F.B.I agents Edward Cullen and Emmett McCarty rely on psychologist Bella Swan to help them solve their most complicated cases. But when a new case exposes the secret that Bella has kept hidden, can Edward save her before it is too late?

Notes

This is my first story and I admit I am nervous about posting it.

The plot of this story has been running around in my head for years, I guess it took these characters to finally inspire me to put it on paper with a twilight spin.

There is a slight supernatural quality to Bella, but she is still very much human as are all the other characters. I am a hopeless romantic, so of course this is an Edward and Bella story. There is also a lot of mystery and I like to try to build the suspense, but I am a believer in a HEA. ;)

I own nothing that has to do with the wonderful creation that is twilight. All rights belong to Stephanie Meyer. I am not associated with the franchise and no copyright infringement is intended. I am just thankful for the chance to play with the characters a bit. The original aspects of this story belong to me.

Thank-you to PTB and betas TDS88 and babykay18 for the words of wisdom and keeping me on track with my commas!

Here we go! This chapter is very short, and simply sets the stage. Other chapters will be longer.
See the end of the work for more notes.
"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." Edgar Allan Poe

There are moments in life that don't make sense; moments you will never be ready for, that seemingly come out of nowhere. I guess everyone deals with them in their own way: some run, some fight, others cry…but me…maybe it's my mind, the one that has always been just left of center, but when faced with this moment, my vision blurs and life becomes a carnival of lights. Colors twist and turn with a melody of a carousel playing in the background, one that is a bit off tune. Part of me wonders at the weird beauty of it all, while another part is still trying to make sense of the person I see in front of me, the person I watched die, the person I believed was the love of my life. How can this be? I think as the colors finally blur to black.
Chapter 1: Yellow Brick Road

Months earlier.....

"Bella, you're finally here! What took you so long?" Emmett says rushing towards me, the exasperation clear on his face. It always amazes me how quick he is for such a large man.

Emmett McCarty is about 6'7" and 250 pounds of pure muscle. He and his partner have been my primary associates at the FBI for the past three years. Emmett's size intimidates most people who come into contact with him, which works to our advantage in this field. However, underneath the muscle is a guy with a huge heart and an infectious love of life. It is impossible to avoid being drawn in by his warm and humorous nature. I am lucky to work so closely with him because those qualities help to offset the dark side of humanity we experience during our cases.

Today, the humor in Emmett is gone, his face is worn and pale, while his body is stiff and on edge. It makes me wonder what I am getting myself into by coming in today as a favor to him.

"Well hello to you too," I state sarcastically.

This is the welcome I get after being called in on my day off?"

I hope our typical banter will bring back some of his humor as this side of Emmett leaves me feeling ill at ease.

"No time for small talk. Look, we have about two hours before we have to release the suspect unless we get more evidence to support keeping him here. The director is riding my ass on this one and wants this guy to stay locked up, so I really need you to go do that thing you do." He barely takes a breath trying to explain the situation quickly; a sign of his anxiousness.

"Thanks, Em, no pressure there. I'm not a wind-up toy you know, I don't perform on command." I huff in annoyance; my own anxiety building. Something feels wrong about this whole situation, I just can't put my finger on the reason.

"Thanks, Em, no pressure there. I'm not a wind-up toy you know, I don't perform on command." I huff in annoyance; my own anxiety building. Something feels wrong about this whole situation, I just can't put my finger on the reason.

"Come on, you know that's not how I think about you," Emmett responds with remorseful eyes, the tension continuing to roll off him. "But this is an important case and, whether you like it or not, Swan, you are my only hope at finding something to hold him over longer."

"Yeah, yeah, say it with chocolate later," I grumble as we continue to walk down the hallway. When we turn the corner and move toward the steel door, I shift into game-mode, preparing to meet my next target waiting on the other side.
"Hey, Eric, Dr. Swan's here to visit with Felix Grey. Can you buzz us through?" Emmett asks the uniformed cop monitoring the entryway.

The door swings open, and, as we walk down another long corridor, I am again struck by the depressing nature of jails. I have visited hundreds and all of them are the same: dark, cold and depressing. Not that they should be all butterflies and rainbows, but come on, when has a little color hurt anything?

Reaching our destination, I turn to Emmett to see if there is any other information I should know before going in and talking to the suspect.

"So what do I need to know here?"

"I thought you like to go in and make up your own mind. Why are you changing the rules on me?"

"I don't want all the details, Em, but I usually have a little more to go on then a phone call from you ordering me down here ASAP."

"The order was done with love." He grins, softly punching me in the shoulder. Finally a glimpse of the Emmett I know and love. With that small gesture, I feel some of the pressure ease off my chest. Maybe things are not as bad as I first thought. "Okay seriously, we are pretty sure this guy committed some major crimes but we have nothing concrete to go on. He's a suspect in an attempted break-in on a woman's apartment, Heidi Roberts. Her friends reported her missing two weeks ago. I won't get into the specifics, but we don't think this is his first rodeo, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, got it, okay let me see what I can do….so is Cullen around today?"

"Really smooth, Bella. No he is off, but don't worry, I suspect once lover boy hears we were in need of your services, he will probably show his face at any moment."

"Em," I growl "You know it's not like that. I just was curious. He doesn't care one way or the other whether I am here, believe me."

"Ha," Emmett laughs. "You just keep on telling yourself that, Swan!"

Edward Cullen, Emmett's partner and the bane of my existence. Edward is easily the best looking man I have ever met, and the trouble is that he knows it too. The word "player" is not a strong enough descriptor to portray the way Edward deals with his so-called love life. For years, I have watched his flavors of the week go in and out of his life. From my perspective, Edward loves the attention and freedom of having no romantic ties, and appears to have little regard to those who are often harmed in his wake. More times than I can count, I have overheard his frustrated voice telling a poor love-sick girl why she needs to "get over it" because they were through. The man didn't have a clue how he instantly charms those around him into falling hard.

If he was simply a jerk, I could easily chalk him up in the hot but total asshole category and move on. However, I've seen on more than one occasion the other side of Edward, which is fiercely loyal, protective, loving and at times breathtakingly vulnerable. This is the crux of my issue with Edward.

That side of Edward calls to parts of me I have tried to bury, parts that only he seems to have the key to, which both thrill and scare me at the same time. But no matter how much I long to connect with whom I hope is the real Edward, I make sure to keep my distance. I've learned nothing good comes from opening up to others, and even if I am willing to try, the last person on earth I should
trust myself with is Edward Cullen.

"Ready?" Emmett asks, bringing me back to the job at hand.

"Ready. See you on the flip side," I say as he opens the door and lets me into the interrogation room.

Like others, it is small with concrete walls and no windows. In the middle of the room is a small table with two chairs on opposite sides. On the chair furthest from me sits Felix, the reason for being dragged from my safe home. He is a large man with dark hair and even darker eyes staring at me with looks that vary from anger to lust. He is sitting still, patiently waiting for my next move. I can tell this will be a long emotional day; he will not break easily.

*Game on Felix*, I think to myself. *Let's see what secrets you carry…*
Chapter Notes

Thank-you to the team at PTB, PLLHalebSpoby and 4mejasper. They are all amazing and help continue to conquer my nemesis the comma! lol I did tweak the chapter a bit more, so any mistakes are mine. :)

I don't own anything related to Twilight, the rest is my own crazy musing.

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Chapter 2: The Sky Is Broken

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when I realized I was different. I know I was young, probably too young to fully comprehend what "different" meant. I remember knowing what people were feeling without really understanding why. Visions are what I decided to call them because I visually see the feelings of those around me expressed in colors and light.

I use to think I was psychic, but that doesn't fit either. I don't predict the future, I don't speak to the dead, and I can't move things with my mind. I just look at people and know how they feel and, in turn, what their true intentions are in the situation. Maybe I developed it through some weird Darwin survival moment as God knows my childhood was filled with ill-intentioned people. My ability was the only thing that kept me safe, kept me alive.

I tried researching what I experienced, but was never able to come up with anything specific. I read about everything from auras to empathic psychics, but nothing explained what I encountered when I look at others. I even attended a psychic fair, but after talking to lots of people who were obviously faking, I left feeling like a skeptic instead a believer, making me even more confused. Finally I decided to just accept I was different and to stop worrying about trying to label it.

As I became older, I learned to structure my ability in ways that keep me sane and in control. Picking psychology as a major was an easy choice. I certainly don't need psychological testing when I have the Bella Swan color light show playing in my head all day long. My intention was to quietly work in the private sector, conducting various types of psychological assessments, but during a fluke assignment for graduate school, I ended up shadowing a police station psychologist for a couple of weeks. This "fluke" forever changed my life because I discovered my visions are particularly clear when talking to someone with a criminal mind. Go figure, not that I wasn't freaky enough, but come to find out my freaky works best with the scum of the earth. Yeah me!

Try as I might, I could not contain myself or what's more, my mouth during those weeks. I amazed the detectives with my perception into the criminals' minds, my ability to give them insights into the case, or offer clues about where to find new evidence.

So years later here I am, Isabella Swan, forensic psychologist and human lie detector.

I keep my ability hidden, letting people believe I simply have good intuition aided by my education. I mean, how comfortable would anyone in my life be if they thought I was always able to stay one step ahead of them? In fact besides my mother, I have only shared my secret with three people, one was my savior, and the other two are Emmett and Edward.
Their inclusion was unfortunately not by choice. We had worked together for almost a year when we assisted on a serial murder case, the worst case I had dealt with at that point. The murders were horrendous in their brutality, the work of a sadistic monster. After months of chasing endless clues, the lead investigators finally caught who they thought was the killer. The director specifically requested I speak with him because, ironically, I matched the physical characteristics of his victims. He thought my presence would rattle the suspect enough to cause him to make a mistake. The director's instincts were correct, and my presence resulted in an extreme visceral reaction as soon as he saw me. However, I was not prepared for the hateful emotions projected onto me when Edward and I walked in the room.

His emotions were so intense and overwhelming that my body physically shut down in defense. I ran from the room just in time to lose all the contents of my stomach followed by a brief period of basically being catatonic, while my mind attempted to process all the stimuli. Not my best moment to say the least.

I found out later that Edward followed me out of the room and stayed with me the entire time. I have no memory of him being there, but Emmett said he refused to leave. After I "came back" from my mini-mental vacation, it was hard to explain what happened. I tried desperately to come up with any excuse I could think of from extreme stress to the flu, none of which Edward accepted. Finally in the middle of one of the many arguments we had afterward, it just came out. I don't fully understand why Edward was so invested in knowing what happened, but when he started in again to learn the truth, I reached my breaking point. We were still on the case, completely exhausted, and that combined with still being scared by what happened, I ended up blurting it out.

My revelation stunned Edward, and at first he didn't believe me, but after we talked for a while, things began to click in his head about why I was able to come up with the insights I did. He convinced me to tell Emmett, using the reasoning that I needed support and back-up if I was going to keep going in this line of work. I begrudgingly agreed, but made it clear under no circumstances would it go beyond the two of them.

Surprisingly, and to their credit, they accepted my gift fairly well. Emmett thought it was a great trick and constantly asked me to tell him what he was feeling to see if I was right. The week he bet on whether he could trick me was particularly rewarding, and after losing about two hundred dollars, he decided there was no way to fool me. For the most part, Edward treated me the same. He never asked me to "perform", and he never asked what I saw in him. If anything, the only difference I noticed was he seemed more cautious of me talking to a suspect.

The best and worst aspect of this ability is I don't get these visions from everyone. Although I have never scientifically studied it, I would guess I can sense about seventy percent of the people I come into contact with, and I have no idea what the difference is for the other thirty. The irony of it is the people I want desperately to have this ability with I usually don't, Edward Cullen being one of those examples and him being another.

Felix Grey sits across the room, evaluating me with his dark eyes, while mine start assessing him.

His stance and facial expression screamed "macho asshole", but his muted colors indicated something different. I have interviewed dozens of his kind. The empty balloon syndrome is the label my professor used in graduate school, which describes a person who on the outside appears tough or arrogant, but on the inside is nothing but insecure air.

The complicated nature of interrogating an "empty balloon" is that in order to protect themselves, these individuals are prone to extreme anger, short tempers and hated being challenged. However, once that balloon barrier comes down, it is easy to get information or a confession. My capacity to
sense emotions help me to push the target in the right direction and find the best way to dismantle the barrier. Emmett calls it our own strange version of the hot and cold game.

What can become problematic is how the balloon breaks. If I hit the right spot, it deflates slowly, the person crumbling in defeat. If I hit the wrong spot, the person explodes and usually results in an aggressive confrontation. Regardless of which route the person takes, it still works to our advantage because both tend to cause them to make a mistake and give up valuable information.

It is a grueling but successful process, and looking at Felix's smug face it becomes clear that a good game of hot and cold is all I need to break him down. Unfortunately, given I only have a couple of hours before his release, I don't have the luxury to find the right spot, I just need to pop the balloon quick.

I suddenly wish Edward is here with me. He usually ensures he is in the room when I partake in this game. I am not exactly sure why, he doesn't really show the enthusiasm Emmett does when we play it. Emmett loves to watch me systematically take a target down, it makes him almost giddy. Edward is more stoic and sits quietly in the chair next to me, watching every move the person makes, ready to intervene if needed. He's like my secret security blanket in these situations, although I will never admit it to his face.

Clear on my next move, I take a big breath and decide it is time to engage Mr. Felix Grey in some conversation.

"Hi, Mr. Grey, my name is Dr. Swan. I am a psychologist with the FBI. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Fuck you, or better yet, come over here and fuck me," Felix sneers, slowly gazing over my body while licking his lips. The sarcastic comment is not shocking, or uncommon. I cock my head to the side and look at him with a small smirk, nodding my head slightly.

"Hmm, clever, but not original, Mr. Grey. I hate to tell you, but I doubt there is anything you can say that would shock me." He snorts in disagreement and rolls his eyes opening his mouth to speak but before he attempts to articulate another disgusting retort, I shut him down by holding up my hand.

"Look, Felix, I am not easily intimidated so how about we stop this childish display and get down to business." I hold my ground as he stares me down looking for any other weakness he could attack. After a few minutes of an uncomfortable silent stand-off, Felix subtly shifts his body and eyes, his hues calming slightly, in other words, I am in.

"I am not crazy and don't need to speak to no shrink." Felix breaks first, still angry, but showing signs of being willing to talk.

"I am not here because someone thinks that you're crazy, and you don't have to speak to me if you don't want to, but from what I understand you want to get out of here so…"

"That's right!" he screams before I could finish the sentence.

"Well, the first step towards making that happen is to answer a few questions, and since you don't want to speak to an agent or police officer, they thought you might be willing to talk to me instead."

"You're not a cop?"

"Nope, no badge, just a doctorate. If you give me a few minutes of your time to answer a couple of
questions, it would probably go a long way towards you getting out here," I said in my most calm and convincing voice.

"So if I answer your questions, I get to leave?"

"I don't have control over that, but I think it would help. Look, I can tell you're a smart man, Felix, probably too smart to get yourself involved in what they are accusing you of, right?"

I am laying it on thick, but feeding his ego is my best shot at going in for the quick kill. "If you really have nothing to hide, what is it going to hurt? They just need you to cooperate, and then you can get on with your life. We can stop at anytime."

"Whatever, just get on with it already," he grumbles holding my eyes, sitting back in the chair and crossing his arms in an obvious show of annoyed arrogance.

"Great." I smile sweetly in response. Now let the fun begin.

I didn't need much as I found if the person thinks about the crime or situation, I get a clearer picture of their emotions, which usually helps lead me in the right direction. In the interest of time, instead of starting with small background questions like normal, I jump right into the heart of the matter.

"Do you know a woman by the name of Heidi Roberts?"

"No."

To the average observer Felix simply narrows his eyes and responds curtly. For me, the few seconds of interaction floods my mind with images of colored lights. He is lying about Heidi that is certain, but his emotions are indistinguishable. The hues are wrong for someone guilty of some unspeakable crime, especially more than one crime as Emmett suggested, but something is off, he's involved but his intention is murky.

"Okay, I just want to help you straighten this out. So if you don't know her, can you tell me why you were trying to get into her apartment?"

Before he responds, I am hit with an overwhelming wave of emotions. The variety of colors bombards me, making it impossible to grasp their meaning and the powerful nature of the vision disrupts my ability to concentrate. Whatever was going on with Felix was beyond Heidi Roberts. It is huge, and it is terrifying. Suddenly the colors of manipulation enter my mind making me think of Felix as being a pawn, but a pawn in what I'm not sure. I struggle to center myself, but before I can recover and regain my control, another wave of overpowering sensations engulfs me. In the mist of the emotional chaos, I make a mistake and ask him about what I am sensing.

"You're desperate," I whisper breathless. "You're desperate to save her from whatever you are in the middle of...you love her." I look up at him, surprised by my own revelation.

"What did you do, Felix?" I ask, fading under the weight of what I am experiencing. Felix's ashen face stares with wide eyes, then as quickly as I glimpse a piece of who I am certain is the real Felix, a mask of anger quickly replaces the shock.

"Who are you?" he asks in a deadly voice.

"Um," I stutter, confused by my outburst.

Never have I verbalized my revelation to a target. Jumbled colors continue to assault my senses. Desperately trying to focus, I nervously watch Felix transform; his face flushes bright red, his
knuckles clench and his teeth grind under the pressure of his jaw. This is bad.

"They sent you, didn't they?"

"No, Felix, you..."

"You tell them to go to hell!" he yells and in a flash leaps over the table, cuffs and all, knocking me to the floor. My head slams into the concrete, making the room spin and my vision blur.

"I won't do it!" He screams over and over, while shaking me, causing my head to hit the ground several more times. Time slows down and although it feels like hours, within seconds, Emmett bursts in the door, lifts Felix off me and slams him into the adjacent wall in one motion.

"You Fucker!" Emmett roars. Chaos ensues as other agents and officers file into the room, some try to pull Emmett off of Felix, others try to subdue Felix who is still screaming at me, while others rush over to make sure I am okay.

I feel physically frozen, not only from what I am sure is a concussion, but also due to the emotions flowing out of Felix, none of which make any sense and only add to my trepidation. Seeing my struggle, Emmett finally releases Felix to the other agents, and picking me up, carries me from the frenzyed scene.

Walking quickly past concerned and shocked onlookers, Emmett rushes me through the steel doors and into the safety of an empty office.

"God damn, Bells. Are you okay?" he asks kneeling down in front of me as I sit gently on a chair.

"I would love to say yes, but I think I need a doctor, my head is killing me," I whisper trying not to pass out.

"Shit, okay, okay...", he mutters. "Let's get you to a hospital. Did you bring anything with you?" I shake my head and wince as pain shoots through my skull. Emmett notices my discomfort which only fuels his anxiousness. "Shit, shit, shit okay, let's go."

If I could laugh I would, Emmett who can lead a charge into any dangerous situation, is falling apart over a head wound. I am going to give him such a hard time once the room stops spinning.

Emmett gently picks me up and carries me through the building. He quietly talks to a couple of people on our way out, but I don't pay attention to any of the details as I am desperately trying not to lose my lunch all over Emmett's shirt. We quickly make it to his car and he eases me into the seat while buckling me in. I lay my head on the cool glass searching for relief from the pain as Emmett starts the car, and quickly pulls out of the parking lot.

"What the hell happened, Bella?"

"I don't know, Em, but it's bad," I mumble as the world mercifully fades away.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time when Edward will finally make his entrance.
Chapter 3: After the Fall

Welcome back! Thank-you to everyone who have shown an interest in this story. There is lots of mystery still to unfold, but for now we finally meet Edward.

Thank-you to the PTB team, especially Betas GetDrunkOnVictory and sweetishbubble for their support. The PTB team is awesome to work with and I appreciate all they do. :)

Sadly I don't own anything in the Twilight universe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: After the Fall

Time loses all meaning.

"Bella? Bella? Come on, Bells, don't do this to me."

I am floating, weightless, free.

"TBI due to assault with elevated intracranial pressure."

Consciousness ebbs and flows like waves in the ocean.

"BELLA! What the fuck happened? Will she be okay?"

I don't understand what's going on.

"Sir, you're not allowed in here."

Past and present collide, I am losing track of my reality.

"Bella, don't leave me..."

The sun shines overhead, adding to the bright colors already vibrant in the sunflower field. This is my favorite spot to sit and think, the innate beauty making it easy to find my balance again. I inhale deeply and breathe in the fresh, floral smell. It reminds me of earth and honey. This feels like home.

"It's been a while since you found the time to come back here." I turn and look at my mother sitting next to me. Her colors rival the vibrant nature of the field. I have never met anyone else with colors like hers.

"Well, you know life gets in the way." I look back towards the field, trying to capture the memory knowing my time here is short. I feel my mom reach over and grab my hand.

"My sweet, sweet, Isabella; you can't run forever."
Without warning, grey clouds mute the brightness of the sun, and the sound of distant thunder rumbles through the valley.

"Our past always catches up with us, whether we want it to or not." She leans over to kiss my head before standing up and walking away.

"Be careful, Isabella, there's a storm coming."

Things slowly come into focus as I awaken from a fog. There is soft light coming through my eyelids, and a constant ache in my head. Not quite ready to fully open my eyes, I try to put the pieces together. Confusion turns to panic until I hear two familiar, hushed voices talking somewhere close. The tone of the conversation intensifies, and through my cloudy brain, I recognize the beginning of an argument between my partners.

"I still don't understand what the hell you were thinking sending her in there alone. She's not a trained agent, Emmett, no matter how tough she acts!"

"This is getting old, Edward; you have to stop attacking me. It won't change what happened! Look, I get it okay, I messed up, but she's fine."

"Fine? Look at her! Does she look fine to you? She could have died! I swear to god if....."

"Stop it." My voice is hoarse with lack of use, and my throat feels like sandpaper.

"Bella." I hear a voice sigh in relief. "Bella, can you open your eyes?"

Blinking a few times, I come around, and see Edward looking down at me with a brilliant smile.

"There you are. I didn't think you would ever open those beautiful brown eyes." I stare in confusion wondering how long I was unconscious.

"How long have I been out?"

"Almost two days. Don't ever do this again, do you hear me?" His voice wavers while his fingers drag through his hair, a common Edward gesture when he's stressed.

"Believe me, it wasn't by choice," I retort.

Anger flashes across his face causing a strange sensation to run through my body. I must still be feeling out of sorts from my ordeal, I think, hypothesizing on the reason for the physical response.

"So what exactly is the damage?" I ask trying to sit up, but as soon as I move, waves of dizziness and pain hit me. "Whoa, that does not feel good."

"Jesus, Bella, don't move. You have a serious head injury. Take it easy for fuck sake!"

"I just wanted to sit up," I complain. "God what has you so cranky? Did my little adventure interfere with your dating schedule?" Something akin to pain flickers in his eyes before narrowing and staring me down.

"Sorry, but waiting to hear whether you were going to live or die has me a bit on edge. Excuse me for caring."

His abrupt response forces me to take a mental step back. Edward is always so composed, even during our worst cases; he is the rock, the one who holds it all together. Standing in front of me is a
man with wrinkled clothes, and a couple of days worth of scruff on his face. However, it is the haunted look in his eyes that really throws me off-balance. I don't recognize this Edward. Guilt engulfs me, and I decide to quickly get "bitchy" Bella under control.

"I'm sorry, that wasn't fair. I guess I'm still processing, and apparently not doing a very good job of it." I smile shyly, trying to disrupt the friction. He looks at me for a moment, before nodding his head. Whether it's in agreement or acceptance of my apology, I'm not sure. Instead of focusing on the uncomfortable tension, I do what I do best and deflect to something else.

"So head injury, huh? Care to fill me in on the details?"

Before Edward can respond, Emmett bursts in the door bringing with him a person whom I assume is my doctor.

"Dr. Swan, welcome back. My name is Dr. Crowley, I'm the doctor assigned to your case. You gave us quite a scare, young lady."

Dr. Crowley is a pleasant looking gentleman, with salt and pepper hair. I like him already as his colors of warmth and calm surround me. He starts asking the standard questions for someone who has experienced a head trauma, and after quizzing me on the date, place, time, and president of the United States, he moves to the physical side of the check up. I sit patiently through the usual blood pressure, temperature, and pulse checks, however when he moves to touch my head, I wince back in pain.

Edward winces along with me as he paces back and forth, waiting for the doctor's assessment. I've never seen him so protective, and when Dr. Crowley touches a particularly tender spot, Edward actually reprimands him.

As soon as the threat leaves his lips, the color of fear overpowers Dr. Crowley, letting me know Edward has chastised the good doctor before. Blame it on dizziness, but for whatever reason seeing the quick change in emotions makes me giggle. Dr. Crowley is a wimp.

Neither Edward nor the doctor understand my laughter causing both look at me strangely. My peculiar reaction results in a new round of check-up questions, which luckily I pass. Once satisfied, Dr. Crowley pulls a chair over to the bed to talk further.

"Okay, let's discuss what's going on with you and then I will answer any questions you have, sound good?" I nod my head gently. "Alright, you came in with a severe head trauma. During your initial evaluation, we determined you sustained a skull fracture most likely from the multiple hits you took during your attack."

Off to the side, I hear a strangled sound. Turning, I see Edward holding the railing of my bed, his knuckles turning white under the pressure.

"Edward? What's wrong?" He snaps his astonished eyes over to mine.

"What's wrong? Bella you're in a hospital bed because some asshole decided to use your head as a bouncy ball! That mother..." He abruptly ends his tirade remembering we are not alone. His eyes turn back to the doctor, his face shaded in embarrassment. "Sorry Dr. Crowley, it's been a rough couple of days. I didn't mean to interrupt you."

Edward takes a deep breath and releases his hands, flexing his fingers to release the tension. Still not quite sure what to make of Edward's behavior, I turn back to Dr. Crowley in the hopes of focusing on something I can understand.
"Sorry doctor, continue," I state

"Yes, as I was saying," the doctor mutters, looking between Edward and I, "you have a skull fracture. Unfortunately, there were complications resulting in intracranial pressure or swelling in your brain. To mitigate any further complications we did a procedure called a ventriculostomy…"

The doctor's voice fades into the background, fear sets in as I consider the seriousness of my injury, and possible long-term effects. My hand flies up to touch my head landing on the gauze surrounding it. Internally I check different parts of my body, trying to sense any changes or problems.

"Bella, it's okay," Edward whispers, grabbing my hand preventing it from exploring my head further.

"Bella," Dr. Crowley speaks, causing me to look back to him.

"It is okay. A ventriculostomy is not as bad as it sounds. We drilled a very tiny hole to insert a tube, and allow the excess fluid to drain. This released the pressure, so your brain could heal with no further complications. Once it heals, you will never know it was there, and in the grand scheme, it's a small procedure. I don't foresee any long-term effects from the injury. You are healing quickly, and I expect a full recovery. That being said, you will probably have a monster of a headache for a little while, and will need to take it easy for a few days."

I smile in relief, as Edward squeezes my hand in reassurance, recognizing for the first time he has yet to let it go.

"Do you have any other questions for me?" Dr. Crowley asks.

"When can I get out of here?"

"Bella," Edward warns.

"What? I just want to know the plan." And figure out a way to get myself discharged as soon as possible, I think secretly.

I hate hospitals, as soon as I step inside the magnitude of everyone's feelings constantly bombards me. It is emotionally taxing, and I try to avoid it as much as possible. But if I was honest with myself, the biggest reason I need to leave is because being in places I can't quickly escape from terrify me, and hospitals fit this category.

Through discipline, I have learned how to function and not over react to the emotions I sense around me. But between being in this emotional environment, knowing I can't leave, and my aching head; I am having a hard time holding myself together. The giggle during my examination is a sign of my waning control. All I want is to return to my safe and predictable home, where I can concentrate and regain my equilibrium.

I focus back on Dr. Crowley, waiting to hear the plan, so I can come up with mine.

"Of course, Bella, that's understandable. You need to stay for at least another day. Exactly how long depends upon the amount of pain you are experiencing, and if you are still feeling dizzy. Okay?" He smiles, once again surrounding me with his calming nature. However, unlike before, I feel no warmth as my own anxiousness blocks the impact of his positive character.

"Okay." I begrudgingly agree while secretly plotting my early discharge; pain or dizziness be damned.
"The other thing I need you to do is eat," Dr. Crowley adds, my stomach rolling at the thought of food. "Proving you can keep food down is another requirement of your release, Bella." He winks, sensing both my desire to leave, and lack of desire to eat; manipulative bastard.

"Yeah okay, food sounds great," I lie.

"Uh huh." He smirks back. "Let's try some broth first, that should help with a queasy stomach." I nod my head in submission. Edward is monitoring the entire conversation, and I can see he is clearly unhappy.

"Any other questions?"

"Not right now."

"Okay then, how about the pain. Do you want any medication?"

"No, I'm fine," I lie again knowing the importance of building my case for an early release.

"She's lying," Edward asserts. I glare at him trying to pull my hand back, to which he just holds tighter.

"What?" Dr. Crowley asks.

"She's lying. When Bella tried moving earlier, she was clearly in a lot of pain. Not to mention all the wincing she was doing when you examined her. Or were you not paying attention, doctor?" Edward sneers in contempt.

"Edward!" I scold.

"I'm not going to stand here and do nothing while you jeopardize your health. Don't let her charm you, doctor, you need to give her something," Edward demands, his laser eyes focused on Dr. Crowley.

"Okay, how about this, I will leave an open order to bring something if you change your mind. You need rest, Bella, and you can't do that if you are in constant pain."

"I understand. Thank-you, Dr. Crowley." I smile while Edward continues to glare.

"Bella, before I leave, I wanted to ask about the emergency contact provided by the FBI. The nurses did attempt to contact…" He hesitates, looking at his chart. "Charles Swan, but the phone number listed didn't work. I wanted to see if there is another number for him, or someone else we can call for you?" Damn it, stupid, stupid mistake, I should have never put a name on that form.

"No, there is no need to contact him, or anyone else. My family and I…aren't close." I notice Edward's appraisal of my words, but I refuse to acknowledge his curiosity on this subject.

"Well then, I will take my leave. I'll be back to check on you before my shift ends." He stands, and gently pats my hand before walking out the door.

"Hey, Bells, you doing okay?" Emmett asks, stepping out of the shadowed corner. His colors and silence during the doctor's visit speaks volumes about the guilt he is feeling.

"It's all good, Em." I smile, even though the weight of his remorse stifles the room. "Speaking of good, I bet they delayed Felix's release. My methods maybe a bit unorthodox, but no one can say I don't get results!" I joke trying to lighten the mood, and relieve Emmett's tension.
"Not funny, Bella," Edward reprimands. Emmett, however, tries to stifle a small smile as his hues lighten. Success.

"Do you need anything?" Emmett asks, still wanting to make up for the wrong he feels he caused.

"No, I'm good, thanks. I really am fine, Em." I reassure him. "So stop looking like someone ran over your puppy, it's depressing." He gives me a soft smile and nods his head.

"Well I am going to take off and let you rest."

He glances at Edward, who scowls back. Walking cautiously over to the other side of the bed, Emmett leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

"You know you mean a lot to me right?" I nod. "Let's make sure we never have a repeat of this okay."

"Sounds like a deal." I agree watching Emmett's face light up with a goofy smile.

"Edward." He nods curtly before walking out, promising to come back in the morning. Edward, on the other hand, simply stares. The distance between them is disconcerting, and does nothing to help my increasing headache.

"What is your problem?" I ask Edward, roughly pulling my hand back from his.

"What do you mean?"

"With Emmett. What's the deal between you two?" He contemplates his words, holding out his hand trying to take mine again.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just focus on getting well so you can get out of here."

Edward flashes me his best "panty dropping" smile. The smile I have seen him use on women a hundred times. Anger bubbles up at his blatant and calculating attempt to convince me to drop the subject. I am not one of his floozies who fall over backwards simply because he smiles. If he wants to play the manipulative game, bring it on, Cullen, I think shamelessly. I have never told Edward I can't read him, and I hate to admit I've used it to my advantage more than once.

"Seriously, you're trying to bluff me?" I ask incredibly. "I can see a lie before you even speak it, and clearly something is going on. So come on tell me." His emerald eyes stare, searching mine. He is stalling.

"Edward, I've never experienced this much tension between you and Emmett. That includes the time he had pizza delivered to your house every 20 minutes because you beat his score at the range. Please tell me what is going on can't stand feeling this rift," I plead, trying to use my own charms to break through his defenses. Damn my inability to see him.

"Fucking human lie detector," he grumbles quietly, probably hoping I wouldn't hear. Taking a breath, he finally yields.

"He put you in a dangerous situation. He should have been there to prevent this, Bella. I mean come on he let you walk into that room blind and alone." He scoffs with disdain.

"Are you kidding me?" I question. "This was not unusual for our working arrangement. How many times have I interrogated someone alone? And you know I like to go in without all the details. This was not an out of the box situation, it just ended badly."
He starts to say something in rebuttal, but I quickly interrupt him. "Hey, this is the risk we take, right? Isn't that what you warned me the first day we met?" His eyes narrow while I continue.

"This job turns crazy at any moment, it's a choice I made, and I'm willing to face the consequences. No big deal, so cut Emmett some slack."

"I was wrong, Bella, this isn't a risk you should take," Edward whispers.

"You should have support when you talk to a suspect, and if you don't want to know all the information, someone else in the room should." He looks at me with an intensity I have difficulty understanding.

"The director was angry about this guy walking, so Emmett threw a Hail Mary. He had hardly any information on Felix, who everyone also knew was clearly agitated. Emmett had no right sending you in that room, and he knows it." He takes a breath, struggling to keep his emotions under control.

I listen to his unexpected words realizing that since finding out about my ability, Edward has never left me alone with a suspect. The solo interviews are always initiated by Emmett. I guess I always paid more attention to his presence during the hot and cold game because of the security it gave me, but I never paid attention to the more routine interviews.

I want to ignore his declaration because it will open an emotional door I am not ready to enter, but I also didn't want this to come between them. Their friendship is important, and whether I want to admit it or not, I rely on their comfortable rapport to off-set the negativity we face.

"I don't want to argue about what is right or wrong. You know Emmett would never purposely do something to hurt me. I know you know that, so even if he made a mistake that is all it was, a mistake. I'm okay. You and Emmett depend on each other too much to let this come between you. That's all I am asking, Edward, please don't make this a big issue. Don't put me in that position. Please," I beg, emotionally worn out, and physically exhausted.

Edward looks at me closely and concedes. "Okay, I will work it out with him tomorrow. Good enough?"

"Good enough." I smile feeling better.

With that settled, I decide to finish the discussion about Felix.

"Getting back to what we were talking about before Dr. Crowley came in. Can you tell me what the deal is with Felix?"

"What do you remember?" Edward asks, once again reaching for my hand. Surprisingly I find myself wanting him to take it.

"The guy was in a bad place, things became crazy and he lost it. I was there for that part, what I want to know is the back story. Why is the FBI so interested in keeping him locked up?"

"It wasn't originally my case, so I am still learning all the details. From what I understand, cops picked him as a suspect on a B&E at a women's apartment."

"Heidi Roberts," I state.

"Right, Heidi Roberts. Her friends reported her missing two weeks ago, and there is not a lot of evidence to explain what happened to her. No one knows if she is still alive, or if she just ran
"Is that why the FBI became involved?" Breaking and entering is typically outside the scope of the federal government's involvement, so I am curious about why they are so interested in Felix.

