



my brother's pet
WAMPVIRE
by ooza

MY BROTHER'S PET VAMPIRE

a Twilight Fan Fiction by ooza

My Brother's Pet Vampire by ooza

There are many things that keep people awake at night. For Bella, it's her brother's angry pet vampire locked in the basement. If she thinks it's bad now, just wait until he gets out . . .

Edward/Bella, Alternate Universe, Rated M



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Chapter One

Bella

MY BROTHER NEVER CLAIMED to be the smartest in the family, but he was a self-proclaimed badass. Most of his bravery came from being too ignorant to know when to back down. Sure, he'd never lost a bar fight. He was also no stranger to spending a night in the county jail. And though Emmett had made his fair share of poor decisions, this one took the cake.

"You can't be serious."

Emmett smacked a long metal bar against his palm. "Titanium alloy. Laced with silver."

"Let me get this straight." I pointed to the trailer behind his pickup truck, filled with more bars. "You're building a cage."

"Yep."

"To house a vampire."

Emmett nodded.

"Uh-huh. Okay. Em . . ." I refrained from asking how much he'd spent on this venture. Emmett was an adult. If he wanted to piss away his inheritance one ridiculous hobby after another, that was his choice. "I'm not even going to address the fact that you think vampires exist."

“They do.”

My patience began to wear thin. “What is it, exactly, that you’re going to do?”

“Well, Bella. I’m glad you asked.” Emmett tossed the bar onto the ground before pulling two more from the trailer. “Once I get this cage built, I’m going to hunt down a vampire.”

Metal clanged as he added another bar to the pile. It took everything I had to keep from jumping and covering my ears. I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against his truck, trying to keep my cool.

“Then I’m going to put the vampire in the cage.”

“Yeah? And then what?”

“Then I’ll have a pet vampire. Obviously.” He turned from me to unload the last of the bars. “Are you going to help me carry these in or what?”

“Where on Earth are you going to find a vampire?”

“In the woods,” he said, as if it were obvious.

“Emmett,” I said, my frustration turning to barely concealed rage. “I do not even know what to say right now. Everything you’ve said is so absurd. I’ve got nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“Then grab the toolbox from the backseat and come downstairs.” Emmett tossed three bars over his shoulder and started for the house.

“Mom and Dad are rolling over in their graves right now!”

“Whatever. Dad would build this right alongside me, and you know it.”

When the front door slammed behind him, I turned and fled into the woods surrounding the house. At times like these, I couldn’t handle being around Emmett. He would work on that cage all night. He wouldn’t eat or sleep until it was complete. Not just complete. Perfect.

I walked until I reached a decrepit tree fort, hidden just from view of the house. It was worn from years of neglect. One of the tree’s branches had cracked off during a storm a few summers ago, deeming the fort unsafe to use. It sat at a precarious incline, the door hanging open. I hoped it served as a warm, dry home to some sort of critter.

I hoisted myself onto the fallen branch and sat.

“A pet vampire. What the heck are you going to do with that?” I muttered.

I'd learned over the years that it was best to let Emmett be. Whenever he got an idea in his head, he obsessed over it in meticulous detail. He spent his time and his money bringing it to life, making it perfect. Once he did, it was thrown away and forgotten, and he went back to living his normal life until the next thing came along. He was like Dad in that aspect, but Dad's projects were at least logical and useful.

As I thought of him, I brushed my fingers across the locket around my neck.

Dad had built our little house in the woods when Emmett and I were small children. He added rooms onto it throughout the years, but before he did, he built us this tree fort so we had privacy and somewhere to escape. Dad was always building, either as a job or on the side. He even served as the town's unofficial handyman throughout the years.

But Dad hadn't been without his demons, and I worried about Emmett. He hadn't been the same since we lost our parents.

My only hope was his new project wouldn't last long.

I didn't see Emmett for the rest of the evening. In the morning when I left for class, I could still hear him pounding away in the basement. I dreaded returning home all day.

For the next three days, Emmett worked on building his cage. He ventured out of the basement when he needed to eat. If he came up to sleep, I didn't notice. I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. It wasn't the first time he had a crazy idea that involved labor, and I'd humored him enough for one lifetime.

When I came home from class that night, Emmett burst through the front door, a giant grin stretching across his face.

"It's done! Come look."

He was excited as I followed him to the basement. It reminded me of Christmas morning when we were kids. Even then Emmett was more enthusiastic than me, often dragging me out of bed while it was still dark outside. Only now, when he

turned on the light, instead of presents there was a large cage. I walked around it, feeling the cool metal with my hands. Emmett waited, a smile on his face.

The cage appeared to be high quality. Not that I was an expert. Emmett was a handyman, just like Dad, and once again he was wasting his talents.

“You could sell this. I don’t know why anyone would need a cage this size, but I’m sure someone could use it.”

“No way. This is for my vampire.”

I sighed. He sounded so serious that part of me wanted to believe him.

“All right,” I conceded. Some fights weren’t worth having. “Come upstairs. I’ll make you dinner.”

The next day, Emmett once again charged out of the house when I got home. He yanked the book bag from my shoulder. He was smiling, and his eyes shone, but there was a frenzied craziness behind them. I knew this was coming. Hopefully it would end soon.

“I got him,” he said.

“Who?”

As Emmett ran back to the house, my stomach sank. I followed. Dread built as he dropped my bag in the entryway and started down the stairs. I was afraid of what I would find down there. All I could think was that our parents’ deaths were too much, and Emmett had finally lost his mind.

I halted at the bottom of the stairs, gasping when I saw a man sitting in the back corner of the cage.

“Emmett, what have you done?”

“It’s the vampire, Bella!” He gestured to the cage, most likely exasperated that I didn’t share his joy.

“He’s just a man!” I started toward the cage, not exactly sure what to do. I had to apologize, to tell this stranger that my brother, while meaning well, wasn’t exactly stable. The last thing I needed was for Emmett to be hospitalized. He was the only family I had. “Sir, I am so sorry—”

Two things happened at once: Emmett grabbed me by the shoulders and drew me back; the man leaped to the front corner closest to us. He strained as he reached for me through the bars, making a noise that could only be described as a snarl.

I winced as we hit the ground. Emmett's knee jammed into my side. "What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

"What the hell does *vampire* mean to you?"

I pushed away from Emmett and sat back on my heels. The man pressed his body against the cage, his knuckles white as he gripped the bars on either side of his face. He focused his dark eyes on mine with an intensity so unsettling that I slid back another foot.

"Emmett, vampires don't exist." My voice sounded unconvincing, even to me. When he didn't respond, I pried my eyes away from the man in the cage to look at him. He was staring at the man, a scowl on his face.

"Don't you look at my sister," he said. It didn't seem like the man heard him. "Hey!" Emmett picked up an extra metal bar from the floor and slammed it against the cage. "Eyes over here, buddy!"

The man hissed as his head snapped toward Emmett, but he made no move to back away from the bars.

Emmett's sudden grip on my arm caused me to jump. "Let's go."

My eyes remained on the man as Emmett dragged me toward the stairs. I wasn't certain, but I swore the corner of his lip lifted into a smile, showing off a long, white fang.

"Promise me you won't go down there." We stood outside the house, Emmett with his keys in hand. I didn't want him to leave. I needed him to stay here and fix the mess he'd created, but he was scheduled to work at the hardware store. He'd had the job for almost eight months, which was a record. He couldn't afford to burn any more bridges. I'd have to deal with this myself.

"I won't."

“I’m serious, Bella. I don’t know what kind of voodoo mind games he has, but I don’t want you anywhere near him. I have half a mind to take you with me.”

“I can’t tag around the store all night. I have homework. I’m not flunking out of college because of your bad decisions.” I sighed. “Emmett, what are you doing?”

“I told you. I want a pet vampire.”

“Emmett,” I said sharply. “I don’t know what happened down there. I don’t know what’s going on, but listen to me.” My parental tone was backfiring. Emmett looked away, appearing interested in something across the yard. I grabbed his face, turning it back toward me. “Listen to me,” I repeated. “Vampires don’t exist.”

Emmett pulled away from my grip. He was becoming irritated. I knew I had to back off or he would shut down.

“Bella, I know I’ve said and done a lot of crazy things. I know. But I’m telling you, that thing downstairs is a vampire. I swear to you. You have to believe me. You believe me, right?”

I nodded, resigned. Diffusing this situation was beyond me. “Sure, Em. But . . . why do you have to keep him? Can’t you just let him go?”

Emmett groaned as he opened the door of his pickup and hopped inside. “I barely survived capturing him. If I let him go now, he’ll kill me for sure.”

A million questions swam through my mind: How did Emmett capture him? Why was he so certain the man was a vampire? Even if he were a vampire, and he wasn’t, what made Emmett think his cage was strong enough to hold him?

“What are you going to feed him?” I asked, approaching logic from a different angle. If Emmett was hell bent on believing in vampires, maybe I could use that to my advantage.

“Feed him,” Emmett said, as though it had never crossed his mind. “He’s immortal. Why does he have to eat?”

“Well, I don’t know. I must have skipped school the day we learned about vampires!” I said in defense. “What if he’s not a vampire? What if he’s some creepy guy who lives in the woods and you end up starving him to death? You’ll go to jail for murder, and I’ll be an accessory!”

“He’s not,” Emmett insisted. “He’s a goddamned vampire. He’s been taunting me for years, and now he’s mine.”

“Emmett . . .” Tears welled in my eyes. Emmett clenched his fists.

“Don’t look at me like that, Bella,” he warned. “I’m. Not. Crazy.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Just listen to yourself, Emmett. Look at what you’ve done! What am I supposed to think?”

“Fine.” Emmett pulled his cell phone from his pocket and offered it to me. “You think that *thing* downstairs is human? Then call the cops. They’ll charge me with kidnapping and you can be the hero.”

I sighed. Right or wrong, I couldn’t turn Emmett in. Despite his flaws and his questionable decisions, he believed he was doing the right thing. I wasn’t sure how, but I would find some way to fix this without the authorities. Shaking my head, I pushed his phone away.

“Smart choice,” he said. “Cause that thing will kill us both.”

Emmett wasted no time hopping in his truck and tearing out of the driveway. When his truck was out of sight, I retreated to the house.

The fresh air had helped clear my mind. That moment in the basement had been terrifying, but it had been clouded with surprise and fear. I wasn’t sure what to do now, but I had to tread lightly. The man was obviously angry; he had every right to be. I just hoped I could smooth over this situation. And if I couldn’t, maybe having the authorities involved wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

Guilt struck me at the thought. Emmett and I always looked out for each other. He protected me with his strength. I protected him by cleaning up his messes—just like Mom had always done for Dad. I reached up to my neck, feeling for my locket as I usually did when I thought of our parents.

Emmett’s warnings ran through my mind as I approached the basement door. I waited, listening for any noise below, but no sound came. It was curious that the man wasn’t yelling for help. I briefly wondered if I’d imagined the whole thing, and maybe I should make sure *I* wasn’t the one who was losing it.

My hand gripped the door handle, and I froze. There was something nagging in the back of my mind. Something about this situation was wrong. Sure, there was nothing right about a man locked up in a cage in the basement. But there was

something more than that. Something that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Stop being ridiculous, I thought to myself. In one smooth motion, I opened the door.

From where I stood, I could see the cage. The man stood in the corner, his back to me, his head slightly inclined. He was listening, waiting for me to make a move.

I watched.

Finally, he swiveled around and once again placed his hands on the bars as he stared up at me. It wasn't the same as earlier. The intensity was gone, replaced with curiosity. I was curious too. My feet found the first step, and then the second. Then Emmett's warning replayed in my head.

I stopped halfway down the steps and sat.

"Hi," I said timidly.

He didn't reply.

"I'm really sorry about my brother. He thinks you're a vampire. I'm sure you figured that out already. He means well. Honestly, he wouldn't hurt a fly. If I let you out, can we forget this whole thing happened?"

I remained seated on the stairs. My legs felt like Jell-O. I didn't think I could move if I tried.

The man stared at me with his cold, black eyes. He didn't speak.

"Do you understand me?" My throat tightened, causing my voice to rise. This was stupid. It was like my instincts were kicking in, and the subconscious part of my brain knew of a danger my mind had yet to recognize.

I forced myself onto shaky legs and approached the cage, careful to keep my distance. I didn't like the way the man pressed himself against the bars as I approached, as though he wanted to be closer to me.

This was not how I expected this encounter to go. I assumed there would be some sort of two-way conversation, even if it meant he yelled at me and threatened to call the cops. I didn't understand his silence.

"I don't suppose you saw where he put the key, did you?" Of course there wouldn't be a key nearby. Emmett probably had it on him. He didn't trust me with it. I felt guilty for breaking my promise.

Even if I had the key, I'm not sure I'd want to let the man out while I was here alone. Maybe if he'd displayed one normal reaction I'd feel differently, but he remained silent, staring at me. His grip tightened on the bars as I waited for him to respond. I couldn't tell if he didn't understand or if it were an act.

Suddenly, something Emmett said outside struck me.

"My brother said you've been taunting him for years. What did he mean?" I didn't know why I bothered asking. This was going nowhere. I took a deep breath and stared him directly in the eyes, feigning confidence. "You know, I have every intention of helping you, but you've got to give me something. You can't just stand there and stare at me. It's rude . . . and creepy."

One side of his lips curled up into a wry smile. The blood drained from my face. I felt my knees going weak. Without another word, I turned and ascended the stairs.

Chapter Two

THAT NIGHT I COULD BARELY SLEEP. I hid in my room, waiting for Emmett to return home. The hardware store had long since closed, so I could only assume he'd stopped at the bar after work. His phone went straight to voicemail. It wasn't an unusual scenario, but seeing as he'd locked a man in a cage in our basement, the timing could have been better.

I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd be able to fix everything while Emmett was gone. I'd expected to have a normal conversation with the man, to come to some understanding. I thought I'd be able to apologize and let him go, and maybe we'd laugh over the misunderstanding.

He'd acted so bizarre. I didn't know what to do. But something inside told me that letting him go was a horrible idea. Maybe it was a good thing that Emmett didn't leave the key where I could find it.

At some point I must have drifted to sleep, because a noise in the house woke me up. I sat up straight in a panic and thought I saw the man standing at the foot of my bed. By the time I reached over and turned on the light, he'd vanished. I wiped the sleep from my eyes. Had he been there? Or was my mind playing tricks on me? I pulled the blanket over my head and squeezed my eyes shut.

This was ridiculous. Vampire or not, if he'd escaped, hiding under the covers wouldn't save me. I hopped out of bed, still fully clothed from the day, and headed toward the basement.

It was just after three a.m. Tonight was a new moon, and it had never felt so dark outside. I tiptoed to the front door and turned on the flood light. I half expected to see him standing outside the window, staring in at me with that creepy smile on his face. There was nothing outside but an empty driveway.

I opened the door to the basement and turned on the light at the top of the stairs. The man still stood in the cage, proving my fears of him having escaped unfounded. Despite my fear, I approached him with much more confidence than earlier, stopping just out of arm's reach.

"Ready to talk yet?" I asked and waited. Immediately I regretted my decision. This was a game to him; I just knew it. He was the predator, and I was the stupid girl too stubborn to run away. Maybe he deserved to be locked up, and Emmett had done the world a favor.

The man gripped the bars on either side of his head. They pressed against his cheeks as he leaned against the cage. I took a step back. Then, to my surprise, he smiled. It was a large, menacing grin, showing off the full set of his white teeth. There were no fangs in sight, but it was unsettling, nonetheless.

I took a step back, ready to retreat to the safety of my bed, when the sound of the front door closing made me jump.

Emmett was home.

I swung around and looked up the stairs, expecting to see him there. Would he be angry with me? Disappointed? I couldn't afford to lose his trust right now. I still hadn't figured out how to remedy this situation.

Before I could draw my next breath, something hard clamped around my ankle. I fell forward onto the concrete floor as my leg flew out from beneath me. I rolled onto my side and saw the man squatting down, pulling my leg through the cage. My thigh slammed into the bars. He gripped my leg, his fingers squeezing into the flesh right above my knee.

A scream built in my chest, but it fizzled when he held one finger to his lips. Neither of us moved. I didn't know if I was paralyzed with fear or confusion. I held my breath.

The basement door handle rattled as it turned.

"Now you're in trouble," the man whispered. He released my leg, holding both hands up, palms out in a sign of truce. I stayed on the floor, scurrying backward until I was hidden beside the stairwell. As long as Emmett didn't come all the way down, he wouldn't see me.

"What the hell are you doing?" Emmett's voice boomed down the stairs. I didn't dare breathe.

The man stood and grabbed the bars. He bared his teeth as a loud, rumbling growl ripped from his mouth. It wasn't human. It wasn't feline or canine. It wasn't of this world.

Instinctively my hands clasped over my ears. My gasp was lost in the sound reverberating through the empty basement.

It was terrifying.

My body shook as I pressed myself against the wall, trying to disappear.

His growl quieted and slowed until it was a low, steady rumble.

Emmett spoke from the top of the stairs. He didn't sound the least bit shaken.

"You can rot down here," he said.

The light went out, shrouding the basement in darkness. Then the door slammed shut.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed. My body wouldn't stop shaking as I sat on the floor, curled in a ball. It was pitch black. I waited for my eyes to adjust, but no matter how hard I strained, all I saw was darkness. Upstairs, Emmett banged around in the kitchen before retreating to his bedroom. Nothing but silence followed.

If I stayed against the stairwell, I'd be able to get out without coming too close to the cage, but I didn't trust my legs to work. Closing my eyes, I waited, taking

deep breaths and trying to calm myself. It would all be okay. I just had to get out of here, and I'd never come back.

Slowly I rose to my feet and tiptoed to the base of the stairs, coming closer to the cage with each step. I listened for anything to tell me where he was. I had a brief flashback to being in a haunted house as a kid, unable to see and waiting for a hand to reach out from the darkness and grab me. Back then, Emmett was always there to save me. Now it would only take one scream and he would come running.

I swallowed back the panic. Emmett couldn't know I'd come down here against my word. My thigh throbbed where it had been wedged between the bars, reminding me of how close I'd come to something terrible happening.

I rounded the stairs. It felt like I was wading through mud as I ran to the top. Once in the safety of my room, I collapsed on the bed and sobbed.

What on earth was that thing? He wasn't human. There was no way. How were we going to get out of this alive? Emmett was right about one thing. If he got out, he would kill us both.

Not for the first time, I wished our parents were alive. I reached for the locket, but my hand closed around air. I bolted upright, frantically running my hands over my neck, searching for the chain.

The necklace was gone.

I didn't sleep for the rest of the night. I was going to be a wreck for my classes today, but it was Friday. I would get through the next few hours and have the weekend to recover. Besides, I needed to get out of this house.

Emmett was in the kitchen when I came out of my room. He sat at the table with the morning paper and a large mug of coffee in front of him. He reminded me so much of Dad on mornings like these.

I poured a cup of coffee for myself and sat down next to him.

"You look like hell," he said.

“Thanks,” I scoffed. “What’s in the bag?” I pointed to the bag on the table with the hardware store logo on it.

Emmett dropped the newspaper and pulled a box from the bag.

“It’s a deadbolt. I figured a little extra security wouldn’t hurt.”

A deadbolt? There was a creature locked up in the basement, and he thought if the titanium cage wouldn’t hold, a deadbolt would?

“Do you think one little lock is enough to hold that thing?” I asked.

Emmett furrowed his brow, examining the lock closer. “Hmm. Good point.” He sighed and set the lock on the table.

“You can’t let him get out,” I blurted. Emmett’s face softened. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze.

“He’s not going anywhere. I promise.”

I finished my coffee and stood. “I have to go. I’m going to be late for class.”

School dragged by. It was two-thirty when I returned to the house. It had felt like days instead of hours, yet I wasn’t ready to return. Emmett’s truck was gone from the driveway. I left my keys in the car. The last thing I needed to do was waste time running around the house if I needed to make a hasty escape.

I entered the house, making my way cautiously past the basement door. There was not one, but five new locks and two chains installed. It seemed Emmett misinterpreted my apprehension about the safety of one deadbolt. Despite my fears, I felt a strong pull drawing me closer. The door itself seemed alive, like it was breathing, emanating fear and danger and excitement. I shook off the feeling and kept walking.

I searched everywhere for my locket. In and under my bed. Under the bathroom vanity. The living room, the kitchen. I checked all the clothes in the hamper. I checked places I knew it wouldn’t be, like the garage and Emmett’s room. But all my searching was in vain. I knew where my locket was.

Standing before the basement door, I ran my fingers across all the shiny new locks. Was I really considering returning after the events of this morning? I'd been so adamant that I'd never come back, yet here I was.

It was just a stupid necklace. It clearly wasn't going anywhere. If I died trying to recover it, it wouldn't do me any good. But it was a source of comfort. It held a picture of my parents on their wedding day. Dad had given it to Mom when I was born, and she'd given it to me a few months before they passed. Besides, if I left it downstairs and Emmett found it, he would know I'd been down there.

Taking a deep breath, I unlocked all five deadbolts and disconnected the two chains. If he were strong enough to breach the cage, I highly doubted a wooden door, no matter the number of locks, would be enough to hold him. Not to mention there were two hopper windows in the basement, which I'm fairly positive even I could bust out if necessary.

I opened the door and peered down the stairs. He was still there in the cage, staring up at me. I steeled myself and entered. I could feel his eyes on me as I returned to the spot I'd been cowering in that morning. A shiny piece of metal caught my eye. I recognized the clasp immediately, but the locket was nowhere to be seen.

"Looking for something?" His voice made me jump. It was low and smooth, sounding nothing like the horrific noise he unleashed on Emmett.

Standing straight, I forced myself to look him in the eyes, keeping my arms at my sides so I didn't come across as intimidated.

"No," I rebutted.

"Of course not," he agreed. "A spontaneous visit then? You aren't supposed to be here. Careful. I'd hate for you to be mistakenly locked down here with me."

His words sent a chill down my spine. I stood a little straighter and crossed my arms over my chest. "And what would happen to me if I was?"

The man shrugged and pushed away from the bars.

"What are you?" I asked.

He gestured to himself as though it were obvious. "A vampire, clearly."

"No, you're not."

"You don't believe me?"

“Vampires—” I paused. He couldn’t be a vampire. Vampires had fangs, and slept during the day, and . . . “—vampires don’t exist.”

“What do you think I am, then?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“So you don’t believe I’m a vampire, because vampires don’t exist. But you’re willing to believe I’m a different being, of which you’re unsure?”

When he put it that way, it seemed ridiculous. Then again, everything about this situation was ridiculous. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I see.”

The man sauntered to the opposite side of the cage, glancing toward the window. I took a moment to study his appearance while his attention was elsewhere. He looked human, dressed in jeans and a short sleeve black shirt. He wore a pair of Doc Martens. His skin was pale, but not unnaturally so. He was attractive—*very* attractive. I hadn’t noticed until he started acting normal. If I hadn’t heard and seen him acting like a monster, I’d assume he were human.

“Why are you talking?” I blurted.

He raised his brows. “I can stop.”

“I just mean, you were all weird yesterday. And you didn’t respond to anything I said. Why?”

He shrugged. “I was deciding if you were worth responding to.”

It wasn’t the answer I expected, and I failed to hide the surprise from my face. The man looked toward the window once again.

“I would leave now, if you’d like to keep this visit our little secret.”

I backed toward the stairs, unwilling to let him out of my sight until I made it to the top. I thought as long as I could see him in the cage, I would make it out safely.

“I hope you find what it is you’re looking for,” he said before I closed the door. “I’m sure it will show up where you least expect it.”

No sooner had I closed the door behind me when Emmett’s truck pulled into the driveway. Somehow the man had known he was almost home. I hurried to turn all the deadbolts and replace the chains. The last one slid into place as the front door swung open.

“Bella!” Emmett jumped when he saw me. “What are you doing?”

“I . . . uh . . .” I grabbed the chain and gave it a tug. “Just admiring your handy work.”

“Oh.” Emmett rubbed the back of his head. He cleared his throat and shifted on his feet. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay in here. I’ll be in the garage if you need me.”

I watched Emmett retreat to his truck. He removed a toolbox and some more hardware store bags from the back and disappeared into the garage.

Chapter Three

I SPENT THE AFTERNOON attempting to distract myself from the man in the basement. Nothing I did kept my mind off him for long. Homework proved to be futile, as did reading. I didn't have the attention span to retain more than one paragraph. Cleaning kept me busy, but it did nothing to silence my mind. Deciding it was best to get out of the house, I drove to the grocery store. Typically I shopped on Sundays, but I needed the distance to clear my head.

By the time dinner rolled around, I had no answers or appetite. I pushed the ravioli around my plate as my stomach twisted in knots.

"You gonna eat that?" Emmett asked, his mouth filled with the last bite of his dinner. I shook my head and slid my plate in his direction. When he finished my food, he cleared the table, leaving the dishes in the sink.

We spent the evening watching television. By eleven, I fought to keep my eyes open. Any hope I had of staying awake longer than Emmett went down the drain at midnight when he got off the couch to make popcorn. I called goodnight to him in the kitchen and then trudged off to bed. My visit would have to wait until the morning.

Sleep didn't come easily. I tossed and turned for most of the night, thinking about the vampire. If he were, in fact, a vampire. I was still unconvinced. But I couldn't deny that he was something otherworldly. Whatever he was, he didn't deserve to be locked in a cage, but I didn't know how to get him out of said cage. Even if I did, I didn't know how to release him and ensure Emmett's and my safety. The thought of returning to the basement filled me with both dread and anticipation. He was terrifying, but there was something about him that drew me in.

Eventually sleep took me. When I woke up, it was light outside. I stretched my weary muscles and rolled onto my side. A glint of silver caught my eye, and I froze. There, on the nightstand, sat my locket.

I pushed the covers off my body as I sat and took the locket in my hands. The clasp was attached once again. I fastened it around my neck, immediately noticing the shortened length of the chain. Emmett must have found it in the basement and repaired it for me. I hoped he wasn't upset with me for being down there. I'd wanted to have a plan in place before he found out.

It was still early, but there was no way I'd get any more sleep. I dragged myself out of bed and got ready for the day before heading into the kitchen.

Once again, Emmett was at the kitchen table.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning."

I sat next to him, not bothering with food or coffee. I waited for the backlash. He didn't look up from the newspaper as he took a sip of coffee. The anticipation was killing me, but if he wasn't going to mention it, neither was I.

I took a moment to inspect his face. Dark circles rimmed his eyes, and his expression, which was usually vivid and full of life, seemed dull and run down.

"You look like hell." I repeated his sentiment from the previous morning. "Are you feeling alright?"

Emmett grunted. He set the paper on the table and drained the rest of his coffee before answering.

"Yeah, it's nothing. Just haven't gotten much sleep lately."

"I know the feeling."

We sat in silence. I watched Emmett as he toyed with his coffee mug. Finally he pushed it away and drummed his fingers on the table.

“I think I’ve made a mistake.”

“Oh?” I asked. This was a good sign. He was coming to his senses.

“I’m worried about the vampire. I don’t think having him here is a good idea.” Emmett reached for his coffee. He brought the mug to his lips, realized it was empty, and set it back down. “I’m worried I’ve put you in danger, and I feel awful.”

“Em.” I reached out and squeezed his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. He’s dangerous. I can’t let him go now. I should have just left him in the woods.” Emmett’s fist pounded the table. He reached for his mug again but stopped.

I retrieved the coffeepot and refilled it for him.

“I’m going to town. I need to clear my head before my shift starts.”

“But—” I began, but he had already stood and stormed out of the kitchen. “Okay.” I sat down again and took his coffee for myself. Emmett seemed to be thinking with his head now. It would have been nice to talk more, but nothing good ever came from pushing him into anything.

When the sound of Emmett’s truck disappeared in the distance, I finished my coffee and went to the basement.

The man stood from his spot on the floor when I approached, once again gripping the bars and pressing against them, getting as close to me as possible. I stopped a safe distance away from the cage. He inhaled deeply, then let out a long sigh. His gaze penetrated me. Neither of us spoke.

Suddenly, I felt bad for him. Man or vampire or whatever he was, he’d been trapped in this cage for two days. He had nothing to do, nothing to eat or drink, nowhere to sit or lie down except the cold concrete floor, no light during the darkness of night. How long was he resigned to live this life?

If I could get on this man’s good side, show him some compassion and make him comfortable, maybe when the time came, we could release him. Maybe he would walk away like this never happened.

“Is there anything I can get you?”

The man cocked one brow. The corner of his lip turned up slightly.

“I’ll take you.”

I stood a little straighter, trying to hide my surprise and discomfort. “A blanket or a pillow? Some water? Food?” I asked, ignoring his comment.

“How will you explain that to your brother?”

Now that Emmett knew I’d been downstairs at least once, I wasn’t as worried about his reaction. It was more important to have a solution in place.

“That’s for me to worry about,” I told him.

“No need to complicate things. *You* could quench my thirst. *You* could keep me warm.”

“Don’t talk like that, mister!” I hissed through my teeth, not sure where my courage came from. “It’s rude.”

“My apologies. You were the one who offered food.”

We regarded each other. I held his gaze, refusing to look away and come across as weak, despite terror creeping over me.

“Are you still trying to convince me you’re a vampire?”

“Yes. Unless you have a different theory you’d like to explore.”

I shook my head.

“If you come closer, I will prove it to you.”

Instinctively, I took a step back.

The man sighed. “I’m teasing. I won’t bite, I promise. Just come closer so I can smell you better.”

“You think I’m dumb enough to get closer to you?”

“If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it two nights ago. Besides, I’m sealing my fate if I kill you while I’m locked in here.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. I couldn’t resist a good debate.

“You might use me as leverage to get out, then kill us both.”

“Again, if that were my intention, I already had my chance. I’m not asking you to stand where I can touch you. Just closer.” The man reached his arm through the bars. I moved toward him with cautious steps, stopping just shy of his reach. He inhaled and closed his eyes. “Better.”

“So . . . you’re really a vampire?”

“If that’s what you’d like to believe.”

His response infuriated me so much I literally stomped my foot. He grinned in return.

“I want to know the truth.”

Still holding the bars, he slid his hands above his head, pressing his body against the cage. “Like I said, come closer and I’ll prove it.”

“If you keep talking like that, I’m going to leave!”

“My apologies.” He dropped his arms and stepped back. His sly smile never wavered.

“Do you have a name?” I asked.

“I do.”

I waited. He didn’t elaborate. I put my hands on my hips. When he didn’t respond, I headed toward the stairs.

“Edward,” he said. I turned to face him again. His smile had vanished. “My name is Edward.”

I returned to my previous position, just out of arm’s reach. Despite his obvious enjoyment of irritating me, he didn’t want me to leave. My first instinct was to be flattered that he wanted me here, but he was probably desperate for whatever company he could get. Maybe I could use that to my advantage.

“Do I not get the honor of knowing yours?” His voice was so smooth, so silky, it was hard to believe he posed any danger at all.

“Isabella,” I stuttered out, not sure why I gave my full name. I supposed it matched his in formality. It felt a little less intimate.

“Isabella,” he repeated. My name had never sounded as beautiful as it did rolling off his tongue. “I thought your name was Bella.”

His comment took me by surprise. I didn’t realize he knew my name. It made me question what else he’d overheard in the past few days.

“If you knew my name, why did you ask?”

“Because it’s the polite thing to do. Have you no manners?” he asked with mock horror.

I scoffed. “Do you get pleasure out of giving me a hard time?”

“I do,” he said. “But there are other ways I’d prefer to get pleasure from you.”

My face flushed, but I forced myself to act unfazed. Edward was not going to get the better of me.

“You have the most delectable blush,” he said.

I pressed my fingers against my cheek, feeling the heat that pooled under my skin.

“May I?” Edward asked as he reached toward my face. His expression remained serious, and he said nothing else as he waited, arm outstretched. I wasn’t sure what made me step forward, but my feet moved before my brain told me otherwise.

He brushed the backs of his fingers across my cheek before pressing his palm against my skin. His hand was cold and smooth, but I swore my cheek burned where our skin made contact. I stared into his black eyes and tried to ignore his tongue as it darted across his lips.

“You’re so warm,” he whispered. “Are you this warm everywhere?”

“Are you this cold everywhere?” I challenged.

“Would you like to find out?” Edward dropped his hand from my cheek. He reached down and popped open the button of his jeans.

“Oh, my god,” I said, bringing my hands up to shield my eyes. “If you take off your pants, I’m leaving.”

“I thought we were comparing temperatures.”

“Not like that!”

“Maybe you should see what I have to offer before you turn me down.”

I was too flustered to respond. I stood staring at the floor, my hands still blocking him from my periphery.

“Oh,” he said at last, a tinge of distaste coloring his voice.

“Oh, what?” I dropped my hands and looked at him, relieved to see all his clothes were still in place.

“I didn’t realize you were a prude. It’s disappointing.”

“I’m not a prude!” I argued. I was strangely offended by his comment, but also surprised that I didn’t want him to think that of me. “It’s just that I didn’t come here to flirt.”

“You came to tease me, then?”

“What? No!”

“You offered me food, and you have yet to deliver.”

“Well, you can’t eat me!”

“Can’t I?” Edward smirked. “I promise you’d enjoy it.”

I held up my finger in a warning. Edward attempted to stifle his smile.

“I’m not even sure I believe you’re a vampire.”

“Why not?”

I pointed toward the window. “Because it’s daytime. And you don’t even have fangs!”

Edward reached for me once again. He held out his hand palm up and waited. My eyes flicked between his hand and his face. There was a challenge in his expression. I hesitated for a moment, and then slipped my hand into his. He pulled me closer, drawing my arm through the bars. Then he pressed my hand against his chest.

There was no warmth to his body, no give to his flesh. His chest rose and fell with each breath he took. His hand held mine in place, and I found myself pushing against him, feeling the way his skin was as hard as stone beneath his shirt. I might as well have been pushing against the titanium bars of the cage.

His scent caught me off guard and I leaned closer, parting my lips as I breathed him in. It was indescribable, intoxicating. I inhaled deeper, tasting him on my tongue. It consumed my senses, even as I exhaled. I wondered if it was even a scent at all, or if he exuded some sort of essence that seeped into my very being.

Edward squeezed my hand, returning me to the present.

“Tell me when you find a heartbeat.”

I shifted my palm to the right and then the left. Lower, higher. There was nothing. I shook my head.

“Do you believe me now?”

I nodded, too overwhelmed for words. I tried to pull my hand away, but Edward held it tight to his chest. The knots returned to my stomach. It was one thing to watch him act like an animal. It was an entirely different level of horrifying to feel that he wasn’t human.

“Can I ask you one thing?” I waited for him to respond and took his silence as permission. “If I find a way to free you, will you promise to leave without retaliating?”

Edward dropped his arm to his side, but he didn’t release my hand. His lips formed a tight line as he stared at me. His black eyes, which had moments ago implored my trust, were now cold and emotionless. I attempted to extract my arm from the cage, but his grip on me tightened.

“You want me to leave peacefully?”

I nodded.

“And why exactly would you think I’d agree to that?”

My heart fell.

“Emmett means well. He’s a good person; he really is. This was all a big misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?” Edward’s voice dropped an octave. “Your brother wanted a pet vampire.”

“I—I know.” I grappled for any other reason he might spare us. I had to do it for Emmett, and for me. “I thought, maybe you wouldn’t harm us, because you like me.”

Edward raised a brow.

“I mean, not that you like, like me. Or even like me at all for that matter, I guess. But you’ve been talking to me, and you haven’t hurt me yet.” I tried once again to reclaim my arm, but he wouldn’t release my hand. My only hope was to play on whatever humanity he had left. “I just thought there was good in you.”

Keeping a firm grip on me, Edward moved our joined hands outside of the cage. He began to turn me in a circle, as though we were dancing, pausing once I faced away from him.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a nervous laugh.

“Don’t scream,” he said.

Edward wrapped his arms around my chest, slamming my back against the cage and pinning my arms to my sides. I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could, for as long as my breath of air lasted, struggling against him the entire time. Edward pressed his cold lips against my ear, shushing me.

My heart pounded against my chest. It too was attempting to break free from his iron grasp. Edward held still. When I realized fighting against him was futile, I stopped struggling.

“I’ll make you one promise,” Edward whispered. “I won’t kill you. I have other plans for you.” Edward pressed his open mouth against the back of my neck and swirled his tongue along my skin. He slid one hand lower, fishing it beneath my shirt and pressing his palm flat against my stomach. I fought against him with fervor, finally breaking free and running to safety.

I turned around in time to see the smug smile on his face disappear. My vision blurred as tears ran down my face, and I took an unsteady breath. “Fuck you!” I spat.

I turned and ascended the stairs, slamming the door behind me, and turning each lock as loudly as possible.

Chapter Four

THE TICKING CLOCK ON THE WALL was the only sound in the house. It grew louder as the hours passed, as though taunting me, reminding me my time was finite. I sat on the couch, stroking my locket between my thumb and index finger absentmindedly. If Mom and Dad were here, they'd tell us what to do.

My calls to Emmett went unanswered. Once again, he didn't come home after his shift at the hardware store. I was growing anxious in this house all alone, but I couldn't bring myself to leave. I was afraid if I did, I might never come back. I was afraid what would await here if I did. A sharp pain pierced the side of my finger, and I realized I'd chewed another nail bloody.

As terrified as I was of what Edward might do to us when he got out, I couldn't ignore the guilt nagging at the corner of my mind. Did Emmett and I deserve what we had coming? Edward wasn't a pet. He was, well, human, or at least as human as something that wasn't human could be. He shouldn't be locked in a cage. Despite his actions toward me, I really did want him to be free to go back to his home, or whatever life he had before Emmett captured him. Did he have a family? Friends? Was someone looking for him?

The back of my neck tingled where his lips had been. I covered the spot with one hand and placed the other over my abdomen where he'd touched me. My stomach flipped and heat filled my chest, my heart beating faster as I recalled his cool skin against mine. My mind and body seemed to be out of sync, because my mind was filled with dread, but my body didn't seem to be having the same reaction. All I could think was that the stress had been too much, and my brain was finding a way to cope with what had happened.

His scent still lingered in my nose. I swore I smelled him every time I moved. He shouldn't smell this good. I shouldn't *want* to smell him.

I needed fresh air. I tossed on a cardigan before heading outside to sit on the branch next to the tree fort. It was a different type of quiet out here. The air was eerily calm. Not even the smallest breeze rustled the trees. The sky was clear and bright blue, its beauty a sharp contrast to the horror inside the house.

What I wouldn't give to be a kid again, to escape with Emmett to our tree fort and play for hours, and when we got tired, return home for dinner with our parents.

I twisted my neck to look up at the fort and frowned. The door was closed. It hadn't been closed in years. I walked the around the tree, inspecting it from all sides. At the angle the fort leaned, there was no way the door could have shut on its own.

Curiosity got the best of me. I tugged on the ladder. Aside from missing a couple rungs, it seemed sturdy. I climbed to the top to get a closer look.

The boards of the makeshift porch groaned under my feet. The fort was only about ten feet off the ground. If I fell, I wouldn't be seriously injured, assuming the whole thing didn't collapse on top of me. The rusty doorknob turned, but the door didn't budge. Someone had been up here. If Emmett had gone inside and it hadn't collapsed, it should support my weight. I pushed on it twice and then threw caution to the wind and rammed my shoulder into the door.

The tree fort lurched as the door popped open and I stumbled inside. Something metal clinked as it flew past me. My eyes homed in on the object, expecting a screw or a nail, or some forgotten childhood toy.

It was a key.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins. My ears thrummed a steady rhythm with each beat of my heart. The key hummed, vibrating with a silent energy that begged me to pick it up, begged me to release the monster from my basement. I felt his lips on my neck once again, felt his cool breath across my shoulder as he whispered his threat.

I reached down and picked up the key. It was thicker than I expected. The metal was cold and heavy in my hand.

Releasing Edward would seal my fate. I couldn't do it, not without knowing his intentions toward me. At the same time, I didn't want to know. But how could I go on, knowing I possessed the power to free him? How much longer could we live like this? How much worse would it be for us if I waited?

Key in hand, I climbed down the ladder. My cell phone rang as I hopped the final foot to the ground.

"Hello?" I answered without looking at the screen.

"Bella, I got your messages. Are you okay?" Emmett asked.

"I . . . yeah." My voice wasn't right. It was thick and dry. I could barely choke out the words.

"Listen, I'm on my way home. I want you to leave for a little while."

"What?"

"Pack a bag. And don't come home until you hear from me, okay?"

His words didn't make sense. Pack? Leave? Where did he expect me to go?

"Emmett—"

"It'll be okay, Bella. I'm going to take care of everything. You won't need to worry about it anymore."

His words felt ominous. I was immediately suspicious. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill it."

There was a long pause. The whooshing of my heart returned to my ears. I drew in a ragged breath.

Kill him?

Edward couldn't hurt us if he were dead, but killing him would make Emmett a murderer. And if I let it happen, I'd be no better. I couldn't live with myself

knowing I stood by and allowed him to die. Even worse, if it backfired and something happened to Emmett, I'd never forgive myself.

"You can't kill Edward." It came out as a whisper, but the warning was clear.

"Ed—you named him? Bella! You're taking this pet thing too far."

"Me? *I'm* taking the pet thing too far?" I hissed.

"That thing downstairs doesn't talk. He doesn't even understand what we're saying."

"He does, Emmett, please. Come downstairs with me. I'll show you."

"You've been downstairs? I told you not to go down there!" Emmett was angry now. He cursed loudly. "That thing is dangerous!"

"I know he is but—"

"No, you clearly don't know. I don't want what happened to our parents to happen to us."

My heart jumped into my throat. My stomach plummeted, leaving a hollow feeling in my gut.

"Emmett," I said, enunciating each letter. "Our parents were killed by a bear."

"No, they weren't. It was a vampire. It was him."

"The medical examiner said—"

"Well, he was wrong!" Emmett shouted. "I'm not discussing this anymore. Leave. Right now. I'm killing him when I get back. I don't care if I have to burn the whole fucking house down."

"No," I said with more confidence than I felt. "You aren't going to kill him."

My demand was met with silence. Without making the conscious decision, I began walking toward the house. The teeth of the key bit into my palm as I flexed my fist.

"I have to. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe. There's no other way out of this."

Edward had said he wouldn't kill me, that he had other plans. Were those plans worse than death? Were they worse than spending the rest of my life knowing Emmett and I were murderers?

"There is."

"Bella," he said, sounding panicked. "What are you talking about?"

“I’m letting him out, Emmett.”

“Are you insane?” he shouted. “You can’t!”

“I’m serious. I have the key, and I’m letting him out. So *you* don’t come home.”

I hung up without letting Emmett respond. He called again before I could put the phone back in my pocket. I rejected the call and turned it off.

My legs felt like lead as I entered the house. I didn’t know what the future would bring. I only knew one thing:

I couldn’t let Edward die.

It felt like I watched someone else’s hand undo the locks on the basement door. A voice in my head begged me to stop. It told me I shouldn’t do this, that I wasn’t ready. But I knew what I had to do, and I didn’t have much time.

Edward leaned against the back of the cage, watching me with a somber expression. He made no move to approach me. I stopped before the cage, out of his reach.

“Back for more?” he asked. The playfulness from earlier was gone.

“We need to talk.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

I fought to keep my eyes on him, to stand up straight and not look away or cover my body. “I need you to be serious for five minutes.”

“Five minutes.” He looked at his naked wrist. “Clock’s ticking.”

I took a deep breath.

“Did you kill our parents?”

Edward pursed his lips and exhaled loudly. My heartbeat echoed in my ears as I waited for his response.

“No.”

There was no reason to believe him, but I did. He sounded too serious, looked too offended by my question.

“Emmett seems to think you did.”

Edward crossed his arms. I waited for him to respond, but it was clear he had nothing more to say.

“Emmett is a good person. After our parents died, he took care of me. He drove me to school, helped me with my homework. He fixed up the house so we could

continue living here. He's always had my back. He would do anything to protect me."

Edward cocked his head to the side, frowning as he regarded me. "Why are you telling me this?"

I took a shaky breath.

"Emmett wants to kill you. He thinks it's the only way this can end."

"And this upsets you?"

I shook my head, fighting to find the right words. My body wanted to run; my stomach churned. Tears brimmed my eyes.

"I don't want you to die."

I forced my hand open, displaying the key on my palm.

Edward's eyes widened.

"If I save your life, will you spare Emmett's?"

Edward sauntered toward me, his expression radiating confusion. "What about your own life?"

"Do what you want with me; I don't care. Just promise me you won't hurt my brother."

"You would forfeit your life to save me?"

I nodded.

"Why would you trust my word?"

"I don't," I answered honestly. "But what choice do I have?"

"You could let him kill me," he said angrily.

I shook my head. "I can't live with your blood on my hands."

We stood, silently regarding each other. Edward stared at me with a frown. I tried to maintain eye contact, but my nerves got the best of me and I dropped my gaze to the floor. Hot tears spilled down my cheeks.

"You are absolutely confounding."

"What?" I asked. I looked up at his bewildered expression. It was not the reaction I'd expected.

Edward reached through the bars, beckoning me closer. As I stepped toward him, I clenched the key in my fist. I wasn't ready to open the door. I wasn't ready to discover whatever fate he had in store for me.

Our eyes met as he placed both hands on my cheeks and wiped away my tears with his thumbs. The gesture was too tender, and I wondered how he was toying with me this time.

“I don’t understand you,” he said.

That made two of us.

Edward smiled and shook his head. It wasn’t the sinister smile I was used to. It was authentic and went all the way to his eyes. He was beautiful. Beautiful and terrifying. Once again, his scent washed over me. I kept my breathing shallow, controlling the panic that threatened to break through as he continued to caress my cheeks. The key in my hand grew heavier with every second that passed.

“So ready for this to be the end,” he murmured, almost to himself. “You’re ready to give up everything.” Edward drew a deep breath then let out a long sigh. His smile faded. “I’m not worth it.”

Edward dropped his hands from my face and stepped back. I wanted to fall to my knees and beg him to spare me. He was the one with the power to change all of our futures. He could make the choice to walk away and let us go on with our lives.

The words danced at the tip of my tongue, but before I could speak there was a shift in Edward’s body language. He tensed as he stood a bit straighter, his eyes losing their focus as his attention was drawn elsewhere. It was subtle, but seeing him unsettled was enough to send a chill down my spine.

I held my breath as I watched at him. When his eyes shot to mine, they were filled with fear. I didn’t have time to process what on Earth could possibly garnish such a reaction from him when the sound of shattering glass echoed from upstairs. I gasped, swinging around in time to see the door at the top of the stairs explode, raining shards of wood down on me. I ducked and covered my head with my hands, screaming as a loud groaning sound reverberated through the room. When I looked up, Edward stood between me and the stairs, his back to me. He reached one arm behind him protectively.

I looked down at the key still in my hand. Then I turned around. The cage bars were bowed out, leaving a two-foot gap. I turned back to Edward in shock.

A growl ripped from his chest. I looked past him. A strange man stood at the top of the stairs. From the noises he made in response, it was clear Edward wasn't the only vampire in the house.

A woman appeared next to him, looking more concerned than angry. She placed her hand on the man's chest and held the other out toward us.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I wasn't sure which one of us she was addressing. Edward stood up straighter. His shoulders relaxed slightly, but he didn't drop his arm.

"I'm fine," he said.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "How did they capture you?"

"I . . ." Edward hesitated. Then all three of them snapped their heads in the same direction.

Emmett's truck barreled up the driveway, sending dirt and rocks spraying from the tires.

"I'll take care of him," the woman said and disappeared.

"No!" Edward started toward the stairs, but the man at the top crouched and growled once again. Edward stopped and turned back to me, a pained expression on his face.

"What's happening?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

"Don't hurt him," Edward yelled up the stairs.

A few moments later, the woman reappeared. She carried Emmett down the stairs, and the man followed. Edward backed us up to the wall, keeping his distance from them. She threw Emmett on the floor like he weighed nothing and tossed what appeared to be chainmail on top of him.

"And just what do you think that's supposed to do?" her shrill voice rang in irritation.

Emmett stared up at her, his eyes wide with fear. I tried to run to him, but Edward blocked my path with his arm and pushed me behind him once again.

"You must be the one blabbing all over town about capturing a vampire," the man said to Emmett. Then he turned to Edward. "What happened?"

Scowling, the woman pointed at me. "Are you protecting her?"

"I know this looks bad," Edward said, "but it's not what you think."

Chapter Five

Edward

THE CRISP SPRING AIR whipped against my face as I ran through the woods. This was my favorite time of year. The forest sprang to life around me, the trees and plants filling out with green and blooming with fresh buds. I appreciated the way they returned to life after a long winter of dormancy. It was something I envied. If only I could return to life, to feel the excitement of living instead of being trapped in my own long winter.

An errant branch caught the leg of my pants, tearing through the fabric and scraping painlessly against my leg. I cursed under my breath. This was my last pair. Any more damage and I'd have to go commando.

A mind in the distance captured my attention, the cadence broken but familiar. I changed my course, following the creek until it split, continuing along the right fork. When I reached the fallen Douglas fir engulfed in moss, I headed south. I didn't need these landmarks to find my way. I could travel any number of paths to reach my destination.

I slowed as I reached the clearing, where I knew Emmett would appear. He carried a hand-picked bouquet of wildflowers. It wasn't often that he brought an offering, but the flowers had recently bloomed, and they were his mother's favorite.

