

At The Edge of Reason

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When James threatens Bella, Edward panics and kidnaps her in a desperate bid to keep her safe. But can he hold her against her will, or will the interference of his family result in his worst nightmare after all? Can he rescue her? Twilight alternate end.

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Chapter 1

from Twilight, Chapter 19, 'Goodbyes', pg. 403

"Let's go." Carlisle began to walk toward the kitchen.

But Edward was at my side at once. He caught me up in his iron grip, crushing me to him. He seemed unaware of his watching family as he pulled my face to his, lifting my feet off the floor. For the shortest second, his lips were icy and hard against mine...

The Edge of Reason - Chapter 1

Thinking back on it later, I would be fairly certain it was that desperate kiss goodbye that caused him to snap - and to realize that goodbye wasn't something he could handle.

Edward had been ready to release me into Jasper and Alice's care, however reluctantly. Of that I was certain. He hadn't been faking his agreement with our plan. He hadn't planned what happened next ahead of time.

But suddenly the grip of his arms around me was almost painful, causing my eyes to snap open. When I focused on him, his were already open, fixed on my face - with a wild look in them that I had never before seen on his beautiful face. It looked a lot like...panic.

He had still yet to allow my feet to touch the floor again...

And then, suddenly, Alice surged toward us.

"Edward! No!"

I'll probably never know whether Alice had seen the same look in his eyes as I did, or if it was the future she was seeing as Edward panicked and made his snap decision. In fact, the only thing I could be completely certain of was Edward's reaction.

The close proximity of his mouth to my ear must have made his snarl sound more fierce and menacing than it could have truly been, I had time to ponder absently - because surely he wouldn't growl at *Alice* as though he fully intended to hurt her if she took even one step closer to us.

And that was the last thought I had time for, because then I was flying...

Somehow, he'd maneuvered my body so that he clutched me against his chest with his arm under my knees as he burst out of the Cullen home with me in his arms at vampire speed. I tensed for him to take off running, but he didn't go far.

"Edward!" I managed to gasp as he ripped open the driver's door of Emmett's huge Jeep still parked just outside the home, going right in the driver's door with me and rather unceremoniously depositing me into the passenger's seat. I heard the engine fire up almost immediately, and we took off backwards so abruptly that it flung my body forward...right into the steel pole that was Edward's arm, catching me and pushing me back into the seat.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" My voice was breathless, shocked.

"Seatbelt, Bella. Now. Put on the harness as best you can." His voice was outwardly calm, but his eyes still held that wild look of panic as he turned the Jeep around in a stomach-lurching move with one hand, still holding me upright with the other arm.

I actually screamed when I saw Emmett standing right in our path. It was a reflex reaction, and a somewhat needless one at that...I had already seen, after all, the effect of just one vampire-hand against a vehicle. The vampire wins. Tyler Crowley's death van would never be the same.

But Emmett wasn't moving and Edward wasn't slowing down, and I wasn't entirely sure what the outcome would be if Edward slammed into his brother at full force. But at the very last moment, Emmett looked to the side as though someone had called his name. I saw a flash of what looked like reluctance - or maybe disappointment? - cross his face, and then he jumped out of the way over us at the very last moment.

Spinning around to look out the back window, I saw the entire Cullen family with the exception of Rosalie - who was most likely still inside pouting - all standing a few yards from Emmett, watching us disappear into the night. They were all still as statues, and it hit me at that moment...

They had decided to let him go. Edward and I were on our own. And he clearly had no intention of abiding by my version of the plan. He had decided to do this his way.

Feeling very rebellious all of a sudden at being handled like a sack of flour and for all intents and purposes *kidnapped*, I considered defying him completely in the only way I could...by ignoring his command to strap myself in.

One look at the speedometer, however, and I amended that rebellion slightly. I'd at least put on the seatbelt. But I'd been belted into that ridiculous off-road harness for the last time today, 115 miles per hour or not.

"Edward, you have to take me back."

"No."

"Edward..."

"You're not leaving my sight until James is dead, Bella. Victoria too, for that matter."

We'd been having the same pointless conversation, in varying forms, for at least the past 30 minutes. After one particularly heated version of it, I'd made the mistake of slinging off my seatbelt and trying to open the door to remove myself from the Jeep whether he agreed or not. It had at least had the effect of making Edward slam on the brakes, but letting me out of the Jeep hadn't been in his immediate plan. Glaring at me and making sure it didn't happen again, on the other hand, seemed to be the key elements of the plan.

So by *this* particular rehashing of the same argument, I was now belted quite securely-thank-you-very-much into the harness, with the added security of one of Edward's hands closed like an icy vise around my closest wrist - keeping me from jumping out of the Jeep, even if I could manage to undo the straps with the other hand.

I no longer had any idea how fast we were going, because I couldn't even lean over to look. But it was fast enough *without* him driving one handed, I thought to myself bitterly.

With an angry sigh, I shifted tactics. This was the first time he'd mentioned the redheaded female vampire, so at least we'd have something new to argue about.

"Why Victoria too? Does she want to kill me now like James?"

He was grinding his teeth so hard that I could hear it even over the souped-up engine of the Jeep. "Not yet, but she will when we're done with James. He's her mate."

"Her mate?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes," he replied, as though that explained everything. The tight set of his jaw said that he didn't really want to talk about it in further detail, either.

It was maddening. Perhaps instead of Googling books on Quileute legends, I should have looked for some kind of handbook...

Understanding Your Vampire - a Glossary and Instruction Manual for Humans Who've Lost Their Damn Minds.

"I don't understand," I told him, clenching my teeth in a way that almost rivaled his own tense pose.

For some reason I didn't understand, his eyes softened a bit as they flicked over to me. "I know. I know."

My own anger melted slightly at his softer look, and *damn him and his dazzle* , suddenly I was willing to let him get away with that ridiculously evasive answer. "But *you* understand it. I mean, why she's going to want to kill me. It makes sense to you."

Again he looked at me, something unreadable in his eyes. His hand on my arm tightened almost imperceptibly, but loosened back up when I winced. He'd already been holding onto me as tightly as he could without causing me pain. Instead, his other hand clamped down on the steering wheel so hard that I thought I heard something crack, and I suspected he was leaving indentions in the huge, leather wrapped wheel. He didn't glance at the road for several seconds, his eyes fixed on me and holding me far more captive than his hands ever could.

"Yes," he told me, more emotion packed into that word than I could truly grasp. He finally looked back at the road, his expression hard and impassive once again. His foot pressed impossibly harder on the gas. When he did speak a few seconds later, it was so low I barely heard. "The same reason that I'm going to kill *her* . We don't - vampires don't give second chances when it comes to someone harming our mates, Bella."

Like a complete coward, I didn't ask the obvious question. I turned to stare out the window instead, trying to ignore the grip of his hand on my arm. Right now I didn't feel like I'd ever be his mate...I felt like his prisoner.

"I thought they were going to follow us," he murmured to himself several quiet hours later, making me jump. I hadn't been asleep, but I hadn't exactly been awake either. Looking down, I saw that he still maintained the same grip on me, only slightly looser and higher up my arm. He must have decided that circulation was important, I grumbled in my mind.

"James and Victoria?" I asked out loud somewhat groggily, noticing that the sun would be coming up within a couple hours.

"No, my family." He seemed confused, focused, concentrating on something. I suspected he'd been focused like that for some time. "They're not within miles of us. I can't hear them. I *haven't* heard them. I assumed they would try to stop me. But I don't hear James either." Looking over at me finally, he blinked in surprise at what he saw. "God...Bella. I'm sorry. I'll stop at the next exit."

I tried again to lean forward to see the answer to my question for myself, but was pulled up short by the harness. "Are we almost out of gas?"

"I...no, Rosalie likes to be prepared for anything, so she modifies all of Emmett's vehicles. She installed a second large fuel tank, and we have an extra canister of fuel as well. No, Bella, we'll stop for *you* . You need to eat something. Drink something. I'm so sorry. You should have said something."

I had not 'woke up' in a good mood. My bladder was full, I had a serious case of PMS, and my patience with being kidnapped and strapped into an off-road harness so tightly that I could barely move had worn dangerously thin before it ever really started.

"Does the prisoner get a shower too?" I carped at him, hating the way I sounded but seriously on the brink of losing my mind.

He flinched at that one, and for once his discomfort left me with a very satisfied feeling. But then he turned to me with apology in his eyes, and I almost softened. Almost.

Suddenly, however, his expression changed dramatically, from chagrin to amused affection as his eyes roved over my face. Something he saw caused his lips to twitch in an approximation of the crooked smile I love so much. A soft chuckle escaped him, and his eyes had the audacity to twinkle at me as he *laughed at me*.

"Yes, Bella, your captors are humane," he teased. Biting back another smile at the obvious fury on my face, he moved his hand down from my arm to my fingers, taking them in his own and giving them a light squeeze before I angrily yanked my hand away. Of course, I knew full well that I'd only succeeded in doing so because he allowed it, and that only annoyed me further.

There was still an amused smile in his voice as he stretched the offending arm along the seatback behind me, not quite daring to touch me but making sure I knew he was still there. "I'll find us a place to stay for a little while."

I spared him one glare before turning to stare out the window. I didn't really hear the words that left his lips next, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of asking, either. It sounded a lot like, "My angry kitten," but that wouldn't have made any sense.

His wealthy sensibilities and his noble ones as well seemed to be insulted by the only lodging available in the near vicinity. Maybe I'd sounded like a spoiled child in the Jeep. But Edward sounded a little bit like one as he made a huge deal out of having to take me to a cheap national hotel chain instead of some ridiculously overpriced five-star hotel. He'd dragged me to the middle of freaking nowhere. What did he expect - the Ritz Carlton? I truly wasn't in the mood.

Of course, that experience paled in comparison to going Wal-Mart'ing with Edward. His Majesty had decided to fly the coop with me *without* the bag we'd packed at Charlie's house, so I not only had nothing to wear, I also had no toiletries. Our hotel definitely wasn't the type that could provide those things, and this town only had one store. By some miracle, it was a 24-hour Wal-Mart.

Since he refused to let me out of his sight or even to break physical contact with me - keeping one arm wrapped *tightly* around my waist from the moment we left the Jeep as his eyes constantly scanned the area - I had no choice but to fill up a shopping cart right in front of Edward. Each item was more blush-inspiring than the last: cheap jeans, sweatshirt, pajamas with huge smiley faces that might actually be the death of me, standard toiletries, bra, panties, tampons...

Somewhere near the end of that list and after the third time I tried unsuccessfully to break his grip on me so that I could make an attempt to preserve some dignity by hiding from him what I was buying, I finally decided that if I was going to have to suffer then I was taking my turn-of-the-century vampire with me. I made sure, in addition to a nice basic set of underthings, to throw a black lace thong and push-up bra in the cart right in front of his ever-watchful eyes. Too bad vampires can't blush.

In contrast with the unmentionables, the tampons actually had no effect on him at all - much to my disappointment. He didn't even bat an eye. It suddenly occurred to me that my cycles were probably not any great surprise to Edward...he probably knew before I did when it was time. *My* turn to cringe.

And then it was my turn to cringe again, when he insisted on paying for *everything* . I'd forgotten about that part, but it wasn't as though I'd been allowed to come prepared, either.

By the time I finally staggered into our hotel room with Edward right on my heels, where he promptly pushed me behind him the moment the door closed until he could be sure we were truly alone, we had only minutes before the sun was going to be coming up.

When I glimpsed my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I forgave Edward instantly for laughing at me earlier. I'd have laughed at me too. My hair was in knots, sticking out in clumps all over my head. My face was a mess, and on the entire right side of my face there appeared to be a near permanent impression of every detail of the

passenger windowsill where I'd been leaning my head. I could only imagine how bad it'd been when I'd first sat up to talk to him. And *oh dear God* then he'd taken me out in public like that. If I didn't kill him for the whole kidnapping thing, *Alice* was going to finish him off for that one offense alone.

With a loud groan, I flopped back against the wall in exhaustion. I was almost too much of a mess to clean up.

"Bella?"

I very nearly jumped right out of my skin his voice was so close. For just a second, I thought he was *in* the bathroom.

"I'm fine," I called back, seeing the shadow of his shoes standing right outside the door. It was a miracle he actually *wasn't* in the bathroom with me, so I should have known he'd be sticking close, listening to every sound. I was too tired to even sound irritated.

Somehow I made it through a shower, combed the tangles out of my wet hair, brushed my teeth...and then realized I'd brought no clothes into the bathroom with me.

Hesitating, I looked down at the pile of clothes I'd dropped to the floor, and then wrinkled my nose. No way I was putting any of it back on right now. And no way was I asking Edward to go pawing through my Wal-Mart bags and bring me some panties and those ridiculous pajamas, even if it would be sort of fun to make him hyperventilate over whether or not it was the thong that I wanted. No, Edward was just going to have to deal with half-naked Bella. If he didn't like it, then he really shouldn't be kidnapping teenage girls and locking them into hotel rooms with him, should he? Wrapping the tiny, flimsy towel as tightly around myself as I could, I opened the door...and almost ran right into him.

His eyes widened as they automatically ran down my form and snapped quickly back to my face. His mouth hung open slightly. Well, at least I'd found *one* way to get him to give me some space. He

backed up so fast that if he'd not been a super-graceful vampire he'd have landed right on his butt.

"I forgot my clothes," I informed him bluntly, as though daring him to challenge me on it.

Edward speechless. There was a first. Maybe now would be a good time to bargain for my release...from captivity, that is...

Another scowl came to my face when I pushed past him to the shopping bag and pulled out those ridiculous smiley pajamas that had constituted exactly 50% of the pajama selection in my size in the local store. It had been either that or the pink princess ones, and I hadn't fallen quite that far yet, I didn't think.

"Um, Bella..."

"Hm?" I asked, a little distracted. I was madder than a hornet at him, and Alice would be the first to confirm that I didn't exactly write the book on fashion anyway; but I still wasn't sure I wanted Edward to see me in these. Even I had my limits.

"Emmett had a spare bag in the Jeep. There's a t-shirt, some sweatpants. I thought maybe..."

I dropped the deranged smileys and whirled around to look for Emmett's bag so fast that I almost dropped the towel. Edward kept his eyes carefully on my face, but there was a hint of a smile there again when he saw how eagerly I responded to his suggestion. "I'm quite certain they'll swallow you whole, but I thought you might prefer them." He lost his battle with the smirk as he motioned toward the pajamas I'd just rejected. "It wouldn't do for your rest to be interrupted by nightmares. I've no doubt you'll have enough to say to me in your sleep tonight as it is."

I'm not sure what about his gorgeous smile and sweet gesture completely undid me, but every bit of fight fled from me in the span of a heartbeat. Forgetting my state of dress, I crossed the distance

between us in three steps and crashed into his chest, my arms instantly winding around his waist.

His arms were somewhat more tentative, as I heard him draw in a sharp gasp of surprise. I could feel his hands hovering just alongside my shoulders, but he seemed unsure whether or not he should touch me, considering I was as close to naked as I could get without being completely uncovered.

But when the first completely overwhelmed sob pushed its way up through my chest and out of my mouth against his hard, cold chest, he forgot all about propriety and his rules. His arms wrapped tightly around me, cradling me to him and one hand fisting itself in my wet hair.

"Oh, Bella...shhhh...it's going to be okay, sweetheart."

I only clung to him more tightly, sobbing harder - for Charlie and the way I had hurt him, for Edward and the position he'd been put in, for the Cullen family who'd been drawn into this, and for myself for more reasons than I could count.

Edward sank to the floor like he'd been sucker punched in the gut, taking me with him down onto his lap. My tears seemed to make him frantic - his voice was shaking as hard as my body. "Bella, please don't cry...I'm not going to hurt you, and I *promise* I won't let anything happen to you. I'll keep you safe, I swear it, and when this is over I'll take you back to Charlie. You're safe with me."

It was such a complete 180 degree turn from what he'd been trying to tell me for months - that he was the most dangerous thing imaginable to me. The irony hit me like a sledgehammer, pulling a slightly hysterical giggle from my throat. That, too, turned into a hard, shuddering sob, which in turn caused Edward to pull me even closer against him. I could feel his tension through my entire body.

It was pure desperation that drove my lips to his, as I turned my head and sought out his mouth.

"Edward..." I moaned against his lips, grasping his face and kissing him with no restraint at all. To my surprise, he kissed me back with a surprising amount of ferocity, causing me to gasp into his mouth. His hand, still tangled in my hair, held me still as he pressed his mouth against mine over and over, sliding our lips together in an ancient dance. I parted my lips, and was shocked to feel his cool tongue sweep in to taste me - something he'd never allowed before.

I tried to turn in his arms, intent on straddling his lap and pushing my chest even closer against him. But, unsurprisingly, his hands shot to my waist and restrained me from doing so - even as his tongue continued to plunder my mouth and dance with my own.