"Honestly, I don't know why we had the case. From what I read, the missing persons report alone didn't warrant our involvement. There was a reference to a possible connection to another kidnapping, but there was no evidence in Heidi's file, so how they made that connection is not clear to me."

"Wait, no evidence at all? Isn't that strange and if this case is so thin, why is the director involved?"

"All good questions, Bella, and I intend to find the answers." Edward looks down at our hands, his fingers methodically rubbing mine sending an electric current through my arm. It's strangely comforting.

"Like I said, I'm still trying to catch up on all the details, but it feels like I am missing something important." He pauses, sorting out a puzzle in his head.

"It's like they are trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Something about this whole situation is wrong, and why they called you…it just doesn't make sense." His thoughts are eerily similar to mine when Emmett called me, reaffirming my fear this is bigger than we realize.

Edward quietly walks over and looks out the window for several minutes, almost as if he is searching for something. Putting his hands on his hips, he turns to me again closing his eyes with a sigh.

"I want to kill him for what he did to you." Edward laughs bitterly. "I actually demanded they hand the case over to me. I lied straight to the director's face, and said I would be objective." He walks back to me with determination, taking my hand once more.

"I don't want you to worry, Bella. He will get what he deserves. I know I should keep my professional distance, but I can't, not where you're concerned." Taking a deep breath, he tries to calm his anger once again.

"You scared me to death, Bella. Please don't do that to me again, your safety is more important to me than I can express."

Edward is rarely this open with his emotions. I am at a loss as for what to say, and as if sensing my panic, Edward quickly shifts the conversation away from his declaration.

"Your turn. What happened in that room?"

"Um yeah," I stutter, shaking myself from the confusion of Edward's behavior. "Truthfully, I'm not sure. I agree, something is off, Felix is not guilty of any other crimes, and I don't think he has anything to do with Heidi's disappearance, at least not directly." Edward raises his eyebrow waiting for an explanation.

"I can't really explain it. I asked why he was trying to get into her apartment, and I was hit with these overwhelming emotions. I've never experienced anything like it, none of what I was seeing made sense. It was chaotic and confusing, and then suddenly I realized he loves her. Whoever Heidi is to Felix, he is desperate to find her. Then I lost control and asked him something related directly to my vision." Edward eyes widened taking in the information. He knows I never make this kind of mistake.
"I scared him, and before I could do any damage control, he jumped over the table and attacked me." Edward's body stiffened.

"He kept asking if I was working for them, but I have no idea what he meant."

"Paranoid?" Edward asks gruffly.

"No, at least not in a delusional way, he is paranoid, but it's a realistic fear for him."

"Don't all paranoid people believe their fears are real?"

"Yes, but I can tell the difference," I state, pointing to my head. "I don't know any details, but I know he is in the middle of something big." Gathering my courage, I decide to acknowledge my fear out loud.

"Edward, this thing with Felix, it scares me," I admit quietly.

Edward leans over the bed squeezing my hand while his other hand lifts almost touching my face, before changing course and grabbing the rail instead.

"What is it, Bella, what scares you?" he whispers.

"I just feel like we are on the verge of being pulled into this dark place, and it scares me because I don't know what to do, or how to change it."

Fighting back the tears, I look down at my hands, and try to pull myself together. Refusing to let me hide, Edward gently lifts my chin, so I can look into his eyes.

"Bella, I swear no matter what, I won't let anything happen to you." He pledges with a calm intensity. The weight of the day catches up to me, and my body begs to surrender to sleep.

"Rest, Bella. We'll figure this out, but for now just rest. You're safe." I finally close my eyes, and allow my mind to shut down as Edward gently strokes my hand.

Right before I slip into a deep sleep, I imagine feeling something glide upon my cheek, and a soft touch on my forehead while a voice says:

"I got you, baby. I got you."

Chapter End Notes

Until next time when we will learn a little more about Bella's past.
Chapter 4: You Only Disappear

Chapter Notes

We start learning more about Bella in this chapter; the plot thickens as they say. I hope everyone hangs in there with me because the mystery is part of the plot, not everything is revealed at once. Also, I am a romantic at heart, so of course Edward and Bella's relationship is important to the story. :)

Thank-you to the PTB team, especially babykay18 and for keeping on my track with my commas and for the helpful advice. You are all amazing. :)

The story and characters of Twilight belong to Stephanie Meyer, the original concepts belong to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: You Only Disappear

When I wake again, it is dark outside. My body has lost all sense of time, but it is either really late or really early given the quiet nature of the hallway. I search the room for a clock, but instead find a sleeping Edward sprawled uncomfortably on a chair residing in the corner.

I blink in surprise, wondering if I am imagining him, but when he moves, I realize he is actually here. Edward stirs again, and I hold my breath, not wanting him to wake up, his unconscious state giving me the opportunity to observe him longer.

Even in his scruffy clothes that have definitely seen better days, and stubble that has passed the 5 o'clock stage long ago, he is still the most beautiful man I have ever met. Captivated by the sight, I let my feelings surface, if only for a moment. My heart beats faster remembering how he looked at me earlier, and how his touch felt; the strange electric current vibrating through my body.

I can feel our relationship shifting, but shifting to what, I'm not exactly sure. In the end, all it does is confuse me, because what I want with Edward verses what I can have is irreconcilable. Over the years, I've learned how to ignore my feelings for Edward, compartmentalizing them to the deep recesses of my mind where I allow myself to imagine possibilities. There were times I thought Edward might have feelings for me too, but his playboy behavior was tangible proof I was misperceiving things.

Who am I kidding? He is way out of my league.

Closing my eyes, I think about Edward's behavior today, and wish I could believe it meant something more. I know he cares, but only as a co-worker and friend. Even if he did like me like that, happily ever after is not in my cards. The baggage of my past makes that option impossible. Tears roll down my face as I silently mourn any other reality, and shutting my eyes tighter, I try to block the voice that haunts me at every turn.

"Emotions create weakness, and the strong always take advantage of the weak. Are you one of the weak, Isabella?"
I hate everything about him, but his belief about emotions is the one helpful lesson I took with me. Survival comes from strength and there is no time for weakness. This is how I have to live my life.

Suddenly, the door to my room opens and a nurse walks in, ending my time of reflection. Quickly wiping away my tears and taking a deep breath, I restore my emotional barricades.

"Well hello," she says in a cheery, but quiet tone. "How are you feeling?" Taking a moment to inventory my body, I happily discover my head hurts less than before, and I'm not feeling as dizzy.

"I feel better," I answer honestly, hoping the improvement results in a quick discharge.

"Good. The doctor ordered pain meds when needed, so if your headache becomes unbearable, press this call button, and I will bring some right in." While talking, she simultaneously takes the required vitals to update my chart.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Almost three in the morning."

"How long has he been here?" I inquire, nodding in Edward's direction.

"He hasn't left," she states bluntly.

"What?"

"He arrived right after your admittance to the E.R. Came in full force too, demanding to see you, and speak with your doctors. He was relentless, using his badge more than once to get around the rules. As soon as you were out of surgery, he sat himself right in that chair and hasn't left since."

Logically, her story shouldn't surprise me given his wrinkled appearance. However, emotions are not often logical, and with Edward's recent behavior slowly chipping away at my defenses, the fact he stayed the entire time confounds me.

"He's the talk of the hospital." The nurse starts in again almost dreamily. "How dedicated he is to you. You are a lucky woman to have a man like that care about you so deeply. I wish my boyfriend showed half as much devotion for me as he does for you."

Hearing a groan from the other side of the room, I turn in time to see Edward abruptly jump out of the chair.

"BELLA!" he yells, looking wildly around the room. When his eyes land on mine, he rushes towards the bed, oblivious to the nurse standing there, and gently touches my face with his fingers.

"Oh, thank God you're here. It was just a dream," he whispers, leaning his head on the rail and staring at me with what can only be described as reverence. His fingers continue to gently graze my cheek before finding my hand.

"Um, excuse me, Agent Cullen, I need to finish up here and then I can leave you two alone."

"Huh?" he responds, finally noticing the nurse. "Oh, of course, let me get out of your way."

Edward steps back but keeps a close eye on me, as though he's afraid I will disappear if he looks away. The nurse quickly finishes her vitals and declares I'm healing nicely. She reminds me about the medication, gives Edward a small smile, and then leaves us in an awkward silence.

Not feeling stable enough to completely sit up, I try to find a more comfortable position. Seeing my
struggle, Edward helps adjust the bed so I can elevate my head. I almost joke about his nursing skills and ask whether he will fluff my pillow, but when I see the seriousness of his look, my humor fades. I decide to again rely on deflection techniques to take me away from the strange dynamic, before I allow myself to consider what it means.

"So, I'm thinking as soon as I am out of here, we need to set up another interview with Felix." Edward narrows his eyes at my suggestion.

"Are you kidding me?"

"It makes the most sense. I obviously affect him, and now that I know what I am facing, I can prepare. Seeing me again will probably scare him, and then…"

"No fucking way!" he angrily cuts me off.

"Why not? It's the best plan for getting information. Even if he didn't do anything to Heidi, his reaction tells me something happened to her. We need to help her," I reason. If finding Heidi means facing Felix again, I will do it, no matter how much the thought scares me.

"And we will, but you are off this case," he states with finality.

"You can't do that!"

"The hell I can't! I'm the lead investigator so it's my call, and I am saying no, Bella. There is no way I'm letting you anywhere near Felix Grey. End of discussion!"

Edward's stubbornness knows no bounds, but then again, neither does mine. However, realizing we will not get anywhere with this tonight, I back down from responding. Edward recognizes the momentary win, but knows this is far from over. I am not done with this subject.

"Are you tired?" he asks, using his own deflection technique.

"No, my sleep cycle is all off so I'm wide awake."

"So, here we are, middle of the night, both of us awake. How should we spend our time?" He winks with a crooked smile.

Is Edward Cullen flirting with me? Undeterred by my silence, he continues.

"How about a game of black jack? Go fish? Come on, Swan, what's your pleasure?"

Tired and confused by this strange dance, I decide to draw upon my inner bitch to force Edward back to our normal interaction. Returning to the status quo is best for everyone involved. Ignoring the dull ache in my heart when I think about pushing Edward away, I make my move.

"Seriously, Cullen, you don't need to entertain me. What are you doing here at three in the morning, anyway? I know for a fact your life is much more exciting than playing card games with me. Shouldn't you be out with what's her name…Mary, Martha…?"

"Marcy," he whispers. "And no, I don't want to go out with Marcy. I haven't seen her in months. Believe me, Bella, there is nowhere else I would rather be right now." Ignoring his intense eyes, I push forward.

"Oh come on, what would the single women of Seattle do if Edward Cullen decides to give up on his 'man-whoring' ways? Hearts would break everywhere!"
My comments will either lighten the mood, bringing us back to our typical banter, or piss him off. Either way, it will distract him from whatever is occurring between us, or at least that's what I hope.

He stands silently, searching my eyes before taking the conversation in an unexpected direction.

"That's really how you see me, isn't it?" he questions sadly, shaking his head. "Of course that's how you see me. I haven't really proved otherwise. But still given everything…" He looks defeated.

"I thought you knew differently. That no matter what, you knew the truth." He sighs in frustration, pulling at his hair.

"What are you talking about?" His statement only confuses me further. Why does he keep changing the playing field?

"You know better than anyone that looks can be deceiving."

"Oh." I humor him while trying to sort out what he is saying, and then it hits me. "Oh!"

Shit. Edward is talking about my ability and his belief that I can read him. Damn it! I'm not ready to admit the truth, especially since I just conned him to work it out with Emmett. However, as he stares with soulful eyes assuming I am in on his secret, I realize there is no alternative. The magnitude of the last few days catches up with me, and I can't help but laugh at the absurdity.

"Thirty percent," I burst out. His frustration turns to hurt at my laughter. It is either laugh or cry, and I didn't feeling like crying.

"What?" he asks in a harsh tone, irritated I find anything about this situation funny.

"You are one of the thirty percent, Edward. I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you are talking about because I've never had any insight into that head of yours." His eyes widen in astonishment, and I try to control my inappropriate laughter.

"You can't read me?" he asks. I shake my head.

"And you never felt the need to tell me before now?" His voice rising in anger. I shake my head again.

"All this time you've never seen me? I can't believe this! I always thought we had this unspoken understanding." In confusion, I silently watch as he unravels before my eyes.

"I am such an idiot! I can't believe…fuck! I have to go. I can't be here now," he mumbles, backing out of the room.

Turning to open the door, he hesitates as if wanting to say more, but instead, his shoulders drop in defeat and he walks out the door.

With Edward gone, the room unexpectedly feels colder. What the hell just happened? I stare at the door wondering how much more can go wrong. Just a few days ago, my life could be summed up in three words: simple, predictable and safe. Now, nothing makes sense, and I don't know what to do next.

Finally, I simply hit the call button knowing the medication will make me drowsy. Sleep is a great way to avoid everything, and right now it seems like the best plan. The nurse comes in, and I wait for the drugs to take effect, hoping when I wake up things will make sense again.
The next time I open my eyes, the sun is shining, and Emmet is sitting in the chair previously occupied by Edward.

"Morning, sunshine! It's about time you join the land of the living. How are you doing?"

Emmett's bright and infectious nature washes over me, bringing with it a sense of normality. At least I can rely on Emmett to stay the same. I feel even better than I did a few hours ago, and putting my assessment to the test, I gently push up into a sitting position. Although the room spins for a brief second, it's not nearly as bad as when I first woke up. In fact, the longer I sit up, the more the dizziness becomes a passing concern.

"I actually feel good." I smile, knowing I am one step closer to going home.

"That's great, Bells!" Emmett is smiling back when his phone goes off, filling the room with the lyrics "I'm sexy and I know it".

"Seriously, Emmett, that's your ring tone?"

"I can't help it if someone wrote my own personal theme song." He winks, answering the call. "What's up?" he says to the unknown caller.

"Yup I'm here. She's good, she's sitting up…What?…I don't know…She looks fine man, calm down…I am not going to ask the doctor that…I am not going to ask the doctor that…If you are so worried come down here and do it yourself…Look I am getting off the phone now…you need to chill out. … No, she can make her own decisions. … I'm hanging up…bye!"

"Damn," he grumbles, his phone coming to life again. Emmett quickly turns it off and shoves it in his pocket.

Rolling his eyes, he looks at me and in unison we say, "Edward."

"Lover boy is worried about you." Emmett laughs.

A part of me feels lighter knowing Edward is still concerned given how he left yesterday. I am not sure what to expect from him anymore, and I don't know what I want either.

"Does Edward calling you mean you guys worked out whatever was going on yesterday?" I ask. Emmett clears his throat, looking sheepish before responding.

"Uh, yeah, we talked this morning. I appreciate you standing up for me, Bella, but Edward wasn't completely wrong. I understand why he's upset."

"Emmett, you didn't hurt me on purpose. I just don't want it to come between you guys."

"Aww, Edward and I would have made up eventually, we always do." He smiles, coming to sit on the chair closest to me.

"So, girlfriend," he says in his best girly voice while pretending to file his nails, "what's the 411 with you and Edward?" I laugh at the goofy display.

"You're so stupid!"

"What? I'm sensitive. But seriously, something going on I should know about?"

Although Emmett is as far from girlfriend material as you can get, he is still one of my closest
friends, and the only person I feel comfortable talking to about Edward.

"Honestly, I don't know. Edward is acting differently, and I haven't really caught up yet."

"Bella, I don't call him lover boy for nothing. You really don't see it do you?" He shakes his head.

"The two of you are foolish and thick-headed about this whole thing. Look, in all the years I've known Edward, he's never acted as crazy as he has the last several days. I think that says something, but I'm not going to tell you what it means. You need to figure that out on your own." As I ponder his words, the door opens and a nurse walks in carrying a tray.

"Good morning. I brought your breakfast. The doctor left explicate instructions for you to eat something." She places the tray on the table next to my bed, scooting it closer to me while taking off the cover.

"Dr. Crowley wants you to start with something easy, so looks like you are having broth and Jell-O." Although my stomach does not feel as queasy, the tray does not look appetizing.

"Can't I at least get some coffee?"

"Start with this, and if your stomach feels okay, we can get something more substantial. Sound good?"

"Sounds lovely," I remark sarcastically. Emmett is snickering off to the side observing the interaction. Once she is out of the room, I turn towards Emmett.

"I'll give you 50 bucks if you eat this, Emmett," I challenge.

"I don't know, Bella. I don't want to end up in hospital jail for aiding and abetting the patient."

"Funny, you're a funny guy! Are you going to help me or not?" He tries to look at me straight-faced, but quickly breaks into a smile and holds out his hand.

"Hand me the Jell-O. That shit is awesome." I give him the nasty green substance, and grinning like a kid, he digs into the container and shoves a huge bite in his mouth.

"Ugh, I think I just lost my appetite again."

"Come on, Swan," he mumbles before swallowing. "I did my part, now you do yours."

Picking up the broth, I bring the bowl to my lips, intent on finishing it no matter what it taste likes whether or not my stomach agrees. My singular goal of being released is more important than the brief displeasure this broth may cause.

"So what's the plan?" Emmett asks, eating another spoon full of Jell-O.

"What are you talking about?" I respond innocently.

"Please, I totally see you scheming over there."

"Are you going to rat me out?"

"Rat you out? What is this, the 1920s? I know how much you hate being in hospitals. Tell me, doll-face, we breaking out of this joint? Going on the lam?" he questions sarcastically in his best gangster voice.
I laugh at Emmett's antics and tell him my plan as we finish my meal. Unlike Edward, he is supportive and agrees to help. Now all that is left to do is wait for Dr. Crowley to arrive.

Four hours, and a few well placed white lies later, I am on my way home to rest and recuperate. Although Emmett offers to stay with me, I am desperate to re-center my thoughts and emotions, which is hard to do with other people around.

"You sure you don't want me to stay?" Emmett asks again as I open the door to my apartment.

"No, Em, I'm good. I just need some quiet, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I get it, but watch out for the head, okay? Promise if you start to feel worse, you will call me."

"I promise." For a moment his goofy defenses drop, and he pulls me into a tight hug.

"I'm so glad you're okay, and I'm sorry I brought you into that situation." I hug him back, reassuring him I was there and okay.

"I don't blame you, Em, and I don't want you to blame yourself either," I tell him sternly before playfully shoving him. "Now get outta here."

Giving me one last hug, he turns and heads back to his car. I wait until his pulls away, giving him a wave before walking into my apartment. Shutting the door, I slide down to the floor taking a deep breath. My mind is racing, trying to process and organize all the different thoughts and emotions. I need to sort it out before I lose it.

Edward is the biggest of those concerns. In the span of a day, he'd pulled the proverbial rug out from under me. Talk about communication problems. He believed we shared some secret aspect of our relationship that made us closer, while I believed we would never be anything more than colleagues. When had things become so fucked up?

The desire to run away permeates my body. Running is something I do well. It's easy for me. My life is purposely uncomplicated so I can leave at a moment's notice with no hesitation. In fact, my time in Seattle is the longest I've ever stayed in one place.

Can I really walk away and never look back?

My heart answers for me when Edward's face and intense green eyes flash in my mind. Jesus, nothing is simple anymore. Pulling myself up from the floor, I decide to focus on Felix instead. Although the overwhelming nature of our interaction scares me, I know it is a more productive use of my time. There is still a girl out there, and helping her is my priority, not Edward.

I move toward the rooms in the back of my apartment and enter the bedroom I turned into an art studio. I learned long ago that the best way to understand my most complicated visions were to put them on paper. It allows me time to analyze and sort out all the dimensions and colors. Moving over to the sound system, I start my "calm" playlist, and then walk over to my bedroom to change into my paint clothes.

After changing, I turn to leave, and inadvertently catch my reflection in the mirror. I step closer and look at the person staring back. My brown hair hangs in a loose ponytail, and my eyes have dark circles forming under each of them. My face looks worn, the physical results of these last few days. There is an almost shocking contrast between the white gauze around my head, and the brown of my hair; a beacon reminder of my attack. I quickly turn away, disgusted by the sight.
Why can’t I be the bubbly, blonde, model type Edward loves to flaunt in front of me? Why can’t I be carefree and beautiful instead of broken and ugly?

"Stop it," I yell. There's no time for pity parties or weak desires. Determined to overcome these unsettling feelings, I march back into the art room to face my new demon. I pick up my brush, turn up the music, and look at the blank canvas in front of me.

"Okay, Felix, what are you hiding?"

Several hours later, and covered in paint, I step back and look at the canvas with a tilt of my head. Splattered in all directions are shades of blue, red, green and black. The red looks like blood dripping on top of the other colors, a chaotic scene if ever there was one, and I feel no closer to solving the mystery of Felix than when I started.

"Damn it, what am I missing?" I yell in frustration. I know there is something important here, but I just can't seem to grasp it. I stand staring at the canvas, hoping something suddenly jumps out and enlightens me.

"Argh, this isn't working!"

I decide to go about this in a different way. Maybe knowing more about the case will help me to understand what I see. I walk back to the kitchen, fire up my computer, and contemplate the best route to get information.

While waiting, I notice the red light on my cell phone flashing indicating I have a message. I look at the screen amazed to see I have 24 text messages, 6 voice mails, and 18 missed calls. All of them are from Edward. On instinct, I go to dial his number, but then hesitate, realizing I have no idea what to say.

"One issue at a time," I mumble, setting the phone back on the counter and returning to my original goal.

Logging on the FBI website, I am hoping to find the right person. Given how much fieldwork our office does, the intranet includes a confidential IM system, and it is not uncommon for Emmett, Edward and I to chat, particularly in the middle of a case.

Just as I hoped, Emmett is on. Knowing Edward won't give me any more information, catching Emmett online is the best way to get answers without causing attention to my inquiry.

BS: Em, you there?

EM: Swan?! Shouldn't you be resting? Hey, the big E is trying to get a hold of you. You really need to call him.

BS: I'm fine, and will call Edward soon, but first I need information. Tell me more about the Felix case.

EM: Not a good idea, Bella, and I know E will kick my ass if I tell you anything.

BS: I'm not asking you to take me to see him, I just want some information. Come on, Em, help me out. I can't rest until I sort out what happened with him. Please, don't make me beg.

I wait for what seems like forever for Emmett to respond.

EM: Okay, against my better judgment...what do you want to know?
BS: I don't know yet, just tell me what you know.

EM: In truth, not much. You already know about Heidi. He has no arrest record, goes to work every day, and pays his bills. The guy doesn't even have parking tickets.

BS: Nothing suspicious in his background then?

EM: The nothing is what's suspicious. He's almost too clean. Even his childhood comes across like living in the middle of Leave it To Beaver.

BS: OMG! That's it; no one can live in the middle of Leave It to Beaver, and come out sane! ;)

EM: Swan, you crack me up! But seriously, it's weird.

BS: Someone is covering his tracks?

EM: If so, it's someone good because there's no trace of anything. It's stumped our tech guys.

BS: That's it, nothing else?

EM: There is one other thing, but it ended up being a dead-end.

BM: What was it?

EM: In the hallway where Felix was arrested, we found a note about a meeting, which of course he claims isn't his. When we tested for prints, his weren't on it, and there was no way Felix was there because he is on video at his job. See nothing.

BS: What did the note say?

EM: Why does it matter?

BS: Come on, Em, humor me.

EM: Fine. It said: 3:00, August 24th, and the name "Volturi Corporation"...

In one moment, my whole world crumbles.

"No, no, no, no," I start chanting. "This is wrong, this has to be wrong." Emmett, unaware of my reaction, continues to type his explanation.

We thought we had something, because the Volturi Corporation is known to deal in all matter of shady shit. From what I understand they are the most powerful crime syndicate in Europe. According to the CIA, over the last decade they've started to build some strongholds in America. The guy assigned to track their activities says they are the scariest group he's ever investigated. If it wasn't for the fact we have Felix on tape elsewhere, I would have pushed it further. It became a dead-end.

I read the first line again and again, trying to make the letters change so they say anything but Volturi. Fear drowns my senses until I feel myself switch to survival mode, history teaching me I don't have time to dwell on my emotions. Hesitating for even a moment could mean the difference between life and death.

EM: Bella? U there?

I pull myself together long enough to type a final response.
BS: Guess you were right, nothing there. Listen, my head is starting to hurt again, so I am going to sign off. TTYL

I sign off and shut down my computer before he responds. Could it be true? Is Felix involved with the Volturi Corporation? Are the Volturi here in Seattle? My mind is a flurry of thoughts. After years of staying one step ahead, suddenly he is closer than ever.

A memory long-buried rushes back.

"Are these it?" I ask, nervously pulling the documents out of the envelope.

"Yes, that's all you need to make this happen," Caius says with conviction. I glance through the documents and look up at him curiously.

"Swan?" I ask. "Where did that come from?" He peers at me with tired and sympathetic eyes, clearing his throat as if embarrassed to answer.

"Isabella, you are the only thing of beauty in our ugly world. Now you are finally free to live your life. It reminds me of when the ugly duckling became the swan. You were never appreciated for who you are, and now I hope you find a place where you will. Never forget you deserve love, Isabella."

Years of careful planning has prepared me for this moment. I know exactly what I need to do next. Forget Felix and Heidi, if he is this close, I have no choice but to get the hell out of Seattle.

I'm sorry, Edward…I will miss you.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time…. 
Chapter 5: Slow Dancing In a Burning Room

Chapter Notes

Here we go again, hope you enjoy.

A HUGE thank-you to the PTB team, especially betas beautifulnightmarex and kitchmill! You guys rock!

Twilight and all the characters are the property of Stephanie Meyer. I am just using them for my own selfish pleasure.

This chapter contains descriptions of violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: Slow Dancing In a Burning Room

Fear

The dictionary defines it as "an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain or a threat."

However, as I wait in my room, I don't consider fear an unpleasant emotion. On this night, fear is my friend, and I welcome it. The natural side effects of adrenaline and hyper-vigilance keep me sharp and on point. I believe fear will help me survive.

Tonight is the night.

After a year of planning and months of waiting, the moment is finally here. There is a mandatory meeting for all Volturi troops at the warehouse in the city. The Denali family is building power in London, and he is furious. He wants the threat to his power neutralized, and more importantly, he wants to know who in the Volturi ranks is to blame for the situation getting out of hand. He does not grant second chances, those responsible will be held accountable for failing. Tonight there will be blood.

The meeting means security at the complex is at a bare minimum. It's a rare opportunity, and the best chance for escape. As a part of the plan, Caius has agreed to "babysit" me for the night. Ironically, Caius is the only Volturi guard trusted enough to watch me alone. If he only knew that his most valued adviser is also the one planning his demise.

Caius was a mystery for most of my life. He was the only one to ever show any kindness; his colors always so intense around me. When he pledged to get me out, I couldn't help but wonder why he was willing to risk his life. I finally understood when I caught him staring at a picture of my mother. In that instant I knew; he was desperately in love with her. Watching the colors of love and loss float around him, I realized he felt the need to save me as he was never able to save her.

I sit on my bed staring at the clock, watching the seconds tick away as I go over the memorized plan in my head one more time. This will not be easy. So many things need to go right for this to succeed, and there will be severe consequences if I fail.
I'm not worried about myself; it is Caius who will pay the price for my escape. I am too valuable to kill, but Caius will face a horrible death for his betrayal.

Ten more minutes.

"I can do this," I chant over and over as I try to build my courage and calm my shaking body.

It seems as though only seconds have passed when the doors suddenly burst open and Caius rushes in.

"We have to move now!" I grab my suitcase as Caius grasps my arm and pulls me hastily down the hallway toward the stairs at the back of the compound.

Reaching the bottom, he pushes me back against the wall before slowly opening the door and looking out in both directions. Pausing to make sure it is clear, we slip out into the night.

There is only one guard watching the cameras tonight, and Caius guarantees he will not notice our movement. He didn't tell me the specifics, but I overheard him setting up a surprise distraction with someone named Tasha. It's not hard to imagine her purpose.

Running quickly across the yard in a strange crouched fashion, we reach the side gate. Caius hurriedly enters a code and opens the door to my freedom.

"Okay, the car is about fifty yards to the east. Dump it first chance you get and then hitch a ride. You remember the rest?" he questions quickly.

I nod my head realizing this is the last time I will see him. It hurts.

"One more thing," he says as he grabs a metal pipe leaning against the fence and holds it out for me to take. "Hit me and make it convincing."

"What?" This is not part of the plan.

"You heard me. Hit me with this. Knock me the fuck out. If I am left unharmed, they will become suspicious. They have to believe you got the upper hand. I need them to trust me so I can provide false leads and buy you as much time as possible."

I look at him with wide eyes. I've never hit anyone before, let alone with a weapon. Considering he is one of the few people to ever care for me, I am having a hard time stomaching his request. What if I accidentally kill him?

"God damn it, Isabella, we don't have time for this shit." When I hesitate, he pushes the pipe into my hands. "Fucking do it, NOW!"

Looking at him a second longer, I reach out and hug him tightly, conveying how much I appreciate everything he has done.

"I'll never forget you," I whisper, kissing his cheek.

Stepping back, I raise the pipe, square my body and swing, hitting him on the side of his head. Blood trickles from his mouth as he falls unconscious at my feet. I swiftly kneel and check for a pulse, exhaling in relief when I feel the constant beat.

Grabbing my suitcase, I sprint as fast as I can to the car, refusing to look back as I am convinced I will see the armies of hell chasing after me. Reaching the car quickly, I throw my suitcase in the
trunk and jump in. Putting the car in gear, I push the gas pedal to the floor, dust billowing behind
the tires as I pull on the road.

I drive for hours before the tank finally starts to run dry. With the gas light illuminated, I pull into
a small restaurant on the side of the road. Using my ability to find the best target, I convince a
family to give me ride to the next town.

Utilizing the technique over and over, I push forward for days without a break, not really breathing
until I reach my final destination.

Standing outside my new home, it feels as though a weight is lifted. I am an unknown girl in an
unknown land. I am finally free. For the first time in weeks, a genuine smile crosses my face.

I know this feeling; I have been here before.

This was inevitable. I knew my luck wouldn't hold out forever. The time has come to say goodbye
to Bella Swan; it is too much of a risk to keep the name. It saddens me to think about having to
start over. I worked hard to become who I am; my schooling and professional career a proud
achievement. I feel lost knowing it's all gone, but there is no time to mourn the past.

I jump up and move toward my bedroom to grab the same suitcase I arrived with years ago. It
holds the only possessions that mean anything to me, and therefore always remains packed and
ready to go. Before I get any further, someone starts pounding on my door, the sudden nature of the
noise causing me to jump, my nerves already on edge.

"Bella!" Edward shouts. "Bella, open the door!"

I stand frozen. A part of me wants to let him in, while another part, the realistic part, knows I need
to cut ties and leave. I can't do that if he is here as a visual reminder of why I want to stay.

"Bella, you have five seconds to open this door or I swear to God I am going to break it down."

He wouldn't dare.

"One."

He sounds serious.

"Two."

"Fuck!" I yell in frustration. "I'm coming. Don't break my freaking door!" I walk over and open the
door to find an extremely agitated Edward. He rushes into my apartment glaring at me, anger
radiating from his entire body.

"What the hell do you think you are doing? Do you know how insane you make me? I mean…"

Unexpectedly, in the middle of his tirade he stops short, the anger quickly replaced with alarm.

"Bella, what's wrong?" Edward whispers, a pained expression on his face. He rushes forward and
grabs my shoulders. "Jesus, you're shaking. Are you hurt? Did something happen?" He moves his
hands up and cradles my face, wiping gently under my eyes with his fingers.

"Why are you so upset?" It is then I realize I am crying. Edward pulls me to him, wrapping his
arms securely around my body.
"Please ba…Bella, let me help you." Against my better judgment, I find myself surrendering to the warmth and safety of his arms.

Why does everything good in my life always arrive too late?

The Volturi are not just a threat to me, but to everyone around me. Edward will not become another statistic in my life. I can't let my history touch him. Using all my willpower, I take a small step back, trying to gain perspective even though his arms remain around me.

"I'm okay," I whisper. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "Really." I try to look honest. "I think the last couple of days caught up with me, that's all." I can tell Edward isn't buying it, but for now he lets it go.

"What are you doing here anyway, causing a big scene for all of my neighbors to watch?" I ask, trying to step back from his embrace, but his arms tighten, holding me in place. His eyes narrow as the anger returns.

"What am I doing here? Bella, what are you doing here? You should be at the hospital resting, not here by yourself doing God knows what!" he sneers, looking down at my paint splattered clothes.

Fueled by frustration, I successfully break his hold and step back. "Hey, the doctor released me. I am free to come back to my home and do whatever I want," I respond curtly. I don't need someone else in my life telling me what I can or can't do.

"Well, he's an idiot for falling for your tricks, and Emmett's an even bigger idiot for helping you."

"Whatever," I scoff. "That still doesn't explain why you are here threatening to cause property damage."

"I've been trying to reach you for hours, Bella! Do you even look at your phone?"

"Yes," I reply hesitantly.

"Well, you should try returning your messages for a change. I've spent the last three days thinking I might lose you. Then to find out you came back here by yourself and not be able to reach you…" Reaching for me again, he takes a ragged breath, my heart tightening in response.

"You have to understand, Bella, the thought of losing you…it does crazy things to me. Please don't shut me out."

He holds me tighter as I rub my hands up and down his back trying to calm him, finally appreciating his panic. Edward does not deserve my bitchy tone.

"I'm sorry, Edward. I was in the middle of…stuff and lost track of time. My phone was in the kitchen, and I didn't look at it until a couple of minutes ago."

He looks down, lifting a hand to gently brush back a few strands of hair that are loose around my face. He takes a deep breath, and I feel his body relaxing.

"I'm sorry too. I may have overreacted just a tad." He smiles softly holding up his fingers to show sarcastically how much.

"Just a tad." I smile back.

"In hindsight, I guess I could have simply knocked." He laughs, embarrassed. "How are you
feeling?"

"I'm good," I lie, hoping he can't feel my racing heart. I need to move his visit along, so I can get out of here.

With a penetrating stare, Edward analyzes me for the truth. I know he is still concerned about my behavior when he first arrived. He is not confronting me now, but the investigator in him is gathering information. I just hope he leaves before deciding to challenge my inconsistencies.

"Good," he states, nodding his head and letting me go. The investigator is biding his time.

Turning away, Edward walks over to the couch, takes off his jacket and sits, gesturing me to sit next to him. Clearly intending to stay longer, I mentally scramble to come up with a plausible reason for him to leave. I hesitate before walking over and sitting down carefully, keeping my distance. Undeterred, Edward turns his legs towards mine.

"Look, Bella, I wouldn't blame you for not wanting to talk to me considering how I ran out on you this morning." He clears his throat before continuing. "I'm hoping we can talk about what happened. I think there are some things I need to explain."

A part of me wants him to continue, to explain what happened, but I also know where that conversation might take us. Unlike Edward, I'm not ready to shift the dynamics of our relationship, especially now. If he arrived ten minutes later, he would have found an empty apartment. I need to convince him there is nothing between us worth exploring.

"Edward," I say scooting further away. "I value our working relationship and I don't want to ruin it. There is nothing else to say. Let's just forget about this morning and move forward." I state in a rational and detached manner. This is for the best, I remind myself.