Emmett knelt and placed the bouquet at the base of a small wooden cross, worn with age. He spoke no words, but his thoughts were of his parents. I would not interrupt him while he paid his respects. I owed him that much.

When he finished, he stood and began hiking into the woods. I followed at a safe distance, curious to discover where he would lead us today.

For a human, Emmett was unusually good at navigation. He had a natural sense of direction and memorized landmarks with a precision I'd only ever witnessed in vampires. On a few occasions, I feared I'd have to step in to redirect him home—I didn't need another death on my hands—but somehow he always found his way.

I found Emmett's mind incredibly complex to decipher. He thought in pictures more often than words, and the words that came into his mind were often disjointed, lost in translation. It took me months to pluck his name from a memory. Today was no different, as seemingly unrelated images flashed through his head. A truck, a hardware store, an empty basement, steaks on a grill. The mind was a fascinating thing. It jumped from subject to subject, woven together by segues that only made sense to the person thinking them.

I shied away from the human population. Not only were they difficult to be around, with the delectable scent of blood pulsing through their veins, but the constant barrage of their thoughts was almost intolerable. Images, partial thoughts, memories, fantasies—they swirled together in a twisted cacophony, making little to no sense as they jumped from topic to topic. There were very few people—human or vampire—whose inner dialog was clear and concise.

But Emmett? Emmett was different. His mind fascinated me. Were his thoughts really so simple? Or did they broadcast on a different frequency, one that I couldn't quite tune into? Perhaps the unknown drew me to him. Or perhaps he was tolerable because it was only ever the two of us out here.

As I followed Emmett deeper into the woods, I paid close attention to anything in his mind that might have to do with me. When he looked for me, I usually indulged his desires by making an appearance, though not always. It was good to keep him on his toes.

Once the babble of the creek was loud enough to mask the sound of my footsteps, I closed the distance between us. If Emmett took the time to inspect his

surroundings, he would notice me. Instead, he kept his head down, only occasionally gazing toward the water.

Emmett took a new path today. Well, new to him. There wasn't an inch of this forest I hadn't memorized in the years I'd lived here. A low-hanging branch blocked the slightly worn trail. Instead of finding a way around it, Emmett hoisted himself on top of it. He produced a baggie of food from his pocket, then gnawed on a chunk of dried meat as he enjoyed the silence surrounding us.

Emmett pulled a phone from his pocket and checked the time. His thoughts once again flashed to his grill, then to a young brunette woman. I'd seen her in his mind before. He harbored no romantic feelings toward her, and she often appeared when he thought of his parents. A sister, perhaps? Or close family friend? If she'd ever accompanied Emmett into the woods, I neither saw her nor crossed her scent.

In the distance, a branch snapped. The crack echoed through the forest. Guided by instinct, Emmett jumped to the ground, vanishing from view. An image of my face flashed through his mind, the jumbled anger of his thoughts so intense that I could practically taste it. I sidestepped, shielding myself with a tree as I peered through the foliage.

Emmett's head popped above the shrubs, a scowl on his face as he scanned the horizon, wondering of my whereabouts. The poor human. If every naturally occurring sound in the forest made him think of me, then I must be on his mind often.

He experienced varying degrees of emotions when faced with me. Anger—which was understandable. Fear—which wasn't nearly as strong as it should be. Curiosity—which I often entertained with an appearance, a growl, or a crazed display of running through the woods.

Emmett has yelled for me, yelled at me, and even followed me with the belief that he was tracking me and I was none-the-wiser. Our relationship was unique. We kept each other entertained.

I crouched, about to leap from behind the tree and make myself known, when another image flashed in his mind.

A cage. With me inside.

My body went rigid as I stopped in my tracks. This was new.

Anger still swirled in his mind as he continued envisioning me as a prisoner. Obviously, I had nothing to worry about. He lacked the means to imprison me. Yet still, it put me on edge. His thoughts focused on determination rather than fantasy. There was an underlying frenzy that I hadn't sensed in a long time, an unhinged excitement that spiked my unease.

Perhaps it wasn't the best day to taunt him. A healthy obsession was one thing, but this bordered on mania. I would wait before tracking him again, allow him time to calm down.

Silently, I slipped deeper into the woods, careful to stay out of his view, disappointed that my entertainment was cut short. Mostly, I was disappointed that I no longer had an excuse to delay the inevitable.

With a resigned sigh, I turned away from Emmett and continued south. I ran for miles, my bare feet slapping against the densely covered forest floor, leaving nothing but upturned soggy winter leaves and snapped twigs in my wake. I steered clear of the small towns along the way, searching for the mental voices of any humans that may cross my path, pleased to hear nothing, only the void of the forest as it fell silent around me.

Their voices assaulted me before the monstrosity of the house came into view. Mundane thoughts swirled through my mind. I slowed, taking a moment to revel in it all. To listen to them when their thoughts weren't about me. No concerns or schemes or misplaced theories about my intentions.

Or my sanity.

No one expected me, aside from one. Apparently, the little tattletale didn't warn them of my arrival.

They heard me as I approached. Their alert thoughts quickly gave way to recognition, followed by a variety of emotions: happiness, apprehension, ire, relief.

The front door was unlocked, as it always was. I entered without knocking. Esme met me in the foyer, her arms outstretched.

"Edward! It's good to see you."

She pulled me into a hug, and I leaned down to kiss her cheek. "The pleasure is mine, as always."

"Carlisle just returned from a hunt, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind going again."

So, my black eyes hadn't gone unnoticed. Still, there was no judgment in her mind. If only the others were more like Esme. She never pressed, or asked personal questions at all. She was the one person who would welcome me home, yet had never asked me to come back, even in her mind. Esme understood my struggles. She accepted my lifestyle.

"I'm sure you're right."

I continued down the hallway in search of Carlisle, leaving muddy footprints behind me. I braced myself as I turned the corner, coming face to face with Alice. She stood too close and craned her head to look me in the eye.

"Hi, Edward."

"Alice." I stepped to the side, but she moved with me, blocking my path.

Fucking psychics. Always one step ahead.

"You need to hunt." Concern filled her voice, and for a moment, I almost felt bad. But that was before her mind started analyzing my appearance.

I didn't like the way she saw me. Matted hair, dirty shirt, and tattered pants. My face was tense and cold. Dark circles framed my eyes. Judgment colored her thoughts, as hard as she tried to hide it.

Alice sifted through my future, searching for when—and what—I would hunt next. She was concerned my dark eyes were hiding something more sinister. The joke was on her, as every vision showed me sticking to the family diet. At least there was a prospect of a mountain lion in my future.

"Hey, Alice. Do me a favor and make yourself scarce next time you see me coming. Seeing my future really sucks the fun out of living."

Her eyes widened as a small gasp escaped her lips. She recovered just as quickly from the shock of my words. Frowning, she flew past me, bumping my shoulder as she went.

I heard Carlisle sigh from behind a closed door.

As Alice fled from the house, Jasper joined her, exiting through an upstairs window. He didn't want to cross my path, not wanting to start an altercation. Too bad. I could use some excitement in my life.

"Edward, that was uncalled for." Carlisle spoke at a normal volume, knowing I could hear him. Just as I knew Alice could hear me as I responded.

“This existence is boring and monotonous, Carlisle. Seeing my mundane future every time I visit makes me want to take a one-way trip to Italy.”

I arrived at the door to Carlisle’s study and slipped inside. His carefully composed face didn’t falter when he saw me, but his thoughts gave away his surprise.

“Are you alright?” At least he had the decency to ask me out loud.

“Never been better.”

Carlisle set down the book he’d been reading and made his way to me, concern etched on his face. He placed his hand on my shoulder and leaned in, whispering so only I could hear.

“You haven’t fed. How long has it been?”

I shrugged, dislodging his hand. “A couple of months,” I said noncommittally.

“Edward—”

“Don’t worry,” I interrupted, saving him from the pain of forming the words. “I haven’t strayed from the meal plan.”

“It doesn’t appear you’re following any meal plan.”

“A feeding schedule isn’t necessary.”

“No, it isn’t, but why make yourself suffer?”

“I barely notice a difference going this long. Besides, I’m not around humans like the rest of you.”

“Maybe it would do you some good to integrate back into society. We’re leaving this summer. Our time here has run its course. You’re more than welcome to come with us. I’m sure Rosalie would appreciate not being the odd man out anymore.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

Carlisle nodded. He knew what my answer would be, but that didn’t stop him from being disappointed.

“Where will you go?” I asked only out of curiosity. Their destination wouldn’t change my decision.

“A suburb outside of Chicago.”

My heart clenched with the pang of memories long forgotten. Shock must have registered on my face. Carlisle misinterpreted it as weakness.

“At least think about it. I hate for you to be out here all on your own.”

Carlisle's concern boiled down to one thing. One slip-up or poor decision and I would be lost from civilized society forever. If I saw a vampire who looked like me, I'd be concerned too.

"At the very least you should stay here. It would be a shame to leave the house empty. Esme doesn't want to sell it after all the work we put into it, and we'll be hard pressed to find anything remotely sufficient when we decide to return."

It would be nice to have somewhere to stay with running water and electricity. And it would be at least 80 years before they returned. It was far enough from town that I wouldn't cross anyone's path, assuming I could handle the minds of drivers passing by. I didn't have to stay here full time, but it would be nice to have the option.

"I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask."

"It's not all," I corrected, already knowing his next demand.

"Well, in that case, are you ready?"

As Alice predicted, I snagged a mountain lion, but the poor feline's blood did nothing to satiate me. Hunting was no longer pleasurable, and it didn't extinguish the flames in my throat. To top it off, a spatter of blood now stained my shirt. Not that it could look worse than it already had.

"You should come back to the house and clean up, grab a change of clothes."

"What's the point?" I asked.

Carlisle's face contorted with confusion. "Do you never venture into town? What about the library? You used to go there all the time."

I shook my head.

"Gas for the generator?" he continued.

It had been months since I'd run the generator in the abandoned hunting cabin I called home. I didn't need light, and the small TV had died years ago. I never watched it anyway. Carlisle had insisted on buying me a phone, but it lay dead on

the counter. I didn't see the point when I could just as easily run the miles separating us.

"Edward, you have to find something, *anything* to do before you go insane. You can't continue to exist like this."

"I don't have much of a choice, though, do I?"

"You always have a choice of how to live your life."

We stood in silence, at least on the exterior. Carlisle's mind worked overtime as he pondered how to save me from my demons. He had always been concerned for me, but my steady decline over the past few years caused him great worry. He didn't want to leave me here alone, believing I wouldn't travel across the country to find him if I needed help.

It was a valid concern.

"I have to ask," Carlisle began, his voice soft. "Do you want to hunt humans? Would that make you happy?"

"No," I said, quick to dismiss his fear. "I don't want that."

"The lifestyle we lead goes against our instincts. All we can do is our best. We are not responsible for the actions of others."

I turned and stifled the growl building in my chest. Carlisle knew better. This topic was off limits.

"Come back to the house with me and clean up."

"I'll wash in the river," I said.

"If you were going to wash in the river, you'd have done so already. Besides, a river will not wash out what's growing in your hair."

He wouldn't take no for an answer.

I was relieved to be met with silence as we neared the house. It seemed everyone had departed, leaving Carlisle and I alone. A large gift box sat on the front steps, adorned with an oversized bow. I approached it warily, hoping it wasn't for me.

"Looks like Alice left you a peace offering," said Carlisle.

“Hmph,” I grunted and lifted the lid. It was filled with clothing. Knowing Alice, they were expensive. I would have felt guilty if I could bring myself to care.

“She cares about you, Edward.”

“I’m sure she does.”

“Alice can’t help her gift any more than you can. She’s very careful not to share her visions with us.”

“That doesn’t do me any good, now, does it?”

“No. I suppose it doesn’t.”

I pulled out a pair of black leather lace-up boots, then dropped them back inside. Too bad everything would end up destroyed within a matter of months.

I excused myself to the bathroom, where I showered and combed through the matted knots in my hair, the water black beneath my feet as it swirled down the drain. I took my time, contemplating what it would be like to live here again, and whether it would feel less lonely than the woods, or if the memories of my old life would haunt me.

Once I was dry, I dressed in the clothing Alice gifted to me. The boots felt foreign on my feet as I pulled the laces taut. They were stiff, not as flexible as my last pair of sneakers, which had blown out their soles over three years ago. Clearly, Alice chose fashion over function. Either way, it all seemed pointless. What need did vampires have for footwear?

I bid Carlisle adieu with a promise that I would return within a month to hunt and returned to my home in the woods.

For the next two weeks, I steered clear of the woods within human walking distance of Emmett’s home. Enough of my scent still lingered there, and with my cabin close by, it was more than enough to ward off any nomadic vampires wandering past.

Fraught with boredom, I cleaned up and changed clothes, intending to go into town. I didn’t know for what. Something new, I supposed. I took a calming breath as I ran, preparing myself for the onslaught of voices and beating hearts that were soon to assault my senses.

Our paths crossed purely by coincidence, but once I heard Emmett's mind, I changed my course.

He was searching for me.

I followed the general direction of his thoughts. Once I homed in on his scent, it wasn't difficult to predict the path he'd taken. The underbrush was well worn, displaying fresh footprints in the dirt. I fell into step behind him, careful not to make my presence known just yet. Not until I had a better handle on his intentions.

Images of a cage were at the forefront of his mind, but not the rudimentary cage from weeks ago. The vision of this cage was so solid, so tangible, that I questioned if it were real.

"Here, vampire, vampire, vampire," Emmett whispered under his breath.

I sped up, decreasing the distance between us. The curves in the trail made it impossible to see him, so I scurried up a tree for a better vantage point. Emmett had strayed from the path, lugging what appeared to be chainmail over his shoulder.

In all my years as a vampire, I had never been rendered speechless. Watching Emmett, my mind could barely register cohesive thoughts, let alone words.

"I know you're out here, motherfucker," he muttered.

I shook off the fog of confusion that clouded my brain. The audacity! Was he legitimately trying to capture me? What did he think his chainmail and cage were going to do for him?

I pushed back my indignation. None of it mattered. He could neither catch me nor keep me. I would not be insulted by his lack of intelligence.

As I watched Emmett forge a fresh path through the woods, with his chainmail and his ridiculous camouflage coveralls, my curiosity piqued. What exactly did he plan on doing with me once he caught me? Obviously, if he went through the trouble of building a cage, then he intended to keep me alive. I leaped from the tree and made a wide arc to head him off. If my heart could still beat, it would be pounding against my chest from the adrenaline.

I didn't bother disguising myself, instead opting to block his path. He came to an abrupt halt when he saw me, his eyes wide with excitement and fear.

Emmett shifted the chainmail and, with his free hand, grabbed a taser from his utility belt, exuding determination and confidence. I smiled.

“Vampire,” he hissed.

I narrowed my eyes and growled in response.

Emmett stepped closer and hurled the chainmail in my direction. It must have been heavier than he expected because he missed by over ten feet. I lunged toward him, curious if he would crumple with fear. Emmett shielded his face with his free arm as he held the taser in my direction and fired. I darted to the right and into the trees, evading the electrodes. Not that they would have any effect on me. But I wanted to keep this interesting.

Emmett scurried to the pile of metal on the ground with determination as he fumbled to reload the taser. I thought for sure after he failed he'd be running for home. Once again, I questioned why he was doing this and how he thought it would work.

When Emmett was back on two feet, I made another appearance. This time he changed his tactic, firing the taser first and then tossing the chainmail, missing once again. We repeated this dance a few more times. It seemed he wasn't about to give up. It was time to take it up a notch. As I ran past, I stiff armed him, careful not to break the bones of his chest. He flew backward and landed on his behind with a curse.

Emmett gritted his teeth as he stood, taser still tightly in hand. His tenacity surprised me. After all these years, I didn't think he had it in him. We stared at each other in a silent standoff. I bared my teeth and growled, but it didn't deter him. I contemplated running away and allowing him to believe he had won, but I couldn't bring myself to forfeit. Not without understanding his intentions. Unfortunately, that part of his mind was closed to me. All I knew was that he was angry, and he had a cage with my name on it.

A question flitted in the back of my mind. How committed was *I* to solving this mystery?

Emmett charged, screaming what I could only describe as a battle cry. I prepared to leap backward, and then hesitated. I wasn't sure what made me do it, but I held my ground as he pressed the taser to my chest and pulled the trigger.

I made the split-second decision to play along and fell to the ground without fanfare. Emmett's breath came in ragged bursts as he scrambled to toss the chainmail over me. I froze, unsure of what I should do. He didn't seem suspicious as he paced the length of my body, muttering a string of relieved profanities.

Was I really doing this? I could easily get up and run. Or get up and laugh at his attempts, crumbling his chainmail with my bare hands. If that didn't send him running for the hills, then his sense of self-preservation was completely missing.

My curiosity won, and I pushed what remained of my dignity to the side as he picked me up and flung me over his shoulder.

Chapter Six

EMMETT'S PICKUP TRUCK bounced along the dirt road leading to his house. I lay in the bed of the truck, covered by the chainmail blanket, questioning the decisions that brought me here.

Perhaps I had lost my sanity after all.

There was ample opportunity to change my mind, a fact I kept reminding myself. At any point, I could release myself and leave, whether or not Emmett witnessed it. I owed him no explanation. I could make a hasty exit in silence, or cause a scene and run away like the crazed lunatic he believed me to be. Or I could speak to him man to man. It was only a matter of how long I wanted to play along, and what reaction I sought in the end.

At the very least, it was something different. An opportunity to squelch the monotony of my mundane existence.

In the cab of the truck, Emmett drummed his fingers on the wheel. Concern filled his mind as he pictured the brunette woman once again. Broken scenarios played in his head, as though flipping between two television channels with poor reception. In one, she was scared. In the other, she was excited. Both images

included me, caged. I couldn't help but wonder if she was in on it, and what he had told her about me over the years.

I sincerely hoped Emmett was a good person. I'd hate to think I'd spent years of my life looking out for someone who turned out to be a sadist with a torture chamber in his basement.

The truck came to an abrupt stop, and the driver's side door opened. I braced myself for what would happen next, searching Emmett's mind for any clue of what to expect. There was too much excitement. It muddled his thoughts, leaving me clueless to his next move. His footsteps grew distant, and then a door creaked opened.

I sighed as I waited for him to return. A scent, faint but sweet, infiltrated my nose. I fought the urge to sit up and free myself, just to suck in the surrounding air unencumbered. The scent had me so distracted that I didn't hear Emmett return. The tailgate squeaked as it dropped open. Then Emmett wrapped his hand around my ankle and tugged me toward him, grunting as he heaved me over his shoulder. I suppressed my laughter. Emmett was much stronger than I expected, but he still struggled under my dead weight.

Emmett huffed and grunted as he carried me inside. A concentrated version of the scent immediately assaulted me. Flames licked my throat, singeing a path down my esophagus. Could that be *her* scent? If so, this charade would prove difficult. For the first time, I regretted not feeding regularly.

Emmett carried me down a flight of stairs before dropping me onto the cold concrete floor. I fought every instinct I had to lash out. He was lucky vampires couldn't be concussed.

Metal clanked around me, followed by the echo of a padlock clicking into place. I felt Emmett's hand grip the chainmail near my leg and pull. I rolled my eyes, relieved to not have to control my expressions yet. If I didn't offer some sort of help, I'd be lying here for the rest of eternity. When he gave a hard tug, I turned my body to the side, unraveling myself from my faux restraints.

I was on my feet immediately, poised for attack and snarling through bared teeth. If I was going to play along, I would do my best to make it believable.

Emmett stumbled away from the cage. His heart rate increased, despite already being heightened by the physical exertion. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. He flinched as I lunged toward him, grabbing the cage with both hands. I was careful to put very little strain on the bars. Vampire super strength or not, I had little faith in Emmett's smithing capabilities.

Relief filled his mind as he realized I was trapped. He laughed under his breath, his lip twitching into the briefest of smiles. His voice was weak and hollow as he spoke.

"You're mine now, vampire."

Once alone, I inspected Emmett's handiwork. I was impressed, to say the least. The cage was large, and the materials must have cost a fortune. I traced my fingers along the bars, admiring the sturdiness of the construction. Aside from a few flaws and quality control issues, it would probably hold a wild animal with little concern. One bar in the back was loose. I made a mental note for future reference.

The metal was a blend of something sturdy. Titanium, by the looks of it. It was hard to say for sure. I pressed my thumbnail into a bar. It dented like butter. As I suspected, I would have no trouble escaping my new prison.

I sat on the floor in the back of the cage and gazed around the basement. It was unfinished, concrete and brick. Narrow windows lined the walls near the ceiling, allowing sunlight to cast beams across the floor. A pile of scrap metal rested in the corner. Other than that, the room was empty.

I had hoped this adventure would increase the entertainment level of my day, but I was fearing the opposite. If I didn't go crazy from boredom, I might return to my normal life with a little more appreciation.

A car pulled into the driveway. I searched for a new mind but came up blank. Above me, Emmett ran through the house and out the door. I struggled to decode what his eyes could see.

The brunette was here.

"I got him," Emmett said.

“Who?”

Her question was laced with confusion. Perhaps she didn't know about me.

Now that I could hear her voice, I scanned once again for her mind. Since she and Emmett were related, it was possible her brain operated on the same wavelength. I sifted through images that weren't mine, both mental and visual, but everything I saw belonged to Emmett.

The door at the top of the stairs flew open, revealing Emmett. He flew down them, and she followed closely behind. When she saw me, she stopped dead in her tracks and gasped.

“Emmett, what have you done?”

Emmett gestured to me wildly. “It's the vampire, Bella!”

“He's just a man!” The woman dashed toward me, and with her came a rush of her scent. “Sir, I am so sorry—”

Venom bubbled hot in my throat. My vision tunneled until all I could see was her horrified face. Before I registered what was happening, I was on my feet, lunging toward her, straining through the bars. The loose, flimsy, bendable bars.

They were the only thing keeping me grounded.

My mind warred against my instincts, and I growled. I wanted her. I wanted her blood to flow past my lips and down my throat. It was the only thing that could quench the inferno threatening to consume my entire body.

Emmett grabbed her shoulder and yanked her back, the force landing them both on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” she yelled.

“What the hell does vampire mean to you?”

The woman stared into my eyes with pure, unadulterated fear. She scooted farther away from me. Finally, someone with a logical reaction.

“Emmett, vampires don't exist.”

It took every ounce of strength I had to relax my grip on the bars before I took down the entire cage. In over a hundred years on this earth, I had never experienced anything as euphoric as the scent of her blood. No other human or beast had ever come close. She must be something else entirely, something not of this world.

“Don’t you look at my sister!”

An angel, perhaps.

“Hey!”

No, not an angel. A demon. Straight from my own personal hell.

“Eyes over here, buddy!” Emmett yelled as he struck the cage with a metal bar.

I turned, hissing my displeasure at him interrupting my turmoil. He held his ground, stubbornly confident that the cage would hold, that I wasn’t a threat.

He had no idea how close they’d both come to dying.

“Let’s go.” Emmett grabbed the woman’s arm. She didn’t take her eyes off me, even as he pulled her up the stairs.

It wasn’t until the door shut behind them and I was alone, left with only the ghost of her scent on my lips, that I realized I’d never once heard her mind.

Sister, he had called her.

Bella.

I listened to their parting conversation, easily hearing their voices coming from outside the house.

How quickly Bella ignored what she’d seen with her own eyes. Human minds could be so simple, often missing the clues that were right in front of them. Despite Emmett’s insistence on my being a vampire, she instead dismissed me as a creepy guy who lived in the woods. While she wasn’t wrong, the two weren’t mutually exclusive. Leave it to the human brain to oversimplify.

Emmett never doubted what I was. The first time he saw me, the word popped into his mind so clearly that he might as well have said it out loud.

Vampire.

How he knew remained a mystery to me. His brain was much more open than his sisters, in more ways than one.

Now that Emmett was gone, I could confirm that Bella’s mind was completely silent to me. If it weren’t for the sound of her feet trudging across the gravel driveway, I’d have sworn she left with him.

It was in Bella's best interest to heed her brother's warning. She needed to stay out of the basement. I'd never doubted my strength before, but I wasn't sure I could be in the same room with her again without giving in to the bloodthirsty monster living inside of me.

Emmett's instructions were simple. I was a vampire. Stay out of the basement.

I could hardly be blamed for following my instincts if she were dumb enough to tempt fate. Surely whatever gods existed would forgive me for this one indiscretion, assuming I wasn't already damned. It wasn't as though I were hunting her down. If she came to me . . .

I made up my mind. If she came into the basement, she was mine.

My muscles tightened in anticipation as she entered the house.

Come downstairs, I thought.

"Don't come downstairs," I whispered.

How was I supposed to exist knowing her blood was so close, so attainable? How many days would her mere existence torture me until I gave in? I couldn't stay here. I had to leave.

My fingers flexed around the bars. I hesitated.

How was I supposed to walk away and leave her behind?

It was one human. One little human. Most vampires killed thousands of humans during their existence. I would take her deep into the woods, where her screams would be swallowed by nature. I'd savor her blood, not worrying about the messiness of death.

Emmett would never find her body. I would even return to the cage to alleviate his suspicions. If I disposed of her car and some of her belongings, he might think she left out of fear. Then my tracks would be covered. No one would ever find out. It would be my secret.

The scenario was practically perfect. Her parents were dead. She didn't seem to have a family of her own. Only Emmett.

The first pang of actual guilt struck me, twisting my gut in an unfamiliar way. After everything, how could I take away his sister as well? As far as I could tell, she was all he had. It would be cruel to sentence him to such a fate. Unless . . .

Unless I gave him a different fate.

It would be a mercy. He would never need to feel the pain of loss. Or feel pain at all. He wouldn't even see it coming.

At the top of the stairs, the doorknob rattled, pulling me from my fantasy. What was wrong with me? I couldn't rationalize murder.

I tore my hands from the bars and turned away as the door swung open. Venom filled my mouth as I held my breath. I waited, listening for her next move. She was silent aside from her ragged breath and steady heart.

If this were a test of my strength, I would surely fail. She was my downfall, as I was hers. What had I done to deserve such a punishment?

What had she done to deserve me?

Resigned, I turned to face her.

Bella descended halfway down the stairs and froze. Her eyes didn't leave mine as she sank down and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Hi."

Her greeting took me off guard. It was so simple. Benign.

Normal.

"I'm really sorry about my brother. He thinks you're a vampire. I'm sure you figured that out already. He means well. Honestly, he wouldn't hurt a fly. If I let you out, can we forget this whole thing happened?"

I was dying to know what she was thinking. Surely she didn't believe I was human after the display earlier. I thought I'd scared her. Had I misinterpreted her reaction? Her instincts couldn't possibly be that unrefined.

"Do you understand me?"

Not at all.

I couldn't speak, afraid opening my mouth would be my undoing. Besides, her questions weren't worth answers. I wasn't here for conversation. I was here for my own entertainment.

Bella stood and shuffled in my direction. The cage pressed against my chest as I subconsciously moved toward her.

"I don't suppose you saw where he put the key, did you?"

She must have a death wish if she were insane enough to trust me. I clenched my teeth as I gripped the bars tighter, feeling their fragility as the metal deformed in my fists. I would not allow myself to give in to temptation.

Bella narrowed her eyes. She cocked her head to the side as her teeth skimmed across her lower lip, causing blood to rush to the surface.

“My brother said you’ve been taunting him for years. What did that mean?”

She didn’t break eye contact as she waited for me to respond. Her sudden bout of courage surprised me. I wanted her to elaborate on the things Emmett had said about me, but unless she could read *my* mind, I’d have to become an active participant to get answers.

“You know, I have every intention of helping you, but you’ve got to give me something. You can’t just stand there and stare at me. It’s rude . . . and creepy.”

Bella’s cheeks flushed red as she stood before me with a scowl on her face. I tried to keep my expression neutral as I stifled a laugh. Despite what I assumed was fear, she talked so tough. What I wouldn’t do to know what she was thinking.

All the blood left her face as she swallowed audibly. With a ragged breath, she turned and raced up the stairs.

Chapter SEVEN

THAT NIGHT, I WAS HIGHLY IN TUNE with whatever noises Bella made. She tossed and turned, kicking her feet under the covers. By her erratic breathing, she had yet to fall asleep.

Emmett hadn't returned home. It surprised me he'd leave his sister here alone with me, without even a phone call to check her well-being. How very trusting he was, not only of the cage, but of Bella. She'd disobeyed him the minute he left.

To both my disappointment and relief, she hadn't been back.

Eventually Bella stilled, and her breathing evened out. Though I couldn't hear her mind, I was confident she was asleep. I turned my attention to the cage.

If I were to uphold this charade for any substantial length of time, I had to find a way out without destroying it completely. I located the loose bar in the back, rotating it between my fingers. After toying with it to work it out of place, I lost patience. One swift kick was all it took to shear the metal from the base. A deep clang rang out, and from upstairs the bed creaked, followed by the rumpling of fabric.

I silenced the reverberation with my hand as Bella gasped. I remained silent in the hope she wasn't fully awake, but the floor squeaked as she got out of bed. As

she made her way to the basement door, I scurried to replace the bar, balancing it precariously where it had once been attached. No sooner was it in place when the basement door opened, and the light flicked on.

Bella approached me with determination. She descended the stairs without hesitation and stopped in front of the cage. From where she stood, I would just be able to reach her. It took everything I had to keep my hands inside the cage.

“Ready to talk yet?”

I turned toward her and leaned forward, pressing my face against the bars to get closer. I didn’t dare take a breath, though I wanted to. Her confidence faltered, her eyes widening as she stepped back.

She was nothing but a scared little lamb. All bark and no bite. I appreciated her courage, all the while wondering why she kept coming back. Did she enjoy the fear? I ignored the way her heart pumped faster. It only weakened my flimsy resolve.

I heard Emmett as he approached the house. His mind was sluggish with liquor, and he drove overly cautiously. Bella didn’t hear his truck pull into the driveway.

I waited.

When the front door opened, Bella jumped and swung around. She stepped one foot back to catch her balance, teetering closer to me. Her sudden movement triggered my instinct, and without a conscious decision, I reached down and grabbed her ankle, pulling with too much force. Bella toppled to the floor face first, barely putting her hands out in time to catch herself.

I had her. She was mine.

I tugged on her leg, wedging it between the bars, and dug my fingers into her thigh. My hand burned from the heat of her body, and I felt the pulse of her femoral artery beneath my palm. A surge of venom filled my mouth, begging me to pierce her skin with my teeth and drink the saccharine fluid that flowed through her veins.

Bella inhaled a staccato breath, her mouth opening wider as she prepared to scream.

I couldn’t allow that. If she screamed, Emmett would know she was down here with me. I didn’t want to be interrupted. Despite my better judgment, I wanted to be alone with her.

Keeping my grasp on her leg, I lifted my free hand to my lips, holding up my index finger as I willed her to stay silent. Bella froze, her breath catching in her chest. A frown pulled at the edges of her wide-eyed expression as she stared at me.

She cooperated. I hadn't expected that.

Emmett stumbled to the basement door. Bella might not have screamed, but she was soon to be discovered anyway.

"Now you're in trouble," I whispered. And in more ways than one if she continued to obey me.

I released her and held up my hands. It only took a split second for Bella to snap out of her shock. To my surprise, she crab walked backward and cowered on the side of the stairwell. I rose to my full height as Emmett swung the door open.

"What the hell are you doing?" he hollered down the stairs.

I growled at him with my teeth on full display. I didn't hold back. If Emmett came down here, he'd see Bella. We couldn't have that.

Emmett shook with fear, even with his senses dulled by liquor.

"You can rot down here."

He turned off the light before slamming the door.

The night was pitch black with a new moon and overcast sky. Not an ounce of light filtered through the window from outside. Bella didn't budge from her spot. She remained curled in a ball with her arms covering her head, shaking as she took ragged breaths.

My own breath had run out after growling at Emmett. I had yet to inhale, afraid of my reaction if I smelled her this closely. Though I didn't need oxygen, the sensation was becoming uncomfortable. It would be easier once she was gone and the scent of her blood dissipated.

Why was she still here? If she were truly so scared, she should have screamed for help. Emmett's wrath couldn't possibly terrify her more than me. Perhaps she didn't want to disappoint him. Or wound her pride. The way she had faced me multiple times now led me to believe the latter was a strong possibility.

My hand was still warm from the heat of her leg. What I wouldn't give to slide it along her bare skin, to feel the heat and the blood and the life within her. Her heart had settled, but it still beat too fast. Bracing myself, I sipped the smallest

breath of air, tasting the bright scent of her adrenaline on my tongue. Pain flickered in my throat.

Every instinct in my body screamed to bust through the bars and savor every drop of her blood. She was a human. She would die eventually. If I didn't take this opportunity, there was a good possibility I would cease to exist before finding anyone like her again.

Then again, it had been so long since I'd felt anything remotely exciting. Bella excited me. If I gave in, if I killed her, this would be over. My existence would continue, as it had been. Dull and monotonous. One never ending day that bled into the next, marked only by darkness between.

Opening my mouth, I inhaled deeper. Flames threatened to consume me.

I welcomed the torture.

Across the room, Bella rose to her feet on shaky legs. Based on the unfocused look of her eyes, she was blind to her surroundings. Her hands slid along the wall as she neared me, her breathing growing unsteady as she pursed her lips. I extended my arm through the cage. She remained just out of reach, but I felt the heat radiating off her as she stood in front of me.

Once Bella reached the stairs, she ran, stumbling halfway up. She didn't look back as she freed herself from the basement and closed the door behind her.

It took everything I had not to follow her.

The early morning sun streamed through the windows, casting narrow beams of light on the floor. A glint of silver caught my eye. I removed the loose bar, careful not to make a sound, and slipped from the cage.

A necklace lay where Bella had huddled the night before. I picked it up, allowing the broken chain to slide between my fingers.

It was a locket.

I traced my thumb over the intricate engraving on the front—a flower, framed with swirls and petals. The pattern had dulled, as though touched often, the metal tarnished with age. I popped it open, curious to know what secret lay within.

A young couple smiled up at me.

I closed the locket and slid it into my pocket. I had no use for material possessions, but I couldn't ignore the urge to keep it close to me.

Upstairs, Emmett stirred. Bella paced in her room, as she had for most of the night. Eventually, she joined him in the kitchen.

"You look like hell," said Emmett.

"Thanks." Bella sounded displeased.

I continued to eavesdrop, searching for clues of what the day would bring. Emmett's thoughts weren't definitive, and like yesterday, Bella's mind gave away nothing.

"You can't let him get out."

Bella's words caused me to bristle. Just yesterday she'd wanted to help me. Why the change of heart? I'd done nothing to her. If anything, I'd shown restraint. Was I truly so horrible to her that she'd see me remain in this basement?

When Bella left, Emmett went to work installing additional locks on the basement door. He made careful measurements before boring new holes into the door and frame. I smiled at his futile attempts to keep me contained. Mostly, he ignored me, but every so often he tossed a scowl in my direction.

When he finished, he closed the door. The five deadbolts clicked into place one at a time, followed by the clanking of two chains. While the new locks wouldn't keep me prisoner, they hindered my plans to sneak out undetected.

Emmett left shortly after, and I sighed in agitation. So much for exploring the house.

I contemplated slipping out of a window to hunt, but without knowing when Bella would return, and without her thoughts to give me a heads up, I was afraid she would notice my absence. Besides, Bella's scent still hung thick in the house. If I went outside, the fresh air would cleanse my palate, making it that much harder to return. It was best to stay and continue desensitizing myself.

A few hours passed before Bella returned. It pleased me to hear her car and not Emmett's, curious to know if she'd pay me another visit without him here. She entered the house and paused outside the basement door. My body hummed in anticipation.

What would she say when she came back? I hadn't yet decided how to react. I'd never spoken to Emmett. It was much more entertaining to let him believe I was uncivilized. But feigning barbarity would get me nowhere with Bella. She was nothing like her brother. While her instincts were a bit off, she still had them. If she thought I was a crazed monster incapable of speech, she would never come down here. She might even leave entirely.

Much to my dismay, she walked away from the door.

I followed the sound of her footsteps as she traveled throughout the house. She visited every room, the floor squeaking with each step as she moved frantically. Doors and cupboards banged. She was searching for something.

I took a shaky breath as she stopped outside the basement door.

"Come downstairs," I whispered.

As though Bella heard me, she turned the locks, hesitating before sliding the final chain from its track. She gazed down at me, squared her shoulders, and started down the stairs, dropping her eyes from mine as she neared the bottom. Once again, the pain seared through me.

I watched her walk along the side of the stairs, and then it dawned on me. My fingers ghosted over my pocket.

"Looking for something?"

Bella jumped as she swung around, her body rigid as she looked into my eyes. She lifted her chin almost imperceptibly.

"No." Her voice came out strong and unwavering.

"Of course not. A spontaneous visit then? You aren't supposed to be here. Careful. I'd hate for you to be mistakenly locked down here with me."

I wondered how she would have reacted if those locks were in place last night. How long would she have stayed here with me before giving in and calling Emmett for help?

Bella crossed her arms over her chest. "And what would happen to me if I was?"

I shrugged. Nothing, most likely. Unless I gave in to temptation. Or rescued her myself. Her reaction to kidnapping would be interesting. I wondered if she would scream then.

"What are you?" she asked.

“A vampire, clearly.”

“No, you’re not.”

Silly human. Still so unwilling to see what was right in front of her.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Vampires—” Bella’s throat bobbed as she swallowed. “—vampires don’t exist.”

Ah, yes. Of course. Vampires don’t exist. Maybe she had a different theory to explain the things she’d witnessed of me.

“What do you think I am, then?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“So you don’t believe I’m a vampire, because vampires don’t exist. But you’re willing to believe I’m a different being, of which you’re unsure?”

A tiny crease formed between Bella’s brows. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I see.”

Her proximity was wearing on me. I stepped to the side of my cage and focused on the window, imagining I was breathing in clean air.

“Why are you talking?” she asked.

Bella had my full attention once again. Did she prefer me silent and animalistic? I found it hard to believe my assumptions were that far off.

“I can stop.”

“I just mean, you were all weird yesterday. And you didn’t respond to anything I said. Why?”

It seemed safe to assume she preferred this version of me. I thought it best to remain vague. No sense in explaining my struggle.

“I was deciding if you were worth responding to.”

Bella’s eyes widened as her lips parted slightly. Surprise, if I had to guess, though I didn’t trust my read on her. Emmett approached in his truck. If I didn’t get her out of the basement, he might add a padlock to the door to keep her out.

“I would leave now, if you’d like to keep this visit our little secret.”

She backed up the stairs, keeping a careful watch on me.

“I hope you find what it is you’re looking for. I’m sure it will show up where you least expect it.”

Chapter Eight

ONCE I WAS POSITIVE Emmett had no intentions of paying me a visit, I slipped out of the cage to search for the missing pieces of Bella's necklace. It didn't take long for me to find the clasp, still attached to a broken section of the chain. I pulled the locket from my pocket to inspect the damage.

It had broken in two places, but it wasn't anything I couldn't fix. I pinched off the damaged sections of the chain before attempting to reattach the clasp. As dexterous as my fingers were, they were large compared to the rings, and I struggled to manipulate the delicate metal without demolishing it.

After putting it back in one piece, I held it aloft, judging my workmanship. It was far from perfect, but it would have to do.

I opened the locket once again and inspected the photo inside. It was small, grainy. The color was off, slightly faded. My best guess would be that it was taken in the nineties. I flipped it over, searching for any clues etched on the back, but there were none. Closing it, I ran my thumb over the well-worn flower on the front once again.

The locket itself was an antique. Maybe even older than me. A repurposed family heirloom by the looks of it. It must be important to Bella if she came all the

way down here with me to retrieve it. I would see it returned to her, despite my irrational desire to keep it for myself.

How to deliver it to her was the only question. I could easily hand it to her if she visited, though I doubted she would grace me with her presence again, not having found the necklace the first time. Besides, I couldn't allow her to think I had gone soft. Where was the excitement in that?

I decided on a more forward approach.

It took hours before Emmett and Bella retreated to their rooms for the evening. I envied the ease with which humans allowed hours to pass—eating, talking, watching television, sleeping. I didn't understand how it came so easily to those with finite time on this earth, while I came closer to insanity with every minute.

It was easy to tell when Emmett fell asleep. His breathing and heart rate both slowed. The images in his head became nonsensical and wavy, filled with a spectrum of colors and shapes. Bella proved more difficult to read. It was almost impossible to tell if she was awake or sleeping restlessly, and if her change in breath was because of her sleep cycle or if she had awoken.

My impatience got the best of me. I went to a window on the opposite side of the house as the bedrooms, turned the lever, and pulled it open. In one smooth motion, I leaped over it, tucking and rolling out of the narrow opening. Once outside, I stood and brushed the dirt from my jeans.

Now to find a way back into the house without causing damage.

The first window I came to had a crank. That was unfortunate—I was hoping for sliders. If I could get into the garage, there might be a crowbar or other tool I could use to pry it open.

As I passed the front door, I grabbed the handle, fully expecting it to be locked, but it turned, and the door popped open.

“Well, that's not safe,” I said to myself. I would never understand why the people who lived in the middle of nowhere left their doors unlocked.

Then again, one little lock wasn't enough to keep out those with ill intentions.

I entered the house, closing the front door behind me with a soft click. Emmett's snores echoed down the hallway. I headed toward Bella's bedroom, knowing where it was in relation to the cage. I paused when I reached her door, bracing myself

before I entered. Her scent was sure to be concentrated in the small room. I wasn't afraid of the pain, only of the strength of my resolve.

I took a couple of deep breaths, bracing myself to enter. Before I could change my mind, I slipped silently into the room. I was prepared to burn as her scent assaulted me. What I was not prepared for was the vision before me.

Bella lay in her bed, her dark hair splayed wildly against the pillow as small strands stuck to the sweat on the back of her neck. The blanket had pooled at her knees, placing her bare thighs on full display. Her tank top twisted around her ribcage, exposing the sleek line of her waist, her underwear slung low on her hips. The creamy expanse of her pale skin shimmered in the moonlight, giving off a porcelain like quality. I would have likened it to my own if it weren't for the delicate flush of blood beneath the surface, tingeing her with life.

She was truly beautiful. Had I really thought her a demon? Lying here, she was more akin to an angel.

My desire for her blood directly competed against my desire for her body as I watched the rise and fall of her chest with each breath she took. I stood, unmoving, torn between watching and touching, the logical part of my mind beseeching me to walk away as yet another part of my psyche begged for her blood.

My body came alive, wanting her in every way, the pain in my throat overshadowed by the pain of longing. I would never have her. Not her blood. Definitely not her body. Yet she tempted me, nonetheless.

Perhaps she was a demon after all.

The locket felt heavy as I removed it from my pocket. My thumb brushed the worn flower engraving one last time before I placed it on her nightstand. I hesitated, not wanting to remove myself from her presence, but she was not a sound sleeper. Not wanting to risk discovery so soon into this game, I retreated to the basement.

The next morning had me anxiously awaiting what Bella would say. If she were to tell Emmett about her locket's mysterious appearance, she'd have to confess to her late-night visit first.

She did neither.

Her lack of comment on the matter left me bewildered. I would have thought my potential breach was important enough to mention, even if it meant incriminating herself. My disappointment subsided when Emmett's thoughts turned to me.

"I think I've made a mistake."

"Oh?"

"I'm worried about the vampire. I don't think having him here is a good idea. I'm worried I've put you in danger, and I feel awful."

Emmett should feel awful. His sister's safety should be his number one priority. If I were anyone else, she would be dead.

They both would.

"He's dangerous. I can't let him go now. I should have just left him in the woods."

Emmett was right, as much as I wanted to disagree. Even though I faked my capture, and mostly he was safe with me, he put Bella at risk. But this was the most entertainment I'd experienced in years. If he hadn't been so dead set on capturing me, I would never know the afterlife could be so exciting.

My thoughts returned to Bella from the night before—her exposed skin and the heat that radiated from her body. Maybe I couldn't have her. That didn't mean I couldn't think about her.

No sooner had Emmett left when the locks on the door unbolted one by one. This was what I'd been waiting for: Bella's return. I braced myself as the door opened.

She descended the stairs, stopping when she reached the bottom. We regarded each other in silence. I breathed in, letting her essence wash over me, torture me. I welcomed it. Revelled in it.

Never had I felt so alive.

"Is there anything I can get you?" she asked.

Well, since she was offering . . .

“I’ll take you.”

Bella stood taller, her brows rising infinitesimally. “A blanket or a pillow?” Her voice shook, exposing her unease. “Some water? Food?”

“How will you explain that to your brother?”

“That’s for me to worry about.”

It was as I thought. She would not let him know anything. She would keep her offerings a secret, just like her visits. Just like the necklace.

“No need to complicate things. You could quench my thirst. You could keep me warm.” My thoughts once again flashed to last night. The only blanket I wanted to be under was hers.

Bella clenched her teeth as she frowned. “Don’t talk like that, mister! It’s rude.”

“My apologies. You were the one who offered food.”

I thought my comment would get a rise out of her, to insinuate she was food. If it bothered her, she hid it well.

“Are you still trying to convince me you’re a vampire?”

“Yes. Unless you have a different theory you’d like to explore.” I’d like to know what explanation she found plausible, if not a vampire.

A superhero, I was not.

Bella shook her head.

“If you come closer, I will prove it to you.” Much to my dismay, she stepped back. I sighed in frustration. “I’m teasing. I won’t bite, I promise. Just come closer so I can smell you better.”

“You think I’m dumb enough to get closer to you?”

I wanted to remind her she had sought me out on her own, four times now.

“If I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it two nights ago.” Or last night when I was in her room. “Besides, I’m sealing my fate if I kill you while I’m locked in here.” While that wasn’t true, it sounded logical enough. I was willing to tell her anything to put her mind at ease.

Bella cocked her head to the side as she folded her arms in front of her. “You might use me as leverage to get out, then kill us both.”

As leverage to get out? How did she think the locket, which currently hung around her neck, ended up on her nightstand? She must not realize.

Of course. She wouldn't have assumed it was me. I was in a cage, behind a door with seven locks.

"Again, if that were my intention, I already had the chance. I'm not asking you to stand where I can touch you. Just closer." I extended my arm, beckoning to her. Bella took one step closer, and then another, keeping clear of my hand. I closed my eyes as I inhaled, her scent intoxicating me, causing me to lust for more than her blood. "Better."

"So . . . you're really a vampire?"

For the first time, I second guessed my decision to convince her of my true nature. Maybe she'd be less apprehensive about approaching me if she assumed I was only a crazy guy who lived in the woods.

"If that's what you'd like to believe."

Bella clenched her fists at her sides as she stomped her foot. A smile spread across my face. I enjoyed getting a rise out of her. I liked the way her cheeks flushed pink and the glimpse of determination on her face. She thought she was tough.

Stubbornness apparently ran in the family. I could probably manipulate her into doing anything I wanted just by posing it as a dare.

"I want to know the truth."

"Like I said, come closer and I'll prove it."

"If you keep talking like that, I'm going to leave!"

I didn't believe her idle threat. She was too curious to walk away when the answers were right in front of her. And clearly, she wasn't afraid. At least not nearly as much as she should be.

"My apologies." I stepped back, putting distance between us, hoping it would cause her to take a subconscious step closer to the cage.

"Do you have a name?"

"I do."

Bella placed her hands on her hips as she glared at me. I smiled. She hadn't asked me what it was, only if I had one, but I could tell she was becoming irritated with my lack of response. My smile faded when she turned toward the stairs with

determination. She couldn't leave already. Not when I was having so much fun. I gripped the bar in front of me, ready to tear it off in pursuit of her.

And then what?

What would I do to her?

I froze and forced my fist to open. If I wanted her to stay, I had to play her game too.

"Edward."

Bella stopped, one foot on the stair. She glanced at me over her shoulder, apprehension filling her face.

"My name is Edward."

She folded her arms over her stomach and returned to where she'd been standing earlier.

"Do I not get the honor of knowing yours?" I asked.

"Isabella." She said it as though uncertain, a slight tightness in her voice.

"Isabella," I repeated. It seemed terribly formal, and I questioned why she didn't give me the name Emmett called her. "I thought your name was Bella."

She frowned once again. "If you knew my name, why did you ask?"

"Because it's the polite thing to do." Not able to resist a chance to tease her, I added, "Have you no manners?"

Bella made a noise of disgust. "Do you get pleasure out of giving me a hard time?"

"I do," I answered honestly. Thoughts of the night before crossed my mind. "But there are other ways I'd prefer to get pleasure from you."

Bella blushed, her face and chest turning bright scarlet. I braced myself for the influx of her adrenaline as her heart stuttered out a faster rhythm. She kept her composure, at least visually, and to my surprise, aired no grievance over my words.

"You have the most delectable blush."

She brought her hand to her cheek. I reached toward her.

"May I?"

Bella regarded me for a long moment. She looked between my face and hand. Just when I was about to try a different approach, she stepped toward the cage, stopping only inches from the bars.

I held my breath as I swept my knuckles over her cheek. The blood beneath the surface burned my skin, distracting me momentarily from the flames in my throat. I flipped my hand over and cupped her cheek.

Never in my life had I wanted anything so badly than to feel more of her body. I no longer wanted to be here in this cage. I wanted to be alone with her. Somewhere far, far away. In a different life, one where I could enjoy her body without breaking her, without the threat of killing her. I wanted to lose myself in her heat until I forgot the very world existed.

“You’re so warm,” I whispered. “Are you this warm everywhere?”