He groaned almost as though he was in pain, his fingers gripping more tightly at my waist - one of his hands against bare skin where the towel had fallen slightly open at the side. The sound of his own enjoyment shot a flood of arousal through my entire body, almost prompting me to try again to turn and face him.

"Bella...time to stop, love." His voice sounded as though he'd rather do just about *anything* than stop. His tongue had retreated, but his lips were still firm and demanding against mine when he captured them again.

"Please, Edward, I need you..." It had never worked before, but I'd never been dressed in only a towel, in his lap, with my life in danger from a sadistic vampire tracker, either.

"As I need you, Bella, but this isn't right." He still sounded pained enough that I thought I had a hope of convincing him.

"It *feels* right," I told him, undeterred by the fact that he wouldn't let me kiss him on the lips again. I just went for his spectacular jawline instead.

"It feels *amazing* , Bella, but even if it were possible for us to take this any farther, this is not the way I'd ever let it happen."

I sighed and pulled back until I could see him, knowing when I was beat. "What do you mean?"

Ever so gently, he brushed my hair off of my shoulder before leaning in to plant a tender kiss on my forehead. "Aside from the fact that I could kill you? Right now you see yourself as my *prisoner* , Bella. You said so yourself. You're not, of course, but I shouldn't even have let things go *this* far so long as you believe that. Please forgive me."

I managed, with great difficulty, not to roll my eyes. "It was a *joke* , Edward."

His eyes searched mine calmly. "Perhaps. But I am holding you against your will. Can you honestly tell me that this is where you want to be right now?"

He had me there, and we both knew it. My gaze faltered, my eyes dropping. "With you? Yes. But here? No. I want you to take me home."

Sadness filled the depths of his golden eyes. "And I'd love nothing more than to give you anything you ask of me. But you've asked the only two things I can't give you, Bella. I can't take a chance on either. Your safety simply isn't negotiable - no matter what it costs me."

"But Edward, why this way? Why..." I struggled to come up with some profound way of phrasing it that didn't involve the words 'kidnap' or 'prisoner', and failed miserably. "Why like *this*?"

We seemed to have both forgotten that I still sat on his lap completely naked other than the tiny hotel towel. His eyes were utterly serious as he framed my face in his hands and looked straight in my eyes. "Alice was trying to see how it would happen, and I was watching her thoughts. There were just bits and pieces of a thousand different possibilities that could come out of the decision to send you with Jasper and Alice...nothing even close to concrete. But Bella, in at least one of them I saw you alone with James. Unprotected."

"I wouldn't have left them, Edward. They wouldn't have left *me*. "

His hands dropped to my shoulders, and I suppressed a shiver at the coldness of them against my bare skin. "It doesn't matter." His voice was hard, firm, unyielding. "Maybe you wouldn't have. Maybe they wouldn't have let you out of their sight. But I *know* I won't let you out of mine. I don't need a mindreader to tell me that."

His eyes burned into me, and I didn't doubt the truth of that statement for a second: there would be no escape from Edward until this was over, whether I wanted one or not. At that exact moment, I didn't want one. But if he intended to strap me back into that off-road harness the next day, there was a good chance I'd change my mind on that.

Exhausted, I dropped my head against his shoulder, giving in for the moment.

His voice was soft, gentle again as he coaxed me to my feet. "Bed time. Come on, Bella."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Chapter 2

Author's Note:

Thank you so much to those who have reviewed! I'm so glad that you're enjoying the story, and I hope you will continue to let me know if you're enjoying it!

Here's part 2...what kind of stunt does Bella try to pull? Will Edward catch her? And will it ultimately get them caught or cause her to become even *more* Edward's prisoner? :)

Chapter 2

'Bed time. Come on, Bella.'

Edward put me on my feet and quickly steered my towel-clad form gently but firmly back into the bathroom. When he accomplished that without getting closer than a foot away from me other than his hand on my back, and then when he looked anywhere but in my direction as he handed me Emmett's bag that he had found for me in the Jeep, it didn't take long for me to put two and two together and realize that Edward would be much more comfortable as soon as I was clothed. If I hadn't scared him so badly with my hysterics, I was certain he'd have insisted on it far sooner and with a lot less contact than we'd just shared on the ground, where panic had prompted him to kiss me as desperately as I kissed him.

With a shiver of breathless excitement at the realization that Edward had been affected and maybe even tempted by my state of undress, I dropped the towel and slipped easily into my new panties and Emmett's *huge* t-shirt. The sweatpants were a little more problematic. I had to cinch up the drawstring waist and roll the legs up many times over just to keep them from trailing the ground.

I didn't expect anything else momentous to happen that morning, other than me falling asleep and staying that way the rest of the day. But suddenly, my heart was pounding in my chest at an alarming rate.

I had knelt to retrieve the clothes I'd been wearing earlier, wondering absently if the hotel had a washing machine anywhere. I mentally refused to just keep buying new clothing every day, especially not on Edward's dime. But as I gathered up my jeans, I felt something flat and hard in the pocket - something that I hadn't noticed when I'd been wearing them or taken them off. Frowning, I reached in and pulled out the object, my eyes growing wide and my heart starting to race as I realized what it was.

Holy crow.

A credit card.

I had Charlie's *credit card*.

Mind racing with possibilities, I remembered Charlie handing it to me that morning over breakfast when I mentioned that I needed to go grocery shopping, insisting over my protest that I should just hold onto it until I got a chance to go. I must have forgotten I had it in my pocket. As though I thought Edward had developed X-ray vision, my head shot around to the door, half surprised not to find him standing there with a disapproving look as he confiscated it.

But the door was still closed and he *wasn't* standing there, and since he couldn't read my mind he had no idea that I'd just gained back some control over at least the issue of who paid for what. Getting far enough away from him to actually *use* the card might be problematic, but I could work that out later. I didn't even have to feel guilty about using it. Charlie had wanted to just *give* me the card for over a month now, and had repeatedly told me that I had continual permission to buy whatever I needed. Since he knew I hated to shop, he knew he had little to worry about with that decision. In fact, it seemed to worry him that I didn't buy myself *enough* stuff.

"Bella?" Edward's voice through the door made me jump, and I nearly dropped the card on the ground. His vampire hearing would've been sure to hear *that* .

"I'm coming!" Cringing at how guilty I sounded, I quickly balled up the dirty clothes, wrapping the card into the middle of them as I schemed. When I went out of the bathroom to my bags to put away my dirty clothes, I would just surreptitiously slide the credit card into the pocket of the brand new jeans I'd bought. Then I'd have it on me when we eventually left the hotel. It was absurd how excited I was by this small rebellion.

"Bella?" Edward sounded very alarmed now, and I heard his fingers rap gently against the door. "May I come in, please? Your heart is racing. What's wrong?"

And I'd been worried about dropping the card on the ground. My own heartbeat was betraying me. With a sigh, I swung the door open before he could give up on asking permission and decide he just needed to break it down. I held still while his eyes swiftly appraised me to ensure that I wasn't bleeding and there were no broken bones.

I smiled too brightly at him, and his eyes narrowed. "No it isn't. I'm fine. See?"

There was no way in the world he was going to let me get away with that, and I gritted my teeth as I wondered just how long it would be before I broke and had to give up my newfound prize.

But to my surprise, instead of starting an interrogation his face just twisted into a mild scowl as he looked me up and down again, more obviously than he would normally consider to be gentlemanly. Feeling a little self-conscious, I fidgeted. For once, he definitely did not look like he liked what he saw. And that bothered me. A lot. Even if he *had* kidnapped me.

"Edward?"

His eyes snapped back to my face, and his features softened into a smile. But there was still something uneasy in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Bella. I know you're exhausted. Come on, love. I'll help you get to sleep."

As he took my hand to lead me toward the bed, I looked down at myself in confusion, looking for what had upset Edward. There was nothing out of the ordinary, other than Emmett's huge clothes.

A tiny smirk lifted my lips. Of course...

I managed to put my dirty clothes in one bag and sneak Charlie's credit card into my new jeans for later, keeping my back turned on Edward. So far as I could tell, he didn't suspect anything.

Soon I was lying in his arms in the middle of the hotel bed, smiling again into his shoulder as I recalled the slightly jealous scowl that covered his face when I emerged in his brother's clothes. Edward might be a 108 year old vampire, but he was also still a 17-year-old male - and a very possessive one at that; one who was almost absurdly well-practiced at everything *else* in the universe, but had never had a girlfriend before. Even ten minutes after I came out of the bathroom, as I lay in his arms with his fingers toying constantly at the hem of Emmett's 'short sleeves' that reached my elbows, he still seemed a little bothered.

"What's wrong?" I asked him, trying to sound as innocent as I could. I already knew the answer.

Even if I hadn't shifted to where I could see his frown, it was evident in his voice.

"I'm not certain that I wouldn't prefer the giant smiling faces."

"Not me," I shuddered, recalling just how much I had dreaded wearing deranged smiley-face pajamas in front of him. "Besides,

these are soft, and they smell good."

"They smell good?" he repeated in disbelief, and I caught my mistake instantly. I really hadn't been trying to goad him. Emmett's clothes *did* smell good - nowhere near as good as Edward's, of course. But I had inadvertently stepped on Edward's male pride.

He was frowning even harder now, his speech quickly slipping into the formality he didn't always realize he was reverting to. "When this is behind us, I would most definitely prefer that you not wear Emmett's clothing in the future, Bella."

I rolled my eyes. For some reason, the return of 1918 Edward bossing me around - and a jealous 1918 Edward, at that - always left me with the near irresistible urge to shock the heck out of him. Usually I restrained it. But usually he hadn't kidnapped me and herded me around like cattle all day, either. So I injected a little pout into my voice.

"But why not? I mean, these smell *really* good. Do all of Emmett's clothes smell this good?" I hid my smile in Edward's shoulder as he sighed in exasperation. '*Oh, Edward,*' I thought. '*I haven't even gone in for the kill yet.*'

"I'm certain that I wouldn't know," he informed me sullenly, his arms tightening around me. "Aren't you sleepy, Bella?"

"Mm-hm." As much as I wanted to score a victory, I couldn't help but press a kiss to his neck as I snuggled closer, subconsciously softening the blow. "But I just can't help wondering... is that how good I smell to you? Suddenly I think I understand." Waiting for the explosion, I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"Bella, honestly!" came the exasperated response as he disentangled me from him, holding my shoulders as he held me just far enough away to look at me. Aggrieved frustration filled his unbelievably handsome face. "I've lived with Emmett for decades, and I've never once felt the desire to smell his clothes. I fail to

understand your sudden fascination. He doesn't smell that much different than me!"

I couldn't hide my smirk any longer, and after just a moment realization dawned in his eyes; some of his scowl faded, and his lips twitched as he studied my face. Graciously, he allowed me my small victory as he realized he'd been played, his body relaxing and a slow smile spreading across his face. I suspected if he could have blushed, he might have. A small chuckle from him seemed to light up the room. "That wasn't nice, Bella," he chided, his smile softening the words. "You had me seriously contemplating violence against my brother."

"Yeah, well you deserved it," I retorted, and was mesmerized as his crooked grin grew wider. "And you were doing that before I said a word."

"Perhaps," he murmured, leaning in to kiss me. He took his time about doing it thoroughly, possessively, and left me so dizzy I'd almost forgotten what we were arguing about. He traced my face with his fingers. "You have no idea what you can do to me with a single word, Bella," he whispered against my lips.

Maybe I didn't. But he *definitely* knew what he could do to me with a single smile or touch, and he was taking full advantage of it. Trying to recover from his dazzle long enough to finish making my point, I breathlessly stood my ground. "Doesn't mean you didn't deserve it."

Pulling me closer, he rested his forehead against mine and shrugged. "I'll give you this: there aren't very many people who can put one over on me."

"That's because you cheat," I reminded him, tapping my finger gently against his temple to show what I meant. "And you really *did* have it coming."

He quirked an eyebrow in question at my insistence on that point, so I clarified - unable to resist the urge to twist his own words and throw

them back at him. "You *kidnapped* me. But I'll give you this: there aren't very many people who can get away with kidnapping the police chief's daughter."

It was the wrong thing to say, I realized too late. He didn't find anything about me getting kidnapped to be very amusing. His face became too serious again, his jaw tightening and his arms pulling me back down to rest on his chest, holding me even more protectively than I was used to.

"And that list begins and ends with me," he informed me. "That's why we're here, Bella. I'm going to make sure nobody else even gets a chance - not James, not Victoria. Not anybody."

"But Edward," I started, intending to question him again about why it had to be *this* way, when I was fairly certain that if he had simply explained what he saw in Alice's vision to his family they would have helped us. His sigh was so deep that I felt my body rise and fall with his chest as he heavily inhaled and exhaled.

"Not now, Bella. Please, just rest. You have all day. We'll leave at twilight."

He began humming my lullaby and I eventually drifted off, but not quite as easily as normal.

We spent the entire bright, sunny day in the hotel room, and I spent the vast majority of it asleep. Edward had had the foresight at Wal-Mart that morning to pick up a variety of quick, easy food and drinks for me, so to make him feel better I attempted to choke down some of it the few times I did wake up. Never in my life had I had less of an appetite.

True to Edward's word, just as the sun started to go down I felt his cool lips against my brow gently kissing me, followed by his velvet voice in my ear. "Bella, sweetheart? Can you wake up for me? It's time to go."

Spending the previous night strapped into a Jeep and then sleeping all day had left me with a pounding headache. I opened my eyes and tried to focus on him, only to wince in pain as soon as light hit my eyes.

Misinterpreting that reaction as my being unhappy to see him, Edward offered me a tiny, sad smile. "It wasn't a nightmare, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, love. I know how you feel about all this, and I promise you I understand why. You have my word I'll take you back to Charlie as soon as you're out of danger." His body tensed when I didn't say anything, and he briefly closed his eyes, nodding his head slightly in agreement with whatever it was he assumed I was thinking. It seemed as though he had to force himself to reopen his eyes and focus on me. His next words were slow, hesitant. "And then if you never want to see me again...I'll respect your wishes."

The thought was too horrible to even contemplate. I suddenly felt horrible for teasing him about kidnapping me. I'd been asleep within moments after my unfortunate joke, but Edward had clearly been torturing himself over it the entire day as I slept. My eyes filled with tears of contrition, and his face fell, his eyes closing as though he couldn't bear to see my pain.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but Edward laid a gentle finger across my lips. He seemed terrified to hear what I would have had to say. "Please don't hate me for all of this, Bella. I'd do anything to keep you safe, but I can't stand that it's making you unhappy. Please believe me on this point: I may have kidnapped you and I'll do what's necessary to protect you even from yourself, but you're not my prisoner."

In a flash, I went from guilt to frustration. I should have let it go, especially considering that I didn't really want to hurt him. But I was in pain, tired, hungry, hormonal, worried about Charlie, and even a little scared - though certainly not of Edward.

"Then what am I?" I snapped at him, immediately wishing I could take it back. He just stared at me sadly, but I couldn't stop. Sitting up

on the bed, I turned to face him. "If I'm not your prisoner, then does that mean I can go home? I can call Charlie and let him know I'm okay?"

Edward grimaced, pain filling his features. "You know the answer to that, Bella. You know I can't let you do that, and you know why. Please don't make this harder."

I couldn't take my eyes off of his strangely determined features. His look of determination sent an uneasy chill down my spine. I didn't normally see Edward as a vampire - not really. But at the moment, it was difficult to ignore. I wasn't sure I wanted the answer to my next question, but I had to ask.

"And if I try? What if I decide to run? Or scream for help?"

He nodded slowly, his eyes dropping to the floor. He seemed to understand that I needed to know exactly how far he'd go.

"I'll stop you, on both counts. I won't hurt you, Bella. But I *will* stop you."

His words rendered me speechless, but his eyes were absolutely paralyzing as he suddenly appeared nose to nose with me and brought them up to my face in a piercing gaze, some of his perfect control shaken. His hands framed my face softly.

"Bella, I'm begging you. Please don't try to do that. It will be useless to fight me, and I don't think you can understand exactly how much I loathe the idea of keeping you quiet by force. It would kill me, Bella. I'd much prefer that you come along with me willingly. If you attempted such a thing and I were to accidentally hurt you..." He couldn't finish that thought, but the look in his eyes gave me some indication of just how badly that would destroy him.

My mouth was so dry it felt like it was filled with cotton balls. I couldn't have forced speech past my lips if I'd tried. I'd asked Edward for honesty, and he'd given it. Numbly, I nodded my understanding

and mechanically got up to get dressed and gather my things - mostly because I clearly had no choice in the matter.

I somehow managed to get myself dressed in the new jeans and sweatshirt we'd bought at Wal-Mart that morning. I was a little surprised to find Charlie's credit card still safely lodged in the pocket where I'd hidden it. I had half expected that Edward would just *know* and that it would be missing.