"Work relationship," Edward mumbles looking closely at me, as if trying to decide something. "Okay, we can it play your way." Using his finger, he pulls my chin up until I am looking into his eyes. "For now," he whispers. I swear the universe created Edward Cullen to torment me.

"Well, since we are both here and relatively in one piece," he states, running his hand across the gauze on my head. "What should we do tonight, roomie? Have you eaten?"

Baffled, I wonder if I heard him correctly. "Did you just say roomie? What does that mean?" I question.

"I'm not a doctor, but I do know you should never leave a head trauma patient alone. So you, Bella Swan, are going to have the privilege of my company until that stubborn head of yours heals." He winks, smiling his cocky Cullen smile.

"There is no way in hell you are staying here!" I yell, in a panic. How can I leave if he is here?

"Okay, then we can go to my place, because one way or another, I'm not leaving your side until you're concussion free," he asserts with a determined look.

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not. So, are we staying here or going to my place?" he challenges.

I know that look. I've seen it hundreds of times during our cases. When Edward Cullen has that look, there is no changing his mind. In other words, I'm screwed.
"Fine you can stay, *but* you are sleeping on the floor, and I am not giving you any of my blankets or pillows," I retort childishly, standing up and walking away. Edward is slowly breaking down all of my emotional barriers. I need time to regroup.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"Away from you!" I shout in frustration, walking back to the art room.

"Swan, you wound me! Just watch, I'm going to treat you so well, you are never going to want me to leave," I hear as I slam the door shut behind me.

*What am I going to do now?* Edward is not going to let me leave easily. *Okay, breath and focus on what you can control,* I remind myself. He can't watch me twenty-four hours a day. I just have to wait for my moment and make sure I am ready.

I turn to see the painting I completed earlier. I tilt my head and look closer, the colors now horrifically clear. The Volturi's involvement explains so much, especially my intense visceral reaction. Touching the hand of evil can evoke overwhelming fear and chaos in someone. If Felix is working with the Volturi, he is in way over his head.

It also explains why Felix's history is so clean, and why his prints were not on the note. The Volturi has the money and resources to make anything disappear. It is standard procedure for them to recruit people in strategic positions of power, particularly within law enforcement.

All of a sudden I have a chilling realization. Only an infiltrator within our office could have manipulated the evidence. It is terrifying thinking that I've most likely interacted with someone who works for the Volturi on a daily basis in my own office.

My thoughts race thinking back through various exchanges with people. Unfortunately, none of my recent interactions provide a clue as to who it might be, but I wasn't looking for them either. Feelings of guilt or betrayal are more common than people realize. Mentally flipping through pictures in my head, I'm also fairly confident they are ignorant to my true identity. If the mole did know about me, their colors of recognition would give them away. Most people react to me with benign indifference.

I'm not naïve enough to believe that makes me safe. The Volturi simply needs to request a copy of all the personnel files from their double agent and it is over. Requesting this type of information is not uncommon during major operations. The more they know about people, the easier it is to manipulate them to their advantage. My exposure would manifest in the form of the staff picture included in every file. Even the newest members of the Volturi guard will recognize it; they are well-trained, and I am sure my capture is one of his biggest priorities. No one else has ever evaded him this long, and I have no doubt he thirsts for my blood.

The situation with Felix concerns me. The Volturi obviously want something from him. Too many aspects of his case aren't adding up. Though the question remains, what exactly is his involvement, and how is that connected to Heidi's disappearance? Did something happen to Heidi because he screwed up, or because he didn't want to play their game?

A missing piece to this puzzle is the date of that meeting. Emmett indicated he was at work all day. I turn to look at the calendar hanging on the wall, quickly calculating that August twenty-fourth was almost six weeks ago.

If Felix is an unwilling pawn, maybe he chose to miss the meeting, instead planning to try to fight them. If he purposely disobeyed a request, and they knew Heidi meant something to him, taking
The Volturi deal with situations in a slow and methodical manner; it is one of the reasons they have successfully evaded authorities. They are patient, and would not react right away to his betrayal. They would wait until he felt at ease, maybe even feeling like he won, and only then would they attack. The timing is perfect if Heidi’s abduction is his punishment. I know this lesson well.

"Today's lesson is about choices, Isabella."

The door opens and Alec, Demetri, and Santiago walk in, each dragging a person with them. Taking a closer look, I realize it is a man, woman, and little girl.

Once in the room, the Volturi guard forces them to kneel, lined up side by side, and then stand behind holding them down by their shoulders. He watches them for a moment as they whimper and cry, before returning his attention to me. This lesson is going to end badly.

"Here we have Mr. Russo, who was given a choice to help us. Even though I was extremely generous in my offer, Mr. Russo regretfully made the wrong decision." He turns from me and focuses on the man.

"Mr. Russo, I brought you here today to grant you an opportunity to change your mind. However, if we are to move forward with our partnership, I need to feel confident that you will not make the wrong decision again. How do you think we can do that, Mr. Russo?" As he talks, he comes around and kneels in front of the man, looking into his eyes.

"I don't know," the man stutters, clearly terrified.

"Hmm, well then, I think you must learn there are consequences for your choices. Isabella, are you paying close attention? Demetri, hand me a gun."

Standing again, he takes the gun, and makes a show out of getting it ready, feeding on the fear of the family.

"The good news, Mr. Russo, is I'm going to let you to live. The bad news is one of your family members will not, and you must choose who will die today."

The family screams and begs for mercy. Little did they know it actually spurs him on. You can't plead with evil. He slithers his way over to the girl. She looks no older than eight.

"Such a beautiful child. Do you want your daddy to save you, my dear?" he asks while wiping her endless tears.

The poor girl is shaking so hard she can't speak. I have been in her shoes, and I hate him even more for doing this again.

"Time is up, Mr. Russo. Who will it be? Your wife or daughter?"

"Please, please don't do this. I will do whatever you want, just please spare my family," the man begs while choking on his sobs.

"Aw, you see, Isabella, he learned the lesson," he exclaims in an overly enthusiastic manner, and then like flipping a switch, returns to his menacing self.

"As happy as that makes me, Mr. Russo, unfortunately, I always follow through with my
consequences, or else people won't take me seriously. You understand I can't allow that to occur. Now I am losing patience, either pick one or both will die. You have five seconds." He cocks the gun and points it back and forth between the mother and daughter.

In an act of pure love, the mother screams out for him to pick her, begging the men in the room to spare her daughter.

Like so many times in my life, the details of what follows are a blur; I'm good at blocking out horror. I hear screams, a gunshot, and a body falling to the floor. He has destroyed three more lives tonight, all in the name of a lesson.

I stand frozen as they clear the carnage. Once the area is clean, my escort comes over to lead me back to my room.

"Did you enjoy the lesson, Isabella?" he asks. "This is for your benefit; maybe now you will also remember the importance of consequences."

"I despise you," I hiss walking past him. He in turn smiles and blows me a kiss.

I silently pray the next lesson ends in my death.

"It's beautiful," I hear a quiet voice say behind me. "I didn't know you painted." I feel Edward move closer and stop directly behind me.

"What is it about? It seems very intense."

"Nothing specific," I whisper, feeling a sense of hopelessness well up inside of me.

"Well, whatever it is, I like it." I feel his hands gently grasp my shoulders. "Bella, you're shaking again. Please tell me what's wrong."

"Do you think you can fight fate?" I ponder out loud.

"What?"

"If a person's fate is horrible and tragic, can you change it? I mean, is it even worth fighting if eventually you just end up in the same place? Would there even be a point in delaying the inevitable?" I question more to myself than Edward.

"What are you talking about? Does this have something to do with your painting?"

"Maybe. Painting helps me sort things out when they are too overwhelming. It helps me see through the clutter to what is important," I blurt out, realizing I'm sharing more with Edward than I have ever shared with anyone.

"And what clutter are you trying to sort through?"

"Felix," I state simply. A low growl resonates behind me.

"Is Felix the one with a horrible and tragic future?" he asks gruffly.

"Probably, but I was wondering more about mine." Hearing a sharp intake of breath, I find myself being whirled around to face Edward.

"Bella, why would your future be horrible and tragic? That makes no sense."
It is difficult to keep eye contact as I think about how little he really knows me. "You said it yourself, Edward. Looks can be deceiving. You don't know me, not really, so you are not an expert on my fate," I whisper defeated.

For the first time, I doubt my choices. Who am I kidding? I will never break free. And, how long before there is nowhere else to run? Maybe it is better to take my chances and face the Volturi. At least then I can do it on my terms.

"I do know you, Bella," Edward says with conviction. "And nothing about you deserves the fate you describe. When are you going to realize you are not alone?"

I laugh bitterly. "That's where you are wrong, Edward. I am always alone."

"No, you're wrong, Bella. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere." He stares into my eyes with a burning intensity before drawing me close. Once again, I succumb to his warmth, realizing I've been in his arms more in the last twenty-four hours than the last three years combined.

"I believe we control our own destiny, and you, Bella, are destined for wonderful things," Edward whispers, lightly kissing the top of my head.

Hearing the conviction in his voice, I begin to hope that maybe there is still something to believe in after all.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, but it's long enough to gain control over my emotions. Edward seems content to hold me, but if I'm going to maintain my resolve to keep him at a distance, I cannot allow myself to stay in the safety of his arms for long.

"Sorry, I guess I lost it a bit." I laugh nervously trying to change the tone of the conversation.

"Bella, it's understandable you are upset, it's been a crazy couple of days."

You have no idea.

"Look, I came in here to tell you I cooked dinner, so why don't we go and eat." He steps out of our hug, but instead of letting go completely, he grasps my hand and intertwines our fingers.

I look down, captivated, not only in his bold choice of hand holds, but because I really like seeing my fingers mingled together with his.

"You cooked?" I ask as we walk back towards the kitchen.

"Yup, grilled cheese and tomato soup." He smiles proudly. "The best comfort food in the world!"

I laugh at his boyish excitement. He has already put our food out on the table, complete with napkins, utensils and drinks.

"Color me impressed, Cullen. Not only can you cook, but you know the importance of silverware and napkins. I always thought you and Em were not aware either existed given how you eat at work," I tease.

"I'm glad I can surprise you. You shouldn't judge someone by what they do at work, especially in our job where I have to act all manly and tough." He smiles as I snort in amusement. "I will have you know, I'm quite the gentleman when it comes to dining with a beautiful woman."

"Oh, that I don't doubt." I think about all the women who fell for him after one date. "But this is
the first time I am the recipient of your hidden talents."

"Believe me, Bella," he says pulling out my chair and pushing it back in. "I intend to show you just how talented I am...in all areas," he whispers against my ear before standing up and walking around to his side of the table. As he sits down, I try to ignore the shiver moving through my body.

"So, are you going to tell me why you are painting something that has to do with Felix?" he asks, looking up at me and taking a drink.

"Just sorting out what happened," I state, hoping it is close enough to the truth to end the conversation. I need Edward to stay as far away from my connection to the Volturi as possible. Edward's eyes evaluate mine as he takes a few bites.

"I told you, Bella, I don't want you anywhere near this case. So whatever you are trying to sort out, just drop it. Felix is no longer your concern, and since there is no way in hell you are ever getting near him again, you don't have to figure anything out." His eyes hold the passion I saw at the hospital. His whole body is tense, and his eyes challenge me to argue.

"Okay," I concede, surprised that Edward's command didn't piss me off like it did earlier. Although I hate being told what to do, I find myself not feeling angry, but protected.

Edward stares at me mid-bite. "Seriously, that's it, just okay? I was all geared up for a battle. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy you agreed, but usually you are more of a pain in the ass with this kind of stuff."

"Wow, thanks so much for the vote of confidence. I guess I am too tired to argue, and if I am being honest, I really don't want to deal with Felix again. The painting has more to do with working through my feelings about what happened."

Edward looks at me, but doesn't ask any further questions, the conversation hitting a lull as we finish our meals. Hopefully I've placated him enough to let the topic go for the evening.

"Okay, we resolved the Felix situation, and we finished our gourmet meal, so how about we watch a movie or something?"

I feel surprisingly excited at his suggestion. Dinner and a movie with Edward Cullen? Maybe I'm still unconscious, and this is all a strange dream.

"Okay," I say enthusiastically.

I move to the living room, contemplating how crazy it is that after a day like today, I am about to do something as normal as watching a movie. When was the last time anything in my life was normal?

As promised, a few minutes later Edward walks out of the kitchen and makes the interesting choice of sitting on the couch by my feet instead of in the chair across the room. Searching through the list of available downloads, he settles on Zombieland.

"Ah, perfect, we could use some laughter. Plus, it teaches some very valuable lessons on how to survive the zombie apocalypse. I need you on your best game, Swan, if you and I are going to take
on the world, so pay close attention," he says with mock seriousness, before focusing his attention on the screen.

Finding courage, I decide to stretch my feet until I feel his leg. Cautiously placing my toes on his thigh, I feel that now familiar hum running through my body. When my feet make contact, I swear Edward's smile widens, even though his attention never wavers from the movie.

I deserve one night of happiness, just one night before I say goodbye. Life owes me that much, I contend turning toward the screen and smiling.

Tonight there are only good lessons to learn.

Chapter End Notes

Until we meet next time, where there is more drama to come. :)
Chapter 6: In the Deep

I am lost in the dark.

Evil faces and bony hands surround me. Escape is my only salvation.

With a racing heart and struggling for breath, I frantically run from unknown forces intent on tracking me down.

 Everywhere I turn is a dead-end. I'm losing hope.

Suddenly, an angel appears, shining light into the dark with gentle touches and whispering words of comfort.

"I've got you."

"I'm here, Bella, I'm here."

"Baby, you're safe."

The angel knows when I need him. No matter how many times the darkness descends, the light is there fighting it away.

A sound invades my consciousness, and although I'm still groggy with sleep, I feel surprisingly rested. Opening my eyes to the sight of my bedroom, illuminated by the muted light of a hazy morning, I struggle to remember how I got here. Suddenly, I become aware of an arm slung over
my waist and a warm body snuggled up against my back.

*What happened last night?*

I look down relieved to see that I am still wearing my paint clothes from yesterday. Hearing the noise again, I recognize it is Edward's cell phone. Untangling myself, I turn over and watch him sleep. He looks so peaceful. Without thinking, I find myself lightly running my hand through his hair. It's softer than I imagined.

His phone rings again, disrupting the moment and bringing me back to reality.

"Edward," I say, pushing his arm gently. "Edward, wake up, your phone is ringing." He groans and reaches out to grab me again. "Come on, you need to wake up."

Edward blinks slowly and smiles, his eyes bright and happy. Realizing where he is, and our physical proximity, Edward sits up quickly and jumps back, looking embarrassed by our current predicament.

"Bella, hey. How are you?" he stutters, running his hand through his hair nervously, and before I can ask about our sleeping arrangement, his phone rings again. Grumbling, he pulls the interrupting device out of his pocket.

"Cullen," he answers, getting up from the bed. "Hey, Emmett, what's up? … No, why is he trying to reach her?"

I sit there listening to his side of the conversation, trying to sort out what happened last night. The last thing I remember is being on the couch.

"*What?*" Edward yells, pacing back and forth in front of my bed."No way! … He can fucking wait! … He assaulted her in a jail. What's the rush?"

On the other end, I hear Emmett's mumbled voice answering the question. Edward is silent for a few minutes, but his facial expression is anything but calm. Whatever Emmett is saying isn't good.

"Say that again… You're fucking kidding me? How the hell does that even happen? … Fine, let me talk to her. … No, I'll do it. … Yeah, yeah okay, see you when we get there." He hangs up the phone and drops his head, gathering his thoughts.

"Bella, I hate to do this, but you need to go in and make a statement about what happened with Felix."

"Right now?" I question.

"As soon as possible. I'm sorry, Bella, the director refuses to budge."

For a moment, I struggle to fight off the increasing panic when I think about setting foot in that building, and the possible enemy within it. Relying again on my survival techniques, I force myself to ignore it. No matter how scared I am, if I am going to convince Edward to leave me alone, I need to play this smarter. Becoming emotional every time Edward mentions Felix is only going to increase his already heightened suspicions about my behavior. Swallowing my fear and putting on my best poker face, I calmly respond.

"That's okay. I understand. But, can we do it here instead?" I ask, getting out of bed and walking to stand next to him.
There is no reason for me to go into the office to give my statement. Edward and Emmett can do it here just as well as the office. I hold my breath, hoping he agrees with my request.

"Yeah, well, here's the thing. The camera in the room broke, and the video of your interview with Felix is messed up. Director Banner wants you to come in and map out the events for evidence. Don't worry. Emmett and I will do this quick, okay," he states with conviction.

"Thank you," I whisper, my mind racing to process his news.

Once again, someone tampered with the evidence. The move seems strange to me. I don't understand what they are trying to accomplish by destroying the tape of my attack. Nothing about our interaction implicates the Volturi. There is a specific plan being followed with Felix, but I'm struggling to connect all the pieces and understand the endgame.

Figuring out where Felix fits in is becoming more and more important; however, there is another pressing question I want an answer for first.

"So, how did I end up in my bed last night?" I ask, Edward's face reddening in embarrassment.

"Yeah, umm, you fell asleep before the movie ended, and I didn't want you to roll off and hurt yourself again, so I carried you to your bedroom."

"And you?" I question again.

"Umm, I swear I was going back to the couch, but you were really restless. I think you were having a nightmare, and sitting next to you was the only thing that calmed you down. Every time I tried to leave, you would get upset and grab me, so I decided to stay longer. I guess I eventually fell asleep."

He watches me with worried eyes, waiting for my response. I can't really blame him for not knowing how I am going to react. My recent push and pull is confusing me as well, my heart and mind no longer on the same page.

"Thanks, Edward. I appreciate you being here with me." My heart aches watching Edward's face light up with a huge smile. No matter how good this morning felt, I can't let it happen again.

"Wow, Swan, an actual thank you? You see that isn't so hard, is it?"

"Don't push it, Cullen," I warn, giving him a gentle shove. "Hey, I guess I messed up your plan." He looks at me curiously. "You know, for the zombie apocalypse. The only lesson I remember is no attachments, so there goes you and me against the world. Guess I will be fighting solo." I start to laugh, but abruptly stop when I see Edward's serious face.

"I will always fight for you, Bella. Only you."

Edward moves forward and grabs my hand. We stare at each other silently while he gently rubs circles along my wrist, both wondering which one of us will break first, and in what direction. Edward slowly leans down, gazing between my eyes and my lips, and although my heart is soaring, my logical side snaps me back to reality, and I quickly step away.

"I better get ready," I whisper, turning and walking towards the bathroom.

Edward stands still but holds my hand until the distance breaks the connection. Glancing back, I see him look down in defeat. Standing in the shower, I let the water wash away the tears. Edward's continued assault on my defenses is making it harder and harder to stay focused on my plan. I
allowed myself one night, but now I need to let him go.

I laugh bitterly thinking about going into the office. Fate is a fickle foe for creating a reason for me to spend more time with Edward in the place that could destroy me. God I hate my life. Half an hour later, I am walking toward the kitchen, dressed and ready to go.

"How's your head?" Edward asks, coming over and touching me where the gauze previously resided. "Any pain or dizziness?" The tension in the air is thick, both of us avoiding what almost occurred before my shower.

"Not really. I have a dull ache, but it's better than yesterday, and the dizziness is gone." I smile reassuringly. He smiles back, continuing to touch the back of my head, checking the wound for himself.

"Do you need to dress your incision or anything?"

"No, it is actually pretty small and not bleeding." He steps away with a gentle squeeze to my shoulder.

"Do you mind if I use your bathroom to get ready?"

I shake my head no, and he smiles tightly before walking down the hallway carrying the duffel bag he brought in last night. Needing something to distract myself, I remember that I have several messages on my phone. Turning toward the counter, I grab it and decide to start with the text messages. They were all from Edward.

_Bella I just found out you're out of the hospital. Call me._

_Bella r u there?_

_Bella I'm worried, call me!_

_I am starting to freak out a bit here. R u there?_

The messages become progressively more frantic, each asking me to call him back as soon as possible. Next, I listen to the voicemails, which are the same as the text messages; although, this time I can hear the fear and worry in Edward's voice.

Guilt bubbles up remembering how I chose to ignore the messages when I first found them. Thinking back on everything he's done for me, I feel sickened by my behavior. Edward deserves more than my indifference.

Focused solely on my preservation, I've neglected to consider how my departure will affect those around me. Edward and Emmett will not simply ignore my disappearance. The last thing I want is for myself or someone else to hurt them, and to that end, I can no longer ignore Felix's case, and the possible outcome. The mole inside the office is still there, and the Volturi are obviously interested in Seattle. The danger will not disappear just because I do. I need to protect them, and given my history, I'm the only one that can give Edward and Emmett ammunition against them.

The best way to protect Edward and Emmett is to expose the mole; this is now my priority. Quietly walking down the hallway, I pause by the bathroom door and hear the shower running. I don't have much time.

Rushing into my bedroom, I open the closet and dig past the clothes to the back corner where my treasured suitcase sits. Dragging it out, I unzip the main compartment and resist the desire to look
at the objects packed there. Most belong to my mother, and I have no time for those emotions. Pulling at the lining, I expose the secret compartment. Hidden within are several ID's and documents, the basics of what anyone needs to disappear. To the right and taped to the back is what I need. Snatching the flash-drive, I lightly kiss it for luck before stuffing it in my pocket. Thank God for secret weapons.

I am about to put the lining back when I catch a glimpse of the guns buried to the far left. Buying them was Caius' idea. He gave me a rundown on obtaining illegal weapons before I left; buying them legally would create a paper trail I didn't need. Caius also told me what to buy; one is a Sig Saucer, and one is a compact Smith and Wesson, which is easy to conceal. Both are powerful.

I hesitate, wondering if I should bring one with me, feeling as though I'm about to go to battle. Shaking my head, I realize the stupidity of my thoughts. Walking into a building with metal detectors is a great way to get caught with a firearm, and there is no logical explanation I could give Edward about why I have one.

After securing the suitcase, I walk down the hallway and back to the kitchen. Edward will be out any moment now, which leaves me little time to plan. I know he is going to stick close to me when we get to the office. I will need him to leave me alone for at least 15 minutes to accomplish my goal, but I am struggling to figure out a plausible excuse.

"You ready to go?" I turn and see Edward standing behind me clean-shaven and in his usual work suit apparel.

"Do I have a choice?" I ask. "Let's just get this over." Edward nods, and we head out the door.

Since my car is still at the office, Edward is driving us. Both lost in our own thoughts, the car is silent as we start our journey. I am anxiously tapping my fingers on my leg, when Edward's hand grabs mine and intertwines our fingers.

"Breathe, Bella," he says simply, his attention focused on the road. I look down at our fingers, wondering how in the span of one evening I let Edward become so important to my life.

Nearing the office, my apprehension grows. My plan is a huge gamble, and successfully leaving today without being exposed will be a miracle. As we pull into the parking lot, I take several deep breaths, to focus my thoughts. There is no more time for doubt.

Game on, I think as we walk into the lion's den.

Edward and I proceeded over to the cubicles and offices. My senses are on high alert as I assess everyone around me for any clue that they are working for the enemy. However, it is not an easy task. Guilt is a strange emotion in humans because being guilty of a behavior often has nothing to do with the experience of guilt. The experience is personal and depends upon many factors. Looking across the office, I see many examples of this contradiction.

There is Jim who is currently drowning in guilt as he eats a doughnut. Last week, Jim pledged to lose 30 pounds and eat healthier after being diagnosed with diabetes. Simply assessing the intensity of his emotion could make you think he committed the worse type of crime, instead of just falling off his diet plan. On the other side of the room is Brett, a new father to an adorable three-month-old girl, recently born to his beautiful wife. He is currently sitting on the edge of Amber's desk, clearly flirting and touching her arm suggestively. His emotion is one of arrogant triumph, not guilt. Fucking asshole.

This is the limitation of my ability. The structure of an interrogation makes sorting through
emotions easier because I can introduce topics, and see how the person reacts. Just searching for a guilty party in a room full of people is almost impossible, especially when I don't know if the person is guilty or proud of the betrayal they are committing. Narrowing down the possible suspects is the only way I will find the mole. I lightly pat my pocket feeling the flash-drive, hoping I can manipulate a way to use it.

"Bella!" Emmett rushes over and grabs me in a big hug. "How are you doing?"

"Hi, Emmett. I'm doing okay."

"Jesus Emmett, don't squeeze her to death." Edward growls.

"Aww, is someone having a bad morning?" he mocks, trying to rub Edward's head. I smile at the playful behavior. No matter what is happening, I can always count of Emmett's bright light to ease my anxiety.


"So what's the plan? Pictures or statement first?" I ask not wanting to waste any time.

"Well, um there's been a slight change." Emmett glances nervously at Edward.

"What kind of change?" Edward tenses.

"Okay, but just remember I'm the messenger. Now, we are still in charge of the case, but since we are close to Bella, Banner decided we shouldn't interview her."

"So who is going to do it?" Edward looks cautiously at Emmett.

"Newton."

Mike Newton, my nemesis in the office. Newton hates me. Well actually, when I started working here, he lusted after me. However, since I never responded to his advances, he's resorted to making snide comments and challenging me at every opportunity. Both Emmett and Edward have told him to knock it off, but it never fails if Mike and I run into each other, he starts hurling insults.

"No fucking way!" Edward yells.

"Look, man, I agree it's not the best idea, but it is a done deal. Let's just get it over with, and if he steps out of line, you and I will make his life hell."

"No, Banner needs to back off. I can't do my job if he's going to call the shots from the sidelines."

Edward turns and looks at me warily. "Bella, I'm going to fix this. Will you be okay for a few minutes while I talk with the director?"

Maybe the fates are finally smiling on me; this is just the excuse I need. Trying not to respond too enthusiastically, I tell him I will be fine.

"Okay, come on, Emmett, let's go." He gives my shoulder a light squeeze, before turning and marching toward the director's office.

After they disappear around the corner, I rush over to my cubicle and turn on the computer. Once logged on, I plug in the flash-drive praying it still works.
"What exactly is this thing?" I ask Caius, looking strangely at the flash-drive.

"This, Cara, may save your life one day." He looks at me with excitement, and I look at him confused. "This device allows you to hack into different systems and retrieve passwords." He smiles triumphantly while I wait for any information that means something to me.

"And?" I respond petulantly.

"Isabella, someday you will need to cover your tracks. This little beauty will help you. Here look," he says, plugging it into his office computer. As the flash-drive blinks, a window appears on the screen with a scrolling list.

"It connects to the system's override programs and provides lists of all the passwords for any file or program connected to the computer. If you attach it to a computer linked to a network, you can pull up any password or file in that whole system. That, Isabella, is power."

I analyze the screen, finally comprehending the usefulness of the device. Although Caius and I have discussed ways to stay off of any electronic radar when I leave, the reality is the world runs on computers. This is my safety net if I need to erase any electronic footprints of my existence.

"That is amazing."

"The best money can buy, and what's more, there is a built-in feature to fool security systems designed to detect any breach."

He pulls out the flash-drive and hands it to me. Once again, Caius has thought of everything.

As soon as I plug it in, it starts working, and almost magically, a new window appears on my screen listing the usernames and passwords of all the staff and departments.

Tapping my fingers nervously, I scan the list looking for Emmett's name deciding to start with his case file for the names of anyone else involved with Felix's case. Opening Emmett's case notes, I scan the information while keeping an eye out for either Emmett or Edward. Luckily, there are only a handful of agents listed. Using my notebook, I write down the names and their connection.

1) Director Banner: He continues to orchestrate and watch how the case is handled.

2) Ben Cheney: The agent who originally processed Felix.

3) Bree Tanner: Tech who signed for the evidence at the lab, including the note.

4) Angela Weber: Was with the officer when Felix was first brought in.

My heart races as I glance around, knowing I don't have much time before Edward and Emmett return; I just need a few more minutes. Looking again at the list, I pull up the files for the personnel department, and using a second flash-drive, quickly download the files of the suspects as well as Mike's, who is new to the case, but could be involved. After successfully transferring the staff files, I also decide to download the case file. I don't have time to analyze the information here, so I need to make sure I have everything I need at home.

Before logging off, I have one last task. Sorting through the personnel files again, I search for mine. Finding it, I pull up the file and hit delete. The computer questions the request, asking if I am sure I want to delete the entire file. You bet your ass I do, I think, hitting the confirm button. I feel relief, knowing I may have bought myself more time. I log off, putting the list and flash-drives in
my pocket just as I see Edward and Emmett round the corner.

Edward's face is full of frustration as he marches over to me. The talk must not have gone well.

"Why is he being such a dick about this? Impartial, I'll show him impartial," Edward mumbles under his breath as they arrive at my desk.

"The talk went well I see?"

"Oh it went swell. Lover boy here is on top of his game," Emmett responds sarcastically. "Seriously, bro, where the hell is that Cullen charm? You don't yell at the director and expect results."

"Well this situation is bullshit! Bella shouldn't have to deal with Newton."

As much as I hate the thought of being in a room for any extended period with Mike, I am more concerned about staying here longer. I have what I came for, and now it is time to leave.

"Edward, it's fine, let's just get it done." Looking at me pensively, he finally nods his head in submission. "So, Emmett, where are we going?" I ask.

"Newton said to meet him in the interview room you were in with Felix."

Like a few days ago, I make my way down the hallway and through the steel doors. I notice Edward walking closely beside me, our arms brushing against each other from time to time. On a few occasions, it seems Edward is about to take my hand, but he never does, and I find myself feeling disappointed. We are about to go into the interview room when I hear a whiny, shrill voice behind me.

"Edward!" Jessica Stanley squeals. "Where have you been? I missed you!" She winks, colored in desperation.

Ugh, this is just what I need today. Although I don't think Jessica and Edward ever had any type of relationship, he does nothing to stop her flirtatious advances. In fact, he usually fuels them with a few well-placed smiles and touches. I look over to Edward, expecting to see the typical Cullen charm, but instead I find him looking uncomfortable.

"Jessica, hi," he mumbles, shuffling his feet and rubbing the back of his neck. "How are you?"

"Oh, I am so much better now that you are here." She purrs, running a finger down his arm.

Emmett stifles a giggle next to me. The lust rolling off of her is too much, so I quickly walk into the room to distance myself from the pathetic scene. Emmett follows me rolling his eyes.

"Listen, Jessica, I need to go. So um, yeah, have a good day," Edward stutters before entering the room as well. The lust from Jessica quickly turns to frustration as I see her walk quickly past the door in a huff.

"Wow, E, when did you tap that?" Emmett laughs. Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. I really didn't want to hear his answer.

"I have not tapped that!" Edward snarls. "I don't want anything to do with Jessica, not now, not ever." Edward is looking directly at me when he speaks, trying to tell me something important.

"I have a feeling she won't give up easily, so good luck there!" Emmet laughs again slapping
"Edward on the back."

"Shut up, Emmett." Edward hisses, intently holding my gaze as Mike walks into the room.

"You finally made it. Look, I'm in the middle of a conversation with Ms. Hale, so give me another minute."

"Rose is here?" Emmett asks.

"Yeah, we are wrapping up a case. I'll be right back, so don't go anywhere," he warns, and as he is speaking, I hear Edward mumble "prick" under his breath.

Great, more waiting, I think when suddenly the room starts flashing in bright and hectic colors. I look to my right to see Emmett sitting on a table, bouncing his leg and drumming his fingers.

"What has you so twitchy, Em?" I ask, watching the light flow out of him.

"Nothing."

"Well, nothing is giving me a headache, so tone it down some," I grumble annoyed.

"It's Rose," Edward interrupts.

Rosalie Hale is the federal attorney who prosecutes the cases we work on. She comes across as a stone cold bitch, but in truth, she is more vulnerable than anyone realizes. It was clear to me early on she was deeply hurt in the past, and it colors all of her interactions.

"What about her?" I ask.

"They went on a date last week, and she hasn't called him back yet."

"Seriously? You went on a date with Rose?" I ask Emmett astonished.

"Yes," he whispers.

"How was it?"

He sighs, the colors around him changing into dull hues of blue. "It was great."

"If it was great, why are you sad?" I reach out to touch his arm.

"Because she hasn't spoken to me since we went out. I thought we had a great time, and then nothing. I really like her, Bells, and it is killing me not knowing if she feels the same way."

"Oh, Em, maybe you just need to give her time." I think about the trust issues I see in her. If she did feel the same way, it is probably freaking her out.

"Wait, you can tell me!" He perks up. "You can do your thing and tell me if she likes me!"

"Emmett, no. Don't ask me to do that."

"Come on, Bells. What's the point of knowing about this thing if we can't use it to our advantage from time to time?"

"Emmett!" Edward warns. "Leave her alone. She is not a toy for your amusement."

"Come on, Bella. Just this once, I pro…"
"Okay, let's get started. Cullen and McCarty, why don't you leave so I can interview Ms. Swan."

"No way. I'm staying." Edward folds his arms across his chest in defiance.

"You know that's not the deal. Don't make things difficult."

"No, I believe the deal is we don't interview her, but I am still in charge of this investigation, and privy to any information. So, as lead investigator, I have a right to observe this interview." He stands there challenging Mike to argue.

"Fine, but that is all you will do. McCarty doesn't need to stay though."

"Don't get your panties in a wad, Mikey. I'll leave," Emmett taunts, smiling at me in support before walking out. Edward moves back to the corner of the room and leans against the wall, keeping his arms crossed.

I turn and look at Mike with narrowed eyes. If this is how he wants to play it, fine. I need an outlet for my frustrations, and Mike is a perfect target. He can act as smug as he wants, but I know his triggers. It is time for some mental fencing, I think, sizing up my new opponent.

"Okay, Ms. Swan, let's start at the beginning. Agent McCarty called you to meet with the suspect, correct?"

"That's correct. Can you call me Bella, please? I mean, it's not like we don't know each other."

"Well, at least one of us should maintain professionalism during this case," he states tersely.

Newton makes his first advance by trying to get me to bite on his indirect insult. Edward growls behind me as I roll my eyes.

"Your right, Agent Newton, my apologies, but if you prefer to address me by my last name, it is Dr. not Ms." I smile politely.

I parry back, targeting his insecurities related to my degree. His colors flash in anger, but the hues include shades of doubt. Point in my favor.

"Okay, so you spoke to the suspect by yourself, correct, Dr. Swan?"

"Yes."

"Is that typical for you?"

"Sometimes, I find it makes the suspect feel more at ease to not talk to an authority figure. Mr. Grey was defensive, so it made sense to try that route with him," I state calmly, wondering what he is trying to get at with this line of questioning.

"Tell me, Dr. Swan, is there anything else you do to make suspects feel more at ease?" He sneers, shades of revenge pouring out of him. I stare at him wide-mouthed, shocked by what he is insinuating. Point to Mike. Edward explodes behind me.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouts, rushing forward and slamming his hands down on the table.

"Agent Cullen, you are here to observe!" Mike yells, pointing his finger in Edward's face.
"And you should treat the victim with respect, Agent!" Edward sneers back.

"It is a simple question." Mike smirks.

"I don't like what you are implying, Newton," Edward responds in a deadly tone.

"Hey, something triggered Felix, and I am just looking at all the possibilities."

"You better watch yourself!" Edward leans in closer to Mike. I need to put an end to this before things get out of control.

