's like to be happy? Content?

And I felt like this only after touching her breasts. For the love of all that's holy, how was I going to react if she let me make love to her? The corners of my mouth turned up quite a bit farther at the thought.

But what if I hurt her?

It wasn't the first time that particular thought had crossed my mind. My lips turned back down.

I would have to be so gentle with her all the time. She was so fragile – so breakable. If I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, I could accidentally break her in half without realizing it before it was too late. I felt the panic rise again.

No, I wasn't going to do that. I would drink first, and then I would have the strength. If I could be careful enough drinking from her, I could be careful enough making love to her.

Making love.

Making love to Bella.

I had no desire to have sex with her. And I certainly wasn't entertaining the idea of any other explicit ways of conveying a similar, yet completely different, act. That's not what I wanted. I wanted to make love to her. I wanted her to feel loved and cherished and beautiful and desired and special and wonderful with every touch, every caress, every movement, and every...thrust.

I had to stop this particular line of thinking and get a little control over my body. I was as hard as the rock underneath my back.

Being seventeen was extremely aggravating.

I shifted and rolled, bringing myself over on my side and then to a sitting position. I looked back over to the island. Bella was still inside, and likely just starting to stir from slumber, though I had yet to hear sounds from the house.

I stopped the thoughts of Bella rolling sleepily in her bed, and instead watched a crab scurry over the rock next to mine, moving a few inches when the waves broke around its claws. Crabs were not the

least be sexy or desirable. Quite the opposite, really. Watching the ugly little thing for a few minutes was enough to get a little more control over my teenage testosterone tendencies.

Did I even have testosterone anymore? I wondered if Carlisle knew the answer. Of course, I couldn't call him to find out. I closed my eyes against a sudden rush of images of Carlisle and me early on, right after he had changed me. His patience with me as I learned to control my thirst, his acceptance of the many, many mistakes I made and his encouragement that I could do better. His forgiveness when I returned with years of death on my hands. My father. The only father I could remember.

Not anymore.

It didn't matter anymore. It was Bella's acceptance I now sought, not my father's. I swallowed hard and opened my eyes back to the blazing sun creeping further up the sky, pushing the memories and what was quickly becoming anguish to the back of my brain. It was going to be a beautiful day, and I wasn't going to waste it with self-pity. I made my choices, and the best part of those choices would soon be waking up to morning sunbeams across her pillow. My Bella loved the sunshine and this would be the first full day I could be with her while she enjoyed it. I started a mental list of things to do today.

Take Bella for a walk around the island.

Take Bella for a run around the island.

Take Bella to the little grove of palms near the edge of the beach, make a blanket of the fronds and serve her a picnic lunch.

Take Bella swimming out around the reefs.

Take Bella to the west side of the island to watch the sunset.

Take Bella back into the house and make love to her over and over again.

Damn it.

It was too soon. I was going to have to wait another day before I could indulge in Bella's blood again, and I couldn't risk hurting her, so I wasn't going to propose physical intimacy until after I drank. Somewhere in the back of my head I knew how ridiculous that sounded, but my attention was directed away from my thoughts and focused on the increasing hardness between my legs.

I must still have testosterone.

I watched the crab scuttle around for quite some time before I could safely go inside the house and burn some breakfast.

Bella insisted on managing lunch after the breakfast I made caused a fire. It was only a small one, but she made me sit outside while she cleaned up the mess and made herself something else. During lunch preparation, I was only allowed to only handle the cold items. No more cooking for me. I wondered if she had caught on that I burned her food on purpose, just because I loved to hear her laugh. It was worth it, even at my expense. The fire had been an accident, of course.

So I assembled a couple sandwiches as she told me exactly what to do. I was allowed to stir in the ingredients for potato salad, but only after Bella cooked the potatoes and let them cool. The mayonnaise and mustard mixture was one of the most revolting smells I had come across in my many years.

Bella went to change clothes and I pulled out my phone to text Emmett again. I hadn't tried since we reached the island, so I didn't realize until just then that there was no phone service. I should have thought about that before. I allowed myself to hope maybe he had tried to call me, or at least responded to the text. I wouldn't know until we went back to Fiji or Kandavu, and I hadn't planned on doing so any time soon. Maybe Bella would want to. I could take her shopping, or maybe to a club.

I thought about all the men that would be at a club, and quickly decided against that particular activity. There would be men at the shopping areas as well. Restaurants, too.

That's when Bella came out of the bathroom in a bikini and flip-flops.

I almost fell over.

I don't know why, but something about her breasts being just slightly covered by that tiny bit of fabric was sexier than seeing them bare. The bottom half was covered by a bluish-green wrap tied at her waist, but it was almost completely see through. She was stunning, and I was stunned. Unfortunately, I didn't stay immobile for long.

The thoughts running through my head were like those from the midnight walk on the beach. *Grab her, hold her down, penetrate...*

Right at that moment, the wind picked up and blew through the open window, wrapping around Bella and rocketing a gust of her scent into my face.

Every neuron fired and every muscle tensed. My vision blurred for a moment, then returned to sharp focus as I dropped into a crouch, a low growl escaping from my chest. I could see Bella's mouth moving and I could hear words reaching my ears, but none of it entered my consciousness. My instincts took over, and I started moving forward slowly, my eyes locked with my prey.

My hands were shaking. In the back of my head I could hear my own voice screaming at me to stop. I didn't understand why. My prey did not try to run from me. It stood its ground. It even reached out to me as I came close enough to touch it. Its hands came in contact with my head, the prey's fingers twining in my hair and bringing my lips to the glorious scent at its neck, which is right where I wanted to be.

My Bella...offering herself to me...

"Mine." I snarled through clenched teeth. I squeezed my eyes shut and felt her fingers in my hair and heard her whispered words. The heat of her body was all over me. I wanted to claim it.

"Edward, relax," she said, her lips close to my ear. "Come back to me."

A shudder ran through my body, allowing the tension in my muscles to release. I wrapped my arms around her, and the feeling of her skin against my hands brought me to her, back from the abyss of the thirst. I dropped my forehead to her shoulder and swallowed over and over again, trying to rid myself of the horrible taste of venom. I was going to take her, and I might have killed her. Her touch stopped me.

"How do you know?" I asked when I was able to speak again. Bella's warm hands stroked over my head and down my neck, then back up again. She shushed me and I felt her lips against my temple. "How do you know what to do? How can you even stand to touch me?"

"Edward, stop it. It's okay."

"It is not," I growled. She sounded like she did when she said she was "fine".

"It's okay *now* ," she emphasized.

I tightened my grip on her, acknowledging internally the futility of apologizing to her again. I wouldn't even say it this time. I was totally and completely unworthy of her, and it didn't matter because and I would never, ever let her go. She was mine. I couldn't change that – I *wouldn't* change that – I could only try to make it better. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I think I owe you a picnic."

"Yes, you do," Bella agreed. Her hands dropped from my hair and she entwined her fingers with mine before walking back to the

kitchen for the supplies. As long as I just looked at her quickly, and since I knew what to expect, I managed to keep myself under control.

I held the door open and Bella walked out into the sun. I followed behind, carrying the basket full of her lunch and bottles of water. When we stepped off the patio and into the sun, Bella turned towards me and gasped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Bella stared at me and then at the ground in front of me, her eyes following the refracted light from my luminescent skin. She reached out and ran her fingers along my arm.

"It's just...incredible," she said. "I'm not sure if I will ever get used to it."

I frowned and looked down to the rainbows around my feet before I shrugged.

"I can stay in the shade," I said. "I don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Edward," Bella sighed, then reached up and lightly stroked my cheek. "I think you're beautiful."

"Beautiful?" I scoffed. I took a step back from her, looking up at her in disbelief. She couldn't possibly be serious. "You're beautiful. I'm a monster."

"Sometimes," she agreed, and then blushed. "But even in your most monstrous moments you are beautiful."

I shook my head and scowled, trying to peer into that locked up, incredibly difficult to interpret brain of hers. Like every other time I tried to understand her, I floundered and gave up.

"Let's go," I said, and started walking down the beach.

We walked around the island, which was only a little over a mile and a half around, and Bella told me about her summer trips to California with Charlie. I asked her a slew of random questions – her favorite color, flower, gemstone, the color of her bedspread at home – and tried to only hold her hand as we walked, and not be tempted to run my fingers over her breasts again. I couldn't help but look at them as often as I thought I could get away with it.

There was no doubt about it – I was a breast man. The thought struck me as both funny and pathetic. I could almost hear Emmett's laugh in my head.

I led Bella to the little shady grove not too far from the beach. There was a lovely view of the reefs and tidal pools from the slightly raised land, and I did make a blanket of all the dropped palm fronds before I sat Bella and the picnic in the middle of them.

I lay back on the sand and closed my eyes, inhaling the tropical breeze that carried Bella's scent to me. The burn in my throat was there, as it always was, but now it was eclipsed by the burning desire to touch her skin.

"This place is so beautiful," Bella said, staring out across the water. "Thank you for bringing me here. This is a lot better than snow and rain!"

"I'm glad you like it." I couldn't help but smile. "It's nice for me, too."

"Because you can be in the sun?"

"That's part of it," I admitted. "It's also so quiet here with you. Not hearing voices in my head is something I can get used to very quickly."

I reached across the blanket and laced my fingers through hers.

"I'm also very glad you like it," I told her. "It's for you, you know. I thought we might name it Bella's Island,"

Bella laughed.

"I'm not sure if I want an island," Bella laughed, shaking her head.
"It's a rather extravagant gift. I don't think I should accept."

"I want to give you everything," I told her. "You've made my existence meaningful. There's no way for me to repay you for what you have given me."

Bella took a deep breath and stared at the sand in front of her feet.

"I don't want you to give me an island."

"What do you want?"

"I don't think you really want me to say," Bella said after a few minutes of silence.

No, I'm sure I didn't want to hear how much she wanted to go home, to be away from me. I couldn't take her there. I wouldn't.

"What do you want that I will give you?" I asked, carefully choosing my words.

Bella's eyes met mine for a very brief moment before she shook her head and chuckled, but it wasn't the laugh I loved.

"How about you take me swimming?" she suggested. "Out deep, where I can't go on my own? I'd like to see the reefs up close."

"It would be my pleasure," I said with a smile.

Bella packed up the food she hadn't eaten and I ran the basket back to the house and ran back to her, startling her a little with my abrupt return.

"Sorry," I said with a smile. I held out a snorkeling mask for her.
"Shall we swim?"

Bella nodded, took the mask and wrapped her fingers around mine. I pulled her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles before heading to the line where beach met ocean. I discarded my shirt, and Bella dropped the wrap around her waist to the same beside it. I resisted – barely – the urge to run my hands down her body. Instead, I helped her get the mask properly fitted, and then took her hand as we walked into the water.

When we were far enough out for the low waves to start hitting Bella's shoulders, I stopped and turned my back to her.

"Get on, and hold tight."

Bella's arms wrapped around my neck and her legs encircled my waist. I took a moment to compose myself against the sensations created by her warm body pressed so tightly against mine.

"When I say breathe, take a deep breath and hold it, because I'm about to go under. If you need to surface or want me to stop, just tap me on the neck. Okay?"

"Yes," Bella planted a kiss on my cheek. "Let's go!"

I stayed on top of the water until we were out farther, gliding slowly near the top of the reef and pointing out the muscles, anemones and other tidal life.

"Breathe!" I waited until I heard her take her breath, and then dived under quickly, pulling her around the curve of the reef on my back and taking her down to see the corals. Eels poked out of their darkened holes and quickly nosed back in when Bella reached for them. When I pointed out a good-sized reef shark, Bella immediately started scraping at my neck.

"What's wrong?" I asked, smiling. "You don't think I'd let a shark take a bite out of you, do you?"

"I wasn't really thinking...about sharks...being out here," Bella said, gasping. "What if you drop me?"

"I'm not going to drop you," I promised. I turned around so she clung to my front and pulled off her mask, poured water out of it, then placed it back on her face with a better seal. "Even if I did drop you, I'm a hundred times faster than a shark."

"That's good to know," Bella smiled.

"Ready for more?"

"Yes."

"Breathe!"

I swam through schools of brightly colored reef fish while Bella held out her hand, touching a few as we raced past them. We even managed to get close enough to a giant sea turtle for Bella to run her hand over the edge of its shell.

When Bella's grip on my neck seemed a little looser, I figured she must be getting tired and headed back to our beach. I took her to the rock I had occupied that morning and took the mask from her face again, kissing lightly on the indentation the straps had made in her skin.

"Your nose is pink," I told her, and kissed it, too. "I should get you inside before you burn."

When we reached the beach, I grabbed a couple of towels from the patio and brought them to Bella.

"May I?" I asked, holding up one of the towels. Bella looked at me quizzically, then nodded.

I took the corner of the towel and wiped across her forehead, over her temple and around the curve of her jaw. I did it again to the other side, and then swiped across her nose, making her smile up at me. I

dried her neck and her shoulders, one at a time. I moved the towel across her collarbones and over the top of her barely-there swimming suit. I switched hands and dried across the top of her suit again, just for good measure. The third time I started drying her off there, she cleared her throat and raised an eyebrow at me.

I gave her a lopsided grin and she laughed. I motioned for her to turn around and dried off her shoulder blades and down her back, holding the towel spread out between both of my hands. I swiped up her sides until I reached under her arms, then back down again to her hips, ending up on me knees behind her.

Bella turned back around and I looked up at her, biting her lip and reaching out to stroke my hair. I licked my lips and kissed her just below her navel before I dried her stomach, and then moved down one leg, back up the other.

"I hate to admit it," I said softly, "but you appear to be dry now."

"You were very..." Bella tapped her finger on her chin a few times before continuing. "...thorough."

"I try to be," I replied. She blushed and reached for the towel.

"Shouldn't I return the favor?"

"You don't have to do that." I shook my head at her.

"I want to," Bella said.

"I wasn't looking for reciprocation," I insisted.

"I know you weren't; I just want to." Bella took the towel from my hand and started drying my shoulders. I had to bend down a little so she could reach when she dried my hair.

Bella began running her bare hand along the same path as the towel, chasing the cloth along my stony skin. She walked around me to get to my back, telling me to stand still while she did so. I closed

my eyes and tried to focus on my breathing and not so much her hands all over my body. Not surprisingly, I failed. My skin burned everywhere her fingers touched.

I managed to keep myself relatively under control until she was drying my feet and I opened my eyes to find her on her knees in front of me. My muscles started contracting and my hands started to shake.

"Bella, get up," I said, reaching down to put my hand on her shoulder.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," I sighed. "I just...um...you're...um...heh...it's just that you're driving me crazy."

"Oh!" Bella got up to her feet and blushed, glancing at me and smiling while she held the towel behind her back.

I couldn't stop myself from kissing her, between the blush and the mock-innocent way she was holding her hand behind her back and rocking back and forth on her feet. I half expected her to start whistling a show tune. I cupped her face in my hands and brought her lips to mine. I pulled back when venom rushed into my mouth and my throat began to burn more than I could comfortably handle.

"I think that swim made me hungry," Bella said, biting her lip.

"Want me to cook you something?" I gave her a crooked smile and she punched my arm, hurting her hand in the process. I rubbed it and kissed it as we walked back into the house so I could watch Bella make her own meal. AT least she agreed to let me stay in the kitchen, which was good. I was finding it harder and harder to be away from her, even for a little while.

So far, the day had been pretty much perfect. Since I had hunted, I had been in physical contact with Bella almost all day long. We didn't

do everything on my mental list, but that just meant there was something to do another day. Bella seemed very happy to go watch the sunset after her supper, and I was ecstatic to have the opportunity to sit and watch her.

I held her hand as we walked to the western side of the island to watch the sun go down. We were maybe an hour away from sunset, and the sky was already starting to glow in the distance. We followed the curve of the beach, scattering lizards around in the sand, until we came to the location I had noticed the day before.

"I thought this looked like a good place to watch the sunset." I gestured to the small hill of sand graced with a pair of fallen palm trees. "The tree trunks should make a good backrest."

I spread out my blanket and Bella situated herself with her back against the fallen tree and her legs sticking straight out in front of her, towards the water and the setting sun. I sat next to her, moving up as close as I dared. I wanted to sit so our legs were touching, but settled for almost touching instead.

I watched the water for a few minutes, and then turned to find Bella looking at me. She blushed as soon as I caught her eye and looked away.

"Can I ask you something?" Bella turned back to me again.

"Of course, anything."

"Your eyes are...different today," Bella said, flicking her wrist towards me. "What makes them change?"

"When I hunt, they get lighter," I said. "They get darker as I get...thirstier."

"When you..." Bella stopped and looked away from me, but didn't continue.

"When I what?" I prodded. She took a deep breath and stared down at her hands, resting on her thighs.

"When you...kidnapped me," she finally said. I tensed. "Your eyes were red then."

"That was from your blood," I admitted softly after a few moments of silence. There were about a thousand different reasons I did not want to be having this conversation. "Human blood makes them turn red."

"And animal blood makes them brown?" She pressed. I nodded. "Actually, a very light brown. Like the color of honey. They're beautiful."

I looked up to her in time to see the scarlet color on her cheeks again.

"Your eyes remind me of chocolate," I said. Her blush deepened. "I remember liking chocolate."

"Before you became a vampire?"

"Yes," I said. "I don't think I had it very often, and I don't remember very clearly. I think it was something I was only given on special occasions. I remember my mother opening a box with four pieces inside and letting me have two of them. I was glad I got the extra piece. I don't remember what it tasted like, though."

"You didn't have any siblings?"

"No," I said. "I don't remember any, at least. I think I would remember a brother or a sister, but my life as a human is very vague. I don't remember my biological father much at all."

"Sometimes your eyes are black," Bella said, her voice suddenly very quiet.

"Sometimes," I agreed.

"Why do they turn black?"

"It's difficult to explain," I said. In all honesty, I just didn't want to explain it to her, but she was looking right at me and I didn't think she was going to let it just drop. I took a deep breath. "They turn black when I want something...badly."

"Oh," Bella sat back against the tree trunk and pulled her legs up. The she muttered, "I guess that makes sense."

"We are very...instinctual creatures," I told her. "Carlisle says there are chemicals in our bodies that are similar to hormones. Those chemicals build up in our systems as a response to certain stimuli. The sudden build up turns our eyes black."

"What kinds of stimuli?"

"Like feeling threatened." For some reason, I thought of the jogger in Holland Park. "The chemicals cause us to react certain ways depending on the level in our systems and the strength of the stimulus. Carlisle also believes the chemicals react more strongly when we've ingested human blood. Venom seems to carry them around our systems. One of the substances builds up and causes the thirst we feel, the burning in our throats. The thirstier I am, the less...rational I become. Once a certain level is reached instinct takes over. We can no longer control our actions, at least, not without extreme effort. Carlisle taught me to control it. He was very patient, and I wasn't always a good student."

"You miss him," Bella said. I wasn't sure if it was meant as a question or a statement.

"Yes." My throat felt tight. Carlisle had been in my thoughts all day. He was always there to explain things to me – to help me understand what I was and why I felt the way I did. He was my guide in this existence, and I wished he were explaining our nature to Bella instead of me.

My head was against her shoulder and her hands were in my hair. I coiled my arms around her frail little body and pressed myself against her as tightly as I dared. I wasn't even sure how I got there, but it didn't matter. Nothing else mattered. All the horrible things I had done to her had purpose, because she was holding me now. Losing my family was worth it, because she was holding me now.

Bella was touching me. The rest of the world be damned.

Dolphin pods were no longer coming close to our island. After the last encounter I was all right with finding something else, but the options weren't overly plentiful. Fish were about as unappealing to me as they could possibly be, and I was quickly running out of viable options. I had to come up with something to have enough control to drink Bella's blood and, if she is at all willing, and I can keep myself together long enough, make love to her.

On our island there were birds and bats and a bunch of lizards. That's it. Bats were at least mammalian blood, but I would have to drain a hundred of them. I'd devour the population of the island the first meal. If I swam all the way to Fiji, I could probably come up with domestic cattle, goats and pigs. It was pretty clear I had not chosen the very best of hunting grounds, unless I was going to resort back to tourists.

Stop thinking like that.

I went after a Bull Shark. It was barely drinkable, but I had to drain something before I went back to the island. It didn't even come close to being enough. I needed complete and total control, tonight of all nights. If Bella decided she was ready for me, I had to be ready for her. Though going so far from her was becoming physically painful, I ended up swimming to Fiji, raiding a local farmer's herd and not getting back until nearly sunset.

Bella had already finished her dinner, showered and was on top of the sheets in her bed with a paperback. She was dressed in a short

pajama set of dark blue, with white lace around the edges.

"You were gone a long time."

"Hunting opportunities are less than ideal here. I had to go to Fiji." Bella's eyes grew wide and her hand quickly covered her mouth, stifling a gasp.

"Cattle," I reassured her. She visibly relaxed against the propped up pillows. "Do you need anything? I was going to take a shower to get some of the ocean off of me."

"No, I'm fine," Bella told me. I hated it when she said that. Every time she uttered those words, I had doubts. "Go ahead."

I stepped into the oversized walk-in shower and turned on the nozzle. I let the water heat my cold skin as it washed the saltwater away. I tried not to let my mind wander towards what was to come – her blood, her body. I shuddered under the stream of water, turning it hotter to warm my skin for her.

I pulled on a pair of boxers and debated lounge pants. I wanted to feel more of her against my skin, but I also didn't want her to be too cold against me, though it was about 90 degrees Fahrenheit outside the house, and I was her only means of air conditioning inside. I finally pulled on a pair of charcoal pants and walked out of the bathroom.

Bella was still in her bed, captivated by her book. I leaned against the doorframe and let the sight of her captivate me. Pillows were stacked up behind her, against the headboard and Bella sat in the middle of them, like an angel on a white, fluffy cloud with her hair all over the place. She was looking intently at each page of the book, her eyes tight with concentration. When she reached the end of a page, she flipped it over quickly to the next.

I memorized the angle of her jawbone, took in the varying hues of the skin at her cheek and neck, and visually drank the

complementing shade of blue against her creamy skin. I let myself steal a look at the top of her shirt, where just the briefest glimpse of those magnificent mounds was visible. I licked my lips, remembering the texture of her nipple in my mouth and how it pebbled under my tongue.

Bella looked up and caught me gawking at her, but I didn't try to hide it. She placed her book face down on the nightstand and reached one hand out to me and patted the space in front of her with the other. I didn't hesitate long before crawling over the bed and settling myself between her legs with my back against her chest.

I lay back against her body gently, resting the back of my head on her shoulder. Bella's arms encircled me under my biceps and around my chest. I closed my eyes and tilted my head to plant light kisses on her jaw, feeling the warmth there and testing my control just a little. I was well fed and strong, for now. Afterwards, I'd be even better and I could continue where we left off the other night.

Bella's hand reached over to caress my cheek, her small fingers dancing over my face and making my skin hum with the sensation. She moved her hand up a little more, the tips of her fingers reaching the hair right above my ear, leaving her wrist poised at my lips.

I kissed the vessel there at the end of her arm, my lips wrapping around it. I licked and sucked at her wrist, being careful my venom-coated teeth didn't break the skin. My hand ran up and down her arm, lightly stroking her a few times before my fingers circled her wrist and my thumbnail rubbed over her tender flesh, but did not tear it. I felt the fingers in my hair tense a little.

I turned my head away from her arm and looked up to her, hoping she could see reflected in my eyes the reverence I felt for her and what she would do for me. I caught her lips with mine, kissing her softly before exhaling over her mouth and nose. I felt her hand relax against my face again, so I turned my attention back to the artery throbbing under my thumb.

Bella didn't even flinch when my nail pierced her skin, tearing a line up the artery. My lips recaptured her wrist, opening up to let the flow of blood down my throat. The cut was a little deeper than usual – probably due to my haste to taste her again, combined with my desire to quench other thirsts afterwards. This would be quick, at least. I groaned and pulled her delicate arm up hard against my unyielding mouth as I sucked, pulling the warm, thick life fluid of my beloved into my body, becoming one with her as much as I had yet to dare.

What would it be like, to drink from her and make love to her at the same time? Would I be able to do it? I barely had the control to stop draining her, and I had yet to exercise enough control to actually bury myself in her body. Could I do both at once? Would she survive a test?

While these thoughts flowed through my brain and her blood flowed into my mouth, I sound came to my over sensitive ears – the sound of water dripping. The sound of water dripping as if someone had just walked out of the ocean onto the beach with water sloshing off clothing and skin and onto the sand.

The scent of another vampire hit me, even through the ambrosia of Bella's luscious flavor.

The roar cutting through the air must have been mine, because I could feel it tearing out of my chest. I couldn't focus on the sound – the instincts flashing through my brain and body were too overwhelming.

Bite, tear, destroy.

Defend the kill.

I heard the running footsteps of the one who would take my food from me. I jumped into a crouch, snarling. A questioning voice was behind me, but I was unable to decipher the meaning of the feminine voice's words.

I took several steps forward – not too far from the kill – I couldn't be too far from it or it would be stolen from me. It must be protected.
She is mine ! No one else will have her!

He walked through the open doors, this other vampire. Through the darkened red haze of my instinctual rage I recognized him. I had seen this one before, most certainly. Had he threatened my food before? My mind couldn't focus. The vampire dropped into his own crouch reflexively. He had short, dark hair, massive shoulders representing considerable strength all wrapped up in a six-foot four frame with honey colored eyes.

Bite, tear, destroy.

"Edward," the vampire hissed. I hissed back, taking another step towards him, ready to destroy that being that would take her blood from me. "It's me – Emmett."

Defend the kill.

The name registered, but not enough to stop my charge. His thoughts were confused and non-threatening, but in his mind, he desired the blood behind me. I hissed again, and mutely heard the echo of blood dripping on the floor. Unlike the drops of water on the sand, the sound was deep and thick. I had to protect the blood that lay behind me, the scent of it wafting throughout the room, growing more intense – darker. The kill came first. Don't let anyone steal the kill. I leapt forward with a snarl.

He must die.

So much for brotherhood.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh.

Bad timing, Emmett!

I know I keep saying this, but thank you all so much for your reviews!
I'm reading them all, though FFN doesn't make replying easy.

Savage

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 – Regret and Redeem

I couldn't think beyond defending what was mine. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed.

The impact against my shoulder was enough to rip near blinding pain through my arm and down my back. I couldn't even remember the last time I felt true physical pain, and the sensation surprised me. Both of us flew out the door, through the wooden slatted railing around the porch and into the sand beyond.

Get a hold, don't let go...

The chant in his head did little to block his planned movements from my gift. Through the red haze in my eyes and in my mind, I heard his mental intentions before he could execute them. He took a swipe at me, and I ducked, slammed into his chest, and watched him fly off the beach and into the water. As long as he didn't get a hold of me, I would keep the upper hand.

He hurled himself back out and ran up the beach, intending to bowl into me, but I side stepped and pushed him into a stand of palms next to the house. I rushed in and kicked at him while he was still untangling himself from the fronds.

We went on like that – he would dive at me, I would anticipate his moves and dodge, knocking him out of the way – for several minutes. If I kept out of his reach, I would eventually wear him down. In the back of my head, I knew this game. We had played it many times before, though the stakes were a little higher this time. *Defend the kill.*

Can't hurt him...have to grab him and hang on...

The next punch into his back as I parried sent him back into the water, and this time I followed. He began swimming out towards the rocks, but I caught his ankle and sent him flying back to the beach instead. He recovered and came towards me again.

I dove under the waves, swimming back to the beach. The warm water slowed me down by only the smallest fraction, but it was enough to lose my advantage. The next parry left him just enough room to grab my arm as I tried to pass.

Within half a second, I was on my back on the beach, half in and half out of the water, growling and snarling. Emmett's massive arm was across my chest, pinning the top half of my body to the ground while his other hand slammed my head repeatedly against the wet sand.

"Are...you...done...yet?" Emmett yelled. He emphasized his words by pounding my head into the sand in time with each utterance. The red haze began to fade from first my eyes, then my brain.

I closed my eyes for a tiny fraction of a second and tried to slow my breathing before I glared back into Emmett's face. He had me immobilized, and I knew it. I was faster, and he rarely caught me, but once he got me down, I wasn't going anywhere.

"Had enough?" Emmett snarled at me.

"Don't touch her!" I spat the words into his face.

"Get a grip, little brother," Emmett's voice dropped lower. "Focus and think for a minute. Smell the blood. Edward, she's in trouble. You have to get a grip."

That's when I heard the thump from inside the house.

"Let me up," I growled, half surprised when he rolled off of me. I raced into the house.

There was blood all over the bedroom.

Bella was face down near the door of the room with a trail of blood leading back to the bed and a larger pool of blood in the middle of the blankets, where she had been holding me just a few minutes ago. I pulled her off the floor and into my embrace. I felt a warm gush across my shirt and arm.

"Oh no, Bella, no!"

For a moment, I could do nothing. Her wrist was spurting from where I had torn open her artery, and the blood pouring out of the vessel was all over me. The smell of her blood all over the room and all over my clothes was intense and completely overpowering my senses. Venom coursed down my throat and I wanted to – *needed to* – drink.

Too much – she's lost too much blood already.

I wasn't done! I wanted more!

There was a small cut by her temple, right at her hairline. There was a small amount of blood there, and a good-sized bump from where she must have hit the floor. Bella's face was completely white, and her head lolled to one side when I pulled her closer to me. I had to push the monster down – I had to get control, or Bella was going to die.

Oh God, no...she can't die.

My Bella. I couldn't survive without her. Without her touch, I would be nothing.

"Bella," I pulled her face closer to mine and wrapped my hand around her gushing arm, pushing my fingers into the cut. "Please, Bella – answer me! Emmett!"

My brother stood near the bathroom, looking down the hall and through the bedroom doorway with his arm held up, covering his mouth and nose.

Oh man, the smell...

"I don't think I can come in there, bro."

"She's lost so much blood. I have to get her to a hospital. I have to get her to Fiji. Please..." I looked up into his darkened eyes. "Please help me!"

"You got a boat, I hope? You're gonna need ID, too."

"In the closet off the kitchen – there's a bag with our passports. My wallet is in there, and the keys to the boat, too. It's docked on the northwest part of the beach."

Emmett disappeared into the other room. Bella was not responding to me at all, and blood was still seeping around my fingers. I pulled her wrist up to my mouth and held my breath, as if that would really make any difference. The scent of her blood was literally covering me. My tongue latched over her wound, sealing it and sending another mouthful of blood down my throat. The monster delighted in the taste as it slid over my tongue and begged for more. It was everywhere – on her, on me, on the floor, on the bed. The monster wanted to stop and drink it all.

"No," I groaned. I forced myself to move, pulling Bella backwards towards the bed. I ripped some of the sheet into strips and wrapped them around her arm.

Emmett called from the other room – he had what we needed. I picked her up and carried her outside and to the boat. Emmett started the engine, and we sped north towards Fiji and help.

Salty smelling wind blew around me and dried my clothes as I cradled Bella against my chest. She hadn't moved or made a sound.

"Bella, Bella – can you hear me? Bella, please, please..."

All that blood... Alice said she saw him kill her. Is this it? Is she going to die?

"Shut up!" I screamed at Emmett.

"I didn't say anything!"

I held her tighter, trying to push Emmett's thoughts of her away. I couldn't lose her. I just couldn't. I ran my hand through her hair. There was blood caked in it. I wanted to bathe her. I tucked my face against her neck and a strange, unearthly sound came out of my throat. *You have to be okay...you have to be...you have to... please...*

I closed my eyes and rocked back and forth, holding her steady and begging her to be all right. I don't know how long I stayed like that, but I knew she wasn't getting any warmer.

"I can't be without you," I whispered against her skin. I looked up at Emmett. "She has to be okay."

Emmett looked over his shoulder at me, holding my unconscious love tight against my body. She was so cold, and I couldn't warm her.

She looks awful.

"Emmett," I met his gaze. I choked back a sob. "She's everything to me. She's my life. I can't lose her. I can't...I can't..."

You are completely screwed up, little brother.

"I know."

Emmett thought about how he would feel if we were reversed, and he was holding Rosalie instead. He shook his head and looked back up to the dark horizon.

"Where is she?"

"Paris," Emmett said, understanding quickly whom I meant. "We're supposed to be on spring break starting next week. We left school a little early."

"She knows you're here?"

"Yes," Emmett looked back at me and glared. "So you *do* remember asking me to come and help? You need to work on your welcoming skills. Next time I'll send Rose instead. She still wants to beat the shit out of you. Not that I didn't enjoy doing it myself."

I took a deep breath and drenched myself in Bella's scent again. I ran my hand over her cheek and pushed my lips lightly against hers. I wanted to glance back up at my brother, but I wasn't quite sure I could look him in the eye just yet.

"I'm sorry, Emmett. I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know why I...attacked you like that. I'm sorry – really."

"It's a good thing your skills aren't that great when you're in the moment, bro." Emmett laughed.

I brushed my fingers over Bella's cheekbone and whispered continued apologies to her. I kissed her lightly on her temple, near the bump on her head.

"I don't know what's happening to me," I repeated. "I don't know why my control is slipping. I can hardly function anymore. I can only think of her. She is my everything."

"Yeah, you got a funny way of showing it," Emmett mumbled.

Twisted anger raked through my brain, and the monster slammed against my insides, demanding I finish off the woman in my arms and maybe tear apart my brother when I was done. My hands shook, and Bella's body shook along with them. I forced them to still and held her tight against my chest. I took a slow breath, but it didn't help. It just filled my nostrils with the scent of her blood.

"Why did you come?" I snapped, then immediately felt guilty about it.

You're my brother. You asked for my help.

"Thank you," I finally whispered.

It was 30 miles to Suva, Fiji, and the closest hospital. It felt like it took 30 days to get there, and I was nearly hysterical with helplessness by the time we reached land. Emmett had even threatened to slap me if I didn't cut it out.

My brother deftly angled the boat against the dock and we both jumped out, me carrying Bella and Emmett stopping just long enough to loop the rope around to tie it off. The hospital was less than ten blocks from the water, so I started to run at top speed, hoping not to be noticed under the darkened sky. Emmett was right behind me.

"Edward, wait a sec," Emmett stopped, his hand grasping my elbow.

"We have to get her to a hospital now," I stressed, but still stopped and turned towards him.

"Edward, think about what you did," Emmett said.

You sealed her arm with venom. The hospital is going to ask questions. You have to...to re-open up the wound.

My stomach clenched. He was right.

We were close to the hospital, so we moved off into a field only a few hundred feet from the entrance. It was deserted, and far enough away from the hospital doors that no one would have seen us there, ducked behind some trees. Emmett stayed back a bit, not wanting to be too close to what I was going to do, and watched for people.

I unwrapped the makeshift bandage of sheet fabric, looked up at Bella's closed eyes and uttered a muted apology before I tore through her arm again.

Bella's whole body jerked, and I held her tight against my chest. I was actually quite glad for the response, even though it meant I had hurt her...again. It also meant she wasn't so far gone that she couldn't feel anything. I wrapped the bandage back around the cut and applied pressure to help it stop bleeding again.

"Ready," I said, and we quickly moved to the emergency room entrance and into the private hospital. I carried Bella up to the front desk and one of the nurses came around to meet us, immediately checking the pulse in Bella's uninjured arm. She motioned over two other people on the hospital staff.

A man and a woman, dressed mostly in white and speaking with British accents, approached the three of us. I told them Bella had cut her arm and had lost a lot of blood. They pulled a gurney over, and I laid Bella down on top of it. I followed long enough for them to get to a pair of double doors, where the man stopped and held his hand out against my chest.

End of the line.

"We're going to need you to stay out here while we check her out," he said. He pulled his hand away from my chest and rubbed his fingers together rapidly.

So cold...

"No!" I screamed at him. Emmett grabbed me by my left bicep and held me back. "I am going with her!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but patients only allowed beyond this point. It is hospital policy. If you want her treated, you will stay here while we check her out. Besides, there is paperwork for you to fill out."

Edward, relax – let them do their jobs. If you get yourself kicked out of here you aren't going to be able to help her at all.

I couldn't possibly relax, but I did reluctantly acquiesce. I realized if nothing else, Bella didn't have time for me to argue with the doctor or take her to another hospital. I was directed to a desk to fill out paperwork on Isabella Masen.

Did you get married?

"No," I said, too quickly and quietly for the receptionist to hear. "It just made traveling a little easier."

Emmett chuckled as he handed Bella's passport to the receptionist. Once I had filled out all the paperwork on my "wife," we were directed to a waiting room where I very nearly lost the small amount of composure I had left. If Emmett hadn't been there to both physically restrain me and talk me down, I would most certainly have killed someone. Maybe several someones.

Emmett eventually sat me down on one of the turquoise bench seats and yelled a few obscenities at me. I wrapped my hair up in my fingers and leaned down so my elbows were on my knees. While my head sank into my hands, my mind sank into my memories.

I remembered every time I had tasted her. Her blood flowed in and out of my consciousness, but instead of remembering the taste, I heard her cries instead. Though they lessened over time and with a little dazzling, I knew tearing through her skin and blood vessels was violent and painful. It didn't stop me, and even though I professed my love to her – well, not in a way that she could hear, but still – I hadn't considered stopping. I put her through it over and over again, and now she could die because I was a selfish, evil monster. I choked out a dry, heaving sob and followed it up with a moan for good measure. I deserved to have her die, just for being what I was, but Bella didn't deserve to die because of me.

If the doctors weren't going to be able to help her, I didn't want to continue existing.

"Emmett," I said, my voice sounding hoarse. I didn't look up at him or remove my hands from my head. "If she dies, you have to kill me."

"Shut up, Edward."

She'll be okay.

Even in his mind, he didn't know if what he was saying were true.

"If she dies, I will follow her, Emmett."

"I said, shut up." He followed his words with a punch to my shoulder.

"Mr. Masen?" A nurse came out of the double doors and motioned for us to follow her.

"How is she?" I demanded, standing up.

"I'll let the doctor give you the details," she said, and motioned for us to follow her. There was nothing in her mind about Bella – she was focused on her son and his financial issues. I wanted to drain her for her lack of concern. Emmett put a hand on my shoulder and held me back, issuing a mental word of warning. Was I actually moving to harm her? I didn't recall.

She led us through the maze of rooms to a large open area with drawn curtains hanging from the ceiling. Most of them were half open, with the occupants and their various illnesses or injuries on display for anyone who walked by.

My hands shook as I walked around the last curtain where the nurse was headed, unsure if I was prepared to see her like this. I felt Emmett's hand on my shoulder again, and I suppose he was trying to encourage me, but all I could think is that it wasn't Bella's hand touching me. His unvoiced words reminded me she was going to be all right. Even if she looked bad now, she was going to be okay.

I rounded the edge of the curtain and stopped.

Bella was, as I expected, in a tall hospital bed with a bunch of tubes running out of her. Her face was far beyond pale. She was gaunt. Then the scent from the other side of the room hit me, and I took a step back.

"She doesn't smell right," I said, cringing.

"She had a transfusion, bro. She's gonna smell different."

"I don't like it."

I wanted to run over and leap onto the bed, cover her with my body and hold her still hands to my head while I hid my face in her shoulder. I didn't think that would be the best course of action for Bella, and likely not appreciated by the hospital staff, so I walked over to the bed slowly instead. The conflicting desires to not see what I had done to her and the need to be close to her again battled in my head. My needs won, as they always did, and I pulled up a rolling chair so I could sit close to her. Gently moving the IV tube out of the way, I reached down and picked up her hand with the bandaged wrist and pulled her knuckles to my lips.

I didn't pay any attention to the doctor who came in and stood at the end of the rolling bed, looking at a chart.

"Mr. Masen," she said, looking me up and down a little.

He is too young, too. They must have gotten the relationship wrong.

"I am Dr. Sans. I've been treating your...sister?"

"Wife," I corrected, not looking away from Bella.

"I see." She made a couple of notations on her clipboard. "And Isabella is nineteen years old?"

"Yes," I answered.

"And you have been married how long?"

"A little over a month," I said. "We're still on our honeymoon."

Bloodymoon.

If there had been fewer witnesses, I would have tackled Emmett for his sick and misplaced sense of humor.

"How long have you known each other?"

"Four or five years," I said. Lies were so easy. They just flowed from my mouth without thought, which was good, since I couldn't think about anything but the warmth of the hand I held in mine. "All through high school."

"Has Isabella attempted suicide before?"

My brain couldn't process what this woman was saying to me. Did she have the wrong chart? I turned towards her, focusing on her mind.

"What did you say?"

"Has she ever done anything like this before? Or maybe talked about it?"

His wife's just sliced open her wrist. Wonder what he's done to her?

"Bella didn't do that on purpose," I snarled. "She fell and cut herself!"

Denial? That would be fairly common, especially for such a young couple.

"On what?"

"Something in the kitchen," I said. "I was outside and found her unconscious when I came back in. I didn't spend a lot of time looking around for what she fell on."

So many healed cuts. How could he not know she's been doing this?

Okay, maybe the lies were easy, but they were also pretty lame. The wrong smell coming from the unconscious woman in the bed was making me feel physically ill. I couldn't focus on what I was saying or what the doctor was thinking. Bella's closed eyes kept reeling back all of my attention.

"There was glass on the floor," I added, realizing how pathetic I sounded even as the words came out of my mouth. She didn't believe me.

Time to play some interference.

"Dr. Sans," Emmett stood up and came to stand so he was a little bit between me and the doctor. He bent over a little so he was face-to-face with her. "Could you please tell me how my little brother's wife is doing, before her hubby freaks out on me again?"

Very helpful.

"She's had a transfusion and she's going to be just fine," the doctor said. "But I want to hold her for seventy-two hours for a psychiatric evaluation."

"That's not necessary," I said, shaking my head.

"I believe it is."

"It won't be necessary," I emphasized looking straight into the doctor's eyes. "She should be released as soon as she is physically able to go. I can take care of her."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Masen," Dr. Sans said. "I'm holding her for seventy-two hours."

She got up and left.

Lost your touch, bro.

"Shut up."

Within an hour, I had thrown a fit at a nurse, three other doctors, and also the hospital administrator. Unfortunately, the doctor who had requested the psychiatric evaluation had left for the day, and no one was willing to overturn her decision. I focused my energy on demanding a posh private room and offered to build them a new hospital wing if they moved her to their best room, and threatened to get them shut down if they didn't. About that time, Emmett hauled me outside, smacked me around a little and told me to "get a grip" again.

I did get her into a private room, and it was a pretty nice one as far as hospital rooms go. Bella couldn't appreciate it though, because she was still unconscious. I took my frustrations out on Emmett and every hospital staff member who walked in the room. After a few more whacks to the back of my head from my brother, I finally fell silent. I dropped down into the uncomfortable little chair next to her bed, held her hand and refused to speak to anyone else. Instead, I sat and caressed Bella's fingers, stroked her cheek and begged her to wake up.

I tried to block out all the surrounding thoughts about the irrational behavior of the injured girls' husband.

She had been given two transfusions since we had arrived. The second one made her smell even worse than the first. I was, as Emmett kept pointing out, an absolute wreck. I refused to let go of Bella's hand, no matter what they were trying to do with her at the time. I was willing to switch hands while they fiddled around with the IV, though I always came back to the one at the end of her bandaged arm.

Most of the time I just sat next to her with my head in one hand and her fingers twisted around the other. Emmett sat in a reclining chair on the other side of the room, flipping madly through beach magazines and trying not to think about anything that would result in me flying off the handle again.

When she finally moved, I didn't even look at first, for fear I had imagined it. I heard Emmett sit up in his chair and put his magazine down, so I squeezed my eyes closed for a second longer before I dared look at her face.

Bella's opened eyes were bloodshot, full of confusion and pain, and also the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

She's waking up.

"Bella?" My voice actually cracked when I whispered her name.
"Bella? Can you talk to me?"

I could see her throat move as she swallowed hard and clenched her eyes shut again for a moment before opening them and focusing on me.

"Edward..." Bella coughed, nearly pulling out her IV when she went to cover her mouth. "What's going on?"

"Oh Bella," I choked. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry...I didn't realize you were...you were..."

I couldn't bring myself to even say it. My hands were shaking again and I couldn't make them stop. I squeezed my eyes shut as visions of Bella bleeding on the floor overwhelmed me again. I ran my hand up through my hair and moaned.

Her warmth was on my cheek, running up my jaw and then into my hair, pushing my hand out of the way and pulling me close to her. She held my head against her shoulder, trying not to get herself tangled up in the tubes coming out of her arm. Her fingertips slid across my scalp and suddenly, everything was all right again. I had been lost without her touch, but now my purpose in this existence was once again crystal clear. All that remained was finding a way to make it all up to her.

I leaned against her, running my nose along her neck and littering her skin with feather light kisses. I turned my head to look up at her hollow, confused eyes.

"Someone was there," she said softly, trying to remember.

"Yes," I said. "I didn't realize...I thought it was someone coming to take you from me. I just reacted – I wasn't thinking. Bella, I'm so sorry."

Bella looked down at the needle buried in her hand and flinched, closing her eyes again.

"Was it that vampire...Samson?"

"No, Bella – not him. Just Emmett. Just my brother."

"I'm so tired..." she mumbled, and was immediately unconscious again with her hand still twined in my hair. I stayed still, resting my head beside her shoulder on the bed, refusing to do anything that might cause my contact with her to cease.

Emmett pushed himself out of the reclining chair and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He shrugged his shoulders at me.

Gotta call the missus.

I nodded just the tiniest amount so I wouldn't disturb Bella, and Emmett walked out of the room and down the hall. He walked past the waiting room and outside as if he wanted some privacy, though his mind was still perfectly clear to me.

"Hey baby," Emmett purred into the phone.

I could pick Rosalie's words out of Emmett's head, though he was too far away from me to actually hear the conversation between the two of them.

"Find him?" Rose was never one for subtlety.

"Yeah," Emmett confirmed.

"And?"

"He's a mess, Rosie," Emmett signed. "He was always a moody little pain in the ass, but this is just...spooky-weird. Even for Edward."

"What do you mean?" Rosalie questioned. "Does he still have the human girl with him? Did he kill her?"

"No, but he got damn close to it," Emmett huffed. "It's a good thing he came to his senses, because there was so much blood, I was about to lose it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"When I found him, he was...well..." Emmett hesitated. "Um...having a snack, I guess you could call it. When he saw me, he flipped and went for my throat instead. I smacked him around a bit and he snapped out of it, but he left her bleeding."

"He *what* ?" Rose was yelling into the phone.

"I'm telling you baby, Edward's completely lost it. You remember when he came back? You know – after the last time he went renegade? He'd just sit in his room and not speak to anyone, babble a lot of nonsense and look like he was tryin' to pull his hair out?"

"Yes," Rose said, her voice a little calmer now. "Carlisle said it was like he was having some kind of panic attack. Guilt from all the people he had killed. Only Edward could make Carlisle consider concocting vampiric Prozac."

"Yeah – exactly!" Emmett agreed. "He did that a couple of times – once on the way to the hospital, then in the waiting room and again in her room before she woke up."

"And?" Rosalie pressed.

"She woke up. And then when she touched him, he totally calmed down, like, immediately. I swear, all she did was run her fingers through his hair and he was perfectly fine again!"

"We should have brought her over to the house in the fifties then."

"No shit!"

"Carlisle called," Rosalie said after a minute. "He said he couldn't reach you. He seemed a little suspicious, but he didn't come out and ask."

"Yeah, I figured Dad would catch on." Emmett laughed. "I don't know how long I'll be here. With his human in the hospital, I haven't even asked him what he needed me for. I don't know if he wants me to take him to vamp rehab or what. I'll give you a call back when I get it figured out, 'kay?"

"Okay Em." Rosalie actually sounded a little worried. "Alice called, too, but said everything around you was too confused and she couldn't trust what she saw. Be careful, he doesn't really sound like he's himself."

"Oh, he isn't, believe me," Emmett said, laughing again. "But it's all good, babe. Keep Dad off my back. Love ya."

"You, too."

I had to fight back the urge to rip the head off every nurse who came into adjust Bella's IV and run her vitals. I didn't like any of them touching Bella. I didn't want anyone coming anywhere near her. I told them I could fill the damn chart out myself, which they clearly didn't appreciate.

Finally, Bella stirred, showing the first signs of consciousness in about six hours, when she had awoken just long enough to help me

get a little composure back again. I sat up a little straighter, my hands wrapped around her hand, making it into a sandwich.

"Bella?" I ran my thumb over her knuckles. Her eyes squeezed shut and her brow furrowed. I felt tension in her fingers. "Can you hear me?"

"Mmm..." was the only sound that came from her.

"It's okay, Bella," I said, leaning closer to her and reaching up to stroke my hand over her forehead. "You're going to be all right."

"Edward?" Bella's eyes fluttered open and she blinked a few times, trying to focus. "Where am I?"

"The hospital," I said. I took a deep breath. "You had to have a transfusion. Well, two, actually. You lost a lot of...blood."

"You left," Bella looked up at me, all the questions in the world held in her eyes.

"I know, Bella – I'm sorry." I reached up and cupped her face in my hands. "I'm so sorry, Bella – I don't know what happened. I just heard him coming up and I thought...I thought...ugh! I didn't *think* – that's the problem!"

"Edward, I understand...it's okay. I'm fine."

"Don't say that!" I yelled at her and pushed away from the bed. I hated that phrase. Every time she said it I knew it was a lie. She wasn't *fine*. She had put up with me and continued to try to make me feel better about being a monster, and all it had done for her was land her in the hospital. I wasn't going to hear anything about being *fine* any more.

The loss of contact with her was making me uneasy. I couldn't stand the loss of her touch, so I went back to the bed and leaned over her, running my hands up her arm, over her shoulder and brushing the

backs of my fingers over her jaw. I stroked her cheekbone with my thumb and looked in the deep, rich, chocolate brown eyes.

"I keep losing myself, Bella," I told her. "You always bring me back. I don't know how you do it, and I don't know why you do it, but you do. You know how much I need you. I can't hide that and I can't change the ways that I need you, but I can stop acting on it."

"I thought it was your blood," I admitted. "But it's your touch I need, Bella. Your warmth, your willingness to look at me and not...not... push me away. That's what I want." I leaned closer, my lips barely grazing over hers. "That's what I need."

"Edward," Bella whispered, her voice still scratchy and hoarse. "What are you saying?"

"That I want you," I repeated. "I want to be with you, always. I...I can't let you go, like I should, but I want you to stay with me. Maybe even someday try to *want* to be with me, even though I know that's asking too much. I want to...I want to watch movies and swim with you. I want to take you on picnics and watch sunsets with you. I want to hold you at night and I want...I want..."

"What?"

I dropped my eyes down, then looked back up at her through my lashes.

"I want to touch your breasts again, if you'll let me." I felt the corners of my mouth twitch into a half smile. I was again glad she was the blusher and not I. "Maybe... well...maybe more, later. If you want to."

"I told you I wasn't going to leave you," Bella frowned. "I know what you need."

I shook my head vehemently. She didn't realize what I was saying, because I wasn't saying anything right. *Just come out and tell her, coward* .

"No, you don't understand," I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, trying to refocus. I wondered if I could have said the words if the transfusions hadn't made her smell so different. "I just want to be with you. I don't want...it's you, not...not your...not your *blood* ."

I opened my eyes and looked into hers again, holding her face and mentally willing her to believe me. For that moment, there was nothing else in the world. Just Bella, her glorious eyes, her touch and her warm skin close to me.

"Bella, I promise you," I declared. "I will find a way to make myself stop. I promise...I *swear* ...I will never, ever hurt you again."

Oh my God, he's the one who's been doing this to her!

I had been so focused on convincing Bella I hadn't heard the nurse come through the open door. Now her thoughts were crystal clear to me. She tried to regain her composure and pretend she hadn't heard my last sentence to Bella, but her mind was completely open. She intended to take Bella's vitals quickly, and then contact the authorities. I felt a growl rising in my chest.

After all my declarations, there was still someone else willing to stand in my way. Another poor soul was going to try to keep my Bella from me. Blood or no blood, I couldn't allow that to happen. I might be able to convince myself to live without tasting her blood again, but I wasn't going to let anyone take her away from me. I was going to have to kill the nurse before she had the chance to say anything to anyone else, and reduce the potential loss of life. I couldn't do that here, in this room and in front of Bella. Time to take a little walk...

So much for atonement.

Chapter End Notes

So, is he finally starting to think rationally, or is he about to blow it completely?

Stay tuned!

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 – Coax and Confess

I watched the nurse wrap her fingers over Bella's good wrist to take her pulse.

Twenty-one per fifteen seconds is...

"Eighty-four a minute sounds pretty good to me," I said, not taking my eyes from her. Her head swiveled towards me and she narrowed her eyes. She scratched on Bella's chart with a wide graphite pencil.

How did he know?

I smiled and shrugged. A shiver ran down her spine as she moved over to a stand with a blood pressure cup. I closed my eyes halfway and listened to the blood flowing through Bella's vessels.

"Ninety-one over sixty-three is still a little low," I commented before she had managed to inflate the cuff. "Has there been an order to increase the saline in her IV?"

"Only if she doesn't improve by noon," the nurse responded, eyeing me again. "Her last check was ninety over sixty-five, though."

"That was the last check," I agreed. "She hasn't made much in the way of progress since then."

She slowly released the air from the cuff and glared at me before writing ninety-one over sixty-three on the chart.

"Edward," Bella whispered, her eyes widened stared into mine. She placed her hand against my forearm. "Cut it out!"

I gave her a half smile and picked her hand up. I brought her knuckles to my lips and kissed each one in turn. I tasted the last one

on her pinkie finger with my tongue.

"Anything you say," I breathed.

The nurse moved around the bed, finishing up her duties and trying to decide if she should first talk to the attending physician, or call the police directly. She wasn't going to get the chance to do either. I watched her carefully and felt her nervousness as I stared at her.

"Edward, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Bella," I said, turning my attention back to her and stroking her cheek. "I'm going to see about getting you released as soon as possible. I'll have a quick chat outside and then I will be right back at your side, okay?"

"Um...okay."

I handed her a glass of water with a straw, then lifted myself from the chair and followed the nurse outside the door. She kept glancing over her shoulder and I smiled at her, wondering how her taste would compare to Bella's.

Well, if she had to die anyway, I might as well get something out of it. Right? Yes, the monster had certainly awoken again. Besides, I rationalized, it would help me control myself around Bella after her release from the hospital.

The nurse stopped at the nurse's station and began transferring information from Bella's chart into a database. Her hands were shaking a little. I stood close to her, watching her work over her shoulder.

What is he doing? Is he just going to stand there? Does he know what I'm planning to do? How did he know what her blood pressure was going to be? How could he know?

"I know you are busy," I hummed the words out at her, watching her body relax as she turned towards me and my breath hit her face. "But do you think we could talk privately for a moment? I might be able to shed a little light on what's been happening with Bella."

"Oh...uh..." she stammered, her eyes glazing over as she stared into mine. All the lucid thoughts she had left her. "Sure...I guess. That should be fine. Should I get the doctor, too?"

"No, not just yet." I smiled at her and gestured towards one of the empty rooms across the hall. She immediately began her death march with me walking close behind her. I had a brief image of myself raising my arms up over my head while wearing a thick, black cape. I suppressed the urge to laugh.

We turned into an empty patient room, and I softly closed the door behind us.

"I know you are concerned about my...wife," I said, smiling and meeting her eyes with an intense stare. "I wanted you to know I really appreciate that. She's very...special to me."

"Oh, of course she is..." the nurse agreed, blinking rapidly.

I walked up closer to her, backing her into the wall beside a cart of heart monitoring equipment. Her pupils were dilated slightly, and I could hear her heart rate increase. I licked my lips and inhaled deeply. She didn't smell anything like my Bella, but human blood was still...quite...irresistible.

"She is my world, my life," I explained. "That is why I can't allow anything to jeopardize our connection. Not even someone who is sincerely trying to help her."

"What do you mean?" The nurse took her final step backwards, meeting the wall with her shoulders.

"I understand your desire to approach the authorities given the exchange you witnessed." I moved up close, my hand reaching out and stroking down her neck. I felt her pulse against my fingers and swallowed venom back down my throat. "But you misunderstood. Regardless, I can't take the chance that you will go to the authorities. I can't take any chances with Bella. So, I must apologize for what I have to do. There just isn't any other way to protect what is mine."

I took one last step towards her, feeling the warmth of her torso against my own. The feeling of her heat on my skin left me with emptiness inside. She was not my Bella. Her body, her life, her blood – they were all nothing to me. I didn't really want any of it, but I had to do this one thing. I had to do this one thing for Bella. I knew in the back of my head Bella would not want me to do this, because she would not understand. She would be angry with me, but I had to protect her. I had to protect *us*. There was no other way.

Irrespective of what I wanted, the monster was quite keen on the blood of this woman.

"Where is he, Alice?" Emmett's hiss matched the elevator door's as it slid closed far down the hall. I could hear him clearly, but he was still a ways off. I was going to have to move quickly.

"In a room – there's a bed and a bunch of medical equipment." Alice's voice threatened to distract me, so the monster took a firmer grip on my psyche.

"No shit – we're in a hospital! All the rooms look like that!"

I was running out of time. I pushed her hair back over her neck and behind her shoulder. My thoughts and my body only seemed to only be remotely attached to each other. *Bella would be so angry with me...*

But the monster didn't care.

"I'm sorry – there's no other way," I whispered before I covered her mouth with one hand and sank my teeth into the artery at her neck.

Her breath came out in a gasp and her mind screamed. My eyelids clamped down as the pain in her mind echoed in my own.

Drink her! Drink her! DRINK HER!

And because it was not Bella, I gave in, and let the monster have what he begged to consume. I didn't have any choice, so I shoved her thoughts of husband, brother, mother, daughter, and twin sons far, far away. The frenzy tore over me and through me and embedded itself deep inside me.

I drank.

The nurse's blood wasn't like Bella's, of course. Nothing else was. However, it was so much better than anything else I had drained since the shop owner in Canada, I found myself holding her tightly against me and I drank. I drank deeply and quickly, wanting the terrified thoughts in her mind to stop so they couldn't consume me before I consumed her. The burn in my throat subsided as her heart thrummed out its last beat, and my thirst was satisfied.

"I'm too late. I'll call you back."

I heard the click of the phone and knew his next intended action before he went to execute it. I let him slam me against the wall as the nurse's corpse dropped from my hands to the floor. Bella would want me to hurt for what I had done, so I let Emmett be the bringer of my punishment. It would be better than the look on Bella's face if she knew.

I had done it. I killed another human. Her taste was still coating the inside of my mouth.

Delicious.

"Are you nuts?" Emmett yelled, turning me around and looking into my eyes. He twisted his fists through the material of my shirt and yanked my feet up off the floor. "Jesus, Edward, what is wrong with you?"

"She was going to try and take Bella from me." I shrugged, not meeting his gaze. "I couldn't let her do that."

"Jesus," Emmett repeated and let go of my shirt. My feet dropped back to the floor, and I dropped down to my knees. "Were you always this fucked up when you were drinking human blood?"

"I don't think so," I said softly, honestly not knowing if I had been or not. I didn't recall thinking this way. It was Bella. Bella changed everything. "I told you before – I can't be without her. Anything that gets in the way of her...I can't...I just can't be without her."

"And this is the only way you thought there was?" Emmett glared at me. "I thought you were the smart one."

Emmett rubbed his fingers into his eyes and dropped down onto a reclining chair in the corner of the room. It was identical to the one he had been using in Bella's room.

"We could have come up with another way," Emmett looked back up to me. "You didn't have to kill her."

"I did," I said, but my voice didn't have the same conviction I held before.

"No." Emmett shook his head at me.

"They would have tried to arrest me," I said. "I don't think that would have ended well. This was better – fewer casualties."

No wonder Carlisle threw him out of the family.

I cringed.

"I'm serious, bro – you're not thinking."

"I know I'm not thinking!" I yelled back at him. "I can't think! Nothing in my head works anymore! Bella is everything. I can't think of anything else. She's everything. She's everything."

I dropped down into a crouch close to the floor and dropped my forehead into my cold hands.

Then it's time to let your big brother do some thinking for you.

I laughed, though I didn't really find anything amusing. It was just the idea of it all. Was I really so far gone I was going to have to depend on Emmett to talk sense into me? Obviously, I was.

"Emmett, what am I going to do?" I looked up to my brother, my crimson eyes reflected back at me in his golden ones. "She'll know. She won't forgive me for this."

Kind of late to be thinking about that, isn't it?

"I can't lose her," I said softly.

I know, Edward.

I closed my eyes and clenched my fists, feeling the warm human blood coursing through me. I felt strong, physically, but my mind was still in a haze.

"Help me..." I didn't know if it was a question or a plea.

I'm going to help. I will fix this disaster you have created, but you gotta stop and listen to me.

"She can't see me like this."

Gonna have to do something about your eyes.

"Contacts? They may have an optometrist here."

First things first.

Emmett nodded over to the body behind me. I shuddered and squeezed my eyes shut again.

"She had kids."

Emmett grunted, and his mind filled with various expletives. I swallowed hard. Why couldn't I think properly? If I could only think, maybe I would have come up with another way.

"I'll take care of...it." Emmett mumbled, tossing a pair of sunglasses at me. "You go find contacts. Then meet me back here. Got it?"

I nodded and left the room, keeping my eyes down to the ground as I moved through the hallways. It didn't take long to find what I needed.

It took a little charming, but I managed to acquire a half dozen pairs of brown contact lenses without much trouble, like an exam or a fitting. I put them in and blinked rapidly. I didn't like the way they made my vision so fuzzy around the edges, and they were uncomfortable, too. I blinked a few more times, and then headed back up to the patient floor.

I knew I needed to go back to Emmett first, but the desire to be with Bella overwhelmed any sense I had. It had been too long since I had felt her touch. The nurse's last thoughts and visions were traipsing around in my head, and I needed something to take them away. I felt ashamed for what I had done, and I needed Bella. *She's going to hate me.*

No. She won't. She doesn't have to know.

I walked through the door and stood on the other side of the room where Emmett usually sat. Bella was still talking to one of the doctors. I stared down at the floor, wondering how long it would take my extremely observant Bella to notice my eye color was different.

The doctor finished changing her bandage and patted her on the arm. I squelched a growl when he touched her so informally, my hands clenching into fists. He nodded to me warily as he walked out.

Have to make a couple of calls to get the right people involved...

What was that supposed to mean? I thought about heading out after him, but Bella's voice drew my attention to her.

"He thinks my arm is healing well," Bella said, tilting her head and looking at me.

"That's a very good thing," I said, keeping my feet locked down where they were. It wasn't easy. I wanted to throw myself into her bed. It felt as though the muscles in my arms and legs were straining to be closer to her. When she reached out her hand for me, my limbs took over and brought me over to her side.

I moved over to her a little too quickly, causing her to startle a bit. I ducked my head between her jaw and her shoulder, kissing her neck and effectively hiding my eyes against her flesh. I felt her hand coil up in my hair and my fists relaxed. I reached around her waist and pulled her closer to me.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Mmm," I responded, nuzzling my lips against her skin. "Everything is okay now. How are you feeling?"

"Still a little dizzy when I stand up," she said. "But it's getting better."

"I'm glad," I replied. "I want to get you out of here as soon as possible."

"The doctor said a psychologist was going to come in tomorrow morning," Bella said, her voice full of trepidation. "What am I going to say?"

"Tell them you fell after dropping a glass. The broken pieces cut you."

"He already asked about the other...um...marks," Bella said softly. "He noticed the one on my neck."

"What did you say?"

"I said I couldn't remember," she replied. "I told him I was pretty accident prone, which I am. He just wrote something down on his clip board, but didn't ask e anymore questions."

"Good." I nodded against her skin. "Stick with that."

Her palm touched my cheek and the muscles on one side of my neck contracted, reflexively pushing my face closer to the heat of her hand. Bella was still with me. She wasn't leaving me and no one would take her from me. I just needed to hold onto her for another forty-eight hours until they could complete the psychiatric evaluation. Then I could get her out of here.

Her hand slipped under my jaw and I felt her put pressure against my chin. She was trying to get me to tilt my head up to look at her. Sometimes her perceptiveness was downright annoying.

I ran my nose along her jaw, reaching the edge of her ear and taking the lobe between my lips. The skin and tiny hairs on her earlobe were so soft, and she tasted incredible.

Her fingers on my chin pulled again, still trying to bring my eyes up to hers. This time I allowed her to manipulate my face to meet hers, though I kept eyes closed. I found her lips at once and kissed her deeply.

It seemed like forever since I had tasted her mouth. I missed it. I groaned softly into her mouth and reached out with my tongue, tracing her lips with the tip.

I moved both of my hands up to cup her face, tilting my head to the right and then to the left, so I could kiss her from different angles. When she seemed to need a break to breathe, I moved back over her jaw, licked the shell of her ear and planted a trail of tiny kisses down her neck. I pushed the hospital gown a little to the side to reach lower.

"Edward," Bella said. "Are you trying to distract me?"

"Yes," I said. I really didn't want to lie to her. I could cope with omitting truths, but I didn't want to lie. "I also missed this."

I licked the skin of her neck, and then felt and heard her yawn. I nestled back against her shoulder and dropped one last kiss against her neck.

"Sleep now, Bella," I whispered into her ear. "It's getting late, and you have had a pretty busy day."

"I am pretty tired."

"I'll stay right here with you," I told her. "If that's okay with you."

"Yes, it is."

She was asleep within a minute.

I watched Bella sleep on her back and wondered if I could roll her over without waking her up. Bella never slept on her back, and I was annoyed with all the tubes coming out of her and the hospital bed that seemed to dictate her position. If I had her back at her island I could affix the tubes so they weren't in her way and she could lie more comfortably.

I untangled myself from her grasp and started looking through the cabinets and drawers at the side of her room. I found enough spare tubing and the other supplies I needed to rearrange the setup of her IV fluids and monitoring so I could roll Bella over on her side.

While I was at it, I increased the saline order in the doctor's handwriting on her chart, and replaced the drip bag with a different one.

I gently reached over Bella's form on the bed and pulled her towards me, curling her up on her side without waking her. She sighed softly in her sleep, shifted just a little, and signed again,

"Edward," she whispered in her sleep. I smiled.

You have completely lost it, haven't you?

Emmett flopped himself down in the reclining chair. I just smiled a little wider. If this constituted "losing it," then I was all right traipsing down that path.

Bella slept clear though three nurses' visits, including a rather distressed older lady who noticed the new IV setup, and all the way until breakfast was brought to her room. I wrinkled my nose up at the smell of what I believe was supposed to be bacon and eggs, but I honestly wasn't sure. I made the remark that even I could have done a better job than what was on her plate, which made her laugh.

Emmett excused himself, thinking about making a series of phone calls to names I did not recognize. I watched him walk out the door and then turned to the window. I used the ledge next to the window to set up another case of contacts and get them slipped in without Bella being able to see what I was doing. She must have been hungry, though, because she wasn't paying any attention to me. My red eyes stared back at me for a moment in my reflection before I replaced them with the dull brown contact lenses.

I stood off to the side while Bella ate, keeping my distance – enough so she would not notice my eye color. When she was done, I moved her tray out of the way and cuddled up against her neck again. Her hospital gown had slipped part way off her shoulder during the night, which suited me just fine. I kissed across her shoulder and

collarbone, and I was intently aware of how close I was to other parts of her.

"Bella?" I whispered against the skin at the hollow of her throat.

"Yes, Edward?"

"May I....touch you?" I ran my fingers down the front of the hospital gown, from her cheek to her shoulder and then a little farther. My finger glided over her skin just above her chest. I stopped and looked down at my hand, waiting for her to answer.

"This doesn't seem like the very best place for that," Bella said, giggling. She hadn't said no, and I decided to take her laugh for a tentative yes. I stroked one finger over the top ridge of both her breasts. Her fingers tangled through my hair again. Between the sound of her laughter and the touch of her hands, I was in heaven.

As if to prove Bella's point about location, the psychologist picked that time to wander through the door.

"Hello there," she said with a soft, melodic voice. "I'm Sophia Spencer."

I hated her immediately. Aside from her obviously practiced comforting tone, and that she already pegged me in her mind as an abusive husband, she interrupted my fondling of Bella's breasts. That action would not be easily forgiven, even if I had been in a forgiving mood.

"Hello Dr. Spencer," Bella said, her hand trying to push mine away from her breast. I tilted my head back into the crook of her neck and moved my hand down to her waist, but didn't break contact with her.

"It's just Sophia," she smiled. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"Yes," I answered before Bella got the chance. I forced myself to stand up and move away from Bella. I stepped up to the doctor and

stared her in the eye. "One of the doctors who initially examined my wife took a simple accident and made it into something it is not. Now I just need you to recognize that so we can get on with our honeymoon."

Very forward for his age.

"Well, let me have a few moments alone with Bella, and we'll get it all sorted out, won't we?"

I didn't want to leave Bella alone with this woman, even though I would be able to hear their conversation easily. I just didn't want to leave her at all, and I hadn't had a chance to make sure she didn't contradict anything I had already told the hospital staff. This woman was already suspicious, and I couldn't do anything to make it worse.

Emmett said he had a plan. He said I needed to let him fix it.

"I need to speak with Emmett," I said over my shoulder to Bella. "I'll be nearby if you need anything."

I took one last look at the counselor and stomped out of the room. There was a collection of bench seats across the hall from Bella's room. The benches circled a carpeted area with a handful of children's books and toys spewed about and a ratty old television with rabbit ears on top of it.

I flopped down on one of the benches and crossed my arms over my chest. Closing my eyes, I settled my back against the wall and focused on the vision of my love through the mind of Sophia Spencer.

"How are you healing up, Isabella?"

"Bella, please" she corrected, adjusting her pillows to prop her up a little better. I wished I had thought to do that before I left. Damn Ms. Spencer for making me forget something so obvious. "I am just fine, thanks."

I still hated that phrase, though I hoped Ms. Spencer didn't see through the lie as easily as I did.

"Bella, of course," the counselor corrected herself. "Bella, I'm from the Fiji Women's Crisis Center. I'd like to talk to you about Edward and about how you got hurt."

"Edward didn't hurt me."

"I didn't say that he did," she smiled. In her head, she considered this an admission. "You're from the states, I understand?"

"Yes, from Washington State."

"I'm from Chicago originally," Sophia said. "I came here after I finished my master's degree. How long have you been on Fiji?"

"Um...just since yesterday," Bella answered. "We were on another island before then."

"Oh really? Which one?"

"Um...well," Bella hesitated. "It's just a small one. I don't know what it's really called. Edward said...um..."

"He said what?"

"He said it was called Bella Island," she said, smiling a truly radiant smile. "You see, he bought it for me..."

Can she really believe that boy out there bought her an island?

"Very romantic," she said. "But it sounds like he was probably flattering you a little. I'm sure he didn't actually buy the island."

"Yes, he did," Bella insisted, and then she became very quiet. "Edward's family has...um...a lot of money."

"Do they now?"

"Yes."

"I see," Sophia mused.

I suppose that's one reason to marry so young. Though at her age, it's probably his looks as much as anything.

"He's a very attractive young man," Sophia smirked.

Through the psychologist's eyes, I watched Bella's blush creep up her neck.

"Yes, he is," she said, looking down at her hands in her lap. "I don't think I have ever met anyone as beautiful as Edward."

Did she mean that? Did Bella think I was attractive? Was she actually attracted to me? Why was that suddenly extremely important? I remembered her reaction to my skin in the sun and replayed the conversation in my head. Did she really think I was beautiful?

"You are very young to be married."

"Um...yes."

"How long have you been together?"

"We met in high school," Bella said, obviously dodging the question. "He was my biology lab partner."

It isn't going to be that easy to avoid my questions.

"How long ago was that?"

"Just...um...a couple of years, I guess," Bella mumbled.

According to the chart, he said four years. Interesting discrepancy. We'll have to come back to that later.

"When did you get married?"

I knew I should have coached her.

"January 23rd, a little over a month ago" Bella said without hesitation. Just a little over a month. Interestingly enough, just as I had when asked for such information by the hospital receptionist, Bella had chosen the day I kidnapped her as our wedding date. I tried not to think about what that might imply.

"Tell me about him," Ms. Spencer said with a wave of her hand.

"Well, Edward is...wonderful," Bella responded. "In a lot of ways."

I started breathing a little faster.

"Such as?"

"He is very smart," Bella continued. "He plays the piano beautifully. He likes to take me places and do things for me. Sometimes he tries to cook for me, but he's really bad at it."

Bella laughed, and I could hear the sound of it through the doors and walls. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up.

"Actually," Bella leaned forward a little. "I think he could cook if he wanted to. I think he burns stuff on purpose because it makes me laugh."

It figured that she knew exactly what I was doing.

"Maybe he just doesn't like to cook," Sophia suggested. "If you think he does it on purpose, maybe it is so you end up doing all the cooking."

"No, that's not it," Bella insisted. "He's not like that."

"I understand you were in the kitchen before you ended up here?"

"Um...yes," Bella scooted back on the bed and tugged at the blanket.

Time to dive in.

"Bella," Sophia reached out and touched my Bella's hand. My hatred of her grew a little. "How did you get hurt?"

"Well, I was in the kitchen," Bella started, keeping her eyes on her hands. "I was washing the dishes, and one of the glasses dropped. It broke on the floor, and there was soapy water all over the floor."

Bella took a big breath, and I learned something new about her. Despite having a relatively plausible story, she was an atrocious liar. The psychologist didn't believe a word she was saying.

"I slipped in the puddle and fell on the glass." Bella smiled and shrugged, her blush deepening.

"You have a lot of marks on your arms."

"I'm pretty accident prone."

"You always fall on your wrists?"

Bella's eyes darkened and she stared at her fingers, which were twisting around each other in her lap.

"Bella, you are very young to be married. Both of you are. That can be a lot of pressure on a couple. It's not unusual for young couples to have some problems."

"I know that."

"Do you ever argue?"

"Not really," Bella answered.

"Do you get angry with him?"

Bella hesitated. Her fingers went still.

"Sometimes."

That sounds like a talking point.

"Does he know when you are angry with him?"

"Um...I think so."

"How does he react?" Sophia asked. Bella shook her head and didn't answer. The counselor pushed. "Does Edward have a temper?"

"I can handle Edward," Bella said, her voice approaching a growl. Something about the timber of her voice and the use of the word "handle" made my mind wander for a moment.

"Is there something you do when he is angry?"

"Yes." Bella's voice was quiet again.

"What do you do?"

"I really don't want to talk about it," Bella said, her eyes narrowing. "It's personal."

Sophia's mind speculated as to the potential sexual favors Bella might agree to perform to ease my temper. I would have stormed into the room and ripped her head off if Emmett hadn't show up right at the same time, clamping a hand on my shoulder.

Oh no you don't, little bro!

Emmett reached for my other arm, but I ducked out of his grasp. He had just ended a phone call with our psychic sister. Obviously, he was sticking a little closer to me at this point. Damn Alice and her visions.

"Stay where you are," Emmett said, shoving me forcefully back into the seat. "My plan is in effect and I don't need you screwing it up now. I know that look."

I snarled at him under my breath and pulled my shoulder from his grip. His words were enough to get me to stay on the little bench for now, but they weren't going to hold me very long.

"She's getting in my way," I growled low at him.

You can't just kill everyone who's in your way.

"I can and I will. No one threatens to take her from me."

"Would you just *think* for half a second?" Emmett yelled, hauling me up from the bench and shoving me against the wall.

The only ones who could really take her from you are in Italy. You want to get their attention?

No, I certainly didn't.

"I didn't think so," Emmett said, raising his eyebrows at me. "If you can't get a handle on yourself, I'll tie you up and toss you back in the boat until I can get her out of here, got it?"

He dropped me back down onto the seat and smacked me in the forehead for good measure, too. He sat in the seat next to mine and started thinking about lawyers and cleaning services.

"What have you done?" I demanded.

"Well, for starters," Emmett smirked, "I arranged to have your beach house cleaned up. It should be done tonight."

I hadn't even thought about that. It was a mess, to say the least.

"Thanks," I mumbled, a little embarrassed I hadn't thought of it myself.

"I'll put it on your tab," Emmett said with a laugh. "I also made a few additional phone calls, which you would have made yourself if your brains weren't currently residing in your ass."

I growled, but then I heard his mind recount a conversation with a local attorney who was on one of Jasper's personal "lists," and also a personal friend of the hospital administrator. They were close, personal friends, apparently. Close enough for their wives to have to opportunity to catch them being *particularly* close. The scandal would ruin both men.

"Someone should be arriving here shortly to re-evaluate Bella and suggest she be released as soon as she is physically up to it."

I closed my eyes and resisted to urge to hug my brother.

"Thank you, Emmett."

"You ain't off the hook yet," he reminded me. "When a certain nurse didn't clock out on time people started looking. She hasn't turned up – and she won't – but the last person to see her saw her with the husband of a patient."

You have to get out of here.

"Leave Bella?"

Yes. It's for her safety and yours. They may question her, but she doesn't know anything – right?

"True," I answered softly and quickly. "But if she is questioned, she may figure it out. She's very good at understanding what's going on around her."

It will be better if you are not here.

"I'm not going anywhere without her," I insisted.

Can you be even the slightest bit reasonable?

"No." I laughed. Then I looked up to him. "I can't be away from her, Emmett. I just...can't."

Emmett sighed, resigned to my decision. He sat back and cocked his head. My attention was drawn back to Bella's room.

"Of course not!" Bella's voice was raised in a way I hadn't heard from her before. "I would never do that to myself! I fell down – I told you that!"

"Bella, no one falls on their wrists in the same place over and over again," Sophia scolded. "Either you did this to yourself, or someone else did."

She paused for a moment, mentally calculating the correct time to say her next words.

"Did Edward do this to you, Bella? I promise, you are safe here. I'm not going to let him hurt you anymore."

Bella laughed, but the sound was hollow.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Bella mumbled under her breath.

Oh yes I do, dear. I know what he's done to you. I have seen it way too many times.

Emmett had to hold me in my seat again.

Don't do anything stupider than you already have.

I had to sit in the waiting room, listening to that woman berate and harass Bella – trying to get her to say I was abusing her – for another ten minutes before Bella herself came to my mental rescue.

I spent the same time wondering how close to the truth Ms. Spencer may have been.

We were here because of what I had done to her. I could deny it to all the doctors, I could tell a doomed nurse she was mistaken in what she heard, and I could tell my brother I couldn't help myself, but that didn't change the fact that I had torn open her skin. I ripped into the artery running down her arm. I left her bleeding.

She could have died, and I would have been solely to blame.

I told her I would stop, and I meant it. It was easy to say after her transfusions, when her blood was not so different from the other humans around me. How was I going to cope with my decision after we returned to our island, with nothing there but Bella and me and the scent of her blood flowing through the house like lava down a volcano? Was I supposed to just stand in it while it burned me?

It wasn't like drinking from her was the only thing I had done, either. I wanted and needed her so badly my temper was more likely to get the better of me than the other way around. How many horrible things had I said to her while trying to keep the monster at bay just a few hours longer? How many times had she cried as I held her, used her, drank her? Why wasn't she in there begging the woman from the crisis center to help her?

Because she knows what I will do to anyone who knows.

"I really don't think we have anything else to talk about," I heard Bella say dismissively. "I'm tired, and I'd like to rest now."

This isn't over.

"All right, Bella," Sophia said. "I'll let you rest, but I'll be back later and we'll talk some more."

I watched Bella settle back against the pillow through the counselor's eyes. She did look tired, and I stood up to return to her just as Sophia Spencer exited the room.

I know what you've done. I've seen a hundred just like you. I'm not going to let you harm that child anymore!

I seemed as if she knew I could hear her thoughts, and she was intentionally provoking me. I returned her glare. Emmett's hand dropped back on to my shoulder.

"Mr. Masen," she addressed me formally. "I shall be returning to speak with your wife some more and also to talk to you. Please make yourself available."

"You will find me in the company of my wife, where I belong," I replied, my formality equaling hers.

We'll see about that.

She stepped past me and down the corridor. Emmett physically restrained me the entire time, or I would have taken off after her. After the urge to slaughter her passed, I quickly replaced my contacts and walked back into Bella's room. Emmett followed silently, his mind only holding concern over what I might do next.

In the middle of the hospital bed Bella sat, her knees drawn up to her chest and her head back against the pillows. One arm was thrown over her eyes. The smell of her tears hit my face, and I cringed. Was she crying because the psychologist had upset her, or because she realized the truth of Ms. Spencer's words?

I went to the side of her bed and reached out my hand towards her arm. My fingers ached to come into contact with her skin, but still, I hesitated. If she was crying because she realized how truly horrible I was, she would not want my touch. She might even push my hand away from her, and I wasn't sure how I would react to that.

Are you going to touch her or just stand there like an idiot?

I really didn't know.

Ultimately, I gave into my own desire to touch her, and even as my skin connected with hers I doubted my ability to control my other needs for her as well. I didn't want to hurt her. Even if she didn't know how I really felt, I knew it. I loved her. I told her I would stop. I had to find a way.

"It's me," I said softly when Bella jumped at my touch. She sat up a little more and wiped the back of her hand over her cheeks. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Bella said. A growl emanated from my chest.

"I should have stayed here with you," I said. "I knew she was going to upset you. I shouldn't have let her talk to you at all."

"It's all right, Edward." Bella sat up straight and I helped her fix the pillow behind her back. "They aren't going to let me out of here until they go through all their little procedures, so it's better to just go with it and get it over with. I have a feeling she isn't going to be easy to convince, though."

"We won't have to convince her," I replied.

"What do you mean by that?" Bella looked up to my face and her eyes went wide, then narrowed. Her eyes caught mine, and I couldn't turn from her. For a moment, she just looked at me. I considered turning away – running even – but she certainly would have known there was something wrong if I did. As it was, there was the slightest chance she wouldn't catch on...right?

"Gold when you drink from animals," Bella murmured. "Black when you want something. Red when...Edward? Your eyes..."

I guess her observation skills hadn't dropped by bucket loads after all. I did turn away then. I couldn't bring myself to keep looking at her expression. I should have stayed on the other side of the room. *But you had to touch her, didn't you?*

Busted.

"Shut up, Emmett."

"Edward, your eyes are brown...like mine."

"Not like yours," I corrected immediately. I wanted to go into prose about the loveliness of her eyes, but the timing seemed a bit off.

"They aren't like yours, either!" Bella's voice went up a few decibels. "Why are they that color, Edward?"

"Bella, please," I started. "Everything is all right, just don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about *what*?" Bella's eyes blazed. I don't think I had ever encountered such an expression of sheer anger from her before. She was remarkably beautiful. Her eyes glistened and her jaw tightened. I wanted to kiss it until it smoothed again.

"Don't think about it," I pleaded. "Please, we'll be out of here soon, I'm sure of it."

Bella leaned closer to me and I took a step back, my insides battling over breaking contact with her skin or allowing her to see my eyes up close.

"You are wearing contacts, aren't you?"

Damn, she is good at figuring things out.

"Yes," I answered them both, stopping myself from throwing something heavy at my brother. His little mental quips were not assisting me in the slightest. Bella already knew what was wrong. It was just a matter of her placing the last piece of the puzzle to complete the picture. There was no point in saying anything different to her now.

Bella reached up and touched my cheek. I leaned into her, my brow furrowing as I met her gaze. Bella cupped her hands around my face and pulled me closer.

"Edward?" She stared deep into my eyes, and I felt as though every secret I ever hidden from anyone came pouring out of me and into her. There was no physical way I was going to be able to tell her anything other than what had actually happened. "Edward what did you do?"

"I had to, Bella...she was going to call the police," I found myself blathering and stumbling over my words. "She heard what I said to you – about not hurting you anymore. You are all that matters to me. I couldn't let her do that."

"Sophia?" Bella blanched.

"No, not her," I said, and then, because I am an idiot, I added, "Emmett stopped me after she was done talking to you."

"Edward, what are you talking about?" Bella cried. " *Who* are you talking about?"

She sat back sharply, her eyes opening wide in shock and understanding.

"That nurse," she said in the softest of whispers. "She came in when you were saying that. They were looking for her earlier today. Edward, what did you do?"

"I had to...protect you..." I tore my eyes from hers. I couldn't watch her come to complete understanding that I had killed again. I couldn't watch her look turn into one of hatred.

"Oh God, no." Bella's hands covered her face. "Oh no, oh no no no..."

"I'm..." The words stuck in my throat, and I pushed them out, futilely. "I'm...sorry."

I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder, only to have her flinch away from me. She could have shoved her fist through my chest; it wouldn't have hurt any more than not wanting me to touch her. I swallowed hard and took a step back from her bed. I wanted to tell her I wouldn't do it again. I wanted her to understand it had to be done – I had to kill that nurse. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to be a monster. I just wanted to be with her.

"I want to be alone, please," Bella said, her voice complete deadpan. My chest tightened up even more.

"Don't send me away," I heard myself beg. "Please don't do that."

"Just go," she repeated.

As if to prove my day truly could get worse, Ms. Spencer and the doctor from the first night decided to walk in as Bella was throwing me out. Two men who could have been orderlies, but were obviously chosen for their physical prowess, accompanied them.

"Mr. Masen, I have to ask you to leave the room," Doctor Sans said. "We need to have a word with your wife."

"I'm not going anywhere," I snarled. It was one thing for Bella to throw me out, but I wasn't about to leave that woman alone with Bella again. It wasn't good for anyone's health.

"If you can't walk out of this room on your own," Doctor Sans said with a nasty little smirk. "I would be happy to escort you out and have you banned from the hospital all together."

Perfect. If he behaves like a lunatic, we can have him locked up that much quicker.

"Come on, Edward," Emmett suddenly appeared at my side, linked his arm around mine, and pulled at me.

"No – Emmett! They want to take her from me!" I screamed at him. Emmett pulled me backwards by both arms towards the door. Bella refused to look at me. "Bella – please! Tell them it's all right! Please, just listen to me! Please, Bella. Bella, please don't turn me away. I love you, Bella!"

Despite all my reservations, I had actually envisioned how I would tell Bella bout my feelings for her on several occasions. Usually there was a scene including something along the lines of a roaring fire, a sunset or perhaps a Jacuzzi in the mix. This particular scenario didn't come close to what I had imagined, but sucking sound waves back into my mouth was not one of my talents. *Now she knows.*

So much for cowardice.

Chapter End Notes

Tsk tsk, Edward! Snacking on nurses isn't allowed!

Emmett's got his hands full!

Not quite the ILY Edward was hoping for, but there it is. Did you expect differently? lol

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 – Beg and Barter

"I love you."

Bella just stared at me wide eyed and open mouthed.

As shocked as she was that I had said it, I realized no one else around us was paying any attention to my declaration. Why would they be surprised to hear me uttering those words to the woman who was supposed to be my wife?

Bella's reaction was more along the lines of disbelief, or possibly questioning the sanity of the one delivering the message. She may even have looked somewhat traumatized. I was having a hard time myself believing the words came out of my mouth. However, what's said is said, and can't be unsaid, even for vampires.

"With all my heart," I whispered, figuring it really couldn't get any worse, so I might as well get it all out there. Her reaction told me how wrong I was. Again. Bella covered her mouth and nose with her hands and shook her head back and forth.

"Get him out of here," Doctor Sans said, motioning to the pair of muscle-bound orderlies. As if they could lay a hand on me if I didn't allow it. My brother was a different story.

Emmett's tight grip continued to restrain me. I debated turning on him and throwing him out the window, but that course of action didn't seem to leave me with many options afterwards. Killing the entire population of the room would have to be next, and Bella would see it all. I couldn't do that to her unless it was the only option I had left.

Would it come to that?

Bella's eyes stared into mine as tears started to flow out of them and down her cheeks. If the doctors wanted to force me away from her for now, I was going to have to allow it. I knew at some point in time, even in a worst-case scenario, I would eventually get her back. If I had to kill every last one of them to do it, I would get her back. Bella's desires had more of an effect on me than that of the others, and I would certainly prefer to go about things in a way that would not upset her if at all possible. If Bella didn't want me to come back, everything changed. If she wanted to leave me, what was I going to do?

It makes no difference. If she doesn't come willingly, I will take her. Again.

Even as the monster's words materialized in my brain, I knew it *did* make a difference. Taking her against her will was going to be...difficult.

So I closed my eyes and let Emmett drag me backwards out of the room. He slammed me face first against the wall outside the door, shouting a number of expletives at me in his head. Several nurses, family members visiting patients, and various other bystanders gasped and began speculating about what was happening in the last room on the left.

You are going to get a grip on yourself and you are going to do it now .

"What am I going to do?" I heard myself say.

"Well," Emmett responded. "I would say that you are probably going to make it even worse, but I'm really not sure that's possible anymore."

Inside the room the doctor and the psychologist were explaining to Bella that she was a battered wife and that help was on the way. They told her she didn't need to be frightened - they were going to protect her from me. I didn't know if I should laugh or scream.

"I would really just like to be alone for a while," Bella said. I could hear the strain in her voice. "If that's all right."

"I'm sorry, dear," Sophia was saying. "We need to stay with you for now, just until we can have your husband removed from the hospital. Then he can't threaten you anymore."

"He didn't threaten me."

"Bella, tell me what happened," Doctor Sans said. "Tell me exactly what Edward did to your arms and your neck. Did he use a knife to cut you? This could help with the investigation..."

"He didn't cut me with a knife!" Bella yelled. "I told you before, I fell."

"Bella, dear," the patronizing little shrink said. "It's all right, he can't hurt you now."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Bella mumbled under her breath. Thankfully, they didn't hear her.

Bella's voice tore at my heart, and I could smell her fear mixed with anger and confusion. I did that to her. I caused her that pain, that fear. I had made her cry. Me. My body gave away, Emmett released my arms, and I dropped to the floor. I knocked my forehead against the painted green brick and just sat there, staring at the wall where it intersected the floor.

Emmett was right; I really had made this about as bad as it could possibly be. It figured the one major time in my life I truly needed my reasoning skills they were completely absent from my brain. The only thing inside my mind was the sound of Bella's voice, telling me to go away. The sound resonated throughout my skull and physically hurt the sides of my head. I ran my hands through my hair, but there was no comfort without her touch.

Bella didn't want me. She told me to leave.

I told her I loved her, and she looked like I had just run over her cat. Or maybe killed a nurse who was trying to help her.

Though I completely agreed that my timing couldn't have been more flawed, I would have hoped her reaction to my admission of love would have been something other than absolute abhorrence. If I had told her over a romantic picnic, would her reaction have improved all the way up to dismay?

Guess what, Bella? That nice, sadistic vampire who occasionally tears holes in you, also loves you! Isn't that sweet?

Who wouldn't be thrilled?

I actually felt a little sick myself.

I closed my eyes, tugged at my hair, and wondered if there was any possible way to resolve this situation in such a way where I had Bella back in my arms and maybe half naked within the next twenty-four hours. It seemed unlikely, but the mental images of her on the couch with me on top of her rummaged around in my head for a while, and provided enough of a distraction to bring me back to my senses.

Well, back to what passed for my senses these days.

As I raised my head, two men in light blue uniform shirts with "Fiji Police Force" scrawled across embroidered badges slipped out of the elevator and walked toward us. The larger of the two adjusted his dark blue beret and walked with purpose towards us.

Last room on the left. Just have to get her to sign, make the arrest and be done with it.

As impossible as it may have seemed, they were actually planning on arresting me. They were planning on arresting me for hurting Bella. Somehow, I didn't think any amount of charming was going to get through to this pair. Through the pain in my temples, I tried to develop a plan where I didn't end up slaughtering every inhabitant of

the floor, and still made it out of here with Bella. I couldn't come up with one.

Maybe I deserved to fail.

I was going to have to kill them, there wasn't any other way. But if I killed them all, there was no way she would go back with me of her own will. I would have to kidnap her again. How would Emmett react to that? Would he allow me to take her back, kicking and screaming? Or would he decide enough was enough and fight me for her?

Emmett's right about one thing - I need to get a grip. If I don't, I'm going to lose her.

The thought was nearly crippling.

I pushed off against the wall and clambered back onto my feet. I stood facing the pair coming down the hall and met the eyes of the shorter one, who glared back at me. He placed a hand on his belt, where a two-way radio sat snugly in its holster.

One of them has to be the guy. The big one could be trouble.

Emmett wrapped his fingers around my arm and kept his grip on me as they approached. I hadn't realized I was trying to move towards them until he stopped me.

They are coming for you?

I nodded my head once. The big officer in the lead was focused on a document he needed "the victim" to sign, but I couldn't determine from his head what the document entailed. An affidavit of some sort? A statement against me? Whatever the contents, it was clear he intended to ask Bella to sign it.

Emmett's grip tightened as they approached, passed us by, and then entered Bella's room, closing the door behind them. Even though I had no trouble hearing through the walls into Bella's room, the act of

shutting the door unnerved me. My hands clenched into fists. I focused on the thoughts of those inside.

Doctor Sans and Sophia Spencer turned to the officers and greeted them warmly, nodding towards Bella as if there was someone else in the room they may have wanted to see instead. Bella looked up at the police in confusion, her eyes darting between the uniformed men and the psychologist.

I moved from one mind to the next, trying to see her from different angles and gauge her reaction to those in the room with her. She still looked to be in a state of shock, and all the people crowding around her were making her fidget and wrap the edge of the blanket in her fingers. I inhaled deeply, and could still detect her scent mingled with fear.