I climbed willingly into the Jeep with him, but balked when he reached for the straps of the off-road harness to secure me in the seat.

"Edward, no!" I protested, probably looking a little more horrified than was really necessary. My head was still pounding and I was feeling sick to my stomach.

Edward froze, the horrified look on my face clearly taking him aback.

"Is this really necessary?" I amended in an attempt to sound more calm, hating how completely freaked out I sounded.

Uncertainty was written all over his face. His hands hovered, one strap dangling from his fingers - but he didn't move to fasten it, at least. "It's safer, Bella."

I shuddered. I'd had enough of the harness by the time we got back to the Cullens' house from the baseball field, when Emmett had strapped me in at Edward's orders and then restrained my hands to keep me from getting out. After that, spending the entire previous night in it after Edward kidnapped me had just been overkill. I thought I might throw up if he put it back on me.

"Please, Edward? I won't try to get away, I promise. You're strong enough to keep me from getting away without it anyway. You said so yourself. Please don't put that thing back on me. Please."

I was starting to sound a little hysterical, and feel a little sheepish at the same time. What was wrong with me? It wasn't as though he was trying to shackle me in the basement and torture me. He was trying to protect me from the sadistic vampire that wanted to kill me as part of some sick game.

But it was too late to behave more reasonably. Edward dropped the strap like it had burned him, his face more horrified than mine had been at the beginning of the conversation. His eyes searched mine wildly.

"You thought..." he began, but couldn't finish. He looked a little shaky as he brought a hand to his face to pinch at the bridge of his nose, speaking without looking at me. "You misunderstand me, Bella. I truly felt it was safer, in case James found us and I had to leave the road for rough terrain. I wasn't trying to... *restrain* you."

It sounded like he almost choked on the word *restrain*, and I realized just how much the implication bothered him - how much all of my implications bothered him. But I didn't seem to be able to stop. I *wanted* to be with Edward, always; but the fact that I wasn't free to go seemed to hang constantly over my head, making me irritable and crabby.

But at that moment, if I could have crawled under the seat, I would have. I'd just negated every single thing I'd said to Edward since we met, every last word trying to convince him that he wasn't a monster. None of that mattered when I treated him like he was one. I'd been so caught up in the idea that he had kidnapped me against my will that I'd forgotten all about *why* - he was doing all of this to keep me safe. I wanted to say something, anything to make him feel better but I was paralyzed.

Before I could even begin to process what to do next, he spoke again, so hesitant and unsure of me that I wanted to cry. "I don't know if my word even means anything to you right now, but you have it anyway. I won't put that on you again, Bella, unless we find

ourselves in a situation where it's absolutely necessary for your safety."

His jaw muscle worked, his fingers clenching the wheel as he cranked up and pulled out of the parking lot. His next words were so low I barely heard them. "If that wasn't such a real possibility, I'd tear it out of the seat right now." I didn't doubt him. He was clearly considering destroying it anyway.

When his eyes glanced uncertainly at me and I saw them focus on the regular seatbelt, I knew he was mentally weighing my safety against my sanity. In an effort to reassure him, I voluntarily reached for the regular seatbelt and quickly fastened it so he wouldn't have to ask, then offered him a tiny smile. His eyes closed briefly as he inhaled deeply, and then he turned to me with gratitude in his eyes. "Thank you, Bella."

"You're welcome," I murmured. After five minutes of long silence, my next words were even quieter. "I'm sorry."

True to his word, Edward didn't try to strap me back into the harness any more that night. At times, it was almost easy to pretend we were just on a road trip. The more I relaxed, the more Edward relaxed, and we even spent some time laughing and talking like normal.

Near morning, Edward pulled into a hotel that I suspected was much more to his tastes. The front of it looked like a castle. It even had its own gas station, which he pulled into after first bringing me into the lobby to check in with him. He stepped out to refuel the Jeep so he wouldn't have to do it when we needed to leave - especially if we needed to leave in a hurry. But as I watched him get out, my heart suddenly started pounding. Directly beside the hotel, almost in the same parking lot, was a small, brightly lit grocery store. This was my chance.

Stepping out of the Jeep, I made it two steps in that direction before Edward abandoned the gas pump and appeared by my side. He

didn't grab me, but he was certainly poised to. Uncertainty and caution filled his face, and I knew he didn't want to do anything to further convince me that I was a hostage. "Bella? Where are you going?"

I kept my voice calm. "I have to go to the bathroom."

I almost felt sorry for him. He clearly *hated* the idea of me going off alone, but he was afraid of pushing me over the edge again. Why was I insisting on putting him in this position? I didn't know the answer, but I did know that the desire for just one tiny ounce of freedom was almost overwhelming. I'd have to be sure never to break the law - I'd never be able to handle prison.

"We'll be in the room in just a few minutes, Bella," he tried reasonably.

"I know. But I'd just like to look around the store too."

His reaction surprised me. He blinked, and then a split second later his handsome face looked almost overjoyed at my showing interest in something, and my making a request that he could actually grant.

"Of course," his velvet voice smiled happily. "Let me finish here and I'll take you."

"No!" The reaction was automatic, but his face fell and I regretted it instantly. "I mean, I'd just like a few minutes alone. If that's okay." I swallowed hard at the hurt look on his face, but pressed on anyway. "You can read minds, Edward. You already know there's no one dangerous in the area. I'll be fine, and I'll be right back."

He was grinding his teeth at the thought of letting me out of his sight, but I could see I had won. I felt more than a little guilty for manipulating his obvious desire not to have me see him as a prison guard, but still a little giddy at having won a victory. He nodded his assent, and I took off for the store at a near run.

I looked around for a while, trying to decide what to buy. It almost seemed anticlimactic that after all my planning for what to buy for myself, I settled on a simple bottle of water. I went quickly to the front and paid for it with Charlie's card, probably looking like some type of prison escapee. I kept glancing all around, looking for Edward to appear out of nowhere.

Shoving the card deeply back into my pocket, I emerged from the store with my bottle of water, clutching my one little symbol of independence and rebellion very tightly. I spotted the Jeep instantly, parked directly in front of the store in the closest parking space.

But my feet pulled up short when I saw that Edward wasn't in it.

A stab of terror shot through me. Had James found us? Had my insistence on something so childish put Edward in danger?

Suddenly, as desperately as I'd wanted five minutes to myself, I needed Edward back. I was almost ready to scream his name in panic as I spun in a circle looking all around me, when I finally saw him.

He walked toward me at human speed, from the side of the store.

"What are you doing?" I called out in relief, half running toward him.

He just looked at me grimly, the pain in his eyes more evident.

"Waiting where I could watch both doors."

Realization dawned. He'd thought I intended to take off out the back of the store. Two feelings warred for dominance in me: regret at having made him think I was so eager to escape his company, and a little bit of unease at the fact that if I *had* decided to make an escape attempt, I'd have made it no more than 3 steps before I found myself in his unbreakable grasp again. It was a little unnerving. Did he have to think of *everything*?

"Bella?" The tone of his voice had my attention instantly, and my stomach dropped when I saw the look on his face. "How did you buy

that?"

Dumbly, I glanced down at the water in my hands. Mentally, I'd only planned as far as buying something for myself. It'd truly never occurred to me that I'd have to explain it.

"I, um..."

"Did you have some money on you?" he pressed.

Slowly, I nodded. "I...found something in my pocket yesterday," I told him truthfully.

Edward seemed to accept that, though not happily. Putting a hand at my back, he guided me back toward the Jeep, opening my door for me. He sighed as he appeared in the driver's seat. "I wish you had told me you were thirsty, Bella. I'd have been happy to buy you anything you wanted."

My eyes widened. There was a topic I hadn't considered.

Thirst.

I grabbed his arm urgently. "Edward...are *you* thirsty?" I hadn't been paying attention, but I studied him closely as I asked and I knew the answer immediately. He'd been spending so much time with me even before the baseball game that I knew he hadn't been hunting as much as he probably should. He wasn't *dangerously* thirsty yet, but he would be within a few days.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine until this is over."

"So you think your family will find James soon? Are they even looking?"

He'd pulled by this time into a spot in front of the hotel, presumably near our room. Both of his hands gripped the wheel tightly. "Yes, they're looking. I'm sure of it. But it could take some time," he admitted tightly.

My heart pounded in my chest. I wasn't sure how this hadn't occurred to me before. "So what happens when you get *really* thirsty? Edward, you have to hunt at some point."

He looked as uneasy as me, and suddenly I knew that he already had some type of plan for how to deal with that - and that I wouldn't like it. When he did speak, I also knew that was the reason he was more short with me than he'd ever been before.

"I said I'd be fine and I will. Let's not worry about that now. I don't intend for that to happen."

But how could I not worry about it, when I could practically see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to figure out just how badly I'd react to whatever he had already decided to do if - *when* - his thirst became a danger to me and he had to either leave me to hunt, or take me with him.

My headache, irritability and general all-over misery made more sense later that day when Edward tried to wake me up. I'd fallen asleep in my clothes within 15 minutes of entering the hotel room and turning on the TV, and I had no idea how many hours I'd slept.

But at some point it had begun to rain, so he wanted to get back on the road and get even farther away from Forks. I suspected he had some destination in mind, but if he did he hadn't told me.

The thought of getting back into the Jeep made me want to throw up. Rolling away from him in protest, I pulled my knees up to my chest and groaned. I heard his affectionate chuckle as he ramped up his efforts to wake me up.

That was when he pressed his lips to my forehead and realized I had a very high fever. Right after *that* was when I heard a word come out of his lips that I hadn't heard from him before - and it sounded panicked.

Indecision seemed to fill him as he tried to decide if it would be safe to just leave me in the room while he made the short trip to the store I'd been in earlier. The only feeling more predominant on his face was regret, and I knew he blamed himself for my being sick. There was little I could say to that - stress and lack of sleep were almost certainly responsible, and any way that I argued it he would be able to determine that he was *at least* indirectly to blame.

I don't think a single raindrop hit me when a very concerned Edward carried me from the room to the Jeep. I also don't think one hit me during the few steps from the handicapped parking spot where he illegally parked to the entrance of the store. He shielded me too perfectly, glaring fiercely at the one departing customer who had the audacity to give him a dirty look for parking where he had when he was obviously in pretty good shape. He let me walk inside the store myself, but there was very little weight on my feet. Most of it was supported by his arm around my waist.

As he was prone to do, Edward went overboard with purchasing supplies to take care of me. I was too sick to really care, so I didn't say a word. He got me a hot meal from the deli section, a meal that I knew I wouldn't be able to eat. But there would be no point in telling him that, so I wisely kept quiet. He bought detergent, and I somehow knew he probably intended to handwash my clothes for me while I slept so he wouldn't have to leave me to buy anything or use the hotel washer. I still couldn't bring myself to care, so long as he didn't find the card.

When we returned to the room, Edward carried me into the room and laid me on the bed before making an *extremely* quick trip back to the Jeep to bring everything in. While he was gone, I managed to hide the credit card under the cushion in the huge, ornate chair that probably cost more than all the furniture in my bedroom at home. Then I fell right back onto the bed. He was back by then, of course, but I fell asleep immediately.

The next two days passed in a blur. I was vaguely aware of cool hands and lips gently touching my face, my forehead, my arms and hands, almost constantly. I was also aware of unpleasant medicine tastes and being coaxed into swallowing some fluids and some broth.

But the next thing I was truly aware of was waking up, once again dressed in Emmett's soft clothes. Had Edward changed my clothes? It was the only possible answer, and it made me blush. But knowing him, he'd probably done it at vampire speed.

Edward was right there by me, of course, his increasingly black eyes even darker than they probably would have been because of his worry.

"Bella?" he searched my eyes.

"Edward?" I asked, watching the way his worry increased when he heard how hoarse I sounded. I cleared my throat, intending to try again and reassure him, but only managed to strangle myself and was quickly taken by a coughing fit.

I hadn't realized his arm was already under my back holding me until he used it to quickly sit me up, gently rubbing my back with his other hand. "Shhh...easy, Bella. Just breathe." I wondered how often that'd happened in the past couple days.

Not wanting to lie back down, I leaned sideways until I slumped against his chest. "How long?" I managed to rasp.

"Two days," he answered grimly and a little shakily. "You scared me to death, Bella. And that's not easy to do."

"I'm sorry," I rasped, and his arm tightened around me.

"No, *I'm* sorry. This is all my fault. "

I would have told him it wasn't, but a much more horrifying thought struck me when I realized we'd been in one place for 48 hours. I struggled to sit up, clutching at Edward's shirt.

"James!"

Edward soothed me, making soft shushing noises. "Shhh...Bella, please relax. You're very weak. James is nowhere near and neither are my family. I can only assume that they are tracking him instead of pursuing us, and that they are keeping him busy evading them." He kissed my forehead, gently rubbing up and down my arms with his cool hands in an effort to calm me.

I tried to relax, but a million fears were swimming through my still tired and sick brain, giving me a headache again. "How do you know they haven't caught him already?"

"I don't," he told me simply. "I'll call them when we get where we're going. But I'm getting you somewhere safe before I risk communicating with anyone. For now, we're safe here, and this is where we're staying until you're well."

It was another two days before I began to get some of my strength back.

The skies were overcast, so I convinced Edward to take me back to the store. I was beginning to go stir-crazy within the four walls of our room, and I needed some fresh air.

He agreed willingly, and even agreed that we could walk rather than taking the Jeep the short distance across the two parking lots.

Now that I was feeling better, I had been a little less harsh with him about kidnapping me. I still felt flashes of irritation about it, but nothing approaching my earlier fury. He held my hand as we walked, and for just a moment I imagined us being on some grand

adventure, or even a romantic getaway - just going to shop for groceries as a couple.

But that wasn't fated to last long.

Everything changed a moment later as we approached the store from the side, and I saw a familiar looking police cruiser pulling into a parking space in front. To my amazement, my dad got out and briskly walked toward the entrance of the store; tension and worry were evident in his frame.

Not thinking about anything other than making my dad look less miserable, I let go of Edward's hand and took a step forward, opening my mouth to call out to him.

My breath left me in a whoosh as one hard, cold hand landed over my mouth creating an airtight seal, and what felt like an iron band wrapped firmly around my waist. My feet left the ground, only to come to rest again with my back firmly pressed against the brick wall of the store, out of sight of the entrance.

Terrified, I looked up, relaxing only slightly when I saw Edward's face and realized it was he that was holding me in place there, facing me with his body pinning me to the wall. He hadn't hurt me, but he wasn't relaxing his grip in the slightest either. His brow was furrowed in concentration, and I knew he was listening to Charlie's thoughts.

Suddenly, I knew what he was hearing. I was the police chief's daughter, for God's sakes. How had I not thought of this? Charlie had tracked me down with my credit card purchase.

Edward's eyes closed, his jaw muscle jumping repeatedly. He inhaled deeply as though trying to calm himself, but my heartrate raced as every muscle in his body suddenly tensed and his eyes snapped open even darker than before. His deep breath had produced the exact opposite of the intended result. Rather than calming him, it had drawn my scent deeply into his nostrils; and for the first time, I was truly afraid of him.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

I guess we all know he won't really eat her, but things just got worse for Edward and Bella! What will it be like now that he REALLY doesn't trust her (and vice versa), and what's going to happen when he realizes he has to go hunt SOON?

If you're extremely curious about those things, make me write faster! Write a review. I promise they motivate me. :)

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

The growling started low in Edward's chest, his black eyes fixed on me. His head leant closer to me, where his hand was still clamped across my mouth, as he deeply inhaled again. His body pinned me to the wall, pushing me even more firmly against it when I made a token attempt at fighting him. Putting down my small resistance was so easy for him that I wasn't even sure he was aware he had done it. I could neither move nor scream - only passively wait to see if he was stronger than the bloodlust that currently consumed him. I couldn't even plead with him.

I felt the tears well up in my eyes, felt one splash down my face to his hand as I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to watch the love of my life give in to the pull to destroy me.

Suddenly, the growling stopped abruptly. The silence was worse, as I held my breath and waited for the piercing pain of his teeth through my skin, whimpering when it took longer than I expected. Was he toying with me? I didn't dare open my eyes to find out.

But the pain never came.

An agonized sound suddenly ripped out of his throat. He still had hold of me the same way, but his voice sounded farther away. Daring to open my eyes, I came face to face with his tortured expression. His frighteningly black eyes weren't looking at *me*, per se. They were fixated on a tiny drop of liquid on his hand - my tear - as he leaned as far away from me as he could while still maintaining his grip on me. I knew without having to ask that he wasn't breathing. His struggle for self-control was all too evident.

" *Bella...* " My name was partly groan, partly pure horror, and I knew the danger wasn't entirely over yet. He didn't have to tell me what he

was thinking; I already knew. During the two days I'd been sick, his thirst had increased to a dangerous level, something which neither of us had paid as much attention to as we should have. But now he was so *close* to killing me. I knew how'd he take it later - not well. Strangely, in that moment I was more worried about him than I was myself.