"Edward. Edward, stop. It's alright," I say, touching his arm to break the staring match between the two men. He finally looks over at me. "Just let it go, okay. I want to get this over with, and this is not helping."

He takes a breath, glaring once more at Mike, before walking back and resuming his stance against the wall.

"Fine, but I am warning you, Newton, nothing will stop me from coming over that table if you step out of line again, clear?" he says, pointing a finger in Mike's direction.

"Crystal!" Mike scoffs in response.

"It's really fine, Edward. Agent Newton just has a hard time understanding that when you have good interrogation skills, you don't need to resort to any underhanded tactics, right, Mike?"

He narrows his eyes at my attack, angered by the reminder that I am better than him. Once again, his insecurities flare. Mike is known for his lackluster interrogation skills. Point returned.

"To answer your question, Mike, no I do not do anything else to put suspects at ease." I sit up taller as he stares me down. However, I see his resolve falter as his insults fall flat. Point and game.

"Fine, let's just go through the events of what happened then." He snarls, taking out his pen and writing down the exchange with Felix.

After the interview, we walk through the room and take pictures of the event. Mapping out where Felix was sitting and how he attacked me. Once done, Mike collects his notes and excuses himself while Edward tracks him with deadly eyes, not moving an inch until the room is clear.

"Motherfucker!" Edward spits moving over to kneel beside me. "Bella, are you okay?"

"Yes," I say honestly. "But I'm ready to go home. Can I leave now?"

"Of course. Let's get out of here." Edward stands and offers me his hand. Before we leave the room, Edward pulls me into a hug.

"I'm sorry," he whispers against my head. "Emmett and I will take care of Newton." I nod, more out of exhaustion then agreement with his intent to mess with Mike. I just want to get out of there.

We walk out of the door, and suddenly, everything moves in slow motion as I spot Felix walking towards me. Two officers are escorting him out of another interview room in waist-chains. He slowly looks up, recognition dawning on his face. Before I can alert Edward to his presence, the colors around him explode in chaotic anger. He screams in frustration, busting out of the grasp of the officers holding him.

"You fucking bitch! What more do you want from me? I will kill every last one of you!" he shouts,
heading directly toward me.

Edward pulls me behind him and draws his service weapon, shouting at Felix to stop or else he will shoot. My hands fly up to my head, the intensity of the emotions causing a blinding pain. I back up until I am against the wall and slide down, holding my head in my hands and shutting my eyes. I am vaguely aware of the commotion happening around me. There are sounds of a struggle and lots of yelling. I can hear Edward's voice threatening to kill Felix if he comes near me again and demanding to know who is responsible for him being here.

Then just as suddenly, everything goes quiet and the pain in my head subsides. Felix must have left the room.

"Bella," Edward whispers, his hands covering mine. "It's okay. He's gone."

One of his hands softly strokes my hair, and I start to feel more in control. I rarely have such an intense reaction to other's emotions, and I am positive that Felix's connection to the Volturi is the cause. I slowly bring my hands down and look into Edward's worried eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine. That was intense." Edward grabs my hand to help me up. Once I am standing, he puts his arm around my shoulders in case I fall over.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yup, just part of the fun of this, I guess." I point to my head, and he looks at me with sympathetic eyes.

"Jesus, Bella. Are you okay?" Emmett rushes over and pulls me from under Edward's arm into a hug.

"I'm fine, but I think I've had my quota of drama this year. I feel like I am this close to having my own lifetime special," I joke, trying to ease the tension and take the attention away from me. Emmett chuckles while Edward looks at me with concern.

"What the hell happened?" Emmett asks.

"Fucking Newton approved Felix being brought up to talk to his lawyer. He fucking knew Bella was here. I swear I'm going to break him!" Edward is breathing heavy, the adrenalin still coursing through his system.

"Just let me know when, and I will hold him for you!" Emmett narrows his eyes towards Mike's office. "So, Bella, why does Felix seem to think you did something to him?" Emmett questions, focusing his attention back on me.

"I don't know? He was saying the same stuff during our interview," I state in a noncommittal fashion, trying to deflect from that line of questioning.

I notice for the first time there are still several people lingering around, staring at our little trio. My fear returns, wondering if my run in with Felix was a coincidence or planned. It is time to leave. I am already taking too many risks, and I don't need to linger while people gawk.

"Okay, I've had enough excitement for one day. I'm outta here," I state, walking to the door, when Edward grabs my arm stopping me.
"Where do you think you are going?"

"Umm, home."

"You can't leave without me. I drove you here."

"Right, but my car is still here from before, so I can drive myself back." I smile sweetly at him.

"Look, I am sure that you have some things to do, and I am fine. I promise." If on cue, another agent steps over towards us.

"Cullen, the director wants to speak to you in his office."

"See, things to do. You go. I'm fine." He looks at me warily but eventually concedes and releases my arm.

"I'm calling you in twenty minutes to make sure you make it home. So, pick up your phone this time, please," he implores.

"Yes, sir," I say, mock saluting him.

He looks at me longer before walking in the opposite direction. I try to memorize this moment, so I can take it with me. Before leaving, I turn once more towards Emmett.

"Emmett, don't give up on Rose." He looks at me with wide and hopeful eyes. "Trust me." I wink.

He explodes with happiness, nodding his head in agreement. I give him one last smile, before walking out the door for the final time.

Arriving back to my apartment, I focus on my goal. I have one more task to complete. After answering Edward's phone call, to his relief, I start on my project. Several hours later, I am still sitting at my computer, reviewing the downloaded documents, looking for any clues on the mole's identity. I check each file using my knowledge of the Volturi and how they pick people. Often it is because their history makes them an easy target for blackmail.

The list of suspects is small, but their histories complicated, and several could fit the profile.

Director Banner is the most frustrating suspect. I have known him since I started working in Seattle, and he has always been forthright and honest. It is hard to imagine him involved with the Volturi, but he is overly invested in this case, and his file gives me no clues as to whether he is the puppet or the puppeteer?

Ben Cheney was recently sanctioned for a DUI arrest. A note in his file indicated it occurred on his way back from a poker game. If gambling is his vice, he would make for an easy target. Owing money to the wrong people can bring even the best-intentioned people down.

Angela Weber is the cleanest of all the suspects. There wasn't much in her file that would make her a target for the Volturi.

Bree Tanner is another mystery. Three months ago, she was hand-picked by Director Banner to run the lab. His strange behavior along with the fact that she signed for the evidence does not bode well. Right now, they are the strongest candidates.

Finally, there is Mike Newton. A part of me hoped to find evidence against him for the simple reason I would love to see his arrogant ass brought down. But, like Angela, there was not much in
his background the Volturi would see as a tool to use to their advantage.

I sit sipping my coffee, considering the best way to package the information for Edward and Emmett. I wish I could give them something more specific, but at the very least, letting them know there is a mole should help to keep them safer. That is all I want and is the best gift I can leave behind.

Deciding to look through things one more time, I go to open the director's file again when my computer freezes.

"Son of a bitch!" I grumble, jiggling the mouse and hitting random keys.

Suddenly, an ominous black box fills my screen. My heart stops as a cursor appears, blinking like a ticking bomb. I watch it move slowly across the screen, filling the box with words. The coffee cup crashes to the floor, my shaking hands losing their grip as I read the message across the screen.

*I KNOW WHO YOU ARE*

Chapter End Notes

Until next time…
Chapter 7: What Makes You Stay

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

My thoughts are racing as I contemplate what to do. Out of all the scenarios I've imagined, never once did I consider being confronted about my identity on a computer screen in my own home. Who is this person? How do they know me, and are they watching me now? I am petrified.

Do I have your attention?

I feel like the words are screaming at me, but I have no idea how to respond to letters in a fucking black box. Anger starts to outweigh the fear. If whoever this is wants me, they need to show their face and not hide behind a computer. I refuse to play games with my life. However, in order to get a full picture of whom and what I'm dealing with, I'll need to "join" the game to build a strategy.

Click on the box in the right hand corner and we can talk.

Flexing my hand a few times to ease the shakiness, I take a deep breath and click on the corner as instructed. A part of me wants to shut down the computer and run, but logically I know the best way to protect myself is to have all the facts, which means I need to talk to whoever is behind the message. As soon as I click my mouse, a voice comes through the speakers.

"The famous Isabella. I can't believe I'm actually talking to you," the disembodied voice says in an almost giddy matter.

His tone surprises me. It is neither malicious nor threatening; the exact opposite of what I expect from someone going to all this trouble to contact me. I sit quietly weighing the pros and cons of my next move. Should I play dumb and deny everything? Or do I engage in the conversation and just take at face value that he knows the truth?
"Isabella? Please talk to me. I'm a comrade, well an admirer really. I hope I didn't scare you. Honestly, I can't believe I'm the one that found you." He giggles…actually fucking giggles.

"Who the hell are you?" I finally respond, furious that in the midst of my worst nightmare, this guy sounds like a fan-girl meeting their crush. Who the fuck is he, and what type of game is he playing?

"Sorry, sorry, that was probably inappropriate. I don't do social well. I say unsuitable things, approach people in erroneous ways, misread cues…great, and now I guess I can add waffling to the list as well."

"Is there a point to this? How do you know me and what do you want?" I yell at the faceless voice, cutting him off.

"Shit, I am screwing this up. You are like finding out there are particles in quarks. No that's wrong, umm, you're like Harry Potter. He is the boy who survived Voldemort's attack, and you are the girl who escaped the Volturi."

He talks in a rapid, pressured fashion, and I'm trying to keep up with his strange train of thought. The psychologist in me wonders if this is normal for him or if it is the anxiety of the situation. Without seeming to take a breath, he continues his manic explanation.

"There are conspiracy theories outside of the Volturi circle about what happened to you. I've heard many wild ideas. They fall into two camps, either how you left or how you were killed. Is it true you turned Caius? I personally think Aro likes people to believe you are dead. It raises his intimidation factor. You know, who would oppose him knowing he killed you….

The voice continues its ramble, the sound becoming distant in my mind. He actually said his name out loud. Time and distance has not changed the hate I feel hearing it. I've refused to speak or think it for so long, choosing instead to distance myself through impersonal pronouns, and yet he speaks it so casually.

Aro. The man who destroyed my life.

Forcing myself back to the present, I realize the voice is still babbling. If he is a Volturi player, he's pulling off an Oscar-worthy performance. Loose speech is not tolerated within their ranks as it is too much of a liability. Interrupting his continuous ramble about conspiracy theories, I push for answers.

"You have me at a disadvantage. You know a lot about me, but I don't know anything about you or what you want from me."

"People call me Reaper. You and I have a mutual goal."

I hesitate wondering if I heard him correctly. He expects me to take him seriously by giving me that answer? Tempted to tell him to go to hell, I remind myself that his strange behavior doesn't change the fact that he knows my identity.

"Reaper? Really? Well, Reaper, what could we possibly have in common?"

"We both want Aro to burn," he responds in a confident tone.

"You must have me mistaken. I don't want to involve myself with the Volturi's demise, and even if I did, I have no reason to trust you."

"You need an offering of trust, something to prove my allegiance? Well, I am happy to report I
provided such a gift.” His excited tone gives me an image of a puppy dancing around its owner's legs waiting for a treat, but his words makes me apprehensive.

"What gift?” I question suspiciously.

"The tape!” he explains with boisterous enthusiasm.

"You destroyed the tape?” Shocked, I try to sort out how his confession connects with everything else with Felix's case.

"Yup. It took some intricate hacking, but luckily for you, my kung fu is the best. I created a virus that damaged the digital output and erased the saved files, making the footage useless. This is good, right?"

Although he is waiting for my approval, I am too busy putting all the pieces together to care about giving him praise.

"Did you do anything else?” I almost ask specifically about the lack of fingerprints on the note, but decide if he does know about the note, I need him to tell me first.

"No, just the tape. Any other possible tampering is due to the evil ones, not me."

"Evil ones?"

"The Volturi. I've tracked their movements for years, but they are a difficult group to breach. Their systems are impenetrable, and I have never been able to get any further than the fringe of their operations. By the way, have you seen The Fringe? It's an awesome show...but probably not relevant to this conversation. Shit I am doing it again...umm so anyway, I couldn't believe my luck when I hacked the FBI system and recognized your face on that video. I destroyed it and then worked on finding a way to contact you."

The identity of the mole just became a lot more complicated. There are now at least two outside individuals interfering with Felix's case.

"So if you're not one of the evil ones, does that make you a good guy?"

"Umm, I'm an ambiguous guy. I break multiple laws with my data retrieval skills, but I do not intend to harm you, Isabella,” he says with sincerity.

"Even with the tape, I've heard you say nothing that warrants developing a partnership.” I respond.

"I can assist you in finding the person working with the Volturi. They were actually mindless enough to communicate through the FBI servers, which means…"

"How do you know that?” I ask cutting off his non-stop chatter.

"I told you, I'm the best. I hacked those servers five days ago trying to follow Felix. So what do you say? I help you find them, and you help me bring down Aro.”

I silently consider his offer. Finding the mole will help protect Edward and Emmett, but is it worth the price of trading one devil for possibly another? There's a reason they say better the devil you know. He sounds genuine, but I can't trust him just yet.

"Look, I can keep you hidden. I've proven that with the tape. We can help each other,” he argues his point further.
"I need time," I blurt out.

"I understand, but we need to move quickly if we are to capitalize on this opportunity to bring down the Volturi. You don't have the luxury of time."

"Is that a threat?" I question. This is the first time during our conversation that he's sounded serious.

"No, it's reality. You are safe for now, but they will find you unless we do something. Your inside information and my hacking can go a long way towards bringing them down. Don't wait long to give me your decision."

"How do I reach you?"

"Don't worry, I'll find you."

"Wait!" I yell at the screen. "If you really want me to consider your offer, you have to give me something else, something more tangible."

There was a small moment of hesitation before he responded. "Aro murdered my family. We have more in common than you think, Isabella. Oh, and my real name is Seth."

Suddenly the box disappears and the FBI documents are back on my screen. Reeling from the surreal experience, I need to decide on which course of action I am going to take. A moment of irrationality washes over me and I pull the plug of my computer from the wall. Logically, I know it won't change anything; he obviously knows how to find me. But for a brief second, doing something, no matter how pointless, makes me feel in control.

Generally, I consider myself a logical person. Rationally, I know the most logical plan considering Felix, the Volturi, and now Seth, is to leave. However, instead of grabbing my suitcase and running, I find myself sitting on my bedroom floor holding Edward's shirt and trying not to cry.

As a rule of thumb, I don't allow myself to get close to others. Complications, attachments, and emotions are risks; a slippery slope to exposure. My partnership with Emmett and Edward is the longest and closest relationship I've had in years.

Living on the run, I've kept my life simple. I always knew I might have to leave at a moment's notice, so I couldn't allow myself to get too attached to anything or anyone. My apartment is a reflection of that simplicity. The furniture is basic, nothing original about the color or patterns. The walls are white with a few random pictures of flowers hanging in each room. The counters in the kitchen are bare except for the needed appliances. There are no knick-knacks anywhere or personal pictures. Nothing about the apartment distinguishes it as mine.

So it surprises me that in the span of one evening, Edward Cullen managed to permeate every part of my orderly and simple apartment.

There is a note in his handwriting in the kitchen letting me know I am out of bread. The tennis shoes he wore last night are lying on the carpet in front of my sofa. In the bathroom, his toothbrush has taken residency in my holder, and his shaving kit is on the shelf over the toilet next to my makeup bag. My bedroom is by far the worst. His clothes from yesterday are strewn all over my bed, and his duffel bag sits on the hope chest by the window with more clothes to the side that must have fallen out when he grabbed what he needed.

The fact that he so boldly took over my space should bother me, but instead of annoyance, I find
myself feeling fulfillment. Edward told me yesterday that I was not alone, but seeing his things intermixed with mine makes it real. The visual crumbles the last pieces of my defenses.

The bedroom is now my symbolic fork in the road. On one side of the room is my suitcase, and on the other side is Edward's duffel bag. I replay the look on Edward's face last night, terrified because he couldn't reach me for a couple of hours. What would he do if I was missing for a couple of weeks or months?

Which path should I take?

As I contemplate my future, the phone I promised to keep with me comes to life, Edward's name flashing on the screen. Lately, he's shown a knack for intervening at the exact moment I need a sign.

"Hey, Edward. What's up?" I question with more cheer in my voice than I am feeling.

"Twice in one day. You've done well, Swan!" He laughs.

"Yeah, yeah, look at me, I can use a phone. So, did you call just to taunt me, or is there a purpose behind this conversation?"

"Wow. Such a grumpy tone for the person bringing you lunch."

"You're bringing me lunch?"

"Yup. I'm about 10 minutes from your house. I picked up some take-out from the sushi restaurant you like."

"You are on your way here? Now?"

"You sound surprised. I told you last night, I am not leaving you alone. I took care of things at work and told them I am telecommuting the next couple of days. You're stuck with me, Bella. Accept it."

"Thanks, Edward," I whisper sincerely.

"No problem. I'll see you in a couple of minutes, okay?"

"Okay."

I quickly hide my suitcase and put Edward's shirt back, hoping he will be none the wiser to its recent location. Satisfied I have successfully covered up the evidence of my dilemma, I walk out to the living room to wait for lunch, and more importantly, Edward, to arrive.

"I'm stuffed." I sigh. After dining on too many rolls, Edward and I lean back in our chairs. "I love sushi."

"I know," Edward states with a look I can't quite name.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing. I like seeing you smile, that's all."

Not knowing how to respond, I decide to clean the table. I feel like a contradiction of emotions, happy and scared all at once. I enjoyed having lunch with Edward, all the while glancing at my
computer afraid it will come to life again. In the middle of my mental musing, I hear Edward's phone ring.

"Esme," he answers happily. "I guess you got my message?…You know how important family night is to me, but I can't make it this time."

Edward gets up and walks back to the bedroom for privacy. Several minutes later, he walks back looking stressed.

"Is something wrong?" I question.

"Not really. That was my Aunt Esme. It's our family night tonight, and she's upset I'm not going."

"Why aren't you going?"

"Because, I'm staying here with you. How many times do I have to tell you that?" he asks frustrated.

"Edward, I appreciate the thought, I really do, but I am fine. I highly doubt I'm going to keel over if you walk out that door. Go be with your family. I'm okay here."

"Why don't you come with me?" he asks quickly. If he hadn't looked at me with such hope in his eyes, I would have laughed at the absurdity of his request.

"Edward, they don't want you dragging some stranger to your family night. Seriously, just go."

"Come on, they would love for you to join us. In fact, Esme and my cousin, Alice, really want to meet you."

"Why would they want to meet me?" I ask cautiously.

"Umm, I might have mentioned you a few times," he mumbles. "Bella, they would love to have you there. Please come, because either we go together, or I don't go at all," he says pulling out the Cullen charm and hitting me with a wide smile.

"I swear you'll have a good time. Besides, we usually play some sort of game, and you are my secret weapon." He winks pointing a finger at his head. This is the first time Edward ever acknowledged my ability in a playful way, making it difficult to refuse his request.

"Fine, I'll go, but you owe me." I relent, internally waging a debate with myself on how stupid it is to accept the invitation with everything else going on.

"Great!" He smiles, giving me a brief hug before calling his Aunt back with the news. After his call, we move to the living room and sit on the couch in an awkward silence until Edward breaks it.

"Bella, are you really okay? What happened today with Felix and...?"

"I'm fine, Edward." I cut him off, wanting to prevent another conversation full of questions I can't answer.

Edward sighs, looking down at his hands folded on his lap, he responds in a low voice. "I don't want to push you, but you need to understand that I'm not giving up. I will never hurt you or betray your trust. Whatever is going on, you can tell me. Please, Bella, let me help you." He looks up, sincerity shining through his eyes.

"I want to, Edward, but I don't know how," I whisper honestly.
"Well, that's something I guess. I will prove to you that you can trust me, Bella. Whatever it takes," he declares confidently. And in a declaration of my own, I move over to lay my head on his shoulder.

We spend the rest of the afternoon watching trash TV and making fun of the ridiculous shows. It is a welcome break from all the craziness. I don't think I have ever laughed so hard then when he did his Dr. Phil impression. This is the first we have spent any significant amount of time together outside of a case. I like it. The easy conversation and good company made the time fly, and before I know it, it is time to go.

Driving towards his family's house, my anxiety returns. I've spent years purposefully being invisible. I go to work and then go home, avoiding most social interactions. I tend to rely on my ability to help me engage in conversation, but these people are important. I am worried that I will make a fool out of myself, embarrassing Edward in the process.

I'm sitting quietly, imagining all the things that could go wrong, when Edward reaches over and grabs my hand. Our fingers naturally intertwine as he looks at me with a small smile. It amazes me how much Edward's touch helps to calm my nerves.

"Bella, I've watched you face down dangerous killers with no fear. How can you be so nervous about meeting my family?"

"Killers I can do; family is a whole new experience." I laugh quietly. Edward's smile fades as he glances at me with sad eyes.

"Family is a good thing, Bella, and I promise mine are going to love you." He pulls my hand up to his lips to kiss my knuckles before putting our intertwined hands on his lap.

Edward thinks his family will love me? The intimacy in that statement and his actions highlight even further the shift in our relationship. If we were only co-workers, it wouldn't matter if his family loves me or not, but if we are something more...

I shake my head, better not to finish that thought. Instead, I decide to gather some information on the people I am meeting. Edward and I have spoken vaguely over the last few years about his family, but I don't have all the details.

"Sounds like you are close to your family."

"Yes. Esme and Carlisle adopted me after my parents died. I don't know where I would be without them."

"Your parents died when you were fourteen, right?" I ask hesitantly, not knowing if it is painful to discuss. My mother died when I was six, and I am still devastated by the loss.

"Umm yeah, they died in a car crash. A drunk driver ran a red light." He hesitates a moment before continuing. "My father has a brother who wanted custody because of the trust fund my parents set up. I didn't spend a lot of time with him growing up, but I remember he always gave me the creeps. Anyway, Esme and Carlisle stepped in to fight for me. It was a vicious battle, and in the end, they offered him a large cash settlement of their own money to drop the petition."

"Wow, that's an amazing thing to do. They must love you a lot." I'm in awe that kind of love exists.

"Yeah, they do. I'm thankful every day that they came into my life. Without them...well, I don't want to think about how my life would have turned out." He shakes his head as if freeing himself of thoughts about living with his uncle.
"I should prepare you, my family is affectionate, so don't be surprised if they give you a hug. Alice is…well, Alice. She has more energy than anyone I know. She's intense at first, but means well. Carlisle is probably one of the calmest people you will ever meet. It is part of the reason he is successful at his job. Esme is the heart of the family. She's an instant mother to anyone she meets, and has the sweetest personality."

"They sound wonderful. You're lucky to have such a great family." I squeeze his hand and look out the window, reflecting on my life and the possible differences if someone had fought for me.

"What about your family, Bella? You never talk about them, or what your life was like before you moved to Seattle." I turn to face Edward again, who is glancing over in anticipation.

People have asked me about my past before, but they were people I wanted to keep at a distance. In this moment, I realize a part of me wants to share more with him, but I also recognize now is not the time.

"There isn't much to tell," I say looking back towards the window to avoid his gaze.

"I highly doubt that, Bella." Luckily for me, before he can push the issue further, we pull into the driveway of a beautiful home.

"This conversation is not over," he says with certainty. Parking the car, he uses his hand to gently turn my head in his direction. "I want to know everything about you, Bella Swan, and you should know that once I make my mind up, there is no changing it."

Edward slowly leans forward and gently kisses my cheek. Pulling back, he steps out of the car and walks around to open my door before I can, which is easy given I am immobile with the warm touch of his lips lingering on my cheek.

We start walking up the front steps when the front door swings open, and a small, short-haired woman rushes out in our direction. "You're here!" she shrieks excitedly. She is full of bright lights and happy emotions that are intense and welcoming all at the same time. I can see why Edward loves her so much.

"Jesus, Alice. Can you tone it down some? You're going to scare Bella away before we even get in the door," Edward reprimands.

"Oh stop it. Bella and I will be great friends!" Reaching out, she pulls me into a tight hug. "I am so happy to finally meet you." I hear Edward mumble next to me something about "annoying pixies".

"Hi, Alice. It's nice to meet you," I say cautiously, uncomfortable with her attention. As I step back from the hug, Edward grabs my hand, calming my nerves once again. Alice glances down at our intertwined fingers with a knowing smirk.

"Come on," Edward whispers. "Let's get you inside before you change your mind about dinner."

We walk up the stairs and through a beautiful glass door. The house is an amazing balance of sophisticated and cozy. The colors are warm, accented by dark wood furniture. The walls are filled with happy family photos, and there is a hint of apples and cinnamon in the air. The living room has two couches with fluffy pillows, a couple of cozy chairs, and a large square coffee table in the middle of the seating area. In the corner is a huge reading chair with a fuzzy blanket thrown over the top. I can imagine myself snuggling into it and reading my favorite book. It feels homey, and I find myself wishing I had grown up in such a comfortable home.

My house was formal and cold. There were never any happy family photos hanging on the wall or
calming smells. The furniture was stiff and black, almost as if it was designed to make people feel uncomfortable.

"Edward, you're here." A striking couple enters from a room to the left and heads in our direction to greet us. "And you must be Bella. I'm Esme, and this is my husband, Carlisle."

Their colors are genuine and full of love. Like Alice, I can see why they are so special. Esme walks over and pulls me into a warm motherly hug. She smells of vanilla and it reminds me of baking with my own mother. My soul is basking in the experience I've missed out on for so long.

"Hi," I whisper shyly. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for letting me crash your family night."

"Nonsense, we are happy to have you here with us," Carlisle states, putting his hand out to shake mine in a firm grip.

"Edward has spoken about you so much over these last few years, we feel like we know you already," Esme adds. I turn to Edward and watch his face redden in embarrassment.

"Yeah, so, you want the grand tour, Bella?" Edward mutters, clearly avoiding any further tidbits his family may share.

"I would love one," I state, trying not to linger on the excitement I feel hearing confirmation that Edward talks about me to his family. After going through the impressive house, we end on the third floor in Edward's bedroom.

"Well, well, well, Edward Cullen's bedroom. If these walls could talk?" I smirk, looking around at the posters and sport trophies.

"For your information, Swan, you're the first girl I've brought in here." He smirks back.

"Seriously? You really expect me to believe that you didn't get any action in high school?" I raise my eyebrow at him.

"No, no, that's not it." He shuffles his feet in embarrassment. "I just never brought any girls here. It seemed wrong to do...things in this house. Esme and Carlisle did so much for me and I didn't want to disrespect them."

"Wow, that's really considerate."

"You seem surprised." He huffs in annoyance.

Taking a breath to search for the right words, I look into his eyes which are watching me closely. "Look, I'm still trying to connect the Edward Cullen I've known for three years, and the Edward Cullen of the past three days," I say, turning around looking at the childhood treasures on his desk.

"I don't blame you, Bella. But in fairness, you've shut me down every time I've tried to explain myself. My family means everything to me. I love and respect them, as well as respect their opinion of me. I'm not proud of my history with women, and it is not something I flaunt in front of them. The truth is there was never anyone important enough to share with them...until now," he whispers. I feel his hands on my shoulders, gently turning me around to face him.

"I want them to know you, Bella," he says, pulling me into a tight embrace. Once again, he leaves me speechless. My emotions are pulling me in extreme directions between elation at his words, and apprehension for the choices I need to make.
"Your history with women?" I finally question. He chuckles in response. I suspect he knows that I'm deflecting more important conversations.

"Yes, Bella, history. I'm not that man anymore. Hell, it was never really me in the first place, just a front to keep people away. A concept I believe you understand very well," he says with conviction pulling out of the hug.

"Okay. We need to keep moving because dinner is almost ready, and we have one more stop to make." I look at him curiously as he grabs my hand and walks out the door.

"What other stop?"

"Carlisle's study. I want him to check your head."

"Edward, I'm fine. We are here for dinner, not to make your uncle work," I argue.

"Humor me, Bella. I already talked to Carlisle, and he is more than happy to take a look. Besides, he agrees that doctor released you too soon. He wants to make sure everything is healing correctly." Walking into a large study, I see Carlisle waiting, doctor's bag prepped and ready to go.

"Bella, I hope you don't mind me taking a look at your head. Edward's very concerned about you." His soulful eyes wrap me in warmth.

"No, it's fine," I respond. Carlisle's caring nature halts any argument I have against the check-up.

"Well then, let's get this over with. Take a seat right here." I sit down while Edward continues to stand anxiously.

"She was dizzy and in pain when she first woke up. That fucker…" Carlisle looks at him with a raise of his eyebrow at his use of language. "Sorry. Suspect, slammed her head into the floor several times. She says the pain has lessened, but I think she's doing too much too soon," he tells his uncle quickly, running his hand through his hair.

"Hello. I can speak for myself, you know." I huff in exasperation, shooting Edward an annoyed glare. "Believe it or not, I've taken care of myself for years and survived."

"And in the last three days, you've proven you will ignore your health to get what you want. So, forgive me, Bella, but I damn sure refuse to lose you to your stubbornness!" His eyes attempt to stare me down while he stands there with his hands on his hips, clearly agitated.

My instinct is to challenge him back, but I bite my tongue, partly because I don't want to argue in front of Carlisle, and partly because I know Edward is acting out of concern. Remembering my earlier promise to show him how much I appreciate his support, I decide letting Carlisle look at me without giving anyone too much grief is a good start.

"Okay then," Carlisle interrupts while Edward and I stare at each other. He takes out his instruments and proceeds to check my eyes, reflexes, and the incision.

"Your incision is healing nicely, Bella," he says. I hear Edward release a breath. "I do, however, agree with Edward that you need to give yourself time to fully heal before jumping back into your normal activities."

He pats my knee and starts putting his tools away. I glance at Edward who promptly sticks his tongue out at me as if to say "told ya so". I giggle and roll my eyes at his playful behavior. It is difficult to stay upset when he's so amusing.
After my impromptu check-up, the three of us walk into the dining room and sit down while Esme and Alice put the finishing touches on the table. Edward sits next to me after pulling my chair out and squeezing my shoulder in reassurance.

The meal is wonderful, and so is the conversation. I glance wistfully around the table during one particular moment of family banter, and although I don't understand the inside information being discussed, I revel in the lovely colors floating around the room. I can't remember the last time I felt so warm, almost as if I'm a part of the love so clearly shared between the family members. Their faces are joyful and smiling. It is a beautiful scene for a beautiful family.

As if sensing my desire to connect, Edward drapes his arm across my chair and starts twirling a few strands of my hair between his fingers. It is such an intimate gesture, but as I glance sideways, he appears unaware of his actions. His attention is focused on his conversation with Alice about the lake trophy, whatever that means. It is a huge step in the grand scheme of our relationship, yet he looks so comfortable. It probably seems to those watching that he has done it a million times.

"Bella, I'm sorry, please forgive us. You must feel terribly excluded with us going on and on about our inside jokes. Come on everyone. Let's not be so rude to our guest," Esme states. Now aware of his twirling fingers, Edward drops my hair. He clears his throat in embarrassment, but leaves his arm around my chair.

"You're absolutely right, sweetheart. Bella, since you've suffered through many of our family stories tonight, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself?" Carlisle requests. "How about your family? Do they live in Seattle?"

Edward looks at me with a mixture of curiosity and hope. With an internal mantra of "keep it simple", I try to answer his seemingly innocent question.

"No, I don't have any family in Seattle."

"Where do they live?" Alice asks.

"Um, I don't really have any family." I smile softly, trying to ease the tension increasing in the room. Hopefully, I can make them believe it's no big deal to me.

"No family at all?" Esme asks. "Where are your parents?"

"Esme," Edward warns, even though I can see he is eager to hear the answer.

I have my fictional history memorized. I can recite anything to any question asked; my background thorough and realistic. I have enough documentation to pass any routine background check, including the one to work with the FBI. However, if someone really digs, they would find cracks, and I've spent the last fifteen years ensuring that never happens.

Yet, looking around at the loving eyes of the Cullens, and feeling Edward's fingers gentle rubbing circles on my back, I find it impossible to spit out the lies. The really shitty thing is that I can't tell them the truth either, so deciding to strike a fine balance between the two; I do my best to respond.

"Um, my mom died when I was six," I whisper, the pain raw in my gut. She was the only bright light in my world and Aro took her from me. "My father never really wanted me, so after she died, I was basically on my own." Edward's arm tightens around me.

"How can a six-year-old be left alone? What do you mean by that?" Alice asks boldly. This time it is Carlisle who steps in to give a chastised warning.
"Alice," he scolds.

"It's simple. You learn to survive," I state matter-of-factly, trying to suppress the emotions kept buried for so long.

This is much harder than I expected. The numbness I rely on has disappeared, replaced with overwhelming emotions. The defenses Edward crumbled did more than keep people at a distance, they also kept me rational, unemotional, and in control of stressful situations. I need to pull myself together.

"Is there a restroom I can use?" I ask, needing to get out of the claustrophobic room.

"Of course, sweetheart. It's down that hall, second door on your right," Esme answers, sympathy swirling around her.

I quickly get up from the table, successful in my attempt to leave the room without looking at Edward. This is the first time he's heard my history. Will he think I am still worth fighting for if underneath it all I'm someone no one wanted?

I stare in the mirror of the small bathroom willing myself to gain control. I hate feeling this way. I hate being out of control, and most of all, I hate that the life I am starting to enjoy is about to end.

Why does he have to ruin everything good? Why couldn't he just let me go? The anger inside me swells as I hear Aro's voice answering my posed question.

"You belong to me, Isabella, and I never let go of my most priceless possessions." His laughter mocks me as I try to stop the tears running down my face.

"Bella?" Edward asks from the other side of the door. "Bella, are you okay?"

Pull it together, Swan! I scold myself, quickly wiping the tears from my eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll be right out."

I erase any evidence of my emotional breakdown, and then taking a deep breath, open the door and walk out. Leaning against the wall directly across from me is Edward. I am wary about having this discussion alone. Given my emotional state, safety in numbers is better since Edward has a way of breaking down my walls, and right now, I cannot afford to lose any more control. As soon as I am out the door, he pulls me into a tight embrace and lightly kisses my head.

"Bella, I'm sorry. Are you okay?" he asks quietly against my head.

"I'm fine, Edward. It's not something I talk about, but I've lived with it a long time. It's not a big deal." He pulls back enough to look in my eyes.

"I don't believe you," he whispers. "Is he the one?"

"What?" His question perplexes me.

"Your father? Is he the one that hurt you so badly?" My body stiffens. This is not a question I can answer, so I do what I do best, lie.

"No more than any father who walks out on their kid. It happens hundreds of times every day to children everywhere."

"You're lying again, Bella. Why are you so afraid?"
Just then, another person comes into the hallway, waves of guilt and regret radiating off her.

"Bella?" Alice asks quietly.

Edward groans, grumbling about taking me away so we can finish a conversation without interruption. "Not now, Alice. Bella and I are talking!" He glares in Alice's direction.

"No, it's okay. What did you need, Alice?" I ask, taking advantage of the chance to avoid his questions.

"Bella, we need to finish this conversation," Edward pleads.

"Edward, there's nothing else to say. My mother is gone, and my father is a deadbeat. End of story. Don't search for something that isn't there," I warn, wrenching myself free of his arms and walking towards Alice.