“Are you this cold everywhere?” she snapped back, her tone pulling me from my fantasy.

I bristled. I’d thought we were having a moment.

“Would you like to find out?” Without hesitation, I removed my hand from her face and unbuttoned my pants.

Bella’s eyes widened before she clapped her hands over them. “Oh, my god! If you take off your pants, I’m leaving.”

I considered calling her bluff, but she’d already tried to walk out on me once today.

“I thought we were comparing temperatures,” I said.

“Not like that!”

“Maybe you should see what I have to offer before you turn me down.” When she made no move to uncover her eyes, I said, “Oh,” lacing my voice with as much disappointment as I could muster.

“Oh, what?” Bella peeked between her fingers, then dropped her hands.

“I didn’t realize you were a prude. It’s disappointing.”

“I’m not a prude!” she argued, her voice heated. I smiled again. Maybe it was time to dare her to take her own clothes off. “It’s just that I didn’t come here to flirt.”

“You came to tease me, then?”

“What? No!”

“You offered me food, and you have yet to deliver.”

“Well, you can’t eat me!” she hollered.

“Can’t I?” I leaned toward her, noting that she had yet to move away from me. “I promise you’d enjoy it.”

Bella held up a finger, silently admonishing me.

“I’m not even sure I believe you’re a vampire.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Bella gestured to the row of windows. “Because it’s daytime. And you don’t even have fangs!”

I held out my hand. Bella eyed it warily. As I expected, she slipped her hand into mine. She followed my lead as I drew her closer, allowing me to pull her arm through the bars. I flattened her palm against my chest, over my still heart, and pressed it flat.

Bella frowned as her fingers flexed against me, no doubt feeling the rigid plains of my skin. She pushed against me as her throat bobbed with a nervous swallow. I could tell she sensed something was off, that something about me wasn’t right. Wasn’t human.

She leaned closer, parting her lips and taking a shaky breath. Did she feel the spark between us as well? The inexplicable desire to be closer? It was too strong to be one-sided.

I squeezed her hand.

“Tell me when you find a heartbeat.”

Bella shook her head, seeming to regain her wits. She smoothed her palm over my chest, pressing down firmly.

“Do you believe me now?” I asked.

She nodded and attempted to retract her hand, but I forced her to hold it against me.

“Can I ask you one thing?”

My stomach flipped with both excitement and dread. She wanted to know more about me, which was good. But depending on what, her reaction might not be favorable. I braced myself.

“If I find a way to free you, will you promise to leave without retaliating?”

Ice ran throughout my body, turning everything cold, save for the fire in my throat. She wanted me to leave. I dropped my arm to my side, gripping her hand tighter as she made a weak attempt to extract it from mine.

“You want me to leave peacefully?” I asked, the cold flowing through my veins reflecting in my voice.

Bella nodded.

No. It was too soon for me to leave. I hadn’t yet gotten my fill of her. She couldn’t possibly want to be rid of me. She enjoyed our interactions just as much as I did. It explained why she kept coming back—why she offered amenities to make me comfortable.

She wanted more.

She had to.

“And why exactly would you think I’d agree to that?”

Bella’s forehead creased as her lips turned down, quivering at the edges. “Emmett means well. He’s a good person; he really is. This was all a big misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding? Your brother wanted a pet vampire,” I hissed. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“I—I know. I thought maybe you wouldn’t harm us because you like me.”

Liked her? She couldn’t possibly know the extent to which I was enamored with her.

“I mean, not that you like, like me. Or even like me at all, for that matter, I guess. But you’ve been talking to me, and you haven’t hurt me yet.” Bella twisted her arm, trying once again to escape my grasp, more forcefully this time. “I just thought there was good in you.”

Without loosening my hold on her hand, I reached through the bars and guided her to turn in a half circle.

“What are you doing?” She kept her tone light, but I sensed fear beneath.

“Don’t scream.”

I slipped my other arm through the bars, crossing my arms over her chest and pulling her as close to me as the cage would allow. This time Bella’s instincts won, and she let out a blood-curdling scream as she squirmed in my embrace. There was

the normal human reaction I'd been waiting for. Too bad no one else could hear it. I waited until she was out of breath and pressed my lips to the back of her ear.

"Shh, shh," I shushed her as she continued to struggle, her heart beating firmly against my forearms. The heady mix of her adrenaline and my flowing venom filled my nostrils, spurring on the instinctual need for her blood, even as my body craved her in a different way. With a choked sob, Bella stilled, her weight shifting downward as her legs buckled. Her head fell back against the cage.

Sweet, sweet surrender.

"I'll make you one promise. I won't kill you. I have other plans for you."

Against my better judgment, I placed my parted lips at the nape of her neck, tasting her flesh with my tongue. Her sweet flavor mixed with the salt from her sweat, and my lips burned in response to the contact. Venom surged into my mouth. Everything about her caused me pain, yet it left me wanting more. Images from the night before assaulted my memory, and I smiled. I wanted nothing more than to feel her bare skin against mine. I worked one hand under the hem of her shirt and splayed my palm over her soft, heated skin.

Just as I thought I might melt through the bars, Bella swiveled her body, fighting against me once again. This time, I allowed her to escape my hold. The high from being close to her was short-lived as she turned to face me. Fresh tears streamed down her cheeks. Her eyes blazed with anger.

"Fuck you!" Bella screamed. She took a jagged breath as another tear broke loose. I stood there, speechless, as she fled the basement, locking each deadbolt behind her.

Chapter Nine

DEFEAT OVERWHELMED ME as I stood in the cage, processing what had just happened. I'd wanted to rile her up, to toy with her. I never intended to send her running away in tears.

I didn't understand. I thought Bella and I were on the same page. How had I misread her so severely?

She felt no attraction toward me, not even curiosity. Here I stood before her—a living, breathing vampire, trapped and at her mercy—and the only thing she cared about was getting rid of me. The connection we shared had been one-sided after all, each moment part of an ulterior motive to placate me.

And here I thought I was the one doing the seducing. Apparently I had it all wrong.

Bella wasn't a demon.

No.

Bella was the devil incarnate, designed to destroy me in every way possible.

I clenched my fists, willing the memory of the warmth of her skin to fade, knowing it never would. This reprieve from my existence would end, and I would suffer the rest of eternity, unable to have what I wanted.

Her.

Emmett was right. He should have left me in the woods. Why had I been so intrigued by this facade, anyway? I should never have come here. I had no business messing with these humans' lives, and my everlasting desire for Bella was the punishment for my indiscretion.

Wasn't this the exact thing that the nosy little prophet was supposed to warn me about? Detrimental, life-altering decisions? I supposed her silence served me right for being such an asshole all the time.

Bella was upstairs, quiet and unmoving. I wondered what she was doing. What would she do if I appeared before her? Scream again, probably. She would not allow me to touch her without the safety net of the cage keeping us apart. After how I treated her earlier, I doubted she would even allow that again.

She was terrified of me.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, Bella left the house. I stood on my toes, craning my neck to watch her as she crossed the driveway toward the woods and disappeared in the trees.

I could slip out silently without a trace, leaving them both to wonder if I vanished, a figment of their imaginations. Though what I really wanted was to break out and tear down the entire house in my wake.

I still didn't understand. Yes, her mind was silent to me, but the other clues were all there. The way she leaned into my touch, the quickened pace of her heart as she approached me, the unsteadiness of her breath when I was near. Had I mistaken her fear for attraction this entire time? Fear, hidden by a carefully composed mask of bravery, worn to lure me in and gain my trust?

It was supposed to be the other way around. *I* was the predator.

The longer I awaited Bella's return, the more impatient I grew. She couldn't stay in the woods forever, and I was eager to know her next move. I paced the length of the cage, convincing myself it was a bad idea to chase after her. The last thing either of us needed was to be isolated in the woods together.

I practically jumped out of my skin when Bella came into my field of view. She walked toward the house with purpose, her arms stiff at her sides. Her expression twisted into a scowl. Apparently, she was still upset with me.

So be it.

I was upset too.

I hadn't expected her to come downstairs, so the sound of the locks took me by surprise. Pushing my hands in my pockets, I leaned against the cage as I waited. Bella pulled the door open and headed down the stairs without hesitation, stopping within a safe distance.

"Back for more?"

"We need to talk."

Perhaps I'd misread her once again when I thought she was afraid. I was beginning to think Bella wasn't scared of me at all.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

"I need you to be serious for five minutes."

"Five minutes," I said, making a show of looking at my wrist. I couldn't imagine what was so important. Probably a strongly worded demand or a lecture on my behavior. "Clock's ticking."

Bella inhaled deeply and wiped one palm across her thigh, her first display of discomfort.

"Did you kill our parents?"

Her words hung in the air, an echo in the empty basement that refused to dissipate, suffocating me as it depleted the room of oxygen. I should explain. I should say something to ease her mind. But her question was straightforward, so I answered the same.

"No."

Bella pressed her lips together and nodded, as though it was the answer she had expected. She looked me straight in the eyes.

"Emmett seems to think you did."

I crossed my arms, refusing to look away from her accusatory gaze. Emmett hadn't been there. If he were, he'd have been dead, too.

"Emmett is a good person," she continued. "After our parents died, he took care of me. He drove me to school, helped me with my homework. He fixed up the house so we could continue living here. He's always had my back. He would do anything to protect me."

“Why are you telling me this?”

Bella inhaled raggedly. When she spoke, her voice was deep and tight. “Emmett wants to kill you. He thinks it’s the only way this can end.”

The idea of Emmett attempting to kill me should have made me laugh, but the tears pooling in Bella’s eyes distracted me.

“And this upsets you?”

Bella shook her head. I wanted to shake her in response, to demand she answer me in words because if I had to guess what she was feeling for one more moment, I would go insane.

“I don’t want you to die.”

Bella held up her fist. She looked at it for a long moment before opening her hand to reveal a key. I felt my composure slip. I hadn’t actually believed she’d find a way to open the cage. She couldn’t release me. If she released me, I’d have no reason to stay.

“If I save your life, will you spare Emmett’s?”

I stepped nearer to Bella, standing up straight and channeling as much anger into my body language as possible. She pulled her arm closer to her body.

“What about your own life?”

“Do what you want with me; I don’t care. Just promise me you won’t hurt my brother.”

I frowned. She couldn’t possibly be that selfless. No one was.

“You would forfeit your life to save me?”

Bella nodded.

“Why would you trust my word?”

“I don’t, but what choice do I have?”

Anger bubbled in my stomach. What choice did she have? There was always a choice.

“You could let him kill me,” I snapped.

Had she no sense of self-preservation? She would set me free. Me—a monster, an abomination. Me, whom she didn’t even trust to keep my word. She would free me and willingly sacrifice herself in the sheer hope that I would leave Emmett unscathed.

Bella shook her head once again. “I can’t live with your blood on my hands.”

I stared at her in disbelief. She wasn’t freeing me in the hope I would spare their lives.

She was freeing me so *I* would live.

I didn’t understand. She knew what I was. She couldn’t possibly care about me. Did she hold all life in such high regard? At least, lives that weren’t her own? It appeared I was right about one thing.

She was stubborn.

Bella averted her eyes as silent tears ran down her face.

“You are absolutely confounding,” I whispered.

“What?” She looked up at me with a snuffle and frowned.

I reached toward her. Bella moved closer, her body rigid. Taking her face in my hands, I wiped away her tears. They were hot—tiny beads of fire that scorched the tips of my thumbs.

“I don’t understand you,” I said. “So ready for this to be the end. You’re ready to give up everything.” For the briefest moment, I allowed myself to bask in wonder. Angel or demon—whatever Bella was—she saw something in me worth saving. That alone proved she was a better person than me. “I’m not worth it.”

I released her and stepped back. I wouldn’t agree with her terms. If I didn’t agree, maybe she wouldn’t open the door. Emmett could attempt to kill me all he wanted. He’d fail. And I’d stay.

I was caught up in the fantasy of becoming a permanent resident in the basement when someone’s mind caught my attention. Two minds. They approached the house with intention, and fast. Too fast to be human. Their thoughts were jumbled, as thoughts usually were when filled with uncertainty. They were on high alert as they tracked my scent closer, and they were looking for a fight.

Bella noticed my change in demeanor, and I saw my fear reflected in her eyes. I wanted to grab her and flee, but I’d never be able to outrun the two of them, and my fresh scent would leave an obvious trail to follow. Besides, it was too late.

They were already here.

The male was the first to arrive. He launched himself through the bay window upstairs, shattering it. Bella turned toward the noise and screamed, instinctively covering her head with her hands. I wasted no time prying open the bars and leaping in front of her, shielding her as the vampire put his foot through the door, causing it to burst into tiny pieces.

Rage rolled off his thoughts in waves, tinged with an air of triumph when he saw me. I crouched and snarled at him, a warning to stay away. My reaction confused him, and he mimicked my stance. I'd never seen him before. I couldn't imagine what he wanted.

He was smaller than me, and with my ability, I could take him in a fight, possibly both of them. But I couldn't fight them off and protect Bella at the same time.

The female caught up, circling the house before joining him at the top of the stairs. She thought more clearly than the male, processing my defensive pose and the warped cage bars behind me. She put a hand on his chest, willing him to calm himself, and held her other hand up to us. The concern for my safety was her number one priority.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

The male stopped growling, but he didn't move from his crouched position. Slowly, I stood to my full height, keeping my arm stretched behind me to protect Bella as I read the two of them to the best of my ability. They were not here to attack me. They were here to save me.

"I'm fine," I answered.

The female focused her attention on the cage once again and frowned. "How did they capture you?"

"I..." How could I explain it to them? I couldn't. Not with Bella standing behind me. She couldn't know the truth. It was too soon. I couldn't leave yet. I wasn't done with her.

It was too late.

As if the universe were intent on ruining my entire life, Emmett returned home. His truck bounded up the driveway, barely coming to a screeching halt before he threw open the door. Panic swirled in his mind when he saw the broken window,

and he ran to the back of the truck to grab the chainmail as images of me attacking Bella filled his mind. He bolted toward the house with no concern for his own safety.

The bond between the two of them would never cease to amaze me.

“I’ll take care of him,” said the female.

“No!” I screamed as she disappeared from the doorway. I took a step forward, but the male growled at me. He didn’t trust me, and I didn’t trust him alone with Bella.

I turned to look at Bella. In all our interactions, I had never seen fear this raw on her face. It nearly broke me.

“What’s happening?” she asked in a shaky voice.

I turned my attention toward the other vampire. “Don’t hurt him,” I demanded, knowing the female could hear me and praying to any gods listening that she would obey.

This couldn’t happen again. Not to them. I would not be the undoing of this entire family. This time I would fight, even if it ended in my demise. Bella would give up her life to save mine. I owed her the same.

The female reappeared, carrying a stunned yet uninjured Emmett. As they came down the stairs, I backed up, pinning Bella between me and the wall. She flung Emmett and his chainmail on the floor.

“And just what do you think that’s supposed to do?” She was irritated and a little surprised that a human would dare to mess with her.

Bella tried to run around me, but I grabbed her and shoved her behind me once again. Honestly, what was wrong with her? Did she have a death wish?

“You must be the one blabbing all over town about capturing a vampire,” the male said. He spoke with an accent that I couldn’t quite place. A Romance language, most likely, possibly from an era well before mine. Maybe even a blend of the languages he’d picked up over the course of his existence. He turned to me, and I heard the question in his mind before he spoke it aloud. “What happened?”

The female pointed a finger toward me, her expression turning from irritation to disbelief. “Are you protecting her?”

“I know this looks bad, but it’s not what you think.”

“Please enlighten us, because we overheard no less than three groups of humans in town gossiping over the local basket case who claimed to have a vampire locked in his basement. We didn’t believe them, naturally, but there was such a buzz that we were curious. Imagine our disbelief when we caught your scent, exactly where someone said this one lived.” She nudged Emmett with her toe, a little too hard for my liking. I fought back the urge to strike, dead set on diffusing the situation.

“We can talk.” I scanned their anxious faces. “Outside.”

They exchanged a glance, and it became apparent who was in charge. The male waited for the female to make the first move. He would follow her without question, and I willed her to indulge my request. Their combativeness had passed, but I’d learned not to make the mistake of extending my trust to strangers.

With a nod, the female strode up the stairs. The male gave Emmett a look of repulsion and then met my gaze. My blood ran cold at the thought that formed in his head.

Telepath.

Somehow, he knew what I was.

I waited until he followed his mate before releasing Bella. She raced toward Emmett, skidding to a stop on the floor by his side. “Emmett,” she whispered, taking his stunned face in her hands. “I’m right here. It’s gonna be okay.”

Reluctantly, I left them both behind.

The vampires waited for me outside. Their impending reaction filled me with apprehension. Our kind typically frowned on fraternizing with humans. Allowing them to know what we were was off limits.

“Well?” the female asked, awaiting an explanation.

“Well, what?”

The male chimed in. “Care to explain what these humans are doing with you?” He was protecting his thoughts now. He could avoid thinking of things, but he was doing a lousy job of hiding it.

I shrugged, trying to maintain a sense of calm. “I was bored.”

“Bored?” she asked.

“Yes. Bored,” I said sharply. It didn’t intimidate them, and they waited expectantly for me to elaborate. “Emmett wanted to capture me.” I used his name, hoping to play on their humanity. “I had nothing better to do. You know how it is.” I gave a dismissive wave of my hand.

Their eyes shifted to each other, unease settling over them. He still guarded his mind, but hers was an open book. I tried, unsuccessfully, to piece together the memories flashing through her thoughts.

“Humans can’t know about us,” the male said. “It’s against the rules.”

I continued my mental search as I took in their appearance. They were clean and well dressed, easily able to pass as productive members of human society. Nomads, they were not, but Carlisle would have known if there were other vampires with a permanent residence in the area. He would have told me.

“Where are you from?” I asked, fishing for more information. They exchanged another uneasy look, but the question was enough to get the answer I sought. Dread pooled in the pit of my stomach. “You’re members of the Guard.”

“Was,” he clarified. “My name is Eleazar. This is my wife, Carmen.”

“Was?” I asked, desperate for more information. If their allegiances lay with the Volturi, this would not end well.

Eleazar shifted his weight, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had turned. “We wanted a change of pace,” he said. His thoughts were muddled, but I picked from them his disappointment in the Volturi.

I allowed myself to relax some, but I refused to drop my defenses.

“We want to live in peace. Less death, less punishment, more compassion for life,” Carmen said. Eleazar reached for her hand and squeezed while giving her a warning glare. He didn’t trust me. The last thing he wanted was for her to badmouth his former employer. “This has been quite a change so far,” she continued. “We miss having a community, but not that one.”

My thoughts flashed to Carlisle and the family he made for himself. I would not proselytize his lifestyle to them. It hadn’t gone well for me in the past, and I’d learned my lesson. Still, I had to get them far away from here, and Carlisle was my best option.

“There is a family of vampires south of here. You can’t get more compassionate than them. I can take you there.”

“Family?” Carmen said with a curious frown.

“That’s what they call themselves, yes.”

Carmen turned to Eleazar. She was careful to keep her emotions in check, but the hope she felt shone in her eyes. “We should meet them,” she said.

Eleazar looked at me. His thoughts returned to Bella and Emmett. “What about the humans?”

“What about them?”

“They know what we are.”

“So?”

“Rules are rules.”

I struggled to keep my voice calm so as not to give away my rising panic. I’d hoped this wouldn’t come to a fight. “You said you no longer worked for the Guard.”

“I don’t, but the laws must still be enforced. If we walk away, we’ll be implicated along with you.”

I barked out a laugh as I shook my head. “Word of this won’t leave the town. No one actually believes—how did you phrase it?—the local basket case.”

“He’s right,” Carmen said. “Enforcing the laws isn’t your duty anymore.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, willing him to remember all the reasons they left.

He gave her a long look and then nodded. “You’re right,” he said. “It isn’t.”

“Head south, along the river. I’ll catch up to you.”

Eleazar was reluctant to leave, but when Carmen turned and followed my directions, he accompanied her. Once they were far enough away that their minds disappeared, I closed my eyes and exhaled a sigh of relief. Unwanted images of a different couple filled my mind, and I pushed them away. History would not repeat itself. At least not today. I would see that Eleazar and Carmen made it to Carlisle. After that, they were his problem.

I took one last breath of fresh air before reentering the house. I hadn’t wanted our time to end this soon, but the surprise visitors left me with no choice. The charade was over.

Bella and Emmett huddled in the same place I'd left them. Determination filled Bella's eyes as they met mine. She shifted to her feet. Emmett grabbed at her shirt as she stood.

"Bella, no," he pleaded. "Don't. Please."

"It's okay," she told him. As she stepped between us, Emmett dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. Bella blinked back tears as she licked her lips. "Please don't hurt him. I'll do anything."

"Anything?"

I stepped toward her. She backed up as I approached, but my strides were longer. I grabbed the nape of her neck with one hand, and with the other on her back, pulled her against me.

For three days I had yearned to feel Bella's body against mine without the cage between us, and the pleasure it brought was indescribable. Her scent burned my nostrils as the heat of her skin alit my hands, and I relished in the soft tickle of her hair against my arms. I would miss this. I would miss her.

My nose pressed against her neck. Bella tensed, gasping as I sucked in one last breath, filling my lungs with the warmth of her body and the scent of her blood. Her hands came to my shoulders, her fingers digging into my flesh. For the life of me, I couldn't tell if she was pushing me away or pulling me nearer.

"So warm," I whispered against her skin. "Someday I'll find out if you're this warm everywhere."

Bella shuddered as I released her. Her legs folded beneath her, and she sank to the ground. This time, Emmett was the one to offer her comfort. He crawled to her side and wrapped his arms around her shaking body, keeping his wide eyes on me. I sensed his fear mingling with relief as his shock dissipated.

It was best for me to leave. I owed it to them to see the new vampires far from here. It was the least I could do. I left them huddled together on the floor. They had each other, and they would be okay.

Chapter Ten

Bella

MY MIND WAS NUMB as I swept shards of glass into a dustpan. I moved on autopilot, my arms and legs functioning even though all I wanted was to sit down and cry. Outside, the setting sun cast the living room in an orange glow. The color did nothing but stoke the fire of fear that burned inside me.

Emmett came upstairs, carrying a five-gallon bucket filled with chunks of wood from the basement door. He took the dustpan from my hand. “I got this,” he said.

I sat on the couch and watched him sweep. When he was done, he sat on the chair across from me and rested his elbows on his knees. He stared at the floor.

“I thought he was going to kill us,” Emmett said.

“Me too.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“I don’t know.”

“The bars.” Emmett shook his head in disbelief as he looked toward the basement. “How did he do that?”

“I don’t know.” It happened so fast. One minute Edward was in the cage, and the next he stood in front of me. The key had never left my hand. He could have freed himself the entire time. “I think he was protecting me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“If he could escape, why did it take him so long?”

Not wanting to sound like a broken record, I remained silent. I wished I had answers to Emmett’s questions. There’d been nothing stopping Edward from breaking out and killing us, so why hadn’t he? I tried my best to recall our conversations, factoring in this new piece of information, but nothing made sense. I squeezed my eyes shut. It was too much to think about, and my brain was still working through what had happened.

“What did he say to you before he left? He whispered something.”

“Oh.” My face grew hot as I recalled being locked in Edward’s embrace. His last words replayed in my head.

Someday I’ll find out if you’re this warm everywhere.

I wasn’t sure if he meant them as a promise or a threat, or if there was even a difference. It seemed too personal of a detail to share. “He said I was warm.”

Emmett looked down and frowned. “I can’t believe you confronted him like that.”

“I couldn’t let him hurt you.”

“It was my fault he was here. You didn’t need to stand up for me.”

When Edward had pulled me into his arms, I thought my life was over. I wasn’t ready to die, but I would have welcomed my death if it meant the possibility that Emmett could walk away.

“It doesn’t matter now. He’s gone.”

Emmett looked at me with a worried expression that surely matched mine. Edward was gone, but for how long? One of our private moments popped into the forefront of my mind. Edward said he wouldn’t kill me, that he had other plans. There was nothing stopping him from returning. If he wanted revenge, he could easily get it.

“When I got home and saw the broken window, I thought you were already dead. I thought you let him out and he killed you.” Emmett pressed his palms against his eyes and let out a long sigh. “I would have never forgiven myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. Fuck. I’m sorry.” He dropped his hands. Red marks from the pressure ringed his blood-shot eyes. “How many of them do you think there are?”

“Vampires? At least three,” I said with a shrug.

His responding laugh lacked humor, but it felt good to have an answer for a change.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“Live. Try to be normal.”

Emmett scoffed. “Wait for that thing to come back and kill us?”

“If he wanted to kill us, he would have already.”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “Right.”

I’d only said it to put Emmett at ease, not because I believed it. I didn’t know what Edward was capable of. For all I knew, he planned to return tonight. He might even be out there now, watching us, enjoying the turmoil he caused.

“He’s gonna kill us. Just like Mom and Dad.”

Now wasn’t the best time to argue, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that Edward had told me the truth. “Edward said he didn’t kill them.”

Emmett scowled before I’d finished saying the words. “And you believe him?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know why he would have lied. Then again, I couldn’t explain anything Edward had done.

“Edward. What kind of dumb name is that? It’s not even scary.” A shudder ran through Emmett’s body, and he sat up straighter. “How did that conversation go, anyway? ‘Hello. My name is Edward. I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself while I was trying to rip out your jugular.’”

I laughed despite my irritation. “Something like that.”

Emmett shook his head. “Five years, and he never once talked to me.”

“Did you ever speak to him?”

“No. I guess not.”

“How did you catch him?” I’d been so distracted by the whole situation that I never thought to ask. Edward had bent metal. There was no way Emmett was strong enough to overpower him.

“A taser. And the chainmail. It was made of silver, but . . .” He trailed off, appearing deep in thought. I didn’t want to interrupt him. Emmett wasn’t the

talking type, and I understood how hard it was to put all these emotions into words. “I used it on that other vampire, and it didn’t do anything.”

“Do you think he faked it all?”

“Why would he?”

I shrugged again. Edward was obviously never trapped, but I didn’t know what he had to gain by playing along. “You really didn’t know I’d been downstairs by myself?”

“I had no idea. You seemed so scared after the first time. I didn’t think you’d go back.”

“How did you think my locket ended up down there?”

“Your locket?” Emmett asked. He stared at me. I waited expectantly, but he didn’t seem to remember.

“Yeah. It broke downstairs. At least, I thought it did.” I was sure I’d seen the clasp on the floor. Maybe it had gotten stuck to my shirt and fell off somewhere upstairs. “Where did you find it?”

“Find what?”

“My locket.” I pinched it between my fingers, holding it off my chest for emphasis. How had he forgotten about fixing it already? He’d even placed it on my nightstand last night after I’d gone to bed.

Emmett shook his head slowly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A ball of heat formed in my chest, tingling as it surged through my body. I inhaled a sharp breath, suddenly feeling as though I were underwater, unable to breathe. Emmett hadn’t fixed my necklace. He hadn’t been in my room.

“What is it?” Emmett asked, his eyes wide. “What’s wrong?” His body went rigid as he leaned toward me.

“I don’t think today was the first time Edward got out of the cage.”

Edward’s unexpected departure left us with a lot of unanswered questions, but I wasn’t about to allow it to disrupt our lives. I couldn’t believe Emmett had started building the cage last weekend. It felt like months ago. So much about our lives

changed in a few days. I refused to think about what had happened, determined to return to my normal life.

On Sunday, I went grocery shopping and did the laundry. I cooked dinner and forced Emmett to eat, despite his argument that he wasn't hungry.

On Monday morning, I left for class, making Emmett promise to go to his job at the hardware store. He couldn't afford to lose it, especially now that we had house repairs to make. Besides, we both needed time away from the house to clear our heads.

Being away did little to distract me from the weekend's events. It was nearly impossible to focus on my courses. I had a few weeks to pull myself together for finals. Then I would have the summer to regroup. Maybe even get a job. The community pool was always hiring lifeguards for the season, and the library had a sign out front that read "apply within."

As I pulled into the driveway, a sense of impending doom settled over me. Emmett was still at work, and for the first time since Saturday, I was home alone. The boarded-up window gave an ominous feel to the house. It looked like something straight out of a horror film. I put the car in park and shut it off before collecting my books from the backseat.

The house was quiet, but I had the sinking suspicion I'd turn a corner and see Edward. It wouldn't even surprise me to see him in the cage, acting like nothing had happened and making me feel like I was the crazy one. My skin crawled as I walked by the gaping hole where the basement door once stood. The hinges had been ripped from the frame, leaving large cracks in the casing. The two chains still hung from the trim on the opposite side.

"They couldn't have opened the door normally?" I mumbled to myself.

The mangled cage was empty, but I still felt an inexplicable draw to the basement. Slowly, I descended the stairs, waiting for Edward to jump out and scare me. I took a long look around, searching for anything that was amiss. The only thing that greeted me was silence.

As I turned to leave, I spotted the key on the floor. I must have dropped it in my terror. I tried to keep the memories from breaching the wall I'd created in my mind, but they came flooding back to me.

Nothing about Edward made sense. I didn't know why he let Emmett capture him, or why he never hurt us when he had ample opportunities. But of one thing, I was certain.

When the other vampires came, he had protected me. I stepped over the key, leaving it where it rested on the floor. I didn't want to touch it. If I ever saw it again, it would be too soon. As far as I was concerned, this basement no longer existed.

I couldn't sleep. Every bump in the night had my eyes wide open. Each gust of wind rustling the trees put me on the edge of panic.

Sleep hadn't come easily while Edward was here, but at least when he was in the cage I knew where he was. It might have been a false sense of security, but it was better than no sense of security at all.

Somehow Edward had gotten out of the cage, bypassed the locked door, and snuck into my room, all without causing damage or alerting us to his whereabouts. Right now, he could be anywhere. In the house. Outside. For all I knew, he could be on the other side of the world.

I kept reminding myself that Edward hadn't hurt us, and if he pretended to be captive the entire time, he had no reason to hurt us. What basis did he have to seek revenge if he stayed here of his own free will? None.

Just as my mind had calmed down, and I was drifting between sleep and consciousness, another fear broke through the surface. What did the other vampires want? Would they come back? And what exactly happened to our parents? I needed Emmett to give me more information. If another vampire killed them, then there were at least four in the area. Was it possible that vampires walked among us during the day and we were none the wiser? It made me never want to leave the house again.

I flipped onto my stomach and muffled my scream with a pillow. Sleep wouldn't come tonight. There was no sense lying here tossing and turning for another four hours.

I slipped on my robe and tiptoed down the hall, pausing in front of Emmett's room. It was quiet, and I was about to knock when I heard a thundering snore from the other side of the door. Not wanting to wake him, I continued my path to the living room.

I crossed the room to fetch the TV remote and was about to plop my butt on the couch when something sharp pierced the bottom of my foot. Sucking air through my teeth, I winced, picking up my foot as I fell back onto the couch. The room was dark, so I turned on the lamp next to me. I squinted against the light as I inspected my foot with bleary eyes.

There was a bloody, red slit in my heel. Nothing protruded from it, but it burned to high heaven when I grazed it with my finger. I stood up to get tweezers from the bathroom, but the pain was so intense that I had to sit back down.

I opened my mouth to call for Emmett, but his name got stuck in my throat. Tears stung my eyes. I didn't want to ask him for help. I needed to be strong.

Bracing my foot on my opposite thigh, I dug my thumbnail into the skin next to the little hole and squeezed. A blood covered shard of glass the size of a sunflower seed popped out. As I placed it on the coffee table, tears rolled down my cheeks. I was hurt, I was tired, and I was scared.

Wrapping myself in a throw blanket, I lay on the couch and cried myself to sleep.

Chapter ELEVEN

“EMMETT, CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?”

The week had passed without incident. There'd been no sign of Edward or any other vampire. It was the first warm spring day, and I wore a tank top and shorts as I helped Emmett stain the new wooden door and frame in the garage.

“Sure.” His response sounded normal, but I didn't miss the apprehension in his eyes as he looked up from his paintbrush.

We'd avoided talking about anything that happened the week before, instead choosing to ignore it. But I couldn't pretend it didn't happen any longer. I had questions that needed answers.

“It's about Mom and Dad.”

“Oh.” The tension in his voice was noticeable now.

I tossed my rag on a sawhorse and hoisted myself onto the workbench. There was no easy way to broach the subject, and I didn't foresee there being an appropriate time to have the conversation. I decided candidness was the best approach.

“Why do you think a vampire killed them?”

Emmett let out a long breath. He wiped the excess stain off the brush before putting the lid back on the can. When he walked away, I thought he would leave without answering, but he grabbed a stool from near the door and placed it next to me before sitting down.

“He was there,” he said.

“Who?”

Emmett tipped his head, gesturing toward the house. I could only assume he referred to Edward.

“How do you know?”

“I was visiting, you know, where it happened.” Emmett’s eyes stared past me, losing focus as he got lost in his memory. “I brought flowers. Mom’s favorites—what are they called? The skinny purple ones that stick straight up.”

“Lupines?”

“Yeah, those. I brought them to the memorial site. It was after we sprinkled their ashes. Anyway, I was sitting there, talking to them, and when I stood up to leave, he was there, watching me. I knew what he was right away.”

“How?”

Emmett rubbed the back of his neck, his brow furrowing. “I’m not sure. I just did. It popped into my head. *Vampire*. And it didn’t make sense, but I knew in my heart it was true. He looked . . . scared? As if I’d said it out loud. Then he turned and ran.”

“That’s not proof that he killed them.”

“What proof do you need?” Emmett asked, an edge to his voice. “Mom and Dad weren’t killed by bears. I found them, Bella. I saw their bodies. I read the autopsy reports. They were completely drained of blood. Both their necks were broken. Something killed them and laid them out next to each other, and their picnic basket was completely untouched. Bears don’t do that.”

I could hardly argue. I’d been fourteen when our parents died, and I’d never read the autopsy report. But I trusted Emmett, especially knowing what I know now.

“I believe you, Emmett.”

“But?” he hedged.

I hesitated. I didn't want to fight with him.

"But I don't think it was Edward."

"Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not! I just don't think it was him. It doesn't make sense."

"What about it doesn't make sense? He started showing up right after they died. Killers go back to the scene of the crime all the time."

While the timing was suspicious, it wasn't proof of Edward's guilt. He was frightening, and I didn't trust him, but that wasn't evidence that he killed them. I had no reason to defend him, but I refused to make him the scapegoat. I refused to set aside logic in the pursuit of closure.

"He's not the only vampire out there," I reminded him.

"So what? Even if he didn't kill them, even if he didn't kill us—" Emmett stood and faced away from me, tugging at his hair. "He's a vampire. He's killed *someone*."

"You don't know that."

"When are you going to figure it out?" Emmett asked as he turned to me. His body tensed as he clenched his fists at his sides. "He's not the hero. He's the bad guy."

I spent yet another night tossing and turning. As I drifted between consciousness and sleep, my mind hung suspended in pleasant blackness—void of all thoughts, unburdened by memories of the past, not yet haunted by dreams.

It didn't last long. My peace was disrupted as my subconscious recognized a presence in the room.

My eyes shot open, and I scanned the darkness. Edward stood at the foot of my bed. When our eyes met, he moved toward me. I sat up, scooting away from him until my back pressed against the headboard. I scrambled to cover my half-naked body with blankets as I sucked in a breath, my body feeling sluggish as everything around me moved in slow motion.

"Don't scream," Edward said in a low, seductive whisper. "It sucks all the fun out of it."

I clamped my mouth shut. If I made a noise, Emmett would come running. Whatever fate Edward had in store for me, I would suffer it silently.

And alone.

The feather light touch of his fingers tickled the side of my neck. As he leaned in, I squeezed my eyes closed. His cool breath fanned over my lips and across my jaw. I retreated into myself, shielding my neck with my shoulders as I turned my body away.

He was going to bite me. I wasn't ready to die.

"Please don't." The plea was barely a whisper.

Edward stilled. Something cold brushed against my lips before his hand disappeared from my neck. A light breeze fluttered the hair around my face, and by the time I opened my eyes, the only evidence he'd been there was the gentle sway of the curtain as it settled against the window.

I flew out of bed and slammed the window shut, struggling to turn the latch with shaking hands. I pulled the sheer curtains closed and sank to the ground, out of sight. My heart beat so wildly I felt it in my throat.

Dread filled me as I thought of the front door. We never bothered locking it. I started to stand, but fear paralyzed me. I'd have to run through the house to beat Edward to it. He'd be able to see me through the windows. I couldn't bear the thought of knowing he was out there, watching me.

Even more scary was the thought of seeing him standing outside.

Giving in to my instinct to freeze, I wrapped my arms around my knees and remained on the floor beneath the window, safely out of sight. Moving wasn't worth it. Even if I made it to the door, there were too many windows to check. Besides, windows, locked doors, and cages seemed to be no match for a vampire.

I spent the rest of the night awake and alert, listening for any sounds that gave away Edward's location. Occasionally, Emmett's snores filled the house, and I took peace knowing he was still alive and safe. At least one of us could sleep.

When twilight came, I stood from the floor and peeked out the window. The yard was cast in gray shadows, but Edward was nowhere to be seen. I climbed into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

I slept longer than I'd wanted to, but my body appreciated the rest. Getting out of bed, I took another cautious glance out the window. Things looked different in the morning light. The woods behind the house were less scary when they weren't shrouded in darkness. I watched for any movement, but other than a couple of squirrels running circles up a tree, there was nothing out there.

Emmett wasn't in the house, but his truck was still out front. There was no sign of a struggle anywhere, and the half empty coffee pot and dirty pan on the stove put me at ease. I poured a cup of coffee and sat at the table. Emmett had spread today's newspaper across it, and I stacked it into a clean pile as I reflected on last night.

I'd been certain Edward planned to end my life. If he wanted to kill me, pleading for my life wouldn't have stopped him, so why did he come back?

If his sole purpose was to scare me, he was successful, but that reason made no sense either. There were much more effective ways to torment someone than showing up and immediately disappearing. So far, Edward had tormented me more while he'd been in the cage. He'd teased me and made sexual innuendos. For heaven's sake, he'd licked the back of my neck!

The memory of his tongue on my skin and his arms wrapped around my body caused me to shiver, and I internally berated myself for getting close enough to let him touch me. Although Edward had frightened me, I couldn't deny that something about him drew me in. Somehow, he'd taken down my defenses. I chalked it up to my curiosity and the complete and utter bizarreness of the situation.

I wasn't the only one who suffered from a fascination with him though. For whatever reason, Emmett felt the need to bring him into our house. Five years, he had said. That was how long he'd known of Edward. Five years and not once had Edward attacked him in the woods.

I frowned as I caressed my locket with my thumb, hoping the worn surface would bring me comfort. All it did was raise more questions.

I removed it from my neck and inspected the chain. A few links were mangled where Edward had pinched them back together. Eventually I'd have to replace it, but for now it should do. I set the locket on the table, my eyes drifting to the ceiling as I tried to decipher his motives.

Why did Edward go to the trouble of fixing it and sneaking it into my room? He didn't seem like the type to do something nice, and if he did, surely he wanted credit for it. Trying to decode him was like reading a book with half the pages torn out. I needed more information.

Emmett came through the front door, jumping when he saw me. He wore yesterday's clothes and stared at me with wide, panicked eyes. My first assumption was that he ran into Edward, too.

"Was he out there?"

"Who?"

"Edward."

"Where?" Emmett swung around and flattened his hands against the glass storm door as he scanned the yard. "Did you see him?"

"No," I lied, relieved that Edward hadn't paid Emmett a visit as well. Emmett didn't need to worry about me. I would do whatever it took to keep him out of whatever Edward had planned. "You looked a little frazzled, that's all."

"I was. Goddamned squirrel ran in the garage while I was staining. Freaked me the fuck out. I guess I'm a little on edge."

The staining explained yesterday's clothes, but if a squirrel scared him, clearly he felt just as uneasy as me.

"You weren't in the woods?" I asked.

Emmett turned back to me, raising his eyebrows. "Hell no! Fuck the woods. I'm never going out there again."

His words saddened me. Emmett loved the woods. He went on multiple hikes a week. I couldn't imagine him not going out there anymore, and I hated that Edward ruined it for him. What made it even worse was knowing he was no safer staying close to the house. It was a false sense of security, just like locked doors and titanium cages.

Emmett retrieved his coffee mug from the sink. He rinsed it and shook off the excess water before refilling it. He offered the remnants of the pot to me. When I declined, he dumped it down the drain.

“Hey Em, can I ask you something?”

He sighed. “About Edward again?”

I nodded. “I’m just trying to figure things out.”

“You and me both.”

Right now, Emmett was the only one who had information about him. He needed to tell me what he knew. I needed more pieces of this puzzle if I was going to keep us safe and sane.

“You first saw him five years ago, after Mom and Dad died?”

He nodded.

“And you said the other day that he taunted you. How?”

“He would follow me around. I always heard twigs snapping and noises in the bushes. Sometimes he’d jump out in front of me, block my path. Most of the time, he stayed where I couldn’t see him.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“Yeah, at first. I always carry when I’m out there, and he ran when I shot at him once, so it made me feel better. Sometimes I tracked him, too. I guess I liked the adrenaline rush.”

“How often did you see him?”

“*See*, see him? Once a month or so, but he was out there more than that. I could sense him.”

“Where? In the same place?”

“No, he was everywhere,” Emmett said. “But he usually showed up two to three miles into the woods. The closest I ever saw him to the house was the first time, in the clearing. And that’s what, a mile out?”

I’d only ever been to the clearing once, when we scattered our parents’ ashes. There was a narrow path that led there. All the twists and turns added an extra half mile to the hike. It was Mom and Dad’s special place. Dad started bringing Emmett once he’d gotten old enough to walk there and back without complaining, but hiking never interested me.

Emmett pulled out the chair across from me and sat down. He wrapped both hands around his mug and stared into it. “I’ve been thinking. Once I get the window fixed and clear out the basement, maybe we should sell the place. Move closer to the city or something.”

His words were such a blow that all I could do was gawk.

“I’ve already done the math,” he continued. “With the amount of acreage here, we could easily buy a nice house in the suburbs. Or we could split the proceeds. I’ll take out a mortgage, and you can live with me until you’re out of college. I don’t expect you to stick around and take care of me forever.”

“Emmett,” I said, finally finding my voice. “Dad built this house. We can’t sell it.”

“What’s the point of living here if we have to be prisoners in the house?”

I stopped myself from telling him that Edward had been in my bedroom last night, and we were no safer inside than in the woods. I didn’t think it would be conducive to my argument. There had been so many opportunities over the years for this to end badly, and because it hadn’t, it further convinced me Edward didn’t intend to hurt us. I was more worried about a random vampire crossing our path at this point.

“You just finished telling me the two of you played a five-year long game of tag in the forest. I’m pretty sure we’re safe here.”

“Yeah, well, that was before I locked him in a cage.”

I threw my hands in the air, exasperated by his reasoning. “He faked it, Emmett! He was never trapped! Literally nothing has changed.”

“Believe what you want, but I don’t want to live here anymore.” Emmett stood, scraping the chair legs against the linoleum floor. He slammed his mug on the counter and stormed out of the house.

It took everything I had not to chase Emmett to the garage and apologize. Calming him down was second nature to me, but he was being irrational, and I had nothing to apologize for. I waited until I knew he’d be inside the garage, then I slipped on my shoes and headed outside. Emmett wouldn’t approve of my straying from the house, but I didn’t care. I followed the path to the tree fort and sat on the fallen branch at its base.

We couldn't sell the house. I never intended to live here forever, but it was perfect for Emmett. If we sold it now, he would regret it, and if Edward appeared wherever we went, it would have all been for nothing.

If I moved out, it was possible he'd leave Emmett alone. Edward had some sort of infatuation with me. He talked to me while leaving Emmett to believe he couldn't speak. He snuck into my room twice. It was almost as though the focus of his cat-and-mouse game had shifted to me. The only thing that didn't fit the equation was his repairing my necklace.

What reason did he have to do it in secret? Why didn't he want me to know?

Unless he did.

I'd lost the locket downstairs. I saw the clasp. He knew I was looking for something.

I laughed under my breath as the pieces clicked into place. I'd been so naïve. Edward wanted me to know it was him. He wanted me to agonize over how he'd put it in my room. It was all a part of his game. Everything he'd said and done had gotten a rise out of me. He'd been so good at getting under my skin. I bet it drove him crazy to not get the reaction he wanted.

The urge to see him again struck me. Now that I knew he wanted a reaction from me, I was determined not to give him one. If he came back, I would remain calm and collected. I would demand he answer my questions. If I could beat him at his own game, maybe he would leave us alone.

Chapter Twelve

THAT NIGHT, I OPENED MY WINDOW before crawling into bed. I propped myself against the headboard, determined to stay awake. Edward wouldn't take me by surprise again. If he returned, I would be ready.

The later it got, the heavier my lids became. A book would keep me alert, but so far, he'd only come into my room when I was asleep. The light might deter him. Besides, a book would distract me. I couldn't listen for noises or keep my focus if I was lost in another world.

Eventually, sleep came for me. In the morning, I awoke to a kink in my neck from slouching against the headboard all night. There was no sign that Edward had visited.

Strangely, I felt disappointed. How was I supposed to confront him if he didn't return?

I reminded myself that if he never came back, it was a good thing. After all, that was the end goal. But I wouldn't put it past him to lie in wait, showing up when I least expected him.

I got ready for the day and popped an ibuprofen for my neck, then I went into the kitchen to scrounge up breakfast. Emmett had already left for work, leaving his

dirty dishes on the counter, as per usual. At least there was coffee. I filled a travel mug and shoved two granola bars in my backpack before heading to class.

The lack of sleep over the past two weeks had caught up to me, and I struggled to work through the mental fog filling my brain. In all the chaos, I had finished none of my assignments. Fortunately, I'd already covered phases of mitosis in my high school AP biology class, or Bio 101 would have been a complete disaster, but I bullshitted my way through American lit, and I fell asleep in psychology.

By the time I got home, I needed a nap. Figuring it was safe to sleep during the day, I grabbed a throw blanket and settled on the couch.

I slept hard, without dreams or any concept of time. When I woke up, the sun was at the horizon, shining directly into my face through the newly replaced bay window. Emmett clanked around in the kitchen. My sweat-dampened clothes stuck to my body as I stripped off the blanket. I pushed off the couch, wiping sleep from my eyes, and joined him. When he saw me, he rushed two bowls to the table.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I made dinner. You looked exhausted. I didn’t want to wake you.”

I sat at the table and peered into my bowl. It was boxed mac and cheese, but I wasn’t about to complain.

“Thanks, Em.”

He set a bottle of water in front of me, and I made a face as he poured himself a giant glass of skim milk.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” he said as he sat down across from me. “I shouldn’t have blindsided you like that. It’s your house too, and you should get a say in what we do with it.”

I nodded, unable to find the words to express how deeply I wanted us to keep it.

“I still want to sell it, but if you need time to think about it, that’s fine.”

“Thanks,” was all I could say. I didn’t want to fight, and I didn’t want to give in before discovering Edward’s intentions.

After dinner, Emmett lit a fire in the small pit in the yard. I considered joining him, but I was up to my eyeballs in homework. I washed the dishes before returning to the kitchen table to study.

That night, I went to bed after midnight and successfully stayed awake until dawn broke. Edward never showed.

During the week that followed, I made a habit of napping after school and staying awake during the night. It was all in vain, as Edward never returned.

I was beginning to think I'd never see him again, and I was surprised by how much the idea depressed me. If Edward didn't come back, I'd have to live with the mystery surrounding him for the rest of my life. I'd never discover what really happened to our parents.

I'd never truly feel safe.

Emmett had yet to venture back into the woods, so I had no way of knowing if Edward was still out there somewhere or if he had completely vanished. I was becoming desperate and antsy. When Emmett called after his shift at the hardware store on Saturday afternoon to tell me he was going to the bar, I took matters into my own hands.

Emmett had said he usually saw Edward two to three miles into the woods. It couldn't be that long of a hike. I emptied the books from my backpack and replaced them with two bottles of water, a sweatshirt, snacks, and a roll of toilet paper. I was no survivalist, but I wasn't completely obtuse. I understood my basic needs.

I laced up my tennis shoes and was about to head out the door when I had another thought. Just because I couldn't fight off a vampire didn't mean I should hike into the middle of nowhere unprotected. Dad had taught me how to shoot a gun, and now was an opportune time to carry one.

Guilt washed over me as I crept into Emmett's room. He'd be mad at me for taking his gun, but I figured he'd also be mad at me for hiking into the woods alone. Besides, he'd want me to be as safe as possible while making a poor decision.

I checked his nightstand and patted through his dresser drawers but found nothing. The closet was a bust as well. There was only one other room the gun might be in, and if it weren't there, Emmett most likely had it on him.

I traveled down the hallway to the office, which had been Emmett's bedroom before our parents passed. I opened the first desk drawer and rummaged through the contents. It was filled with assorted papers. I was about to close the drawer when something caught my eye.

It was our parents' autopsy report.

I'd never looked at it, uninterested in the gory details, but now, armed with what I'd learned, it was impossible to ignore it any longer. I scanned the medical examiner's notes. It was hard to focus on the sea of words, but phrases like "bled out" and "neck laceration" captured my attention. There were outlines of human bodies with X marks denoting broken bones. Ribs, shoulders, collar bones—their bodies had been crushed.