"Mrs. Masen," the first officer said in a thick Fijian accent. "I am Officer Baravilalas. I will need you to sign this affidavit immediately."

"Why?" Bella asked. "What is it?"

"This is your statement," he said, walking up to the side of the bed and leaning over her. "This is the evidence we need to arrest your husband so he cannot hurt you anymore."

"He didn't." I could see Bella shaking her head. The officer leaned in closer, and Bella backed up as far as she could against the hospital bed. I froze, all the muscles in my body tensing.

"He did," the officer persisted. "Your doctors know he did. You do not need to lie for him any longer. You will sign this so we can take him to the station and protect you."

Bella drew her legs up so her knees were near her chest.

"I don't want to sign anything," she insisted, her voice soft. "Edward doesn't need to be arrested."

"Of course he does," the officer replied, waving his hand dismissively. "It is our job to protect you, even if it is from your husband. I thought you were American? Do they not have laws like these in your country?"

"Yes, but..."

"So you let us do our jobs." He pushed the paper and a pen towards her. "Sign here."

"No."

"Listen," he said. The second officer moved to the other side of Bella's bed, effectively crowding her. I felt a growl rising from my chest. "We understand these things. Doctor Sans and Ms. Spencer are going to take care of you. They will take you to a shelter and help you in whatever way they can. But first you have to help me. Now sign this."

"Just sign it, Bella," Sophia moved up next to the officer. Bella wrapped her arms around her own shoulders. "Then this will all be over."

"Yes," Doctor Sans agreed. She also moved up closer to the side of the bed. "He can't hurt you anymore."

The second officer nodded enthusiastically. Bella coiled in on herself some more. Both of the orderlies moved the end of her bed, leaving Bella completely surrounded. I felt my already tense muscles begin to shake with the sheer effort of remaining still.

I have had enough of this nonsense.

Officer Baravilalas gripped Bella's right arm and shoved a pen into her hand. I could see Bella wince through his eyes, and I heard Bella cry out in pain as the needle from the IV tugged painfully at her skin. He didn't even loosen his grip on her when she yelled, and I could no longer keep still.

I dropped my body down slightly, twisting to one side and out from under Emmett's arm. He reached for me, trying to grab at my shoulders, but I ducked out of the way and swiveled around his back, shoving him into the wall, which cracked under the force. I barely kept myself from breaking right through the door to get to her.

I was between Officer Baravilalas and Bella a half second later. I shoved him as gently as I could manage, which was still enough to knock him off balance. He stumbled, but righted himself before he could fall.

I had moved over to Bella's side much faster than I should have, and heard both Doctor Sans and Ms. Spencer gasp at my sudden appearance. One of the orderlies was rubbing his eyes in disbelief. I ignored them, turning all my attention to Bella, who was still wrapped in a tight little ball at the top of the bed, with a trickle of blood coming out of her arm.

Oh God, no. Not now.

I held my breath, but the scent still slammed into me. It wasn't quite right, though. Not quite *Bella*. Otherwise, I may have done exactly what Emmett suggested was impossible, and made the situation a whole lot worse. I forced venom down my throat and gently took Bella's face in my hands.

"Shh, Bella," I whispered, bringing my face close to hers and keeping my eyes away from the trickle of red on her arm. I reached down to her wrist near the needle, covering the red liquid so I couldn't see it. "It's all right. I'm here."

Bella opened her eyes and I felt a shudder run through her body. I felt a drop of warm liquid against the edge of my finger.

"I... don't...want to..." Bella choked out in broken sobs.

"Shh," I said again. I stared into her eyes and moved closer to her. I felt her hands grip my forearms. "I will protect you Bella. Always."

I could feel Bella tense through her fingers on my arms.

"No!" Bella shook her head violently. Her voice was barely audible.
"Don't hurt anyone else, *please* , Edward."

The shorter officer moved around the bed so they were both behind me, each of them trying to take one of my arms. I barely felt the pressure they exerted trying to pull me back away from her, so I just ignored their presence. I used the pad of my thumb to brush Bella's tears away from her cheek, then leaned closer and touched my lips to the same spot.

"They don't matter, Bella," I whispered so only she could hear. I touched her forehead with mine. "You don't have to listen to them."

Officer Baravilalas was actively yanking on my arm now. I turned my head towards him, and anger flooded through my limbs when I turned to face him and had to break contact with Bella.

"Back off," I snarled, shoving his hand off of my bicep.

That's all I need...a good reason.

He brought his hand to his waist where a long, thick nightstick hung from his belt. I shifted a half step towards him, baring my teeth and growling. I was very close to letting go and ending him, if not for having the audacity to threaten me then for daring to cause Bella pain. If Bella hadn't told me not to, I probably would have. As it was, the chances of him leaving unscathed were slim. He flinched back, and suddenly Emmett was standing between me and the officer, reaching behind his back to capture my wrist.

You are going to expose us if you keep this up...

"I will not allow them to treat her this way," I growled.

Italy, Edward. The authority on this island can only do so much to us. If we are exposed, this is going to become much more complicated.

You do not want the Volturi to find Bella.

Between Emmett's extremely correct thoughts and Bella's request, I couldn't rip off the officer's head like I wanted to do, so I held myself still, keeping my eyes on him the whole time. Maybe I wouldn't attack just yet, but I certainly wasn't going to let him touch her again, either.

"How about we give my brother a minute with his wife, okay?" Emmett held one of his hands up in surrender. The officers weren't impressed. The orderlies moved to either side of Emmett as well, their thoughts focused on helping to subdue us both.

"Your brother is going to jail," Officer Baravilalas said. "Do you want to get out of my way, or join him there?"

"I'm going to have the both of you tossed out of here," Doctor Sans crossed from one side of Bella's hospital bed to the other, joining the officers and Emmett in their standoff. She shook a finger at us both.

"I find that fairly unlikely," Emmett said, turning towards her and nodding towards the open doorway. Though I kept my eyes on Officer Baravilalas, I could see through Emmett's mind as well. Emmett focused on the door of Bella's room, where two men in suits walked in and surveyed the scene before them.

I hope we aren't too late.

"That's enough, Doctor Sans," the tall, dark-haired man said as he approached. I recognized him as the hospital administrator from the night Bella was admitted. I thought I may have thrown a tantrum at him about having Bella's room changed. "Harassing the Masens is not in your best interests."

I remembered Emmett's phone calls and the information Jasper's source had provided. My brother's grip on my wrist lessened and then dropped. I went immediately to Bella and cradled her head in my hands again, focusing only on her and trying to convey with my eyes that she did not need to fear them. I was here for her. Bella's

eyes darted around to the various parties that had taken over the room. Now that everyone had backed away from her bed, she seemed to have relaxed somewhat.

"Mr. Delai," Doctor Sans started, "I hardly think..."

"I said that's enough," he repeated. He made his way over to Officer Baravilalas. "Officer...?"

"Baravilalas."

They shook hands tentatively.

"I am Manasa Delai, the administrator of this hospital. I'm afraid there has been a misunderstanding here."

Bella's eyes turned back to mine, and I felt her fingers crawling up my wrists. She was touching me again. My Bella's hands were on mine, and I could feel her warmth and her pulse through her skin. Once she reached my face, my head, everything would be right again - I knew it would be.

Then I felt her hands pulling mine away from her, and pushing me back, and I went cold.

"I don't see any misunderstanding," Officer Baravilalas replied. "I am here to arrest the man who put this patient in your hospital."

"As I said," Manasa repeated. "A misunderstanding. Mr. Masen is not responsible for his wife's injuries, and she will be discharged to his care as soon as possible."

"What are you talking about?" The doctor's face began to turn crimson. "She is my patient and I decide..."

"No, she is not," Manasa scowled at her. "She is a patient in *my* hospital and you will stop harassing her and her husband. If you don't, you will find yourself unable to practice medicine before the week is out. Clear?"

Doctor Sans simply stared, not responding.

Bella moved over a little to the other side of the bed, away from me, her eyes cast downwards, not meeting my gaze.

"I know when a woman is being controlled," Sophia said, standing up as tall as she could. "Mrs. Masen has all the signs..."

"Would you like to continue to have privileges in this facility, Ms. Spencer?"

"Are you threatening me, Mr. Delai?"

"I most certainly am, Ms. Spencer." Manasa motioned towards the door. "Feel free to leave now, while you are still welcome to return tomorrow."

She stomped off in a huff with Doctor Sans right behind her. The two orderlies slinked out after them, their large forms suddenly not so advantageous as they tried to make a hasty and unnoticed getaway.

"Bella?" I questioned, my hand reaching out to her.

"No." Bella's shoulders curled in towards her chest. "Don't. Just...don't."

Bella motioned me away from her. My breath caught in my throat, but I acquiesced, taking a step back from her. The tension in her shoulders was still evident, and the smell of fear remained, so I took another and another, until I backed myself into the wall on the other side of the room. My eyes never left her.

"Officers," the administrator motioned to them both. "We no longer need your services here. Out with you, now!"

Their minds protested, but they also decided they weren't going to win this battle at this time, so both of the Fijian Police Officers skulked out the door and back down the hall to the elevators.

"Mr. Masen," Manasa approached me, but I barely heard him. "Let me offer my most sincere apologies on the behalf of my staff. I will be sending in my personal physician to examine Mrs. Masen. He will let you know later today when she can be released."

"Thank you, Mr. Delai," Emmett stepped up again and took the administrator's proffered hand. "I believe we have a few details to work out, so let's take it out in the hallway, shall we?"

"My office is at your disposal..."

They all cleared out of the room, and I was left alone with Bella, standing on the opposite side of the room from her bed. Though we had obviously just barely been saved from what was likely to have been a bloodbath, I couldn't feel overly pleased about it just yet. Bella wouldn't look at me. Bella had pushed me away.

I didn't know what to do.

I wanted to throw myself at her, or maybe drop down on my knees and beg her to forgive me. I would offer to do anything, say anything, give her anything if she would just touch me again. The muscles throughout my body called out to her. My skin crawled over those muscles, looking for her touch alone to stop the overwhelming sense of cold, desperate loss. If she couldn't forgive me, I would have to beg her to still stay with me. If she refused...

Well, that just couldn't be an option.

I swallowed hard and looked over to her. She sat against the rough hospital pillows with her knees still drawn up to her chest. Those that harassed her into that stance were no longer in the room, so I had to assume her posture had to do with my behavior. Even though I had told her I wouldn't hurt her any longer, the first thing I did was cause her emotional pain. Since I didn't think before I acted, there was nothing I could do to change it now.

I didn't know what to do.

I was desperate to comfort her - I knew they had caused her emotional anguish and I wanted to hold her and make her feel better. I was also desperate to be comforted. I wanted to touch her and taste her so badly I might have preferred spending the next three days in the pain of transformation than to spend the next hour without feeling her skin against mine.

I didn't know what to do.

So I just stood there.

When she began to cry, I felt like I was choking on her tears.

"Don't cry, Bella," I whispered, not even sure if she could hear me. "Please don't cry."

She must have heard me, because she looked up from her hands, and the look she gave me almost brought me to my knees. All the hurt, all the anger, all the frustration she had carried with her all this time exited her eye sockets and burrowed through my heart, leaving a gaping hole.

And...oh God...was that hatred in her eyes?

An unfamiliar sound came out of my throat. I wasn't sure if it was a moan, a guttural sob or just something unnamable. I had accused her of hating me in the past, but she had never looked at me like this before.

"You killed her because of me," Bella snarled at me. I flinched. "She's dead because of me."

"No, Bella," I said. "Not you. It's me - only me. You can't blame yourself for what I did."

I took a step forward, my whole body aching to be closer to her.

"Don't come near me," Bella said, and I felt like all the pointless internal organs in my torso dislodged and dropped into my gut. She

turned her head to the side, refusing to even look in my direction.

"I won't," I replied. I suspected just saying the words would carry enough pain to end my existence. I stammered on, because I was a fool. "Please, just...just...let me...explain."

"Explain?" Bella's eyes widened and her head swiveled back towards me. " *Explain?* Explain *what* ? Why she had to die? How you couldn't help yourself? I *gave* myself to you! I gave myself to you so no one else had to die, and now you want to *explain* ? Go ahead, Edward. You go right ahead and *explain* this to me."

My hands were shaking, so I balled them up and held them against the front of my thighs. She was completely correct, of course. I had no idea what to say, and couldn't speak anyway because that sinking feeling in my gut had spread to the rest of my body. She wasn't going to forgive me. Of course she wasn't, because I wasn't even close to being forgivable. She was never going to forgive me. She was never going to touch me again. She was never going to let me hold her again.

Her eyes burned at me, and my mind recounted how she looked at me through her bedroom door while I played Chopin for her. I thought about how they glinted in the afternoon sun when I looked back at her holding tightly to my shoulders while I swam around the reefs. I thought about how her eyes sparkled in laughter when I tossed a flaming saucepan into the sink, right before she banned me from the kitchen.

"Please," I begged, wondering if getting on my knees would help. "Please, tell me what I can do. I will do anything Bella - anything. I just can't lose you."

"Just shut up, Edward," Bella buried her head against her knees and wrapped her hands around the back of her neck. "I need to think."

I held my breath and dropped silently to the floor, sitting cross legged with my fingers digging into my hair. I had always thought of it as a

nervous habit of mine, and it had always rather bothered me that I did it. Now it only reminded me that it was my own hands, and that I was trying unsuccessfully to comfort myself. In the past, it had worked for me, at least to a degree. Now it was Bella's hands I wanted. Bella's touch I needed.

Had it been that way since I first saw her in Forks? Most certainly it was her scent that drew me to her initially, and her silent mind gave me the ability to be close to her, but was it always her touch I craved above all else? I remembered how much I wanted to touch her and comfort her in the car when she first regained consciousness. I remembered how warm and soft she was when I held her after drinking her blood. I remembered the touch of her lips on mine and I remembered the soft, darkened flesh at the tips of her breasts that contracted under my cool touch. I remembered how they tasted.

I only wanted to be with her. I didn't want to hurt her, and I didn't want her to be distressed because I had hurt someone else. I only wanted to touch her and love her and give her everything she desired in the world. I wanted to watch her sleep and play songs for her. I wanted to make love to her on the sand.

I wanted to taste her blood again .

No! I wasn't going to do that to her anymore. I wasn't going to hurt her anymore. I wouldn't let myself. I wouldn't. I wouldn't. Never, ever again.

But it's so good, and she almost smells right again.

It was true, her blood was starting to develop the distinct scent it had before the transfusions. The burn in my throat was steadily increasing and my thirst along with it. The nurse had been quite satisfying, but her blood still did not compare to Bella's. I wanted it. Even now, after everything, how was I going to control my thirst for her?

My eyes traveled down to the edge of my finger. I turned my hand inwards and my palm up. There was just a tiny drop of dried blood there, from the spot when Bella's IV had been partially pulled out. I brought my finger up close to my mouth and inhaled. My eyes rolled back in my head as my tongue darted out and cleaned the blood from my skin. What if that was it? What if that was the last taste of her I ever had? It didn't even taste quite right.

Everything okay in there, brother?

"I seriously doubt it," I said back, too quickly and too quietly for Bella's ears.

I've got everything under control out here. Another doctor will be here later, sometime after the evening meal. If he clears it, we can get out of here.

"Thanks, Em. I owe you."

Yeah, no shit.

Emmett headed back down the hallway to call Rose, but not so far away that he couldn't get back to me quickly. He was still feeling a little guilty that he hadn't reached me in time.

I turned my thoughts away from him. I also tried to force the thoughts of the hospital staff and patient visitors out of my head as well. Unfortunately, I had started to get used to the internal noise after being in the hospital and surrounded by it for the past two days. I didn't like it, and it made me miss the island with Bella even more.

I wanted to take her back there. We were good while we were there alone. We would be fine as long as no one bothered us. That's where I could be with her and play for her and do all the things that made her smile. That's where I could hold her against my chest and watch the sun dip below the horizon while I placed small, soft kisses down her throat.

I began to count Bella's heartbeats and breaths and compare them over each minute I sat there. Sometimes they increased, sometimes they decreased. Could I predict when she would speak to me again based on her autonomic responses to stress? I tried to remember what her heart rate was when I drank from her and calculated how long it took from the time I stopped taking her blood and the time she would relax into my arms and sleep. It was different each time; the time it took her to relax had become shorter. I hadn't noticed it at the time.

I don't know how long I sat there, playing mental math games with myself to distract me in a vain attempt to keep my slender grasp on sanity. I wasn't even sure if it worked, but eventually she did speak again.

"Edward." Bella's voice drew breath out of my lungs for the first time in an hour. I was afraid to speak, wondering if I had actually heard her voice or if I had only imagined it.

"Come here, Edward," Bella said.

I couldn't stop myself from getting up and running to her at top speed. I hesitated for a second, my eyes meeting hers, until I saw her nod slightly and reach out her arms. I dove into them, catching my own weight so as not to crush her, and burying my face against the skin at her neck. I inhaled the sweetest smell in the world.

My Bella.

"We're going to have to talk about all of this, Edward," Bella said, her hands wrapping around my head. My mind screamed in elation. I wondered if I could conjure up some tears out of my dry eyes. I certainly felt like I could. "You can't do that again. Not ever."

"Anything, Bella," I breathed out in a gasping sob. "Anything, anything..."

"You have to promise me," she said definitively. "No one else, Edward."

"I swear." I looked up to her for a moment, and saw her with absolute clarity. I looked away quickly, realizing the clarity was because my contacts had dissolved, and my traitorous red eyes advertised my mistake. I buried my face back into her neck. "Just please, please don't leave me. I can't be without you."

"I know, Edward." I could feel her smile against my forehead. Her lips pressed against me, and I wrapped my arms around her.

"I need to be with you," I mumbled against her throat. "I don't have to have your blood. Just you."

"Shh, Edward," Bella responded. "I know. We can talk about all of that later. Just promise me you won't hurt anyone else."

"I promise." Even as I said it, I wondered if I could live up to it.

I wanted to live up to it.

She was so much better than me. She was so much stronger than me. Nothing about me deserved her. I was going to change that. I was going to be worthy of her. I was going to become what she needed. I would find a way to be worthy of Bella. I would find a way to tell her I loved her without seeing loathing in return.

If I did it right - if I could really, truly change for her - maybe someday she could love me back.

I checked the paper bag the street vendor handed to me and shook my head when he offered me change. I still thought it smelled revolting, but at least I could identify what it was, unlike what the hospital was providing. I couldn't tell the difference between mashed potatoes with gravy and eggs on toast - by sight or scent.

Bella's new doctor cleared her to be discharged this evening, and I wanted her to have a decent lunch at least. She made it extremely clear that she was still angry with me, but she touched me and let me touch her. I could cope with anything else.

Last night, she let me stay with her, though there wasn't any room on the bed, so I sat on the stool next to it. I hummed Nocturne in F Sharp Major until her sleep deepened. In her sleep, Bella had whispered "I won't leave you." For the briefest moment, I had allowed myself to feel content, eyes closed, nuzzled against her shoulder while she slept.

By the time the sun set tonight, I would have her back on our island. I pushed open the glass door of the hospital and made my way to the elevator and up to Bella's floor, fighting the most bizarre desire to skip down the hall. Emmett was in the waiting room, on the phone with Rose. I gave him a wave as I went by, but didn't stop. I had a pretty good idea what their conversation was like from the images in his head, and I really didn't need that right now.

Bella sat up a little when I walked in, carrying the sack of actual food instead of what they had brought for her lunch and tried to pass off as food. I had thrown it in the garbage before the person delivering it even had time to leave the room. I picked up the empty tray and placed the carry out shrimp, duruka—which looked a little like asparagus—and fried root vegetables from the vendor's cart on top of it.

On the table beside her bed, I noticed a vase of flowers. It was a large arrangement with white hibiscus and yellow bird of paradise flowers in it. They were arranged in an opaque white glass vase with a card stuffed in the middle of them.

"Where did the flowers come from?"

Bella looked at me and narrowed her eyes.

"I thought you bought them."

"No," I said, feeling suddenly guilty because if anyone should be bringing her flowers, it should be me. "Maybe Emmett brought them in."

I fished the card out of the tiny envelope and opened it up.

So sorry to hear of your accident.

I would take better care of you.

-Samson

My breath caught in my throat and I almost dropped the card.

"Edward, what is it?" Bella tried to sit up against her pillows. "Who are they from?"

He was here. He had been here, in the hospital. He knew where she was.

Obviously, I had done some pretty horrific things in my life. I knew better than anyone how much I didn't deserve Bella's forgiveness or companionship. But once – just once – couldn't I get a break?

Someone up there hates me.

So much for complacency.

Chapter End Notes

Well, he had to come back eventually, right?

Bella has had it with Edward. Any chance he can "fix" this?

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 - Placate and Punish

"Edward?" Bella sat up a little straighter in the bed. "Who sent the flowers?"

I had been thinking earlier about Emmett's appearance on our island and how ill-timed it had been. I had felt anger, wondering why he had to show up and put this health-care-system merry-go-round in motion. Now I suddenly remembered why. With everything else, both the good and the bad, I had completely forgotten about the deranged vampire in the airport. Obviously, he had not forgotten about us.

He sent Bella *flowers*? With a veiled threat on the card? At this point in my dealings with Bella, was I allowed to refer to another vampire as "sick"?

I needed to get Bella out of here - now - but my body didn't want to act. I stood frozen for a moment trying to get a grasp on all the feelings flowing through me at once. Two months ago, I couldn't have remembered the last time I felt an actual emotion that I could confirm was my own. Now I had so many of them coursing through me I couldn't name them all. I had a pretty good idea I hadn't felt most of these emotions since I contracted the Spanish Flu in Chicago.

Bella prompted me again.

I started to open my mouth and tell her they were from Emmett after all, but I knew I couldn't keep that from her for very long. He had to be close, though I knew I hadn't caught the scent of another vampire in the hospital. Had I been exposed to him long enough to recognize his internal voice? Maybe. Maybe not. I tried to focus for a few seconds, but there were too many voices in my head. When I

stopped trying to block them all out, they crashed into me and none of it made sense.

"I need to talk to Emmett," I finally managed to say. I started for the door, but her voice stopped me.

"Edward! Come back here and tell me what is on the card!"

I sighed, and my internal debate team continued to fight over what to say to her, weighing the pros and cons and desperately trying to figure a way out of this disaster. The answers were not forthcoming, so I went with honesty.

"I don't want to tell you," I admitted.

"Why not?" Bella sat up in the bed and shifted her legs over the side. I went over to her before she could get up.

"You should rest," I told her. I put my hands on her sides, feeling a little comfort in her warmth. I placed my lips on her forehead. "Stay here, I'll be right back."

"Tell me." She would not be so easily distracted. Bella moved her hand down to mine and tried to retrieve the card. I held it away from her.

"I don't want to," I repeated.

"Edward," Bella said, exasperated. She tried to grab the card again. "You are being ridiculous."

Well, of course I was. I would have thought she was used to it by now. Figuring she was not going to give up, and considering she would know eventually, I relinquished and let her take the card. As I watched her read it, I immediately wished I had taken the note and run out of the room. Her eyes grew wide, and the hand holding the card started to shake.

"Don't be scared, Bella," I said, reaching out for her. "I told you - I will protect you."

"It's the one from the airport, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"What does he want with me?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter, he's not going to get anywhere near you. Please, Bella - just relax a few minutes. I need to talk to Emmett, and you'll be out of here in no time."

I tried to smile reassuringly, though I didn't think it worked. My lying skills were substandard when it came to talking to Bella. I walked to the door and called for Emmett, because I wasn't about to leave Bella alone, not even for a second. Emmet and I spoke in her room, so we could be sure she was safe. Windows were far too accessible to my kind to assume standing outside her door would be good enough. At the same time, I didn't really want her to hear our conversation, so we spoke quickly and quietly.

"With everything else going on, I haven't even talked to you about why I asked for your help."

Emmett plopped down in the recliner and looked up at me.

I thought you just needed my expertise with the opposite sex.

He grinned that inane grin of his.

"Yeah, maybe later," I replied, rolling my eyes. "For now, I need to tell you about Samson."

"Who's that?" Emmett scowled as I handed him the card.

"I first saw him on the plane to Hong Kong from London," I said. "He was looking for company, I guess. He didn't care for my refusal. Later on, he saw me with Bella, and decided he wanted what I had."

Emmett handed the note back to me.

He was alone?

"Yes."

"I'm surprised you didn't off him right there on the plane."

"It was in the airport," I corrected. "I would have, but he seems to be gifted."

"Yeah? What can he do?"

"Totally incapacitate me."

"Huh," Emmett rubbed his chin. "That sucks."

"To put it mildly, yes."

Was he Volturi?

"Possibly," I said. "But I don't think so. Maybe he was at some point - he definitely has some connections - but I think if he was currently connected to them, he wouldn't have been looking for companionship."

"Probably true," Emmett agreed. "So you asked me to come here so I could kick his ass?"

"Well," I shrugged. "Yes"

"Excellent!" Emmett beamed. "So you are admitting that I'm a better fighter than you are?"

"I most certainly am not," I growled as he laughed. Leave it to Emmett to consider this the opportunity to show me up. "But I am willing to admit I may need help."

"That's close enough, anyway."

"Emmett," I scowled at him. "I'm serious. This guy is dangerous and he's after Bella."

"Well, he can't have her."

"Agreed." I narrowed my eyes at my brother. "So what do we do? He obviously knows she's here and may even be here himself."

"I think we would have smelled him."

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm not willing to take the risk. I want her out of here now."

"So where do we go?" Emmett stood up.

"If we take her back to the family, we can protect her better," I said.

No way. He won't let you in.

I took a deep breath. I should have known before I even said it that Carlisle wasn't about to help me continue to keep Bella a prisoner. I couldn't think about him now, so I forced him out of my head. I had enough going through my brain at the moment.

"Go where, then?"

"Back to your island," Emmett shrugged. "Unless you have a better idea. If he tracked you this far he'll find you again. An island should be easily defensible. The sooner he shows up the sooner I get to go to town!"

I rolled my eyes again. At least Emmett could see the entertainment value in all of this. I didn't think I could ever get there. I had to force myself not to think about it too much, because of the images gallivanting around in my mind were too hideous. That coupled with the torment of all the minds around me, each one forcing me to listen a little closer to make sure it wasn't Samson, was going to send me over the precarious edge on which I balanced. I needed to get Bella out of here.

"They cleared her to leave this evening," Emmett confirmed. "It's already afternoon. I'll go talk to my friend Mr. Administrator and you get Bella ready to go."

"Go," I said. "I'll tell Bella."

Emmett zipped out of the room and I looked over at Bella, who was glaring at me. I swallowed hard and realized I was afraid to move closer to her. *What did I do now?*

"Edward Cullen," Bella narrowed her eyes at me.

"Um...yes?"

"Do you realize how rude that is?"

"What?"

"Talking over there in the same room with me knowing full well I don't know what you are saying. I hate that."

"I'm sorry." I couldn't help but smile a little, but when I thought about the conversation, my smile wavered. "I don't want you to be...alarmed."

"I'm already alarmed, Edward," Bella said. "At this point, I'd rather just know what is going on."

"All right," I said, tossing my hands in the air and giving up. "We are going back to the island, because it is easier to defend than trying to run. Since he has followed us this far, chances are he has nothing better to do, and he'll come after us wherever we go. He could be a tracker - a vampire who has a sense for finding others - or maybe he knows one. I don't know, and I don't care. The sooner Samson is destroyed, the sooner you will be safe. I just need you to be safe."

I was sounding a little hysterical, and I knew it. I spewed out a lot more information than I had originally intended. I moved over to her bed and reached out to her.

"Edward, it will be okay." Bella's hands found their way to my favorite place, tugging into my hair and bringing me to her shoulder. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against her, wishing I believed what she was saying. "Emmett is here, and you told me he was the strongest vampire anyone has ever seen. Between the two of you I know I'll be safe."

My lips tightened. Part of me wanted to tell her about Samson's metaphysical attack against me in the airport, the crushing, helpless feeling that weighed down on me at his will. I wanted her to understand the danger, but I didn't want her to be as afraid as I was.

I had to be able to protect her. I had been in dangerous situations plenty of times - fights with other vampires, with werewolves, with shape-shifters - I had faced them all and never felt fear. Now this one vampire was causing almost mind-numbing terror. The fear was not for me, but for the beautiful, fragile woman holding me and trying to make me feel better.

If anything happened to her...

I couldn't even think about it.

Thinking about living without her was painful enough. If I imagined a world without Bella in it, I simply couldn't function. I had to be able to protect her, and it came down to one, simple question.

Did Samson's power only affect one creature at a time, or could he spread it amongst a crowd?

If he could incapacitate both Emmett and me at the same time, I didn't think we stood a chance. As if to prove that my self-loathing was still intact, my brain conjured up images of what he might do to Bella while I stood immobile and helpless.

I tried to hold my body still and focus on the sensations Bella was causing with her hands. The other thoughts running through my head were adding enough agitation to counter the comfort she

offered. Her fingers stroking through my hair were just barely enough to keep a step ahead. I could feel myself becoming frantic, and she was so close I was afraid I would hurt her.

If the touch of her hands wasn't quite enough, what else could work?

My lips found hers and I tried to control the pressure I put against her mouth. I wanted - I needed - to do something to her to make her completely and totally mine. Something that would prove to me, to her, to anyone else, that there was no question about to whom she belonged. He couldn't have her. She was mine. Mine alone.

My hands ran down either side of her, and then back up along her ribs. I parted my lips and ran my tongue over her mouth, feeling her open to me and not wasting any time tasting her.

Without ever moving my mouth from hers, I lifted her up by her waist and moved her back over the bed, my body following. I felt her say my name against my lips.

I pulled my lips from her mouth and ran them over her chin and across her throat. The scent there was intoxicating. I kissed the indentation at the base of her neck and let my tongue touch the warmth of her skin there. My hands ran up her sides, skimming the outside curve of her breasts with my thumbs.

"Edward, please," Bella said, her hands sliding down my neck and on to my shoulders. "Stop. We're in a hospital bed, for goodness sakes!"

I couldn't have cared less. I just wanted to touch her and taste her and make her mine. I wanted to tear off the pale blue hospital gown and run my tongue over her nipples and listen to her breathing increase when I touched her.

"Edward!" Bella pushed against my shoulders, so I backed off, groaning at the loss of contact. I realized I was pouting at her, and made myself stop.

"I want you," I mumbled. "You make me feel...better."

"I know," Bella smiled wryly. "We'll get back to that topic after we reach the island."

I didn't know exactly what she meant by "that topic," but I was looking forward to finding out.

I should have realized it wasn't what I hoped it would be.

Emmett walked into Bella's hospital room carrying a large, rectangular box.

"What is that?" I asked.

"I have no idea," he responded. " *Your sister* told me to go pick it up and bring it to Bella."

Emmett walked over and placed the box on the bed next to Bella. Whatever was inside of it smelled like silk and lavender.

"Where did you pick it up?"

"The post office," Emmett said. "Right where Alice told me to pick it up."

"Hrm."

Bella pulled the lid off the box to reveal a lovely green and blue flowing sundress.

"Your sister sent me a dress?"

"Apparently."

"Why?"

"Because," I said, sighing. "She knows that I am an idiot who would never consider the fact that you would have nothing to wear out of the hospital. Your other clothes were pretty much ruined."

Bella laughed, though I wasn't sure what was so funny. It didn't matter, because I hadn't heard her laugh in a while, and I started to make a new mental list of things I could do to make her laugh more often. I guessed there was more cooking on the horizon for me.

Bella bathed and dressed with the help of one of the nurses, completely ignoring my offers to help. Disappointed, I filled out discharge papers with a lot of bogus information while Emmett ran downstairs for a quick patrol around the building. He had news when he returned.

One of our kind has definitely been outside. I don't know if it's him or not.

"I will know," I said quietly. I hoped I would.

With Bella's discharge papers in hand, I signed her out and grumbled when they insisted on taking her out in a wheel chair that I wasn't allowed to push. I walked next to Bella and tried to ignore the nurse pushing the chair. Emmett walked behind me, finding my reactions highly amusing.

Once we got to the front door, it occurred to me we didn't have any transportation back to the boat. Not that it mattered much - I could carry Bella. It might have looked a little strange to some, but carrying her a few blocks sounded pretty good to me. Then I noticed a car waiting for us right outside the door. I looked over to Emmett.

"Alice," he said with a shrug.

Of course.

As soon as we were outside the building in the fresh tropical air, I could smell him. I felt Emmett tense beside me.

"How long ago?" I asked.

It's not recent. Maybe this morning. Could have been as long ago as yesterday evening.

"Can't you be any more specific?"

I'm not a tracker, Edward.

"I know - sorry."

Is that definitely him?

"Yes," I said. I wasn't sure if I would recall his scent, but as soon as I smelled it, I knew who it was.

"Will you two please stop that? It's driving me insane."

Emmett chortled.

I kissed her softly near her ear, whispering my apologies to her. I placed my hand on the small of her back and helped Bella into the car. A few minutes later, we were boarding the boat and heading back to Bella Island.

The cleaning crew Emmett hired must have had quite a job cleaning up the place from Bella's "accident." I can't imagine what he must have paid them, considering the replaced carpets, the deck, and of course the extra bonus for discretion.

Take turns patrolling?

"Yes, that makes sense," I answered. "I want to get Bella settled in and fed some actual food first."

No prob - I'll take the first watch and you, ah... take care of Bella.

"Nice," I growled at the handful of lusty images Emmett threw into my head. "Couth" was not in Emmett's vocabulary.

"I really don't like it when you do that."

"Sorry, Bella," Emmett and I chorused.

Emmett walked off the newly reconstructed back deck and onto the sand, making his way around the small island counter-clockwise.

Bella poked around in the refrigerator, tossed out a bunch of things that must have gone bad in our absence, then dug around in the pantry before coming up with a box of pasta and a jar of red sauce.

"I don't think I'm up for making it from scratch," she said, holding up the jar.

I stood close to her while she cooked, offering to help, having her laugh and say "not a chance," trying to help regardless, and generally being in the way so I could touch her as often as possible.

She was on to me. I had no doubt of that.

She was very quiet while she ate, which should have been my first warning sign, but I was too happy just to have her back on the island to notice. Even with the threat of Samson, at least we were here and alone. Well, except for Emmett. He wasn't in the room, though, and this was the first time I had really been alone with her for many days. I sat and watched her finish her meal, and then she washed the dishes.

"Edward," Bella said, placing the last of her dishes into the drying rack. "I need to talk to you."

My stomach felt queasy in a way I did not think it had since I was human. I wasn't sure if it was something in her tone, or because I knew our conversation from the hospital wasn't over, but only delayed. I wondered if there was any way to get out of it. The look

she gave me told me there wasn't, so I took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. Her scent was almost all *hers* again. I swallowed back venom and followed her to the living room.

I sat on the edge of the couch, leaving Bella plenty of room, but she walked across the room and sat in the other chair. I fought to control my breathing. Sitting away from me couldn't possibly be a sign on my favor. Her distance made me crave her touch that much more, like every inch between us had an exponential effect on my level of desire.

Bella sat without speaking for three full minutes, twisting her fingers around themselves. She seemed so agitated, and all I wanted to do was go to her, hold her and try to make it right. Knowing she sat away from me so I could not touch her was devastating.

"I didn't want to talk about this in the hospital," Bella finally started. "Because this isn't going to be a pleasant conversation, and I didn't want you to kill anyone else. I needed to ...placate you while we were there. Now that we are alone, we need to get some things straight between us."

Placate. Was there an alternate definition to the word I didn't know about? Something to do with divine forgiveness? No, probably not.

I was definitely queasy. *How can a vampire's stomach be queasy?*

"Okay," I said, like the complete idiot I was. This wasn't "okay" in the least. This was awful.

"Edward," Bella began, "when we talked in London, I thought we had an understanding. You said you wouldn't kill anyone else."

The pain in her voice hurt me, too. My gut reaction was to remind her of the details of that bargain - her blood given freely if I didn't kill anyone else. If I chose not to drink from her, the deal was moot. I could kill as often as I wished, based on the conditions of that particular bargain.

The monster with the ever-growing appetite reminded me - again - that he hadn't had any supper. I shoved him into a dark corner of my head and tried to ignore his growling.

I didn't actually *want* to kill anyone else. I hadn't wanted to kill the nurse or the store clerk. I just didn't know what else to do, and if the hospital personnel realized I was the one who had hurt her, they would try to keep her from me.

"I was scared," I heard myself whisper.

"Of what?"

"Losing you," I answered. "It's the only thing I care about now. I don't know how to be without you now."

"Why did you think you were going to lose me?"

I laughed, though there wasn't anything I found funny. Bella raised an eyebrow at me.

"Do you want the entire list of reasons?"

"Yes," Bella told me. "I do."

"I almost killed you." The words burned coming out of my throat. "If Emmett hadn't knocked the smallest bit of reason into my head you might have died."

"I didn't die," Bella said. "You knew I wasn't going to die before you killed..."

Bella took a deep breath. I could smell the salt in the water gathering near the corner of her eyes.

"Before you killed that nurse," she finished.

"She knew it was me," I said. "She knew I was the one who hurt you. She was going to tell the doctor what she heard. She was going to

contact the police. I couldn't let her..."

"The doctor already suspected," Bella reminded me. "The police came anyway, after I talked to Sophia."

"I wanted to kill her, too," I grumbled, then regretted the words.

"She was trying to help," Bella said softly.

"She wasn't trying to help *me*," I retorted. Another regret. The monster poked at me again. I wasn't particularly thirsty, but I wondered if I should hunt anyway. I obviously wasn't in control of my mouth.

"Edward!" Bella stood up and started pacing back and forth across the floor, her hands up in her hair. "I just don't know how to cope with you! Sometimes you are so sweet and caring, and then when I turn around your attacking me or someone else. I never know what you are going next! There's a fifty-fifty chance you are going to tear me open or cop a feel! You're a...a...horny, bipolar vampire!"

"Bella," I said, though I really didn't have anything to say other than her name. I just wanted her to stop. Some of what she was saying was a little too accurate. Maybe part of me still believed I was fooling her about how I felt and about my nature. Obviously, that was not the case.

"I can't live like this, Edward," Bella said. "When we were still at the hospital, and I realized what you had done...I just couldn't...I didn't want...ugh!"

"I'm sorry, Bella, please..." I started to get up to go to her.

"No, Edward," she snapped. "Don't come near me, not yet."

I think I whimpered, but did sit back down.

"I wished I had died." Bella stopped her pacing and sat back down. "I would rather have you just kill me, like you always say you are going

to do eventually. I'd rather die than go on like this, waiting to see who you are going to off next in the name of keeping me to yourself."

"No..." I moaned. My hands were shaking. I couldn't hold them still. "Bella, please don't say that."

"Edward," Bella sighed. "I don't know if there is anything you can do to change. But I've had it. Something's gotta give."

I took a deep breath, because I knew I was going to have to say something. I had to make her understand what it did to me when I couldn't touch her, and how irrational my thoughts became when I thought someone might jeopardize my ability to be with her always.

"They all wanted to take you from me," I said softly. "The thought of not being near you, not seeing you or touching you...even being this far away hurts."

"That's not good enough," Bella said. "It obviously isn't what she thought was going on, but Sophia gave me a lot to think about."

"She was right." I dropped my head into my hands, my elbows resting on my knees. "She was completely right about me. I...hurt you. I put those marks on your wrists, your neck. I'm horrible. Bella, please... I don't know what to do. I want you so badly. I don't want to hurt you - I meant that. I will do anything you want me to do if you will stay with me. Anything. I won't drink your blood. I won't kill anyone else...well, unless they are a threat to you. And Samson. But no one else - I promise you. I don't know how to stop. Your blood...it...it...it's like it calls to me. I don't know how to resist it."

I was rambling, and I knew it. I had no idea what to say to her. I couldn't justify what I had done to her. Maybe to myself, but not to Bella. I couldn't think. Her words were terrifying me. Would she really rather be dead? She couldn't think that way – I couldn't let her. I had to *fix* this, but I had no idea how. I needed her too much to make any of my thoughts coherent.

"But I don't need it," I said, to myself as much as to Bella. "I don't have to have your blood, and I don't have to kill any other humans."

"And while we are at it," I said, looking down at my feet. "What I said to you while we were in the hospital when Emmett was...dragging me away. Well, I'm sorry. Again. I never meant to say that...not in that way. Not under those circumstances. But it's true. I love you."

I closed my eyes, because I couldn't bear to see her reaction.

"I don't expect you will ever return my feelings. I'm not stupid. But I will do anything to keep you with me. I need to be near you. I need to...touch you."

"I'm glad you mentioned that," Bella said. "The touching, I mean. That's what I really wanted to talk to you about."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"While we were in the hospital," Bella continued, "I did some thinking, and I had an idea. An epiphany, even. There is only so much I can do. If I tried to leave, you wouldn't let me. I can't stop you from keeping me here with you, but there are some things I control."

I froze. Bella turned her head and looked straight at me, her beautiful brown eyes cold and deadly serious.

"I'm going to punish you, Edward," Bella said. My heart sank. "I'm going to punish you for killing that nurse."

I didn't see how she could possibly be serious, but her eyes told me she was. What could she possibly do to punish me?

"Starting right now, you aren't allowed to touch me for the next twenty-four hours."

What?

"Now before you say anything, let me explain exactly what I mean." Bella looked away, took a deep breath, and then brought her eyes back up to mine. "I can't stop you from touching me if you want to. I understand you...crave my touch, and I will touch you, but only on my terms. If you touch me in the next day, I won't touch you anymore. Not at all. Ever."

The queasiness moved into full-fledged nausea.

"You can grab my hands and force them against you, but it won't matter. I won't be the one touching you, and you know it."

Yes, I did.

"If you can control yourself and not touch me for the next day, then I will let you again. We can try to...start over. I'll let you hold me in bed and start thinking about all those other things I know you want to do. But if you harm anyone again, I'll punish you again, and for a lot longer."

"Twenty-four hours?" I questioned, my voice shaking. My mind tried to decide what it wanted to focus on the most - her proposed punishment or what she had said about doing "other things."

"Yes."

"Then I can...touch you again?"

"Yes."

"But you'll still touch me? I mean...during that time?" I tried not to sound desperate, but likely failed.

"Yes, I will, but only when I choose to do so."

"What about...when you are asleep?"

"I sleep alone tonight," she said simply. "You keep your distance. Tomorrow, well, if you live up to my conditions, then you can stay

with me again."

I should have kept my mouth shut. At least then, if caught, I could have claimed ignorance.

I was breathing more rapidly, and the monster inside of me was jumping around in my head, screaming that she could not dictate our actions, that we would do as we desired. He wanted to go over to her and touch her everywhere, just to prove that we could. He wanted to do as she suggested – grab her, take her, force her to touch us.

But it's not the same. It would never be the same.

I had to have her willing touch. I'd get along without anything else for now, at least. I would be insane if I never felt her touch again.

All at once, I needed it immediately. My body was shaking because all of my muscles had held tense for so long. Everything from her anger at my actions, to her revelation of wanting to die, hurled down into my consciousness and encompassed me completely. I was lost – I was drowning. There was only one thing that could stop this feeling.

"I need you, Bella," I begged, no longer caring how I sounded. "I can't think...please."

"Not until you agree."

"Yes! Yes! Anything, please!"

"All right," Bella nodded. "Come over here – but keep your hands to yourself."

I was on the ground in front of her half a second later, kneeling with my hands tightly gripping my thighs. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to control my limbs, which had often found their own way towards the woman in front of me, whether I wanted them to or not.

Bella's fingers stroked my jaw, and I forced myself not to lean against her hand, unsure if that was against her rules or not and not willing to take the chance. My hands clawed at my legs, demanding to reach out and grab her. I wasn't going to be able to control this. I needed her too much.

"I can't do this," I heard myself say. "Bella, please don't make me..."

"Shh, Edward – yes you can, and you will, because if you don't you are going to lose me in a much more permanent way."

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to force out the thoughts of tearing everything around me to shreds. I did not think that was going to help my case significantly. I tried to focus on the sensations created by her hands on me.

Like it always did, her touch slowly began to calm me, and my thoughts regained some of their coherence. I could do this. For her, I could do this. I could control myself if it meant she would stay with me willingly. Bella was my reason for existing, and I had to be able to give her anything she desired. I would start with keeping my hands to myself, even though the thought of it was downright painful. If I could do that – just for twenty-four hours...

The thought made me shudder.

Bella ran her hands over my face, her fingers gracing along my temples, and then into my hair. She stroked through the strands, and I felt myself relaxing further into her. My body reacted, urging me to reciprocate – to take her head in my hands and bring her lips to mine.

I tightened my fingers against my thighs, digging into them and holding on.

No touching.

If I could do this one thing, this thing that I craved as much as anything else, then maybe I could keep myself from drinking her blood, too.

Bella's hand slid back down to my chin and tilted my head up to look at her.

"I know you can do this," she said to me. Her faith was obviously much stronger than mine.

I nodded, and her hands left me. Knowing I couldn't stay there and keep my hands from reaching out to her, I quickly vacated the house to find Emmett and take my turn patrolling the island. Mixed emotions followed me – fear, desperation, relief.

Fear, because I just didn't know how I would be able to do it.

Desperation, because I was quickly losing all control over what was happening, and I think part of me needed the comfort of knowing how things were going to play out.

Relief, because if I could do this, she wasn't going to leave me.

When I got outside, Emmett was hanging out by the stand of palm trees, laughing hysterically. All the mixed-up emotions flowed into one – anger – and the need for violence. I walked straight up to him and connected my fist with his jaw. He took the hit and came right back at me, swinging.

We went at it about half an hour, until Emmett threw me into the salty water, where I decided to lay on my back and float rather than come back to shore for more of the same. The pent-up energy from my conversation with Bella had evaporated and left me feeling simply empty.

Empty was a feeling with which I was very familiar. I had felt it most of my existence. It almost felt normal to me, though not necessarily welcomed. It was how I felt in a house filled with perfectly matched

couples when I was always alone. Emptiness was the feeling of walking across a stage to receive your fourth medical degree with dozens of people you refused to befriend over the past four years, because they would be dead in a few decades. It was the feeling that had followed me around for far too long. I had a bit of a revelation when I realized I hadn't felt empty since taking Bella from Forks to satisfy my various thirsts.

Well, except for one.

I floated a while longer while the water and the sun warmed my skin. I steered my thoughts away from that one, as of yet unquenched thirst, because if I started thinking about it, I would be with her and violating her rules very quickly. I sighed, rolled over and swam back.

When I came back out of the water, Emmett was waiting for me. He sat on the edge of the deck leaning back against the railing and looking like an advertisement for khaki shorts. All he was missing was a bottle of Bud Light.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Not particularly," I replied.

"She really knows how to get to you, huh?" Emmett let out a snort that turned into a giggle. If he did it again, I was going to rip his head off, and I didn't mean that figuratively.

"This is going to be torture," I grumbled.

Emmett glared at me.

I haven't touched my wife in a week because of you. You think that's any easier for me?

I hadn't thought about it.

"I didn't know what it was like before," I admitted. "I always knew you loved her, and that she loved you. From the day she brought you

home it was obvious how much she loved you. I could see it in her eyes and in the way she worried about you. When she begged Carlisle to save you, I could feel the desperation in her. I didn't need to be able to read her mind. When you woke up, I watched you look at her the same way."

"She was my angel."

"I probably rolled my eyes at you both," I told him. "Because I didn't understand. I read thoughts, not hearts."

Now you think you understand?

"I know I couldn't survive without her."

Emmett stared out over the sea and tried to think about deviant sex with my sister, but I heard his half-hidden thought anyway. *Bella doesn't feel that way about you.*

"I know she doesn't," I whispered. "And I know I can't make her love me. I will do anything she asks of me, and I suppose I will hope...someday..."

What if she never does? What if she asked you to let her go?

"No!" I snarled.

"And that's your idea of love?"

The day following my conversation with Bella consisted of the longest, most torturous hours of my life.

I was terrified of getting too close to her, because if I did, I was going to forget and reach out to touch her. I was also afraid of being too far away, because she said she would touch me, and I wanted her to do so. If I was too far away, she couldn't touch me. I couldn't avoid her, and I couldn't be close to her.

It was maddening.

On top of that, I tried not to think about what Emmett had said to me, because I was too afraid I would realize how right he was. I wasn't ready to cope with that sort of introspection.

I patrolled the island while Bella slept. Being in the same building with her was far too tempting. On the one hand, I was relatively sure I could sneak into her room, touch her and get out without being caught. I was also positive Emmett would rat me out. Aside from that, I think she would just *know* .

In the morning, I tried to keep my distance from her. That was still complicated by the fact that I didn't know if or when she was going to touch me, and I really didn't want to miss out on the opportunity. I tried to figure out how to be close enough to her that she might decide to do so, but at the same time far enough away that I didn't forget or just lose my senses long enough to grab a hold of her and kiss her. If I did that, all was lost.

I probably should have left to go hunting at some point, but I didn't want to be too far from Bella, even if I wasn't allowed to touch her. Samson could show up at any time, and I wasn't about to leave my brother shorthanded. I could see Emmett's eyes darkening as well, and wished we had thought to hunt before coming back to the island.

Bella had touched me exactly four times since my punishment period had begun. The first was right after she told me her conditions and I begged her to do so. The second was right before she went to bed, when she warned me not to come into the room while she slept, but ran her hands through my hair and kissed my cheek. The third had been a "good morning hug" right before she made her breakfast, while I kept my arms tense and unmoving at my sides. The last was right before I went on patrol, when she cupped my face and told me to be careful.

Not touching her back had been almost impossible. If I hadn't been practiced up on pulling myself away from drinking her blood, I'm sure

I would have slipped up. The draw to her skin was almost as much, and of course, right under her skin were bluish vessels carrying the luscious liquid I craved.

I had no idea what made Bella come up with this punishment of hers, but she couldn't have picked a more effective one. Now that it was nearing its end, I was looking for distractions, which meant watching Bella cook dinner. Why I was fascinated with her preparation of human food was beyond me. I just loved watching her hands move so deftly. For someone who claimed to be so graceless, her skills in the kitchen were unparalleled, and that was coming from someone who never enjoyed the end product.

"What are you having?" I asked. I didn't care; I just wanted to hear her speak to me.

"Well, I don't have any fresh vegetables or anything," Bella said. "Everything went bad in the fridge. So, I'm making a Shepherd's pie out of some of the potatoes that are *not* overgrown and frozen vegetables I found."

"I'll have more delivered if you make a list of what you want."

"That would be wonderful, thank you."

"Can I help?"

"Absolutely not." Bella looked over at me and smiled. She abandoned the bag of frozen mixed veggies and walked over to me, placing her hand on my cheek. Her fingers were colder than usual, though still warm to me. I clasped my hands behind my back to keep myself in check. She ran the back of her hand across my face. "I'm on to you, Cullen."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You and the food destruction – I know what you are doing."

"You do?" I had already figured this out, but it was more fun to play ignorant.

"Uh huh," she said, dropping her hand and going back to the food preparation. "I bet all the jokes you know are too old to tell, so you think slap-stick is a better way to make me laugh."

"Are you calling me old?"

"I certainly am."

"And you are insinuating that I don't know any jokes?"

"Why don't you go ahead and tell me one, then?"

I wasn't expecting her to call my bluff quite so quickly. I thought I would have a little time to think of one. I vaguely remembered a lot of jokes about Lenin, but not well enough to actually tell one. They probably weren't quite as entertaining given the current world climate, anyway. After I was turned, I was more interested in feeding and music than popular comedic culture.

"I remember songs," I said, trying to save a little face.

"What songs were popular when you were in high school?" Bella asked. "I mean...the first time."

" *Hail hail, the Gang's All Here* ," I said. "And *I Ain't Got Nobody* ."

Bella rolled her eyes.

"I didn't say they were good," I said. "Just popular."

I thought for a moment.

"I do remember one joke," I said.

"Is it any good?"

"Um...I don't know," I admitted with a chuckle. "I supposed it's old-fashioned. I remember it from when I was...younger."

"Well, tell it to me."

"Um...okay." I took a deep breath, trying to remember the last time I told a joke. It might even have been the same one, and I may have been telling it to my birth mother. "A mother is in the kitchen, and...um...her son walks in, and he's all covered in mud. So she says 'Have you been fighting again, Johnnie? Good little boys don't fight.' And then Jonnie says 'Yes, I know that. I thought he was a good little boy, but after I hit him once, I found he wasn't.'"

Bella stared at me. Then she stared at me some more. She wasn't laughing.

"Was it that bad?" I asked.

"Was that it?"

"Um...yes." I stammered. "See, if the other little boy had been a good boy, he wouldn't have fought back."

"Yes, I get it," Bella smirked. I guess it really was that bad.

"Sorry."

"Edward, that was awful."

"Sorry," I said again. I smiled and shrugged. "I probably heard it in 1914. If I thought about it for a while, I might come up with another one. I could try to find a modern joke, but the more colorful language of today isn't something with which I am comfortable, and cursing seems to be in every punch line."

"Forget the colorful language and go back to colorful lounge pants, please."

"As you wish."

"How much time do you have left?"

"Seventeen minutes and forty-seven seconds," I said, not missing a beat. Bella laughed. At least I could say something that amused her.

"And what are you going to do when that time is up?"

"Hold you and kiss you," I said, watching her eyes to see if she was going to object. Nothing I saw in them indicated such, so I expanded. "Maybe throw you down on the couch and try to look down your shirt."

"Oh really?" Bella tilted her head and looked at me through her lashes. "Mr. Cullen, that would hardly be proper for a young man of your times."

"That's true," I agreed.

"I'm not sure I should allow that," she said, shaking her head. Bella's hand reached up and rubbed against her neck, tracing one of the scars there. Then it dropped a little lower and ran along the top of her shirt. She bit into her lower lip

I wanted to bite it back, and had to stop my legs from taking me over next to her to do just that.

"Miss Swan, are you *teasing* me?"

"Um...I might be," Bella said, her voice not quite as sure as it was. "But I'm pretty sure I am safe...for the moment."

"For the next fifteen minutes and twelve moments, actually," I corrected.

"Edward?" Bella's voice lost its playful tone.

"What is it, Bella?"

"Is that all you wanted?" she asked, her voice wavering. "I mean...um..."

"Bella, what's the matter?"

"I just wanted to know if you..." Bella took a long slow breath and finally blurted out her question. "I just wanted to know, are you going to drink tonight?"

She ran her hands up through her hair.

"I know it's time," she said. "Past time, really. And that's okay, if you wanted to, I mean. You can touch me again, so it's fine. I just wanted to...be prepared."

"I told you, Bella," I said. I had to shove my hands into the pockets of my shorts because they were starting to shake. The monster heard everything she said, and was licking his lips. I mentally threw him in a corner, refusing to acknowledge him. "I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"Are you sure?"

For the love of all that is holy, don't tempt me!

"Yes," I croaked, shoving my hands deeper into my pockets. Eleven minutes left.

I looked up at her face, trying to read her. What was going on in her head? Did I misinterpret her earlier words, or was she amiable to me accosting her with my lips when the time ran out?

My eyes didn't leave hers and the countdown continued. With about four minutes left, Bella mumbled something about putting dinner in the oven, and broke eye contact. She quickly covered the pan with aluminum foil, twisted some knobs on the stove and placed the pan on the top rack of the oven.

By the time she had the door closed, I was down to my last few seconds of torture.

"How long does that have to cook?"

"About an hour," Bella said.

"Good," I replied.

Three...two...one.

Bella squealed when I reached her, my hands on her face and my lips eagerly seeking out her mouth. She opened her mouth to me without hesitation, and my tongue reached out to taste her and feel her warmth again.

My hands went up into her hair, reacquainting themselves with the silky strands. Then they dropped down to her shoulders, my fingers gripping her lightly before running over her arms and then down her sides. I stopped at her hips, and then traveled back up, running my thumbs over the curve of her breasts on either side as I did.

"Please, please, please," I mumbled into her mouth. My hands reached around to her shoulder blades, and down to her waist before my arms wrapped around her as tightly as I dared. I wanted to touch all of her. I wanted to encompass her. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"You keep your promise," Bella said, pulling back from me and looking into my still scarlet eyes. "If you can do that, you won't have to worry about it. If you don't, it will be worse next time."

"I will – I swear." I pulled her mouth back to mine and ran my tongue along her bottom lip, hoping I could live up to her expectations.

I walked through the open door and saw Emmett with his feet up on the coffee table, watching something extraordinarily violent on the

television.

She went to bed.

Emmett's memories replayed for me. He showed me Bella sitting on the couch, reading a book, and getting a little excited about the plot development. In Emmett's mind, she suddenly jumped her feet, yelled "no he didn't," at the book, followed by shouting "squee." That seemed to be when she realized Emmett was still in the room. She had then turned a beautiful shade of red and excused herself for the night.

It was pretty funny, really.

"Thanks," I said, smiling.

Emmett sighed and shook his head, thoroughly convinced I was a lost cause. Then he hit the remote to pause the movie, dropped his feet to the carpet and walked outside. I stepped quietly down the hall and peered into the bedroom.

Bella sat up in bed with a book in her hands. It was getting late, but I could see she was close to the end, and would probably keep reading at this point until she finished the story.

"May I join you?" I asked, still terrified she was going to deny me. She nodded without looking up from the page, and held her left arm out to the side, giving me room to slide in next to her. I cuddled up against her side, and her hand crept up the back of my neck and into my hair, holding my head against her shoulder.

I curled alongside her with my cheek resting against her shoulder. I placed a small kiss against her neck, staring up at her and just watching her eyes travel back and forth over the page. After a while, I let my eyes wander down to the top of her shirt. It was a tank top, and cut just low enough I could see the valley between her breasts. I smiled, but resisted the urge to run my finger down between them. For now, I settled for wrapping my arm around her waist instead.

This was my favorite place to be, holding her like this while she read her books. I hugged her to me, trying to be gentle and not hold her too tightly, but it was a strain. I wanted to be closer to her - making up for the lost time. I wanted to be closer to her warmth and her soft, Bella-scented skin.

Bella shifted in the bed, holding her book out with just her right hand. I hugged her to me again, and then relaxed against her, trying to clear my mind.

I inhaled her scent, felt the burn, and tried to ignore it. She smelled so good, her skin, her hair, her blood - all of her. I pulled my hand back and rested it on her stomach. My eyes followed the movement, and I found myself focusing again on the tops of her breasts and the valley between them, clearly visible from the neckline of her tank top.

My thumb ran across the fabric over her stomach, feeling the heat of her skin through the material. I reached up a little higher, and stroked the underside of Bella's right breast. I glanced quickly up to her eyes, wondering if I should have asked permission before touching her there.

Bella was still engrossed in the pages of her book, and did not seem to be paying me any mind at all. I looked back down again.

They were still there, and my thumb was still touching one of them. I stroked slowly across the bottom half, just around the outside. Slowly, softly and gently, because I really didn't want to disturb her reading. Then I moved back a little, making it easier to reach the underside of her left breast and repeat the movement.

My fingers tingled against the feeling of her warm, soft and curved feminine flesh. I reached up and over them, to the top where I could touch bare skin, and stroked the backs of my fingers over the top of both.

Bella kept reading.

I ran one finger along the top, dipping slightly into the valley between, catching a tiny amount of sweat gathered there. I repeated the action with an additional finger. Then another one.

My fingers moved across the side of her breasts, down next to her arm, across the bottom of both, and then back up the other side. I repeated the action in reverse.

My breathing had increased, and her scent filled my nostrils. I closed my eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply. *Feel the burn.*

I opened my eyes again and watched Bella deftly turn another page with the thumb of the same hand holding the book. Her brow furrowed.

My eyes dropped again and my hand raised, this time cupping the lower half of her breast and lifting it a little, feeling the weight of it in my hand I switched to the other side, telling myself I just wanted to compare them, but really I just wanted to give each of them equal attention.

I still had no idea why that was so important, but it was.

I licked my lips and drew my fingers up over the top of her left breast, over the ridge of the fabric encasing them and back to bare skin at the top. Then I traced back down, the tip of my middle finger grazing the nipple. Over to the right side. Repeat.

Bella's nipples hardened with my cold touch, so I had to run my finger back over both of them, just to feel the difference and to see if the skin would contract more. It did, making me smile. I cupped one side and ran my thumb over her constricted nipple, licking my lips again and remembering how they tasted. I started to move over to the other side.

"Edward Cullen," Bella exclaimed. "What do you think you are doing?"

The phrase "jump out of your skin" had whole new meaning for me all of the sudden. I actually startled, jumped back a little and quickly moved my hand back down to her stomach. I glanced up at her.

Bella was looking down at me with her eyebrow raised and her lips pursed. She didn't actually appear angry as her tone of voice had indicated. For that, I was quite grateful. At worst she seemed irritated.

I looked up into her brown eyes through my lashes, and gave her a half smile and accompanying shrug.

"I like them," I admitted sheepishly.

"I'm trying to read," Bella scowled down at me, but her eyes were smiling.

I tried to settle back down, but the fact that my final touch had been over her right breast and not the left was really bothering me. I kept looking over at it, and my fingers would twitch, wanting to touch her again. I glanced up at her, and was she was again absorbed in the last few pages of her paperback.

My hand moved back up, and I quickly cupped her left breast, ran my thumb over her nipple, and then placed my hand back on her stomach.

Bella scowled down at me.

"I'm trying to finish this book," she growled, but broke into a smile with the last syllable.

I shrugged again, peering up at her.

"They weren't even."

Bella slept, lying across my chest with her hand up on my shoulder and my arms wrapped around her. I was, once again, in my own small version of heaven. Maybe I wasn't completely forsaken after all.

The burn in my throat was still there, and the monster in my head was still rattling the bars of the very fragile cage I had constructed for him. I did not know if I was going to be able to keep him contained or if he was going to jump out at the worst possible moment – again. However, I knew now – without a doubt – exactly what I wanted. I wanted to love Bella. And I wanted her to love me. And that wasn't going to happen if I couldn't modulate my behavior into something she found acceptable.

The punishment Bella had placed on me had been nearly unendurable. Nearly. The part that had made all the difference was my knowledge of the duration. I could count down – I knew she would allow me to touch her again if I could just follow the rules for the time allotted. It had also made me realize if I were to ever lose her, my speculations about not being able to survive would come to fruition.

Bella wasn't just my life; she was my lifeline. She was my salvation, because the existence I had before was just that – an existence without meaning or light. Bella was all of that to me.

She was also my sustenance.

If I was to be honest with myself, I had to admit that as well, because the burn in my throat wasn't going away. I had just passed the fifth day without drinking Bella's blood, and I honestly thought without the blood of the human nurse in my system I wouldn't have been able to control myself for as long as I had.

Once the nurse's blood was out of my system, would I still be able to resist Bella's?

Emmett's comments about the hunting around here had been correct – there just wasn't a decent predator population. If I was going to stop drinking from Bella, I had to have better hunting grounds. So it came down to drinking from other humans in the hopes of not being caught and punished again, or leaving Bella Island.

I slipped out from under Bella's warm body and went into the kitchen. I could hear Emmett's footsteps out on the beach, ever watchful of our impending intruder. I pulled out my phone and started searching for another area. If I couldn't be what Bella needed me to be here on her island, I had to find another place to be with her.

I was not going to drink from Bella, as I had promised myself. I was not going to use any other humans to satisfy my thirst, as I had promised Bella. I was going to live up to her expectations of me. I was going to be better for her. I had to be, because if I couldn't change, then Emmett was right – I didn't love her enough. I was going to prove that I did. *The monster will be contained.*

So much for vacillation.

Chapter End Notes

"They weren't even" still cracks me up.

A bit of insight from Emmett, eh? What do you think of the punishment? Is Edward finally making progress?

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 – Choose and Lose

Sunrise the next morning hit me straight in the eyes as I peered out over the water's edge.

I felt different. I couldn't have put the differences into words, but I still knew they were there. I felt determined. I had finally made up my mind to do whatever I could to show Bella I loved her, and that I could change for her.

The land line on the little island was certainly welcome, since I still couldn't get the cell phone to work at all. I had placed an order of fresh food to restock the kitchen and managed to come up with a couple of options for new living locations. I wanted to give Bella the chance to choose where we would go next. It would take a few days to get any of the places ready, but we weren't going anywhere until we dealt with Samson anyway.

I hadn't forgotten what Emmett had said. I knew I was taking away a fairly fundamental choice from Bella – her freedom. Despite understanding how insanely wrong that was, I couldn't bring myself to give her the option to leave. I knew I should allow her to leave, if that's what she chose to do. I knew I should, but I wouldn't.

Because I couldn't live without her, and I was a selfish, amoral bastard when it came to Bella.

Since I wasn't willing to give up that little piece of control, I was going to at least try to make up for it by letting her choose anything and everything else, including where we were going to live next. There were several places I was considering based on their hunting prospects. Mozambique, Indonesia and Brazil were at the top of my list. Each place had its own selection of predators, and they were all warm climates, which I hoped Bella would like.

I heard Emmett walk across the planks of the deck and jump off into the sand.

Happy Thursday, little bro.

I had no idea what day it was, but I decided to take his word for it. He stood beside me and looked out over the water.

Anything out there, or are you just being moody?

"I was just thinking, thank you."

"Moody it is," Emmett chuckled.

"I am not," I insisted. "I was just thinking about where we should go next. Hunting here just isn't going to work."

"Yeah," Emmett agreed. "That shark yesterday was...well...nasty."

"I concur."

"So," Emmett started. "Are you..." *Just going to haul Bella around wherever you go, whether she wants to or not?*

"Emmett," I snarled in warning. I did not want to have this conversation with him.

"You can't keep doing this," Emmett said in a lowered voice. *It's tearing everyone apart, especially her.*

"She is staying with me."

"For how long?"

I sighed. How could I answer such a question, when there was no answer? Forever? Until she dies? Until I kill her? *No, I won't let that happen.*

"When I think about her not being near me," I told him, "even just being inside when I'm out here, I can't think straight. I want to give her the choice, but I can't. The very idea is painful. If I had to watch her walk away from me, I don't think I could survive past the first few steps. I can't tell her she has the option and then when she chooses to leave me, do what? Tell her she can't? I would just make it worse."

Will she leave if given the choice?

"Can you think of any reason why she wouldn't?" I questioned. Even though she put up with my bipolar behavior, as she put it, that didn't mean she wouldn't run if given the opportunity. There isn't a sentient being on the planet that wouldn't.

"I don't understand why I feel this way," I continued. "I've never felt any of this before. I've never been so attracted to a human's blood before. I won't say it was ever easy – it never was, but when she walked past me in school and her scent hit me, it's like all of the control I ever had and all the restraint I had practiced for decades meant nothing. I might as well have been a newborn."

Emmett's memories flashed in my head.

A woman in an orchard, the scent of her blood all-consuming, drawing him close, his mouth against her throat...

"Jesus, Emmett."

"Sorry," he said softly. "I think I might know what you mean, though."

"Yes, actually," I admitted. "That was...pretty accurate. I didn't know."

"I didn't think about it," Emmett said with a shrug. "I certainly never talked about it, except with Rose. It just happened."

How did you ever stop?

"I have no idea." I bent over and absently picked a shell up off the beach. I tossed it in my hand a couple of times before flinging it out

into the ocean. "I knew I wanted it again. If I killed her...well, I couldn't have her again. So I stopped."

That's kind of smart, really.

"Gee, thanks. I feel so much better about all of this."

I'm not trying to make you feel better .

"I just meant, that never occurred to me," Emmett said aloud. "I might have done the same thing, if I had thought about it."

But it's different now, isn't it?

"Yes," I said. "Now I'm in love with her."

It was easier to say it now, out loud. I guess declaring oneself to a room full of strangers right after the love of your life has just found out you recently murdered her nurse removed any inhibitions I may have had about the statement.

"I don't understand everything I feel," I said softly. "It scares me. I want her so much – her blood, her body, just *her* . Her warmth, her closeness. Everything about her is perfect, but I can't control anything I feel towards her. The...jealousy is the worst. I didn't even have a name for initially. Sometimes I feel so angry I can't control what I'm doing. I can't even think. I've...hurt her. Not just to get to her blood, but...other times as well."

"Can you really not put two and two together?" Emmett snorted. "I thought you were the smart one."

It's the blood, bro.

"What do you mean?"

Does he really not know?

"I hate hearing your thoughts," I mumbled, not really meaning to say it out loud. "I wouldn't be asking if I knew."

"You're taking in human blood. It changes everything. Don't you remember?"

I thought about all my memories of years on my own, draining humans I deemed unworthy of their lives. Playing God. Beyond the desire for the blood, there were changes in how I felt. The violence, the pain. Yes, I did remember. And no, I had not managed to add two and two.

"That's why Carlisle said we couldn't go after you or talk to you or anything," Emmett continued, his voice was a lot softer than usual. "He said the more human blood you drank, the more you would be ruled by instinct. He thought there might be something different about her blood, too. He said you weren't rational, and finding you would be dangerous to us and to Bella. I guess I proved his point."

"If I stop drinking from her, I'll stop hurting her in other ways?"

Emmett shrugged, his thoughts matching his movements.

"What if I can't stop?"

I think you can figure that one out on your own.

"I want her to love me," I said.

"Edward," Emmett said. "I'm going to ask you a question, and it's probably going to piss you off. Do you know anything about women at all?"

I laughed. The comment probably should have angered me, but I knew immediately what the answer was. I had no idea what I was doing.

"Yeah, I didn't think so," Emmett chuckled.

"What do I do?"

What? To force her to love you? Are you serious?

"No...not force her." I sighed. "What can I do so she will love me the way I love her?"

"It doesn't work that way, little bro."

"Then how does it work?" I inwardly hated the fact that I had to turn to Emmett, of all people, for relationship advice.

You just have to be you. Either she'll love you, or she won't.

"But she already knows me as the sick fuck I have been over the last two months."

Whoa – an actual curse word!

"I don't know, Edward," Emmett said. "She doesn't hate you as it is. I mean – it's obvious she's got some kind of physical attraction to you, or she wouldn't let you paw at her all the time."

"I don't 'paw' at Bella."

Whatever.

"I want to...be with her all the time. I like touching her. I think she just puts up with it."

You're blind and stupid.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She already likes you, even though you've been a sick fuck. Maybe if you went back to moody and boring, she'd like you even more."

A boat showed up with another week's supply of fresh vegetables and fruits for Bella. I ushered the two delivery boys – teens from the local school – into the house, warning them to be quiet while she still slept. By the time they were done restocking the kitchen I could hear her stirring in bed. Not quite awake, but she would be soon.

I escorted them back to their watercraft and bid them a hasty goodbye. It wasn't quick enough, though. Bella was already in the shower by the time I returned. I listened intently to the sound of water hitting her body, my eyes closed and my mouth slightly open, taking in the taste and scent of water on her skin.

When the water turned off, I moved myself to the kitchen, not really wanting to be caught standing right outside the bathroom door. I listened to the rustle of towels and clothing, as well as the hum of an electric toothbrush. After a few more minutes, I heard her footsteps coming close to the door.

Bella walked out of the steaming bathroom in a tank top and shorts with her hair wrapped up in a towel. Her long, mostly bare legs looked so smooth, and the desire to touch them was overpowering. I had to stop myself from racing to her to drop down on my knees and run my hands over her calves.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to not even glance at her chest.

"Good morning, Bella. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did, thank you." Her smile slammed into my eyes and burrowed its way through my skull. I watched her enter the bedroom and stop in front of the mirrored dresser. She rubbed vigorously at her hair with the towel for a moment, and then tossed it lightly on the bed before grabbing a hairbrush.

I loved watching her brush her hair. It was smooth and shiny, and I always wondered what it felt like when it traced along her back. Did it tickle? I wondered if she would let me brush her hair if I asked. I

stared a moment longer and felt a frown cross over my face. Something about her movements didn't look quite right.

"Bella, are you all right?"

"Yes – I think I just slept on my neck wrong. I'm sure it will work itself out."

"But it hurts?"

"A little." Bella smiled at me and placed the brush down on the top of the dresser. "It's okay, Edward, it's not that bad, really."

Bella put her brush down and I followed her out of the bedroom and into the kitchen where she picked up one of the oranges recently delivered. She rubbed her thumb over the peel to loosen it, and then started to tear into the fruit. I had an idea.

"Bella?" I said, and then hesitated.

"What, Edward?"

"Would you like me to...give you a massage? It might help your neck."

Bella just looked at me for a minute.

"Do you know how to do that?"

"In a way," I said. "I've never given one before, but I have studied anatomy extensively, and I understand how muscles work with each other. I think I can help. If you want me to help."

I fully understood that fumbling over all my words was making me sound like a bumbling idiot. I finally took a deep breath and blurted an entire sentence.

"I mean, I'm sure I could make it better if you will allow me to do so."

"All right," Bella said softly. "What do I need to do?"

"Lie down?" I said, questioning. "I think that would be the most comfortable for you."

"The couch or the bed?"

"Your choice."

Bella walked over to the couch and lay down on her stomach.

"I can try this either way, but I think it might work better if you...ah...took off your shirt."

Bella smirked at me.

"Why am I not surprised?"

I shook my head.

"You don't have to – I'll make it work this way."

"It's all right, Edward, but where is Emmett?"

"Currently he's about two hundred feet west of the deck, heading away."

"I guess we have a little time, then." Bella sat up and pulled her shirt over her head. I tried to keep my breath under control as images from the last time she was on this couch and making the same motion paraded through my head.

"This too?" Bella hooked her thumb through the strap of her bra.

"I'd like that," I said. I could feel the corners of my mouth turn up. I glanced down at the floor, trying to gain a little composure, but it didn't work. I looked back up at her. "Please?"

Bella reached around her back, and the material around her shoulders went slack, then fell forward. My version of a visual heaven filled my eyes for far too short a time before Bella bit down on her lower lip, smiled up at me and rolled over on to her stomach.

"Put your arms down at your sides," I said, regaining my senses. I knelt down beside her and ran my fingers through her still damp hair, pulling it off to the side.

"Is that going to be in the way? I could get a hair tie for it."

"Stay there," I suggested. "I will get it for you."

I went to the bedroom and found an off-white hair band on the dresser. I took a few deep breaths, informing particular parts of my body that certain reactions to visual stimulus were not always appropriate, and then went back out to Bella's side.

Gathering her hair up in one hand, I slipped the tie around twice, so it wasn't too tight, and then lay her hair over her shoulder. I started at the top of her neck, near her hairline, and stroked as softly as I could over her neck, down her shoulders, over her shoulder blades, down to her waist and back up again. I completed the same circuit three times, warming up both her skin and the muscles underneath. I caressed her skin from her neck, across her shoulders and down her arms next, letting the warmth tingle up my fingers.

I tilted Bella's head slightly to the side so I could better access the offending trapezoidal muscle. I could feel the muscle tighten over and over under my hand. Bella winced a little as I pushed my fingers into her tender flesh, feeling the taut muscle underneath.

"Too much?" I asked.

"No," Bella reassured me. "It's fine."

Fine.

"You have to tell me if it's too much, Bella," I insisted. "I don't want to hurt you."

"It just hurt a little at first," she finally admitted. Bella lifted her head a little, turning to look up at me. "It's okay now, really."

She settled back down, and I started again, running my hand back and forth across her neck, shoulder and down her arm, slowly increasing the pressure. I did the same to the joining muscles, which could also be responsible for some of the tension.

"That feels really good," Bella said.

"Is it helping?" I hoped it was.

"I think so, yes."

I worked through her muscles for several minutes, from her neck to her shoulders, down her back to her waist and back up again. As the minutes passed on the clock and my hands passed over Bella's skin, her muscles slowly began to relax under my touch. Once they seemed to have loosened enough, I hesitantly stroked her skin a final time before laying my cold hands across the sore muscle. Figuring I was as good as any ice pack, I held them there for a few minutes before sitting back.

"I think that's it," I said, realizing the words were depressing me. That was, of course, before I knew she was going to roll over.

"Thank you," Bella said. She rolled onto her back and my eyes immediately sought out her exposed skin. I ran my tongue across my lower lip. Bella reached up, clasping her hands around my neck and pulling me down to her. Her lips traveled over mine and I felt her warm, wet tongue touch my mouth. I parted my lips, and Bella pushed her tongue into my mouth, running it along mine.

"Careful," I whispered against her lips. "Sharp teeth."

"Good thing to remember," she said. Her hands traveled up into my hair and she pushed harder against my mouth. I heard myself groan. She tasted so good. Warm, soft and mine. My hand slid up her side and around the front of her, finding her breast and gently caressing it. I shifted my weight and switched hands so I could reach the other one. I felt Bella smile against my lips, and then giggle.

I loved that sound.

"I'm amusing you?" I asked playfully, leaning back and looking down at her. My eyes darted quickly to where my left hand lay, then back again.

"I would dare you to touch one of them, but not the other, however I don't think you could cope."

"I have to admit," I said, "I don't like the idea."

Bella's hand reached up and grazed over my cheek.

"You are adorable sometimes, do you know that?"

Adorable? That's good, isn't it?

I wanted to respond, but instead I just stared at her, not sure what I could say.

"Your turn," Bella said, tugging at the hem of my T-shirt. Blood rose into her cheeks, and I had to hold my breath for a moment. She was blushing – embarrassed about...what? What was going on in that silent mind of hers?

I leaned back, and pulled my shirt over my head, and then dropped it down on the floor beside the couch. Bella's fingers ran up the side of my arms, to my shoulders, her fingers tracing the edge of my biceps along the way.

"Switch places with me?" Bella looked up at me and her cheeks started turning red again. I had no idea what she was planning,

which made me a little nervous, but I wasn't about to refuse her, so I moved back so she could get up. Bella stood, and motioned for me to lie down on my back. Then she straddled my waist.

My whole body went stiff.

Yes, all of it.

"Bella...what are you doing?"

"I told you," Bella said with a smile. "It's your turn."

Bella leaned down over me and pressed her lips to mine. My hands gripped her hips, unsure whether I wanted to push her up my torso, away from the bulge in my khakis or hold her down against that same bulge. The idea of using her body as friction against me was both intriguing and terrifying. I wanted it. I wanted her to want it. My body was screaming for it.

Instead of doing something sensible, I pushed harder against her mouth, wanted to taste more of her. I ran my hands up her sides and around the front, finding both of her breasts at the same time and running my fingers up alongside the soft, smooth skin. My thumbs circled both nipples and Bella gasped into my mouth.

"Is that okay?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't say no, but also appreciating words as a distraction from the foreign sensations my body was experiencing.

"Yes," Bella said, her breath hot against my cheek. "But I said it was your turn."

Her hands grasped mine. For a moment, I didn't want to allow her to move them, and I held on. I traced around and around with my thumbs a few more times, then let out a small protest before allowing her to guide my hands. Bella placed both of my hands behind my head, and I laced my fingers together, smiling up at her. I had no idea what she had planned, and it made me a little edgy.

The tips of Bella's fingers ran down my neck, across the tops of my shoulders and down to my chest. She traced the outline of pectoral muscles, and then her fingers met in the middle, brushing over my sternum and down to my abdominals. With one finger, she lightly followed the outline of each muscle in turn, brushing back and forth across my stomach.

I held my fingers tightly together. The monster tossed up visions of tearing through her remaining clothing and impaling her on me. I closed my eyes for a moment, forcing my breaths to be slow and even. Once again, the monster was not appeased, and he began rattling the bars of his cage, snarling and licking his lips. I didn't know what he wanted most – her blood or her body. The burn in my throat intensified as I heard and felt her heart rate increase. I needed to find some kind of distraction from the smell of her...

Oh...wow.

I reflexively inhaled, and the scent that came into my nostrils was both completely *Bella* and also completely *different* from the scent of her blood or her skin. The smell was coming from...

Wow.

Bella was...aroused. I could smell it on her.

My hips bucked, only a tiny fraction of an inch. I wasn't sure if she even noticed. This new scent was beyond intoxicating. I had to reel myself in, or I was going to lose what little control I had.

Bella shifted to the side, her fingers rolling around my navel and then dropping down. Her hand brushed quickly over the front of my shorts. All control over my breathing left, and I heard the soft tug of fabric as Bella released the buttons on my shorts. I was completely immobile, afraid to do anything that might make her stop and equally afraid to do something that might encourage her to continue.

Her new scent intensified and slammed into me repeatedly.

Her fingertips moved up to the line of the boxers I wore under the khakis and slipped inside. The warmth of her hand enveloped me, wrapping around the most sensitive part of my body and stroking first down, and then back up again. I could feel the tip of her fingers gliding over the head and down the shaft.

If I could sleep, I would have been thoroughly convinced I was dreaming.

I couldn't hear. I couldn't see. I couldn't even breathe. It felt like electricity – warm, soft, beautiful electricity – shooting through my entire body. I had to fight against my body's desire to buck against her hand, and force myself to remain still. My fingers gripped into the arm of the couch behind my head, tearing into the fabric and wood underneath.

"Oh God, Bella!" My breath finally came out in a raspy, guttural moan.

Wow – wasn't expecting that.

My brother was quickly becoming the king of all the worst timed entrances in existence. I quickly removed my fingers from the indentations they had made in the now ruined couch arm and sat up. In doing so, I effectively trapped Bella's hand firmly against my erection inside my boxer shorts. I tucked my forehead against her shoulder and moaned against her skin. My hand reached down and covered hers, and tried to carefully extract her from my pants. Of course, to do so meant one final stroke up my length.

My wide eyes met hers, and her eyes smiled at me. She bit down on her lip and looked down between us where our hands were twined together, still pushed against me. Apparently, I hadn't managed to remove her hand from my shorts at all, but further secured it instead.

"Like that, do you?" Bella smirked at me.

A short, staccato laugh escaped me.

"I would say so, yes."

Emmett snickered, reminding me of his presence.

I untangled our hands from each other and from my pants, though I couldn't think of much of anything in the world I would rather not do. Except maybe continue while my brother was in the room. As Bella withdrew her hand, I was left with an unwelcomed chill where her fingers had been. Her skin was so warm. *What might it feel like to be inside of her?*

I wrapped my arms around Bella's shoulders, effectively covering her exposed body with my own. Of course, that meant her chest pressed against mine which made both of us lose our breath for a moment.

Nice work, little bro.

"Is there something I can help you with, Emmett?"

"Well, yeah," he chuckled. "Unless you're too busy, you might want to come out here. There's a boat approaching."

Now that he said it, I could hear it. As soon as I could hear the boat, I could hear him.

Now's the time, my young friend. Time to give up the treasure you hold...

"He's almost here," I said softly. I immediately wished I hadn't, because Bella let out a soft cry and her fingers dug into my forearms.

"Edward..." Bella's voice sounded strangled.

"Bella," I said softly, looking back into her eyes and stroking my hand over the side of her face. "It's all right. I love you. I will protect you."

I stood up, raising my pants back up as I went, and deftly closed the buttons. I blocked Emmett's view of Bella with my body until I could collect her shirt from the floor and pull it back down over her head.

I guess the timing could have been worse. A little. Five minutes later and...

"Shut up, Emmett," I growled.

"I didn't say anything," he reminded me.

"Shut up anyway," I retorted. I leaned back down to Bella and quickly kissed her mouth. "Stay inside, please. I don't want you to...see this."

"Edward, I can't..."

I put my lips back over hers again. I didn't have time for her objections and rationalizations. This time she just had to listen.

"Do not step one foot outside this house," I said definitively. Bella furrowed her brow, but nodded to me. I stepped back away from the couch, watching her until I reached the door of our little beach house. When I reached the door, I tore my eyes from her and went to the beach outside to face the one creature who had some hope of stealing her from me.

The boat looming towards me was nearly identical to my own. Samson's mind was relatively silent as he approached, carefully watching my reaction. I could feel a rumbling growl coming from my chest, but my thoughts were focused on his. He hated me. He considered my rejection of his company for that of a human to be completely and totally unforgiveable.

You could have created a coven with me, but you had to be selfish and keep her all to yourself.

My growl deepened. Samson pulled his boat up to our dock and jumped easily over the side, not bothering to tether it. He approached at leisurely human speed, smirking at me. His eyes danced across the sand, searching for the other vampire he could smell.

I wasn't good enough, so you found someone else worthy of sharing her.

"Now I'm going to take her from you both," he stated, continuing his saunter up the beach.

I stepped to one side, placing Samson between myself and Emmett's position within the cover of the palms. Emmett watched closely, preparing for the perfect time to strike. Unable to contain myself any longer, I dove at my enemy.

Then I felt it. The same as it had been in the airport – like a hundred tight, gripping fingers coating my flesh, holding me immobilized, followed by an intense crushing feeling. Only this time it didn't just push down a little, making me feel off balance. This time I found myself crushed to my knees in the sand, literally unable to lift a finger.

He cackled.

I can't imagine you have forgotten my power so quickly. Though obviously I meant nothing to you, so maybe you have.

His mind released me, and I jumped up, crouching low and growling.

"What is it you think you can do to me, mind reader?"

"I'm going to tear you apart," I swore.

He laughed again.

I don't think so.

I moved towards him, and again felt the unbreakable hold on my limbs, keeping me from advancing. A flash of movement signaled Emmett's approach as he raced across the beach towards our adversary.

Samson turned, and his hold on me wavered. I watched Emmett drop to the ground, immobilized. Again, I headed towards him, and again, he turned back to me, and my body stopped responding to my commands.

Emmett rose slowly, sand falling from his clothing. Samson took several steps backwards, closer to the house. His new position changed the straight line created by the locations of Samson, Emmett, and me into a more triangular formation, so he was no longer directly between me and my brother. His eyes darted back to Emmett, and I could move again. Back and forth, we continued, never making enough progress to turn the tides.

Samson took a few more steps, putting distance between himself and both of us. I followed, but immediately dropped to my knees again as he turned his gaze back to me. Emmett side stepped on the sand, moving closer.

Yes, that's it...right where I want you.

"Emmett, no!" I screamed, but I realized his intentions too late. As Emmett came within three yards of me, Samson's eyes moved independently of each other, and both Emmett and I were caught in his gaze at the same time.

Then we were both on our knees on the beach.

Not so tough now, are you little mind reader?

Growls escaped from my chest.

The pressure increased.

The crushing surrounded my body, pushing slowly and steadily inward, threatening to pulverize my insides.

"Edward!"

Oh God, no.

Bella was running towards me. *Could she not follow the simplest of instructions?*

"Bella, stop!" I screamed at her. She came to an abrupt halt in the sand. "Get out of here!"

"Edward...what..."

"Run, Bella!"

"Oh I don't think so," Samson cooed, his eyes not straying from their respective positions. "Come here, little girl."

"Don't you even think of touching her," I snarled.

"You've left your marks all over her." Samson smiled down at me. "Don't you think it's time someone else got a taste?"

He threw his thoughts at me. His demented mind beheld visions of Bella against his body, his mouth at her throat, his eyes on me as his hand slid up the hem of her skirt.

I screamed incoherently at him, fighting desperately against the invisible bonds surrounding me.

"Come here, little girl, or I'll crush him into nothing."

Bella's wide eyes met mine, and I could see the understanding in them. Samson moved to her with vampire speed without taking his eyes from us. His fingers clawed around her wrist and she screamed.

More visions assaulted me. Images similar to the one I had seen from him in the airport – his memories of other human women. He focused his thoughts on their torn and mangled bodies after he had finished with them as he pulled Bella by her arm and twisted her around to face me.

He held her tight, with her back against his chest. He gripped her with one arm around her waist while his other hand slid up her side and around the front, covering one of her breasts. Bella whimpered, clawing at his hand without any hope of dissuading him. I could see her rapid, horrified breaths gasping out of her throat.

The sheer fury inside of me would most certainly have caused all my limbs to vibrate with the energy, if I could have moved them at all. He was going to hurt her – really hurt her – while I watched, and there was nothing I could do.

I wanted to close my eyes. If I watched this, it would kill me. But doing so seemed so cowardly – like I was leaving Bella to her fate. If I kept my eyes on her, at least I was with her, sharing her fate, because it was going to kill me, too. She would know I hadn't abandoned her.

I promised to protect her. I swore to her I wouldn't let him touch her.

Just one more lie.

"So responsive," Samson said, flicking his finger over her nipple. It felt like my body should have been shaking from the exertion of trying to move close enough to tear his body to pieces. He was touching her. He was touching my Bella. His hand dropped down to the hem of Bella's skirt and he began to rub up to her hipbone and back again, exposing the skin of her thigh. "She likes the attention of our kind, doesn't she?"

Just as I was about to give into hopelessness, salvation came from a most unexpected source. I heard her mind first, and felt the fury that nearly equaled my own.

Despite the opinions of most every male to lay eyes upon her, Rosalie Hale had never been physically attractive to me. However, I had never seen a more beautiful sight than her form coming silently out of the trees behind Samson with a look of sheer hatred in her eyes.

"Get your fucking hands off of her!" Rosalie screeched, her foot coming into contact with the middle of his back and sending him sprawling. Bella was knocked to the side, her hands reaching out to break her fall on the sand. He swiveled and righted himself, his attention directed straight towards my beautiful sister.

Every muscled in my body had been tensed. Every muscle had one target. Every muscle was released when he turned his gaze towards Rose. As she dropped to the ground under his attack, I leapt onto his back, sunk my teeth through the thick skin of his neck, and with a screech, I tore his head from his shoulders.

The fury remained, not even close to sated, and I began to tear his body into shreds, as I had promised him I would do. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Rose going for Bella, cradling her carefully as Bella sobbed. Emmett was on the other side of me, tossing driftwood into a pile and setting it alight. I began throwing pieces of the torn vampire to the flames.

Bella's eyes were still wide and her whole body shook as she sat in Rose's lap with her legs pulled up under her in the sand. It reminded me of when I had first taken her away – curled up in the passenger seat of my Aston Martin.

I met Rose's eyes, preparing to offer my eternal gratitude when her plan traveled into my brain. Samson's pieces burned in the bonfire, but that didn't mean the threat had ended.

"Rosalie..."

"I came here to get my husband, Edward," she interrupted. "I'm not here for you. If that guy hadn't been threatening Emmett and Bella, I

would have let him have you."

She didn't really mean it. Well, she kind of did, but even in her anger Rosalie wouldn't have actually let the other vampire kill me. Well, probably not. Her next thought she truly meant.

I'm taking Bella home.

"No!" I dropped quickly into a crouch, snarling. I couldn't believe after all of this, my sister was going to try and take Bella from me.

Emmett was immediately between us, standing in front of Rosalie defensively, his thoughts confused.

"You aren't doing this to her anymore!" Rosalie screamed at me. "You aren't doing this to our family anymore! We're leaving, and she's coming with us!"

My growling increased. Rose snarled right back at me.

"Edward." Emmett's voice held a warning tone. "Rose is right. You have to stop. You have to let her go."

It was like it had been at the cabin. I was outnumbered by my family, and completely incapable of defending Bella when Rosalie already had her arms wrapped around her. Anything I might try to do could end up with Bella hurt. My mind flashed to an image of Bella disappearing under a frozen lake. *I'm not going to hurt Bella...not again.*

"Bella," I pleaded. "Tell them...please. Tell them you'll stay."

Bella's tear-stained eyes moved frantically between the three of us, then came to rest on mine. As soon as she focused on me, I knew what she was going to do.

Though there was no physical impact, the emotional wave that swept over me was just as debilitating as Samson's powers had been. I

tried to stand, but stumbled backwards, barely keeping my footing. Rosalie's intentions were clear in her mind before she spoke.

"I'm taking her far enough away that you can't influence her decision," Rosalie said definitively. "I'm taking Bella where I can have a real, one-on-one, heart-to-heart talk with her *privately* . Somewhere you can't listen to what I'm telling her or pick it out of someone's head later. Here, you can read my mind and you can threaten and influence her, either before or afterwards. If she decides to come back, that will be her choice, but I'm taking *you* out of the equation."

"You aren't taking her anywhere!" I yelled.

"Edward." Bella's voice startled me, and I looked over to her quickly, beseechingly. "Rosalie is right. I need to talk to her. Without you."

No no no no no no no no no no no no no no no...

Panic overtook me, and I was once again as immobile as I had been under Samson's attack. Was she kidding? No – this isn't funny in any situation. Was she serious? No, no, no...she couldn't be.

My breath came in short, staccato pants.

"Edward," Bella said softly. "I'm going with Rose. I want to hear what she has to say."

"No," I moaned. "No...no...please...don't...don't..."

I couldn't even form the words.

"I need to do this, Edward. I need to hear her out. If I don't...well, I'll always wonder if I should have."

And that's your idea of love?

Emmett's words from the previous day echoed through my head. I love her. I love Bella. If I really, truly love her the way I should...

I dropped to the ground where I was, knees up, and buried my head in my arms. She was going. Bella was leaving. Bella was leaving me. Bella was going to leave me. The words flopped about in my head like the fish of an upturned aquarium.

I looked up and just stared as Rosalie and Emmett took Bella inside the house. I could hear the sounds of dresser drawers opening and closing, as well as the zipper of Bella's carry-on bag. I dropped my face back into my hands. Then, three pairs of feet, one loud, two soft, exited the house and crossed the deck into the sand. The soft ones walked past me, not stopping. The louder, less fluid steps approached and stopped next to me. I felt warm fingertips against the top of my head.

My body trembled under her touch, realizing I might never feel it again.

"Don't go," I heard myself whisper.