"Alice?"

"Um," Alice hesitates seeing the tension between us.

"Fine, have it your way! Why should I expect anything different?" Edward scoffs, marching down the hallway. A few seconds later, I hear the front door slam, making me wonder if I need to find my own way home.

"I'm sorry, Bella," Alice says. "I really do want us to become friends, but instead, I make you feel completely uncomfortable, and cause a problem between you and Edward."

"Alice, it's fine. You didn't do it on purpose. No harm, no foul, right?" I utter, building up my walls again. I can see she doesn't believe me, but unlike Edward, she doesn't push the issue further.

"As for Edward and I, this is par for the course. What you saw is pretty typical when we work on a case. Like always, we'll get past it," I contend, trying to convince myself as much as I'm trying to convince her.

"Bella, you can't seriously think this is like a work disagreement? Edward loves your work banter. He says it pushes him to think more clearly and gain perspective on a case. What happened here has nothing to do with work. Edward cares about you and wants you to let him in. I've never seen him like this with anyone. I mean, he just yelled at us for making you uncomfortable for god's sake."

"What? No, I don't want to cause problems for your family."

*Jesus, now I am wreaking havoc with this perfect family,* I think bitterly, reminding myself how everything goes to hell the moment I let myself falter.

"No, Bella," Alice states grabbing my arm. "You don't get it. My point is Edward has never defended someone else over us. That tells me something about his feelings for you." She pauses, assessing me with an appraising eye.

"It has never been clearer to me how important you are to him. I have a feeling we will be seeing a lot of you at our family nights." She gives me a wink and rubs the side of my arm in comfort.

"Now, please come back with me. Esme is getting the chocolate cake and games ready. It's the perfect cure to end all of this angst." She smiles brightly. Her cheerful disposition pulls me out of the abyss I am sinking in and even allows me to smile a small genuine smile.
Walking into the living room, I see Esme preparing a game of Pictionary. Edward and Carlisle are noticeably absent, and I wonder if I finally pushed him away with my crazy behavior.

"Bella, I should warn you that this family seems lovey-dovey, but put a game in front of us and we become competitive monsters. I hope you are ready to keep up with us, and please don't use what you are about to see as a reason to not come and visit us again." Esme smiles at me.

Apparently, Alice is the family spokesperson for the apology, because mercifully Esme continues to talk as if nothing occurred. A few seconds later, I hear the front door open, and both Edward and Carlisle come back into the room.

Edward walks in my direction, and I prepare for another fight. However, instead of starting an argument, he leans down looking directly into my eyes and puts his hands on my shoulders.

"I'm sorry for walking away, Bella, but I'm not sorry for wanting to help you." He presses on without taking a breath. "However, I admit this is not the best time for that conversation. Now, I promised you a fun and relaxing night. Are you still willing to hang out with me and my family?"

"I would like that very much." I smile, relief flooding my body. Even though I've given him plenty of reasons to give up on me, he keeps coming back.

I turn to walk back to the game when Edward's arm grabs me. I feel him lean down again, but this time placing his lips next to my ear to speak quietly.

"But let me make this clear. As soon as we are alone, you and I are going to discuss things once and for all. No interruptions, no avoiding, and no more lying. It's time for you to tell me the truth, Bella." Without waiting for a response, he let's go of my arm and walks over to his family.

"What's the game tonight?" he asks Esme. As soon as he sees the box, he laughs out loud.

"Pictionary? You are in trouble. In fact, you are in so much trouble that I'm even okay with uneven teams. You guys, against Bella and I."

I look at Edward as if he is crazy. "Hey, you're an artist, and I am amazing at any game I play. We have this in the bag, Swan!" he declares with cocky arrogance.

It is time to choose my path. Watching as the Cullens joke and laugh together, it is hard not to choose the path that keeps me here. Looking at Edward, my heart argues the case to trust him, but my head reminds me of the danger these secrets holds. Working with Seth to find the mole might be the best solution to my dilemma: I can protect Edward, and buy myself more time in Seattle.

I feel a sense of calm wash over me when I make my decision. Taking a freeing breath, I move toward the board game, listening to Edward taunt our opponents.

Game on, I think, and for the first time, that saying has nothing to do with a target on a case.

Chapter End Notes

So who wants to know who Bella is? Tune in for the next chapter when it all hits the fan.
Chapter 8: Breathe No More

Chapter Notes

A/N: Important please read

The characters of Twilight are not mine, but I am sure having fun bending them to my will.

I promised the next update would reveal who Bella is, but I ended up breaking it up into two shorter chapters, for a very specific reason. Don't worry though, the next chapter is done and will post in a couple of days.

Now on with the story and by the way, I wasn't kidding about things hitting the fan, so hang on.

This chapter contains graphic descriptions of violence.

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex and Tds88! Your guidance and skills are amazing! :) I also can't thank my pre-reader Beachlover enough, who is always available for advice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8: Breathe No More

I glance at my watch, amazed at the time. We've played for hours, laughing at each other and our ridiculous drawings. Sadly for Edward, he was hasty with his taunting of an easy victory based on my artistic ability. I have not taken any art classes, nor is drawing my forte. My paintings are abstract and for my benefit only. I've never worried about whether anyone else could interpret what I painted, and since I cannot read Edward, I had no advantage in trying to interpret what his crazy scribbles meant.

Most of the night, the teams traded both points and insults. Finally, when the clock struck midnight, Carlisle called it a tie. Even with Edward's sulking every time we lost a round, it was still one of the best nights of my life, and for a short period, I almost forgot who I am and what I am facing.

"We should probably get going." Edward stretches his arms above his head, yawning. "I've kept you out till all hours of the night instead of making sure you rest." I nod my head in agreement, also yawning.

Watching Edward help put the game away, I find myself reflecting back on the day events. It's been a roller coaster of emotions, starting with waking up in Edward's arms, hacking files, sparring with Mike, Felix's attempted assault, and the shocking experience with Seth. And after all that chaos, fear, and anxiety, I end it with the nicest people I have ever met.

My changing relationship with Edward also adds to the crazy emotions of the day. It feels like we have come to some sort of unspoken agreement about what we are to each other. The little displays of affection are examples of the corner we've turned.
Regardless of my attraction for Edward, before today, I never allowed myself to believe we could be together. But after hearing him make declaration after declaration, I can no longer ignore what is between us. It makes me ecstatic and anxious all at the same time. If only my life was simple, but the reality of what I am dealing with complicates the happy realization.

Life is a strange journey, and days like today leave me feeling as if I am hanging off a cliff by my finger nails. My nerves are raw, and with my barriers crumbling, my emotions are closer to the surface than I've allowed in years. Even with the calm I initially experienced when I decided to stay, I feel wary knowing the Volturi situation is not resolved. I need a good night's sleep so that tomorrow I can plan my next steps.

My first priority is Seth's offer. I hate being reliant on him to contact me. I need to set up a face-to-face meeting and pray he is not one of the thirty percent so I can get a read on his trustworthiness. How well the meeting goes with Seth directly affects my other priority; Edward's assertion that we will talk soon.

As with everything else these days, Edward's statement leaves me feeling confused. I find myself wanting to trust and open up to Edward more, and yet on the other hand, talking will expose him to risks he doesn't understand. I will need to walk a fine line until I have a better handle on the situation. However, Edward's persistent and stubborn nature will not make this easy, particularly because I don't have the strength to keep him at a distance anymore.

My plan is to neutralize the mole before I am completely honest with him. I'm not naïve enough to believe that will rid me of the Volturi completely, but the mole is the biggest threat to my exposure, and I can't risk Edward's safety if they find me.

Beyond his safety, there is a part of me that is also afraid of Edward's reaction to the truth. I am so focused on the consequences of my exposure that it is easy to avoid thinking about how Edward will take the news. I realize I need to prepare myself for him to walk away once he knows my identity.

"Well, kids, I think we are off to bed," Carlisle says, interrupting my thoughts. With the game put away, everyone is now standing, preparing to say goodnight.

"Thank you for coming, Bella," Esme says walking in my direction. "Please come and see us again soon. Or better yet, maybe you and I can meet for lunch sometime this week."

"Thank you, I would really like that," I whisper back caught up in the moment.

"Great! I will be in touch." Her colors brighten, and knowing I am the cause of her happiness makes me feel worthy of her attention.

She looks at me lovingly, and pulling me into a hug whispers in my ear, "Sweetheart, I hope you know you are not alone anymore. You are part of our family now."

Tears fill my eyes. Edward was right; she is an instant mother to everyone, and having that kind of love directed at me means more than I can express.

"Bella, it was wonderful to meet you. Take care of yourself," Carlisle says giving me a goodbye hug. "Okay, goodnight, kids. Alice, lock everything up before you go to bed." We wished them goodnight and watched as they walked up the stairs.

"You are still staying here, Pix? I thought you were moving out this week?" Edward asks Alice.

"The remodeling of the condo is taking longer than expected. It will be another couple of weeks
before Jaz and I can move in," she replies colored in frustration. "I guess that's the downside of buying one of the first units available in a building being restored. The whole place is under construction, but it will be worth it when it's complete."

"Aww too bad. I know how much you love living with your fiancé in your parent's house," Edward laughs.

"Shut it! And don't think I didn't hear about all the shit you are giving Jasper. Just wait, karma's a bitch, Eddie." Edward growls in response to the hated nickname. Their interaction is hilarious and obviously based in love.

"Alright, now that the parents are gone, what should we do? Shots?" Alice asks excitedly.

"No, Alice. Bella and I should leave," Edward says stifling another yawn. "Bella really does need to rest, and I need to drive us home before I fall asleep."

I almost argue with him about speaking for me again, but hearing the words "us" and "home" together, calms my annoyance. I really need to figure out a way to manage these emotions. This back and forth is exhausting.

Edward and I say our goodbyes and prepare to leave when I hear the front door open. An unknown man, surrounded by a calm confidence, strolls in and walks over to Alice giving her a warm hug and kiss. I assume this is "Jaz", seeing the obvious love between the two.

"Sorry I missed family night, darlin'"

"That's okay, par for the course. This is an important case. I'm just glad you made it when you did. I want to introduce you to someone," Alice says immediately dragging him over. I find myself unconsciously moving closer to Edward, feeling apprehensive but not sure why.

"Bella, this is my fiancé, Jasper. Jasper, this is Bella." She smiles widely.

"The famous Bella Swan. I'm glad I finally get to meet the girl who's the center of so many of Edward and Emmett stories."

"Emmett?" I question.

"Oh, so apparently I did not receive the same honor?" He glances in mock annoyance at Edward.

"What can I say, Jaz, you're not nearly as interesting to talk about and damn sure not as beautiful," Edward states putting his arm around my shoulders as I blush at his compliment.

"Ha ha, well I guess I will just have to introduce myself then." He reaches out and shakes my hand. "Jasper Whitlock, it is nice to officially meet you. I'm Edward and Emmett's contact at the CIA."

"You're CIA?" I question, briefly wondering whether Edward met Jasper through Alice or Alice met Jasper through Edward. Talk about a small world.

"Yes, in fact, Emmett and I were just discussing the Felix Grey case." He hesitates a moment before adding softly, "I'm sorry Felix assaulted you. Hope the bastard gets what he deserves." Edward's arm tightens around my shoulders.

Stunned for a moment, I realize that Jasper is the agent monitoring the Volturi Corporation. Jesus, it feels like the world is conspiring against me at every turn.
"Sorry to do this, sweetheart," he turns to Alice kissing her temple, "but I need to talk shop with Edward. This case is getting more interesting by the minute."

"Now?" Edward glances at me worriedly. "Bella and I were just leaving. Can't it wait until morning? Besides, I don't want Bella involved in this conversation."

It's ironic, only to me, that Edward's insistence that I stay away from the Felix case and his plea to talk to him are opposite requests for the same dilemma. If he only knew the seriousness of what he was really asking for on both ends.

"I'm sorry, but it's important, and I need to ask her a question. You don't mind do you, Bella?" Jasper asks me.

"Umm, I guess I can-" I start to respond, when Edward cuts me off.

"Bella's already answered questions about him today. She needs a break. He came after her twice, Jasper. So let me be clear, I don't want her involved in the details of this case," he says with conviction pulling me tighter against his side.

"Look, Emmett told me you don't want her involved, I get it, but it's just related to what Emmett already shared when she asked him for information yesterday."

Edward quickly cut his eyes to mine and narrows them a bit. Busted...shit.

"Really, well if its information that everyone's already discussed, by all means let's talk," he states coolly, dropping his arm.

Alice, taking the hint we are heading into territory not for her ears, decides to take her leave. Looking back, she smiles softly. "It was great to meet you, Bella. I hope we can talk soon. Love you, Edward, I'll call you tomorrow. Jasper, don't be too long, let them go home soon."

Everyone waits quietly as she walks out of the room. Once she is gone, Edward walks over to the loveseat and sits down stiffly. Jasper takes a chair to his right and gestures for me to take the chair to the left. I can tell this is not going to end well as I watch Edward bring his fingers together in front of his face and take a deep breath. This is his ritual right before we speak to a suspect, making me wonder whether it is me or Jasper that is the focus of his attention.

"Okay, I know it's late, but Emmett and I just had a break on this case. He's been searching nearby surveillance video by Heidi’s apartment for evidence that Felix knows her. It was a long shot, but after looking through hours of tape, he actually hit the jackpot. About seven weeks before her abduction, there is a video of Felix outside the grocery store next to her apartment. That in and of itself is thin, but judging by his body language, he was having an intense conversation with a guy who passed him an envelope before speeding off in a car. It was the look on his face that caused Emmett to call me."

"Is this related to the Volturi connection?" Edward asks, now more interested in the conversation.

I try to fade into the background as I watch the train wreck in front of me. This is not supposed to happen this way. I need to put some more protective measures in place before Edward starts to investigate the Volturi.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Bingo. He called to ask me to check the tape and see if I recognized the guy as a Volturi player. I don't have confirmation yet, but the guy is in my files as a possible newly acquired employee for
Jasper turns to me. "Bella, did Felix say anything that could confirm he was working with someone or that someone was orchestrating this whole thing? It could be something you thought was insignificant, a name or date, anything like that could give us a lead in proving he's connected to the Volturi." Both he and Edward look at me waiting for my reply; one with hope and one with sympathy.

Keeping in line with my established lie, I respond. "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. I barely started the interview before he attacked me. Like I've said, both times we interacted, he accused me of working with 'them'. Whether that's the Volturi, I can't say."

"Damn it, I can't get anything solid on this group! I know in my gut they're planning something, but for all intents and purposes, they are squeaky clean and just establishing legitimate businesses," he responds frustrated, turning toward Edward, he continues. "The timing of all of this crap with Felix and Heidi is too coincidental."

"What do you mean?" Edward questions.

"Okay look, according to my contact at Interpol, the Volturi manipulates people to work for them whether they want to or not. Felix is the dock manager at one of the biggest ports in Seattle, and the Volturi need access," Jasper explains.

Felix is a dock manager? How did I not know this before? That is exactly why the Volturi would want to use Felix. In order to successfully expand his business to the United States, Aro will need to ship things in and out undetected. If Felix went rogue, he would be a huge liability; a problem that would need a quick solution.

Another piece to the puzzle just fell into place.

"We have Felix on tape seven weeks ago taking a package and looking like someone just put the fear of God into him. Then we have a note for a meeting taking place six weeks ago, which we know Felix didn't show up for, and then Heidi goes missing two weeks later. If there's a connection between Heidi and Felix, taking her is a great way to get some payback," Jasper says explaining his theory.

"Yeah, Emmett and I floated that idea today, but there is just no evidence to support investigating the Volturi." Edward responds. I watch as they put together the same pieces I did yesterday, unable to stop it from happening.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"But that is what concerns me." Jasper hesitates, choosing his words carefully. "I wouldn't say this outside of this room, but I learned the Volturi have a habit of strategically placing people inside other organizations. So my question is, if all other evidence points to a connection between Felix and the Volturi, why weren't his prints on that note?"

The room is silent as Edward contemplates Jasper's question.

"Shit, you think they have an inside man at our office, don't you?" Edward sits back against the couch allowing the full weight of Jasper's theory to hit him.

"It explains a lot, don't you think? The Volturi have done a good job of flying under the radar since becoming active on US soil. However, this Felix situation feels different. I think they are gearing up for something big, something to show other organizations they plan on taking charge." Edward
nods in approval of Jasper's assessment.

Sitting there while they causally discussed the Volturi is tortuous. Neither Jasper nor Edward have a clue about what evil acts they are capable of committing, and at the moment, I am in no position to tell them.

"Aro Volturi, the head of the Volturi Corporation has not left his home base of Tuscany yet, but I bet he will make an appearance soon. From what I understand, he likes to closely monitor everything," Jasper continues.

The breath leaves my lungs and my heart stops. Is it possible Aro's coming here? Jasper is right, Aro monitors everything. The best way for him to maintain control is by evoking fear and loyalty from those working for him. Using my knowledge of Aro, I try to surmise how quickly he would want to check on the progress of his new territory. If they are planning something to make a statement, he won't stay away for long.

Memories flood my thoughts as I consider the consequences of Aro's arrival in Seattle. There is no way I can protect those closest to me. In fact, I will only bring their death. Fear for Edward overwhelms me.

"Ah, Isabella, you're here," Aro says in an overly giddy manner given the seriousness of the situation I see as Demetri and I enter the room.

Before me stands Aro with Anthony, my tutor of the last several months. He is kneeling on the floor, his mouth covered and hands bound.

Aro knows.

"So I heard some interesting information today. Imagine my surprise when I learned your tutor betrayed me by attempting to tell the police that I'm abusive." As usual during his speech, he paces around his victim. It's an effective technique to increase fear and anxiety. Right now Anthony is choking on it.

I told Anthony to leave it alone after he expressed concern watching the bruises come and go. I know what happens to those who try to help me. My life is not worth the loss of another. He didn't listen.

Aro nods to Demetri who walks behind Anthony with a knife. Aro moves over behind me, snaking his hands around my neck, using his fingers to hold my head in place. He wants me to watch.

"Have you ever seen what happens when a throat is cut, Isabella?"

I feel Aro's head move in what I assume to be another nod, and then with a quick flick from Demetri's hand, a pool of blood runs down Anthony's shirt. He looks shocked as he slumps forward.

"Watch the beauty, Isabella. The blood like paint on a canvas. The final gasp of breath as the life drains away."

My eyes fill with tears, but I refuse to let them fall. He can control everything else, but I control my emotions. I feel Aro lean forward, pressing his lips against my ear.

"I am a god, Isabella. Life is mine to give or take at any moment, but on this night, I want you to remember his blood painting this floor because you failed to understand the concept of loyalty."
I find it difficult to hold back the memories and emotions as I focus back on Jasper's words. My control is waning.

"However, word on the street is Aro's second in command, a person they call Mr. James, will arrive later this week. He's known as Aro's enforcer. My contact says this guy's a monster, really enjoys his work if you know what I mean."

Jasper and Edward continue their discussion about what James' arrival means while I am focusing on the fact that James will be here soon. My racing thoughts switch from the consequences of Aro's arrival, to concern of what happens if James is the one to find me. I don't see the outcome being any better, just a different method of attack. Aro's anger at my betrayal will result in swift action, but James is more calculating.

If Aro is evil incarnate, James is the devil himself. Once again, Jasper is correct: James not only loves what he does, but he gets off on it. The more a person screams, the more he loves the torture.

James also has a particular fascination with me. For years, I endured his lustful stares and innuendos. On several occasions, he would sit in a room with me, licking his lips while blatantly touching his groin over his pants. To survive, I learned to ignore his gestures and tried to avoid any interaction with him when I was alone.

Part of the game for James is his prey's anticipation of what is going to happen. Therefore, the couple of times he was able to corner me, he chose not to act on his threats, but instead use words and gestures to ramp up my fear. His technique is effective, and I spent many hours terrified of what would happen when he finally chose to act on his threats.

I turn the corner and see a figure standing by the wall.

"Good evening, Isabella. Fancy meeting you here."

"What do you want, James?" He strides forward causing me to back up against the nearby wall.

James continues moving until he is directly in front of me, close enough that I can feel and smell his foul breath, but far enough away to not physically touch me. I hear him take in a large amount of air through his nose in an overly dramatic fashion.

"You smell divine and you look delicious. I wonder if you taste as good as you look." He contemplates, licking his lips while glancing slowly down my body. My spine tingles with fear, but I continue to stare at him in defiance. I will not show weakness.

"Too bad you'll never know. Aro wouldn't stand for it," I state with false confidence.

He laughs darkly. "Someday, Isabella, you will become worthless to him. When that day comes, I will be there, and he won't stop me from taking what I want then." He slowly lifts his hand and runs it lightly down my hair. His touch sickens me. I am about to slap his hand away when another voice interrupts.

"Knock it off, James!" Caius growls. "We don't have time for your shit. The boss wants to see us."

James smirks at me before backing away and walking in Caius' direction. I turn and watch him,
catching Caius’ eyebrow slightly arch in a question of my well-being. I softly nod my head in return, thanking God for secret guardian angels.

My panicked thoughts ponder what involvement James has already had in Seattle.

Does he know where I am, but wants to play games before coming for me? Is he behind Felix? Is he the reason Seth contacted me? Could Seth be working for him?

I can’t breathe.

"Here’s my problem," I hear Jasper say as he and Edward continue to discuss the case, unaware of my increasing panic.

"Because there is no evidence that the Volturi are a threat to national security, I’m only authorized to monitor their activities, not actively investigate them, which limits my access to other agency files. I’ve gone to my supervisors for approval to take this to the next level, but without evidence the Volturi are conducting illegal activities, they’ve refused the request."

"Why?" Edward questions

"The Volturi are big fish, so lots of agencies want the status of putting Aro away. No one is willing to play nice in the sandbox, so we need solid evidence to get cooperation. My Interpol contact says several European agencies, particularly Italy, have years of information on the Volturi, but they are not willing to share the details without cause. Once I have the green light to open an investigation, I can officially request copies of those files," Jasper explains

My world crumbles.

Most likely those files will contain years of photographs taken by law enforcement monitoring Aro’s activities. Since Aro forced me to parade around with him, I am sure my picture is all throughout them.

I am out of time.

"You know I can kill you anytime I want." Aro hisses. "Do it then!" I yell back, he laughs ruefully. "Oh Isabella, where’s the fun in that?"

I can’t breathe.

"Isabella!" I hear right before the gunshot. I don’t understand what’s happening. I want my mom.

I can’t breathe!

"Is your skin as smooth as it looks? I can’t wait to rub my whole body against it." James smirks

I can’t breathe!

The room blurs as I struggle to take a breath. The harder I try, the more difficult it becomes. The emotions I desperately fight to keep buried come crashing in, and the control I’ve built up slips away, images of death and horror rushing back.

The eyes of all the people murdered in front of me flash in my mind; the thousands of threats Aro issued echo in my ears; and the vile touch of James lingers on my skin.

In a surreal and dream-like moment, I mentally step outside of myself, watching from afar as I
finally break into a million pieces.

Chapter End Notes

See you soon!
Chapter 9: Losing My Religion

Chapter Notes

A/N IMPORTANT

Okay, this chapter is written differently, see the end for the full explanation about why. Thanks for sticking with me.

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex and Tds88, as well as my pre-reader Beachlover! They are amazing, I am lucky to have their help and guidance!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9: Losing My Religion

Bella's world is hazy, almost as if she's in a foggy tunnel, the edge of her vision tinged with black shadows. It's disorienting trying to figure out exactly what is happening. She is drowning in panic and the room feels like it is caving in around, suffocating her every breath.

"Bella?" Edward questions, jumping up and moving in her direction.

"Bella, what's wrong?" he asks frantically. "Jesus, Bella, you're hyperventilating!"

"She's having a panic attack." Jasper determines also coming towards her.

"Get Carlisle!" Edward yells, holding her face gently.

"Bella, listen to me, you need to slow your breathing down. Come on, baby, let's do it together. Breathe in." Looking into her eyes, he takes a slow breath willing her to do the same. "And then out. That's right, breathe with me, in... out."

She tries to focus on his voice; it's familiar and a part of her recognizes a certain amount of comfort in his touch.

"That's it. That's my girl." He soothes.

"Edward, what's going on?" Carlisle asks as he, Esme, Alice, and Jasper rush back into the room.

"She's having a panic attack," Edward answers, not breaking eye contact as he continues to breathe in synch with her. "What should we do?"

Carlisle comes over and kneels next to Edward, taking her wrist, he feels her pulse. "Just keep doing what you're doing. It will pass soon. She just needs to breathe through it."

Edward maintains eye contact as they continue to breathe in and out. Slowly the pressure on her chest eases and the dizziness fades.

"What the hell happened?" Jasper asks.

Back in control of her breathing, she attempts to assess the situation to decide what to do. Aro and James are coming to take her back to hell. There is no way she can allow that to happen. Caius
made her promise she wouldn't let him win. He said getting away from Aro was all her mom wanted for her, and being free is the best way to honor her memory. Shifting into survival mode, she evaluates her environment. She needs to escape. There is no other choice. She can't let anyone stop her.

She needs to go *now*.

Finally able to move, she roughly pulls out of Edward's grasp and jumps out of the chair. She looks desperately around the room for the best route. Her heart is pounding, and everyone else's panic is only feeding hers. Lights and colors explode around her, preventing the ability to think clearly and calm down.

"Devo andare, devo andare," she mumbles, looking around the room, not realizing she slipped back into her native tongue.

"What is she saying?" Edward slowly approaches her, clearly confused by the change in language.

His face looks stricken as he tries to calm her. A part of her wants to go to him, but Caius warned against trusting anyone. Her mother trusted people and ended up dead.

"It's Italian," Alice whispers. "She's saying she has to go."

"Why is she speaking Italian? Is she Italian?" Jasper questions, looking to Edward for the answer. Everyone else stands still, stunned by her chaotic behavior.

"No… I don't know!" Edward yells, frustrated by his inability to help her.

"Don't you think it's strange she's suddenly speaking Italian?" Jasper asks, appraising her suspiciously.

"Jasper, back the fuck off. I don't really care why she is speaking Italian right now. The only thing I care about is helping her calm down," Edward snarls, never taking his eyes off of her, continuing to slowly move in her direction.

"Bella, what's going on? Where do you have to go?" Edward asks in a calming tone, gently grabbing her arm to stop her harried movements.

"*Don't touch me!*" she screams. Edward jumps back and holds up his hands in submission. "Tu non capisci ha intenzione di trovare me!"

"Alice, what is she saying?" Edward whispers.

"Alice, what is she saying?" Edward whispers.

"You don't understand. He's going to find me," Alice translates.

She tries to move to the door, but in her disoriented state ends up walking backwards into a corner as everyone surrounds her. *Why won't they let her leave?*

"Bella, let me help you," Edward says, trying to get her to focus on him.

"Nessuno mi puo aiutare!" she cries, desperate to get out of the room.

"She's saying that no one can help her," Alice translates through her own tears.

"Sweetheart, no one is going to hurt you here. Let us help you. Everything will be alright, just let us help you." Esme tries to break through her panic with a motherly tone.
Don't they understand, no one can save her from Aro and James? The only choice is to escape. She slowly moves against the wall trying to find a way out. Trying to show their support, the family positions themselves around her, moving when she moves, but their good intention does nothing but fuel the feeling of being trapped.

"Carlisle, what the hell is happening?" Edward watches her closely.

"I don't know, Edward. She's not grasping the reality around her. This is more than a panic attack. Does Bella have a history of these types of episodes?"

"Not that I know of. About two years ago, she had a bad reaction to a case, but she just shut down. Nothing like this. Fuck! I can't stand seeing her like this. Tell me what to do to help her!" His own eyes fill with tears as he watches her struggle.

Edward stays in front of her following her movements down the wall. His arms are still held in a submissive position, his hands twitch, desperate to touch her.

"Non si capisce che cosa accadrà se mi becca. Egli mi tortura, devo uscire di qui."

"She's saying we don't understand what will happen if he catches her. He will torture her. She wants to get out of here," Alice continues to translate.

"Edward, what is she talking about? Why would someone torture her?" Jasper asks, mimicking Edward's movements to the side, ready to intervene if she runs.

"Bella, I don't understand. You're not making any sense. Who's going to catch you?" Edward asks, trying to approach her again.

"LUI! Egli mi perseguità per sempre. Perché non può semplicemente lasciarmi andare?"

"Him. He will haunt me forever. Why can't he let me go?" Alice responds for Bella.

"Who is she talking about? She's terrified, Edward. Who's after her?" Alice asks, wiping tears from her eyes. Esme comes over to put her arm around Alice in mutual comfort.

"I don't know, Alice! Just let me get her calm before we worry about the specifics," Edward reprimands.

"Bella, I promise. I would never let anyone hurt you, but you have to tell me what is going on. You have to trust me," Edward pleads, looking deeply into her eyes, silently asking her to let him approach.

Everyone whispers in the background on the best way to calm her down. She stares at Edward, sincerity and concern showing in his eyes. There is something that makes her want to trust him, but as soon as she considers it, she reminds herself of all the deaths that have resulted from trusting the wrong person.

She doesn't want to die. She doesn't want anyone to die.

"Esme, go get my bag. Edward, I have something to sedate her, but we will need to hold her down," Carlisle states. Edward turns to look at him with wide eyes.

"Do we really need to take it to that level? She is already scared enough, you think grabbing her is the best option?"
"We need to calm her down, and right now, she's not capable of doing it on her own."

"Vi prego di non farmi male," she begs. "Ti prego, lasciami andare."

"She's asking you not to hurt her. To let her go," Alice interrupts.

"I will never hurt you, Bella," Edward chokes out, "but I can't let you go. Not like this, not ever. Tell me why you're afraid. I'll protect you, I swear."

With a sudden fire in her eyes, she points at Jasper. "It's his fault!" she screams, anger replacing the panic.

Edward looks back at Jasper, who is looking at her bewildered by her accusation. "How, Bella? How is this Jasper's fault?" He moves closer with his arms up as if approaching a wild animal.

"If he gets those files, everyone will know!"

"The Volturi files?" Jasper questions.

"Yes! You will all know, and he will find me!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Esme return with a bag, taking it over to Carlisle. He pulls out a syringe before walking back in her direction. She continues to creep against the wall toward a window, planning her escape.

"Who will find you, Bella?" Edward asks.

"Aro Volturi! My father!" she screams.

The room goes deathly silent, both Edward and Jasper are speechless. They look horrified and frozen.

Realizing this was her chance, she quickly turns and using both hands fisted together, hits the window breaking the first pane. She barely recognizes the pain in her arm as she tries to break the second pane. Edward grabs her tightly, holding her arms down to prevent her from hitting the glass again. She struggles for a moment before she feels a small pinch in her arm. Her body starts feeling heavy, her eyes fuzzy.

"Calm down, baby. I got you."

Edward moves with her as she sinks to the floor, eventually being cradled in his arms. It is the first time she has felt secure. The last thing she remembers is Edward kissing her temple as she succumbs to unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

I do not speak Italian; all translations are from Google, so I apologize for any non-grammatically correct sentences. There is no disrespect intended.

Okay, so why two chapters and change in writing style? In this chapter, Bella is
experiencing a type of dissociative state called depersonalization. People who experience these states describe feeling like they are in a dream watching their life through a third person perspective.

I decided to take a bit of a risk by writing in the third person instead of first to make it realistic. I went back and forth on this, but decided to remain true to the experience it makes the most sense.

I realized the switch in perspective would be confusing and might easier to digest if it was in a separate chapter. I am a bit nervous about this one and I hope my risk was not a complete failure.

So now we know who Bella is, surprised or had it figured out? Next up, a long overdue conversation between Edward and Bella, especially now that her secret is out.

Translations:

Devo andare = I have to go

Tu non capisci, ha intenzione di trovare me! = You don't understand, he's going to find me

Nessuno mi può aiutare = No one can help me

Non si capisce che cosa accadrà se mi becca. Egli mi tortura, devo uscire di qui. = You don't understand what will happen if he catches me. He will torture me, I have to get out of here.

LUI! Egli mi persegueterà per sempre. Perché non può semplicemente lasciarmi andare? = HIM! He will haunt me forever. Why can't he just let me go?

Vi prego di non farmi male = Please don't hurt me

Ti prego, lasciami andare = Please, let me go
Chapter 10: Bring Me to Life

Chapter Notes

I own nothing that resembles Twilight's characters or plot. The other aspects of the story are mine.

Now on with the story, Bella's secret is out and there is a lot to discuss.

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex and Tds88 and my pre-reader Beachlover! Their skills are amazing and they always keep me on track with my commas. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10: Bring Me to Life

The wind blows lightly across my face, the heat of the sun warming my body. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with fresh air and the comforting smell of the sunflower field.

I feel safe here.

"Back so soon?" I hear my mom ask as she sits down beside me.

"I need a break," I reply, keeping my eyes on the sunflower field in front of me, afraid that if I don't stay focused, my visit will be cut short.

"Mmm, sounds like you are avoiding things again, Isabella." I snap my head over to her in aggravation.

"You don't know what happened. I can't deal with it anymore!" I shout, tears of frustration filling my eyes.

"My daughter is not a quitter," she says. I turn my eyes forward, hurt by the disappointment I hear in her voice.

"You are stronger than you think. Everything you went through, all the things your father has done and you never let it break you."

A tear rolls down my cheek. I certainly feel broken. "I wish this was real," I whisper.

"This isn't real?" she asks smirking, knowing as well as I do this is all a figment of my imagination. I laugh out sarcastically.

"I may take 'breaks', but I'm not crazy. What kind of psychologist am I if I don't recognize my own mental defenses?"

"You were a child left without a mother and with no safe place to go. So you created one. There is nothing wrong with that, it helped you survive."

"I just need a few more minutes and then I can go back and come up with a plan."
"You and your rational plans and logical steps, I get it, Sweetie, I do. You keep everyone at a distance to protect yourself, but maybe it's time to believe in things you can't see or control. He's good for you, Isabella. Trust him. You need his support now more than ever." Although she doesn't say his name, I know she's talking about Edward.

"Will I survive this?"

"I can't answer that, Isabella, but my hope is you will no longer need to visit here. There is more to life than this sunflower field. It's time to stop surviving and start living."

Strange blurry images and muted sounds fill my mind. My head feels hazy.

I slowly open my eyes to an unfamiliar room. I have no recollection of how I arrived here. My body feels strange, heavy, and exhausted. My eyes are gritty and raw. I feel like I'm hung-over.

Did we end up doing shots last night? I don't remember anything.

I remind myself to stay composed while I assess the situation, using logic to neutralize my increasing panic. Taking a calming breath, I take stock of my body. My right arm feels heavy and trapped. I can't move it. Turning my head to find answers, and hopefully my location, I see Edward's sleeping form.

He is sitting in a chair with his head lying on the bed next to me. His hand is holding mine tightly which explains why I can't move it. The initial panic I felt at not knowing where I am disappears. Edward is with me and that makes me feel safe.

However, his presence doesn't explain what happened or where I am. My mind is still a blank. Knowing Edward would not let anything happen to me diminishes my panic, but not my curiosity. Continuing to check my body and mind for clues, I realize my left arm is aching. Looking over, I see gauze covering my forearm, a hint of blood showing through.

What the hell did I do?