The police report was attached. It detailed the position in which Emmett claimed to find them, lying side-by-side on their backs, as though sleeping peacefully. The officer who filed the report suggested Emmett moved them in his grief and either wouldn't admit to it or didn't remember doing so. Even if that were true, it failed to explain the untouched picnic basket, which the report also mentioned.

I dropped the report back into the drawer and closed it, feeling sick to my stomach. Why hadn't Emmett told me sooner? Why did he feel the need to protect me from this information?

I turned my attention to the other side of the desk. The gun was in the first drawer I opened. I didn't own a belt, so I removed it from the holster, making sure it was loaded and the safety was on before slipping it into the front pocket of my backpack.

I decided to follow the path to the clearing. It seemed like a good place to start. As I passed the tree fort, I noted the sun's location in the sky. Finding my way home couldn't be that difficult. I'd go straight west and come straight back. Easy as pie.

It took me a half hour to reach the clearing, and I paused to take it in. The lupines were in bloom, and they were beautiful. I understood why they were Mom's favorites. At the far end of the clearing stood the cross Emmett made for our parents. It was weathered and faded. A bouquet of dead flowers sat at its base, a visual representation of Emmett's absence.

I plucked a variety of flowers to leave in its place, saving one lupine for myself. I tucked it into my backpack before continuing my journey.

The path picked up on the opposite end of the clearing, and I felt optimistic as I traveled along it. What I hadn't expected was how the path twisted and turned among the trees, or how it narrowed until it came to an abrupt end at the creek. Not wanting to turn back after only an hour and nothing to show for it, I followed the water downstream. All things considered, it was better than blindly walking through the trees.

I paid close attention to the noises surrounding me. Aside from the birds and an occasional small critter skittering through the brush, there were no other sounds of wildlife, only the flowing water as it babbled over the rocks.

When I hit the two-hour point, I decided to turn back. I wanted to return home before the sun set, and while Emmett usually stayed at the bar until closing time, I didn't want to risk him coming home early and finding me gone.

My feet were sore from navigating the uneven ground, so I stopped to sit for a while. I ate a bag of mixed nuts and drank a bottle of water. After ten minutes, I forced myself to continue.

My pace had slowed considerably since I'd left home, and it seemed to take forever to find my way back to the path. I questioned if I'd missed it and gone too far, but I didn't want to turn around prematurely. Everything looked the same, yet nothing looked familiar. I stayed along the creek. An hour passed, and then another. I turned around, hoping I'd recognize where the path started if I came at it from a different direction.

It was to no avail. After another hour of wandering aimlessly along the creek, I had no idea which direction the path lay. Dad had told me once that if I got lost in the woods to follow the water, but without knowing where it would lead or how long until I found help, I was hesitant to take his advice. The DNR owned miles of land surrounding our property. For all I knew, the creek flowed into the middle of nowhere.

The sun danced on the horizon on the opposite side of the water. Based on its position in the sky, I could deduce the basic direction of the house, but without knowing if I'd traveled north or south, it did me little good.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, thankful I'd left with a full charge, but there was no reception. It would be dark soon, and there was no one out here to save me.

I was on my own.

Deciding to take my chances finding the house, I turned my back to the sun and walked away from the creek.

The sounds of the forest were unsettling, especially once the sun set. I opted to carry the gun, cursing myself for not bringing a flashlight. I was out of food and water, and if I didn't find civilization before twilight ended, I'd be spending the night out here alone.

Behind me, a branch snapped. I swung around, aiming the gun in front of me. The sound of my pounding heart filled my ears, and I willed my breathing under control.

The sound could have been anything, but my brain conjured every worst-case scenario. A wolf, a bear, a masked murderer.

A vampire.

"Edward?" I asked the darkness, my throat thick with fear.

There was no answer.

"Edward?" I repeated, louder this time.

He wouldn't leave me out here. He wasn't the type of monster who would take pleasure in watching me, alone and scared. Was he? I didn't want to believe it, but I didn't know for sure. I took a deep breath, mustering all the fear I had, hoping if he were out there, he would hear the plea behind it.

"Edward!"

Above me, a flock of birds rustled the trees. To my left, something small scurried through the bushes. If Edward was out there, he didn't come to my rescue.

I couldn't waste more time. If I had any hope of returning home tonight, I had to keep moving.

Dusk crept over the forest, and I was about to give up any hope of finding my way home when I heard the familiar sound of traffic in the distance. I picked up

the pace, shielding my face with my arms as I chased the sound through the trees. When I saw a flash of headlights, I stifled a cry. The forest thinned as I neared the road, and then I was in the ditch, collapsing to my knees in tears of relief.

I recognized the county highway. I wasn't far from the house. After taking a moment to regroup, I dried my tears, stowed the gun in my backpack, and got to my feet. My body ached, and the scratches on my arms from all the branches burned, but it was almost over.

I walked in the ditch, not wanting to be close to the road without a flashlight or anything reflective. It took another 45 minutes before I got home. Emmett hadn't returned yet, and the house was dark.

Once inside, I returned the gun to its holster before stripping off my clothes and hopping in the shower. The hot water felt good on my sore muscles, but my feet were too sore to enjoy it for long. I didn't bother eating dinner or waiting up for Emmett. I crawled into bed and fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow.

In the morning, I joined Emmett at the kitchen table. I drank my coffee as he read the Sunday paper. It felt good to do something normal.

"What did you end up doing last night?"

"Stayed in and watched TV. How was the bar?"

"It was fine."

"You didn't drive home drunk, did you?"

We didn't live far from the bar, and a lot of the cops looked the other way at closing time, but I still hated when he did it.

"No, of course not."

I didn't believe him, but I didn't press. I had my own secrets and didn't want to rock the boat.

"Where did that come from?" Emmett nodded toward the single purple lupine in a glass of water on the kitchen table.

“Side of the road.” The lies came so easily, it was almost concerning. I didn’t want to deceive Emmett, but I very well couldn’t tell him I’d gone to the clearing on my own or wandered aimlessly in the forest for six hours.

I spent the rest of the day lounging on the couch. There was enough food to get us by for a few days, and there were far too many blisters on my feet to go walking around a grocery store. If Emmett noticed my melancholy mood, he didn’t mention it.

That night, I closed my bedroom window.

Chapter Thirteen

I DIDN'T BOTHER ALTERING MY SLEEP schedule the following week. If Edward came back while I was asleep, so be it. There was no reason to disrupt my life over something that probably wouldn't happen.

Emmett and I fell back into our normal routine. He worked all his scheduled shifts at the hardware store and busied himself with home improvement projects. I focused on studying for finals, which were just around the corner.

On Wednesday, I arrived home to an unnerving sight. The trailer was hooked up to Emmett's truck with a small pile of titanium bars on top. It was so reminiscent of the day only a month ago, when he arrived home with the metal and proclaimed he was building a cage for his pet vampire.

I'd thought he was losing his mind. If only I'd known just how much that vampire would uproot our lives.

Emmett had propped open the front door. He appeared, carrying a bar over each shoulder.

"Hey," he called.

"Hey."

Not wanting to relive that day over again, I retreated to the living room and turned on the television to distract myself. Emmett continued to haul out bars two at a time. He didn't ask for my help, and I didn't offer it. With all the repairs done and the cage out of the basement, it was only a matter of time before Emmett mentioned selling the house again.

That night, I went to bed before Emmett. The longer I could hold off the conversation, the more Edward's disappearance would benefit my argument. I read a book that wasn't curriculum related and turned out the lights by ten o'clock.

For the past few nights, I'd slept soundly, so when I woke up feeling uneasy, I was immediately on full alert.

The moonlight filtering through the window illuminated Edward's looming form, standing once again at the foot of my bed. Adrenaline surged through my body, and I sprang to my feet, the sudden movement making my head spin. Seeing him with no barrier separating us jarred me. He appeared larger than I remembered, more foreboding.

The air between us sizzled with electricity. All the tiny hairs on my body stood on end. I watched as his eyes raked over my figure, his throat bobbing as he swallowed, and I ignored how exposed I felt in my tank top and underwear.

"I'm not afraid of you."

Edward's eyes met mine. His expression remained neutral, impossible to read.

"Good."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Why were you in the woods?"

I hesitated, surprised he knew. Or cared enough to ask.

"How did you know I was in the woods?"

Edward stepped toward me, stopping just before our bodies touched. I resisted the urge to place my hand on his chest once again, to see if he truly didn't have a heartbeat or if my mind had played a trick on me before.

He dipped his head, and his lips brushed against my cheek as he spoke.

"I smelled you."

"You *smelled* me?" I asked in disbelief.

Edward stood to his full height. I had to crane my neck to look at his face. I held my ground, despite my instincts screaming at me to back away.

“Why were you in the woods?” he asked again.

I felt my anger rising. What right did he have to ask? If he cared what I did, he shouldn’t have disappeared for so long.

“Why should I tell you? You don’t answer any of my questions.”

“I’ve answered every single one of your questions.”

“Not why you’re here.”

Edward exhaled a frustrated sigh, his breath fanning across my face. His scent was just as intoxicating as before, and I tried to ignore its sweet allure. When he spoke, it was slow and deliberate.

“I’m here because I want to know why you were in the woods. I’ve never smelled you there before.”

My mind tried to wrap around the fact that he could smell me. Outside. I considered making up something less pathetic than the truth, but I expected him to answer my questions honestly. He deserved the same consideration.

“I thought you’d be out there.”

A smile broke through his stoic expression. “So you do find me irresistible.”

“No!” I said, quick to dismiss his assumption. “I have questions.”

Edward brought his hand to my face. He swept the hair from my cheek, tucking it behind my ear. The familiar heat of adrenaline once again flooded my body.

“Then ask them.”

“Okay. Um . . .” I was unprepared for this, and his touch had left me flustered. I grappled for literally anything to say.

“Oh, I see,” he said, grinning wider. “Questions.” He punctuated the word with air quotes. “No need to be ashamed of your desires.”

I opened my mouth to argue. The only thing I wanted from him was closure! But the words wouldn’t form.

Edward moved closer, and I walked backward until my knees hit the mattress. I tried to keep my balance, but he leaned into me, forcing me to sit on the bed. He sat next to me and slid his hand up my bare thigh, stopping just shy of where my

legs came together. I sat up straighter as I shivered, my breath catching in my throat, but I refused to push him away. I wasn't afraid of him anymore.

He leaned in, keeping his eyes trained on my lips. He moved agonizingly slowly, and my heart raced when I realized what he planned to do. His eyes fluttered closed as he tilted his head. I held my breath as his lips ghosted across mine. When the anticipation became too much, I closed my eyes and pressed my mouth to his.

Edward's lips were smooth and cold, firm yet somehow soft, like velvet. I kissed him once, then twice, my heart beating wildly. I parted my lips, unsure of where this was going, or if I even wanted it. When he didn't reciprocate, I realized he'd remained still the entire time. I opened my eyes and pulled away as I caught my breath. His mouth curled into a wicked smile.

"Let's not forget who kissed whom first."

I scoffed. He'd tricked me.

Edward squeezed my leg, his fingers sinking deeper into my flesh. He took a deep breath as his lips met mine with determination. I kissed him again. A little voice in my head told me I was crazy, but my body disagreed. Warmth spread through me as I swept my tongue across his bottom lip. It was then I realized he still hadn't kissed me back. I pulled away again as he snickered. My face flushed hot with embarrassment.

"What's your problem?" I hissed between clenched teeth.

"I don't have a problem with you kissing me."

I wanted to smack the smug smile off his face.

Edward removed his hand from my leg and wrapped his fingers around the back of my neck. "Hold still." He leaned in and then stopped. "I mean it. Keep your mouth closed," he said, looking me in the eye. "My teeth are very sharp."

I allowed my eyes to close as his lips met mine. I kept them pressed firmly together, refusing to reciprocate. The tip of his tongue traced along my lips, cool and wet, and he exhaled a shaky breath. He kissed me again, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth.

I tensed, and my eyes flew open. Edward appeared relaxed as he slid his tongue under my top lip, but all I could think about were his sharp teeth and the warning

he'd spoken less than 30 seconds ago. I wasn't sure if he could sense my discomfort, but he stopped mid kiss and pulled back.

"I thought you wanted me to keep my mouth closed."

Edward shrugged. "I'm not good at following rules."

He laid me down and crawled on top of me, his legs straddling one of mine. His tongue flicked across my lips, and then we kissed. It was needy and frantic, the result of weeks of pent-up fear and confusion and attraction.

Edward tasted overwhelmingly sweet, a concentrated version of his scent. It reminded me of honey and cherries, but there was also a bitterness just beneath the surface, like the bite of a liqueur—slightly sour, yet intoxicating all the same.

My lips tingled, feeling cold and slightly numb. Or maybe hot and hypersensitive. It was hard to tell. The sensation traveled into my gums and the tip of my tongue, leaving it feeling heavy and sluggish.

Not knowing what to do with my hands, I placed them on his sides, feeling his unnaturally solid torso beneath his t-shirt. Edward broke away from my lips and worked his way down my neck. I tried to move away, but he had me pinned down.

"Don't bite me."

Edward exhaled and chuckled against my skin. "I wouldn't dream of it."

My breaths came heavy, but I willed myself to relax. I tilted my head, granting him access. He kissed up and down the column of my neck, slowly, tasting me. I was acutely aware of his body, and as he moved, I swore I felt his erection pressing against my thigh.

I bent my free leg and shifted, hoping the movement was enough to confirm what I thought I felt. He took it as an invitation and settled fully between my legs.

Edward was, in fact, undeniably hard.

It was enough to catapult me back into reality. This was too much, too fast. I'd never have my life back if I didn't get answers. I needed to regain control of the situation.

"Edward, stop."

To his credit, Edward stopped kissing me, but he didn't move off me. He took a deep breath and sighed through his nose. "I knew it."

"Knew what?"

“You are a prude.”

“I’m not a prude!” His comment shouldn’t have offended me so much. I had nothing to prove to him. “I just don’t know you.”

“So get to know me.”

“I was trying until you accosted me!” I hissed.

“Accosted you? In case you forgot, you kissed me first.”

“Get off,” I demanded.

“I was trying,” he grumbled before pushing to his knees.

I extracted myself from beneath him and headed to my dresser. Unable to talk to him half naked, I grabbed a pair of purple sweatpants from the drawer. Edward made a noise of disgust.

“Not those.”

Ignoring him, I slipped them onto my legs before pulling a matching sweatshirt over my head to hide my nipples. By the time I turned around, he was sprawled out on my bed, one hand propping up his head as he watched me.

“If you’re going to lie in my bed, will you at least remove your boots?”

“That sounds like an invitation.” He untied the laces and kicked his boots onto the floor as I crossed my arms over my chest. “What did you want to ask me?”

Between him kissing me and now lying in my bed, my mind had drawn a complete blank. “Will you at least sit up?” I asked, buying time.

Edward smiled the chilling smile I’d seen so many times. “Make me.”

He was trying to get the best of me again. Determined to regain control of the situation, I took a hold of his arm and pulled as hard as I could. He didn’t budge.

“You can do better than that,” he hedged.

I pulled again. Edward rolled toward me. His arm shot between my legs, and then I was flying. I screamed as my feet left the ground, and my head spun as he flipped me over his body. I landed pressed between the wall and Edward, his mouth an inch from mine. He pressed his thumb against my lips.

“What did I say about screaming?”

Edward vanished a moment before my bedroom door swung open.

“What’s wrong?” Emmett asked as he ran inside. His eyes darted around the room.

I barely had time to collect my thoughts. “Bad dream,” I choked out. “Sorry I woke you.”

“It’s okay.” He lingered in the threshold for a moment, looking unconvinced. “Let me know if you need anything.”

When he left, I collapsed onto the bed and exhaled.

That had been close. If Emmett had come in a second sooner, he would have seen Edward in my bed. I wouldn’t have known how to explain that, not that there was a good explanation of why the vampire he hated was in my bed in the middle of the night.

A thought struck me, and I rolled over, peering over the edge of the bed. Edward’s boots were gone. I stood and crept to the window. The only light came from the stars, and I strained my eyes for any movement outside.

“Edward?” I whispered into the darkness.

I was met with nothing but silence.

Chapter Fourteen

THE SHRILL RING OF MY ALARM CLOCK startled me awake. I fumbled for the snooze button and was about to enjoy an additional nine minutes of sleep when memories of last night invaded my mind. I sat up with a gasp, searching my room for any sign of Edward. As far as I could tell, he hadn't been back.

I groaned and covered my face. For over two weeks, all I'd wanted was to talk to Edward about what happened, and the minute I got my chance, I blew it by making out with him. I wanted to believe it was a dream, but the sweatsuit covering my body proved otherwise.

Now that Edward knew I wanted to talk to him, he had the upper hand. Again. I had no answers, no way of finding him, and no idea when he'd appear next.

Once again, I found myself tired and distracted during class. Despite my best efforts to pay attention, my mind strayed back to last night. Each time I thought of Edward kissing me, butterflies danced in my stomach. I swore I could still smell him on my skin—sweet cherries and bitter amaretto.

His being in my room hadn't frightened me, but something about him made me uneasy. There was still a very real possibility that Edward would hurt me, or worse—kill me. I wasn't ignorant to the ways of the world, and I didn't believe he

held any genuine feelings toward me. I might have enjoyed being close with him more than I'd expected, but that didn't mean I wanted to end up a pawn in his game. It all boiled down to one thing.

I didn't trust him.

If only I knew what motivated him. Sure, he liked to get a rise out of me, and maybe seducing me was part of his conquest, but what was his end game? He had to have a goal, something he wanted to achieve.

The one thought I couldn't shake was that Edward's toying with us held a darker motive. Had he grown bored with Emmett and moved on to me?

Had he grown bored with our parents as well?

I couldn't allow him to distract me any longer. I had my own goals, and it was time for me to focus on them. Shielding my notebook from the person sitting next to me, I flipped to a new page. I chewed on the end of my pen as I thought of topics I wanted to address and began my list.

Parents

Emmett/5 years/no talking

Fake capture

Other vampires

Once I had the most pressing items down, I thought of other things I wanted to know, like his age, how many people he's killed, and why the sun didn't bother him. Any of Edward's visits could be the last. I had to be prepared. At the bottom of the page, I wrote, "Are we safe?" and underlined it three times. After all, the whole point of this was to find out if Emmett and I could move on with our lives without fear.

I flipped between my lecture notes and page of questions, adding to both as the professor droned on. By the time my classes were over, I was more than ready to go home. As I stepped outside, the gloomy day immediately dampened my mood. It would be hours before Edward showed up—if he did. For all I knew, another week might pass before I saw him again.

I wandered the parking lot, searching for my car. I'd been so distracted when I arrived this morning that I didn't remember exactly where I parked, only the general area. The car was a white sedan, and not the least bit ostentatious. I looked past it twice, thrown off by the person leaning against the passenger side.

I stopped in my tracks as I recognized Edward's tall, lithe figure.

Though I knew without a doubt it was him, my brain struggled to reconcile the vision before me. Edward didn't belong out here in the real world. He didn't belong in broad daylight, standing among the people who surrounded me every day.

Panic filled me as I looked around, convinced he had drawn too much attention, but no one seemed to pay him any mind. He blended in too well, leaning casually against my car, and that felt wrong.

Edward wore the same black shirt, jeans, and Doc Martens as the other times I'd seen him. There was a tear in the sleeve of his shirt. Mud caked the hems of his pants, and scuffs marred the leather of his boots. He had disheveled hair and purplish, bruise-like shadows under his eyes, but all of that made him no less attractive.

A car turned down the aisle. It slowed as it neared us, and the blinker turned on. When the driver realized we weren't leaving, they sped away.

Taking a deep breath, I approached my car, giving Edward a wide berth. His unexpected presence not only took me off guard, it made me nervous. I was used to seeing him in the house or coming into my room under the cover of darkness. This was unfamiliar territory. I didn't know what to expect.

"Why are you here?"

"For claiming to have so many questions, you sure like to ask the same one."

His tone was light, teasing. We were in public. He couldn't do anything too crazy, and the chances of us making out on the asphalt were slim. I focused on keeping my cool and staying in control.

"Well?" I asked.

"I need a ride."

I gave the parking lot a once over with fresh eyes, expecting to see a hearse or some other morbid, vampiric looking car, but nothing appeared out of place. "How did you get here?"

“I walked.”

Safe wasn't a word I would use to describe myself around Edward. While he hadn't hurt me so far, my instincts warned me that getting in a car with him was a bad idea. Especially not knowing where he would direct me. By the time I realized I was in a dangerous situation, it might be too late to get myself out of it. Like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Yet, the opportunity to find out more about him intrigued me. Giving him a ride would offer me a glimpse into his life, and it couldn't be that far out of the way if he'd walked here. Besides, I didn't think telling him no and driving away would bode well for me in the future.

“Fine,” I said. “Get in.”

Edward smiled as he opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. I hesitated as I grabbed the handle. I hoped I wasn't about to make a fatal error, but what other choice did I have? Taking a deep breath, I slipped inside the car and tossed my backpack onto the back seat.

“Put your seatbelt on,” I said as I pulled out of the parking spot.

Edward chuckled but made no move to fasten it.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Your house.”

I slammed on the brakes. Edward flew off his seat and into the dash. He looked at me, stunned, as he re-situated himself, slowly and deliberately fastening his seatbelt.

“My house?”

“That is where you're going, correct?”

“I live there,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“You aren't good at asking questions or answering them, and you're a prude. Maybe I should just get out now.”

I scoffed at him.

“You're holding up traffic,” Edward said as the car behind us honked.

I took my foot off the brake and eased the car through the parking lot. It should comfort me to know we were going back to the house. It was safe. Familiar. But being alone in the house with Edward sent up all sorts of red flags.

I didn't trust him, but I also didn't trust myself.

"What do you want?"

On the surface, it was a simple question, but it housed an endless possibility of answers. When Edward didn't respond, I glanced at him, careful not to take my eyes off the road for too long. He stared intently out the windshield, his jaw tense. I felt my anxiety rise in response.

He swallowed audibly before cracking open his window. Fresh air swirled through the small space, washing his scent over me. I inhaled slowly, deeply, enjoying how all my senses sparked to life.

"You have questions. What are they?"

I cleared my throat, unsure where to start. The most pressing questions I had were about our parents, but I didn't want to start with anything heavy right out of the gate. I wanted to ease into it, get a handle on Edward's mood and his willingness to answer. The last thing I wanted was to offend him and jeopardize my opportunity.

If I were being honest, part of me wasn't ready to know what happened to them. I wanted to believe Edward was innocent, that despite what Emmett believed, Edward wasn't the bad guy.

I started with something inoffensive yet personal.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

I wasn't sure if that was human or vampire years. "How long have you been twenty-two?"

"Pass."

I frowned. Maybe it was too personal of a question. Vampire etiquette was lost on me. "Where do you live?"

"The woods."

"The woods? Like a house in the woods? Or literally in the woods?"

"Pass."

"Okay." I'd thought they'd been straightforward questions, but apparently I was wrong. I decided on something more serious. "Those other two vampires. Should we be worried about them coming back?"

“No. They’ve been taken care of.”

“Taken care of?” I repeated. “What does that mean? Did you kill them?”

“Pass.”

I sighed in frustration. “This isn’t fair. Why did you tell me you’d answer my questions if you weren’t going to follow through?”

“Now you know how it feels.”

“How what feels?”

“You’re a tease.”

My mouth dropped open, and I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. “I’ve never teased you. You misinterpreted and twisted my words.”

“You kissed me.”

“You tricked me!”

Edward placed his hand over his heart. “I am but an unsuspecting victim of your feminine wiles.”

My blood boiled. “Pick one. Am I a prude, or am I a tease?”

“You’re both,” he said. “Besides, I never said I would answer your questions. Only that you could ask.”

“You are insufferable.”

We continued down the county highway in silence. If he wouldn’t cooperate, then my entire plan was useless. I might as well just make out with him again.

Eventually, the silence became too much. Edward could pass on my questions all he wanted. That didn’t mean I was going to give up. I glanced at him. He turned his head and stared at me with his black eyes.

“You look tired.” It wasn’t a question, but at this point, my only goal was to get him talking.

“Tired?” A small smile graced his lips, and he looked away. “No, I’m not tired.”

The shadows beneath his eyes told a different story. Maybe I wasn’t the only one suffering from long nights awake, awaiting the unknown.

Then again, Edward was a vampire. Wasn’t he supposed to be awake during the night? I’d been around him during the day, and not once did I catch him resting.

“Do you sleep?”

I expected another pass, so it surprised me when he answered.

“No. I haven’t slept in over a hundred years.”

I wasn’t sure if Edward meant to inadvertently answer my earlier question. I did the math in my head. If he’d been a vampire for a hundred years after he turned twenty-two, then that put his date of birth no later than 1899.

“You’re old.”

“Does my age repulse you?”

“Thoroughly.” I fought to keep the smile off my face. My non-question tactic seemed to work. “You must have a good sense of smell.”

“It is the strongest of my senses.”

“When did you say you smelled me in the woods?”

“I didn’t,” he said. “Yesterday evening.”

Yesterday? That was four days after I’d been there. How could my scent linger anywhere that long? It was impossible.

“My best guess is you were there sometime between Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. And you got lost.”

“How . . .” It wasn’t the first time Edward had rendered me speechless, but it was the most shocking piece of information he’d told me by far.

Edward grinned.

“Okay. You smelled me in the woods. So what? Why did the reason matter?”

Edward shifted in his seat and ran a hand through his already messy hair. I wasn’t certain if he would answer, but I was determined to wait it out.

“I find you incredibly hard to read.” He wiped his hand over his mouth and took a deep breath. It was strange to see him uncomfortable, and I wondered how much of his bravado was a facade. “At one point, I thought we shared a connection, but then I wasn’t so sure. When I returned that first night, you didn’t seem very . . . enthusiastic.”

“I thought you were going to kill me,” I admitted.

“How many times do I have to tell you? If I wanted to kill you, I would have done so already.”

I wanted to believe that was true. I’d used the same reasoning with Emmett. Until I knew Edward well enough to be absolutely certain of my safety, my guard was staying up.

“I didn’t plan to come back after that,” he said, so quietly I strained to hear the words. “You wanted me to leave without retaliating, so I did. Then I smelled you in the woods, miles from your house.” He seemed to waver, torn by an internal dilemma. Our eyes locked, and then he looked away. I returned my attention to the road.

“I thought it might be wishful thinking, but if there was even the smallest chance you’d been searching for me, whatever the reason . . . I had to know.”

His admittance came as a shock. There was vulnerability behind his words. It was a side of him I hadn’t witnessed.

“If I hadn’t gone into the woods, you would have left us alone?”

Edward remained silent for a long moment. I slowed as my street approached, pulling onto the shoulder so the cars behind me could pass. We were almost at the house, and my stomach twisted with nerves.

“Is that what you would have preferred?” he asked at last.

Ultimately, it had been my goal. I’d wanted Edward to leave us alone so we could stay at the house and go back to our normal lives. If he left for good, we’d be safe, but then I’d never get answers. I’d spend the rest of my life wondering about him. Maybe even looking for him.

I didn’t want that.

“Pass,” I said.

Edward laughed under his breath. “Fair enough.”

I turned onto the gravel driveway. It twisted and turned until the trees opened up and the house came into view. I parked in my spot. Edward was out of the car before I turned off the ignition, opening the driver’s side door before the passenger door had even closed. I stared up at him as he held the door open for me. With shaking hands, I shoved the keys into my backpack and stepped out of the car.

He gestured to the front door. “After you.”

I swallowed as I made my way toward the house, my throat suddenly dry. Edward stayed on my heels. I hesitated at the front door. We never locked it, and I didn’t want him to know. Not that it mattered. He’d gotten in on multiple occasions. I turned to face him.

“You can’t stay,” I said. “Emmett gets off work soon; he won’t be far behind us.” Whether Emmett came directly home after work was a crapshoot, but I wasn’t comfortable being alone with Edward, and I was grasping at straws.

“Then I’ll make it quick.”

I didn’t see a way out of this, aside from demanding he leave, and I didn’t want to do that, afraid Edward would take it the wrong way and depart for good.

Nodding, I turned and opened the door, gesturing for Edward to enter first. He obliged and stepped over the threshold.

Once inside, I closed the door behind us and dropped my backpack on the floor. Edward sauntered into the living room. He ran his hand along the frame of the new bay window, inspecting it. Then he turned around. His nose flared as his eyes scanned the room. He homed in on the end table and made his way toward it. Panic filled my chest as he picked up the shard of glass I’d removed from my foot over two weeks ago. He held it aloft, scrutinizing it. His throat bobbed as he extended his arm toward me.

“You should dispose of this.”

I rushed to take it from him, in awe of the sensitivity of his sense of smell. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I can handle it,” he said. “But it would be in your best interest not to spring a leak.”

I brought the glass to the kitchen and tossed it in the garbage. I wasn’t sure if it was a good enough method of disposal, but the can had a lid, and trash pickup was tomorrow.

Edward followed me and sat down at the kitchen table in Emmett’s spot. He leaned back, resting one arm on the table and extending his legs, crossing them at the ankles. It almost looked as though he belonged there.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He sighed and gazed around the kitchen wistfully. “Imagining life on this side of the cage.”

“We both know this isn’t the first time you’ve wandered through the house.”

“You figured it out.”

I sat in the chair across from him, hoping he didn't notice how my whole body shook.

"Do I make you nervous?" he asked.

I considered lying, but honesty was the best policy. Especially since I wanted him to open up to me.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know what you're doing."

Edward gestured to himself. "I'm sitting at the table, acting like a perfectly normal human."

"Yeah, that's the problem," I mumbled.

One of my textbooks was on the table. He opened it and thumbed through the pages. "Psychology major?"

I shook my head. "Just getting my generals."

"Any future career plans?"

"No." I needed to redirect this conversation back to him. There was no telling when Emmett would arrive home. I had to make the most of what little time I had. "What about you? You can't possibly work, right? How do you afford to live?"

"I don't need much."

Even if Edward didn't need much, he couldn't survive without a means of income. He owned nice clothing. If he lived in the woods, where did he keep his belongings?

A dark thought came over me.

"You kill people, and then take their money and things."

Edward smiled, looking amused. He shook his head. "I don't kill people."

"You seduce them then. Is that what this is?" I gestured between us.

He leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table and propping his chin on his hands. "You think I'm seducing you?"

"No," I stuttered. "But if you need to use my washing machine, just say so."

Edward chuckled. "I have access to amenities."

"Where do you really live?" I asked again, hoping for a more definitive answer.

"We can go there if you'd like, but we have to leave now."

As tempting as it sounded, I wasn't about to follow Edward blindly into the woods. Not to mention there would be a lot of explaining to do once I got home.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"If Emmett comes home and I'm not here, he's going to freak out."

"Do you need his permission to leave the house?"

"No, but if I'm gone, he's going to think the worst. I don't want him to worry."

"And what's the worst?"

"That I'm with you."

Edward pursed his lips. He closed the textbook and slid it back to its place on the edge of the table.

"I should go."

Edward stood and made his way to the front door. I leaped to my feet and followed him, unsure if what I'd said offended him. He'd never come across as sensitive before.

"Already? We just got here."

He paused at the door and faced me. "I'll be back tonight. Don't scream this time, please."

Without waiting for a response, Edward opened the door. He jogged across the driveway and down the path leading to the tree fort, disappearing as Emmett's truck pulled up to the house.

Somehow, he'd known. His timing was always perfect.

I added yet another question to my list.

Chapter FIFTEEN

MY EXCITEMENT BUILT ALL AFTERNOON, knowing I'd see Edward before the night was over. I busied myself with laundry and cleaned my room. Not that I was normally a slob. It just seemed appropriate to tidy up now that I expected company.

After dinner, I plopped on the couch while Emmett binged the newest season of his favorite show. I wondered how late Edward would arrive, and if he'd be open to answering more questions. I wanted to know more about him, particularly why he seemed to have a built-in Emmett detector.

Emmett shifted in his recliner, letting out a fart that popped in rapid succession like a machine gun.

"Gross, Em. Again?"

"You're the one who made chili for dinner."

I pulled the throw blanket over my nose. "Remind me not to do that again."

"Bella, if you need to use the bathroom, do it now. You will *not* want to go in there once I'm done."

"You don't have to tell me twice." I stood, tossing the blanket on top of Emmett. Maybe it would keep the smell in. "I'm going to bed. See you in the morning."

I rushed through my nighttime routine. When I emerged from the bathroom, Emmett waited in the hallway, dancing uncomfortably. He wasted no time pushing past me and slamming the door.

“Good night,” I said to the door before retreating to my bedroom.

I turned on the lights, gasping when I saw Edward sprawled across my bed. “Jesus!” I peeked out the door, listening for any sign that Emmett heard, before closing it quietly behind me.

“Took you long enough.”

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“What?” Edward gestured to his bare feet. “I took off my boots.”

“Yeah, but now your muddy jeans are getting my clean blankets dirty.”

“Bella.” My name rolled off his tongue in a way that made my knees weak. “Are you trying to get into my pants?”

I didn’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

“How long have you been here?”

Edward shrugged. “A couple hours.”

“Hours?” I’d been killing time waiting for it to get later, and he’d been here all along. I pushed away my frustration at the two hours I wasted.

Edward held out his hand, beckoning me to join him. Maybe he was okay with sitting on my bed wearing his street clothes, but I was not. My sweats sat folded on top of my dresser. Who knew how much longer Emmett would be in the bathroom, or when it would be safe to re-enter?

I would have to change here.

“If you keep wearing those, I’m not coming back.”

“Close your eyes.”

“I don’t mind.”

I waited him out. Edward sighed as he rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his forearm.

When I was sure he wouldn’t look, I turned off the harsh overhead light and stripped off my clothes. I pulled a clean tank top over my head before covering up with the sweats. Finally, I unclasped my locket, letting it fall onto the dresser.

Edward dropped his arm and rolled on his side to face me as I approached the bed. I turned on the bedside lamp to see him better. He pursed his lips, looking displeased as his eyes roamed my body. I folded my arms over my chest, ignoring how my stomach flipped at the sight of him on my bed.

“You left right before Emmett got home. And last night, you vanished as he opened the door. You knew he was coming. How?”

“I heard him.”

“What, like, you heard his truck? His footsteps?”

“Something like that.”

“You must hear really well.”

“It’s my strongest sense.”

I frowned. “I thought your sense of smell was.”

“They’re equally strong.” Edward shrugged.

“Okay.” I paced the small room as I processed the information, careful to not look at Edward. There was something mesmerizing about his black eyes, especially here in the dim light of my room. I didn’t want to lose my focus. “How’s your vision?” I risked a glance at him long enough to see him fighting a smile.

“It’s also the strongest.”

So he had super senses. It seemed plausible for a vampire.

“What about last night, and today, when you got out of the car? You moved so fast; I didn’t even see you. Was it some sort of trick?”

Edward shook his head. “I’m very fast.”

“Of course you are.” I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Let me guess, you’re really strong and super smart, too.”

“And indestructible.”

“Indestructible?” I nearly shouted.

Edward’s eyes shifted to the door, and I froze, listening for Emmett. Maybe Edward could disappear without a trace, but I’d still have to explain to my brother why I was standing in the middle of the room yelling at myself. Not only that, but I didn’t want him to leave. Not while he was opening up to me.

When Edward exhaled and returned his attention to me, I assumed it was safe to continue. I kept my voice low.

“You were never worried about Emmett hurting you.”

Edward shook his head.

“Why did you let him capture you?”

Edward regarded me for a long moment. I made the mistake of looking into his eyes again. Without making a conscious decision, I moved to the edge of the bed. He opened his mouth as he drew in a breath, captivating me as I waited for his answer.

“Pass.”

Just like that, the spell broke. I groaned in frustration. At this rate, it would take years for him to answer all my questions.

Edward extended one arm toward me. “Shall we try this again?”

I took a cautious step forward, unsure what he wanted. He slipped one arm between my legs, and in one graceful motion, flipped me over his body. Once again, I landed on my back, sandwiched between him and the wall.

“That wasn’t so scary now, was it?”

Edward slid one of his legs between mine and pressed his body against my side. He gripped the bottom of my sweatshirt and lifted it. I folded my arms over my waist, stopping him.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Taking this off.”

“I just put it on.”

“Regrettably.”

His fingers traced along the waistband of my sweatpants. I wasn’t ticklish, but my body shuddered in response.

“It’s nothing I haven’t already seen in my fantasies,” Edward said. He tugged the hem of my sweatshirt again. “You’re right here, and I don’t even get to feel your warmth.”

Maybe it was the dejected tone of his voice. Maybe it was the way the corners of his lips turned down into the slightest of pouts. Taking a deep breath, I raised my arms above my head. Edward wasted no time peeling the sweatshirt off my body.

My breath hitched as he pressed his palm flat against the exposed skin of my stomach. It immediately transported my mind back into the basement, the cage against my back, his mouth on my neck. The same adrenaline rushed through my veins, fueled by fear and excitement.

Edward pinched the drawstring of my sweatpants, untying the bow with one tug. “Maybe these aren’t so bad after all.” He slipped his fingers beneath the waistband. I flew into action, grabbing his hand through the fabric.

“Don’t,” I warned. I didn’t loosen my grip until he pulled his hand away.

“Tease.”

“I haven’t even done anything!”

“You’re still a tease.”

“How?”

“This body,” he said, returning his hand to my stomach. He slid it under my tank top, until his palm rested on my chest. “The blood pumping through this heart.”

I swallowed down my nerves. “I have no control over either.”

I closed my eyes as Edward leaned in, brushing his lips against the corner of my mouth. I refused to take the bait. He wouldn’t trick me into kissing him again.

He slid his hand over my ribs, caressing the underside of my breasts with his thumb. I wanted him to keep going. I wanted him to stop. Common sense and desire warred within me, swirling through my mind until I didn’t have a grasp on either.

I flexed my hand, ready to stop him again if things went too far.

With each stroke of his fingers, my breathing became more ragged. Edward’s scent grew more concentrated, consuming me. It would be so easy to turn my head and kiss him. To taste his bittersweet flavor and feel the icy burn left behind by his lips.

Edward shifted until he hovered above me. I opened my eyes as he dipped his head. I thought he was going in for a kiss. Instead, he nudged my chin with his nose and pressed his lips to my neck. I brought my hand to his shoulder, but before I could touch him, his hand shot out, grabbing my wrist. He pinned my arms to my

sides before settling his weight on top of me. His chest vibrated as he growled in my ear, a deep, low rumble that sent goose bumps over my body.

I froze. I'd forgotten just how much that sound unsettled me.

I held my breath as Edward placed his mouth against my neck, and I braced myself for the pain of his bite, too afraid to fight him off. Judging by his iron grip on my arms, it wouldn't do me any good.

If I didn't fight him, maybe he'd be gentle. Maybe he'd let me live.

I inhaled, filling my lungs with his scent as he extended his jaw. A sense of calm washed over me as his lips tugged at my skin. I exhaled, sinking deeper into the mattress as I forced my body to relax.

If Edward wanted to kill me, he would already have done it. He'd said so himself. And if he changed his mind, surely there were worse ways to go.

Above me, Edward stilled. He loosened his grip on my arms as his lips left my neck. I struggled to steady my breaths as he pushed away from me, his body visibly tense as he rose to his feet.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I need to leave."

"Emmett?" I looked past Edward to the bedroom door, listening for footsteps. He shook his head. "Did I do something wrong? Tell me if I did."

His expression gave away nothing. "You should get some sleep."

I didn't understand. He hadn't been concerned about my sleeping before.

"I'll sleep. You don't have to leave."

He cocked a brow. "Bella, if I stay, you won't be sleeping."

"You just got here," I argued.

"I've been here for over two hours."

Once again, I found myself frustrated at the time I wasted. I'd been looking forward to seeing him all day. I couldn't shake the feeling I'd done something wrong.

"Don't go."

Edward hesitated, and for a split second, I swore his resolve faltered. His brow furrowed as he looked at my bed. His jaw flexed as he swallowed.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

He picked up his boots, and with more grace than any living creature I'd ever seen, hopped out of the window. I didn't bother following. By the time I looked outside, he'd be long gone.

I ran my palm over my neck, shuddering at the memory of his mouth against my skin. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd been sure he was going to bite me. I didn't know if it should give me a sense of security that he hadn't, or if I should consider it a blessing and stop cheating death.

Sleep didn't come easily, and when it did, dreams of being trapped in the basement with Edward haunted me. In them, I desperately tried to escape his teeth and his hands. After each one, I awoke with a start, covered in sweat and panting, with the blankets twisted around my thrashing legs.

I was thankful when the morning finally came. It was Friday, and I needed the weekend to regroup. When class ended, I rushed outside, expecting to see Edward waiting beside my car once again.

He wasn't there.

I pushed down my disappointment as I drove to the grocery store. I was anxious to get home to see if Edward was waiting in my room again, but I needed to shop for groceries since I didn't do it the weekend before. The only food remaining in the house was leftover chili, and it was going straight into the garbage once I got home.

I planned meals on the way, hoping I could remember everything I needed without writing it down. I kept it simple—meat for Emmett to grill, frozen veggies for sides, and sandwiches for lunch. After tossing a variety of breakfast food in the cart, I made my way to the checkout.

As I waited in the short line, I scanned the store, wondering if Edward was here. I wouldn't put it past him to spy on me. Even if only to be creepy about it later.

Edward wasn't in the store, and he wasn't by my car. When I got home, I checked my room before bringing in the groceries.

It was empty.

I didn't bother looking elsewhere in the house. Emmett was tinkering in the garage. I didn't think Edward would be so brazen as to walk around the house while he was here.

Emmett made his way inside as I put away the groceries. He took one look at the bag of Granny Smith apples and unopened bottle of maple syrup and smiled.

“Are you making what I think you’re making?”

“Mom’s famous apple pancakes?”

“Yes!” Emmett pumped his fist. “Tomorrow?”

“Do you work in the morning?”

“Afternoon. I close the store tomorrow.”

“Good. I love you, but I’m not getting up at six on a Saturday to make you breakfast. Are you okay with grilling this week?”

“T-bones! Nice,” Emmett said, already inspecting the packages of meat. “You trying to butter me up or something?”

“What? No. Why?” I couldn’t help but think of the close calls he’d had with Edward over the past two days. If Emmett discovered I’d been communicating with Edward, he would lose his mind. I hated to think about how he’d react if he knew Edward had been in my bed.

“I’m just teasing, sis.” Emmett reached to ruffle my hair, but I stepped out of the way. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, I just have a lot on my mind. Finals and . . .” I struggled to think of something else that could be bothering me, but only Edward came to mind. “Just finals.”

Emmett nodded as he frowned, clearly thinking about Edward as well. I’d hoped to not remind him of the topic we’d been dancing around for weeks.

“You should get out of here this weekend. Go hang out with Angela, or that hot friend of yours. What’s her name again?”

“Don’t act like you don’t remember her name.”

“Jessica, right?”

I shook my head. “Jess is on the other side of the state. And Angela is on the other side of the country. I’m the only one who stayed behind.”

“I hate you being at the house alone ever since . . .” Emmett waved toward the basement. “Maybe you should look at transferring this fall.”

“No way! I’m not transferring before I finish my generals.”

“You aren’t staying here because of me, are you? I’m twenty-five, Bella. I can take care of myself.”

“No, of course not.” I pushed back my guilt. “Living on campus . . . it’s not really for me.”

Emmett held up his arms like he held all the solutions to the world’s problems. “Let’s move then. That way I can get out of here, and you can continue pretending I’m not the reason you’re stuck in this dumb town.”

“We’re not selling the house.” The words came out sharper than I intended. Surprise reflected on Emmett’s face. “I don’t want to leave here. Not yet.”

Not while this was the only place connecting me to Edward.

Emmett nodded, but I could tell the conversation was far from over.

“What’s got you all twitchy?” Emmett asked. “You haven’t held still all night.”

“Me?”

He looked around the living room. “Unless there’s someone else in the house.”

I fought to keep my face composed as I pushed down my rising panic. There was no way Emmett knew about Edward’s secret visits. He’d been in far too jovial of a mood all day. “Not last I checked.”

Emmett narrowed his eyes, no doubt noticing the blush that was surely obvious on my face. A commercial came on, and I hopped off the couch, searching for an excuse to check for Edward again.

“I’ll be right back. I need to use the bathroom.”

“I don’t need details, weirdo,” he called behind me.

“Says the guy who announces when he’s going to take a shit.”

“You’re welcome!”

I peeked inside my bedroom. Edward wasn’t there, and I cursed myself for making him wait so long the night before. Even though I’d been checking for his arrival a couple times an hour, I feared I missed him, and he grew tired of waiting. After changing into my pajamas, I headed to the bathroom to brush my teeth, then popped my head into the living room.

“I’m going to bed, Em.”

Emmett checked the clock on the wall. “Already? It’s eight-thirty.”

“I’m exhausted. I’m going to read until I fall asleep.”

It wasn’t a lie. Edward’s late-night visits had done a number on my already sketchy sleep schedule.

I closed and locked my bedroom door, then opened the window all the way. There was nothing amiss in the yard, and I wondered if Edward was out there watching me. I slid into bed with my book and turned on the lamp, hoping the light wouldn’t deter him from entering. If he didn’t appear within an hour, I would turn it off and wait in the darkness.

It didn’t take long for my eyes to grow heavy. I kept switching positions, trying to stay awake, but nothing worked. Either my head would fall, or I’d drop the book, jolting awake. After reading the same page three times, I decided to close my eyes, just for a moment.

When I opened them again, it was light outside. By the gray cast in the room, I could tell that it was early and overcast. Birds chirped loudly through the open window. My heart sank. Edward never returned.

I sighed and stretched my legs.

My heels hit something firm.

Startled, I flipped onto my back, propping myself up on my elbows. Edward lay alongside me on top of the covers, his head sharing my pillow. There was a slight flush to his cheeks, and the dark circles beneath his eyes were gone. I resisted the urge to run my thumb over where they had been. I didn’t want to disturb him. He looked so peaceful in sleep.

In sleep . . .

I frowned.

“I know you’re awake.”

Edward’s lips twitched. His lashes fluttered as he opened his eyes. Ever so slowly, he raised them to meet mine.

My breath caught in my throat. His eyes, which had always hypnotized me with the depth of their darkness, were no longer black. They were bright and clear, like glass—tinted the lightest shade of amber. I stared, unabashed.

“Whoa.”

Edward was the first to break eye contact. He flicked his gaze to the side before dropping it completely. He seemed uncomfortable under my scrutiny, which wasn't at all his M.O.

“How . . .?”

“Long story.”

I reached for his face, hoping to force him to look me in the eyes again. He flinched when I touched his jaw, and I pulled my hand away, but it worked. His eyes met mine.

“You don't like it when I touch you,” I stated.

“You're not touching me in the right places.”

I rolled my eyes. It was becoming a habit around him. I lay down on my side, facing him, keeping as much space between us as I could while sharing a pillow on a twin bed.

“When did you get here?”

“A little after ten.”

Ten? He'd been here all night, and I hadn't even been aware.

“Why didn't you wake me?”

“Bella, I crawled into your bed, and you didn't even move. All night. Even after I felt you up.”

“You wouldn't,” I said, holding the blanket closer to my chest. I one hundred percent believed he would, but I couldn't imagine sleeping through it. “What did you do all night?”

“Felt you up.”

“No, really.” I gave him my best admonishing look.

“I watched you sleep.”

“I'm not sure which is creepier,” I said. “I'm surprised you weren't under the blankets too.”

“Then I'd have to take off my pants.” Edward lifted the blanket and peeked beneath. “And what's the point when you're wearing those?”

Clearly, whatever changed his eye color had no effect on his personality.

I looked down at his feet, wondering how much dirt I'd have to brush off my bed this morning. To my surprise, Edward wore a clean pair of jeans, black this time. He'd also traded in the black t-shirt for a gray one. I'd been so distracted by his presence and his eyes that I hadn't noticed.

The realization that these might not be his clothing popped into my mind, but I buried the thought deep. Worst-case scenario, Edward was a murderer. Best worst-case scenario, a thief.

And he was in my bed.

Even though they weren't black, his eyes transfixed me once again. There wasn't one blemish in his crystalline irises. Not a speck or a pattern. No fibers. Their depths seemed to go on forever, sucking me in like an ocean filled with honey. Drowning me.

Edward closed the distance between us, breaking his hypnotic spell as his mouth pressed against mine. I kissed him in return. The familiar tingle spread across my lips. I inhaled, burning the memory of his scent and his taste into my mind.

Edward pulled me against him before rolling me onto my back and climbing on top of me. I reached for his shoulder but stopped when I recalled his reaction from the night before. I didn't want to upset him again.

Even through the blankets, Edward's desire for me was obvious. Judging from the way he pressed himself against me, he wasn't trying to hide it.

The lack of oxygen was making me dizzy, and I broke away from his lips with a gasp. Edward used the opportunity to kiss his way lower. He sucked against the sensitive skin of my neck, and when he pushed his body against mine again, I couldn't stop the moan that slipped past my lips.

"You aren't the only one awake in this house," he murmured in my ear. "Keep it down. Unless you want to go to my place. You can scream all you want there."

His subtle reminder that we weren't alone was the reality check I needed.

"I can't leave."

"Why not?"

"I have to make Emmett breakfast."

"Plenty of time to squeeze in a quickie."

“What? No!” I whisper-yelled. Edward grinned. For the life of me, I couldn’t tell if he was serious. “I’m not having sex with you.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a prude.”

“I’m not.”