But before I could even blink he tensed again, moving rapidly back toward me. I almost panicked until I saw that something else had caught his attention this time. His eyes had grown wide, unfocused, his face lined with heavy concentration. And then suddenly instead of pushing me against the wall, he was pulling me against him. He kept his one hand clamped over my mouth, but the other arm that had been pushing me up against the wall was suddenly around me, holding me against him, shielding me. His eyes darted around wildly. In a heartbeat his actions had gone from aggressive to protective.

His eyes were still haunted and blacker than coal when they met mine, and I thought he was going to say something else to me - beg my forgiveness, or even yell at me about Charlie's credit card. But without warning, the wall was suddenly no longer at my back. My feet were off the ground as he swept me up in one arm. Everything was a blur until suddenly I was standing in our hotel room. Edward himself was almost still a blur as he swiftly gathered my clothes, toiletries, and the medicine he'd bought for me. I stood frozen in place, watching him dumbly and trying to keep up - near paralyzed in shock. As he threw things in the bag, he seemed to be looking for something.

Finally, he looked straight at me and spoke, his voice sending a shudder through me as he glared at me, seeming annoyed that he had to stop moving so quickly and ask.

"Where is it?" he asked darkly. "Tell me quickly, Bella, there's little time."

I didn't have to ask what he was talking about. Meekly, I pointed at the chair where I had hid Charlie's credit card just before passing out

for two days.

Fingers ripping through the cushion in his haste, he found the card quickly - almost as quickly as he snapped it in two between his fingers and shoved the pieces in his pocket.

"We have to go. Now." His voice was hard, cold, impersonal, and I felt myself finally begin to tremble as I went into what was probably near-dangerous shock. Had I pushed him too far?

Or had he pushed *me* too far?

As surely as the plastic card that had represented my independence, I snapped completely in two, backing away from him.

"No! I'm not going! I can't do this anymore. I want to see my dad. I'm going to see Charlie!"

Foolishly, I turned toward the door; I should have known Edward was too fast for me. He was already packed, so he just grabbed my arm and allowed my forward motion to continue, half dragging me out the door behind him.

"No!" I protested. "I said I'm not..." That was as far as I got before he let go of my bicep to grab me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and clamping his hand over my mouth again. Before I knew it, he was pushing me in through the driver's door of the Jeep, dropping me into the passenger seat. Firm though he was, he had still inflicted no pain other than the brief moment outside the store when he'd pushed me too hard against the wall as he almost killed me. Vaguely, it struck me just how much control he must be exercising, to manage not to hurt me at the same time that he was manhandling me.

He let go of my mouth as soon as the door closed behind him, and didn't seem too worried about the noise level as I completely lost it and started screaming for him to let me go. He just firmly gripped my left wrist in his hard, cold hand as he cranked the Jeep and spun out

of the parking spot and onto the road so fast it made me dizzy. He didn't even blink when I screamed for Charlie at the top of my lungs, beating on the window with my free hand as we flew past the store onto the main highway. It occurred to me that since their vehicles were modified in every *other* way to be as strong as the vampires who owned them, they were probably practically soundproof too. Maybe even bulletproof. And missileproof. Though why they needed any of the above, I couldn't be sure.

Desperate not to be taken away when Charlie was so close and in obvious pain, I fought desperately to escape. It was useless, of course. When I used my right hand to try to open the door, Edward simply let go of the wheel long enough to reach over and capture it with his left, quickly transferring it to his right with my other one so that he now held both of my wrists easily in one hand. He accelerated quickly, and was soon driving one-handed faster than I'd seen him drive yet.

"No! Edward, *please!* Please take me back! We have to go back!" Tears streamed down my face as I pleaded with him.

Everything seemed to hit me at once, including fear that I'd seen my dad for the last time. And what a horrible way to remember him - face drawn and pinched with worry, but desperately hopeful that he would find a clue at the store where someone had used the credit card he'd given to his daughter.

And then there was the fact that in the span of five minutes I'd gone from happily imagining myself on a romantic getaway with my boyfriend, to being confronted head-on by my dad's grief, to having said boyfriend almost kill me, and now I was a prisoner again.

"Please...please...I need to go home!" I was openly sobbing at this point, no longer fighting him - just breaking down completely. "I have to go home, Edward. Charlie needs me. And Mom...please!" At the thought of Renee's free spirit being broken by my disappearance, I was completely overwhelmed and only sobbed harder. "Oh God...I'm going to be sick. Please stop!"

His hands tightened slightly on my wrists, in a way that told me my pleas were affecting him. His voice was as tight and drawn as I'd ever heard it.

"I can't, Bella. We can't stop." His eyes stayed on the road, but his voice began to sound strangled. "Please stop begging me... *please*." The last word was whispered. "You don't understand."

"Yes, we *can* stop!" I begged anyway, completely past any point of reason. I'd reached my limits and could take no more. "I need to see Charlie. It's okay. We can explain it to him. He'll understand," I babbled incoherently, crying more desperately by the second. It was a miracle he could make sense of what I was saying.

"Bella, you don't understand!" Edward was practically shouting, but not from anger. I dazedly recognized the same panicked frustration I'd seen in him right before he took me. "You led him right to us!"

My head shook back and forth frantically, my heart pounding faster by the moment. "No - no, just to the store. He didn't see us. But please, Edward, you've got to let me at least talk to him!"

"I'm not talking about your father, Bella!" Edward's frustration and fear boiled over; he hit the wheel for emphasis, terrifying me that he would lose control of the Jeep at 150 miles per hour. He didn't, of course, but I did suddenly notice how closely he was watching *everything* around us. "That's why we haven't seen James. He's been tracking Charlie, and he followed him here. You led James right to us!"

Suddenly all I was aware of was a roaring sound inside my head, like a white noise that enveloped me in a tunnel and could only allow one thought: Charlie. James had followed Charlie. My father was at the mercy of a vampire who would stop at nothing to find me - including torturing or killing my dad. And instead of protecting him, Edward was driving in the opposite direction, with me as his prisoner.

Charlie was going to die.

And then, mercifully, the white noise was joined by blackness as I mentally shut down and knew nothing more, passing out and slumping over against the passenger door.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Eventually, I became aware of a rhythmically repetitive sound, coming from far away - maybe from some deep, dark tunnel.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The noise was coming closer, but I didn't want it to. I was happy where I was. I didn't even *know* where I was, but I liked it: nothing was there. It was comfortingly empty.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Slowly, against my wishes, I felt myself pushing my way to consciousness - almost as though I was fighting through layer after layer of thick wool surrounding my brain. It would be so much easier to simply stay wrapped in the wool, but something was pulling me toward awareness. I knew without a doubt what that something was:

Edward.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I was consumed by the desire to see him, to know that he was okay. I couldn't remember exactly why as I pushed my way up through the fog, but I had the sense that he had been in danger. Something danced right at the edge of my mind, but I couldn't grasp it.

I only knew I needed to wake up.

So I did.

And the tapping stopped immediately, before I ever moved - as though it *knew*.

I found myself on a very, very soft bed - a *huge* bed, solid wood and four-poster. No, actually, I wasn't *on* the bed. I was definitely *in* the bed, tucked in with soft, warm blankets, my head pillowed on what must be very high-quality pillows. It was close to what I imagined resting on a cloud must be like.

But that wasn't what captured my immediate attention.

No, the very first thing I noticed was so much more important than that...

I was alone.

Edward wasn't leaning over me, murmuring into my ear or brushing hair off of my forehead. My hand wasn't in his, and his arms weren't around me.

"Edward!" I called out and sat bolt upright, panicked, suddenly remembering why I had been afraid for him. James. James was looking for us. Had he hurt Edward? He must have, if he wasn't with me. But then, if that was true, why was I...alive?

"I'm here, Bella," I heard, so quietly that I almost thought I'd imagined it. Looking around wildly, I finally found him. He sat against the far wall, as far as he could be from me in the spacious, opulent room we occupied. He sat on the ground, one leg straight out and the other foot planted flat with the knee facing the ceiling. His head was thrown back against the wall, as though holding it up was too much effort. One arm rested across the one upturned knee, and the other arm hung casually down his side to the floor beside his hip. His expression was anything but casual, however. I sucked in a sharp gasp as I took in his appearance.

"Edward?" I asked him tentatively. His face looked haggard, if such a beautiful face can. He had clearly had his hands in his hair, pulling and running through it many times in frustration or agony. His shirt was partially untucked, the laces of one shoe untied. But nothing struck me more harshly than his empty, haunted eyes. Dark circles

stood out under them, in stark relief to his pale skin. He didn't respond this time, now that he'd let me know where he was. He simply dropped his head sideways, staring down at the one hand that was on the floor.

It was then that I saw the source of my strange *tap, tap, tapping* sound: he held one of the pieces of Charlie's credit card in his hand, where he'd been idly tapping it against the floor - the type of nervous gesture I wasn't used to from him. I wondered what thoughts had tortured him as he held it: had he been wondering if I'd been *trying* to lead Charlie to us? Was he angry with me? No, I concluded...he wasn't angry at me. He was worried about me. How long had I been out?

Needing to reassure him - and myself - I spoke softly. "It's all right, Edward. I'm okay. I'm fine now."

"I know," he told me, again too quietly. "I've been listening to your heartbeat. To your...breathing." His voice broke twice...once on the word heartbeat, and once on the word breathing. Both seemed to bother him. Something danced on the edge of my memory - something that I felt like I should remember but simply couldn't - something that would explain why the thought of my heartbeat seemed to suddenly cause him pain.

Rhythmically, maddeningly, he began tapping the broken piece of plastic against the floor again. "I'd apologize for waking you with this, but...well, I wouldn't mean it. I'm certain that was my intention." He sounded too dead, too empty. "I finally realized that the sound of my voice and my presence was only driving you farther away. This was all I had." He still wouldn't look at me.

"Edward..." Carefully, not trusting my limbs, I pushed the covers back and shakily stood. I crossed to his side, trying to kneel in front of him. But as soon as I got too close, his hand shot out and grabbed my arm, holding me at arm's distance. The card in his hand clattered to the ground, forgotten.

"Stay back, Bella," he warned darkly.

Suddenly, *that* memory came flooding back as well, and I knew what was bothering him.

Outside the store. Edward, deeply inhaling to calm himself and instead getting a lungful of my scent. He'd very nearly killed me. Accepting his boundary, I sat on the floor a few feet from him but didn't retreat any further.

"It wasn't your fault," I whispered, and he scoffed bitterly, a humorless combination between a grin and a grimace contorting his handsome features.

"Wouldn't have made much difference, would it?" Shaking his head, he squeezed his eyes shut. "I almost *killed* you today, Bella. You have no idea how close..." His voice trailed off, his eyes opening to search mine. Without warning, suddenly his restraining hand on my arm disappeared and I heard a loud crack. I jumped and flinched away from him, realizing seconds later that he'd punched the ground by his leg. The beautiful hardwood floor in what I could only assume was the highest priced hotel suite imaginable now had a hole in it from his fist.

When his eyes met my face again, I wished I'd kept my startled reaction to myself. He only added frightening me to his list of crimes, a bitter smile of resignation ghosting across his lips as he shook his head minutely. "I was kidding myself, Bella, to ever think that I could be anything but poison to you."

Suddenly, I didn't care about his boundaries. Pushing closer to him, I threw my arms around his neck recklessly. "No! Don't you do that! Edward, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me! You're..."

"Shhhh..." Gently, he pried me off of him, laying a finger across my lips to stop my stream of panicked speech. His eyes were bottomless in their sadness. "Don't worry, love. I'm still going to make you safe. I'm not going anywhere until you're safe."

I wasn't entirely reassured by that word 'until', but he was here now and his reference to my safety brought up more pressing concerns as one more memory jolted through my overtaxed brain.

"James! How - what - did he - you said he was behind us! Where..."

Edward nodded slowly, studying my face warily as though wondering how much more I could handle.

"He was. He came into range where I could read his thoughts just after Charlie entered the store."

"Charlie!" I gasped. My mind must have shut that part out, but it hit me with even harder force the second time around. "Oh, God, my dad! Did he..."

Edward shook his head, dark eyes locked to my face, but I noticed that he made no move to physically comfort me as he normally would. "No. He has no intention of harming Charlie. He's rather enjoying stretching the game out, taking his time - letting your own father do the work. The irony appeals to his sadistic senses."

Edward's lips curled back, baring his teeth, and I knew exactly what he thought of James' sick pleasure with the idea of my own father being the one to sign my death warrant by finding me. I saw the effort it took to get control of himself before he continued.

"And there's something else there too, but...he didn't think clearly enough of it for me to be sure. Like something's chasing *him* as well. I can only assume that my family's been tracking him, shadowing him; and then when he got too close to Charlie they made a move. I would assume that's why James broke off following us from the store so abruptly and then disappeared again: he must have sensed my family was close, although they never got close enough for me to hear."

"Or maybe we just outran him," I offered, trying to calm the rapid beating of my heart and the panic that threatened to overtake me.

The overly careful way that he searched my face, gauging my ability to handle what he had to say, made my blood run cold. This was the worst of it, I was sure.

"What?" I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

His lips pressed into a thin line, and ever so briefly he reached toward me before dropping his hand without ever touching me. His voice was grim. "Bella, we shouldn't have been able to outrun him. Not like that. He was almost on top of us by the time I got you in the Jeep. I thought he would attack at any moment. He *intended* to."

My breath caught in my throat, as my subconscious began to debate whether or not to give back in to the seductive pull of unconsciousness. Knowing James had been so close was nearly enough to shove me back over the edge. But then Edward abruptly switched gears.

"I'm so sorry, Bella. That's the reason I couldn't stop when you felt sick. And then when you..."

His hands came up to his face, his head dropping into them as he groaned, no longer touching me. "I had to drive for an hour with you unconscious, before James finally disappeared. I drove another 30 minutes before we got here. It still seemed too close to stop, but you..."

I pulled at his hands, and he allowed me to remove them from his face, gratefully taking hold of mine and gripping them in his own. He brought one to his lips, closing his eyes as he kissed it. Relief flooded me as he allowed that contact, and then again when he continued to hold my hand and rested his forehead against it. "Bella...these have been the longest two hours of my existence. I called your name so many times, but you just...you wouldn't even look at me. You just..." He bit his lip, shaking his head, and then ever so gently released one of my hands and brought a finger to my face to trace it down my cheek. If he'd been able to produce tears, I was certain he'd be doing so.

"My Bella...where were you? Where did you go?" he finally whispered, his voice breaking.

I didn't even know the answer to that one. Clearly, I'd been in worse shape than I thought. To me, it'd been nothing more than a pleasant sleep. I couldn't help wonder what Edward had seen. Had my eyes been open? Had I stared wordlessly, sightlessly at him? Vaguely, I thought that perhaps I remembered him calling my name; remembered the sound of crashes and growls and pleas and whimpers of agony. Everything had just been too much - I had just shut down to protect myself. But I could hardly ask Edward what had happened, not in his condition; he didn't need anything else to feel guilty for.

"Nowhere," I reassured him breathlessly, still unsure about how much I should touch him at his current level of thirst. "I'm not *going* anywhere. I'm right here. I'm fine." Taking a deep breath and gathering my courage, I volunteered for the last thing I wanted to do - getting back in the Jeep. "We can even go, if we need to. I'm fine. We can get back on the road right now."

If anything, Edward looked more miserable. He turned his head, looking sideways past me. I followed his gaze, gasping at the gorgeous view in front of me. Almost one full wall of the huge room was made of glass, looking out into one of the most magnificent forests I'd ever seen. I hadn't noticed it before - I'd only been looking for Edward. But even in the midst of our horrifying situation, the beauty made my breath catch in my throat.

"Oh...Edward...it's beautiful."

Again, he looked at me with those eyes that seemed to be trying to assess just how much I could deal with. "It's one of Carlisle's many real estate holdings," he told me carefully. "I've lived here many times. The property backs up to the forest, and it's very secluded. Nothing for miles."

Slowly, I began to catch up with why we were still here. Suddenly, I sat a little straighter. "Oh."

"I have to hunt," Edward confirmed hoarsely when he saw my understanding, sounding as though he was confessing to a crime. "Leaving you is incredibly dangerous, but I can't risk *this* anymore either. I should be strong enough to stay with you, but Bella I'm not. I'm too weak, and yet still a thousand times stronger than you. I'm as dangerous to you as James at this point."

"So you're...taking me with you?" My voice shook, suddenly unsure if I wanted to see Edward on the attack after coming so close to being a meal myself.

His eyes closed, his shoulders falling. "You know I can't. You have to stay here."

The idea of being left alone when James had been so close earlier was frightening, but I wasn't about to ask Edward to stay when he so clearly needed to go. "I'll be fine here," I assured him, trying very hard to mean it. "I won't try to leave."