Looking around the room, I deduce I am not in a hospital, which means whatever happened to my arm did not require outside medical attention.

Okay, let's go step by step.

Edward and I were at his Aunt and Uncle's house. We were playing games, we were getting ready to leave, and then Jasper arrived. He was talking about the case and then….shit, I don't know.

Intuitively, I know something went terribly wrong. Psychological episodes of lost time only occur with major events. I think I remember having trouble breathing and feeling out of control. What triggered that reaction I'm not sure. I have a blurry memory of yelling, but at this point, it is hard to know what's real.

"Bella?" I hear Edward whisper. "Hey, you're awake." He smiles softly, but his eyes look anxious and cautious, almost as if he is afraid of my response.

"What happened?" I ask, sitting up.

Edward moves from the chair to sit on the bed next to me so we are facing each other. "You had a panic attack. Do you remember anything?" he asks. His arm cages the lower half of my body while his eyes search mine.
A panic attack. That explains why I remember having trouble breathing, but I am still drawing a blank on what triggered it. If Jasper was talking about the Felix case, my reaction is most likely connected to that conversation. Fear creeps up my spine.

"Not really. What did I do?" I ask hesitantly.

Edward pauses a moment, gently brushing my hair away from my face. "I don't know where to start. We have a lot to talk about, Bella. I have questions that need answers." His uncertainty increases my anxiety. This is not good.

"But, right now my biggest concern is making sure you're okay. I don't want a repeat of last night," he states. His eyes are full of concern and something else I can't identify.

"It was bad, wasn't it?" I whisper. My mind conjures up all sorts of scenarios, all of which involve the Volturi.

"Bella, I know you want answers, but we need to take this slow. I don't want to trigger another attack, so, please tell me if you start feeling panicked."

The amount of pain and anxiety I see in his eyes shocks me. "I promise," I murmur.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Edward asks.

"I remember Jasper talking about the Felix case," I respond.

"That's right," Edward confirms. "And then what?"

"Everything else is hazy. The next thing I remember is waking up here. Where are we anyway?" I ask, looking around the room again.

"We are still at Carlisle and Esme's house in one of their guest rooms," Edward answers. I feel some comfort knowing I am still with Edward's family. "As for what happened, you started hyperventilating during the conversation with Jasper."

Edward reaches out and grabs my hand, watching as our fingers intertwine before he continues. "You couldn't catch your breath and looked terrified. I tried to help you calm down and at first it was working, but then you suddenly started to yell... in Italian." He stops when I gasp in shock. Oh my God.

"I was speaking Italian?"

I haven't spoken Italian in fifteen years. Caius and I agreed that covering up any ties to my heritage was essential to my escape being successful. I spent many hours learning to speak with an American accent before I left.

"Yes. Alice was able to help translate, although the context of what you were saying was confusing."

"What did I say?" My body tingles with anxiety. Each piece Edward puts in place points to the very real possibility that I revealed everything.

"You talked a lot about someone coming to get you and needing to leave. I've never seen you like that, Bella. It scared me. You completely lost control and nothing helped to calm you down. Then out of nowhere, you started yelling at Jasper. You were enraged."
Edward looks into my eyes and hesitates like he is trying to decide what to say next. I have no memory of anything he is saying. His description sounds like another person, not me. Remaining in control is important for my survival. I've never had an outburst like this in my life.

"You said the Volturi files would expose everything," Edward continues, his voice lowering.

Fuck. A vague memory emerges of Jasper mentioning those files. Hearing about those files is probably what triggered the panic attack.

"And then," Edward looks down, struggling with the story again and I hold my breath, instinctively knowing what is coming, "you told us your father is Aro Volturi. Is that true, Bella? Are you really the daughter of Aro Volturi?" he asks, confusion and concern written all over his face.

Hearing him speak the truth is surreal. I've hidden my identity for so long I don't know how to react to it being spoken out loud. For the first time in years, people know who I really am. Edward is waiting for me to respond, but I'm terrified of his response and desperately wishing I could read his emotions first.

_How does he feel knowing that I am the daughter of a sadistic murderer? Does it change how he feels about me?_

"Yes, it's true," I whisper.

"I don't understand, Bella. How is that possible?"

"Where do I begin? The short version is I ran away from Aro fifteen years ago. I changed my name and disappeared. I'm good at covering my tracks and was successful at keeping my true identity hidden until."

"Until Felix." Edward answers for me, his mind putting all the pieces together about my behavior since the case began.

"Yes. If Jasper mentioned those files yesterday…" I pause, trying to build courage to continue, "My picture is in those files, Edward. If he gains access to them, my identity is exposed."

Tears slowly run down my cheeks. Having revealed my secret with Jasper in the room is a problem. He is intent on going after Aro and I just became his best shot.

"How much trouble am I in?" I ask wiping my eyes.

"I would say a lot," Edward says gruffly, tightening his hold on my hand.

"You hate me don't you?" I feel lost. "I should leave and get out of your way," I mumble, trying to get up.

"No, Bella!" Edward grabs me by the shoulders, lightly pushing me back onto the bed. "You aren't going anywhere."

"Edward, I don't want to cause any trouble for you or your family." Edward and his family do not need my baggage.

"Bella, there is no way in hell I'm letting you leave. Not with everything you're facing," he argues.

"Edward," I start to reason, but he cuts me off by holding up his hand.

"Damn it, Bella! Stop being so stubborn and listen to me," he shouts, running his hand roughly
through his hair in frustration. "Bella, I could never hate you. I'm confused, but I don't hate you. I...care about you, so much." He clears his throat as if wanting to say more but stops instead.

"I don't understand. How can you accept this so easily? I'm the daughter of a mad man. How do you not want me gone?"

Edward chuckles quietly. "Well, I've had about nine hours to digest this revelation, and believe me, I've run the gamete of emotions, including being upset with you. Once I calmed down, I realized that before Felix, there was no reason for you to tell me. I mean, it's not something you can just throw into a casual conversation, I understand that now."

"My survival depends on keeping it a secret. I haven't ever spoken about who I am with anyone," I whisper quietly

"I know, Bella. Like I said, I understand the need to keep it a secret, but it hurts that you didn't trust me enough to say anything the last couple of days. Especially when I kept asking you what was wrong."

Tears continue to run down my face. I knew not talking to him was hurtful, but actually hearing it is difficult.

"Please don't cry." He pulls me into his arms, softly rubbing his hands up and down my back in comfort. "I want to help you, but I can't do that if you keep things from me," he whispers in my ear.

I nod my head lightly against his shoulder. It is time for the truth. Rubbing his back lightly in return, I pull back to face him. "The day I came home from the hospital, I wanted to figure out what was going on with Felix. My reaction to him confused me, and I knew there was more to the story. My intention was to find Heidi. I never in my wildest dreams considered he worked with the Volturi."

"You didn't know when you met him?" Edward questions, his tone taking on an investigative quality.

"No," I answer quickly

"Does he know who you are?"

"No. He didn't express any type of recognition. He thinks I work for the Volturi, but I'm positive he doesn't know I'm Aro's daughter." Not having acknowledged being his daughter for so long, I choke on the words. I hate being connected to him.

"When did you figure it out then?" Edward asks, continuing his inquisition.

"When I asked Emmett for more information, he mentioned the Volturi, and it all fell into place. The timing of Heidi's disappearance and the missing evidence are standard operating procedures for the Volturi."

Edward stares at me for a moment before sitting back with wide eyes. "Wait a second, you knew a Volturi mole was in our office, didn't you?" he asks abruptly.

"I suspected as much, yes," I say softly

"And you were planning on doing what with that information?" His tone takes on a hard edge. I hesitate answering him, knowing he is not going to like hearing this part.
"I was planning on exposing them," I mumble looking away from his intense gaze. I've never had to explain my actions to someone who matters. Feeling guilty for choices I make is a new experience. I'm not sure I like it.

"Excuse me, you were what?" he asks curtly.

"I know you heard me. I said I was going to expose them," I retort back, gearing up for battle.

"Jesus Christ, Bella! I can't believe this! You've known for two days that we have an enemy working with us and you didn't think to share that with me? No, of course not! Your brilliant solution is to expose them on your own with no thought to your safety," he yells.

I guess being calm about this is over. Doesn't he understand that I didn't have a lot of options if I wanted to stay, and at the same time, protect him from Aro?

"How was I supposed to tell you, Edward? I discovered there is a mole because I know how the Volturi operates. So, how do I tell you that information without disclosing how I know them? Not to mention that you made it clear you wanted me off this case. I had no good options without exposing everything!"

"You could have trusted me," he retorts.

"Right and then what? You don't understand half of what you are asking. Everything I've done for the last fifteen years revolves around staying hidden, and then out of nowhere it all goes to hell. And if that wasn't enough, you decide to change every rule about our relationship. I didn't know what to do!" I yell back.

"Bullshit. I know you too well, Bella. You had a plan. What was it?" Edward asks, his jaw clenching in frustration.

I laugh without humor. "That depends. Because of you, I've changed my plan several times over the last three days. You made this crazy situation even harder," I state bluntly.

"Me? Why?"

"You, Edward Cullen, unraveled all of my plans. You showed up at all the wrong times, throwing me for a loop and making me re-think everything."

"What do you mean re-think things?" Edward asks narrowing his eyes.

"Do you know what it takes to disappear in this world? You can't afford ties or complications. Everything depends upon your anonymity. And then you come along challenging everything I believe in. Making me feel safe and wanted with your freaking declarations. Something I haven't felt in a long time. Then you take me to your family's house, and for the first time in my life, I felt included. Do you know how much I loved and hated that at the same time? How much I desperately wanted to stay, but knew I couldn't. Do you know how much that hurts?"

I pause, catching my breath, tears running down my face as I purge the avoided emotions of the last few days. Edward watches perplexed as I continue my rant.

"You want to know my plan? My plan was to leave. That night you came to my apartment I was ten minutes away from disappearing, but you showed up and ruined everything. And then you wouldn't leave me alone! You broke through all my barriers. Do you understand that? Every barrier I need to survive. I couldn't leave, but I also couldn't tell you. So what the hell was I supposed to do, Edward? Tell me. What was I supposed to do?"
Edward stares at me with a fiery intensity. There is a strange electric tension between us and the only sound in the room is my breathing. Before I comprehend what is happening, Edward reaches out and grabs my face, pulling me towards him, our lips crashing together, but somehow moving as if they fit together perfectly. Time stands still as the intensity of the kiss increases. Edward softly groans, pulling me tighter against him, moving his hands into my hair.

To say the kiss is amazing does not give justice to the significance of it. My whole body tingles as everything in my world suddenly feels right. Reluctantly, we both pull back to catch our breath. Edward rests his forehead on mine.

"Wow," he whispers. "I've imagined doing that for so long, but that was…I can't even describe what that was, but I know I never want to stop." He smiles widely kissing me again. This time with a slow passion that causes my entire body to explode in long forgotten sensations. It's official, Edward Cullen will be the death of me. Our mouths and tongues duel breathlessly for an unknown amount of time before Edward pulls back, looking at me with wonder.

"Umm, not that I'm complaining, but where did that come from?" I smile shyly, wiping the remaining tears from my face. I can't believe Edward Cullen just kissed me.

Edward laughs in response to my question. I guess he can't believe it either. "I acted on impulse. I couldn't wait anymore." He shakes his head smiling. "Every time I've tried to talk about us, you've shut me down. I was so afraid that I lost my chance with you. But listening to you, I realized if you didn't care, my behavior wouldn't have affected your plans. I saw a chance to show you how I feel and I took it."

"I'm glad," I whisper, and in return, his face lights up in a brilliant smile. "I guess we have another thing to talk about now. Not that I want to ruin the moment, but what does this mean, Edward?"

"It means I need to explain some things to you, especially what happened at the hospital." He clears his throat, nervously chuckling. I've never seen Edward this nervous. It is almost comical to witness.

"It's okay, Edward. I promise to listen and not shut you down this time."

"Okay, here goes," he mumbles.

My heart is pounding. This is the first time in a long time that I have put myself out on an emotional limb.

"Bella, you captivated me the first day we met with your intelligence, strength, and passion. Not to mention your beauty. That first year we worked together was the worst, wanting to get closer to you, but also wanting to keep my distance. It's difficult for me to get close to people, for many reasons, and then this amazing woman comes along. I found myself wanting to think in the long-term." He pauses for a moment, running a hand through my hair. "But those thoughts scared me. I wasn't relationship material, and I knew you deserved someone who could fully commit to you."

"I don't understand that, Edward, especially after watching how your family interacts and the closeness of your Aunt and Uncle. Why would relationships scare you so much?" I interrupt, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"Actually, you are probably one of the few people who can understand." I look at him in confusion, wondering what he means. "Losing your parents at a young age changes you," he clarifies, looking at me with a knowing glance.
"I love my aunt and uncle, but there was a hole left behind when my parents died. Watching how easy relationships were for the rest of my family was hard. I never really felt like I belonged; it was like I was watching from the sidelines. So, I decided relationships weren't for me. The added bonus of keeping everyone at a distance meant I didn't have to risk losing them."

Edward is right: this is something I understand well. Deciding to show him how much I appreciate him opening up to me, I move closer to him, grabbing his hand in mine. Edward smiles widely, both of us knowing this is the first time I initiated holding hands. Edward sighs contentedly as he continues.

"But you, Bella Swan, knocked me off my ass and made me feel things I've never felt before. You called me on all of my shit, and never fell for any of my fake charms. I went crazy that first year, trying not to care about you, but terrified some guy would take you away from me. And then I found out about your gift. I can't imagine what it's like having the burden of everyone's emotions subjected upon you. And then to have to experience the emotions of criminals...I was in awe of you." He pauses briefly before continuing. He seems intent to get this all out before he loses his nerve.

"Then I realized if you could read emotions, you had to know how I felt about you. I wasn't sure how to act around you, and it upset me that it was no longer my secret, or so I thought." He gives me a small knowing smirk. "But you never confronted me or acted any different." He laughs nervously, looking down at the bed, breaking our eye contact.

"I should have known it was because you couldn't read me, but I convinced myself you simply understood my fear. I believed we had this unspoken agreement to wait to discuss anything until we were both ready. As stupid as it sounds, it made me feel closer to you." He shakes his head, his skin red with embarrassment.

"Now I realize what a jackass I must have looked like to you. Keeping you at a distance and parading my 'flavors of the week' as you call them in front of you. I always thought you understood the reason, that you knew the truth." He looks up at me, waiting for a response.

"Okay, I can buy you thought there was some unspoken agreement, but the girls, you need to explain that one to me. What truth can possibly explain liking me and serial dating at the same time?" I ask tersely. Edward's dating history still triggers my insecurities.

"It made so much more sense in my head," he mumbles, looking into my eyes, guilt and shame shining in his own. "I guess it was a selfish way to keep my distance. But, Bella, what you don't know is things changed for me after that first year."

"Edward, I know you've gone on dates these last two years," I state brusquely.

"Yes, but not as many as you think, and most were just dinner or lunch. Nothing else." He stares at me trying to convey the hidden meaning behind his words. "Every time I went out with someone and thought about nothing but you, it strengthened my resolve to overcome my fear." He laughs ruefully. "Like I said, it made more sense in my head. Now that I hear it out loud, it just makes me sound like an asshole. God I am such an idiot!"

He's right; it does make him sound like an asshole. However, I also know that side of him is a front. Unlike all of those others, I am the only one that knows the real Edward. I decide in that moment to let it go. Both Edward and I have pasts we're not proud of and hashing out things we can't change will get us nowhere. I have more of an interest in what brought us here today. I take my hand and run it down his face watching closely as he leans into me with a sigh, slowly closing his eyes.
"You aren't an idiot," I say gently. "However, I do have a question." Edward looks up, and now it's my turn to hesitate. I take a moment to gather enough courage to ask the question I've wondered about for the last few days.

"You talk about not being ready for anything, but what I don't understand is what changed? The way you've acted towards me. The things you've said and the way you touch me, you aren't hesitating anymore. Why?" I ask.

"So many things have changed," he whispers. "You are such a vital part of my life, so much so that I can't imagine it without you. That's all I thought about while sitting in your hospital room. What I would do if you didn't make it." He takes a ragged breath. "The thought paralyzed me. I realized I had to get out of this limbo. But then you woke up, stubborn as ever." He smirks, pulling my hand up to his lips.

"I guess I expected you to read me and just be on the same page. Then I found out I concocted this whole 'relationship' between us in my head. I was afraid I ruined everything. Your assault put everything into perspective, and I couldn't stand the thought of not being with you. I decided to fight for you instead." A soft smile forms on his lips as he plays with my fingers before finally intertwining our hands securely together.

"I think finding out that you can't read me ended up being just what I needed."

"Why?"

"Because it forced me to talk to you and finally find the courage to prove to you how much I want you with me."

He leans forward capturing my lips again. We sink into each other, his arms pulling me closer. Edward was right in his earlier assessment; now that I know what it is like kissing him, I doubt I will ever want to stop.

After everything that happened, it is hard to believe I am sitting here discussing a romantic relationship. There is so much still unresolved, but in this moment, I feel the almost foreign emotions of joy and happiness. They give me the courage to speak from my heart for the first time in years.

"I want that too, Edward." I can't stop myself from smiling. "What do we do now?"

"Well, before we get even more off track of our original conversation, is there anything else I need to know about the Felix case? If we are going to move forward with being together, you need to lay everything out on the table," Edward asserts.

Reality suddenly sets back in. There is more I need to tell him, especially now. "Um, yeah, so um, someone else knows who I am."

Edward stares at me for a second, processing what I just said. "What are you talking about?" he whispers, his body tensing.

"Yesterday after I returned from the office, I was on my computer, when someone hacked into it. He completely froze my system and set up this communication box. He told me his name is Seth and that he knows who I am. He wants me to work with him to bring Aro down."

"Fuck! Tell me exactly what he said," Edward requests, anger radiating off his body.

"I don't think I can repeat it. He has an interesting train of thought and it was hard to follow him.
He did claim responsibility for ruining the tape of my interview with Felix."

"What?" Edward yells, jumping up from the bed. He starts pacing back and forth in front of the bed. "How the hell did he ruin the tape?"

"He says he hacked into the system a couple of weeks ago," I explain.

"There's no way. The FBI has firewalls for that, it makes no sense."

"Look, all I know is whatever he did to my computer was pretty sophisticated. He seems to know what he's talking about."

"Why did he erase the footage?"

"He says he did it for my protection, to prevent the Volturi from finding me. He offered it up as proof I can trust him."

"Fuck! Did he do anything else?" Edward continues to pace back and forth, running his hand through his hair.

"No, I asked the same thing. He does claim that he can help find the mole," I disclose, watching Edward closely for his response to this information.

"Shit. Okay, we need to strategize and do some damage control. Having someone else know about you changes everything. You are at more risk than I first suspected. This is bad, Bella."

"What am I going to do?" I ask, knowing there are limited choices available and most will take me away from the happiness I just experienced.

Edward walks back to the bed and sits down. "You're going to stay with me until we figure out a plan to keep you safe." He looks at me with conviction "You are not alone anymore, Bella, please stop trying to run away."

"A part of me is afraid I am dreaming, that you can't possibly want me, especially now." 

"Bella, you are everything to me, don't you know that by now?" He sighs, passionate emotions shining in his eyes. "Looks like I still have some things to prove to you."

Smiling, he leans forward again when a knock on the door interrupts our little bubble, the real world crashing in as Carlisle enters the room.

"Bella, you're awake," he states, walking in and raising an eyebrow in Edward's direction seeing our position.

"Yes," I say hesitantly, still unsure of the details of last night and how much he saw.

Edward leans forward again, kissing me before standing up allowing room for Carlisle to examine me. I guess that saves me from asking him whether we are going to share the change in our relationship with everyone.

"How are you feeling?" Carlisle asks taking my pulse.

"Fine, a bit groggy, but fine," I answer, trying to ascertain his emotions. Amazingly, I continue to see nothing but warmth and concern from him; there's no shade of anger or hatred. I feel relieved as it is suddenly very important that Edward's family accept me.
"That is a side effect of the sedative you were given. It should wear off soon."

I was given a sedative?

"How about your arm? Any pain or discomfort?" he questions, picking up my gauze-wrapped arm.

"It's a little painful, but not bad. What happened to it?" I look back and forth between the two men as they hesitate to respond. Edward moves closer to me and takes my hand again as Carlisle steps back.

"You broke a window last night. I think you were trying to escape," Edward answers, his eyes haunted.

"I broke a window?" I try desperately to remember that part. "I'm so sorry. I swear I will pay you back for whatever damage I caused," I tell Carlisle, my tears return, but this time in embarrassment.

"Bella, it's just a window. We aren't worried about it. We are, however, concerned about you," Carlisle states. "So, it seems you don't remember what happened last night?" He moves quickly past the window and right back into assessing my condition.

"No," I whisper.

"You had an extreme panic attack. Given everything you went through recently, I suspect you hit an emotional wall and things became overwhelming." He looks at me with kind and sympathetic eyes.

"Honestly, Bella, I don't know how you haven't had such an episode before given, what you must experience every day." Shocked by his words, I look quickly to Edward.

He didn't...

"I'm sorry, Bella, but I had to tell Carlisle about you. I thought your head injury may have tweaked what happens, making it out of your control. I didn't want to betray your trust, but I needed to make sure you were okay." He holds his breath, worried about my reaction.

"Bella," Carlisle interrupts. "Edward only shared your gift with me, no one else knows. I will keep it confidential. For medical purposes, it was important for Edward to tell me."

"Honestly, I don't know what to think. I guess I understand why you did it, Edward, but it was not your secret to share," I respond.

"I would never do anything to hurt you, Bella. I trust Carlisle, and I was desperate to help you. He needed to know in case it was the cause," Edward argues, making the case for his defense.

Although a part of me is angry, I also know everything Edward has done over the last few days was in my best interest. More importantly, somewhere between dinner and Pictionary, Edward's family wormed their way into my heart. Looking at Carlisle's warm and sincere colors, I decide I want to trust him too.

"Do things feel different to you, Bella? Has what you experience changed since the injury you sustained?" Carlisle questions.

"No, I don't feel any different in that sense."

I know what ever happened last night was because of my fear of the Volturi. I am sure that hearing
Jasper mention those files is what triggered…

Out of nowhere, a hazy memory of Jasper talking returns. My blood runs cold suddenly remembering what triggered my panic. "Oh my god, James is coming to Seattle," I blurt out, my breath hitching.

"Bella, calm down," Carlisle cautions.

Edward climbs onto the bed wrapping his arms around me. "Bella, he won't find you, I promise."

"You don't know that, Edward. You can't promise that. They are relentless, and if he learns I'm here_"

"He won't. We will make sure of that, I'm not going to let anyone hurt you." He tightens his arms around me.

A knock on the door breaks the silence lingering after Edward's declaration.

"Carlisle?" Esme enters speaking quietly. "Oh, Bella, you're awake." She smiles brightly before noticing the tension in the room and Edward's protective hold. "Everything okay?" she questions.

"We're talking about what happened last night," Carlisle answers for all of us. "It might be a good time to take a break, yes?" He looks at me for confirmation.

"Yes. Let's take a break," Edward answers. "We don't need to talk about everything right away. I don't want a repeat of last night."

"Yeah, a break sounds good." My head is spinning.

Edward, sensing my racing thoughts, leans down and whispers in my ear, "you're not alone, baby. We do this together."

Despite my concern of James' arrival, I smile at the term of endearment, another change in our relationship. No one has ever called me baby before. I feel calmer. Edward's presence has become crucial to my sanity. I know we have a lot to figure out, but in the midst of overwhelming odds, I feel a sense of hope because I am not facing this alone. Edward is with me.

"Well, in that case, Bella, I bet you are starving. How would you like some lunch?" Esme asks.

"Lunch sounds good." I smile softly, realizing how hungry I am.

"Would you like me to bring you something, or do you want to come down to the kitchen to eat?" she questions sweetly.

Feeling the need to get up to shake off the lingering effects of the sedative, I tell her I want to go downstairs. Edward shows me to a restroom so I can freshen up, even giving me an extra toothbrush, which I wish I had thought to ask for before we shared our first kiss. Afterwards, Edward and I walk towards the kitchen. As soon as we turn the corner, I am swept into a big bear hug.

"Emmett? What are you doing here?" I ask, surprised but happy to see him.

"I couldn't miss out on all the drama. So, mafia princess huh?" he jokes, setting me back down. I, however, just look at him surprised.

*Emmett knows now?*

"You're awake!" Alice comes bounding over, rushing past Emmett to give me a hug. "How are you? Are you okay?"

"Jesus, can you all just give her some room please?" Edward grumbles.

Although I appreciate Edward's protection, I am actually okay with the attention, especially because it gives me a chance to assess everyone's reaction to my news. As with Carlisle and Esme, both Emmett and Alice show nothing but concern and friendship.

Is it possible everyone still accepts me regardless of my bloodline?

Unfortunately, that thought is premature as Jasper walks in, filling the room with negative tension and suspicious colors. Edward tenses and pulls me slightly behind him.

"Jasper, we aren't doing this now." Edward's tone is chillingly calm, his body poised to strike.

"Edward, I have no choice. I need to report her to my supervisor. The information she has on the Volturi is invaluable, not to mention," he analyzes me, as if I am the criminal, "how do we know she's not the inside contact?"

"I told you she's not involved with them! Were you even fucking here last night? How can you, for one moment, believe she is working with the Volturi?" Edward yells in my defense.

Hearing the commotion, Carlisle and Esme come out of the kitchen. Tension fills the room as Edward and Jasper stare each other down, both waiting for the other to break first. Alice looks between the two with alarm and sadness.

His accusation sparks a deep anger. I hate being compared to Aro. I snort in amusement at his ridiculous accusation. Stepping out from behind Edward, I walk over to Jasper to face him.

"I suggest you shut your mouth about things you have no clue about. You don't know who I am and have no clue about my involvement with the Volturi," I yell.

"I know you are the daughter of a psychopath, so forgive me if I don't roll over like everyone else and accept you with open arms."

I narrow my eyes, assessing the angry colors floating around him. There is a hint of protection in the midst of his angry suspicion. He's worried for his family, and a part of me knows I should back down. However, his accusation has pissed me off and a larger part of me wants to just put him in his place.

"Well, Jasper, let me shed some light for you on my relationship with the Volturi. Aro Volturi executed my mother in front of me and has murdered every single person I considered a friend. His daily lessons involved either physical punishments, or watching while people begged for mercy. On good days, death was quick. On bad days, it was slow and painful. Do you know what it sounds like when someone dies in the most painful of ways?" Jasper shakes his head while I move forward, poking him in the chest as I continue. "I do!" Edward comes up behind me grabbing my shoulders to keep me from moving further into Jasper's space.

"No one wants to see Aro pay more than I do, but you are clueless when it comes to the Volturi's power. So trust me or don't trust me, I don't care, but there is no way in hell I'm going anywhere near your office to turn myself over to the CIA."
Edward pulls me back against his chest, wrapping me up in his arms. "Bella," Edward chokes into my ear. "Baby, that's enough." His body is stiff, the tension rolling off his body and through my own.

Looking up, he addresses Jasper. "I'm only going to say this once. We are not doing anything that places Bella in jeopardy. She is not an assignment, and if you cannot support that, get out!"

Edward growls.

"Okay everyone, let's all calm down." Esme intervenes wiping her cheeks. "Bella came down to get something to eat. Let's focus on that for now, the rest can wait."

I continue to stare at Jasper, emotions of regret and sympathy surround him, but my fear does not allow me to back down. "Esme, I appreciate the offer. I cannot express enough gratitude for everything you've done for me, but I think for everyone's sake I should just leave."

"No, Bella," Edward says gruffly, tightening his hold around me. "The best place to figure out our next move is here."

"I agree there is no need to make rash decisions. Let's take time to calm down and gain perspective," Carslie suggests.

"Yes, let's go into the kitchen and eat," Esme agrees, both clearly trying to ease the tension of their once peaceful home.

Edward lets go of me, but grabs my hand to pull me into the kitchen, staring coldly at Jasper. Emmett follows closely behind, while Jasper and Alice linger in the hallway.

"I get that we're not talking about issues right now, but Jesus, Bella, you can't expect to spit out all that shit and for us to just drop it," Emmett huffs angrily.

Edward looks at me with cautious yet curious eyes. Like Emmett, I'm sure he has questions. I glance over to where Esme is preparing food, her back is towards us, but I see the slump in her shoulders and flash of sadness when Emmett speaks. This is not the time or place for this discussion. I spin around to face Emmett and get close to him, trying to prevent Esme from overhearing.

"Look," I whisper. "What do you want from me? Nothing can change who I am or my history. Talking about it is pointless. These are mine demons to face, not yours."

"That is where you are wrong, Bella," Emmett disputes. "We're involved whether you like it or not, because we care about you. Why do you think I'm even here? It's not to solve a case. I'm looking out for my friend who is obviously in trouble. So suck it up and accept our help."

Edward stands next to Emmett with a knowing smirk, clearly in agreement with him. I stop myself from responding and simply listen to what he has to say. Looking around the room, I realize how many people I have in my corner. Apparently, the family I so desperately want is right in front of me.

"Okay, I get it," I relent. "But I think I've caused enough excitement for now. Can we wait until after lunch to talk?"

"Agreed," Edward states while Emmett nods his head. And before I realize what is happening, Edward gives me a quick kiss before walking over to help out Esme. I stand there stunned, knowing Emmett will take full advantage of this new development.
"Well hells, Bells!" Emmett boasts "No Emmett, nothing is happening. We're just friends. I don't know what you mean, Emmett, Edward doesn't like me," he mocks me in what I assume is his fake Bella voice.

"Shut it, Emmett!"

"Seriously, no details? Come on, I told you in the hospital, I can have a girly moment with you. I will just pretend we are on Grey's or some shit like that. Now what's the story, girlfriend?" he goads, elbowing me in the side.

"Give it up, Emmett. I'm not telling you anything."

"Hey, Emmett, don't mess with my girl." Edward smiles enjoying the friendly banter, as usual, Emmett knows how to break the angst and tension.

"Your girl, huh? Just wait, I'm going to get all the gory details out of you guys soon." He winks before sitting down at the counter and munching on the chips Esme laid out.

I notice during our interaction, Esme also has a pleased smirk, her body radiating love. When Edward made the "my girl" comment, she looked lovingly at him and squeezed his arm. Hopefully this is a good sign that, like Carlisle, she approves of my relationship with Edward.

As promised, lunch is issue free. Even though we do not discuss any issues, the seriousness of the situation is not far from anyone's mind. The conversation stays light and superficial, but every once in a while I catch Esme's concerned eyes looking at me. Emmett helps to keep up the lightness by regaling us with his outrageous tales of all things Emmett, but even he sends me small concerned glances. Edward shows his worry through constant little touches on my shoulders or arms.

I use the time to build up my confidence, knowing the conversation following lunch will be difficult.

I sit with Emmett in Carlisle's study waiting for Edward to return. He is with Jasper deciding if he will be a part this discussion.

Jasper made himself scarce after our argument. I suspect in part to Alice. Edward promised he will only bring Jasper in if he is willing to play by our rules, but I also know he wants backup. Regardless of this morning, Edward still trusts him. I am trying to convince myself that if Edward trusts Jasper, I should too; however, old habits die hard. It is difficult to give up control and let Edward decide things that affect my life.

Thankfully, Emmett recognizes my need to sort things out and for the last twenty minutes has sat quietly beside me, which is impressive for him. The anxiety of being on the verge of sharing my story builds, so far everyone is supportive, but what will they think after hearing the darkest parts of my life?

Finally, the door opens and Edward walks in hesitantly looking behind him as Jasper follows, shutting the door behind him. The decision is made. We are trusting Jasper.

"Bella," Jasper starts and then clears his throat, "I want to apologize for accusing you of working for Aro. That was obviously untrue. It's no excuse, but I've tried for so long to get a solid lead on them, I got caught up in the moment. I hope you can forgive me and believe that I'm here to help as hopefully a friend and not an agent."

His eyes are earnest as he stands there shaded in hues of regret. He is telling the truth, however, a
part of me wonders how easily he could get caught up in the desire to close the case again.

"Thank you, Jasper. I would be lying if I said I wasn't cautious about your involvement, but I trust Edward and he trusts you. All I ask is that you remember that this is my life, not a way for you to promote."

"Understood," he states quietly before sitting down in a chair across from me. Edward watches our interaction quietly before coming to sit next to me on the sofa, gently taking my hand in his and kissing the side of my head.

"Thank you," he whispers quietly.

"How are we doing this?" I question, bouncing my leg with nervous energy.

"Why don't you just start at the beginning?" Edward suggests, squeezing my hand in reassurance.

"Okay, I was born on a dark, cold Italian night," I joke, my defenses rearing their ugly head, trying to help me distance myself from the wave of difficult emotions I am feeling.

"Bella," Edward warns.

"Okay, okay," I relent, organizing my thoughts. "I guess I should start with my mother."

Taking a deep breath, for the first time in my life, I tell my story.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time, when we hear all of Bella's story, things only heat up from here.
"I guess I should start with my mother," I whisper. Edward places one arm around my shoulders, while the other is across my lap, his hand holding mine tightly.

"It's okay, Bella. I'm here," he whispers back only for my ears.

Taking strength from his touch and his words, I begin. "Max, my maternal grandfather, was a drunken gambler. My grandmother died giving birth to my mother. According to my mom, Max's heart died right along with her. He began drinking shortly after her death, and since Renee represented everything he lost, he struggled with being a father. To keep up with the expensive nature of his vices, he started working for the Volturi. Unfortunately for Max, he had the heart of a gambler, but not the talent. The result of his nightly ritual was a large debt with all the wrong people. When a particular nasty group was ready to collect, he stupidly went to Aro for help."

"I'm assuming that didn't end well?" Emmett asks gruffly.

"Hardly," I scoff. "Aro is not a generous man. Every choice and action he takes is to serve his best interests. He has no heart or conscience. The only time he provides 'help' to anyone is when he sees a larger benefit in it for himself. In this particular case, the benefit was my mother. Enthralled by her beauty, Aro wanted to own her. When given the choice of saving his life or saving his daughter, my grandfather chose his life."

"What exactly does that mean?" Jasper asks, curiosity and intensity are floating around him.

"Basically, Max made a deal with the devil. Aro agreed to cover his debts, and in return, my mother was 'gifted' to him. She was eighteen years old."
"Gifted?" Edward choked on the word with disgust.

"Yes, gifted," I confirmed. "However, not being a smart man, Max continued his habits, foolishly believing Aro would protect the father of his new prize. Six months after the transaction that sealed my mother's fate, Max's body was found in the river with a bullet in the head. In my opinion, his death was too quick in comparison to the horrible life he created for his daughter."

"Jesus," Emmett mumbles.

"My mother never talked to me about her life with Aro. I can only assume it was hell. Their relationship had nothing to do with love or friendship. Aro has no understanding of either. I have no pretenses about the reality of my conception. I doubt anything physical between them was ever consensual."

The tension in the room increases, but instead of looking around to check the emotions of those in the room, I stare down at my hands instead. I can almost feel their questions about my mother's life, but not wanting to get bogged down for too long on one topic, I continue. The only way I'm going to get through this is moving quickly. I can't stop to analyze every horrible detail of my life. There are too many to mention. A part of me realizes that I'm being detached. The monotone aspect of my voice is a recognizable sign, but it helps me push forward.