“Prove it.” Edward pushed against me again. “Come with me,” he whispered.

Aside from the fact that I couldn’t bail on Emmett, I wasn’t about to allow Edward to whisk me away to god-knows-where in the heat of the moment.

“I can’t.”

“Your brother won’t let you leave?”

“No, for real, I promised I’d make him breakfast.”

Edward frowned. “Why can’t he make his own breakfast?”

I didn’t want to mention our parents or explain how Mom made us apple pancakes on special occasions because they were Emmett’s favorite.

“He usually does. This is kind of a special thing.”

Edward studied me for a long moment. He didn’t seem to believe me. I wished I knew what he was thinking.

“Fine. We’ll go when you’re finished.” His voice held no emotion and no room for argument.

“I can’t just waltz out the door with you.”

“Then make up an excuse to leave and waltz out of the door by yourself.”

As curious as I was to know where Edward lived, I wasn’t convinced going there was a good idea, but I would agree to almost anything if it meant the end of this conversation. I’d find an excuse to get out of it later.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine.”

Edward pushed off me, and I instantly missed the weight of his body. He stood and picked up his boots.

“You’re leaving again.” Disappointment was clear in my voice.

“Come find me when you’re done.”

“The last time I tried that, it didn’t turn out so well.”

“Try driving this time.”

Chapter Sixteen

AFTER COOKING BREAKFAST, I took my time cleaning the kitchen, making sure everything was washed, dried, and put away. When I finished, I tossed a load of towels into the washing machine. I had yet to decide what to do about Edward.

He wanted me to go with him today, and he left no room for argument. While I was apprehensive, I knew if I was going to get anywhere with him, I'd have to do some things on his terms. Before I could change my mind, I got dressed and grabbed my car keys.

"Where you going?" Emmett called as I walked past the living room.

"Library. To study. Um, I need some books."

He frowned. "Okay. Cool. See you later."

"Okay. Bye," I said awkwardly.

"Bella," he called behind me. I stopped in my tracks. Did he know? He couldn't possibly know. "I'll probably swing by the bar after work, so I'll be home late."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Sounds good. Drive carefully."

As I got in my car, I tried not to second guess my decision to meet Edward. I didn't stop until I reached the county highway. Damn him for not giving me any

hint of where to go. Because he'd found me on campus, I headed toward town. It seemed like a safe bet.

Less than a minute later, I spotted someone walking on the edge of the ditch ahead. Even from a distance, I knew it was Edward. His long, lean body and messy hair gave him away. I slowed as I approached, watching as he navigated the uneven terrain with grace, his strides long and smooth.

Edward held out his thumb as I neared. I pulled to the side of the road and rolled down my window.

"Hitchhiking is illegal."

Edward placed his hands on the top of the car and ducked to look at me. "Fifty-fifty chance, and you turned the wrong way."

"Your instructions sucked."

Edward laughed as he got into the car. "Turn around."

I waited for two cars to pass, then whipped a U-ie.

"How was breakfast?" he asked, sounding cynical.

"It was good. Thank you for being understanding." The proverb about honey catching more flies than vinegar popped into my mind. I wondered if he was jealous that he didn't get invited to breakfast, and the thought was so ridiculous I smiled. Still, it raised another question. "Can you eat?"

Edward shot me a sideways glance, his brows lifting in amusement.

Dumb question. Everyone eats.

"Food, I mean. Like a pancake."

"If by eat you mean put it in my mouth and swallow it, then technically yes."

I replayed his words in my head and covered my mouth to keep a giggle from escaping.

"You think that's funny, do you?" he asked. I nodded. From the glare Edward gave me, he wasn't amused. "I suppose, being a prude, you wouldn't know anything about it." He waited for me to stop laughing before he continued. "My body can't process food, so it remains in my stomach as an undigested lump until I vomit it up. It's quite uncomfortable."

I giggled again.

"What now?"

“I can’t see you hunched over a toilet.”

“Nor will you,” he muttered.

“If you can’t digest it, why eat it at all?”

“To keep up appearances.” Edward must have known by the look I gave him that I didn’t understand. “Sometimes it’s necessary to appear human.”

“Then what do you eat?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

It was, but I’d hoped there was an alternative to the traditional vampire diet.

Edward pointed out the windshield. “See that mile marker?”

I squinted but saw nothing. “No.”

“It’s a half mile ahead. There’s a gravel patch just beyond it. Pull off the road.”

Sure enough, a green mile marker sign came into view. I pulled off the road as instructed.

“Trade places with me,” Edward said as he opened his door.

I put the car in park and left it running as I got out. I didn’t see Edward leave the car, but by the time I made it to the passenger side, he was already in the driver’s seat.

“Do you even know how to drive?” I asked as I clicked the seatbelt into place.

“I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“What?” I asked as Edward floored it. The tires squealed as we fishtailed onto the road. I grabbed the handle near my head. “Holy shit!” If I survived multiple interactions with vampires only to die in a fiery car wreck, I was going to be pissed. I looked at the dash long enough to see the needle creeping toward one hundred. “The speed limit’s fifty!” I yelled over the whirl of the engine.

The trees were nothing but a green blur as they whizzed by. My mind raced as I thought of everything that could go wrong, like hitting a deer or another car. Or a tree. Or accidentally swerving off the road. Edward might be indestructible, but if he turned this car into a pretzel, I wouldn’t walk away from it alive.

The car slowed, and I exhaled in relief.

“It tops out at one ten. That’s disappointing.”

“I was hoping to make it home alive today.” It was supposed to be funny, but my voice came out breathless and weak.

Edward let out an exasperated sigh. “I can’t make any promises.”

We drove in silence. Edward sped, though he kept it under seventy. I was just relieved he knew how to operate a motor vehicle. After a few miles, he turned onto a private drive. I was immediately alert, wanting to retain every detail of the journey so I could find my way back.

The road was nothing more than two barely visible tire tracks, overgrown with branches that scraped against the car as we wound through the trees. I winced at the noise, hoping the paint survived.

“This isn’t an off-road vehicle.” I couldn’t imagine getting stuck in here. It would be nearly impossible to get towed out.

Eventually, the tire tracks stopped, and the car bounced over deep ruts in the earth. We passed weathered signs that read “private property” and “no trespassing,” obscured by greenery. Whoever owned this property hadn’t bothered to upkeep it.

Finally, Edward came to a stop. We were tucked into such a narrow space; I had no idea how he planned to get us out. He killed the engine.

“We’ll have to walk the rest of the way. It’s not far.”

I took a moment to inspect my surroundings. The forest was thick for as far as the eye could see in every direction. I turned to look out the back window. The path we came in on had practically disappeared.

Unease settled over me as I looked at Edward.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“You just hid my car in the middle of the forest, and now you want me to take a walk with you?”

“Are you afraid?”

I was afraid, but I didn’t want to admit it to him. “It seems a bit murderous.”

“Murderous?” Edward laughed. “Would you have preferred to walk from the road?” He had a valid point, but it didn’t put me at ease. I shook my head. “Well,” he said as he opened the door, “let’s get on with the murdering.”

Edward extended his hand as I glared at him. I opted to exit through my door, but when I attempted to open it, it bumped against a tree stump. I sighed before taking his hand and allowing him to help me out of the car.

“It’s not far. Less than a hundred feet.” Edward nodded in the direction the car faced, and we started our walk. I tried to remove my hand from his, but he held on tight. I was grateful for his support when I tripped on a tree root ten feet later. “Be careful,” he warned. “Remember what I said about springing a leak.”

I shivered involuntarily and squeezed Edward’s hand. “Don’t let me fall.”

Edward was right. After a couple of minutes navigating through the trees, there was a man-made clearing. I dropped his hand and stared at the dilapidated cabin standing in the center.

“Is this yours?”

“Define ‘yours.’”

“Do you own it?”

Edward shrugged. “Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

The cabin had seen better days. The outside wood was rotting in spots where the paint had peeled away, and the roof appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Plywood covered a missing window. If I stumbled across this cabin on my own, I would run the other way.

“You own a murder shack in the middle of the woods.”

Edward opened the door and gestured for me to enter. “I prefer bloodshed bungalow.”

I took a slow step forward, pausing in the doorway. “This doesn’t seem very safe.”

“It’s safer than your tree fort.” He placed his hand on my lower back and pushed me inside.

Despite its outer appearance, the inside of the cabin was in decent shape. It was clean. I expected it to smell old and musty, but it smelled like Edward. I scanned the room. There was a counter and kitchen cupboards in the corner, a wood-burning stove, an old television, and a large, plush couch that looked modern and out of place in the otherwise rustic space.

“What’s in there?” I asked, pointing to a closed door.

Edward crossed the small room and opened it. Inside was a metal bed frame and a dresser.

“The mattress had to go, as did the original couch. The place was overrun with mice when I discovered it. Vile creatures.”

“So you’re squatting.”

“Whoever owns this land hasn’t been here in years.”

“What if they come back?”

“I’ll be long gone before they get here.”

“Because you’ll hear them coming?”

Edward stared at me, unmoving. For a moment, it looked like his mind was somewhere else.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I will hear them.”

I looked away, trying to escape the intensity of his gaze. I made my way around the room, inspecting the contents. There was a pile of books on the counter, and I flipped through them. They were relatively new releases, each one donning a library sticker.

“You use the library?” I struggled to envision Edward perusing the shelves.

“It’s a recent occurrence.”

I turned my attention to an old CD player. I hit the power button, but nothing happened.

“There’s no electricity. The generator’s out of gas.”

A flip phone sat on the opposite end of the counter. “Look at this antique,” I said as I picked it up. “Is it yours, or is it a murder trophy?”

“Nine-tenths of the law, remember?”

“Does it work?”

“It works.”

I turned it over in my hand, curious about what information I could glean. Probably not much, considering it wasn’t a smartphone, but it would still be interesting to see who his contacts were. I flipped it open and pushed the power button. The screen remained dark. “It’s dead.”

Edward sauntered toward me. Heat rose to my cheeks as he plucked the phone from my hand. He closed it before slipping it into his back pocket, then braced his palms against the counter on either side of me, trapping me.

“Do you have a problem with old, dead things?”

I shook my head.

Edward picked me up and placed me on the counter before stepping between my legs. His hands came to my hips, and he leaned in. I closed my eyes as he kissed and sucked on my neck. I wanted nothing more than to feel his lips against my skin all afternoon, but I didn't want things to get too heated. While he'd made many sexual innuendos and pushed me to go further, he'd only mentioned my blood once. I wasn't sure if that was something he would ask for eventually, and I wanted to finish the conversation we'd started in the car.

"Edward?"

He didn't stop kissing me, but he hummed against my neck in response.

"When you said you don't kill people, were you telling the truth?"

Edward sighed against my neck before putting space between us. He kept his hands on my hips. "I've never killed a human, if that's what you're asking."

Relief flooded through me. I stopped myself from flinging my arms around his neck and hugging him with all my strength. If he'd never killed a human, then he wasn't responsible for our parents' deaths. Emotions overwhelmed me, and I closed my eyes as I fought against tears of relief.

Edward wasn't the bad guy.

Once I was sure my voice wouldn't break, I continued my questioning.

"How does it work when you drink blood? Do you only take a little bit? How do you keep someone from bleeding out?"

I hoped he didn't misunderstand and think I was interested in participating. If he suggested it, I would shoot him down immediately. There was no room for negotiation. I was much too squeamish to bleed on purpose, or be present while he ingested it.

"I don't drink human blood. It would be a death sentence. I hunt deer, mostly."

"Deer," I repeated. Edward nodded. "But you said my blood teased you."

"Oh, it does. Abstaining from human blood doesn't come without its struggles, and your blood smells particularly appetizing to me."

I swallowed as his eyes drifted to my neck. "So if you bit me, I would die?"

"I don't believe I possess the self-control to stop. And if I did, let's just say you wouldn't enjoy the outcome." Edward's golden eyes met mine. His expression was

strained. I could only assume he meant I would become a vampire, but I was too afraid to clarify. At least any future debates over drinking my blood were off the table.

“Do all vampires drink animal blood?”

“No. There are only a few that I’m aware of. It goes against our instincts. Sometimes mistakes happen.”

“But you’ve never made a mistake?”

“Not yet.” His eyes once again flashed to my neck. “I’ve come close. Recently.”

I recalled his abrupt departure Thursday night and wondered if that was the time in question. It was the last time I’d seen him with black eyes. The pieces clicked together.

“The other night,” I began, struggling to form coherent words. “You left. Were you afraid of losing control? Did you go drink a deer?”

A smile spread across Edward’s face. “Drink a deer?”

“Sorry, I don’t know the terminology,” I said, irritated that he found any humor in this situation.

“Yes, I drank a deer.”

“That’s why your eyes changed color?”

Edward nodded. “Were you freaked out?”

“A little,” I admitted. “They’re beautiful.”

“Beautiful,” Edward repeated, sounding skeptical. He leaned in and kissed my lips. I allowed it for a moment before pushing against his chest. He growled quietly, but it didn’t sound like a warning, at least not like the other night. I left my hand on his chest, feeling the soft vibration against my palm. “What do I have to do to get into your pants?”

“You don’t even own a bed.” I gestured to the back room.

“I have a couch.”

“I’m not having sex with you.”

“Prude.”

Ignoring him, I slid from the counter to continue my inspection of the cabin. The cupboards were empty, which made sense considering Edward didn’t eat food. Some drawers contained random items—knives, matches, candles, batteries that

were well beyond their expiration dates. I could only assume they came with the cabin.

“If there’s no electricity, what do you do when it gets dark?”

“I don’t need light to see.”

“So you just sit here in the dark?”

“To be honest, I’m not here very often. I don’t need to rest. I mostly use this place to store my belongings. Sometimes I come here for a reprieve from the elements.”

“What belongings? A TV and a CD player that you can’t use because there’s no power, and a phone that’s dead? Some library books?” I gestured toward the couch. “A couch that you can’t even nap on?”

“The television doesn’t work.”

“Edward—” I stared at him, shocked by the simplicity of his life. “How do you live like this?”

“As I said before, I don’t need much.”

“But you’re here all by yourself.” My throat constricted around the words. “I would hate living in the middle of the woods all alone.”

“You aren’t going to cry, are you?”

“I feel bad,” I admitted.

“I’m not above a pity fuck.”

I shoved his chest, frustrated that he could make me laugh through my tears. I was trying to be serious.

“Don’t feel bad for me,” he said. “I have other options. This is the life I chose.”

I couldn’t imagine choosing a life of solitude. “Why?”

“I struggle to be near others.”

“Vampires or humans?”

“Both,” he said.

“But you’re around me a lot.”

“You’re different.”

I wanted to know what he meant by that. Was I special? Was it something I did or didn’t do? Clearly he found me attractive, or at the very least I aroused him, but I refused to let myself hope he felt anything more.

“Different how?”

Edward laughed under his breath and turned away from me. He rubbed his hand over his mouth, which appeared to be one of his nervous tells. I wanted to know why my line of questioning had shaken his composure, but I was afraid of him shutting down if I pushed too hard, so I waited for him to speak.

“Pass.”

The fact that he didn’t want to tell me made me want to know even more. His ability to dance around my questions exasperated me.

“You can’t just pass on all my questions when you don’t like them.” The words came out sharper than I intended. “Tell me.”

Edward raised his brows, appearing surprised by my outburst. “You’ve been good with weird so far,” he said, almost to himself. “When I said I have good hearing, I wasn’t only referring to my ears,” he said. I frowned, not understanding. “I can hear people’s thoughts.”

He couldn’t possibly be serious. I laughed nervously. There was no way he could hear my thoughts, not without giving himself away. Not from the comments he’d made about my being hard to read.

“That’s impossible.”

“I wish it were.”

“Prove it. What am I thinking?”

“You’re thinking I’m full of shit.”

I scoffed at him. “You don’t need to be a mind reader to figure that out. Seriously. What am I thinking about right now?” I closed my eyes and pictured a golden onion. If he could pick that from my brain, I would believe him.

“Let’s see.” Edward placed his hands on my waist, causing me to jump as my eyes flew open. “You’re thinking about how you can’t get enough of me, and you want nothing more than for me to toss you on the couch and have my wicked way with you.” He leaned in to kiss me, but I pushed his face away.

“Nice try.”

“Hmm. I thought for sure that would be it.” He leaned in again. This time I allowed a kiss, but only for a moment before I broke it off. We weren’t done talking.

“So you are full of shit?”

“Believe what you’d like. I’ve heard the thoughts of everyone I’ve ever met. Except for you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Well, isn’t that convenient?” I asked, still skeptical of his claim.

“You would think so, but the universe has a way of balancing itself. Your silent mind makes you easy to be around. On the other hand, I don’t know what you’re thinking, so I constantly second guess myself. Then there’s your blood.”

“What about my blood?”

“Your blood challenges my resolve at every turn. Sometimes I think you were sent to Earth for the sole purpose of driving me to insanity. Though I don’t know what I did to deserve such a punishment, all things considered.” His voice was laced with bitterness. For the first time, I got the impression Edward wasn’t happy about what he was.

“If being near me feels like a punishment, then why do you keep coming back?”

“Why do you want me to keep coming back if you find me so terrifying?”

I didn’t have an answer. How could I explain the pull I felt? The attraction that defied reason? He couldn’t possibly feel the same way about me. It didn’t make sense. I was just a boring human.

Without thinking it through, I slipped my arms around his waist and rested my head against his chest. Edward went rigid.

“What are you doing?”

“Hugging you.”

“Why?”

My face burned with embarrassment as I waited for his rejection. “I wanted to know what it was like.”

“And what is it like?”

As always, Edward was cold and unyielding, but the longer I stood pressed against him, the warmer he became and the more my body molded to his.

“It’s nice.”

Edward crossed his arms over my back and pulled me closer.

“We could continue this,” he said. “On the couch. Naked.” I laughed through my nose. Edward rested his chin on the top of my head. “If your goal is to destroy my ego, you’re succeeding.”

I didn’t think anything could destroy Edward’s ego. I squeezed him tighter. “Shut up and hug me.”

Chapter SEVENTEEN

EDWARD HAD NO TROUBLE navigating my car out of the woods. The ease with which he backed it down the path left me in awe. I would have undoubtedly hit a tree or gotten stuck.

“Sorry again,” I said as he pulled onto the county highway.

“Stop apologizing for being human.”

“I’ll bring toilet paper next time.”

“Next time?”

It was presumptuous of me to assume Edward would invite me to his home again, but it never crossed my mind that he wouldn’t want me there, that this had been a one-time opportunity. Not that I was keen on spending an extended period in a place with no bathroom, no electricity, and no running water.

“You’re right,” I said, keeping my tone light. “What’s the point of being alone in the middle of the woods if there’s no bed?”

Edward’s head snapped in my direction. “Are you suggesting that if I had a bed, you would have slept with me? Because that seems highly unlikely.”

I smiled and shrugged. He could assume what he wanted.

As we drove, I processed everything Edward had told me. He could read minds, which made it hard for him to be around others, but he couldn't read mine. He'd never killed a human, but my blood tempted him to where he almost lost control. His eyes changed color after he ate, and he drank deer blood. He was squatting in a murder cabin, where he stored library books and a bunch of shit that didn't work.

Most importantly, when I demanded Edward answer my question, he did.

"You should let me drive the rest of the way," I said when Edward turned onto my road. "Emmett might still be home."

"He's not."

"How do you know?"

Edward tapped his temple.

"You can read his mind this far away?"

"Yes. My range is about a mile, give or take."

No wonder he shied away from crowds. Hearing other people's thoughts would drive me mad, especially if they were about me. Especially if they were Edward's thoughts. I blushed at the idea, but the blood quickly drained from my face as I remembered he also thought about killing me.

No. I definitely wouldn't want insight into anyone's mind.

"Was it hard for you when you met me on campus, being able to hear everyone?"

"Not particularly. It's not as obtrusive when I'm using it."

"Using it for what?" I couldn't imagine what he found intriguing about college kids. Most of my classmates still acted like high schoolers.

"Spying on you."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. "You what?"

"I wanted to know what you were like when I wasn't around."

I tried to recall what I might have said or done that day. I couldn't think of anything out of the ordinary. Nothing stood out in my mind. I probably made small talk with my classmates and ate lunch with the same group I always did.

"You smiled at the boy who sat behind you in American literature. Apparently you do that every day. He's going to fail, but don't blame yourself. He wouldn't pass the class even if you weren't distracting him the entire hour."

Any skepticism I had over Edward's mind reading abilities flew out the window. I knew the guy he referred to. We typically sat in the same seats, and I did smile at him every day before sitting down, even though we'd only made small talk a handful of times.

"I don't know how I'm distracting him," I admitted.

"Your mere existence distracts him. I can't say I blame the poor boy. Don't worry though. His fantasies have nothing on mine."

Edward parked the car in my spot, and I wasted no time getting to the bathroom. When I finished, I returned to the living room, expecting Edward to be there, but he was gone. I checked the kitchen. There was a note from Emmett on the table, telling me he left grilled pork chops in the fridge.

I wandered down the hall. My bedroom door was wide open.

"What are you doing?" I asked when I found Edward inside.

"You snooped through my house. It's only fair I snoop through yours." Edward held up a royal blue silk nightgown. "Why haven't you worn this to bed?"

I stomped toward him and pulled the skimpy piece of fabric from his hand before shoving it back into the drawer. "I didn't snoop through your bedroom dresser!"

"That's on you." Edward turned his attention toward my locket. He picked it up and flipped it open. "Parents?"

I nodded. "The picture is from their wedding day. My dad gave it to my mom when I was born."

"This locket must be much older than that."

"I think it was my great-grandma's, or maybe great-great? I'm not entirely sure."

Edward closed it before inspecting the chain. I hadn't been wearing it, afraid it would break again.

"Why did you fix it?"

"It was important to you."

"How did you know?"

"You came downstairs to look for it, despite your terror the night before."

Although that evening wasn't the most scared I'd been around Edward, it was the first time I thought he would end my life. "When you pulled my leg between the bars, I thought you were going to kill me."

"Me too."

I fought to keep my composure. Edward's face was unreadable. I admired how easily he engaged his emotionless mask, while I struggled to conceal even the slightest of feelings.

"That noise you made," I said, recalling the way his growl cut through the basement. "Like a lion's roar, but also a wolf snarling. It was so loud. I felt it in my bones."

"It's an unmistakable sound once you've heard it. It was the only thing I could think of to keep your brother out of the basement. If he found you down there with me, I doubt he'd ever let you out of his sight again." Edward ran his thumb over the face of the locket before placing it back onto the dresser. "If things end badly, I'll add this to my collection of murder trophies."

If it weren't for the slight twitch of his lips, I'd think he was serious.

"That's not funny."

"Neither is a case of blue balls."

"Blue balls have never killed anyone."

Edward leaned in closer, his lips inches from mine. "Neither have I."

I turned from him and walked out of the room, knowing if I let him kiss me, we'd end up on my bed. As I expected, he followed me to the living room.

"So, Edward, do you do human things?"

He raised a brow. "Like?"

"Well, I already know you go to the library. What about movies? Or the mall?" Everyone needed clothes. His were nice; he had to shop somewhere. "You obviously don't go to restaurants, right? What about bars or, I don't know, bowling alleys?"

Edward pursed his lips, failing to hide his smile. "Is this your way of asking me on a date?"

"No!" A date with Edward was the furthest thing from my mind. I wasn't ready to be with him in public. There was no way I could act normal, knowing what I

knew. It was weird enough when he came to campus. “I’m trying to figure out who you are. Maybe there’s somewhere else you’d rather be instead of my boring house.”

“I can guarantee your bedroom isn’t boring. I’ll show you if you’d like.” His grin faltered when I put my hands on my hips. “I can’t go anywhere while the sun is out.”

I glanced out the window, dumbfounded. We’d literally just been to his house. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but the sun has been out for about ten hours.”

“The sun has been up, but it hasn’t been out. It’s been overcast until about five minutes ago.”

“Does the sun hurt you?”

Edward shook his head. “My skin reacts to sunlight. It would be obvious I’m not human.”

“Is it scary?”

Edward grinned. “Terrifying.”

I was afraid to ask for more details. Frightening images of Edward morphing into some ungodly fanged creature popped into my mind. If the sun made him resemble a character that stepped out of a horror movie and into my backyard, I didn’t want to know. I pushed the horrific thought from my mind.

“That’s nice of you to not go running around scaring people.”

“It’s against the rules,” he said with a shrug. “Technically, I’m breaking them with you. I probably should have left town five years ago when Emmett figured out what I was. This might be a good time to mention you shouldn’t talk about what I am to anyone. Your brother did, which is why the others showed up.”

The memory of the other two vampires sent a chill down my spine. “The ones you killed?”

“Why are you so eager to pin me as a murderer?”

I didn’t have a good answer. He was the one who alluded to murdering them.

“I didn’t kill them. I saw them away to keep you safe.”

“Is that why you were gone for so long?”

Edward nodded. “I had to be absolutely certain they had no intentions of returning.”

“Where did you take them?”

“Roughly a hundred miles south of here.”

It should make me feel good, but all I could think was even though Emmett and I were safe, eventually they’d kill someone. “I kind of wish you had killed them. Is that bad?”

Edward’s face softened. “Bella, I can’t go around offing every vampire for doing what we’re supposed to do.”

“I know,” I said, but I still hated the idea of people dying.

I made my way to the couch and sat on the end. To my pleasure, Edward took the spot next to me. I turned to face him, drawing my knees to my chest.

“You said you’ve never killed a human. What about vampires?”

“I wanted to, once. But I never have.” He looked at me and smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“So the phone isn’t a murder trophy?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

This time, his smile was genuine. “No, the phone is mine.”

“And the bill goes to where, the middle of the woods?”

Edward shifted his weight. He pursed his lips as he sighed.

“Don’t even think about saying ‘pass,’” I warned.

“The bill goes roughly a hundred miles south of here.”

He’d said the same thing about the other vampires. I waited for him to elaborate, giving him a pointed look. Edward cleared his throat before continuing.

“There is a family of vampires who live there. They’re like me.” He didn’t look at me, opting to stare out the window instead. His brow creased in a frown, and his voice grew quieter. “I brought Carmen and Eleazar there. They seemed willing to try the diet but not the lifestyle. Once they left, I came back here. That’s when I smelled you in the woods.”

“What lifestyle?”

“You don’t miss anything, do you?” Edward angled his body toward me. I extended one leg over his lap, and he placed his hand on my knee. He kept his gaze on his hand as he traced a pattern over my skin with his thumb. “They’ve integrated into human society.”

“How so?”

“They go into public, they work, they go to school. It’s quite impressive.”

I tried to imagine Edward being in public and acting human. When he was on campus, no one seemed to notice anything different about him. He must have made it out of the library without notice. If I pushed aside everything I’d witnessed, it was entirely possible I’d believe he was human as well. The first time I saw him in the cage, I had no inkling he was anything else.

“How many of them are there?”

“Five.”

“Five?” That seemed like a lot of vampires this close to home. Add in Edward, Carmen, Eleazar, and whoever killed our parents, and that brought the total to nine. “How many vampires are in the world?”

“We don’t exactly take a census, but my best guess is somewhere in the tens of thousands.”

I took a moment for that number to process. That was a lot of vampires wandering the world, killing people.

“What if more come? Ones that aren’t interested in drinking deer.”

“They won’t. Vampires are territorial, and my scent is too concentrated here. The only reason Carmen and Eleazar showed up was because your brother ran off his mouth in town.”

It was comforting to know Edward’s presence helped ward off other vampires. Emmett hadn’t seen Edward until after our parents died, which supported his claim. A little voice in my head warned me the timing was a little too convenient, but I pushed it to the back of my mind. Edward had told me multiple times he’d never killed a human. I wanted to believe him.

“This family of vampires, do you see them often?”

“Every few months or so. Let’s just say they have a state-of-the-art washing machine.”

It took a moment before I figured out what he was referring to. “The amenities,” I said with a nod. “And they don’t mind you using it?”

“No. One of them owes me.”

“For what?”

Edward fell silent, suddenly very intrigued by a scar on my knee. I watched his face as he ran his fingernail along the mark in my skin. He'd put the mask back on. I waited, unsure if I wanted to push him for more information. Just when I was about to change the subject, his eyes met mine.

"For turning me into this."

I'd never given much thought to how or why Edward had become a vampire. None of my questions revolved around his change or his human life. It sounded like a sensitive topic. I didn't want to come across rude or offend him by asking something too personal, but he brought it up, so I figured it was fair game.

"You were turned against your will?" I guessed.

"That depends on what you consider implied consent."

"I don't think implied consent includes changing someone into a vampire."

"Doesn't it?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I should have known he wouldn't make this easy on me. "How would it?"

"What if I were dying already?"

Of all the things he could have said, I didn't expect that. "What happened to you?"

Edward shifted beneath me. His hand gripped my knee, and his jaw tightened as he clenched his teeth. I wasn't sure if he was uncomfortable talking about himself, or if he didn't want to share the information with me.

"I want to know more about you." I didn't know the first thing about flirting, but I batted my eyelashes on the off chance that it worked in my favor. "Please?"

Edward sighed, letting his head fall back onto the couch. He stared at the ceiling, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. I held my breath in anticipation, hoping he would open up more.

"I was six months into my internship at a hospital in Chicago."

My mouth dropped open. "You were a doctor?" I couldn't reconcile vampire Edward with human doctor Edward. He seemed too young, and I struggled to envision him with any sort of appropriate bedside manner.

"In nineteen eighteen."

There was an edge to his voice, something that told me to read between the lines. I ran through possible scenarios in my head. I didn't know what people died of in the early 1900s. Dysentery? Snake bites? I shook my head.

"Not a history buff?" he asked.

"It's not my best subject."

"Let me give you a hint. It was during the height of the Spanish influenza."

"You were dying of the Spanish flu?"

"Technically, I was dying of septic shock brought on by bacterial pneumonia, but in short, yes."

"And a random vampire came and . . . *saved* you?"

"Remember when I said those vampires integrated into human society?"

I nodded.

"Well, one of them is a doctor."

"A vampire doctor?" I asked in disbelief. "How is that even possible? Wait—" I replayed his words in my head. "What do you mean, *is* a doctor?"

"Do you want to hear my story or not?"

I gestured for Edward to continue, filing away my question about the vampire doctor for later.

"I worked with him during my internship. He was amazing. He worked long overnight shifts. He never tired, barely took breaks. No matter what ailment someone had, he knew, sometimes even before running tests. Not once did I see him refer to a medical textbook. I pushed myself harder. I wanted to be as good as him one day."

Edward scoffed. A sardonic smile graced his lips. Whatever respect he'd held for this vampire seemed to have vanished.

"When I got sick, I made him promise to do everything in his power to save me. I told him I knew he could do things other doctors couldn't. At the time, I didn't know what I was asking of him. The night I lost consciousness, he brought me to his house, and he bit me."

Edward turned his head toward me. His golden eyes were distant, most likely reminiscing about a different time.

"You had no idea what he was?"

Edward shook his head. "I believed in science, not the supernatural."

"If being a vampire is what made your mentor such a good doctor, then in theory, couldn't you be just as good?"

"The irony that I wanted to be like him isn't lost on me," Edward said. "Carlisle has had hundreds of years practicing this lifestyle. His temptation for human blood is nonexistent. I don't have that level of restraint."

"You've resisted my blood."

"Not without great effort." Edward hooked his hand behind my knee and repositioned me to straddle his lap. "Besides—" He wrapped his arms around me and pulled my body against his. "I have an incentive to keep you alive."

Chapter Eighteen

I REMOVED A BAG OF STEAMED BROCCOLI from the microwave and replaced it with a leftover pork chop, conscious of Edward's eyes on me as he sat at the kitchen table. While my dinner reheated, I snuck a glance at him. As I suspected, he was staring at me.

"Are you sure I'm not being rude?" I asked again.

"Eat, Bella."

"I can wait until . . ." I let the thought trail off. Wait until he left? I didn't want him to leave. Wait until tomorrow? I might starve to death before then.

"It's fine. Nothing about your food is remotely appetizing. Trust me."

I stabbed a broccoli floret with my fork and held it toward him. "You're welcome to have some."

Edward narrowed his eyes. "Are you making fun of me?"

I smiled before popping the broccoli into my mouth. Edward made a face.

"How often do you eat?" I asked.

"In the past, every few months, but I'm upping that to a couple times per week."

"Why such a drastic change?"

“If we’re to continue—” Edward hesitated before gesturing to the space between us. “—whatever *this* is, then I need to hunt more often.”

I was a smart girl. I could put two and two together. He didn’t want me to become the meal.

“Are you hungry now?”

“I’m always hungry.”

“If you’re always hungry, how can you go months without eating?” I couldn’t imagine going one day without eating, let alone months.

“Feeding isn’t necessary for our survival. Animal blood holds no appeal to me, and it does little to quench the thirst, so most of the time I don’t bother. It wouldn’t be like drinking your blood, for instance.”

My appetite vanished at the thought of him drinking my blood. If any shock registered on my face, Edward didn’t appear to notice. I removed the plate from the microwave and placed it on the stove before sitting next to him.

“How do you know if you’ve never had human blood?”

Edward tapped his temple.

“Right,” I said. It was easy to forget he could read minds. Once again, I was thankful he couldn’t read mine. “Did you ever want to drink human blood?”

“I considered it briefly in the beginning. Carlisle told me it wasn’t an option if I stayed with him. At the time, I respected him, so I agreed to do things his way.”

“You’re not with him now. What made you stick with it?”

“Killing people goes against the Hippocratic Oath. Besides, I don’t want to be a monster.”

“What about the other four? They must be okay with it.”

Edward nodded slowly. “The lifestyle is a struggle, for some more than others, but it’s important to us all. Abstaining from human blood helps us maintain our humanity. Without it, we’d be unable to live the lives we do.”

“You’d be unable to squat in a murder shack?”

Edward pursed his lips. “I’m sitting here, and you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

I decided to change the subject. “Tell me more about Carlisle being a doctor.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Edward admitted. “He’s currently working in family practice at a small-town hospital, but he’s gathered an array of experience over the years.”

“How does that work? You can’t exactly waltz in somewhere with a resume containing a hundred years of experience.”

“We have very convincing documentation. Carlisle was changed at twenty-three. It’s a stretch to make any significant amount of work history look believable. Let’s just say we move around a lot.”

I didn’t miss Edward’s continued use of the word *we*.

“Do you stay close to them?”

“I used to consider myself part of the family. After the last move, I went off on my own. That’s when I discovered the murder shack.”

“Five years ago?” I asked.

Edward nodded.

“Did Carlisle change the others, too?”

“He did.” Edward pointed behind me. “Why aren’t you eating?”

“Oh.” I turned around, seeing my plate forgotten on the stove. “Guess I lost my appetite.”

“There’s a certain bedroom activity that can work up an appetite. I’d be more than happy to assist you.”

“You are relentless.”

“When I know what I want.”

“Stop trying to change the subject.”

“You seemed happy to change the subject while you were making out with me on the couch.”

Heat rose to my face. Conversation had been the last thing on my mind while I was on Edward’s lap. It was easy to get lost in the sensations of his mouth on my neck and his hands roaming my body.

“You started it.”

“And you stopped it when your stomach started rumbling.” Edward nodded toward the plate behind me. “I’ll talk if you eat.”

I rolled my eyes but didn't argue as I retrieved my dinner from the stove. I shoved a piece of pork into my mouth. "Talk," I demanded as I pointed my fork at him.

"Carlisle changed all five of us. Granted, we were all dying; he likes to use that as an excuse to justify his actions. But it wasn't like he gave any of us a choice. He knew how I felt about what he'd done to me, yet he kept doing it." Edward shook his head. The same sardonic smile from earlier returned. "And he did it knowing how each addition to his family made it increasingly difficult for me to stay."

"You were his first?"

"Yes. For the first few years, it was only Carlisle and me. It was easier back then. Then he changed Esme. They're mates now. About a decade later came Rosalie. I suppose you could call it a failed attempt at matchmaking."

Edward laughed to himself, but all I could focus on was the jealousy burning a hole in my chest. Until now, I hadn't considered him being with anyone else. It was naïve of me to think otherwise. I wondered how many women he'd been with over the past hundred years. For all I knew, he could have been married as a human. Maybe even had kids. I ignored the sinking feeling in my stomach as he continued.

"The last two he changed were a pair of star-crossed lovers, Alice and Jasper. That was in nineteen fifty. I tried my best to stay, to get along with everyone. But I didn't choose this life. And I didn't have the privilege of choosing my family."

It must have been hard for Edward to watch Carlisle continue to change people, pushing him further away each time. No wonder he held a grudge. I understood why Edward went off on his own, though I still felt bad that he resigned himself to living alone in the woods. The way Carlisle disregarded him wasn't fair, and I did my best to push down the anger I felt toward his maker.

"Do you think he'll change anyone else?"

"Possibly. He seems content with his family now, but who knows? Maybe he'll feel the need to replace me. I doubt he would change anyone who wasn't on their deathbed, so don't let that concern you." Edward tilted his head to the side. His eyes drifted above my head, losing focus. "I thought your brother wouldn't be home until late."

“He told me he was going to the bar after work.” I glanced toward the driveway, listening for the sound of his truck. “Why? Can you hear him?”

Edward stood from the table. I jumped to my feet and followed him to the door.

“You’re coming back, right?”

“After I hunt.”

Edward gripped the door handle and then froze. He dropped his hand before turning to me. I didn’t understand his expression, brow furrowed, lips parting as though he wanted to say something. I waited for him to speak. Instead, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine.

The innocence behind the gesture took me by surprise. Edward slipped out of the door without another word. I stood there for a moment, watching where he disappeared into the woods as I brought a hand to my tingling lips.

Not in the mood to make small talk with Emmett, I placed my food in the fridge and fled to the bathroom to get ready for bed. When Emmett came inside, I heard the telltale sign of him rummaging through the fridge, followed by a can of beer cracking open.

I poked my head into the living room as he settled into his recliner.

“What happened to the bar?” I asked, unable to hide my frustration. Emmett didn’t seem to notice.

“Waylon was there and already shit-faced. You know how much I hate that guy.”

I didn’t know how long it would take Edward to hunt, but I didn’t want to waste any time I could spend with him. “I’m heading to bed.”

“Night.”

Once inside my bedroom, a streak of blue caught my eye. I closed and locked the door before making my way to the bed, where the nightgown Edward discovered while snooping was laid out across my pillow. My eyes flashed to the open window.

Sneaky, persistent vampire.

I took the nightgown in my hands, feeling how the silky fabric slipped easily across my skin. If I wore this to bed, Edward wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off

me. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I enjoyed the way he touched me, but I didn't want to spend the entire night rejecting his advances.

I swallowed back my nerves, unsure why the thought of having sex with Edward made me so anxious. It wasn't anything I hadn't done before. His not being human didn't bother me nearly as much as it should. I found him attractive, and knowing he wasn't a murderer eased my guilt about feeling that way.

I liked him. A lot. But I still didn't trust his motives. If this was all part of his game and he disappeared after he got what he wanted, it would devastate me.

I shook the negative thoughts from my mind. So far, Edward had given me no reason to believe he was using me. Over the past three days, he opened up more than I ever expected. He trusted me with private details about his life. That had to be a good sign.

Taking a deep breath, I stripped off my clothes and slipped the nightgown over my head.

For the first time, I was awake as Edward hoisted himself through the window. He hopped to the floor and untied his boots before unfurling his body to his full height. A smile graced his lips when he noticed me watching him.

"Hey," I said. "How was the hunt?"

"Too long."

Edward kicked off his boots, exposing his bare feet.

"No socks?" I asked.

"Unnecessary."

Edward knelt on the bed next to me. I clutched the blanket to my chest, suddenly self-conscious of my lack of clothing. As he leaned in to kiss me, his eyes drifted to my exposed shoulder. He froze, his lips parting.

Silently, he pinched the blanket between his fingers and lifted it, peeking underneath. His eyes met mine, and he cocked a brow. Blood rushed to my face. I hoped the darkness disguised my embarrassment.

"I certainly didn't expect that," he murmured.

Edward stood and pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing broad muscled shoulders and a narrow waist. His skin was pale, flawless. He tossed his shirt to the floor, and my eyes stayed glued to his muscles as they flexed with each movement. At least, until his hands dropped to his pants.

My breath caught as he unfastened his jeans and stepped out of them. Unlike socks, he believed underwear was a necessity, much to my relief. I scooted closer to the wall, giving him room as he slid beneath the covers. He hooked his hand behind my knee and hitched my leg over his hip before rocking his body against mine. His scent washed across my face as he kissed me, and I breathed him in, reveling in the way my senses came to life when we were this close.

Edward slid one hand up my thigh, slipping it under the nightgown. His fingertips left a trail of goosebumps as they moved over my hip and across my stomach, stopping just shy of my chest.

“Can I touch you?” he asked.

I nodded.

Edward’s hand closed around my breast, and I closed my eyes. The chill of his palm was a stark contrast to the heat spreading between my legs. His mouth came to my throat as his hand squeezed and massaged me, and I tilted my head, exposing more of my neck. I loved the thrill of him kissing me there—the danger and vulnerability. I couldn't get enough.

Edward rolled me onto my back and hovered above me, placing one of his legs between mine. He slid his hand lower, over my abdomen, stopping just at my underwear. When I didn't protest, he continued lower. My eyes shot open when I felt his feather light touch between my legs, and I let out a shaky breath.

His fingers danced across the fabric, tracing patterns that matched the contours of my body. He slipped one finger under the hem of my underwear, and it glided along slick skin. I thought for sure he'd make a smart-ass comment about my being wet, about being a tease or how much I wanted him, but Edward's only response was a low hum of pleasure, so quiet I barely heard him.

Not wanting all the attention on me, I reached between us and ran my palm along his length. Edward's reaction was immediate. His hand shot to mine, prying

it away from his body. He pulled away from my neck, looking at me with wide, panicked eyes.

“Ha!” I laughed. “Who’s the prude now?” I tried to twist out of his grasp, but he tightened his hold, causing pain to radiate from my wrist. “You’re hurting me,” I hissed. Edward released me, his arm recoiling as if my words caused him physical pain. “What the hell?”

“You can’t do that.”

Anger and embarrassment swirled within me, and I put on a frown to mask the hurt I felt at his rejection. “You can touch me, but I can’t touch you? How is that fair?”

“You can’t surprise me like that. This is hard for me.”

“Yeah, I could tell.” I nodded to the space between us.

Edward narrowed his eyes. By the slight quiver of his lips, I could tell he was fighting a smile. “Bella, I want you to touch me, but I’m barely staying in control as it is,” he said, his voice playful despite the weight of his words. “Let me get used to being with you. You’ll have every opportunity to ravage me later, I promise.”

The promise of later offered me some comfort, but his comment about control concerned me. “Is it my blood?”

“I have to stay focused. I can’t fully let go. If I let my guard down . . .” The implication hung heavily between us. Edward was obviously aware of his weakness. As much as I didn’t want to ask, I had to know.

“Have you had sex with many humans?”

“Not since I was one.”

“Vampires?”

“Never.”

Edward’s pale amber eyes met mine. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore there was vulnerability in their clear depths. He hooked his fingers into my underwear, and I lifted my hips as he stripped them from my body.

“You?” he asked.

“I’ve never had sex with a vampire.”

Edward cracked a smile. He brought his hand between my legs once again. Despite being tucked safely under the blankets, I’d never felt so exposed.

“Humans?”

“One or two,” I said noncommittally.

Edward slipped his fingers inside me, and I closed my eyes, blocking out the world around me so I could focus on his touch. I lost myself in the sensations, gasping each time he hit the spot that made my toes curl. All too soon, his hand disappeared. He settled between my legs, and I took a shaky breath as he reached between us, aligning our bodies before pushing into me.

Just like Edward’s kisses and his touch, nothing in my previous experiences compared to this. I moaned, squirming as my body adjusted to him. I started to wrap my arms around his shoulders but thought better of it. He’d growled at me the last time we were in this position, and after his warning earlier, I didn’t dare test him.

As I let my arms drop to the mattress, I realized Edward hadn’t moved. He was still. Too still. I was suddenly hyper aware of him, of the tension in his rock-hard body and the proximity of his mouth to my neck. Each of my ragged breaths emphasized the fact that he wasn’t breathing.

“Edward, are you okay?” I asked. Edward didn’t respond. I couldn’t tell if the tremor I felt in his chest was a silent growl or my own body shaking against him. My heart pounded, which I was sure did nothing to help the situation. “Edward, it’s me.” When he said nothing, I brought my hand to his shoulder and squeezed, hoping to pull him out of his trance. Again, he didn’t react. I took a deep breath, putting as much strength in my voice as I could muster. “I swear to god, if you bite me, I am never having sex with you again.”

My threat worked. Edward let out a pained chuckle as he angled his face away from my neck. I breathed a sigh of relief. When I removed my hand from his shoulder, Edward captured my arm and draped it over his back. Surprised by his unspoken permission, I wrapped my arms around him, cautiously at first. When he didn’t object, I held him tighter, needing him closer.

Edward relaxed into me and let out the breath he’d been holding. He turned his face back toward me, nuzzling the crook of my neck.

“So warm,” he whispered against my skin.

As he moved, every nerve in my body came alive. I held on to him with all my strength, my hips meeting his with every thrust. The same tingle caused by his lips spread between my legs, simultaneously burning me as it chilled me to the core.

A tightening built in my belly that I'd only experienced while alone. I buried my face in Edward's shoulder, taking gasping breaths as I neared my climax. Within seconds, I was no longer in control of my body as I jerked and spasmed around him. Edward groaned, long and low in my ear. He rocked against me, his fingers digging into my flesh as he succumbed to his own pleasure.

When Edward finished, he rolled onto his back. Not wanting to lose contact, I shifted with him, curling against his side. His entire body tensed as I rested my head on his shoulder, but just like when I'd hugged him, I refused to be intimidated by his aloofness. We'd just had sex. The least he could do was cuddle with me.

“Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head. “It was amazing.” In my post-coital bliss, I'd lost my filter. I instantly regretted saying anything to boost his ego.

Edward wrapped one arm around me, cupping my shoulder as his entire body went lax. He let out a long sigh. I melted further into him, snaking my top leg between his and pressing my palm to his chest. Though my heart was beating out of control, his remained frozen, unmoving. It didn't unnerve me like the first time. He might not be human, but he was still a living, breathing creature. And I couldn't imagine living without him.

Chapter Nineteen

I WOKE UP FEELING REFRESHED, unable to remember the last time I'd slept so soundly. Edward lay behind me, his arms locked around my chest, holding me against him. I took a moment to bask in his proximity, enjoying the way our bodies melded together.

"You're still here," I mumbled, my voice rough with sleep.

"Where else would I go?"

I shrugged. "You got what you wanted."

"Did I?"

He loosened his hold as I rolled to face him, and I draped my arm over his waist, trying to act casual as I did so, even as butterflies threatened to burst from my chest at the contact. Pain flashed across Edward's face, so quickly I almost missed it. His throat bobbed as he stroked my neck with his fingertips.

Of course. What he wanted was my blood.

Something about him seemed different this morning, and I struggled to put my finger on what. Maybe because he was under my blankets, or maybe because he was naked, at least from the waist up. I shifted my hand lower, feeling for a waistband, but the only thing I felt was his smooth, warm skin.

I frowned.

“Your skin is warm.”

“That’s because I spent all night next to you.”

“It’s such a shame I slept through it.” I brought my hand to his cheek and caressed the sharp planes of his face. Purplish red splotches on my wrist captured my attention, and I pulled my arm closer to inspect the bruises.

Edward wrapped his hand around my wrist. His fingers aligned perfectly with the marks.

“Oh,” I said.

He closed his eyes as he placed an open-mouthed kiss on my tender skin.

“I like your kisses.”

“Do you?” he murmured.

“They tingle.”

Edward looked surprised as he removed his mouth from my wrist. “Really?”

I nodded. Edward leaned in closer, and I laid my head back on the pillow. He skimmed his nose along my neck as he inhaled deeply, breathing me in. His closed lips pressed against mine, and I ran my tongue across his lower lip, tasting his familiar flavor. Sweet cherries and liqueur. When his tongue met mine, cold and wet, the reaction was immediate. The icy hot burn filled my mouth, making its way down my throat. I couldn’t help but imagine the sensation elsewhere on my body.

All too soon, Edward pulled away, leaving a bitterness on my tongue.

“As much as I would like to continue, now is probably not the best time.”

As if on cue, heaving footsteps clomped down the hallway. I groaned under my breath.

“What are your plans for the day?” he asked.

I mentally ran over my Sunday checklist. “Laundry. Grocery shopping. I should really get some last-minute studying done. Finals are this week.”

“Then I’ll make myself scarce.”

With a whine, I buried my face in his chest. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’ll be back tonight.”

“What time?”

“You’re putting me on a schedule now?”

I pulled away to look at his face, but his expression was unreadable. I didn't want him irritated with me. The last thing I wanted was to drive him away with silly demands.

"If I'm constantly wondering when you'll be back, I'll be too distracted to get anything done."

"Open your window when you're ready for me." Edward hesitated, then winced. "If you still want me to come back."

"Okay," I said. I couldn't imagine what would make me change my mind.

Leaning in, I stole one more kiss from him before rolling out of bed. Edward sat up, and the blanket fell away from him, exposing his chest and a sliver of pale skin on his hip. His body was beautiful, and he was in my bed.

Completely naked.