"Edward." I felt her hand against my upper arm, but I didn't turn to her. If I looked at her – if I watched her leave me, I wouldn't be able to let her go. I'd either kill my siblings, or be killed by them if I opened my eyes. "I'm just going to listen. I don't know what I'm going to do yet. Do you understand? I haven't made any decisions."

My eyelids squeezed tighter, trying to block all possible sights from me. Of course, I could still see her through Rosalie's eyes, as my sister waited impatiently by the dock. Emmett turned the key and the boat's engine roared triumphantly.

"Goodbye, Edward." Bella sighed, and her fingers traced over my cheekbone before the heat of her hand disappeared from my skin.

I couldn't leave it like this. I had to do something, *something* to make this right. I had to do something to make this better, if only a little.

"Bella," I opened my eyes and looked to her. She turned back to face me. "If you...if you decide not to...come back..."

I took another deep breath, knowing the words were going to burn my throat.

"I'll still keep my promise to you," I whispered. "I won't hurt anyone – I swear I won't."

It wasn't what I wanted to say, not by a long shot. I wanted to scream and threaten. I wanted to tell her all the population of Fiji would be dead before she could get on a plane. I wanted to do or say anything that would keep her from getting on that boat with my siblings.

But I didn't.

I listened to the sounds of her footsteps in the sand, on the dock, stepping over the rail of the boat and on to the floor. I listened to her settle herself in a seat next to Rosalie and put her bag on the floor. I listened to the boat's motor slowly turning them around, and off over the waves.

And then Bella was gone.

With my head still tucked into my hands, I listened to the sound of the boat's motor until I could no longer hear it. The farther away it traveled, the more it felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest and dragged along behind it. I had to do it. I had to let her go with Rosalie. Not just because Rose was going to slaughter me if I didn't, but because it was the right thing to do.

And it was going to killing me.

If she didn't come back...if Rosalie convinced her to stay away from me, I honestly didn't know if I would be able to survive.

I loved her. I loved Bella Swan. And if I was going to love her – really love her – the way someone as precious as Bella deserved to be loved, I had to give her the choice. I had to let her leave me, if that's what she wanted to do. I could hope and pray against all odds that she might decide to give me the chance, irrespective of whether or

not I deserved one, to love her and be with her. Bella was the most wondrous thing in the entire world, and I knew I wasn't worthy of her. But if there was even the slightest possibility that she might give me the opportunity to prove myself to her, I would not squander it. She was everything to me, and if allowed, I would be everything to her. But she wasn't going to come back, and I knew it. *I'm going to die without her.*

So much for selfishness.

Chapter End Notes

So, Edward might have learned a lesson, but will it be the end of him? Stay tuned ! :D

The next chapter is (as some of you might remember) so weird ass shit. For those who have enjoyed a little humor in this dark tale, you're in for a treat.

Chapter 18

Author Note: This is my favorite chapter. :)

Chapter 18 – Desperation and Despair

"Don't go. Don't go. Don't go. Don't go..."

It didn't matter how many times I said it, I knew she was gone. I couldn't even hear the engine of the boat anymore. My mind remained divided – part of it refusing to believe Bella actually left, and the other more rational part, that knew she was gone. I couldn't hear her and I couldn't smell her. I considered opening my eyes, just to see if she might still be there, but I didn't, because I knew she wouldn't be. Proving it to myself visually wasn't going to improve the situation.

Maybe she was still standing on the dock. Maybe she had decided to get out of the boat at the last minute, and she was waiting for me to come and get her. If she was far enough away, not moving, and the wind was blowing her scent away from me...

Hear any heartbeats, genius?

An audible groan escaped my mouth. She said she wouldn't go anywhere. She told me in London she wasn't going to leave me. Bella was a wholly good person, and she wouldn't lie to me. She has to still be here. She wouldn't leave me. She wouldn't *dare* leave me!

Do you think she could be within ten miles of here without you being able to smell her, wind or no wind?

My arms released my knees and I dropped backwards into the sand. I kept one arm thrown over my eyes, at least for now. Eventually, I would get tired of pretending she might still be there if only I didn't peek, but for now I didn't want to see the empty beach or hear the

non-existent sounds of an empty house. Maybe later, if I managed to be in a slightly better mood, I could listen to the food rot.

Every step I had taken with Bella had been the wrong one. I obviously didn't know when I first kidnapped her that I was going to end up in love with her, but even once I had that figured out, I still managed to choose the wrong direction at almost every turn. I couldn't have been more vile if I had checked a book out of the library titled "How To Be the Most Evil Towards Your Captive" and did a thesis on it. I was learned enough now; I could probably give seminars on the subject.

I had always hated what I was, what Carlisle had made me to be. Except for those few years of playing God, I had tried not to be the evil monster inside of me. Most of the time, I had been successful. I hadn't cheated, as Jasper sometimes did. I hadn't had any accidents, as Emmett sometimes did. This one time I gave in, and the result could not have been more horrific. Of course she left me the first chance she got – who wouldn't have? To add to the self torture, our last words to each other replayed over and over again in my head.

" Edward, Rosalie is right. I need to talk to her. Without you."

" Without you."

" Without you."

" Without you."

Her words kept repeating themselves in my head until I was screaming at myself to stop thinking them. A group of birds took flight, squawking at my outburst.

In the distance, I could hear a boat approaching the island. My entire body tensed, listening closely. It was certainly similar in size to the one I had purchased. The engine sounded about the same, but not

exactly the same. After a few minutes, it moved farther away, taking a quantity of tourists back to their hotels, no doubt.

" I'm going with Rose."

She left with Rosalie. *Rosalie* , of all people. She didn't even know her. How could she leave me and go with a vampire she just met?

Because she knows you are a sick fuck.

There was that. I could hardly argue with the statement, since I was the one who said it first. Emmett had wholeheartedly agreed with me as well, so I already had a second opinion. Going with Rose, who was at least acting like a rational being, was almost certainly less dangerous for her than staying with me for more kidnapping and bloodletting. However, I didn't have to like it. Actually, I rather felt like I was the one torn to pieces instead of Samson.

" I need to do this, Edward."

"But I need you," I whimpered to the tropically heated air around me. "You were supposed to stay with me."

I felt like I was choking. I *wished* I was choking; at least I would be doing *something* . Choking, crying – I couldn't do either. My body began to shake with what should have been sobs, but weren't, because I wasn't human. I was a monster.

Should have just drained her.

"No! No! No!"

If tearing my own head off could have removed the monster's voice from my thoughts, I would have done it gladly. As much as I deserved such a fate, Bella's words hurt more than any physical pain.

" Goodbye, Edward."

Those were the words that made my chest feel like it had a gaping hole punched through the middle of it.

" I'll still keep my promise to you"

Each time I heard the words, I considered what I should have said instead. If I had kicked and screamed like a toddler, would she have had pity on me and stayed? If I had threatened all of Fiji and the surrounding islands, would she have been too frightened of what I would do to leave me? If I had just told her I couldn't survive without her, would she have stayed, just to appease me?

Then maybe she would still be here.

At what cost?

"Doesn't matter," I heard myself mutter, but didn't believe it.

I tried to force all the thoughts from my head, because I could feel the slim grasp I had on sanity slipping away from me. If I focused on thirst, at least the feeling would be different, so I put all my mental energy into recognizing the burn in my throat.

The sun's heat slowly lessened as I felt it dip down to the horizon. When the tide reached its nightly maximum, I could feel it sloshing over my bare feet.

If Bella was still here, she would be sitting up in bed by now, reading a new book. I could have been lying down with her, my head on her shoulder, watching her chest rise and fall with her steady breaths. I wouldn't try to touch her. I would even sit on the other side of the room, if she preferred. I could even be in the other room, playing Chopin for her. Anything...but I couldn't, because she left me.

" Goodbye, Edward."

"Why did you leave?"

Well, if that wasn't the most asinine question I had ever asked, I didn't know what was.

The air around me cooled a little more as the sun set. The silence of the night helped clear my mind a little, but thoughts of the many nights I had spent watching her sleep, waiting for her to say something straight from her subconscious, rumbled around in my head, reminding me again of what I had lost.

You didn't lose her; you drove her away.

The most difficult part of all of it was the knowledge that I had no one and nothing to blame but myself. Bella had given me ample opportunity to stop behaving like an ass, but I continued to be the most self-serving idiot that ever lived.

I had to force thoughts from my head again. I pulled myself into the center of my head, all thoughts focused on the burn in my throat. I stopped breathing and tried my best to cut off all other senses.

The sun rose. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

The sun set. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

The sun rose. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

The sun set. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

The sun rose. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

The sun set. Water swept over my feet, and then receded.

I lost count of the repetition.

The sun rose and cast shadows over my still closed eyelids. I rolled over on to my stomach with my head turned sideways, resting on the bend of my arm. It had been so long since I moved, my muscles

seemed surprised to receive commands from my brain. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter for a moment. Then I opened them.

I saw sand.

I sighed, blowing some of the dusty grains closest to my mouth farther away from me. I looked out over the beach and watched the most beautiful woman in the world, clad in the silky green and blue sundress purchased by my sister, as she walked up the beach. The wind blew her hair back and made the skirt of the dress flow around her legs. She was smiling and waving at me, though she did not make any sound – not even her footsteps. As she got closer, she stopped in the sand and brought her hand to her lips. She kissed her hand and blew over her palm towards me, then turned and waved behind her head, walking away.

Even Fantasy Bella was saying goodbye to me.

There wasn't a single piece of my being that didn't recognize her for the hallucination that she was. I knew I had no more than the most tenuous grip on reality. It occurred to me that if I started thinking she was real, I would be truly and possibly irrevocably insane. The thought wasn't completely unwelcome. If I was insane, maybe I would think she was really here with me.

I kept my eyes open, and Fantasy Bella walked back and forth along the beach, picking up shells and getting her feet wet when the waves came a little closer. She never approached me though, because even delusional I knew I wouldn't be able to touch her. At least I could watch her.

Another boat came close to the reef off the shore of our island. Our island. No, it wasn't *ours*, not any longer. Boats came near the island regularly, possibly every day, though I hadn't kept track of days. Three people on the bow looked out over the water, but not actually in my direction.

The burn in my throat increased a thousand-fold. I tightened my limbs and pushed myself into the sand. I would not move. I would not break my promise, regardless of how truly mouthwatering the thick, red life fluid only a few hundred yards away...

Shut up.

After several minutes, they moved on. If they had lingered a few minutes longer, I might have lost my battle. I was extremely thirsty.

Understatement.

The sun set, and the wind picked up. White capped waves crashed against the beach, slapping against my legs. Fantasy Bella went into the house to stay dry while the storm hit. I couldn't really blame her. From the wind and the rumbling of thunder in the distance, it was going to be quite a gale.

Drops hit my face and legs. First, there were only a few sprinkles, but it wasn't long before the rain was coming down in sheets, drenching me and the sand around me. It continued through the night, blowing the tall palms high above my head.

There was no noise from Fantasy Bella inside the house. I wondered if she was curled up on the couch with a book, or if she had decided to watch a movie instead. Remembering Bella and the couch and watching a movie proved to be too much for me, so I tried to focus on something else instead. I began listing all the reasons Bella had to stay away from me.

I tried to kill her a couple hours after we first met.

I kidnapped her.

I tied her to the bed in a hotel room.

I dismembered and killed a man in front of her, then told her it was her fault.

That was the first forty-eight hours. It just kind of went downhill from there.

It's been too long. She's not coming back.

I covered my face up with my arms and pulled my knees up closer to my chest. There was never a reason for her to stay. I took her from her father and wouldn't let her speak with him until she begged me. I constantly told her everything that happened was her doing as much as mine. I practically blamed her when I killed that man. I all but told her it was her fault. I violated her body to get to her blood, and was then surprised when she thought I was going to rape her.

It was the only sin against her I hadn't consummated.

I never gave her any choice in anything we did, and I made her life a living hell. The very thought that she might have chosen to stay with me was ludicrous. I didn't even want to stay with me.

Throughout it all, she was the one who constantly comforted me.

The wind picked up and blew my hair and khaki shorts around, but the rain eased up a bit. I heard a deep, rumbling sound out in the water, and realized it was a whale song. I wondered if Bella had ever seen a whale, and if she might want to see one. Maybe I could point it out to Fantasy Bella, if she ever came back outside again.

I rolled to my side and curled up in a ball. The wind and rain pelted me, but I didn't really notice.

The storm blew itself out just before daybreak. I could feel all the sand, bits of palm and seashells scattered around and on me. I thought I should probably get up and brush myself off, but when I asked myself what the point of such action would be, I received no answer. So I stayed where I was, unmoving.

When the sun was high overhead, I opened my eyes. The debris from the storm lay all around the beach. One of the palms near the house had blown over and lay just a few feet in front of me. Many of the palm fronds were dried and brown, and as they lay haphazardly across the sand, they reminded me of Bella's hair when she first woke up in the morning.

I reached out and pulled one of the fronds closer to me. It felt coarse and dry in my hand, despite the raindrops that fell from it. It felt nothing like the silky smooth strands of Bella's hair, but it was better than nothing.

I released the leaf and ran my hand quickly over the sand, piling it in a roughly oval mound. I pulled the palm frond back into my fingers, then arranged it over the top of the oval shaped sand.

There was a pang of embarrassment when I realized exactly what I was doing, but since there wasn't anyone to point out what an imbecile I was, it didn't matter. I smoothed out the hair around the head shaped pile of sand. The realization hit me – this was the closest I had come to actually brushing Bella's hair. The understanding ripped through my throat and down my torso, causing me to pull my knees up to my chest. I inhaled sharply and squeezed my eyes shut, letting the pain ripple through me.

Eventually, it faded. The pain never disappeared, just like the thirst, but sometimes it ebbed. Even when it hit a low valley of intensity, it overshadowed any thirst I had. I knew my throat burned, because I hadn't fed since I pulled a helpless nurse into an empty hospital room and drained her body of blood, but the other pain blocked the thirst out completely.

I didn't even know what happened to that nurse's body. I never even asked. I didn't know her name or anything – just the images in her head when I killed her.

I took a deep breath, inhaling a few grains of sand, and opened my eyes again.

My fingers reached out and traced lightly over the pile of sand in front of me. First a ridge – a smooth crescent, followed by its twin just about an inch to the side. A little dip under the ridges and I could make out the shape of my love's eyes. I wish I had something close to her color to use as irises, but I was going to have to deal with what was reachable, because I had no intention of getting up. I didn't see any reason to do so. I used two fingers to approximate the shape of her nose, and my thumb completed the curve of her bottom lip. I felt a shudder run through my body.

Two small pieces of broken shells were the only reachable items of the correct size. They were orange-brown in color, with off white edges. Not even close to the deep chocolate of Bella's irises. I chipped off the excess and smoothed out the edges before dropping them onto the depression under the crescents.

When Sand Bella was complete, I pulled my arm back and just gazed at her for a while. Her face was a remarkable likeness, considering the media. I added the shape of her neck and shoulders. I critiqued my work and adjusted a few grains of sand until they seemed closer to actual. When I decided she was as accurate as I could make her, I slowly drew my index finger over the shape of her chin.

"I miss you," I whispered to Sand Bella.

Sand Bella had a lot of advantages over Fantasy Bella, the first and foremost was I could reach her and touch her.

"Are you going to come back?" I asked. Sand Bella didn't answer. She didn't even have the decency to shrug. One point to Fantasy Bella, for she would have given me a noncommittal shrug. At least, I think she would have. Fantasy Bella was down the beach, apparently feeling dejected regarding my attentions to the recently formed Sand Bella. Or maybe she was just walking away for good. I wouldn't have been surprised.

I completed Sand Bella's arm and hand, so I could put my hand in hers. I leaned forward and tucked my forehead into the space between her sand neck and sand shoulder. I wondered if there was a Guinness Book of World Records entry for the most pathetic creature in existence. I think I had a pretty good chance. Maybe I would get a lot of publicity and the Volturi would have to destroy me.

Now there was an idea.

One of Sand Bella's fingers disintegrated when I flexed my hand, and I had to fix it. Symbolic, to say the least. When wasn't I causing her harm?

Right at the moment, because she isn't here for you to hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, smoothing out Sand Bella's new fingers. I rubbed my nose against her sand shoulder carefully, so I wouldn't have to fix it later. I inhaled, but it was all wrong. "You may look right, but you don't smell right."

Sand Bella didn't seem to mind my criticism. One point to Sand Bella.

To recap – the current score was tied, three-all.

Fantasy Bella received a point each for looks, being mobile, and walking into the wind, which made her skirt blow up high on her thighs.

Sand Bella received one point for staying close to me, and two points for being touchable.

Fantasy Bella had her hands on her hips and was shaking a finger at me. I thought about taking a point away, just for being belligerent. I shook my head, feeling bits of sand fly around my face and hair. No, she was entitled to her opinion. It was, most likely, similar to the real Bella's opinion of me.

Sand Bella continued to smile and let me stroke up and down her arm with my fingers. I wouldn't take a point away from shaking a finger at me, but I could give a point for being complacent.

With the final score of the day at four-three, Fantasy Bella stomped off down the beach and out of sight. Ever since Sand Bella arrived, Fantasy Bella had been irritable. After walking around the island, she stomped off into the house. I knew she would eventually end up leaving me, too.

Sand Bella was a much better sport than Fantasy Bella, so I gave her a bonus point.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and a sliver of rational thought slipped through. This wasn't going to help. This wasn't bringing her back, it was just allowing me to continue to lie here on the beach pretending it wasn't the place where she left me. It was nothing more than an inadequate distraction.

I was really, really thirsty.

It was about this time that I started hearing Carlisle's voice again.

How long do you think you can exist like this?

"What difference does it make?"

You are stronger than this, Edward.

"No, I don't think so," I said, sighing. "Maybe I was. Maybe I could have been. It doesn't matter anymore."

Maybe you still could be?

"I want to come home."

Do you think you are really ready to do that? What have you done that would show me you could be a productive member of the family again?

"I haven't. I wouldn't be."

You've answered your own question, Edward.

Edward. Not "son" anymore.

Don't you think it's about time you hunted?

"I don't care. I don't want it."

You are getting weak.

"Good," I snarled. "Maybe my suicide attempt will succeed where yours failed."

Suicide?

I shook my head, effectively burrowing my face in Sand Bella's neck.

You don't mean that.

"Don't I?"

Edward, there are many things in your life worth living for...

"Not without her."

I was shaking all over with thirst. I had kept it down, wallowing in the emotional pain for so long, but now it was back with a vengeance. Everything Emmett said about the effects of human blood were starting to make sense. Well, as much sense as anything made to me in my current state. It occurred to me that I was probably mad with thirst by now, even without everything else. How long had it been? I'd lost track of the days, but I was pretty sure I had never gone this long without hunting. What did it matter? Maybe I could die of thirst, even if Carlisle hadn't managed to do so.

I pressed myself up against the completed Sand Bella, one arm tossed over her midsection and one leg wrapped around hers. I rested my head against her shoulder and tried to apologize to her again.

"Four hundred and seventy-six times," I said. "That's how many times I told you I was sorry. I don't think I ever meant it, not at the time. I was sorry that you were sad, or upset, and I was sorry you might hate me for it, but I wasn't sorry for what I had done. I lied to you."

I looked up into her wrong-color shell eyes.

"I mean it now," I told her. "I'm sorry for all of it. Everything I did to you. If I could take it all back, I would, even if it meant never being close to you."

I reached up and stroked Sand Bella's cheek and down over her jaw. I had to be even more careful with Sand Bella than I had with the real Bella, because she was even more fragile. I couldn't touch her without some of the grains of sand coming off on the pads of my fingers. I had to fix her all the time, and it was the only thing I looked forward to doing.

"If it were just for me, I'd still want all of it," I admitted. "For me, it was all worth it, because I touched you and you held me and you made me feel human. If I could, I would still take it all back for you, though, even if it meant I never touched you. Even if I never knew what it felt like to be with you."

I heard thunder in the distance. I wasn't sure when the rainy season ended around here, but it obviously hadn't yet. It wasn't long before I could hear rain drops out on the water, making their way to the island.

This storm came in quick, and was far more violent than the last, blowing rain and sand all over the beach. Though I tried to hang on to Sand Bella, the rain pummeled her back into the beach, leaving

nothing but a sodden mess of sand and palm fronds in my arms. I pulled what was left to my chest and held on as tight as I could, but the wet grains slipped through my arms and ran down the beach and into the water in a stream.

It wasn't right. Sand Bella had the most points. She was supposed to stay with me.

Whatever grip I still had on sanity slowly eased itself into the torrent of water and flowed away into the ocean.

When the storm let up, Fantasy Bella walked out of the house and shook her head at me. She obviously had no sympathy for my most recent loss, but I could hardly blame her for that. She strolled down to the beach, hopped onto a fantasy windsurfer and sailed away. She didn't even wave this time. I was relatively certain she wasn't going to return.

I decided the only thing left to do was sleep. I used to know how to sleep. I could even remember, if only very vaguely, trying to go to sleep on Christmas Eve, and how hard it was to calm my mind. But it was possible, if one were to try hard enough. When Bella held me, sometimes it felt like sleep.

The tearing, burning sensation racked my body again. I couldn't think about that, it just hurt too much.

Sleep would bring darkness, nothingness, oblivion. That's what I wanted. That's what I needed. Calm, peaceful, soothing nirvana. That would be most welcomed.

I took a deep breath, settled myself against the slight mound of sand that used to be Sand Bella, and closed my eyes.

I hadn't moved. I kept my eyes closed, telling myself that I was sleeping, and that I would continue to sleep for the rest of eternity. I stopped breathing, because even the slightest smell of blood from

passing fish in the water was starting to eat away at my insides. The monster sat emaciated in one corner of my brain, banished to his cage. I didn't even acknowledge his existence.

Another boat was approaching. Apparently, I hadn't paid much attention to the marina traffic around here before my mental vacation on the beach. This one was coming close, but I told myself I was still sleeping, so I didn't hear it.

"Oh no...is he...?"

Hmm. Fantasy Bella had apparently returned, and found her voice.

"No worries, he's fine. Moody as ever."

Apparently Fantasy Emmett had joined Fantasy Bella. I definitely wasn't going to wake up for any of this nonsense. Maybe I should resurrect Sand Bella. She was quiet, but I could touch her. Of course, as soon as another storm came, she would be gone. I didn't think I would survive it if she left again, and that was good.

Footsteps sounded across the sand, getting louder. A slow, steady rhythm accompanied the melody of the steps. Though the thirst had become so deep I didn't even recognize it any longer, my throat began to burn again with the unique pain belonging to a singular, glorious source.

"Oh, Edward," a soft, beautifully unforgettable voice sighed.

Apparently, it was not Fantasy Bella, but insanity induced Torture Bella. This one I could hear and, for the love of all that is holy, *smell*.

I felt warm fingers against my forehead, brushing sand away from my stony skin. The fingers traveled into my hair, pulling slightly to remove the tangles and debris that had lodged in there from the storms. I choked back something that resembled a sob. This was too much. This was supposed to be sleep, darkness, nothingness, oblivion. This wasn't right. This dream *hurt* .

"You're a mess," Torture Bella said emphatically.

It felt so good. The warmth, the soothing soft touch that felt every bit like her fingers had all those times. In the cabin, in the Subaru, in the apartment stairwell in London, in the hospital, on the couch, in bed. It felt like her. It felt so good it burned, because it still wasn't real. I was sure it still wasn't real.

"Edward, look at me."

"No," I whispered.

"Why not?" Torture Bella wanted to know.

"Because you aren't here," I answered. "If I open my eyes, you won't be there. If I open my eyes and you are there, then it's just because I'm a lunatic."

A light, tinkling laugh escaped before Torture Bella shushed herself. I felt hands on my face, stroking away more grains of sand. Her warm fingers ran over my shoulder and back, brushing sand and God knows what else from my skin.

"Please, don't," I moaned. "I can't stand it, please."

"Oh, Edward," she said. "What am I going to do with you?"

A few ideas came to mind, but even tempting my conscious thoughts with such delusions tore a gash from my throat to my abdomen, leaving whatever remained of my soul disemboweled on the sand. I felt my stomach muscles clench, and I pulled into a tighter ball.

"I don't know if this is a great idea or not," I heard Torture Bella's mumbled voice say. I felt her fingers brushing over my mouth, dusting away the sand from my lips. Shuffling in the sand followed, then warmth all along my torso.

My eyes tightened again. If I looked and she wasn't there, I would tear myself apart. I wasn't sure if that was possible or not, but I

would find a way. I wouldn't be able to stand this anymore.

What if she is there?

I tilted my head slightly and slowly opened my eyes. I blinked twice. She was there, lying beside me and brushing sand from my arm with her warm fingertips. She wasn't wearing the same blue green dress, but a bright red shirt and a pair of shorts I had never seen before.

You can hear her, you can see her, you can smell her, she touched you...maybe, just maybe...

"Please be real...please be real...please, please..."

"I'm real, Edward." Bella laughed her beautiful, melodic laugh again.

I reached out with my arms and touched the sides of her face, flinching slightly when we made contact. I could touch her. I could touch her and she was warm and soft and all the things Bella was supposed to be. I moved my hands across her cheeks and into her hair. It was smooth and soft and smelled incredible. Slowly, I pulled her close, touched my forehead to her shoulder, and held her as tightly as I dared. Bella wrapped both her arms around my head and I snaked mine lower, under her arms and around her back.

She's here. Bella is here.

I nuzzled up against the skin on her neck, inhaling deeply. My throat burned with an intensity that might have knocked me to the ground if I hadn't already been there. I felt the steady rhythm of her heart against my cheek. I loved it. I loved her. She was here. Bella came back to me.

"You're here. You're here. You're here. You're here..."

I chanted against her skin, holding myself close, my arms wrapped tightly around her, terrified to let go and find out she was nothing more than my own imagination. Is it possible? Did I finally go

completely mad, and now I believe it's real, when it isn't? Do I care? I wrapped my arms tighter around her back and held myself against her body. Her hands smoothed through my hair as we lay in the sand on the beach. I decided I didn't care if this was actually happening or only in my mind. I would figure it all out later. For now, I was home. Really, truly home, right here. This was where I needed to be – wrapped up in my Bella. Holding her, loving her. I might have been laughing. I might have been crying. I could feel my body shaking all over. None of it mattered. *Bella came back...*

So much for agony.

Chapter End Notes

Who gets your vote – Sand Bella or Fantasy Bella?

I wrote this so long ago, but I still remember cackling to myself over Sand Bella.

So where do they go from here? Do they have a chance?

More soon!

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 – Allay and Alarm

My body shook, though whether with sobs or joy I wasn't completely sure. All I could focus on was the soft crooning against my ear, the fingers against my scalp, and the burn in my throat, which was intensifying with each passing second.

"Shh, Edward," the most beautiful voice in the world said. "Shh, I'm here."

I wasn't aware I was making any kind of noise, but apparently I was. I tried to stop.

Her fingers tugged through my hair. Little flakes of dried palm fronds and sand cascaded down my back and shoulder as she freed debris from the strands. I could hear the arteries running down her arms pumping blood to her hands.

And it didn't matter.

I could hear her heart beat. My throat burned with instinctive desire for blood. I could smell the sweetest, most luscious ambrosia just a few inches from my teeth, and it didn't matter. I didn't want her blood at all, because wanting it would hurt Bella. I just needed her hands on me – nothing else mattered in the least.

I pulled back only as far as I absolutely had to in order to tilt my head up and look at her face. My fingers reached up to touch the edge of her jaw.

"You're here?"

"Yes, Edward, I'm here."

"Are you sure?"

She laughed. I loved that sound more than almost anything else in the world.

"I'm sure Edward," Bella lightly traced my cheekbone, and then ran her thumbs under my eyes. "You haven't hunted in a long time."

"I'm not sure how long," I answered truthfully. I really had no idea. "It's okay, though."

"It's okay?" Bella narrowed her eyes at me. "What do you mean, it's okay? When did you hunt last?" Bella pressed.

I dropped my eyes. I didn't want to talk about that. I didn't want to remind her of the things I had done.

"Edward?"

"What day is it?" I asked, though I didn't care. It was only to throw her off the topic. I immediately felt guilty for doing so.

"It's June 9th," Bella said.

That long?

It was March when she left. I hadn't fed in over three months.

"You haven't hunted all this time, have you?"

"I'm not really sure," I said, which was true. I couldn't remember all that time going by. At the same time, it seemed like years, or decades even. I didn't think I had actually moved from my current spot, so I probably hadn't hunted. Most animals, even really stupid ones, weren't stupid enough to walk up to a vampire. The tip of my nose touched her throat and I inhaled deeply. "You smell so good... don't need anything else..."

I felt Bella tense.

"I won't hurt you," I whispered against her skin. "I'll never hurt you. I swear I'll never hurt you."

I opened my eyes and looked into the warm brown of hers.

"I know I'm...not right," I told her. "I'm probably insane. I only want to love you, Bella. I know you don't love me back, and that's all right, just let me love you and be close to you. You don't have to pretend anymore, if you don't want me to...if you don't want...anything else. That's all right. It doesn't matter. Just let me be near..."

"Edward," Bella ran her fingers over my forehead. Sand fell across my cheeks.

"I won't hurt you," I swore again. "And I won't hurt anyone else. I won't do anything you don't want me to do. I'll promise anything you want if you'll just stay with me, because if you leave again..."

"Edward, stop, please."

I did, since doing anything contrary would pretty much nullify everything else I had just stated.

"I'm tired," Bella started, "and it may not be that late here yet, but I've just spent two days on planes without a whole lot of sleep, and I am not ready to go into all of this just yet. I am here, and I don't intend to go anywhere just yet. I would have been here sooner if...ugh. That's going to have to wait, too. I need to eat something, and I need to go to bed."

"The food rotted," I said absently. "I heard it."

Bella laughed again. I hadn't intended the statement to be humorous; I just wasn't sure what there was for her dinner. Now that I heard her, I wanted to make her laugh some more.

"I'll learn to tell a joke," I offered.

"Edward, what are you talking about?"

"If you stay," I said, "I'll try to learn how to tell a joke. I haven't acquired any more colorful pajamas yet, but I will as soon as I can. I want to hear you laugh. I want you to be happy."

Bella sat up, and in doing so, shifted away from me. I must have said something wrong.

She's leaving. She's leaving. She's leaving...

"No! Please!" I wrapped my arms around her waist. "I'm sorry!"

"Edward!" Bella's wrapped her hands around my forearms. "What are you apologizing for? I'm going inside now, and you need to hunt. Emmett brought..."

She's leaving. She's leaving. She's leaving...

"No," I groaned. "I don't want it. I don't need it. Just you..."

"Edward, look at me." I felt Bella's fingers under my chin, pushing up. I didn't want to look. If she told me she was leaving, or told me to go...I couldn't watch that, so I refused to move.

"Please don't make me go," I whispered. "I don't need to hunt. I don't want to hunt. *Please...*"

Her hand relaxed and ran lightly across my chin and over my jaw.

"All right," Bella said, "but I am exhausted, and I'm going inside. You come with me."

I slid my hand around to the front of her torso and then down her arm. I locked my fingers around her hand and looked up at her again.

"Please...don't let go," I begged. I sounded pathetic, and I didn't care.

"All right," Bella agreed.

I nodded and gave her hand a little squeeze, just checking to see if it was really there and I really had a hold of it. It seemed tangible enough. I pulled my legs up under me to get the leverage to stand up, and it seemed my muscles had forgotten how to make such movements. One leg buckled under me and I dropped back down.

"Are you okay?" Bella's free hand gripped my arm. It did nothing to actually assist me physically, but it was welcomed all the same.

"I am now," I said, pushing myself up the rest of the way and forcing my body to balance on two feet. My physical state didn't cause me too much concern. As long as I could keep in contact with her skin, nothing else mattered to me.

"Should we go slowly?" Bella asked.

"You always go slowly," I interjected.

Bella twined her fingers with mine, led me across the sand, across the deck and to the door of the house. It was still open, and apparently had been the entire time. There was water and sand on the floor of the entryway and at least one pair of lizards setting up shop in the living room.

"Come with me," Bella said, as if I was going to let her out of my sight. Never again, not if it could be avoided. She motioned to the mess on the floor. "We'll deal with that later."

Bella walked straight back to her bedroom, opened up one of the drawers and pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Then she led me into the bathroom and let go of my hand to start running the bath. I tried to keep the strangled cry in my throat, but it got out any way. I reached forward and lay my fingertips against her back, slipping them in just under the hem of her shirt, so I could still touch her skin. Bella adjusted the nozzle and turned back to me, taking my face between her palms.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You said that in London," I heard myself whisper in return. Bella's fingers traced up over my temples and into my hair.

"That's true," Bella admitted, but didn't choose to elaborate. She turned back to the tub and poured a quantity of bubble solution under the stream of water. The scent of vanilla filled the room.

I watched her gather up shampoo, body wash and a plastic cup while my brain tried to register what she was doing. I had been concentrating on making sure I moved with her, so my fingers were still touching her back the whole time, and not paying attention to what Bella was actually *doing*. Was Bella going to take a bath? Two possible scenarios danced around in my head. Either she let me stay and watch her, or she was going to make me leave the room. My breathing increased, sudden panic overcoming me. There was no way she was going to let me stay in here while she bathed.

Bella shut off the tap.

"Come on," Bella said. She slid one finger through the belt loop of my shorts. "Get these off."

I blinked rapidly.

"What? Why?"

"Because you are a mess, Edward." Bella sighed and gestured up and down my sand-covered body. "I'm going to give you a bath."

"You're going to..." I trailed off, trying to wrap my head around what she was saying.

"Edward, just take the shorts off and get in."

I couldn't fathom why she would be doing such a thing, but I wasn't going to question her. She wasn't kicking me out of the room, which was the important piece of information. Bella ran her fingers over my forearm, and the near panic attack disappeared, leaving me feeling

drained. I couldn't have argued if I wanted to, and I really didn't see any reason to argue about this.

I popped open the buttons of the fly and let the khakis drop down to the floor, along with a shower of sand. Then I just stood there in my boxer shorts, not really sure what I should do next. Did she want me to take them off, too?

Bella sighed.

"Just do it, Edward," she said, facing away from me slightly and focusing on the bottle of shampoo in her hands.

"Okay," I answered, and dropped my sole remaining article of clothing.

I stepped in and lowered myself into the bubble-topped water, which was quite a balancing act for an underfed vampire who wouldn't let his fingers move from where they were. The water was warm – warmer than Bella's skin. The scent of vanilla was overwhelming.

Bella sat on the edge of the tub, and I slid my hand from around her back and rested my arm over the same edge where she sat. I made sure my fingers just slightly grazed her thigh. I relaxed more from the continued contact with her skin than from the water.

The internal war was subsiding, but I knew my brain still wasn't working quite right. Part of me kept insisting she wasn't really here – either I had managed to fall asleep or I was completely off my rocker. Another part of me said it really didn't matter if she was real or not; as long as she seemed real, everything was all right again.

But I didn't want to be a lunatic. I wanted her to be real. I wanted her to be here with me.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you aren't sure if I'm real or not."

"Because I'm not sure if you are real or not?" My words came out sounding like a question. "I'm trying to decide if I...if I'm completely insane."

"You are," Bella said succinctly. Then she smiled. "But that doesn't mean I'm not real."

Bella reached up and brushed my sand from my face. The tiny grains dropped down into the water and collected on the bottom of the tub.

"I'm here, Edward," she said simply.

And I was pretty sure it was true. Of course, if I was imagining her, that's exactly what I would have had her say.

Bella picked up the plastic cup and told me to lean my head back. I complied, and she doused my hair and face with cups full of water. I watched her face as she filled her palms with shampoo and started washing my hair.

"That's really unnerving, you know." Bella's stare met mine.

"What is?" I asked.

"Your eyes...they're so dark."

"I'm sorry," I said, not really knowing what else to say. I looked away from her, not wanting her to be uncomfortable.

"You need to eat," Bella said. "Er...drink. Hunt. Whatever."

Her voice lowered to barely a whisper.

"Alice said you were starving."

"You talked to Alice?"

"Since I've been gone?" Bella clarified. I nodded. "Several times. I've seen the rest of your family, too."

"I don't have a family," I corrected, but my mind was reeling. She had obviously been to Forks. She had been home. She went half way around the world to get away from me.

"Yes, you do, but that conversation is also going to have to wait until I'm up for it," Bella said. Her tone of voice left no room for interpretation. "Tilt your head back again."

She rinsed the suds from my hair, re-washed it, and then added something else in it – conditioner, I assumed. I considered telling her how unnecessary it was, but frankly, it felt so wonderful I didn't want to say or do anything to cause her to stop.

Bella rinsed the conditioner from my hair, and then filled her hands with body wash, also vanilla scented. She rubbed them together to create lather and started washing my face and neck.

I considered telling her I could do all of this myself; she didn't have to do it for me. Two things occurred to me after that consideration. One, I could barely walk in here under my own power, and I really wasn't sure how great a job I would have done cleaning myself up. Two, there was no way on earth I was going to tell her to stop running her hands over my skin.

I closed my eyes and felt her hands on my shoulders, and then my chest. She reached under the water and washed my stomach.

"Edward?" Bella said. I opened my eyes and looked at her. "You have to let go of my leg long enough to turn around so I can wash your back."

I didn't realize my hand had actually gone from just grazing her leg with my finger to actually gripping it with my entire hand. I told the fingers to let go, but they didn't seem interested in obliging.

"I'll keep my hand on you the whole time, okay?"

"Okay," I said and felt my fingers release. I turned and faced the back wall of the bath. Bella was true to her word, and kept one hand on my shoulder, rubbing up against my neck the whole time. Her other hand ran over my shoulder blades and down my spine.

"The water made your skin feel warmer," Bella remarked.

"Yes," I said. "It will even stay that way, for a little while."

"Hmm."

When she was done with my back, she kept her hand on my shoulder until I turned around and lay my hand back on her leg. I looked up and she gave me a half smile. She traced her finger over my cheekbone and smiled back at me before washing the arm and hand that held her thigh. She ended up wet, but didn't make me let go. She pulled my other arm closer to her and did the same.

"Bend your knees," Bella said. I complied, and she started washing my legs. I leaned back against the tub, resting the back of my head against the tiled wall. My eyes found hers and I wanted to just look at them forever. I had missed her eyes. Sand and Bella's weren't right and Fantasy Bella never came close enough for me to see her eyes that well. I tried to push the thoughts of both of my substitute Bellas away, recognizing them and what they represented with more than a tinge of embarrassment. I had the real thing with me now, and I needed to get myself back together for her.

I watched her eyes move back and forth as she cleaned away the sand and everything else that had adhered to me over the months. *Months*. It hardly seemed possible. What had Bella been doing all that time?

Bella's hand ran up and around my hip, back across my stomach and down my thigh. Her hands flew quickly over my legs, down to

my feet and toes, then back up the other side. I closed my eyes to the sensation.

Before I even realized it, Bella has washed every inch of me. It probably should have had a more physical effect on certain parts of my body. Maybe it was the lack of hunting, but I didn't think so. I was honestly so glad she was here with me nothing else mattered. She held my hand and averted her eyes when I stepped out of the bath and wrapped a towel around my waist. She dried my hair with another towel, and I remembered our swim and subsequent toweling off from what was – apparently – so long ago.

Bella finished with my hair and stroked the towel over my chest.

"Thank you," I said when she was done. "You didn't have to do any of that."

"You're welcome," Bella replied.

"I don't think the others would have done that," I said before I realized what was coming out of my mouth.

"Others?"

"Never mind," I said quickly, looking at the floor. I wasn't about to reveal the false Bella personas I had been entertaining while she was gone.

"Edward," Bella dropped the towel she was using on the vanity and took my face in her hands. "I'm going to ask you to do something, but you have to relax and stay calm about it, okay?"

There was no way on earth I was going to be able to agree to that. I was already panicking because she asked me to relax. I looked at her with wide eyes.

"What...?" I barely got the one word out.

"I'm going to take a shower, and I want you to wait outside."

Yep. Definitely panic time.

"No, please...I won't watch you...just let me..."

"Edward," Bella said, cutting off my rant and shaking her head. "I'll only be a few minutes, and I need those few minutes to myself."

"I want to stay," I begged.

"Edward – five minutes, I promise you, but I do want my privacy."

"I don't want to be away from you."

"I know you don't, and you won't be. You won't even be ten feet from me. Go on!"

I wanted to refuse to leave. I wanted to tell her I wasn't going anywhere, but when I thought about what she would think of my reaction, I stopped. I didn't want to let her, but I allowed her to push me backwards and out of the bathroom. I sat with my back against the door intently listening to the sounds of her clothing hitting the floor, water tumbling over her body, and then the sound of the soft cloth of the towels rubbing over her skin.

I wish I was a towel.

Then I remembered that a towel was all I was wearing, and raced to the bedroom to yank on a pair of lounge pants. They were green and not at all humorous. At least, I didn't think so. I raced back to the bathroom door, but she was still in there.

It took seven and a half minutes, but I didn't say anything about the discrepancy.

Bella walked out wearing the clothes she had gathered before bathing me. She reached down to take my hand, and I sighed in relief, realizing part of me was expecting her to turn back into a fantasy. I stayed next to her with my hand against the back of her shirt or on her shoulder while she pulled something out of the

freezer, shoved it into the microwave and made quick work of it. When she was done, she asked if I was ready for bed.

"Yes," I replied softly, unable to keep myself from grinning ear to ear. I didn't think I had ever heard sweeter words.

Bella crawled in first and opened her arms to me. I slid in beside her, tucked my head in between her neck and shoulder, and coiled my arm around her waist. I closed my eyes and basked in her scent and her soft skin. I pulled my arms in a little, giving her a gentle hug.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome, Edward," Bella responded, her fingers stroking through my hair. "Goodnight."

She must have truly been exhausted, because her fingers stilled and she was asleep almost immediately.

"I love you, Bella Swan," I whispered against her skin. "Always."

Come on outside, little brother. I got something out here for you!

I heard a growl coming from my chest. I knew he was out there, but I really didn't want to acknowledge him. I was curled up in Bella's sleeping arms, and I had no intention of leaving.

You know you want to!

No, I most certainly did not know that.

You know I'm going to continue to bug you if you don't!

Okay, that I did know.

He went on and on for a half hour. I tried to ignore him, but it was becoming more difficult. Eventually, I couldn't stand anymore, which is exactly what he counted on happening.

I'm going to march in there and drag you out kicking and screaming in about ten seconds!

For the love of all that is holy...

I didn't want him waking up Bella when she was so tired, so I slid out from under her and lay her gently against the pillow. Physically taking my hand from her was about as difficult as any act of willpower ever had been. Standing up was still a little difficult. I felt... awkward...uneasy. I may have even been a little dizzy.

Three months, no blood. And the sweetest blood in the world is within reach.

I just shook my head. It wasn't even hard to ignore the voice. Walking away from her – now *that* was hard. I moved out of the house and on to the beach quickly, intending to seek out my brother and get whatever it was he wanted out of the way so I could return to holding Bella.

Over this way...

I'm going to kill him when I catch up with him, I thought, but I didn't really have a lot of energy. I wouldn't have admitted it to Emmett, but I didn't think I would have had much of a chance against him in my current state.

An unfamiliar scent hit me. I stopped, stood up straight and opened my mouth, letting the scent coat my tongue. I crouched low, turning abruptly and stalking up into the stand of palms. The smell led me to the clearing where the creature paced. He was huge and orange and black and growled deep in his throat, showing me long, curved teeth.

I returned the growl, and he leapt at me. I was vaguely aware of Emmett off to the side of the clearing, leaning against the trunk of a palm and smiling with a near identical tiger held immobile under his foot.

It was probably a very good thing the tiger's teeth were useless against my skin, because I was not in the very best condition for hunting. If he could have actually damaged me, I might have been in trouble. As it was, once he got a grip on me, I could get a grip on him. I pulled his neck to my lips and tore through fur and flesh to get at the carotid I felt pulsing underneath his hide.

The thick, warm fluid coated my throat. Once it hit my tongue, I lost myself in it, no longer aware of my actions, just feeding, sucking, and gulping the creature down. I heard the other one growl as I took the last mouthful from the first tiger. I sprinted to his mate and drained her too, just moments after Emmett had released her.

When the frenzy ceased, I sat back for a moment against a palm tree. Emmett stepped away from his spot on the other side of the clearing, near the carcass of the female.

Feel better?

"They're endangered."

Emmett shrugged.

I know. They weren't too far away though, and pretty close to what you like. I'm just glad Alice was right and you didn't drain Bella on sight.

"I won't hurt her," I said definitively. "Never again. I don't care if I starve."

I took a deep breath and looked up at my brother.

"I do feel a little better, thank you."

"Anytime you need a Bengal Tiger or two dropped at your feet because you've had a three-month self-pity party, you just let me know."

I glared at him.

"I'm just sayin' I'm here for ya, bro."

"Three months."

You wouldn't leave. Carlisle tried to get you to leave.

"He was here?"

"Yeah," Emmett looked at me, confused. "He said he talked to you."

"I didn't know he was...real," I said.

You are one fucked up vampire.

"You still have a way with adjectives."

"What do you expect me to think?"

I decided to ignore his comment.

"What happened after you left?"

Emmett looked at me sideways, and then dropped his eyes to the ground. Images paraded through his head.

First, there was a vision of Bella in the boat, sobbing while Rosalie held her shoulders. The next was from a hotel room, and memories of Bella crying out in her sleep, asking for me. I saw Bella's father as Carlisle brought her home, standing in their driveway next to Bella's battered truck, holding Bella tightly while Emmett watched on from the passenger's seat of the Mercedes. There was more – flashes of Alice, yelling at Carlisle to do something before it was too late. Bella stood in the background, more tears in her eyes. The final one was of a family meeting, everyone sitting at the dining room table, Bella occupying my usual seat.

"I don't know if we did the right thing or not," Emmett admitted, thinking of taking Bella from me. "At first, it seemed like it, but then she just fell apart. Alice kept seeing you, and I think she told Bella

what she saw. She wasn't sleeping or eating. She wanted to come back earlier, but Charlie..."

"He wouldn't let her out of his sight, I'm sure."

Pretty much, yeah. Carlisle wouldn't allow it, either.

"What do I do now?"

That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

"She wanted to come back?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

You would have to ask her.

"Is there any way for me to fix this?"

Alice thinks so.

I wished my sister was here. I needed to see her visions for myself. I didn't know what to do. How could I make this right? How could I make it all up to her? I was willing to do anything to keep from losing her again, but I didn't have the slightest idea where to begin.

Emmett was eying me, wondering if I was completely insane or not.

"I'm better," I said softly.

You are back to being moody and boring, at least.

"Thanks a lot," I mumbled.

"I still think she'd like you that way."

"That's ridiculous."

"Edward," Emmett sighed and looked back to me. "I can't tell you why, unless she's just as nutty as you are, but she likes you. Even when we were first leaving, I don't think she really wanted to go."

Images of Bella and Rosalie, arguing about me and my behavior. Bella looking up at Rose and saying "he needs me."

"She would have been back sooner. I would have even brought her here myself, but Rose...well, she wasn't in favor of it. Between her and Carlisle..."

"It's okay," I said, not meaning it. "She's here now."

Emmett shuffled his feet in the palm fronds and sand for a minute, drawing spirals with the toe of his shoe. Additional images of Bella over the past months echoed around in his mind. As the images and time went by, she seemed increasingly upset.

"So where are you going to go?" Emmett finally asked. "You can't really stay here."

"Are you sure you want me to tell you? When you returned with Bella, how did the rest of the family react? What did Carlisle do when he found out where you had been?"

Thoughts of an exasperated Carlisle threatening to ground Emmett and Rosalie filled Emmett's head.

Emmett just shrugged.

He ended up coming here himself. He can't go too hard on me.

I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly.

"I was going to ask Bella where she wanted to go," I told him. "I was considering taking her to an island off the coast of Mozambique, near Mucojo. The hunting there should be excellent, though I'll have to be careful about populations. Stick with the more abundant

predators and away from White Rhinos and such. I think I've effected the populations of endangered animals enough this week."

Not sure there's time...ah shit...elephants!

"Wow, that would be a big meal, huh? Ever drain an elephant?"

"No, and I doubt I'll try."

It's getting late.

He was dodging me and trying to block me from his thoughts. There was something he didn't want me to know. I might have pressed him for the information, but now that I had fed, I really just wanted to get back to Bella.

"I have to go back," Emmett said. "I only have about two hours to get back to the hotel before Rose said she would come here and kill you. I'm not completely sure she was joking."

Emmett held out his hand and I gripped his forearm up near his elbow. He pulled me to my feet. I was definitely steadier now. I felt strong.

"Emmett?" I said as he turned to walk back to the boat. He turned back, meeting my stare.

"Thank you," I said. "You brought her back to me."

It wasn't my idea.

"Whose then?"

Bella's, obviously.

"She is one stubborn girl, Edward. I think you've met your match."

He walked off through the trees and down to the beach where Samson's boat was docked. I hadn't noticed before, but the boat was

towing a small barge with a crate on the back of it. It was just the right size to nicely fit a pair of Bengal Tigers.

"I know I have," I said softly after he was gone. I left the animals where they were for now – I would clean up after myself later. Right now, Bella was in the house, and I wasn't going to waste another minute without being by her side.

I sprinted back, only slowing down when I got to the door of the bedroom, and then only so I could watch her for a moment. Her hair was all over the place, the way it always was when she slept. Seeing her lying there was incredibly beautiful, peaceful and calming.

I lowered myself slowly onto the bed next to Bella, making sure I didn't wake her. She had rolled over on to her side, so I couldn't get myself back into the position I was in before, with my head on her shoulder. I stretched out next to her, placed my hand on her lower back, and lay my head on the pillow right next to her splayed-out fingers.

I felt whole again.

How my brother knew exactly what I needed, when throughout most of my time with him he'd never done anything right, was beyond my comprehension. I undoubtedly felt like a new...well...whatever I was. I felt strong again, and I had Bella wrapped up in my arm, so I was a little more right both in mind and body for the first time in a long time. Maybe in forever.

I wanted to know why she was here. Emmett said it was her idea, but neither he nor Bella had told me much of anything regarding the last three months. Emmett said Carlisle was here – on the island, with me. I hadn't even realized he was real. I remembered talking to him, somewhat. Now that I thought about it, I was afraid I might very well have fought him as he tried to extract me from – I shuddered – Sand Bella.

You really, really need to get yourself together.

I reached up with one hand and rubbed deep into my eyes, finding and extracting a few missed grains of sand. I knew I was a far cry from being a saint, but I was going to do anything and everything to make amends for what I had done to Bella.

"Edward, you are making this extraordinarily difficult."

"I'm sorry," I said again, and dropped my hand from the arm that held a spatula. I reached out with my other hand and ran it down her back. She squirmed under my light touch.

"That tickles!"

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Sit down!" Bella commanded, and pointed at the kitchen table and chairs. I complied without verbal protest, even though my hands were twitching a little. I only wanted to touch her, though I'm sure I was probably in the way and possibly driving her up the wall. I watched her intently as she continued to cook herself breakfast.

I was finally convinced she was the real thing. Somewhere between the fulfilling hunt and holding her all night it had hit me that I was no longer hallucinating. I was relieved, without a doubt, though the relief did not completely remove all of my anxiety. She had still been gone a very long time, and still hadn't told me why she came back.

She hadn't actually told me why she left either, though I could think of one or two reasons. One or two hundred reasons, really. I wasn't sure if the tension I had remaining in my shoulders had more to do with not knowing the whys or more to do with knowing at some point she was going to tell me.

No time like the present.

"Bella?"

"Mmhm?" She flipped a pile of previously frozen hash browns over in the pan.

"What happened?" I asked softly, still not sure if I really wanted to know. "I mean, what happened after you...left?"

Getting the word out was just as painful as I expected it to be.

"That's a long conversation," Bella remarked.

"I hope we have time for it," I responded. "I know I do."

"Let me eat breakfast first, okay?" Bella stopped cooking for a moment and looked over at me. "How about taking a walk on the beach when I'm done?"

"I think that would be nice," I said.

Bella finished up her hash browns with ketchup, and then went back into the bedroom. I followed her, trying not to crowd her too much, but I really hated it when I couldn't see her. Not touching her was bad enough. She pulled her hair through a hair tie and rubbed sunscreen on her neck. I was so busy watching her fingers run over her own skin, it didn't occur to me to offer to help until she was already done.

"Ready?" Bella asked. I nodded, doubting that I was ready for any of this, and we walked out the door and onto the beach. I reached out and ran my fingers over the back of her hand. She turned it palm up, and wrapped her fingers around mine. I sighed. Whatever this was going to be, it wasn't going to be awful, because she was holding my hand.

We walked for a little while in silence, and then Bella started talking.

"I didn't know what I should do," she started. "I knew leaving was going to hurt you, and I was afraid you might hurt someone else. That's why I stayed with you, you know. Because if I didn't, I thought

you might hurt someone. Ever since you threatened to kill that little boy...I just couldn't let that happen. I figured if I stayed, I could keep you calm and no one else would have to suffer. But in the hospital, I realized it didn't matter – you were going to kill people whether I was with you or not, and there was nothing I could do about it."

"Bella, I won't..."

"Just let me get all this out, please."

I nodded, looking down at the sand in front of my feet. I tried to keep thoughts of additional threats out of my head.

"Then you said you weren't going to hurt anyone," she continued. "I could tell by the way you said it you meant it. I started thinking I was free, because you weren't going to hurt anyone even if I did leave. I didn't have to stay anymore. Rosalie and Emmett were there so you couldn't physically make me stay, and your words told me I didn't have to stay to protect anyone else."

"I didn't understand why I was still upset, not at the time. I just couldn't stop crying, but I thought it was relief as much as anything else."

I cringed.

"Rosalie had a lot to say about you and what you had been doing. I don't know what you'll have to do to ever get back in her good graces. She and Emmett fought half the time we stayed in the hotel on Fiji. Emmett defended you a lot. Rose was worried what Carlisle was going to do when he found out, but that ended up not being a problem. None of that mattered to me, because all I wanted right then was to get home and see Charlie, especially when Emmett told me how bad off he was."

"Emmett said Charlie spent a month looking for us. He put posters everywhere from Portland to Vancouver trying to find us, even after I talked to him on the phone. I should have known he wasn't going to

buy into that story very well. I never do anything without thinking it through. He went to your house a hundred times, looking for information. Renee even showed up after a psychic apparently convinced her we were both dead. Carlisle thought your family was going to have to move."

"I was so angry with you after I heard about Charlie and Renee I couldn't even see straight. Charlie was a complete wreck and blaming himself for not protecting me. Of course, he never believed I went with you willingly, and I should have realized that. I never told him any different, but I think he still believes it was all your idea, and I think it just about killed him. It was one thing to do...what you did...to me. But you hurt my family, too."

"Bella, I..."

"No." Bella held her hand up in front of my face. "It's still my turn."

I closed my eyes for a moment and nodded.

"I spent three days on Fiji with Rose and Emmett absolutely infuriated with you. After we left, it was like the farther away I got, the less angry I felt."

"It was on the plane ride from New Zealand to Hawaii when I started feeling a little...different. I kept seeing you every time I closed my eyes. I saw how you looked when I left, and you were so...sad. I knew it was because of me. I kept trying to tell myself that you deserved it."

Bella stopped for a moment and looked up at me.

"You did deserve it, you know. For everything you did to me."

"I know I did." She turned back and started walking again.

Bella looked back at me, but kept walking.

"I continued to stick with the running off together story once I got home. I told Charlie I wised up and realized I couldn't do that anymore, but that you were refusing to come home. It was lame, but he didn't seem to want a lot of detail other than your whereabouts so he could have you extradited. I'm not a very good liar, and I don't think he believed a word I said. Carlisle eventually told him you had been located and sent to boarding school in New Hampshire or something."

"Even after all of that, I couldn't get you out of my head. I couldn't stop thinking about you and wondering what you were doing. We were the hottest topic in school, of course, so people were constantly asking about us. I think every student of Forks High School asked me what had happened. I just told everyone I didn't want to talk about it. Even if I had been able to stop thinking about you, someone would bring you up again."

"After about three weeks of being back in Forks, I started having nightmares. I'd wake up screaming every night, and I just knew you were in pain. I couldn't explain it – I still can't. I just knew you were hurting, and I wanted to go back to you. Of course, I was pretty much under house arrest with Charlie. I thought he was actually going to have a heart attack right in front of me he was so mad sometimes. Especially when I wouldn't tell him exactly what happened."

"Anyway, that's when I went to your family's house and ask for help getting back to you. It's not like I could manage the plane fare and all the other traveling expenses on my own. I didn't want to ask, but I didn't know what else to do. There wasn't enough in my college fund to get me here."

"Carlisle refused. He said you were too unstable, and it would be dangerous. Emmett argued with him. Alice, too, I think, but I couldn't understand what they were saying – they were all talking so fast. In the end, Carlisle said no, and that was that."

"So I got a job, figuring I'd save up everything I made until I had enough for the ticket. I worked as much as I could – every day after

school and ever some overtime on the weekends. About the middle of April, I still only had about half as much as I needed for the ticket. That's when Alice came by during my dinner break."

Bella stopped and stared out over the water, then looked down at our entwined fingers.

"She said she could see you." Bella's voice was quiet. "She said you hadn't moved – not for days – weeks, maybe. She said she wanted me to go to you, because every time one of the others decided to go, it turned out bad."

"She said she knew I was thinking about it, because she kept seeing me in your future, like it was changing based on things I was considering. But she said if I left as soon as I had the money, Charlie was going to lose his mind. I couldn't do that to him, not again. Over the next few days, I had lunch with Alice when she was in school. Jasper never sat with us. Alice said it was hard for him to be around me. Anyway – she said you were worse, though she never told me exactly why. I picked up one more paycheck on Friday, and I had enough money. I decided to go anyway, even though my dad would end up going ballistic."

"Every time Alice talked about you and how you were...it's like it hurt me, too. I thought you would be upset for a while, but eventually you would just go back to your family. I never thought you would...well, I never thought you would be so lost."

"I got my things together and headed for SeaTac. I thought I would be able to just walk into the airport with the cash and get the flights. I forgot that the passport you made for me had my last name as Masen. My new driver's license said Swan, of course, and the birthdates were off. They wouldn't let me get a ticket, and then they called Charlie. He made me quit my job and pretty much had me under lock and key until school let out."

"I could only see Alice at school after that. Between the two of us talking back and forth, and Alice delivering messages to Carlisle, we

convinced him to go and get you. Alice said she couldn't see what would happen – too much of it depended on how you reacted. She said she didn't think it was going to work, but Carlisle agreed to go anyway."

"After he got back, it was sunny for nearly a week, I was still under house arrest and I hadn't seen or heard from anyone in your family. So I...got a little creative, and ended up in the emergency room when Carlisle was working."

"You *what* ?" I practically shouted. I didn't mean to, but I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I...cut myself. On my finger. It wasn't bad – I only needed a couple of stitches. Besides, I don't think anyone would have noticed another scar at this point."

"Oh God, Bella," I moaned. "You...hurt yourself? On *purpose* ? Just to see..."

"I didn't know what else to do!" Bella interrupted. "I hadn't slept in almost three days, and I didn't know if you were alive or dead. I had to know, because it would be my fault!"

"No, it would not," I growled. I knew whose fault all of this was, and she wasn't even in the equation.

"I'm still not done," Bella said softly.

As much as I wanted to scream at her for being so reckless, I allowed her to continue without any more comments from me. Not right at the moment, anyway.

"Carlisle told me what happened while he was stitching up my finger. He said you wouldn't move, and fought him when he tried to bring you back, so he left you where you were. He confirmed all of my nightmares, that you were scared and alone. I knew you needed me,

and no one else was going to be able to help you. I just knew it. I don't know how."

"It was Alice who convinced Charlie to let me leave Forks. She told him that there was this writer's summer camp in New York that was perfect for the both of us, and it would take my mind off of everything else that had been going on. She also told him Esme would be going with us, so we'd have adult supervision."

"Before you, I had never lied to my dad's face, Edward. Never. But I did, again, because he was buying it and it was the only way I was going to get out of the house. Esme and Alice picked me up and brought me to the airport. Emmett and Rosalie were already there. I think Rosalie totally hates me now. She decided to come in case you...well, in case anything happened. Esme and Alice went to the camp in New York to help with the cover story, because Charlie would check up, no doubt. Alice can really imitate my voice; did you know that?"

I wasn't at all surprised.

"And here I am," Bella sighed. "When I first saw you...I thought...I don't know, I guess I thought you were dead or something. It really scared me. When I realized you were okay, and you were saying you were a lunatic and begging me to be real, I couldn't help but laugh, because I was so relieved. I thought I might be too late, and you wouldn't know who I was or push me away just like you did to Carlisle. I was so glad you knew it was me. And I was glad because I missed you."

"You missed me?"

"Yes, I did," Bella said. "I guess that makes me crazy, too?"

"No, you are not," I insisted. "Though as much as I like hearing you say it, I can't help but wonder why."

"You were all alone," Bella said softly. "You didn't have anyone to calm you down...to comfort you. You just get...lost. You need me."

"But I was awful towards you," I said, my voice barely loud enough for her to hear over the waves. Then the realization hit me. I slowly understood exactly why she came back, and it made me feel positively sick. It was hard to get my remaining words out. "You don't have to...come back...because you...pity me."

I stopped, and under great duress, released her hand so I could step away from her.

"I don't want your pity," I stated, trying to hold my voice steady. "If that's why you came back..."

I couldn't bring myself to say the rest.

"That's not the only reason," Bella said.

The thoughts rushing through my head were starting to overwhelm me. Bella pitied me. It was about the last emotion towards me I would wish her to have. At the same time I recognized how pitiful I had been, but it was still not something I wanted her to feel. What other reasons did she have for coming back, and were they even worse? Was she coming back to tell me how much I had hurt her? Was she here to make sure I knew of every scar I had left on her, inside and out? Did she come back here to...to...leave me again?

"What then?" The sound scraped out of my throat.

"I needed to see you," Bella said. "This was the only chance I was going to have, and the writing camp only lasts for two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

"I can't stay, Edward." Bella's words ripped through the thread holding me together. "Charlie is expecting me home on the twenty-first. He'll call out the FBI if I'm ten minutes late."

It was my worst nightmare, and I stumbled back as the pain rippled through me. My heart must have been torn in two, because I could feel it simultaneously in my throat and my gut. She didn't come back to stay with me, it was only to explain what happened and to show me her pity. She only came back to leave me again. The thought was crippling. She wasn't staying. *I won't survive this...*

So much for relief.

Chapter End Notes

Bella is back, but what will they do now?

Stay tuned!

Loving everyone's remarks! Please keep it up! :D

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 – Cope and Hope

She was only here because she pitied me.

And she would only stay for two weeks.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. I couldn't even think. My brain could only focus on the place where we had been touching and how I could no longer feel her hand in mine. It hurt, the pain all focused on my fingers and palm. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to force away the pain. I barely registered the impact when I dropped down to the ground, unable to hold myself upright.

"Edward! Edward, stop it, please!" Bella's words clawed their way into my conscious mind. "Please, listen to me! I'm not done!"

"You're leaving," I moaned, barely able to convince my breath, larynx and mouth to work together and form the words.

"Listen to me, Edward," Bella's soft words broke through to me. "I have an idea, you just have to listen. I don't want to leave you!"

Bella pushed my hands out of my hair and replaced them, running her fingers over my head and pulling me close, against her chest. I felt the overwhelming pain subside with her touch, and I reached out, clinging to her like a pathetic, frightened child. I tried to focus on something outside of myself. I tried to understand what she was telling me, but the panic coursing through my body was making it hard to comprehend anything else. I forced my eyes open again, but couldn't look up.

"I don't want your pity," I said softly, staring down at the sand in front of me.

"That's not why I'm here," Bella responded. I furrowed my brow. I couldn't understand what she was saying. There was too much pain to listen. I felt her hands on my jaw, trying to tilt my head up to look at her, but I refused.

Bella knelt down in front of me and ducked her head lower so she was looking straight into my face, her hands still gripping me.

"Sweetheart, listen to me." Bella narrowed her eyes and I felt myself flinch backwards a little. She spoke clearly and succinctly. "I do not want to leave you. I came back here because being away from you was...difficult. I missed you, and I want to be with you. Do you hear me?"

One word made its way into my head.

"You called me sweetheart," I said.

"What?"

"You said it just now, and right before you gave me a bath. You've never called me that before."

Bella's face relaxed into a wry smile and I heard her sigh.

"Are you going to calm down enough to listen now, sweetheart?"

That word burst through the panic, and I gripped my fingers against her back.

"Yes," I whispered, not sure if I really could, but I would try. For her, I would try.

"I have to be back in Forks on the twenty-first," she said again, and I felt a shiver run through my body. Bella tightened her grip on my jaw. "I will be with you until then. After I go back, I have to be with my dad for a while – at least until I turn eighteen. Once I'm an adult...well, he won't be able to dictate what I do."

"I can come back here then," Bella said. "Or join you somewhere else where the hunting is better for you."

"You'll still let me...be with you?" I was terrified to hear the answer.

Bella's fingers loosened their grip a little, and her hand ran over my cheek. I leaned into her warmth reflexively.

"Yes, Edward," Bella told me. "I'll stay with you as long as I can, and I will be back with you again after I'm eighteen. Are you listening? Do you understand me? I want to be with you, Edward. After my birthday, wherever you are, I'll be there, too."

I looked into her eyes, trying to comprehend exactly what she was saying to me, but I wasn't entirely sure I was going to be able to understand it. It didn't make any sense, for starters. Bella was a smart and rational human being, and there was no way she was going to come back of her own accord to the monster that took her from her home and tortured her for weeks.

A chuckle escaped my lips, and I closed my eyes.

I must be insane.

"None of this is real," I mumbled. I waited for the pain in my heart to encompass me again.

"Edward Cullen!" Bella's voice made me jump a little. I opened my eyes and looked back at my hallucination. "I am here and not in your head! Now what do I have to do to convince you?"

"I think you definitely win over the other two," I heard myself say. "I don't remember the final score. Might have to start over."

"Edward." Bella's voice came out in a hushed breath. "You are talking nonsense. I'm here."

"There's no reason for you to be," I explained. I closed my eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply. "Ten points for scent, though. I think you

definitely win."

"Would you just stop it, please? You are not imagining me!"

"There's no reason for you to come back to me. I knew that when you left. I'm not worthy of you."

My skin barely registered the touch, but I did see Bella's hand pull back and smack me across the face.

"Damnit, Edward!" Bella balled her hand into a fist and winced.

I didn't recall any of my previous hallucinations of Bella either hitting me or cursing.

She's real...she has to be real.

But if she was real, and she was going to leave me again, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be able to cope with that knowledge. If she was just another part of my demented mind's follies, it all made a lot more sense. I deserved to be tortured, so I would torture myself.

"I'm going to prove it to you."

I heard her words, but again, they didn't register. I felt the fingers wrapped around my jaw tense, trying to hold me where I was. I saw her head moving closer to mine, and then her mouth was on me.

Everything inside of me exploded.

Her soft lips crushed against my hardened skin, her mouth opening and her tongue reaching out and tracing a line between my lips. I parted them, my tongue seeking hers, crying out to taste her mouth.

If I had any further doubt as to her truly being with me, it left as soon as her lips touched mine. Even though the burn in my throat sang out to be quenched, all I could really feel was her mouth against my lips and her hands in my hair. I moaned against her mouth, my arms wrapping tighter around her and my tongue running along hers as I

reacquainted myself with the glorious taste of her mouth. This was not something my self-loathing imagination would have conjured up.

She pulled away slightly and took a quick breath before I pulled her back to me and kissed her again. My hands found their way up her back and into her hair, stroking through it once before cradling her face between my palms. I moved away from her mouth and across her jaw.

"Do you believe I'm really here now?"

"Yes." It was all I could say.

Bella shifted back a little, and I lost some of the contact with her skin. I shuddered and reached out to wrap my arms back around her.

"So now you are going to listen to what I have to say and not curl up in a ball anymore, right? No more jumping to conclusions without listening?"

"Yes," I repeated, cringing a little.

"All right, now listen!" Bella sat back on her heels, but kept her hands wrapped around my forearms as my hands slid from her back to her waist. "I came back here to tell you I want to be with you, and not just because I feel pity for you. I do feel that, but it's not why I'm here. I was completely miserable when I was away from you. I couldn't eat or sleep – all I could do was think about you and how sad you were. When Alice told me you were still there...on the beach...that you hadn't moved at all...Edward...it broke my heart. I had to come back, and more importantly, I *wanted* to come back."

"You ...want to...be with me?"

"Yes," Bella sighed and leaned towards me, her lips brushing against mine. "Why else would I come all the way back here?"

I held her to me, burying my face in her hair and breathing in her scent. She was real. I knew she was. She wanted to come back to me. Maybe Emmett was right. Maybe she was as crazy as I was.

We were near the place where we had once watched the sun set, and I could see now how low the sun was in the sky. We had been out here all day, and Bella hadn't eaten since her breakfast.

"I should take you back," I said. "You have to be hungry."

"I'm fine," Bella responded automatically.

"I hate it when you say that," I blurted. "You never mean it when you say you are 'fine.'"

Bella laughed. The sound was beautiful, and made me smile, too.

"All right," Bella said. "I am a little hungry."

I stood up and pulled her up with me. I took her hand in mine and looked down at her, seeking her eyes.

"You really want to be with me?"

"Yes, Edward," Bella sighed. "I know it isn't going to be easy, but I know what it's like to be without you, and I'd rather not do that again."

"I can't be without you," I said softly. "My world was dark without you."

"My world was, too, sweetheart."

"You called me that again," I said, smiling.

"Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay," I responded. Something about having Bella refer to me by a pet name was more reassuring than all the other

words she had spoken.

We started back to the house, walking slowly and not speaking. Bella held my hand the whole way. I tried to stay out of her way while she made dinner, and offered to help her with the dishes afterwards.

"When will you...leave?" I slowly dried Bella's dinner dishes as she handed them to me. We hadn't spoken about any of it since coming back inside, and though I dreaded it, not knowing was eating at me more and more.

"I only had two weeks, that's it," Bella confirmed. "Charlie is expecting me home on the 21st. I turn eighteen in September. After that, he can't tell me what to do."

"Today is the tenth," I remembered. She came back yesterday, which she said was the ninth. "That's not two weeks."

"I spent two days on planes," Bella reminded me. "I had two weeks all together. Eleven days left, but it will take me two days to get back from here."

"Where will..." I stumbled over the words. I didn't want to say them, but still had to know what she was thinking. "Where will I be?"

"Where do you want to be, Edward?"

"With you," I said without hesitation.

"Then you'll have to come back with me," Bella said. She smiled up at me, but her smile faltered. "But if Charlie finds out..."

"He must hate me," I said.

"Hate is a strong word," Bella said. Then she sighed. "Yeah, he hates you. If he saw you at all, I think he would pretty much go ballistic."

"Then I can't go back to Forks," I said. "I don't even know if Carlisle would allow it. I've...fed off humans. It would be dangerous for them

to let me stay in the area."

"I think once you talk to him, you may be surprised," Bella said. "Forks may not be the best option, anyway. I don't think too much happens there without my dad knowing about it. We have to think of something else. You wouldn't have to be in Forks – you could be in Seattle or Vancouver, even. I wouldn't be very far from you. I could try to come and see you on the weekends."

"Weekends," I contemplated. The whole idea was repulsive, especially since it was sounding like the best option so Bella could finish high school over the next year. Finishing high school was the right thing for Bella to do, so it needed to be done.

"Just until I'm eighteen," Bella reminded me. She put her hand against my bicep and gave me a squeeze. "Then we can work out something else where you can be with me all the time."

"Five days...every week?" I could feel the panic welling up inside of me again, and tried to push it down. Bella must have recognized it, because her hand traveled up my arm quickly, lacing through my hair. "And your birthday isn't until September! Bella, I can't..!"

"It will be all right," she said, her lips touching my neck softly. The touch kept me from falling apart, but only barely.

"I could go back to school with you," I suggested, knowing full well it wasn't going to work.

"I'm pretty sure if Charlie finds out where you are, he's going to come after you," Bella confirmed.

"He can't do anything to me," I reminded her.

"Maybe not physically," Bella agreed, "but he can make my life hell and definitely complicate yours, unless you're thinking about exposing your entire family."

I shook my head, already knowing what she said was true.

Be strong for her. You can do this.

Could I? I didn't feel strong. My physical abilities meant absolutely nothing when it came to how I felt about the frail little human with her hands in my hair, trying to calm me down.

"I need to be with you," I said, yet again.

"You will be, Edward," Bella assured me and handed me another dish. "Maybe not all the time, but we'll always be close to each other."

"Seattle and Vancouver are too far," I insisted. "Port Angeles. I'll stay there."

"My dad is there all the time."

"I'll be careful," I promised. I put the dish in the drying rack and looked down at her. "Bella, I can't be that far from you. Just the idea of Port Angeles is...difficult."

"All right," Bella conceded. "Port Angeles."

I reached over to her, unable to keep my hands off of her any longer. I leaned over and pressed my lips against her throat, then moved up and over her jaw before finding her lips. My hands grazed down her sides and found the strip of skin exposed between her shorts and her shirt. My thumbs traveled around on her skin, making circles against her ribs.

Bella's hands raked through my hair, pushing against the back of my head and holding me against her throat. I was still awestruck by the trust she had to have to hold me in such a position. I moved my lips quickly down her neck to her shoulder. I stopped when I reached the edge of her shirt and traveled back up to her jaw and lips, touching them with mine only very softly before I pulled back to look at her.

Her eyes held me captive, and I understood for the first time that I was hers, completely and wholly. Maybe at one point in time I had tried to make her mine, but now nothing mattered except whatever she wanted. Anything she desired, if within my power, would be hers.

"When should we go back?" I asked. "I mean, maybe we should go back now? You could stay with me until you have to go back home."

"How soon could we leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then let's go tomorrow," Bella said, smiling up at me. "I can help you find a place and settle in. We can figure out the details before I have to go back home."

I nodded, but didn't like any of it. Bella reached a hand up to try and smooth out the grimace on my face.

"It will work, Edward. We will make it work."

Though it was only the second night she was back, lying in bed with her felt so right to me.

Bella lay on her back with my head against her shoulder, my fingers slowly stroking the skin peeking out between her boy shorts and T-shirt. Her fingers ran through my hair over and over again, sometimes stroking off to the side, pushing the strands up around my ear. It was heavenly. I could have stayed there forever, though I realized it was still a little early for bed, and I might very well be boring her. Bella being happy had to be my first priority.

"Would you like me to get you a book?" I asked.

"Are you trying to distract me so you can fondle my boobs?" Bella retorted, giggling.

"I...ah..." I stammered, realizing that act wasn't too far from my mind. I shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe."

"You don't have to distract me for that," Bella said. "You know, I was quite aware of what you were doing the last time."

"You were?"

"Yes." She smiled down at me, speaking softly. "It was nice."

"It was?"

Bella nodded, blushing. The burning in my throat increased, but I shoved it to the back of my mind, glaring at the monster in his corner and daring him to react.

"You can do it again, if you want, since you seem to like them so much."

"I do like them."

I tilted my head up and brushed my lips against hers. I couldn't help myself, so I let my tongue dart out and taste her before kissing a trail down her neck. Her blood pounded in the artery just under her skin, trying to tempt me. I closed my eyes and kissed it, letting my tongue flick over her skin. Her skin tasted divine. If I could have that, I didn't need her blood.

I looked down at the beautiful mounds hiding under the fabric of her shirt. I did want to touch them. I wanted to feel their weight in my hands. I wanted to run my fingers over her nipples and watch them contract under my cold touch. I wanted to make sure they each contracted the same amount, and I wanted to taste them and remind myself of the slightly different flavor between her nipples and the rest of her breasts.

But I couldn't. Not yet. There was something else I had to do first.

And I hated the very idea, because once I said what I had to say, she might very well want some time to herself. Maybe a lot of time. Maybe she would finally run away screaming. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to risk it, but I had to at least start making this right, because what was right for Bella had to be my first priority.

"Bella?" I sat up and made myself scoot away from her, painfully. Not very far, because I couldn't do that, but I thought a little distance for this was appropriate. "I have something I must say to you."

"All right." Bella narrowed her eyes in confusion.

"Bella, I have to..." I faltered. I knew this was going to be hard - for both of us - but I had to do it. "I have to apologize to you...for everything."

"Edward, you've done that before," Bella said. "You have apologized a hundred times. You don't have to do it again."

"I do," I insisted. "I have to say it, because it didn't mean anything as long as I kept doing those things to you."

I reached out and touched her arm lightly.

"I have to say this," I told her.

Bella nodded, and I pulled my arm back, allowing the pain to ripple up my hand and forearm. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm sorry I took you away," I began. "You had only just arrived, and I took you from your new home and your father. I didn't allow you contact your parents or anyone else, and I'm sorry I did that to you."

"Edward, it's..."

"No, please," I stopped her. "It's my turn to get everything out."

Bella nodded and allowed me to continue.

"I'm sorry I tied you to the bed in the hotel room on Yorkton. That had to be terrifying for you. When I think about it now...how scared you must have been...I can't...I can't even imagine it. I'm sorry about the way I reacted when I saw you had tried to get out of the ropes. Of course you tried to escape, that was a reasonable thing to do. My reaction wasn't reasonable, and I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I killed that shop keeper who wanted to help you. I'm especially sorry I killed him while you were there – I'm sorry you watched it. I told you afterwards it was your fault, and I'm sorry I did that, because it was a lie. Everything I did was my fault - my responsibility."

I dared look up at Bella then. Quiet tears fell from her eyes as she sat completely still with her hands in her lap. She wasn't looking at me. I took another deep breath before continuing.

"I'm sorry about the way I...held you down...immobile...when I drank from you. I knew it scared you, even when I was doing it. I shouldn't have been surprised when you thought I was going to rape you. I wanted to. I mean, I wanted to have sex with you then. I was...attracted to you then. I didn't understand it – I'd never felt that way towards anyone before, and I didn't know what to make of it. I don't think I ever would have raped you, even at my worst, but considering everything else I did it was pretty logical to think I would. I'm sorry I made you think you were going to be raped."

I kept going. I apologized for all the times I had yelled at her, for the toddler I threatened, for the man I had attacked when he thought about her and for the dozens of other horrible tortures I had inflicted on her. When I apologized for killing the nurse, Bella's crying increased. It hurt. It hurt to bring up all of the horrible things I had done to her. It hurt watching her cry harder and harder as I went on, but I knew if I stopped I'd never get it all out.

"Above all else," I finally said, "I'm sorry I tried to live off of your blood, because that was my rationalization for everything else I did."

I'm sorry I hurt you physically over and over again. I'm sorry I didn't control myself."

"I love you, Bella. I don't know how it happened, but I do. I want to stay with you, but I know how terrible I was. If you never want to see me again..."

I winced, but forced the words out anyway.

"I'll understand if you want to leave."

God, saying that hurt.

Bella's hands were over her face and her elbows were resting on her knees. She was shaking from crying so hard.

You did that to her.

My breath caught in my throat, and I had to run away from her.

No you don't. You did this to her, you can be man enough to watch the effects.

I looked back, disallowing myself the luxury of ignorance. After a few minutes, I reached over to the nightstand, grabbed one of the tissues out of the box and handed it to her. Bella wiped her nose, and then held the tiny scrap against her eyes. It didn't seem to help.

I couldn't keep away from her any longer, so I moved back over next to her and wrapped my arms around her, half expecting her to push me away. She didn't, so I pulled her head against my chest and held her while she cried. When one tissue was ruined, I pulled out another from the box. Her pain was my pain, and I let it flow over me, wishing I could add my tears to hers.

After a long time, Bella's sobs finally slacked.

"I wasn't like this," I told her softly. "I wasn't. I don't understand what happened to me. I kept myself under control for so long. Even when I

was living off of human blood, those I killed – they were animals. Murderers, rapists, child molesters. I thought I was saving someone else every time I killed. That was my justification. It was never someone like you."

"The instincts inside of me – the monster that is in my head – I kept him contained for so long. Then when I first came into contact with you, something inside of me snapped, and he took over. I don't want to be a monster. I don't want to hurt anyone, but especially not you. There are times, though, when the instincts want to take over, and they are almost impossible to control."

"It's like there are two of you," Bella whispered against my chest. "The one that kidnapped me, that horrible creature – he terrifies me. I don't know what he is going to do, and I know he is capable of pretty much anything. I knew that when I saw him holding that little boy that he would do anything to keep me. But there's another one in there, too. The one that's scared and lonely and lost. He wants to do what is right. He's loving and caring and he tries to tell jokes to make me laugh. He gives me a massage when he knows I'm hurting. He's so sad, it breaks my heart. I know he needs me, and I think I need him, too."

Bella pushed back away and looked up at me, her cheeks stained with tears.

"I want to love him, Edward. I want to love that part of you, but the other part scares the hell out of me. He's so unpredictable, and I never know when he's going to come back."

"I locked him up," I told her. I hesitated before continuing. "I want to tell you he's locked up for good, but I...I just don't know. I thought he was locked up before, but I was too weak to keep him there. Maybe before I didn't have a compelling enough reason to keep him there, but now I do. You are the reason. The idea of ever hurting you... hurting you again...is abhorrent to me. I think I'd find a way to kill myself before I hurt you again."

"I want to find that person in you," Bella said. She reached up her hand and pushed the hair off of my forehead. "I want to help you find him. I want to know him better."

"I want to be him," I responded. "I want to be...worthy of you. He is the one that loves you."

"I'm afraid he'll be replaced by the other one," Bella said.

"I think he's contained, but I'm afraid, too. I'm afraid the other part of me has also changed."

"Changed? How?"

"The way I have been living...off of you...off of your blood...I don't know. Emmett said drinking your blood may have made me different."

"In what way?"

"I don't know," I said. "In the past, I would ask Carlisle. I don't think I can do that now."

"Don't be so sure, Edward," Bella's hand reached up again, this time stroking my cheek. Her gentle touches surprised me. Even now, she tried to comfort me. "He did come here to bring you back."

"He was going to bring me back?"

"Yes," Bella said. "He tried. He said he physically couldn't force you to the boat. He said you wouldn't let go of the sand, which didn't make any sense to me, but he refused to elaborate. You fought him for hours, but he couldn't make you leave. He stayed with you for days, but you wouldn't even acknowledge him."

"I didn't know he was there," I shrugged, not sure what else I could really say. I didn't want to elaborate either.

"How could you not know he was there?"

"Part of the way I've changed," I said, speaking softer. "I don't think I'm completely...stable."

"Stable?"

"I can't think right anymore," I said. "I thought he was in my head. I thought I was hallucinating."

"Are you serious?"

"That's not the half of it," I mumbled. I leaned back against the pillows at the head of the bed and ran my hands through my hair. I was tearing myself in two – part of me wanted to tell her everything, because I knew I should tell her, and part of me wanted to see if I would get better spontaneously because she was with me again. "I don't want to tell you."

"Honestly Edward," Bella stated, "I think I've had enough for one night."

I hadn't realized how late it was. When I looked into her eyes, I could see how exhausted she was, and I was keeping her up and crying.

"I'll play Chopin for you," I said. Bella smiled.

"I would like that."

I picked her up and lay her down on the pillows, then pulled the sheet up to her chest. I leaned over and brushed my lips against her forehead. Though I wouldn't have said it was easy, moving away from Bella in order to do something for her...that was much less painful.

"I love you," I told her. "And I am very, very sorry for what I did."

I turned to walk out of the room, and stopped when I heard her say my name.

"Edward?"

"Yes?"

"I forgive you," Bella whispered.

My eyes closed and I swallowed hard. I nodded my head slightly before I silently moved out into the next room, where I played Chopin until I heard the sounds of her slumber.

"It's strange, leaving this place," Bella said, her voice as soft as the evening breeze.

"It is still your island," I reminded her. "It always will be. When you want to come back, you tell me, and I will have you here as fast as possible."

"We'll stop off somewhere where you can hunt first," Bella said with a smile.

"It's a deal." I smiled back at her and took her hand. We walked over the cooling sands as the sun began to set and I helped her step over the edge of the boat. Bella's eyes drifted back to our little house, and I reached out to her cheek, catching a tear there.

"We can stay," I offered. It wouldn't be easy, but I would make it work if that's what she wanted to do. "I don't want you to be sad."

"It's okay," Bella said. "I do want to come back someday."

"Then you will," I responded, kissing her hair. I started the boat and we headed to Fiji.

Bella was quiet during the water voyage, but she sat near me and held my hand. We reached Fiji and I docked the boat quickly. I was immediately bombarded with thoughts of everyone in the area. At least it was later in the evening, and most people had gone home for the night. Our flight was leaving fairly soon, so I hesitantly loaded Bella into a taxi and told her I would meet her at the Nausori Airport.

Bella gave me a confused look, but I promised her there was just something I needed to do, and I would catch up with her there.

I traveled on foot in the darkness and made two quick stops. The first was a small house with a sign on the front that read "Fiji Women's Crisis Center." There was a mailbox next to the door, where I deposited one of two large manila envelopes.

The second stop was a quiet residential street, also with a mailbox next to the front door. When I stepped silently up to the porch, the lights from inside the house illuminated two boys of approximately seven years old, dressed in identical clothing. As I watched them roll matchbox cars across the threadbare carpet, a slightly older girl-child and a young man entered from the other room. He smiled warmly at the boys when they looked up at him, but when the children turned their eyes away, his eyes dropped and the pain inside of them coupled with his mental images of the woman I had murdered caused me to take a step back. The pain echoed through me, and I realized over the past three months I had only experienced a fraction of his loss. At least I had known Bella was out there somewhere. His loss was never to return. I placed the second envelope in the mailbox and walked backwards off the porch, watching his eyes.

Inside each envelope was half a million in cash. It wasn't good enough, but nothing I could do now would remove the past.

Returning to civilization and the constant barrage of thoughts from every mind in the area was not a welcomed change. Bella certainly noticed my discomfort, because she initiated touching me on a regular basis, stroking my arm or cheek and telling me to hold out – we'd find somewhere private. She actually found the place for me to live, and rattled off my credit card number to the realtor while we were on layover in New York.

When we arrived in Seattle, I purchased a black Audi with tinted windows. It made it easier to travel in and around Port Angeles without being recognized. Bella was fairly certain anyone we might

encounter from our high school would know about our "running away together" fiasco, as she called it, and would certainly bring any rumors of us being seen together back to Forks. I was getting the idea that school had been pretty intense when she had returned, and the questions regarding where we had gone and what we had done were never-ending. I found myself apologizing repeatedly until Bella told me to shut up.

The little cabin near Lake Aldwell was about as close as I could feasibly get to Forks without running into Charlie Swan or anyone else who knew me on a regular basis. It was small and secluded – nestled tightly in a grove of trees with nothing more than a dirt path leading up to the door. There weren't any neighbors, and the only minds I could sense were people fishing out on the lake.

"It reminds me of the other cabin," Bella said softly.

I felt panic starting to rise again, and tried to push it back down. How bad was that? My mind went through the events that occurred there – the multiple times I held her down and drew blood from her while she cried and the time she thought I was going to rape her – those came to mind first. This was a mistake. This was going to traumatize her.

Ask her, and stop making assumptions!

"Is that..." I stopped and cleared my throat. "Is that bad? I'll find another place if you don't..."

"No, it's okay," Bella held her hand up.

"I hurt you there," I whispered.

"Yes," Bella said. "But I don't want to talk about that now. There were good things there, too. It was...cozy."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

I nodded and took her hand in mine as we walked in. The layout was completely different, but it definitely wasn't *unlike* the place in Manitoba. An eat-in kitchen, a living area, a bedroom and a bath made up the whole floor plan. There was already wood stacked in the fireplace, though it was fairly warm out. At least the caretakers were efficient.

Bella was yawning before we even surveyed the place, so I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, turning down the sheets and laying her against the pillows. There wasn't any food in the place yet, so I brought her a glass of water. I offered to go into town and get her something, but she seemed to know how much I really didn't want to be away from her, and declined. I knew she was only saying it for me, so I kept offering until she told me to shut up again.

"I need to hunt," I said quietly when Bella had settled into bed. "I won't be gone long. I'll be back before you wake up."

Bella reached out and ran her fingertips under my eyes.

"Go," she said softly. "I'll be fine."

I smiled and kissed her lightly.

"I love you," I called to her as I walked out the door.

By the time I was in the driveway, I thought about what she had said.

I'll be fine.

I still hated that word when it left her mouth, but even aside from that, it suddenly occurred to me that she would be alone in a strange, new place. I wouldn't be there if she needed anything, or if she needed my help. There was wildlife all over the place here, and some of it was dangerous. What if someone came to the door? What if she got up to use the bathroom, and fell down, hurting herself?

Goodness knows she was clumsy enough. What if she was bleeding? What if she started bleeding and when I came back, I couldn't control myself?

Panic set in.

I ran back in, startling her awake.

"Are you all right?"

"What are you talking about?" Bella asked, glancing at the clock. "You haven't been gone five minutes. What do you think might have happened to me?"

"Burglars," I said. "Or you could fall. Or a bear could come in."

"Are you serious?"

"I think so," I said, a little unsure.

"Edward, go hunt."

"I think I'll wait."

Bella traced a finger under my eyes again.

"You need to hunt, sweetheart."

I blinked a couple of times, looked down at the floor and then back up at Bella.

"I don't want to leave you," I admitted. "Something might happen to you."

"Nothing is going to happen to me," Bella smiled so sweetly I had to bend down and touch her lips with mine. "I promise I'll be okay."

"You don't know that," I said, crawling into bed with her, my lips moving from her mouth down over her chin. "I'll stay. I can hunt

later."

Bella let out an exasperated sigh.

"You will hunt tomorrow, right?"

"Yes." I ran my tongue over her neck and up to her ear, taking the lobe between my lips and sucking on it.

"Promise?" she pressed. "Don't think I don't know it when you are trying to distract me."

"Can I see your breasts?" I asked, smiling against her ears.

"Edward!"

"I like them," I whispered against the skin of her throat, kissing back down to her shoulder.

Bella moaned quietly and tilted her neck so I could reach her better.

Maybe I would hunt tomorrow, and maybe I would wait until she had to go back to Forks. The thought made me cringe, but I forced it out of my conscious mind for now, at least. I pressed against her lips again, my tongue reaching out and finding hers. Bella sighed into my mouth, her hands coming up and wrapping into my hair.

Sufficiently distracted.

We spent a couple of days shopping in Seattle, because it seemed safer than hanging out a little closer to Forks. Lots of the kids in our class would be out and about in Port Angeles in the summer, and it seemed a little too risky. Even in Seattle we went for the more out-of-the-way stores for what we needed.

Bella offered to go herself so I wouldn't have to be exposed to so many people's thoughts again, but the idea of being away from her was much worse than being inundated with the thoughts of others.

Besides, I needed to remember how to control what I heard again. I needed to relearn how to block it out.

The cabin was furnished, but not decorated, so Bella picked out a bunch of things to give it a more "personal touch," she said. I kept waiting for Alice to either call or show up, considering we were shopping and she hadn't been invited. I knew if she wasn't showing up, it must be because Carlisle wasn't allowing her to come near me. The realization was unwelcome. At some point, I was going to have to face my father, and I wasn't entirely sure I was ready for that discussion.

Once we were done and had it all delivered to the cabin, Bella found a home for everything while I tried to simultaneously stay out of her way and keep at least one hand on her at all times. An upright piano was delivered one evening, and that night I played for her until she fell asleep.

I lay in the bed with her every night while Bella either read or just talked to me, running her hands through my hair. If she was reading and not paying attention to me, I'd start running my hands over her stomach or her arms, and eventually kiss and lick her neck until she tossed her book aside and kissed me back. I still hadn't hunted, and didn't trust myself to try anything else. Eventually, I would kiss her lightly on the lips and tell her good night before I curled up against her side. When I heard her breathing regulate in sleep, I would close my eyes as well.

In the morning, just two days before Bella was to return to Forks, the thirst had become unbearable.

All day, Bella made comments about my eyes repeatedly, and I dodged them repeatedly. I knew I needed to hunt, but I also knew my time with Bella was short, and I didn't want to waste any of it being away from her. Being with her was also starting to become a problem, because the burn in my throat combined with being so close to her all the time was affecting my tenuous grip on the monster.

He was rattling his cage again, and I was fighting every hour to keep him contained. It was quite a relief when Bella actually stomped her foot and told me I couldn't touch her again until I had fed. Nothing else would have gotten me out of the house.

Once outside, I noticed this choice of locales was pretty good for hunting. Deer were everywhere, and I drained two of them, but the grizzly near the shore of the lake was what I really needed. I didn't waste any time with chase or fight, but chose to tackle and kill immediately instead. The carcass fell to the ground, and I had to spend some time disposing of it before I could return. If I was going to hunt in this area, I needed to make sure it didn't become too conspicuous.

It was dark when I returned, and Bella was sitting in bed, reading. I couldn't help but smile sideways at her, and when Bella looked up at me, she blushed immediately. My tongue darted over my bottom lip and I swallowed back the venom creeping into my mouth. I took a step towards the bed, and Bella lay her book down on the nightstand.

My mind felt clear for the first time since Bella had returned to the island. Maybe it was getting a decent meal, and maybe it was being close to her for so long, but I didn't care. There was quite a bizarre combination of tension in my muscles and calm in my brain trying to confuse me. As if I could handle any more confusion.