Edward exhaled deeply, opening his eyes with a new look of firm resolve in them that was almost frightening. More frightening was the fact that that firm look was focused on the ground in front of him. He refused to meet my eyes, and he looked like a prisoner on his way to the gallows. His voice sounded strangely dead when he spoke.

"I know you won't leave, Bella. I'm going to make sure of it." Finally, he met my eyes, but what I saw there was no comfort. "You may never speak to me again after this, and I regret that more than I can tell you. But you've left me no choice. Your safety is more important."

I inched backward away from him a little bit. "What...what do you mean?"

He leaned away from the wall now, beginning to close the distance between us. His eyes burned into mine.

"I can't hear your thoughts, Bella. If I could, it wouldn't be an issue. Even if you ran, I could find you before James could. This wouldn't be necessary."

In a sudden panic, I scrambled to my feet, backing away. What the hell wouldn't be necessary? A shiver ran down my spine when I saw how dark his eyes were. A sudden panic ran through me that maybe he intended to feed from *me*...

Edward sprung lightly to his own feet - seeming very much the stalking predator all of a sudden - but still with that same look of dread on his face. He seemed desperate for me to understand, but I still had no idea why. I couldn't make my throat form words; fortunately - or unfortunately, depending on your perspective - he was still talking.

"But I *can't* hear you. I can't know what you're planning, or what you're doing when you're out of sight. I can no longer afford to simply trust you in this situation, Bella. Doing so has already endangered you once. I can't let that happen again."

Okay, I knew what *that* part meant. Wincing, I glanced down at the pieces of Charlie's credit card, abandoned on the floor when he had jumped up.

Like the victim in some kind of slasher movie, I decided to try bargaining. "Edward...I wasn't trying to lead Charlie to us. I just hated the idea of you paying for everything. Really. It's okay. You can trust me."

His eyes closed. "Stop, Bella," he cut me off, and it occurred to me that he'd probably heard similarly ineffectual pleas from humans in his past - most likely ones he'd killed. The thought was a chilling one. "I *do* trust you, with everything but this. You didn't intend to endanger yourself. But you did. Surely you understand that with a monster like James after you, I can't take that risk again. I *have* to know you'll be where I left you when I return."

He had gone eerily still, but I continued backing away...for all of another 3 steps, before his eyes snapped open and his body tensed. He must have been building his resolve...

"I'm so sorry, Bella. I'll understand if you can't...but I'm begging you to forgive me for this."

I opened my mouth to scream, but never got the chance.

Suddenly, I landed on the bed, flat on my back. There was no *oomph* to it...I had been picked up and then set down as gently as a carton of eggs, which was nothing short of miraculous considering the speed with which it happened. But before I even had a chance to ponder what I was doing there or why, I felt what I *thought* was the icy cold of Edward's hand settling around my wrist and pulling it over my head.

But it couldn't have been his hand, I realized quickly - because his hand closing around my wrist wasn't usually accompanied by the sound of metal ratcheting shut, click by rapid click. Being the police chief's daughter I should probably recognize that sound, but then again I'd never really accompanied Charlie on many arrests, either...

But I still thought I had a pretty damn good idea of what it was.

My sudden suspicion was confirmed when I realized that the icy coldness was still around my wrist, despite the fact that Edward had now backed several paces away from the bed, looking incredibly nervous and uncomfortable.

Holy freakin' crow...Edward had just handcuffed me to the bed - specifically, my right wrist to one of the tall posts of the headboard, with my arm stretched out over my head. I was so shocked I didn't even move at first.

"Edward! What the hell!"

He winced, but didn't back down. "I don't like this any more than you do, Bella, I assure you. This is strictly for your safety. Please don't be concerned that I have any less than honorable intentions."

I just stared at him, and very nearly rolled my eyes as I finally translated that one into 21st century English. *He* thought that *I* thought that he...oh. *Riiiiight*. Yeah, like *that* was on my list of worries.

I'd never heard him babble before, but that was definitely what he started doing as he backed another step away, misconstruing my silence for doubt of his intentions. "You have my word that I won't take advantage of you. I'll be back very soon, and I'll release you immediately. I don't intend to venture very far. I'll be listening for James, so if he comes anywhere near I can be back almost instantly."

As only one wrist was secured, I quickly realized that I could twist sideways and sit up or even stand by the bed, albeit awkwardly. I quickly maneuvered so I could sit up, my face turning brilliant red - from fury, for once, rather than embarrassment.

"Dammit, Edward, where the hell did you get *handcuffs*, and what makes you think you have the right to *use them on me*? " was all I managed to splutter, noting absently that my language was deteriorating rapidly.

He sighed in embarrassment, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Does it matter where I got them? The sooner I leave, Bella, the sooner I can return and release you."

I just glared at him, so he dropped his hands to his sides in frustration and answered me. "Fine. I got them *here*. All of our homes are incredibly well-supplied, with anything you might imagine. Carlisle's had centuries to accumulate all manner of antique collections, most with some functional use in an emergency situation. While living here, he maintained a collection of military antiques. These are from that collection."

My gaze finally turned to the cold steel around my wrist. They were nothing like the ones Charlie wore on his police uniform. Much heavier and darker, they *looked* antique - and military - but still very, very functional. My pale wrist looked tiny in the bulky dark metal. I felt my eyes grow huge as I looked up at him, all the color washing out of my face. We stared at each other for a moment, and his features filled with even more concern as he took in my pale appearance. A flicker of doubt crossed his features, as though he was seriously beginning to question the wisdom of this decision.

"Bella? Please, please say something," he begged, his voice strained.

"Please, please tell me you have the key," I whispered in return.

He actually almost grinned at that one, just a ghost of an expression across his face. "I hardly need one. Those may be very sturdy, but they're no match for me. But to answer your question, yes, I have the key in my pocket." I relaxed, and he followed suit, his tone turning conversational. "I'm simply relieved that I remembered Carlisle's collection stored in the garage. When I realized a few days ago that I'd eventually have to leave you to hunt, I had planned to use the ropes in the back of the Jeep to secure you. This will allow you to be much more comfortable."

A few days ago? A few *days* ago? He had *planned*?

My jaw fell open as reality slammed into my chest. I'd been angry enough when I thought I'd brought this all on myself by going behind his back with Charlie's card. I could almost accept his reasoning on that. But suddenly I realized that this had absolutely *nothing* to do with that. This was what he'd meant when I'd originally brought up the topic of him having to hunt and he had reacted so strangely - this was the thing he'd dreaded. He'd never intended to leave me unrestrained even *before* I broke his trust.

" You've been *PLANNING* this all along? "

Unhelpfully, he froze into place.

I just stared at him for all of two seconds. And then, for the second time in one day, I completely snapped.

"NO! No, no, no, no, no!" Without even thinking about it, I started viciously yanking my hand in an effort to free myself. Sharp pain registered, but it wasn't enough to make me stop. Twisting so that I could stand by the bed, I began to put all of my weight into trying to pull my hand free, grunting and pulling over and over again as hard as I could. There was no give at all, but still I pulled, oblivious to the pain.

"Bella!"

Suddenly, my hand was immobilized in a firm grip, stopping me from pulling anymore. He managed to grab both my wrist and the handcuff chain in the same hand, so that there was no longer a possibility of me injuring my wrist any further by straining against the bindings. When I continued to fight, strong arms wrapped around me from behind, pinning my upper arms to my sides, with the bottom part of the cuffed arm still stretching toward the bedpost below the point he gripped me.

"Bella, *stop!* You're hurting yourself! "

Still holding me from behind, one of his hands tenderly lifted my cuffed wrist, turning it easily but carefully despite my struggles so that he could see the damage.

"Oh, Bella..." I heard him sigh. I felt cool hands gently touching the skin around the cuff, examining it. That stopped my tantrum long enough to look up and over my shoulder into Edward's guilty eyes.

"What?" I snapped.

He made an unhappy sound. "Look at this. You're going to hurt yourself if I leave this on you."

I felt a little victorious. At least he realized *that* . He had seen reason and wasn't going to leave me restrained.

Or so I thought...until Edward suddenly disappeared from the room and then reappeared before I could even panic about the fact that he'd left me cuffed to the bed after all. And then without warning I was flat on my back again on the bed, my still-cuffed right arm stretched back over my head. In a panic I tried to push myself up, but came up against solid resistance.

That was the moment I realized that Edward was now kneeling above me on the bed, straddling my waist. He put no weight on me - didn't even touch me unless I bucked up into him - but his solid bulk effectively prevented me from rising to a sitting position. His arms reached up over my head, doing something to the headboard.

I didn't know what he was trying to do, and I didn't care. The feeling of being trapped took over, and I started bucking, kicking, twisting, and doing everything I could to escape. Something cold wrapped around my free wrist, and for one outraged moment I thought he'd put another cuff on me before I realized that this time it was his hand.

"Edward! Whatever you're doing, stop it and *get off of me!* "

My struggles intensified...and that was *before* I saw the loops of rope in his hand...

Before I could even question him, my 'free' left hand was securely wrapped in soft rope and tied to the post behind me on my left side.

As I stared at him in shock, Edward raised up and reached into his pocket, his eyes grim. I bucked wildly fighting my bonds, and his hand shot out to grab the handcuff chain before I could hurt myself again. Before I knew it, the steel cuff was falling empty to the bed and my right wrist was free. But not for long. Before I could even pull away from him, something soft wrapped around it - to protect the skin I'd chafed, I realized later when I'd calmed down some and was

thinking more clearly - and then more rope looped around and over that padding as my right wrist received the same treatment as the left, and soon was tied to the bedpost behind my right shoulder - slightly looser around that wrist, but no less secure. The knots were all positioned perfectly out of reach of my questing fingers, my arms well separated so they couldn't reach the knots on the opposite arm. I was there until he decided to untie me. Great. One more thing Edward did well.

This time, with both wrists tied, I couldn't even sit up - despite the fact that Edward had quickly got off of me the moment that both wrists were fully secured to the headboard. So that was what he meant about the handcuffs being more comfortable; with the ropes he felt compelled to secure *both* hands so I couldn't untie myself while he was gone. I *would* have been better off with the cuffs. I was getting really, really tired of making my own situation worse.

Still he leaned over me, adjusting things here and there, for almost another minute. With a disgusted sigh, I eventually relaxed into the soft bed, closed my eyes and stopped fighting him. I was so angry I couldn't even look at him.

Eventually he must have been satisfied, and I heard him slowly back away. I knew he had intentionally *let* me hear him, to let me know where he was. It certainly wasn't as though he couldn't move silently.

"If anything should happen, Bella...just yell my name. I'll hear you. I can only imagine what you think of me right now, but I'm still safer than the alternative. Please, please call me if you need me. I'll be close."

My eyes and mouth both opened at the same time, but before I even got a word out I saw him disappear out the large glass window into the forest.

The last thing I heard was one more whisper of, "Forgive me."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

So...before anybody tells me Edward would never tie Bella up even for her safety, I bring into evidence page 537 of Eclipse...Edward, speaking to Bella when they're on top of the mountain as the big battle begins: *"If I didn't truly believe that, I would be down there now - and you'd be here, chained to a tree or something along those lines."*

So yeah, it's in character. Not saying I think it's the *best* idea, but the whole point is sort of how far he's willing to go...

And also...c'mon, guys! Hardly any of you who have alerted or favorited have reviewed. If you had any idea how many times a day I check the review count, you'd take pity on me and review. I'm eternally grateful to the ones who *have* reviewed, especially the couple of you who review each chapter. You are my heroes. :)

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

I couldn't help it.

I had made up my mind not to cry anymore. After all, it wasn't as though my 'captor' intended to harm me - far, far from it. I was safe, even lying bound to the headboard of this ridiculously sturdy and probably massively expensive bed. The childish, petulant thought ripped a snort from my lips as I gave one more ineffective tug with all my might, a move which netted me exactly nothing: Stupid rich vampires and their elegant tastes; only the finest, strongest wood would do for securing their fragile humans *against their will* .

But still, I was safe - almost ridiculously so. Edward was so far gone with worry for me at this point that I had no doubt he wouldn't allow so much as a fly to touch me. My *father* was safe, too, according to Edward; Carlisle and the rest of Edward's family were seeing to that, he believed, and I believed *him* . So I didn't need to cry about my own safety, or Charlie's.

And yeah, when this was eventually over and Edward released me back to Charlie, I was going to be grounded for the rest of forever; but at least, if I *did* decide not to kill Edward for all of this, I'd still have a boyfriend who could silently let himself straight into my room every night anyway, so what did even that matter?

But as I lay there, I became more uncomfortable by the second - not because I was losing circulation or experiencing muscle strain, because I wasn't. I knew that he had been *extraordinarily* cautious to make sure that wouldn't happen. I had, in fact, helplessly lain there refusing to watch while he went to great lengths to doublecheck that the loops around my wrists weren't too tight and that I had enough slack to move around some while still not being able to reach the very tightly tied knots...as though I had any hope of picking loose a

vampire strength knot anyway. No, it was more the fact that I *couldn't* get up. It was definitely more of a mental thing.

And did it make me absolutely *the* most horrible person in the world to be just a tiny bit irritated that I'd managed to fall in love with the *one* unbelievably gorgeous vampire on the face of the planet who could tie his girlfriend down to a bed in a secluded forest mansion without even *thinking* about the possibilities for making that a *fun* thing? No, it was all about *safety*. In retrospect, for just a second I wanted to laugh. Only Edward...

That impulse died out quickly as the enormity of the past days hit me.

The first helpless sobs annoyed me; after that, the remainder of my sobs were almost entirely fueled by pure *frustration* with the whole situation, along with a healthy dose of anger at Edward for leaving me like this. Before I knew it, I was halfway to full-fledged hysterics as I tugged harder at the ropes holding me down - a bad idea, because the wrist I'd injured with the handcuffs was beginning to swell as I continued to yank on it, aggravating the injury.

My breakdown continued for quite some time, leaving me puffy eyed and miserable. It went on and on...at least until I heard the sound of what must be the front door to the house opening. That silenced me and froze me in place pretty fast.

James...it had to be. But *how*? Edward had promised to stay close enough to hear James' thoughts. How could he have found me?

Instinctively, I jerked hard against the ropes holding me to the bed, but even in the sudden violence of my now frantic struggles there was absolutely no give. There was only one hope I could think of, but I had no way of knowing if it would work. If Edward wasn't close enough to hear James, he wasn't close enough to hear me scream, either. But I would yell his name in terror, and just pray that he could reach me before James could do something to me that not even

vampire venom could save me from...and just hope there were no innocent hunters or hikers nearby to hear my screams, try to intervene, and become dessert for their trouble.

But before the terrified shriek could even leave my throat, it died there - as the locked door to the room I occupied was forced open in one quick, surprisingly quiet movement.

I didn't bother to look up at James entering. What good would it do? As though the ropes made me any more helpless against him - which in reality I knew they most certainly did *not* - my attention had turned to desperately (and pointlessly) trying to get my fingers just the extra half inch they needed to reach the knots, my breath coming in terrified gasps and sobs as I waited for the snarl that would signal the end of my life.

The low whistle of surprise that I heard instead caused my terrified eyes to swing around to the door, to the three forms that now stood just inside it - Carlisle, Esme, and Emmett. I'm not sure whose eyes were widest - mine or theirs. A lingering hysterical sob escaped my lips as I gasped once for air, and then all was quiet as I finally started to realize that I was safe and wasn't about to be killed after all.

The flabbergasted whistle of surprise, clearly, had come from Emmett, and it was his face I was first drawn to even though he stood in the rear of the group. His stance was defensive - he had his parents' backs if trouble followed them into the house. He didn't speak, but his eyes ran over me and I knew he was looking for any sign of blood or damage. I also knew from his uncharacteristically frowning face that if he found any, he'd be the *second* person in line to get a piece of his brother - me being the first, probably while he held him for me. Even though I didn't feel particularly violent toward Edward, the feeling of Emmett's brotherly protectiveness was a calming one. I'd never expected to fall in love with a vampire, much less have another one for a big brother. I found that I rather liked the idea of both. Already, I felt less hysterical.

Now if one of the vampires would just untie me...

My attention next turned to Esme's face, which was completely unreadable. Like Emmett, she was utterly speechless. Had vampires been able to go into shock, I'm quite certain she would have needed to be treated for it. In retrospect, I assume that's understandable. After all, did *any* mother really want to wander in to a room where her son was staying, only to find his girlfriend tied to the bed, hyperventilating and desperately trying to escape, complete with a panicked look and a tear-streaked face? No, probably not. I wanted desperately to calm her concerns, but speech was beyond me at that point.

Carlisle was the first to speak. He stood at the front point of the little triangle they formed, his gorgeous amber eyes radiating both disappointment and understanding in equal measure.

"Oh, Edward," he uttered the first thought through his mind, on a heavy sigh, as his eyes briefly closed and he slightly shook his head.