"Ironically, most of my earliest memories are happy ones. My mom kept me incredibly sheltered from Aro's world. And knowing what I know now, I shudder to think about the price she paid to make that possible. I remember lots of singing, dancing, horseback rides and trips to the beach. I never questioned why I barely saw Aro. I guess my mom more than made up for my lack of a father."

"You really didn't know who he was?" Jasper asks incredulously.

"I was a little kid," I respond tightly. "My mom purposely protected me from his world. We basically lived in a whole different section of the complex. Aro was barely on my radar."

My mom was everything, and the strength of her spirit amazes me. Her lights and colors were always bright and warm. I don't remember a day when she wasn't smiling, and her love for me was endless.

I often wonder if she purposely kept her emotions happy for me. It took years to learn how to distinguish the subtle nuances inherent in human emotions. I could have easily missed the sadness or fear underneath her happiness. If she did, it is another example of how much she tried to protect me.

She was the one who discovered my gift. She says when I was very young, I would try to reach out and grab the colors I saw in people. She thought something was wrong with my eyes or my coordination, but every doctor who examined me told her I was developing normally.

As my speech emerged, I began to verbalize the colors I would see around me. My behavior perplexed my mom, but finally, she figured out I was just different. She used to say I was magical, and even if I didn't understand it then, someday I would realize the importance of my gift.

When I was in preschool, she would hide my ability from others by claiming that my unfiltered comments were simply a result of learning my colors. As I got older, my mom helped me discover ways to control it and keep my thoughts quiet. She used to tell me that people would not understand or try to use my gift against me. I think she was especially worried about what Aro would do if he knew.
"But something changed?" Edward asks knowingly, bringing me back to the conversation.

"Yes. It was around the time I turned five that she starting making plans for us to escape. Aro started to show an interest in wanting me to learn about his business, I'm not exactly sure why, but it concerned her. Unfortunately, she trusted the wrong people and he quickly learned about her plan. In typical Aro fashion, he kept his discovery to himself, letting her plot for months believing she was one step ahead. Like a snake waiting for unsuspecting prey, Aro waited for the right moment to strike. That moment was my sixth birthday party."

"What happened, Bella?" Edward asks quietly, squeezing my hand in reassurance.

Taking a deep breath, I become lost in my memories, connected to the room only by the feel of Edward's hand in mine. If I close my eyes, I can still feel her hugs and kisses as I blow out my candles. After I made my wish, she leaned in and whispered a promise to make all my dreams come true. I felt so loved and protected. It was the last time I ever felt that way.

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It was the best day ever! My birthday party was super fun and all my friends came. We played games and ate cake. Walking back into the house with my mom, I grab her arm and hug it tightly. She smiles down and just as we reach the door, she twirls me around. I love her.

I am sitting on a stool by the counter sneaking little tastes of leftover cake while she cleans up when suddenly the door slams shut.

"Renee!" Aro shouts. His voice makes me jump. He sounds angry.

Mom quickly pulls me with her out into the hallway. Aro stands in front of us with several of his men. They were all dressed in black, looking formal and angry.

Turning around, Mom kneels down and holds my shoulders tightly. "Sweetheart, I want you to go and watch television in the other room." I see fear around her. I've never seen her afraid before. She's always so bright and happy.

"Why?"

"Just do as I ask, okay? Go and shut the door. Everything will be fine. Now go," she says smiling.

It is the first time her smile hasn't matched her colors, but I do as I'm told. I look behind me as I walk to the living room. She is still smiling, but for some reason, I am afraid. Closing the door behind me, I turn on my cartoons. I keep looking at the door, waiting for her to come back, but it is taking a long time.

All of sudden, I hear yelling from the hallway. Aro is yelling and my mom yells back. I can't understand what they are saying, but it scares me. Something outside the door crashes, the sound makes me jump. Wrapping a blanket around myself, I turn up the volume trying to block out the angry sounds.

Pulling my knees up and laying my head on them, I put my hand over my ears hoping that it blocks the sound. The door suddenly slams open, and one of the men from the hallway comes in. He demands I go with him. He drags me into the hallway where my mom is on her knees. Her hands and feet are tied together. She is crying, begging for Aro to stop. I don't understand what's happening.

Another one of the men grabs me and holds me against him. Aro starts yelling about loyalty and respect, words I remember hearing before, but I don't know what they mean. I'm scared and
confused.

Aro keeps yelling. None of it makes sense. Then I see him pull a gun out of his jacket. My mom always told me that guns hurt people. I'm not allowed to touch them. I wonder if Aro knows about guns. He shouldn't wave it around. It's dangerous.

Aro lifts it and points it at my mom's head. I don't understand why. I think I might be sick because my body is shaking. I can't make it stop.

"Isabella, I want you to watch. Do not close your eyes. Do you understand?" he asks in a scary voice. I nod my head, tears running down my face.

"Please, Aro. Please don't do this! She's your daughter. Let her go to her room. Do what you will to me, but I beg you, don't make her watch," my mom screams at Aro, tears are also running down her face. Her colors are the darkest and saddest I have ever seen. It confuses me even more. The man holding me grabs me tighter. Aro pulls back the trigger and everything seems to slow down.

"Isabella. I love you. Never forget that, sweetheart. Be strong for me, okay."

The sound of the gunshot echoes in the hallway causing me to jump. The man's hand grabs me even tighter when I move. I don't understand what happened. There are spots of red all over the tile. I don't know why it's there or why everything is suddenly quiet.

Aro walks over to me; the gun is now put away. He kneels down to look in my eyes. The smell of his cologne gags me. My stomach feels sick, but I don't want to throw up in front of him. It will make him even angrier.

"Isabella, I want you to understand that your mother brought that on herself. More importantly, you need to know that I will do the same thing to you if you are not loyal to me. Do you understand?" he asks sternly. I don't, but I nod my head anyway, afraid that he will yell at me if I don't answer.

"Good. Now, tomorrow, you and I will start spending more time together. No more of this child-like foolishness. It's time for you to learn about my world." He taps my nose and stands back up, motioning for the men to follow him out the door.

I stand in the hallway, still being held by the man standing behind me. I don't know if I can move. Things are confusing and everything looks fuzzy.

"You'll be okay, Isabella. I swear it," the man whispers. I don't understand. I want my mom.

"My mind blocked out the details of the actual shooting. I remember hearing the gun and specks of red on the tile, but I don't remember her body. I think that was the beginning of my survival skills," I say in my detached monotone voice.

"For years, I wondered why he killed her and not me. If he wanted to teach her a lesson, killing me was the perfect way to do it. It's not like he cared about me. I was a burden, and getting rid of me would have killed the only spirit she had left. I often wished he killed me instead. Sometimes, I dreamt he killed both of us, and we were together and happy in heaven. Those dreams were the hardest to wake from because my reality was hell. On the worst days, I was jealous because she was free. Those thoughts were usually followed by extreme guilt. I mean what kind of person feels jealous of their murdered mother?"

I feel Edward kiss the top of my head, his hand once again tightening around mine. Both give me
the encouragement to go on. Edward seems to understand that I didn't want my question answered, it is just my rambling way of working through the difficult memory.

"I was sixteen when I discovered why he killed her instead. Right after her death, he started brokering for my hand in marriage. My mother had become useless to him. He had taken what he wanted and saw no benefit in keeping her around, whereas I had become his golden ticket to a merged power. Life after my mom revolved around Aro and his 'corporation'. His need to control me was insane. He kept me monitored at all times. He took me out of school and limited my interactions to the servants, tutors or his staff. Aro insisted I stay close to him, which was always strange to me. Why require me to stay so close, but have no interaction?" I pondered out loud.

Not being able to read Aro always limited my ability to understand his behavior. I may not have been able to read Aro, but I could read almost everyone else on his staff. Some days, I would purposely mess with Aro by using the emotions of his employees against them. A few well placed words to the right staff could cause just enough problems to drive him crazy. These were the only days that would make me smile.

"He didn't interact with you at all?" Jasper interjected.

"Basically, I'd become Aro's prized possession to show off in public and abuse in private," I mumbled quietly.

I don't like to think about the details of his physical abuse, but it was incessant. Some of it was the result of my stubbornness. I refused to bend to his will, and it angered him. I think a part of me just didn't care if he hurt me. Most days it was hard not to feel hopeless.

I feel another wave of tension build within the room when I mention the word abuse. However, like before, I push forward before anyone can ask questions, desperate to just get it all out.

"The younger part of my childhood with Aro, although bad, was easier in comparison to when I was older. When I was young, I could blend into the scenery. Most of his partners didn't pay attention to me, and since I didn't understand their conversations, I simply drifted off into daydreams during his business meetings."

This is when I started taking "trips" to my sunflower field. When I was younger, I would imagine running around and playing games with my mom. As I became older, I imagined having conversations with her.

"What happened as you got older, Bella?" Emmet asks softly.

"Umm, as I became more womanly, his partners paid more attention to me during meetings and parties. It made me uncomfortable. Aro didn't care what they said and did as long as they left me a virgin. My virginity was part of the marriage deal."

"Fuck," Someone hisses, but I'm not sure who, as I still refuse to look up.

"During my seventeenth birthday party. Aro announced I would marry Marcus Morretti when I turned nineteen. Aro had a habit of connecting my birthday with horrific events." I spit out angrily. "Marcus was a disgusting man who had worked with Aro for years. He owned various shipping yards in Northern Italy, and although they had a working relationship, Aro wanted more control over Marcus' real estate. I suspect Aro was using me to bargain for that control. After the announcement, Marcus tried to gain my favor by boasting about the great life we would have once married. However, I knew I was trading one hell for another. Just like when Aro bought my mother, I had no doubt Marcus would take what he wanted regardless of my consent." Still looking
down, I twist my hands painfully.

"Bella? Do you need a break?" Edward asks with concern.

"No," I say brusquely. I need to stay detached and keep moving. Thinking about Edward or his concern will only make it more difficult. My singular goal right now is to just get through it. I feel myself drifting more and more into a depersonalized state. The numbness has now been added to the monotone voice, but I welcome it.

"How in the hell did you keep going after news like that?" Emmett asks.

I laugh humorously. "I almost didn't, but then something, or more precisely, someone came along that made life easier."

Shortly after turning seventeen, a ray of sunshine came into my cold world by the name of Jacob Black. Jake was a young man, who, for unknown reasons, pursued a job with Aro. I knew immediately he was different. He hated Aro and everything involved with working for him. Honestly, I'm still confused about why he started working for him in the first place.

"Jake became my assigned guard, and we spent most of our days and nights together. Amazingly, in the midst of this unbearable situation, I found a true friend. We became close, closer than we should have, and when our friendship turned into something more, it complicated everything. Jake promised to do everything in his power to get me out, but like my mom, Aro murdered him because he tried to save me."

"How was he murdered?" Jasper asks.

"The specifics don't matter. He's dead," I say forcefully, the guilt still heavy in my heart. "But, after his death, I lost all hope, finally accepting I would never escape Aro. However, I refused to resign myself to my mother's fate of a forced marriage and ultimate death. If Aro wanted me dead, I was going to do it on my terms, not his. I started hoarding pills, any pills I could find. I saved them up for weeks, along with an extra sharp razor blade. I was not going to take any chances that I would live."


As strange as it sounds, thinking about this time of my life is not as horrible as the others. There is a sort of peace that comes from taking control of your own death. For the first time in years, a sense of calm washed over me while I planned my demise. Fortunately, my secret guardian angel was there to save me from myself.

"Did you try?" Jasper asks.

"I never got the chance. Caius stopped me before I tried."

Caius and I were a strange duo from the start. From the outside, I'm sure no one will understand or appreciate our relationship. He was Aro's most trusted adviser and the man who held me during my mother's murder. At first, I hated him for being in the room with me that day. However, he became the only person in Aro's world who treated me like a little girl. His actions were always confusing to me. He was stern and scary for business, but when we were alone, he treated me with kindness and care.

Because Aro trusted him, he had the ability to spend time with me without other guards present. This freedom allowed him to give me treats such as ice cream or even play a game from time to time. He also figured out ways to interrupt Aro's tirades with important business calls, often saving
me from further punishment. He became the closest thing I will ever have to an actual father. I loved him.

I often wondered about his relationship with my mother. I knew he loved her. What I didn't know is if she reciprocated those feelings or if they were together before her death. He refused to talk to me about his feelings for her. I do know his guilt over her murder resulted in his need to help me. I was all there was left of her.

Per usual in my typical daily routine, after a long day with Aro, Demetri walks me back to my room to lock me in for the night. I can't wait until this bullshit existence is over. I can't do this anymore. I smile sweetly at him as he opens the door. I only do it because I know it pisses him off. I have to try hard not to laugh as his colors predictably flare red. I don't know why he hates it so much, but I don't really care either, simply knowing it provides me some much needed entertainment.

I turn and survey my two-room suite of a prison. A long couch, reading chair and a large desk fill the space of the first room. Against the inner wall, there are several bookcases holding all my favorite novels and current text books. Several windows are scattered across the outer wall, making it difficult to have anything against it. The walls themselves are bare. I've never felt the need to decorate them with anything. It's not like a pretty picture can change what the room represents.

The second room is where my bed is and includes a small bathroom and modest closet. Clothes bought to play different roles for Aro's sick game fill the closet. I hate all of them. The room always smells like bleach and cleaning supplies. Aro expects perfection and cleanliness, therefore his cleaning staff works tirelessly to make sure everything is always spotless. It is like living in a museum. Nothing is to be touched or moved.

One day, in an act of defiance, I moved everything around on the shelves in the living room and broke a vase. I was almost giddy when I did it, but Aro's fist against my cheek and more restrictions on my movements proved the act more trouble than it was worth.

Dropping my jacket on the chair, I move into my bedroom. Looking up, I scream at the unexpected sight of Caius sitting on my bed.

"Jesus Christ! You scared the shit out of me. What the hell are you doing in my room?"

Caius sits there stiffly. He has yet to move. After several tense moments of silence, he raises his arm and holds up my bag of pills. Fuck.

"Want to explain this to me, Isabella?" Anger, fear and sadness are swirling around him. As usual, he's a contradiction of emotions.

I'm stunned and, for a moment, speechless. Quickly, I try to pull myself together enough to lie. "Explain what? I don't even know what that is," I say with more confidence than I am feeling.

He quickly jumps up and moves to stand right in front of me, holding the bag directly in front of my face.

"Don't play dumb, Isabella. It doesn't become you. So, let's try this again. Care to tell me why I found these fucking pills hidden in your bathroom?" His eyes narrow as he stares me down.

A part of me wants to deny them on the basic principle of not backing down, but I know I'm caught. "Fine, they're mine. So what?"
"What are you planning to do with these drugs?"

"It's really none of your business," I say defiantly.

"Okay," he says reaching into his pocket. "How about this?" he asks holding up the razor blade I had stashed next to the pills.

"I like a close shave," I retort sarcastically.

"Cut the crap, Isabella! This looks like a fucking suicide kit. Are you planning to kill yourself?" He choke on the words.

"So what if I am? You going to run and tell Aro like the good little lap dog you are?"

He looks taken back by my words. The fact I didn't deny it shocks him. His shock quickly turns to despair. Out of everyone in Aro's guard, his emotions confuse me the most.

"How can you give up? How could you do that to your mother?"

Before I realize it, my hand moves to strike him, but he catches it before I can do any damage. Seething I yank my hand free.

"You shut your mouth about my mother. You, Aro and all the rest of his little minions have no right to speak about her." My anger is boiling out of control. I can't believe he had the nerve to say anything about my mother, considering he was a direct witness to her murder.

Caius smirks. "You still have your spunk, Isabella. Maybe there is some fight left in you yet." I narrow my eyes in his direction, daring him to continue as my hands clench again. "Isabella, the only thing your mother ever cared about is you. Nothing meant more to her than your happiness. She asked you to stay strong, not take the easy way out."

I open my mouth to respond when he cuts me off.

"What if I can offer you another choice?"

"I think we screamed at each other for hours, each purging years of pent-up emotions about my mother and my situation. The fight ended when Caius pledged to get me away from Aro. When I argued the futility of trying, citing my mother and Jake as evidence, he pointed out that neither had the influence he did being Aro's second in command. That night we began a secret alliance. Caius asked for my patience while he planned, but promised I would leave before the date of my marriage. That gave us a year."

"So Caius helped to get you out?" Jasper asks. The continued silence from Edward is almost deafening, but I don't have time right now to linger on what it means.

"Yes. I prayed everyday my mother was somewhere up in heaven working on a miracle. Aro's powerful connections would make avoiding detection almost impossible. My task was to keep up appearances and pretend everything was status quo. I wanted out as soon as possible, but Caius kept reminding me that my freedom would be short-lived if we were careless. While waiting, Caius helped me learn to speak with an American accent. In order for this to work, I needed to leave all traces of my Italian upbringing behind."

I pause for a moment to pull my legs under me, the comfortable position a contrast to my personal discomfort. Taking a deep breath, I continue to push forward.
"Caius used his connections to acquire my new documentation. As a part of his duties for Aro, he was responsible for obtaining all the fake documents the Volturi guards needed for various reasons. To create my documents, he purposely picked people who were not invested in the corporation, but had done similar jobs for him in the past. Part of Caius' genius plan was to wait until he needed similar documents for Aro, so that he could place an order for several sets at the same time. He did this on several occasions, thereby creating sets of 'dummy' documents. From a paper trail perspective, this made tracing the origin of my specific documents difficult and created dead ends for Aro when he started looking for me."

"Why did you pick the name Bella?" Emmett asks.

"We realized we took a chance by choosing a name derived from Isabella, but it was something I was adamant about doing. My maternal grandmother's name was Isabella, and my mother fought Aro to name me after her. She was insistent. I wanted to honor her by keeping it in some form. Caius and I hoped it was something Aro would not expect, basically hiding in plain sight."

"So what was the plan for getting you into the U.S.?" Jasper asks. As usual, he's focused on the details of the story.

"After researching many options for the best way to disappear, I chose an unusual route for my entrance into American life. I decided the best plan was to become a homeless teenager. Caius hated the idea knowing the danger shelters posed and the possibility that I would remain homeless. However, I was willing to take the risk rather than stay with Aro or marry Marcus. I was confident in my ability to survive even though it would not be an easy path. Most importantly, a homeless shelter is the last place in the world Aro would look, buying me more time to set up my new identity."

"Homeless? Aro is a multi-millionaire. I find it hard to believe that Caius couldn't get you some cash," Jasper says.

"You're right, but I refused to take any of it knowing it came from the blood of the innocent. Caius gave me enough cash to buy the plane ticket, bus fare and essentials for several weeks. The rest was up to me once I arrived."

"But homelessness, Bells. That was a risky move," Emmett comments.

"I never do anything without a plan. This was not a rash decision on my part. I knew exactly what I was doing. I researched the funding and programs available to homeless youth. I learned several of these programs would not only help me establish myself, but also indirectly help to cover up the holes of my new identity."

I pause, my logical brain once again in control. It is always easier to talk about facts than feelings.

"In the 1970's, the United States established federal programs to help homeless youth. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in particular focuses on unaccompanied homeless youth and basically ensures access to services without parental consent or information. Since The National Alliance to End Homelessness defines homeless youth as 'unaccompanied individuals between the ages twelve to twenty-four', I would have access to these services even though I was eighteen. Once identified as an unaccompanied youth, I could complete and submit applications for Federal Student Aid without providing parental information. After researching several different locations, San Francisco, California became the most logical choice for ease of access to these services. California enacted laws requiring counties to provide counseling services to homeless youth, and San Francisco spent millions each year on homeless related programs."

"I had to," I say loudly, looking up at Jasper. I'm surprised to see a slight hue of admiration before looking back down at my hands.

"So I'm guessing you developed a back story," Emmett states correctly.

"According to my documents and the story I told the social workers when I arrived, Bella Swan was born to Marie and Charles Swan, a destitute couple who drifted from city to city looking for work. Neither had completed school, and both tended to work under the table, which means there is no paper trail for a work or tax history. Marie died of natural causes when I was young. With no money and little documentation, my 'father' left her body in Miami, Florida. She was most likely buried under a Jane Doe marker since there was no one to claim her. With my 'father' being a drifter, we didn't stay anywhere long enough for me to enroll in school, which was why I had no education documents. Basically, their nomad lifestyle meant there was no documentation to investigate or verify our movements."

"Brilliant," Emmett mutters in awe.

I'm still afraid to look at him, not yet wanting to see what he feels. Edward continues his silence. If it wasn't for his physical touch, I wouldn't even know he was there. The thought is disturbing.

"Okay, so now you had your back story. How did you get into the system?" Jasper asks, helping to focus me back on the story and not the meaning of Edward's behavior.

"I told the social workers that when I was seventeen, my 'father' left me behind in a small coastal town in California. After running out of money, I ended up living on the streets. With little resources, it was difficult to find a job. Finally, I decided to hitch-hike my way to San Francisco for a new start. Once involved with the system, an assigned social worker opened a case file in my name. My file, combined with my fake documents and prepared story, would explain any inconsistency found during a routine background check, especially my lack of documentation before the age of eighteen."

The memory of walking into the shelter remains crystal clear.

I walk through the door into the shelter. The dim lights add to the depressing nature of the vast room. Rows of bunks are spread out, each with just enough space between them to provide room to place a bag or some other belongings. This is considered low end for even a shelter. I learned during my research there are several types of shelters depending upon the funding and program running them.

This is a six in and six out shelter, meaning guests check in at six p.m. and have to leave by six a.m. the next morning. There are no guaranteed spots at these shelters. This allows everyone a chance at a bed, but makes it more chaotic and dangerous. However, they also have social workers, and I need to get a meeting with one if my plan is going to work.

I was one of the first in line, waiting all day outside of the shelter for the magic six o'clock hour. I shuffle slowly in the line, holding my suitcase tightly. As strange as it seems, losing my suitcase is the worst fear I have about being here. I'm use to abuse and violence. Unfortunately I've learned to handle those, but losing the last remnants of my mother is unthinkable.

The shelter has a strange smell. It smells like someone tried to overpower the smell of dirt, grime and urine with cleaning products. I try not to focus on it as the smell makes me want to throw up
The shelter worker leads the line to the end of the room and starts assigning beds. A commotion behind me distracts everyone's attention. Turning to look, I see two men brawling several feet away. Two workers quickly pull the two men apart, telling both of them they are out for tonight. With the commotion settled, everyone resumes what they were doing, which for me is finding my assigned bed for the night.

Sitting down, the flimsy cot squeaks loudly. The mattress is thin, the pillow flat and the wool army-green colored blanket covering it makes me itchy. I'm sure to most it looks more inviting than a cardboard box or concrete bench, but for me it is depressing. Looking across the room, I see a young mother trying to settle her toddler. Both are dirty and thin. The toddler is clutching what looks like a beloved and dirty stuffed bunny. Like my suitcase, I bet it represents home to her.

I vow right then and there that I will not take anything for granted ever again and that I will be successful. This isn't the best place in the world, but I'm free and really, what more could I want?

"The rest as they say is history. I worked hard every day to leave my past behind, and although there were days I barely scraped by, it was worth it. Aro's paid tutors taught me well, and passing the GED was easy. After taking a few community college courses, I was able to transfer to a university. Between grants, scholarships, and student loans, I paid my way through school. Although being on the run and needing to look over my shoulder made it a bit lonely, I was happy because I was free. Completing my doctoral degree was the proudest moment of my life. That degree became a symbol of my survival, and I knew somewhere my mom was smiling at my achievement."

"Do you know what happened after you left? How Aro reacted to your escape?" Jasper asks.

"No. There was only one person left behind that I ever thought about, and Aro killed him."

I paused, feeling overwhelmed by my thoughts of Caius. I'm thankful every day for him. I would not be here without him, and he probably saved me more than I realize. Several years after I ran, I decided to Google his name. Although expected, it was still devastating to read that just a mere month after I left, Caius' tortured body was found dumped in a park with a bullet to his head.

Caius did what he promised. He got me out and paid for it with his life.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it.

Bella had a lot to say. Up next, Emmett, Jasper's and more importantly Edward's reaction to Bella's story (he won't stay silent for long) and the planning begins.

Finally, the laws and organizations Bella researched are real. They provide a very important service and have a lot of great resources. Check them out if you are interested in knowing more.
A/N:
Thank-you for sticking with me as we continue on the journey of this story, I know the last chapter was a bit dark, so I appreciate everyone's support. :)

Stephanie Meyer owns the rights to Twilight and everything associated with it.

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex, Tds88 and pre-reader Beachlover! They rock!

Chapter 12: Karma Police

The power of the human spirit is a concept often explored in the world of psychology. We call it resiliency, the strength of a person to overcome insurmountable challenges and come out the other side stronger and wiser.

There are countless examples of resilient individuals, from the small things such as losing a job or a family, to things much bigger in comparison such as genocide survivors and prisoners of war. The list goes on and on. For all intents and purposes, these individuals have every right to hate the world, but instead they find joy in life and still believe in the good of others as well as the power to make a difference.

The specifics of what creates resiliency is difficult to quantify. Research provides us clues, characteristics and life circumstances that increase someone's chances. However, the "grayness" of human nature makes it difficult to predict who in traumatic situations will thrive and who will struggle.

After deciding on forensics, one of my practicum placements involved treating juvenile delinquents in a residential program. Working with those youths was a world apart from the adults I confronted in integration rooms. The majority of them still possessed an innocent light underneath the rough edges brought on by abuse and neglect. No one but me knew how similar my past was to theirs, and as I listened to their stories, I wondered why my path was different. Why I was able to overcome everything that happened and succeed in school and career.

In the end, I recognized my own resiliency.

However, I have not felt resilient since walking into the room and seeing Felix; I've felt confused, out of control and broken. The last few days challenged my priorities because for the first time, the fear of being caught is equal to the fear of losing something else, or more importantly, someone else.

With moves straight out of Jane Austen, Edward and I have spent three years dancing around each other. Weaving in and out, drifting close then apart, always yearning for more. If not for Felix, we may have danced forever, the chaos making us finally stop to face each other. Only time will tell what the next song will bring.
I am not naïve enough to believe a relationship with Edward will solve everything. The danger of the Volturi will not fade away, and I'm sure my trust issues will cause conflicts. However, I can no longer allow myself to simply glide through life. The only way to bring this to an end is to confront my past.

Reflecting back on my time at the residential program, I realize regardless of resiliency, what those youth had the courage to work on that I haven't is closure. I've justified avoiding my feelings with needing to keep sharp, but the psychologist in me understands the memory of my mother is raw, not only because of the violent nature of her death, but because I haven't allowed myself to fully grieve it.

Telling my story is probably the most important step I've taken towards healing. Maybe it is finally my chance to find closure, to live and not just survive, and hopefully after hearing the darkest parts of my life, Edward will still want to live it with me.

Finally done with my story, I break from my detached state and focus back on the present. My cheeks are wet with tears I didn't realize were falling, my body shaking from the anxiety of revealing things long-buried.

Edward is still beside me but is no longer holding my hand. His ragged breath is the only sound in the room, his head is down and fists clenched. Suddenly he stands. I watch closely trying to ascertain what his reaction means, feeling, now more than ever, the deficiency of not being able to read him.

I pause before looking at Jasper and Emmett, not sure what I am more afraid of seeing; disgust or pity. Emmett also sits with his head down, anger and hatred swirling around him. Sensing my stare, his head slowly rises and our eyes meet. Shades of love and respect emerge as he walks over. Kneeling, he folds me into his arms.

"You are the strongest person I know," he whispers in my ear, knowing he doesn't need to say much. Pulling back, he softly kisses my forehead before looking in my eyes again. "I love you like a sister, and no one messes with my sister. We got this, okay. You're not alone." He smiles a crooked smile before sitting next to me, putting an arm around my shoulder in support.

Edward is standing with his back to me, his shoulders hunched and back moving with each breath. I open my mouth to say his name when Emmett squeezes my shoulders and leans over.

"Give him a minute," he whispers. Emmett and Edward have worked together in the field for a long time, so I trust his judgment and knowledge of Edward's moods, but it doesn't stop my heart from pounding faster.

Jasper sits stiffly in the chair holding his hands together in a tight fist. He is also radiating anger, but with undertones of sympathy and regret. Looking in the distance, hues of determination temper the anger as his hand comes up to pull on his chin. His reaction makes me nervous; he is plotting. I don't like it.

Edward starts pacing back and forth, his hands still clenched. His silence is nerve-racking. I am not sure if it is the story or me that is the most disturbing for him. "How does James fit into all of this?" Edward asks in a low tone breaking the silence.

His question takes me off guard as I realize I didn't specifically talk about James. Edward is the only one who knows it is not just the files that triggered my reaction last night. He saw my fear of James' impending arrival in the guest room.
Still unsure of Edward's state of mind and feeling lost by his lack of eye contact, I answer hesitantly. "Umm, James was one of the guards who liked to torment me with verbal threats and suggestions. He is calculating with his prey, but a loose cannon with his obsessions. If James finds out my location, he will make a game of it." My body shakes harder causing Emmett to pull me close. I can't let James find me.

Edward simply nods his head before walking over to Carlisle's desk where he puts both hands down and drops his head. After several painful seconds of awkward silence, his body jerks upward, his arms pushing everything off the desk with a loud crash. I jump in surprise while Emmett leaps up to calm Edward down who is now looking wildly around the room.

"Edward, man what the hell are you doing?" Emmett roughly grabs his arm before he can do more damage.

"We're going to kill the fucker," Edward yells. "I don't care what we have to do, he is a dead man. And then James is next. I am going to send his fucking ass straight to hell!"

"Edward, I get that you're angry, but you need to calm down. This is not about you, it's about Bella. Tone it down before you freak her out," Emmett states sternly.

"Shit," Edward murmurs finally looking at me, his eyes filled with pain. "I'm sorry." Edward walks over, and like Emmett, kneels down in front of me.

"Jesus, what you've been through…" Grabbing both of my hands in a vow, he continues. "I swear we are going to make them all pay." Suddenly I am in his arms as he whispers promises to keep me safe.

Sinking into his warmth, my body finally stops shaking. We sit quietly for several minutes, both taking comfort in gentle touches before he pulls back. Sitting next to me, he takes deep breaths trying to reign in his anger, our hands tangling in a now familiar gesture of reassurance. Looking at our hands for courage, I force myself to verbalize my fears instead of hiding behind the security of emotional barriers.

"I don't want revenge, but I can't go back there. I'm afraid of losing everything I have in Seattle… I'm afraid of losing you." I feel Edward's body shift, his free hand softly angling my chin up until I look into his eyes.

"Hey, you can't get rid of me that easily," he states with conviction. "I will never let you go back. Whatever it takes, I promise."

"So, what do we do now?" Emmett asks, posing the million-dollar question.

"We take them down," Jasper finally speaks, looking toward our trio with resolve. I laugh at his arrogant nature.

"You think it's that easy? Specialized task forces haven't touched Aro after decades of working his case. You think you can do better after monitoring the Volturi for what, a few months?" I scoff.

"Yes, I think we can do better, because we have you."

"Jasper," Edward warns.

"No! She has inside information on these people, their weaknesses and habits. She's our best hope at catching them," he explains.
Jasper is an enigma. We clash at every turn and the emotions he triggers blurs my ability to clearly read him. I don't sense ill intent, but there is more to Jasper than meets the eye. I know the Cullens love him, so he isn't a bad guy, but I'm struggling to understand his angle with me.

Blocking my own feelings in an attempt to stay neutral, I take a closer look at the colors swirling around him. I can see Jasper is a man with little tolerance for injustice. The need to protect those under his guard whether his family or his country is the core of his values, and it shines through his interactions.

Unfortunately, his obsession with the Volturi is narrowing his vision. If he's not careful, his thirst for justice will lead to mistakes and mistakes when hunting the Volturi only leads to death. Protecting those around us is a common trait we share, but I believe his plan can only harm those around me, leaving Jasper and I at an impasse.

"Look, I agreed to tell you my history because my outburst last night left me little choice, but I'm not on board with being your secret weapon."

"Don't you think your mother deserves justice?" He looks at me pointedly.

"Jasper!" Emmett and Edward yell together.

Jasper is unknowingly proving my hypothesis. His desire is making him stupid, and he is close to experiencing a natural consequence for his idiotic comments, my fist unconsciously twitching in response to his question. Pulling my hand from Edward's, I stand up and walk towards Jasper. Seeing my approach, he stands as well, placing his hands on his hips.

"I think my mom would want me alive," I respond curtly. Jasper knows nothing about my mom or the justice I wish I could give her.

"Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you?" Edward moves to stand in front of me glaring in Jasper's direction.

"Someone in this room needs to keep their objectivity. I get that Bella is important to you guys, but James is on his way and there's a mole in your office. We don't have the time or luxury to sit around and wait for them to make their move. We need to strike first!" Jasper yells in response.

"I know better than anyone what it takes to survive the Volturi, and it does not involve capturing Aro. His connections will always keep him one step ahead. Aro believes everyone has a weakness, and he uses that philosophy to his full advantage," I yell back, frustrated by his tone.

Jasper continues to push all of my buttons. I can't help myself from reacting even though I understand the motivation behind his words.

"What other choice do you have, Bella?" he challenges.

"I have choices!" I insolently shout, moving to the side of Edward to fully face Jasper.

"Like running?" I nod my head, sticking my chin up in defiance. "Seems to me if you were going to run, you would have done it already. You've had three days, why are you still here?"

I automatically glance in Edward's direction, a silent response to his posed question. Edward is watching me closely.

"That's what I thought," Jasper responds. "Listen, I know you think I'm an asshole, but the only way this doesn't blow up is if someone thinks about things rationally."
"Okay, Jasper. What are you thinking?" Emmett asks. I cut my eyes to him. "I think we need to hear him out. He's right about needing a plan, Bells."

Conceding for the moment, I walk over to lean against the desk. Crossing my arms, I wait to hear what Jasper has to say.

"I think we start with James," he declares looking at me. "He wasn't second in command when you were there, right? Why did Aro pick him? Was he the next in line?"

Three sets of eyes look towards me for a response. I decide to play along, but Jasper needs to accept that I'm not committing myself to his plan.

"Honestly, I don't know. Demetri was the most logical choice, but who knows who Aro turned on after Caius' betrayal."

"James wasn't close to Aro?" Emmett jumps in switching to an investigative tone.

"Aro appreciates the love James has for the job. He liked to play off James' stalking nature to increase the fear in his targets, but James' desire to hunt is also his biggest weakness. Like I said, he's calculating, but loses sight of the big picture when he becomes obsessed. Aro would need to keep him on a short leash to make sure he stayed focused on the right things."

"See, that right there," Jasper interrupts. "That knowledge is invaluable because according to our intel, James is arriving solo. If he is easily distracted, we could use it to our advantage. Maybe we can use his obsession against him if we…"

"Don't even think about it," Edward interrupts, coming over to stand next to me. "Bella is not going to play the role of bait," he says in a deadly tone. As he moves closer, his hand reaches behind softly resting across the small of my back. His touch grounds me.

"Whoa, Edward. I wasn't going there, I swear." Jasper holds up his hands in defense. "I heard the story same as everyone else, but she can still feed us information about his preferences."