I glanced down Bella's body, not even bothering to be subtle about it. I gave up on subtlety quite some time ago. She was in her usual nighttime attire – a T-shirt and sweatpants – but the pant legs were rolled up to her knees and she had kicked the blanket down far enough for her calf to be sticking out. Both of her legs were bent at the knee, and she had been using her lap as a place for her book to sit while she read. I took another step forward and reached out far enough for my index finger to trace from her ankle to her knee.

Her skin was so soft and warm and all I wanted to do was touch and taste every inch of her. I wrapped my hand around her knee, my

fingers rubbing lightly over the inside and then back down to her ankle again. I felt my tongue moisten my lips and glanced back up into Bella's eyes.

Her breathing had increased, and I could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

"Did you...hunt?" she asked. The tone of her voice held an unusual quiver.

"Yes," I replied.

"You're eyes are still...dark."

"Are they?" I murmured. I ran my hand back up the inside of her calf, over the bulge of fabric at her knee and half way up her thigh. I could feel her pulse continue to quicken down the femoral artery in her leg. I pushed gently against her thigh, moving it to the side and against the mattress so I could place one of my knees between her legs. I kept my eyes locked with hers and placed my other hand up close to her shoulder for balance. I dropped my eyes down to where I was still clutching her leg, and then slowly allowed my eyes to follow up her body – the top of her leg, where it met with its mate, her hip, her stomach, over her breasts. I leaned over and put my mouth up to her ear. "I must want something else."

I paused there, inhaling deeply and letting her scent wash over me before I continued on – kissing her neck, then her mouth. I looked up into her eyes. Her pupils were dilated, and the look behind them traveled into me and straight down to my groin.

I felt my own breathing increase a little, and I kept my eyes trained on hers as I leaned down to place an open mouthed kiss on her shoulder. The burn in my throat returned far too quickly after a hunt, so I decided to stop breathing.

"You..." I said, moving up a little closer to her neck and kissing her again, "are..." I reached the spot where her shoulder met her neck,

"incredibly..." I tasted the hollow in her throat, "beautiful."

I ran my tongue up the center of her throat, over her chin and across her lips. My eyes found hers again, and I kissed her lips gently, leaving my eyes open and watching her. I felt her panting breaths against my lips.

I released her leg and placed my hand at the hem of her shirt, sneaking my fingers under the fabric and pushing up a little. I paused until Bella nodded her head, indicating it was all right for me to continue. I sat back a little, and pulled her shirt up over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra, so I didn't have to wait any longer. I leaned back to one side and ran my hand down her shoulder and across her breast. Bella shivered, and I looked up to find her smiling and biting her lip. I couldn't help but return the smile, because she was entirely too beautiful when she did that. I ran my finger in a circle around her nipple, watching her flesh pucker up when my cold skin contacted with her warmth. I moved my hand over to her right breast and did the same.

I ducked my head and ran my forehead across her collar bones and my nose across the top of each breast, nuzzling gently against her. I felt Bella's hands gripping my shoulders for a moment before running down my arms and back up again. Her touch was exquisite, and I remembered the last time she had really touched me. The part of my body that had been touched remembered it as well and reacted to the memory.

I brushed my lips over one nipple before taking it into my mouth, carefully avoiding the touch of my teeth to her skin. I pulled on it with my lips, and then ran the tip of my tongue around in a circle before moving to the other side.

I loved the taste of her here, both very similar to the rest of her skin but different at the same time. My hand reached up and cupped the other breast while my mouth entertained itself with the first. My fingers twirled around her nipple, pulling slightly.

Bella arched her back and gasped. I pulled back immediately, my eyes wide and staring up at her, but her hands on my shoulders gripped down against my hard skin, as if she wanted me closer.

"Do you like that?"

"God, yes," Bella moaned. "That feels so good."

A dozen thoughts went through my head, the first of which reminded me that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. Every time I touched her, I realized, I was doing it because I wanted to. Because I liked it. I hadn't even thought about what Bella might like or want, if anything at all.

The next few dozen thoughts that ploughed through my head were my third year of medical school, the second time through. Harvard, 1969, and a class in anatomy and human sexuality. The studies were flawed, because the sample group consisted of all prostitutes, but much of the information was still considered accurate. I remembered the professor's words.

There's a direct line between a woman's nipples and her clitoris.

"Do you want me to do it again?"

"Please."

I definitely didn't need to be told twice.

I switched sides, licking and sucking on the breast I had been holding, while my other hand cupped her other breast and tugged at the nipple. Bella's back arched again, and she cried out. I paused, still concerned I may have hurt her, and looked up at her face.

She was flushed, and had a few beads of sweat beginning on her forehead. Her breath was coming in pants and her heart was pounding in her chest. I noticed the color of her lips was a darker red

than they usually were, and when she looked down at me, I could see the dilation of her pupils.

The most common outward signs of sexual arousal include increased heart and respiration rates, dilation of pupils and of capillaries, which can cause a flushing of the skin or darkening of the lips...

I had run out of breath, and didn't have enough air to speak again. I allowed myself to inhale deeply, and immediately recognized the scent of Bella's excitement.

A near blinding feeling rushed through me, and the only thing I wanted to do was to give Bella an orgasm. It was immediately the most important act in the world. I brought my head back up to hers, kissing her darkened lips before moving over her chin and to her neck. I felt her mouth against my jaw, her teeth grazing my skin. I ran my fingers over her breast, down across her stomach to her hip, down the outside of her thigh, and back up again on the inside. I paused.

"May I...touch you?" I slid my hand an inch higher up her thigh, in case there was any doubt as to what I meant.

"Yes," Bella's breathy whisper coated my ear with moist heat.

My hand moved up further, stroking up between her legs. I kept my eyes on Bella's face, watching her expression for any sign that she wanted me to stop. Her breath caught in her throat when I reached the apex of her thighs and slowly rubbed the tips of my fingers across her warmth. Bella's eyes widened at my touch, and at first I thought I had done something wrong, but when her wide eyes met mine, she smiled at me.

My hand traveled up to the waistband of her sweatpants, and I slipped my hand inside. The warmth I found there was intense, and I had to stop breathing again. My fingers traveled lightly between her

legs, and then back up again, staying on the outside of the soft silk panties she wore.

The clitoris consists of eighteen parts, with over eight thousand nerve endings in the clitoral glans itself...

My thumb rubbed across her pubic hair while two of my fingers ran alongside her outer labia, stroking down, then up again, still over the top of her panties. I reached my other hand up to the back of her neck and pulled her to me, kissing her deeply while my thumb softly caressed over the tight bundle of nerves just below the hair. Bella moaned into my mouth, and I started making small circles with my thumb.

She arched her back again when I moved my mouth away from her lips and back to one of her nipples, sucking it into my mouth and tracing over the tip with my tongue. My hand moved up to the elastic on her panties and moved it aside, my eyes seeking her approval before I let my fingers reach in to her most intimate place. I moved my thumb faster while my fingers slipped between the folds of heated skin, finding moisture around her opening. I touched her opening with the tip of my finger, and Bella jumped, her breath now coming in pants. I slowly inserted my index finger part of the way into her heat, still rubbing circles over her clit.

I circled my finger up, trying to gauge the location of the other side of the nerve bundle inside of her by her reaction. When I reached it, she jumped again. I moved my finger inside of her in tandem with my thumb as Bella began to push her hips up against my hand. Quiet, guttural gasps and the occasional cry came from her lips. I moved a little faster, sucking gently on her other nipple for a moment before tilting my head up to see her.

A high pitched cry escaped from her as her body tensed, and her legs started to shake. I circled her clitoris once more before pushing a little harder against it.

I watched Bella's back arch even more than before, and her free hand gripped the sheets by her side while the one on my shoulder tried to dig nails into my impermeable skin. She threw her head back against the pillow, her mouth opened, and she cried out while her entire body convulsed from the point where my thumb pressed against her and outwards through her body.

I slowed my movements, pulling my finger out of her and gently caressing her outer lips, and softly stroking her cheek with my other hand. Bella let out a long, shaky breath and opened her eyes to mine. Her blush returned immediately as she looked away from me, embarrassed to see my eyes on her. I placed my hand against her cheek and turned her to face me again, brushing my lips lightly and gently over hers.

"That was the single, most incredibly beautiful sight I have ever seen in my many, many years."

"Edwards that was...amazing."

I smiled and curled against her side, my head resting on her shoulder. Her hands found their way into my hair and she stroked me softly. I reluctantly removed my hand from her panties and lay it lightly against her hip.

"I really liked doing that," I told her.

"Should I...?" Bella fidgeted against me, her hand reaching down and laying on my stomach.

"No," I said and looked back up into her brown eyes. I knew what she was going to suggest, and I only wanted to give to her, not take. *For once.*

"Your eyes are different," Bella pointed out. "They're all golden brown again."

"That's because I have everything I want," I replied.

Bella continued to run her fingers through my hair for a few minutes, eventually slowing the movements and stopping as she fell asleep. I carefully pulled my hand from her hip and brought it up to my mouth. My eyes traveled up to her face as I slowly sucked my index finger between my lips and ran my tongue over it to taste her on me. As if her skin, her mouth, and her nipples weren't enticing enough, this new taste could have knocked me off the bed and on to the floor. I groaned involuntarily, but managed not to wake her.

My arms coiled around her and I nestled against her neck, closing my eyes and pretending to sleep. I was content, and if I had to make a guess, I think I was happy. The feeling was intense, but short lived. As midnight approached, anxiety and fear renewed their hold on me.

It was June twentieth, and Bella would be leaving me the next day. I was on edge as soon as the clock clicked from 11:59 to midnight, and I immediately held Bella closer to me while I tried to fight back the panic. I was panicked because she was leaving, but also because there was still something else wrong with me and I couldn't figure out what it was.

I kept thinking the feeling would go away as long as she was near me, but I had been with her for ten days straight, had joined her in bed every night and even given her an orgasm, and I knew there was still something fundamentally wrong. I wanted to tell her, because telling her was the right thing to do, but I didn't know what to say. I felt...different, but not in any tangible, explainable way. I should have been able to think about many different things at once, but the only thing in my head was her. I couldn't focus on anything else. I hadn't been able to read or actually pay attention to movies we would watch. I couldn't think about hunting, even when I had been thirsty, and only went when she made me go.

I felt increasing pain when I thought about her walking out the door of this little place that had been our most recent home. She was going to do that tomorrow, and when that thought went through my mind it was all encompassing. To make up for it, I made sure my skin was touching hers at all times. I knew I was driving her crazy, but I

couldn't stop. The only time I wasn't touching her was when she kicked me out of the bathroom to take a shower.

I spent the entire night on edge, imagining Bella walking out the door, turning around at the last second and telling me she decided she wasn't coming back. By the time morning came around and Bella stirred out of sleep, I had gone over literally a thousand different things she might say as she left me, each one more heart wrenching than the last.

In the morning, Bella made her herself breakfast, and I was in the way. She put up the remaining decorative items she purchased, and I was in the way. She made herself lunch, and I was in the way. I kept waiting for her to make me sit down away from her for a few minutes, but she must have felt my heightened stress level and didn't make me stop.

Around noon, my phone buzzed briefly for the first time since I had been in an area with reliable service. I looked down to see a text from Alice.

Tell her it's your birthday.

Why in the world would I do that? I knew it was my birthday, obviously, but the day seemed more significant because it was the last day I would be spending with Bella before she went back to Forks and her father. I must have had a strange look on my face, because Bella asked me what was wrong.

"My sister," I said with a shrug.

"Which one?"

"Alice," I clarified.

"What did she want?"

"She seems to think it's important for you to know I turned one hundred and nine today."

"It's your birthday?"

"Yes," I said. "I stopped celebrating them quite some time ago. There didn't seem to be any point."

"Happy birthday, Edward."

I looked over to her and smiled to see her smile. Her expression was new to me. She seemed...decisive. Maybe even a little anxious. She bit down on her lower lip and dropped her gaze.

"Thank you," I responded. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I think everything is great, actually."

I sat on the couch and flipped the DVD case open and shut repeatedly. I was trying to remain controlled. I was trying to keep myself together, but Bella had been in the bathroom for an hour and a half, and I was just about to lose my mind.

Bella never spent that much time in the bathroom. I'd called through the door four times, and she kept telling me everything was okay and to just give her a few minutes. I gave her a few minutes. I knocked again, and she told me to start a fire in the fireplace. I started a fire in the fireplace. I knocked again. She told me to pick out a movie. I picked out a damn movie. When I knocked again, she finally told me to sit down and wait until she was done and not to dare knock on the door again. Since then I had fidgeted like an expectant father forced to stay in a hospital waiting room.

When she finally came out, she didn't say anything, just blushed and sat down next to me. She was in a light blue short pajama set, which wasn't normal night attire for her, but it looked lovely against her skin. The top had spaghetti straps that were already starting to fall

off one of her shoulders, which was also lovely. I would have inquired further about what she had been doing all this time and why she was practically dressed up for bed, but once she was next to me and the heat of her skin was touching mine again, I honestly forgot how long she had been gone. Nothing else mattered – she was here with me now, smelling of vanilla soap and Bella.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she settled against me with her arm around my stomach. I pointed the remote at the television, and spent the next hour and a half watching Bella watch the movie. When she wasn't paying attention, I would quickly slip a finger under one of the straps to her top, and pull it off her shoulder. She'd pull it back up and I would start all over again on the other side. If she didn't get to it right away, her neckline dropped just a fraction of an inch, exposing the top of her breast, and I would smile.

If she realized what I was doing, she didn't let on.

When the movie ended, I reluctantly untangled myself from Bella and stood up. I walked over and turned the TV off, dropping the room into near darkness. Only the light from the fire illuminated the room.

"Edward?"

"Yes?"

"It's still your birthday up until midnight." Bella nodded over to the clock on the wall, which read 11:15.

"That's true." I pushed the button on the DVD player and removed the disc. It clicked back into its box, and I replaced it on the shelf. I heard Bella stand up from the couch and walk up behind me.

"Would it be okay if I gave you a present?"

"A present?" I queried, narrowing my eyes. I didn't celebrate birthdays, and I couldn't recall the last time someone wanted to give me a birthday present. "I guess so. What is it?"

Bella closed the distance between us and ran her fingers up into my hair. I offered no resistance as she pulled my head down to hers and pressed her lips hard against mine. Her mouth opened and her tongue reached out across my lips.

"I'm your present, Edward." Bella's voice was husky and dark. "I want to give you me. All of me."

Sound waves crept through my ear canal and invaded my inner ear, which heard her words and sent them into my temporal lobe. The temporal lobe recognized the words as English and figured out the general structure of the sentence before sending it along to my frontal lobe for interpretation. Once her sentence was taken apart and put back together again every way possible, and the same conclusion was drawn, my frontal lobe sent all kinds of impulses through my limbic system, which in turn raced towards the lower half of my body like a bunch of...a bunch of...of...of...ugh! Similes failed me. *Bella wants to...to...oh God...*

So much for placidity.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Happy Birthday, Edward!

It's awesome seeing all these familiar profiles leaving reviews! I'm glad reposting this has given y'all something to look forward to! I will keep it up until it's done! 35 chapters in all, so there is still a ways to go.

In the meantime, check out Sins in the Grey – my mew story. It's only four chapters in, but I'll be posting weekly (Fridays).

If you want to talk about this or anything else, check out my reader group on facebook. The link is on my profile page!

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 – Give and Take

"You are giving me...you?"

Bella nodded, and I felt my knees weaken and try to buckle, which wasn't something that happened to vampires very often. It confirmed my suspicions that there was something wrong with me, but frankly, I had more interesting things to consider right at that moment. My brain was still trying to reprocess the tiny bit of information she had provided and come to some sort of definite conclusion.

"Do you mean..." I couldn't even finish the sentence. If I was wrong, I didn't know how I was going to deal with it. If I was right, I definitely didn't know how I was going to deal with it.

"I want you," Bella said, her mouth finding mine again. She pressed her body up against me, and I wrapped both of my arms around her back, increasing the pressure between our bodies. I moaned into her mouth. She pulled back and ran her fingers over my cheek. "I know you want me. I want you to make love to me."

All right, then! No additional affirmation needed.

"I want to," I confirmed, my words coming out along with my panting breaths. All control over my breathing was gone, and her scent covered me with each inhale. I tilted my head to the side and placed my lips back over Bella's.

I opened my mouth to her, my tongue seeking her lips and mouth as my mind ran screaming up and down a group of fictitious, cartoonish hallways with a lot of doors on either side. I tried to summon the mental ghost of Dr. Gest from Harvard for another lecture, but all I could really think about was my penis entering her vagina and just exactly what that was going to feel like.

It's going to be warm.

And wet...she has to be wet, or it will hurt her.

Okay...I know how to do that.

I was familiar enough with the act of intercourse itself, regardless of my level of experience. I knew what, physically, was supposed to happen. As I ran through the possible scenarios of how to get to the definition of the act itself, I felt the panic rise.

There were too many possibilities. Too many variations. Too many *positions* .

In about four seconds, all three hundred and eighty-five pages of the Kama Sutra flashed through my head. I pushed away from Bella, feeling my back hit up against the television on the wall.

I would have to move inside of her. *Thrust* inside of her. My strength...she is so fragile...I could hurt her.

"Edward!" Bella took a step closer to me, holding out her hand. "What's wrong?"

"Too many," I said, unintelligibly. "All of them...I'd have to...I might hurt you."

"Please, sweetheart," Bella took a step towards me and stopped. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"I would have to..." I couldn't form a useful sentence. Nothing in my brain was working right. "If I hurt you...and I could, Bella – I could. I can't do that."

"Edward, you aren't making any sense." Bella reached out and took my hand, then pulled me over to the couch where we sat down. She leaned back against the arm and pulled my head down to her chest. Her fingers laced into my hair, and I got a little control back over my breathing. "Now calm down and tell me what's got you so upset."

I tried to do what she told me to do. I closed my eyes, wrapped my arms around her and tried to bury myself in the soft skin at her throat. I finally took a painfully deep breath and tried to explain.

"If I lose control," I stated, "I could hurt you. I'm afraid of..."

I paused, not because I didn't know what I wanted to say, but I got stuck on which word to use – "orgasm" or "come."

"Of what, sweetheart?"

"Of..." I took a deep breath and went with clinical. "Of having an orgasm. I know the feeling is supposed to be...powerful. I don't know how I will react. If I'm inside of you and that happens...if you're under me...vulnerable...I could hurt you, even though I don't mean to hurt you."

I opened my eyes and looked up to Bella.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wish I was better... experienced...for you. I wish I knew what I was doing so I could make it right for you, but I don't. I could have been...if I had known...but I don't know what it's going to be like, and I don't know what I'm doing."

"Edward," Bella said, taking my face in her hands. "I'm glad you don't know what you're doing. I don't know what I'm doing either! I could hardly get the nerve to come out of the bathroom! I'm glad we're on equal ground here. It's one of the few areas where we are."

Well, I certainly couldn't argue with that. She outweighed me in everything except sex and actual weight.

"Besides," she continued, "the start last night was pretty incredible. If that's you not knowing what you are doing, then I'll take all of that I can get."

"Medical school," I mumbled. "I guess I finally found some use for all those classes. I never could work in the ER like Carlisle."

Bella laughed, which made me smile and relax a little more.

"I could...um..." Bella stumbled over her words and her face turned red. "I could...return the favor? I mean, if you are worried because you don't know what it will be like when you are inside me...I could do for you what you did for me."

I thought about what she was trying to say.

"You want to cause my orgasm through manual manipulation?"

Bella laughed again.

"If that is the same as a hand job, then yes."

"I don't know what my refractory period is," I stated.

"Your what?" Bella narrowed her eyes at me.

"Refractory period," I said again. "The amount of time between orgasm and the ability to maintain the next erection. If you stimulate me manually, I don't know how long it will be before I will be able to have intercourse with you."

Bella smiled, and then bit down hard on her lower lip. I narrowed my eyes as her grin spread.

"What's so funny?" I asked, truly confused.

"You are adorable," Bella said. She had called me that in the past, and I thought it was a good thing, but I was a little concerned about the potential for the remark to be meant sarcastically. I decided on some confirmation.

"That is good, right?"

"Yes, sweetheart." Bella's hands ran down my neck and across my shoulders. "It's good."

At least that was settled. In Bella's eyes, I was apparently worthy of adoration, and she was still calling me sweetheart. It was my turn to smile. I kissed her throat and put my head down against her again, closing my eyes and trying to breathe slowly.

"So..." Bella said, and then stopped.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Do you want me to...?"

I had gotten caught up on refractory periods and the word adorable. Somehow I had missed the actual focus, which was Bella offering to masturbate me. *Hand job.*

"I think so," I said, my breathing increasing as my mind flew through what it might be like. I thought about the warmth of her fingers when she ran them down the shaft of my penis before. "Yes, please."

"Should we go to the bedroom?" Bella asked.

"If that is your preference," I responded.

"Okay," Bella said, blushing again.

I got up and offered Bella my hand. She placed her fingers through mine and we walked to the bedroom.

She still thinks you are going to kill her.

I don't know from where the thought came. If it was the monster speaking or just some other evil part of me that wanted to increase my panic in a situation that already had me about as nervous as I could be.

Back in London, Bella said maybe she would have sex with me because she didn't want to die a virgin. That must be why she is doing this – why she is offering herself to me. She still thought I was going to kill her.

I stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and took a step back, pulling my hand from hers. I still couldn't control my breathing, and as the realization of why she wanted to do this burrowed through my brain, all my words came out in gasps.

"You don't...have to do this," I said shaking my head and turning away from her. I panted through my words as a full-fledged panic attack came over me. "Not with me. Before...you thought...it had to be me. Because...you didn't want to...die a virgin. It doesn't have to be me now."

"I know that Edward." Bella's hands cupped my face, and I allowed her to turn me to look at her while the panic subsided with her touch. "I want it to be you, don't you know that?"

I shook my head. I didn't know anything.

"I want to do this with you, Edward. Not anyone else."

"You do?" I asked, trying to wrap my head around what she was saying. She wanted me. She wanted *me* .

Bella nodded and smiled, then took my hand in hers again and led me over to the bed. I followed, because she said she wanted me and anything Bella wanted, I would give her. Even if what she wanted was me, which probably wouldn't be in her best interest, I would always be hers. I guess there was still a portion of me that was selfish, because any rationalization I might have for allowing her to become intimate with me was suspect. The truth was – I wanted it.

Bella placed her hands on my forearms and turned me around so my back was to the bed. She pushed against my chest.

"Lay down," Bella commanded. I sat down on the bed and moved backwards across it until my feet weren't dangling over the edge anymore. Bella crawled hands and knees over to my side.

Something about my back hitting the mattress caused me to go to pieces again.

There was no doubt - I was petrified, and I didn't mean how unyielding my skin was. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to perform intercourse with another vampire, let alone a fragile human.

I could kill her.

Not that I would mean to. I wasn't thirsty, and I thought I could get do this without biting her. Maybe. I hoped. I was more concerned with my physical strength and losing the ability to control it when I had an orgasm.

What is it like to orgasm?

Yes. Okay. We had already established this. I had never had one, and I had no idea what it was like. Even from people's minds, thoughts always seemed completely incoherent during orgasm. I had no frame of reference other than the incredibly short experience when Bella stuck her hand down my pants and stroked me right before Emmett walked in on us. That wasn't something I was ever going to forget. Even with the light warm touch of her hand, the feeling had been exceedingly intense, and Bella wanted to do that again, only this time she intended to follow the act to its natural consequence.

Yes, and you nearly tore the arm off the couch when she first touched you.

"Edward," Bella reached out and ran her fingertips over my jaw, breaking me out of my internal, panicked monologue. "It's okay, sweetheart."

She took my hand and ran her fingers over my knuckles, stroking them softly. I looked from our hands back up to her face. I swallowed hard, relieving my mouth of venom.

"I promised not to hurt you again," I told her. "What if I ..."

"Edward," Bella said, shaking her head. "You think too much."

"I do?"

"Yes, you do," she repeated. "Now stop it and kiss me."

"Okay," I replied. I moved back until I was up against the headboard and pulled Bella close to me. Once I tasted her mouth again, all the other thoughts slipped away, at least for a little while.

Bella faced me, leaning over my lap with her arms around my neck. My hands lay against the small of her back, my fingers sneaking under the silky blue fabric of her pajamas to touch her warm skin.

Her hands moved around to my shoulders and stroked down my chest and back up again. I put a little pressure on her back, just to bring her closer to me. Bella broke contact to catch her breath, so I moved my mouth to her neck, nibbling her skin with my lips. I licked the hollow at the base of her throat and felt Bella shiver in my arms.

Bella's hands ran back down my chest until she reached the hem of my shirt. She pushed it part way up until I leaned forward and helped her remove it. Bella shifted around, turning until she was sitting beside me, facing across me with her legs running down the bed next to mine. She supported her weight leaning against one hand, and laid the other one on my chest.

She took the flat of her palm and ran it over my chest and across my stomach. I leaned back on the headboard and watched Bella's face as she touched me.

With a quick glance towards my eyes, Bella leaned over and kissed my chest. I sucked in a breath as her warm lips came into contact with my skin. Her eyes looked up to me and a mischievous smile crossed her lips. She placed her mouth on my chest again, and flicked her tongue over me.

My tongue darted out over my lips as I watched Bella lick her way over to my right nipple. She kissed it, and the warmth from her mouth spread throughout my body.

Bella stopped for a moment and giggled.

"If I only kissed you here," Bella said, running her finger over the nipple she had kissed. Then she moved her finger to my left nipple. "But not here, you'd go nuts, wouldn't you?"

"No," I said with a frown. She raised an eyebrow at me. I had to look away, because she was probably right. But she was smiling, so this must have fallen into the "adorable" category.

"Maybe." I smiled and looked back to her.

Bella kissed and caressed the left one, apparently deciding not to test my sanity, for which I was quite grateful. Bella smiled and sat back up, her hand making circles on my stomach. I glanced up at her, and then my eyes dropped lower.

"My turn?" I asked hopefully, my fingers stroking against the silky fabric of her nightshirt.

"I don't know, Cullen," Bella shook her head once. "I think you are pretty far ahead in turns at the moment."

I nodded. She was probably right. Besides, having her touch me was almost as good as touching her. It would be better, except for my apprehension. I couldn't read her mind, and I didn't know what she would do next, which put me on edge. If she did something too... unexpected...it could be dangerous.

I felt Bella's hand on my cheek, and I looked up at her.

"I'm kidding, Edward."

"You are?"

"Of course." She giggled again. "I wouldn't deny you your favorite pastime. I was kind of surprised you were satisfied with just playing with the straps during the movie."

Bella slid her thumb underneath one of the straps on her top and looked at me pointedly. It was pretty clear to me then that I didn't get away with anything.

"I didn't want to disturb you," I said.

She tilted her head to the side and kissed my neck, then trailed kisses up my throat to my lips, where her tongue came out and met with mine. Bella leaned back too soon, and reached out to take both of my hands in hers before bringing them up to her breasts.

My hands held them both gently, caressing the outsides with my fingers while my thumbs teased her nipples through the thin fabric. It was strange that Bella was wearing something so different for bed tonight, but it was definitely a good kind of strange.

She's wearing it for me.

My eyes went up to hers, as if I could find confirmation of my last thought somewhere in her chocolate irises.

"It's beautiful," I said softly, stroking her over the fabric again. "This color on you and the feel of your skin under the silk is incredible."

"You like it?" Bella bit down on her lip and blushed.

"Very much," I confirmed, silently pleased that I had guessed right – she had worn this for me. "But I think I might like it better on the floor."

Bella smiled around the teeth imbedded in her lip and looked down to my hands as I slowly pulled the top over her head and tossed it on the floor. I sat up away from the headboard so my mouth could reach her glorious nipples.

I sucked each nipple into my mouth in turn, while my hand made sure the opposite breast wasn't lonely. My free hand would wrap around Bella's back, and as I switched sides, I'd have to switch hands as well. Bella's hands found their way on my shoulders, caressing a warm path up into my hair, then back down to my shoulders again. On one pass back down to my shoulder, her hand took a different route – over my arm to my side, and then down to my hip and across my stomach.

Bella's hand ran back and forth over my abs once more. She stopped at my navel and looked me in the eye before lowering her hand to the top of the jeans I wore. She brushed over me through the fabric and I gasped, releasing her nipple from my lips and placing my forehead on her chest. The hand I had on her back pulled her body closer to mine. I closed my eyes, trying to feel the sensation of her hand, and at the same time, not feel too much of it at once.

I had to release her breasts and lean back against the headboard. I looked up at the ceiling, tried and failed to steady my breaths, then glanced down to watch Bella's hand slide back up over my hardened shaft through the denim, all the way to the tip, and then narrowing in on the buttons for my pants.

She pushed each of the buttons of the button fly through their holes in turn, and then pushed the denim out of the way. She managed to get both the jeans and my boxers out of the way without actually taking them all the way off, but pushing them over my hips until my erection was exposed.

Her hand slid down and wrapped around the shaft of my penis, stroking first down and then up again. Her fingers traced lightly over my foreskin, running in a line all the way around. Then she moved her hand up, pushing the foreskin over the head, then pulling back down again, exposing the tip. I reached back up over my head and grasped the top of the headboard, clenching my teeth together to keep from screeching out obscenities.

"Is that okay?" Bella asked.

"God, yes!" I cried. I was trying not to scream, and was successful thus far. What came out was more of a loud grunt than an actual scream. I could feel every neuron in my skin that came into contact with her fingers and she fondled her way up and down.

"Don't stop," I opened my eyes and stared down at her, watching her slender fingers as they wrapped most of the way around me and continued their movements up and down. When she got to the tip, she ran her thumb over it. I hissed, and felt my fingertips dig into the wooden part of the headboard. "Yes...more...please."

Bella's free hand pushed my pants off my hips a little more, and then slipped inside, gently cupping my scrotum. I think I did scream then, her gentle fingers running over my sensitive, hard flesh driving me to some kind of near breaking point.

There was pressure throughout my body. Every muscle was tensed as I tried to remain relatively still, but it wasn't the pressure of overexerted muscles. The pressure was inside my skin, in the pit of my stomach and throughout my limbs. I could feel it steadily building and building as Bella's hand continued to run to and fro, her hand pulling back the foreskin going down and then running it back over the glans on the upstroke. A tingling sensation ran down my shaft and into my legs, which twitched slightly, then spread out over my abdomen and chest.

I felt my hips buck against her hand involuntarily, and I forced myself still. Bella apparently took the cue to move faster, and did. The tingling and the pressure increased, multiplying exponentially and colliding with each other. I felt Bella's thumb run over the tip of my penis and I pushed forward with my hip enough to increase the pressure over the glans. The sense of vibration and force went from the head, down the shaft, and into my testicles before I felt it all in reverse. As the feelings replayed in the opposite direction, and the tension became nearly overwhelming, I could feel it as my testicles constricted and released semen back up the shaft and out.

Two sounds became most predominant. One was my own voice, calling out with utter lack of coherence. The other was a resounding crack coming from behind me.

At that point, the pressure, the tingling, the muscular tension, the vibrations – all of it came to focus on the head of my penis and exploded in wondrous release throughout my body. I felt myself go limp, exhaustion experienced for the first time in my vampire life. I couldn't even open my eyes at first. When I finally did, Bella was looking at me, her eyes wide and bright and a slight smile on her lips.

"You weren't kidding," she said softly, nodding up over my head.

The headboard had been completely cracked into two pieces. My fingers had burrowed into the wood and were having difficulty releasing themselves from the holes they made. I moved them around a little before pulling them out of the indentations and setting the cracked piece of headboard over on the floor. I brushed sawdust from my fingers onto the floor.

Bella's hand graced up and over my scrotum and penis as she removed her hand from my boxers. I groaned against her touch, and felt myself starting to become rigid again.

"I guess that answers that question," I said softly.

"What question?" Bella asked.

"Refractory period," I clarified. "It appears to be about fifty seconds."

I reached out and pulled Bella over my chest, kissing her deeply, my tongue reaching into her mouth and running along hers, tasting her. After a minute, I let her sit back and I looked down to see what a mess I had made all over my stomach and Bella's hand. I reached over to the side of the bed where Bella had discarded my shirt and used it to clean us both off.

Bella's fingers reached out and lightly stroked the tip of my already erect member. I flinched at the touch.

"You *are* ready again," she marveled.

"Hmm." I shrugged my shoulders. "But you aren't."

"Yes I am," Bella said, her eyes narrowing a little.

"Not yet," I said and rolled her over on her back. I followed along with her, leaning over her and supporting myself on my hands beside her shoulders. "You have to be lubricated or it might hurt."

"Lubricated?" Bella breathed. She stared up at me and bit down on her lip.

"Yes," I said looking into her eyes. "I need to make you orgasm now. Preferably more than once."

"Well," Bella said as blood rushed into her cheeks. "I guess I don't have any arguments against that."

I smiled, quite glad she was amenable to this, because I really enjoyed touching her in such ways. I leaned over and kissed her gently.

I moved to one side of Bella, gently touching her cheek with my fingertips.

Females are more likely to be aroused by spoken words and light touches than by visual or more rigorous physical stimulation...

Thank you Dr. Gest.

I ran my fingers lightly from her shoulder down to her hip and back up again. Then I did the same on the other side of her body. I stroked her skin softly, wanting to touch every inch of her. When my hand ran back down to her hip, I slid it to the side, over her stomach and up between her breasts. I leaned over and kissed her neck,

running my tongue up to her ear and sucking on her ear lobe. I whispered quietly to her.

"You are so beautiful," I said. "I don't even know how to begin to tell you how I feel about you."

My hand ran over her right breast, then her left. I caressed her skin with light, teasing touches. Bella moaned softly and closed her eyes.

"You are everything to me," I continued, my hand moving down to her abdomen and running a finger along the hem of her pajama shorts. "You are everything in my world. In a hundred years, there has never been anyone like you."

My hand reached her hip again, and began to pull lightly at the fabric there. I sat up and reached down with my other hand to slowly pull the shorts down and off of her. I took one of her feet in my hand and pulled it up towards me as I leaned over to kiss her toes. My hand ran up the inside of her leg, continuing with light touches. I wanted to feel all of her. I wanted to know every inch of her skin. I wanted to taste her everywhere.

Everything is what you want.

I looked up to Bella, laying with her head resting against the pillows and looking back at me. Her lower lip was going to end up with teeth marks in it. I found the idea strangely arousing.

"Is this all right?" I asked. "Do you like this?"

Bella nodded her head, rather vigorously. I smiled and dragged my hand back down, stroking the inside of her other leg. I kissed each of her toes on each foot before I ran both hands up the outsides of her thighs and back to her hips. I used one finger to trace the outline of her panties around the tops of her thighs, where they met with her body. I felt Bella shudder under my touch and looked to her again. I slipped a finger under the top of her panties.

"Okay?" I pulled a little on the fabric. Bella nodded, and I slowly pulled them down her legs, leaving her completely naked in front of me for the first time.

The sight was completely indescribable.

I felt faint.

Vampires weren't supposed to get nauseous, have weak knees or panic attacks, and they certainly weren't supposed to swoon. But I felt like I could, because Bella was just that beautiful. She was all laid out on the blankets with her skin turning flush as I stared open mouthed at her and tried to come up with something articulate to say.

"Beautiful." It was all I could muster.

I kissed the insides of her feet, and then up the inside of her leg, all the way up close to where the two came together. I moved to one side, unsure how close she would want me to be to her in that way. My fingers continued where my lips had stopped, tracing up the inside of her thigh, then quickly over her mons and back to her stomach.

I moved back up and kissed her deeply, my tongue licking at her lips and mouth before I kissed up her jaw and back to her ear.

"So beautiful," I said softly. I continued moving my hands up and down her body. "I want to make you feel the way I feel whenever I look at you."

My hand brushed over her mound and then lowered slowly, barely touching her skin.

"Do you like it when I touch you here?" I asked her, needing to know.

"Yes," Bella whispered, her voice raspy.

"I'm glad," I said, smiling against her ear, "because I could touch you here all night long. I loved the way it felt when I touched you before, the way your body shuddered, and the way your muscles tightened around my fingers inside of you."

Bella let out a long moan. I ran my fingers lightly over her outer lips, and then dipped a finger between them. She squirmed against my hand, moving to increase the pressure. I pulled my hand back a little, waiting for her to settle before I kept going.

I let the back of my fingers caress from her slight mound of hair and then down between her legs. The pads of my fingers stroked her on the way back up.

"I can smell it, you know." I breathed cool air against the skin at her neck. My tongue reached out to taste her. "I can smell it when you are aroused."

I could hear the blood rushing into her cheeks.

"It's fantastic," I said. "Knowing you are aroused because of something I am doing to you. I want to make you feel like this every day, for the rest of forever."

I slid my finger inside of her, feeling how slick she was already, and ran my thumb over her clitoris. Bella gasped and her arms wrapped around my shoulder. I brought my mouth to hers, kissed her quickly, and then moved down over her chin and to the hollow of her throat. I dipped my tongue into the depression there, and then planted a trail of kisses between her breasts.

I slid a second finger into her and curled them both towards the back of the nerve bundle that was beginning to convulse under my touch. I moved my thumb with more pressure, but still slowly.

Bella's other hand reached up and held onto the back of my neck and she cried out, lifting the top half of her body off the bed. I stroked

her a little faster, bringing my fingers part of the way out of her, then back in again, circling around inside.

I was too close to her breasts to not to anything with them, so I covered them in open mouthed kisses, drawing her nipples into my mouth as I slid my fingers in and out of her. I could feel the tension in her muscles as her fingers dug into my shoulder and her back arched, effectively crushing her breast into my mouth.

I changed the angle and pressure with my fingers, ran my thumb up and over her clit, around in a circle, then turned my wrist to place the heel on my hand against the top of her pubic bone, applying pressure and moving back and forth as my fingers continued to caress her inside.

Bella's hips bucked up against me, and I could feel the muscles clamping down on my fingers. I switched breasts and sucked her nipple as I increased the speed of my fingers.

"Oh, God...Edward!" Bella screamed out, and I felt a shudder run over her body. She yelled out my name again, and I smiled against the soft flesh of her breasts. I continued to stroke her gently, slowing down but not stopping...not yet.

My fingers slipped from inside of her, and I started running one of them over her clitoris. Bella gasped and pushed her hips against my hand reflexively. I captured her lips with my mouth and felt Bella moan against me. I used two fingers to slide back and forth over her sensitive clit, knowing it would be particularly responsive after her orgasm. I pushed lightly against her, cupping her mound with my hand and rubbing slowly.

Bella cried out again, her fingers digging into my shoulder. I moved my mouth to her throat, gently kissing her pulse point and viciously ignoring how the throb on her carotid made my throat burn.

Bella convulsed and moaned again, her legs shifting against the blanket as she pushed against my hand once more before collapsing

back to the mattress.

I slowly caressed her, slowing my rhythm with each stroke. Bella's panting breaths slowed and I moved my hand over to her hip and brushed my lips lightly over hers. I sat back, looking down at her body, smelling how ready she was to receive me now, and despite the lectures from Harvard, still not knowing what I was supposed to do next.

I felt like there was some kind of moment of truth in front of me, and I suppose there was. I was so completely and utterly... *excited* , I couldn't contain what was going on inside of me. At the same time, I was terrified of letting it loose on the woman in bed with me, so I was entirely unable to move.

Because I was a completely open book to Bella, she sat up a little and brought her eyes to mine. She grasped both sides of my face and looked onto my wide eyes.

"Edward, what's wrong?"

"I'm scared," I admitted. "I might hurt you."

"You won't hurt me, sweetheart," Bella reassured me. It didn't help.

"He wants you, too," I said, my voice barely loud enough for her human ears.

"Who?"

"The one inside me," I whispered, as if the monster wouldn't hear me if I was quiet enough. "The monster inside me wants you...all of you...not just your blood. He might hurt you."

"You're going to keep him locked up, right?" I couldn't tell if Bella was asking or telling me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to gauge the monster's strength. Bella's mouth was on mine almost immediately, her teeth

nibbling on my lower lip. I felt her hands tugging at my already undone pants. I shifted my hips up a little, allowing her the access she needed to pull the pants down and off, along with my boxer shorts. She had to break her lips from mine to reach down far enough. I tried to collect myself again, but my brain was on overload.

Bella's hands were back in my hair, and I knew she was doing it to calm me. It might have worked if she hadn't slid her hands down from my hair, over my jaw and chest, and then down to my hips.

Mount, take, penetrate...

No, no, no – not now!

"Bella," my voice sounded harsh. "Please...stop...I can't...just stop a minute."

She did, and looked up to me for barely a second before wrapping her hands around my head and pulling me down to her chest.

"I want you so much," I groaned against her skin. "Too much. I can't think...if I move too fast..."

"Edward," Bella's hands cupped my face as she spoke, and she tilted me up to look at her. "I have an idea. Roll over onto your back."

I complied, and then Bella rolled along with me and tossed one of her legs over to straddle my hips. I gasped, my hands flying to her waist to hold her still.

"What are you...?"

"With me on top," Bella explained, "I'll be moving, and you won't have to worry about going too fast. Make sense?"

It did, actually. I nodded. Bella reached up and coiled her fingers back into my hair, allowing me to calm a little more before she continued. Her mouth met mine, and she kissed me gently, softly, her tongue just lightly teasing my lips before she placed small kisses up

my jaw and down my neck. I closed my eyes and tried to relax back into the mattress while Bella led the way.

Bella dropped one hand down to my shoulder while the other continued to run through my hair. Her hand traveled down my arm and over my hand, where I still gripped her hip. She took my hand in hers and pushed it up to her breast. I opened my eyes and hand to bring my other hand up to her other breast and watch them both as I touched them.

After a few minutes, she pulled my hands away and placed them up over my head. I took this as my cue to hold on to what was left of the bed's headboard – the metal frame. Bella moved down my body, planting kissed on my sternum as she went, until her hips were maneuvered over mine. I held my breath as I felt the slickness of her folds glide over the shaft of my penis as she moved herself into position.

I had wanted this for so long, and now it looked as though Bella was going to give herself to me in a way I don't think I had ever truly comprehended.

Happy Birthday to me!

Bella's hand wrapped around me and she stroked up and down a couple of times before I felt the head at her entrance. I dared to look down, feeling the warmth that was Bella's heated core over the tip, as she positioned me and slowly pushed down.

I tensed everywhere, forcing my body not to move, not to breathe, not to make a sound.

The feeling was completely indescribable.

Bella paused for a moment, took a deep breath and lowered herself until I was all of the way inside of her. I registered her groan as her muscles tensed around me and her weight rested on her hands against my chest.

Aside from the warmth, which I expected, and the clenching sensation as her internal muscles gripped me and seemed to naturally squeeze and pull in time to its own instinctive rhythm, it felt as though I was being caressed by a lightning bolt. It was excruciatingly magnificent.

Bella pulled back, and I slid out part way. I tightly gripped what was left of the headboard and I twisted my fingers around the metal frame, trying to keep myself from tearing it apart. I was panting, and my throat was burning with the scent of her blood and her desire. Bella pushed back down, encompassing me again.

I groaned, loudly, and pushed the back of my head against the pillow. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to hold my breath, but I couldn't. It just burst back out of me again, and my chest heaved with each inhale.

I opened my eyes again to see Bella, her face and breasts flushed, as she moved up and down over the top of me. When I looked between us and saw my body entering hers, coupled with the warmth surrounding me I nearly came undone.

Bella moaned above me.

"Bella..." I grunted. "So beautiful."

Her eyes opened, and she looked down to me and smiled, her tongue darting over her lips. She closed her eyes again and rocked against my pubic bone, keeping me deep inside of her.

All the same pressure, tension and tingling were there, but at least this time I knew what was coming. Somehow, that didn't stop my body from taking over at the last minute.

I didn't know how I got there, just that Bella was suddenly underneath me and my hands were running up and down her sides, holding her to me while I thrust into her as gently as I could. Her fingers were digging into my forearms, and it felt wonderful. I

changed the angle of my thrusts so I was hitting her clitoris on the downward stroke, and I heard her gasp and start to moan underneath me.

"You feel so good," I heard myself mumble against her chest. "I want to feel you come on me, Bella."

My hand slipped between us, and I found the head of her clit with my fingers and slowly began to rub against it. Bella cried out and bucked her hips upward. A few more strokes over her and I felt her vaginal muscles constricted around my shaft.

"Oh...yes...Bella...more!" I pushed against her with my fingers and felt her clamp down more as she screamed out.

"Edward!"

A more beautiful sound had never been heard before.

I grunted as I thrust into her a little faster, trying to maintain the control. My hands moved down to her hips, holding her where I wanted her to be as I moved in and out of her warm, tight, moist core. The pressure built to excruciating, then subsided a little, then built up again until my hands gripped her hips and pulled her against me, and I felt myself pouring into her, her name a prayer on my lips.

Maybe I blacked out. Could that happen to me? Add one more non-vampire-like thing to the list.

I was still breathing rapidly, with my head tucked into the side of Bella's neck. My arms were around her back, pressed into the mattress, while I used them to hold Bella's slight form against my hard chest.

I was still inside her. I was still buried to the hilt in her warm body and it would have been perfectly acceptable to linger right where I was for the remainder of my existence.

I placed my open mouth against the side of her throat and reached out with my tongue to lick the salt from her skin. I tasted her, and then brought my lips together in a quick kiss before holding her body tight up against me, my hand running from her shoulder down her side and back again.

"Can we do that again?" I asked. Bella laughed.

"I think you've worn me out, sweetheart. I don't have vampire stamina."

"You feel so good," I said into her neck. "You are my everything."

I pulled back, kissed her and ran my hands over her skin. When I shifted back more, I slipped out of her and groaned at the chilly air and loss of sensation. I glanced down our entwined bodies and ran my hand from her shoulder, down her side to her hip, and then over her stomach.

That's when I saw them. Bluish, purple marks all over Bella.

"Oh, God, no!" I yelled out and pushed myself off of her and away from her.

"Edward, what's wrong?"

"I hurt you," I moaned.

"No you didn't!" Bella contradicted. "Why do you think that?"

I reached over, very slowly and cautiously, as if I was going to hurt her again, and placed my hand on one of her hips. The marks matched up.

"I bruised you," I could feel my muscles tightening as the familiar panic settled in. "Oh, Bella – I'm so sorry. I promised I wouldn't...I didn't mean to...I never should have..."

"Edward Cullen!"

I froze at the sound of her voice and tentatively looked up to her eyes, which were blazing at me. I must have really hurt her if she was so angry.

"Are you listening to me?"

I nodded, afraid to move any more than that.

"Good, because if you start freaking out on me, I'm going to be pissed. Got it?"

I could only nod again.

"I bruise easily," she said definitively. "I always have. They do not hurt and you did not hurt me. That was one of the best moments of my life, and I'm not going to have you ruin it by making assumptions about how I feel! Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said quietly.

"Good! Now get back over here and stop thinking about it!" Bella grabbed my hand, and I moved back towards her. She pushed me onto my back and pulled the blanket part way up my chest. She wrapped the rest of it around herself and crawled over me, resting against my shoulder. Her hand came up and stroked my jaw, and I wrapped my arms around her.

"Are you sure it doesn't hurt?" I tried to keep the panic from my voice, but it just wasn't working. The marks were so obvious to me, and hiding her skin under a blanket, even under the pretense of warmth, wasn't going to stop me from knowing where they were or how they got there. Three of my fingers and my thumb on each hand perfectly matched the bruises on her hips. There were similar marks up a little higher, near her breasts and another one on the upper part of her left arm. I had done that to her.

"Edward!" Bella's voice was harsh and scolding. She raised her head from my shoulder. "Look at me."

I did as I was told.

"You didn't hurt me, sweetheart," she said, her voice softening. "I feel fantastic and that was absolutely wonderful."

"It really didn't hurt?" I finally asked, cringing a little, just in case she chastised me again. "I mean, when I went inside of you?"

"I thought it would," Bella said, shrugging her shoulders. She laid her head back down on my chest, her fingers splayed out and began gently stroking the few chest hairs I have. "I had always heard it would the first time, but it didn't – not at all. It felt wonderful, even the first time you went inside me. Maybe it was because your skin is so much colder than mine. Whatever – it felt great."

"Lubrication," I said with a smile, and my reason for getting the second medical degree made complete sense to me, though at the time it was mostly out of boredom.

"I think you got that part down very well, Mr. Cullen." Bella snickered.

"Bella?"

"Umm hmm?" Bella hummed back.

"Thank you," I said, kissing the top of her head.

"For what?"

"For my birthday present."

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Bella mumbled and yawned, nuzzling against my chest. My arms wrapped tighter around her shoulders, one hand stroking her hair. I felt the rise and fall of her chest slow and regulate just as the clock changed to two o'clock in the morning. It was the same approximate time I was born, if my human memories served my correctly.

I had done it. I made love to Bella and I didn't kill her. The bruising was still very upsetting to me, but she told me to stop thinking about it, so I was going to try. I listened to her breathing calm in sleep and leaned forward to kiss her hair, wrapping my arms around her body so I could hold her through the night. She wouldn't be able to get a full night's sleep, for there were only eight hours before Esme and Alice would arrive to take her home.

I wasn't a virgin anymore, and I found the thought to be strangely satisfying as well as unnerving. It had been the only sin I hadn't committed, the only part of me that had remained pure and innocent. I shook my head. No, it wasn't sinful, not with Bella. She was my love. She was my life. She would be my forever, and I would never want to be with anyone else ever again. Wasn't that at least part of the reason for marriage – to show your commitment to a single person? Adam and Eve didn't have a piece of paper from the State of Washington. I was fully and completely committed to Bella, so showing my love for her with my body could not be wrong. Everything I had done to her was an act of love and worship, and I had in no way defiled her.

Though my innocence was gone, I didn't think it was the worst of my remaining sins. There was definitely an overwhelming amount of lust traipsing around inside of me. I wanted to be inside her again now and maybe for the rest of forever. I wanted to destroy all her clothing so she would have to be naked all of the time. I wanted to think back through all the pages of the Kama Sutra and try every one of those positions with Bella. I wanted to listen to her scream my name while I slid in and out of her. *I want to take her over and over again...*

So much for virtue.

Chapter End Notes

"You want to cause my orgasm through manual manipulation?" – the height of romance. LOL

They finally did it! Woo hoo! 100 points to Real Bella! :)

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 –Mend and Bend

I lay with my head against Bella's chest and my eyes closed, pretending to sleep.

My arms were wrapped around her, holding her lightly so she could still move in her sleep if she wanted to do so. Bella's fingers were splayed out across the back of my neck. After I made love to her, Bella had moved a blanket between us so she wouldn't get chilled from my touch, but neither of us had bothered to dress. I was trying hard to "sleep" with her, and to not think about her naked body intertwined with mine or the fact that she would be leaving in just a few short hours.

My focus remained on her heart beat, and I tried not to count the ticks from the clock in the other room.

I rubbed my cheek against the skin at the top of her chest, right near her shoulder. She smelled good. She smelled like herself, and of course my throat burned from the scent of her blood, but I didn't care about that. She also smelled of me, in a strange and new way. As if the act of lovemaking had left my scent on her more so than common physical contact.

I tried to keep my eyes closed, because opening them was going to cause all kinds of problems. I chanted to myself, matching the rhythm of Bella's heartbeat, sometimes with only with the atrium contractions, sometimes both the atrium and ventricle contractions.

Sleep, sleep, sleep.

Love you, love you, love you.

Sleep, sleep, sleep.

I couldn't keep my body still. My fingers rubbed lightly against her side, and my arms tightened a little bit, just to hold her closer. I nuzzled my nose against her throat. I thought about every part of me that was touching her, even if it was through a blanket. I shifted my hips and felt myself rub against her thigh.

I was almost instantly aroused and wanted to be inside of her again. It was a strange feeling – the arousal itself obviously felt quite wonderful nestled up against her leg, but there was also some discomfort and the overwhelming desire to grind myself against her. I wanted friction. I wanted her hand on me. I wanted to feel her warm, wet flesh engulf me.

I opened my eyes. I just couldn't keep them closed anymore.

With my head on her chest, the first thing my eyes came across was the tops of her breasts. The blanket had fallen down...or maybe I had shifted it down...and her nipples were exposed. I could see her hair lying across her shoulder and my own arm lying across her waist with my elbow bent so my hand reached up to just under her shoulder. I held her to me and inhaled again.

There was a glowing red digital clock just on the other side of her, which gave me more information than I wanted, and constantly updated that information. At least it didn't tick, like the one in the other room. Currently, it was informing me that the time was 4:56 a.m. I had a little over five hours before my mother and sister would come to take Bella from me.

I hated that clock, and resolved to destroy it once Bella was awake and otherwise occupied. Maybe I would wait until she was gone. I had the feeling more than one thing might get demolished during that time.

I closed my eyes again.

Sleep, sleep, sleep.

Love you, love you, love you.

Sleep, sleep, sleep.

I opened my eyes again. This just wasn't working.

I tilted my head up and felt the corners of my mouth turn up slightly when I looked into her sleeping face. Her head was tilted to one side and her bottom lip was pulled a little ways into her mouth, held there with her teeth. Her hair lay across her forehead and over one cheek. I raised my hand, reached up and lightly pushed some of the strands off her face so I could see her better.

Of course, once I started touching her, I couldn't stop.

I knew this would happen.

I pushed the rest of the strands off her face. Then I ran my fingers lightly over her cheekbone, down across her cheek and then over her jaw line until I reached her lips. My touch was light, and she would have barely been able to feel it if she had been awake. I ran the tips of two fingers over her the top of her shoulder and part way down her arm. Wrapping my arm back around her, I held her body close to me again.

Of course, that movement managed to press my erection up against her thigh again. I shifted my hips away, regretfully, and lay my head back on her shoulder. My eyes dropped down again to her exposed nipples.

I couldn't help myself.

My touch was still light as I touched her right nipple with the end of my index finger, running a soft circle around the tip. I reached over and did the same with the left side. Both of them constricted beautifully for me. I used three fingers to lightly brush over the tops of both breasts, first pulling my hand towards me, and then back away from me, my fingers curling to touch her skin with the backs of

my fingers going the other way. The pad of my thumb ran underneath both breasts, over top of the blanket, and then back up to her nipples again. I had to, since the previous touch hadn't been enough to keep them contracted for very long, and I quite liked them that way.

I wanted to taste them, but I knew that would be pushing my luck.

I kept with the light touches, brushing my thumb over both nipples, running a finger over the tops and once daring to place a light kiss over the top of each breast. Then I switched, running my finger over her nipples and my thumb over her breasts. When I realized not all of my fingers had managed to touch her nipples equally, I tried to remedy the situation. Then I thought about my hand and arm currently trapped under Bella's body, and wondered if I should try to extract myself so they could have a turn.

I felt Bella's fingers run up my neck and into my hair, tugging softly through the strands.

I tilted my head up and met her eyes. I gave her a smile and a little shrug, silently grateful my pinky finger had just run over the second nipple, so everything was already even. Bella's other hand came up and stroked against my cheek, and I closed my eyes, leaning into her warmth.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking back to her. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Bella ran her fingers through my hair, and I couldn't help but smile at the feeling and at the memories from just a few hours previous.

"You look very pleased with yourself," Bella said.

"I was inside of you," I said, my smile growing. I wanted to laugh, because it felt so good, but it seemed laughter would be misplaced. I couldn't stop the smiling. I wrapped my arms back around her and hugged her to me. "I liked that."

"I can tell by your expression!" Bella laughed. Maybe laughing after sex was okay, because I sure did like it when she laughed. Bella reached up to touch my cheek with her fingers. "I liked it, too."

I quickly moved to give her a light kiss on the lips before snuggling back against her neck. Bella stretched and yawned, and then glanced over at the clock.

"I hate that clock," I mumbled under my breath. She still heard me.

"I don't think it's the clock's fault that time moves forward, sweetheart."

I kissed the palm of her hand near my cheek and hugged her gently, my hips pushing against her a little.

"Mmm," Bella hummed. She rolled towards me, pushed the blanket down and wrapped her leg over my hip. She held my head against her neck, where I nibbled her skin with my lips. I could feel the warmth between her legs.

I let my hand maneuver down and ran my fingers through her pubic hair and across her labia, then back up again. I could feel the moisture on my fingertips.

"May I make love to you again?" I whispered against her ear. Bella nodded her head. "You aren't sore? I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I'm fine."

I growled, and Bella laughed.

"I am not sore, and I want you to make love to me again."

My thumb circled her clitoris, and she moaned against my neck. I felt her tongue on my skin and her fingers pulled against my hair. I drew my fingers over her labia again, parting her folds and sliding first one finger, then another inside of her.

Bella drew in a sharp breath and raised her hips to meet my hand. I turned my wrist to place the heel of my hand over her clit and applied gentle pressure against her. She moved her hips and I matched her rhythm until sweat gathered on her skin and her breath was coming in pants against my neck.

Her muscles clamped around my fingers and she cried out, whispering my name as she came down from her orgasm. I caressed her softly for a minute before I rolled her onto her back and slowly pushed into her.

Bella's hands wrapped around my back, gripping just above my hips, and I set a slow rhythm against her, fighting against the urge to move quickly. I brought my head over her breasts and took her erect nipples into my mouth, licking and sucking them in turn as she began to moan under me again. I encircled her shoulders with my arms and continued to move slowly in and out of her.

I didn't want to increase the speed. I didn't want to orgasm, because I didn't want this to end. Somewhere in my warped mind I thought if I never ended this, she would never go.

Even with the slow rhythm, I could feel the pressure building up in my body. I tried to keep it back, but instinct or desire pushed me forward. I released her shoulders with my hands and reached up to grasp the mangled headboard. I held myself over her and quickened my pace until Bella's eyes closed and her head pushed back against her pillow, moaning then screaming as her hips bucked into me. I tried to match her speed, and my release followed quickly, injecting my seed into her body with a shudder.

I collapsed on her, and then quickly rolled, pulling her with me so I was still inside of her. I held her head against my chest and planted kisses on her hair.

"I love you, Bella."

"I know you do, sweetheart."

I smiled and nuzzled in her hair, inhaling her scent and letting it wash over me, burning my throat. Bella's breathing slowed and she slept on my chest.

The clock continued to update every minute. I hated it.

At 8:38 in the morning, Bella woke and tried to get out of my embrace to get herself ready to leave.

"Don't go," I pleaded, holding her tighter. "Please don't go yet."

"I have to be ready when they get here, Edward."

"I know," I said, "but there is still time."

"I need a few human minutes," Bella looked up at me pointedly. I reluctantly released her and watched her walk towards the bathroom.

I stayed outside the door, listening to her brush her teeth and shower. I quickly went back to the bed as she approached the door and walked out wearing only a towel wrapped around her chest and extending half way down her thighs. She blushed, and I realized I was staring at her unabashedly, but I didn't stop.

Bella moved to the dresser and started to remove clean clothing from one of the drawers. I rose to stand behind her, my finger tracing the line right above the top of her towel. I inhaled, basking in the scent of water and Bella. The damn clock changed again, announcing that I had a little over an hour with my love.

"Don't dress," I whispered in her ear with what I hoped was seductive tone.

"I haven't even packed up my things yet," Bella protested. She leaned back into me and turned so I could see her smile. "I need breakfast as well, after the workout somebody put me through last night."

"I'm sorry." I kissed her on the side of her neck and wrapped my arms around her waist. "I didn't mean to keep you up so late. Next time, I'll tear your clothes off and save time."

Bella laughed and shrugged me off of her. I sat down on the bed and tried not to appear too dejected while she dressed. When she was about done, I remembered that I should probably put on clothes as well, and dug out a fresh pair of boxers and jeans.

"No shirt today?" Bella cocked an eyebrow at me.

I just shrugged. It hadn't been a conscious decision. I just didn't want to waste time putting one on while she was still here with me.

"I kind of like you like this," Bella said softly. She reached up and ran her fingers over my chest from my sternum down to my abdomen. Her fingers didn't continue lower, but my body went ahead and reacted like they had anyway.

"I can take the rest back off, if you prefer," I offered.

"I'll starve if you keep making offers like that."

"I'll bring you breakfast in bed."

"As tempting as that sounds, I really have to get ready."

I sighed, placed my arm around her waist, my hand on her hip, and followed her into the kitchen. I kept my arms wrapped around her from the back as she flipped pancakes for herself. I placed kisses over her shoulder and pushed the strap of her tank top out of the way so I could get complete coverage. She must have had some sympathy for me, because throughout breakfast preparation, eating and cleanup, she put up with a lot more than she normally would have.

"When will you come back?" I asked. I had been avoiding the question, and now I was out of time. Bella had finished her breakfast

and packing. Her tattered suitcase clicked shut, the sound reverberating in my head.

"I don't know," Bella said. She picked up her suitcase and walked towards the door with it. I should have taken it and carried it for her, but I didn't want it to be packed and ready for her to leave, let alone next to the door. I felt immediately guilty for not offering. "Not exactly. As soon as I can be. I know Charlie will want me to stick around for a while at least."

"How will I know when you are going to be back?" I sounded like a whiny child, and I didn't care. What if she came back while I was hunting and I wasn't here?

Off in the distance, I heard Esme's familiar voice alongside the purr of a Mercedes engine.

"You're still sure he'll let her go?"

"Yes," my sister Alice's voice joined in. "He doesn't like it, but he will allow her to leave."

"I will call you," Bella answered.

"When?"

"When I'm on my way."

"Will you call me other times?" I asked.

"Of course, sweetheart," Bella said, placing her hand on my cheek to reassure me. It didn't work.

"How often?"

"Every night when I go to bed, okay?"

"Can't I just come to you?" I asked. "I could sneak into your house, maybe through a window. No one would know I was there."

"That doesn't seem wise," Bella said, shaking her head. "If Charlie sees you..."

"He wouldn't," I insisted. "I'd make sure he didn't."

All their thoughts came into my head as the car approached. *He* was with them, too, and I didn't want him to be. Alice was excited to see Bella and concerned about me. Esme's head was full of unconditional love, and additional concern.

His mind was full of...medical terms, which meant he was blocking me. Lovely.

"I don't know..." Bella's eyes narrowed as she considered my suggestion.

"Please," I said, pulling her back against me, trying to remember how to force the thoughts of others out of my head. I didn't want them there.

"Not this time," Bella said. "Maybe after things settle back down again."

I nestled my face in her hair and held her tighter.

"Please don't leave," I said. I knew it was useless, but I obviously wasn't above begging.

"Edward, I have to."

I turned her around and kissed her, my tongue tracing the outline of her lips before delving inside her mouth. My hands ran up her sides and danced over the sides of her breasts. I took a step forward, and Bella ended up with her back to the wall next to the door. I slid my hands back down to her waist and pushed my hips forward a little, trying to get some pressure against my groin.

"I want to be inside you," I murmured low into her ear. "Please?"

"It's almost ten o'clock," Bella said. "They could be here any minute."

"They're already here," I said. "They're out in the driveway."

"Edward! Why didn't you tell me?"

I leaned back to look at her and raised my eyebrows. The answer to her question was about as obvious as it could be.

"That's not polite," Bella chastised.

"Watching you orgasm is more important to me than etiquette."

Bella pursed her lips at me, and I ducked down to kiss them lightly. Then she opened the door, and my world suddenly crashed down around me as she walked out onto the porch holding her suitcase.

I saw my father's car with Esme in the driver's seat. Alice was standing by the passenger door. *He* was nowhere to be seen, but I knew he was nearby. I didn't want to acknowledge his existence by thinking his name. Besides, I had more important things to think about. I had to make some plans.

There was only one thing I could conceivably do to be able to let her walk away from me and remain even remotely sensible, so I made my decision. I would follow Bella to Forks, even if she didn't want me to do so. I would keep my distance, and she wouldn't even know I was there, unless she needed me. That way I could at least see her, and I had to be able to see her. Then maybe after her father went to sleep, I could enter her room through her window...

Immediately, my sister's eyes jumped to mine and she shook her head vigorously. Her visions danced in my mind.

I am standing outside of Bella's house. It's dark, and I can see Bella and her father through their kitchen window, talking. I hear him tell her she's not going anywhere and Bella arguing, tears in her eyes. I

am immediately on their porch, tearing the door from its hinges to get to her.

I am with Bella in a small room with a twin sized bed. My back is against the headboard and she is sitting on top of me, moving rhythmically up and down while I kiss her. My hands cup her breasts. I hear her father's voice outside the doorway.

Bella is in the schoolyard and Mike Newton is laughing and talking with her. He reaches up and runs his fingers through her hair. I am suddenly right next to them. I shove into his chest, and he goes flying through the air. The students gathered around gasp and stare at me wide-eyed as my skin glitters in the sunlight.

Alice stared at me, her eyes pleading.

You can't follow her to Forks.

Mike Newton, touching my Bella? Mike *Newton* ? Mike *fucking* Newton?

The thought of that pathetic, shallow child touching my Bella was enough to kill the erection derived from the penultimate vision. The whole "exposing myself to the entire teenaged population of Forks, Washington" was completely secondary. I heard a growl rising in my chest.

Edward...my son. What's happened to you?

I didn't want to hear Esme's mental voice any more than I wanted to hear any of the others. I think I wanted to hear her even less than I wanted to hear *him* . Even seeing her made my skin crawl with shame. My mother was disappointed in me, and that hurt. And as always, I could sense her underlying feeling of pity for me, which hurt even more.

"Edward?" Bella's hand was on my cheek. "What's wrong?"

"He's going to follow you," Alice called from the driveway. "Edward, you can't follow her. I've seen what will happen. You'll expose us all!"

"No! Edward, you can't do that!" Bella dropped her suitcase on the edge of the porch, cupped my face in both of her hands and looked up at me. I kept my narrowed eyes trained on Alice, about ready to spring at her for coming up with such visions, or at least for telling Bella about them.

"Edward, will you look at me?"

I shook my head.

"Well, you are going to listen, got it?"

I nodded.

"You are going to stay right here at this cabin while I am gone," Bella said in her "get the heck out of my kitchen before you start another fire" voice. "You are not going to Forks. You are not going to follow me. You are going to wait right here until I come back. Do you hear me?"

I snarled and clenched my hands into fists. My arms were shaking from the strain of holding still. I turned and slammed both fists into the wall of the porch before I sank down to the ground. Cracked bits of cedar siding fell along with me from the holes I had created. Bella knelt down in front of me, not letting me off the hook in the slightest, regardless of my tantrum.

"Edward! Are you listening?"

I nodded.

"Promise me," she insisted.

"I promise," I said, automatically. I'd decide what exactly I was promising later.

"Say it," Bella said. "Say the whole thing."

She knew me far too well.

"I promise," I said softly, surrendering to her. "I won't follow you to Forks. I'll stay here at the cabin until you come back."

I could hear the shocked thoughts of my family, but I pushed them away. I didn't want them here, and I definitely didn't want to hear them.

One of Bella's hands grabbed mine and held it while she kissed the top of my head. Her other hand stroked my cheek once more before she started to stand and leave. I wrapped my fingers around her hand, not gripping it tightly, but not letting go, either.

"No," I heard myself say.

"Edward, please," Bella said softly, her free hand reaching up to touch my cheek one more time. "Don't make this any harder."

Harder? Could it possibly be any more difficult than it already was?

I banged my forehead into the wall of the porch, making another dent, and held my eyes closed. I couldn't watch her walk away. I felt my arm stretching as she took the steps off the porch and her fingers slowly passed down mine until I could only feel the tips, and then she slipped away from me. I whimpered when the touch was gone, and fought to keep my muscles still, to not allow myself to go after her and drag her back.

As I listened to her footsteps on the driveway, I felt all the cohesion inside my head flow away from me, leaving my thought in scattered disarray. It was like all the synapses in my brain were now firing in the wrong sequence, and I felt an overwhelming sense of dread in addition to the array of emotions surrounding Bella's departure. I didn't feel *right* anymore. Something was definitely wrong with me

"It's not a good time, Esme," Alice said. "He won't listen to you now. I'm not sure Carlisle should stay, either."

"I'm staying," his voice rang out.

"It won't go well."

"I'm staying," he repeated.

I listened to Esme and Alice as they said their hellos and helped Bella into the car. I could hear their thoughts, but they didn't make any sense to me. The engine purred and gravel crunched as they drove away. The clouds opened up and light rain began to drizzle across the lawn.

He stayed behind.

I didn't acknowledge him. I didn't open my eyes or turn to him. I didn't want to talk to him. I preferred it when I thought he was only in my head. Maybe he was only in my head. I hadn't actually seen him.

Are you going to talk to me?

I didn't respond. Hopefully, he would get the hint and leave. I heard his frustration and indecision, but I didn't want to hear anything. I wanted my mental silence back. I wanted my Bella back. I could feel my hands starting to shake, demanding to find the warm skin they were addicted to touching.

Edward, we need to talk about what has happened.

I heard him walk up to the edge of the porch and then pause. I felt the growl in my chest as much as I heard it. Carlisle debated what it meant, and seemed to decide I wasn't actually threatening. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Please let me in.

"No," I snarled.

His footsteps vibrated through the wooden planks of the cabin's front porch. I felt his hand on the top of my head, and his cold fingers were so unlike what I wanted and needed to feel, I jumped backwards and scuttled on my hands and feet until I hit the wall by the door. I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around my head.

"Don't touch me!"

You must talk to me, Edward.

It's still "Edward."

I have to know what you are planning to do. Alice's visions are too haphazard, too uncertain. They change all the time. I need to know if you are going to return to our way of life.

I heard him move and felt his fingers closing in on me.

There was no actual thought to the action, it was purely instinctive. I felt threatened and had to react. Synapses fired, but not down any reasonable pathway. I shoved back against him, propelling him off the porch and into the gravel driveway. He rolled, righted himself and dropped into an innate, defensive crouch. The need to protect myself gave way to incredible, uncontrollable fury as every emotional pain I had ever blamed on him came pouring into my consciousness. I stood and thundered down the porch steps.

"You tried to take the only person who ever mattered away from me!" I screamed at him and dove, wrapping my arms around his chest and upper arms. We both flew into the shrubbery near the edge of the woods, where he shoved me off to the side.

Edward, what are you doing?

He was panicked. For once, my father was losing composure.

Good.

"I watched Esme take my place in your heart, and I was happy for you," I yelled, standing back up and walking towards him as he backed away from me. "I watched the woman you turned for me choose another, because it didn't matter. You pushed me to that succubus, and I endured living there for you, even though I wanted no part of her. When I finally find the one I need, you try to tear her away from me!"

I took a swing at him, heard his thoughts on which direction to parry and corrected my attack to fit. My other fist connected with the side of his head, sending him reeling.

"Everyone else had someone to go to. Everyone else had someone to share their existence. I had nothing. No one. And when I found what I needed, you kicked me out. You tried to take the one that was most important to me. The only one who ever made me feel like there was any reason to exist."

"You were torturing her!" Carlisle finally found his voice.

"It was better than killing her! Emmett would have. Jasper would have. But they still live under your roof and sleep with their wives, while the only person who knows how to deal with me is being taken away!"

"Emmett can slip up on a regular basis and Rose just smacks him across the head and forgets it... Poor Jasper's control just isn't that great, so Alice has to coddle him and tell him it's all okay. After *decades* of being your perfect son you abandoned me when I couldn't help what I was doing!"

I dove at him again. I was beyond rage, beyond fury, and beyond hope. All I could feel was the loss of her touch, and everything in my mind was despair, loneliness and rejection. Everything about this was wrong, and he didn't help me, so it must have been his fault. He was supposed to keep me from doing anything like I had done. He was supposed to lead me down the right path. He failed, so everything I did was his fault. He was the one who hurt her, not me.

Edward, stop it!

"You should have killed me!" I screamed at him. "Then I couldn't have hurt her! You let me hurt her!"

"Edward, you're not making any sense!"

Carlisle tried to grab me, but I ducked and spun away. I came at him, again, and we both toppled into a Douglas Fir, taking it down with us. With our limbs tangled in the branches of the tree, we rolled back out of the greenery and into the driveway. I managed to roll into my Audi and smash my head on the front bumper, creating a horrific dent and giving Carlisle just enough advantage to get a grip around my chest and shoulders.

I twisted and turned against him, snarling and growling, but I couldn't get loose. I kicked and I screamed, but he kept his grip on me. I was tiring – not physically, but mentally. His voice was in my head, yelling at me over and over again to stop. Combined with the recent entourage of Esme's thoughts and Alice's visions, I could no longer cope with the influx. My body tried to continue the fight, but my thoughts became fuzzy and vague.

Carlisle refused to relinquish his hold on me, and I finally gave into the emotional exhaustion, dropping my head against his chest. My breath came out in what should have been sobs, if only I could produce the tears to make it real.

Are you going to fight until you destroy me? Will that change anything?

"You were going to kill me," I said, my voice was shaky and unsure. "You thought about it."

I had to consider it. You didn't leave me with any other option. I couldn't let you kill a child. But I'd rather you destroy me than have you believe I don't care about you. I never did anything to intentionally hurt you.

"You abandoned me!"

You were beyond help.

"I needed you, and you kicked me out."

I couldn't help you when you did not want to accept help.

"You don't want me in the family."

Of course I do. I only said those things to try to get you to see reason. You needed to understand the gravity of your actions.

I was having difficulty comprehending what he was saying. Why would he say that if I could come back? Could I come back? I didn't understand.

"Am I still your son?"

Edward, you are still my son. You will always be my first child.

I breathing slowed as we sat there in the gravel, my father holding me and refusing to let me loose. Eventually, my struggles diminished to nothing, and I hung limply in his embrace.

Do you see yourself, Edward? Do you even recognize yourself as the same person?

"I'm not the same person," I said softly. "I haven't been since I first came into contact with her. Nothing matters to me except Bella."

Come home, son. Come home with me.

"I can't," I said.

Why not? You shouldn't be here alone.

"Bella told me to stay here until she got back," I mumbled. "Besides, I don't want to hear everyone's thoughts anymore."

She said you cannot hear her mind.

"Not at all. It's...heavenly."

She gives you the peace you couldn't find with me.

"Not since we were alone. When it was just us, it was tolerable. Now there are too many. I can't go back to that. It would make me worse than I already am."

Worse? How are you now? I don't understand.

"I'm not right anymore," I whispered. My eyes burned, and I wished again for tears. "She's the only one who can make me feel whole. She makes me feel human. When she's not with me, I can't think. Nothing makes sense and my mind just doesn't work. There's something wrong with me, but I don't know what it is."

I looked up into my father's eyes and his hold loosened.

"Help me," I pleaded. "Please, Carlisle. *Father*. I'm broken inside. I think I...I might be..."

I took a deep breath, trying to get the words out.

"How do I know if I'm insane?"

We sat in the living room, Carlisle sitting forward in the armchair with his elbows on his knees while I curled up on the far side of the couch. It was the same place Bella had held me yesterday and reassured me we could be together. I could still smell her on the little red throw pillow next to the arm, so I put my head down on it and inhaled, closing my eyes. Her smell reminded me of her soft skin and all the ways I could touch her now. That led to thoughts of being inside of her. I replayed the previous night through my head a couple of times, pausing at some of the best moments.

"Edward!"

My eyes flew open to find Carlisle crouched in front of me, his eyes full of concern. I furrowed my brow and looked at him.

You wouldn't respond to me. It was like you were when you were on the beach.

"I was thinking about her," I said.

Couldn't you hear me? My thoughts? My voice?

"No," I answered. "I told you...I'm not *right* ."

Did you tell Bella?

"What, that I think I'm crazy?" I laughed, but didn't find any humor in the statement. "No, that didn't seem prudent. She seems to know when I am hiding things from her, though. She probably does know. She knew about the straps, and I thought I was being pretty sneaky. If she knows...maybe she's not coming back. Carlisle! If she doesn't come back...!"

"Edward! Stop!"

I tried, but my hands were shaking even more, and I couldn't keep my thoughts in any kind of logical order. I went from considering what Bella might do if she thought I was crazy to thoughts on getting the Audi bumper fixed and making love to Bella in the shower all came at me at once.

"Edward...please," he said. Carlisle was still crouched in front of me. When did he move over here? "Can you even hear me?"

"Yes," I whispered.

I think it would help me understand if you start from the beginning. Can you focus enough to tell me?

"Yes," I said again. "I'll try."

Why did you take her? Why did you kidnap Bella?

"I couldn't stop myself," I admitted. "All the control I had for so long around every other human vanished as soon as I caught her scent. She smells so different from everyone else."

What do you mean she smells different?

"Her scent...it's so different than other humans. My throat burns like I haven't hunted in a month and it's like her blood is calling to me. Begging me to drink it. And once I tasted her...I was addicted. She's my drug of choice, and I had to have her. It was so hard to wait, even just three days."

What happened?

"I never experienced such...ecstasy. Her blood is the most incredible thing in the world. Can't you smell how different it is?"

Carlisle tilted his head to one side, considering.

I don't think she smells much different from any other human.

"She is different."

Perhaps she is only different to you?

"Emmett said he felt something like it before," I told him. "He killed her though."

I looked up at Carlisle pointedly. I wanted to accuse him of...of something. I just didn't know what. Why could Emmett get away with killing someone whose blood smelled so good, but I am tossed aside when I keep such a person alive?

If her blood was so appealing, how did you stop from draining her?

"If I killed her, it would be gone. I wanted more."

What about now?

"I still want it," I admitted. "But I love her too much to hurt her. I promised her I wouldn't hurt her. I can't break my promise to her."

You killed others.

I didn't respond. He knew the answer, and it wasn't really a question.

When you drank from the other humans, was it the same as Bella?

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Not the same. It was...like it always was. Better than the animals. Much better, but not like Bella. Bella is different...special."

Do you think you...lost your sanity when you tasted her blood?

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't think so, but it could be. No – I think it was later. Emmett thought it was because I was drinking from humans again, but there were only two. She was so angry with me when I killed her nurse. I don't want her to be angry with me. That's why I can't leave here."

"Edward," Carlisle said. I looked up to him. "Do you hear yourself? Do you hear what you are saying?"

"No," I said. I didn't understand what he was talking about. My body ached for Bella. Nothing else meant anything. Nothing else made any sense.

You have stopped killing humans, correct?

"Yes," I said. "At least for now. But I don't want to."

Edward, if you choose to live that way...

"I know," I interrupted his thought. "I don't want to do anything that would upset Bella, but..."

I took a deep breath and sat up on the couch, dropped the throw pillow to the side.

"You get used to it," I admitted. I hadn't thought much about it before, but it was making sense. Even the monster agreed with me, his head nodding up and down from behind the bars of his cage. Maybe if I let him out...only sometimes...she wouldn't know. "Bears...deer...they just aren't good enough anymore. I got used to drinking from Bella, but I won't hurt her again. I promised. Bella would be angry, if she knew. But I want to drink from humans. No one has to know."

What about those you intend to be your victims? Their families? Those that love them and do not wish to see them hurt?

"I could always find someone without a family," I said. "Someone who wants to die. Someone who is sick. I could make it easy for them."

It sounds like you have given this some thought. Are you trying to justify your actions?

"No...well, not exactly," I ran my hands through my hair, hating the lack of warmth. "But what if human blood is what I have to have to be sane? If I'm crazy, I have to fix it. I have to fix it so I can be right for her."

We have been through this before. You decided you didn't want to play God.

"I didn't have a good enough reason before."

Bella would not want you to do this.

"She doesn't have to know," I said pointedly. "When she goes back to school, she'll be gone from me Sunday evening until Friday

afternoon. If I drink Sunday night from humans, then from animals the rest of the week, there is enough time for my eyes to change. Bella doesn't have to know."

You can't hide that from her.

"I could," I insisted. "Unless you are planning to interfere again, she wouldn't know. She said I couldn't go back to school. Her father hates me."

Charlie...will be difficult, understandably. But Edward, you just said I abandoned you before. How can you expect me to both not interfere and not leave you to behave this way? Make up your mind.

I laughed.

"Make up my mind," I said slowly. "My mind is shambles. I can't make it up, nothing in there is right. I can't focus in there. Everything is a mess. I'm not really even sure if you are here. I have to get fixed. If I can't fix myself, how can I be with her? I love her. I made love to Bella."

You...what?

Carlisle stood up and took a few steps backwards until he dropped back down in the armchair.

"I made love to her."

He shook his head slowly, watching me intently. He wondered if it really happened, or if I had imagined it. He finally decided that it probably wasn't in my imagination.

That was incredibly dangerous.

"She asked me to," I told him. "It was my birthday present."

Son...what can I do? You asked for my help, but I don't know what you want from me.

"Tell me what's wrong with me," I begged. "I have to be okay for her. She deserves someone who isn't broken. I'm broken, Carlisle. Fix me. Please fix me."

He makes no sense, repeating himself, contradicting himself. Behaving so irresponsibly. Contemplating actions he swore not to do, both to me and to the girl he says he loves.

"I do love her!" I yelled.

"I know, son."

"Why am I 'son' again?" I asked.

You always were.

"No, you stopped calling me son. You were just saying 'Edward' all the time."

Carlisle shook his head, looking at me and trying to find answers that weren't written on my face.

There is definitely something wrong.

"Yeah, no kidding," I mumbled.

"You haven't told Bella any of this?"

"No," I said. "But I'm okay when she's here. I forget about it when I'm with her."

"When Bella is near you, you can think straight?" Carlisle felt the need to speak his question aloud, for whatever difference it made.

"Yes," I said. "I think so, anyway."

You had sex with her. That wasn't thought out or rational.

"I did not," I corrected. "I made love with her."

I understand.

"You do?" I said, really looking at him for the first time since we had come inside. "You know what's wrong with me?"

No, I'm sorry, Edward. I will have to do some research. Insanity in our kind isn't rare, but usually it occurs in vampires much older than you. Much older than me, as well. Before...recent events, you have always been level headed. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out, son. I'll help you.

"You will?" I didn't know if I was more shocked or more relieved.

Carlisle stood up from the chair and walked over to me. I tensed, sensing his desire to touch me, comfort me. I wasn't sure if I could accept it.

"Son," Carlisle said softly. He held his hand out to me, and I stared at it for a minute before I took it. He sat next to me and pulled me close to him.

I never abandoned you. You were always in my thoughts. I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do to help you.

"I don't think I made it very easy," I said.

Carlisle chuckled.

You never have.

"I love her."

I know, son.

"I don't know if I can be without her," I said. "I don't know how long she's going to be gone. If I knew when she was going to come back, maybe I could think."

I dropped my head on Carlisle's shoulder and felt his arm around my back. I was immediately reminded of days long, long past. There were various times in my past when Carlisle comforted me like he was now.

It was only the two of us in an apartment in Chicago, and it was right before he took me away from the city where I had always lived to somewhere more remote, where the constant desire to kill wouldn't be so great. He had just stopped me from killing someone in the alley outside the apartment. I hadn't noticed in my craving for blood that the person I was about to attack had gone to school with me. I was terrified of going back outside again.

"Control comes in time, son," Carlisle had said to me. I didn't believe him. I didn't think I would ever be able to be around humans again. Eventually, I learned through his teaching and his patience.

"I'm so proud of you, son," Carlisle had said to me when we moved into the London apartment, just a few weeks before I killed a man in the park outside – my first human victim. "You have learned so quickly to control your thirst. It won't be long before you will be comfortable going out on your own."

"It's all right, son," Carlisle had said to me as I had tried to stop my blood covered hands from shaking. "I shouldn't have tested you so soon. I should have known you weren't ready."

I shook my head, trying to rid it of the memories. Carlisle's arm around me tightened slightly. I saw it was dark outside, and wondered how long I had been sitting with him.

"I'm sorry, Carlisle," I said. "I'm sorry I killed those people. I don't want to kill humans. I just want Bella. I want to be right for her. I won't kill anyone – Bella would be so angry."

I know, son. I have to do some research, but we'll figure something out.

I nodded and sighed.

Come and hunt with me.

"I can't. Bella said I have to stay."

I don't think she meant to keep you from hunting.

I shoved off the couch and away from him, my anger and confusion returning with new ferocity.

"I don't know what she meant!" I screamed. "I only know what she said! She said I had 'to stay right here at this cabin' until she returned."

Edward, it's reasonable to think that she would let you hunt.

"I don't know what's reasonable, Carlisle!" I turned back to him and glared. "Don't you understand? I thought it was reasonable that if I only took a little blood, it wouldn't really hurt her. I thought it was reasonable to tie her up. I thought it was reasonable to kill the woman who was going to try and keep her from me."

Somehow, I managed to find myself right in front of the ticking clock. *The fucking, ticking clock.* I pulled it from its hook, mangled it and threw it across the room. It imbedded in the wall with a thud.

"I'm not reasonable!" I yelled at him. "I can't go by what I think! I have to do what she says! If I don't, she'll punish me again!"

Punish you? She punished you? How can a human punish a vampire?

"She didn't let me touch her," I said. Thinking about her punishment made me focus. I didn't want that to happen again, so I had to try and keep myself together before I did something wrong. I couldn't go hunt with Carlisle – she said to stay here. "After I killed someone, she said I couldn't touch her for a day. It was...horrible. I have to

touch her. I have to feel her skin...it's warm. I need to touch her to feel right. If I do something wrong again, she'll make it for longer."

You feel you have to have physical contact with her in order to feel 'right?'

I nodded.

I may want to talk to her about this as well. Will that be all right with you?

"No," I said. "I don't want her to know."

It might be necessary.

"Not yet," I pleaded.

All right. Only as a last resort, then.

"I want to go to bed," I told him.

"To bed?" Carlisle questioned.

"It's getting late," I said. "Bella will be going to bed soon. I always go to bed with Bella."

But you will stay here?

"Yes," I answered.

No hunting? Is that wise?

"No hunting," I confirmed, and I was sure it was not wise. "I'm not very thirsty. Maybe something will come close to the cabin. I'll watch for deer in the morning. She didn't say I had to stay inside. She said 'at' not 'in.'"

Carlisle spent a few more minutes trying to convince me Bella wouldn't mind if I hunted, but I wouldn't budge. Eventually he gave

up and refocused on where to start his research. Once he was gone, I decided to do a little cleanup. I walked into the kitchen and put the dishes that were in the drying rack back in the cabinet, and then I pulled the clock out of the wall and threw it in the trashcan. When I went into the bedroom, I saw the other clock and beat the living shit out of it.

I was definitely not myself. Or maybe I was. The thought scared me.

I saw a strip of blue almost hidden under the edge of the bed and leaned over to pick it up off the floor. It was the top to Bella's pajama set – the one she wore for me. I held it up to my face and inhaled, my throat burning from her scent.

I stripped off my jeans and dropped into the bed wearing just my boxer shorts and still clutching Bella's pajama top. Between the pajamas, the sheets and the pillows, Bella's scent positively engulfed me, making me groan. I grabbed one of the pillows, placed the blue silk over the top of it and held it against my chest and closed my eyes. It smelled like her, so I could pretend it was her while I pretended to sleep. Pillow Bella wasn't as bad as Sand Bella. At least, I didn't think so. Wasn't it common for humans to hug the pillow of the one they loved when they weren't there? I knew I had seen that in movies on more than one occasion. And I was pretending, not hallucinating. Not yet, anyway. I was fairly certain that distinction was an important one. I was also willing to admit that whatever I may be certain about was probably suspect.

There was no more ticking clock in the outer room, and no more digital clock in here. I still had a pretty good idea about how much time was passing, but I didn't want to acknowledge it.

Bella said she would call every night, but she hadn't called yet.

As the dawn began to cast shadows around the room, I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to acknowledge the passing of night into day. I clutched the pillow closer to me, and told the part of me that was

watching my internal clock that it meant nothing. She'd call tonight instead.

But she didn't.

She didn't call the next night, either.

I think Carlisle came on the third day, but I didn't open my eyes and didn't respond to him.

On the fourth night, my phone began to play Chopin's Nocturne in F Sharp Major. I didn't recall downloading the ringtone, but I knew exactly who was calling as soon as I heard it.

"I miss you," I said immediately.

"I miss you, too, sweetheart," Bella replied. "I'm sorry I couldn't call. It's a long story, but basically Charlie surprised me with a trip to see my mom in Florida."

She had been so far away, and I hadn't even known where she was.

"I stayed here," I told her, wanting her to know I was being good and had done what she told me to do. Of course, I had been in a physical fight with my father, which reminded me of the joke I had told her. I guess I wasn't a good boy after all.

"Thank you, Edward," Bella said. "When Alice told me what might happen if you came to Forks...I can't let that happen."

"If Mike Newton ever touches you, I'll kill him," I mumbled, immediately sorry the words had come out of my mouth.

"Edward! Why would you say that?"

"Alice's vision," I admitted. "In her vision...he was touching your hair."

"Sweetheart, I really can't imagine Mike Newton or anyone else doing that. It's not like I'm Miss Popular at Forks High. If I'm lucky, they'll all forget I exist when school starts up again."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Bella said with a sigh. "Not now, anyway. Tell me what happened after I left. Did you talk to Carlisle?"

"Yes," I said.

"And?"

"And, what?" I wasn't sure what she was getting at. Did she know we fought? Did she know he was going to try to find out if I was crazy? Oh no, she knew. She knew I was insane and she wasn't coming back.

"Edward, are you listening?"

"Um...yes?"

"I said, did you and Carlisle make up?"

"Yes," I said, relief washing over me.

"Good! I was hoping you would."

"What did you do in Florida?" I asked her.

"Not a lot, really. After I got home, Charlie waved two plane tickets in my eyes, asking me if I was ready to turn around and get on another flight. I hadn't seen my mom since Christmas, so I couldn't really argue. When we got there, it turns out Mom's phone had been cut off because she forgot to pay the bill."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I heard myself say. I should have given her a cell phone. I'd have to go and get her one.

"Edward, I'm the one who is sorry. I know I said I would call..."

"It's okay," I said softly. "It doesn't matter now. When will you come back to me?"

"I'm not sure yet," Bella sighed. "Charlie got me a summer job at... um...a store, and I start on Friday."

"Why did you get a job?"

"Money for college, of course."

"You don't have to do that," I told her. "You can go to any college you want. I'll take care of you."

"Oh no, Edward," Bella's tone became serious. "You are not going to do that, and we are not going to discuss this right now. I am just not up for it."

"All right," I said, not wanting her to be angry with me. I didn't want to hear her anger; I wanted her voice when she was happy. I wanted to hear the tone she used when she called me sweetheart. Hearing her voice was like hearing long forgotten melodies, but it wasn't enough. I still couldn't focus.

"What are you doing now?"

"I just got unpacked," Bella said. "I still have some summer reading to do, so I'm trying to get caught up on that."

"What are you reading?"

"Romeo and Juliet."

The balcony scene ran through my head, and I thought about coming to her window at night and serenading her. I thought about the alternative, which was laying here holding her pillow and not actually seeing her or touching her.

"I don't think I can do this," I said into the phone. "I miss you. I want to see you, Bella. I need to touch you."

"Edward, I want you, too." I could hear Bella sigh into the phone. Her tone changed slightly. "But Charlie would freak out if he saw you."

"He won't see me." I sat up straight, recognizing the slight vocal variations that indicated Bella was reconsidering. The resolve from our prior conversation was certainly gone.

"I think I'll be able to get away Saturday," Bella said. "Charlie's supposed to go fishing."

If I had to wait another three days to see her, I would definitely lose whatever semblance of control I had left. There had to be some way to convince her I could see her without him noticing me. Didn't she remember how quiet I can be? Of course she does, so that avenue won't work. I decided on a new tactic.

"I saw Alice's vision of us," I said softly. "I think it was your room. You have a purple blanket, right?"

"Yes I do."

"I saw her vision," I repeated. "We were in your bed, and I was up against your headboard."

"Hmm..." Bella hummed. "Where was I?"

"In my lap," I said, feeling the corners of my mouth turn up. "You were moving up and down on the most peculiar way..."

"Oh was I now?" I could hear Bella stifle a giggle. "What exactly are you suggesting, Cullen?"

"That one of the most wonderful sights I have ever seen is you on top of me. Watching myself go inside of you was...indescribable. It is almost as good as feeling you come on me."

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"You are...um...getting me a little..."

"What, Bella?"

"How fast can you get here?"

The run took about eight minutes, and I drained a buck along the way, just to be safe. The last time I went to her house I had also drained a deer, but this time I would not hurt Bella. This time I would make her feel wonderful. This time I would hold her against me and bury myself in her and she would say my name softly so we didn't wake up her father.

I crawled silently up the tree outside the upstairs window and saw the same bedroom from Alice's vision. Through the walls of the house, I could hear the police chief's snoring. The window protested a little when I pushed it open, but still allowed me relatively silent access. As soon as my head was through, I could see her. Bella was sitting up in the middle of her bed in a nearly see through, very short pink nightgown. I could tell the panties matched, and she wasn't wearing a bra. *She's waiting for me.*

So much for separation.

Chapter End Notes:

Taking some chances, aren't they?

So, what do you think is "wrong" with Edward? Can he be fixed?

More tomorrow!

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 – Realize and Rationalize

As soon as I felt Bella's hands in my rain-drenched hair, my tensed muscles relaxed and my mind cleared. Well, maybe it wasn't that my mind was clear, but it was completely and utterly occupied with thoughts of her. Since those were the thoughts that most held my interest, it felt right to me. I could hear the beat of her heart, smell the blood flowing through her vessels, and feel the warmth of her body. She was all that was in my head and nothing else mattered. My hands found her waist as I crawled over top of her, pushing her into the mattress and attacking her lips with mine.