He was then at my side before I had even noticed him moving. I jumped, flinching away and whimpering as my all-too-human eyes finally adjusted and saw Carlisle suddenly standing there over me, my reaction heightened by the adrenaline still surging through me. But Carlisle immediately withdrew the hands that already reached toward my bonds, misinterpreting my reaction.

His mouth fell open slightly and he exchanged a loaded look with Esme - who seemed to have recovered somewhat and now had her lips pressed into a thin angry line - before turning his eyes back to me with even deeper concern in them.

"It's all right, Bella," he assured me, holding his hands out to his sides with his palms forward, a gesture one might make as they approached a frightened or injured animal. He made no move toward me. "We won't hurt you. I won't hurt you. I'm just going to untie you, okay?"

Shaking my head furiously and feeling my entire face blush pink, I tried to explain my reaction. I failed, epicly.

"No, it's...I just didn't...this isn't what...he didn't..."

But my disjointed explanation made sense to *somebody*, at least, even if Carlisle and Esme still looked like they couldn't decide whether they should dismember and permanently confine their son *immediately*, or *after* he had a chance to explain. Esme looked like she was leaning toward 'immediately.'

Before I could even stop rambling enough to explain that Edward *oh-my-god-are-you-crazy-how-could-you-think-that* hadn't done anything to hurt me, I heard a deep chuckle announcing that Emmett had appeared by the bed next to Carlisle and finally had something to say. It was probably some type of miracle that it had taken *that* long; but it was clear that, even in his crudeness, Emmett had now read between the lines of my rambling explanation and knew Edward hadn't harmed me in any way. He was back to his normal happy-go-lucky self. Now he just looked amused as he reached down and picked up the forgotten handcuffs that still lay on the bed beside me, twirling them around his finger. He also looked impressed.

" *Damn* , Edward. *Kinky* . Didn't see that one coming."

Okay, so maybe he'd just gotten the wrong idea in a completely *different* direction. Typical Emmett. I blushed even pinker.

His big-brotherly delight was all too plain to see, and I suspected the only thing that could have made it better for him was having Edward there to hear it.

Carlisle, unlike Emmett, was less than amused, especially when he saw - and most likely smelled - my furious blush.

" *Emmett!*" I had never heard the calm, unflappable doctor sound so frustrated or impatient. For a half second, as he turned to glare at Emmett and snatch away the antique cuffs, I could actually imagine this gentle creature as a terrifying...vampire. The bulky metal disappeared out of my sight for the last time - Carlisle had put them somewhere out of sight so quickly that I didn't even see it.

"Sorry, Bella," Emmett told me, almost managing to sound remorseful for the split second before his lip jerked back upward. "But c'mon, you've got to admit...I mean, it's *Edward*..."

At that point, the only thing that could have surprised me more than Carlisle's ferocity was the furious snarl that came from the last place I'd ever expected to hear it. Beautiful, loving, motherly Esme had just *snarled* at her biggest son.

"Emmett, not one. more. word."

Before I could even blink, she was on my other side. I managed not to jump this time. In contrast with her vampire speed to get over to me, her hand moved at a snail's pace as she cautiously brought it to my forehead to smooth the hair out of my eyes. She smiled warmly, but it faltered for just a second when her sharp eyes flicked to my right wrist, which - thanks to my ill-conceived escape attempt - had now swollen to the point that the ropes were no longer loose around my wrist as Edward had left them. My struggles when I thought James had found me had only increased the swelling; the ropes were now cutting in painfully and noticeably.

I saw Esme catch Carlisle's eye, silently using her eyes to indicate my injured arm to him. I heard his small noise of disapproval and watched his jaw clench, as she returned her attention and warmth to me.

"It's okay, sweetheart," she soothed. "We're here to help. Carlisle's going to get you loose, okay?"

I had calmed enough by this point to make speech possible, hopefully without managing to act like some kind of catatonic victim. Adrenaline began to fade, and I could now feel myself shaking from head to toe. "Yes. P- please." My lips trembled, and I couldn't force my tongue to form any other explanations.

"Bella, you're injured. I need to get you free," Carlisle told me gently in what I was certain was the voice he reserved for his most

cowardly, terrified patients. "It'd be faster to just break the ropes but I'm afraid I might hurt you, especially this arm. If you're okay for just a few seconds longer, I can untie the knots without having to take that risk." He still didn't seem entirely sure that I wasn't going to freak out on him, so I tried to reassure him - which probably would have been more convincing if I wasn't shaking like a leaf.

"I'm f- f- fine. Do what you need to. I tr- trust you."

A small, pained smile graced Carlisle's features before he slowly approached me again. Seeing that I didn't curl up in a ball and start screaming, he finally began to make swift work of the knots Edward had taken such care in tying, and before I knew it the loops hung loose around my wrists and my arms were free. Without waiting for Carlisle to finish the job, I used more force than necessary to sit up and jerk the loops off my wrists, flinging them across the room angrily. Still shaking, I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly freezing and shivering as well. Esme sat down on the bed beside me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders tightly. It should have only intensified the freezing feeling, but it didn't. Had she tried to let go, I might have started crying again.

Ignoring their unspoken questions *and* my shaky voice, I answered the only question I felt like answering.

"He finally had to h- hunt. He wasn't going far." I gulped, and had to stop and slow my breathing - which for some reason still came in gasps as I tried to recover from my fear. Esme gently smoothed my hair. "He's l- listening for James, but he's going to be back here f- fast when he h- h- hears your thoughts. He's not...he's not going to be happy to s- see - to see you."

"Bella..." Carlisle began, and I realized he'd backed off after releasing me and had been silently scanning me from head to toe at a distance. Not finding anything else of concern, he was now staring at my swollen wrist, fingers twitching at his side with the urge to see for himself how bad it was. "How exactly did you hurt your..."

A sharp hiss escaped from Esme, drawing every eye to her - but her eyes were fixed on Carlisle. The two vampires exchanged another loaded glance, and I realized that she was objecting to his phrasing which unintentionally put the blame on *me* for being hurt. I didn't have to ask who she thought *was* responsible. I'd never seen her like this before. She was *angry* at her son, I gathered, most likely for taking off in the first place and worrying her, but also on my behalf. I felt guilty about that, but there was nothing I could do about it. At the same time, it also warmed my heart that she cared for me so much.

Carlisle had the look of someone caught in the middle - like part of him agreed with Esme, but I also saw another flash of that same look I'd seen on his face when he first came into the room: understanding. Some part of him, more so than Esme, understood Edward's actions. But I noticed that he *did* rephrase his question when he started over.

"How exactly were you injured, Bella?" he amended diplomatically, and I opened my mouth to answer, prepared to clear up all of the misconceptions.

But a much more terrifying thought hit me at that exact moment, and I jumped to my feet instead.

"Oh my God! Charlie! If you're all here..."

Esme had risen with me, and she took me by the shoulders now, forcing me to look in her face despite my panic. "Bella, relax. Chief Swan hasn't been unguarded for even a moment. Alice says James has taken a different course now which doesn't involve him, but Rosalie is still guarding him just in case. Your father's *fine*, Bella. We're taking care of you both, I promise."

I relaxed somewhat, sinking back to the bed in relief. Again, Esme mirrored my action, staying close and putting a supportive arm back around me. I still hadn't stopped shaking.

And then the floodgates opened, my tongue loosening and every question I had spilling out at once.

"But why are *you* three here? Why not...where's Alice? Can she see anything? Who's looking for James? Where's Jasper?" I couldn't seem to stop babbling long enough for Emmett to talk, so he just answered the first question.

Grinning at me, he jerked his huge thumb first in the direction of Carlisle and Esme, then at his own broad chest. " *They're* here to give Edward the parental guilt trip. *I'm* here in case he needs his ass kicked."

I stared at him for just a moment, and then blinked in surprise as a sharp bark of laughter unexpectedly came out, mingled with a leftover sob. I felt some of my normalcy return as I looked into Emmett's good-natured face, almost laughing again at how overly pleased he was with himself for his joke. I could definitely get used to having a brother, especially one like Emmett. I forced a tiny smile for his benefit, knowing he'd appreciate my answer.

"Oh, he does. Believe me. But I want to be the one to do it."

Emmett grinned huge at that, a look of approval in his eyes as he interlocked his fingers, popping his knuckles and flexing his muscles at the same time. "Oh, we can probably arrange that."

"Emmett, you're not helping." Esme's soft voice, but I thought I saw a hint of a smile on her own lips as she gave me a gentle squeeze, glad to see me acting somewhat normally. She seemed a little more relaxed now.

"Bella," Carlisle tried again, the furrow in his brow increasing in concern as he attempted to answer the rest of my questions. "Jasper and Alice have been tracking and pursuing James, protecting Charlie at the same time during the time that James was shadowing him. The three of us, along with Rosalie, have been tracking you and Edward since he took off with you. Rosalie is now with Charlie just in

case, as James seems to have tired of involving him in his game. He's taken a different path at the moment. Jasper and Alice are still following him, but we're unsure yet what he's doing."

I was pretty sure I probably looked as confused as I felt. "But Edward hasn't heard you. He's been listening for you. How...how did you follow us all this way without him knowing?"

Carlisle smiled, seeming more relieved now as well that I was responding more naturally and asking questions that made sense.

"We've stayed just out of range so Edward wouldn't hear our thoughts and become even more frantic. We're in constant contact with Alice, which is how we've stayed with you. She's been able to pinpoint you every step of the way through Edward's decisions. She saw today that he was leaving to go hunting and that he's utterly focused on listening for James' voice to the exclusion of all others, so we decided to risk coming in closer to check on *you*. We were simply going to make sure you were all right without your noticing us, but when we got close we heard you crying..." He trailed off, his lingering question about my tears obvious - just how far off the deep end was Edward? Why *had* I been crying?

"I'm fine," I responded, hating the tightness in my voice and the tears that sprang back into my eyes just thinking about my temporary confinement. "I didn't mean to worry you. I wasn't hurt, or even scared. I did this to my own wrist, trying to break free. It was stupid. But I was just so...mad at him."

It was a pretty simplistic response, and a slightly hostile one, at least as far as Edward was concerned. But that didn't seem to bother my new...family. The word gave me a warm feeling despite the knot of anger in my chest. They had belonged to Edward first, by many, many years. But here they were, allowing me to vent my frustration at him without chiding me for it.

"What do you want to do, Bella?" Esme asked me gently. "We'll do anything we can without putting you in danger."

What I really wanted was to leave. But at the same time I didn't want to leave Edward alone. In his state, I wasn't sure he could handle my disappearance. So I was as honest as I knew how to be as I found myself clinging to the woman I had begun to think of as my future mother.

"I want to go with *you* . I want to go *home*. But I don't want to leave *him* , either. I want to *slap* him. But I want to kiss him."

To me it made no sense, but understanding radiated from Esme and Carlisle both. This time as they exchanged a glance, there was a tiny smile on each of their faces. The man I already thought of as my second father approached a step closer, his eyes filled with truth.

"Bella, I don't pretend to condone what Edward has done here. Clearly, this has all gone too far. The decision what to do now is yours, and we will respect that. But although Edward has quite certainly handled this the wrong way, I believe I might be able to explain it in a way that might ease some of your conflicted feelings. I can try, if you'd like?"

I sat up a little straighter, nodding eagerly. I hadn't dared hope to get a direct explanation of that look of understanding in Carlisle's eyes that I had seen a couple of times now. I wanted more than anything in the world to hear what he had to say that could possibly excuse kidnapping and false imprisonment.

But I wasn't going to get that chance, it turned out - at least not at that exact moment.

A sudden, vicious snarl was punctuated by the sound of glass breaking - a *lot* of glass breaking. Before I could even see what had happened - almost before I even heard it - Carlisle darted in front of me and shielded me as shattering glass shot through the room like tiny daggers.

I tried to look around him to see what had come flying straight through the wall-length window looking out over the forest, shattering

it along the entire length of the wall; but his arms and body held me fast, shielding me and keeping himself between me and...whatever it was.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

So, what did you think? What'd you like? What's your favorite line? What do you think just flew through the window? Knowing things like that really help me as a novice writer. So...

Give me an R...

Give me an E...

Give me a View...

What's that spell? REVIEW!

What's that spell? REVIEW!

(please, please, please, please, please, please, please...)

I'll even throw in a chocolate-covered Edward...I'll even make him promise not to whine about how disgusting the chocolate is and how this behavior is *completely* improper, blah, blah, blah...just review! :)

Chapter 5

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In the utter chaos that ensued in the initial moments after the entire wall of glass shattered, it took several moments for me to sort out exactly what had happened - to realize that not one but *three* forms had come crashing through the wall into the room. The one who had so viciously snarled was in front, closely followed by two others in hot pursuit. I held onto Carlisle for dear life as I tried to look around him, terror gripping me. My mind could only come up with one answer for who the three newcomers were: James, Victoria, and Laurent.

But I was wrong.

It was only when the snarling one took a snap at Carlisle in an effort to grab me that I realized it was Edward - wild-eyed and crazed. Carlisle darted back and dodged him, with me in tow, but was only able to avoid him because the other two forms through the window smashed into Edward with a resounding *BOOM* at almost the exact same moment.

"Carlisle, get her out of here!" came the clear, high-pitched shout from one of them.

"Alice?" I gasped, my mind reeling as I recognized the two vampires who'd chased Edward through the window: Alice and Jasper. But why were they here? And why were they after Edward? They were supposed to be chasing James...

And why was Edward so upset? Was it only because he feared his family intended to take me from him...or was there something worse?

Alice and Jasper seemed to have their hands full pulling back Edward, who growled and snapped ferociously, eyes locked on Carlisle. Emmett quickly joined the party, helping to restrain his brother.

"Now, Carlisle! You have to get her out *now* ! Head for Forks." Alice yelled again. "We're taking Edward with us."

" *No!*" The primal growl from Edward seemed to shake the room. The crazed look still filled his black eyes, and I could see he hadn't found time to hunt in the time he'd been gone. In fact...I soon realized that *none* of the Cullens had found time to hunt, probably since before Edward took me. All of their eyes were black as night, harsh dark circles in the hard skin beneath them.

Emmett, Jasper and Alice were clearly beginning to lose the battle to hold Edward. Though I didn't fear him, I instinctively moved closer to Carlisle, unsure what Edward planned to do when he inevitably broke free - although judging by his reaction to Alice's suggestion I was pretty sure that it involved taking off with me again.

"You *have* to, Carlisle. Trust me," Alice urged. "Go!"

" *I said NO!*" Edward hissed through clenched teeth, as he landed what looked like a vicious blow to Jasper, momentarily breaking Jasper's grip on him. Emmett - with the help of Alice and Esme - responded by shoving Edward into one of the remaining walls, but if Jasper hadn't been right behind them to resume his former place they'd never have held him there.

Edward's shout was desperate.

"You're *wrong* , Alice! I won't let that happen! *Carlisle!*"

Carlisle visibly hesitated, his eyes going from his son to me.

"I trust your judgment, Alice, but I can't do this to him without knowing why. Fill me in, quickly, but make sure Bella hears

everything." Carlisle's voice remained calm as always, but from his protective stance close beside me I could feel just how tensed he actually was - coiled and prepared to strike if necessary. "From this point forward, she has a say in this as well."

Alice huffed impatiently, clearly unhappy with that order. "There's no *time!* It was a trap - James *led* Jasper and me away intentionally. *Victoria's* here!"

"Good!" Emmett reacted first. "So stop fighting with *me* , Edward, and let's go get her!" Edward only growled louder, and I suddenly realized that he already *knew* about Victoria being there.

But how could he have known that? He had *left* me. I felt myself begin to shake. Surely he hadn't known *before* he left me?

Carlisle exchanged a look with his wife.

"Victoria's presence is all the more reason we shouldn't split up, Alice," Esme's soft voice intoned, her eyes already locked back on Edward, and I knew that suggestion was her way of trying to protect me and protect her son's sanity at the same time.

"No!" Alice continued. "You don't understand. Carlisle..." And then her lips were moving so fast that I couldn't understand a word she was saying. I couldn't even hear anything.

But I knew it was bad by the way Esme gasped, Carlisle's grip on my arm tightened, and Emmett forgot about holding onto Edward for a split second as his head snapped around in shock. Jasper and Edward didn't react as they continued to struggle, so I knew without question that they already knew whatever she was telling him.

Carlisle had clearly forgotten about keeping me informed. "Edward, if Alice is right about what they're planning, we have a responsibility to..."

"She's *not*," Edward snarled again. "And it doesn't matter! Bella's staying with *me*!" A sharp yank against his brothers' arms punctuated that statement.

Alice sighed. "She'd never forgive you, Edward, and you know it. Carlisle, this has to happen either way."