Heat filled my face, undoubtedly coloring my cheeks bright red. I pulled on my sweatsuit over my nightgown and slipped out of the bedroom. Before I could make it to the bathroom, Emmett called for me.

"Bella, are we out of coffee filters?"

"There's some in the pantry."

"I can't find them."

I rolled my eyes before changing course and heading to the kitchen. I opened the pantry door, not even bothering to look inside as I pulled out a new box of filters. "Here." I shoved it into Emmett's chest, but he wouldn't take it.

"The fuck is that?" Emmett brushed my hair over my shoulder and his mouth dropped open.

Instinctively, I covered my neck. Suddenly, it all made sense. Edward's gentle caress, his abashed expression when he insinuated I wouldn't want him to come back. He'd left a mark.

I was going to murder him.

"You went to the 'library' to 'study,' huh?" Emmett asked, complete with air quotes.

I braced myself for an argument. My love life was none of his business. I was an adult, and I didn't have to answer to anyone. As I opened my mouth, Emmett held

up his hand. At first I thought he was silencing me, but as I looked between his hand and the dumb smile on his face, I realized he wanted a high five.

“Don’t leave me hanging!”

I gave him the weakest, most awkward high five of my life.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re seeing someone?” Emmett’s excitement took me off-guard, and all my previous defensiveness dissipated. “Wait. You’re not back with that Mike kid, are you?”

I shuddered at the thought. “God, no.”

“Good. He was a slimy little douchebag. Who’s the guy you went to prom with? It’s not him, is it?”

“Tyler?” I asked, my face crinkling in disgust. “No, Emmett. Gross. It’s not anyone from high school. He’s . . . new.”

“College guy,” Emmett said, nodding in approval. “When do I get to meet him? Dad would’ve wanted me to vet him out, you know?”

Guilt settled over me. Emmett was genuinely happy for me. He wanted me to share this part of my life with him, but I could never admit the guy was Edward. For however long this went on between us, whatever it was, I would have to lie to my brother.

“I don’t know, Em. It’s kind of early. I’m not sure if I’m ready to bring him around yet.”

Emmett’s face fell, and I hated myself for it. “Well, I’m glad you’re putting yourself out there. You deserve someone good. But if he hurts you, I will kick his ass.”

I’d never been so thankful for long sleeves. “Thanks, Em.”

“Is he from around here? Maybe there’s a relocation in our future.”

“Don’t push it,” I warned. Before he could interrogate me further, I escaped to the bathroom.

I stood before the bathroom mirror, staring at myself in shock. The bright pink hickey covered much of my neck. As I ran my fingers over the mark, I wondered

how I was going to conceal it. Emmett had already seen it, so there was no sense in covering it while I was at home. But I had finals this week. It wasn't like I could skip them.

I retreated to my room and changed into real clothes. I tossed my sweats into the hamper, then began to strip my sheets. As I pulled off the comforter, Edward's scent hit me, causing me to pause. The sheets needed to be washed, but the thought of removing his scent from my bed caused my stomach to lurch. I had nothing else with his scent on it. If he didn't return, I'd never smell him again.

Collapsing onto the bed, I pulled the blankets around me, burying my nose in the fabric and wondering if it was too soon to open the window. I grabbed my phone from the nightstand to check the time. It wasn't even noon yet. Even if I had nothing to do today, Edward probably wouldn't even notice my window open this early.

An unread text message captured my attention. It came from a number I didn't recognize.

Unknown: You should tell him.

I frowned as I tried to decipher the message. My finger hovered over the spam button, but I hesitated. Could the text be from Edward? I glanced toward the window, as if I'd find the answer outside.

It shouldn't surprise me that Edward eavesdropped on our conversation, but did he honestly want me to tell Emmett about us? What would I even say? Emmett hated Edward. There was no way to spin the situation to make it look good.

I pushed that roadblock to the back of my mind. Right now, I had a beef with Edward.

Me: You're in trouble, mister.

I pressed send. A response came almost immediately.

Unknown: New phone who dis?

I smiled as I shook my head. I didn't know how Edward got my number, but I imagine he did some sleuthing while I was asleep. The thought of him sending me

a text from his stupid flip phone made me grin even wider. I saved him as a contact and continued my chores with a renewed fervor.

With my notes strewn before me, I sat at the kitchen table, chewing on the end of my pencil. I felt good about most of my courses. American literature was the only class that concerned me. There would be essay questions on the final, and I didn't know how well I could bullshit my way through them. Part of me wanted to throw in the towel and call Edward. Worst-case scenario, I bombed the test, and even then, I'd still pull a C in the course.

Emmett's truck barreled up the driveway, and I peered out the window as he unloaded flowers from the back. He'd spent all day cleaning out Mom's old flower garden. We'd let it become overrun with weeds over the past few summers. I wasn't sure why Emmett spruced it up now, but I was glad he did. Hopefully, he did it to remind us of Mom and not as a future selling point for the house.

It was strange to see a big burly dude on his knees digging in the earth. He handled the flowers carefully, gently extracting them from their starter pots before planting them into the ground. I considered offering him a hand, but he seemed content to do it by himself, and I didn't want to interrupt if he was using the time to think. Besides, Emmett never minded spending time alone.

I guess we were alike in that way.

He'd seemed happy today, grinning at me whenever we crossed paths, a sparkle in his eye. I could only assume it was because he thought I was in a relationship. Once again, I pushed away my guilt. Even though I hadn't outright lied to him, a lie by omission was still a lie.

I wished Emmett had someone special. Someone to love him despite his demons. Maybe even because of his demons. Someone to take care of him and keep him grounded. The handful of relationships he'd been in had been short and probably only physical. It made me sad for him. He deserved so much better.

When Emmett set the last plant in the ground, I joined him outside. The flowerbed was filled with a sea of colors, a rainbow of bolds and pastels. Mom would have been proud.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Thanks.”

Emmett crossed his arms, sighing as he turned his face toward the sky. We stood in amicable silence, awashed in the bright sunlight. For as much as I longed to revisit the past—to see our parents, to hug them and learn more about them, get answers to questions I never asked while they were still of this world—for the first time since they passed, I looked forward to the future.

The trip to the grocery store was tricky. I kept my hair over my shoulder and my head down, hoping I didn’t run into anyone I recognized. I breathed a sigh of relief when I made it to my car without having to socialize. When I got home, Emmett put away the groceries, and I folded the last load of laundry before turning in for the night, using the excuse of needing sleep before finals week.

I didn’t want to wear the same nightgown two nights in a row, so I opted for my standard bedtime uniform: a tank top and underwear. As I stripped down to shower, I did a double take in the mirror. A handful of bruises covered my hip. I turned and leaned in for a better look, spotting more on my shoulder. Though they were small, they were an angry purple. Between them, the bruises on my wrist, and the marks on my neck, my reflection was downright ghastly.

I recalled how Edward dug his fingers into my skin as he came. At the time, I registered pain, but I was too blissed out to care. Even now, the memory made my insides feel hot and mushy. I wanted to be upset with Edward for being careless, but all I could think about was how much I wanted to do it again.

Knowing each moment I delayed cut into my time with him, I hopped into the shower. Once I was clean and dry, I sent Edward a text telling him I was ready. By the time I wished Emmett one last goodnight, Edward was in my room, perched on the edge of my bed.

I stopped before him, just out of reach. Placing my hands on my hips, I stood up straight and squared my shoulders, putting my bruised body on full display. At least he had the decency to look contrite as his eyes scanned the damage.

“I will admit I got a bit carried away.”

“You think?”

Edward reached for me, and I stepped closer. He smoothed his palm over the bruises blooming across my hip. “I didn’t bite you.” He raised his eyes to my breasts and brushed his lips across my fabric-covered nipples. “You said if I didn’t bite you, you’d have sex with me again.”

“That’s not at all what I said.”

“Hmm.” Edward trailed his fingers over my thigh and slipped them between my legs. “You don’t want to have sex with me again?”

My knees went weak as he caressed me, and I brought my hands to his shoulders for support. “I didn’t say that either.”

With a smirk, he reached over and turned off my lamp.

In the morning, Edward was gone. I tried not to let it bother me as I got out of bed. He knew I had finals. Maybe he didn’t want to distract me this morning. Or maybe he needed to hunt again after last night.

I checked my body for new bruises, but there were no new marks. I lamented not having any high neck shirts as I stood in front of my open closet. Then I remembered a box of Mom’s old accessories stashed on the top shelf. I retrieved the box and dug through it, stumbling upon a scarf. It was sheer, neutral tones, and in some sort of animal print—not my style, but my options were limited.

I wrapped it around my neck, adjusting it to cover as much of the hickey as possible. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. I chose my outfit to match and stepped back from the mirror. It was retro, but cute.

As I expected, my American literature final was a nightmare. At least the test was Monday, and I didn’t have to suffer through the class for the rest of the week. I took my time writing the essays and was one of the last people to finish with only

minutes to spare. Once I submitted the test, I retreated to the hallway, where I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

“Bella?”

Hearing my name caused me to jump. I swung around, coming face to face with the boy who sat behind me all semester. He gave me an enormous smile, showing off beautiful white teeth that stood out against his naturally tanned skin.

“How do you think you did?” he asked.

“Not sure. If I bombed the test, I’ll still pass, so I’m trying not to stress about it. How about you?”

“Oh, I for sure bombed the entire class. I thought I’d do better considering all the Native American work we covered, but . . .” He shrugged, not upset by the wasted time and money over a failed course. “I’ll take a different class this summer so I don’t fall behind.”

“Why didn’t you drop before it counted against your GPA?”

He gave a sheepish shrug. “I guess I wasn’t ready to walk away.”

Edward’s comment ran through my mind, telling me the boy was going to fail even if I wasn’t distracting him.

“I’m sorry. I never caught your name,” I admitted.

“Jacob,” he said proudly, offering me his hand. I accepted it, and he dragged out the shake a little too long for my comfort. “So, hey. I was wondering if you wanted to hang out this summer. You know, when I’m not here making up classes.”

“Oh.” I failed to hide my surprise but quickly composed my face. Jacob laughed uncomfortably, but his smile never faltered. “I’m flattered, really I am. But I’m kind of . . .” I hesitated, not knowing how to explain my relationship status. “I’m dating somebody.”

“That’s cool,” he said, his gaze shifting to the floor. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

I didn’t know what else to say. If it weren’t for Edward, I would have said yes, but it wasn’t appropriate to tell him that. Fortunately, Jacob took the hint and turned away, waving as he went.

“Have a great summer, Bella. Maybe I’ll see you around in the fall.”

“Yeah, you too.”

When I settled into my car, I checked my phone, hoping for a new message from Edward, disappointed to find he hadn't reached out. I knew, rationally, that I could text him first, but it didn't feel right. I didn't want to intrude, and I didn't want to come across as needy.

A sense of dread pooled in my stomach. With my mind cleared of my course load for the day, I finally put a finger on what had been nagging me since waking up alone. I was waiting for Edward to disappear. Expecting it even. We'd spent two nights together. It was only a matter of time.

Emmett's truck was gone when I arrived home. He'd never told me his work schedule for the week, but I assumed he was at the hardware store. When I opened the front door, I stopped in my tracks. Edward's boots were on the rug. A sight that, only two short weeks ago, would have filled me with fear. Now it brought relief, followed by a nervous excitement. I turned the corner, spotting him sprawled on the couch. He sat up when he saw me and patted the spot next to him.

Dropping my backpack on the floor, I crossed the living room, tucking one leg beneath me as I sat facing him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"My TV is broken, remember?"

I threw a glance over my shoulder. I didn't recognize the show. It appeared to be some sort of high school drama with basketball and cheerleaders. Was Edward using me for my amenities after all? I didn't need more insecurities surrounding our relationship.

I turned back to him, my brain swimming through muddled doubts, trying to make sense of the situation—of the last few days. To my surprise, Edward was completely focused on me. Smiling.

"What?"

Edward pushed to his knees, crawling over me. My only option was to lie down as he settled on top of me, his weight causing me to sink into the cushions.

“So,” he said, his grin turning predatory. His golden eyes shone with mischief.
“We’re dating now?”

Heat which had nothing to do with the way he pressed himself between my legs crept up my body. “You heard that?” I choked out.

Sneaky, spying vampire.

“And here I thought you only wanted me for my body.” Edward brought one hand to the scarf on my neck. His fingers moved deftly, quickly untying it and exposing the marred skin beneath.

“I could say the same about you,” I challenged.

“That’s not all I want.”

Right. My blood. Too bad for him it wasn’t an option.

“So, what am I supposed to say next time someone asks me out?”

Edward’s eyes blazed. Though he kept the smile on his face, the strain behind it was evident. “Do you expect many more boys vying for your attention?”

“I’m not the mind reader.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance while taking a secret satisfaction from his obvious unease.

“I don’t care what you tell them.” Edward lowered his head and skimmed his nose along my neck. “As long as you make it clear you’re taken.”

Chapter Twenty

THE WEEK PASSED QUICKLY. Emmett worked opening shifts at the hardware store, so we spent time together in the evenings, eating dinner and watching television. Though he tried to hide it, Emmett was going stir crazy. The weather had been beautiful, but he refused to stray from the yard, opting to stay within the tree line.

On multiple occasions, I encouraged him to venture into the woods. No matter how many times I tried to reason that he was no safer at home, he dismissed my suggestion. It frustrated me to no end, especially knowing Edward wasn't a threat.

Emmett would view the situation differently if he knew Edward spent every night in the house, but he wasn't ready to hear that. Maybe he never would be.

He hinted at meeting my "boyfriend" daily. Each time, I made up a new excuse. The relationship was too new. He was busy. We really weren't that serious.

It never stopped him from trying.

On Friday, I left campus feeling lighter than I had in months. The semester was officially over. I had an entire summer to spend with Edward, and each day I felt more confident that he wouldn't disappear.

Emmett was already off work when I got home, and I waved to him as he mowed the lawn. Once inside, I tossed my backpack on the floor and grabbed a granola bar

before heading to my room to change. I opened the door, coming face-to-face with Edward. His presence startled me, and I jumped, flinging the granola bar from my hand. Edward snatched it out of midair.

“What are you doing here?”

“Now that you’re done with school, I have every intention of monopolizing your time.”

“Emmett’s home. I can’t just sit in my room all night. He’ll know something’s up.”

“Then let’s go to my place.”

I wasn’t sure how to leave without Emmett interrogating me. I contemplated sneaking out, but that wouldn’t bode well if he thought a nefarious fate befell me. Knowing Emmett, he would jump to that conclusion first.

“Unless you’d like to officially introduce us,” Edward suggested.

“Absolutely not.”

“He wants to meet me. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is you’re you.”

“You can’t keep me your dirty little secret forever.”

Once again, I couldn’t tell if he was serious. So far, Edward hadn’t struck me as the type who cared about proper introductions. He was good at being sneaky. Sneaky suited him.

I hadn’t noticed my teeth pressing into my bottom lip until Edward ran his finger across it.

“Remember what I said about springing a leak?”

I released my lip, and Edward dropped his hand.

“What should I tell him?”

“Tell him you’re going to the library to study. It worked last time.”

I rolled my eyes. Edward knew damned well Emmett figured out it was an excuse, and there was no reason for me to study until fall.

“Do you remember the mile marker?” he asked. I nodded. “Meet me there.” Without another word, he jumped gracefully out of the window.

I waved down Emmett. He shut off the lawnmower before wiping his forehead with a rag.

“What’s up, Bella?”

“I’m going to head out for a bit.”

“Will you be back for dinner?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay, see you later. Oh!” he said, realization dawning on him. “Celebrating the end of the semester with a certain someone?”

“Maybe,” I said, unable to keep the stupid grin from my face.

“Is he picking you up?” Emmett craned his neck, as if he’d be able to see the driveway from the backyard.

“No, I’m meeting him in town.” The lie rolled off my tongue, and guilt nagged at the back of my mind.

“You know I’m cool with you bringing him here, right? If you’re embarrassed by me, I can just, I don’t know, hang out in the garage or something.”

“Emmett—” I closed the space between us and gave him a hug, not caring that he was sweaty and covered in grass clippings. “You’re not an embarrassment. It has nothing to do with you, I promise. I don’t know where this is going yet, and I don’t want to make a bigger deal out of it than it is.”

“Alright.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. I wasn’t sure how long I could keep Emmett placated with excuses. “Be safe. I’ll see you later.”

Though I couldn’t remember the exact mile marker, I recognized the gravel patch as I neared it. I pulled off the road, spotting Edward standing in the trees. He looked out of place, wearing sunglasses and a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head. He shoved his hands into his pockets and lowered his head as he approached the car. I was so shocked by his appearance that I didn’t even consider getting out until he opened my door.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I scrambled across the console and into the passenger’s seat.

Edward didn’t bother checking for other cars as he pulled onto the road. He clearly placed a lot of trust in his other senses.

I tried to get a better look at him as we zipped down the highway, but he kept his face diverted.

“Why do you look like you just murdered someone?” I asked. He shot me a crooked smile but didn’t explain himself. The sunglasses completely hid his eyes, and if I didn’t know him as well, his reaction would have unnerved me. “Try to keep it under the speed limit this time, will you?”

The drive took longer when Edward didn’t excessively speed. Once he turned onto the private drive and we were out of view of the road, he put the car in park. “It’ll be easier to go on foot from here.”

If my memory served me correctly, we drove much farther last time, through overgrown and uneven terrain. “If you make me walk the rest of the way, I *will* spring a leak.”

“You don’t have to walk.” He shoved my keys into his pocket before getting out of the car.

Panic filled my chest. Rationally, I knew Edward wouldn’t leave me here alone, but my adventure in the woods had left me scarred. I hopped out of the car. “I’m serious. I’m not walking the rest of the way.”

Edward rounded the vehicle. He stopped in front of me before turning around and sinking to one knee. “Climb on, little coward.”

“You’re kidding.”

“What’s the problem? It’s not like you haven’t wrapped your legs around me before.”

I sighed and climbed onto Edward’s back. He stood, adjusting me higher, and I hugged his chest.

“Hold on tight.”

Edward took off, running faster than humanly possible. The trees whizzed by in a blur, causing my head to spin, yet when I closed my eyes, it felt like we were at

a standstill. If it weren't for the wind on my face, I'd have no idea we were moving at all.

I squinted as we emerged from the shadow of the trees and crossed the clearing surrounding the cabin. As the sun heated my exposed skin, it hit me.

"You're trying to stay out of the sun."

"Can't get anything by you," he called over his shoulder.

The prospect of seeing him in the sunlight made me anxious, but I wanted to know what he looked like. I needed to know. If he turned into some sort of demonic creature, I could get past that, but I didn't want to be taken by surprise. Him not wanting me to see him didn't bode well.

Edward paused before the front door and released his hold on my legs. I slid to my feet.

"Let me see you."

"No."

He left no room for argument as he opened the door and disappeared inside. Once he was shrouded in shadows, he turned to face me. I lunged for him, grabbing him by the wrist and tugging, but his arm remained immovable at his side.

"Why not?"

"It's embarrassing."

His response surprised me. I didn't think he was capable of embarrassment.

"Embarrassing? I thought you said it was terrifying."

"It's both."

"What are you so worried about? Is hiding it from me worth the effort?" I gestured to his overdressed body. "You look ridiculous, by the way."

"If you think this looks ridiculous, just wait."

Edward ripped the sunglasses from his face and flung them onto the counter, sending them clattering across the surface. His eyes appeared darker than they'd been the past few days, closer to deep amber than honey. With one hand, he grabbed the fabric of his hoodie and pulled it over his head before tossing it aside. He moved toward me in long strides, forcing me to back out of the door.

Edward paused in the threshold, and I waited with bated breath.

"Don't scream."

My heart beat faster at his ominous warning, the one he'd given me so many times, but he had yet to give me a reason to scream. I realized then—it had never been a warning.

It was his way of asking me to trust him.

Edward took one last step, placing himself in the sunlight.

At first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I expected something horrifying, so it took me a moment to process the vision before me. I blinked to clear the haze covering my eyes. Then everything came into perfect focus.

Edward's exposed skin glittered like sunlight glinting across a body of water. I reached out and trailed one finger down his arm. It didn't feel any different. Taking his hand in mine, I pulled his arm closer for a better look. Tiny flecks of metal appeared to be embedded in his flesh, creating a faint holographic rainbow where the sun shined directly on him.

I tore my eyes from his arm to look at his face. The whimsical sparkles dancing across his skin contrasted with the sharp planes of his cheeks and jaw. He stared back at me intently, his mouth set in a grim line. Though his arm seemed relaxed as I held onto it, tension radiated from the rest of his body.

"Is this it?" I asked.

Edward cocked a brow. "Is this not bad enough?"

Bad? Nothing about his appearance looked bad. As if he needed another way to mesmerize me.

"You're beautiful."

"Beautiful?" Edward scoffed. "I am the world's most dangerous predator. A perfect killing machine. And this is my weakness?" He extended his arms, sending sun glitter rippling across his skin. "I have to stay out of the sun, not because it harms me, but because it makes me *sparkle*." He spat the word, and I fought to keep from smiling. There was something endearing about his obvious distaste for the phenomenon.

I shrugged as I took both his hands in mine. "It could be worse."

"How? What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Something gruesome. Horns? Hooves?"

"Hooves," he repeated.

“You said it was terrifying!”

“It is terrifying,” he mumbled. “Emasculating.”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s not an emasculate bone in your body.”

Edward tugged on my hands. A grin spread across his face as he backed into the cabin, pulling me with him. “Come inside. I’ll show you a masculine bone.”

All I could do was roll my eyes as I followed him inside.

At first glance, the murder shack appeared the same. Then the collection of items on the counter captured my attention. Bottled water, toilet paper, a pile of snacks—it appeared Edward had gone shopping.

“Did you rob a convenience store in that getup?”

Edward shot me an irritated look, one I was recognizing as a facade. “Forgive me for being thoughtful.”

“Thank you,” I said, not wanting to appear ungrateful. “I appreciate it.”

“Well . . .” Edward stepped behind me and placed his hands on my hips. “My motivation wasn’t completely selfless.”

“Oh?” I turned to face him. “And what was your motivation?”

“To get you to stay.” Edward slid his hands to my lower back and pulled me against him. His touch lit my entire body on fire. I hoped it would never change. “We have more freedom here. Fewer distractions.”

I found myself trapped in his smoldering gaze. At that moment, I knew I was in trouble. The more time Edward and I spent together, the more I wanted to be with him. I didn’t think I’d ever get enough.

Edward was like a drug, and I was already an addict. The thought alarmed me.

He was a vampire. He’d lived multiple lifetimes before me and would live multiple more once I was gone. As much as that realization hurt, the thought of him abandoning me was more painful. Even if he never wanted to leave, there was no way we could stay together. Eventually my secret would come out, and I would have to choose. Emmett was my brother. He would always come first.

I diverted my eyes, but it did little to break the spell Edward put me under. As I looked anywhere but his face, my eyes wandered to the back room. The door was open, revealing a bed. I pushed away from Edward and made my way to the

doorway for a closer look. He followed me, wrapping his arms around my waist and holding me close.

“You bought a bed?”

Edward brushed his lips against my ear. “Purely selfish reasons.”

“How did you pay for it if you don’t have a job?”

“I wore my ridiculous getup and stole it.”

I squirmed out of his arms and sat on the bed. It was a queen size, and it filled most of the room. Edward sat down next to me.

“I have money, Bella.”

“But you don’t work.”

“I played my part for years.”

“So it’s family money?” I guessed.

Edward let out a long sigh. “You really know how to kill the mood. You know that, right?”

If I’d learned anything so far, it was that Edward didn’t volunteer information. If I wanted him to talk, I needed to press him. “I want to know more about you,” I confessed. “Tell me about your life. What did you do before you came here?”

With a huff, Edward flopped back on the bed. He wove his fingers together and placed his hands behind his head. I repositioned myself to face him and sat cross-legged, knowing if I lay down next to him, we wouldn’t be talking for long. After a few moments passed and he didn’t speak, I prompted him with a less personal question.

“You mentioned Carlisle is a doctor. What about everyone else? He can’t be the only one who works.”

“Carlisle has worked as a doctor since before I knew him, aside from a few brief hiatuses after he turned everyone. It’s his passion. He would probably do it for free if it were feasible. Esme is an architect and owns a remodeling company, but for the past five years she took a break to be a substitute elementary school teacher.”

“Um . . .” I interrupted as I gathered my thoughts. A vampire near children was more than a bit unsettling. “How does that work? Aren’t little kids susceptible to skinned knees and bloody noses?”

“She takes precautions, including a documented phobia of blood. If she runs away from a bleeding child, no one will question it. She also claims to have a sun allergy. It’s her excuse to decline jobs on sunny days, and if the weather turns nice unexpectedly, no one looks twice at her gloves and umbrella.”

After seeing Edward’s skin in the sun, I understood the difficulty of navigating the outside world during the day. It would make any job hard, especially during the long summer days.

“As for the other lucky bastards.” Edward chuckled, giving me the impression they were anything but lucky. “They’re all younger than me, in human years anyway. They’re stuck in high school.” He laughed again, and I got the feeling he took pleasure in their plight.

“Sounds terrible.”

“It’s not as bad as you may think. They’ve learned all there is to know. It would be like you going back to kindergarten. And they don’t associate with anyone else, so there’s no drama. It’s something to do. They don’t look old enough to pull off a career. I suppose they could get entry-level jobs, but again, the sun poses a problem. You can’t keep a job if you don’t show up.”

That was a struggle Emmett knew all too well. So far, he had a good run at the hardware store. Hopefully he could keep it up. Now that Edward was in my life, I didn’t want to get a summer job, but one more bout of unemployment on Emmett’s part, and I would have to help pay the bills. Our only saving grace was the house being paid off thanks to our parents’ life insurance policies.

“What about you? How did you stay busy?”

Edward pursed his lips as he stared at the ceiling. I waited patiently, giving him a chance to open up. He hadn’t shut down on me yet, but I didn’t want to risk pushing him that far.

“I never quite fit in anywhere,” he said at last. “I’m too old to pass as a high school student, though I enrolled as a senior on a couple of occasions, just so I wouldn’t be completely separated from the others. I have several bachelor’s degrees that I will never use. Carlisle had encouraged me to learn, to find a new passion, but I don’t want to be around large groups of people. Eventually he came to understand and stopped pressuring me. For the past few decades, I’ve been

helping Esme remodel houses. The two of us can get it done faster than an entire crew of humans, especially if no one is there to witness it. And if we need to be in the sun, gloves, long sleeves, and a hard hat don't look out of place."

"I can't picture you in safety green."

Edward tilted his head toward me and smiled. "Why not?"

I shrugged. "You don't seem like the physical labor type."

"What do I look like? Some sort of office schmuck?"

"No," I said with a laugh. "Definitely not. It surprised me you even knew how to text."

"Why?"

"Because you're like a hundred years old."

"One hundred twenty-four."

"My point exactly."

"I've *lived* one hundred twenty-four years. Keep in mind I've been twenty-two for most of it."

"Hmm . . . I'm not sure that's how it works," I challenged.

"I regret my decision to bring you here," Edward said. "It was much less stressful sneaking into your room under the cover of darkness, and it was acceptable to shush you."

I shivered as I recalled how Edward covered my mouth with his hand last night, whispering in my ear to hush.

"Whatever." I tugged his arm from behind his head and took his hand. To my delight, he didn't resist when I threaded our fingers together.

"Enough about me," he said. "What are your hopes and dreams?"

I shifted uncomfortably. I didn't enjoy talking about myself, but Edward had answered my questions. It was only fair that I reciprocated.

"I haven't really thought much about it. I suppose you could say I've been avoiding it. Our lives got so derailed after our parents died. Emmett took care of me; he still does. But I take care of him too. He's good most of the time, but sometimes he gets these crazy ideas, like—" I waved my hands in the air, searching for a good example.

“Like capturing a vampire?” Edward’s voice was light, and I laughed under my breath. He was good at breaking the tension.

“Yes, like capturing a vampire. I do what I can to talk him down. Sometimes I just reason with him, to make him think about what he’s doing. Make him eat and sleep and go to work. Other times I ride it out with him until he comes to his senses. Sometimes I stand up to him, like with you, at the end.”

I didn’t want to think about how this whole pet vampire debacle would have ended if it were just the two of them. Knowing Emmett, he probably would have burned down the house.

“I know I’m not stuck here. I know I can leave. But I can’t bear the thought of Emmett being here alone. Sometimes I wish he would find someone. Then I would be free to go without guilt. That probably sounds bad.”

“Not at all.” There was no judgment in Edward’s voice. To my surprise, he seemed understanding.

“The only concrete plans I have are to finish my generals next year. Beyond that, I don’t know. I always assumed I’d transfer to U-Dub, but who knows?” I shrugged. “A lot can happen in a year, right?” My heart clenched at the thought of where I’d be a year from now. Where Edward would be. “I suppose you’re going to tell me life’s too short to stay here and look after my brother.”

Edward smiled and shook his head. “If you want a lesson on life being too short, you’re talking to the wrong person.”

“I suppose you’re right. Besides, it took you, what, ninety-seven years to leave your family?”

“Something like that.” His tone was terse, but once again, a smile threatened at the corners of his lips.

“Do you ever wish you’d left sooner?” I asked.

A frown marred his beautiful face, and he wiped his free hand across his mouth as he returned his gaze to the ceiling. I wasn’t sure why he stayed with Carlisle for as long as he did, but I wondered if he regretted waiting so long. I didn’t want to regret staying with Emmett.

I also didn’t want to regret leaving him.

“I used to. When I first left, I felt liberated. Free. I had no one to answer to. No one to *listen* to.” Edward sat up before pushing me down onto the bed and crawling on top of me. I spread my legs, allowing him to settle between them. I loved the feeling of his body against mine, of his weight pressing me into the mattress. “But if I’d left earlier, I never would have discovered the murder shack, and then who would keep me warm?” He moved his hand between my legs. “Who would tease me?”

“I’ve never teased you.”

“Haven’t you?”

I put on my best innocent face and drew an invisible halo over my head.

Edward raised his brows. “You’re no angel.”

“I’ve given you everything you wanted.”

“Have you?”

“Except my blood.” It was the one thing he couldn’t have.

“I can live without your blood, as long as you give me everything else.” Edward popped open the button of my jeans. “Right now, I want this.”

Chapter Twenty One

JUST LIKE THE PAST FIVE MORNINGS, I woke up pressed against Edward, despite the larger bed giving us more space to spread out. My face was buried in his neck, my head cradled beneath his chin. His arms were wrapped around me lazily, as if he'd fallen asleep in the position.

I inhaled, breathing in his familiar scent.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning."

I rolled over and felt around the bed for my phone. Edward groaned as he pulled me closer.

"It's dead." I turned to look at him over my shoulder. "I should probably go home. Emmett will be worried."

"You can use my phone. The battery lasts for days."

I considered it for a moment but decided it would be better if Emmett didn't have a direct line of communication with Edward.

"Thanks, but there are some human things I need. Like my toothbrush. And a shower." A proper bathroom sounded divine after a night peeing in the woods.

Edward tightened his hold. His lips traced the shell of my ear. “But I like my scent all over you.”

A shiver ran down my spine as his hand moved lower. If I didn’t act now, we would be here all morning. I squirmed out of his arms. He released me with a sigh. As I slipped out of bed, the sheet fell away, exposing me in all my naked glory. I bent to pick up my clothes scattered across the floor.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he grumbled.

I couldn’t help my smile. “Because I’m a tease.”

Edward drove us back to the house. He stopped at the end of the driveway.

“Emmett’s awake.”

We exited the car, and I moved to the driver’s side. Edward leaned in to kiss me. I wrapped one arm around his shoulder, the other gripping the back of his neck, pulling him closer. His hands came to my hips, and he pushed me against the car as he deepened the kiss. I gasped as he thrust his hips against me. I didn’t want to say goodbye.

Edward broke away from my lips and kissed a trail down my neck. When he sucked against my skin, I swatted him away.

“Don’t you dare!” The hickey on my neck was just about gone. I didn’t want another one. Edward chuckled before releasing me. “Meet me inside?”

He nodded and kissed my forehead before disappearing into the woods.

When I entered the house, Emmett was in the kitchen. His concerned expression turned to relief when he saw me.

“Bella. Thank god you’re okay! My calls kept going to voicemail.”

“Sorry, Em. My phone died, and I must have dozed off.”

“Look, I know you’re an adult and can do what you want, but will you at least tell me if you aren’t coming home? I was really worried.”

Once again, I felt guilty for not being open with Emmett. It was probably still better for him to worry about where I was than to know I was with Edward.

“I’ll be better next time,” I promised.

Emmett nodded. I hoped that was the extent of the conversation.

“There’s coffee in the pot. I was just about to make toast.”

“I’ll make you breakfast,” I offered. If anything could smooth this over, it was food. “Just give me a minute.”

I ducked into my bedroom. Edward stood from the bed.

“Breakfast again?” he asked.

“It’s my way of apologizing.” I plugged in my phone and gathered a change of clothes. “I think he’s working today. I’m going to hang out with him for a bit. Don’t go anywhere.”

Edward cocked a brow.

“I mean it. Stay here.”

“You’re trying to make me *your* pet now?” His voice was laced with bitterness.

I turned to him and put my free hand on my hip. “We all know you faked it. Stop playing the victim.”

Edward cracked a smile. “You can lock me in the basement if you’d like. I’ll stay there forever.” My heart fluttered at the thought of him staying with me forever. His eyes flickered to my chest, and I wondered if he could hear it. “Just know I have certain . . . needs.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sit,” I demanded, pointing at the bed. Edward complied. “Stay.”

I closed the door behind me and slipped into the bathroom for a human moment before joining Emmett in the kitchen.

“What did you do last night?” I asked as I gathered ingredients for omelets. Emmett’s love for eggs was second only to Mom’s pancakes.

“Met up with some guys at the bar. Got home pretty late. If I’d known you weren’t home, I would have checked up on you sooner.” He said it apologetically, as though he was blaming himself for whatever he thought happened to me. It didn’t make me feel any better about myself.

“Are you working today?”

“Yeah. I was supposed to close, but I got someone to trade shifts with me. The bar is having a karaoke night. I don’t want to show up late and have to catch up to

everyone. Besides, who wants to sing sober?” Emmett laughed as he shook his head. “Not me.”

I was relieved to hear Emmett would be gone for the rest of the day, which also fueled my guilt. I’d never been excited for him to be out of the house before. It was a strange feeling. I pushed it from my mind, along with the nagging warning that he’d been spending a lot of time at the bar over the past month. It couldn’t be a coincidence that he started drinking more ever since he stopped going into the woods.

“You know, if you’re gonna be spending the night with this guy, I really think I should meet him.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as I stood over the stove, spatula in hand. I’d hoped we were done with this topic for the day.

“At least let me instill the fear of god in him like Dad would have done. If I can’t impress this guy with my smarts, at least let me intimidate the fuck out of him with my size.”

I let out a small laugh as I imagined Edward’s reaction to his comment. Emmett’s size would intimidate anyone else I dated, especially if he kept a straight face while meeting them. If they didn’t know him, they’d never guess there was a big softy under his beefy exterior.

I envisioned Emmett giving Edward a thinly veiled threat about what would happen if he hurt me. It brought a smile to my face, but it didn’t last long. It was a conversation that would never happen.

Emmett brushed the hair away from my neck, pulling me from my thoughts. I jumped as I swirled to face him.

“What? I was just doing a neck check.” His goofy grin was back, and I could hardly fault him for trying to break the tension in the room.

I slapped him with the spatula, leaving a buttery stain on his shirt. “Do you want breakfast? Because I can eat this omelet and be done.”

Emmett raised his hands in the air as he backed toward the table. “Okay, okay. No more neck checks.”

Once the first omelet finished cooking, I plated it and placed it in front of Emmett.

“It’s supposed to be a warm night. Maybe you should go camping instead of karaoke.” I stole a glance at him as I cracked an egg. Emmett’s eyes went wide as he rushed to chew his bite, most likely to make a rebuttal. “There’s not an invisible force field around the house keeping Edward away. If he hasn’t retaliated yet, he’s not going to.”

“We’ve talked about this.”

“I know. I just thought—”

“I’m not camping anymore.” Emmett’s tone left no room for argument. “Not while that killer is out there.”

“I’m worried about him,” I confessed, watching through the bay window as Emmett backed out of the driveway. Edward stepped behind me. He wrapped his arms around my chest and hugged me against him, and I closed my eyes, basking in his comfort. “I just wish he’d do the things he loves. He hasn’t left the yard in a month. If you wanted to retaliate, you could have. You would have. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

Edward placed a kiss behind my ear as he sighed. His cool breath sent goose bumps across my skin. “You could introduce us,” he murmured against my neck. “Perhaps he would accept a peace offering. Does he like venison?”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m being serious.”

A peace offering wouldn’t solve anything. Somehow, I had to prove that Edward didn’t kill our parents and wouldn’t hurt us.

“Maybe he’s not afraid of me,” he said.

I glanced at Edward over my shoulder before following his gaze to the tree line. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe he’s afraid of other vampires.”

Edward released me as I turned to face him.

“Do you know something I don’t? What is he thinking?”

“Emmett is difficult for me to read. It’s more of an educated guess than anything else.”

“Based on what?”

“Emmett has never had a problem being near me. Carmen and Eleazar gave him quite a scare, though. It’s possible he wants to avoid running into more of my kind.”

On some level, Emmett had to know Edward wasn’t a threat. Not after five years together. Not after Edward pretended to be trapped in a cage that couldn’t hold him. But facing other vampires? That was some scary shit.

“Let’s say you’re right. Why would he think he’s safer at home?”

“Tell me, Bella. Are you afraid of anything in the woods?”

“Bears,” I said without hesitation. I’d spent years believing one killed our parents.

“Are you afraid of bears when you go into the yard?”

“No, I guess not.” Bears had come into the yard before, but I was never worried that one would take me out on the way to my car. And so far, a bear hadn’t broken into the house. “But bears aren’t vampires.”

“Again, it’s just a theory.”

It made sense, but I wasn’t convinced. I stepped away from Edward and settled on the couch. He followed, taking a seat on the opposite end.

“You said Emmett is difficult to read. Difficult how?”

“His mind is different. It’s mostly closed off to me. Not completely silent like yours. I get the gist of what he’s thinking based on images, but I don’t pick up words in his head, per se, unless it’s something he’s really focused on. The best way I can describe it is watching a movie with poor reception and no sound while trying to read lips.”

“Do you hear words in other people’s minds?”

“Words and images, mostly, but they don’t always make sense. Some people think more clearly than others, but it varies depending on how present the person is, anywhere from single disjointed words to full sentences.”

I stared out the bay window, watching the trees sway in the wind, thankful once again that my thoughts remained private. It was too bad Edward couldn’t hear

what Emmett was specifically thinking. It would make the situation so much easier. Then again, I wouldn't wish that on either of them.

"You've never run into others like us?" I asked.

"Never."

"Do you think it's genetic?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edward shrug. "It's possible."

"I wonder if our parents were like us."

"No, their thoughts were normal."

It took only a moment for his words to register.

My stomach dropped. I tried to draw in a breath, but it was as though all the oxygen had been sucked from the room.

Edward had heard my parents' thoughts.

Edward had known my parents.

I turned to look at him, expecting to see his face composed, devoid of emotion. Either that or his signature smirk. What I saw was worse.

Edward's wide eyes radiated unease. He hadn't meant to say it. He knew he'd slipped up.

Ice filled the hollow pit left behind by my stomach. The only sound in my head was the pounding of my heart. I stood from the couch. My legs felt like lead as I took a step back.

"What do you mean, their thoughts were normal?" For how much my body shook, the strength in my voice surprised me.

Edward parted his lips, but no sound came out. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and then all traces of emotion disappeared. He stood from the couch and stepped toward me. My imagination conjured unwanted images of him stalking our parents. Killing them.

I took another step back.

"Tell me how you know about my parents."

I felt my panic rising with each silent moment that passed between us. He couldn't have done it. He'd told me he'd never killed a human. I'd asked him straight up if he killed our parents, and he'd said no. There was no room for misinterpretation in one word.

“Edward?”

Edward took another step. I moved with him, cursing the room for being so tiny when the backs of my knees hit the chair.

“Tell me,” I demanded again.

He held up his hands, palms out. For the briefest moment, I thought I saw fear flash in his eyes.

“I was there.”

My mind raced to make sense of his words. There *where*? When? He could only mean one thing.

“You mean when they were murdered,” I said. Edward cringed. “I know a vampire killed them.” He didn’t disagree, which was all the confirmation I needed. Traitorous tears threatened to fall, but I maintained my composure. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Of course it matters.”

“It has nothing to do with us.”

“It has everything to do with us!” Despite my best efforts, a tear slipped down my cheek. Edward had known what happened to my parents all along. He witnessed it with his own eyes, maybe even played a part, and he never thought it was worth mentioning. I tried to recall our interactions, searching for an ulterior motive, but it was impossible to sift through my muddled thoughts. “I trusted you.”

Edward’s face darkened. “I’ve never lied to you,” he said through clenched teeth. “You asked me if I killed them. I didn’t.”

“You should have told me you were there.”

“That’s not what you asked!”

Edward’s tone caused me to flinch. He’d never raised his voice at me before. It made me wonder how well I really knew him. If he could lie to me about this, what else was he hiding?

“Lying by omission isn’t exactly being honest, Edward.”

“Like how you’re being honest with your brother?”

His words stung so badly, he might as well have slapped me across the face. I knew he was right. My reasons for keeping my relationship with him a secret didn’t

matter. Emmett would view it as a betrayal. Even if I had a valid argument, it would never get past the lump in my throat.

Not wanting to cry in front of Edward, I fled the living room. He reached for me as I passed, but I sidestepped, avoiding his outstretched arm. Once in the safety of my bedroom, I slammed the door with all my strength. I collapsed on my bed, barely stifling my first sob with a pillow.

I was furious with him for lying to me. Furious and hurt. At the same time, I was afraid of what he knew, what he might have done. I'd wanted answers, but the thought of Edward somehow being involved in my parents' deaths made me sick to my stomach.

I was afraid to press him. I didn't know if I could trust him to be honest, or if he even wanted to be. Maybe he would rather leave than keep up the charade. It wasn't like I hadn't been expecting him to disappear.

The thought of Edward leaving was enough to turn my anger into sorrow, and I was overcome with a fresh round of tears. I didn't want to fight with him. I didn't want whatever we had to end.

The bedroom door creaked open. I squeezed my eyes against the tears that were falling and hugged the pillow tighter to my face. Edward's soft footsteps crossed the room, coming to a stop next to my bed.

"I'm not leaving. Not unless you tell me to." The bed dipped under his weight as he sat. "Maybe not even then."

"I don't want you to leave," I admitted.

"I didn't tell you, because I didn't think you'd want to know."

Taking a deep breath, I pushed my fears aside. Maybe I didn't want to know. Maybe he would lie anyway. But I couldn't live the rest of my life wondering. I needed closure.

"Did you contribute to my parents' deaths? Don't lie."

Edward remained silent. My stomach twisted into knots as I waited. At last, he let out a long sigh. "No."

"Why did it take you so long to answer?"

The mattress moved as he shifted his weight. "I suppose it was my fault that it was them, specifically," he said slowly, deliberately. "But no. I didn't contribute."

“Who killed them, then?”

“There was a couple passing through town at the same time as me. They were curious about my lifestyle. At least, the female was. I brought them with me to hunt. The deer didn’t go over well. On our way out, we crossed paths with your parents.”

Edward spoke barely above a whisper. I heard the remorse in his voice. Still, knowing he was there offered me little comfort.

“Why didn’t you stop them?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Did you even try?”

“What would you have me do? Start a fight two to one that I probably wouldn’t win? I can’t change how other vampires live their lives. If it weren’t your parents, it would have been someone else. It’s not my job to protect humans from my kind.”

Deep down, I understood, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept that he stood by and watched my parents die. It was hard not to let my emotions cloud my judgment of him.

“What about me and Emmett? Would you protect us?”

“I did.”

Edward had busted out of the cage and put himself between me and the other vampires when they’d stormed the house. He’d pleaded for them not to hurt Emmett while keeping me tucked safely behind his body. But ultimately, their concern had been for Edward. He’d diffused the situation before it went too far.

“You didn’t have to fight them.”

“I would have.”

There was no hesitation in his answer. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe, after everything, we were worth fighting for.

“Did they suffer?” The words barely made it out of my mouth before I choked back another sob.

“No.”

“Were they scared? Did they think about us?”

Edward sighed. “Bella—”

“I want to know. Please.”

“There wasn’t much time for them to process what was happening. By the time they registered fear, it was over. They didn’t think about you. I’m sorry if that’s not what you wanted to hear.”

I shook my head. Knowing they didn’t spend their last moments in fear or pain made my heart a bit lighter. “I’m glad they didn’t suffer.”

“After the others left, I arranged their bodies. I knew it was risky, that it might raise suspicion, but I couldn’t leave them crumpled on the ground. A few days later, I returned. I wanted to make sure someone had discovered them. It was the first time I saw Emmett. I’d never even considered if they had children. That was when I decided to stay. I knew my scent would ward off any more nomads passing through.”

I rolled over and allowed myself to look at Edward. He sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from me, elbows propped on his knees. His gaze remained fixed on the floor as I pushed myself into a seated position and scooted closer.

“You stayed to protect Emmett?”

“I stayed out of guilt.”

I touched Edward’s forearm. He tensed before glancing at my hand.

“Either way, you kept us safe for five years.”

Edward’s eyes flitted to mine as his lips curved into a smirk. “Well, what really sold me on the area was the murder shack. You were just a bonus.”

I made a dramatic show of rolling my eyes. “Did you know about me?”

“Not until Emmett brought me to the house. Like I said before, I’d never smelled you in the woods. He thought of you sometimes, but I didn’t know who you were or that you lived with him.” Edward flipped his palm up, and I slipped my hand into his. “His mind doesn’t do you justice.”

I looked away, feeling my face redden. Edward squeezed my hand. When I looked at him again, his expression had turned serious.

“I wasn’t trying to deceive you.”

So far, he’d given me no reason to doubt him. While it upset me that he wasn’t forthcoming about my parents, I didn’t hold him responsible for their deaths.

“Just be honest with me, okay?”

“Anything you want,” he said. “All you have to do is ask.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

EDWARD DIDN'T SPEND THE NIGHT.

It was probably for the best. I needed time to process everything he'd told me, and I couldn't do that with him distracting me. Things had been strained after his confession, and the harder I tried to act normal, the weirder it felt.

Still, as I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, I wished he were here. The room was too quiet, too dark. My twin bed felt too big without him.

I squeezed my eyes closed, blocking out the shadows that danced in the moonlight, telling myself there was nothing lurking in the corners. I hadn't felt this unsettled since Edward was first on the loose. Only now, I wasn't afraid of him.

I was afraid of losing him.

Emmett stumbled into the house a little after two in the morning. I heard a beer can open, followed by the sound of him rummaging through the pantry. Tomorrow he would be crabby and hungover. It was time to have a serious conversation about his drinking. At the very least, he had to stop driving home from the bar.

I wasn't sure which felt more daunting: addressing his drinking or telling him about Edward.

Try as I might, I couldn't sleep, plagued by thoughts of Emmett's path of self-destruction and my parents and their untimely deaths. Mostly, I thought about my relationship with Edward. I didn't know why, but I couldn't shake the feeling that our time together was running out.

As the room lightened with the morning sun, I finally succumbed to sleep.

I awoke to cold kisses on my neck. Edward lay curled behind me, his arm holding us close. My eyelids felt heavy as I blinked against the light, and I groaned as I rolled to face him, burying my face in his bare chest.

"Humans," he said. "Are you going to sleep all day?"

"What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"It's not even that late," I mumbled.

"It's late for you."

"I was up until dawn."

"Doing what?"

I didn't want to relive all my fears and insecurities from last night, so instead, I decided on a partial truth. "Thinking about you."

"Well, that makes two of us."

Edward's words melted away some of my apprehension. When his lips returned to my neck, I relaxed, letting all the tension seep from my body. Being with him felt right. Perfect, even. I couldn't imagine being with anyone else. I didn't want anyone else.

Maybe Edward and I could have a future together. If he even wanted that with me. Emmett would come to accept him. He had to. I just needed to warm him up to the idea. If I had enough time and we took things slow, maybe he'd come around.

Edward kissed a path across my shoulder, nudging the blanket out of the way as he went. The cool air sent a chill across my dampened skin, but his hand, warm from being beneath the covers, smoothed away the goose bumps. He pulled my

tank top over my head before flinging it across the room, leaving me feeling exposed in the morning light.

“My door is unlocked.” I tried to get up, but Edward pushed me back onto the bed.

“Leave it. Your brother is dead to the world.”

Edward kissed me. His tongue flicked against mine, leaving a hot tingle and the taste of bittersweet cherries in its wake. He worked his way down my neck and over my chest, sucking and toying with my nipples. I shifted my hips, seeking some sort of friction, but he was too far away.

When I trailed my fingers across his side, Edward tensed. He grabbed my hand but made no move to push it away.

“Why do you do that?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Flinch every time I touch you.”

Edward released his hold, leaving my hand where it rested against him. “I’m not used to being touched.” He propped himself up on both arms, hovering above me. “And you have a way of surprising me. It triggers my instincts.”

“Does it feel good?”

“It feels amazing.”

I slid my hand between us and flattened it against his abs. “What about touching you here?” I asked, nudging the waistband of his underwear with my fingertips. “Is that still off limits?” When Edward didn’t respond, I reached lower, gripping him through the fabric. His breath stuttered, but he didn’t stop me.