"Thank you," I mumbled into her mouth.

"For what?"

"Letting me be here." I wrapped my arms around her back and held her to me. "I missed you. I don't like being away from you."

"I missed you, too," Bella said. She reached out with her tongue and passed it over my lips. Her hand ran down my bare chest. "I can't believe you came over here like this."

I wasn't sure what she was talking about until I looked down at my near naked form and realized what she meant. In my haste to get to her, I hadn't bothered to dress and was still clad in only my boxers.

"I guess I was in a hurry," I admitted, smiling. I pressed my lips back against hers and let my hands reacquaint themselves with the skin of her neck, her arms, her waist, and her back. I felt her fingertips grace over my shoulder blades, around my shoulders and down my arms. My mouth moved to her chin and down the front of her neck before finding its way back up to her ear so I could take the lobe between my lips.

"I'm sorry I didn't call," Bella said, stroking my cheek. "I wanted to, but Charlie has been hovering. He barely gives me a minute to take a shower by myself. He thinks you are going to come here and steal me away."

"He's right to be concerned," I said. My lips moved around the line of her jaw and over to her other ear. "There is nothing I want to do more than take you back where we can be alone all the time."

"Edward, you can't..."

"I know," I interrupted. "I won't do it, but that doesn't stop me from wanting it."

"Someday, Edward," Bella said. I felt her lips on the top of my head, and I nibbled the skin of her throat with my lips. "For now, we'll have to make do with the time we have."

"It hurts to be away from you," I said, too softly for her to hear my words. Bella's hand caressed over the hard skin of my back, and the ache I had been feeling since she left demanded attention. I ran my hand over her stomach and on to her hip, then moved around to grip her backside and pull her flush against me. Bella let out a gasp.

"Ouch!"

I jumped back and pulled my hand away.

"What? Did I hurt you?" My mind dwelled on the bruises I had left on her, and I wondered if they still hurt after all these days.

"No, not you," Bella said, rubbing against her rear. I stared at her, confused. "It was Carlisle."

I ran through at least two dozen scenarios that fit what she just said, and none of the results were satisfactory. When had she seen my father and what in the name of all that is holy had he done to her?

"Carlisle?" I tried to keep my voice from indicating the boiling rage trying to release itself from my gut. If he laid a hand on her, I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do about it, but it wasn't going to be pretty. My hands were starting to shake, and I wanted to reach out and touch her skin in the hope that it would stop the trembling.

"He was here a couple of hours ago," she said. "He was... concerned."

"Bella," I said softly, trying to keep my composure. "Please explain before I lose it."

"It's okay, Edward!" Bella exclaimed, noticing my impending fury. She reached out and took my hands in hers and brought them back to her waist. Her hands cupped my face. "He came while Charlie was watching the game and he um...he had me take a pregnancy test."

"A what?"

"He wanted to make sure I hadn't gotten pregnant," she said, dropping her eyes from mine. "He gave me a pregnancy test and then a birth control shot. He didn't know if you could...um...you know...get me pregnant, but he wanted to be sure."

I was, without a doubt, the biggest idiot in the vampire world.

It hadn't even occurred to me to take precautions in that area. I had just assumed nothing like that worked for me anymore, the same as the rest of my internal organs. In my wildest imagination I didn't think I had the potential to impregnate Bella, and hadn't even thought to ask her if she wanted to use some sort of protection. If I caused her to become pregnant, what in the world would the child be?

"Are you...?" I couldn't even complete the question.

"No," Bella said. "At least, Carlisle didn't think so. But um...he did give me these."

Bella opened up the drawer by her nightstand and brought out a box of condoms.

"He said the shot wouldn't be effective until twenty-four hours had passed, so we have to use these until tomorrow. I told him they weren't necessary, but apparently, he had an inkling you might be here tonight. Alice, maybe?"

I nodded and took the little box with the word "Trojans" written across it. The top was opened, so I reached in and pulled out a little square wrapper. I could feel the ridge of the round object inside through the packaging.

"I have never..." I stumbled over my words – again. I had never so much as looked at a condom, let alone tried to use one for its intended purpose. "I mean, I'm not sure how to use them. I know you have to put them on the right way for them to be effective."

"Carlisle showed me how."

"He *showed* you?"

"Oh, Edward! Not like that!" Bella sighed and nodded her head towards a trash basket next to the nightstand. Inside, there was a foil packet, an unrolled condom and a banana peel. I looked from the basket, to Bella, then back to the basket again.

"I ate the banana after he left," Bella said with a blush.

Thoughts of Bella rolling a condom on a banana, then peeling it and wrapping her lips around it rampaged through my mind. The thoughts continued along their merry way with a mental image of Bella rolling one of the condoms onto me instead. Then the thought of her lips around me in that way overshadowed any other coherent thoughts I might have had on the subject.

Add hyperventilating to my list of non-vampire-like traits.

"Are you okay?" Bella's hand stroked over my cheek. I nodded and tried not to think of the conversation she must have had with Carlisle. I was both perturbed that he would be so forward with her as well as relieved he had taken the initiative since I obviously hadn't considered the possible consequences.

"You will...put it on me?"

"Yes," Bella said softly.

"Now?" I asked. "I really want you now."

Bella giggled and took the little square wrapper out of my hand and tore it open. I moved off of her and sat up against the headboard. Bella positioned herself on her knees between my legs and quickly removed the only garment I had managed to wear to her house. Once the boxers were out of the way, her hand stroked up my shaft, and I gasped. My hands went to her hips, and I had to stop myself from holding her too tightly. I could see the remnants of her bruised skin through the lightweight material of her nightgown. They had almost healed, and the last thing I wanted to do was add to them.

Bella's eyes flicked up to mine, and then back down to her hand as she slowly moved it up and down, caressing me gently with her warm, soft fingers. She brought the hand holding the prophylactic closer and placed it over the tip. I watched intently as her fingers gripped the end of the condom and she unrolled it over me. My breathing increased as Bella reached the base and ran her hand back up one side and down the other. She looked up at me and smiled.

"I think I got it right," she said with a blush. I ran my hands from her hips up her sides and to her face before I pulled her close to me and found her tongue with mine. While I kissed her, my hands went back down until my thumbs hooked into the elastic of her panties, and I began to push them down her legs. Without waiting for them to be completely off, I reached between her legs with two fingers and began to stroke her softly, spreading her moisture around.

Bella hummed into my mouth, and her hands came up to rest on my shoulders. She ran them across my chest and back again, then up the sides of my neck. She broke the kiss, panting, and I tilted my head back a little as she planted kisses down my neck.

My hands found their way inside of the little sheer top she still wore, and they gently caressed the outsides of her breasts, then around to the front. My thumbs ran over her nipples, making them contract a little before I rolled each nipple between my thumbs and index fingers, watching the movements through the material.

Bella gasped as I pulled on them slightly, and raised up to capture my mouth with hers. Her hand dropped down and pushed her panties off her legs before she straddled my waist. With her panties out of my way, I lifted her slightly by her hips and lowered her over me. The feeling as her flesh surrounded me was decidedly different through the condom, but the soft warmth was still deliciously satisfying. I lowered her slowly until I was completely encompassed by her body.

"Oh Edward," Bella moaned against my lips. "That feels so...right."

"Hmm..." I hummed, agreeing with her completely. "There is nowhere I would rather be than buried inside of you."

Bella raised herself up, and then lowered herself over me again. She broke our kiss and leaned back, bending me in a new angle inside of her and offering me a beautiful view of my hands on her breasts underneath her sheer top. Bella closed her eyes and threw her head back, moaning at the sensations as she continued to move herself up and down over me. I could feel pressure building up inside of me, and watched Bella reach down between us to stroke herself. Her muscles contracted around me as she increased the pace of her movements with another low moan. Her lips crashed back down to mine, and I ran my hands over the soft flesh of her breasts.

I should have recognized the scene.

I heard his snoring stop first, then the slight change in the timbre of his thoughts. Charlie was awake, and trying to figure out what had caused him to stir. I tried to focus on his thoughts and movements, but Bella raised herself up and dropped back down against me, her vaginal walls wrapping tightly around my shaft and bringing us both closer to the brink of ecstasy. Charlie was momentarily completely forgotten.

"Bella?" The voice was followed by a short, sharp knock.

Bella froze with me still buried deep inside of her as the cusp of her orgasm faded away. My body screamed for continued friction, while my mind tried to tell me to get the hell out of the room. Bella's terrified eyes met mine and brought me around to the situation at hand. My mind and body fought for control over my next action, because a decidedly large part of me wanted to just continue on and forget Bella's father was outside the door.

As my head finally managed to form a coherent thought, I raised Bella off of me with vampire speed, lay her back down in the bed, covered her with her blanket and dived into the closet just as Charlie's head peeked through the door.

"Ah...what is it Char...er...Dad?"

"I thought I heard something," Charlie said.

"Well, I was asleep," Bella said. Her tone was completely unbelievable. She didn't even sound tired, let alone like she had just been awakened. "Maybe I was talking? I still do that sometimes you know."

"Yeah, I guess." I watched Charlie's eyes scan the room slowly.

"Why the heck is your window open?"

"I was hot," Bella responded.

"The AC is on," Charlie said. "Do you think I want to air condition all of Forks?"

"Sorry," Bella mumbled.

"Close it," Charlie said.

Of course, Bella was only wearing the top half of her sheer night attire. Getting out from under the blanket was going to be a little problematic. Bella stayed in the bed, eying Charlie wearily.

"Can't I just leave it open for tonight? I like the fresh air."

"No, I said close it, Bella. I'm a little tired of you arguing with me about everything."

"I don't argue about everything," Bella snapped back.

"You have argued about anything and everything since you ran off with that delinquent."

"Edward is not a delinquent," Bella mumbled. Her eyes darted over to the closet door and back again. Thankfully, it was too dark for Charlie to notice.

"Don't even start with me," Charlie retorted. "He isn't back for the summer, is he?"

"Do we really need to talk about this now?" Bella asked. "It's the middle of the night!"

"Fine," Charlie conceded. "Shut the window."

He closed the door with a bang, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I listened intently as Charlie considered calling my parents in the morning to see if and when I would be returning to Forks, and to reiterate he would get a restraining order if he needed to do so. He mumbled to himself about trying to raise teenagers in this day and age before he drifted back off to sleep.

"Oh my," Bella whispered as I came back into the room and silently slid the window closed. "Why didn't you hear him wake up?"

"Um...I did."

"You did?" Bella struggled a little to keep her voice low. "Why in the world didn't you say anything?"

"I was a little...distracted," I admitted. I looked up to her as I crawled back into her bed and gave her a half smile. "You feel so good. How can I concentrate on anything but you?"

My hand found her thigh, and I traced a line up to her hip. I covered her body with mine and nipped at her jaw.

"Is he asleep now?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive," I answered. "Are you nervous now?"

"Yes," Bella sighed. "Having your dad walk in on you is definitely a little nerve wracking!"

"Do you want me to stop?" I asked, silently praying she wouldn't make me do so, since I was fighting to keep myself from plunging back into her as hard as I could. I didn't care for being interrupted, but my reasons didn't have to do with embarrassment. I just wanted to be back inside of her.

"I don't want to stop," Bella finally said.

Thank you, God.

She put her hand against my shoulder, and I let her position me back against her headboard before she straddled my hips and took my penis in her hand. Her fingers danced over the outside of the

condom before she positioned me at her opening and sunk down until I was once again complete.

My hands found her breasts and my lips found her mouth. I tried to remain mostly still and completely silent as I let Bella move up and down over me in whatever way she liked. She broke away from my lips and tucked her head against my shoulder, breathing hard as she used my body in the most wonderful way to bring herself back to the brink.

"You feel so good," I whispered, bringing my mouth to her ear. "I can feel it when you are close."

"Ugh...Edward...keep talking."

She liked my talking? I tried to think of what to say, my mind a turmoil of incomplete thoughts and a thousand sensations. My hands reached back up to find her nipples under her top.

"I love the way I can feel your reaction to this," I moaned against her ear as I pulled a little on her nipples, "all the way inside of you. I can feel every muscle inside of you grip me tighter. Oh...God, yes, Bella! Just like that!"

I had to fight to keep my voice from becoming too loud as her muscles clamped around my shaft and her body shuddered around me. Her hands gripped my shoulders, and she let out a little muffled, squeaky moan.

It was enough to send me over the edge, the pressure building up and passing over me in waves before my leg muscles tensed and I released inside the covering of latex wrapped around me. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her to my chest and pumping my hips upwards and into her a few more times before I collapsed against the headboard and closed my eyes.

"You have to take it out right away," Bella said through heavy breaths. "Carlisle said so."

I reached between us and held the edge as I pulled out of her, missing her warmth immediately.

"I don't think I like that rule," I grumbled, pulling the strange thing off of myself, looking at it and wondering what I was supposed to do with it now. Bella blushed, and pulled a couple of tissues out of a box on her nightstand and handed them to me. I wrapped it up and tossed it on top of the banana peel.

"Did you, um..." Bella stammered. "Did you not like it?"

"It was different," I said, "but making love to you is perfection, in any form and with any variation."

I slid down and held her against my chest again, listening to her breathing and heart rate return to their normal resting state, though not into sleep.

"Edward, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," I responded.

"Before we...um...did it the first time, you said something that confused me a little," Bella admitted. "When you were talking about not being experienced, you said you could have been if you had known. What did you mean by that?"

Had I said that? I guess I had. At the time, I was thinking about Tanya and her...advances. She had wanted to teach me about sex, which meant I would have known just what to do with Bella. I would have known what it was going to be like. But Bella had said she liked that I was in the same position as she, and when I thought about it now, I was also glad we had only been with each other. The thought of someone else touching my Bella in that way made my thoughts turn...murderous.

"It's not important," I said, trying to dismiss it. I started kissing her neck, then up to her ear, hoping to distract her. I really didn't want to

tell her about Tanya, because something about Bella's tone was making me a little nervous.

"Okay, it's not important," Bella said, but didn't let me off the hook. "So what is it then?"

"Um..." I stammered, not liking this discussion at all. "I just meant if I had given in...in the past, then I would have known what to do."

"Given in to...what? Or who?"

"It was a long time ago," I said softly.

"Why are you being so evasive?"

"I'm not," I insisted. Okay, I was, but I didn't want her to think that.

"So there was someone before me then?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Then why are you sandbagging?"

"I don't mean to be," I said. "It just...wasn't important at the time, and it definitely isn't important now."

"Out with it, Edward."

I closed my eyes and sighed before I sat back and took her hand in mine.

"There was someone a long time ago who had..." I tried to find the right words. I took a deep breath before continuing. "Someone who had expressed some interest. But I wasn't interested in her, so there isn't anything to tell you."

"Who?"

"Her name is Tanya."

"Is she another...vampire?"

"Yes."

"Do you still see her?"

"Not for some time now, but yes, she visits us sometimes. She and her family are rather like an extended family to us. They are vegetarians, like my father's family."

"Where does she live?" Bella's voice was low and somber. I had never heard this tone from her mouth before, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Alaska," I told her. "Really, Bella, there isn't anything to tell. She wanted to establish a relationship, and I told her I wasn't interested."

"What does she look like?"

I really didn't like where this was going.

"She's pale and has gold eyes, just like the rest of us."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Not compared to you," I replied. Bella snorted.

"That's a yes then."

A thought occurred to me.

"Bella, are you jealous?" I couldn't help but smile a little. The idea that Bella wouldn't want another female to be interested in me was kind of fascinating.

"No!" she cried out. "I was just...curious. You are all so beautiful."

"Camouflage," I mumbled. "We look this way to attract our prey."

"It works," Bella said, smiling again. She reached over to her nightstand and flipped the switch on top of the alarm clock. Her lips touched mine softly, and she snuggled back against me.

"Edward, you're going to have to go when the alarm goes off," Bella told me.

I furrowed my brow, but didn't say anything. I had the feeling the clock wasn't going to make it past the next hour, let alone the rest of the night.

"And don't even think about doing anything to the clock," she added, pulling my head against her shoulder and winding her fingers into my hair. I growled, but still nodded my acceptance. Bella's lips touched my forehead briefly before she fell into sleep.

The alarm went off at 4:45. Bella hit the snooze button and yawned.

"You have to go, sweetheart."

"I don't want to!" I didn't even care how I sounded. Too much time had passed since I had been with her, and this little bit wasn't enough to make up for it. The thought of more days without her touch was unfathomable.

"We can't risk this, Edward," Bella said definitively. "I know you think it will be all right, but Alice told me how bad it could be. We got lucky tonight. I don't want Charlie to find out you are back in the area. You need to go back to the cabin and stay there. I will be there Saturday morning, as soon as Charlie leaves on his fishing trip. It's an overnight, so I can stay with you until Sunday evening."

I closed my eyes against the skin at her shoulder and sighed. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave her, but I would, because she wanted me to leave, and because she promised she would be with me again. Something about having a definite time frame seemed to help a little. I pushed myself up and out of the bed and slipped my boxers back over my legs. On the corner of the bed were Bella's

sheer pink panties. I picked them up, looked pointedly at her and held them to my chest, silently asking her permission to steal them.

Bella smiled and nodded, then gave me a final kiss, which I think was meant to be quick, but I managed to prolong it for a minute before she pushed against my chest and pointed to the window.

I ran slowly through the darkness, the urgency of my previous run completely gone. I didn't hunt along the way, but took myself straight back and clambered back into the bed. I put the pink panties alongside the blue camisole inside of the pillowcase, so Bella wouldn't see them when she returned.

The next day was graced by a visit from my father. He sat in the chair across from me while I sat on the edge of the couch and tried not to run back into the bedroom for my Bella-scented pillow.

"I'm going to need more information, and I'm not sure you can provide it," Carlisle told me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"To put it bluntly," Carlisle said, "your account of the entire situation is suspect, at best."

I can't trust what you say to be accurate.

"You think I am lying?"

Of course not, but I don't think you are in the best situation to know truth when you see it. Sometimes I am right in front of you and you do not know I am there. How can I trust your recollection of what has transpired?

"What are you getting at, Carlisle?"

I need to speak with Bella.

"No!" I yelled at him. "I don't want her to know. It's bad enough for her as it is, I don't want to make it worse."

What is bad enough?

I laughed.

"She's being courted by a bipolar vampire," I said. "One that can barely stand not to drain her while he loves her. I admit it doesn't sound like it could get any worse, but I'd rather not take the chance."

*What if talking to her tells me what I need to know to help you?
Wouldn't that make it better for her?*

I thought about it for a while. If Bella could tell him something that I hadn't noticed or overlooked somehow, and Carlisle could use it to fix me, then I could be right for her. I could be all right and love her the way she deserved. If I was able to think clearly again, maybe I could come up with a way for us to be together all the time. I could find a way to make it up to Charlie so I could go back to school with her and see her every day. Maybe I would be able to control my actions again, and keep some of Alice's predictions from coming true.

To do all of this, I would have to admit to Bella what I thought may be true. I would have to tell her that I might be crazy. How would she react to that knowledge? Turn away and run screaming out of the cabin, probably. I couldn't let that happen.

"Carlisle, she might leave me if she knows. I can't even stand the thought."

I don't think she will. Bella cares for you very much.

"She does now, maybe" I admitted. "But if she finds out I'm a raving lunatic? Any reason she may have for putting up with me would leave her."

Trust me son, please. She won't leave if you tell her this. Bella will want to help you.

I shook my head, trying to clear out the thoughts. They were all jumbled up in there, and I couldn't even begin to get a numeric sum of the pros and cons. I felt Carlisle's hand on my arm as a recent memory floated through his conscious.

Esme was standing in the kitchen, looking out the window. Carlisle wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her neck. He asked if Bella had been delivered safely back to her father's home.

" Yes, but Carlisle, as soon as we were down the road she asked if Edward would still be able to hear us from as far away as we were. When I said no, she broke down in tears."

" Was she frightened of him?"

" No, not at all. She didn't want to leave him. She said it tore her up inside to watch him be so sad. If it wasn't for her father, I think she would have made us turn around and take her back to Edward."

"Bella will want to help you, Edward."

"All right," I resigned. "Tell her, but if you are wrong, I don't know if I'll be able to control my reaction."

I understand.

"I doubt it."

He left, promising to return Saturday evening, since Bella had told me she would be come back to the cabin on Saturday morning. I thought about Carlisle's memory of Esme's words, but I didn't know what to make of them. I went back to the bedroom and pretended to sleep until I felt her hand in my hair and her lips on my shoulder.

I held her close to me, trying to slow my breathing and come down from my post-coital high. I swallowed back a mouthful of venom, the monster dangerously close to the surface and begging to feed on the fluid right underneath my lips. *It would be so easy, so quick...*

No!

I pushed back a little and rolled off of her onto my back on the bed. Bella slid an arm around me and hugged me close to her chest. I needed to tell her to back away, but I couldn't form a sentence as she began to trace little circles on my stomach with her fingers.

I pulled my hands away from her, feeling the loss of warmth and closeness and hating it. I was thirsty, but not *that* thirsty. I should have been able to control the urges better. I closed my eyes and tried to block all sensations from all of my senses from getting into my head.

Just a little taste, just a little taste, just a little taste...

The monster chanted in my head, setting a beat to the rattling of his cage.

I could hear her voice calling my name, but I couldn't respond. If I opened up, if I allowed myself to hear her, see the throbbing at her neck, smell her...I wasn't sure if I could stop the monster from breaking back out of his cage again.

My head was swimming, and nothing made sense. I thought I could feel my arms around Pillow Bella, but the scent was too strong. Was she here? Was Bella actually here, or was I still on the beach, completely and totally out of my mind? If I was insane, and she wasn't even really here, I could taste her blood again...it wouldn't hurt her...

"Please, *please* , Edward! Stop! You're scaring me!"

I opened my eyes and felt her hands on either side of my face, trying desperately to push me away from her neck. I could taste the salt from her skin on my tongue.

"Are you real?" I whispered against her skin.

"Yes, Edward, I'm real...please stop! Can you even hear me?"

"Yes," I said, and then added, "I think."

"Are you listening now?" she asked.

"Yes." My thoughts blurred together, random images of Bella curled up in the seat of my Vanquish, in the hospital, refusing to speak with me, on the beach with Samson's hand on her thigh. I heard myself growl.

"Look at me."

I did as she said.

"You need to hunt, don't you?"

"I'm not very thirsty," I said. Then I reconsidered. "I should probably hunt anyway."

"Go hunt. Now."

"Okay."

I left the room and exited the cabin, draining the first thing I saw before even recognizing it as a deer. My head was still cloudy and my thoughts still came in random flashes of memory and fantasy, with none of it making any sense. I tried to remember what Bella had told me to do. She told me to go hunt, I remembered that. What else did she say? Had I hunted yet? I couldn't remember, so I went searching for a meal.

The burn in my throat had subsided, and I sat down on the trunk of a tree that had fallen so long ago there were other trees growing out of it. I tried to remember what else Bella had told me to do, but all I could remember was her telling me to hunt. I had done that – there was even still blood on my hands. Was I supposed to go back to her now, or did I have to stay away, since I had scared her?

Did I nearly bite her?

I thought I had, maybe. I hadn't done it, I was sure I hadn't hurt her, because if I had I would be torn up inside. As it was, I only felt disoriented and confused. I was sure I had scared her though, and I didn't mean to scare her.

I dropped my head into my hands, trying to remember and trying to make sense of my memories.

"Can you see him, Alice?"

I heard the voice of my father, and the more muffled response from my sister.

"You're close. Keep going down the same trail."

"There are two deer here on the trail – both drained."

"Right around the corner."

"I got him."

I heard Carlisle's footsteps in the dampened leaves and felt him sit next to me.

Edward, do you know where you are?

"Yes," I said. "Bella told me to go hunt."

That was this morning.

"What time is it?"

Nearly midnight.

"I scared her," I told him. "I wasn't sure if I could go back."

She was more afraid that you hadn't returned. Bella is worried about you.

"I didn't mean for her to worry."

Come back with me now.

"Does she want me to come back?"

Yes, son. Bella wants you back.

"Okay," I said, and removed my face from my hands before standing.

Carlisle led me back to the cabin where Bella was standing on the front porch, pacing back and forth. When her eyes met mine, she ran out and threw herself at me. Her arms went around my neck, and she held on tightly.

"Edward, I was so worried about you!"

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I was just in the woods. I didn't realize...you would worry about me. I'm so sorry I scared you...I won't hurt you; I swear I won't ever, ever hurt you."

Bella shushed me.

"I was only scared when you didn't come back," she said. "I wasn't sure if I should believe her or not, but I decided I would."

"Let's go inside," Carlisle said. "Bella's time is limited now, and we have some things we need to discuss."

It's time to tell her, Edward.

I felt a growl in my chest. Bella looked up at me and narrowed her eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just want to be inside of you again."

Bella eyed me for a moment.

"Don't try to con me, Cullen," she said, backing up so my arms fell from her waist. I whimpered a little. "I know the difference between your 'I want sex' and 'I'm pissed off' growls by now."

"You do?"

"Most definitely."

"Oh," I said, dropping my eyes. I looked back up to her through my lashes and held my arms out. She hesitated a minute before snuggling back against my hard chest.

"Well?" Bella prompted.

"Carlisle wants to talk to you," I admitted.

"About what?"

"About me."

"What about you?" Bella backed up again, but I moved with her this time, not letting go.

"I don't want to tell you," I whispered.

"Why?"

"I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of, Edward?"

"I'm afraid you'll leave me when you find out."

"Edward," Bella's voice went cold. "What have you done?"

"I didn't do anything," I said. "I swear – I didn't hurt anyone. It's not like that."

"Are you going to keep being cryptic?"

"Yes, probably."

"Then I guess I will go talk to Carlisle." Bella pushed herself out of my arms and turned to walk back into the cabin. I followed, and sat down next to Bella on the couch. I wanted to reach out to her, but found I was afraid to touch her.

Edward, it will be all right.

I closed my eyes and didn't acknowledge him.

I need her help.

"If she hates me after this," I growled, "I'll blame you."

I'm aware of that, son.

"Bella," Carlisle spoke aloud. "Has Edward told you why I was coming here today?"

"No," Bella said, glancing over at me. "He didn't tell me you were going to be here at all."

"Has he expressed any concerns to you about himself?"

"I'm not sure what you mean." Bella looked back to Carlisle, then to me and back again. "I know he's worried about keeping his promise to me and not hurting any more humans. I know sometimes he's not sure he can resist. And once he said..."

Bella looked to me, her eyes wary. I looked down at the ground near my feet. She did remember.

"He said what, Bella?" Carlisle prompted.

"He said he couldn't think straight, and that he had hallucinations."

You told her?

"I wanted her to know," I said, "but I didn't want her to know."

Carlisle's thoughts turned to images of me on the beach. He wanted to tell her how he had found me there.

"Please don't," I begged.

"Don't what?" Bella demanded. "Edward, you know I hate it when you do that."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't want Carlisle to tell you any of this. You need to know, but I can't think about it because when I do, I think you're going to leave, and I can't think straight."

"Which is the crux of the problem," Carlisle said. "Edward says he has been having problems thinking straight when you are not near him. I have been trying to research the subject, but I've only encountered dead ends."

"Research what subject?" Bella asked softly. Carlisle looked at me.

I'm going to tell her everything, son.

"What do you want, my permission?" I snarled at him.

"Edward!" Bella chastised. "Let Carlisle talk to me. What research?"

"Insanity within our kind," Carlisle said simply. "We are creatures of habit – unchanging, stagnant. When there is a change within us, it is almost always permanent. There are also other factors – not actual

internal changes, but something that acts as a catalyst and can have an effect on us."

Bella's body went still and she stared at him. I could see the fear in her eyes when I watched her face, or maybe it was loathing, I wasn't sure. She was going to leave me now. I knew it. I tried to hold my body completely still.

"You have been with him more than anyone else," Carlisle continued. "I hope you can give me the information I need to find out what has happened to my son. If I can get an idea of when his behavior changed, maybe I can determine what caused it. If I can figure out the cause, I may be able to find the solution."

"Edward is...insane?"

"I'm not sure," Carlisle admitted. "It is something we are considering."

Bella's eyes turned to me. I couldn't read her expression, and I never wanted to be able to read her mind more than that particular moment.

"I didn't mean to be," I said softly.

"Come here," Bella said, holding her arms to me. I stared back at her, idiotically. "I'm not leaving you, sweetheart. Come here."

I moved to my favorite place, with my head on her shoulder, my arms wrapped around her middle and her hand in my hair. I closed my eyes and sighed. If she would still hold me like this, maybe it would be okay.

"What do you need to know?" Bella asked.

"At what point his behavior changed," Carlisle responded. "Edward has always been a rational being. He always thought through his decisions. Even when they were decisions with which I did not

agree, I couldn't deny that he had thought them through. Did he always seem irrational to you?"

"No," Bella said. "When he first...took me away, he explained exactly what he was doing, and what he was going to do and why. He thought of everything, actually."

I tensed, thinking about all of the horrible things I had done to her. Her fingers ran over my scalp – her way of telling me it was okay now.

"When did Edward's behavior change?" Carlisle asked. "Was there an obvious point in time?"

"Yes," Bella said softly after a significant pause. "It was when I came back. After I left him on the island. I did this to him, didn't I?"

I could smell her tears, and I opened my eyes and tilted my head to look up at her. Little droplets fell from her lashes, and I reached up to brush them away with my fingers.

"Don't cry, Bella," I said.

Bella looked over to Carlisle.

"I did this to him, didn't I?" Bella repeated. "I never should have left him!"

There are so many variables...human blood, his feelings, the other vampire they encountered, staying there for so long without hunting...I don't know which ones matter and which ones do not. Too much of it could be coincidence.

"We don't know that, Bella," he said.

"But it's possible, isn't it?" Bella pressed. "It could be my fault."

"It's not your fault," I told her. "None of it is your fault, don't say that it is."

Her hand stroked the side of my face, and she tried to smile at me through her tears.

"There are too many possibilities, Bella," my father told her. "Is there anything else you can tell me that might help? Maybe something that happened before you left? Something leading up to it?"

"Sometimes he would get angry," Bella looked down to the ground. "He would yell at me for no reason, or just seem very tense."

"When would this happen?"

"When he was...thirsty," Bella blushed. "When he would...um...drink my blood, he wouldn't be angry anymore. He would change."

She looked at me and continued to stroke my face.

"You were always so sweet then." She smiled.

"I was sorry I hurt you," I told her. "I loved you; I just didn't know it yet."

"I know," she responded. "But after you drank, you also stopped being angry."

I nodded, sure she was right, though I didn't remember it clearly.

He says she smells different to him. Is her blood different? Would it have a similar effect on other vampires? Is that why the nomad had such an interest in them?

"I have to keep her away," I said, my eyes reaching his as I sat up. "I have to keep her safe from other vampires! They might all want her!"

"Edward," he said, "we don't know if that has anything to do with it."

So many variables...

"I have to protect her," I snarled.

She will be protected, son.

"Protect me from what?" Bella yelled, grabbing my wrist. I stared at Carlisle.

"If your blood can tempt Edward, it is possible others of our kind would be similarly tempted."

"I will not let anyone touch her!" I growled low in my throat.

I know, but how can you protect her the way you are now?

The next evening, Bella left me where she found me, lying in the bed and hugging her pillow. Shoving her blue top and pink panties inside the pillowcase obviously hadn't fooled her, since when I reached inside, I found she had added the sheer pink top to my collection.

After everything she and Carlisle had discussed, I had hoped maybe she wouldn't leave. Maybe she would want to stay and try to help him figure out what was wrong with me, or at least for protection. I thought she might stay in hopes of keeping me sane, but I knew she couldn't. She had to go home to Charlie. Why couldn't vampires be shape shifters, too? Then I could find a way to shrink myself and crawl into Bella's pocket where he couldn't find me. I could be with her, even when she went to school.

I tried not to think about the visions Alice had shown me. When I thought of Mike Newton touching her, even as a potential action in the future, I wanted to drain him. I tried to think coherently about when I stopped being rational, because I obviously enjoyed completely impossible tasks. One thing I had noticed was a flaw in my original hypothesis. When Bella was near me, my thoughts were centered on her, but no more clear or articulate than when she was gone.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, and I didn't hear Carlisle's approach, but at least I knew he was there eventually and opened

my eyes to him.

Do you see me, Edward? Can you understand me?

"Yes," I said softly.

Will you come and talk with me?

"Okay," I responded, and took Pillow Bella out to the living room with me, no longer concerning myself with how it looked. I dropped the pillow on the couch first before snuggling up against it.

I'm at a loss, son. I can't find anything in any of my journals that explains this. There are simply too many variables – too many possibilities.

"What can I do?" I asked.

I could continue to research, in hopes of eventually finding something, but I fear we might be running out of time.

"Time for what?"

If there is a way to cure you, it may be more difficult the longer we let you continue as you are. I don't think we can afford to wait until I happen across the answer.

"If it's because she left me, you can't ever tell her," I said. "I don't want her to cry anymore."

I think Bella may have something to do with it, but I'm not sure what.

"What then?"

"Edward, as much as I hate to say this," Carlisle said aloud. "There is only one vampire I know who may understand what has happened to you. I think we need to seek his council."

Italy.

The Volturi.

Aro.

"I'm going to take you to Aro."

The implications of what Carlisle was saying came at me fast and strong. I had never been to Italy, even when Carlisle had chosen to visit his old friends in the vampire city after he had changed me. Carlisle had kept me from Aro's sights because of my gift, because he knew Aro would covet such a power. Aro would only have to touch me to know I could read the minds of everyone in the room. He would not want to let me leave. Going to Aro also had the potential to expose Alice and Jasper's talents to the vampire royalty. If we were to go there, Carlisle thought whatever was wrong with me was important enough – that is, bad enough – to warrant such a risk. It could only mean one thing. Carlisle thought I was correct. *I am insane.*

So much for anonymity.

Chapter End Notes:

Now seriously...can't you just see Carlisle showing Bella how to use a condom with a banana? Isn't that just the shizt? ROFL! Hit review and tell me how you think Daddy C started THAT conversation!

Want to know what the conversation was like? There was a contest called "Carlisle, Bella, and the Banana" back in 2010. The resulting entries are under my profile's "favorite authors" section. Check them out! One is from the POV of the banana! LMAO!

If anyone remembers who won this contest – please let me know! I can't seem to find it and the link is gone.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 – Confuse and Amuse

Aro.

The Volturi.

Italy.

"I can't go to Italy," I said to Carlisle.

"Why not?"

"Bella told me I had to stay here."

Alice was concerned about what you would do if you went to Forks. That's why Bella wanted you to remain here. She didn't mean for you to stay right here in this cabin forever.

"Bella told me to stay here," I repeated. "I have to stay. I don't want her to be angry."

Wouldn't she want you to get better? Wouldn't she want you to find help?

"I...yes..." I stumbled over my words. "I think so. I don't know. She's never been to Italy."

We couldn't take her with us Edward, be reasonable.

I laughed into the pillow.

"You can't reason with me..." I blurted. I laughed again, and shook my head. My forehead rubbed against the pillowcase, and I could feel the ridges of the clothing inside, which was very distracting. I remembered what Bella looked like when she came out of the

bathroom all dressed in blue on my birthday. Then I thought about how she looked on top of me in the sheer pink nightgown, slowing moving up and down. I shuddered at the memory and inhaled her scent from her clothes and pillow.

"Edward!" Carlisle's shout startled me, and I looked up to him.

"Sorry," I mumbled. I tried to remember what I was supposed to be thinking about. "If Bella says I can go, I'll go."

You will talk to her? Let her know why you have to go?

"No," I said. "I don't want to tell her why, but I'll ask her if I can go."

Carlisle narrowed his eyes at me, his thoughts nearly as confused as mine. I shrugged.

"She is my life," I said. I considered all the things I had done that had upset her, even when I didn't mean to do so. "I don't always know what will anger her. Sometimes I think what I'm doing makes sense, and she's upset with me and..."

I stopped.

She might punish you?

"And she doesn't like it," I amended, but still nodded to him. "I can't go on what makes sense to me. I have to have her tell me what she wants me to do."

We need to go soon.

"I have to stay," I said. "Bella will be back tomorrow. Charlie is working a double shift."

I could hear Carlisle's mind churning away. He didn't trust me to remember what I had agreed to do, or to actually ask her if I did remember.

I could go and speak with her first.

"You showed her how to use a condom," I remembered. "I don't think I liked that."

"Edward..." Carlisle continued to speak a little louder than normal. "I need you to try to focus. I want to go discuss Italy with Bella tonight."

"All right," I said, feeling a little defeated. He was going to do it whether I agreed or not, so it didn't matter what I said. I knew I couldn't go to her room again, since Bella said it was too risky and I had to stay here. But she would be back tomorrow. I only had to wait until then.

Thank you, Edward. If Bella agrees it is a good idea, you will go with me to Italy?

"Italy is a long way from here," I said. "A long way from Bella."

I think I actually heard an exasperated sigh from inside Carlisle's head. He made up his mind to have Bella tell me I had to go.

It's going to be dangerous.

"He will find out about Alice," I said softly.

I don't like it, but yes, he will probably want to make contact with us, and in doing so, he will know all that we know.

"If he touches me, he'll know about Bella," I said. "I broke the law. They'll destroy me."

No, I don't think they will. It is your gift that will save you. Aro will not want to waste such talent. He will want you to stay with him and the Volturi.

"I don't want to stay with them," I said. "It's too far from Bella."

I don't want you to stay, either. Aro does not force people to remain with the guard. It is an honor – a choice. He will not make you stay.

"But I broke the law," I said again. "Bella knows about us."

For a moment, a flash in Carlisle's head showed me Bella held in the Cullen home in Forks. Comfortable, but captive. He immediately changed his thoughts, and began considering what days we could leave for Italy and if any of the others should accompany us.

I knew he was blocking me, and blocking something important, but at the same time a flash of lightening bathed the room in light, followed directly after by a crack of thunder. The sound of heavy rain on the roof pounded into my head, and it seemed I could actually feel each and every raindrop hitting inside my head.

It was too loud. Much too loud. I tried to cover my ears, but it didn't help. My body was shaking, and I could feel strong arms and hands on me, trying to crush me. I fought against them, kicking out at the force trying to latch on to me, but I couldn't see anything. I wasn't even sure if my eyes were open or not. I didn't want to let go of Bella. I knew I had to keep her safe from whatever was attacking us. I held her tightly against me with one hand and shoved out with the other.

The pressure released from my shoulders, and the only thing left was Bella's scent and the pounding of rain on the roof. I gripped her tighter, held my face against her body, and let her scent wash over me.

Eventually – I wasn't sure just how long – my breathing slowed, and I realized the object I held didn't feel quite like Bella's skin and the scent wasn't nearly strong enough to actually be her. I opened my eyes and saw Carlisle sitting on the floor, just watching me.

My son...my son...I can't let him stay like this. I have to be able to help him. Aro has to be able to help him. I can't bear to watch this...

"I'm all right," I said, wondering what had him so agitated. "If Bella says I should so, I'll go. But I don't think Bella should come with us, even if she wants to go. The Volturi are too dangerous."

Carlisle just stared at me for a moment, wondering if I had any memory of the last hour.

"What do you mean?"

Do you remember what just happened?

"I don't know what you are talking about," I admitted.

Edward, you curled up in a ball and wouldn't speak to me. You pushed me away when I tried to touch you.

"I did?"

Do you remember anything?

I tried to think of what had happened, but the only thing that seemed incongruous was Carlisle moving from the chair to the floor without my noticing it. I shook my head.

You aren't getting any better.

I let out a short, humorless laugh.

"No, I hadn't noticed any improvements." I sat up, letting Pillow Bella lay beside me, though I kept my hand against her. I felt...tired.

"Sometimes when Bella is here, I feel better. I don't want her to go to Italy. It's dangerous even for us to go."

It is precarious, of that I have no doubt. I agree - Bella should not go, certainly – but I believe you and I must. If there was another way, I would not be suggesting this.

"I don't want to go," I repeated. My thoughts were becoming a little disjointed again as fatigue washed over me. I couldn't remember

what Carlisle had just asked me, or what I did or didn't want to do.

I will talk to Bella.

"Don't talk about condoms," I told him. Then added, "Or bananas."

Carlisle smiled up at me and shook his head.

Sometimes parents have to have tough conversations.

I shrugged, and settled myself back on the couch lying on my side. I held my Bella scented pillow closer to my chest and closed my eyes. The next thing I remembered was Bella's hand in mine, leading me into the kitchen to watch her and touch her while she made breakfast. I could hear her speaking, talking about Italy and telling me I had to go with Carlisle and I had to do what he said. I nodded and told her I would, not really understanding what she meant.

I listened to the sizzling in the skillet as Bella shoved various food items around in oil. The sound seemed very loud to me, and it started to drown out all the other sounds I would have normally heard, even Bella's voice. I reached up and rubbed at my temple, as if I could massage the sound away.

The red and orange heat waves coming from the stove were very bright. It wasn't something Bella would have seen, only felt, but the intensity of the light began to hurt my eyes. I took a step back away from it and looked away, my hand falling away from where it was touching Bella's skin. She said...something, and I could hear her, but the words didn't make sense. They reverberated around in my head and mixed with the crackling sound of eggs and sausages frying. I took another step back, shaking my head and trying to clear it, but it didn't help.

Bella turned to me, and I could see her mouth moving and hear sounds, but there was no comprehension. She reached out and her fingers touched my arm. I jumped back and pulled away from her. Her touch was hot – too hot. I looked to my arm, expecting to see a

burn mark there, but there was nothing but cold, pale, rock-hard flesh. My hands were shaking. Actually, I think maybe my whole body was.

I swallowed hard when I tasted venom in my mouth. All of my sense seemed to be in overdrive, and my brain just couldn't process everything coming in at once. Bella kept moving towards me, her voice becoming increasingly strained, and I kept moving back away from her. I tried to say something, but I don't think anything came out. If something did, I wasn't sure what the words might have been.

I felt my back hit something hard, and I turned, hissing at whatever it was.

It was the refrigerator.

What's happening to me?

"Bella...help me..." I could hear my voice this time. "Everything is... too much. I can't focus on anything."

"Edward, just listen to me, okay? Can you do that?"

"I don't know."

"Try, sweetheart," Bella said softly. "For me, please try to just focus on my voice."

"I'll try." I closed my eyes and stopped breathing.

"I'm here for you, sweetheart," she said. I still loved it when she called me that. If anything could hold my attention, it was that one word. "It's just you and me. You're going to be all right. You're just lost right now, but I'm here and I'm going to bring you back. Do you hear me?"

"Yes." And I did.

She kept talking. The words didn't matter, she just kept going on. I could hear her breakfast burning in the pan, but she just stood there and kept talking to me in her soft, reassuring tone. I don't know how long it went on, but eventually I stopped shaking.

"Can you open your eyes?" Bella asked.

"Yes," I said, and slowly raised my lids and looked at her. She reached out her arms, but didn't come any closer. She just waited for me.

I took a half step and brought my fingers up to touch her, waiting to see if it would hurt again. She was warm, but warm the way she was supposed to be, not burning hot. I took a deep, raspy breath and dropped to my knees before diving into her embrace and wrapping my arms around her midsection.

"Shh, Edward, sweetheart...it's okay. It's all going to be okay."

At some point she pulled back and turned off the stove while I whimpered from the loss of contact. She was back with me immediately, stroking my hair briefly before pulling on my arms so I would stand. She held both of my hands and walked backwards, leading me to the bedroom.

With her hands holding my shoulders and her legs wrapped around my waist, Bella brought me home again, and my mind came back into focus. Her flesh was so warm inside and wet from my fingers and her recent orgasm that I slid into her easily, our bodies becoming one with each other.

"I love this..." I panted against her throat, trying to make some kind of sense out of my thoughts and words. The only thing that made sense was my connection with Bella – physically, emotionally, spiritually – I was hers. Nothing else could touch that, not even my own mind rebelling against me.

Bella moaned and arched her back against the sheets, tilting her hips up and driving me deeper into her. My mouth covered her throat, down across her shoulder and back up to her ear. Her hands gripped my hair and brought my lips to hers, her tongue running along mine.

"I love you...you feel so good," I moaned into her mouth.

My fingers traced down her sides to her hips, then back again, grazing over each breast before I placed them against the mattress on either side of her head, making sure I wasn't touching her with my hands as I came closer to release. I still didn't quite trust my reactions enough to have my hands on her when I had an orgasm.

"Edward...oh, God! Edward...that's so...ugh!"

I felt her internal muscles clamp around me and couldn't take any more. I cried out against the skin of her throat and held myself against her, filling her with my body and my love for her. As soon as I could, I wrapped my arms under her shoulders, held her to me, nestled against her chest and deeply breathed in her scent. I kept my weight on my arms underneath her so she wouldn't be crushed.

"Bella?" My breaths were still rapid and my words sounded breathy.

"Hmm?"

"Can I stay here?" I pushed my hips against her slightly, making sure there was no doubt what I meant. She laughed.

"I think if you stay there, you're going to be wearing me out again in a few minutes."

"No," I said, and then thought about it. "Well...yes. Probably."

I settled back against her warm skin and sighed. I listened to her racing heart come back to its normal pace while my breathing

subsided as well. As my body relaxed against hers, my mind started racing.

At the very least, we would be traveling sixteen hours to get to Volterra. At least a day to meet with Aro, Marcus and Caius and another sixteen hours or more to return to Forks. In the very best of circumstances, I would probably be away from Bella for three days.

"I don't want to be away from you," I told her.

"I know, sweetheart."

"I don't want to go to Italy."

"I know, but you have to."

"I don't want to be away from you, but you can't come with me. It's too dangerous for a human. They would kill you. I have to keep you safe."

"It's all right, Edward; I will be fine. You have to go so you can get help."

"What if they can't fix me?" I whispered against her skin. I tilted my head to look up at her. "What if there's nothing anyone can do?"

"Shh, Edward," Bella whispered, stroking my hair. "You are going to be fine. I'll still be here when you get back. No matter what happens, I will be waiting for you."

I was both relieved and agitated at her promise to me. Horribly relieved, because she was telling me I could come back to her, even if they couldn't help me. At the same time, I knew she deserved better than a crazy vampire as a consort. If I couldn't be fixed, she shouldn't be stuck with me. Of course, and the moment, she was stuck with me in a rather literal sense. I thought about that for a moment and ground myself into her.

"I want to stay here," I said, looking up into her eyes and rolling my hips against her again. "You feel good."

Bella laughed and ran her fingers over my shoulders before lacing them through my hair and pulling me up to kiss her. I brought my lips to hers gently, barely touching her before I moved back down her neck and settled myself back against her shoulder.

On one level, I knew things in my head still weren't right. I would think of something I wanted to say to her, and then it would be gone before I could get it out of my mouth. I knew we should talk about Italy, but then I couldn't remember why we needed to talk about it. I also had the suspicion I had asked her the same question more than once, but couldn't remember her answer.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Edward?"

"I think I caused breakfast to burn again."

"That's all right," Bella said. "I'll just eat a big lunch to make up for it."

"I will learn to cook for you," I told her. "I mean for real – to really cook. Then I could do that for you."

Bella kissed the top of my head.

"You're sweet, my sweetheart," she said.

I liked hearing that. She could call me that over and over again, and I would never get tired of hearing it.

"Bella?"

"Yes?"

I tilted my head so I could see her face better. She smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile back, because she was so beautiful when

she smiled like that. I also knew her smile was for me, and the knowledge made my stomach feel strange and bubbly, like I had been forced to drink a bunch of carbonated beverages.

"I like being here with you," I told her. She smiled again and moved one of her hands down to stroke against my cheek.

"I like being with you, too, Edward," she responded.

I tucked my head into her neck again and held her a little closer, careful not to hug her too tightly, even though I wanted to do so.

"Bella?" I said again after a few minutes of silence. "What if I can't be fixed?"

"We've been through this," Bella said definitively. "We're going to find out what's wrong with you."

"You don't know that," I countered.

"Yes, I do," Bella insisted.

"Carlisle couldn't find anything. Maybe this has never happened before."

"Carlisle said his friends in Italy were some of the oldest vampires around. And with Aro's gift, he'll be able to tell Carlisle if there was ever anyone he touched who has heard of something like this. They are going to figure it out and you are going to be fine."

I wondered if she realized what word she used. *Fine*. I decided not to bring it up. I took a deep breath and rested against her for a few minutes.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Edward?" Bella sighed.

"If I can't be fixed, will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"I just want you to tell me you are coming back," I said. "Tell me it will be a little while or maybe longer than usual. I think that would be better."

"Edward, what are you talking about?"

"I want you to lie to me," I said clearly. "Just tell me you are going to come back when you leave me. When you go, I kind of forget what's going on around me, and I might just stay like that. I think that would be my preference rather than to know you aren't coming back."

Bella's fingers clamped around my chin, and she tugged at it until I faced her.

"You're not well, Edward," Bella said. "I'm not going to leave you because you are sick."

Was I sick? I closed my eyes and drifted into the softness of her body against mine. I did remember being sick. I remembered being hot, and then cold, and then hot again. There was pain, sharp and strong, and then nothing but heat. I wanted to die. Was I sick like that again? Was Bella going to catch what I have? Memories poured into me...a voice from so long ago I didn't recognize it and couldn't really place it.

" Don't bother your father now, Edward. He's not feeling well." The voice was soft, musical and light. I loved the voice; that much I did remember.

" He wanted to know how the math test went. I believe I did well."

" You'll have to tell him tomorrow, he's got a fever. To tell you the truth, I don't feel particularly well, myself. I think I'll go lay down..."

The memory faded, and the warmth that was Bella surrounded my consciousness once again. I inhaled deeply, and her scent overcame

me, filling my brain and forcing out all the other thoughts to abandon me. I looked back up to her, then tightened my grip and rolled on to my back, taking her with me.

Lying with Bella was the only time anything felt right. Her warmth surrounded my body and made me feel like I was right where I belonged. Nothing else mattered. When I held her close to me, she sighed and snuggled against my chest.

"Bella?"

Her eyes opened and she smiled down at me. Her fingers twisted through a piece of my hair.

"What is it?"

"I love you," I said. She smiled a little wider. "I want to be what you want and what you need, but I don't know if I can."

"Edward," Bella's smile faltered. "Whatever is wrong, it's not your fault. If anything, it's probably mine."

"Don't say that," I growled. "It is not your fault."

"It might be," Bella insisted. "Regardless, it's not something you are doing on purpose. You can't help it. I'm not going to abandon you now any more than if you were human and developed Alzheimer's."

"But I'm broken," I said. "If I can't be fixed, Bella, what can I offer you? You'd have everything without me. You mean everything to me. How could I be with you if I can't be fixed?"

"Carlisle is going to figure it out," Bella insisted. She sighed again. "That's why you have to go to Italy."

"I can't go. They will find out about you."

"It's worth the risk, Edward."

"No!" I yelled, and I sat up and pushed her off of me. I rolled myself out of the bed and crossed the room before her heart could complete a single beat. "Nothing is worth risking you! Nothing!"

"You are worth it!" Bella knelt on the mattress and pointed a finger at me. "I haven't gone through all of this just to lose you to yourself! I told you I was going to help you find yourself when you got lost, and I will!"

I remembered her words. I remembered when she told me I got lost sometimes. I thought about going to Italy, without her. I thought about what it might mean if Aro and the other ancient vampires had no way of helping me.

"I don't want to be alone," I said softly, lowering my eyes. "I don't want to go back to the way I was. I want to be with you."

"Oh, Edward," Bella sat on her heels and reached out her hand. "Come here, sweetheart."

I looked up at her again, and my body was trying to pull me along and back into her touch, but my twisted mind rebelled. Even if she could get past the fact that I wasn't even human, I was wrong. I was broken, and she deserved someone better.

I shook my head and took a step back. I needed to do what was right for her. I needed to keep my promises. Oh wait...there was a promise I still needed to keep.

"I need to go to into Port Angeles."

"Edward," Bella said softly, dropping her hand at her sides. "Please come here."

"I have to go," I said. "I made a promise."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Bella said, shaking her head. She focused on my eyes for a moment. "Go, if that's what you

need to do. I'll be back in the morning after Charlie goes to work."

"You're leaving now?"

"Only if you are."

"I'll go later." I said, finally letting my body have its way and moving to her. Bella took me back in her arms and held me against her shoulder again. I decided it was time to wear her out some more, and she seemed pretty willing. I think she was actually tired, because I truly wore her out during round two. She fell asleep with me curled up against her almost right afterwards. I snuggled against her and closed my eyes for a while. My sense of time was definitely flawed, so I don't know how long it was, but I eventually had to open my eyes and look at her again.

My head was lying on the top of her chest, so I had to touch her... just a little. I made sure each finger and thumb had a turn. Since my thumbs had, over all, been in contact with her nipples more often than the sides of her breasts and my pinky fingers just the opposite, I tried to think back and count and at least made an effort to get things evened out.

I accidentally woke Bella up again, and had to move my hand away fast enough so she would not see it. Of course, her taught nipples were kind of a giveaway. I looked up and gave her the half smile that sometimes made her blush. She eyed me back, but didn't blush or even smile.

"I don't know, Cullen," Bella shook her head once. "I think you have been sneaking gropes when I'm asleep."

I didn't have the ability to blush, but the look on my face must have been enough. Bella started laughing.

"I knew it!"

"I haven't," I insisted. "At least, not often...I've thought about it...but most of the time..."

"Why should I believe you?" Bella asked, laughing again.

"I wouldn't lie to you," I told her, shifting myself back a little. "I wouldn't...not really. I mean, I did touch you...I do, sometimes. Not every time though."

I could feel panic rising up in me. She was angry. Maybe this fell into the category of violating her. I hadn't meant to do that.

"I was only joking, sweetheart," Bella said, sensing my panic. She reached up to run the backs of her fingers across my cheek. I nodded, relieved she wasn't really angry. I reached up and touched her cheek in return, and she leaned over and brushed her lips over mine.

"I wouldn't do that...not while you were asleep...if you told me not to...not when you didn't know..."

"What if I said it was all right with me if you did?"

"Then I would probably do it every chance I could get," I said truthfully.

"I thought so," Bella snickered. Then she was quiet, her fingers going back to tracing shapes on my abdomen.

"Is it?" I asked quietly.

"Is what, what?" Bella looked at me quizzically.

"Is it...okay?" I really hoped I wasn't going to have to ask outright, and she'd get it from my cryptic little clues. When she started laughing again, I knew at least she understood. When she managed to stop snickering, she responded.

"I don't think I would mind."

"I'll remember that," I said, smiling. My arms wrapped around Bella's shoulders, and I held her against my chest, stroking her hair with one hand. I nudged my nose into the soft strands and inhaled deeply, and then I hummed Chopin until Bella fell back into her nap.

I drove the Audi to a body shop Rosalie had claimed wasn't run by complete idiots in order to have the fender fixed. After I dropped it off for an estimate, I headed to the shopping center nearby to make good on my promise to acquire more colorful pajama pants.

I wasn't really sure which garments would make Bella laugh, so I decided to enlist the help of one of the sales people. I found a young woman hanging up the latest fashions in rain jackets and asked for her assistance.

I'd like to help you right out of your clothes!

I grimaced a little at her thoughts.

"I'm looking to purchase some lounge pants," I said. "I would like to find some that are amusing."

"Are what?" she asked.

"Amusing," I said. Then realized I was going to have to clarify. "I want pants that are...funny. I want to...um...make my girlfriend laugh."

Damn. It figures he's attached.

"Okay, let me show you what we have."

I ended up with three pairs. The first was covered with candy again – this time it was silver Hershey's Kisses and not Christmas colored M&Ms. The second had Spiderman in various heroic poses all over it, and the last one had multiple pictures of a bright yellow cartoon character on it, which the sales woman assured me was funny. I

couldn't tell what it was supposed to be. I was roughly rectangular with large eyes, spindly limbs and wore a brown pair of shorts.

I thanked the sales woman, and she rang them up for me, and I thanked her. She placed them all in a bag and I thanked her. She asked me if I wanted the receipt in the bag and I said that would be fine and thanked her. I tried to remember if I had thanked her or not, so I made sure to do so before I walked away.

I walked out into the rain with my bag of pants and headed next door to a small bookstore. I was going there for the last item on my list. I shifted around from one foot to the other, pretending to look at a magazine display while actually trying to pick out the location of the right kind of book from the shopkeeper's head. All he was thinking about was the advertisements in the newspaper he held. He wanted to buy his grandson a car as a graduation present.

I finally broke down, asked him my question, picked the answer from his brain and went to the right shelf before he could give me a verbal reply. The only thing I could find was actually meant for children, but I decided it was better than nothing.

I stopped back at the body shop to be told the Audi would need a decent amount of work and be repainted to get it right again. The owner said it would take two weeks. He wasn't being entirely truthful – his backlog wasn't that great and it was really only three days' worth of work. I dropped a grand in cash on the counter and told him I would pick it up on Friday. He nodded and said that would be fine.

I ran back to the cabin in the rain. I wanted to call it "home," but Bella wasn't there, so the word didn't fit.

I shuffled through the bag of lounge pants and put them in the dresser drawer before sitting down on the bed. I pulled the book out of the little plastic bag and began to read with Pillow Bella tucked under my arm. I spent a few hours finding just the right section of the book and then practicing over and over again until I was sure I got it right.

Bella was back the next morning and wrapped her arms around me as soon as she walked in the door and found me waiting for her. She had a large shopping bag in each hand, which made embracing a little awkward, but I still didn't let go for a while. When she complained her arms were starting to hurt, I took the bags from her and brought them to the kitchen. Bella pointed to the chair by the table and told me to sit, and then immediately began cramming the items from the bag into the refrigerator and the pantry.

I watched her move around, and my fingers bounced up and down over my legs, thrumming against the denim. I'd rather be touching her, but I also recognized I had been banished to the chair so I couldn't and she could get the groceries put away. If she didn't, she said it took her ten times longer to get anything done.

I was feeling relatively coherent at the moment, and decided now was as good a time as any to see if all my practicing worked. I went over it in my head a couple more times, took a deep breath and stood up just as she was folding the bags up and putting them in the recycling bin.

"Bella?" I said. Even I could hear my nervousness. I needed to just come out and say it.

"Hmm?" She looked up at me and tilted her head to one side.

I took another unnecessary, deep breath.

"Knock-knock!"

Bella turned and looked at me, her brow furrowed.

I nodded my head at her, hoping she would understand it as a prompt to continue with her side of the joke. Then I wondered if Bella knew about Knock-knock jokes. What if she didn't know how to continue to the punch line? My tongue darted over my lips as I tried to think of a way to cover all of this up.

"Who's there?" Bella said slowly, much to my relief.

"Annette," I said.

"Annette who?" Bella's eyes narrowed again.

"Annette catches more fish than a hook!" I concluded, smiling. I waited for her to laugh.

Bella stood there for what had to have been very close to forever before she slowly shook her head at me. I guess the practicing didn't really help, because she didn't even smile, let alone laugh.

"I was going to learn to tell jokes," I said with a half smile. "I like to hear you laugh. You sound happy."

"Where did you hear that joke?" Bella asked, eyeing me.

"I...um...found it in a book."

"What book?"

I went into the bedroom, reached into the night table drawer and pulled out the copy of *Clean Jokes for Kids* I had purchased the previous day. I brought it back to Bella.

"This is a children's book," Bella informed me.

"I know – it was the only joke book in the shop."

She flipped through the pages of the book and groaned a couple of times.

"Edward?"

"Yes, Bella?"

"I want you to promise me something," Bella said, her voice solemn.

"Anything," I answered.

"I want you to promise not to try to tell me anymore jokes. And burn this book."

The book flew through the air, and I caught it before it hit me in the chest. I looked at her for a moment, trying to gauge the emotion behind the request. Her eyes glittered, and she broke into first a smile, then a laugh. I smiled as well and hugged her to me. It didn't happen the way I had planned, but at least I had made her laugh.

Of course, I would have promised her anything and everything, but this request was simple enough and quite frankly, my preference. I remembered sitting with Carlisle when he bought our first television, watching Jack Benny and not understanding when my father would laugh. The same thing happened with Emmett and Jasper while they watched Saturday Night Live, and I didn't think that was funny, either. Bella was most certainly right. *Sane or not, I'm no comedian.*

So much for vaudeville.

Chapter End Notes:

No cliffhanger! :)

My kids had that joke book. Those jokes were terrible.

Does everyone know what cartoon character is on Edward's new pants? If you know the show, hopefully I described it well enough for you to figure it out.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 – Burn and Churn

I was sitting on cold tile floor. I wasn't sure how I got there. There was an intense, acrid smell surrounding me.

I knew whatever was happening wasn't right. I knew I should be able to remember why I was on the floor. I had the distinct feeling there was a lot of important information regarding my current situation that I should recall, but didn't. The smell wasn't right – it was out of place, a warning. I could hear the sound of someone talking in a smooth, unhurried voice about the correct amount of red peppers to add to the eggs.

The worst part was that I did remember certain things about myself. I remembered I had been to universities many times and graduated with many degrees, but I couldn't remember what subjects I studied. I knew I had a family, and I could see their faces, but I didn't know their names. I knew I used to be human, and I had been transformed into a vampire nearly a century ago.

Or was that part of my insanity?

If I had to be crazy, why couldn't I be the kind of crazy where I didn't *know* I was crazy?

I tried to find something outside myself on which I could focus, but my eyes either weren't open or just weren't working. Everything I could see was inside my head, and none of that made any sense. Images of long brown hair, pale, shell colored eyes and a pillow on a windsurfer floated around my mind. I could still hear the droning voice giving instructions, but the words were no longer decipherable.

I can't think. Why can't I think?

I wasn't supposed to be like this. I knew whatever this was, it wasn't normal for me. I wasn't accustomed to these feelings and this lack of insight into my surroundings. This was new to me - I hadn't always been the way I was now. I also knew there was a way to get out of my current situation, but couldn't remember what it was.

Not what, but who.

"Bella ..."

My lungs protested and ached inside my chest. If she was there, if she responded to me in any way – her voice, her touch, anything – I couldn't discern it.

The acrid, dark smell was thicker, and I could feel warmth surrounding me. The heat seemed out of place, even in the summer. Too intense, too focalized. Again, I knew the smell wasn't right, but I didn't know what I should do about it. I felt my hands curl around the back of my neck and pull at my hair. The sensation was wrong, and I remembered why. The fingers should be warm, and they're not. I dropped my forehead to my knees.

I had the feeling I cried out in pain, desperation, fear...I didn't know what. I hurt, but I was pretty sure that was all in my mind. At least...I thought it was. I couldn't exactly trust my own summation of my circumstances, could I? Who trusts the opinion of a deranged vampire?

Other voices joined the monotone one that continued its leisurely pace, I could hear two new voices, but one was muted and distant. It occurred to me that I couldn't really trust the ears of a deranged vampire, either.

"He won't respond to me at all," a clear, feminine voice I recognized said. "My vision...I saw the whole place going up with him in it. He wasn't going to move."

"Have you contacted Bella?" the muted male voice asked.

"Not yet," the female again. *Alice. That voice belongs to Alice.* "I called you right after the fire was out. I think someone should bring her here. I don't want to leave him alone."

"Call her," the muted voice of my father commanded. "Come up with a plan of some sort – tell Charlie it's your birthday or something and you want Bella to go out for dinner with you. I'll pick her up and be there as soon as I can."

The voices faded and the smell dispersed. I could feel tugging at my hair, but it still wasn't right. I thought it might be my own fingers, which wasn't what I wanted. I wanted...I *needed* warmth. It was hot in the room, but it was dry and impersonal, not soft, inviting and calming. I could feel myself shut down. What I wanted wasn't out there, it was only inside of me. There was no point in comprehending anything else.

"Edward, *please* ! I will call Bella and you can talk to her."

There was that one word – that one name that broke through to my conscious mind.

"Bella?" My voice sounded scratchy and dry.

"I'm going to call her," Alice said.

I opened my eyes and tried to focus on my sister.

"What's that smell?" I asked.

Smoke...you almost burned down the cabin.

Alice showed me her previous vision – the cabin in flames from a fire in the kitchen. I was on the tile floor where I stayed, unmoving, as the flames got closer and closer until they engulfed me.

"Edward..." Alice sighed. I opened my eyes and could see her concern reflected in her dark orbs.

"I didn't mean to," I said softly. I glanced over at the television in the next room, tuned to a woman in a white hat standing in front of a stove and whisking ingredients into a bowl. "I wanted to cook something for Bella."

I'm going to call her now.

I nodded and listened to Alice call Bella's house and speak with her father in a light, friendly tone about dinner in Port Angeles with her and Rosalie. Of course, there would be parental supervision, and Carlisle was even going to stop by and pick Bella up on his way home from the hospital.

I looked around the kitchen and took in the scene around me. Behind the stove were black scorch marks all the way up to the ceiling. The countertops on either side were also black. The entire room was covered in fine white powder, and a fire extinguisher lay on the floor near Alice's feet.

Bella was at the store, so I couldn't talk to her. My fingers clutched into fists in my hair, and I dropped my head back down to my knees. I wanted Bella. I needed her. There was nothing else here for me, so I retreated back into myself.

"Edward? Sweetheart? Can you hear me?"

My reason for existence called to me. I didn't know where I was; only that she was nearby. I tried to respond, but I had no breath.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Off and on, since I got here." I heard Alice say. "He came around for a little while and said he was trying to cook, but then he curled up and hasn't really said anything since then."

"When did you get here?"

"I came as soon as I saw the fire start," Alice told Bella. Her voice became quiet and dark. "If I had been much farther away, I wouldn't have gotten here in time."

"Carlisle says they'll be leaving for Italy tomorrow," I heard Bella state.

"I don't want to go," I said, finally finding my voice.

"I know, sweetheart," Bella said, and I felt her fingers stroking down from my hair into my face. I leaned against her touch, and she put pressure on my jaw until I tilted my head up to see her.

"You smell so good," I said. I looked onto her eyes and saw fear there. Fear for me or of me? I didn't know, so I tried to reassure her. "I will never hurt you. I want to...I mean, I want to taste you," I felt my tongue run over my dry lips, "but I won't do it, I swear."

"Alice said you could have burned up in here, do you realize that? Edward, I'm scared you are going to get hurt."

I looked up and saw there were tears in her eyes. I had made her cry again.

"Don't cry," I said quickly. "Please don't cry. I'll make it better, please. I'll try to be better."

"Oh Edward," Bella sighed. One of the tears escaped and ran down her cheek. "It's okay...you just have to focus now, all right?"

"Yes," I answered automatically. Then I couldn't remember what she had asked me to do. "What should I do?"

"For starters, you need to get cleaned up," Bella said, her hand brushing against the front of my shirt, which seemed to have bits of tomato on it. Then Bella's eyes got wide as she pulled one of my arms away from my leg and stared. "Sweetheart, what in the world are you wearing?"

I looked down at the yellow character on the lounge pants I wore.

"It's a cartoon," I said.

"I know who Sponge Bob is!" Bella's eyes darted from the character on the pants, to my eyes, then back again. Suddenly, she laughed aloud.

"I didn't know the name of it," I admitted. "Why is it called Sponge Bob?"

"He's a sponge!" Bella laughed again. "His name is Sponge Bob Square Pants, and he lives in a pineapple under the sea!"

"A sponge?" I questioned. "You mean a sea sponge?"

"Yes, of course."

"In a pineapple?"

"Yes."

"Pineapples don't grow in the ocean or near coral reefs," I told her.

"Of course not." Bella smiled and bit down on her lip, apparently trying to hold in laughter. "Sponge Bob lives inside of a hollowed out one on the bottom of the ocean."

"Pineapples would decompose fairly quickly in salt water," I informed her.

Bella's lip escaped her teeth with a loud burst of laughter. She began laughing so hard she had to sit down on the floor next to me. I felt myself smile, because Bella happy was exactly what I wanted to see.

"Why did you buy those, Edward?" Bella asked when she calmed down again.

"To make you laugh," I said. "The salesperson said they were funny."

"They are much better than knock-knock jokes." Bella smiled and bit down on her lip again.

I reached up and touched the side of her face with my fingertips. The back of my index finger caught lingering moisture from her eyelashes and brushed it away.

"I've caused more tears in your eyes than smiles on your lips," I said, speaking very softly to her. "I hope I get the chance to fix that."

I didn't remember leaving the kitchen – hadn't I been cooking something for Bella? Suddenly Bella was there and leading me to the bathroom. She pulled my shirt over my head and untied the drawstring on the Sponge Bob pants. She smiled and shook her head as her fingers brushed over one of the strange yellow figures.

"They make you smile," I observed.

"Yes," Bella said. "I have to admit they do."

"I want you to always smile," I told her. "I want to be the one that makes you happy."

"I am happy with you," Bella said. "It's definitely...different, but I am happy with you."

It was my turn to smile.

Bella removed the rest of my clothes and pushed me towards the shower. I started to comply, but stopped when she turned on the water and stuck her hand in the stream of water to check the temperature.

The sound of the water pounding against the tile and porcelain filled my ears and my brain until there was nothing but the sound. I could hear it, I could taste the moisture, I could feel the stinging droplets as

they pelted me, and I could feel the grit of sand against my face and hands.

No...no...no...I am not there. She came back to me. I'm not still there.

A distant voice called to me, and the grit was replaced with soft warm fingers.

"Edward, sweetheart, what is it?"

"I don't want to," I heard my voice and recognized the words, but I had no idea how they got there. "Please don't go...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to do it. I won't kill anyone else, please stay...I promise..."

"Edward I'm not going anywhere," Bella's hands cupped my face and my eyes focused on her. I looked to the shower and the running water and then back to her.

"It rained when I was on the beach," I whispered. "The water carried you away."

"Edward, look at me," Bella commanded. I looked into her eyes and watched her lips move, but I didn't hear everything she said, only the last part. "I'm sticking with you, sweetheart. No matter what. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I whispered, and wondered if I could believe it. I wanted to believe it. I also didn't want to believe it. The pounding water continued to echo through my ears. "I don't like the water."

Bella's hands wrapped around my waist and she leaned her head against my chest. I raised my hand and touched her hair, feeling how soft it was, and dropped my head a little to inhale the scent of her shampoo.

"I'm here with you, Edward," she said, looking up to me. "It will be fine. I'll even go with you, okay?"

"Go with me?"

"In the shower, Edward," Bella said. "Whatever you were cooking as all over you, and you smell like smoke. From the fire...remember?"

"No," I answered. I didn't know what she meant. Bella's fingers ran over my cheek and her eyes narrowed with concern. "I'm sorry."

"There was a fire," Bella said, and then she sighed. "Never mind. You're going to take a shower now, and I'm going to get in with you, all right?"

"Will you take off your clothes?" I asked with a smile.

"Hmm...do you think I should?" Bella teased.

"Yes," I said simply. "Of course, I do."

"Then I will," Bella responded.

"I don't like the sound," I told her, nodding towards the noisy shower. "The water is...loud."

"I'll be with you, sweetheart."

"Okay."

Bella finished undressing me and then quickly removed her own clothes. My hands found the skin on her arms, then her shoulders, then down her sides and her stomach. Bella giggled and twisted away, grabbing for my hand to pull me under the water. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to feel it on my skin. I wanted to touch her instead. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulled her away from the shower, and started kissing her neck.

"You are trying to distract me," Bella accused me.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Why don't you want to get in the water, Edward?"

"I'm afraid you'll be gone," I heard myself say. "You might wash away and then I can't hold you anymore."

"Edward..." Bella's eyes looked so sad, and I didn't understand why. I didn't want her to be sad. She took my face between her palms and looked up into my eyes. She was talking again, and I could hear her voice, but not her words. I knew she was trying to comfort me, but I also knew there were too many uncertainties for her to offer me any real assurance.

"Come with me," Bella said.

I nodded and let her lead me under the stream of water. It was warm, and not biting like the tropical rains. I closed my eyes and kept my arms wrapped around Bella's waist and tried to keep them from shaking while I held her against me.

I felt her turning me around so my head was under the water, then back out again. Her hands went up into my hair and she fanned her fingers over my head, massaging shampoo into my hair. I ducked down so she could reach me with greater ease, and also so I could kiss the top of her shoulder.

When she was done with my hair, Bella turned me around again and placed me under the stream long enough to rinse the suds off of my head and down over my shoulders and chest. I tried to remember the bath she gave me, and how it felt compared to her hands on my skin now, but the sound of the water was too loud in my ears and blocking out other sensations. I could feel her hands running over my chest and hips, but I couldn't connect the feeling with what was happening.

Nothing made sense to me. I knew it was wrong. I wasn't supposed to be like this.

"Bella...help..." My voice found its way out of my lungs without me realizing I was trying to speak. Bella's hands were in my hair and she was holding me down to her shoulder. "Don't be gone."

"I'm here, sweetheart."

Sometimes I thought, if I could cry, it would make it better.

"I don't know what to do," I whispered into her dampened skin. "I'm scared to go away."

"I know," Bella said. "I don't want you to be away, but I want you to be okay again."

"I want to make love to you."

Bella let out a breathy chuckle and lay her head on my chest.

"Edward, you always want to do that!"

"Yes." There was no point in denying it. "May I? Please?"

She looked up to me and smiled, shaking her head slightly. I waited anxiously, wondering if the movement from her head was her answer.

"How could I say no when you ask so politely?"

I looked down and tilted her head up so I could kiss her mouth. While my lips were busy there, both my hands made their way up from her hips to her breasts, each fingertip running over her nipples once before my thumbs and forefingers rolled them both gently. Bella moaned into my mouth, and I moved towards her until she stepped back and met the wall of the shower.

My lips moved from her mouth down her neck and over to her ear.

"I might not remember anything else," I whispered to her, "but I think I can still make you scream my name."

I covered her neck and shoulders in kisses before moving down her front and placing small kisses on each breast, then sucked her nipples into my mouth. Bella's breath hitched, and she grabbed at my hair.

"Oh my God," Bella said. "That's so...fantastic. The heat from the water and the cold from your mouth..."

I went back to the first nipple and ran my tongue all around it as Bella arched her back and pushed her breast further into my mouth. I completed the act on the other side and then placed another kiss between them.

I moved down a little farther, dropping to my knees in front of her and kissing across her stomach. My tongue made a cool trail from one hipbone to the other, my lips nipping at her skin along the way. The scent of her arousal was strong from where I was, so close to her core. The water washing down my back couldn't begin to wash away the smell of her excitement. I realized I wanted to taste how ready for me she was, but I didn't know if she would want me to do that.

I looked up and met her gaze as she stared down at me with wide, dark eyes and a half smile. Her rapid heartbeat called to me. I kept my eyes on her and moved back over to one of her hips before descending to the place where her thigh joined her torso. I kissed her there, and then moved down a little farther, closer to her center.

I focused on Bella's eyes, still not sure how she would react or if she realized what I wanted to do. My hands slid slowly down her sides and rested on her hips for a moment before dropping to the outsides of her legs. I moved one hand around to the inside of her thigh and pushed against it as gently as I could.

Bella moved her legs apart and kept her eyes on mine. I was pretty sure she nodded slightly, and I felt my breathing increase, which only brought her scent to me faster. I licked my lips and moved over another inch.

"Is this okay?" I asked softly, afraid of what she might say. She didn't say anything, but this time her nod wasn't so slight. It was more enough of an invitation for me. My eyes dropped from hers and I stared at the pale, sensitive flesh before me with its smattering of hair covering the top.

My hands moved to the inside of her thighs and she moved them apart for me. I could see that this position was going to be a little awkward as we were now, so I lifted one of her legs and rested it over my shoulder. Now, not only was Bella better supported, but my access to her was eased as well.

I slipped my hand to the leg that wasn't over my shoulder and ran it all the way up until I reached her heated core. My thumb moved up and ran over her outer labia before reaching the clitoral hood, exposing her to me. I leaned closer, unable to wait any longer, and tasted her.

Every new taste of Bella was a glorious experience.

This flavor was, undoubtedly, only second to one.

My tongue ran over her labia, then with the help of my fingers, my tongue caressed her inner folds first up, and then down. Bella shivered and her head tilted back against the tiles as she moaned out my name. I couldn't help but smile against her skin as I continued stroking her with my tongue, using the same motions my fingers had in the past.

I reached her opening and lapped around the rim before going back up to her clit and down again. My finger reached up and slowly made circles around the little nub as my tongue explored the rest of her, then stopped again at her opening.

My tongue reached into her and I pushed up, feeling the muscles in her thighs around my head begin to shake as Bella cried out again. I reached around and under her backside and used both of my hands

to pull her against me, diving into her, licking, sucking, and tasting, tasting, tasting...

Pulling back, I drew a line with my tongue from bottom to top and back again as Bella convulsed against me. I went back to the top and sucked at the end of the exposed part of her clitoris, then ran my tongue in a circle around it.

"Edward! Edward! Oh my... God...Edward..."

The rest of the sounds she made were incomprehensible. I smiled against her and sucked harder one more time before she gave a final shudder and her weight collapsed onto my shoulders and hands.

I lifted up and moved her legs down to my hips, wrapped them around my waist and entered her in one, swift movement. Her wet flesh curled around my shaft and drew me into her as she gasped and had another orgasm as I buried myself inside of her. I held her up and lifted her slightly before bringing her back down over me and moaning against the skin of her neck. I pulled out almost all the way, and then quickly entered her again, feeling her back brace against the tiled wall of the shower. I continued the slow, deep pace as long as I could, tilting my hips slightly to the left and right to change the pressure and feel what she was like from every possible angle.

"So much...warmer..." Bella gasped into my ear.

I slid into her again, feeling her heat encompass me, savor me, own me. Being inside of her was like nothing else I had ever experienced in my existence, and though I didn't want it to end, I could feel the wondrous pressure building through my nerves and radiating out of my body until I couldn't take anymore. I wrapped my arms around her and held her to my chest as I caressed inside her once again and felt myself empty into her body while I cried out her name.

My mind swirled and darkened, and all sensations left me empty and alone inside my head. I tried to determine if my eyes were open, and

discovered that they were not. I opened them slowly, and found my head tucked against Bella's shoulder. As my other senses returned, I felt her warm, wet body pressed into mine, and realized our bodies were connected most intimately. Water poured down my back in slowly cooling turrets.

My breathing was rapid, and I pressed my lips against her ear. I had no memory of how we got into this position. Words I thought I should say came into my head.

"I love you so much," I panted into her ear. "I'm scared to be without you."

"I'll always be here for you, sweetheart. Always."

I wondered if she understood what she was saying. I wondered if she knew how much of my mind was gone.

"Usually if I touch him, he responds after a few minutes."

"Yeah, when I tried to touch him, he tried to take my arm off."

"Edward?"

I opened my eyes and looked up at Bella, my brow furrowed. I knew Emmett was there, and I knew he had been trying to get me to answer him or stand up or something. I didn't care. His thoughts were full of Carlisle's impending arrival to haul me out of the country and away from Bella. He was also thinking of his nightly escapades with Rosalie, and I had never been in the mood to listen to that.

"I'm not going," I said.

"Sweetheart." Bella sat down next to me and tried to pull Pillow Bella out of my arms. I let her, but then captured the real Bella instead, pulling her body against my chest while she squirmed. "You need to go. If you are going to be this obstinate, I'm going with you."

"No!" I shouted as an image of Bella in a room full of human-drinking vampires invaded my brain. "You can't go anywhere near them!"

"Are you going to be good and go quietly?"

I thought about it for a little while, not answering. I noticed Emmett was still standing in the doorway and snarled at him to get out.

"Emmett, please," Bella said, much more politely than I was apparently capable of projecting. "Give me a little time with him, okay?"

"Sure."

Quit being such an ass.

I growled back at him as he exited the bedroom.

Bella turned around in my arms and cupped my face with her hands. Her lips came down and kissed me softly, which just wasn't near enough, so I reached around with one hand, twisted my fingers into her hair and pulled her closer to me. My tongue reached out for her mouth, and she obliged. I rolled us over, pinned her beneath me and started sliding my hand up her shirt.

"Edward, stop," Bella mumbled into my mouth. I growled and dropped my hand down to unbutton her denim shorts.

"I want you," I replied, slipping my hand inside of her panties and smiling against her mouth as she gasped and bucked against my fingers. I found moisture already collecting between her legs. "It's been too long."

"There isn't time," Bella said, but she immediately followed her words with a soft moan. "And it hasn't even been twelve hours!"

"Shh," I said, moving over to her ear and sucking on the lobe. "Emmett will hear you."

I can hear both of you, you know that.

I ignored his thoughts – I didn't care if he heard us or not. I kissed down her neck and to her shoulder while I circled her clitoris with my forefinger. I moved farther down and kissed her breasts through her shirt. I managed to pull Bella's shorts off of her as she sighed and gave into me.

I let go of her hair long enough to remove her shirt and bra, then immediately attacked her breasts with my mouth while my fingers dipped inside of her, stroking her quickly to climax. I was nearly frantic with desire for her, partially because I just wanted her, but also because I knew I was leaving and wouldn't get another opportunity anytime soon.

I withdrew my fingers, ditched the pants with the Hershey Kisses on them, and drove into her. Bella gasped and tightened her grip on my shoulders. I realized I was being much too rough, and I forced myself to stop and slow down my breathing.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against the skin between her breasts.

"No...please, don't stop," Bella panted back to me. I looked up and saw the dark desire in her warm brown eyes as her hands slid down my sides and gripped my backside. I pulled back and entered her again, more in control of my movements, but driving just as deep. She cried out again, much to Emmett's amusement in the next room, but I forced my thoughts away from him and on to her.

I closed my eyes, leaned my forehead on her chest and continued to move in and out of her, my pace quicker than it had been before. I could feel the buildup of pressure in my lower belly as I ground down against her clit with my body. Bella cried out again right before I felt warmth spreading through the tip of my penis, up through the shaft and throughout my body as I filled her.

I panted against her skin, mumbling apologies to her until she told me to shut up.

I swallowed hard, my throat painfully aware of how close her blood was to my mouth with her beating heart directly below my cheek. I could feel moisture from the gathered sweat on her skin where my thighs touched hers.

Bella's fingers tugged at my hair, and she brought my mouth to hers. I couldn't get enough of her tongue and lips, so finally she had to turn away from me in order to breathe. I apologized again before resting my head against her shoulder.

"Better now?" Bella asked, teasing.

"Much."

"Will you go with Carlisle now?"

"I don't want to go," I said for what must have been the hundredth time. "I don't want to be away from you. What if I can't remember...?"

"Edward, please...will you listen to me?"

"Yes," I said. I felt panic begin to rise until her fingers starting looping through my hair and she looked into my eyes.

"You have to do this, sweetheart," Bella told me, then held her finger to my lips when I started to list more reasons not to go. "Please, Edward. I told you I will be here for you regardless, but I want you to be well. I want you to be all right again. It tears me up to see you like this. Alice said you could have...could have been destroyed in the fire. Edward, please – I can't stand the thought of something happening to you. You have to go – for me. All right?"

"I'm afraid I'm getting worse," I confessed. Bella's eyes closed for a minute, and when she opened them, they glistened.

"That's why you need to go now, sweetheart," Bella sighed heavily.

"Don't cry, please," I whispered. "I love you. I don't want you to be sad."

"Then go," Bella insisted. "Go to Italy and let them help you."

"What if they can't...?"

"Don't start that again!" Bella snapped. I cringed. I hadn't meant to anger her. "They're going to be able to help you. They have to."

I didn't respond. I didn't want her to cry anymore, and I definitely didn't want her to be angry with me when parts of me were attached to her.

Edward, it's time.

I snarled towards the doorway.

"Carlisle is here, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Go now," Bella told me. "Do what Carlisle tells you to do and then come back to me. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, but I didn't let go of her or make a move to get off the bed. Bella leaned up and brought her lips gently to mine. I kissed her back and still held her to me. We went on like this for a while until I finally let her shove me out of the bed and into some clothes.

Emmett was still out in the other room, loitering by the door and grinning like an idiot. He raised his eyebrows up at Bella, which made her blush and made me growl. Bella told me to stop it, and Emmett just kept thinking about Rosalie as if he was trying to make me sick.

Or maybe trying to block his thoughts .

Emmett wasn't very good at hiding thoughts from me, and he knew images of naked Rose were his best bet. I glared at him for a moment, but only received glimpses of Bella in my room at the house in Forks, which didn't make sense to me.

I didn't get much of a chance to try discovering what he was hiding, because Bella grabbed me for another hug. That made me kiss her again and got me rather worked up before she managed to usher me out the door towards my father's Mercedes.

"Don't say goodbye," I begged, holding onto both of her hands.

"Never." Bella shook her head. She kissed my cheek again and said something in my ear that I didn't understand. I felt tired again.

"I love you," I said before I slumped into the passenger side of the car and growled at Carlisle.

You aren't going to make this easy, are you?

I didn't look at him. I stared out the window while we pulled away from the cabin. After we had traveled a while, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

He is worse; there is no doubt of that.

"Edward, can you even hear me?"

I wasn't sure if I could hear him or not. Was he here? Or was it just the Carlisle voice that trounced around in my head occasionally, telling me what I had done wrong.

It's best this way; he didn't even question Emmett's presence. I hope Bella understands we had to do it. She couldn't be left to her own devices, not with everything she knows about us.

I tried to force the thoughts from my head, attempting not to hear him at all. I allowed Chopin to play in my head and ignored his internal ramblings.

Carlisle sat in the window seat and led me to sit next to him. He politely declined the complimentary champagne offered to all the

first-class passengers and settled into his seat. I did the same, trying to follow Bella's instructions to follow Carlisle's lead and do what he tells me to do.

Edward, I need to talk to you about Aro's gift.

"I know," I responded quickly and quietly. "If he touches me, he'll know all my thoughts. You have told me before."

He will want to touch you, son. There may be no avoiding that. He will want to know your thoughts and you will have to show him. He'll know about Jasper and Alice. He'll know about Bella.

"I don't want him to know about Bella," I said. "Or the others. I don't want him to touch me."

I don't want that either, but it is likely we will have no other alternative. I have taken some precautions regarding Bella, but there is a risk.

"The risk is too high."

Son, you are worth the risk.

"I'm not." I shook my head slightly. My head swam and I lost my train of thought. I didn't know what Carlisle was saying any longer, and then I became distracted when a flight attendant shuffled some luggage around to make room for a last-minute passenger's luggage in the overhead bins. Directly behind her, a woman entered right before the cabin doors closed. She sat next to me across the aisle. She had chestnut brown hair with slight tinges of red in it. Her eyes were brown, but a lighter shade than Bella's. They had similar builds, but this woman was obviously older – in her mid-twenties. After the plane took off, she turned to me, calling me out on my staring.

"Can I help you?" she said tersely.

"You look like someone I know," I said softly.

"Oh," the woman said. Her eyes softened as she glanced down and back up again. "You don't look familiar to me."

I would definitely remember that face, and that body.

"You have the same color hair," I told her.

Edward, that's enough.

"Your eyes are lighter though, and you don't smell as good as she does."

Okay...that's a little creepy.

Edward!

The woman leaned back slightly and moved her hand off of the armrest closest to my seat. I looked down at the exposed skin of her arm, and wondered if her skin was as warm and soft as Bella's. I reached out across the aisle and grazed my fingertips over her arm.

"Excuse me!" The woman jumped back and started to rise from her seat.

Oh my God, he's so cold...

"I'm terribly sorry, miss," Carlisle grabbed my hand and pulled me up until I was standing. "Please forgive my son. He's not feeling well."

"She looks like Bella," I said softly.

Edward, you have to control yourself. Believe it or not, the situation could actually be worse.

"I'll try." I remembered to speak softly enough so the woman would not hear me, only Carlisle.

Carlisle maneuvered me until I was in the window seat and he was in the middle. He continued to talk and reassure the woman as I looked

out the darkened window and all but forgot either of them was there. My thoughts turned to where they always turned – back to Bella.

The remainder of the flight to Italy and subsequent drive to Volterra was quick and uneventful. I didn't say anything to Carlisle, but part of the reason for the perceived speed of the trip was because I simply didn't remember very much of it. Carlisle talked about the members of the Volturi guard and their various gifts, but I was only half listening. I missed Bella, and I didn't want to think about Jane's sadistic gift for pain or Renata's ability to shield her master. Before long, we arrived at the gates of the city.

It was dusk, and the shadows inside the walls of Volterra were deep enough to hide our unusual skin. Many humans walked the streets, and I could sense both their minds and the minds of the vampires slowly stalking us from the top of the walls as well as the easily accessed sewer systems underneath the streets.

Interesting souvenirs...oh look! There is a yearly festival...I wonder if the hotel has a map of the city...the one on the left looks familiar – I think I have seen him here before – but not the other one...they are heading straight to the entrance...I wonder if there is a cab I can take, these shoes are killing me...

I hated their thoughts, both human and vampire, but the vampires were worse. I hated hearing them because they could think of so many things at one time, and were not limited as humans were. I tried to block them out so I didn't have to listen, but when I did, Carlisle would shake my arm. He reminded me that Bella told me to listen to him, and then told me I had to pay attention and stay alert.

Are they watching us, Edward?

"Yes," I replied, only loud enough for Carlisle to hear. "Two on the wall above us, two more up near the gate. They just came out of the sewer grate there."

Are they hostile?

"No, just curious right now."

We continued around and down a side street, then through the main plaza as the sun dropped below the city walls and the risk of exposure disappeared with the daylight. Carlisle thought-talked about the different buildings as we passed them and told me of the many secret entrances into the Volturi's abode from the streets. I didn't need him to tell me, there were vampires all around us, most of whom either came out of a secluded doorway or perched near one, in case they needed to make a hasty retreat.

Carlisle also tried to tell me more about the different members of the guard, but I waved my hand at him. It was bad enough to try and block out all the other voices in my head without him adding to the chatter intentionally.

Carlisle turned and took a short flight of steps up to a barred door. There were two vampires in ashen grey cloaks standing at either side.

He certainly knows his way around like he's been here before.

The one on the left side of the door eyed my father, and then looked to me.

This one just looks deranged.

I didn't realize it showed. I was going to have to keep myself together better than this. For Bella. I had to make this work for her. I closed my eyes for a half second, then met the vampire's crimson gaze.

"May we be of some assistance?" he asked.

"I'm an old friend of Aro's," Carlisle said immediately. "Please inform him that Carlisle Cullen is here to see him."

Both vampires registered shock in their thoughts, though not in their faces. It didn't take them long to usher us into a waiting room, get a message to Aro, and then start apologizing for not acting faster.

We were taken to an elevator and then down to the lower floors. Before we entered the room, I could identify some of the members of the Volturi, primarily Aro and Marcus. There were also members of their guard – Renata, Aro's bodyguard, Jane, Alex, Felix, Demetri – they were all inside. I knew each of them from Carlisle's descriptions.

As we entered, the entire company turned to us.

So this is Master's old friend Carlisle...I have heard so much about him...a handsome pair, no doubt...I wonder the reason for their visit...Aro said Carlisle has never brought company before...

I tried to block them out, but the thoughts and images kept coming, building one on top of the other.

Strange how one could be so obviously bonded to another when the other is not even present...I wonder if I will get the opportunity to show them my gifts...not too big, I think I could take them both if needed...mmm, yes, there they are – it would be easy enough to find them again...

"Carlisle, my old friend!" Aro smiled grandly and stood up, stepping forward.

Who has he brought with him, and why? Carlisle has never brought anyone to us before. His reasons must be interesting indeed. Is this one of Carlisle's offspring?

"It is a pleasure to see you again, my old friend." Carlisle stopped and did not move close to Aro.

"It is wonderful, simply *wonderful* to see you, Carlisle!" Aro beamed and laughed before looking to me.

I knew I should respond to him in some way, but I wasn't sure how. My hands were starting to shake. There were too many voices – too many *vampire* voices in my head. They were all so strong, so in depth, detailed and layered. I couldn't keep up with the thoughts, and I couldn't figure out which thoughts were theirs and which ones were mine.

Strange for him to visit out of the blue...I wonder when Heidi will be back from her fishing trip...I'll have to keep tabs on that new vampire outside the city today...I can only hope I get to punish one of these two...poor Jane, she's anxious to use her gift for Master Aro...I'm thirsty, there must be someone around here Caius has decided isn't worthy, I don't want to wait...there are no more distractions worth my time here...

"Please...Carlisle...it's too many. I can't focus. Please..." I wasn't even sure what I wanted him to do.

"Aro," Carlisle stepped forward, but still not close enough to touch the ancient one. "Would it be possible for us to speak in a more private, isolated setting? I hope you will trust me that we mean no harm, and your immediate guard is welcome, but the number of others here is making it difficult for my son."

His son...very interesting.

"Of course, my old friend." Aro looked up and made a quick motion with his hand.

I tried to block out the confused thoughts of all the vampires around us, as they followed their Master's bidding and moved out of the door and away. I could still hear their thoughts, but the distance made it easier to ignore. Aro led us over to a small, out of the way alcove behind the grandiose, throne-like chairs at the top of tiered steps. I noticed Caius and Marcus did not leave the main room, but didn't join us, either. They could easily hear from where they were.

Aside from Aro, only Renata, and Jane followed us. The alcove was little more than a large depression in the wall, with bench seating and a long table decorated with dried flower arrangements.

"My apologies, Aro," Carlisle said. "It's been a long trip and Edward is...not well."

"Not well?" Aro said. His thoughts began to focus on what I might be able to offer the Volturi. He offered his hand to me, but I didn't take it. After a moment, he dropped it again.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Carlisle?"