Again, Esme interjected sensibly. "Then we should at least split up in even numbers with Victoria out there. You and I can go with Carlisle and Bella, Alice; while Edward, Emmett and Jasper handle..." She glanced uncomfortably at me as her words faltered. "...the - the *other* situation."

Alice shook her head grimly. "No, we can't go with Bella. Believe me. Because in approximately two seconds, Bella's going to..."

I'd had enough. I *needed* to know what they were all talking about.

"Stop it!" I yelled, making everyone but Alice startle and look in my direction. "Tell me what is going..." But that was as far as I got. I had pulled away from Carlisle, with the intention of running to Alice, to grab her by the shoulders and demand that she answer my questions.

But as usual, that didn't really go as I planned. I stumbled almost immediately, pitching forward onto my hands and knees to catch myself - right in the middle of a pile of shattered glass from the window. The pain was instantaneous as glass sliced into my palms - which after just a short pause began to become sticky with blood.

"...to do *that* ." I heard Alice finish on another sigh, this one sounding more than a little weary. "Great."

" *Bella!* "

Edward broke free at that exact moment, spinning and crouching in front of me between me and all of his family except Carlisle, who was still behind me. His very, very thirsty family...

The next moments happened so fast that I was outside in Carlisle's car before I processed it all.

Carlisle surged forward from behind me and picked me up.

Edward turned to attack *him* , a look on his face like nothing I'd ever seen. I had no doubt that he'd tear Carlisle apart if necessary to get to me, and the thought was so frightening it almost made me dizzy.

And what happened after that, I wasn't sure. I only knew that I was suddenly in a car with Carlisle, speeding away from the house and leaving Edward behind.

Probably an hour passed before I could bring myself to speak. Not even when Carlisle stopped the car several miles from the house, retrieved a medical bag, cleaned the glass out of my wounds and applied bandages did I ever say a word. When he was finished, I just brought my feet up onto the expensive leather seat and wrapped my arms around my knees. Sometimes I stared out the window. Sometimes I stared at Carlisle. The concern in the gentle vampire's eyes was evident, but he didn't push me. He just gave me time to process.

I began to realize that we were, in fact, headed back toward Forks.

But that wasn't what I was focused on. All I could think about was the look on Edward's face.

"This is all my fault."

I almost jumped at the sound of my own voice. I hadn't even known I intended to say anything.

"Bella," the fatherly man beside me began. " *None* of this is your fault. Of that I can assure you." I barely saw the rapid glance he shot in my direction, as though trying to decide whether to say more. He must have decided I could handle it, because after a moment he

continued speaking. "None of this is Edward's fault, either, though I'm sure he's feeling the same way as you right now. He's reacted to all of this in the only way he knew how - instinctively."

Some of my residual anger at Edward reared its ugly head, mingled with my horror at the way he'd gone after his father. Maybe I *wanted* Carlisle to explain it to me. But I could no more have kept my mouth shut at that point than I could have safely walked a tightrope - in other words, not a snowball's chance in hell.

"He took a snap at you," I protested, tears rising in my eyes. "He would actually have *hurt* you if not for Emmett and Jasper."

The corner of Carlisle's lip turned up. "Yes. I can more than hold my own in a fight if necessary, Bella, or I'd never have agreed to Alice's plan of taking you away by myself - not knowing that Victoria is almost certainly following us. But yes, Edward's abilities *do* make him a formidable opponent. In a one-on-one contest, he has the advantage over almost anyone. If Edward truly wanted to hurt me, the probability that he could do so is high, despite my years of experience."

I stared wordlessly at him for a moment or two. He almost sounded...proud of his son. "You're not mad at him?"

That same look of complete understanding was back on Carlisle's face as I had seen earlier. "No. I have only myself to blame for Edward's reaction today." His gentle smile was gracious for my sake, as he tried to carefully explain. "Edward is many things, Bella, but when all is said and done he is still a vampire. And I'm not certain if he completely acknowledged this fact before the arrival of James and his coven, but he has chosen you as his mate. I've known that for quite some time now. But when he broke the window out today and I grabbed you to shield you from the glass, I should have realized how he would react. Edward didn't see a father at that point. He saw another vampire between him and his mate, keeping her from him. He read the thoughts of another vampire, one whom he could hear internally debating on removing his mate from his

presence by force. Again, his mindreading capabilities mitigated the situation somewhat in that he could see the purpose behind my actions. But his instincts still overrode that knowledge. It's actually quite natural."

Again, I could only stare at first. And then I felt the angry tears begin to fill my eyes as I remembered lying there bound to a bed terrified that James had found me. And as it turned out, I *had* been in danger - Victoria had been there. But most of all, I couldn't forget Edward driving away from that store *knowing* that James was with Charlie.

"Okay, fine. So that's all great. But he *kidnapped* me. He kept me from Charlie, and he did *nothing* to protect him! He *tied me to a bed* and *left me there* ."

"Yes," Carlisle agreed quietly. "He did all of those things, although in the case of Charlie I believe Edward sensed we were nearby even though we stayed far enough away that he couldn't hear us. But again, I believe I understand why he took all of those actions."

"I don't," I whispered, though I desperately *wanted* to understand.

Carlisle placed a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "Bella, there are many things I could say to you on this point, but I believe it comes down to this simple statement. I've been with my son since 1918. Yes, he has a flair for the dramatic, and yes he has a tendency to overreact. But in all these years, I can truthfully tell you that when he realized James wished to harm you is the first time I've ever seen him *scared* ."

The gently spoken admission knocked the breath from me like a physical blow - and Carlisle wasn't finished.

"I can also tell you that in all these years, the past months are the only time I've seen him truly happy. I may not condone what he's done or the way he's gone about it...but I do understand it. In every way that matters, Edward hasn't been *alive* until now. His love for you alone dictates that he must do whatever is necessary to

physically protect you, even at the risk of alienating you. But this goes deeper even than that. Bella, as I said, you are Edward's mate. What happens to you affects him as well. The most basic instinct of all living creatures is the survival instinct. If you die, I feel confident in asserting that my son will quickly die with you - figuratively, at the very least, and quite possibly literally if he is able to find a way. Instinctively he understands that, whether he grasps it mentally or not. And he simply *can't* trust anyone else - including his own family - to keep you, and by extension himself, safe."

I certainly had some new things to think about. Edward...scared. Completely terrified. I tried to put myself in his position, tried to imagine myself attempting to make rational decisions if I feared for Edward's bodily safety; but I couldn't get past the cloud of terror to come up with anything. It actually *did* make his actions more understandable.

But frustration still filled me at Carlisle's last word.

"Safe. Same from *what* ? Carlisle, what did Alice tell you? Please tell me what's going on."

Suddenly, his eyes locked on the road ahead of us, his hand removing from my shoulder to the steering wheel as he inhaled deeply. He didn't move for a few seconds. "Bella, I'm not sure that would be wise. I'm truly not certain if you can handle this right now."

"Handle *what* ?" I begged desperately. "Carlisle, *please!*"

He glanced at me again, and the hesitation flooded me with even more horror.

"Is it Charlie? Oh God, is he..."

"Charlie's fine," Carlisle cut in smoothly, and I almost relaxed...almost.

And then the world turned upside down again, as he gently continued.

"Bella...it's your mother. James has your mother."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

Hmmm...so is this parallel universe going to end up in the same place after all? Will Bella end up in the ballet studio with James? And most importantly, what's Edward going to do NOW?

Second Chances is probably getting the next update, but if there are enough reviews I may do the next chapter of this one first instead. Please, please, please review! If you have a favorite line or favorite part, I absolutely LOVE to hear those. Thanks, you guys! :)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

In that moment it felt like the world turned upside down and threatened to shake me off of it. Panic gripped me by the throat - even though I didn't seem to believe what Carlisle was telling me. Words of denial poured out of my mouth, my eyes wide in horror.

" *What ?* I - no...NO! My mom's in Florida with Phil. She's not - she can't be - NO! You're wrong!"

"Bella..." Carlisle began gently, pulling the car over so he could turn his full attention to me. He eyed me warily, as though afraid I might shatter - but his words were firm.

"Alice is certain. She and Jasper followed James halfway across California before Alice saw Victoria decide to approach you and Edward back at our former house where Edward had left you. They turned around and came back to help us protect you and Edward, believing that James had just been luring them away all along so Victoria could attack.

"But when they arrived, they found Edward chasing Victoria through the woods. He almost had her when Alice saw the vision of James taking your mother. By that time Alice and Jasper were right behind him, so Edward saw what she saw - along with Alice's intention to leave Victoria to Edward and Jasper so she could return to the house and take you away without his interference. That was when Edward...came back. He chased Alice down and passed her, trying to get to you first. Jasper followed to protect Alice, and Victoria got away. You know the rest."

I stared at Carlisle in silence for a few seconds...and then I felt the bile rising in my throat. Desperately flinging one hand over my mouth, I wrenched the car door open with my other hand, flinging

myself out of the car and managing to land right in the ditch on my hands and knees. I didn't care. I retched until I was dry heaving, emptying the contents of my stomach into the ditch beside the car, sobbing and gasping at the same time. I was vaguely aware of Carlisle hovering nearby, but I was too sick even to be embarrassed.

It was so much worse than I'd even thought. Edward had been hunting while I was tied to the bed, all right - he'd been hunting Victoria. The thought of him going one-on-one with that monster was almost as scary as what Carlisle had told me about my mom...almost. And it explained why it'd taken Edward so long to show up after his family arrived: he'd been too busy chasing Victoria alone, at least until he saw into Alice's head and had to come back to kidnap me again before Alice could. The whole thing made my head spin.

But the worst by far was Renee. I dry heaved again just thinking about my harmless mother in the clutches of James.

Finally the horrible retching stopped. I pushed back away, crawling backward a little before pushing back off of my knees and falling backward to sit on the ground. I drew my knees up toward my chest, holding onto them.

"Maybe she just saw what *could* happen," I begged almost desperately, looking up at Carlisle as I rocked myself back and forth. I could feel my entire body tremble. "My mom's in Florida. She *is* . There's no way James could have found her there...not yet. Maybe there's still time. I could warn her..."

"Bella...please listen to me." Carlisle knelt nearby, not touching me. "Your mom's not in Florida. You've been missing for days. Charlie called her two days after Edward...left with you, and she flew to Phoenix immediately to look for you there. This morning she apparently decided to fly to Washington to be with Charlie."

Denial was beginning to fade. Unfortunately, it was replaced with anger. I pushed up furiously to my feet, gesturing frantically. To my

frustration, Carlisle just remained where he was, looking up at me.

"How the hell did Alice not see this happening *before* this?" I raged. "And why were so many of you following me and Edward instead of James? You could have stopped this!"

"You are the target of this, Bella," Carlisle told me reasonably - which only infuriated me more. It wasn't reason I wanted. "Our strategy was the most logical. With Jasper and Alice on James, they could relay information to the rest of us about his location - not to mention that as a team they are almost unbeatable in a fight. Rosalie was protecting Charlie. And with the rest of us following you and Edward, we could be there near instantly if either James *or* Victoria attacked the two of you. And if it was James who did so, that would also bring Jasper and Alice to the scene as well. We would have a united front against them to protect you."

"But...Alice still should have seen it!"

Carlisle shook his head sadly. "It was a snap decision on James' part. He didn't expect to find your mother in Forks. None of us did. Rosalie was outside the police station shadowing Charlie when Renee arrived at your father's house from the airport by cab, with no warning. Neither Charlie nor Rosalie knew she was coming.

"After leading Jasper and Alice away and doubling back to Forks, James had intended only to go to your house to familiarize himself with his prey - to look for something he could use against you to track you down. Alice had seen that Charlie would be safely out of the house, so in their haste to get back to you and Victoria, she didn't focus on it. She simply didn't see your mother. Perhaps your mother's decision to go to your house was erratically made, another snap decision. James simply took advantage of the opportunity."

Well...that would just be...typical, I thought: Renee making a harebrained, erratic decision. A sob ripped out of me then. It wasn't like I hadn't always figured that Renee's flighty ways would

eventually be the death of her; I just hadn't counted on it being *this* way.

"We have to do something," I managed to tell Carlisle miserably, feeling my knees begin to buckle from all the trembling. He shot to his feet instantly from where he had still knelt below my level, steadying me.

"We are, Bella. I'm keeping you safe because the rest of my family is simply too thirsty to be around you safely. Rosalie will stay with Charlie just in case. Emmett, Jasper and Edward will go after your mother - especially when Alice is done convincing him. I feel certain that Esme and Alice will catch up with us shortly, though they'll have to maintain a distance."

I felt the anger deflate out of me like a popped balloon. That anger had been so misplaced it didn't even bear considering any more. Without even my anger to hold onto, my composure took a drastic turn for the worse. I felt the sobs begin to build in my chest, my trembling intensifying until I could barely stand.

"Come, Bella. I'll take you somewhere that you can clean up."

It was the first I'd thought of what a mess I was - especially after being sick. Mechanically, I allowed Carlisle to lead me back to the car.

After a quick stop at a convenience store, where Carlisle disappeared inside for a minute or two while I hugged my knees and stared blankly out the windshield, we quickly pulled into a rest stop off the main highway. Carlisle placed a bag in my hand, which after peeking into I realized contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, some soap, deodorant, and a hairbrush.

Despite my misery, I managed a tiny smile.

"That bad...wow. Sorry."

Carlisle smiled graciously. "For *your* comfort, my daughter. You'll feel better if you can clean up a little. I'll be right outside."

Tears sprang to my eyes. "I'm sorry...about yelling at you before. I know you're doing all you can."

Again, Carlisle just smiled. "I understand. We can't stay long, Bella. Go ahead."

Managing a tiny, still remorseful nod, I stepped out of the car.

I shivered a little as I entered the secluded rest stop bathroom, imagining monsters behind every partly open stall door. Looking back over my shoulder toward the main door, I reminded myself that Carlisle was right outside - and that despite his gentle demeanor, he was a very experienced vampire who could easily overcome any human attackers. It just wasn't the human attackers I was worried about.

I brushed my teeth to clear myself of the horrible aftertaste of being sick, feeling better almost immediately - at least physically. Quickly I washed my face, washed up a little bit, and brushed my hair. After throwing everything back in the bag, I set it down on the sink and made my way into one of the disgusting stalls to use the facilities.

Just as I was preparing to open the stall door and let myself out, I suddenly froze into place at the sound of a metallic *thud* from inside the bathroom with me - just outside and above the stall door.

I froze into place, not even daring to breathe.

One second passed.

Two.

Three.

Four.

I could hear my own heartbeat.

And then my heart leapt into my throat as I heard the main door to the outside fly open forcefully.

"Bella!"

In relief, I swung open the stall door.

"Carlisle?"

He was in front of me instantly, a protective arm outstretched.

"Are you hurt?"

I stared at him in blind terror. "No...why?"

His voice was calm as ever, but his nostrils flared as he sniffed the air, his eyes searching the room. "She was here. Just now."

It felt like my heart stopped beating - and then I followed his suddenly still eyes up to the skylight in the ceiling, meant to provide natural light during the day. A small, metal window to the side of it was pushed wide open, allowing cold air into the room. My heart picked back up at an alarmingly rapid pace as I realized that Victoria had come into the bathroom - just a few feet from me - via that skylight. The metal thud I'd heard...

But why would she have come in and then left without making herself known? Or killing me?

"Let's go, Bella. We're getting you out of here."

Carlisle's expensive in-car speaker phone system was already ringing when he pushed my too-terrified-to-be-of-assistance form into the car, closing the door and almost immediately reappearing in the driver's seat.

He never even glanced at a caller ID as he punched the button to answer it while simultaneously peeling out of the parking lot at dizzying speeds.

I might have wondered how he knew who it was before he even answered...if I hadn't already known myself, as well.

"She's fine, Edward," were his opening words. "She didn't hurt her. Stay with Emmett and Jasper. You have a job to do."

"I'm coming to get her. Now. I mean it, Carlisle..." Edward's rich voice filled the car, marred by obvious terror.

"Edward!" His name ripped out of my throat as half shout, half sob. I'd never been so glad to hear his voice.

"Bella!" Edward's voice was pure desperation when he heard me. "Tell me where you are! I'll be there immediately."

"No, son," Carlisle interjected firmly. "Emmett and Jasper need your help to rescue Bella's mother. You're the only one who can read James' thoughts when you find him."

"They *don't* need me!" Edward growled back fiercely. "They have Alice. With her help, Emmett and Jasper can take him easily. I just saw it in Alice's thoughts - Victoria was within a foot of Bella. You can't protect her like I can. He only has her mother to get to *her* and you know it! Dammit, Carlisle, tell me where you *are*! "

Carlisle didn't even bat an eye at the way Edward was speaking to him, though I had no doubt it was the first time he'd ever dared. "I'm sorry, son. Right now you need to focus on getting Bella's mother back for her. And why is Alice still with you? I thought she and Esme were shadowing Bella and me."