I stroked him, keeping the pressure light. Edward’s jaw tensed, and he closed his eyes. Then he stopped breathing. I didn’t know what was too much for him, but I trusted him to tell me if I pushed him too far.

Edward hissed as I slipped my hand inside his underwear and touched his silky-smooth skin. His arms shook slightly, and I smiled, thrilled that my touch had this strong of an effect on him. After a few more strokes, he grabbed my hand again, stilling it.

“Too excited?” I asked. It was impossible to keep the satisfaction out of my voice.

Edward glared at me through half-closed eyes. “You won’t be so smug if I lose control.”

“I already told you. If you bite me, I’m never having sex with you again.”

Edward’s low growl vibrated through the bed, but his crooked half smile was playful. I tried to remove my hand, but he squeezed it, forcing me to grip him tighter. Ever so slowly, he moved my hand up and down his length. I relaxed my arm, letting him set the pace.

When I dipped my free hand into my underwear, Edward’s eyes went wide. He watched for a few moments as I touched myself, mesmerized, before releasing his hold on me. He pushed my other hand away and replaced it with his own.

My eyes closed as my head fell back on the pillow. I stroked him again, matching the pace of his fingers as they moved on me, inside of me. A moan slipped from his lips.

“My god,” he choked out. “You *are* the devil.”

Just as the pleasure built, Edward stilled my hand once again. I whined in protest.

“You need to stop,” he said, though he made no move to remove my hand from his body.

“How’s your control?”

“Dangerously close to non-existent. As always.”

“I know you won’t hurt me.”

Edward moved our hands in tandem once again. After a few pumps, he stopped. My hand fell away from him as he sat back on his knees. He stripped off my underwear before pushing his own down. I reached for him as he settled between my legs, pulling him closer. His lips found my neck as he pushed into me, and I gasped as the familiar tingle spread between my legs.

There was something different about this time. Something gentle, despite the way his fingers dug into my flesh. Something reserved, even as he sucked on my neck. His body felt more strained, his movements more controlled. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I pressed his face against me, not caring if he left another mark, wanting him to leave something behind—anything to show I was his.

I writhed beneath him with each thrust, holding him against me. When I came, he stifled my cries with his mouth.

Edward slowed as I came down from the high. “You’re so warm,” he murmured. “So soft.” His eyes closed as he dropped his forehead to mine. “I can feel your heartbeat everywhere. It’s like I’m alive again.”

He took a ragged breath before his body convulsed, and he groaned in my ear as he came. Once he finished, he wiped away the damp hair clinging to my forehead. It was an intimate gesture. More human than I’d come to expect from him.

My feelings overwhelmed me. I didn’t know where the thought came from, but I fought the urge to tell him I loved him.

Edward smiled nervously. “What are you thinking?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t say it out loud. It was too soon, and I didn’t want to scare him away. “Nothing.”

“Come on. I’m not a mind reader.”

I laughed under my breath, and Edward’s smile turned genuine. He was truly a beautiful sight. I brought my hand to his face and traced the line of his jaw, pleased that he didn’t flinch or tense up. His eyes, which had darkened to the point of almost passing for brown, explored my face as I caressed him.

“Your eyes are different again.”

“It’s been a week since I’ve hunted.”

I frowned. I thought he’d planned to hunt multiple times a week. “Why so long?”

Edward pursed his lips as he shrugged. “I’m a glutton for punishment.”

“I don’t want you to suffer.”

“Far from it.”

He swept his fingertips over my cheek before leaning in for another kiss. Just as I was thinking I could stay beneath him like this all day, the bathroom door slammed shut. I groaned. Edward dropped his forehead to my shoulder and sighed.

“I should get up,” I whispered.

“That’s right. I forget he can’t make his own breakfast.”

I pushed against his shoulders, and he rolled to the side.

“You’re just jealous I can’t make *you* breakfast.”

“So what if I am?”

I hadn’t expected him to admit it, at least not with a straight face. For a moment, I let myself envision Edward sitting at the kitchen table, sipping coffee while I stood at the stove, making his favorite meal. As quickly as it came, I pushed the thought away. I didn’t want to daydream about something that would never happen.

“I won’t be long.” I didn’t know if Emmett would be in the mood to socialize. Or eat. He might even end up back in bed. I would feel him out, make breakfast, and get back to Edward as soon as possible. “Do you want to wait here, or should I meet you somewhere?”

“I could go out there with you.” Edward nodded toward the closed door.

“No way,” I said. Not after Emmett spent all night at the bar. He probably wasn’t even sober yet. I wasn’t ready for the fallout. Besides, one difficult conversation was enough for one day, and I intended to address his drinking tonight.

I slipped out of bed to get dressed. Edward’s clothes were on the floor, and I eyed his light gray t-shirt, contemplating whether to commandeer it for myself. It was soft, and it probably smelled like him. I could knot the bottom if it was too big. I hesitated. It would feel weird stealing his clothes, especially while he watched. The opportunity passed when he got out of bed and retrieved the garments from the floor.

I tossed on jeans and a shirt before finger combing my hair into a messy bun. Then I turned to Edward. He stood in the middle of my room, his brows drawn into a frown, appearing deep in thought.

“I’m going to eat and take care of a few human things. Meet me at the mile marker?”

Edward nodded. As I made my way to the bedroom door, he spoke.

“Bella?”

His voice was uncertain. I turned to face him, trying to read his expression. At first, he seemed torn, but then he reached for me. I wasted no time closing the distance between us.

Edward pulled me into his arms as his lips crashed against mine. My fingers tangled in his hair, and I held him closer. He lifted me slightly, forcing me onto my toes as one hand slid over my behind, squeezing. I hummed into his mouth, enjoying this side of him, wishing we didn't have to hide.

The three little words were once again on the tip of my tongue when my bedroom door flew open.

"Gotcha!" Emmett yelled. I jumped, wriggling out of Edward's arms as Emmett's face morphed from excitement to shock to horror. "What the fuck?"

"Emmett—"

"No." He looked between us, shaking his head as he backed away. "No fucking way."

When Emmett disappeared into the hallway, I looked at Edward. He was watching me. His face gave away nothing. He didn't look abashed or apologetic. Nothing in his expression reflected my surprise at Emmett barging in on us. My stomach dropped as the realization hit me.

"You knew."

Edward didn't respond.

Pushing down my anger, I chased after Emmett. I found him in his bedroom, rummaging through his closet.

"Emmett?" My first instinct was to tell him it wasn't how it looked, but he'd seen enough. Besides, it was exactly how it looked. "I'm sorry." He tossed a backpack on his bed and shoved clothes inside of it. "What are you doing?"

"If that thing is in the house, then I'm leaving."

"You can't just run away."

"Watch me." Emmett pushed past me. I followed him down the hallway to the office, my panic rising as he retrieved the gun from the desk drawer.

"Emmett, come on. Don't do anything crazy."

"Crazy?" Emmett fumbled with his belt as he slid the holster into place. "I'm not the one—" He shuddered, a look of disgust crossing his face. "How could you let him touch you after what he did?"

"Edward's not the bad guy. He doesn't kill people. He didn't kill Mom and Dad."

"If you believe that, you're more naïve than I thought."

I stepped in front of him as he tried to exit the room, but he shoved me out of the way.

“Can we please just talk about this?”

I followed Emmett down the hall and into the kitchen. He yanked open the pantry door and crammed fistfuls of packaged goods into what little space was left in his backpack.

“I’ve been fearing for our lives for the past month. I stayed out of the woods because I didn’t want to run into him.” Emmett’s voice rose with each word as he fought to zip the backpack closed. “How many times has he been in the house, Bella?”

My throat tightened as my eyes filled with tears. I couldn’t admit how many times I’d deceived him. “Emmett, please.”

“God, your neck.” A fresh wave of disgust washed over his face. “How could you let him do that to you? He could have killed you!”

“Edward won’t hurt me.” My voice sounded unconvincing, even to me.

“Is this why you didn’t want to move? You didn’t want to leave *him*?” Emmett shook his head, mumbling something about voodoo mind games. He dug out a whiskey bottle from the back of the pantry before hoisting his backpack over one shoulder and heading toward the front door. “You can stay here with him. I’m outta here.”

“Don’t go, Em. Please.”

“I won’t sit here and watch him kill you. Or worse, make you like him. I’d rather you be dead.” His words stung. In my entire life, he’d never said anything so cruel to me.

Emmett kicked the screen door open, and it slammed shut behind him. I felt helpless as I watched him disappear into the garage. I didn’t know what to say to calm him down. All I knew was I couldn’t let him drive off with a loaded gun and a bottle of whiskey.

I turned, coming face to face with Edward. White hot rage built in my chest. I felt it spread across my face and the tips of my ears as my vision blurred.

“Why did you do that?”

Edward gave away no emotion. No remorse, despite me standing in front of him in tears. “He deserved to know.”

“He wasn’t ready to know,” I said through clenched teeth.

“You couldn’t keep it a secret forever.”

“No.” I felt the smallest twinge of guilt. I would have kept the secret for as long as humanly possible. “But him finding out like that wasn’t fair, Edward.”

“And it’s fair that I have to sneak around with the woman I’m dating?”

“Oh, we’re dating now?” I threw his words from a week ago back in his face, only mine were hostile, not a trace of humor to be found.

Edward’s eyes blazed. His jaw ticked as he clenched his teeth. It was the first glimpse of emotion he’d shown since Emmett walked in on us. He had no right to be angry, not when he was in the wrong. I wouldn’t argue about it right now. Emmett was my priority.

“You should leave.”

“Bella,” he warned.

“I mean it.” My voice dropped an octave as my throat constricted with a fresh round of tears. “Get out.”

Edward hesitated. I held my ground. Finally he brushed past me, all pretenses of secrecy dropped as he left through the same door Emmett had moments before.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I STOOD INSIDE THE SCREEN DOOR, not wanting to miss Emmett when he emerged from the garage. Hopefully the space would clear his head, and once the initial shock wore off, he'd be willing to hear me out. Five minutes passed, then ten. I clenched the keys in my fist, prepared to follow him in my car if he refused to talk to me.

After fifteen minutes, worry got the best of me. I didn't think Emmett would hurt himself, especially after packing a bag and taking food, but he'd been in such a hurry to flee, it seemed unusual for him to take his time now.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way toward the garage. My heart pounded in my chest, drowning out the crunch of gravel beneath my feet.

"Em?" I called as I opened the service door. There was no response, and the lights were off. I slipped between the rows of shelving, peeking around various tools and abandoned craft projects.

Emmett was nowhere to be seen.

He must have slipped out when Edward and I were arguing, or when I went to fetch my car keys. His truck was still in the driveway, so at least he hadn't left. I stepped into the sunlight and glanced around the yard. "Emmett?"

Maybe he'd snuck back into the house after I came outside. I was halfway across the driveway when a thought struck me. I rushed back to the garage, to the corner where Emmett stored his camping equipment. Though I didn't know the extent of what he owned, I was certain of one thing.

His tent was missing.

Emmett didn't just run away.

Emmett ran away to the woods.

The sun dipped below the trees while I sat on the fallen branch below the tree fort. I checked my cell phone, as I had been doing all day. No new notifications.

I dialed Emmett's number. The call went straight to voicemail, just as it had countless other times today. I didn't bother leaving another message.

I hated that he felt the need to leave home. Hated that my actions drove him away. He deserved better than to be taken by surprise, but even if I told him about Edward, I feared his reaction might have been the same.

There was a pang in my chest as I thought about Edward. Despite our rocky conversation the night before, our time together this morning had felt magical. There was something lighter about him. More relaxed. He spoke honestly, without me having to pry.

When he'd called me back into his arms, he kissed me like it meant something more. For a moment, I believed he felt the same way as I did, that maybe he loved me, too.

It broke my heart to know it was all for show.

Time crawled. I checked my phone again. No word from Emmett.

I contemplated calling Edward, but I didn't know what to say. I was still angry at him for outing us to Emmett, but mostly I was hurt. He'd shown no remorse, offered no apology. Not even as I stood before him in tears. When I told him to leave, he obliged, and though part of me was relieved to see him go, it stung that he walked out of the door so easily.

I stayed outside, lost in my thoughts until the woods fell dark around me.

The house was too quiet on Monday morning. I dragged myself out of bed, checking all the rooms for Edward, even though deep down I knew he wasn't there. Emmett's truck still sat in the driveway. Nothing in the house seemed amiss, so I knew he hadn't been back.

I called the hardware store to see if Emmett was scheduled to work today. His boss confirmed he was a no show. I apologized profusely, claiming there was a family emergency. Emmett had a good track record at this job, and I hoped they'd cut him some slack.

I didn't want to leave the house, but I needed groceries. I called Emmett before I left, getting his voicemail once again.

"Hey, Em. It's me. Please come home so we can talk. Just us, okay? I've got to run to the grocery store, so you'll have some time to yourself, if you want. I'll be back by dinner. Hopefully I'll see you then. Okay, bye."

On my way home from the store, I stopped at the bar. By the looks of the parking lot, happy hour was in full swing.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness as I stepped inside. Billiard balls echoed through the building, breaking through the static hum of conversations. The scent of fried food assaulted my nose as I followed a path of neon signs to the bar.

"Bella Swan," the bartender said, recognizing me. After our parents' unfortunate passing, everyone seemed to know who Emmett and I were. It was an unfortunate aspect of living in a small town. I couldn't get away with anything. "You're not twenty-one yet, are you?"

"I'm looking for my brother. Have you seen him?"

"Not today."

His words made me hopeful.

"Was he here yesterday?"

The bartender contemplated for a moment, then he shook his head. "Haven't seen him since karaoke night."

"If he comes in, will you send him home?"

“Will do.”

Emmett hadn't returned home while I was gone. I ate dinner alone before cleaning the kitchen, all the while wondering where he was and if he was okay. I understood if he needed time to clear his head, but it concerned me that he hadn't been to work. It looked like I'd be getting a summer job after all. At least it would distract me from thinking about Edward.

I opened our brief text chain. I'd sent the last message a week ago, telling him to come to my room. My fingers hovered over the screen. It would be so easy to ask him to come back. As juvenile as it sounded, I didn't want to be the one to reach out. I wanted Edward to call or text or show up at my door—anything to show that he cared. That I meant something to him. That he was sorry.

I wanted him to fight for me.

I tossed and turned all night. At one point, I awoke to what I thought was a kiss on my shoulder, but it was just the cool breeze coming through the open window. I slipped out of bed and peeked outside. The moon illuminated the yard, and I watched for movement in the trees.

“Edward?” I didn't think he was out there, but it still disappointed me when there wasn't a response.

I crawled back into bed before checking my phone. Even though I hadn't expected any new notifications, it didn't stop the anguish from twisting in my stomach.

I tried to convince myself Emmett would be okay. He'd camped many times before, though he usually planned out anything longer than a night. If he didn't do anything stupid in a fit of rage, he would make it home in one piece. He might not have a job when he returned, but we'd deal with that roadblock when it came.

I wasn't as optimistic about Edward.

For the first time in almost two days, I allowed myself to really think about him. Was he angry, or was he giving me space? Did he even know Emmett was still gone? Did he miss me like I missed him, or was he off doing vampire things?

Was it over?

I didn't want it to be. We needed to talk.

Before I lost my courage, I called his number. I held my breath as the silence stretched on. After three short beeps, the call disconnected.

So much for his battery life.

I kept my phone in my hand as I pulled the blankets up to my neck and closed my eyes.

Tuesday brought much of the same. I called the hardware store and the bar, but Emmett hadn't gone to either. My calls continued to go straight to voicemail.

Edward's phone kept dropping my calls. I wondered if he'd disconnected it. Maybe he'd wanted a clean break. It wouldn't be hard for him to do. Even if I drove to the mile marker, I'd never be able to navigate to his cabin.

In the early afternoon, I set out along the path to the meadow. There was plenty of daylight left this time, and I didn't stray from the trail. I didn't expect to find Emmett. There were a lot of woods surrounding the house, and I assumed he set up camp far from the path. Still, I couldn't sit at home and do nothing.

I walked slowly, carefully dissecting each sound as I remained as quiet as possible. When I reached the meadow, I paused. My parents had spent their last moments here. With Edward.

Pushing the thought to the back of my mind, I continued my hike. It didn't take long before I reached the creek. This time I didn't risk walking along it. I couldn't help but feel defeated as I turned back toward home.

That evening marked the third night Emmett was gone, and the realization sat with me uneasily. A tent, a gun, and one measly backpack filled with clothes and snacks didn't seem like enough for survival. Emmett owned plenty of camping gear, but he couldn't have taken much in the time it took for him to run off, and other than the tent and maybe a sleeping bag, nothing else seemed to be missing from its carefully organized corner.

Unable to sleep, I got out of bed at the first sign of light. I didn't bother making coffee. I was much too jittery. The morning air was crisp, and I slipped on a sweatshirt as I headed outside, phone in hand. I tried pushing down the panic that was threatening to consume me, but to no avail. I couldn't explain why, but a wave of urgency struck me.

Something was wrong.

I called Emmett. When I got his voicemail again, I hung up and dialed Edward one last time.

It rang.

My knees went weak as relief flooded through me, but I forced myself to stay standing.

"Bella?"

I couldn't get a read on his mood, but I was so happy to hear his voice I could have cried.

"Emmett has been in the woods since Sunday. I'm worried about him."

There was a long pause on the other end.

"He's spent a lot of time out there. I'm sure he's fine."

"Not like this. He barely has any supplies. He would have come back by now."

At the very least, he would have returned for food. Emmett would never survive on a few bags of chips and a package of beef jerky. "Will you help me find him?"

"I don't think that's a good idea, all things considered."

"Please, Edward. I have a really bad feeling about this. Something's wrong, I know it."

Edward sighed. "Give me a couple of minutes."

Edward ended the call. Less than two minutes later, he appeared on the tree fort path. He wore the same gray t-shirt from Sunday. It was wrinkled and smudged with dirt, and his hair was disheveled. I wondered where he'd been for the past three days.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I ran to meet him.

"Thank you for coming."

"I told you I'd do anything you want, didn't I?"

"Which direction should we go?"

“No offense, but I’ll find him on my own. You’ll only slow me down. Besides, if everything’s all right, I don’t plan to make my presence known.”

I wanted to argue, but I knew Edward was right. He would find Emmett faster without me.

Edward hesitated. His lips parted. Just when I thought he would speak, he turned away from me and crossed to the opposite side of the yard, disappearing into the trees.

I paced while I waited, unsure how long it would take for Edward to return. Even though I was relieved he was here, I couldn’t shake the feeling in my gut that something was terribly wrong.

Time seemed to drag on. No more than ten minutes had passed when I spotted Edward coming through the trees, carrying Emmett in his arms. His head lolled from side to side, and his arm hung unnaturally from his body. I broke into a run. I tried to yell, but my lungs wouldn’t work. Edward laid Emmett out on the lawn and rushed to meet me.

“You don’t need to see this,” he said as he grabbed my shoulders, blocking my view.

“Let go of me!” I squirmed, pushing against him. When Edward released me, I raced to Emmett’s side and dropped to my knees.

Emmett’s face was unrecognizable. Deep gouges marred his skull, and blood ran in rivulets across his swollen skin. His blood-soaked shirt hung off him in tattered pieces. I let out a sob when I realized it wasn’t torn fabric sticking up from his chest.

It was his flesh.

“What happened?”

“Bear.”

“Is he . . .” I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

It had been years since my first aid training, and I struggled to remember what to do. “What do we need? Towels? A tourniquet?” My hands flitted helplessly over his lifeless body. “We have to get him to a hospital.”

Edward made no move to help. He looked at me with pity in his eyes.

“A hospital can’t fix this.” He crouched beside me. “I’m sorry, Bella.”

“No.” I shook my head, unwilling to accept it. Emmett couldn’t die. He was the only family I had left. I couldn’t imagine my life without him. I placed my hand on his arm. His skin felt cold to the touch. “We have to help him. You were a doctor. Do something!”

“Bella—”

“Please, Edward!” I swiveled to face him as tears streamed down my cheeks. “He’s my brother. I can’t just let him die.”

Pain flashed across Edward’s face, reflecting my own. He took a deep breath, then scooped Emmett off the ground. “Twelve forty-three Evergreen Terrace. Meet me there.”

I stood on shaky legs. Edward was already running. “Edward?”

“Twelve forty-three Evergreen,” he repeated over his shoulder.

I retrieved my phone from my pocket and entered the address before I forgot. My hands shook as I typed in the numbers, leaving blood smudged across the screen. The directions said it was over two hours away.

I wasted no time grabbing my car keys and rushing after them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Edward

THE TREES WHIZZED BY in a blur as I ran south. The added weight of Emmett's limp body made it impossible to travel at my normal pace. I clenched him against me. His blood soaked into my shirt, spreading warm and thick across my chest. I ignored it as best I could as I focused on the task at hand.

Panic filled me as I approached the house. The only mind I could hear was Rosalie's. I pushed myself harder, running faster against my protesting muscles, my lungs burning for oxygen I didn't need.

I knew the moment Rosalie heard me coming. She was on full alert, evaluating the potential threat. Irritation replaced her concern when she concluded it was most likely me. She hoped I wouldn't stick around long, not wanting to entertain me while everyone else was gone.

She didn't care if I knew.

I broke through the trees lining the property and placed Emmett on the grass.
"Stay inside!"

Rosalie ignored me. She threw open the front door and ran out onto the lawn. All her thoughts fizzled as she struggled to process the scene before her. Questions swirled in her mind, coming and going without fully forming.

I got the gist of it.

Who? What? Why?

There wasn't time to answer.

"Where's Carlisle?"

Rosalie winced as the scent of blood wafted across the yard. She clutched her chest, her body curling inward against the pain. "At the hospital."

"Call him."

"You know he doesn't keep his phone on him when he's working."

"Call him!"

Rosalie fumbled for her phone as I turned my attention back to Emmett. He was breathing, but barely, his pulse almost non-existent. The injuries caused his head and face to swell, and his skin appeared pallid in contrast to the blood covering his flesh. It felt like there was more blood on my shirt than what remained in his body.

After leaving Carlisle a frantic message, Rosalie approached us. Morbid curiosity had gotten the best of her. She stood behind me, peering at Emmett over my crouched form, astonished by the extent of his injuries.

"How is he still alive?"

I couldn't answer. The breath I'd been holding since fighting off the bear had run out, and I didn't dare risk inhaling, afraid I'd lose what little control I had left.

Rosalie's restraint impressed me. If I didn't know Emmett personally, if I didn't care about him and his sister, I wouldn't be able to resist. I wouldn't be able to withstand the urge to drain him of what little blood remained in his veins.

I'd forced thoughts of Bella out of my mind during the trip here, focusing solely on transporting Emmett safely, but now all I could see was her tear-stained face as she knelt beside her brother and begged me to help him.

Some protector I turned out to be.

Every single one of my actions led us to this moment. If I hadn't allowed Emmett to catch us, or pretended to be trapped in the cage, or moved into the area, he never would have been mauled by a bear.

If I'd never left Carlisle, their parents would still be alive.

I was nothing but a curse to this family.

“He’s not going to make it,” Rosalie whispered. She was right. His heart was failing. Once it gave out, no amount of venom would do any good.

She’d witnessed death, but never like this. It had always been quick and painless, brought about by someone’s lapse of control. Or she’d experienced the aftermath—a corpse, pale and peaceful, being laid to rest in the ground.

She’d never watched someone slipping away. Never observed their body struggle as it slowly gave up the fight for life.

I took a shallow breath so I could speak. The pain in my throat flared as the scent of fresh blood assaulted me. “Carlisle will help him.”

“Carlisle’s not coming.” There was an edge to her voice. “He’ll die on the front lawn if you don’t do something!”

Bella had said the same thing.

Do something.

I wasn’t strong enough to change him. I would kill him, and the taste of human blood would be forever imprinted on my tongue. What if, like a drug, I craved more? What if I couldn’t resist Bella’s blood afterward? It was already a struggle to be around her.

Would I kill her, too?

“I can’t.”

“He’s dying, Edward!” Rosalie didn’t understand why I made the effort to bring him here only to let him die. She couldn’t comprehend why I wouldn’t even *try*.

I clenched my teeth as I screamed, letting out my anger and frustration and hopelessness. Whichever way Emmett died, Bella would never forgive me. I’d already lost her.

I’d lost them both.

I couldn’t lose myself too.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

To my horror, Emmett’s heart stuttered out a final beat.

In my entire existence, I’d never felt regret so immediate, so strong. I should have tried harder to save him, even to my detriment. He was here because of me. I owed him that much.

Without a second thought, I plunged my teeth into his heart.

My throat was on fire. The flames licked up my chest, inside and out, a blazing inferno threatening to consume me. The dried blood on my shirt scratched against my chest, taunting me, torturing me further.

I welcomed the punishment.

Fresh air did nothing to extinguish the flames, not while the taste of blood still lingered in my mouth. I swallowed down yet another surge of venom, causing my stomach to churn. It made me sick. I wanted to vomit, a sensation I thought had been lost to my human years.

Bella would never forgive me. Neither would Emmett. I wanted to yell, if only to drown out the screaming coming from the second story of the house.

Rosalie appeared from inside and joined me on the front porch. I glanced up at her from where I sat on the steps. Blood covered her blouse and arms. Her thoughts perfectly reflected the emotion on her face. Shock, disbelief, and a frenzied excitement, just beneath the surface.

Bloodlust.

“I got him upstairs and opened the windows.” She grasped at her neck absentmindedly, smearing blood across her skin. She was stronger than I gave her credit for.

Then again, so was I.

Rosalie crouched on the stairs beside me. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, swallowing a mouthful of venom once again. I could never take it back, never untaste the essence of human life.

Never make Emmett human again.

Rosalie reached out and took my hand. I grabbed a hold of it like a lifeline. She would never truly understand the enormous burden that was now mine to bear, but unlike anyone else, she'd been there to witness it.

None of us had been present during a change. Carlisle always did it on his own, isolated far from witnesses, sparing us temptation from the sight and smell, and offering privacy to the one transforming.

I'd been privy to Carlisle's thoughts afterward, but he always kept the memories well-guarded. It wasn't the same as performing the act. They didn't portray the physical struggle or the depth of emotion involved.

Rosalie's phone rang, pulling me from my thoughts. She dropped my hand and stood to answer, turning away, though it offered her no privacy. I could hear the conversation in both her thoughts and through the phone.

Carlisle had gotten her frantic message. She told him it was over. We no longer needed him. He said he would come home as soon as possible.

No sooner had she hung up when her phone rang again. I could see in her mind it was Alice.

She must have seen.

Rosalie told her not to come home. At least until the place was clean. There was too much blood. She and Jasper agreed to intercept Esme and find somewhere else to stay.

"Why didn't Alice warn me?" I wondered aloud. "She had to have seen this coming."

"You told her you don't want to know your future. On multiple occasions. You've been insufferable about it for the past seventy years." Her thoughts conveyed what her words did not: I was an asshole. "If she saw something, she wouldn't tell you—good, bad, or otherwise."

I laughed under my breath. "Well, it would have been a nice heads up. I'm not the only one this affects."

"Alice doesn't actively look for our futures, Edward. Least of all yours." Rosalie envisioned Emmett's condition when we arrived. It still surprised her he survived the trip here. "Maybe the last time she looked, she saw a different outcome. I wasn't even supposed to be here today."

Rosalie had a point. Alice's visions were subjective. She could have seen many outcomes that didn't end with me bringing Emmett here. Despite how I despised knowing what the future held, watching Alice's predictions shift as our paths changed fascinated me, though I'd never admit it.

The last time I'd observed a vision was after Carmen and Eleazar left. Though nothing in their minds had led me to believe they were untrustworthy, I wanted to make sure they didn't stray back to the house.

Alice was apprehensive when I asked her to look into their futures, and understandably so. She obliged, despite the way I treated her throughout the years. The visions flashing through her mind put me at ease. The pair would travel north into the Canadian wilderness, their eyes remaining a brilliant shade of gold.

One vision, however, did not belong.

It was a blip. An accident.

In it, Bella was in my arms. She pulled me closer before pressing her lips to mine. It ended just as quickly as it started. Alice's eyes widened, reflecting my shock as she saw me with a mystery woman.

A human.

"You asked me to look!" she said, immediately defensive. "You know I can't control what I see!"

I was too surprised to be upset. When I'd snuck into Bella's room the week before, she cowered. She was terrified, repulsed. I didn't intend to return to their house, so I questioned the validity of the vision. I thought Bella wanted nothing to do with me.

That was before I smelled her in the woods.

"I'm going to clean up and sit with him," Rosalie said, pulling me from my memory.

"Are you sure?" I asked. Emmett's wounds had yet to heal. Blood still ran through his veins, untainted by venom. I questioned if it was safe for either of us to be near him.

Yet, there was no ulterior motive in Rosalie's mind. No weakness anywhere to be seen. Only a compulsive need to take care of the man I dragged here, bleeding and half dead.

Once alone, I buried my face in my hands.

Bella would arrive within the hour. I didn't know what to expect. Her allegiances lay with Emmett. Would she forgive me, even if he did not? Or had I already committed too many transgressions?

I would grovel if I thought it would do any good.

I heard Carlisle's mind before his car. His normally calm demeanor was shaken. He didn't know what he was coming home to. His concern for me was at the forefront of his mind, and he was eager to discover the circumstances surrounding the situation.

He didn't know what could possibly make me change a human.

I didn't look up from my hands as Carlisle pulled into the driveway, nor when he got out of his car. His mind registered the scent of blood hanging thick in the air, but other than the acknowledgment, he paid it no attention. It held no temptation for him.

I expected Carlisle to run upstairs and check on Emmett, so it surprised me when he sat on the steps beside me. Emmett wasn't going anywhere. His priority was me. He felt I needed him more.

It was more than I deserved.

Nothing but concern radiated from him as he placed his hand on my shoulder. He spoke no words, but he reflected openly on his past, on his experiences changing us all. He didn't guard his mind from the regret or sorrow or self-doubt, recalling in perfect detail each of our transformations, of the pain he witnessed.

The pain we all remembered so well.

The pain Emmett was experiencing now.

"It's a heavy burden to bear." There was no judgment behind his words. Nothing vindictive. Only honesty based on his own experience. An experience I'd never understood until now. "You'll find a way to live with it."

I wanted to be angry with him. Angry for not being home. For forcing my hand. For making this my burden when I'd wanted it to be his.

I didn't deserve his sympathy.

"May I ask what happened?"

"It's a long story." Too long to get into now, when Bella was on her way.

My unwillingness to answer didn't bother Carlisle. He was never one to take things personally. He patted my shoulder before folding his hands together and resting his elbows on his knees, mimicking my position. "We have three days. Plenty of time."

He let his mind wander to everything that had to be done. The blood needed to be cleaned up before anyone else returned to the house. He would resign from his job early and notify the hospital in Chicago that he could no longer accept the position. He didn't think the others would mind the last minute change of plans, but it would be their choice.

Everyone always had a choice.

While the others wrapped up loose ends here, he and I would drive Emmett to the Alaska property, far away from human inhabitation.

Another wave of nausea hit me.

Of course he would expect me to rejoin the family. And how could I not? I'd created a new life. Emmett was my responsibility now. It would be unfair to ask them to uproot their lives to clean up my mess while I stayed behind.

"What's his name?"

"Emmett."

"A new family member will make for an interesting change," Carlisle said, forever optimistic about whatever life tossed his way. "It's been seventy-one years since Alice and Jasper joined us. Do you think he'll stay?"

"I'm not sure." There was no way of knowing how he'd feel about his new life, let alone how he'd choose to live it.

"Will you tell me about him?"

With a sigh, I dropped my hands, finally looking up for the first time since Carlisle arrived. I kept my eyes trained on the forest surrounding the house, similar in so many ways to the one I'd come from.

My appearance took Carlisle by surprise, but he refrained from expressing his concern verbally. His thoughts urged me to change my clothes and wash my face, that it would be easier if human blood weren't dried on my skin.

I ignored him. I deserved to suffer.

"Emmett is an avid outdoorsman. He hikes and camps. He's content to just be in the woods with his thoughts. Thoughts I struggle to decipher."

Carlisle caught my comment, but he refrained from asking for clarification, wanting me to continue.

“He’s handy. He can fix almost anything, though he’s had no formal training. He builds things—metal, wood—it doesn’t matter. It comes naturally to him.

“He doesn’t always think things through. He can be irrational and impulsive. Stubborn. But he has a good heart. Good intentions.” Pain that had nothing to do with bloodlust surged through my chest as I thought of Bella once again. “He’s fiercely protective of his sister. He took care of her after their parents died five years ago.”

Carlisle pored over the details I’d given him. Everything seemed to point toward Emmett being a good fit. His heart hurt for the sister Emmett would leave behind. It was a lot of loss for her in a short period of time.

I knew the exact moment the timeline clicked. He looked at me questioningly, and I nodded in confirmation.

Their parents were the couple who’d died because of me.

Carlisle blew out a breath. “I didn’t realize you had a relationship with their children.”

“It’s relatively new.”

“Do they know what you are?”

I hesitated. Breaking the rules put everyone in danger. Yet, I couldn’t lie. Not to him.

“They know.”

“I see.”

As hard as Carlisle tried to change the trajectory of his thoughts, it was nearly impossible for him not to wonder what I’d really been doing these past five years. He was happy I hadn’t completely isolated myself, but he was curious about what my relationship with two humans entailed. He concluded that I had been friends with Emmett, that we had been close. Maybe something more. He must have been important to me if I changed him to save his life. Carlisle hoped we were happy.

“You’re a little off.” I would tell him the entire story before Emmett completed the transformation. Newborn emotions ran high, and I didn’t want Carlisle blindsided if Emmett didn’t take it well. “I’m in a relationship with his sister. At least, I think I still am. Maybe not after this.” I recalled Bella’s anger as she used my own words against me. “Maybe I never was.”

“Human,” Carlisle said with an underlying tone of disbelief. It surprised him that I could tolerate being involved with anyone, let alone a human. Then again, he didn’t know Bella’s mind was silent to me. “I’m proud of you.”

“What I did was wrong.”

Carlisle shrugged. “Right or wrong isn’t for us to decide. What you did took restraint and control. I’m sure it wasn’t easy for you.”

“I couldn’t have done it on my own. Rosalie made me stop. She pushed me away and performed CPR until my venom strengthened his heart enough to beat on its own.”

“Well then, I’m glad she was here. I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

Though it wasn’t his intention, his words made me feel worse. It wasn’t his responsibility to fix my mistakes.

We heard a car speeding down the road. It slowed as it neared the driveway. Carlisle was immediately on alert. Now wasn’t the time for visitors. He knew I would disappear before anyone saw me, but nothing could be done about the screams coming from the house.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“It’s Bella.”

I didn’t need to explain further. Carlisle was a smart man.

He hadn’t expected to meet her so soon, or under such circumstances. He was interested in learning more about the human who got beneath my aloof exterior.

Bella brought the car to a screeching halt in the driveway. Venom flooded my mouth in anticipation. The thought of her scent alone had my body coiling, ready to strike.

“Carlisle?” The plea in my voice captured his full attention. “Don’t let me hurt her.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

MY HEART POUNDED as I arrived at the address Edward gave me. Dense trees hid the house from the road, and it came into view as I followed the long, winding driveway, a behemoth standing gloriously in the middle of the forest, reflecting the morning sun off a wall constructed entirely of windows.

I recognized Edward first. He sat on the front steps, his head bowed.

My heart sank.

A man sat next to him, one hand resting on Edward's shoulder. His eyes followed me as I threw the car in park and hopped out. He held out his hand as I ran toward them, gesturing for me to stop. I slowed to a jog, and then froze when I registered the vision before me.

Edward's gray shirt, the same one I'd almost stolen three days before, was covered in rusty red crimson. When he raised his head to look at me, I gasped, jarred by his appearance. Blood covered his chin and neck. Arms. Hands. The man next to him shifted his grip, his splayed fingers digging into Edward's shoulder.

I opened my mouth as my brain dredged through questions. Before I could form a coherent sentence, a blood-curdling scream pierced the silence. Though I'd never heard Emmett wail like that before, there was no doubt in my mind it was him.

He was alive.

My initial response was relief. I'd spent the two-hour drive coming to terms with the inevitable. Edward's words kept repeating in my head.

A hospital can't fix this. I'm sorry.

After the initial shock had worn off, I knew Edward was right. There was no recovering from Emmett's injuries. Yet here he was. Alive and conscious.

Only we weren't at a hospital.

We were at a house a hundred miles south. And the golden-eyed man with his hand on Edward wasn't human.

Another scream pierced the air.

"What did you do?"

Edward didn't answer. He didn't need to.

My legs moved of their own accord, bringing me closer to the front door. The man stood, staying between me and Edward as I passed. From the corner of my eye, I saw Edward drop his head into his hands.

Once inside, I followed Emmett's screams upstairs and down the hallway. The door to the room at the very end was open, and I raced toward it, afraid of what I would see. I came to a halt when I turned the corner, surprised to see Emmett wasn't alone.

A girl who appeared younger than me sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over him. Light blond hair cascaded down her back in thick waves. She glanced at me over her shoulder as I approached, her soft features filled with sadness. Our eyes met for the briefest moment. She said nothing as she turned her attention back to my brother.

I crept toward them, refusing to be intimidated by this beautiful girl, this vampire. Emmett was my brother. It was my job to be there for him.

"Emmett?" My voice was barely more than a whisper. Though his head and face were no longer covered in blood, the gashes and swelling remained. Without the gore, it didn't look real.

I didn't want it to be real.

He wore a different shirt. It was in one piece and had considerably less blood on it than Edward's. I didn't want to envision how his chest looked beneath.

Emmett continued to thrash in pain. He held onto the young girl's hands. She showed no sign of discomfort, even though his knuckles were white and the veins in his arms bulged from exertion.

I cleared my throat and tried speaking again. "Em, can you hear me?" I reached past the girl and touched his shoulder. He didn't react. "I'm here. It's going to be okay."

Emmett cracked open one swollen eye. "Bella?" he gritted through clenched teeth. Then his face contorted as he cried out again. I flinched, yanking my hand away. The girl continued holding his hands, running her thumb in comforting strokes over his knuckles.

"Rosalie," Edward said from the doorway. She sighed before extracting her hands from Emmett's. He let out a sob, reaching for her as she backed away from the bed and slipped out of the room.

I took her place, sitting on the edge of the bed. I was afraid to touch him. Afraid to hurt him. Afraid he would hurt me.

"You told me to save him."

"Not like this," I whispered, unable to look away from Emmett's shaking form. Tears filled my eyes. I should have known what I was asking. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I did. I just didn't believe it would happen. "What's happening to him?"

"It's part of the transformation. We all went through it."

"How long is he going to be like this?"

"Three days."

"Three days?" I felt helpless. I would do anything to take away his pain. "Will he—" I clamped my hand over my mouth to stifle a sob. Emmett's injuries were horrific. He would hate living the rest of eternity with a mangled body. I would never be able to look at him again, knowing it was my fault. "His face."

"It will heal."

"Em, I'm so sorry." I took his hand in mine. He squeezed so hard I thought my bones would break. I tried to breathe through it, but it was too much. The minute I yelped in pain, Edward jumped between us and pried Emmett's hand from mine.

"Where is she?" Emmett hollered. "Where did she go?"

I opened my mouth to tell him I was still there when Edward called Rosalie back into the room. She reclaimed her spot by his side, taking his hands once again. My jealousy spiked. I knew it was neither the time nor the place, but I couldn't help it. Rosalie had been changed for Edward. Now she seemed to have some sort of weird vampy claim on my brother.

"Can we talk in private?" Edward asked.

I didn't want to leave Emmett while he was suffering, but my presence didn't seem to do any good. Besides, I wasn't the one he wanted right now.

I followed Edward out of the room and down the stairs. Once outside, he sucked in a deep breath. He pulled at his hair with both hands as he paced the porch.

It was a relief to be outside. The bedroom was enormous, but it felt cramped with four people, one of whom was screaming. It was quieter out here, easier to collect my thoughts with just the two of us.

"Was that Carlisle out here before?"

Edward stopped pacing. His hands came to the porch railing as he bowed his head. "Yes."

"So, what, you asked him to change Emmett, and he did?"

Edward shook his head. "He wasn't here." He met my eyes, but only for a moment. "I did it myself."

"*You* did it?" I failed to hide my surprise. Now it made sense why Edward was the only one covered in blood. It also explained why he could barely look at me. "You bit him?"

"Yes." His voice was cold, detached.

More screams echoed from the opposite side of the house. Edward winced.

"You tasted his blood," I said. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Are you okay?"

Edward shifted his eyes to mine. His irises were nearly as dark as his pupils. Pain flashed across his face. "I can still taste it." He furrowed his brows as he gestured to his neck. "It feels like it's stuck in my throat."

Maybe if he weren't covered in Emmett's blood, it would be easier for him. Even I could smell the tangy metallic scent. I reached out and placed my hand on the

side of his arm, avoiding where the blood was most concentrated. He seemed surprised by the gesture as he glanced between my hand and my face.

“You need to wash off this blood and change your clothes. There’s no reason to torture yourself.”

“Maybe I deserve it.”

“You don’t.”

Edward didn’t respond. I didn’t understand why he’d want to make this harder on himself. Then it hit me.

Edward changed my brother to save his life. He did it because I asked.

And he did it without Emmett’s consent.

“Don’t do this to yourself.” I tugged at the hem of his t-shirt. “Take these off. Please.” Edward made no move to comply. “For me?”

Edward inclined his head toward the house, then closed his eyes and sighed. “Fine,” he bit out. I wasn’t sure who he was speaking to, but I had a feeling it wasn’t me. He ran the back of his fingers down my arm before slipping his hand into mine. “Come with me.”

He led me to a bathroom on the main level. A change of clothes awaited on the counter. I started to close the door as he stripped.

“Leave it open, please. I need the airflow.”

When he entered the shower, I gathered his dirty clothes from the floor, unsure what to do with them next.

“I’ll take those.”

I jumped, startled by the unexpected voice. Carlisle stood in the doorway, his arms outstretched. I deposited the bloody clump into his hands.

“Your brother will be okay.” He smiled. Sympathy radiated from his pale amber eyes. “He’s in excellent hands.”

All I could do was nod.

I waited while Edward showered in silence. When he finished, he stepped out onto the bathmat and wrapped a towel around his waist. I crossed the room to hug him, but he grabbed me by the shoulders and held me at arm’s length, his black eyes blazing.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

Edward shook his head. "Are you mad at me?"

"No." I had been mad when he outed us to Emmett, but too much had changed in a few short days. I couldn't focus my energy on that right now. All I wanted was to be near him. I tried to wrap my arms around him again, but he refused to loosen his grip. "What's wrong?"

"I can't be any closer to you."

I frowned. "Why?"

"I tasted human blood." Edward drew in a ragged breath. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "God, I want it so bad. I can't stop thinking about it." His gaze traveled to my neck. "About *your* blood."

Somehow, I kept my face composed. "You won't hurt me." I tried to wiggle from his hold, but he held tight. "I trust you."

"Don't. I've done nothing but slowly destroy your life."

His words angered me. What good would it do to walk away now? It wouldn't bring back my parents. It wouldn't keep Emmett human. My life changed irrevocably because of Edward. That didn't mean I wanted him to stop being a part of it.

"You don't want to be with me?"

Edward huffed. He slid his hands down to my elbows. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what are you saying?" I spat. "You want us to be together, but you won't even hug me? I need you, Edward."

Tears pooled in my eyes, blurring my vision. I reached toward Edward with what little slack he gave me and flattened my hand against his stomach, longing for a connection, willing to take whatever he gave me. His body was rigid, too still. He wasn't breathing. I closed my eyes as he dropped his forehead to mine.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered.

"You can't get rid of me that easily."

"Oh, you think this was easy?" His tone was teasing, and I laughed as I wiped the tears from my eyes. The moment didn't last long. "Will you be okay if I leave for a while?"

"You want to leave me alone in a house full of vampires?"

“I don’t want to leave you ever,” he said. “But I need to hunt. Clear my head. Only Carlisle and Rosalie are here. You can trust them.”

I didn’t like the idea of being alone with them, but as long as Emmett was here, I wasn’t going anywhere.

“For how long?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll be back before it’s over.”

More than anything, I wanted Edward to stay. I needed his support. But I couldn’t begrudge him his needs either. The past few hours must have been incredibly difficult for him. I didn’t want him to suffer, or put my life in jeopardy more than it already was.

“Please hurry back.”

For the rest of the day, I sat by Emmett’s bedside while he thrashed and screamed and cried. Rosalie was there for most of it, holding his hand. He clung to her as she whispered words of encouragement.

Whenever she left to give us privacy, I told him stories about our childhood. Stories about Mom and Dad. Sometimes it seemed like he was listening. Other times, I was positive he was lost in the pain.

He never seemed as comforted by me as he was by her.

Carlisle checked on Emmett a few times, but mostly he kept his distance, for which I was grateful. Being near one unfamiliar vampire was stressful enough. I thanked him when he brought me food and politely declined his offer to answer my questions. While I was sure Carlisle meant well, it was hard for me to set aside Edward’s resentment toward him, and it didn’t seem right to have those conversations without Edward here.

At the end of the night, Carlisle showed me to a guest room. Even from across the house, Emmett’s screams kept me awake. I didn’t understand how his body could survive this much trauma.

The next day, Emmett was still in agonizing pain. He still clung to Rosalie.

It fascinated me to watch his wounds slowly heal before my eyes. The gashes on his head sealed from the inside out. The swelling on his face decreased. I was so relieved to see his boyish features return that I wanted to cry.

I couldn't wait to see his dimples as he laughed again. And the mischievous glint in his eyes when he had one of his crazy ideas.

Eyes that would no longer be blue.

For the first time, the reality of Emmett's transformation struck me.

We would never drink coffee together in the morning. I would eat all my meals alone. I'd have to get a job that could support us both.

What if he hated his new life? What if he blamed me? I pushed the negative thoughts from my head. Emmett was alive, and that was all that mattered right now.

I'd grown used to Rosalie's silent presence, though I didn't understand her dedication to my brother. Like the day before, we didn't acknowledge each other, so it surprised me when she spoke.

"You seem like a nice girl," she said without looking at me. "What do you see in him?"

I bristled, insulted that she would call me a girl when she didn't even look old enough to be out of high school.

Then again, she'd probably lived for over a century.

"Who?"

"Edward." She glanced at me and smirked. "He's such an asshole."

It wasn't necessary to explain myself to her, but I wanted to defend Edward. Sure, he could be a jerk sometimes. He was rude and infuriating. Pushy and arrogant. But during the moments he let his guard down, let himself be vulnerable, he was sweet. Gentle. Protective. Not only of me, but of Emmett, too.

Besides, there was no way to explain the excitement I felt while in his presence. Or how the mere thought of him left my body buzzing in anticipation. When I was with him, he made me feel special.

"If you think he's an asshole, then you don't really know him."

“You think I don’t know him?” She laughed under her breath as her eyes appraised me. I expected her to argue, or at the very least tell me I was an idiot, so it surprised me when she shrugged and said, “Maybe I don’t.”

Watching Emmett suffer for two days straight took its toll on me. By the time the sun went down, I was exhausted. I retreated to the guest room, wishing I was at home in my own bed, surrounded by silence. I felt guilty even thinking about it.

My phone was dead, so I couldn’t call Edward. I missed him. I still didn’t know if we would be okay. If he couldn’t be close to me again, if he blamed me for what he’d done, I didn’t know what I’d do. How was I supposed to go back to my life before him?

Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. Emmett was becoming a vampire. Nothing would ever be the same.

I didn’t want to take back the time I spent with Edward, but if it didn’t work out between us, this would have all been for nothing.

Did he wish he’d never met me?

I hoped not.

I tried not to let my mind get carried away with alternate scenarios of what could have been. None of it mattered. It was impossible to change the past.

I drifted in and out of sleep, plagued by my doubts and fears. In the back of my mind, I registered the blankets moving, followed by the bed dipping behind me. I grasped at consciousness as Edward wrapped his arm around me.

“You’re back,” I mumbled. He pressed his mouth against my shoulder. Though he made no move to kiss me, his steady breaths washed across my skin. “I missed you.”

His only response was to hold me tighter.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I SPENT THE REST OF THE NIGHT locked in Edward's embrace. Even as I tossed and turned, he kept his arms around me. Sleep didn't come, though the minutes grew hazy and blurred together while we listened to Emmett's cries of pain.

It felt like the night would never end. Part of me wanted to get out of bed and sit by Emmett's side again, but I needed the break. I was so tired, and it was a relief to be close to Edward after so many days apart.

I rolled to face Edward and tucked my head under his chin. His cool skin soothed my puffy eyes, irritated by crying all night. He swallowed once and then twice. The third time I pulled back to see his face.

Strain was clear in the set of his brows, and his lips turned down into a pout. I pressed my palm against his cheek, feeling his jaw flex beneath my touch. He opened his eyes; the light amber hue practically glowed in the dark room.

"Are you okay?"

Edward swallowed one more time before responding. "I've got it under control."

"Do you need to leave again?"

He shook his head. "I can endure it."

“If you bite me . . .”

“I know. You won’t have sex with me ever again.” He cracked a smile, but it faded instantly.

“I don’t want you to suffer.”