"I need your help, Aro," Carlisle told him. "Edward is experiencing... problems."

"Problems?" Aro inquired.

"I'm crazy," I informed him.

"Are you now?"

I nodded.

"Wasn't always," I clarified. "Just recently, but it's not Bella's fault."

"And who is this...Bella?"

"She's mine," I said.

"Edward, why don't you let me explain?" Carlisle stepped in front of me. "Edward is...very dear to me, Aro. He is my first child, and he has always been...gifted.

I always knew he was hiding something from me.

"Is that so?" Aro beamed with insincere wonder. "What sort of gift does Edward possess?"

"It is similar to your gift, my friend."

Another reader of thoughts? I wonder if he can see as well as I.

"No," I said. "Not as well, not as *deep* , but I can hear everyone at once."

You can hear my thoughts now?

I nodded.

Without physical contact as well. How very...convenient.

"Sometimes," I shrugged. "When there are so many, and I'm not used to it...I can hear too much."

How much do you hear?

"Only what's going through your head at the moment," I responded. "Nothing like you can get with your touch."

Aro took a step closer. He wanted to touch me. He wanted to know what it was like.

"But I'm broken now," I said softly.

You still hear.

"But I don't understand anymore."

"Edward has been suffering from many problems over the past few weeks," Carlisle told him. "He's forgetting things, he is losing time, and becomes non-responsive to outside stimuli."

Always the doctor...

"He has gone from stubborn and strong willed to nearly incapacitated with anxiety and almost completely unable to make

decisions for himself. Aro – I'm very concerned for him. With all of your gathered knowledge, have you ever seen anything like this?"

"It's hard to say, my friend," Aro purred. "If Edward has...lost his mind, as he seems to think, there are many different things that could cause such an infliction in our kind. You have seen it yourself."

"I have done some research." Carlisle nodded. "Edward does not fit into anything I have seen before."

Aro took another step closer.

It would be so much easier if I could see it myself, Edward...

"Edward, show me," Aro reached his hand out to me.

I glanced over at Carlisle. I didn't know what to do. If I touched him, he would know about Bella. I could be putting her in danger. If I didn't touch him, my chances of ever being right again were slim. I had to be right for her. Bella wanted me to be right.

I slipped my fingers into his.

Over the past near-century, I have experienced a lot of bizarre things. I nearly died of Spanish Flu right before I was changed into a vampire. I've heard the thoughts of newborn babies, children with Autism and the criminally insane. I even managed to fall in love with my natural food. After all of that, I had never experienced anything as strange as watching my thoughts go from my mind to Aro's and back to my own again.

It wasn't just in my head or what I was thinking about at the time. There were images of my human life I didn't recall. I saw my mother's face as she held me and my father's strong hands catching a baseball at Weeghman Park when the Cubs beat played the Reds in a National League game. Those images were followed by my transformation, the early years with Carlisle, Esme, Rosalie, Emmett, Alice and Jasper, Alice's visions dancing through my head, years in

Universities, high schools, years alone when I couldn't take anymore. More recent times with my siblings, drawing into myself and music, sensing Bella for the first time, drinking from her, wanting her, loving her...it was all there.

Mixed in among all of my own thoughts, emotions and desires, was every thought of every sentient being with whom I had come into contact over the past ninety years.

There were other things I didn't remember – words Bella spoke, but my mind refused to hear and comprehend – they were there, though the meaning slipped away from me as soon as it passed into Aro's conscious mind. There were even Carlisle's thoughts while we were in the car...thoughts I ignored or blocked out or blacked out, I wasn't sure, but now I heard them. They were instructions to Emmett regarding Bella.

Emmett, I want you to take Bella to the Cullen house and hold her there. She will never be allowed to leave again, for her safety and for ours. Once we find out what is wrong with Edward, we can decide what must become of her.

Aro's hand dropped from mine.

"Your...you...you have Bella?" I looked over to my father, my eyes wide with disbelief. "You are holding her...holding her *hostage* ? Against her will? No!"

It was necessary...

I screamed and dived at Carlisle, tackling him to the ground and rolling. We crashed together into the wall, and I clawed my way on top of him. I would have torn him apart had I been given the chance.

Pain.

I heard the thought, then I felt the result.

It approached the intensity of the change, without actually being hot. Just pain. Intense, rolling, all-consuming pain over every inch of my body. Not just my skin – I could feel it inside. Every facet of my being was affected. I dropped to the ground immediately, barely aware of Carlisle rolling away from me and righting himself before yelling at Aro to make her stop. I could hear my own cries of pain, as my arms wrapped around myself, and I tried to comprehend what was happening to me.

Eventually it stopped, and I found I missed it. It was raw, and it hurt, and it was better than nothing, which is how I always felt without Bella. I stayed on the ground, curled in a ball and wondered why I hadn't brought Pillow Bella with me. She would have been very welcomed at the moment.

I heard voices in my ears and in my head, but I tried not to acknowledge them. Still, I heard them anyway.

"Carlisle, your son is – as you said – not well."

"Yes, that's why we came to you."

"I have seen this before, as has Marcus. I wish to consult with him and then I will return."

I could hear his light, brushy footsteps as he left the ante chamber.

Edward?

"You can't hold her like that," I snarled. "I told her I'd protect her... you can't. Not after everything I put her through. You can't."

"I must do what I believe is best for our family, Edward. I always have."

"Leave her alone!"

Son...please.

I started to get up as Carlisle took a step back from me.

Please....go right ahead. I haven't had much practice lately.

I looked up into the eyes of the sadistic little girl and growled at her. She gave me a perfectly angelic smile and cocked her head to one side. I considered how quickly I might be able to do damage, and concluded it wouldn't be worth the effort. For a while, we just stared at each other as she mentally challenged me.

I heard Aro's mental voice before he came around the corner and beckoned for us to come back to the main chamber, since it was much more comfortable. All the other vampires had left, except the two guards, Felix and Demetri, who stood on either side of the large doors.

Aro sat in the center throne-like chair, with Marcus and Caius on either side of him. Carlisle tried to pull me with him to stand in front of them, but I refused to acknowledge him. I pushed past him and stood off by myself instead.

"I see his is still somewhat strong willed, Carlisle." Aro chuckled and waved a hand at me.

"Indeed," Carlisle agreed.

Come to us, dear Edward. The news we have for you is good.

If that were the case, then why was he blocking it from me?

Edward...I would never hurt Bella. You understand that, don't you?

I growled low in my chest at him as the images – from his mind, to mine, to Aro's and back to mine again – of Bella captive in my room of the Cullen house...the rage inside me at the very idea was overwhelming.

"Carlisle, you were right to come to me," Aro smiled and held out his arms, as if to hug my father. "I do believe we can help."

"You know what afflicts him?" My father tensed, afraid to hope I may be cured.

"La Tue Cantante," Aro remarked. He sat back in his chair and looked over to me. "Edward met his singer, and through some miracle, didn't kill her outright. Marcus remembers another instance of this, back in Egypt some two thousand years ago. Instead of draining the human's blood immediately, this vampire drank again and again for a decade before finally losing control and draining it all."

My singer? Bella was my *singer* ? I had never heard of such a thing. Apparently, neither had my father, whose thoughts were equally confused. The analogy did make a certain amount of poetic sense – Bella's blood did sing the most captivating of songs for me, begging me to drink it.

"He had, to put it simply, become addicted to the blood. His body not only craved it, but his mind demanded it. When the supply was no longer available, his mind quickly deteriorated until his madness consumed him. Marcus doesn't know what happened to him. He may even still be around in the world, somewhere, though if he is, I think we would have learned of him."

"There was one other as well," Marcus remarked.

"One we all knew quite well," Caius added.

"The situation was the same," Aro said, "but in this case, the vampire inflicted came to us. It was the beginning of the sixteenth century when she first found us. We kept her here for many, many years as her mind left her further and further behind until the day we found what we thought could never be."

"We found another human whose blood sang to her," Caius interrupted. "The assumption had always been there could only be one. This time we made sure she didn't kill him."

"She recovered, albeit slowly," Aro said. "She regained her faculties, and went on relatively normally, as far as we could tell, until the human singer met his end by natural causes."

"She had to be destroyed when she went mad again," Caius informed us. "She was too much of a liability."

"What I find strange is this human's abilities," Aro remarked. "She has a strange hold over your boy, Carlisle. She is the only one immune to his gift, which is unusual enough, but she can also reach his mind when no one else can, not even those of his own coven. We were never successful in reaching the other vampire under similar circumstances. I found towards the end I could not bear to touch her, her mind was so...disturbing."

There was something in Aro's thoughts that alarmed me – something about Bella – but the images he remembered from the other singer-deprived vampire were more than enough to pull my attention away from his other thoughts. I pulled back, horrified at the images he had seen inside her head.

"There was never any hope for the Egyptian, but since Bella is alive, there is good news for Edward. As long as he doesn't kill her, he should be able to drink from her for the rest of her life. She's young, and he may be able to continue for many, many decades. It's very lucky she seems to care for him, and may even offer her blood to him willingly. Quite a strange relationship between one of ours and one of theirs."

"In accordance to the law, we shouldn't allow it," Caius grumbled. "I don't like it in the least, and should demand punishment, but I'm afraid Aro doesn't agree."

"We must consider the circumstances," Aro smiled back at Caius, then looked to me. "Though Edward has certainly revealed himself to this human, she is now bound to him and is needed to keep him whole. I would not like to see young Edward's unique mind destroyed. No, definitely not. What a waste that would be!"

You are far too important, Edward. Far too valuable. We will do everything we can to help you.

His tone was reassuring and pleasant, even inside of his mind, but the undercurrent...there was something else. Something I was missing.

"I'm glad you have taken the precaution of holding her, Carlisle," Caius said. "Like those humans who serve us here, they must be controlled and monitored. Had you not, we would have had to take action."

Carlisle's thoughts returned to Bella, held prisoner. Another growl escaped me, and Aro raised up his hand.

All will be well in time, dear Edward. We will take care of you and your Bella. She will be safe with us, and you will be with her – always.

"I would suggest you leave Edward here," Aro tilted his head to Carlisle. "Then go back to retrieve Bella and leave them both in my care."

Not in a thousand lifetimes.

My father smiled pleasantly, completely hiding his anger. He was going to tell Aro he would consider it after discussions with the family, but I spoke first.

"What do I do?" I said softly, more to myself than to the vampire royalty. It was too much information – these other vampires and singers – I couldn't understand anything past Aro saying there was good news for me, since I hadn't killed Bella.

"You already have the solution, my boy," Aro said with a smile. "Why you chose to stop is a mystery, but if you start drinking from her again, in due time, you'll return to the way you once were. You will be whole again."

Both Marcus and Caius mentally agreed.

It had all been confirmed by those who knew more about our kind over their thousands of years of existence than anyone else. Not only could vampires be insane, but I was confirmed to be one crazy vampire. I had been driven insane by repeatedly drinking the blood of my singer, teaching my body and mind to crave that one substance alone. As long as I drank it, I was able to maintain myself. But as soon as I stopped, my body and mind rebelled against the absence of Bella's blood, and the only cure would be to drink from her again. *I would have to hurt her all the time...*

So much for covenants.

Chapter End Notes:

OK – now you know what's wrong with poor adorkable, bipolar, horny Boobward. Is it what you thought? Some people got it right in reviews. How do you think he's going to cope? What will Bella's reaction be? And WTF is Carlisle doing holding Bella captive? Hit review and let me know what you think!

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 –Manipulate and Capitulate

I laughed.

I laughed probably harder than I ever had before.

I laughed at the insanity of the entire situation, notwithstanding the *actual* insanity of the situation, and the irony of the supposed cure to my ailment.

Drink Bella's blood.

If I did it, I would be cured.

Perfectly fine in no time.

Whole again.

It's only Bella who had to suffer.

No big deal.

I laughed harder.

"Edward, please..." Carlisle's mind was torn. He was shocked by the revelation as well as by my outburst. His mind raced in a dozen directions at once, trying to determine how this could be resolved in a satisfactory matter for all involved.

Satisfactory. I actually snorted aloud.

"Who do we get to sacrifice this time, Daddy?" I continued my laughter until I felt myself stumble backwards into the wall of the room and slide down to the floor. I tucked my head down into my

arms and continued chuckling as the thoughts of those around me bombarded my consciousness.

So this is what crazy looks like...son, we will find another way...he's a maniac...stay with us, Edward – we will help you...I wonder if Master will let me...I don't understand the problem, he'll be fine now...what's the big deal about this human... it's because of their diet, they're probably all nuts...

"Bring the girl to us, Carlisle," Caius spoke up. "I believe we'll be able to handle both of them better than you."

"I appreciate your concern, gentlemen," my father replied quickly. "I think it would be best for me to discuss this with my son privately. Edward?"

I shook my head. I wasn't actually refusing to go with him – I wanted to be out of the place – but there was no discussion to be had. I was fairly certain my point about our kind being damned was just proven. At the very least, God hated *me* .

"Of course, my friend," Aro said.

Edward, you may stay here with us as long as you like...we'll head home immediately and figure this out...if he flips out again, I'm taking him out...the singer must be the one he's so bound to...it would be in everyone's best interest to keep him here...

"Stop it!" I screamed. I wrapped my arms back around my head and tried to force all of their thoughts from me. It didn't work. They flowed in and out of my head. All I managed to do was make the words indecipherable.

Aro ushered the others out of the chamber.

Please, Edward. Let me take you back home.

"And then what?" I spat back at Carlisle, all my laughter taking a sudden hiatus. "Are you going to force me to drink her? Did you know this already? Is that why you're holding her?"

Be reasonable.

"Seriously?" I found the laughter again. "Are you really asking me to behave rationally? And I'm the one who is insane?"

Come home with me, son.

I growled. My body wanted to fight, but there was nowhere to direct my fury. I slammed the back of my head into the wall behind me and heard the plaster crack. I wanted to tear myself apart. I looked for Jane – if I attacked her, she would make me feel the pain I deserved. She was nowhere in sight.

We will figure something out .

"No, we won't," I contradicted.

I will not abandon you.

"You should," I retorted, but his words still calmed me, albeit only slightly. "You all should. Maybe it would be better if I stayed here."

No, I don't want you here. You need to be with your family .

"No, I don't want to. I need Bella." I wrapped my arms around my head and curled up, wanting the blackness to take me again. I wanted to forget this. Why couldn't I forget when I wanted to? I didn't want to know what it was going to take to cure me. "We shouldn't have come here. I would have rather not known."

We can't undo it, son. We can only move forward.

"There is no forward – no future."

There is always hope.

"Not anymore."

Carlisle came and sat next to me. His mind flowed from one thought to the next rapidly, trying to come up with an alternative at the same time he contemplated how to get me to go home. We sat in comparative silence for some time, until I heard his thoughts as he fretted about Bella and wondered if I would forgive him for imprisoning her.

"Not likely," I mumbled, and brought my head up from my knees to look around.

No one else was in the room any longer. I could still hear a multitude of vampire voices shuffling through my head, but they were at least somewhat distant and not overwhelming.

We should return home immediately.

"Why?"

We need to figure out our next steps.

"I'm not going to hurt her," I asserted.

I would never advocate you drinking from Bella again, but there may be another way. I could draw her blood painlessly...

"No!"

I know how you feel, son. I wouldn't want you to hurt her. I'm just trying to examine all of our options.

"She's going to be upset," I said. "She's going to think it's her fault. It's not her fault. I don't want her to know."

She has to know, Edward.

"No!" I shouted. "You said she had to know about what was wrong with me, and that didn't help. It's only made it worse."

"You don't give Bella enough credit," Carlisle said aloud. "She is a very strong young woman."

"I know that," I said. *Strong* didn't even begin to describe Bella. She had to be made of fucking steel nerves to put up with my crazy, Sponge Bob covered ass. "I must be losing it; I'm starting to sound like Emmett."

Edward, I have no idea what you are talking about.

"It doesn't matter." I waved my hand dismissively. "Emmett probably loves Sponge Bob."

Carlisle sighed, inwardly wondering how he was going to get me back home and into his house again when he couldn't even follow my ramblings. He considered calling Bella, asking her to tell me to come back. He dismissed the idea, assuming I would also refuse to talk to her.

"I want to talk to Bella," I said softly. Hearing her voice suddenly became the most important thing in the world. I missed her, and I hadn't brought anything of hers with me. "I don't know how to be without her, Carlisle."

If I call her, you'll listen to what she says?

I nodded.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and after a moment, I heard her voice on the other side. I cringed as Carlisle told her only the immediate concern – I wasn't agreeing to return. He placed the phone in my hand, and I just stared at it. I heard her calling my name, but I was afraid to speak to her. I didn't know how the phone got in my hand in the first place.

"Talk to her," Carlisle urged. I put the phone up to my ear.

"I'm here," I said softly.

"Edward! What's happening? Carlisle said you don't want to come back!"

"I don't want to tell you," I said.

"Sweetheart, you told me you would come back to me. Whatever it is, it will be all right."

"It won't," I argued. "It will never be all right again. You don't understand."

"Then tell me," she demanded.

"No," I said. "If I stay here then you don't have to know."

The phone was silent for a moment, though I could still hear her breathing and her heartbeat as the tempo of each fluctuated.

"Please, Edward. I need you to come back." Bella sounded like she was crying. "You promised you would come back."

"Don't cry," I whispered. "Please don't."

"Then come back to me."

"You won't cry if I come back?"

"If you say you'll come back now, yes."

I couldn't let her keep crying – not for me.

"I'll come back," I said. "I need you."

"I need you, too, sweetheart."

"I'll tell the others," Carlisle said, taking the phone from me. "You stay here."

We'll leave here as soon as possible. You need to stay away from Aro while we're still here.

Carlisle left me on the floor, and I heard him speaking with the others in the next room over. He left them briefly, and followed Demetri to make arrangements for a car back to Florence. I heard Aro's approach immediately after Carlisle walked away. He wanted me to stay, but his reasons were guarded and selfish.

"Edward," Aro spoke softly. I didn't look up to him.

I want to be able to help you, son. If you stay with us, I would find you somewhere quiet, without the minds of others to bother you. You would be looked after – cared for by the Volturi. You would be one of us.

"You just want my ability." I didn't miss his use of the word "son." He remembered my thoughts when Carlisle was only calling me Edward. It was obviously manipulative, even to someone in my fragile state.

Of course it would be extremely useful, but like everyone here, I would only call on you when the need was desperate. I only want what is best for you.

"That's a lie," I said. "You can't just speak in your mind and think I'm not going to know the difference between a lie and the truth."

Aro contemplated, considering his options while trying to hide his thoughts from me.

I apologize, Edward. You know I want you here for my own reasons as well, but I will care for you.

At least he was sincere this time.

"I have to go back to Bella."

If you must, then go. But if you are determined not to cure yourself, at least come back to us.

"I need to be with Bella." I raised my head and looked into his red eyes.

Aro tilted his head to one side.

I know how you feel about her, Edward. I have been inside your mind, and I know how deeply you care for her. It's one of the reasons I want you to consider staying.

"What do you mean?"

You know, because the thoughts are your own. You promised not to hurt her again, and her pain is your salvation.

"I can't hurt her."

Even if you do not drink from her, you will harm her. She would feel obligated to take care of you.

"She shouldn't have to be with me," I said quietly. "Not the way I am."

You would be a burden to her.

"She deserves better," I agreed. I wasn't sure if I was agreeing with Aro or with myself. Though I knew his reasons were not entirely based on my wellbeing, he was right, the thoughts were my own. I would be a burden to Bella. I'd be a burden to my family. "They all deserve better."

You do not want to be a liability to your family.

"A liability?"

If you do not drink from your Bella you will break down. You will not be able to control your actions. You may hurt someone. You could harm someone in your family. Maybe even your mother.

"I would never hurt Esme." The idea was sickening.

When you can think, of course you wouldn't. But what about when you don't remember what you have done? What are you capable of then?

I could feel the panic rising from the very thought of hurting Esme, or anyone else in my family. What if I did hurt one of them? What if I hurt Bella? What if, when I couldn't even remember what I was doing, I bit her? I could kill Bella so easily. Aro was right. I would be a liability. Even more so, when it came to Bella, I was truly a danger.

They would worry about you all the time.

My family worried about me now. Even without knowing her thoughts, I was fairly certain Bella worried about me, too. He was right. My family would have to watch out for me to make sure I didn't do anything to expose us. I was already bad enough they didn't leave me unsupervised.

When you forget important things, Bella will be upset with you. She may even punish you.

I didn't want to upset Bella. I didn't want her to be angry with me, and I knew I forgot things all the time.

She will eventually learn to hate you, even when she still calls you her sweetheart.

My hands were shaking again, and I could feel my breath coming out in rough gasps. Bella hating me was unendurable. I couldn't let that happen. If I returned to Volterra, she might be sad for a little while, but in the end she would be better off.

The only solution, if you are not going to drink from her, is to return here. We would keep you from hurting those you love. We would keep you safe. If you stayed with us, you wouldn't burden anyone else with concern for you.

"You would let me stay?" I asked. "Even if I can't help you the way you want? Even though I'm crazy?"

"I would very much like for you to stay with us, Edward."

I nodded, understanding that Aro had other ulterior motives and not caring very much what they might be. His reasons were secondary to the real issues – I didn't want anyone to worry about me. I didn't want to be a burden, and I definitely didn't want to be a liability. Aro was right – I could be a danger to those I cared about, and if I stayed near them, I may end up doing something horrific. I couldn't stand the thought.

"I have to go home first," I told him.

Of course. We will wait for you, Edward. Take as much time as you need. Just remember the longer you stay with them, the more likely you will deteriorate. The longer you remain with those you love, the more likely it is you will do something you regret.

"I won't stay long," I promised. "I don't want to hurt them."

"You will be cared for here, like my own child."

He meant it. Aro smiled and walked back out of the door, thinking he had won whatever the contest may have been. I didn't care – it didn't matter to me why he wanted me here. I knew he was sincere with his offer – he would care for me, regardless of my mental state. I wouldn't burden my family. I wouldn't be in a position to hurt Bella. Staying in Volterra seemed like the logical thing to do.

At least, as far as I could tell.

Aro nodded at me slightly as Carlisle opened the door, and we stepped out into the hallway, following Demetri as he led us back to the exit. I knew he had said nothing to my father about our conversation, and I didn't plan on mentioning it, either. Carlisle would

object, because he always thought there was a way to solve every problem. He was already considering ways for me to drink Bella's blood and wondering if she would agree. I wasn't going to let that happen.

Remember our talk, young Edward. You will be welcomed here.

I gave him the slightest of nods back, managing to avoid Carlisle's detection. Everything seemed to be going gray inside my head, and voices sounded more distant. I couldn't remember why I felt it was important to keep my conversation with Aro from my father, but I was relatively certain it was.

We waited in the reception area until darkness fell around the city, and I followed Carlisle back to the city gates. Transportation awaited us there to return us to Florence and the airport. As soon as we were away, Carlisle gave a heavy sigh.

"Edward, I'm sorry, but I had to deceive you about Bella."

"What are you talking about?" I looked over to him, trying hard to remain focused and understand. I thought what he was saying was important.

"I knew Aro would insist on hearing your thoughts," Carlisle said. "And when he did, he would know everything that you know. I also thought he would be satisfied, given your gift, with touching you only. If I could deceive you, I could deceive him as well. He would be satisfied touching you only and not insist on touching me."

"What does this have to do with Bella?"

I would not hold her against her will indefinitely, Edward. I only did that to make sure they didn't demand her life.

I stared into his eyes and his thoughts as he revealed them all, and seeing the truth of them. He did tell Emmett to hold her, and to keep that knowledge from me. He only did it to deceive Aro.

As soon as you believed it, I contacted Emmett and told him to let her go. She was sitting comfortably in your room for a few hours only. Emmett said she wasn't concerned at all.

I took a deep breath, still not liking it, but found I was strangely tired again and unable to argue with his decision. For now, Bella was safe. Everything else in my head became a shambles.

Carlisle made sure I sat as far away from humans as possible as we waited for our flight, and then when we boarded the plane as well. I didn't say anything during the trip, and Carlisle was too busy considering the possible alternatives to drinking from Bella. He wasn't really coming up with anything better than making it less painful for her. That just wasn't the point. Even I was coherent enough to know that.

Esme, Rosalie and Emmett were waiting for us when the plane landed, and we all made our way out of the airport. Carlisle asked about Bella, and Rose said she was home with Charlie.

"We need everyone together to discuss what we learned from the Volturi," Carlisle told them when they pressed him for information. "We'll need everyone involved if this is to work."

I laughed again. None of this was going to work. There was only one way to fix me, and I wasn't going to do it. I only needed to return long enough to fulfill my promise to Bella, and then I could get back to Italy and relieve my family of my presence.

They took me back to the family home in Forks, despite my insistence we go to the cabin. Bella might have looked for me there, and I wouldn't be there, so she wouldn't have found me. I really wanted to see her. Esme told me they had already called her, but none of that made sense to me as I tried to understand what she was saying amongst all the other voices in my head. I was just afraid I would miss seeing her, or that she would be looking for me in the wrong place. I needed to see her.

I ended up on the couch in the living room of the family home, not being entirely sure how I got there. I could tell Bella had been in the house fairly recently, but she wasn't here now. Alice said she was on her way, so I curled up and closed my eyes to wait. I wasn't sure if being "on the way" meant she would be here today, just "soon," or if it would still be a few days.

My head was spinning again, but I could smell her blood and feel her touch on my head. I heard something attune to a whimper come out of my mouth as I reached out and wrapped my arms around her waist. I felt her body against mine, and I was so elated at the feeling, I pulled her over on top of me and tickled her sides. Bella giggled.

I loved that sound.

I felt her hands stroking my face and hair, but refused to open my eyes and look at her, because sometimes when I did, she wasn't there. If this was another hallucination, I didn't want to know about it.

Edward, will you be able to talk about Italy?

I nuzzled against Bella's shoulder and ignored Carlisle.

"Edward," he said aloud. "We need to talk with everyone together. I need to know if you are able to do so now."

I tasted the skin on Bella's neck and growled softly at him. I wrapped my arms around her body and rolled so I faced the back of the couch, with Bella sandwiched between it and my body. Carlisle sighed and dropped down in the chair across from us.

"Bella, could you assist?"

"Sweetheart, I want to know what happened."

"No," I mumbled against her skin. "Please...I want to go home with you. We didn't go. None of it happened."

"Edward, it did happen," my father said. I broke away from Bella long enough to hiss at him before I cuddled back into her body, where everything was all right again.

"Please, Edward," Bella ran her fingers up the side of my face and into my hair. I opened my eyes and looked at her. "I'm here with you. It will be fine."

"It won't be," I shook my head before I buried my face back in her shoulder. "Don't make me."

"Carlisle, I think maybe we should wait a while," Bella told him. "An hour or two isn't going to make any difference, is it?"

"No, it won't," Carlisle confirmed. He stood up and walked out of the room, leaving me with Bella, for which I was quite grateful.

For a long time, she just held me while I leaned into her shoulder and occasionally kissed her neck. Her hands were in my hair, and I couldn't think of anything better than where I was right at that moment. I calmed, I relaxed, and my mind did clear, at least a little bit. I breathed deeply, letting myself get reacquainted with the scent of her blood. Venom flowed into my mouth, but I swallowed it down without a second thought. I wouldn't hurt my Bella. No matter what, I wasn't going to drink from her again.

I leaned back a little and looked at her. Bella gazed into my eyes for a moment, brushing her lips against mine, just for a second. Her lips were soft and warm and I wanted more, but not here. Not now. Right now, I only wanted to hold her and have her hold me.

Bella seemed to understand that as well, and kissed me lightly once more before she leaned her head against my chest and wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

Even if you do not drink from her, you will harm her.

Aro's words floated around in my head, and I had to swallow a mouth full of venom before I could speak.

"I'll never hurt you again, Bella," I told her. "I promised you, and I meant it. I'll never do that to you again."

"I know," she responded. "I believe you and I forgave you."

"I want to be with you forever," I added. I didn't want to tell her I was going to have to leave. Not now. Not yet. "I don't deserve it, but I want it."

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart," she said.

Unfortunately, I believed her.

You would be a burden to her.

I wrapped my arms around her back and held her against me until Carlisle came back and Bella told me I had to participate in the family meeting. Apparently, she had already been involved in a few of them. She untangled herself from my limbs, stood up and took my hand before she led me to the table.

The dining room table was always used for the important family discussions. It was strange to see Bella sitting in the eighth seat, which had previously been unoccupied. I reached under the table and held her hand as Carlisle started talking.

"We all know Edward has been experiencing problems," he stated, completely unnecessarily. "After I couldn't find anything like his symptoms, I had nowhere else to turn but to the Volturi to help. When we met with Aro and the others, we found out that Edward's condition is not unique, and that there is a cure for him."

"Well, that's wonderful news!" Esme cried out. "I don't understand why he's still so..."

Out of sorts...upset...tormented...

I considered the gravity of her understatement and considered it quite comical. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up and had to stifle an actual laugh. Then the reality of that hit me, and it wasn't funny at all. My mouth dropped, and I narrowed my eyes. Bella's fingers ran up and down my palm, and it occurred to me I hadn't made love to her in nearly five days. The height of the dining room table looked just about perfect for...

Jasper gasped, then stood up from his chair and took a few steps away, eyeing me warily.

You change emotions so quickly...so randomly...

"I'm sorry," I said to him. "I'm not trying to..."

He shook his head and took another step backwards. Alice joined him, clutching his arm and leaning against him.

"Obviously, something's still screwed up or you would both be in a better mood," Emmett said. "Just be out with it already."

Carlisle sighed and leaned his head into his hands for a moment before he went on.

"The Volturi have a name for a human whose blood is so...appealing to one of us. They call that person a singer. Bella is Edward's singer, and since he didn't drain her outright, he's now addicted to her blood. If he goes back to drinking from her again, he'll regain his cognitive abilities."

I didn't want to, but I looked at Bella anyway. She sat stiff and unmoving, her eyes on Carlisle and her expression indecipherable.

"Are you sure, Carlisle?" Esme asked. "Could Aro have been...deceptive about the cure?"

"I don't believe so," Carlisle responded.

Did he lie to us?

"Not about that," I responded with a shrug. "All three of them remembered the one who was with them before."

"That's fucked up." Emmett leaned back in his chair and eyed both Bella and me.

"It doesn't change anything," I said softly, turning to Bella. "I will keep my promise to you."

"He needs my blood," Bella said, still looking at Carlisle. "If he drinks it, he'll be okay again?"

"No," I told her. "You aren't going to do that. I won't hurt you again."

There may be other ways.

"No!" I turned to Carlisle and yelled at him. "There aren't any other ways! I'm not going to do it! I'll stay the way I am."

"You won't," Carlisle contradicted. "You're going to get worse. You *have* gotten worse!"

I wasn't sure if he was more frightened for me or angry at me. I tried to keep the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the rest of my family out of my head so I could focus on Carlisle alone.

"There are no other options," I snarled.

"Will he be okay again if he drinks my blood?" Bella's voice was louder now.

"That was what the Volturi have seen in the past," he said.

"Then I want him to do it," she said, still looking at my father.

"I won't hurt you again," I stated again.

"I could draw her blood without pain, Edward."

"That works for me," Bella said with a nod.

I squeezed my eyes shut and knocked my chair over as I stood and moved away from the table. Bella was going to do it. She was going to give me her blood...again. I couldn't...no...I couldn't let her do that. I wanted it. I wanted it so badly. I couldn't break my promise. My head started to swim.

What had I promised her? What was she offering?

My mind spun in circles, and for a moment I thought I had fallen to the floor. When I opened my eyes, I saw I was still standing, with everyone's eyes on me. I wondered how long I had been standing there.

"I can't do this. Carlisle, I'm sorry." Jasper left the room, silently apologizing to me as well. I couldn't blame him. I didn't want to be in my head either.

"Edward, if it will make you better..." Bella reached out for my hand.

"Absolutely not," I said, glaring and refusing to touch her. "We are not discussing this anymore. I won't do it. You won't do it."

"We are too going to discuss it," Bella retorted. "I told you I want you to be better!"

I picked up the chair and threw it through the window before I stalked back into the living room. She couldn't make me talk about this. She couldn't make me do it. Not this time. I absolutely would not break my promise to her, and I would not drink her blood again. Not ever. Not for any reason.

I wanted it so much...

I refused to break my promise. I loved her, and I wasn't going to hurt her again. I picked up a large flat panel television and tore it to pieces.

Damnit, Edward! I know what that was!

I couldn't have cared less about Emmett's weekend entertainment.

"Carlisle," Esme's voice was soft. "What if Bella was...changed?"

"The effect on Edward would be the same," he said. "I asked as much of Caius. Edward needs Bella's blood to regain his senses. He drinks it and returns to his normal functioning or he doesn't drink and gets worse. I just don't know why."

"I want to give Edward my blood," I heard Bella say in the next room. "I want him to be better. Carlisle – can you draw my blood here?"

"I have everything I need here, yes," Carlisle told her.

"No! No! NO!" I ran back into the kitchen and dropped to my knees in front of Bella. "Are you out of your mind, too?"

"It would be painless, at the very least," Carlisle continued.

I placed my hand against her face and forced her to turn to me. I held my other hand out to Carlisle, begging him silently to shut the fuck up.

"I don't want this," I told her, beseeching her with my eyes. "Please, Bella. Please don't...don't... *tempt* me like this."

"I want you to be better, Edward. If I can help with that, then I'm going to."

"Not now...please, at least wait."

"Why would I wait? Carlisle said you're going to get worse."

"Maybe there's another option," I said, not believing my own words. I just had to get her away from Carlisle before she went through with it. If her blood was there...exposed...right in front of me...

I shuddered.

There would be no way to stop myself.

My whole body tensed and started shaking.

"Please, Bella, *please* !" I leaned forward and dropped my head in her lap. "Please don't make me. Please don't let him do it. I want to go home with you...please!"

"I want to help you," Bella insisted. Her voice cracked

More panic overwhelmed me as I felt her tears hitting my skin. I lifted my head back up and took her face in my hands.

"No...don't cry," I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I just want to be home with you. There are too many voices here. We'll talk about it, but not now. Please, not now. I can't think anymore!"

"All right, baby," Bella said, placing her hands on my head. "It's all right. I'll take you back to the cabin – just you and me. We'll talk about it tomorrow. Okay?"

"Yes," I said, breathing heavily.

I still didn't want to talk about any of this, but at least I had stopped her from doing anything right at that moment. As long as I could keep her sufficiently distracted for a while, maybe I could make her forget about it. I wasn't going to do it. I made a promise, both to her and to myself, and I wasn't going to break that promise, certainly not for my own sole benefit. Not even Bella could make me do it. *But it would taste so good...*

So much for certainty.

Chapter End Notes:

So, Aro was telling the truth about Edward's cure, and Carlisle was lying about holding Bella hostage. Bella is perfectly willing to become

the blood bank again, but Edward doesn't want to do that...well...sort of. Maybe. Actually, she's looking more and more tasty by the second.

Is Edward going to go back to the Volturi? Will he drink from Bella again? Will Emmett have yet another gratuitous use of the word "fuck"? Answers to these questions and more in the next installment! :)

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 – Pause and Persuade

Back in the cabin, in our bed, lying on our sides, I slowly made love to her, holding her as tightly as I dared. One of her legs was tossed over my hip, and I sucked gently on her nipples while moving in and out of her. Her hands held my head, holding me against her chest, and I was relatively certain there wasn't anything better than where I was right at that moment. I wanted it to last forever.

I tilted my head and shifted up to kiss her lips, then her throat, her ear, and back down again to her breasts, where I settled between them and pretty much planned on staying there indefinitely. My hands caressed her back, and I tilted my hips...yet again...to rub up against her clitoris and felt her shudder around me.

It was enough to set me off...yet again...as well, and I placed my hands on the bed underneath her, and held my body against her as sensations encompassed me and I released into her. I didn't pull out...yet again...and just held her in my arms for a minute before starting over again, slowly and gently.

I think she probably let me go on longer than might have been her preference, but eventually she did demand a break and a human minute. When she returned from the bathroom, I wrapped myself around her again, wanting to touch as much of her as possible. I nuzzled between her breasts so I could listen to her heartbeat next to my cheek. Her hands went back to my hair, and I smiled against her skin.

For a few hours, I had forgotten the things I wanted to forget.

"I think I need to sleep for a while, sweetheart," Bella said, still stroking my hair.

"Of course," I responded. I kissed the breast in front of me reflexively. I had to sit up a bit so I could turn my head and kiss the other one before I settled back down between them. I looked up to see Bella smiling at me and raising an eyebrow. I shrugged and gave her a half smile back.

"All even?" she asked.

"Yes," I confirmed.

Bella chuckled and then kissed the top of my head. I wanted to kiss her back, but I knew she wanted to sleep, so I let her relax against the pillow and close her eyes. She fell asleep quickly, leaving me to what started out as rational thoughts, but quickly deteriorated.

I was happy to be here, alone with my Bella again. I never wanted to be away from her, and I quickly categorized a few dozen ways of making that happen. I knew there were many complications – her father being at the top of the list. Deep down, the monster was still there, hanging out in the back of the cage and making suggestions that always sounded good in the beginning, but I knew would only end up with Bella mad at me. I had to come up with my own ideas, and leave the monster's opinions to the monster. My ideas were problematic in their own ways. I wasn't sure if any of them were possible – especially the one involving hot air balloons, but it was an intriguing one.

My phone started vibrating from the pocket of my jeans, which were lying in a heap on the floor. I didn't want to answer it, because I really didn't want to move from where I was, but I also didn't want it to wake Bella.

Alice.

I took the phone out into the other room and answered it.

"Every thirty seconds I get another vision of you doing something amazingly ridiculous," she said.

"What is your point?"

"Right now...I'm not sure. I can only see you with Bella now. You change your mind so fast I can't keep up."

"Stop *watching* me, Alice. It's an invasion of my privacy."

"I'm trying to help you."

"Stop it. You can't help me." I looked out into the darkness at the woods beyond the cabin. "Besides, I'm standing here naked. It's just creepy knowing you are watching me, especially when I'm with Bella. I never listened to you and Jasper..."

"Fine," Alice said, cutting me off. "But if you end up in a hot air balloon floating over the Puget Sound, I'm not going to take a boat out to retrieve you! You can just swim back!"

She hung up.

I tossed the phone onto the couch and went back to Bella; slipping silently in beside her while she slept. I remembered she told me it was all right if I wanted to touch her while she was asleep, but I also knew she was tired. Maybe in a little while. I was just glad she was here with me again. Just Bella and me, together.

But not for long.

I cringed at the thought. When I could collect my thoughts and put them together, I knew I couldn't stay with her. Bella said she would stay with me no matter what, and I just couldn't let her do that. I was, without a doubt, a complete mess. Bella wanted to help because she thought it was her fault. I knew better.

When I couldn't collect my thoughts, all I could think of was how good she smelled and how soft her skin was up against mine. The idea of leaving her was completely incomprehensible.

She would feel obligated to take care of you.

I didn't want Bella to think she had to stay with me. She was soft and warm and it felt so good when I was inside of her, but she shouldn't have to be with me if she didn't want to be. If she thought she had to stay, she would never tell me otherwise, and I couldn't read her mind to find out for sure. She could say whatever she wanted to me, and I would never know if she was thinking something else.

Bella stirred beside me, turned slightly, and placed one of her hands against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and held her closer to me.

She will eventually learn to hate you, even when she still calls you her sweetheart.

I didn't want Bella to hate me.

I wanted her to call me sweetheart – she even called me "baby" during the family meeting. Did she think she needed to call me those things? I didn't want her to say those things because she thought she had to, even when she hated me.

I definitely didn't want Bella to hate me.

She would hate me, eventually. Regardless of whether I gave in and drank from her or not, because if I didn't drink, I'd get worse. If I did drink, it couldn't last forever. She would eventually become old and infirm. Bella would eventually die.

Change her?

No, I wouldn't do that to anyone. I would never condemn someone to this un-life. Besides, Bella would never want something like that – she understood too much about it already.

Bella's hand pushed against my chest, and I felt her muscles tighten and stretch. Her heart rate increased minutely, and her eyes opened to look into mine.

"Hmm," she smiled and closed her eyes for a moment as she completed her stretch and yawn. "Is it morning yet?"

"Almost," I said. It was still mostly dark outside, but the sun would rise soon enough.

"I feel like I had four hundred orgasms last night."

"Only twelve," I corrected. Bella laughed and stroked my cheek.

"How are you today?"

"How am I supposed to tell?" I asked with a shrug. "I'm the crazy one, remember?"

"As long as you remember," Bella said, raising her eyebrows. I nodded, understanding what she meant.

"I think I'm all right," I told her. "I remember making love to you, at least."

"Is that something you forget?" Bella smirked.

"Only once, I think," I admitted. Bella's eyes widened for a moment, and I realized she had meant it as a joke, and I had just confirmed it had happened. "We were...in the shower. I didn't know how we got there. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's all right, Edward." Bella shook her head. "I mean, as often as you want it, you couldn't possibly remember every time, could you?"

"I'm sorry," I said again. I thought for a moment. "Do I ask for it too much?"

Bella laughed.

"Yes!" she snickered. "And I'm glad you do, since I want it that much, too."

"You would tell me if you didn't want to, wouldn't you?" I asked.

"Of course, sweetheart." Bella sat up and ran her fingers through her hair.

"You wouldn't call me sweetheart if you didn't want to, would you?"

"No," Bella said, narrowing her eyes. "Why do you ask that?"

"I just don't want you to do something because you think you have to," I told her. "I don't want you to call me that if you don't...mean it."

"Of course I mean it," Bella said, taking my jaw in her hand and kissing the side of my mouth. "You are my sweet, adorable, horny vampire."

She laughed and I smiled.

"So, my sweetheart," Bella said, propping herself up against the head board. I moved over a little to put my head in her lap. "Are you okay today? Are you ready to talk about what you need to do?"

"I'm not going to drink your blood again, Bella."

"Yes, you are," she said. She pushed my head out of her lap and made me sit up on the pillows next to her. "It's the only way you'll get better."

"No."

"Edward..."

"Wait, please." I turned to face her, sitting cross-legged in front of her and reaching out, grabbing both her hands in mine. "Let me explain."

"I'm listening."

"Sometimes I don't know what's happening around me," I said, wondering if this was old news to her. Well, yes, of course it was. "I

can't understand what people are saying, and sometimes I can't see or hear anything that makes sense. When I hear your voice, or feel your touch, it can bring me back. But I always smell you first, because your scent is so strong. If I start drinking your blood, I'm afraid I won't get past the scent any more. Even if Carlisle draws it from you, I may smell you before I hear you, and in that state..."

I stopped and took a deep breath before I looked up at her eyes.

"Bella, if I couldn't stop myself, and I hurt you...I mean, not just taste, but really hurt you...I could kill you, Bella. It's a lot more likely now than it was before, and it was pretty likely before! I can't let that happen. I just can't."

"But they all said it would make you better, and then you would be able to think straight."

"I won't be thinking straight if I kill you during one of my *treatments*. It's so easy to kill one of you. I could do it by accident. I could do it the very first time you give it to me!"

"You are always careful with me," Bella said.

"I love you," I reminded her. She knew I loved her, didn't she? I've told her that before, haven't I?

"And that's why you won't hurt me. I trust you, Edward."

"Don't." I stared at her warily. "I can't be trusted, especially not when your blood is involved. If I start again, I don't know how I would ever stop."

"You wouldn't," Bella said softly.

"What, you want me to just drink your blood until you die of old age?" I snapped at her. I felt my whole body tighten at the thought. Seeing Bella...pale and cold...I closed my eyes and tried to block out the image.

"Maybe Carlisle will figure out another way," Bella suggested. "Once you are thinking better, you can help him..."

"I can't assume that," I told her. "Please, just give me a chance. Maybe there's another way. Maybe I can just...get over it. Since I know what it is now, maybe that will make a difference. I've been pretty good since I got back."

"If it's physical, Edward, you can't just will it away."

"We don't know that for sure," I corrected. "It might be, but it might be something I can do on my own. It has to be, because I will not drink your blood."

"I want you to," Bella said again.

"Absolutely not."

She was quiet for a few minutes, her forehead creased and her fingers fidgeting in mine.

"What if we try it your way," Bella eventually said, "just for a while? If it doesn't work, you drink from me. No more arguing about it."

"I don't want..."

"And..." Bella interrupted, "either you agree to this or I'm going to Carlisle right now and having him draw a pint. Got it?"

Unless I was willing to resort to kidnapping again, I didn't have much of a choice, so I agreed.

"I'll be better for you," I told her, taking her face between my palms and brushing my lips over hers. "I swear – I'll try harder to focus. I'll make myself hear you. I won't get worse. I just won't let myself."

"For now, I'll agree," she finally said. "But only for a little while. If you get worse and Carlisle can't figure anything else out, you will drink my blood."

I couldn't bring myself to respond to her as her words as my thoughts became fuzzy, and for a moment, all I could sense was the deep, rich scent of my beloved's blood, singing to me.

Even with Emmett watching me I was nervous, but went to hunt anyway since Bella told me to go. I didn't know when I had hunted last, and neither did anyone else. Carlisle thought the last time might have been when he found me in the woods, but I didn't remember what he meant.

I noticed a lot of my recent memories were either incomplete, incomprehensible, or simply missing. I tried to make myself focus, but it just wasn't working. I looked around for Bella because I didn't want her to see me break down again. Every time I did, she started in on the blood. She didn't seem to be near us.

I tossed the term "feeble" around in my head for a while. There was mental feebleness and physical feebleness. I didn't seem to be affected physically, though I did think I felt tired sometimes. I liked going to bed when Bella went to bed, even when she wasn't with me. Carlisle said sometimes I didn't get up in the morning if Bella wasn't here. I didn't think she was here very often, but I also had a very hard time figuring out how much time had passed. Sometimes I thought she was here, and I'd realize later she wasn't at all. Or maybe she would leave and I wouldn't know it. It was getting harder to tell.

Emmett smacked me on the back of the head, and I stumbled forward a step before regaining my balance. He pointed to the north, and I could smell the deer just across the clearing. He raised his eyebrows and I shrugged back to him. I didn't care what animal I used to satisfy the physical thirst the monster craved. I didn't care what he wanted, because he wasn't going to get what he really desired, no matter how many times she offered it.

We raced across the clearing, and I must have fed, because Emmett led me back to the cabin. Bella wasn't there anymore, and I couldn't

remember why. I looked up to Emmett questioningly, and he shook his head at me slowly.

"She's at her house," he said simply. "Charlie's home and she said she was making him dinner."

Charlie was her father, and he didn't like me. I nodded, remembering that much at least. Then I remembered that I could go through her window and see her that way, so I started out the door. Emmett grabbed me and held me back. He wouldn't let me go to her, and I fought with him until he pinned me down and held me against the gravel driveway until Alice showed up.

Jasper never came to the cabin – he wouldn't get near me. He couldn't stand to feel what I felt. I couldn't blame him.

We would keep you from hurting those you love.

Esme wouldn't come near because I wouldn't let her. Something in the back of my head told me I would hurt her if she came too close, so I told Carlisle not to let her visit. It hurt her feelings, and she wanted Alice to tell her it was okay for her to be here. Alice said she didn't see it in the future, but she couldn't count on any of my decisions.

You could harm someone in your family. Maybe even your mother.

There was always someone with me. They couldn't trust me to be on my own.

They would worry about you all the time.

Emmett was gone and Alice was there on the couch with me, my head in her lap as she looked for my future and made sure I didn't do anything rash. She put an old Humphrey Bogart movie in the DVD player, and I closed my eyes, listening to the words but not understanding what they meant. When it was over, I stood up and

went outside to the back porch, looking across the field and wondering if I was supposed to hunt or not.

"Why can't you see what's going to happen?" I asked my sister.

"Because you change your mind so much," she said. "At least, that's my best theory. You make a decision, then either disregard it or forget what you decided and the vision fades away. I've seen you do so many things, but you haven't actually done any of them. At least, not yet. Sometimes I get a hundred different futures for you in just a few minutes. I'll see you giving into her, kidnapping her again, confronting her father, taking off on your own and going to Denali or back to Italy. I can't keep up, Edward. You don't know what you are going to do, so I don't know what you are going to do."

"Do you see me hurting Bella?"

"No," Alice said succinctly. "I don't think that is something you would ever consciously decide to do."

"Is she going to make me drink her blood again?"

"Are you going to decide to let her?"

"No."

"Then for now, you already have your answer."

"I can't let her do that, Alice." I turned and looked at my little dark-haired sister. "At the very best, it's temporary. How could I possibly allow her to condemn herself to a life like that?"

"After all the times you have taken her choices from her, how could you consider taking away another one?"

I growled at her and walked out into the middle of the field behind the cabin. I stood there for a few minutes, taking in the dew-covered grass on my bare feet and the cool summer breeze in the air. Then I couldn't remember how I had gotten there or what I was doing there,

and it pissed me off. I ran to the edge of the clearing, and the next thing I knew, I was practicing my own, special form of deforestation. I tore every tree near the cabin right out of the ground and mutilated it. I crushed random rocks against the trunks of the trees and swung trees into other trees before Alice managed to get her arms wrapped around me and planted herself on top of my shoulders, refusing to dislodge.

"I'm going to call Bella, and this is going to tick her off!" Alice told me.

I growled in response, trying to shake my irritating sister off of my back. She didn't budge, and I finally rammed us both into the trunk of a tree, toppling it and us on to the ground.

"I will tell her," Alice threatened again. My hands were shaking. I didn't know what Alice was going to say, but I didn't want her talking to Bella. I didn't want her telling Bella what I had done, because I couldn't remember what it was, and my eyes were going dark, and I couldn't hear anything around me. My mind closed up on itself.

"It's been a bad couple of days," I heard Alice say. "He's calm now, at least."

"Is he in the bedroom?"

"No, he's out on the back porch. That seems to be his favorite place, now."

The glass door slid sideways, and I heard Bella's footsteps. My head was against the inside wall of the porch, and I could see her from my curled up position on the floor. I didn't want her to think I was falling apart, even though I could feel that I was. I had to be able to focus and show her I wasn't going to need her blood. I could do this. I had to be able to do this.

I gave her a half smile. I didn't need to read her mind to see her concern for me. I didn't want her to worry about me anymore.

If you stayed with us, you wouldn't burden anyone else with concern for you.

"I'm okay," I told her. Bella knelt down in front of me and took my head in her hands.

"I missed you, sweetheart," she said with a smile. "Alice said you and Emmett got in a fight."

"I wanted to go see you," I said with a shrug. "He wouldn't let me."

"You know you can't do that. Alice said Charlie would find you if you went again."

"I forgot."

"I know, sweetheart." Bella sat back on her heels. "Will you come inside with me?"

"Yes," I responded, pushing against the wall to help myself stand up. I think I had been there for a while, since my body didn't want to respond to my commands at first. Bella took my hand and led me into the kitchen. She let me touch her while she cooked and hummed and talked about how long it had been since she last heard me play the piano.

"I have something to play for you," I said. "You like Chopin's lullabies, but I wrote you a new one."

"You wrote me a song?"

"Yes," I said, feeling strangely shy about it. I hadn't meant to tell her about it. I wasn't sure if it was ready. "Are you staying tonight?"

Bella's brow furrowed for a moment before she responded.

"Yes, Edward," she said. "I'm staying tonight and tomorrow night. Charlie went to Seattle for a couple of days, remember?"

When you forget important things, Bella will be upset with you.

"No," I whispered, immediately regretting the word. I should have lied to her, but I didn't like to do that. She was upset because she must have told me before. From her tone, she had probably told me several times. I fiddled with the belt loop at her side. "I didn't mean to forget."

"It's all right, Edward." Her tone was terse. She was angry with me.

"I'll try harder," I whispered. Maybe I could do something to make it up to her, whatever it was upsetting her. I wasn't sure. "I'll take you out for dinner."

"Dinner's half cooked." Bella looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. At least she didn't look angry.

"Tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Bella relented. "When do I get to hear the song?"

I had forgotten I was supposed to play for her.

"Do you want to hear it now?" I asked. "Or would you rather wait until tonight?"

"I would like to hear it now, if that's okay," Bella said.

"Anything you wish," I said, looking into her eyes. I brought her hand up and placed my lips against her knuckles before I walked slowly towards the piano.

I started to play the song I wrote for her. It was supposed to be how I felt when I watched her sleep, but when I had gone through the first few stanzas, I began to lose the harmony. I knew there was a bridge section I worked on the previous night...or week...I wasn't sure when. I remembered working on it. I had it finished. I had played it all the way through a hundred times so I could play it for her.

Now I couldn't remember it.

I screamed and locked my fingers under the keyboard, flipping the piano over and smashing it against the wall. The bench went flying after it, splintering all over the room.

"Edward, stop!"

Bella was there, her arms wrapped around me and speaking softly into my ear.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, pushing myself against her so I could feel her body on mine. "I didn't mean to..."

"I know, sweetheart," she said. "It's all right."

"I'll remember," I said, burying my face in her hair. "I know I will. I just can't right now. I think I wrote it last week, so it's been a while, that's all. I'll remember it later. I know I will."

"Shh, Edward." Bella's hands wrapped around my shoulders, and I felt her lips against the side of my neck. "It's all right. You can play it later – whenever you're ready."

"I didn't mean to tell you it was done," I said. "I think it's not quite done yet. I can't play it now...the piano's broken. I'll have it fixed."

The longer you remain with those you love, the more likely it is you will do something you regret.

Everything he said was proving itself out, and it was happening more and more.

I didn't know what to do, and I knew I had disappointed my Bella. I wanted to play for her, but I certainly couldn't do that now. I would have to have another piano delivered. At least there was still one thing I hadn't managed to either destroy or make unbearable. Maybe I could make it up to her that way.

"I'm sorry," I said my lips seeking out her neck hiding under her hair. I dropped down a little and kissed her shoulder, then up her neck, and then right below her jaw. I moved my hands around her sides, then down to her hips, holding her against me. "I didn't mean to..."

"Hush," Bella said again.

I pulled back a bit and looked down at her. She was fighting back the start of tears in her eyes. I kissed the corners of both her eyes, capturing the moisture on my lips and then finding her mouth. I moved against her, increasing the pressure and opening my mouth to hers. I felt her tongue against mine and brought my hands up around her shoulders as I deepened the kiss.

"Let me make it up to you?" It was a question, a hope, a plea. My hands slid back down to her waist and I picked her up. Bella's legs wrapped around me, and I carried her into the bedroom at top speed, causing her to gasp and cling to me.

I lay her down on her back at the edge of the bed with her legs dangling over the side. I kissed her again, and then ran my hands down her sides, over her hips and down her legs until I was kneeling in front of her. Bella sat up on her elbows, and watched me unlace her shoes and pull them off. Her socks were next, followed quickly by her shorts and panties.

She helped out, and pulled off her own shirt and bra before she grabbed the hem of my T-shirt and pulled it over my head. My mouth found hers again at the same time my hands found each of her breasts, gently running over them, palming them and rubbing over her nipples with my thumbs. Bella pulled at the buttons on my jeans until she could slide her hand inside, gripping me through my boxers and making me hiss.

Once the rest of my clothes were on the floor I leaned over her, following her body with my own, though my feet were still on the floor. My hands ran back up her sides until I cupped her face, kissing

her lips and sliding my tongue over hers. She tasted divine, as always, and I kept kissing her until she broke away, breathing hard.

I moved to her chin and down around to her throat, kissing the hollow there before moving to her breast. I ran my tongue around the darkened areola, and then sucked gently before moving to the other one and doing the same. When they were both standing up beautifully, I smiled and continued planting kisses between her breasts and then down to her stomach.

I felt Bella's hands on my head, and smiled against her skin. I reached out with my tongue and licked the little dip of her navel, kissed it, and then started to move back to her breasts.

"Other way," Bella said softly, delicious blood pooling in her cheeks. The hands on my head pushed down a bit.

I looked up to her, confused.

"I really liked that," she said.

"Liked what?"

"When you...you know..."

I had no idea what she meant, and had a horrible sinking feeling that I was forgetting something important. I could feel myself beginning to panic, and I knew I had to make it stop. If it kept going – if it overwhelmed me – Bella would know. She would know I wasn't any better.

"Tell me," I demanded.

"I liked it when you used your mouth...down there."

Oh God.

I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling my breaths becoming shallow and rapid. Had I done that? Had I tasted here there, and I

couldn't remember? How could I possibly forget something like that? I tried to force the tension out of my muscles so I could get my mind to relax.

I finally composed myself enough to look up at her.

"Would you like me to do that...again?"

"Yes," Bella said, smiling and nodding. Her teeth sunk into her bottom lip.

I shifted myself backwards a little more until I was completely off the bed, kneeling between Bella's dangling legs. I reached under her hips and pulled her closer, until she was right at the edge of the bed, spread out before me.

I ran my hands over her thighs, around her hips and back down to her knees. I looked up to her and slowly lowered my head to kiss the knee to my left before I started moving up her leg. Once I arrived at my destination, so to speak, I kept my eyes on hers; waiting to see if this is what she really wanted. I had done this before, apparently, and she had liked it. When did I do it? Was it in the shower, or had I forgotten another time?

Bella's eyes were soft, and she smiled at me, her eyes telling me it was all right. I kissed her right on the top of her pubic bone, just under her navel, then over to her hip, across the top part of her thigh and finally right at the top of her labia. I reached out and tasted her, wanting to tear out my shattered brain for allowing me to forget such a thing. She was simply incredible, and every time I tasted her it was as fantastic as...as...

Damn similes.

There just wasn't anything I could compare to Bella.

I slipped one arm under her hips, pulling her towards me. The other hand rested on the inside of her thigh, pushing her open as I twirled

my tongue in a circle around her clitoris. Bella gasped and fisted her hands in the blanket below her.

I ran my tongue down one side and back up the other before reaching in with my hand to spread her folds and use the tip of my tongue to stroke her up and down. Bella's legs quivered and I could hear her breathing increase, matching her beating heart. I rubbed my thumb against her clitoris as my tongue explored the rest of her.

I didn't need her blood; I just needed to taste her here.

Using the tip of my tongue, I ran around her opening before delving inside. My thumb worked a little faster until I replaced it with my tongue. I wrapped my arms under her thighs and around her hips to pull her to me, increasing the pressure as I tongued her from her clit down to her opening, inside and back up again.

"Oh...Edward...uhh!" Bella moaned and her legs clamped around the side of my head. I increased the pressure of my tongue against her clitoris and tightened my grip on her. Bella's hands found my hair, and I could feel her pulling at it as her body shook around me. She cried out again, and I kept going until I felt her come a second time.

"I need you Bella," I panted as I pulled back.

"Yes...please..."

I slid my hands from her hips to her knees and then to her ankles. I lifted them up and placed them on my shoulders before I positioned my penis at the entrance to her vagina. I drove into her with as much control as I muster, and her body wrapped around me completely.

She felt so good and so warm and so much like home.

I kept the pace slow, always afraid of moving too fast and hurting her, especially when I wanted her so badly. I didn't know how long it had been; only that it felt like forever and I never wanted to be

separated from her. Her body tensed around me, caressing me and drawing me deeper into her. The different angle seemed to make her muscles clamp down on me tighter, and the sensation was wonderful.

My hand found her spot, and I used two fingers to stimulate her to another orgasm. She cried out my name, and I didn't think I could possibly love her any more than I did at that moment. A deep growl of satisfaction erupted from my chest and I lowered her legs to my sides and nuzzled against her neck, never breaking my rhythm.

I felt Bella's hands gripping my backside and pulling me tight against her, and the added sensation was too much. I exploded in a fever of bliss, warmth, and love before I collapsed on top of her.

"You don't remember, do you?"

"Yes I do," I said, having no idea what she was talking about. I wasn't even sure how I got where I was. I cringed internally, because I realized I was lying to her. "I think."

"Say it, then."

I had no idea what I was supposed to say.

"I thought so," Bella grumbled. She dug around in the dresser drawers until she found sufficient clothing to cover herself. She ran a brush through her hair, reminding me that I still wanted to do that myself, and pulled it into a sloppy ponytail on top of her head. She glanced back at me, raised her eyebrows, and walked out.

I sighed, got out of the bed and pulled on a pair of boxers, jeans and a dark blue T-shirt before I joined her in the living room. When I entered the room, she was sitting on the couch, looking at me pointedly.

"You aren't getting better."

"I'm not getting worse," I countered, wondering if the statement was true or not.

"Maybe," Bella said. "But you fought with Emmett."

"I wanted to see you," I whispered. "I just...forgot I was supposed to stay here."

I looked up into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I won't forget again, I promise."

"You can't come to my house again, Edward," Bella said. "It's too risky. Promise me."

"I promise," I said. "I won't go to your house."

"Thank you," she said. "No more fighting, either."

"All right."

"Because if you get to the point where you are far enough gone to attack your family," Bella threatened, "I'm going to do something about it! I don't think you could help it if I took a razor to my wrist, could you?"

"Not funny," I said with a glare.

"Not joking," she retorted. "Just keep your promise."

"I will," I said, as the dizziness threatened to overwhelm me, and I wondered what we had been talking about.

"I'll be back on the weekend," Bella said. "Charlie's going on a fishing trip Saturday morning. Okay?"

"I don't want you to go," I said.

"I know, but I have to go back to my dad."

He shouldn't keep her from me. I didn't want her to go.

Alice went to Seattle. Rose and Emmett tried to keep it from me, but I found it in Emmett's thoughts. They were keeping it from me in case I tried to use her absence to my advantage to try to see Bella. I did want to see her, but that wasn't what was foremost in my mind. It was the reason *why* she wasn't here for me to see – that was the problem. I made sure I didn't think about anything too much, or make any real decisions. I thought about hunting, but couldn't remember if Bella had told me to go or not. That actually distracted me for long enough. For a while, I forgot what I was considering.

I stayed in the same spot on the porch that had become my regular sitting place and wondered about the meaning of life. Not that I really thought about anything deep. On the contrary, I could be in that spot for days and not recall a single thought I had. Emmett got bored of checking on me, so Rosalie came out for a while. I didn't pay any attention to her, and after a while she left, her conclusion the same as Emmett's – I was too far gone at the moment to be of any consequence.

Not quite, sister of mine.

I got up silently as Emmett and Rosalie became more interested in their own personal activities than in my behavior. I raced into the forest and headed straight for Forks and the Swan residence, because I did remember something. I remembered why Bella wasn't here. It was because of her father. Charlie hated me, and if he knew she was coming here to be with me he would be very upset and not allow her to leave the house any longer. I had been putting up with her not being able to be here because of him for far too long, and I wasn't going to put up with it any longer. It was time to do something about it. *He can't keep her from me...*

So much for sequestration.

Chapter End Notes:

Uh oh. Edward and Charlie confrontation coming? Bad vampire! No no!

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 – Found and Lost

Running at top speed to make sure no one could catch up to me fast enough to stop me; I arrived at her house and stood on the front porch. After a short pause, my hand reached out and rapped knuckles against the doorframe. I silently noted that the door and the frame of the door were all new wood, unlike the wood of the porch and of the exterior walls. I remembered the first time I was in the same spot, the scent driving me to break the door down to get to her blood.

If only I had known.

The echo from my knock reverberated around, and I watched the minute shaking of the glass storm door window from the impact.

Always something interrupting the game...I wonder who that could be?

The interior door creaked as it opened, and I raised my head to find myself staring at Bella's father, still dressed in his work uniform and belt. Here in front of me was the sole reason for her not being with me all the time.

When his eyes met mine, I reflexively took a step back. His eyes were the same color as Bella's, and the light coming out of them felt like it could sear through my stony skin. His thoughts held a second of confusion, and then steadily increasing rage.

Edward Cullen...it can't be.

In the briefest of moments, I saw him as he arrived home from work to a broken door and a missing daughter. I felt his panic as he raced to the school, only to find it empty. I watched his memories of frantic phone calls to the homes of every teenager he could remember –

Angela, Jessica, Mike, Tyler, Lauren, Austin, Ben – as well as to every teacher, every school board member, and every member of the of Forks and Port Angeles police force. I felt his short-lived hope when he heard one of the Cullen boys may have seen her last, and he raced to the house, only to find another distraught parent – Esme – and to learn of her missing son. Days of searching that turned into weeks, distrust of the family with so little information, and the gut feeling they were hiding something from him. Finally, a phone call from his lost daughter with a story so unbelievable he felt in his heart he would never see her alive again.

A final thought of the one responsible for his anguish standing before him, and him with his police-issue revolver still secured at his hip.

"What the hell do you think you are doing here?" His voice was a low snarl as he swung open the storm door and headed towards me.

I was still caught in his stare, so full of malice, hatred, loathing, and so much like Bella's eyes, though I had never seen a look such as this one from her. I couldn't take in enough air to form words to respond to him.

"I can't believe you have the guts to actually show up at my house." Charlie took a step closer to me, and I took two steps backwards, down the porch steps.

"I want to see Bella," I said softly, trying to maintain some semblance of control as his words – verbal and non – flowed through my brain. "I know you don't want her to see me, but..."

"If you come anywhere near my daughter again, I'll arrest you myself," Charlie growled. "Bella's about the worst liar in the State of Washington and always has been. I have plenty of evidence to convict you of kidnapping, at the very least."

"I wouldn't...hurt Bella," I said, stumbling over my words.

"You already have, you son of a bitch," Charlie screamed at me and continued to take steps towards me. I kept matching his steps, moving backwards and wondering why I was here and what I had wanted to say to him. "She still wakes up crying nearly every night. She had nightmares for a month when she first came back. I wanted to go after you, and she just defended you, like you didn't do anything wrong! *But I am not stupid!* "

He wasn't going to let me see her. One of my hands found its way into my hair and pulled at the roots. I needed to see Bella – that's why I was there. I needed her calming touch to ground me. I turned my focus back to her father, who was still yelling at me, though I had missed most of his words.

"...and if I have anything to do with it," he said, "you will never set eyes on her again! Now get the hell off my property, or I will haul you into the station right now!"

Never see her again? She would never come back to the cabin again? My voice formed words without the knowledge of my brain.

"You can't stop me from seeing her," I snarled. A low growl emitted from my chest. I looked back up to him and narrowed my eyes. I saw a slight flicker of fear in them as I made my inhumanity known to him. I took a step closer to him, and this time he backed away. "I won't let you."

"Are you threatening me, Cullen?" I saw his hand drop to the holstered weapon at his side. As if it mattered. I felt the side of my mouth turn up slightly.

If he threatens me, it would be just cause...

"Go ahead and try it," I growled low in my chest. "No one keeps me from Bella."

"Edward, NO!"

The storm door banged open and shut again, and Bella flew down the steps, stumbled across the gravel, and threw herself in between me and her father.

"Bella, get back in the house!" Charlie shouted at her. He reached out and tried to pull her back by the arm. "Don't get near him!"

I felt my hands tighten into fists as I took a step closer to both of them, still snarling.

"No, Dad," Bella said, her eyes never leaving mine. Her hand reached out, her fingers splayed on my chest. "Edward is going to leave now, aren't you, Edward?"

I felt my muscles calm just a little at the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand. I made myself focus on her words.

"You need to leave, Edward."

"I just wanted to see you," I told her, trying to explain, though I wasn't sure myself what I was doing. "I thought if I told your father..."

"No, Edward!" Bella yelled. "You are leaving now! Do you understand? Leave now! Do not come back here again!"

I cringed at both her tone and her words.

"You promised me, Edward," she said under her breath. "Go now."

The finality of the words hit me in the chest. Bella wanted me to leave, and in my dead heart I knew it was the right thing to do. I needed to go – now.

"Okay," I said, my eyes dropping to the ground. I turned slowly and walked back down the driveway and started walking up the street. I could hear Bella and her father arguing behind me and wanted to go back to her, but I didn't. She didn't want me there. She told me to leave.

I knew then that I had to go – I had to return to Italy and to Aro. I couldn't postpone it any longer.

I walked at human speed down the driveway, onto the street and then followed it to the highway. My body moved with no thought behind it, just reacting mindlessly to Bella's instructions. I had to leave. I had to go away and not come back again. I moved slowly over the asphalt until a car pulled up beside me. I felt Esme's hand on my shoulder and allowed her to lead me into the back seat of Carlisle's car. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, I was seated at the dining room table with Emmett, Rose, Jasper, Carlisle and Esme.

"Alice says you're going to leave us," Esme said aloud as she reached out and touched the back of my hand on the table top. She had been thinking of her conversation with my sister since they picked me up.

"Bella told me to leave," I said softly, refusing to look up and meet anyone's eyes. I pulled my hand back and hid it under the table. "I have to go."

Absolutely not.

"Edward, I'm not going to let you go to Italy," Carlisle stated, his arms folded across his chest. "Bella doesn't want you near her father, that isn't the same as wanting you to leave Forks."

"Maybe," I shrugged. "But she's still angry. I still hurt her."

You didn't touch her.

"Carlisle," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. "I didn't hurt her physically, but I still hurt her. What will it be next time? I'm not going to drink her blood. It is better I go now than just prolong the inevitable. If I go now, you know it's of my own – albeit deranged – will. Otherwise, I'll be forced there later when you can no longer control me."

"What if I found another way? Maybe there's something I'm missing. I could run tests..."

His mind began to race through all the things he could test – my venom, DNA, RNA, tissue samples...

"No, Carlisle," I said, shaking my head. "I know you want it to be something different, but we already know what the cure is. I'm refusing to take the medicine, and you can't force me to do that."

No, I wouldn't force you into that.

"Then there is only one way left," I said. I took a deep breath and tried to keep myself focused. "I have to leave. It's better to be with them than off on my own. At least they can...take care of it if I become too bad."

Stop screwing everything up!

I looked up at Rosalie, and her dark eyes glared back at me.

"I won't be screwing anything up if I'm not here," I told her, my voice flat.

"You will, and you are!" Rosalie screamed at me.

"Babe..." Emmett reached out and took her hand, holding her back.

I don't want you to leave.

I looked at Esme.

"I know," I said. "But it's not safe for me to be here."

I turned to Emmett next, and his eyes danced over me as he considered his options for physically restraining me. Jasper's thoughts were of a similar mindset.

"You can't lock me up forever," I said, looking back and forth between them. "This is what I want to do."

"You're not in your right mind, son." Carlisle rubbed his eyes with his fingers and dropped his elbows to his knees.

" Though this be madness, yet there is method in it ."

"Fucking Shakespeare," Emmett snorted. "You'd make a good Hamlet."

I didn't look at him.

Do you understand what you are doing? To yourself? To all of us?

"Yes," I whispered. "I know what it means, but staying is worse. I won't be cured. There is nowhere else for me to be. They have the means to contain me and keep me from harming anyone."

I turned my head to look my father in the eye.

"I was going to kill him, Carlisle. It was only because she was there that I didn't. What if she hadn't been? What about the next time? I will eventually expose us all if I stay."

"No, Edward, you wouldn't..."

"Yes, Esme, I would. I will. It's just a matter of time."

There was silence as they all contemplated my idiocy and my insanity. I scratched a mark in the table with the nail of my index finger, trying to use the act as a focusing point so I didn't forget where I was or what I was doing. Finally, Carlisle directed his thoughts back to me.

You have made up your mind.

"Yes," I confirmed. "There's nothing you can say or do to change that. You can try to force me to stay, but I will eventually do what has

to be done."

Are you going to tell her?

"I'll tell her I'm leaving," I confirmed. "I don't want her to know where I'm going. If she tried to come after me, she would only end up dead."

I looked around to room to all of them.

"No one can tell her where I'm going."

Carlisle nodded.

I don't like this, son.

"You don't have to like it," I responded. "It has to be."

Rosalie hurled curses at me and left the room. Emmett slowly followed after her. Jasper cringed as I tried to keep my thoughts on track, and he slowly followed after our siblings. Esme covered her face in her hands.

I'm going to lose my boy.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said. "But I don't think I'm really here anymore anyway."

They let me leave on my own, knowing Alice was on her way back to the cabin anyway. Esme didn't like it, but Carlisle told her I was going to be on my own soon enough. He didn't want anyone else going to Italy. I considered just running straight for the airport, but Alice would have intercepted me. I would leave soon, and I could at least say goodbye to my sister before I went.

Don't do this.

I removed myself from Pillow Bella and sat up on the bed.

She wants to help you and you won't let her.

"I can't let her do that, Alice, please!"

"You could," Alice snarled at me.

"No!"

You would get better if you did, then we could find another way...

"There isn't another way. If there was, the Volturi would have found it before."

They only want to use you.

"I know that." I shook my head. "It doesn't matter."

"They weren't looking at this from the same angle," Alice reasoned. "We will make sure Bella is all right. We wouldn't hurt her..."

"Stop it, Alice. I'm not going to debate this again. I don't have the... ability to do that. I am not going to change my mind."

If Bella tells you to stay...

"No," I repeated as everything swirled around inside my head and went black again. I could feel nothing, and the only thoughts I had were about Bella and knowing I wasn't right for her – it wasn't right for me to be this way and for her to have to put up with me. I wasn't even sure where I was. Was I still there, in the cabin? Or had I already left? Did Bella know I was gone?

My throat burned, and the monster woke up, rattling inside his mental cage and demanding his meal. I knew she was there because her scent overwhelmed me. Following her scent was the sound of her voice, though the words were indecipherable at first. I tried to focus my vision, and found her standing above me as I sat in my corner at the back porch of the cabin.

I could hear the sound of rumbling thunder in the distance, and the overcast sky was turning a deeper shade of gray, preparing for the coming rain. Bella's scent permeated the clean, wet smell of the coming storm.

Her eyes were bloodshot, though there were no longer any tears on her face. Had I been speaking to her, or had she just arrived? How much time had passed since I stood in her driveway, contemplating the murder of her father?

"You just can't do that," Bella was saying. "I mean, it was almost impossible for me to leave the house! I'm only here because Charlie got called into the station. Do you have any idea what could have happened?"

"He would have tried to shoot me," I said. "I don't think I can really blame him for wanting to do that."

"Edward!" Bella let out an exasperated sigh. She dropped down in front of me and sat with her legs crossed. "There is only one thing we can do. I know you have your reservations, but I want..."

"I won't do it," I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

"We can't go on like this," Bella stated.

"I know," I said softly. I knew what had to be done. The only thing left to do was tell Bella I was leaving. I would go back to Volterra and stay with Aro. He wanted me to be there and would at least put up with my erratic behavior. He would keep me away from the others, so I didn't have to hear their voices all the time, and would only call on me when he really needed something, and only if I was up for it. I wouldn't be here to hurt anyone else.

"Edward, you said if it didn't work your way..."

"Bella, I'm not going to do it." I stood up from my spot at the back corner of the porch and leaned myself against the wall. I fought

against the urge to simultaneously grab her and hold her to me as well as keep myself from touching her. If I touched her and she told me to drink from her...I couldn't take the chance that my self-control would falter.

"You aren't getting better, Edward!" Bella's voice went up a notch. She stood as well and looked up into my eyes. "You almost attacked Charlie! I can't trust you anymore! You have to drink my blood!"

"You are right about one thing," I said softly. I stepped down from the porch to the grass in the yard. "I can't be trusted. That's why I'm going to leave now."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't let you do this, Bella," I said. "I love you, and I can't let you be forced into living and being with me because you are obligated to make me well. It's just wrong. I can't let you do it."

Bella's eyes turned upwards to the darkening rainclouds, and she reached her hands up to her temples and through her hair before turning her eyes back to me. Her mouth was tight, and I could tell she was clenching her teeth.

"I'll never give up on you, Edward," Bella said, her determination ringing clear in her voice. "I'll never leave you. It's my choice."

"No," I corrected. "It's mine."

"So what are you going to do?" Bella questioned as the raindrops began to pour from the sky. "Just walk away?"

"Yes," I said, taking her hand in mine for the last time. "But don't worry – I promise you I won't come back. This is the last time you'll see me. I want you to get on with your life. I want you to go back to being a normal girl without all this...insanity in your life. No more monsters."

"Don't be ridiculous," Bella scoffed. "You aren't going anywhere."

I wished what she said could have been true. I pulled on her arm and coiled my arms around her back before I leaned over and kissed her right behind her ear. I hugged her to me gently, and then pulled back. I took a step backwards and our arms stretched out until I was only touching her fingertips. I willed my mind to record the warmth I felt there.

"Oh, my God," Bella said, her free hand lifting to cover her mouth. "You're serious, aren't you? You are going to leave me."

"I have to, Bella." I let go of her hand and starting walking backwards into the grassy field behind the cabin.

"No! Edward – no!" Bella stepped forward, but I mimicked her steps with my own. "You can't leave me! You can't!"

I tried to take a deep breath, but couldn't. I could hear her voice changing pitch and tone as she realized I what I was doing. I didn't want this. I didn't want her to hurt, but I didn't see any other way for us to be.

"It has to be this way," I said, looking into her eyes. I wanted to remember how beautiful they were, and how they reminded me of the chocolates my mother would give me. I would never see another pair of eyes as beautiful as hers.

"Please, Edward – don't!" Bella screamed out at me, taking a few steps towards me. "I love you, Edward!"

My knees buckled as the sound waves traveled from her mouth to her ears and into my brain. I had to have reached a new level of madness to hear such words from her, but they were real. She had said them. I was sure I felt my heart rip in half and explode through my lungs. I couldn't breathe at first, but then felt the air entering my lungs in rapid, raspy bursts. Words I never, ever thought possible to

hear coming from her lips, and there they were, when it was too late for it to make any difference.

"No...not now," I whispered, my breath still coming in pants. "Don't tell me that now."

"Not now? Not *now* ?!" Bella sobbed and her eyes overflowed, tears mixing with the falling rain. "I've told you over and over again, Edward! Every time I say it you claim it's the first time, or it is as if you didn't hear me. You never remember when I tell you how much I love you."

I felt my already erratic breathing increase. Had she really said that to me? Could I really forget the sweetest, most intoxicating words I had ever heard, multiple times? If I had truly forgotten such a thing, how could I possibly be worthy of it?

"I love you Edward, please – don't leave!"

"I'm sorry, Bella," I whispered, taking a few steps backwards, away from her.

"Edward, you are going to stay!" Bella's voice cracked, and I could see the tears flowing from her face. I had to go, and quickly, before I lost the nerve and ruined her. "Please!"

"I will always love you," I whispered, unsure if she heard the words or not.

I turned on my heel and fled.

I didn't want to go.

It felt like it would kill me.

I didn't have a choice.

Running away felt like I was tearing myself into two pieces. I was better off if I had never come into contact with her that fateful day in

biology. I was better off on the beach, alone in the sand. I was better off if Alice had let me burn in the cabin than what I was doing at that moment. I could still hear her crying and screaming for me to come back, but I continued on, my chest tight and my stomach threatening to expel the emptiness inside of it. I had to do it. I had to go. She said she would never leave me, no matter what. I was wrong. I was broken. I could only be fixed by hurting her, and I promised I would never do that again. She would have let me – I knew she would have done it. She would have let me live off her life blood until the day she died. All of that was reason enough for me to run now, while she still had a chance. She would have endured staying with me, and it would have ruined her life. There would be so many things she would never have been able to do because of me. I couldn't allow that.

I would die inside, I knew that. Nothing else would ever matter to me again – nothing. Whether I went to the Volturi or curled up at the bottom of an ocean didn't matter, because she would never be with me again. My existence, and any meaning I ever derived from it, was now over. I would never touch her again, never kiss her or hold her. I would never see her face light up at the sight of the ridiculous pattern on my clothing. I would never make love to her or tell her another horrible joke. *I never did brush her hair...*

So much for love.

Chapter End Notes:

Do please hit review, and tell me how awful I am for this...

For all those readers who thought Bella was uncaring because she never told Edward she loved him, there ya go! She's been saying it all along. If you read back through previous chapters, you'll probably figure out exactly when she told him a couple of times.

Okay, just to make everything totally clear now – this is where Hide and Drink was supposed to end. Yes, end. It was supposed to be

tragic and this was originally going to be the last chapter. DON'T PANIC. There are still 6 chapters and an epilogue to get through.

Do y'all hate me yet?

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 – Lost and Found

I remembered my name, and I remembered Bella.

I remembered her crying as I left.

I knew I needed to get back to her.

The dark, damp stones allowed me to run my finger along them so I wouldn't get too turned around. The passages underneath Volterra were vast and not easily navigated for humans or deranged vampires. Sometimes I got lost when I went out looking for Bella because everything was such a blur. I didn't always know if what was in my mind was what was happening at the moment or a memory from the past. Maybe it never happened at all. I could no longer discern the difference.

Sometimes I knew. Those times were worse.

Outside, at the ground level of the city, where humans were found, there was a wall all around. I couldn't find my way to the gate, so I started looking in the sewers for another way out – another way back to Bella. I didn't always remember what I was looking for, and when that happened, I would just stop and wait, because I thought sometimes Bella would find me first.

My finger trailed over the wet stones and came to a place where there were stairs leading back up. I wasn't sure if I had come down this way, but I knew I didn't want to go up, so I tried going around until I found myself cornered. I sighed and sat down against the wall. Eventually, someone would come and find me.

"Where has he gone? Demetri, locate him and bring him upstairs."

"Of course, Master."

I waited, knowing he would find me whether I ran or not. I didn't really want to run – I didn't know which way to go.

Edward, Aro wants to see you.

I didn't respond to Demetri. I was officially tired of him finding me. I didn't want to be found. I could feel his approach, but I didn't want to come out of the small cubby hole under the stairs near the very bottom of the Volturi's castle in the middle of the city. This place reminded me being under the stairs in London, and I had found myself here before. Sometimes when Demetri found me here, I thought it was Bella coming to tell me it was all right and she would forgive me. She said she wasn't going to leave, but we would still talk about it later, which scared me.

"Talk about it later" meant she was angry and she would punish me. I felt panic begin to swell in my breast.

Come with me, Edward. Don't fight.

I didn't realize I was.

Demetri hauled me up to a standing position and led me out of wherever I was and into the Volturi's assembly area. Many of them were gathered there, and the internal noise from their minds was deafening. One voice always made it through the prattle of the others.

Come to me, son.

Demetri released my arm, and I moved to stand next to Aro. I tried to keep the voices from my head, but it wasn't working. Aro hadn't called me to this place for quite some time. He discovered fairly quickly that I was in no shape to be of any real use to him. The first time he brought me to their meeting chamber to help him know the thoughts of those around him, I revealed more about what Caius was thinking than those that would be interrogated. Most of the time, I couldn't tell one person's mind from another's.

Aro was angered and disappointed. Caius was infuriated. Eventually they were both resigned to let me wander around the city, trying to find a way back to Bella and generally not being too much trouble for them. Aro never tried to stop me, though he would always send Demetri out to get me if I was needed for something or had just been gone too long.

Now, Aro's thoughts were guarded and determined. I couldn't make out why he had me called back to him. The only vampires here were the guard, and he wasn't worried about their loyalty to him. Through his partially blocked thoughts, something slipped through. Aro wanted to try something to make me stronger...

Heidi will return soon.

The rest of his thoughts came to me in a rush, and I tried to back away, but Felix was behind me, and Demetri moved back to my side.

"I'm not thirsty," I claimed. The words were ridiculous – Aro knew I hadn't fed since I first appeared here. I didn't know how long I had been here, but I was thirsty when I arrived. He had tried to get me to drain the receptionist.

Edward, you are getting weaker. You need to drink.

I heard Heidi's approach and was inundated by the minds of the humans following blindly in her wake. I shook my head and backed into Felix, who gripped my upper arms and held me steady.

"No...Aro..."

"You will be fine, Edward," he said with a smile. "The more you deny your nature, the weaker you will become. You will not consent to bringing your singer here to help. Perhaps I cannot heal you without her here, but at least I can give you what care I have to offer."

I promised you I would care for you. I couldn't neglect the son of my good friend, could I?

"Not thirsty," I repeated. I tried to pull away from Felix, but he wouldn't let go. I growled low and struggled against his grip.

The others began milling around – taking their positions around the outside of the chamber as a group of tourists filed in under the portcullis. Aro's hand reached out, palm facing me. He didn't touch me anymore. He couldn't stand it.

Heidi stepped in behind the last of the humans, all dumbly staring around the chamber. The large iron door clanged shut, and for a moment, every human in the room went silent. Aro smiled, showing his teeth.

"Welcome, all of you!" Aro sang out. He reached forward and took a woman by the hand. "I truly appreciate the sacrifice you make this evening."

He tore into her neck and held her tightly against his body as screams erupted around the room and others were similarly grabbed and drained. Their final, desperate thoughts hurdled towards me, and the scent of the human blood slapped me in the face, reminding me just how thirsty I really was.

"Now, Demetri," Aro said softly.

"No," my voice was barely a whisper.

I felt Felix's grip tighten on my arms as he pushed me forward towards Demetri and the human man he held in his grip. Aro came up beside me and put his hand on my shoulder, carefully avoiding my skin. I looked over to him, pleading with my eyes.

"I promised."

"I know, son," Aro smiled. "But promises to humans are made to be broken. You must drink."

"I don't want to...she'll be angry."

"Of course you want to," Aro said, and his hand reached out and gripped the screaming human's neck, bringing him closer to me. The scent of his blood was thick and hot in my nostrils. I turned my head away, closing my eyes against the scene.

"Demetri," Aro said softly. Demetri's plan invaded my mind.

"No!" I yelled, but it was too late. Demetri tore open the man's neck with clawed fingers and held him to me as Felix pushed me forward, turning my head towards the victim and his rasping, choking sounds. I felt his blood spurt from his neck and spatter across my face, arm and chest. The scent was too much...I was too thirsty. It was exactly what Aro had counted on happening.

The bloodlust erupted from me, and the monster shattered his cage. My hands were on the man's head and my lips were on his throat, tearing deeper into his artery and sucking madly. The fluid hit my throat, and I swallowed over and over, tearing and pulling at him until there was nothing left. By then, there was another in my hands, and I fed again.

The blood on my face felt like hot tears from my eyes.

I'm sorry...Bella...I'm sorry.

I didn't know where I was, but that was not unusual. It was dark and cold, and I was somewhat aware of my curled up position with my knees against my chest and my arms over my head. I could hear voices in my brain, but the words were indecipherable. That was fine with me. I didn't want to hear them. None of them were close, and none of them were looking for me.

Demetri didn't usually come looking for me until Aro thought I needed to drink again. I had stopped fighting them on the forced feedings. I hated it, but I couldn't stop myself once they tore open a victim and put him or her in my hands. None of the blood made me any better, but as Aro kept telling me, nothing really mattered any longer, so I

might as well feed. I didn't really believe him, it was just another of the many reasons I didn't deserve my existence.

He wouldn't destroy me. I had asked him to, but he refused.

I stopped looking for Bella as much as I had before. I didn't want her to see my eyes. She would be so angry, and she wouldn't let me touch her. I still tried to find my way out of Volterra many times, but I was easily disoriented and distracted. I had never made it past the city walls. Usually I got lost and just stayed where I was for a few days until Demetri eventually came to fetch me.

I tried not to think about Bella too much.

I pushed myself up onto my feet and started walking. I was near the city gates and could see them in front of me, bathed in moonlight. They were closed for the night, so street traffic couldn't enter. There was a door for foot traffic that was not padlocked. It did have a strange latch on it, though. I couldn't figure it out at first, and my fingers stumbled around over the metal. Then I remembered I could just break it, so I did.

A noise off to my right distracted me, and I walked towards it, the door forgotten. It was a small cat, which took one look at me, hissed and ran away. I sat down in the alley near one of the grated entrances to the sewer system below. It was sheltered enough here that the sun would never hit me, even if any humans managed to venture over here. It was important not to be seen in sunlight, but I wasn't sure why. Bella said I was beautiful in the sun.

I allowed myself to fall sideways against the low curb next to the wall of a defunct storefront. I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapped my arms around myself and closed my eyes.

I didn't think I had been there very long before a multitude of sensations hit me simultaneously. The single scent that could always capture my attention, no matter what, hit me first. It was followed by the sound of approaching human feet on the sidewalk and the taste

of *her* on my tongue, though it was only a memory. I felt her touch on the side of my face and was sure whatever was left of my sanity was now gone.

I heard her say my name.

I squeezed my eyes tighter, terrified of the soft, warm contact against my cheek. I knew what it felt like. I knew what it smelled like, but either I had officially lost it completely and totally, or Bella was way too close to a whole lot of vampires. Neither was good. I swallowed a mouthful of venom and was silently glad I had actually fed recently... at least, as far as I could tell. The scent of her blood flowed over me and embedded itself in my consciousness.

"Sweetheart, please...just stand up for me, okay?"

"Yes," I said automatically and tried to comply with her voice. I felt warm fingers interlock with mine as I stood, my eyes still closed. I stumbled after the clumsy footsteps in front of me, following their lead.

"Open your eyes, baby," she said.

"No," I whispered back. "If you see them, you'll know. I don't want you to punish me."

I felt her hand on my cheek run up into my hair and back down again, over my shoulder and down my arm. She took my hand back in hers, pulling me along.

"I won't look, okay?" I heard her say. "You open your eyes, and I'll just look straight ahead. I won't see them."

I opened my eyes and saw the image that was there, but couldn't possibly be real. I closed my eyes again.

"I look for you all the time, you know," I told the image right before I started babbling at it. "It hurts when you look so real and I think I

found you."

"It's okay, sweetheart," the image said. "I'm taking you away from here."

"I liked being with you," I told her. "I liked being inside of you best. Not just because it felt good, but because I felt so close to you. Like I was part of you. You are so much better than me. I could never deserve you, never be right for you. That's why I had to leave you. I didn't want to do it. I never should have done it. I wanted Aro to kill me, but he wouldn't."

"Shh, Edward. Not now."

I quieted, since she told me to do so, and followed her through twisting alleyways until there was a bright flash of yellow in front of me. I was directed to the backseat of a car, and then we were traveling quickly down a deserted highway. I felt Bella's arms wrap around me before my mind shut down again, and there was nothing.

There were voices over loudspeakers and hundreds of people swarming around lines of chairs and display screens listing city names, flight numbers and times. Too many voices slammed through my head. My hand was wrapped up in small, delicate fingers, and the fingers pulled me along through the crowd. Then the hand was pulling me down a slender walkway and pushing me into a plush seat.

"When they think about you, you'll kiss me," I remembered. "The co-pilot watched you get on. He thinks you're hot."

"Shh, Edward!" Bella chastised quietly. "I don't think you need to say that quite so loudly. Alice, is he going to draw too much attention?"

"He'll be all right – just keep him calm."

Relax, Edward. Bella is with you now.

"She's real this time," I said, still keeping my eyes closed. I wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement. Maybe it didn't matter.

"Edward, please – just whisper to me, okay?"

"But you're supposed to kiss me now so I don't kill him for looking at you and thinking about you."

"You shush and I will."

"Okay." I felt her warm mouth against mine and opened my eyes to see her when she pulled away. I hadn't noticed the dark glasses covering my eyes but was grateful for them. Maybe she wouldn't know what I had done if she didn't see them. Bella was still standing over me, trying to get me settled into my seat before she got into hers. My eyes took her in quickly, and my mind categorized the ways she had changed.

She was thinner and even paler than she was before. There were dark circles under her eyes that rivaled mine when I was thirsty. Her hair hung limply from her head and wasn't shiny and bouncy like I remembered it.

I did this to her.

"I'm sorry, Bella – I'm sorry!"

"Shh, baby," she whispered. "You have to be quieter! People are looking at you!"

"I shouldn't have done it, Bella," I looked into her eyes and tried to keep my voice low. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have left, I'm sorry...I need you. I shouldn't...you shouldn't have to...I'm so sorry I'm broken. I tried to find you but I kept getting lost. Bella – I can't be without you. I don't know how to be without you."

"Shh...I know, sweetheart," she said, smiling through the tears forming at the corners of her eyes. "I don't know how to be without

you, either."

"I don't want to be away from you again," I said definitively. I leaned forward into her lap and wrapped my arms around her waist, holding my cheek against her stomach and closing my eyes again.

"Then don't leave me again," Bella said, her voice darkening. "Ever."

"I won't," I told her. "I promise – never again."

"Good."

"I love you, Bella."

"I love you, too, Edward."

My lungs exhaled a sob, and I held her even tighter. Her hands stroked my hair until I calmed down, and she sat beside me, still holding onto me and letting me touch her skin.

"I'll be fine, Alice. You already know that."

"Bella, it's still going to be a strain on you. I don't feel right leaving you both alone."

"We aren't alone; we have each other now. I'll be better now than I have been for months."

"I will be close in case anything changes. He's actually more predictable right now that he is so far gone. I don't see the next week changing at all, but it's still dim, which means it's uncertain. If this works, his reactions and decisions may change quickly. Are you sure you want to do it this way? Yes, you are. I can see that very clearly."

"We'll be fine. I'll see you in Forks in a week or so."

Warm breath breezed across my forehead and warm hands cradled my face against soft, warm skin. I felt fingers through my hair, and

they weren't my own. I could hear whispering words in my ear, but I wasn't sure what was being said.

The scent of the blood rammed into me, and the monster's eyes got wide. He shuffled towards the front of my brain, his cage still in ruins. The scent had always been the most overwhelming of all of my senses, but now it was somehow even thicker and even stronger, like it had been when I fed from her. I remembered doing that – drinking from her. I remembered hurting her, and I cringed back from the luscious scent.