"Hi, Bella!" Alice's musical voice filled the car, and I wondered how she'd coaxed the phone away from Edward - until I realized she could almost certainly hear Carlisle's questions even with Edward

holding the phone, and was probably just speaking into it as Edward held it. "Esme is following the two of you. She'll be close by. I'm staying with the boys so I can warn Jazz and Em fast if Edward decides to take off again."

I didn't even give Carlisle a chance to answer. "Alice! My mom...please tell me she's going to be okay." The raw fear in my voice must've been more than Edward could take. I heard a sharp hiss, and then it was Edward's voice that answered.

"Bella, it's going to be all right. I promise. They'll find her. Just promise me you'll stay close to Carlisle until I come for you. *Promise me.*" His words were clipped, his tone intense.

"Edward? You're going to crack my phone in half." Alice again, this time in the background. "Take it easy...that's a diamond encrusted Vertu Diamond. Do you have any *idea* how hard those are to come by?"

"Edward," I begged, ignoring Alice. "You have to listen to Carlisle. You have to find my mom. I'll be fine. Please... this is all my fault. I can't let her die because of me. *I can't . Please!* "

"No!" Edward's insistent voice filled the car again. "Bella, I *need* to be where you are. It's the only way I can be sure you're safe. My family will take care of *your* family. I need to take care of *you.*"

Carlisle cut off whatever I might have said. "We'll be in touch, son. Alice, make him understand."

Before I realized what had happened, Carlisle hit the button and disconnected the call, then turned off the ringer. The absence of Edward's voice left me feeling even more empty than before.

More time passed as the car hurtled along the dark streets before I was finally able to speak again.

"You hung up on him," I accused.

"Yes," Carlisle stated gravely. "Though certainly not to be unkind. Now that he knows you're unharmed, contact with you can only distract him from what he must do now."

I nodded, mutely, wondering if there was anything in the entire universe that could actually distract *me* from the horror of what was surely happening to my mom.

After several more hours of silently staring out the window, trying and failing to make any sense of some very hushed conversations Carlisle held over his handheld cell phone, I almost panicked when he finally pulled into my driveway.

I couldn't even form words. I just turned to stare at him in wordless shock.

"He's not here, Bella. I spoke with Rosalie earlier. Phil called Charlie this afternoon. He became concerned when he never heard anything else from Renee after she called from Phoenix and said she was getting on a plane to Seattle to see Charlie. Charlie never even knew Renee was coming. He's flown to Phoenix to look for both of you."

A lump formed in my throat. What must Charlie be going through? It was hardly news to me that he'd never gotten over my mom. Now she and their daughter were both missing. He must be frantic.

"He's safer there, Bella, and there would be no reason for James to pursue him at this point," Carlisle assured me. "Rosalie's on her way back here, as is Esme. They're going to watch your house from the woods. When Victoria inevitably tries to reach you again, the three of us will take care of her. You'll be perfectly safe, Bella. All you have to do is go about your normal routine as much as possible. I'll remain inside the house with you, but I won't interfere unless necessary."

Again, I stared at him dumbly. "I'm *bait* ?"

Carlisle shook his head, allowing a tiny smile. "No. Absolutely not. Even if I would consider such a thing - which I would not - Edward would kill all of us first and ask questions later. No, this is simply an effort to give you as much normalcy and stability as is possible until we catch her. Victoria could find us anywhere we take you. The only advantage to bringing you here is that you can be more comfortable."

Six hours. That was all it took.

One moment I was staring blankly through the TV in the living room, not even aware of what I was watching, while Carlisle stood like a statue at the door to the living room.

The next moment, Carlisle's head shot up at something his ears could hear that mine couldn't.

"Bella, stay inside! Esme and Rosalie intercepted Victoria outside! I'm going to assist them!"

And like that, Carlisle disappeared - chasing his wife and daughter who were chasing the vicious monster that wanted to kill me.

I felt very alone all of a sudden.

At least, until I heard a ringing phone that I didn't recognize.

The first six times it rang, I sat frozen on the couch, trying to figure out what it was.

After a brief pause, it began ringing again. Muting the television set, I stood up on suddenly shaky legs and began following it. Without even knowing what it was, I only knew that it couldn't possibly be good.

The ringing got closer as I made my way up the stairs...closer still as I made my way to my bedroom - but it started to grow softer again

after I passed the bathroom.

Again it stopped ringing, paused, and then started again.

Turning around, I carefully walked back to the bathroom, my eyes scanning cautiously as my heart thudded in my chest. I only saw one thing out of the usual: my little bag of toiletries Carlisle had bought me, that I'd taken with me into the rest stop bathroom.

With a shaking hand, I reached in and pulled out what I suddenly knew was going to be there:

A cell phone.

Victoria's cell phone, or one she had stolen - possibly from someone she killed. The reason she'd come into the bathroom. She must have been following us, and took the opportunity of my being away from Carlisle a few moments to swoop in and put it in my bag.

I knew who was going to be on the other end, as well - and it wasn't going to be Victoria. She'd simply led Carlisle and the others away so that they couldn't hear.

"Hello?" I asked, my voice not nearly as shaky as I'd expected.

"Hello, Bella," came an overly polite voice - and my blood froze in my veins even though I'd known it was coming.

"Please don't hurt her. Please. I'll do anything you want."

The sound of James' evil, cold voice rang through the lines.

"Oh, I'm counting on it."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

Please, please, please hit that little green button! I'm truly enjoying writing this story, but it's much more fun when I get reviews in turn for my trouble. The more you review, the faster I write! Also, if you're enjoying this one, please check out my other story [Second Chances](#). :)

Chapter 7

"Please don't hurt her. Please. I'll do anything you want."

The sound of James' evil, cold voice rang through the lines.

"Oh, I'm counting on it."

Chapter 7

At that very moment - which, coincidentally, was the exact moment I made my decision to trade my life for my mom's - the house phone started ringing furiously. I ignored it.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked James, clutching Victoria's cell phone in my hand too tightly. To my amazement, my voice shook less as I talked to him than it had since the beginning of the entire ordeal.

"Get in your truck and start driving before they get back. Take this phone with you and take the 101 south. You'll hear from me again - very soon."

I had been surprised to see my truck parked in the driveway when Carlisle first brought me home, knowing that I had left it at their house. He soon explained that practically the first thing they did after Edward took off with me was to drive my truck to the bus station and leave it there, keys inside. Charlie had found it relatively quickly and brought it home, and any suspicion had been thrown off of the Cullens. It had also given Charlie a bogus lead to follow that would keep him out of harm - well, at least until my stunt with the credit card.

I nodded like I thought James could see me. "Okay. I - okay. Just please...can I talk to her?"

A cruel chuckle sounded in my ear. "Oh, you'll be talking to her very soon - at least for a little while. But that's not what you really want, is it? You want to know she's alive. Guess you're just going to have to take my word for it."

I had no idea where the undercurrent of steel in my voice came from. "No. You let me hear her voice, or I'm not coming. I'll use this phone and call Edward."

This time Jame's laugh was nothing short of evil. "With pleasure. But just remember...you asked for it."

I heard movement, as though James was rapidly moving into another room - and then came a sickening thud followed by a heartwrenching cry that made my insides twist.

My mom's terrified, tear-filled voice flooded the line, making me sick to my stomach all over again.

"Please...please stop - what do you want with me? Who *are* you?" Another shriek followed, and I could only assume James had hit her again.

"Mom!" I screamed into the phone, terror flooding me. "No! Stop it, you *sick bastard* ! I believe you - I'm leaving now!"

Desperately, I looked for my truck keys. Great. Of course Charlie had hidden them on the off chance that I came home, so I couldn't take off again.

The sound of my mom's sobbing drew a sob from me, as I absently realized that at some point the house phone had finally stopped ringing.

James still had that cruelly delighted tone to his voice. "Looking for your keys? Your father hid them on the belt rack in his closet. I had plenty of time to look around. Such a lovely home you have - so cozy. Too bad you won't be seeing it again. But at least dear old

mommy might see it again - unless you do anything stupid like trying to call your boyfriend. It'd be a shame for him to meet with an unfortunate end as well."

I had jerked open Charlie's closet door and retrieved my keys before the final words were out of James' mouth. Before I could respond, a light click told me the call had disconnected.

As I passed the kitchen on my way out the door, shoving the cell phone in my pocket, I hesitated for a moment. The house phone had just started ringing again. Was James checking up on me? Was I supposed to answer? Would he hurt my mom if I did? What if I didn't? Sudden anger flared, and I ran for the phone.

"What?" I snapped into the receiver, fully expecting to hear that disturbing laugh again.

"Isabella Marie Swan, don't you *dare!* " It was Alice, more worked up than I'd ever heard her. "You stay *right there* until Carlisle gets back. I *mean* it."

Tears filled my eyes. "Alice, I can't talk to you. I have to go."

"Bella, stop! *Listen* to me! I don't think you realize what you're doing. This will *kill* him! You have to stop and think. James will kill her anyway if you hand yourself over to him - *and* he'll kill you either way. Let the boys take care of James. They'll get your mother back, Bella. Trust us."

"So they've found him?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Alice hesitated. "They're hunting so they'll be *strong* enough to fight him when they *do* find him. I made them take time to do it, and I'm doing the same. That's the only reason we're separated, and it's a good thing, too. If Edward was close enough to read my thoughts..."

Like she had summoned him by that statement, I suddenly heard Alice gasp. "Oh God...Edward - Bella, he heard! He's on his way

here and he..."

Panic flooded me as she spoke. I wasn't certain I could do this if I heard his voice - but I *had* to do this. My mom's life depended on it.

Then all I heard was the sound of Edward growling, growing closer by the moment, and the low hum of Alice's voice going too fast for me to hear as she tried to either explain or calm him down.

"No! Bella!" It sounded as though Edward was already yelling at me *before* he got to Alice. And then his desperate voice filled my ear completely as he took the phone. "Bella - Bella, listen to me, love...don't do this! I'm begging of you, Bella. Wait for me to get there! I'll get her back safely for you, I swear it. Just please - *please* stay there. I'm on my way right now."

That cemented it. Although Edward, Alice, Emmett and Jasper were still several hours away by car, there was no more time. I tried to put every ounce of what I felt into my voice, needing him to know that I didn't make this decision lightly.

"I can't let him hurt her. He said he'd kill her if I involved you, and he threatened you too. Edward, I'm so sorry. I *have* to go. Please don't hate me for this."

"*Bella!*" His voice was so loud, so full of pain that I almost couldn't get out the one other thing I had to tell him.

"I love you."

I could hear him shouting my name again, terror filling his normally gentle voice. I had to close my eyes and will myself to hang up the phone - but I did.

And then I was outside, getting into my truck and heading straight for the 101.

I hadn't traveled even 10 miles before the phone Victoria had given me was ringing again. I didn't bother with a hello...I already knew it was James.

"I'm doing what you said. Please...please promise me you'll let her go when I get there."

James didn't even acknowledge my pleas this time.

"Keep driving South until you see a small blue car with tinted windows sitting on the side of the road. There's a dirt path beside it. Drive your truck onto the dirt path, out of sight of the main highway, and leave it there. Then run back to the car. Leave this phone in your truck. Keys and another phone are inside the black car underneath the passenger seat."

"James..."

"Mommy looks awful scared. Better hurry."

Click

In utter frustration, I yelled and threw the phone, letting it make a satisfying *thud* off the passenger window as it bounced back and almost hit me in the head. It wasn't like I'd be needing it again, anyway. James was already finished with this particular phone.

It was another half hour before I found exactly what James said - a small car with Texas plates. It crossed my mind to wonder where James and Victoria had got a car. After all, they were nomads - far from rich like the Cullens.

And then, with a sickening lurch of my stomach, I realized *exactly* how they had got this car, and the new phones - the same way they got everything else: their victims. Some poor tourist from Texas wasn't going to be going home again.

The newfound nausea didn't leave me as I drove my truck off the dirt path into the woods, slightly off the road. It hit me that it'd be the last time I'd see it, and I wondered when I'd become so sentimental about a hunk of tin. At least maybe Charlie would eventually find my truck, though I could only imagine what kind of conclusion he'd draw from finding my truck here.

Hesitating, I decided that the least I could do was take the time to give Charlie some closure. Scrambling around, I found a discarded sheet of notebook paper that had made its way out of my backpack after school one day. In the glove compartment, inside Charlie's maintenance journal for the truck, I found a small pen. Taking a deep breath, I put pen to paper.

Dad,

Please don't worry about me. I'm sorry to leave like this, but I had to get away from Forks. I'll be all right. I have money and a plan, and I'm not alone. I'm with friends, of my own will. I'll call one day if I can, but please don't worry for me if I don't. I love you.

-Bells

Not the most eloquent of notes, but I could only stomach writing so many lies.

And I still had over half the paper left - and Charlie probably wasn't going to be the first one to find the truck anyway. I knew exactly who *that* would be.

Taking a deep breath, I ripped the paper in half, leaving Charlie's note on the dashboard. Then I put pen to paper again...

Dear Edward,

I'm so sorry about this. But if there was even a small chance, I had to take it. Please never doubt how much I love you. I'm doing this for you as well...I can't bear the thought of you being hurt trying to help

me or my family. Please don't go after him - at least allow my sacrifice to protect you that much. That's all I ask of you. I love you. I love you, and I'm so sorry.

All my love,

Bella Swan

That note I tucked in my pocket. I'd bury it partly under some leaves at the point that I got into the car. It bore my scent; when Edward inevitably found the point that my scent disappeared into the car James left for me, he'd find my letter. That I knew.

And that's exactly what I did when I ran back to the road, just before suppressing a horrified shudder and climbing into a dead man's car.

James called almost as soon as I climbed into the blue car; and he wanted me to turn around and go the other way.

A strangled sob filled my throat.

"You sent me the wrong way?" I accused in fury, realizing that I must sound insane - what reasonable person was in such a hurry to die?

"Just go North on the 101, back through Forks, and keep driving until I call."

The realization that James was going to drag this out filled me with even more frustration, but there was little I could do other than exactly what he said.

I was just a few miles from being back in Forks when I saw it...and heard it...and *felt* it.

It sounded like a distant crash of thunder, and felt like a small earthquake. But what it *looked* like was a huge ball of fire rising up

through the trees into the sky, not far from where I was.

In shock, I just kept driving, one eye on the plumes of black smoke rising up out of the trees that I was driving straight toward. A few rescue trucks passed me within just a few minutes, along with several firetrucks. If I rolled the windows down, I could hear multiple sirens. I could smell thick, acrid smoke.

I just kept driving.

I was within a mile of the plumes of smoke coming from the woods when I passed the dark-colored, expensive looking car with deeply tinted windows coming toward me from the other direction. But even though my attention was drawn toward the area of the large explosion in an effort to catch a glimpse, I still didn't miss that car suddenly spinning around behind me in dramatic fashion only seconds after going past, and then falling into place behind me.

It kept a respectable distance.

At first.

But in the middle of nowhere, maybe 10 miles North of the explosion site, that car suddenly and rapidly started closing the distance, until it was practically on my back bumper.

And then it easily pulled up directly beside me and began to drift toward me. With horror, I realized that the driver was steadily, carefully - almost gently - forcing me off the road.

I wasn't really frightened so much as angry; I already expected to die. I just didn't want it to happen *now* with some random abductor so that I couldn't even save my mom in the process.

With no other choice, I carefully pulled over and left the car running, watching in shock as the other driver quickly and expertly maneuvered so that the car was positioned directly beside and yet

slightly in front of my car - neither allowing me to drive forward nor to open my door; the rear quarter panel of the other car was less than an inch from the door, leaving no room to open it.

Strangely resigned, I watched as the other car door opened. My eyes were fixed tightly on the opening to see who emerged...but I saw nothing. Instead, I heard the sound of my passenger door being opened - rather forcefully, considering that it was locked. Too late, my mind registered the fact that the only way the driver could have moved that fast and could easily tear open a locked car door is if they were a...

Vampire.

"No!" I managed to squeak out.

Panicking, I slammed the car into reverse and stomped on the accelerator.

I hurtled backward for all of one half second - before I slammed into something hard enough that I could literally hear the rear end of the car crumpling.

I only had enough time to register the fact that there must be two of them, before icy arms grabbed me in an inescapable grip.

I opened my mouth to scream...

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author's Note:

Come on, you guys, give this story some love! My faithful reviewers are totally AWESOME and I love you guys...but I'd love to hear from some of you lurkers, too. Come on out, and don't be shy! I may *write* about vampires, but I don't bite...I promise. :)

C'mon I'll make it easy...I'll give you a topic. Let's play a game. Who can guess what the explosion was and who caused it? If you get it right, you'll get a special shout-out in the next chapter...where we'll find out all about that explosion. Let's see who can get closest - but you have to go on record with your guess, through review. :)

Also, please check out my other story, Second Chances. :)