Edward inhaled before pressing a kiss to my forehead. “I would rather suffer with you than suffer without you.”

I closed my eyes and rested my head on his chest, soothed by the rhythm of his slow, even breaths.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next time I opened my eyes, it was light outside. Edward was no longer in the room with me, and the house was eerily silent.

I dressed in the same clothes I’d worn for the past two days and went straight to Emmett’s room. Rosalie sat on the bed in her usual spot, but it surprised me to find Edward kneeling on the floor beside her. I fought the urge to be upset that he hadn’t woken me as I made my way closer.

Emmett’s face twisted in pain. A strangled wheeze came from his open mouth.

The screaming had never stopped.

He’d lost his voice.

Edward gave Rosalie a pointed look. She rolled her eyes, then dropped Emmett’s hand and left the room. Edward stood and gestured for me to come closer.

“You should say goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I repeated. My head spun as I tried to make sense of his words. Panic set in as I looked at Emmett once again. Did something happen overnight? Was he going to die after all?

Edward noticed my distress. “He’ll be fine, but I need to get you home.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said. Edward was out of his mind if he thought I’d abandon Emmett now.

“Newborn vampires are volatile. He won’t be in control of himself.”

“He’s my brother. He won’t hurt me.”

“You don’t understand. Even if he has the self-control not to kill you, which he won’t, your mere presence will cause him pain. Do you want that for him?”

I didn’t want to make Emmett’s pain worse, but how was I supposed to walk away? Emmett had always been there to support me. It felt wrong to leave him in a house full of strangers at such a pivotal moment in his life.

“Can’t we stay a little longer? You said it would take three days. That’s not until tomorrow morning.”

“The timing isn’t exact. I don’t want to cut it too close, and we need you gone so your scent has time to dissipate.”

“When can I see him again?”

Edward hesitated. His eyes shifted to Emmett, studying him as he thrashed on the bed. “It depends on him. Once he’s ready, I’ll reunite you myself.”

“Okay,” I conceded. With numb legs, I walked to Emmett’s bedside and sank to my knees. Edward stayed close behind. “Em?” I whispered. His eyes were glassy and distant, but he focused on me when I said his name.

I brushed his thick curls from his sweaty forehead. There wasn’t so much as a lump under his hair, as if the bear attack had never even happened.

“I have to leave for a while. It’s not safe for me to stay here.” My heart ached as a tear slipped down Emmett’s cheek, but I didn’t know if my words or his physical pain caused it. “Do you understand me?”

Emmett nodded.

“I don’t want to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can, okay?”

“Love you, Bella.” He struggled to speak. I could barely make out the words through the hoarseness of his voice.

“Love you, too, Em.”

Emmett closed his eyes as another silent scream wracked his body. I leaned over him and pressed a kiss to his forehead. I didn’t want to leave yet. There was so much more I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him he would be okay and that I was sorry, but I could tell the pain had consumed him, and he was no longer listening.

Edward took me by the elbow and coaxed me to my feet. As he led me from the room, I realized I would never look into Emmett’s blue eyes again.

I stared out the passenger window as Edward drove my car back to the house. We were quiet for the first hour, and I appreciated the reprieve. It gave me time to process the enormity of the situation. My thoughts were overwhelming, and I could barely wrangle them into anything that made sense.

“Does Emmett know what’s happening?”

“We’ve told him. He seemed to understand, but he’s not processing much outside of the pain right now.”

“Why does it hurt so much?”

“There’s venom in our saliva. Once it enters the bloodstream, it infiltrates every cell of the body. I imagine it to be the equivalent of being burned alive.”

For as long as I lived, the image of Emmett writhing on the bed would be forever etched into my memory. I couldn’t fathom the amount of agony he was in, all because I refused to be honest with him.

“What if he hates me?”

“Why would he hate you?”

“Because this is all my fault.”

Edward glanced at me, surprise written on his face, and barked out a laugh. “Last I checked, I was the one who bit him.”

“Only because I asked you to save him. If I hadn’t lied to him, this never would have happened.”

Emmett had been so upset when he caught Edward and me together. Edward might not have been human, but Emmett didn’t even view him as a living creature. *That thing*, he had called him. He said he’d rather I be dead than become a vampire. What if he felt the same way about himself?

“What if we made a mistake?” I whispered, afraid to say the words out loud. It felt awful even thinking them. “What if we should have let him die?”

The question hung in the air, a palpable void that expanded between us. Edward stared out the windshield, his lips set in a hard line. I wanted him to tell me I was wrong, that we made the right choice.

“Could you have lived with that?” he responded at last.

I forced myself to imagine it. The frantic call to 9-1-1. Watching Emmett’s lifeless body being covered and carted away. Attending the funeral and witnessing his casket being lowered into the ground alongside Mom and Dad. Never seeing his face or hearing his voice again.

No. I couldn’t have lived with that.

“Do you ever wish Carlisle hadn’t saved you?” It was a heavy question, but I needed to know the answer. Edward had only ever said he wasn’t given a choice. He gave no indication of his own desires. I hoped he wasn’t so put off by this life that he preferred the alternative. “Sorry if it’s too personal. You don’t have to answer.”

Silence stretched between us for a long moment. Edward’s fingers flexed against the steering wheel. He stared ahead, expressionless, as though his mind had been transported to a different time.

“There were times,” he admitted. “This life isn’t always easy, especially in the beginning.”

“How so?”

“It’s hard for newborns to control their emotions. The bloodlust is all-consuming. Pair that with a strict diet of animal blood; it’s almost unbearable—mentally and physically.” Edward took one look at my face and backtracked. “I’m probably being dramatic. We all survived it. Emmett will have a larger support group than I did. He’ll be fine.”

The thought of his support group made me want to groan. “Yeah, he’ll have Rosalie to get him through.” I crossed my arms and stared out the passenger window. Who did she think she was, anyway? No one asked her to play bedside nurse to my brother.

“Are you jealous?” Edward teased.

“No,” I snapped. So much for playing it cool. When Edward didn’t respond, I glanced at him. He made his usual half-assed attempt at hiding his amusement.

“Cut her some slack. She had a vested interest after helping me save him.” Edward laughed under his breath. “And once his face healed, she was smitten.”

“Too bad for her he hates vampires. How old is she, anyway? She looks so young.”

“She was turned at eighteen.”

“Emmett’s twenty-five. She’s way too young for him.” I wanted to add that she was too young for Edward, too, but I kept that thought to myself.

“Rosalie has lived for over a century.”

“She’s too old for him, then.”

“Am I too old for you?”

I snuck another glance at Edward. He was grinning now. I didn’t bother giving him the satisfaction of a response.

The house felt stuffy when we arrived. I brewed a pot of coffee then set to work opening the windows. Edward watched me as I moved from room to room. When I was done, he followed me to the kitchen and sat in Emmett’s chair.

I removed two mugs from the cupboard out of habit. After filling one, I realized a whole pot was way too much to drink by myself. It was only the first in the long list of things I’d have to adjust without Emmett here.

I sat next to Edward and blew on the scalding liquid before taking a sip. Even though he made it the same way, Emmett’s coffee tasted better. Maybe because it was always ready for me in the mornings when he got up first. Or maybe it was because I rarely had to drink it alone. I set the mug on the table and pushed it away.

“What now?” I asked.

Edward shifted in the chair, his entire disposition radiating discomfort. It put me on edge.

“I’ll stay here as long as I can, but I should be there when the change is complete. I owe him that much.”

I nodded. Emmett might dislike Edward, but at least he wasn’t a complete stranger.

“I’ll let Carlisle explain what he is and how we choose to live. He has a better bedside manner, and Emmett will probably be more open to listening to him. Then the six of us will take him hunting.”

“All of you?”

“Newborns are ridiculously strong. We’ll do our best to steer clear of humans, but even if we cross an old path, it might take all of us to subdue him.”

The idea of Emmett killing a human made me feel sick. The thought of him *wanting* to was even worse.

“There are certain precautions we have to take in the beginning,” he continued. “After the initial hunt, we’ll relocate somewhere more remote.”

“Relocate,” I repeated. My mind searched the brief conversations we’d had over the past two days. I was positive this was the first Edward had mentioned anything about relocating. I studied his face, noting the frown that hadn’t been there moments ago. He refused to meet my eyes. “How remote?”

“We own property in Alaska.”

“You’re taking my brother to Alaska?” I couldn’t hide the shock from my voice.

“It will be easier for everyone. Emmett can hunt whenever he wants, there won’t be any foot traffic to worry about, and he won’t have to deal with temptation until he’s ready.”

I was too busy hearing what Edward didn’t say to focus on his words. “*You’re going to Alaska.*”

“I have to see this through.”

Once my initial shock wore off, my brain went into overdrive searching for a solution. If both Emmett and Edward were going to Alaska, it seemed simple. “Then I’m coming with you.” There was no reason I shouldn’t go. Even though I hadn’t bitten him, I was just as responsible for Emmett’s change as Edward.

“Bella, you can’t. It defeats the purpose of him getting away from humans if you’re there.”

“Then I’ll stay somewhere else. There has to be a hotel nearby. Even if it’s a few hours away.” We had some extra money from our parents’ life insurance policies. I’d hoped to save it a little longer, but this was an emergency.

Edward shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“When Emmett is ready, I want to be close. I don’t want to waste time traveling.”

“Bella,” Edward sighed my name, a combination of exasperation and pity. “It’s going to be at least a year before he’ll be ready to be near you.”

“A year?” My chest tightened. I felt like I was being held underwater as I gasped for air. Angry tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to make it harder—”

“This is hard, Edward! There’s no way to make it easier!”

He turned his head away from me, diverting his eyes once again.

“You robbed me of a proper goodbye. I would have said more. I would have hugged him!”

“You’ll be able to talk to him once the change is complete.”

“Not in person!” I shouted, unable to control my anger any longer. Even though I shook with rage, it had nothing to do with Emmett, or the year until I could see him again. “You should have told me it would be a year. You should have told me you were taking him to Alaska. Why do you keep lying to me?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you!” Edward’s voice boomed through the tiny kitchen, causing me to flinch. Coffee splashed over the side of my mug as he slammed his fists on the table. He jumped to his feet, sending the chair scraping across the linoleum, and stormed out of the room.

I sat there for a moment, shocked at his outburst, before following him into the living room. He stood facing the front door, one hand wound tightly in his hair. I was unsure what to do. All I knew was I didn’t want him to leave.

I crossed the room and placed my hand on Edward’s shoulder. Before I could speak, he turned and pulled me into his arms, crushing me against him. I felt the desperation in his embrace, and my anger dissipated as I breathed him in, memorizing his intoxicating scent, afraid once again that I would lose him.

I freed my arms and wrapped them around his neck. When I stood on my toes to kiss him, Edward jerked his head away. I gripped the nape of his neck and tugged. Though he was strong enough to resist me, he gave in, his body tense as I

pulled him toward me. He allowed me to kiss him, but when I parted my lips, he turned his head, breaking away from me with a whimper.

“Please,” I whispered. I needed to know he still wanted me. Needed to know we could survive this.

Refusing to accept his rejection, I cupped his cheek and tried again. To my relief, Edward gave in. He tightened his hold as his lips crashed against mine, and he gasped as I coaxed his mouth open with my tongue. His kisses grew frantic, and he broke away from my lips to work his way down my neck.

Edward squeezed me tighter, forcing the air from my lungs. His venom tingled my lips and ignited a fiery path down my neck. Now that I knew what caused the sensation, it unsettled me. I wasn’t sure if Edward’s frenzied kisses were a product of arousal or bloodlust, but my mind jumped to Emmett and the pain I’d witnessed.

“Don’t bite me.” I tried to keep humor in my voice, but between my fear and lack of oxygen, it came out as a breathy plea.

Edward froze. He pulled back enough to look at me, and his expression turned somber as he searched my eyes. Releasing me, he stepped back, putting space between us.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I backed away from him and collapsed on the couch as I caught my breath. Edward joined me, keeping a safe distance between us. I pressed my hand over my heart, feeling the way it fluttered beneath the surface.

My thoughts drifted back to Emmett. Soon his heart would be just as silent as Edward’s.

“Will it really take him a year?”

“At the very least. It might take longer. Only time will tell.”

I couldn’t imagine living without Emmett for that long. Living alone.

Living without Edward.

I’d felt bad for him the first time I saw the murder shack. I couldn’t imagine coming home to an empty house, not having anyone to talk to. It seemed like such a lonely life.

Now that life would be mine. It was almost too much to comprehend.

“He can come home after that, though, right?”

“We would strongly advise against it,” Edward said softly, as if the words would be easier to accept if he didn’t speak at full volume. “He’ll look a little different, and with a town this size, people are bound to notice. Not to mention he’ll still be new, and it will be a struggle for him to be around humans for an extended period, you included. I wouldn’t allow you to stay here with him unsupervised.”

I still had trouble believing that Emmett—my brother, my protector—would be a danger to me. In my heart, I wanted to believe Emmett would never hurt me, but I’d seen the way Edward struggled around me sometimes, and he’d been a vampire for over a hundred years. I didn’t want to tempt fate, and Emmett would never forgive himself if he hurt me.

“Ultimately, it will be his decision, but if he wants to be successful in this lifestyle, he’ll need a support system.”

“What am I supposed to do without him?” My voice tightened as tears threatened to spill once again. “Emmett did so much around the house. Whenever anything broke, he fixed it. He took care of the lawn and everything outside. He changed my oil, put air in my tires. I don’t know how to do any of that on my own, and I can’t afford to pay someone every time I need help.”

“You don’t have to stay here,” Edward said. “You can go anywhere. Do anything. You don’t have to feel stuck here anymore. We’ll take care of Emmett.”

The guilt washing over me took me by surprise. This was exactly what I’d hoped for—someone to take care of Emmett so I could be free.

Right now, I felt anything but free.

It didn’t matter where I went or what I knew how to do. The same issue remained.

“But I’ll be alone.”

Edward slid closer. He wiped away a tear that managed to escape.

“You’ll still have me.”

“You’ll be in Alaska,” I scoffed. The tone of my voice made me internally cringe. I reminded myself Edward was doing right by Emmett. We both had to bear the responsibility of my choices. It wasn’t fair of me to punish him for it.

“Only for a year, and not the whole time. I can make the trip in one day on foot. I’ll come back once or twice a month, maybe more frequently as Emmett adjusts.”

Edward smiled as he pinched my chin and turned my head to face him. “I’ll wear my safety green.” His voice dripped with seduction, and he cocked a brow.

I laughed despite the ache in my chest.

Edward leaned closer and kissed my forehead. “One day at a time.” He caught my gaze, his face growing serious. “Are we okay?”

I nodded as I wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

An antiquated chime filled the air. Edward retrieved the phone from his pocket and flipped it open. There was a single message on the screen.

Alice: 5 a.m. tomorrow.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I STOLE A GLANCE at my alarm clock. It was almost midnight. In five hours, Emmett would officially become a vampire. He'd go off to start his new life without me. A life that included Edward. It was difficult to accept the unfairness of it all.

As if sensing my anguish, Edward pulled the blanket around my shoulders and wrapped me in his arms. His body had grown warm from being pressed against me beneath the covers for so long. I buried my face in his chest. His breaths came slow and deep. It felt deliberate rather than relaxed.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked.

Edward took a deep breath before exhaling into my hair, tickling my scalp.

"I keep telling myself nothing has changed. That I'm just as strong as I was before. The only difference is now I know what I'm missing. I can't believe Carlisle had the strength to change the five of us. I have a newfound respect for his restraint."

"Tell me if it becomes too much." I didn't want to put space between us, especially because he'd be leaving me soon, but the thought of causing Edward pain hurt my soul. I hated that changing Emmett caused him so much turmoil. "Do you regret it?"

“No,” Edward said without hesitation. “I never thought it was something I would do. I never expected to be in that position. Or to care about anyone enough. It’s given me a different perspective on life. There are some beliefs I need to reevaluate.”

“You don’t regret tasting human blood?”

“It only seems fair. I altered the course of someone’s life. I shouldn’t get to walk away unscathed.”

I snaked my arm around Edward’s waist and ran my hand across his back, feeling how his skin was colder on that side. He pressed his nose against the top of my head and inhaled deeply.

“Do you think there’ll ever be a time when my blood no longer tempts you?”

“Doesn’t tempt me at all?”

“Yeah.”

Edward rested his chin on my head. His throat bobbed against my forehead.

“I hope so.”

Knowing Edward still fought against his instincts after all these years made me nervous about Emmett. I believed he would want to practice their lifestyle, but that didn’t mean he would be successful.

“What if he can’t do it?” I asked. “Emmett doesn’t have very good impulse control. When he gets an idea in his head, he runs with it. Consequences aren’t usually something he considers. I’m also pretty sure he’s an alcoholic, or at least well on his way to becoming one. What happens if he can’t refrain? What if he kills people?”

“If it happens, it happens.”

“You say that like it’s not a big deal.”

“We can’t let it be a big deal. What we do goes against our nature. Mistakes happen. We learn from them and move on.”

“But you’ve never made a mistake.”

Edward laughed softly. I pressed my ear to his neck, enjoying the deep sound and the way it vibrated my body. “It’s not my fault if I’m better than everyone else.”

“You’re so conceited.”

Edward hummed and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“If he kills someone, will Carlisle kick him out?” I asked.

“No. Carlisle is too compassionate. He would never give up on someone who was trying their best.”

It made me feel a little better knowing Emmett would be with people who supported him. He would need all the help he could get.

“You should sleep,” Edward said.

I shook my head. Our time together was limited. I didn’t want to waste any of it sleeping. I looked at the clock again, feeling the need to speed up time while simultaneously wanting it to slow down.

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Since when do you need my permission to be intrusive?”

I smiled to myself. Edward liked to pretend to be difficult.

“Why did you spend five years taunting Emmett in the woods?”

“Why do you assume I was the one doing the taunting?”

“Weren’t you?”

Edward shrugged. “He was in my woods. Maybe he was taunting me.”

“You can’t claim the whole of nature as your own. Besides, you’re the vampire.”

“Whom he locked in a cage,” Edward countered.

“You let him. Stop playing the victim.” I smacked his chest as I laughed. “Come on, tell me.”

“I’m not sure what he told you, but don’t think for a moment that it was one-sided. He sought me out, too.”

“He did?” I struggled to imagine Emmett willingly searching for Edward.

“I fascinated him, and his mind fascinated me. He was easy to be around, and he was excited to see me, which was more than I could say for some others. It was something to do. It broke up the monotony of life.”

“Emmett made it seem like you terrorized him, and he hated you.”

Edward chuckled. “I may have terrorized him a few times, but he wanted it, and he always came back. Finding me was a game to him. Don’t let him tell you otherwise now. I’m still not sure when he got it in his head that I killed your parents, or what made him decide to capture me. It was almost as though he didn’t have a motive or a plan.”

“That sounds like Emmett,” I said. He was never much for planning. “Why didn’t you ever speak to him?”

“He never spoke to me. Why is it my responsibility to be the bigger person?”

“Because you’re the vampire,” I reiterated. I leaned back to look at his face. As I suspected, he was pouting. “How long would you have stayed in the cage if the other vampires hadn’t shown up?”

“It’s hard to say. You wanting to free me threw a wrench into my plan. I like to think I could have kept up the charade for a while, but it was just a matter of time.”

“A matter of time until what?”

“Until I couldn’t stay away from you anymore.”

Edward leaned closer. My eyes drifted closed as his lips met mine, and he rolled me onto my back as he kissed me. I kept my hands to myself and let him lead, not wanting to make it more difficult for him.

He traced the curves of my body with his tongue as he stripped off my clothes, leaving warm trails of fire across my skin. I let them burn me, and then cool me. It took every ounce of self-control I had to stay still as he worked his way between my legs. Fire and ice warred on my tender flesh, pleasure and pain, until it became one overwhelming sensation. Until it was the only thing I could feel.

I didn’t know when my climax started or when it ended. All I knew was that I was flying, weightless, every ounce of my being consumed with pleasure.

I never wanted it to end.

The first thing I became aware of was my body. Then I was falling, weighed down, engulfed in the scent of sweet cherries and bitter amaretto. I reached out, finding Edward and pulling him closer as the world around me crackled and came into focus.

I clung to him as he moved, tilting my hips to meet each of his thrusts, needing him deeper. Needing more. He panted against my shoulder, keeping his mouth away from my neck. From the rigid set of his body, I knew he was holding back.

I wanted his kisses. I wanted his fingers digging into my hips. The hickeys and the bruises. Something to remember him by. I clawed at his back, but my nails glided across his skin. Edward growled before grabbing my arms and pinning them above my head.

It was all I needed. Another wave of euphoria crashed over me, amplified by the way Edward fell apart above me. He released my hands as he slowed, and I pulled him against me, not allowing him to roll away as he collapsed.

I caught my breath as best I could with his weight pressing me into the mattress. He tried to move, but I held him tighter, silently demanding he stay. This was exactly where I wanted to be.

“I love you.” The minute the words left my mouth, my stomach sank. It was too soon, and the way Edward tensed told me he agreed. The room suddenly felt too hot, and I was acutely aware that I was the only one sweating. “It’s okay if you don’t feel the same way,” I said in an attempt to recover the moment. “I don’t expect you to say it back.”

Edward pushed off of me. His lips curled into a wicked smile.

“If I’d known that was all it took for you to profess your love, I’d have done it a long time ago.”

I groaned and covered my face to hide the flush creeping across my cheeks.

“Don’t hide,” he said as he pried my hands away. He pressed his lips to mine. The kiss was brief, but it was sweet.

Edward rolled onto his back and opened his arms. I curled my body against him, holding onto him with all my strength. I tried not to be disappointed that he didn’t return the sentiment, and as he folded his arms around me, I allowed myself to pretend that he did.

Despite trying to stay awake, exhaustion eventually won. It was just after six when I woke up. Edward was gone.

I checked my phone, but there were no messages. Edward didn’t answer when I called, so I left a voicemail and sent a text telling him to call me with an update on Emmett.

I tried to be productive, but I couldn’t focus on anything. The laundry was half done, and the kitchen was a mess. The television droned on in the background. As

the hours passed, I grew more and more uneasy. I called Edward again; once again he didn't answer.

Why did he bother having a phone if he wasn't going to use it? He had to know I was going insane. Would it be so difficult for him to reach out?

Fear clouded my mind. What if something went wrong? And if it did, what would be so bad that he couldn't call?

Maybe he was on his way to deliver the bad news in person. That Emmett didn't survive. Or that he killed someone on the hunt.

What if he hurt Edward?

I refused to let my mind wander down that path. Edward's lack of communication wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

Perhaps he had his hands full transporting Emmett to Alaska. I had assumed I'd see him again before they left. We didn't even say a proper goodbye.

It was entirely possible Edward was avoiding me after last night's confession, though I didn't want to believe he'd be so cruel.

Just as I considered making the two-hour drive back to the house, my phone rang. I scrambled to grab it, my anxiety spiking when I saw it was from an unknown local number.

"Hello?"

"Bella?"

The voice didn't sound like Emmett's. It was deeper, smoother, yet somehow it was undeniably his. It surprised me he had a voice at all after what he sounded like yesterday morning.

"Em? Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Emmett, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. It's over now." He sounded as exhausted as I felt.

"Are you still in pain?"

"No. I mean, my throat is on fire. Like, the morning after too much tequila and super fire hot wings at the bar on fire. I guess that's normal, though."

"Did you hunt already?"

“Yeah. It was insane.” Wonder laced Emmett’s voice, and I smiled as I pictured him telling me the story with wide, excited eyes. “I took down a deer by myself. Not even with a gun—with my bare hands! I didn’t even need to think about it. It’s instinct or whatever. And I ran so fast. Like, stupid fast. I jumped over a ravine that was at least fifty feet wide. I wish you could have seen it.”

“That sounds really cool, Em.” I was happy to hear him so excited, but I couldn’t deny that it stung to know he was moving on with life, experiencing things I couldn’t be a part of, while I had to live my life without him. “Did you talk to Edward?”

A good ten seconds passed before Emmett spoke. I held my breath, unsure how he would respond. I was too tired to fight, and I didn’t want to anger him. He had enough to deal with today.

“Yeah.” He didn’t sound pleased about it. I had no idea what Edward might have said. I didn’t know if they talked about their past or me, or just what had happened to him three days ago. “It was weird. He’s normal. They all are.” Emmett sounded surprised. I fought the urge to tell him I told you so.

“It was my decision, you know. I told Edward to save you.” It was hard to know what to say without having heard Edward’s side. I didn’t know if he would be honest with Emmett or shoulder all the blame himself. “Are you okay with what you are?”

“Am I okay with being a vampire?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not gonna lie, Bella. It’s going to be a hard adjustment. I don’t want to move away or leave you on your own. But if my only other option was death?” He blew out a deep breath. “I’ll happily take this life.”

I scrubbed at my eyes, wiping away tears of relief. All I wanted was for Emmett to be okay with it. To not hate me or Edward for what we’d done. “So you and Edward are getting along?”

“We haven’t talked much, but . . . he told me what happened to our parents. Everyone has been really accepting. I think I’ll like it here. Or, well, Alaska.” There was another long pause. “You know they’re moving me there, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” I took a shaky breath. “I miss you already.”

“I miss you too, but you can call me whenever you want. I won’t have much else going on for a while.”

For the first time, I wondered what became of Emmett’s phone—if it survived the attack and the elements, or if I should get him a replacement. “Whose number is this?”

“Oh, it’s mine. Carlisle bought me a new phone.”

“Is it a flip phone?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

“Carlisle thought it would be a good idea to get a new number. He said people from my old life shouldn’t be able to reach me anymore. Other than you, of course. You’re safe, because you already know about vampires, but even if you didn’t, there’s no way in hell they could keep me from contacting you.”

It was thoughtful of Carlisle to get Emmett a new phone so soon, especially if I was the only person he could call. When Edward said they would take care of him, I didn’t realize they’d be so thorough.

“Oh, hey, want to see something badass?” Emmett asked.

The call disconnected before I could respond. When my phone rang again, it was a video call. I swiped to accept it, and Emmett’s face popped up on the screen. The first thing I noticed was his pale skin. It was weird to see him without a tan. Even this time of year, he still had a healthy glow from the previous summer. I smiled, happy to see he was alive and okay with my own eyes.

“Check this out.” Emmett grinned broadly. At first, I couldn’t figure out what he wanted me to see. Then he wiggled his brows, drawing my attention to his blood-red eyes.

“What the hell?”

I had seen Edward’s eyes the deepest black, the lightest of amber, and every shade in between. But I’d never seen them red. It was eerie, like a video filter gone wrong.

“Isn’t it fucking awesome?” Emmett asked.

It was fucking terrifying, but if he was excited about it, I wasn’t going to burst his bubble. “Wow, Em. That’s . . . great.”

“I know, right?” He giggled as he looked at himself on the video. “Rosie said it’s my body processing my own blood, and I’ll look like this for the first year.”

“Rosie?” If Emmett noticed the distaste in my voice, he didn’t let it show. He was still smiling, thrilled to have red eyes.

“Yeah, she’s been really helpful today. And she was there for me when . . . well, you know. I don’t remember much aside from the pain, but she stayed with me the whole time, holding my hand. She was like a beautiful angel, guiding me to my next life.”

Any jealousy I’d felt was quickly replaced by the urge to gag. Emmett glanced away from the phone. His entire face lit up.

“Speaking of my angel, I have to go.”

I couldn’t help the way my face fell. I’d just gotten him back, and he was ditching me for his new vampire girlfriend already.

Emmett noticed.

“Don’t be sad, Bella. I’m okay. Everything will work out.”

I nodded, afraid I’d cry if I opened my mouth.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m just really going to miss you,” I admitted through a sob. “A year is a long time.”

“I know, but it’ll be over before you know it.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ll be off having an adventure in the Alaskan wilderness while I’m here all alone.”

I didn’t want to let my pain show. The next year wouldn’t be easy for Emmett, either, and I could hardly complain to him about it when it was my actions that changed the course of his life.

I reminded myself this was the price we all had to pay to save him.

“And after that, you know you can’t come home, right? You’ll have a new life with them, and I’ll still be here.”

“Bella.” Emmett’s voice was sad. I could see the concern behind his red eyes. “Don’t get stuck in that dumb town for the rest of your life. I know you only stayed there for me. This is your chance to get out. Sell the house. Keep the money. I won’t

need it anymore. You can literally go anywhere in the world. Be whatever you want to be.”

“I’m scared,” I admitted. “I’ve never been on my own. With you gone, I have nobody.”

“Bella, you’re the strongest person I know. You’re just like Mom. And it’ll be easier because you don’t have to take care of my ass anymore.”

“You took care of me, too,” I reminded him.

“I still will. I might not be there, but I’ll find a way. Alright?”

I nodded and sniffled.

Emmett glanced off camera again. Though the sadness in his eyes remained, he gave me a soft smile. “Time for me to go to Alaska.” Excitement filled his voice, and I forced myself to smile in return. He would love it there. “We’ll talk every day, okay? Call me whenever you want.”

“Okay.”

“Love you, Bella.”

“Love you, too.”

I waited for Emmett to disconnect the call before dissolving into sobs.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE LAST OF THE DAY'S SUN peeked through the trees while I sat on the fallen branch beneath the tree fort. My parents smiled up at me from their wedding photo, immortalized in my locket. I snapped it closed and rubbed my thumb over the engraved flower on the front, feeling how the metal had worn over time.

I wondered what they would say if they were here with me. What I wouldn't do to hear Mom's advice one last time, or for Dad to make a joke so ridiculous that I'd giggle no matter the circumstances. I'd love to see their faces if they found out vampires existed. Emmett had been right that first day, seven weeks ago. Dad would have built that cage right alongside him.

One thing was for sure. They wouldn't want me to stay here and mope. They would tell me to make the best of the situation, to find what made me happy and go for it.

The only problem was Edward made me happy, and he was busy escorting my brother across North America.

The next year would be difficult. I'd miss Emmett terribly. After that, nothing would be as it was. Normal no longer existed for us. But that was part of life. I never wanted to spend my life living with Emmett. There was more for me out there.

Edward was different, though. We could finally be together without hiding, and now he was gone. I didn't know how I'd survive a year without him. Sure, he would visit, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to be around him more, not less.

My biggest fear was that he wouldn't come back. That after a year with his family, he would realize how much he missed them, and I would be forgotten.

After all, he never proclaimed his love for me. There was no grand gesture before he left.

He didn't even bother saying goodbye.

About one thing I was absolutely positive. If Edward still wanted me, I would never let him go.

A chill settled in the air as the sun fell below the horizon. I wished I could stay outside all night. Out here, I could pretend I wasn't alone. I could pretend that Emmett was inside watching television and Edward was waiting to crawl through my window.

Begrudgingly, I made my way back to the house. I must have left on a lamp because a soft light illuminated the bay window. I opened the front door, thankful I wouldn't be walking into a dark room.

"You really should lock your door. Otherwise anyone with a murder shack could wander in here."

I gasped, my hand flying to my chest as I whirled toward the voice.

"Edward!" I rushed across the room and threw my arms around his neck. Edward pulled me against him, lifting me off the ground. He breathed in deeply before letting out a contented sigh. "Emmett said you were leaving. I thought you'd be halfway to Canada by now."

"You thought I'd leave without saying goodbye?"

I shrugged helplessly as he set me back on my feet. It was exactly what I thought. "What are you still doing here?"

"Carlisle, Rosalie, and Alice took Emmett in the fastest car they own. I helped Esme and Jasper pack. It will take a few days for them to get everything in order."

"So you're leaving with them?"

A smile spread across his face. He appeared happy—lighter than I'd seen him in days. "I'm not going to Alaska."

“What?”

I let my arms fall from his shoulders as he cradled my head in his hands.

“I’m staying here with you.”

Though I heard his words, I didn’t allow my hopes to rise. It was his responsibility to help Emmett; he’d said so himself. As much as I didn’t want to lose him, he couldn’t abandon my brother.

“Does Emmett know that yet?”

Edward leaned closer. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It was his idea.”

I searched his face for any sign of deceit. His smile widened.

“Are you serious?”

Edward nodded.

I laughed and then choked back a sob. “You’re serious!” I didn’t wait for a response before flinging myself into his arms again. “Why? How?” After everything that happened, I couldn’t imagine a universe in which Emmett wanted Edward to stay here with me.

“After your phone conversation, he was concerned about you being alone. I told him I had every intention of returning throughout the year, and after grilling me about my intentions, he demanded I stay and take care of you.”

“Your intentions?”

“Emmett worried I was only with you to provoke him. I assured him that wasn’t the case.”

I couldn’t believe it. It was one thing for Emmett to accept our relationship, but I never would have expected him to tell Edward to stay with me. It was more than I could have asked for, especially this soon.

“He doesn’t hate you?” I asked, hopeful Emmett would come around quickly if he hadn’t already.

“No. He’s uncertain about me. I’m not at all who he thought I was. He doesn’t trust me, necessarily, but he’s willing to start over.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I was afraid he might try to hurt you.”

“Well, he did threaten me.” Edward paused. I released him from my arms and waited for him to elaborate. “He told me in no uncertain terms that he would kill

me if I ever hurt you. And he probably could. Your brother will be a force to be reckoned with, even after his newborn strength is gone.”

I couldn't contain the grin spreading across my face. Emmett got to instill the fear of god in my boyfriend after all, just like Dad would have done.

“Should I be concerned that you're smiling?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I'm just happy you're here.”

And then I showed him just how happy I was.

Though it wasn't the first time Edward had been in my bed, it was the first time he'd been there with the bedroom door wide open. We weren't concerned about being overheard or caught. It was just the two of us, and as I lay there in his arms, I knew it was the only place I wanted to be.

“So . . .” Edward was the first to break the silence. He drew a lazy pattern on my arm with his fingertips, and I snuggled closer, comforted by the familiarity of his silent chest. “Emmett is on his way to Alaska. I'm here to stay. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

“I don't even know. I'm so overwhelmed. But I had some ideas today.”

“Anything you'd like to share?”

“Well.” I propped myself up on my elbow. Edward studied me with his liquid honey eyes. “I'm already registered for fall courses, and it's probably too late to apply to U-Dub. I was thinking I'd finish my generals this year and sell the house in the spring.”

“And move where?”

I dropped my eyes, feeling slightly embarrassed. I hoped he didn't think my idea was silly.

“That depends on where you bring Emmett next. I know it won't be safe to stay with him,” I said as Edward drew a sharp breath, cutting him off before he could object, “but I still want to be close. I could look at colleges there, too. Even if it took me an extra year to move and get enrolled, I should still graduate by the time you plan to move again.”

Edward stared up at the ceiling, appearing lost in thought, his fingers still tracing invisible lines on my exposed skin.

“And then what? You would uproot your life every four or five years to follow Emmett?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Edward’s eyes shifted to my face again, and I wondered if he could see my blush in the moonlight.

“I wasn’t sure what you planned to do. I didn’t know if you would want to live with your family again.”

“I don’t.” There was no hesitation, no doubt in his voice.

“Okay, then. Where would you want to go?”

Edward studied me for a long moment. As usual, his expression gave away nothing. “You would follow me?”

“I was thinking it would be more of a . . . together type thing.”

Edward pushed up onto his elbow, mirroring my position. “Do you want to be with me?”

“Yes,” I answered with certainty.

“Really be with me?”

“More than anything.”

His eyes drifted to my lips and then my neck. A smile threatened at the corners of his mouth. Excitement flashed in his eyes as they met mine once again.

“Be *like* me?”

My breath caught.

“A vampire?”

Until this moment, I’d never considered it as an option. I wasn’t sick and dying or maimed beyond recognition. The choice to become a vampire was a major decision. If I were positive Edward was serious about us, I’d be willing to make the commitment, but I didn’t want to change the entire course of my life only for him to grow tired of me after a few years.

“Sorry to be so blasé about ending your life, but it does solve a few problems.”

“What problems?” I asked.

“For one, I wouldn’t have to worry about your brother killing you.” Edward tangled his fingers in my hair and pulled me closer. “Two, I wouldn’t have to worry

about killing you myself, and three—” He ghosted his lips across mine. “It’s the only way I can keep you forever.”

“Forever?”

Edward captured my lips with his, and I closed my eyes, savoring his taste and his proximity and the idea of forever.

“I do love you, Bella. You are everything to me. I’m sorry if I don’t show it in a way you understand.”

Butterflies danced in my stomach, filling me with hope for the future. Edward loved me. I wanted nothing more than to be with him, to be like him. To touch him whenever and however I pleased. Never having to worry about his control. Never having to be separated from him again.

“I take it that’s a no.” For as infallible as his ego could be, the dejection in his voice surprised me.

“Why do you assume that?”

“Well, for starters, you’re constantly telling me not to bite you.”

I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed with every ounce of strength I possessed. “Do you really mean it? Forever?”

“Every single day of forever.”

“Then yes,” I said. Edward blew out a breath, and with it, the tension left his body. He returned my hug as he melted into me. “I want to be like you.”

Edward hummed and pressed his mouth to my throat. I braced myself for the pain, fighting against my instinct for self-preservation. This time, I refused to tell him not to bite me.

The atmosphere in the kitchen felt completely different from the last morning Edward was here. I filled a mug from the half-pot of coffee I made and joined him at the table.

“Not to sound overeager, but what sort of timeline are you thinking for your change?”

“To be honest, I was waiting for you to do it last night.”

Every time Edward's lips had met my neck, I prepared myself for his bite. He was all too aware, teasing me, nipping the air next to my flesh. It was scary. Thrilling. I wanted him to get it over with. At the same time, I wanted to delay. Memories of Emmett danced in my mind. I'd never be ready for the pain.

"This isn't an ideal location. You're far enough away from neighbors that no one will hear, but the proximity to town makes it tricky. You'll need to hunt right away, and we can't do that here."

"Okay." It was surreal to be having this conversation, as though we were discussing something completely normal, like the weather. Not my impending death and rebirth. "Where would you suggest?"

"Ideally somewhere we could stay, at least for a few months. Most of our properties aren't secluded enough, save for the one in Alaska, but I can't exactly bring you there now, can I?"

"It's probably a bad idea to spring a leak around the newborn."

Edward chuckled. "Exactly."

"Why don't we go somewhere else in Alaska? There must be somewhere near your family where we could have privacy for three days. Then at least we'd have somewhere to live for the next year."

"I suppose it's not a terrible idea." Edward didn't sound like he was on board. The way his lips turned down told me he thought it was, in fact, a terrible idea. "Is it something you're ready to do now? I'll understand if you want to wait. Finish college first. I could enroll with you."

"I thought you didn't want to be around large groups of people."

Edward shrugged. "I don't, but I'd be willing to sacrifice for a year or two."

"To learn? Or to make sure no one hits on me?"

Edward pursed his lips and stared at me. I crossed my arms over my chest. Finally, he shrugged, laughing under his breath. "You know me all too well."

"I don't want to wait that long. I want to do it as soon as possible."

"I'll talk to Carlisle and set a date. Perhaps he has somewhere he'd prefer to go."

Edward's mention of Carlisle threw me off. I'd assumed Edward would be the one to change me.

"Carlisle?" I asked, suddenly nervous.

“His control is impeccable. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t want some stranger biting me.”

“Don’t romanticize it, Bella. It’s not a big deal. I’ll be by your side the entire time.”

“It’s a big deal to me.” I didn’t want to be dragged to the middle of nowhere for someone else to bite me while Edward looked on. Becoming a vampire was my choice. It was a very personal decision. No one else needed to be a part of it. “I want you to be the one to do it.”

“I’m not strong enough. Your blood—”

“Of course you are. You changed Emmett!”

Edward’s jaw ticked as he narrowed his eyes. “That’s different and you know it.”

I knew my blood was more of a temptation for him, but that didn’t stop me from thinking the worst. “You don’t want to be tied to me like that?”

“That’s not it at all.”

“You don’t want to take responsibility for me?”

“No, Bella! If I kill you, I’ll never forgive myself. You won’t have to live with my mistake, I will.” Edward punctuated his words with a sharp jab to his chest. “It’s a miracle you’re still alive as it is. I don’t want to tempt fate.”

“If you’re worried about killing me, then maybe you don’t want me badly enough.” I knew it was a low blow, but I had just as much say in this as he did.

Edward’s face fell. “I wouldn’t have offered it if I didn’t want you.”

“Then be the one to change me. I don’t want anyone else there. Just you and me.”

Edward remained silent. He rested his elbows on the table and scrubbed his hands over his face.

I refused to give in. If Edward wasn’t ready to change me, I could wait longer. I would go ahead with my plan to complete my generals and sell the house in the spring. Once he was ready, I wouldn’t hesitate to let him change me.

“Just you and me?” he asked at last. I nodded. “I’ll make you a deal.” I leaned forward in my chair, eager to hear his compromise. “We can go to Alaska for the first year, but I want to stay in a place of our own. After that, promise me it will just

be the two of us. We can visit your brother as often as you'd like, but I want us to have our own life, separate from the others. If you will agree to that, I'll change you myself."

"Okay."

"Okay?" Edward seemed surprised by my eager acceptance. "You're sure?"

"You're all I need," I promised. "How soon can we do it?"

A week later, we were on our way to Alaska. Everything we needed for the next year was crammed into my car. Edward navigated from memory, despite my offering to check my phone for the fastest route.

"You're just jealous 'cause your phone can't do that."

"My phone doesn't need to. Photographic memory."

"What if the roads have changed?"

"Then I'll use common sense."

I queued up a map anyway.

Nothing about this situation felt real. It wasn't until we crossed the Canadian border that it hit me.

By next week, I'd be a vampire. The life I'd lived for the past 19 years was ending. In its place, I'd get to spend an eternity with the man I loved. Three days of suffering seemed like a small price to pay when I thought of it that way.

Not wanting to dwell on the impending pain too much, I exited the map and Facetimed Emmett to let him know we were on the road.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Emmett asked. Concern was etched on his face, his red eyes sad. "You're not doing it because of me, are you?"

"No, Em. I want to be with Edward forever."

"He isn't pressuring you, is he? Hey! I know you can hear me, buddy," he said louder.

Next to me, Edward stifled a laugh.

Emmett's concern for me didn't dampen my spirits.

“I want this,” I assured him. “You told me I could be anything. This is what I’ve chosen.”

“Fine,” Emmett sighed. “When are you selling the house?”

“Edward wants us to keep it. He said it would be a good option if anyone needed to escape for a little while.”

“Hmm . . .” Emmett grinned as he nodded. “Some privacy does sound good right about now.”

“Gross, Em. I don’t want to think about you and *Rosie* needing privacy.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to think about what you and Edward did all those nights he crept in through your window while I was sleeping down the hall.”

I felt my face grow hot. “You weren’t always sleeping,” I mumbled.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Edward shaking in silent laughter. Emmett made a face of disgust.

“You let me know if you ever want me to kick his ass.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I will.” Emmett grinned again, and I couldn’t help smiling in return. “I’ll see you in a couple of weeks, okay?”

“Good luck, Bella.”

I blew him a kiss before ending the call.

“I know Emmett threatened punishment of death upon you hurting me, but if Rosalie breaks his heart, *I’m* going to kick *her* ass.”

Edward smiled and shook his head.

“What?” I asked.

“Vampires have powerful emotions. Once we are passionate about something, it rarely changes. If they love each other now, they’ll love each other forever.”

I let the full meaning of Edward’s words sink in as he threaded our fingers together and brought my hand to his lips.

The cabin Edward rented was small. It reminded me of the murder shack, only it had electricity and running water. I took a couple of days to unpack and decompress after the long drive, and Edward used the additional time to hunt.

Unfortunately, with no amenities nearby, my last meal consisted of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a granola bar.

Edward sniffed the peanut butter jar before grimacing. “The scent of this actually makes animal blood seem appetizing.”

This time, it was my turn to grimace. The idea of drinking blood made me queasy. Edward had assured me I wouldn’t feel the same way after the change. All I could do was take his word for it.

Edward wiped a smudge of peanut butter off my lips before kissing me. “Don’t worry. After you drink a few deer, you’ll grow to love it.”

“Who said anything about drinking animal blood? I’m going to *omnomnom* some humans.”

Edward raised his eyebrows in blatant disbelief.

“What? Abstaining from human blood wasn’t part of your deal.”

His mouth fell open. “Bella—”

“Oh, my god, Edward. I’m kidding!”

He growled, a low rumble in the back of his throat, and pulled me into his arms. A fire burned behind his golden eyes. “It’s all fun and games until you *omnomnom* someone.”

“I’m coming for your track record.”

“Good.”

Later that night, I showered one last time before putting on comfortable clothes. I took a long look in the bathroom mirror, knowing the next time I saw my reflection, my entire life would be different.

Edward waited for me in the bedroom. He took one look at my purple sweatpants and groaned. “Not those again.”

“I want to be comfortable.”

“Not that I want to scare you away, but nothing will make the next three days comfortable.”

“Well, I’m still going to wear them.”

“Fine, but once you lose track of reality, I’m taking them off.” As I crawled into bed, Edward noticed my t-shirt. “Is this mine?” he asked, fisting the fabric. “That’ll be two shirts destroyed now.”

I silenced his complaints with my lips. Edward rolled me onto my back. He forged a path of burning kisses down my neck. I relaxed, enjoying the sensation, not knowing if it was something I'd experience again.

"For the record, I take back what I said about never having sex with you again if you bite me."

"I knew you found me irresistible." Edward laughed as the tip of his tongue traced along my jaw. "You kissed me first, after all."

"Yeah, because I'm such a prude."

"No, you're a tease. Maybe I'll keep you in this bed for the next year to make up for it."

"How will you keep me here if I'm stronger than you?"

"I'll tie you down."

"With what?"

Edward's eyes glinted with mischief. "Titanium alloy, laced with silver. Obviously."

"Then I guess I'll pretend to be trapped here."

"Trust me. By the time I'm done with you, you won't want to leave."

"Who said you get to be in charge? If I remember correctly, you promised *I* could ravage *you* one day."

"I'm all yours." His face grew serious. "I don't care what you do with me, as long as you keep me."

"Forever?"

Edward smiled. "Forever."

"Will you miss anything about me?"

"I rather enjoy your warmth. And being able to do this." Edward pressed his open mouth to my neck and sucked. I squirmed beneath him.

"You are *not* sending me into immortality with a hickey."

Edward released my skin with a pop. "It won't stay."

I ran my thumb over his pouting lips. "Are you ready for this?" I asked.

"I should be asking you that."

I rolled my eyes at him and rephrased my question. "How's your control?"

“I thought a lot about what you said—that if I was worried about killing you, I didn’t want you badly enough. You were right. As much as I want your blood, I want to spend eternity with you even more.”

I took a shaky breath. “As long as you’re sure. We can wait if you’re not ready.”

“Not trying to back out, are you?” Edward’s voice was playful, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“No.” I took his face in my hands. It was hard not to get lost in the depths of his amber eyes. “I want this. I want you.”

Edward trailed his fingers down my neck, stopping at my locket. He pulled it over my head, careful to keep the chain from tangling in my hair, and dropped it onto the nightstand. With a gentle push, he guided me onto my back and brushed his palm across my chest, pausing above my heart.

“I’ve wanted you in every way imaginable since I first laid eyes on you,” he admitted. “Every second spent with you never feels like enough. I never dared to dream of the moment when I could finally make you mine. I love you, Bella.”

“I love you,” I said.

Edward lowered himself onto me. I parted my legs, and he shifted to settle between them, pinning me to the bed.

“You’re ready now?”

“I’m ready.”

He nudged my cheek with his nose. I turned my head to the side, exposing my neck.

“Right now?” His cool breath fanned across my skin. I shivered involuntarily, inhaling his scent as I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him tighter.

“Yes.”

I felt him smile as his lips pressed against my flesh.

“Don’t scream,” Edward said in a low, seductive whisper. “It ruins all the fun.” And then he plunged his teeth into my neck.

The End

Author's Note

First, thank you so much for reading this story (**yes, you!**). It still amazes me that after all these years I can write about the same two idiots and bring enjoyment to so many people. Also, a very special thanks to everyone who reviewed, sent me messages privately, or talked about this story on FB threads. Your support means the world to me.

Second, super big thanks to **Liv** and **Butts** for allowing me to force them to be pre-readers. Every time I sent them a new chapter, I waited with bated breath afraid they would tell me it was hot garbage. They did not. And if you made it this far, hopefully you agree. Also I want to give a shout out to **Paige** for pimping this story on FB with each chapter. She's an awesome cheerleader.

When I started writing this story, it was the first time I'd written since AB Negative went on hiatus. I'd been through a couple of major life changes and moved twice. I thought my writing days were far behind me. Then COVID happened and I found myself spending a lot of time at home alone. It felt weird to write again, but it felt good. Like a warm hug from an old friend.

I wrote the first part (Bella's first POV), but I couldn't in good conscience start posting it without finishing ABN, so I focused on that story until it was done. I told

myself I wouldn't post MBPV until it was complete, and then immediately turned around and posted the first chapter, as you do.

The story was supposed to be short. I estimated around 20k words. I just had to find a way to make Edward come back and change her. But then the story developed a mind of its own and here we are 90k words later.

I know a lot of you are sad that it ended here, and I guess that means I did my job. Leave 'em wanting more, right? A lot of people made comments about wanting to see Bella and Edward reunited with Emmett and the rest of the Cullens and live happily ever after. To that, all I can say is ultimately this is a story about Bella and Edward. Their conflicts are resolved, and I felt him biting her was the perfect place for the story to end. Fear not, they will go on to have their own small piece of forever.