"It's all right," I heard a sweet, melodic voice tell me. I felt warmth against my lips as her mouth touched mine for the briefest moment, and I felt the tip of her tongue against my lips. I opened my mouth to hers, wanting more from her kiss, when suddenly her lips were replaced by her wrist, already opened for me.

I never had a chance. The blood hit my tongue and there was no way I could have stopped myself from tasting it.

I heard myself groan against her skin as her blood poured into my mouth, the indescribable taste of a shot of whiskey to a recovering alcoholic inundating me as it hit the back of my throat. It had been so long since I had tasted it, and my body screamed for me to take it all.

My mind automatically began chanting...

Not so fast...

Drink very, very slowly...

Count the drops...

Enough...pull back...

I cried out – in anguish, in ecstasy – when I pulled my mouth away from her wrist, my tongue sealed over the straight cut, and I dropped back against a soft mattress. I tried to slow down my breathing as I

felt the blood of my love flow through my body. Realization hit me – it wasn't a dream, I wasn't hallucinating – and I rolled back, taking her into my arms and holding her against my chest. My old mantra formed at my lips and poured out.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Quiet," her breathy words spoke to me.

I tightened my grip around her and felt her hands curl around my shoulders. Her head rested against my chest, and I gladly obeyed her command, closing my eyes and wishing I could really sleep next to her. I tried to understand what was happening, but it was just too impossible. I knew Bella had come to get me, and I knew she took me away, but I wasn't sure where I had been.

My tongue ran over my lips, and I could taste her blood on them. I fed from her. I promised not to do that anymore. I pulled her closer to my chest and tried to understand what was happening. So much of what was in my mind was shattered and incomplete. My brow furrowed as I tried to remember why.

Was I...sick, somehow? Wait...no...I remembered Carlisle talking about Bella's blood, and I remembered Aro saying she was my singer. Bella had tried to get me to drink her blood again, and I had refused.

She said she loved me.

I closed my eyes and felt her heart thrumming against my side. Her fingers clutched at my shirt and her slow, steady breathing felt so right to me. I was where I was supposed to be. No matter what else was happening, I was supposed to be here with her.

I opened my eyes and took in my surroundings, realizing I didn't really know where "here" was. I was surprised to find we were in the bedroom of the cabin in Leaf Rapids, Manitoba. I could clearly see

the marks my fingers had dug into the chest of drawers as I tried to control myself enough to drink her blood without killing her.

This was the place I forced her to submit to me and took her blood repeatedly.

This was the place I showed her how I could make her do anything I wanted her to do.

This was the place I held her down and made her think I would rape her.

Why were we here? Why would she even consider coming back to this place? She fell through the ice here and could have frozen to death. Not a half mile from here I threatened to kill a child if she didn't come with me. Why would she bring me here?

I closed my eyes and focused on the sound of her heartbeat and breath, trying to somehow worm my way into her hidden thoughts. It didn't work, of course. I nuzzled into her hair and inhaled deeply instead, letting the scent of her wash over me.

I looked over to the little nightstand where I used to put Pop Tarts and orange juice for Bella to eat. There was a small, shiny razor blade sitting on the wooden tabletop.

Bella had cut herself open to feed me. She did it because I was insane, and her blood was supposed to cure me.

"Oh my God, Bella," I whispered into her hair.

She stirred slightly, and her hand gripped my shirt a little tighter, her body pressing against mine. Then she spoke out in her sleep.

"Please no...please don't go..."

I held her tighter.

"I won't," I said, pressing my lips to her temple. "Never again – I swear."

Bella slept a long time. There wasn't a clock in the room, but I watched the window lighten and darken again before she opened her eyes. She looked up to me immediately and smiled her glorious smile.

"How do you feel?" she asked, her voice full of trepidation.

"Angry," I responded. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I love you," she said. "It was all I could do."

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. Bella reached up and took my hand, pulling it to her mouth and kissing my palm before she laid it against her cheek. She reached up and started running her hand over my temple, into my hair and around my ear before starting all over again. I could feel myself relax into her touch. I stroked her cheek in return.

"Since the day I first... *encountered* you," I said, "every decision I have made has been wrong. Everything I did I did for myself. I thought if I left I couldn't hurt you anymore, but I was wrong there, too, wasn't I?"

"Yes," Bella confirmed.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted. I closed my eyes and shook my head. "I can't force you to live like this."

"You aren't forcing me," Bella said as she sat up and took my face in her hands. I opened my blood-tainted eyes and looked at her. "I'm forcing you, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"If I allow this, the monster wins," I said softly.

"If you don't allow it, you and I both lose."

"It's selfish."

"It was selfish for you to run away," Bella said. "I want this. I want to heal you."

"I'm not worth it."

"Did you just decide that?"

I looked away from her, trying to contemplate, but I was pretty sure my mind didn't work that way anymore.

"I need you," I finally said, still not meeting her eyes. "Your body, your blood, your love – I need all of you. I can't function without them. I should be destroyed."

"Don't you even think such a thing!" Bella yelled. She grabbed me again, and I allowed her to force me to look at her. "I need you, Edward. Don't you see that?"

"It's not fair to you," I whispered.

"Stop taking away my choices."

"Alice said I was doing that," I told her. I let out a breath and looked away again, painfully aware of the color of my eyes. "Even when I think I'm doing something right, it's wrong. What am I supposed to do when I can't trust my own mind?"

"You have to trust me," Bella insisted. "I know what I want."

"But I'm broken."

"We're going to fix you."

"What if it doesn't work?" I asked. "I...drank from you, but I still don't feel right."

"Carlisle said it may take some time before you get enough of my blood into your system. That is why we're staying her for a while. Six more days – two more times you drink from me, and then we'll go back to Forks. Carlisle wants to run tests and see if he can find another option."

I closed my eyes again and thought about what she was saying. She wanted me to keep drinking from her – every three days, just like in the beginning. The monster jumped up and down, rubbing his hands together and cackling with glee. I was sure it was wrong, but I also understood nothing I thought I knew was ever right.

"I'll do it," I said softly. I opened my eyes and took her face in my hands. I pressed my lips to hers gently, wanting to re-familiarize myself with the feel of her mouth on mine and the taste of her. I pulled back and nodded. "I'll do whatever you tell me to do. I think I should only do what you tell me to do. Nothing I decide is right."

Bella nodded.

"I need you to tell me everything you remember," she said. "Just tell me everything from the time you...left me."

I didn't like the way she stumbled over the last words. My hands ran down her back and then back up to her shoulders, holding her to me again. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"I didn't know it would hurt you so much," I said. When I opened my eyes there were tears in hers. "I will do anything to make it up to you...if that's possible."

"For now, just tell me," Bella repeated. "Carlisle wanted me to figure out how much you remember, and see if you remember more as you drink more."

I shuddered a little and tightened my grip on her shoulders.

"I could hear you crying," I told her. "I just ran until I couldn't hear you anymore. I went to Sea-Tac and asked for a plane ticket to Italy. I don't remember the flight or getting there. I couldn't find Volterra, so I walked around in Rome until I found a shop where one of my kind had been. There was a brochure for tours to Volterra. Then I was there."

"I kept looking for you," I said. "I didn't know where I was. I couldn't find the way out. Then you were there and brought me back."

"What else do you remember?" Bella asked, and her hand stroked underneath my eyes as her brow furrowed. I knew what she meant.

"I broke my promise," I told her. "Aro...he made it impossible not to... feed from them."

Bella sighed.

"How many?" she asked. I shook my head.

"I don't want to tell you."

"How many, Edward?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. I felt panic rising up from the pit of my stomach. If she knew, would she not want me to stay? If she didn't trust me, she could send me back to Volterra. What if she decided I couldn't touch her anymore? "I remember...um...eleven, maybe? I don't know. That's a lot, isn't it? I won't do it again. I swear I won't!"

"It's all right, sweetheart. I mean, it isn't, but I understand."

"Will you...punish me?" My muscles tensed as I awaited her answer. I hadn't been able to touch her all this time. If she decided I had to wait longer, I would make myself do what she said. I had to.

"No, sweetheart," Bella said as she caressed my cheek again. "But back to the all vegetarian diet starting now, right?"

"Yes," I said, and then I remembered I drank from her – did that count, too? I thought she wanted me to do that. "Except for what you give me?"

"Yes, except for what I give you."

"And I can still touch you?" I asked, needing the confirmation. "I want to touch you."

"You are touching me, baby."

I looked down at my hands, which were gripping her waist. I slipped my fingers under the hem of her shirt so I could touch her bare skin. I pulled her to my chest and held her against me.

"I missed you so much," I cried into her hair. "I can't be without you... I can't."

"I'm here, Edward," Bella reassured me. "We'll always be together now."

I held her against me for quite some time, not wanting to let her go ever again. I didn't know how long we had been apart. I didn't know how long I had searched for her, but she was with me now, and I was going to make sure I wasn't parted from her again. I didn't think it was right for me to want her like I did. I didn't think it was right for me to be so selfish, but Bella told me she was going to fix me, and I couldn't trust myself, so I would have to trust her.

"I should get you something to drink," I said. Then I wondered if that was the right thing to do. "I should, right? You should have orange juice, shouldn't you?"

"All right," Bella said with a half smile.

I tightened my grip on her.

"I don't want to be away from you."

"The kitchen is twenty feet away, Edward."

"Too far," I said.

"Just get it, Edward." Bella sighed.

I moved over to the edge of the bed and stood up, bringing her with me. Bella laughed as I cradled her against me and kissed her lips as I carried her out to the kitchen and held her in one arm while I poured orange juice into a glass with the other.

"It smells revolting," I said, wrinkling my nose at the glass.

"I think it has gone bad, Edward. It's been here since we left. I mean – that's not even orange anymore."

"Oh," I said, narrowing my eyes. "What should I do?"

"Well, dump it in the sink and maybe pour some water?" Bella giggled, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Okay," I said. I dumped both the glass and the carton into the drain, and then retrieved a clean glass for the water. She drank while I looked through the pantry for something with a longer shelf life.

"There's soup in here."

"For breakfast?" Bella laughed. "I guess there aren't too many options, are there?"

"I could call and have something delivered," I offered.

There was a beeping sound from across the room, and my head jerked up at the sound. A growl came from my chest.

"It's just my phone," Bella said, her fingers stroking my chest. I carried her over to her backpack and knelt down, still holding her, so she could reach the phone. "It's a text from Alice. She says she's already ordered food to be delivered and it will arrive in two hours."

"I think you need to eat something before then," I said.

"I think you are right," Bella agreed. I was glad to be right about something.

I put Bella down so she could sort through what was in the pantry and freezer and find something to make for herself. I stood behind her with my arms around her waist, unwilling to be any farther away from her.

"You're thinner," I said, running my hands over her hips.

"I know," Bella said, but didn't elaborate.

"Is it because of me?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"It doesn't matter now," Bella said. She turned in my arms and put her hands up on my shoulders. "You aren't going to leave me again, right?"

"Never," I swore.

As I looked down at Bella's naked form on the bed after being apart from her for so long, I came to several realizations. The first was that I was a complete and totally idiot for ever walking away from her. Next was how much I wanted to make up for being such an idiot, because it had obviously affected her as much as it had me. I also realized that I could spend the rest of eternity happily worshipping her body, and there were a whole lot of ways I wanted to do that. I hoped I would be able to combine the worship of her body and making up for being an idiot together, and maybe make up for being an idiot extremely frequently.

I started with her shoulders, running my fingers over them slowly and following the curve down over her arms and to her wrists. I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed each of her fingers – first on one hand, then the other. I ran my lips from her hand to her wrist, up her

arm and back to her shoulder. My tongue traced over the pulsing vessel at her neck, and I felt Bella shiver.

"Are you cold?" I asked, kissing her jaw.

"A little," Bella admitted. "But I don't want you to stop."

I looked into her eyes, wanting to challenge her at first, but I second guessed myself and decided to go with what she said.

"You will tell me if you get too cold though, right?" I asked. "I can make a fire."

Bella's hands ran up my sides to my back, and then she wrapped them around my head, pulling my mouth to hers and kissing me deeply. When she pulled back her eyes were bright and her breathing increased.

"I want you to make love to me now," she said with determination. "It's been too long."

I wanted to ask how long I had been away from her, but it didn't seem to be the right time. I would know eventually, and there were more important things at hand. I went back to kissing her mouth, then over to the other side of her neck and down to her collar bones. I shifted myself lower down her body so I could easily reach her breasts.

I closed my eyes and nuzzled first one, then the other with my nose, making small circles around her nipples with the tip. I kissed her between them and looked up to her. For a few moments, I just stared into her eyes.

"You are so beautiful, Bella. What I feel for you is indescribable."

"I love you, Edward," she said. Her hand came up and stroked my cheek. "No matter what happens now, I'll always love you."

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tightly.

My thoughts bounced around rapidly, debating the various pros and cons of lengthy foreplay involving her breasts or just getting myself inside of her as quickly as possible. Both had their good points, and it was difficult to come up with any bad points, so I was torn. Bella somehow caught on to my dilemma, and helped me decide by wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me closer to her center.

She felt so warm and tight as my penis slowly entered her body. I could have ejaculated instantly, but forced myself to hold back and enjoy the sensations coursing through my body. Bella let out a long, deep moan and then a gasp when I was completely buried in her. I held there for a few minutes, just feeling her wrapped around me and trying to be as close to her as I could possibly be.

I wondered if this was what it felt like to touch her soul.

My hands and mouth found her breasts, and I thought I would just have to find a way to move into the space between her breasts and just stay there forever. I alternated left to right, stroking one breast and suckling the other. I reached between us and heard Bella whimper as I rubbed softly against the little nub of sensitive tissue above where we joined. I stroked it and continued sucking gently on her nipples.

I matched the movements of my fingers with the pace of my thrusts into her, slowly increasing the speed and depth of both. It wasn't long before Bella began panting my name over and over again as I felt her vaginal walls clench around my shaft and her fingernails attempt to dig into the hardened skin of my back. I pulled away from her breasts and wrapped my arms around her, palms flat against the mattress below. My mouth found hers and I kissed her, my tongue reaching out for hers, tracing along its edge before moving to her chin, jaw and ear.

I heard myself gasp and moan Bella's name into her neck as I released into her, my body trembling as the orgasm erupted outward through my thighs and stomach. I shuddered a final time, holding

myself deep inside of her, and collapsed my weight onto my arms behind her back. I held myself there for a moment, collecting my breathing and softly kissing her shoulder before I rolled to my side, bringing her with me.

Bella's fingers reached up and twirled a piece of my hair around near my ear. She sighed against my shoulder and I felt her lips on the skin at my neck as she whispered goodnight. I wrapped around her and tried to make sure I was touching as much of her as I possibly could. I was satisfied in more ways than one, I felt more coherent than I had in a very long time, and the most wonderful woman in the world gave it all to me.

"You saved me," I whispered into her hair, but she was already asleep.

"What's wrong, Edward?"

"I don't know!" I yelled from the floor near the nightstand. I slammed my head back against the edge of the bed. I didn't really mean to yell and immediately released my grip on my hair and pulled her to me.

"I'm sorry! I just...I don't know what's wrong."

"Tell me how it feels," Bella suggested.

"Like my head is trying to go dark," I said. "Like I'm trying to... leave...inside. I don't want to go. I don't want to be away from you."

"You aren't going anywhere, sweetheart," she told me. "I'm right here. You've been feeling better – remember? You could tell me everything about what happened yesterday. Do you still remember?"

I tucked my head into her neck and her scent covered me and taunted me. I didn't want to think about spoiled orange juice and the grocery delivery man and his wandering eyes.

"I want your blood," I said. With each staccato breath I was more fully immersed in the smell of her blood, and the monster thrashed inside my brain, screaming to be allowed his meal. "I want it now!"

"Soon, Edward," Bella said. I could hear her worry in her voice.

"If it all goes away, I won't be good enough." I tried to make sense out of my own words. "I want to be better...for you. But everything is going away again! I can't...I don't understand."

"I know," Bella's hands stroked my head and she held me against her chest. I forced myself to hold my breath and try to pretend the most precious substance in the world – which also kept the most precious being in the world alive – wasn't mere millimeters from my mouth, hiding just below her pale skin.

I don't know how long she held me. Eventually she moved us both from the floor to the bed, and she slept, promising me that by the time she woke up, I could drink from her. I tried not to hate myself for the elation I felt at her words. I tried not to hate myself for wanting it so badly, because she told me not to do so. I tried to remind myself that she wanted me to do this and was, in fact, insisting on it.

I fought back the monster through the night. It was so much harder now that he was out of his cage. I felt completely out of control, and I wanted her so much – all of her. I wanted to bury myself inside of her and tear into her neck all at once. The thought was staggeringly, temptingly frightening, and I had to battle both the urge to save her, love her, and kill her all at the same time.

By the time she woke, the sun was rising outside the window, and I was shaking all over with the physical strain of not biting into her. Towards the end of the night I had to move away from her and not touch her anymore, which also hurt. I pulled my knees up and squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to inhale, and I stayed that way until Bella's hand tickled up my arm and she pulled me back to her.

"Now? Please...please..."

"Yes, sweetheart. It's time."

I tore into her wrist with my nails, loving it and hating myself. I drank quickly, both to satiate myself and to keep her from suffering very long. With the taste of her blood still in my mouth, I held her to my chest and kissed her hair. I kept myself from apologizing again, though I could still hear the words floating around in my head.

"This is better, Edward," she told me. "This is better for me than being apart – you have to know that now."

"But what if it doesn't work?"

"It is already working," Bella reminded me. "Do you remember what you said last night about focusing?"

"It's easier to concentrate," I said, relaxing a little as her touch soothed me. "I'm not forgetting as much."

"Everything is going to be all right, Edward," Bella said with promise.

"I love you, Bella...so much."

"I know," she said, her lips brushing over my forehead. "I love you, too."

I was where I belonged. Though I didn't understand why Bella would want to do this for me, I knew I couldn't go against her wishes on this again. I had to be with her, and I could see now that she had to be with me as well. By some miracle, she loved me. I would never deserve it. I would never be worthy of it, but if she was going to offer it to me, I would do everything in my power to be as good for her as I could be. *I would get better for her...*

So much for uncertainty.

Chapter End Notes:

Okay - they are back together again and Edward's breaking all his promises and drinking her blood. Good move for him? Bad idea? Will it cure him? Is he so used to human blood again, and now he'll starting snacking on Bella's fellow students? Hit review and let me know what you think! :)

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 – Regain and Resign

My tongue ran over Bella's wrist and sealed the wound. I held her to me as tightly as I dared and attempted not to hate myself too much. She told me not to think that way, and I was trying. She drifted off to sleep for a few hours, and I watched the hated clock on the nightstand. I didn't hate it for moving forward now – only for doing so at such a snail's pace. When she awoke, the routine continued. I would hold her while she ate something and then she would start questioning me, which she did every day.

"Tell me about when I found you," Bella prompted.

"I was looking for you," I said. "There was a door, and I tried to open it...or maybe I did open it. I didn't go through it, though. There was something in the alley."

"That's where I found you."

"I could smell your blood. I knew you were there."

"Did you know it was really me?"

"No," I admitted. I thought about it for a moment. "I'm never very sure what's real."

"What about now?" Bella reached up and touched my cheek.

"I don't know," I said softly. "I think you're real, and usually I want you to be real. But I've broken all my promises, so I think maybe you aren't. I know there have been times when I've been unable to understand what was going on around me, and I know there are times I've seen things that weren't there. How do I know now? There's definitely a part of me that's afraid none of this is real."

"I'm real, Edward," Bella said, brushing her lips over mine. "I promise."

"I hope so," I replied when she pulled back. "I don't think I could stand it if I found out you weren't."

"Are you able to focus any better?"

"I watched the movie last night," I reminded her. "I was thirsty then, too, which makes it harder."

"Do you remember it all?"

"Yes," I said definitely. I quickly rattled off the main point of the film. Bella smiled and stroked my cheek again.

"Are you ready to go home?" she asked.

"No." I shook my head. "I want to be with you."

"I'm going with you, sweetheart." She ran her fingers through my hair, and I leaned into her touch.

"But you'll have to go back to your father," I said. "I didn't forget that part. You'll have to go to school. I won't see you."

"I'm staying with you," Bella repeated.

"But Charlie...he said I would never see you again. He's not going to let you..."

"I'm eighteen now, Edward," Bella said. "He can't make me stay away from you."

"Does he know where you are now?"

"Not exactly," Bella said, looking away from me and out the window. "He probably figures I'm with you, though."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I was in love with a vampire and only my blood could save him."

My head jerked to meet her eyes, but she was already laughing.

"I'm kidding," she clarified. "He knows I want to be with you, but he's not happy about it. He told me it wouldn't happen under his roof, so I moved into your room."

"You what?" I tried to wrap my head around what she was saying, while simultaneously trying to picture Bella in my room, on my leather couch, listening to my music and maybe taking her clothes off in front of my bathroom mirror.

"You've been living there? With my family?"

"Yes, since about two weeks after I turned eighteen."

I lost focus and became distracted by thoughts of her birthday, and how it would have been filled with gifts in bright paper wrappers with ribbons and bows.

"I missed your birthday." I furrowed my brow, wondering what I could do to make up for it.

"I can see those wheels turning in there, Cullen," Bella growled at me. "Don't even think about doing belated birthday *anything*. The one I had was absolutely horrific. The only way it could have been worse is if I managed to get a paper cut in a room full of vampires."

She laughed again, but I didn't think that was a particularly funny scenario.

"What happened?"

"Charlie and I fought all day," she said, trying to shrug it off.

"Tell me."

"He said he was sending me to Jacksonville to live with my mom," Bella told me. "He didn't like how I had been acting."

"What were you doing, Bella?"

"Nothing," she said. "I was just...worried about you. No one would tell me where you had gone, even though they obviously knew. Alice wouldn't tell me if you were all right or not. Charlie was still flipping out over you coming to the house – I just couldn't deal with it all. So I didn't really do anything. Charlie said I had to go live with Mom, and I refused. I was afraid you would come back and I wouldn't be there. I couldn't risk it."

"I made a mess out of everything."

"Stop it, Edward," Bella glared at me. "None of that matters now. You're with me again."

"Tell me what to do to make it better," I pleaded with her. "You have to tell me, so I do nothing wrong."

"You're here now, sweetheart." She took my face in her palms and brought her lips to mine. "Just don't ever put me through that again. That promise is all I need from you."

"I promise," I whispered against her mouth. "We'll be together forever."

"I'm going to hold you to that." I felt her smile against my lips.

I lay next to Bella, curled against her side, and waited for her to wake up. This was my favorite position when she slept, Bella on her back with me close up against her body, and her hand in just the right position to stroke my hair if she woke up. At the moment, her hand had slumped a little and rested on my shoulder, but that was close

enough. My arms were wrapped around her – one underneath her shoulders and the other one lying across her stomach. This way, I could easily hug her gently without waking her up.

I was trying to think of all the things that had gone on the previous day, because I knew Bella would be quizzing me while she ate her breakfast, and I wanted to get all her questions right. I was remembering more now, and I didn't think I had lost any time or completely forgotten anything since the previous morning – the third time I tasted her blood.

Today we were to start the journey back to Forks, retracing the steps taken when I stole her away many months ago. I wondered what the date was and decided to ask Bella when she woke up again. It was winter here, or near winter, at least. We had been apart for so long, and my hands were still trying to make up for lost time against her skin.

I let out a long exhale and opened my eyes. From the place where my head rested against her shoulder, I had a nice view of the slight swell of the top of her breasts incased in the thin silky material of a blue camisole with white lace edges. I shifted my head a little, and from just the right angle I could see the slightly darker color of the top of an areola. I glanced up at Bella's face as she sighed in her sleep, but she showed no signs of waking.

My hand at her side moved up her ribs and paused underneath her arm, right next to the breast farthest from my eyes. I gently tightened my embrace, bringing her body minutely closer to mine, and also shifting the material of her top – bunching it together in the front.

Now I could see the top of both areolas, and nearly all of the top halves of both of her breasts. My tongue ran quickly over my lips. I glanced up at Bella again, a little nervously. I wasn't sure why I felt nervous. Hadn't she told me this was okay with her? Did I imagine that she said such a thing, or had Bella truly given me permission to grope her in her sleep, like I was some randy teen unable to control his hormones?

I decided I should go with what seemed right. Of course she told me it was all right, which meant she would want it, too. That meant it was right for me to touch ...well, not right, really, but I should go with what seemed...I should...I mean, maybe go with what seemed...seemed...

Oh, for the love of all that's holy! I just wanted to touch her boobs, so I did.

I dipped my finger in over the top of the fabric and brushed against her right nipple, delighting in the way it contracted quickly to my cool touch. I repeated the action on the other side, of course, and went back and forth for a minute, making such they were equally contracted. Then I slipped my finger between them, and smiled when they seemed to grip my finger.

I didn't want to wake her, so I didn't try to take her top off all together. Instead, I gently moved my arm out from under her shoulders and rolled over. I braced myself over her body, mostly holding myself up with my lower body so my hands were free. I palmed both of her breasts and lifted them a little – just to feel the weight. They were smaller, too – like her waist. She had lost as much as fifteen pounds, I guessed. On a girl Bella's size, that made some difference.

They were still lovely and perfect and round and soft and beautiful and sensual and enticing and just...magnificent.

I kissed the tops of both, and then wriggled enough of her top away to trace a circle around her areolas with my tongue. Bella gasped and moaned in her sleep, and the scent of her arousal hit me. My lips turned up, and I sucked each nipple in turn again, feeling Bella's body react to my touch even in her sleep. I reached down and worked a finger into her folds, feeling how wet and ready for me she was, even in sleep.

Did I dare?

Yes, I did.

Pulling her panties to one side and out of my way, I slowly guided myself into the warmth of her body and smiled as her breath halted in her chest for a moment, her eyes flying open. Her breathing started up again in a gasp, and I smiled down at her as I began to slowly move in and out of her. She returned the smile and reached up to grip my shoulders as her calves circled around my hips, pulling me deeper. It was only a few minutes before she was screaming out for me, and I for her.

Rolling us both over, I held her against my chest and snuggled into her hair. I whispered my love for her, and she responded in kind.

"I must admit, that's quite a wakeup call," Bella giggled.

"Was it all right?"

"It was fantastic," she said sleepily. She giggled again. "Couldn't you tell by my screaming?"

"I mean, was it all right for me to...do that? While you weren't awake?"

"Yes, baby." Bella tilted her head up and pressed her lips lightly to mine. She tucked her head against my shoulder, and I stroked her hair for a minute. I remembered there was something I wanted to ask her.

"How long was it, Bella?"

"Umm...what?" Bella's face scrunched up and she gave me a strange look. "Did you want me to find a ruler?"

"No!" I cried, realizing how my question sounded and becoming retroactively mortified.

"How long was what, then?" she inquired.

"How long was I gone? How long was it before you found me?"

I was met with silence for some time. Finally, she sighed into my chest and responded.

"Almost five months, sweetheart," Bella told me. "We'll just make it back to Forks for Christmas."

I wished I had let her go with her first assumption and looked for the measuring stick.

I slowly traced the tip of my finger from Bella's ear, around the back of her neck, near her hairline, down to her shoulder, and then back up again. The index finger of my other hand made a half-circle from the top of one hip bone and around her back to the other side. My lips wrapped around her earlobe as I gently sucked it into my mouth.

"You're driving me crazy," Bella said.

"Really?" I responded. "Would you like to compare notes on insanity?"

She snickered and nudged me with her shoulder.

"At least let me get the casserole out of the oven!"

I took a step back at her command, but kept one hand on her waist. I still didn't like it when I wasn't touching her, though I could tolerate it for short amounts of time.

"You need to eat, too," Bella said. Again.

"I will," I said, in no hurry to traipse after the caribou herds hanging out near the lake. Returning to my old diet was less than satisfying, and it required leaving Bella's side, which was not in my top ten list of favorite things to do.

Bella set the dish down on top of the stove, so I stepped closer to her again and found her neck with my mouth. My hands dropped

down to the front of her thighs, and I caressed her through her jeans.

Bella jumped, and then cried out in pain.

"I'm sorry!" I stammered, pulling her to the sink and running cool water over her burned palm.

"It's all right, Edward," Bella growled. "You aren't responsible for my clumsiness."

"I was distracting you," I said, shaking my head. "I didn't mean to. I'll make it up to you, I swear. I'll do anything..."

"Edward!" Bella yelled, pulling her hand away from mine and drying it with a towel. "Hunt. Now."

I lowered my eyes and nodded before exiting through the sliding glass door and clomping in a very un-vampire-like, dejected fashion. When did I become such a child? I watched the herd from a distance, just for a few minutes before slowly walking downwind, seeing how close I would be able to get to them. The cool wind whipped around my bare arms, though it didn't bother me with its temperature. It did remind me of what Bella told me this morning – Christmas was coming. We would be back in Forks for the holidays. I wondered what kind of gift I could give to the woman that offered me her life's blood just to keep me stable.

He must be nearby...I can sense him clearly.

My head turned and I lifted slightly up on the balls of my feet, recognizing the tenor of Demetri's thoughts. I immediately ran around the other side of the cabin and met him along the snow-covered drive.

"I was surprised to find you had gone outside the city walls." He smiled and shook his head.

Now what am I going to do with you?

"I'm not going back," I said with conviction. "I have to be with Bella."

Demetri contemplated this and carefully examined my demeanor, immediately noting the differences.

"I see that."

"Tell Aro you couldn't find me," I insisted. "Tell him you destroyed me."

Aside from being fruitless, I don't think that will be necessary.

"He would know your thoughts." I distressed at forgetting such an important fact. Maybe I wasn't improving after all.

"Of course." Demetri nodded. "But it is inconsequential. He's been trying to figure out what to do with you ever since he realized you could not perform the task for which you were brought into the guard."

"I was useless to him."

But if you were to heal, he would want you again.

"I can only be healed through her," I told him. "I will not allow him to have her, so he cannot have me and keep me sane."

"I assumed as much," Demetri said with a smile. He clasped one hand behind his back and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Even with her, your usefulness would only last as long as her human years allow. Temporary and fragile. We don't usually operate that way."

She does smell enticing.

A growl began deep in my chest, and I narrowed my eyes at him. Demetri took two steps backwards, his hand held out in front of him.

"I was only taking notice." He smiled and tilted his head towards his right shoulder, exposing his neck – understanding his submissive

action would calm me. It worked. "You will go back to your strange diet now?"

I nodded, and a question formed in my mind. I had been there for so long, and I knew my memories were faulty. At the same time, I wasn't sure if I wanted the answer. I asked anyway.

"How many, Demetri?"

"How many what?" he questioned.

"How many...humans? How many did I feed from?"

Demetri blinked a couple of times as he mentally calculated the times I fed, and the faces of twenty-four humans flitted through his memory. I cringed and felt my stomach muscles tighten. I had no idea there had been so many – more than twice what I remembered. I ran my hand through my hair, but took no comfort in the gesture.

Aro will know I have located you, but I still consider you unfit for the guard.

"That should be enough for him, Edward," Demetri said. "I will suggest we leave you in peace."

"Thank you," I whispered as he turned to go.

"I enjoyed your antics, my friend."

"Antics?"

Thoughts of me revealing Caius' thoughts to Aro, and Aro's thoughts to Caius played through his memories. Demetri recalled me attacking Jane as she riddled me with her gift, but I appeared oblivious to the pain. I could see her running from me as Felix finally caught up and held me back. Aro laughed in Demetri's mind. The images were completely unknown and foreign to me.

"Though life will be less interesting," Demetri remarked, "I do believe you are where you should be. Goodbye, Edward."

When she is no more, come to me. Aro will not mind, and I will care for you, my friend.

"Goodbye, Demetri," I said quietly. "And thank you."

I turned and walked back into the cabin with thoughts of what I would do when Bella was... *no more* . I couldn't comprehend the very notion. I hoped Demetri would be as willing to take care *of* me as much as he was to care *for* me.

Bella was placing her dishes in the sink and filling it with steaming, sudsy water. She turned and looked at me quizzically.

"Is everything all right?" Bella asked.

"Yes."

"You came back pretty fast," she said. "Did you hunt?"

I forgot I was supposed to be hunting.

"No," I said. "I got...distracted."

"Edward, you have to..."

"I will," I promised, and went back out to chase caribou. After I fed, I walked back at a slow human pace and tried to remember more of my time in Italy, but it wouldn't come to me. Now that the encounter was over, I was relieved Demetri had found me so quickly and that he was content to leave me in peace. In his mind, he considered me a friend, and I was distressed that I remembered so little of our time together.

When I reached the cabin, Bella had a suitcase packed and was loading a backpack with a stack of books. I decided to get her a new iPod Touch for Christmas, so she wouldn't have to carry all those

books around. I could fill it full of the classics she loved so much and she could read them to me, if she wanted. Perhaps I could read them to her, or we could even take turns.

"I threw out the food that could go bad," Bella said. "I left the rest. I'd like to come back again someday. Maybe a summer vacation? I've never seen it here in the summer."

"Why did you choose to come here?" I asked. I had wanted to know since I first realized where we were, but the opportunity to question her decision hadn't arisen before.

"Several reasons," Bella said. "It's isolated, which you needed after your...time in Volterra. I also like it here."

"But I hurt you here," I reminded her unnecessarily.

"You did," Bella said, looking intently into my eyes. "But that's not who you are now, is it?"

"No," I said softly. "It's not."

"Help me with the bags?"

"Of course."

We packed up the SUV in silence, locked up the cabin and hit the road, as they say.

At first, Bella wanted to drive. I didn't think it was a good idea, but I agreed to her suggestion anyway. After the second time she nearly slid us into a ditch, she relinquished control of the wheel to me and my vampire reflexes. I managed to stay on the snow-covered road, at least, though my speed was less than desired. At least this way I could still touch her, and I held her hand between our seats whenever possible.

"Are you going to tell me what you have been doing all of this time?" I asked Bella once she was settled in the passenger seat.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I said with a shrug.

"I'm not sure if you really want to hear all of this, Edward."

"I do," I said softly. I had a pretty good idea what she meant. She obviously hadn't been taking care of herself, and I had forbidden my family to tell her where I was, fearing for her safety in the vampire city.

"Well, I went back home when you left," she finally said. "Charlie was only going to be gone for a few hours, and he would have locked me in a cell or something if I wasn't there when he came back. I waited until he was asleep and then I went to your family's house. I didn't realize you had already told them you were leaving. I punched Emmett for letting you go, and Carlisle had to set my broken hand afterwards."

My thoughts immediately flew to various ways I could physically punish Emmett for harming her in such a way.

"They wouldn't tell me where you were going. I was so angry I just left again, going back to Charlie's. I avoided him in the morning so he wouldn't see my bandaged hand. When he came back from work that evening, I told him I fell, and I didn't need to have it checked since Carlisle looked at it for me."

"That's when he first started going off about you. At first, he was yelling that you probably came over with Carlisle, but I said you hadn't. Eventually, I told him you left and you weren't coming back. He was thrilled when he realized I meant it, and I didn't speak to him for two weeks. I stayed in my room with the door locked."

"You didn't even come out to eat?" I asked.

"Sometimes," she shrugged, like it didn't matter. "I would come out after I knew he had gone to bed and sometimes eat. I didn't really

want anything."

My hands trembled, and I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter with one hand, but I couldn't do that with the hand wrapped around Bella's fingers, so she noticed anyway. She placed her other hand on top of mine and stroked my fingers. It offered a little comfort, but I was still concerned about her health. I would have to make sure she ate better and regained what she had lost.

"Once I couldn't stand being in there anymore, I went back to your house. I tried to convince Esme, Alice, Carlisle – any of them – to tell me where you were. I wanted to take care of you, even if you weren't going to let yourself be cured. I wanted to be with you, and I was afraid for you. You needed me, even if you didn't know it. They all said they understood, but had to respect your wishes."

"I hated them for that," Bella admitted. "I was even convinced for a while you must be there, in the house. I came over at night, watching through the windows to see if I could catch a glimpse of you and prove it to myself. Alice was out there one night when I came to watch. Of course, they had known I was out there the whole time. I ran off and didn't go back."

"I didn't see Alice again until school started. I couldn't help but be grateful for her for being there, really."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, Edward," she sighed. "You really don't want to hear all of this."

"I do, Bella – please. Please tell me everything."

"I don't exactly have a lot of friends, Edward. Outside of your family...well, that's really pretty much it. I'm the crazy new girl who ran off with the weirdo Cullen. No one wants anything to do with me."

"I didn't know." In how many ways could I destroy her life?

"I know you didn't," Bella said. "I didn't see any reason to tell you and give you one more thing to worry about."

"I should protect you," I said. "You shouldn't have to protect me."

"Yes, I do," Bella insisted. "You won't look after yourself."

I couldn't really argue with her statement, but I wanted to be the one who kept her safe. I wanted to be there for her and not allow things like bitter teens, other vampires, violent humans or anything else to harm her. Her hand reached up and brushed my hair from my forehead.

"You do protect me, Edward."

Sometimes I thought maybe she could read my mind, which I why I couldn't read hers.

"You and Alice spent time together at school?"

"Yes," Bella said. She continued on with her story. "Even more so after my birthday. I already told you about that. Once I moved into your old room, Alice drove me to school, and I would try to get her to look for you and tell me what she saw. She always refused. It took months, but eventually she saw something. It was on the way to school, and I knew she had seen you as soon as she got that look in her eyes. After some convincing, she told me where you were. Then we went to get you, and you know the rest."

"I think you skipped over a lot," I said.

"Yes, but none of it is important."

"Will you eat better now?" I asked.

"Yes," she moaned. "You sound just like Esme, you know."

I had to laugh at that.

"There are worse people to resemble," I said with a smile.

"She is very...motherly."

I laughed again.

"It is her forte," I agreed.

"She is wonderful," Bella said with a smile. "My mother was never particularly nurturing in the way Esme is. Not that she isn't loving – she is – just not in the same way. She's always been my friend first and mother second. I took the adult role more often than she did."

We rode in silence for a while, but an unrevealed portion of her story plagued me.

"Bella, how did you find me?"

"With Alice's help, obviously," Bella stated. She didn't seem to want to elaborate, so I kept pushing until she did.

"When I moved out of Charlie's house, I thought I would be able to convince someone to tell me where you were," Bella said. "They are all very loyal to you, you know. No one would tell me. It wasn't until last month when Alice finally gave in, right after she saw you in her vision."

"What made her change her mind?"

"A loophole," Bella said with a smirk. "She wasn't there when you demanded no one tell me where you were going. I brought that to her attention, and she eventually told me you went back to Italy. Carlisle was not pleased when he found out, but when she told him about her visions of you..."

Bella's voice cracked as she stifled a sob. I stroked the palm of her hand with the side of my thumb until she composed herself enough to go on.

"She said you were lost all the time. You didn't seem to know where to go, but you kept looking for something, going in circles until you would just...collapse. Then someone would come find you after a while, and you would start all over again. She told us your eyes were red, and Carlisle relented, and told us to go get you."

I stared straight ahead at the blowing snow on the highway, trying to remember so I would know what Alice saw. I was glad Bella did not have the ability to see Alice's visions first hand.

"We devised a plan to get you," Bella continued. "Alice said her visions were too spur-of-the-moment, so we just went and waited for the right opportunity. We stayed out of the Volturi's way – a hotel in the next city – and Alice watched for you to be somewhere close enough where I could go inside Volterra and bring you out."

"It took more than two weeks of waiting, and I probably would have just run in there and grabbed you if Alice hadn't physically restrained me a couple of times. Finally, she saw you near the gate at a time no one was watching you. It was the first opportunity I had to find you without being caught."

"If I had known..."

"I know, Edward." Bella sighed and swiped the back of her hand over her cheek. "I was so frustrated with Alice. I hope she can forgive me for some of the things I said. Your decisions were too haphazard and random, so her visions changed all the time. I was upset, and blamed her for not being able to figure out where you were. I was desperate to get you out of there."

"I don't think I made any actual decisions," I admitted. "I was looking for you and trying to find the gate but I didn't know where to go."

"Carlisle is worried about retaliation," Bella said. "He said we'll have to all stick together, maybe move away so they can't track you and try to take you back."

"That won't be a problem," I told her, and relayed Demetri's visit and my conversation with him.

"He was right there? At the cabin?"

"Yes."

Bella shuddered.

"I wouldn't have allowed him to harm you, Bella."

"I know you wouldn't, sweetheart." Bella reached over and ran her fingers through my hair. "You are my protector."

"Always," I said, smiling. The monster wondered who would protect her from me.

I was trying to keep calm. Really, I was.

It was cold, much like it was when we made this same trip in the opposite direction. The windows were up and the heater was on max to keep Bella from getting chilled. It also enhanced and blew her scent around the tiny confines of the car, and as much as I tried not to breathe, sometimes I just wanted to let it flow over me.

Two days on the road, since Bella wouldn't let me go much over ninety when she was paying attention to the speedometer. We were almost to Port Angeles and the little cabin was just on the other side of the city. It was late, Bella was asleep, and I wanted to take her there and not try to face my family right away. We would be with them again soon enough. It was only four days until Christmas Eve, and Bella said she wanted to spend it with my family. I would have rather kept her to myself, but if she wanted to be with them, she would be.

I took another deep breath and half closed my eyes. I glanced over at her sleeping form, curled up against the door and using her

backpack as a pillow, and involuntarily licked my lips. I inhaled the scent of her blood through my open mouth, and I could taste her. *Really* taste her on my tongue. I wanted her. I wanted her now – body, soul, and blood.

It was too early, though. I had to wait until morning. I heard myself growl at the thought, and the monster began his incessant protest regarding waiting. He started chanting things like "blood now, blood now," "take her body, take her blood," and "instant gratification doesn't happen fast enough."

The chants were so numerous; I could almost put the words to music.

I swallowed venom and felt it coat my throat. A small green sign announced I was entering the Port Angeles city limits, and I slowed slightly as the thoughts of a police officer with a radar gun warned me of the upcoming speed trap. It was past midnight, and the officer was looking for late-night speeders and erratic drunk driving. Typical weekend endeavors.

A few minutes later, I adjusted my speed and flew down Highway 101, following the signs to Lake Crescent in a state of near panic. I wanted to pull over and take her immediately, and my fingers were leaving definite dents in the steering wheel. I tried to inhale as much of her scent as possible while simultaneously holding my breath. It's wasn't a successful endeavor. As I turned onto the gravel road that finished at the cabin's driveway, I managed to reach over and gently brush my fingers over Bella's cheek.

"We're here," I said softly. My voice was breathy and desperate. Bella's eyelids fluttered and she looked around sleepily.

I needed her. I needed her now.

I was at her door a half second later, pulling her out of the car and into my arms. I broke the lock on the door to get her inside and onto the bed. Seeing my desire for her, but not really understanding, Bella

started to remove her shirt, but I was too impatient, tearing the fabric from her body along with her bra and jeans.

"Edward!" she cried out. "I liked that shirt!"

"I'll buy you a new one," I growled against her and tore off my own shirt so at least we would be even.

I covered her with my body and ran my nose along the pulsing cord at her neck. My tongue ran over my lips, then over her skin, tasting as much as I dared...for now.

My arms coiled around her shoulders, and I held her to me tightly, wanting to feel as much of her against me as I could. My mouth found her shoulder, leaving open mouthed kisses in a line from there to her breast. I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth and then moved quickly to the other one.

I moved back to her mouth, kissing her deeply while one hand slid down her back to cradle her panty-clad backside. My hand rested there only for a moment before hooking my fingers into the fabric and quickly ripping them from her, leaving her bare. I wasted no time parting her folds and finding her moisture on my fingertips – running it over her lips and her clitoris – up and down.

Bella gasped and writhed under me, her tongue tasting my lips. I wanted to taste more of her – her skin just wasn't enough. I pulled my fingers out of her and tore off my jeans and boxers, which quickly found their way to the floor.

"You smell so good," I murmured into her hair. I inhaled deeply, feeling my body shudder and my muscles tense, and the monster continued his rant. Venom poured into my mouth, and I had to swallow a few times to rid myself of it.

"Bella...I need you...now...please..." I begged with cool breath in her ear.

"I want you too," Bella breathed against me.

She didn't understand.

"I want to drink, Bella," I clarified. "Now...I can't wait anymore."

"It's too soon, Edward," she said softly. "In the morning."

"No," I groaned. "I want you just like this..."

I slid into her, burying myself completely with one single thrust and holding my hips up against her. I tucked my forehead against her shoulder and moaned into her skin as I moved in and out of her. My fingers reached between us, finding her most sensitive flesh and teasing it. My kisses trailed over the top of her breasts and my other hand stroked down her side.

Bella moaned, and I moved faster against her and inside of her, grinding into her and sucking harder on the nipple in my mouth. She cried out, her fingers trying to dig into my back and her calves wrapping around my thighs. I switched to her other breast, sucking hard and pressing against her clitoris with my thumb as she clenched around me and cried out with her head thrown back against the pillow, exposing her neck.

"Just like this," I whispered into her skin, grunting in time to my thrusts. I turned my head up to hers and kissed the hollow of her throat. I kissed up to her chin, and my tongue made its way into her mouth. "Please Bella...I want it now. I need it."

"Edward," Bella sighed in post coital euphoria.

She hadn't said no, and I capitalized on that as quickly as possible, before she could change her mind or deny me. Before anything else could happen – like the phone ringing, or a fire alarm going off, or a freak meteor shower, or most likely, one of Alice's visions – the decision was made.

Take her! Take her now!

I wanted this. The monster wanted this. Bella wanted me to drink her blood – she had practically forced it on me. It was too soon, but how much difference could a few hours make, anyway? The monster stretched and groaned, and his limbs became my limbs, and I was powerless to control him any longer. The monster's hand moved up and tangled in her hair, pulling her head slightly to one side as his lips found her neck. Venom coated his teeth as he bared them against her skin, preparing to bite. *My cell phone is buzzing...*

So much for schedules.

Chapter End Notes:

Chapter subtitle - The Return of Boobward :)

Hit review and leave me some encouragement. Feel free to bitch about the cliffie - I know how evil this one is, but more tomorrow!

"Instant gratification doesn't happen fast enough" is a quote from Carrie Fisher – may she rest in peace.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 – Mope and Hope

The feeding frenzy is nearly impossible to describe, even to another vampire who would have experienced it. Vision doesn't fade, but it changes – focuses and narrows until there is only one thing visible – the target and its blood. Hearing and smell follow – focusing on the meal, but also keeping tabs on anything that might interfere or try to steal the kill. There is no true conscious thought, nothing that thinks what the consequences of the action may be or considers any possible regrets. Instinct takes over – completely and totally.

The monster's name is instinct. Vampire instinct at its highest and most finely tuned. He can be uncontrollable. As a newborn, Carlisle taught me how to fight it, but he couldn't have taught me how to fight this. This was no ordinary target and this was no ordinary blood. This was sanity. This was life. This was existence. This was addiction. This was salvation. This was mania. This was ecstasy.

This was love.

Between the smell of her blood at her throat, the incredible thirst, the monster's insistence, and the feel of her internal warmth wrapped around me most intimately, I was almost completely lost.

Almost.

I snarled, barely fighting my way back to conscious actions. One hand reached out and grabbed the buzzing piece of electronic nonsense off the nightstand and pulverized it. My thoughts narrowed and focused...her blood. I needed her blood.

Do not bite!

I couldn't convince my fingers to release her hair, so the hand that destroyed the phone traced slowly up her side, under her arm and

next to her breast before my fingers softly caressed the skin at her neck, right at the throbbing artery underneath while the monster screamed from the little post to which he was tethered. The rope looked very thin and fragile, and I didn't know if I could hold him back enough not to kill her.

Kill my Bella.

The thought played around in my head while I watched my body act. Visions of the cabin we recently abandoned and Bella crying underneath me invaded my skull as the nail of my thumb cut through her skin and the arterial tissue beneath.

The tether broke, and the monster fed while I screamed at him to stop.

I was no longer making love to her – I was fucking her while her blood poured down my throat. My fingers reached down and gripped her hip, pulling her against me with every thrust. The sound of her heart's rapid beating was all I could hear. I could no longer discern the tightrope-thin line separating me from the vile, horrid creature set loose the previous January. With every thrust, I sucked her blood into my body, groaning against the skin of her throat. I pulled out, almost all the way, and slammed back into her, never breaking the rhythm. I could barely hear her moaning underneath me.

"Edward...Edward, please...you have to stop. Protect me, sweetheart. Edward...Edward...I love you, Edward..."

Protect.

Bella said I was her protector. I felt my hips collide with hers again, burying me inside of her before pulling out and diving into her again. Blood coated my tongue in another wave of ecstasy. I was killing her. I was going to kill her.

Protect.

Protector.

Protect *her*.

I felt my arms coil around her back and pull her closer to my chest. With a grunt, my release came, coating her and claiming her and filling her as the sensations trembled through my skin. My tongue lapped at her neck, sealing the mark with venom and closing the wound. I felt every muscle shudder against her, and I collapsed onto her body.

Deep, heavy breaths pulled air into my lungs, and I tucked my forehead against her shoulder, as if I could hide from what I had done. I couldn't speak, and I couldn't move. I held my beloved against my chest and kept my eyes closed, terrified of what I might see if I opened them.

I always told her I was going to kill her someday. Was that day today?

"Please, Bella, please...tell me you are all right. Please!"

My miniscule whisper was met with silence, lasting an eternity in my mind.

I felt her hands against my shoulder blades, but they were limp. She didn't move to run her fingers through my hair, which she did after every time we made love.

The more intact, logical part of my brain registered her breathing and her steady heart rate a moment before she spoke.

"I'm fine."

The growl from my chest was almost reflexive as she uttered those words. I wanted to pull back, release her and maybe run away as fast as I could, but I couldn't move. True to my disgustingly vile

nature, I felt myself go hard inside of her, the monster ready for another go.

I tried to form more words – apologies, or maybe just begging – I wasn't sure. I didn't know what to say. My body was still shivering in sheer *delight* at having nearly killed her. I was still so overwhelmed by it all, I couldn't think or act. I wanted to destroy myself. I wanted to do it all over again.

I don't know how long I stayed immobile, lying on top of her and breathing in her scent. I could feel my erection still buried inside of her and had to force myself not to start thrusting into her again. Her blood coursed through my body, and I could literally feel it nourishing me, strengthening me...and him.

Eventually, I lifted my head just enough to turn it towards her.

She was looking away from me, towards the window. She was almost as motionless as I.

"Bella?"

She didn't turn towards me, and she didn't respond. I pulled out of her slowly, the sound of moistened skin and fluids seemed extremely loud in the silence of the room. I rolled over to the side, onto my back and stared at the ceiling. When I couldn't take any more of that, I rotated and sat up on the edge of the bed, waiting for her to say... something.

I wanted to look her over with what medical knowledge I had and make sure I hadn't hurt her...or that I hadn't hurt her too much. I considered calling Carlisle, which made me remember that the phone had been buzzing.

It was now in shattered pieces all over the floor. I barely remembered reaching for it. What else had I done? I had nearly bitten Bella, fed from her before it was time...how much did I take? I glanced back over to her, focusing on her hip where I knew I had to have left

bruises. Yes, there they were. Finger shaped and curving around her, they looked back at me and reminded me that I never should have allowed this.

But I told her I would let her decide. How did I know if it was the right thing to do or not?

Because she told me to stop, and I didn't hear her. Or maybe I just hadn't listened. I had to stop thinking about it, because if I kept thinking about the way it felt to take her blood while pounding inside of her too much, I was going to do it again.

"Bella?" I said softly. She didn't respond. I didn't really know what to say to her, anyway. Apologize? Again? Hey Bella, sorry about that whole almost screwing you to death thing. I'd say it won't happen again, but we both know I can't really guarantee that with a straight face.

I looked over to her and watched her wipe tears from her cheeks. She continued to look at the window, so I dropped my eyes down to my feet on the floor, surrounded by bits of cell phone, and continued to say nothing until I just couldn't stand it anymore.

"Bella, please," I started, but didn't know how to complete. I took a couple of deep breaths. "Just say something."

"I'm all right, Edward," she finally said.

"How can you be?" I countered.

"I will be, okay?"

"No," I said. "It's not okay. This is what I have feared since..."

"Edward," Bella sighed and looked over to me. She pushed herself up with her forearms and leaned against the headboard. "I know you didn't mean to. It's all right, just don't...do that again."

Just don't do it again.

Just don't do it again.

Seriously?

I wasn't sure if it was the incredulous nature of her request, her blood running through my system, or just my general frustration level finally reaching a point I could no longer contain, but I was suddenly, completely infuriated with her. *Just don't do it again* . Did she think I had some kind of choice in the matter? The only real choice I had was to leave, which I did. I protected her that way for nearly half a year. She went off and dragged me back here. She made me drink the first time, knowing what it would do to me. And now she was going to tell me to just cut it out?

"You wanted this!" I screamed at her. I jumped up from the bed and pushed myself against the wall farthest from her. It seemed prudent to not be in her immediate vicinity at the moment. "I never wanted it, and you forced this on me! You knew this could happen – you knew it!"

"Edward!" Bella's eyes widened.

"No!" I yelled back. "I didn't want it. I was away from you where you were safe. It was all I wanted – just for you to be safe and happy. I want you too much – in too many different ways. You made me drink when I didn't want to do it! And now I've...I've..."

I couldn't even put a name to what I had done.

"I wasn't going to stand by and watch you be that way, Edward! I couldn't do it!"

"You could have," I said, my voice low. "You could have just forgotten about me."

"No," Bella argued. "I couldn't forget you. Not ever."

I closed my eyes and tried to calm my trembling muscles. I was angry at myself, at my nature, and taking it out on her. I wanted to take a deep breath, but her scent was too strong. I moved slowly back to the bed and sat back on the edge of it, still away from her. I looked into her eyes and saw I had made her cry again.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do, Bella," I said to her. "All of this seems so wrong to me. It can't be right. I can't...drink from you again."

"You will if that's what's needed," Bella said with authority.

"Bella, you don't understand." I shook my head and looked back down at the broken phone bits. "I could have killed you so easily. You're with a vampire, Bella, don't you..."

The sound from her throat was nothing less than a growl. I looked up to find her eyes blazing at me as she bridged the area between us. Bella sat up on her knees and grabbed the sides of my face. I looked into her eyes as they bore into me.

"You listen to me, Edward Cullen!" Bella hissed at me. "Do you think I'm so stupid that I don't know what you are?"

I shook my head between her hands.

"Then stop treating me like I am!" Bella's voice softened. "I know you, Edward. I know who you are, and I know *what* you are. You aren't perfect, by any means, but I don't expect you to be. You are going to screw up. I'm not perfect, and I'm going to screw up, too. I may never forgive myself for leaving you on our island all alone, and I'm going to make sure that doesn't happen again. I've learned from that mistake, and you are going to learn from yours as well."

"You may not be perfect," she went on, "but I don't think I have ever witnessed anyone who tries harder than you do. I know it's hard for you – I don't think at this point in my existence I can fathom how hard it is – but you still keep on trying. You go against your very

nature to love me and to be with me. Someday it's all going to be worth it. I promise you that, Edward. It's difficult now, but someday everything is going to work out for us."

Walking up the steps did not feel like a homecoming.

It was Christmas Eve. I had avoided my family since our return and my...near miss with Bella. I hadn't tried to drink her blood since then, and had all but refused to touch her in anything other than a chaste manner. We still cuddled in bed, and I still had to have a hand on her all the time, unless she told me specifically to stop. Tonight, Carlisle would draw Bella's blood for me, so I wouldn't have the opportunity to harm her again.

I was still afraid – terrified, even – that I wouldn't be able to control myself around her. Especially during more intimate moments. Despite Bella's insistence that she understood what she was doing, I couldn't help but disagree with her internally, even if I didn't voice it. I was tense, apprehensive, a little annoyed and more than a little embarrassed. I could hear them all clearly as they awaited our return.

Alice said he was better already, and I missed my son so much...if that vision of him punching Emmett comes true, I'm not holding back...calmer, at least, and not so confused...so glad you are both here together...not sure how I can begin testing if they can't keep a strict schedule...it's about time!

Alice threw open the door before we reached the top step and took Bella into a close embrace. I didn't let go of Bella's hand, so her returning hug was with only one arm.

Are you going to be grouchy all day?

"I'm not grouchy," I grumbled back at her, my volume too low for Bella's ears.

Alice raised an eyebrow at me and took Bella's free hand to lead her into the house. The rest of my family was near the foyer, offering happy holiday wishes to Bella and wary glances at me.

"He's better," Bella suddenly piped up, scanning each of their faces. "Stop treating him like he's a leper or something."

"Bella," I whispered. "I deserve it."

"No, Edward," she turned back to me. "I'm not staying here if they're going to do this to you."

"Bella's right," Carlisle interjected. He took a couple of steps forward and hugged me. I also only returned the hug with one arm.

"Welcome home, Edward. I'm glad to see you back to yourself."

"I'm not," I said. I rubbed the side of Bella's hand with my thumb. "But I am better."

"He's thirsty," Bella announced, looking straight at Carlisle. "Can we go ahead and get him fed first?"

"Of course," Carlisle replied. "It's all set up in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen?" I said. "Isn't that a little morbid?"

"It's all right, Edward," Bella said. "I think if you consider who lives here, the kitchen is the perfect place."

She started to lead me through the doorway, but I stopped.

"Should I be there?" I said softly, looking into her eyes. I didn't know if it would be a good idea or not. "I mean – while he's drawing your blood? I don't know how I would react to seeing that. The smell alone..."

"All right, sweetheart," Bella said with a nod. "Wait in the living room and we'll call you when it's done. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, but didn't release her hand. I looked down at our intertwined fingers and tried to figure out how we could be in two different rooms and her still hold my hand.

"Let go, Edward."

"I have to?"

"Yes," she said with a giggle.

I smiled down at her, glad I could still make her laugh, and slowly released her fingers. I hated the feeling. I took a few steps away from the entrance to the kitchen, just so I wouldn't see it happen, but I couldn't bring myself to go as far as the living room. Alice joined Carlisle and Bella while Esme stood by my side, her hand on my arm.

"Edward?" Esme said softly. I tore my eyes away from the kitchen doorway and looked at her. "I missed you, son. I'm so glad you are back here with us for the holidays. I don't like having my children so far from home."

I looked into her amber eyes and heard her mental whispers of love and caring and remorse for not doing more for me. I shook my head slightly.

"There's nothing more you could have done," I told her.

"There is always more a mother can do," Esme responded. Her arms reached around my neck, and she held my head to her shoulder.

I gripped her around her back, holding her tightly and snarling as the scent of Bella's exposed blood invaded my nostrils and threatened to do me in. Esme's grip tightened around my neck, her embrace turning into a method of restraint. I felt Emmett's powerful frame move up behind me. Insurance.

I held my breath and concentrated on keeping my hands from shaking. I could hear Bella's life fluids pouring out of her in the next room, and I might have whimpered into my mother's shoulder. I turned my face into her neck and just let her restrain me.

It's going to be all right, Edward. We're going to make it all right. Whatever needs to be done, it will be done. I love you so much. We all do...

It was only a few minutes, but it might as well have been a lifetime. I heard Carlisle tell her it was enough, and I listened to the sound of the needle slowly retreating from her body. I broke from Esme's grasp and ran to my love, cradling her against me. I wasn't sure if it was to comfort her or myself.

A few minutes later, I sat in the kitchen with a unit of Bella's blood in my hand along with – God help me – a straw. I made everyone leave. It was just too odd to have them in the same room with me while I did this completely monstrous act. I took a few deep breaths and just did it.

It didn't taste right, but then it wasn't really the proper temperature. I drained it anyway, because it was still deliciously hers. I had to physically restrain myself from trying to lick every last drop from the inside of the bag. I disposed of it and sat where I was for some time, embarrassed and disgusted with myself. I was probably in there for an hour before Bella came back into the kitchen and stood in front of me.

She wrapped her arms around my head and pulled me against her chest.

"I don't want to be like this," I whispered against her.

"I know, baby," she responded just as softly. "We'll find another way. Carlisle wants to get samples tonight. He already took some of my blood for his tests."

As if on cue, my father walked up behind her.

Let's get this out of the way so we can enjoy the rest of the holiday.

"Fine," I said, a little curtly.

"Edward," Bella chastised. "He's trying to help."

"I know," I sighed. "Sorry, Carlisle. I'm a little on edge."

"Understandably," my father said. "I'm going to take some samples from you first, Edward. I'm also going to get some from Emmett and Esme, just as a control. Venom is the easy one, but I'm going to need something else as well."

"Bella shouldn't be here for that," I said, knowing what was in his mind.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Bella...please."

"I'm not leaving you," she insisted. "You kicked me out when it was time to drink and then you sat in here and mentally punished yourself. I'm not going anywhere."

All right, I wasn't going to argue with her because I told her I would not. If she wanted to stay, I wouldn't stop her. Actually, having her here would make it easier for me...

"Bella," Carlisle said gently, interrupting my thoughts. "I need to get a sample of Edward's ejaculate."

"I'll be in the other room." Bella turned on her heel and scrambled out of the kitchen.

Saved by my father. Who would have thought?

Esme and Alice had decorated what must have been the most gigantic Fir tree ever to be found. It was ginormous, both in height and girth, and it took up a good quarter of the large living area. There were colorful balls, sparkling snowflakes and tinsel all over the sides. Of course, there was a star on top which was blinking and playing tinny Christmas tunes.

I sat next to Bella on the couch, and tried not to meet any of their eyes. I didn't want them seeing me this way. It was worse than when I couldn't think straight. Their thoughts – their *pity* – were as painful as being lost, and this time I was fully aware of what was happening around me.

I didn't want to be there, but Bella was smiling and hugging everyone and I hadn't seen her smile often enough. I laced my fingers with hers and just watched her glow in the light of the tree and laugh at Emmett's idiotic jokes.

At least he could tell one properly.

Gifts were piled under the tree for the following morning, and I saw Bella slip gifts she had brought from the closet in my room upstairs in with those Alice had wrapped so carefully. Bella's gifts interested me, because I didn't know what was inside. I usually knew what was in the packages long before anyone opened them.

Esme pressured me into playing the piano. Bella smiled and nodded at the suggestion, so I gave in and played every Christmas song Bella could name, except one she claimed was by The Chipmunks. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Bella sat next to me on the piano bench while my fingers brought *O Holy Night* out of the piano's chords. She laid her head on my shoulder and I turned to smile at her and place a small kiss on her forehead. I flowed into *Silent Night* and noticed my family quietly leaving the room to give Bella and me some privacy.

"I remember it now," I said softly.

"Remember what? The Chipmunk song?"

"No," I scoffed. "I remember your lullaby."

I changed the song again and brought this new melody to Bella, the person for whom it was written.

"It's beautiful, Edward."

"It's how I feel when I watch you sleep," I said softly. "You are so beautiful and peaceful. You fascinated me and you captured my heart while you slept."

Bella reached up and placed her lips softly against mine.

"Thank you," she said simply. I smiled and looped the song around, starting over from the beginning. If I could have her kisses and her smiles, I would have played forever. But Bella was human, and as her head rested on my shoulder her eyes began to droop.

"Bedtime for the human?"

"I don't really want to." Bella yawned and stretched. "I might rather just listen to you play a little longer."

"If you prefer," I said, and continued to play her song for a while longer, and then I changed the tune to Chopin. When I felt her weight a little heavier on my side, I lowered the volume of my playing for a minute before stopping all together. Bella yawned again, and I scooped her up into my arms. I took her up to my room...well, her room now, really. Our room? I took her to the third-floor bedroom and tucked her into a bed that hadn't been there in the past. I heard Carlisle's internal desire to speak with me, but I ignored him and crawled in next to her. I had spent enough time sharing my Bella this evening, and for the next eight hours I wanted her only to myself.

She slept soundly while I held her, until her dreams came to me through her unconscious words.

"Charlie...didn't mean to...Merry Christmas, Dad...I'm sorry..."

I was such a selfish creature. I hadn't even thought about Bella's father since we had returned and she told me they were no longer speaking. Again, it was my fault. It was for me that she pulled away from him, and it was because of me he was angry with her. It wasn't right, not now – not during the holidays. She needed to see her father.

She wouldn't go without a lot of persuasion, I realized. Bella was nothing if not stubborn, and I would hazard a guess that she inherited that trait from her father. There had to be a way I could get the two of them back together, even if I had to speak with him myself, and beg for his forgiveness.

Bella's mumblings stopped, and I stroked her hair softly as she lay across my chest. I felt the rise and fall of her breaths against my chest, and of course, the feeling of her breasts pushing against me did not go unnoticed.

I hadn't tried to make love to her since I almost killed her. I wanted to do it, and she made it very clear that she wanted it as well, but I was terrified of the same thing happening again. That didn't stop me from touching her in her sleep though. I loved to touch her, and couldn't really seem to let an opportunity pass me by. I wasn't sure if she knew it or not – I was careful not to wake her up again.

With her on top of me, all I could do was touch her hair and her back and her arms. That was all right with me. I loved all of her skin, and considered it a perfect night if I could just touch her the whole time. This night was no less than perfect on that level. I held her and kissed the top of her head while she slept, and tried to think of a way to get her to see her father. As the sun's rays slowly permeated the room, I watched the hues in her hair lighten and softly stroked her cheek. It wasn't long before Christmas morning began in the most perfect way possible, with Bella opening her eyes and smiling at me.

"Merry Christmas, love," I said, kissing the top of her head.

"Merry Christmas, Edward."

"I'm fairly certain from the sounds and the smell, Esme is attempting to cook you a Christmas breakfast," I warned. "Hopefully she has retained some of her human cooking knowledge and it doesn't turn out like any of my attempts."

"I don't smell smoke." Bella giggled and reached her fingers up and into my hair. "So far so good!"

I had thought about it all night, and never did come up with the proper way to broach the subject, so I just spit it out there.

"We should go and see your father today."

"What?" Bella said with a clipped laugh. "Do you want to prove to me you are bullet proof? It's not necessary."

"You need to see him, Bella. Especially today."

"It's not a big deal, Edward."

"Bella, it is a big deal," I said. "I may not remember much of my human life, but I do remember my parents most clearly. Your father is important in your life. Sometimes I think I didn't cherish my parents enough when they were alive, and then it was too late. You shouldn't let me be in the way of your relationship with Charlie. I can't be in the way of something that is so important in your life."

"Edward, he's not going to forgive me for walking out on him. He's not going to forgive me for choosing to be with you. He knows you took me away without...well, without me wanting to go. I don't know how he knows it, but he does. I caused him to worry a lot. He isn't just going to forgive and forget."

"I understand, love," I said, kissing her head again. "But your father will forgive you – he is your family, and you are so important to him. Please, go see him."

I could see by the crinkles in her forehead she was contemplating. I waited patiently while she mulled over the idea and finally scowled back up at me.

"Fine, Edward," Bella finally said. "I'll go, but on one condition."

"What is that?"

"You make love to me tonight," Bella said simply.

"Bella..." I didn't really know what to say.

"*Edward*," Bella mocked. "I think you need to stop thinking the worst of yourself and realize this can work. Did you really think I wasn't going to notice? You went from wanting sex every nine minutes to telling me I need a good night's sleep every night."

"I didn't think you would notice," I mumbled.

"Please," Bella said, not even trying to hide behind the sarcasm. She touched her lips lightly to mine. "Don't you know how much I want you, too?"

"I'm afraid," I admitted, trying not to let my body react to the touch of her lips. "Bella...I came so close...so close to...to... *killing* you, Bella!"

"I know you think you might do that," Bella nodded her head. "And I know the possibility is there. But I don't think you ever will. You have had too many opportunities, Edward. If you were going to kill me, you would have by now."

"You don't know that," I argued. "I feel so...out of control sometimes. The urges to feed are extremely strong."

"I know, baby," Bella said, kissing me again. "But you are stronger than they are."

"You have more faith in me than I do."

"Yes, I know that," Bella smiled. "And apparently you have more faith in my father than I do. Deal?"

I didn't think I could really turn down a deal like that, so I nodded my head and took her down to breakfast.

I parked a block away from Bella's house, and Bella took another deep breath. If she kept this up, she was going to hyperventilate.

"Stay here," she said, glaring at me. I had no intention of going inside with her, but I still got out and opened the door for her and helped her out of the car. She gave me a quick kiss on my cheek, picked up the small cube-shaped package containing a new fishing reel, and headed down the street and to the front door. She stood on the porch for a minute, likely trying to decide if she should knock or not. After a minute she reached up above the door and pulled the key out of its hiding spot, unlocked the door and went in.

I could still hear her easily from this distance, but if it gave her the illusion of privacy, I would do my best. I turned up the music in the car, like I told her I would. I didn't want to listen, and I didn't want to hear his muted thoughts, either. Some things slipped through, and when I heard him yell at her, and tell her he would never respect her decision, I almost went to the door anyway.

Somehow, I managed to stay where I was, until I saw movement at the window, and then Charlie Swan's form coming out of the house, down the street and towards my car.

I turned off the music and tried to decide if I should get out of the car all together, or just roll down the window. I opted for getting out, since it seemed more respectful.

"Chief Swan," I said with a nod. "Please, allow me to apologize for my actions the last time..."

"Can it, Edward," Charlie snapped. "I don't like you and I don't trust you, so your apologies don't mean a thing to me. What does mean something to me is my daughter. She is the most important thing in the world to me, and I don't want to lose her. She seems to think she's in love with you, and it seems I'm going to have to accept that in order to keep her around."

"I love her, too," I told him. I didn't want there to be any doubt that I returned her feelings for me. "More than my own life."

Charlie grumbled at my declaration and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"You're a bad influence on her," he stated. "She's missed school since Thanksgiving break, and I'm thinking that probably about the time you two met up again, since I know she left town, and I know you weren't here. She's a smart girl, and she needs her education."

"I agree, Chief Swan," I said with a nod. I thought about telling him I had no idea she had been missing school, but I doubted it would have affected his opinion of me.

"She has to go back to school," Charlie snarled at me. "If you thought it was so important, you'd be in school as well. You can't tell me that hasn't been a deciding factor in her attendance. How many times have you shown up on the weekend from wherever you've been?"

"I haven't, sir," I said, shaking my head. I needed to steer this conversation in another direction. "I mean – I want her to finish school as well. I will make sure she goes back to finish her senior year. I'll help her catch back up so she will graduate on time. I'll make sure she gets into a good university – I swear. I will take care of her, Chief Swan."

Sure you will. I bet you have been, already.

"You aren't welcome here," he said as he turned back to the house. "I'll be removing this badge long enough to take care of you if you ever hurt her again. Are we clear, son?"

"Yes, sir."

For some bizarre reason, his words actually concerned me as much as they would have any teenage boy. That night, his words continued to haunt me as I made love to Bella. I didn't hurt her, and did my best to make up for the days I hadn't given her orgasms. She gave me a sly, vindicated look before snuggling back into my arms and sleeping in our room at the Cullen home.

The next week went uneventfully. I drank Bella's blood when Carlisle drew it from her. It never tasted right, though I wasn't sure exactly why. I mentioned it to Carlisle and he couldn't give me a definite answer. We decided the only real difference would be the temperature change from the short amount of time the blood was outside of her body.

I should have realized it wasn't working. I should have noticed the more subtle differences in my thought processes and behaviors before I did. I blew them off, trying to ignore the signs. I wasn't sure if Bella didn't notice at first either, or if she was in the same denial state as I.

By New Year's Eve, we could no longer deny that something was wrong.

How did we know?

Because Bella was touching my shoulder – shaking it, and asking me what I was doing out here.

I had to look around to figure out where *out here* was.

I was sitting in the dirt at the edge of the river at the back of my family's property. There was a small, flat rock in my hand, which was just right for skipping across the water if it hadn't been moving so swiftly.

I didn't recall coming to this place, and I didn't know why I was there.

Bella took my hand and led me back to the house. She kept telling me everything was going to be okay, but I wasn't so sure. I didn't want to argue with her, so I didn't say anything. I just nodded my head when she asked me a direct question.

Once we were back in the house, Bella took me to Carlisle's study and told him where she found me. I continued to nod and shrug as they discussed the possible reasons for my setback, because I didn't know what else to say or do.

"I don't know what else to suggest," Carlisle said, hopelessness coating his words. "If the time between drawing it from Bella and you ingesting the blood is enough to somehow...change it...either in temperature or some other way, then I'm not sure what else can be done. It gives me something else to look for in the meantime, but for now..."

The blood has to be taken from the source.

I would always have to hurt her.

"Never alone," I whispered.

"What, baby?" Bella's hands found their way into my hair and she held me against her chest.

"Don't let me drink from you when we're alone. Someone should be there to stop me if I can't."

"Edward, you can. You know..."

"Please," I looked up to her, not the least bit embarrassed to be begging for her life. "Please, don't put me in a position to hurt you again."

"All right," Bella finally agreed.

And again, this seemingly unending cycle continued, only this time with an audience.

My path of self-hatred was starting to wear on me.

Nine days after New Year's, I was finally feeling a bit like myself again. Carlisle was at a loss to explain why Bella's blood didn't seem to have an effect on me unless I took it straight from her. He was dumbfounded, I was depressed, and Bella was...resigned.

Like she always was.

It wasn't anywhere close to being happy, which is what I wanted for her. I longed to know what she was truly thinking, now more than ever. I knew she loved me, because what she was doing for me was far beyond something like friendship or obligation. It was far beyond pity, even for a self-sacrificing soul like Bella. But was she actually okay with our...arrangement? Could she be satisfied by our relationship as it stands? I had difficulty believing she would choose this existence for herself. As my faculties improved, I had also begun to dwell on Bella's life expectancy, and what would happen when she was gone.

All the options I could imagine were dreadful. It all came back to one thing – someday she would be gone, and I would go mad, and it wouldn't be from lack of blood. I'd be insane the moment life left her body. How could I doom her to a life such as that? How could I allow myself to live in such a way, regardless of her desire to sacrifice for me? How could any of us allow it?

I leaned back in the overstuffed chair next to the bookshelf in Carlisle's study. I had been fiddling with one of his more obscure

reference texts on blood disorders, but drawing nothing from the pages of any use. Bella had gone out with Alice for groceries or clothing or something, and they both insisted I stay behind, which I didn't like. This concept of "girl time" was not only foreign to me, but completely unnecessary. They could still talk and be together while I was in the room holding Bella's hand, and I wouldn't feel so tense and anxious for her return.

Carlisle had spent weeks going over the tissue samples he had extracted from me, comparing and contrasting his own and those of Esme and Emmett as well, looking for anomalies. I was trying to stay out of his thoughts and focus on my own research, but my mind kept dwelling on Bella's absence and my eyes kept darting up to the clock.

I was, in a word, fidgety.

This is interesting. Edward, come here.

I tossed the text onto the coffee table and went over to his desk.

"There is something here, Edward – look," Carlisle said as he pushed the microscope in my direction.

I looked through the eyepiece at Carlisle discovery, but saw nothing of interest.

"It's just a DNA sample," I said with a shrug.

"Yes, it is," Carlisle agreed. "Now look at this one."

"It is the same, but there's an anomaly on this one. The protein structure is a little different."

"Both are from you, Edward," Carlisle said. "The first one I took from you at Christmas. The second one I took from you in 1921."

"My DNA has changed? Mutated? Can that happen?"

"Apparently, yes. By the addition of a single protein."

"How is that possible?"

"Now look at this one." Carlisle placed a new slide under the oculars.

"This is a blood sample," I said, shaking my head.

"See anything interesting?" Carlisle carefully blocked his thoughts, wanting me to draw my own conclusions without tainting them with his theories. I stared into the ocular again.

"It's the same protein."

"Yes, it is."

"I don't recognize the amino acid combination."

"Nor do I," Carlisle said. "As far as I know, this protein is completely unique."

"This is Bella's blood," I said, slowly putting it all together. "Her blood...or this protein in her blood, rather, has combined with my DNA?"

"I believe so, yes."

"And changed me?"

"Yes."

"And you've never seen this before in any other human?"

"Never – not in a human or a vampire."

"If it is unique to her, then I can't be cured any other way. There's nothing we can do."

"No Edward – think. If this is what it seems, then it's not Bella's blood that causes your problems. It's not her blood causing your... addiction, for lack of a better term. It's this protein, or lack of it, that affects you. All you need to ingest is the protein."

And proteins can be synthesized.

My brows furrowed as his thought poked around in my head and attempted to lodge itself in the part of my mind that could still form logical conclusions. It took longer than it should have, but it slowly crept over me, and I tilted my head up from the microscope to look into my father's eyes. If this was right, I could be cured without continuing to drink from Bella. I could remain intact, as she needed me to be without harm to her. I could be for her what she was to me. *Do I dare believe it to be possible?*

So much for hopelessness.

Chapter End Notes:

Extra Extra! Read all about it! Possible cure for Boobward! :)

So - what do you think? Could it possibly work? Can Carlisle synthesize a protein and save both Edward and Bella? Is there *gasp!* hope? Hit review and let me know what you think!

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 – Try and Fail

"How could all of this happen because of protein?" Bella asked. She sat next to me on the couch with piles of shopping bags at her feet.

"The DNA of humans and vampires is made up of proteins," Carlisle said. He sat on the edge of one of the large, overstuffed chairs and talked with his hands. "Proteins are made up of different amino acid combinations. Your blood contains a combination I have never seen before. It seems to have...well... *affixed* itself to Edward's DNA, for lack of a better word."

"And that's caused all his problems?"

"I believe it has," Carlisle said.

"It's not just the interaction with the DNA," I clarified. "There's more to it."

"This protein seems to react with certain neurotransmitters as well," Carlisle continued. "Those are the chemicals in your brain that take information and pass it between cells. It seems to react strongest with those concerned with memory, vision and processing language. It makes sense, when you think of the symptoms Edward experienced."

"Why didn't it work when you drew my blood, Carlisle?" Bella asked. "If it's this protein, and the protein is part of my blood, shouldn't that have worked, too?"

"The protein seems to break down very quickly outside of your body," Carlisle said. "Think of it as an ice cube that is an exact size and fits in an exact space. Even a few moments in the heat, and it begins to melt, no longer fitting in that exact space. It would be the same here – even the short amount of time outside of you is enough

for it to change, no matter how small. Once it changes, it is no longer able to bond with Edward's DNA. This is going to be the challenge with synthesizing the protein as well."

"Synthesizing?"

"Yes, Bella," Carlisle said, smiling. "I think I can recreate it without using your blood at all."

We talked a while longer, with Bella asking questions and Carlisle answering them as best he could. When she ran out of things to ask, she turned to me and just looked into my eyes for a moment, and then she threw her arms around my neck and began to sob.

"Bella!" I cried. "Bella, what's wrong?"

"I'm so glad," she finally managed to say through her tears. "I was... losing hope. I didn't know if there would ever be a way..."

"Shh, love." I pulled her close to me and just held her to my chest.

"I love you," I heard Bella cry into my shirt. "I hate seeing you so upset...I want you to be all right. I want to...find a way...to be with you..."

"It's all right, Bella," I said, tightening my grip on her and stroking her hair softly. "It will be all right. I love you, too."

I had never seen this before. Bella never broke down in front of me. I recalled Carlisle's remembered conversation with Esme from months ago, when I found out Bella waited until she was far enough away from me to cry. I'd seen her cry because of me, but never for me. No, not for *me* . For *us* . She was crying for us.

She's exhausted. Maybe you should take her to your room.

I nodded and stood, bringing Bella up with me and cradling her in my arms.

I want to start working on this right away, so I'll be heading to the hospital's lab. You could join me.

"Not now," I said, too softly for Bella to hear. "I need to be with her."

I carried her up the stairs to the third floor and pulled back the blankets. I helped her into the silky pajamas Alice picked out for her that day, and dressed myself in my replacement green and red colored M&M lounge pants – a Christmas gift from Bella. Alice had screamed at her and threatened to take them back, but Bella wouldn't let her.

I climbed into the bed, bringing her down with me and pulling the blankets around her to keep her warm. I kissed her hair and held her to my chest as she sniffed and told me she was sorry – she was just happy. Bella being happy was of the utmost importance, so I held her to my chest and told her how much I loved her. I promised her everything was going to work out, and that I was certain Carlisle would be able to figure it all out, but I wasn't sure if I believed it.

Bella pulled the blanket away and lowered the M&M pants and her silky pajama bottoms. She straddled me and guided me into her entrance, while I held the headboard and just allowed her to do what she wanted with me. I felt her shiver against my skin and worked quickly to bring her release, not wanting her to get chilled. I followed quickly after her, and wrapped her up again in the blanket before her teeth began to chatter. I ran through my head what would need to be done to install a fireplace in the room so I could touch more of her skin at night.

I counted the passage of time by how often I had to hurt her to remain sane.

It took seven drinks from her before Carlisle brought us all together and held up a small vial with a red solution inside of it. It was blood, but definitely not human. Alice was excited, but her visions were clouded and uncertain, so I wasn't sure why she was so sanguine.

Jasper nodded, and was glad to be able to be around me without being driven over the edge as well. Rose was annoyed, Emmett was amused, and Esme just basked in the love she saw between Bella and me.

Carlisle, whose opinion mattered most to me, was carefully optimistic.

"I synthesized the proteins in pig's blood," he told us. "It seemed the best fit. It is not exactly the same, but I believe it is close enough. I had to make some changes to keep it stable enough outside of a living mammalian body. If that doesn't work, we may find ourselves in the livestock business before too long."

He meant it to be humorous. It went over about as well as one of my knock-knock jokes. It didn't even get a chuckle out of Emmett.

"So, does Edward just need to drink it?" Bella asked.

Carlisle nodded and handed it to me. There was only a small amount, which he explained was concentrated. It was approximately the same amount as would be contained in a pint of Bella's blood. I drank it quickly and handed the little vial back to him.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now, we wait."

"That could drive me insane again," I mumbled. Bella stifled a laugh and took my hand and pulled me close to her.

"It's going to work," she said with a smile. "I know it will."

"I hope so," I said, kissing her forehead lightly.

"How about we go celebrate?" Bella suggested. "We could go to Port Angeles for dinner, and spend the weekend at the cabin."

"All right," I said. "But back to school on Monday, right?"

"Yes," Bella sighed. "Midterms are at the end of the week. I'll have to do some studying on Sunday."

"I'll help you," I offered.

"I'd like that."

We held hands heading out to the garage where I saw my Vanquish parked in its old spot. It reminded me that the Audi I had purchased was likely still in the shop, when I had paid extra to have the work completed in a couple of days and promptly left it for half a year. I'd have to go pick that up. I thought about taking the Vanquish, but when I remembered the last time Bella and I were in that particular vehicle I changed my mind and skipped over it. I opened the passenger door of the Volvo for Bella, and we were on our way.

"How do you feel?" Bella asked once we were on the highway.

"I'm *fine* ," I said, smirking a little.

"I bet you think that's a good joke, too." Bella looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"I don't feel any different, if that's what you mean," I said. "I don't think I'd really notice a difference before a few days had passed, at least. Honestly, if it doesn't work, I probably won't notice right away."

"Is there something I should look for?" Bella asked. "I mean, maybe I would notice something before you did."

"I don't know," I said. I looked over to her. "I think you are probably the only one who could really answer that. When have you noticed me acting differently?"

"I was thinking about that after New Year's," Bella said. "The day before, you were staring into space a little. I figured you were just deep in thought."

"Where was I?" I asked. "I don't remember that."

"Sitting at the piano," Bella said. "You were just sitting there and looking at the keys."

I thought about it and tried to make myself remember when I had done that. I remembered playing her song for her on Christmas Eve. I had some recollection of wanting to write another song for her, but I didn't remember trying to start on it.

"I don't remember doing that," I admitted softly.

"I thought so," Bella said. She reached over and placed her hand on my thigh. I covered her fingers with my own.

My mind wandered a little to the last time I took blood from Bella. When the monster focused in on the taste and the sensations from the memory, I snarled at him. I would never taste her blood again.

"Never again."

"Never what?" Bella asked.

"Oh, um..." I hadn't actually intended to say it aloud. "I just realized I wouldn't drink your blood again. The last time was...well, it was the last time."

We sat in silence for a moment and Bella stroked my hand.

"Did you want to...I mean, just one more time?"

"No," I said definitively. I couldn't believe she was even suggesting such a thing. I shook my head to emphasize the negative. "If I knew it was the last time, I don't know how I would react. That has always been an important part of stopping. I made myself stop before by reminding the monster there would be more blood later. I don't think it would be a good idea for him to ever know it was the last time."

"I never thought of it that way," Bella said, and then suddenly she gasped and yelled. "Holy crow, Edward! Slow down!"

I sighed, eased off the gas and dropped down to eighty.

"I'm just trying to save on time." I shrugged. "I thought you were hungry"

"I'm not that hungry!" she said. "Can you imagine what my father would do if he knew you were going that fast?"

"I've never had a ticket, Bella," I tapped a finger against my forehead. "I always know where they are."

"It doesn't matter," she grumbled. "He asks me stuff all the time like that, and he's even asked me if you were a safe driver. I could say yes to that with a straight face, but do you really think I could manage to say 'no' if he ever asked about your speeding?"

I had to smile. I was glad she and Charlie were at least talking on a regular basis. Most of their conversations had been phone calls, but she did meet him for breakfast last weekend. He still didn't want me anywhere near him, and Bella had to have Alice drive her to meet Charlie at the diner. He was still not at all happy Bella was living in my parent's house. Bella had convinced him I was living at the cabin in Port Angeles, and not in the same house as Bella. I did live there sometimes, but only when Bella came with me. I was always with Bella. She was my home.

"Sorry, love," I said, releasing the gas and dropping down another ten miles an hour. I felt like we were literally crawling down the road now. I growled a few minutes later when a red mustang passed me on a straightaway. I hadn't been passed by another car since the fifties. Bella giggled.

"Your idea of humor flabbergasts me," I told her. She laughed harder.

"Flabbergasts? Really, Edward? Do you even know what century you live in?"

"I still have a lot of knock-knock jokes memorized," I threatened with a grin. "I could tell you a few of those if you are going to find my use of language so amusing."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Knock-knock!"

"Absolutely not!" Bella laughed again. "I will not respond to that and you can't make me."

"I bet I can."

"No way."

I quickly thought through the next mile of our route until I remember a place that would be perfect. A few seconds later, I whipped the Volvo around and onto a logging road. We bumped along for a minute before we were out of sight of the road, and I stopped, turning off the ignition.

I moved quickly, causing Bella to gasp and bite down on her lower lip. I lowered her seat until it was completely reclined and straddled her. Her winter coat was quickly unzipped so I could reach in closer to her body. I stroked my hands over her breasts and began to kiss her. My tongue ran over her mouth, and she opened to me. It wasn't long before her breath was coming in pants, and I moved down her neck and over to the spot under her ear she liked so much.

"Knock-knock," I said softly, blowing cool air across her skin.

"Not going to say it," Bella responded. Her words were breathy and her previous resolve was waning. My fingers rolled her nipples through her shirt, tugging just a little as my tongue traced over her neck. "You can't make me...oh, God...Edward..."

My hand reached down and unbuttoned her jeans, lowered the zipper and slipped inside. She was already so wet. I almost

reconsidered my plan – my desire to please her outweighing my desire to prove the point. But I smiled against her skin and knew that I could have both.

I felt her muscles clench around my fingers as they entered her, and my thumb massaged her clitoris. Bella's back arched and she moaned, getting closer to her release. I slowly backed my fingers out of her and removed my thumb.

"Oh, Edward...no...don't stop!"

"Say 'who's there,'" I commanded, my tongue tracing over her ear. My fingers caressed her outer labia, threatening to enter her again, but not quite.

"Oh that's just mean," she moaned, as I went back to her clitoris just enough to bring her back to the edge before stopping again.

"Say it."

"No!"

I went back to her breasts, pushing her coat open more and sliding my hands up her shirt and released the little hook between her breasts. I raised her shirt up to expose her and pulled at her nipples – each in turn – with my lips. My fingers went back down into her panties, stroking and teasing her until she moaned and writhed underneath me.

"Not fair," she groaned. "Oh please, Edward...keep going."

"Say it," I repeated, sucking harder on her nipple.

"Oh....mmmm...oh...please..."

"Say it," I pulled away from her breasts, kissed her and whispered against her lips. "I will stop unless you say it."

"Okay...okay...I'll say it!" Bella moaned again.

"Knock-knock," I leaned over and whispered in her ear. I slowly slipped my fingers back inside of her at the same time. I curled my fingers inside of her, and she gasped out her words.

"Who...who's there?"

"Usher."

"Usher who?"

"Usher wish you would let me in," I said, putting more pressure on her clitoris with my thumb, and speeding up my fingers until she was screaming my name and her muscles clamped around my digits. Her body shuddered and her eyes clamped shut. Her flushed face was the most incredible sight to ever exist. I slowed down my movements and she slowly opened her eyes to me.

"You don't play fair," she said, smiling up at me and pulling me down for a kiss.

"Never said I would," I told her. I pulled my hand out of her panties and kissed her softly once more before returning to my own seat and getting us back on the highway. Bella wriggled around in the seat until she was properly dressed again, then put her head back and sighed. She relaxed, and her breathing returned back to normal. She was also sufficiently distracted enough in her post-coital state that I arrived at the restaurant just a few minutes later. I even passed the red mustang along the way.

The hostess led us to a quiet table in the back with a little help of an extra tip, and I leaned close to Bella's ear.

"Do you realize she just *ushered* us over here?"

"You are impossible!" Bella groaned and giggled. I couldn't stop the smile on my face. She looked so happy – so alive. I hadn't seen her like this before. I was wonderful.

" *Usher* hope they don't take too long getting your order," I said, continuing with the theme. "I know how hungry you are."

"Ugh!" Bella pushed against my arm, which wasn't very effective. She still laughed again. "You aren't going to stop, are you?"

"As long as you still look so happy, I probably won't."

I continued using the word *usher* as often as possible while Bella ate her pasta and tried not to laugh too hard with food in her mouth.

Bella excused herself to the restroom for one of her human moments while I waited for the server to drop the check on the table. She handed me a folded plastic envelope containing the bill, and I pulled out enough cash to leave a generous tip. I left my seat and went to find the restrooms and wait for Bella. She was coming out of the door just as I came around the corner. I felt myself relax again as her hand took mine and we returned to the car.

I felt nearly lightheaded at the frequency of Bella's laughter and smiles. It seemed the first time I had been able to take her on a real date where she was having fun and wanted to be with me. It was the first time since we had returned to Washington that I was sane and she was happy.

I kept finding ways to tease her and make her smile as we drove back towards the cabin, only a few miles away from the restaurant. I told a few more jokes, which she said she hated and insisted she was laughing at *me* , not the jokes. They still brought forth laughter from my Bella, so I kept telling them until she groaned and begged me to stop.

Bella turned on the radio and soft, classical music filled the car. She smiled and watched the trees fly by as I slowly crept up to a hundred miles an hour. She glanced back over towards me and shrieked, so I slowed back down to eighty for a while, then crept back up again, waiting for her reaction. Bella caught on to the game by the third time

and playfully slapped my shoulder, probably causing her finger to bruise. I kissed it for her, and then held it in my lap.

"You could at least pretend to watch the road," she said.

"I am watching the road."

"You are looking at me."

"I can do more than one thing at a time."

"I've noticed that," she said with a mischievous smile. "But it really is making me a little nervous."

"I'm sorry, love," I said, and focused my eyes back on the highway.

We were nearly back to the cabin and the darkness of the winter evening dropped over us. Right before we arrived at the spot that turned off and became the extended driveway, something happened that was...odd. Everything shifted. I watched the road in front of me shift to one side, rise up, drop down again, and then land a tree right in front of the car.

The Volvo was suddenly skidding sideways, and Bella wrapped her arms around her head and squealed. I didn't understand what the tree was doing there, how it got there, and for a brief moment, I couldn't determine how far the tree was from the car. When it came into sharper focus, I pulled the wheel to the side and the tree skimmed the driver's side of the car before we came to a stop just to the left of the actual driveway.

"Oh no, oh no...no," Bella chanted.

I sat for a moment and tried to comprehend what had just happened. Had I nearly wrecked the car? Did I actually come close to hitting a tree? For a moment, everything went dark. I squeezed my eyes shut, shook my head and opened them again. Light rain began to fall on the windshield, and Bella was still chanting.

"Bella," I said, reaching over to her. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," she said, removing her hands from her face and looking over to me. "What happened?"

"I'm...not sure," I said.

"Are you not sure, or do you not remember?" Bella asked tentatively.

"I remember," I assured her. "I was turning on to the drive, but everything got a little...blurry, I think."

"Blurry?"

"I think so," I said. I shrugged, and smiled at her. "It's probably just because you distract me so much. You're probably right – I should slow down."

"Hrm," Bella mumbled back to me. I could see in her eyes she wasn't completely convinced. I gave her the half smile that always increased her heart rate. It was too soon to think something wasn't working right. It had been a few hours at most. I had drunk from her only three days ago, and I wouldn't be falling apart this quickly.

"We're almost there," I said. "I'll go slowly the rest of the way, all right?"

Once we were inside, I led Bella to the couch, kissed her softly, got her a glass of water and put a movie in the DVD player for her to watch. She was still shaken up from the near accident, and to be honest, so was I.

"I'm going to take a quick shower," I told her, looking for a little time to get myself completely calmed down. I didn't want her to see my agitation. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes, Edward," Bella sighed. "There's nothing wrong with me – just a little left-over adrenalin. Give me a couple minutes to relax and I'll be perfectly okay."

I fluffed up her pillow, refilled her glass and gave her a few more kisses until she literally pushed me towards the bathroom door. I slipped out of my jeans, unbuttoned my shirt and dropped them and my boxers on the floor. I turned the water on extra warm, because I knew Bella rather liked it when my skin heated up a little.

Once I was in the shower, I could feel some of the tension from the car washing off of me. I had always found showers to be relaxing and enjoyed the way the warm water ran over my hair and down my back. I stood there with my eyes closed and water running over me for several minutes, just reveling in the sensations of the warm wetness over my skin. Bella seemed to like it as well, and I heard her soft footsteps across the floor before the shower door slid to one side.

"Any room for me?" she asked playfully as she slipped in behind me. "I've seen that movie before."

"Always," I responded with a smile. I turned to her and put my hands on her waist, turning us both in a little circle so she would be under the spray. Watching the stream of water cover her hair and her breasts was more than enough to make my excitement at her proximity apparent. Bella shook water from her face and glanced down, then raised an eyebrow.

"Mr. Cullen," she said in her most seductive voice. "I do believe you are happy to see me."

"Always," I heard myself repeat, and then I had to clear my throat a little. My fingers grazed up her sides and traced slightly over her breasts. I hadn't managed to give them near enough attention in the car, and I wanted to make up for it. I lifted them both, and then leaned over to kiss each nipple gently.

"It's my turn, you know," Bella said slyly. She ran her hands over my chest and guided me back into the water with my back towards her. She didn't waste any time.

Bella's hand circled my waist from the back and slipped down, covering my erection at the base and slowly moving up and over the head, then back down again. I closed my eyes, because watching her hand do that to me was simply too much. I couldn't maintain any control watching for more than a few seconds and then only if I was lucky.

Her other hand reached around as well, gently cupping and fondling my scrotum. I heard myself moan and squeezed my eyes shut tighter. My hands went to the wall and I braced myself as Bella's hand began to stroke me faster.

I felt her hardened nipples against my back as she moved up closer to me, crushing herself against my body in order to get a better grip on me. Her mouth was on my shoulder blade, kissing, sucking and licking the water from my skin. Her fingers wrapped around the head of my penis, pulling back the foreskin and then pushing it forward again. I felt the pressure build and the tingling throughout my limbs increase until I exploded over her fingers and on to the floor of the shower.

I leaned against the tiled wall with one hand and forced my breathing to slow as Bella's warmth pressed up against my back. I turned to her and wrapped her in my arms, holding her against my chest in silent appreciation. I wondered if it would be better to return the favor here, in the shower, or to take her to our bed and make her body respond to me more leisurely. I decided on the bed, and kissed the soft, wet skin underneath her ear. I tilted my head to the ceiling, finally opening my eyes. I saw nothing. Somewhat confused, I shook my head and tilted it back to Bella's direction.

Still, I saw nothing.

"Bella?"

"Hmm?" she hummed against my chest.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Are my eyes...open?" I asked.

I heard and felt her move.

"Yes," she said, slowly drawing out the word. "Why are you asking me that?"

"I can't see," I stated, and heard her breath catch in her throat.

"What does it mean?" Bella asked, her fingers tightening around my hand. We both sat on the couch against the wall of Carlisle's study. "I mean – it hasn't even been a day since he had the first dose."

"I'm not completely shocked," Carlisle said. "Creating proteins isn't easy. I would have been more surprised if the first attempt was completely successful. Edward and I discussed this."

"I didn't tell her," I confessed. "I didn't want her to worry."

"Edward," she growled in my ear and then she cursed at me. I flinched.

"I didn't mean to make you angry," I whispered. "I didn't consider that an inexact match might cause problems to arise even when your blood is still in my system. I thought it would take longer. I didn't realize I was taking such a risk, Bella – I'm so sorry. I never would have driven anywhere..."

"Stop," Bella said, and I felt her calming touch against my cheek. "What do we do now?"

"I will start again," Carlisle said.

You are going to need to stabilize. We won't know how successful the new version is if your body is already compromised.

"No...Carlisle, please..."

"What?" Bella said. I felt her sit up straighter on the couch.

"Edward will need to drink again," my father said. "He has to become normalized for this to work."

I felt her hand on my neck, then my cheek. I already know what she was going to say. I didn't need to worry about her, just make myself better. Selfish, bastard monster that I am. I'll just have another go at her until I feel a bit better. What's the harm in that? It was *fine* .

I stood and pushed away from the couch, snarling and trying to navigate by sound alone. I knocked over a lamp. I had a feeling it was the crystal one Esme liked a lot. Why weren't vampires equipped with sonar?

"Edward, where are you going?" she asked. I could hear her getting up and coming over to me. I tried to move away again and knocked over something else. You would think with all of my vampire enhanced memory and the like I would know where everything was and could avoid it. Apparently, that was not the case. I heard something else crash. It might have been the table where the lamp used to be.

"I don't know!" I heard myself yell. "I don't care! Away from here. Away from you!"

"Edward, stop it," she told me. I felt her hand against my forearm, and I pulled away.

Son, you need to try and relax.

"Relax?" I turned towards where I thought he was. I could hear his breathing, at least. "How can I relax? It's not working, Carlisle! It's not working and now you expect me to hurt her again!"

A wave of calm covered me and invaded my senses. I hadn't heard Jasper approach, and I truly wasn't certain if his gifts were welcomed now or not. Once I realized he was here I was annoyed, but almost with the same breath, I was grateful. I took a couple moments to collect myself, and Bella wrapped her arms around my waist. This time, I didn't pull away.

"I can't keep doing this," I said, my head tucked into the crook of her neck. "I can't think that it's over, then start again and stop. It hurts too much. It hurts you too much, Bella – please!"

"Shh, Edward." Her hands were in my hair and I let her pull me back to the couch and hold me against her chest. "It's just for now, sweetheart. This is going to work. You heard Carlisle – you can't expect it to work the first time. It's temporary. We will find one that works, Edward. We will."

"You don't know that," I said, shaking my head. "I thought I wouldn't have to anymore. I don't want to be tempted anymore. I can't think straight when I know...when I even consider I might do that again."

"It's not forever," Bella said softly, her voice determined.

"It feels like forever," I responded, then sighed. I pushed myself up and tried to walk to the door, but the bookshelves weren't exactly where I thought they were, and I knocked over some books. "I know one thing, though. I definitely do not like not being able to see."

I heard Bella stand behind me and grasp my hand. Her fingers stroked my cheek, and I tried to ignore both my father and Jasper's thoughts about the whole situation.

"Just...let's get it over with," I said, tilting my head down to be closer to Bella's ear. "I want you. Now...please. Can we go upstairs?"

"You want to be alone?" she asked.

"Please," I said, nodding. Truly, I didn't want to drink from her. At that moment, I had no desire for her blood at all. I had already told myself I would never do it again. "I'll be careful."

"Carlisle?"

"It's all right," my father said. "You two go. I will need some time to work on this. If you need anything..."

We could still hear if something went wrong.

Alice will see it – we're close enough to help you.

"I'm fine," I growled low, already doubting myself.

Bella led me up the stairs and into our room. I wanted to scream. It wasn't working, and the implications were staggering.

She pulled me into bed with her, into my favorite place with my head against her shoulder and her arms wrapped around me, fingers in my hair. For a few minutes I just circled my arms around her body and held on as tightly as I dared. The scent of her blood invaded my nostrils and woke up the monster inside of me. When he tried to approach the forefront of my brain, I punched him and told him to get the fuck out.

I held Bella and wished, for the thousandth time, that I could at least cry for what I would do to her. I could smell her tears – I didn't need to see them. Every muscle in my body tensed and constricted, making me feel claustrophobic in my own, hardened skin. I was breathing rapidly and was having trouble connecting one thought to the next. Abruptly, I grabbed Bella's wrist and pulled it up close to me, kissing the pulse point in silent apology.

I felt her tense a little, her fingers pulling slightly at my hair, and then she relaxed, trying to prepare herself. I cut her open and pulled her blood into my body as quickly as I could. My hands were shaking when I sealed the wound I had made and went back to holding her.

I turned my face towards hers and opened my eyes, even though I couldn't see the beautiful brown irises that grounded me. I reached up and cupped her cheek, feeling the moisture from her tears as it collected on my thumb. I brought my hand back to my own face, smearing the tears against my cheek before I settled back against her shoulder and closed my eyes again.

"It's going to work," Bella said, the tone of her voice leaving no room for any contradictions. "Carlisle is going to make it work. It's just going to take some time."

"You never should have brought me back." I was back in full-fledged self-pity and generally-annoyed-with-existence mode.

"I had to, Edward." I heard her sigh and sniff before continuing. "I can't be without you either. You have to know that by now."

"I know," I admitted. "It was the worst of the possible outcomes."

"What possible outcomes?"

"When I first realized I loved you," I said. "I knew there were only so many ways this could turn out. The first one, and the one I expected to happen – I would lose control and kill you. The second, the one I tried to force, would be for me to leave and you to live out a normal, natural life. Now I'm left with the only other outcome. We'll be together, with me living off of you if Carlisle can't find another way. Then someday, when you are...no longer here...I will find a way to end myself."

Bella was silent for a few minutes before she spoke again.

"There's another option, Edward."

"There isn't," I argued. "You are too stubborn to leave when you should."

"Edward," Bella said, and I felt her hands on the sides of my head, turning me towards her. "We don't have to talk about this now. But someday, when this is all over and everything is okay, we will talk about it."

"Talk about what?" I felt my throat constrict as I pointlessly closed my eyes and awaited her response.

"About changing me, Edward," she said. "That is the only real option for us. When you're well again, I want you to change me."

I should have considered it before, and I suppose the only reason I hadn't was because of all of the insanity in our lives. How many times had she made reference to forever? How many times should I have realized what she meant? She wanted me to grant her immortality. Bella wanted to be like the rest of my family. She wanted me to change her into a vampire. She wanted me to change her into a soulless monster so we could be together forever. *How could I do this to her?*

So much for sanity.

Chapter End Notes:

You didn't think I was going to make it quite that easy, did you? :)

You can lead a blind vampire to blood, but can you make him drink? Hit review and let me know what you think! Remember the word you want is bee-yotch! :)

Masturbation DOES lead to blindness! :)

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 – Vials and Trials

I wanted to look into her eyes so I could try to determine if this was, by some miracle, a joke. When my eyes were open, I still only saw darkness. The tone of her voice was quite clear, regardless. I closed my useless eyes and tried to convince myself she hadn't just said what I knew she had just said.

"You can't be serious," I said when I finally found my voice. I knew she was. Bella didn't joke about such things and was completely serious about what she was saying. That didn't stop me from asking the question anyway. She didn't understand what this existence entailed. "You don't know what you are asking."

"Yes, I do," Bella said softly. Her hand was still in my hair, but her fingers had stopped their ministrations. "I can't be without you, Edward, and you can't be without me. There is only one way for us to be together."

"But you would...you would have to..." I couldn't find the right words. I wanted to scream that she would have to die for that to happen. I wanted to jump up and down for joy. I wanted to shake her and make her see reason. I wanted to bite her now, claim her as mine right this moment – no doubts and for forever, regardless of what it might mean for me. At least I would have her.

Selfish, selfish bastard.

"Edward, please think..."

"No," I said, and I reached up to find her face and cup it in my hands. At least she might have the illusion of the gaze I wished to give her. "I can't talk about this – not now. I don't even know if I can talk about it later, but please, Bella – not now!"

"All right," she said softly and covered my hands with her own.

I leaned forward and touched my forehead to hers. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on her thoughts. I needed to understand what she was thinking, now more than I ever had before. I wanted it. There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to do it – change her, keep her – forever. Her mind remained silent, of course. Hers was the only one I truly wanted to hear, but instead I had to listen to everyone else's thoughts. I couldn't even look into her eyes to try to read what was there.

"If I have to lose something," I mumbled, "why couldn't it be mind reading?"

"I would think you would want to keep that," Bella responded.

"It gets extraordinarily tedious," I told her. "Not being able to read your thoughts, though aggravating at times, is a wonderful change."

"I'm glad you can't read my mind," Bella admitted. "That would just be too weird."

I laughed a little, and my lips tried to find their way from her nose to her mouth, then over to her ear. I wondered if Bella was changed into a vampire, would I be able to read her mind then? Probably not. I didn't have that kind of luck.

"Think of how much pleasure I could bring you," I whispered in her ear. "If I knew how every touch affected you."

"Mmm...what you do now is almost more than I can take," Bella said. "I think I would have to have vampire strength to take any more."

I continued kissing Bella's neck and shoulders until she stifled a yawn, and I rolled back, bringing her with me. I held her to my chest and hummed her lullaby until her breathing evened out and she slept. After a couple of hours Bella rolled on to her back, and I was able to wriggle my way into my favorite position, with my head on her

shoulder and my arms wrapped around her. Whether I had my faculties about me or not, I still liked sleeping with Bella, even though I couldn't actually sleep.

I held my eyes closed throughout the night, almost feeling like I was really sleeping since I couldn't see anything anyway. I tried not to pay any attention to Carlisle's thoughts as he worked on a new version of the protein synthesis. I tried to find ways of blocking him out of my mind as I held Bella and waited for morning to come so she would wake. The hours went by, and I counted Bella's breaths and heart beats and wondered if my memories of her eyes, her hair, and every other part of her would eventually fade. I didn't think so.

As the sun began to rise and warmth came through the window, light passed through my eyelids and blackness faded to red, then pink. I slowly opened my eyes and blinked a few times as everything came back into focus like nothing had ever happened. I didn't know if I should feel grateful or annoyed. Then Bella shifted under me, and I leaned back so I could look at her. She woke up slowly, and I focused on her eyes.

"You're beautiful." I smiled at her.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Bella asked with a yawn.

"Yes," I said, and I shifted again to place my lips against hers. Bella's arms tightened around me, and her mouth turned up as she kissed me back.

"I told you it was temporary," she said when we broke apart.

"I'll never doubt you again."

"I just might hold you to that." Bella looked into my eyes. "Your father is going to figure this out and everything is going to be okay."

"Carlisle's been working on it all night," I informed Bella. "He thinks he has isolated the problem with the last trial."

"When will it be ready?"

"Not for a few more days," I said. "But I can hold out that long."

"Edward, you don't have to..."

"No, please." I took her face in my hands and kissed her lightly. "I can go more than three days. At least four. He should have it by then."

"Don't push yourself, Edward." Bella's eyes narrowed, and she gave me one of her *don't argue with me* looks. "Carlisle said you have to remain stable or we'll never know if the different trials are working or not. I'll put up with three and a half days. If that works, we'll try a little longer, okay?"

I couldn't really argue with her, so I didn't. I could only put my head back down against her shoulder and try not to be too thrilled that I could see her breasts outlined under the blanket. I started reaching over to play with them, but Bella trumped my fun by excusing herself for a human moment. When she returned from the bathroom, she let me snuggle back into the crook of her neck. I could still see her, and her breasts, and the sun shining through the window, and I actually felt *good* for once.

Relief and joy washed over me, and I rolled onto my back, taking Bella with me and pulling her down for a kiss. I traced her lips lightly with my tongue until her mouth opened and increased the pressure against my lips. I opened my eyes. I almost felt afraid to *not* look at her. Her face was magnificent – beautiful, poised, kind, loving – and I watched her kiss me until I couldn't help but smile against her mouth. Bella's eyes opened and she broke away.

"You aren't supposed to peek," she chided. "There's an unwritten rule, I'm sure. Maybe even a written one."

"I can't help it," I told her with a chuckle. "I have the feeling I'm going to be looking at you a lot today."

I kissed her chin, then down her throat. My fingers went to the buttons of her pajamas, quickly exposing her chest and stomach to me. I held her above me and kissed all down her torso while she tried not to giggle at her awkward position. I moved her back down, lying her against my chest with her knees on either side of my waist. I kissed her again on her lips, leaving my eyes open and laughing when she did the same. I placed slow, soft kisses up the line of her jaw to her ear, and then sucked slightly at her lobe.

Bella sat back, perching on my stomach and looking down at me. She bit into her lower lip and raised her eyebrows before reaching down and grasping both of my wrists. I smiled up at her and let her place my hands over my head. I watched her skin appear before me as she slowly pushed her top off her shoulders and dropped it on the floor. She raised herself up and removed the bottoms as well. I lay motionless as Bella began kissing my shoulder – first one side, then the other. She moved to the hollow of my throat, biting gently on my skin. I felt my breathing increase as she moved down my chest with her mouth and her hand found its way to my growing erection.

When her lips reached my navel, she sat back and hooked her thumbs into my lounge pants. I lifted my hips and she pulled them down along with my boxers. Her eyes darted up to mine, and then back down. Her hand slowly traced over my thigh until she reached what she wanted, and her fingers circled me around the base of my penis, then slowly moved up.

I couldn't stay completely still at that point, though I could keep my hands where she placed them. We started this particular "game" on Christmas, when I felt much better about her safety with her on top and my hands out of the way. She would stroke me and toy with me before straddling my hips and encompassing me with her warmth.

The light touch of her fingers running up and down, barely touching my skin was intoxicating. I shifted my hips a little, trying to increase her touch, because she really did seem to enjoy teasing me this way. I wasn't about to tell her to stop, so I let her continue to touch me with almost ticklish strokes while I moaned out her name.

After a while, Bella's grip tightened around me and she stroked all the way up, and then back down again. I moaned and closed my eyes for a moment. As much as I wanted to see everything today, I wanted to hold off at least until I was inside of her. I heard Bella shift on the bed and sudden warm wetness engulfed me, but it wasn't what I expected.

Oh God...she...she...she...she had her...her...her...mouth...

Oh God.

She had never done this before. We had never even discussed it. We should have, because the desire to thrust into her mouth was nearly my undoing. If I thrust too hard, she wouldn't be left with soft-tissue bruising that would heal in a week. It would be more likely for her skull to be crushed.

"Bella..." I could hardly say her name. The muscles in my hips and backside tightened, constricting with the effort of keeping my body firmly against the mattress. I stopped breathing and held my eyes shut tight. I felt her tongue...dear God...her *tongue* stroke all the way down until the end of my penis was touching the back of her throat. She pulled back and I felt the suction as she released me. I think I whimpered a little, the pain of holding myself still and the fear of actually moving kept me from acting at all.

She hummed her response. She hummed around my shaft, and I probably came as close to killing her as I ever had.

I don't think Bella even realized I was off the bed until I was across the room as she lay on her back looking up at the ceiling in shock. I was breathing, quick, panting breaths with my hands flat up against the door leading out to the hallway. I tried not to look at her or even think about her being in the room, or her mouth around my...

Don't think about it!

I couldn't close my eyes, so I tried to look out the window and get some calm from the contrast between the light blue sky and the incoming cloud cover.

"Edward?" Bella's soft, questioning voice floated over to me. I shook my head sharply and finally managed to close my eyes for a moment and get my breathing back under control. I looked over to her and saw the concern on her face.

"I don't think fellatio is something we should practice," I finally managed to say in a relatively calm voice.

"You didn't like it?" Bella's eyes narrowed. I barked out a humorless laugh.

"Didn't like it?" The ridiculousness of her statement seemed to calm me. I got hold of my breathing and I could look at her again. I moved back to the bed and took her up in my arms. "It was too good, my love. I wasn't prepared for it, and...well...I think that particular act is a little too dangerous, even for one such as yourself."

"One such as yourself?" She looked up to my eyes and waited for an explanation.

"One whose sense of self-preservation is so low, she shacks up with a vampire."

Bella laughed, and the tension was broken. I kissed her softly, begging forgiveness with my lips and tongue. Before long she had me supine on the mattress, and was back to her teasing strokes. Her fingers traced around my foreskin, pulling it back, stroking the glans, and then pushing it forward again.

"Sometimes I think you consider my penis as your own personal toy," I teased, then gasped as she pushed back over the hand and palmed me.

"Are you trying to say it's not?" Her fingers twisted around gently to the base, then back to the tip. "I could stop..."

"No," I said, shaking my head violently.

"Good, because it is fascinating."

"Fascinating?" I questioned. "Is that really the word you wished to choose?"

"Most certainly," Bella confirmed. "It is somehow simultaneously the hardest and softest part of your body. I think it's a little warmer than the rest of you, too."

"That's because you always have your hot hands on it."

"Oh really?" Bella pulled her hands away and tossed one leg over my torso. She leaned up and placed her lips against mine. I reached down to cup her backside, but she grabbed on to my wrists and placed them back over my head. "I'm not done with you."

I rested my head on the pillow and tried to keep at least a little composure while Bella's hands ran up and down my body, stopping to trace the outline of the muscles on my stomach and chest, then proceeding back to her...um...toy.

Bella's eyes met mine as she rose up above me on her knees and stroked up my shaft once more before positioning it between her legs. I held my breath as she slowly lowered herself down until I was completely buried within her body. *There's no place like home.*

I forced a vision of Bella in a little blue and white dress and ruby slippers from my mind.

I watched her move up and down, trying to watch her face more than the way her breasts bounced with her movements. If I watched that, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands to myself. I also couldn't look

farther down, where we were connected. It was just too glorious a sight.

Bella shifted her weight forward, using my pubic bone to add pressure to her clitoris. She was grinding against me, moaning out my name and using my chest to support herself on her hands. Her eyes squeezed tight, and I tried to focus on her breathing rather than the warm moisture wrapped around me, clutching me and practically begging me to release. Her muscles clamped down suddenly and she gasped.

I couldn't stop myself from touching her any longer. I grasped her hips and pushed up against her while pulling her down towards me. Then I raised her up to the point when only the tip of my penis was still inside of her, then slowly pulled her back down over me. I repeated the motion until she was panting as hard as I was, with her forehead against my chest. When I felt her internal muscles tighten again, I increased my pace and poured into her.

Bella placed her cheek against my cold chest and began tracing little shapes on my bicep with her fingertip. I ran my hands up and down her back, loving the warmth of her skin on mine and wishing this particular moment would never end. Unfortunately, with the ability to read minds and a house full of vampires who could hear the beating of moth's wings a mile away, we weren't able to enjoy the moment near long enough. My father's thoughts and words to Jasper invaded our privacy. He had an idea on how to restructure one of the amino acids, and I was needed for the analysis.

I sighed and kissed Bella's hair before rolling to my side and dislodging from her. I didn't want to go, but I knew the sooner Carlisle manufactured the solution, the sooner Bella and I could really be together.

The sooner I can change her.

I pushed the thought from my head, dressed and went down to meet my family for a full day of research. That day went into another, and

then another. Between working on the formulas and Bella's senior year of high school, I hardly saw her at all.

Carlisle was ready with the new formula before I had to drink from Bella again, thankfully. It was still less than a week before I tasted her blood again. Carlisle continued, not even close to giving up. The next one was ready two days later. I lasted a little longer on that one. No matter what Carlisle changed, something would go wrong, and I found my mouth wrapped around Bella's wrist within days.

Trial eight.

I became so off balance I literally couldn't walk.

Trial fourteen.

I couldn't understand anyone. Not their spoken words or their thoughts.

I didn't realize how many times I would have to switch. I would drink Bella's blood for a week, maybe two, then on to another trial formula of synthetic protein when Carlisle had it ready. It would work for a few days – maybe – but more often the effects would be fairly quick. Then I would have to go back to Bella again.

Eventually, the routine was going to kill one of us. I just wasn't sure who would last longer. I didn't know if either of us would be able to last long enough to get it right. Carlisle began working faster and through the night. Jasper and I were both helping out as best we could. After trying for two months, we could produce a new version almost every other day, which was good, since none of them seemed to work.

Trial twenty one.

Carlisle held up the vial and I drank it without hesitation.

This one is nearly the same as trial nineteen, though the stabilizer is a little different. I'm pretty happy with the results.

I just sighed and sat down on the overstuffed chair in Carlisle's office.

"I supposed the chances of this one working still aren't all that great," I said.

There's no real way to tell without trying it out.

"At least I get to save Bella from one night of torture."

She doesn't see it that way. She wants to help you.

I waved my hand dismissively. Bella was always doing what was right for me, but rarely what was right for her. I wanted a way to bring the two together.

Bella and Alice will be back from school soon. You should stay here tonight, just in case...

"Of course," I snapped at Carlisle, and then apologized. I was on edge, though I thought it was with pretty good reason. "I'll plan on staying here for at least the first three days. Hopefully we'll have some kind of idea if it's working or not by then. Bella is always threatening to cut me off if I try to drive anywhere right after a new treatment, anyway."

Carlisle laughed, and I realized what I had just said.

"I mean...I didn't mean to say...she hates it when I drive fast..."

"It's quite all right, Edward," Carlisle smirked. "That particular threat transcends humans, vampires, and the centuries."

I couldn't take anymore, so I got up and went back to our room, staring at the clock on the wall and waiting for Bella and Alice to return from school. I was fed up with the waiting. I felt like I was

always waiting for something. Waiting for Bella to come home from school, waiting for Carlisle to find the right formula, waiting for Alice's visions to show me some glimmer of hope for the future.

I wanted to give Bella some semblance of normalcy. It had been bothering me for a while. Despite everything else, Bella was still a teenage girl, and I should be a decent boyfriend and take her on dates. We hadn't been to Port Angeles since the night I nearly wrecked the car, and I wanted to take her out of dinner. Maybe I could take her to a movie, or on a walk – whatever. I needed to take her on a date. Bella deserved actual dates.

Besides, I was sick to death of my family members' thoughts. If they weren't worried about how I was going to react to the next treatment, they were worried about how Bella was coping or how Charlie was going to react if he ever opened his eyes and saw the scars I had left on her skin.

Even though I didn't bring it up until two days later, Carlisle still didn't want Bella and me to go out so soon after the beginning of a new trial. I wanted to punch him. Couldn't he see how much Bella needed this? Thankfully, he had the sense to keep his thoughts in his mind. I glared at him as I ushered Bella out with the promise to not get behind the wheel.

I let Bella drive the Volvo, and we went to the same restaurant as the last time. Bella even ordered the same dish. The server was different, at least. Bella flipped through possible movies to see on a little pamphlet she pulled out of the local newspaper, then completely back tracked and decided she wanted to go to a bookstore instead. Like our last date, Bella excused herself while I paid the check. I waited a couple of minutes at the table, and then decided to walk towards the restrooms instead. When I went around the corner, I saw her standing in the hallway near a door marked *ladies* and talking to someone. I inhaled slightly and recognized his scent – Mike Newton.

She really is pretty hot, even if she's a little freaky.

Alice's previous visions for Mike touching Bella flew into my head, and I felt my hands tighten into fists. A slightly different version of the same scenario began to unfold in front of my very eyes as he reached out his hand and touched her fingers. Bella pulled her hand back. Newton didn't notice, because his eyes were too focused a few inches below her face.

She spent all that time alone with Cullen...there is no way she didn't put out after all of that...

"I was thinking about seeing ' *Love Spelled Backwards Is Love* ' tonight. Why don't you come along?"

"She's busy," I snarled, shoving him backwards and into the wall. I gripped the top of his shirt in my fist and barely stopped myself from smashing his skull against the wall. "She's *always* busy. Do you understand me, Newton? Don't you ever, *ever* forget that! You don't talk to her, you don't touch her, you don't even *think* about her, you son of a..."

"Edward!" Bella moved herself in between us by ducking under my arm and placing her hands against my chest. She was reaching up, and I knew her plan without needing to read her mind. She wanted to run her hands over my scalp and try to calm me. I wasn't interested. Mike Newton needed to know. He needed to understand, and if I had to *make him* understand I would do just that.

"Do you understand me, Newton?" I snarled and tilted my head back so Bella couldn't reach where she wanted. "Am I being crystal *fucking* clear with you?"

"Yeah! Yeah, dude!" He tried to squirm away by moving along the wall. I kept my fist wrapped around the collar of his shirt, and lifted his feet up off the floor a little.

"Good," I said, slowly releasing my grip and letting him drop. "Now get out of my sight."

He ran.

I watched him race out the front door of the restaurant before dropping my eyes down to Bella. She was glaring at me. I was still too angry to care.

"Edward Anthony Cullen," she hissed between her teeth. "What the hell was that?"

"That was mercy," I snarled back at her. "I wanted to fucking kill him. Do you know what he was thinking?"

"Edward!" Bella looked around quickly before meeting my eyes again. "Lower your voice before someone hears you!"

"I don't give a shit if someone hears me or not! He had it coming! He's been after you, I know he has!"

"Edward," Bella said, lowering her voice even if I wasn't. I finally tilted my head and allowed her hands to reach where they wanted. "We are going home. Now. Just get in the car."

I did as she asked, silent and fuming the entire way back. I wondered how many times Newton had approached her. Had he been talking to her at school? I hadn't paid much attention to Alice's visions or thoughts lately. Most of them were too vague, too contradictory or just too depressing. Perhaps I needed to pay more attention to her thoughts of school. Maybe I just needed to go there myself. Yes, that was a much better idea.

Two days later, I pulled into the school lot and saw the multitudes of hormonal males spilling out into the common area near student parking. I meant to get there before the last bell rang, but I had been so infuriated by Esme's continued pity and worry for my situation, I had to leave to hunt. I became sidetracked while taking out three elk before I realized I was going to be late.

I navigated around a few other cars before pulling into a spot. There were a lot of people around despite the light, misting rain – some speaking in groups, some getting into their cars, some making out against the picnic tables. I hated being out in public where I was forced to listen to the inane, mindless chatter in people's heads. Especially teenage people's heads.

Across the parking lot, I saw him. I saw *them* . Mike Newton and my Bella. They were standing near his car, which had the hood open. Mike was leaning against the fender when I first looked up, but then he moved closer to Bella. Bella moved closer to him. Then they were hugging each other.

I was between them a second later.

"Shit, Cullen!" Mike yelled with a start as slammed into the fender of his car. "Where did you come from?"

"Are you completely stupid?" I snarled at him. "You never touch her, do you hear me? I told you to never, ever fucking touch her. I'll kill you, you fucking..."

There were hands on my biceps, pulling me backwards.

You have to stop, Edward. You have to stop now .

In Alice's head, I saw it. The blood, the death. Not just Newton... there were dozens. Bella was screaming in the background, her hands over her eyes.

You have to stop.

I allowed her to pull me back a couple more steps, and then Bella was standing in front of me.

"We're leaving," she said, glaring at me. "Right now."

I kept my eyes on Newton a few minutes longer as we headed back to the Volvo.

Are you going to behave yourself? Or do you need to ride with me?

"I'm fine," I snarled.

We'll see.

Bella got into the passenger seat of the Volvo and turned to me the moment the engine turned over, still glaring. I sped off, ignoring Bella's protests about my speed and heading straight out of town, towards Port Angeles and the cabin. At least there I could keep Bella to myself and away from the hormones of her classmates.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" she finally said when we were on the highway.

"He had his arms around you, Bella," I growled low, trying to control my voice.

"He was just thanking me, Edward," Bella said. "His car wouldn't start – I told him Alice and I could give him a ride home."

"Bullshit." Honestly, I had heard him thinking about his car, and how much money he had put into it recently. He didn't have anything left to get it fixed. It didn't matter. He shouldn't have touched Bella. I had already warned him once.

"You need to just leave Mike alone," Bella said softly. "He didn't mean anything by it."

Actually, he did. I knew that from his head as well. His thoughts of Bella were not the least bit innocent, and it was insulting both to her and to me.

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could."

"Poe, Edward?" Bella obviously wasn't amused, and I didn't really care. I was still seeing red and contemplating pulling over, leaving her in the car and going back there to kill the son of a bitch. "Are you going to wall Mike up in the back of the school?"

"Maybe," I growled, my eyes flashing to hers for a minute before I looked back to the road. "You're going to quit school tomorrow."

"I most certainly am not."

"Bella!"

"Absolutely not, Edward!" She turned and actually pointed her finger at me. "I don't know what your problem is..."

When she halted her words mid-sentence, I believe we both came to the same realization at once. Of course she knew what was wrong with me. We both did.

"We should go see Carlisle," Bella said after a few minutes of silence.

"Fuck Carlisle," I heard myself snarl. I changed my course back to Forks.

Trial twenty six.

The pain in my head was unbearable. I could vaguely register my body curled up in a ball in the corner of the room I shared with Bella in my family's home. I didn't know how long the pain lasted because it was so overwhelming, I couldn't really think. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I could hear Bella's voice and feel Bella's hand on my arm. I couldn't comprehend her words, and it hurt too much to open my eyes to see what she was doing. The monster still knew when her blood was exposed.

I drank.

"How is Charlie?" I asked.

"He's good," Bella told me. She put her purse and book bag down in front of the cabin door and sat down next to me on the couch. I pulled her close to me and kissed her lightly.

It was late on Friday night, and I hadn't seen Bella since she left my family's house this morning for school. She had dinner with her father before joining me at the cabin in Port Angeles, where we would finally have a couple days of alone time. The latest trial had been working thus far – nearly a week since I started taking it. It wasn't the longest time without side effects, but it was getting close.

"He spent all of last weekend with Sue Clearwater," Bella told me. "He's finally admitting there something going on between them, but he still hasn't really come clean."

"And you're sure you're okay with their relationship?"

"Yes," Bella said with a nod. "She is good for him, and he needs someone else in his life, even if it just keeps him from eating take-out every night. I made a couple of casseroles while I was there and put them in the freezer. I hope they don't get buried in fish, never to be seen again."

"It's good you look after him," I commented. Bella looked over to me.

"How are you doing?"

"Well, it's been six days since the last trial," I said. "I haven't noticed anything so far. Honestly, I'm afraid to think about it too much. I've become a firm believer in Murphy's Law when it comes to this subject. Have you noticed any changes in me?"

"Nothing discernable," Bella said. She seemed to look me up and down for a minute, her eyes lingering on the Sponge Bob pants as a smile formed on her lips. "I'm afraid to think about it, too. After the last one...I mean, it was nearly ten days but you had the most violent reaction to that one. It scared me."

"I'm sorry," I said, wrapping my arms around her. "I don't want to scare you."

"Just make sure you mention it if you get another 'mild headache' that ends up lasting for two days, before turning into something a little nastier that has you completely freaking out, and scaring the crap out of me and the rest of your family, okay?"

"I promise." I tried not to laugh at the run-on sentence she managed to complete in one breath.

Bella changed into her pajamas and we relaxed on the couch, watching television reruns and cuddling. Bella dozed off with her head in my lap, and for a while I just watched her sleep. I gently caressed her cheek and ran my fingers through her hair. I found one strand that seemed to be a little different hue from the others, and I twisted it slowly around my finger before releasing it in a little spiral against her cheek. My eyes focused and concentrated on the small curl, the way it touched her skin and the way it made my dead heart want to pound in my chest. In my mind's eye, I saw her skin become moderately more pale, hard and cool to the touch.

"It's hard for me to explain how grateful I am to you," I said softly so I wouldn't disturb her rest. "You don't just love me, you sustain me – body and mind. I don't deserve any of it, but I'm beyond trying to keep you from doing it. I would literally do anything for you, even if it is against my better judgment. I will get better Bella. When I am, I will do whatever you ask. I will..."

Change you.

I couldn't get the words out of my mouth. I knew immediately that this trial, like the previous twenty-six, was a failure. My vision blurred and my breath started coming in short gasps. Bella's arms were around my shoulders, and I thanked whoever might be listening for my ability to know it was her, because I could feel panic and instinct taking over. I forced my body to remain still for fear of hurting her. I

could hear her yelling, but I could only guess as to her words. I think her phone was in her hands, and she was speaking rapidly into it.

I don't know how long it was before I heard Carlisle's footsteps coming up behind me, and he lifted me from the couch and put me in the back of his car. I looked to Bella and caught her gaze with my own. I wanted to assure her we would be together forever. I tried to project the words I felt to her, though I didn't think I was successful. I was going to spend the weekend working up the courage to tell her I would do it – I would change her, if that's what she really wanted. I wanted to be with her forever, but I couldn't even last the weekend. I had wanted to give her a couple of days of peace and hope, but again, she was left with nothing but me - broken and useless. *Why did she do all this for me?*

So much for declarations.

Chapter End Notes:

So...is this chapter a cliffie, or not? I mean, it's the 27th time the formula failed, so is that really a cliffie? Or do I need to just shut up and get on with it? Hit review and tell me what you think!

It's always darkest before the dawn!

One chapter + epilogue left!

I've been nominated for the 2021 Twific Fandom Awards under the minor to major leagues category! Thanks to whoever did that. It means a lot to me to still be considered part of this community! Love you all! Check out all the nominees and categories on the TwificFandom blog! Round 1 voting opened until March 1st!

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 – Consent and Change

I watched the sky darken and the rain shower begin through my bedroom window. From my position on the couch, I could see the driveway clearly so I would know exactly when Alice's car would be close enough for me to catch a glimpse of Bella before I met her at the door. This had been my place of choice from the time Bella left for school until she returned – sitting with my knees bent, arms wrapped around my legs and trying to ignore the tension in my muscles.

I needed to touch her.

It was all I could think about, and it took every ounce of my will to keep from following her to school and keeping tabs on her all day. I had a pretty good idea how well that activity would work out, so I never allowed myself to do it. At this point, Bella was probably in the car on her way back. I hoped Alice was driving fast.

I rubbed my hands on my thighs, feeling the friction caused by the denim material warming my palms. I clenched my fingers, drawing my hands into fists, and then relaxing them again. I glanced at the clock for the seventy-ninth time in the past four minutes.

Just a few more minutes. Just a few.

Twelve days had passed since I last drank from Bella, and ten days since I took the last formula. So far, nothing seriously drastic had happened. I was fine, at least, as far as anyone seemed to be able to tell. I felt...strange, but not in any discernable way. Definitely not in a bad way and not in a way I thought was worth mentioning to Carlisle or Bella. If anything, I felt happier than I had...especially when I was touching Bella. I wanted to touch her all the time, and usually she didn't mind. It was only these hours – when Bella was at

school – that I felt out of sorts. When I could see her, but not touch her, it was barely tolerable. I was fine as long as I could reach her, feel her skin, and know she was with me. When she was out of sight, I was out of mind.

Oh, all right – I'm not fine.

I hadn't told Carlisle or Bella about these feelings. I didn't want Bella to worry, and I didn't want Carlisle to think this formula wasn't working, either, so I kept it to myself. It didn't take a mind reader to know Bella had been getting angry with me, or at least frustrated. For a while, I had been taking her out – on actual dates or at least to the cabin for a couple of days where we could be alone. Too many things had happened. It was too dangerous, so I didn't go anywhere any longer. Alice had taken Bella shopping in Port Angeles a couple of times, but Bella didn't actually like shopping, so I didn't think it was really helping.

Every time I had slipped into bed with Bella and brought her wrist to my lips, I felt like my heart was somehow dying again. Despite her optimism and continued assurance that all would be well, I had felt her attitude shift slightly as time wore on. My reaction was always one of anxiety, and I was constantly waiting for something horrible to happen. She was becoming stoic, which was far from what I wanted for her. There were certain, haunting words that kept popping into my head as well.

You do not want to be a liability to your family.

She would feel obligated to take care of you.

She will eventually learn to hate you.

More than anything else, I was tired. I was tired of having to do this. I was tired of hurting her. I was tired of existing when I had to live off of her.

I had stopped counting the trial numbers after fifty. I'm sure if I thought about it, I would be able to come up with the exact trial number, but I didn't want to know. Over the past almost two weeks, on the third day, I would tip the vial back and drain it. Then I would sit back and watch Bella and Carlisle wait for something awful to happen.

I looked at the clock again, and then leaned forward to put myself just a little closer to the window, straining my ears. I tried to hold myself still, but I couldn't completely stop the shaking of my arms and legs as they anticipated her return. When I heard the sound of Alice's Porsche engine, I rose up on my knees to get a better look at the drive. I counted the stones scattered by the wheels as she turned onto the drive and leapt from my seat when the car finally came into view. For a brief moment, I could see Bella's animated hand gestures as she spoke to my sister about their day, and then I ran downstairs at top speed.

I opened the door when I heard her footsteps on the porch stairs, then threw my arms around her, hugging her close and dipping my fingers under the hem of her shirt so I could touch her skin.

Bella giggled and brushed her lips against mine.

"I missed you," I told her, running my lips up her cheek.

"I see that!" Bella laughed again. "I have a ton of homework tonight. Do you want to sit with me while I do it?"

"Of course," I said. There was no way I was going to be apart from her between now and the time she left again in the morning. We went to our room and Bella spread her math homework out on the desk. I pulled another chair up close to her and slid my hand between her back and her chair, letting my fingers sneak into her shirt again.

I could relax now, breathe deeper, and focus more. As long as my skin was in contact with her, I was fine. She gave me a wry smile

before she opened her book and began working on the problems. I didn't think she knew I was keeping anything from her. If she had suspected something, I was pretty sure she would have told me. She had made it her job to monitor my behavior as much as possible, since I couldn't always be trusted to notice when something was off kilter.

"Edward, could you help me?" Bella called me out of my thoughts and pointed to a page in her calculus book. "Number thirty-three. I thought I had it right, but the answer in the back of the book is different. I have no idea what I screwed up this time. Do I even have the right formula?"

"Anything for you," I responded, kissing her lightly on the neck before I looked down to the page covered in numbers and symbols. I glanced from her book to her homework page, then back again. It looked familiar to me, and I was quite sure I had been through this same book more than once. However, the formulas themselves didn't actually make any sense. I felt an unmistakable and completely unnecessary chill run down my back. I had no idea what the answer was. I didn't even know where to begin.

"Why don't you tell me what you've done so far?" I suggested, trying to bide myself a little time. Maybe I just needed to focus more. "Start from the beginning of the formula."

Bella started going on about F of X and summations in the array, but I couldn't even comprehend where she was going with them. I tried to take a calming breath, but that only served to fill my nostrils with her scent and my mouth with venom.

"Oh! Here it is!" Bella said, pointing with her pencil. "It's the stupid arithmetic that bites me every time."

"I knew you would find it," I said with a fake smile. I tried to get my mind off the biting reference and focused on the problem again. It was useless. I had no recollection of the way to solve the equations on the page.

I managed to "help" Bella figure out the answers on her own throughout the rest of the homework assignment. After she was asleep, I pulled myself away from her and looked through the book again, reading all of it up to that chapter and still not understanding. I went to the bookshelf and picked up an anthology of English literature. I read through it all, having no difficulty with the plots, foreshadowing, political intrigue or analogies. I understood it perfectly, just as I always had. I went back to the desk and pulled Bella's history book out of her backpack. I remembered all of the important events, dates, names, places and how they all tied together.

Slipping out of the room, I was relieved to find Carlisle's study empty. I looked over a handful of medical journals, finding some of the concepts – like muscle names, how ligaments attach to bone and the location of different nerve types to be evident, but concepts about memory function, the ratios between different vitamins and their effects on the kidneys and liver – those I didn't understand in the slightest.

Odd.

I went back to bed, deciding I had spent far too much time not touching Bella. After curling up beside her again, I started wondering about the implications of my recent discovery. It was, undoubtedly, a side effect of the treatments. I was sure I should tell Carlisle about the change, but I had no intention of doing so. Anything I could hide from Carlisle and from Bella could not be all that important. If it was harmful, they would notice. This wasn't harmful to anyone. This side effect was less of a problem than wanting to touch Bella all the time, which only made me anxious and sometimes annoyed Bella, and no one had questioned that one yet.

I didn't have to tell them, and they didn't have to know. I would be perfectly fine the way I was, and Bella wouldn't be hurt. Carlisle wouldn't have to keep wondering when this trial was going to fail. Esme could stop worrying, and maybe Alice would have a positive vision of my future with Bella.

I had just been in the kitchen speaking with Esme. She wanted to talk to me about rebuilding the little cottage at the back of the property as a place for Bella and me to have our privacy and still be nearby, but she couldn't quite bring herself to talk about it. After five weeks on the same formula, she didn't want to worry about the possibility that the treatments wouldn't work. My need for Bella's touch was constant, but not any worse than it was at the beginning of this trial, and Bella had yet to comment on it aside from calling me adorable or telling me to get out of her way. I had so far either managed to help Bella with homework or diverted enough attention to something else that no one had questioned my academic abilities. I was successfully hiding the issues that had arose, and justifying the act by telling myself it wasn't really an issue at all. If no one could tell the difference, what did it matter?

Esme finally convinced herself it was all right to talk about ways to rebuild the cottage with me, but I wasn't really paying attention. I was just trying to get the time to pass a little quicker as I waited for Bella to come home from school. I had heard Esme worrying in her mind about me staying in my room all day, and was trying to alleviate her concerns by spending at least some time downstairs. At least it was Friday, and I wouldn't have to be without Bella's presence for a few days...

...Then I was at the piano, my fingers poised over the keys, and the notes to Mozart's E-flat concerto ringing out through the room. I had no recollection of going from one place to the other, and no idea how long I had been playing. It was dark outside, and I could hear Bella and Alice talking in the next room.

No, oh please no.

I closed my eyes and bent over the keys, my muscles tight and my head swimming. It had been over a month since the beginning of this trial. Thirty-six days. Bella was smiling again, Alice was talking about plans for graduation parties, and even Carlisle was starting to have carefully optimistic thoughts about the whole thing.

Maybe it was just a fluke.

I knew it wasn't.

Bella leaned against my chest and looked up into the warm sunshine of an uncharacteristically bright and clear Saturday. I could hear the rest of my family in the house behind us, but as long as they stayed in there and we were out here, near the back of the property, we could pretend to be alone.

I felt Bella's smooth fingers trace over my arm and down to my hand. She took one of my hands in both of hers, spreading out my fingers and tilting my hand back and forth. The sun created prisms off my skin and onto the ground around us.

"Do you think you will ever go to school again?" Bella asked.

"Yes," I said. "I think I could go back anytime, but Carlisle said staying out of Forks High School was probably best at this point. I'll get a diploma from the private school I'm supposed to be attending. We can still go to college together."

"Where would you want to go?"

"Somewhere remote," I said. "At least, that would be my preference. How does Alaska sound?"

"Cold!" Bella laughed. "But I supposed somewhere sunny is out of the question."

"Not if that's where you want to be," I whispered against her temple. "I can take night classes."

"I would have to take night classes, too." Bella turned slightly so she could look up at me.

I shrugged, not wanting to be pulled into this particular conversation again. I opted for a change in topic instead.

"How is Charlie doing?" I asked. "Did he go out with Sue Clearwater again?"

"Yes, he did, Mister 'Divert Attention from the Touchy Conversation.'" Bella's lips tightened and she looked forward again. I never seemed to be able to get away with anything when it came to her, which was one of the many ways I told myself the side effects from this trial were not important. If Bella didn't notice, it must not be a problem. "I keep asking him when he's going to pop the question, but he changes the topic faster than you do."

"Do you think Sue will say yes?"

"I don't know," Bella said. She wriggled around before settling herself against my chest at a different angle. "She certainly seems like she would, but you never know."

"Would you?"

"What, say yes to Charlie if I was Sue?"

"No." I kissed her earlobe. "Would you say yes to me?"

"I'm not the marrying type, Edward."

"Why not?" It wasn't the reaction I had anticipated, and certainly not the response I had hoped to hear.

"Because I saw what it did to my mom and dad when they got married too young."

"I hope this doesn't come as a shock to you," I said, "but if I marry, I'm going to be marrying young."

Bella giggled and tilted her head up to kiss my cheek.

"Someday," she said softly. It was good enough for me, at least for now. I tilted her head a little more so I could kiss her lips...

...Then we were back in the living room.

Bella was looking into my eyes and saying my name. We were both on the couch, and she was turned to face me. I had one hand on her leg, my finger tracing over the hem just below her knee.

"Yes?" I said softly, hoping she hadn't had to repeat it over and over again. The last thing in my mind was pressing my lips to hers while we were out in the yard.

"Are you going to go with me or not?"

"Umm...yes, yes," I said, hoping I was going to pull this off. I stood up and took her hand in mine. "Are you ready now?"

"I think we should probably purchase the plane tickets first, don't you think?"

"Of course," I responded, and sat back down. All right, I was going to have to get a little cleverer if I was going to get away with this. Half a truth makes a good lie. "I'm sorry, Bella. I think I got a little distracted."

"Distracted?" Bella raised one eyebrow and tilted her head at me.

"Mmm hmm..." I hummed, moving in closer and taking the lobe of her ear between my lips. "You are always distracting to me. I think about you – touching you, being with you – and I can't concentrate on anything else. How about we go upstairs and I show you what thoughts were occupying me a few moments ago?"

Less than a minute later, we were in our room and Bella's back was up against the closed door, her legs wrapped around my waist. I pressed my mouth against hers, my tongue reaching in to taste her

and feel her warmth. My hands crawled up her sides, brushing my thumbs against the outsides of her breasts.

"I need you," I mumbled into her mouth. I opened my eyes and stared into hers. "You're everything to me. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Edward," Bella said, reaching her hands up to twist into my hair. "You're my everything, too."

My hands reached under the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. I glanced down at the beautiful round orbs mostly hidden by the pale blue fabric of her bra. I kissed the top of each breast while I reached around to undo the clasp and toss the garment away.

I held her against the door with one arm while I traced around her left nipple with my finger, then leaned over and kissed it gently. Then I looked into her eyes, switched hands, traced around her right nipple, then kissed it, too. I held her up with my hips and took both breasts in my hands lifting them, rubbing the nipples with my thumbs and finally taking them in my mouth, running my tongue over each of them in turn. I traced around the outside of the areolas with each finger, smiling sheepishly at Bella when I realized I had been caught playing again.

"I can't help it," I said with a half smile. Bella's eyes sparkled and she shook her head at me.

"Take me to bed," she commanded, and I obeyed.

I placed her across the bed and crawled up between her legs, kissing her stomach, then her hips, then up her side to her arm and shoulder, then finally her lips. My mouth covered hers and my hands reached down and quickly removed her jeans and panties. Her fingers clawed at the buttons on my shirt, yanking them through their holes and finally pushing the shirt down my arms. I threw it behind me and loosened my pants. Bella reached up with her feet and pushed them down over my hips, taking my boxers with them.

I reached around under her back and pulled her up to me, my lips against her throat. Her hands went back up into my hair and pulled me close to her. My hips dropped between her spread legs and I pushed up against her core, trying to find the friction I needed.

"Can we try something?" Bella said, and I felt her cheeks get warm as her heart thumped louder.

"Like what?" I asked, a little tentative. If she was going to try to attempt oral sex on me again, I was going to have to stop her. If I could stop her...I would at least try...maybe...

"A different...position..." Bella said. She couldn't even look me in the eye. I wondered what she was thinking of doing. Before I could ask, she turned around underneath me and raised herself up on her hands and knees. "Like this?"

I stopped breathing as I looked over the smooth skin of her back, down lower to where her backside curved up to meet me. I watched my hand slide around her hip and over her smooth, rounded skin. I looked up towards her, and saw her turn her head to look at me over her shoulder. Our eyes met, and I slowly slipped my hand down between her legs and let my finger glide inside of her.

"Is this what you want?" I asked, my voice dark and husky. The sight of her bare backside angled up in a most enticing way was making it hard to control myself. I curled my fingers and felt her muscles shudder around me.

"More...please..."

I pulled my fingers from her and leaned over her back, putting my ear close to hers. I grasped myself around the shaft of my penis and slowly stroked the tip up and down her labia.

"More what, Bella?"

"Oh God, Edward...don't tease me..."

"Do you want this?" I asked, smiling and nipping at her earlobe with my lips. I let just the glans pass her folds and inside of her. "Do you want me to take you just like this, Bella?"

"Yes...please, Edward..."

I slowly, slowly entered her about half way, and then I leaned back, pushed her legs a little farther apart, and entered her totally. It felt so much deeper this way, and the angle was completely different. I felt her clamp down on me and moan softly as I began to move slowly back until I was almost all the way out, and then push forward again until I was buried in her.

From this position, I could clearly watch myself move in and out of her, and the tempo of my breaths reached a new height. The curve of her back as she arched up to meet my thrusts was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. The one thought that kept me from exploding inside of her immediately was me berating myself for never trying this before.

My hands ran up her sides, and I was elated when I realized I could lean forward just a little and reach around to fondle both of her breasts as well. I rolled her nipples between my thumb and forefinger and increased the speed of my thrusts. I touched my cool lips to the ridge of her spine as I rocked against her and listened to the beautiful sounds she made when I was inside of her.

Bella pushed back against me, driving me deeper, and I leaned back again, taking her hips in my hands and matching her pace. I let one hand curl around to her front, finding her clitoris and rubbing against it. She cried out only a moment later, and I felt all the muscles inside of her clamp down around me as she pushed back hard. I met her stroke and felt my thighs shake as the sensations rocketed through my body and I released inside of her.

We collapsed, rolling over to our sides. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her back against my chest, holding her tight against me.

"You are incredible," I said, kissing the side of her neck.

"We should definitely do that again," Bella said, her breaths still coming out in quick, staccato bursts.

"Anytime you want to, you just say the word," I responded, kissing her again. It felt so good, so right to be this close to her, our bodies together, unclothed, touching...it was perfect. It reminded me how imperfect I was, and how I was going to have to tell her eventually.

I had managed to sufficiently distract her for now, but I knew I couldn't keep this from her much longer. If I told her, she was going to want me to go back to drinking her blood again while Carlisle tried another version of the synthesized protein concoction. I simply couldn't go back to doing that again. I was going to have to tell her, but I couldn't do it without help.

"Carlisle?"

Edward, come in. I was hoping you could look at some of these charts with me.

"I can do that," I said, not overly optimistic with the proposal. The last several times we had looked over them I had remained mostly silent, agreeing with his findings and not offering much of an opinion. I couldn't. I didn't have an opinion. I could barely discern what the data was indicating.

This one has lasted longer than any of the others.

"Are you sure you haven't noticed any issues, any problems?" Carlisle asked.

I debated in my head. I could tell him. I should tell him. I came in here for the sole purpose of telling him exactly what had been happening. At that point, it didn't matter anyway. My hesitation was enough to make him look at me more closely.

"Edward?" Carlisle pressed.

You've noticed something, haven't you? Something since yesterday?

"Not exactly," I said with a sigh. I sat down in the chair across from his desk, deciding I might as well come clean. "There are things that I know aren't right, but it doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter?"

"The side effects," I clarified. "It doesn't matter because I'm not going to do this anymore."

An explanation, please.

"I am not processing higher level information," I said. I laughed at the ridiculousness of the statement that seemed to contradict the words. "I don't seem to be having any problems with language, but there are other areas where I just can't comprehend the information any longer. Math, for instance. And all of this..." I waved a hand at his charts and metrics, "...is meaningless to me."

I waited a moment for the information to sink in.

"I crave Bella's touch. It's controllable, but just barely. I'm keeping myself in line and I don't feel violent, but the cravings are there. I've lost time as well, but only on a couple of occasions."

You've been keeping this from me.

"Yes," I admitted. "Because it doesn't matter. I'm sticking with this one. It's good enough."

We can try to change the...

"No," I interrupted his thoughts. "I won't do it again. I won't hurt Bella ever again. I can't, and I need your help convincing her that this has to stop now."

"I don't know if that's possible, son," Carlisle said. "You know better than anyone how stubborn Bella can be."

"That's why I need your help," I told him. "This must stop. You have to get her to see that. You have to convince her this is as good as it's going to get. I can't do it on my own."

Carlisle argued, and I defended my position. I don't know if he eventually saw my side of it, or realized I could be just as stubborn as Bella when I wanted to be. He finally nodded and accepted my desires.

She's almost home.

I heard Alice's car pull into the gravel and head up the driveway.

"Please, Carlisle. Please talk to her."

I will.

"But I want to talk to her alone first," he clarified aloud. "When she comes in, bring her up here, but I want you to stay outside first."

"I'll still be able to hear you."

But she will speak more freely with you not in the room.

I nodded, and then raced to meet Bella at the door. I took her hands in mine, kissing her softly.

"I missed you," I said.

"I missed you, too," Bella smiled and kissed the tip of my nose.

"Do you have much homework?"

"I only have a little reading for literature, and some studying for biology."

"Carlisle wants to talk to you, if you can spare a little time."

"Talk about what?"

I shrugged, hoping I wouldn't give anything away. Bella stared at me for a minute, trying to read my eyes.

"He's in his study," I said, and led her up the stairs. I opened the door for her and closed it again once she was inside.

I sat on the floor outside Carlisle's office, with Bella just on the other side. The short amount of time I had been able to touch her before bringing her to Carlisle wasn't near enough. I didn't like being out here and not being able to touch her. It made me nervous, but I knew I just had to be a little bit patient for a little while longer.

I leaned up against the door, as if that would help me hear any better.

"We need to talk about Edward."

"What did he do?" Bella asked. I furrowed my brow. I supposed it was natural for her to assume I had done something I shouldn't have, but I still didn't like the implication.

"He hasn't done anything," Carlisle said. "He's just confessed to me that he has noticed side effects and he's been keeping that information from both of us."

"What happened?"

"He has had some instances of lost time again," Carlisle said.

"I knew it!" I heard Bella cry out. "That happened just the other day when we were talking about going to visit my mom. He just zoned out on me, and I knew it was something like that!"

"Bella," I heard Carlisle say. "There are some things about Edward that aren't ever going to be right. We've talked about it, and I think he

understands."

"What do you mean, never right?" Bella asked. I could hear her shift in the seat across from Carlisle's desk.

"He's going to continue to forget," Carlisle said. "He won't forget everything, and there is no reason to think he will ever get worse, but his short-term memory just isn't going to work correctly all the time. With patience, I think he'll remember things he needs to remember, but some memories just aren't going to take."

"What else?" Bella sighed.

"He has admitted to his overwhelming desire to have physical contact with you as well," Carlisle added. "He believes he didn't feel it quite so strong when he was drinking from you."

"He was always like that," Bella argued. I smiled, realizing my hands were aching to be on her skin. I hoped Carlisle would be done talking to her soon. I couldn't remember why it was such an important discussion, and I wanted to touch her.

"It seems like it," Carlisle continued. "It's possible his behavior is because of the protein. If that is the case, his desire to touch you would mean this trial is closer to being the right combination. He is also admitting to having trouble with certain higher thinking skills – math especially, but it seems to be in other areas as well. It may be related to the memory loss. He knows he should know the difference between meiosis and mitosis, but he can't remember what it is."

"My calculus homework," Bella said. I could imagine the look in her eyes as she realized I couldn't actually help her. "He was so evasive. I thought he was just trying to make me understand it myself."

"You are probably right," Carlisle commented. "As far as the memory loss goes, I'm not sure if it's the protein itself or just not being able to completely stabilize it...I could keep trying, but this might be as close as I will ever get."

I heard Carlisle take a deep breath before he continued.

"Regardless, Edward has refused to continue. He says he wants to stay the way he is."

Oh, right. Now I remembered why he was talking to her. I wanted to stay the way I was. I smiled and thought about how I wouldn't hurt her anymore. Bella could be happy now.

"I'll talk to him about it again," Bella said, and my smile faltered. She wasn't supposed to say that.

"You can try, but I think his mind is made up." I heard Carlisle shuffling around. "We've tried so many combinations. His senses are intact, and he's not reacting violently. He seems relatively content with the way he is. He hasn't been agitated, he hasn't been depressive. Honestly, Bella – this may be the best option for him."

"He can go back to drinking from me," Bella said.

"No, I don't think he will."

"I've convinced him before."

"He says you want him to change you, Bella. He says he is considering doing it."

"I know he will, eventually," Bella said. "But I can't do that until I know he's going to be all right."

"He is going to refuse."

"He will not," Bella said sharply. "He said he would let me decide."

I couldn't hold myself back anymore, so I opened the door.

"Not this time," I said softly, looking down at her.

"Edward, we've been over this and over this!" Bella was exasperated, and I could see moisture beginning to collect in her eyes. "You agreed that I got to make the decisions when it comes to this, because you're not always thinking right. This is one of those times. You don't know what you are saying. You have to keep trying."

I dropped down to my knees in front of her and took her face in my hands.

"Bella...Bella, *please* ," I begged. "I've struggled with this and I've done this – all of this – for you. I just can't go on like this anymore. I can't drink from you, try another formula, and go back to drinking your blood over and over again. I want to be right for you, but at some point, we have to realize this may be as good as it gets."

"I know I'm still not right," I continued. I shifted up a little so I was looking more directly into her eyes. "But I'm not in any pain, and I'm not trying to inflict pain on anyone else. I don't remember everything, and I know sometimes I don't really...understand like I used to."

I sighed and looked to Carlisle, then back up to Bella.

"I think I'm all right this way," I said, trying to sound definitive. "I'm not dangerous to anyone. I have all my senses. Maybe I'm not quite as...smart as I used to be, but given some of the alternatives, I don't think that bothers me too much. I still love you, Bella, and if this formula continues to work as well as it has, I don't have to hurt you ever again. That's a lot more important to me than getting a second doctorate in nuclear physics."

"Can you put up with me Bella?" I asked her, staring into her eyes and willing myself to finally, finally pierce through the walls inside of her head. "Do you still want to be with me, even if I'll never be quite right? Do you still want to be with me forever?"

One of the tears clinging to her lashes slipped down and moistened her cheek. My mind was flooded with all the possible replies that could slip from her lips at any moment.

Why would I ever want you like this?

No, I'm not going to take care of you for the rest of eternity.

You will drink from me again.

"Edward..." The sound was a plea. "I don't want you to feel this way. I want you to be all right."

"I *am* all right," I insisted. "I can live with this. I can't live with myself if I keep hurting you. It's killing me. It's killing you. This is far, far better than that. The only thing I have to have is you. If you...can't love me when I'm like this, well, I'll keep doing it, because I have to be with you and I have to have your love."

I took a deep breath.

"Can you still love me like this, Bella?"

I could almost feel my dead heart pounding in my chest as I waited for her to answer.

"Edward," Bella sighed. "If this is the way it has to be for you, I can accept it. I don't like it, but I understand. Yes, of course I will still love you. I will always love you. I can accept you this way, and I will take care of you forever, if you need it. If we need another doctorate in physics, maybe Alice can get it."

Carlisle chuckled, and Bella gave me a big, glorious smile, which I had to kiss.

"Thank you," I whispered into her mouth. I felt every tense muscle in my body suddenly release and nearly collapsed into her lap. "Thank you, thank you...I love you...always."

"Forever," Bella replied.

It had been three months since I last drank Bella's blood.

Bella's father married Sue Clearwater today. Bella went early to help set up for the reception. I had been waiting for her to come home from school, and I forgot I was supposed to be at the ceremony. I apparently forgot that school had been out for three weeks as well. Esme reminded me about the wedding and drove me there just in time.

During the reception, I had to sit at another table, since Bella was in the wedding party. I was agitated, wanting to touch her and not being able to feel her skin. I still managed to control myself when she danced with her father's best man.

At least I hadn't gotten any worse.

My lips trailed down Bella's neck and across her shoulder. I had to push the strap of her tank top off to the side a little to keep in touch with her skin. Bella giggled and gave me a small push with her arm. I backed up a little so she could move a pot of soup from the hot element to the center of the stove.

"What are you going to do to annoy me after I'm changed and I don't have to cook anymore?" Bella snickered.

"I'm sure I'll come up with something," I responded. "Did you want to make me a list?"

"No, I think you are perfectly capable of handling that on your own." Bella ladled out a bowl of soup and sat it at the kitchen table. I sat up close to her on the bench seat, wrapped my arm around her waist and nuzzled at her neck. "Don't forget your own lunch. Carlisle brought over a new batch of protein shakes for you this morning while you were hunting."

"Protein shakes?" I laughed.

"Yeah, I keep thinking about throwing one of those in a blender with some frozen yogurt and a banana."

I shook my head and went to the refrigerator to get one of the vials. I downed it quickly and sat back down.

"How are you feeling?" Bella asked.

"I feel fantastic," I said truthfully. I kissed her cheek and looked into her eyes. "As long as I'm with you, I'm fine."

"Not completely," Bella reminded me.

"But acceptably," I retorted. "Really, Bella, I feel perfectly fine. I don't care about the other things. Just knowing I'm not hurting you anymore has taken away a lot of the anxiety I was feeling before. No, I'm not going to be balancing the portfolio any longer, but we have accounting firms that can do that. I haven't been forgetting much, either."

"You forgot where we were last week."

"Only for a little while," I said. "I remembered going to the movie, just not actually watching it. When all is said and done, I'd rather have to watch a movie over again than compromise your safety."

"I always felt safe with you," Bella said.

"Not always." I looked over her shoulder and out the window for a moment. "There were a lot of times you didn't feel safe with me."

"That was a long time ago, Edward," she said, taking my hand and placing it up against her cheek. I looked back to her eyes. "It doesn't matter now. I've forgiven you. At some point, you are going to have to forgive yourself."

"I'm not sure if I can," I admitted. "My memories of those times are very clear."

"You've more than paid for those mistakes."

"Maybe," I said with a shrug, not really believing there was any penance worthy of my transgressions.

"You have," she insisted.

"I wish there was some way I could possibly make it all up to you," I told her. "It's frustrating, because I know I can't. If I could, I'd turn back the clock and start all over again, and be right with you from the start. Maybe you still could have loved me someday, somehow. Part of me still wonders sometimes if you only tell me you love me to keep me from going nuts again."

I smiled, so she would know I was joking. Well, sort of joking.

"I wish there was some way I could stop you from beating yourself up over it," Bella said. "What's done is done. I'm not dwelling on it, so why should you? Maybe you could win me one of those big stuffed animals at the fair this weekend and we'll call it even."

"I could go the monetary route," I said. "Drop a million dollars at your doorstep, like that nurse, but you probably wouldn't go for that."

"What?" Bella's voice was instantly dark and tense. I forgot I hadn't ever told her about that, and I regretted bringing it up at all.

"I guess I never mentioned that," I mumbled with a shrug. "I didn't know what else to do, but I wanted to do something. So I left half a million in cash on her family's doorstep."

"You gave the nurse's family all that money?"

"Yes," I said softly. "Well, half of it."

"What about the other half?"

"I donated it to the women's shelter on Fiji."

"That doesn't change what happened," Bella said bluntly. I closed my eyes.

"I know it doesn't," I admitted, "but there wasn't anything else I could do."

"Anything else you have done that I should know about?" Bella's voice was harsh, but her face had softened. "Did you fix Mike Newton's car?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know," Bella shrugged. "You seem to have tried to make amends to some of the people you hurt. You scared the crap out of Mike, and I think you might have killed him if Alice hadn't stopped you. Don't you think he's owed an apology of some sort?"

"I don't like the way he thinks about you," I grumbled. I closed my eyes for a moment, and then looked back to her. "He wants you, and when he thinks about you that way...I could kill him."

"If you try to actually think rationally about the whole thing," Bella said, "you would realize I was the one who hugged him, not the other way around. Mike didn't do anything wrong."

I felt myself stiffen all over.

"Stop that," Bella commanded. I tried, but it didn't really work. "He was really upset. He only barely had enough money to get through his first year at community college, and that was only if he lived at his parent's house. The store isn't doing well, and there's no way they could get him another car. He won't be able to afford housing in Port Angeles and he can't live in Forks and get to school without a car. He still doesn't know how he's going to get to school."

"You could have just slapped him on the back and said 'tough break, kid,'" I mumbled. I didn't really mean to say it out loud. I sighed. I wasn't going to get away with my jealous tirade, so I might as well get it all out in the open. She knew it all, anyway. "You didn't have to hug him. I don't like it when you do that with other...men, especially

when they're thinking about how much they'd like to...do things with you."

I moved over closer to her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

"I don't like anyone else thinking about you in that way. No one should ever think of you like that except me."

"He's never said or done anything inappropriate, Edward," Bella said with a wry smile. "It's not his fault you can read his mind."

"He could control what he thinks," I said.

"Can you?"

"Can I what?" I asked.

"Control what you think?"

I narrowed my eyes and watched her for a moment. I had to admit, she did have a bit of a point. My family often had trouble controlling what they thought, and they had the advantage of knowing that I could listen in.

"All right," I admitted. "I see your point. I don't think it's a good idea for me to go to your school and tell him it was all a mistake. Frankly, there are too many of them who think about you that way, and even though I haven't had any violent tendencies of late, I would hate to test the theory on a group of children."

Bella scoffed, most likely at my use of the word "children" to describe her classmates. I leaned over and kissed her cheek. It was a lame apology, but I wasn't completely sorry, so it was going to have to suffice. I still thought about what she had said for quite some time, until I finally came up with the perfect solution.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment. I listened closely to the thoughts inside the house. Unless Bella was in there, Mike was alone and thinking about what kind of snack to make himself. I knocked on the door and heard him approach. When he opened the door, his lower jaw dropped down to his Adam's apple, and his eyes bugged out like a cartoon character. I wondered how his face would look on a pair of lounge pants.

"Cullen?"

Oh shit, oh shit...what did I do? I didn't do anything!

"Hello, Mike," I said as softly and as non-confrontationally as I could.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to...apologize," I said. "I was very rude to you in the past concerning Bella, and I realize now that it was uncalled for, and I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

He didn't believe me. He thought I was trying to trick him.

"I really am," I said. He just looked at me and waited for me to either say what I really meant or do whatever it was I had really come here to do. Part of him was waiting for me to throw a punch. I sighed.

"Bella told me about your car, and I thought maybe I could help out."

"Help out...how?"

"Well, I'm going to be leaving town soon," I informed him, and he found the idea pleasing, so I made it exceptionally clear. "Bella and I will both be leaving, and we'll be taking my Volvo when we go. I have this...extra car here. I don't need it anymore. It's yours."

I held the keys to the Audi out to Newton, who dumbly held out his hand. I dropped the keys into it and turned to go.

"You're giving me an...Audi?" Mike looked to me, then out to the curb. "An Audi A8?"

"I already had the title transferred," I said, nodding my confirmation. "It should arrive in the mail within the week. You'll just need to go to the courthouse and sign it in front of the Notary Public."

That's a \$75,000 car, and this year's model.

"I got a good deal on it," I said, and then realized I was responding to his internal question. "And it's had to have a little body work done to it, so it's not really new."

Mike continued to stare at the car, then at me, and then back at car again. His thoughts were as blank as his stare. I had to chuckle a little, which got his attention.

"You can't be serious," he said.

"I am serious," I confirmed. "I don't need it anymore, and you need a car for school. Use it, or sell it, get a different car, and use the extra cash for school. It's yours, so it's up to you."

I've got to be dreaming.

And because I still didn't like the guy, and I would still rather see him dead than ever touching Bella again, I just couldn't help myself.

"You aren't dreaming," I told him, giving him a maniacal grin before I turned away from him. "There's no trick – the car is yours."

"Umm...thanks?"

I trotted down the porch steps and down the sidewalk. I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a cocky smile.

"You get the car, but I still get the girl."

Newton continued to stand there with his mouth open, looking from the car, to the keys in his hand, and then to my retreating form heading down the street. I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Once I was out of view, I ran the rest of the way home.

I don't know what the appropriate amount of time between a vampire taking regular treatments of a synthesized protein in order to keep his sanity and calling the whole experiment a success may be, but after a full year had passed, Bella was insisting we had waited long enough.

She also started harping on her next birthday, which was still a few months away, and how she wasn't going to live out eternity in a completely different decade from me.

I wanted to do it. Bella wanted me to do it. Why was I so terrified?

There was that barely-still-logical portion of my brain that insisted it had to do with her soul and my fear that condemning her to this life would be her damnation. I recognized it as there, in the back of my mind, but it wasn't the primary reason for my hesitation. Bella was still so young, and I was afraid she would change her mind about me as she got older. She could, and I knew it. If she went to college, she could find someone else – someone like her – to fall in love with and be with for all of her life. If I changed her, she would always be mine.

How could I possibly take this step, knowing I was taking her choices away from her?

Then I had to remind myself that I didn't always think that clearly, and I never knew when my mind wasn't working quite right. It was nothing like it had been in the past – I might lose a little time here or there, but never to the point where it had any real consequences. I had to concentrate now to learn something new, and there were some concepts I simply could not comprehend. I relied on Bella to help me during those times. I needed her to keep me from going

astray. If I could trust her in those circumstances, shouldn't I also trust her to know her heart and do this one thing she asks?

Take her life.

I felt the sweat from her shoulder collect against the cool, smooth skin of my forehead. Bella's breath came in quick, short pants, her gasps matching my strokes. I rolled us over, pulling her on top of me and let her take the pace she wished. My hands reached up and held both of her breasts, stroking the undersides slowly with my fingers before pulling her nipples to my mouth and sucking each in turn. I looked up into her face while she rocked her hips down against me, burying me deep inside of her as she tossed her head back and cried out.

Watching her like that was more than I could take. I emptied into her with a growl, grasping her hips, nestling my face between her breasts and holding her as tight as I could without bruising. I dropped back onto the mattress and she collapsed onto my chest. Her breathing slowly regulated as I stroked the soft skin of her back. She took another deep breath and touched her lips to my skin. After a few minutes, I felt her relax totally. I pulled her sleepy form tighter against my chest and kissed her softly on top of her head. Bella sighed, nearly asleep, her mouth turning up in a slight smile.

"Edward...mmm..."

I closed my eyes and tightened my grip as much as I dared. Her eyes opened and she looked up to me, smiling fully as soon as our eyes met. I ran my fingers down her arm and grasped her hand, pulling it to my cool lips.

It was in that moment when our eyes met that something inside of me shifted. It was as if her gaze entered my eyes and flowed through my body, coating my insides the same way her blood did when it ran down my throat. I felt different. I felt lighter. I felt like I finally understood everything she had been trying to tell me all of this time.

She loved me, and I loved her. Truly, I did.

Bella had told me she knew what she wanted, and I had spent far too many days trying to second guess whether or not it was right for her. I needed to let her choose her own life. She wanted her life to be with me as one of the undead, and that was what I would give her. The fact that there isn't anything on Earth I could possibly want more...well, that's just an added bonus. I had to put my trust in Bella and in our love for each other. As I absorbed the chocolate brown of her irises and felt her beating heart against my chest, there was one thing that was irrefutable in my mind - she was mine, and I was hers. There was truly only one way for us to be. *We would be together forever.*

So much for indecision.

Chapter End Notes:

I think I can finally say this chapter is not a cliffhanger! :)

So...what do you think? All of you who thought I was going to end it all in blood, so to speak, are you happy? Perfectly HEA? Not HEA enough? Just right? Hit review and let me know!

I'll post up the epilogue tomorrow! In the meantime - thanks for reading!

Chapter 35

Hide and Drink – Epilogue: Love and Live

I lifted Bella into my arms and carried her through the doorway of the cabin in Leaf Rapids, Manitoba. The sun was shining, and it was relatively warm, though still cooler than it had been when we left Forks. I pulled her hand up to my lips and kissed the simple gold band on the third finger of her left hand, feeling my entire body tingle. The ceremony had been short, simple, and performed by a justice of the peace. Alice was infuriated, but Bella promised we'd have a grand ceremony in a few years, when we were married again. It appeased my sister to a degree. At least she didn't remove any vital parts from my body.

"You're such a romantic, Mr. Cullen," Bella said, blushing and smiling at me. I kissed her lips softly, and then moved up her jaw to her ear. "Now I wish I had taken Alice up on her offer to shop for a wedding dress."

"No way," I said, nipping at her ear with my lips. "If you had done that, she'd have you in Paris right now, interviewing a dozen designers. Maybe next wedding. I thought you looked perfect in your jeans and T-shirt, personally."

"Not near as good as you did in your khaki's and stripped button down!" Bella's fingers traced over the collar of my shirt, while her teeth captured her bottom lip.

Not able to wait any longer after the extensive drive, I leapt from the doorway to the couch in one jump, cradling Bella in my arms so she wasn't jostled too much. I hovered over the top of her, my lips at her neck.

"Are you going to do it right now?" Bella asked with a giggle.

"No, I'm going to fuck you senseless first."

"Edward Cullen!" Bella exclaimed, laughing again. "I think you have been spending too much time with Emmett."

"I've spent decades with Emmett," I reminded her. "Undoubtedly, it has been way too much time."

I kissed past her neck and down her shoulder, then held her arm out to the side and kissed down to her wrist. I kissed all up and down the finger with the ring on it, unable to stop smiling.

"You really like that, don't you?" Bella teased, wiggling her fingers in front of my eyes.

"More than you will ever know," I answered, meaning it. Seeing a ring on her finger and knowing that she was willing to tie herself to me in all ways possible gave my existence meaning. It was definitely worth my sister's wrath.

I abandoned her finger for a moment and reached down to the hem of her long-sleeved T-shirt, pulling it slowly over her head. She was wearing a blue bra, a color I simply adored next to her skin. I wasn't sure if she knew it or not, but I still had her little blue camisole inside my pillowcase. There had only been a few occasions recently when I was not able to lie beside Bella while she slept, but I would still hug the pillow when she was gone. Maybe that meant I was still a little nuts. Sue me.

Bella's fingers quickly made their way through undoing the buttons of my shirt, and then she pushed the fabric down over my shoulders. Her warm hands caressed the skin down the outside of my arms, then back up and over my biceps. I twisted my hands behind my back, balled up the garment, and threw it off into the corner. I placed a knee on either side of Bella's hips and popped open the button on her jeans.

"I meant it, you know," I said slowly, lowering my voice and leaning down to lick over the edge of her ear.

"Meant what?"

"That I'm going to fuck you senseless."

A little sound escaped Bella's throat and made my already throbbing erection just a little bit harder. My lips trailed across her throat and then down between her breasts. I dipped my tongue onto her navel and then swirled around it. Bella squirmed under me, giggling as I tickled her stomach with my mouth.

I dropped the zipper of her jeans down, tugging gently until they slipped over her ankles, and then tossing them on the floor. I planted open mouthed kisses over the edge of her panties from one hip to the other. Her fingers tangled in my hair, and I looked up into her glorious eyes. She was smiling at me and biting into her lower lip. Her fingers pulled through my hair as she pushed it back off my forehead.

"You're so pretty," she said. "I know that's not supposed to be right for a guy, but you are."

"Just don't let Emmett hear you say that," I told her. "I'd never hear the end of it."

"He's just jealous," Bella scoffed. "I thought you were the most beautiful the first time I saw you."

"No one compares to you," I said. I crawled back up and kissed her mouth. She opened to me, and I slid my tongue against hers. Her arms wrapped around my shoulders, then dropped down my back and into the waistband of my khakis. I rose up a little when she maneuvered one hand around to the front. Bella quickly released the buttons and pushed the pants off my hips. Working its way into my boxers, Bella's hand wrapped around my length, and she stroked

slowly down to the base and then back to the tip, her fingers tracing the edge of the foreskin. I moaned into her mouth.

"It feels so good when you do that," I said. "It is almost as good as when I am inside of you."

"Nothing feels better than when you are inside me," Bella said, her voice distorted from her heavy breaths. "Please..."

"Patience," I said with a smile. "I'm going to make you scream my name first."

Bella moaned at my words, and I reached around her back to unhook her bra. I pulled it down her shoulders and arms, dropping it next to the growing pile of clothing on the floor. I marveled at her perfect breasts long enough for Bella to touch under my chin with her finger to make me look at her face. She smirked at me, and I shrugged, not making an effort to hide my fascination with them. I kept my eyes on hers as I lowered my head and reached out with my tongue, slowly circling one nipple, then the other.

Bella shivered at my cool touch on her sensitive flesh, and I reached up to cup one breast in my hand, stroking across the hardened peak with each fingertip while my lips and tongue manipulated the other nipple. After a minute, I switched, and Bella's hands tightened on my hair, holding my mouth to her chest. As if I really needed the encouragement.

"Please, Edward..." Bella whispered as she let go of my head and pushed at my boxers. I released her nipple, stroking each tip quickly to make sure they were even, and then helped her free my erection from the fabric. Bella wasted no time pulling her panties down her long legs, wrapping her calves around my waist and pushing up against me.

"Eager, beautiful girl?" I teased. I pushed back off of her, easily escaping the clutch of her legs. I smiled to myself, realizing that soon she would be strong enough to keep her grip on me. I was looking

forward to it. I directed my body backwards and over the arm of the couch, pulling Bella along with me by her hips. The soft skin of her legs met my hands as I wrapped my arms underneath her backside and dropped to my knees at the edge of the couch. I towed her body to align it with my mouth, and immediately plunged my tongue onto her depths.

The taste of her here was still one of the most exquisite flavors in the universe, as far as I was concerned. I would have happily stayed right where I was for the better part of the next year, if she would let me.

"Edward! Ugh...uhhhhh...!" Bella cried out, partially sitting up on the couch for a moment before collapsing back onto the cushions. I ran my tongue in a circle inside of her before pulling it out and stroking it up to her clitoris. Looking up over my lashes, I could see Bella's arms extended out over her head, almost touching the other end of the couch with her fingers outstretched. Gorgeous.

I pushed the top of my tongue flat against her and rolled it slowly around as she shook under my touch. When her orgasm subsided, I stood up at the end of the couch and dove into her with one quick thrust of my hips. I was home again, and it felt like I had never left. As much as I wanted my own release, I still preferred watching Bella. I pulled all the way out, then inserted just the tip of my penis into her, stroking in shallow, quick movements several times before thrusting hard all the way in.

Bella cried out and writhed under me, her hands reaching up and grasping my wrists, trying to pull me closer to her. I looked down at her and slowly licked my lips. She moaned, released my wrists and tossed her head back.

I dragged back, all the way out, and then repeated the shallow strokes again. After a few of them, I pushed all the way in, pulled most of the way out, and then pushed all the way in again once more before pulling out completely. Bella whined and struggled, pushing

her hips into the air and trying to keep me from pulling out. I grinned down at her, enjoying the reaction.

"You are driving me insane!" she cried, her hands digging into the couch cushions below her.

"That's the idea, Mrs. Cullen," I smirked again.

I continued the pattern of slow, shallow strokes followed by an increasing number of deep penetrations until I felt her body clench around me and she screamed. I slid all the way in, holding myself against her as her orgasm overtook her body. I reached down and brought her body up close to mine, kissing her deeply before lowering us both to the floor. Keeping my hands firmly on her hips, I tilted backwards until I was lying down with her straddled on top of me. I raised her up a little, and then back down over my penis.

"You feel so good," I said. "I could stay right here for eternity."

"Hmm..." Bella moaned. "You just might get your wish."

Bella took over the pace, slowly raising herself up and lowering herself back over me. The slow rate was agonizing, and it was my turn to struggle under her. She leaned back, changing the angle of the pressure, looking down at me with a suddenly mischievous expression. Her hands left my stomach and slowly ran up her torso. She gripped her own breasts, pulling her nipples taut and moaning my name.

"You will be the death of me," I groaned, pushing up with my hips. I reached up and covered her hands with my own, finding myself jealous of her fingers and the way they were pulling at her nipples.

Bella hummed my name again, looking at me through hooded eyes and playing with herself until I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Mine," I growled as I pushed my hands under hers and pinched lightly at her nipples. Bella stroked over the tops of my hands softly

before pushing them down her body to rest back on her hips. She leaned forward, rocking against my pubic bone and gasping. Bella's muscles clamped around me and her body shuddered as she let out a low groan. I pushed up with my hips as hard as I dared, tugging her down to me at the same time.

"Bella!" My strangled cry filled the room as I felt the sensations flood through my body. Bella's head dropped down to my chest, and I gathered her up in my arms. I kissed the top of her head, holding her close to me for a couple of minutes before I flipped her over on to her back, and pushed inside of her again.

"Not done with you yet," I murmured into her ear. I slid in and out of her slowly at first, and then increased my speed, eventually picking her up and lowering her over the arm of the couch, on her stomach before plowing into her again. I moved as fast as I could without hurting her, judging her reaction to my deep thrusts and adjusting the angle and pace as needed. Bella moaned, panted, and cried out my name as she came again, and the clenching muscles inside her body brought me over the edge as well.

I lay my head down on her back for a moment, and then kissed between her shoulder blades. I stood, pulling out of her slowly, then slid my arms under her shoulders and knees and carried her to the bedroom.

"I think I'm senseless now," Bella said, snuggling against her pillow and drawing the blanket halfway up her naked body. "Consider your mission accomplished.

"It's a good thing you told me," I said with a smile. "I was about to start all over again."

"I think I may need a few minutes...or hours..."

"Soon you won't need to take all these breaks," I reminded her. "We could see how many days in a row we could keep this up. I bet Emmett and Rose have some sort of record we could beat."

"I don't know," Bella said. Her cheeks suddenly flushed and she looked away from me. "You might not want to after I'm turned."

"Why in the world would you say such a thing?" I asked, a little upset she would consider such a possibility.

"What if you don't like the way I feel?" Bella asked. "I won't be warm and soft anymore, and I won't smell the same. Maybe you won't want me as much."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

"I'm not," Bella insisted. "I won't be the same. You might not like it the way you do now."

"There are things I may miss," I admitted. "Your blush and the sound of your heart beating, but those things are nowhere near as important as having you with me."

I took her face between my palms and looked into her eyes.

"You will always be my Bella. You'll just be a little less fragile."

"My blood will be gone," she said matter-of-factly. "If the synthetic protein stops working for some reason..."

"Bella, it doesn't matter, because I couldn't do it anymore anyway." I looked over, but there was nothing in her eyes that told me she wanted to hash through all this again, so I relaxed. "It was too hard on you, which made it hard on me."

"I would do anything for you, Edward," Bella said with a smile. She reached up and pushed some strands of hair off my forehead. "You know that."

"I think I understand that now, yes."

Bella reached up and placed her lips against mine softly, and I closed my eyes, basking in her closeness. She kissed over my jaw

and down my neck, finally resting her head on my shoulder.

"I love you," I told her. "But even saying that...the word is so inadequate. I wish there were words to truly express the depth of my feelings for you. You are my salvation."

"And you are my everything," Bella told me. "That's what makes this so right."

"I'm going to hunt," I said, kissing Bella softly on her lips. "It seems prudent."

"In those?" Bella raised her eyebrows at me, looking down at the Sponge Bob pants I wore.

"Why not?" I asked, grinning. "It's not like I'm going to catch a chill, and I don't think there's anyone out here concerned about my fashion sense."

"You're adorable." Bella smiled a bright, glorious smile that made my insides feel like they just dropped down to my feet.

"And you are beautiful," I replied. "I'll be back soon."

"Do you really need to?" Bella asked, looking into my eyes. I had just hunted the night before, and she knew it. "Alice's visions..."

"I know," I responded. "Alice says everything will go fine, and that hasn't changed for weeks now. That's the only reason she hasn't ripped one of my limbs off about the wedding – she knows there will be another one. I just think it would be best to take all possible precautions."

"You're always good at overkill," Bella chuckled. "You've tasted my blood plenty of times, and have always stopped."

"Not for a long time," I said. "I don't know how I will react. For the record, I'm going to try not to 'taste' you at all. I think that will make it easier."

I kissed her again.

"I'll be back soon," I promised again.

Warm breezes greeted me outside the cabin, and I walked across the field in the back and jumped the lake. I traipsed through what used to be a stand of trees but was now a stand of...well...holes in the ground where trees used to be. I felt a little internally embarrassed as I remembered the temper tantrum that led to the downfall of this particular patch of nature.

Being back in this place was evoking many memories from my first few weeks with Bella, and I wasn't sure exactly what to do with them. Some of them were nice – watching old movies with her, and just watching her read books, her intense eyes staring enraptured at the tiny screen in her hand. In other ways, the memories were horrific. I was reminded of what I had done to her, and especially the way she had felt – believing I was going to violate her in ways I still considered unimaginable.

I was an idiot.

I probably continued to be one, but at least now I was a forgiven idiot.

As memories of the things I had done – taking her from her home against her will, tying her down, forcibly taking her blood, murdering innocent people trying to help her in front of her eyes and behind her back – flooded through my brain, I had to stop a moment and crouch down, wrapping my arms around my stomach. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe normally. After a few moments, I steadied and stood up again, continuing my search for prey...

...I dropped the bloodied carcass of a grizzly at my feet and wondered how I got where I was. I sighed, shaking my head and chuckling to myself. The gaps in my memory probably should have bothered me more than they did, but I considered them a small price to pay.

The more I contemplated my misfortunes, the more I considered them not only fitting, but probably only barely in the realm of justice. After everything I had done to Bella, my family, and the populace at large, I deserved a much worse fate. I forgot things sometimes, but not all that often. It only bothered me when I forgot something important to Bella, and she had become quite adept at reminding me of those important things more than once to increase my chances of remembering. I hadn't really screwed up in months, not since completely forgetting to attend a mid-term exam for a world politics course. I talked my way into taking it later with a doctor's note from Carlisle.

Bella and I had attended the community college in Port Angeles for a year. She wanted to be near her father for a while longer so she could make sure he was happy with his new wife and his life on the reservation. We lived in the cabin, and he visited us a few times. I managed to dodge any questions about why I didn't accompany Bella on her visits to La Push, and he never had any thoughts of deception. Bella and I took all the same classes, and I still managed to pull off a three- five grade point average. Bella had straight A's . If I hadn't taken that damn statistics class with her, I probably could have done the same.

But like I told Newton, I got the girl. Small price to pay, if you asked me.

I wasn't perfect, but I didn't care. Bella didn't seem to think any the less of me, which is all that really mattered. Alice saw frequent visions of our future, and when I invaded her mind with my gift, Bella always looked happy, which is all I ever wanted. The irony of the situation was never lost on me, though. I was the aggressor in the

beginning of our relationship, yet she was the one who survived intact.

I strolled back into the opening of the sliding glass door and saw Bella devouring the last of a half-gallon of Moose Tracks ice cream. I smiled and shook my head. Last week she had claimed it was the only food she would miss, and when I panicked and told her I couldn't go through with it – she would lose too much – she smacked me. It hurt her hand, so she switched to yelling at me instead. She was so cute when she got really angry like that, I had to give in. I would give her anything she wanted, and she knew it.

"You've got chocolate on your nose," I said with a smile.

"Do you want to lick it off?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes at me.

"I'm not so sure about the chocolate, but I'd be happy to lick a little lower."

Bella giggled.

"If you start with that, we're going to be here for a month." She stood up, tossed the empty carton into the trash and washed off the spoon. "I guess I won't need to do dishes anymore, huh?"

"Bella..."

"I'm not regretting anything, Edward," she said before I could really begin my sentence. "I'm just...making realizations. I hate doing dishes, so this definitely falls into the positive category."

I watched her dry the spoon carefully before dropping it back into the drawer. She opened the refrigerator door and peered inside for a moment before smiling and nodding.

"Okay," she said softly. "I'm ready."

"It's time," I said, immediately regretting my choice of words when her eyes flew up to mine and widened. I tried to keep the panic welling up inside of me from showing on the outside. I took a deep breath and started to stammer out an apology when she stopped me.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she said with a smile. "I'm not in the middle of a chapter this time."

I reached out and took her hand, silently leading her into the bedroom where I kissed her forehead before lying her down on the bed.

"Are you comfortable?" I asked. That made two completely stupid remarks out of my mouth in as many minutes. Even if she was comfortable now, it wasn't going to last.

"I'm good," she said, allowing me another transgression without recourse.

I crawled in beside her and leaned over her upper body, stroking her cheekbone with my thumb.

"Are you sure you want this?" I asked her. "This is your last chance to change your mind. There is no turning back later."

"I'm sure, Edward," Bella said, her hands running up into my hair. "I never would have considered it until Carlisle found a cure, but now that I know you are okay, I am sure of what I want."

"I'm so afraid for you," I whispered into her hair. "The thought of seeing you in pain..."

"It's temporary, sweetheart."

"It will seem like an eternity," I told her. "For both of us."

"And when it's over, we will have eternity, so it is worth it."

"I'm not," I gave her a half smile. "But apparently I am still ultimately selfish."

I held her in my arms, kissing her gently and feeling the heat of her lips against my skin as we lay casually on the same bed where I took her blood against her will. She wanted to be here, in the place where I first understood her importance to me. In a twisted way, it made sense. It was here I realized I could not be without her, and it was here where I would make her mine forever. The remote location made the chance of coming across humans slim, and we could be alone. Carlisle wanted to be here, as did Alice and the others, but Bella insisted she wanted us to be alone, and Alice's visions continued to confirm our success.

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes," Bella said softly. She shivered under me.

"I'll stay by your side the whole time. I won't leave you alone, not even for a moment."

"I know."

"I love you," I whispered against her ear.

"I love you," she repeated. "Always. Forever. Please, do it now."

I took a deep breath, inhaling the incredible draw of her incomparable blood for the final time. Venom flowed into my mouth, coating my teeth, and for the first time I did not swallow it back. My fingers graced over the skin of her neck, pushing her hair back across her shoulder. My eyes darted to hers.

"Forever," I said softly as I sank my teeth into her throat.

So much for death.

~The End~

Chapter End Notes:

"Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-That's all, folks!

Sleep well - Boobward and Bella are happy with how everything turned out. I promise!

Hopefully, this has answered all of your remaining questions. If not, feel free to stop by my reader's group on facebook (link on my profile) and ask whatever you like!

Again, thank you all for such a warm welcome back. I'm still working on Sin in the Grey (new chapter later tonight!), so please stick around and let me know what you think of the new story! I'm still struggling with writing in general, and hearing your feedback is quite literally the only thing keeping me going,

Much love to you all!

Shay Savage