I ponder Jasper's plan. "It won't work to start with James," I jump in unable to stop myself. "You have to start with the mole. As long as they are feeding information to the Volturi, you won't get ahead of Aro."

"She's right," Edward says, continuing to show his support through subtle touches.

"Okay then, how do we smoke out the mole?" Emmett questions.

"Umm, I kind of started working on that," I say hesitantly.

"What? Lucy you've got some splaining to do." Speaking in a dreadful fake accent, Emmett turns towards me with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh yeah, 007 here decided to find the mole herself," Edward responds sarcastically, still not happy about the risk I was willing to take. Emmett looks at me shaded in frustration while Jasper is shaded in approval.

"And yet you keep saying you aren't going to get involved." Jasper smirks, his support irritating me.

"I was trying to contain the situation. I had no grandiose thoughts of taking down the Volturi. Sorry to disappoint, but my goal is to avoid, not engage," I sneer back. Jasper thinks he understands, but
has no clue about my intentions.

"Okay sports fans, focus on the ball here," Emmett says interrupting our stare down. "Bella, how far did you get?"

"Not far, just started a list of everyone involved with Felix's case."

"Who's in the lead for the number one spot?" Emmett asks.

Edward observes us with curious eyes. We did not get the chance to discuss any details in the guest room. I know he's also interested to learn the possible list of suspects.

"Bree Tanner, the director, and Ben Cheney were the strongest candidates."

"Director Banner? Really?" Emmett reacts. "The guy is the most 'by the book' agent I've ever come across. I don't see him working with the Volturi."

"But you've got to admit, Banner took a huge interest in this case," Edward points out. Emmett nods in agreement.

"True, but it doesn't feel like a good fit," Emmett argues.

"What about the other two candidates?" Jasper asks. His interest is also piqued by the knowledge of possible suspects.

"Umm the director hand-picked Bree and she signed for the note. If he is dirty, she could be his errand girl and Ben because he was recently sanctioned for a DUI. I guess he has issues with gambling too, which makes him easy prey for the Volturi if they are looking to turn someone."

"Ben? I've worked with Cheney for seven years. He's a good guy. I don't… wait, how do you know about the DUI?" Emmett questions.

Shit.

"Um, I hacked into their personnel files yesterday," I admit quietly. Edward turns looking at me in astonishment.

"What are you talking about?" He moves in front of me, bending slightly to stare in my eyes as he waits for my answer.

"Before I left, Caius gave me a flash-drive to hack into computer passwords. If I connect it to a network computer, it allows access to all the files in that system. I, um, used it yesterday to download their files and delete mine," I mumble.

"That's brilliant!" Jasper exclaims, and then focusing on Edward, says, "I think I'm beginning to like this girl."

Stopping myself from childishly sticking out my tongue, I settle for rolling my eyes instead. Jasper shines with enthusiasm, again misperceiving my actions as a sign I want to help more than I'm willing to admit. He continues to bring out my argumentative side, and I find myself wanting to challenge him based solely on principle even though I see his negative judgments of me decreasing.

"What else did you find?" Edward asks, focusing the conversation back to the matter at hand.

"Not much, I was still going over the files when Seth interrupted me."
"Whose Seth?" Emmett asks.

Fuck, what happened to my filter?

"We should tell them," Edward states, his hand moving so he can loop his pinky with mine. I wonder if he also feels more secure when we are physically connected.

Clearing my throat, I look into the inquisitive eyes of Emmett and Jasper. "Yesterday a guy named Seth hacked into my computer. He claims to know who I am and wants me to help him to bring down Aro."

"Okay, can someone create me a flow chart? Just how many fucking people are after you, Bells?" Emmett inquires, holding up his hand to count as he continues.

"We have Aro, your twisted father, stalker James, and now Seth who can expose you completely. Oh, and let's not forget the mole who may or may not know who you are…did I miss anybody? Christ, what do you make of this Seth dude?" he asks irritated, but summing up nicely the cast of characters I've tracked the last few days. Welcome to my crazy world.

"He's strange. He doesn't seem like a Volturi player, but it's not like we talked for a long time. He could be telling the truth, or he could be working for James. I don't know."

"You need to get out of Seattle," Jasper blurts out. I looked over seeing determination around him. Edward tenses beside me, his grip on my pinky tightening.

"Having your identity exposed changes everything. With all the recent activity, and James' arrival, Seattle looks like ground zero for the Volturi takeover. It is only a matter of time before Aro shows his face. We can't keep you hidden if there is an unknown factor. At this point, I think it's safer if you leave," Jasper justifies.

I shiver at the mention of Aro's arrival causing Edward to release my finger and put his arm around my shoulder holding me close.

"I thought you wanted my help. Now all of a sudden you want me gone?" I ask incredulously.

Jasper is certainly keeping me on my toes. Part of me is happy that he is switching focus from my immediate involvement, but I am not pleased about the suggestion to leave. I know his reasoning is sound because it's the same argument I've had with myself for the past three days. However, that was before Edward and I talked. Logic does not take away the ache in my heart when I think about leaving.

"Don't misunderstand, I still want your help, but your knowledge is too valuable. The first rule in the CIA is to protect your assets. It's too hot here for you to stay."

"She is not a fucking asset!" Edward growls besides me. "She's my…she's not an asset. Don't talk about her like she's an object." I appreciate Edward's support, but his censorship makes me curious about the intended end to his sentence. The possibilities excite and unnerve me at the same time.

"Jasper's right," Emmett says weighing in on the conversation for first time. "We can't run the risk of exposing you. Edward, look at it rationally man, this is the safest plan for Bella." He stares at Edward hoping for his agreement.

The back and forth of trying to figure out the best thing to do since this whole mess started is mentally exhausting. Once I decide to move in a certain direction, everything changes forcing me to move in the other. Finally deciding to stay gave me a sense of peace even with all the unknowns.
Now, I will most likely have to change my plans yet again.

Edward appears deep in thought, the room silent as everyone waits for him to comment on my fate in Seattle. "It's hard to argue with your logic. Leaving Seattle is probably the safest solution," Edward replies. "I can take her somewhere-

"No," Jasper interrupts. "If you leave too, it will cause undue attention to yourself. We need both you and Emmett in that office to smoke out the mole."

"I'm not leaving her," Edward snarls.

Jasper pauses, gathering his thoughts. I can see his mind working on a plan; the question remains whether I will accept it. "Just let me explain what I'm thinking." Jasper looks back at me. "Okay, I get your position, but I imagine you also want to stop running. That you want something more than the life you have now."

I glance once again at Edward knowing that anything we have or will have will be short-lived if I am constantly running from the Volturi. "Yes," I say slowly, knowing Jasper will use this to argue his point. However, I find myself unable to lie with Edward standing so close.

"The only solution is to take down the Volturi." I shake my head in disagreement, but before I can verbally respond, he continues. "Your argument for avoiding them doesn't work anymore, not if someone found you. Your safety is already compromised. Unless you're willing to go into hiding and leave everyone behind, there is no other option. Just let me finish," he states quickly, seeing the panic in my eyes.

"All you need to do is give the three of us information. We can coordinate any arrests or interviews with our agencies. No one will know you are behind the scenes. We will keep you hidden, I promise. If we are successful, and I believe we will be, you can finally be free of this nightmare."

"That actually makes sense, Bells," Emmett agrees, now aligning with Jasper.

"We need to get you out first. This is the perfect time for you to leave on vacation. People will easily believe you needed to get away given the assault," Jasper continues.

Edward is quiet, taking in what Jasper is proposing. Logically I know what Jasper says makes sense, however, everything inside instinctively screams to stay as far away as possible from Aro.

"Her safety comes first," Edward finally speaks. "I don't care if we are on the verge of making everything happen. If Bella becomes at risk, we're out." He looks straight at Jasper making sure his feelings are known. "But, you're right. This may be the only way to keep her safe in the long run. Bella, what do you think?" he asks turning to face me.

"It won't be easy. Aro garners extreme loyalty from those who work for him," I state, actually finding myself contemplating the plan.

"But is it loyalty or fear? You would know whether they are loyal because of their dedication to the Volturi, or their fear of Aro's wrath." Edward subtlety points to his head.

"Yes, many follow out of fear, but it doesn't change the result. Aro always finds out," I retort knowing that those who betrayed my mom did so out of fear not loyalty.

"But no one before had the inside information to target the right people with the right incentives," Jasper jumps in. "You said it before, everyone has a weakness. We need to use that same principle to undo what Aro has built."
"You are the only one who can do that, Bella," Edward whispers. "You deserve more than living life always looking over your shoulder. This is the only way to bring it to an end."

"An end," I whisper.

The end is something I've rarely allowed myself to hope for, but looking at Edward gives me the courage to fight back. Jasper is right. I'm running out of options with Seth knowing who I am, and I don't have the strength to run away and never look back anymore.

Edward's support of the plan forces me to look beyond my instinct to argue with Jasper. Whether I want to admit it or not, he makes a good point. In my haste to avoid Aro, I find myself arguing two opposing points to the same dilemma. Stepping back from my singular focus to really look at the situation, I realize it is stupid to believe I can build something with Edward and avoid Aro at the same time.

If I am truly going to find closure, I need to take a stand. I need to face the monster and put an end to this once and for all. Jasper is also correct about my inside information. I can do a lot of damage to Aro from a distance. Hell, it's not too different then when I messed with his employees to make his day difficult. He's built an empire brick by brick, but we can take it down the same way. It's time for Aro to stop controlling my life. It's time for me to live and not just survive.

There is only one other imperative issue to discuss before I agree. My freedom and future is one part, but the safety of the others in this room is another. My agreeing to this plan will also bring everyone else into the thick of this battle, and I can't let them get hurt because of me.

"I want to make it clear that your safety is just as important as mine. I can't cause anyone else's death, I couldn't take it. Especially..." I choke on the words looking at Edward. My freedom cannot come at the cost of his life, it just can't.

"Bella," Edward whispers, leaning forward to lightly kiss my lips. "Nothing's going to happen to me. Trust me, I have too much to live for and am too stubborn to die." He winks and smiles softly in reassurance.

"Bells, we totally got this! Mr. big bad gangster won't know what hit him. In fact, I'm kind of insulted you would even think he could beat us. I mean seriously, have you seen me?" Emmett asks flexing his muscles. I smile at his vivacity. He always knows exactly how to lift my spirits.

"Bella, whether you get involved or not doesn't change the fact that they are coming to Seattle. It doesn't change that Edward is in charge of Felix's case. We will be interacting with the Volturi whether you want us to or not. The reality is you are the only one who can protect us. Your involvement prevents us from getting blind sighted by their games. Your knowledge allows us to stay one step ahead. Without that, we are in more danger," Jasper responds rationally.

The longer I'm in the room with Jasper, the better I understand his intentions. Fueled by the assumption he only sees me as a promotion, my frustration filtered my ability to acknowledge he also wants the best outcome for everyone. In the midst of my fear of being caught, habits of avoidance and concern for Edward, I discounted the positive side of my involvement.

I've evaluated all of my interactions with Aro through my experiences of living under his thumb, instead of realizing that being out of his control means, for the first time, I have the advantage. A sudden sense of empowerment fills me, recognizing the difference between now and the other times I tried to fight him.

"I'm in," I quietly agree, the choke of Aro's hold falling away with my agreement. Edward squeezes
my shoulder in approval while Jasper's excitement fills the room. "What's the next step?"

"I think we need to grab Seth before we do anything else," Emmett says. "The mole is important, but Seth knows your identity."

"I agree," Jasper says. "How do you get a hold of this guy?"

"I don't, he says he will get a hold of me. He seemed anxious, so I assume he will contact me soon."

"Okay, then I think we need to get you out first. We can watch your computer for contact and interface with him as you to set up a meeting to grab him."

"I don't think that will work. The last time, he wanted to talk. He's pretty savvy with computers, so I wouldn't try to outwit him in the IT world," I retort.

"Fine. We can figure out a way to keep you connected until he contacts you, but you can do that from anywhere. All you need to do is schedule a meeting," Jasper counters.

"And then what? We can't take him back to either agency without exposing Bella," Edward points out.

"Shit, your right." Jasper pauses, pondering the situation. "We can take him to my building. The top floors are perfect to hide him and are not scheduled for any construction for several more weeks. There is a back stairway we can take him up, and since the construction workers are the only ones entering the building, we can monitor the traffic easier."

"That's a good plan. We can stash him there until we figure out if he works with the Volturi," Emmett agrees, both he and Jasper expressing enthusiasm as the plan comes together.

For many agents, even the most dangerous situations cause an adrenaline rush. It is part of their survival skills and what drives them to pursue the career in the first place. It is my hope that I can borrow some of those skills as we move forward.

"No, I have to meet him," I say quickly.

"No way, Bella! It's too dangerous," Edward shouts, stunned by my request.

"Edward, I have to see him," I say with a pointed look.

The only way I will feel secure about Seth is if I read him. The boys can question him all they want, but emotions don't lie. Edward's eyes widen as he realizes my unspoken request.

"Fuck," he hisses too quietly for the others to hear. Searching my eyes for a moment, he reluctantly agrees. "Bella needs to meet him."

"What?" Jasper asks, incensed by a request that goes against everything else I've argued this afternoon.

"Seriously, Edward, what…” Emmett starts asking before I turn towards him with the same look. "Oh…oh shit. They're right, Bella needs to meet with Seth."

"Okay, I'm missing something here. Someone gonna fill me in?” Jasper requests, colored in frustration and standing with his hands on his hips.

"Bella's intuition into the criminal mind is why she's so valuable in our interrogations. Between that
skill and her knowledge of the Volturi, her opinion is crucial to determining if Seth is working with them," Edward lies easily. Only his eyes give away how disturbed he is about my face off with Seth.

"So what, now we just wait for this guy to contact Bella?" Emmett asks.

"Yes and no. We have about a week before James arrives. We still need to get Bella out of Seattle and that will take some planning. There is plenty to do while waiting for Seth. Bella needs to leave before James arrives. If Seth doesn't make contact by then, we need to move forward and get her out." Jasper again keeps us on a logical track. He might not fully understand why I am meeting Seth, but I agree I need to leave Seattle before the week is up.

"Agreed," Edward says, looking toward me.

"Agreed," I respond back.

After consenting to bring Aro down; plans come together quickly to get me out of Seattle. Although Jasper suggests that I go to Alaska and stay at a safe house he has set up for other CIA informants, I choose to stick with my own last-resort hideout.

Years ago, I purchased a small lake house in Montana under a different identity. I've visited briefly throughout the years to establish myself in the small town. According to the people there, I am a writer who seeks solace at the lake house when I am experiencing writer's block. The benefit of a small town is that they tend to protect their own and pay close attention to strangers. Establishing myself as a resident means that if anyone starts snooping around, I will hear about it through small town chatter.

In order to put Edward and Emmett's mind at ease, we look at the house on Google maps. They want to evaluate the security potential of the property. Feeling the stress of the day, I stand to stretch while they discuss the access roads. Glancing at my watch, I am shocked to realize it is already seven in the evening. We have been at this for over six hours, and the boys seem intent to keep going.

An unexpected knock at the door breaks through everyone's concentration, the boys look up from the computer. Alice slowly opens the door and steps in unsure of whether she is welcome.

"Hey, are you guys' hungry? We were wondering what we should do for dinner?"

"Holy balls! Is that really the time? No wonder I feel like my stomach is eating itself. Yes, sustenance is a must," Emmett says patting his stomach.

"Let's just order pizza. We still have a lot of work to do," Edward says, focusing back on the computer. Out of everyone, he is the most concerned about my future location, knowing that I will be alone.

"Okay, I'll order it." Alice smiles and then winks in Jasper's direction. Their love for each other is obvious and shines above anything else when they are together. "Bella, I brought your phone. It's beeping, so I thought you may want it," she says handing it to me.

I haven't looked at it since last night, although anyone who would try to get a hold of me is actually here. The group is finalizing the pizza order while I look at my phone noticing several text messages from an unknown number. As soon as I open the messages, my heart starts pounding.

"Hey guys," I blurt out getting everyone's attention. "Seth is trying to contact me." I hold up my phone showing the handful of texts asking where I am. Just then another text comes through
stating it is imperative we talk as soon as possible.

"What should I do?" I ask with wide eyes. I may have insisted on meeting with Seth, but that doesn't mean I'm not terrified of doing it.

"Set up a meeting," Jasper says coming around to stand closer. "Have him meet you at the Starbucks on 1st and Pike."

As Jasper talks, I type an apology for not responding and then the suggestion to meet. Silence fills the room as we wait for a responding ping. Time seems to stand still as I stare at the phone. After several seconds his response appears.

"10 a.m. tomorrow," I read the text.

"Better get extra pizza, darling. We've got a long night of planning ahead to prepare for this meeting," Jasper says to Alice clapping his hands and pulling out a notebook.

Staring at the message, I feel Edward walk up behind me. Slowly putting his arms around me, he reaches for the phone prying it out of my hand, my knuckles turning white under the pressure of holding it tightly. Spinning me around, Edward pulls me into a tight hug, rubbing his hand up and down my back in a soothing motion.

"I won't let anything happen to you. This is going to work," he whispers, knowing I need reassurance that I'm making the right choice by meeting with him. I nod my head against his chest in acknowledgement.

He leans over again to kiss my head before pulling away and walking over to Jasper and Emmett who are now looking at the map of the Starbucks location.

"Game on," I mutter to myself. There is no turning back now. Tomorrow it starts.
Chapter 14: How We Operate

Chapter Notes

A/N:
Stephanie Meyer owns the rights to Twilight and everything associated with it.

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex and Tds88!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13: How We Operate

As the early morning hours roll around, Jasper concludes we've done everything possible to prepare for today. Wearily, we go our separate ways to catch a few hours of sleep before the meeting with Seth. Edward insists we stay at Esme and Carlisle's house, so after saying goodbye to Emmett, he takes my hand and leads me to the guest room I woke up in this morning.

Exhausted, I stumble along behind him with jelly legs, concentrating on each step to avoid embarrassing myself as we saunter up the stairs. Walking into the guest room, I eye the bed longingly, but as soon as I hear the door click shut, I find myself encased in Edward's arms, my legs dangling as he holds me tightly.

"Mmmm, I've wanted to do that for hours," he whispers, his words softly moving strands of my hair. I breathe in his scent and wrap my arms around him; he embodies warmth and safety. Putting me down, he grabs my hand and walks over to the bed.

"Come here," he mumbles. Settling himself on the bed, he pulls me with him until I am lying with my head on his chest.

My whole body exhales and my jumbled mind calms as I focus on the peaceful moment. Right now it is only Edward and I. There are no complications or danger, there is just us. We breathe together in silence for several moments before Edward speaks.

"Favorite song, go," he says with surprising enthusiasm given our lack of sleep.

"What?" I ask confused.

"I'm too wired to sleep and I really want to talk to you." He lightly kisses my head and softly runs his hand down my arm that is currently draped across his body.

"Really?" His declaration pulls me from the depths of exhaustion, butterflies filling my stomach. We've exposed our histories to each other, but we've not had time to just be Edward and Bella.

"Yes, really. In the middle of all this craziness, something great happened; you and me. I feel like we haven't savored it. I've waited a long time for you, and despite everything that's going on, we deserve this moment. We deserve to just be us," he whispers, verbalizing my earlier thought.

"Um, I don't really have a favorite song," I admit.
Gently shifting me over, he turns on his side to face me. "What? How can you not have a favorite song? Don't you like music?" he asks skeptically.

Turning to mimic his position and curling my hand under my head, I continue. "Oh, I love music, that's the problem. I have an incredibly eclectic taste when it comes to music. My favorites tend to shift with my mood so it's impossible to narrow it down to just one."

"Interesting. Should I be afraid of your iPod?"

"Depends on what scares you. My iPod is an exercise in OCD." I laugh at his dumbfounded expression. "I'm a bit neurotic about my playlists. I organize songs by years, cities they remind me of, and most importantly, moods. I basically have a playlist for almost every event in my life. It's kind of pathetic actually. How about you?" I ask.

While I explain my answer, Edward smiles widely with a look difficult to describe, but it causes me to feel warm inside. He reaches over to push my hair behind my ear contemplating my question.

"Ah well like you, Swan, I have a range of tastes, but I do not organize my songs. I either listen to whole albums at a time or put the whole damn thing on shuffle and take it as it comes. But I would say my favorite is Hallelujah, the Jeff Buckley version. It's just so raw, it speaks to me I guess." As I return his smile, the room fills with a comfortable silence, both of us absorbing the sight of the other.

"Okay," he says once again breaking the silence. "Favorite memory with your mom?" My body stiffens slightly.

"It helps," he whispers, answering my unspoken question about why he is taking the conversation in this direction.

Staring into Edward's eyes, I consider his own history. We both understand loss and Edward is offering me another step towards healing.

"When I was five, during a particularly rainy week, my Mom decided to try to chase the clouds away by painting our entire living room. We turned it into a sunflower field with a blue sky and a yellow sun. It took us all weekend to finish it. She let me paint a bunch of the flowers which I am sure were a big old mess. I just remember her smile while she was painting, she seemed so happy. It was a great couple of days." The memory brings a smile to my face.

"Your mom loved you a lot," Edward whispers. "So you got to live in your own personal sunflower field?"

"Um no. When I came home from school the following Monday, it was back to normal. I assume Aro made her change it. I shudder to think about what he did to her as punishment," I murmur, the smile falling.

"Don't do that, baby. Don't let him take the good memories too. Hold onto that great day. That's what your mom would want you to remember. She did it for you, and you loved it. That's what mattered to her."

I nod my head knowing he is right. My mom loved me and no one, not even Aro, can take that away. We lay quietly for several more minutes before Edward continues with his questions.

"Ideal date?" Edward asks, switching topics to a lighter subject.

"Why, Cullen, are you going to ask me out on a date?" I infer from his posed question, butterflies
erupting again at the thought.

"Hey, I didn't say anything about asking you on a date. I'm simply gathering information, learning about the beautiful woman in front of me." I look down embarrassed, my skin heated by his unabashed compliment.

Clearing my throat to focus, I answer. "Um, I'm really a low-maintenance girl. I think the perfect date is lying on a blanket and watching the stars, maybe sharing a bottle of wine."

"Seriously?" Edward asks, looking off into the distance seemingly lost in thought. Suddenly, he jumps out of the bed and moves towards the door.

"Where are you going?" I question while sitting up, confused by his unexpected movement.

"Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back," he says with a giddy tone. There is a sparkle in his eye as he runs out of the door with a wide smile.

After he leaves, I fall back against the pillow, unable to contain my own smile. I close my eyes and pray this is real, that I won't wake up and have this moment taken. I gently shake my head reflecting on the day. I've filled more events and extreme emotions into these past several days then some people experience in a lifetime. I guess I can't say my life is boring.

Several minutes pass before Edward rushes back in carrying what looks like a globe.

"I can't believe I still have this and it works too!" he says excitedly.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, completely confused but amused by his childlike enthusiasm.

"Well, given the hour, sharing wine is probably not advisable, but stars I can do." He winks, plugging in the device and turning off the lights. Immediately, thousands of tiny stars illuminate the walls and ceiling.

"Oh my god!" I am stunned at the sight. Coming back to bed, Edward pulls me into the position we started in, my head nestled close to his heart.

"I use to have a fascination with astronomy. The last Christmas I had with my parents, they bought me this star globe with all the constellations. They wanted me to have access to the stars even on cloudy days, which in Seattle, as you know, occur a lot." He laughs quietly, the love for his parents obvious in his reminiscent tone.

"That's really sweet," I whisper.

"Yeah, my parents were great. I probably kept it because it's one of their last gifts to me. Although my Mom would probably not approve of me using it to seduce this woman I really like," he whispers, leaning down to kiss my head.

"Is that what you're doing? Seducing me?" I question, feigning shock but scooting closer.

"Do you want me to seduce you?" he counters, deflecting his response.

"I don't know, maybe," I whisper coyly, stretching up a bit more.

In an instant, our mouths collide, waves of overwhelming sensations engulf me, our limbs tangling. There is a power in Edward's touch that is indescribable comforting and exhilarating all at the same time. His lips move across my face and down my neck, lighting up my body when he touches a
particularly sensitive spot. Rolling until he is over me, I sink into the bed feeling the pressure of his body pushing into mine. His hands tangle in my hair, soft moans filling the air. I am flying.

Minutes pass in heated exploration before Edward pulls back breathing heavy and lightly places his forehead against mine.

"Baby, we need to slow down. This was not my intention tonight." His eyes close, kissing me lightly once more before shifting and again pulling me over to our original position.

Although surprised by the aggressive nature of our behavior, I hesitate to respond, wanting to hear his explanation for stopping first, my anxiety peaking at the possible rejection. Sudden silence fills the room, and I can almost hear him thinking about his next statement.

"I've thought of being with you a million times, and now to have you here, you can't know how much this means to me. The reality is so much better." He smiles, looking at me with that same indescribable look. I breathe easier knowing he feels it too.

"But, I want to do this right. You deserve more than a rushed night after an incredibly emotional day in my Aunt and Uncle's house no less. I want time to show you how important you are to me. Most importantly, I don't want it be a goodbye." He chokes on the last words, reality crashing our peaceful moment.

Tears fill my eyes, and it's hard to know if it is the heartfelt nature of his words or the cold reality of leaving Seattle that is causing them. He is right, this is too important to rush. Logically I know both of us have baggage to navigate and overcome if we want this relationship to survive. I don't want temporary with Edward. Unlike before, the lingering silence is awkward as we both lie still, lost in thought.

"I should probably let you get ready for bed. Esme left some clothes and other essentials in the bathroom for you," Edward says. I glance towards the bathroom. Changing out of these clothes does sound incredibly good. Sitting up, I move to get off of the bed at the same time Edward does.

I watch him with questioning eyes as he moves once again towards the door. "I have some extra clothes in my old bedroom, so I am just going to go and-"

"Will you come back?" I ask quietly, not sure if I can stomach being alone right now. He looks at me with a crooked smile.

"Where else would I go? Get ready for bed, and I'll be back before you know it." I smile in relief as I watch him leave.

After freshening up and changing into pajamas, I lay back down in the bed looking around the room, the stars still glowing. A few minutes pass before I hear the soft click of the door opening and closing. Edward shuffles in wearing basketball shorts and a t-shirt. It is amazing how good he looks in such simple clothes. My heart rate increases at the sight, especially knowing he's here with me.

Pulling back the covers on the other side of the bed, Edward slips in, our bodies naturally drawn together, my back snuggled into his chest and his arms secured around me.

"Where were we?" he softly questions. "Favorite movie, go."

We go back and forth for several more minutes, sharing interesting facts and stories in the soft glow of the room until my eyes, heavy with exhaustion, refuse to stay open.
I slowly stir, taking a moment to gather my bearings. Something woke me up, but I'm not sure what. I'm incredibly warm with Edward still wrapped around me and sleeping soundly. *What time is it?* I wonder, locating the clock by the bed. My body is fighting my attempt to wake up, still exhausted by too little sleep and too much stress. I hear a loud knocking at the door.

"Come on you two, wakey wakey!" Emmett bellows. "Everyone decent?" He laughs at his own question. Moving out from under Edward, I stagger to the door.

"What the hell, Emmett, it's only seven!" I grumble, annoyed.

"Well, good morning, sunshine! Come on, Jasper wants to go over some things before we meet Seth, so let's go. Up and at em'!" he says.

Looking over my shoulder, he suddenly rushes past me and jumps on Edward, reminding me of two kids at summer camp. I try to control my laughter as I watch Edward spring up disoriented.

"Fuck, Emmett, what the hell!" Edward moves to push him, but Emmett jumps out of the bed before he can make contact. Edward settles on flipping him off instead.

"Come on, lover boy, let's go. Lots to do!" Emmett says as Edward gets out of bed and stretches. Walking towards me, he pulls me into a hug.

"This is not how I hoped to wake up this morning," he whispers in my ear before pulling back just enough to give me a chaste kiss. "I better get ready. Esme found you some clothes for today, right?"

"Yes, thank goodness. I don't think anyone would want me around if I had to put on my clothes from yesterday again…shut it!" I say quickly to Emmett as he starts to open his mouth to add his own comment about my lack of hygiene.

"I don't know if that's true." Edward winks.

"Oh Jesus, is this what I have to look forward to? I take back every good thought about the two of you getting together. You guys don't mind gagging noises right? 'Cause I may do a lot of that now," Emmett says sarcastically, but his wide smile and bright colors reveal how he truly feels. Emmett is, first and foremost, a loyal and supportive friend.

"Ha ha, okay everyone out so I can get ready." I giggle as I watch Edward and Emmett playfully shove each other down the hallway. Turning, I walk to bathroom to take a long-awaited shower, which will hopefully wake me up.

The time flies quickly between breakfast, last-minute discussions and equipment checks. Like yesterday, everyone kept to a silent agreement to not discuss the case at breakfast, treating me once again to the warmth of a loving family meal.

Carlisle and Esme are obviously supportive of the career track Edward took, but as the morning went on, it was clear neither had witnessed the preparation for a mission. Esme dealt with her anxiety with motherly gestures; making sure we had everything and asking if we wanted to take water or snacks with us. I couldn't help but imagine a 50's housewife sending her kids off to school, except instead of making sure we had our lunches, it was making sure we had our ammunition.

Driving toward Pike Place Market, I go over the plan in my head one more time. Although it is not complicated, it helps to ease my anxiety. Until I see Seth, it is hard to know exactly what I am walking into, so we are taking all the precautions possible.
Each of us is rigged with an earpiece to allow for constant communication. I am also equipped with a hidden camera, the video feed going directly to everyone's phones. This will allow Edward, Emmett and Jasper to watch the interaction with Seth, and through the ear piece, provide any thoughts or suggestions.

Edward made me promise to signal them if I sense any trouble, whether it is from Seth or someone else. He and Emmett know I plan to also assess those in the store for any sign of an accomplice or James' presence.

Edward is doing his best to hide his concern, but as the time draws nears, I catch him looking at me with worried glances. We may have faced dangerous individuals in the interrogation room more times than I can count, but this is the first time I have participated in an active mission. I know I've faced worse, but that does not calm my pounding heart.

The adrenaline pumping through my body has effectively fought off any tiredness I felt earlier. I take a breath, focusing my mind on the task at hand. This is game-mode time. I need to push all of my feelings away and focus on the target. I can't let anything distract me or blur my concentration.

Emmett also gave me some security before we left in the form of a gun. It is currently tucked safely in the waistband of my jeans under my shirt, and although I hope I won't need it, having it there gives me a sense of control. If the worst happens, and this is trap for James to grab me, he has one hell of a fight ahead of him because I won't go I know it, we are pulling into a parking garage located three blocks from Starbucks, the clock indicating it is 9:36.

It's game time.

Checking the microphones, ear pieces and camera one more time, everyone sets off as planned. Jasper will be located in the store with me, while Emmett and Edward will remain outside guarding the entrances. Since Seth hacked into the FBI systems and knows Felix's case, chances are he would spot them right away whereas Jasper is hopefully an unknown. Jasper also gave us pictures of James and some other key Seattle players to use to scan the crowd. However, everyone knows given the size of the Volturi Corporation, if someone is here doing their dirty work, we will most likely not know who it is until something happens. After the boys do a preliminary assessment of the scene and get situated, I will go in last.

I stand by the SUV nervously biting my nails waiting for the signal. As planned, Jasper enters the shop first, checking for familiar faces. Edward and Emmett successfully place themselves next, assessing the crowd around the building. I listen in as Jasper clears the shop and Edward and Emmett clear the street.

"It's go time, Bella." Jasper's disembodied voice comes through my ear. Walking briskly out of the garage, I turn left and move in the direction of the store. My senses are on heightened alert as I carefully watch everyone around me.

"I'm on your six, Bella," Emmett says.

"I thought you were already in place?" I mumble, trying not to cause attention to my lips in case Seth is watching.

"I scoped it out, but we didn't have a good feeling about you walking solo." I smile at his protectiveness. This part was heavily debated, but if Seth planned on watching for my approach, we didn't want him to know I wasn't alone. I guess they decided it was worth the risk.

I slow down as I approach the historical building. There are two doors into the Starbucks; the main
entrance and the side door leading to an outdoor patio. Edward is stationed across the street of the main door, near the entrance of Pike Place Market, whereas Emmett is across from the side entrance.

"There are three guys in the store who are alone," Jasper whispers as I turn the corner and open the door.

The familiar smell of coffee engulfs my senses. Calming indie music is playing in the background while employees bustle around. As usual the store is busy, animated discussions happening at various tables. At first glance, no one seems suspicious or out-of-place. I look around hoping to catch the signs of recognition in one of the solitary men.

A young man sitting in the back by the table closest to the side door grabs my attention. His thin framed body sits hunched over the table causing a wisp of his unkempt hair to fall into his eyes. He is folding and unfolding a napkin, his chair slightly shaking due to the constant bounce of his leg. Next to the chair sits a worn, black laptop bag covered in faded stickers and markings. However, it is a faded R in the front that catches my eye.

Reaper

As I move closer, the young man looks up to meet my eyes. His body lights up when he recognizes me. Anxiously, he stands up waiting for me to reach the table. The anxiety drains from my body as I watch him. Seth is harmless.

"Found him," I whisper, pretending to hold up my hand to cough. "I think it's okay." I'm hoping Emmett and Edward understand the significance of the statement.

"The one standing up? Jesus, he's a kid," Emmett comment. For a moment I'd forgotten about the camera. He's right; Seth can't be any older than nineteen.

"Keep your guard up, Bella. Don't take any chances," Edward warns.

"Isabella! You actually came," Seth says as I reach his table. He motions to the other chair for me to sit as we awkwardly stare at each other.

"I came," I state simply, wanting him to take the lead in the conversation.

I watch him pick up the napkin from earlier, folding and unfolding it again. He looks nervously around, his mouth busily chewing gum.

"I can't believe I'm sitting with Aro Volturi's long-lost daughter. If you only knew how many people are looking for you, and I beat all of them," he states, the hair standing up on my neck as he casually talks about the people after me.

"Keep sharp, Bella, I don't like the direction of this," Edward hisses. I understand his concern, but looking at Seth, I don't think his intentions match the tone of his words. Like our earlier conversation, he appears oblivious to how his words come across.

"I've wanted to talk to you since I saw you on that tape, but now that you're here…do you want something to drink?" he asks quickly.

"No, I'm okay."

"Did you know that New Yorkers drink almost seven times more coffee than any other city in the United States?" Seth blurts out suddenly.
"Um, no," I respond caught off guard by his question.

I focus on Seth's colors and behaviors. He's drenched in nervousness, but I also take note of several other things. He continually looks around the room, particularly at people, and when someone walks by him to go out the door, his anxiety peaks. His leg continues to bounce, but it is the napkin that grabs my clinical attention. There is a repetitive and obsessive nature to his anxious movements.

Fold 1,2,3,4,5.

Unfold 1,2,3,4,5.

He places the napkin on the table and smooths it out, his hands brushing over it, 1,2,3,4,5.

Then it starts all over again. Seth has a ritual.

"Legend has it a 9th-century Ethiopian goat herder discovered coffee by accident when he noticed how crazy the beans were making his goats," he adds in a manic fashion.

"Does the kid have the Wikipedia coffee page memorized? What is his deal?" Emmett asks.

"Hey, Seth, I'm nervous too," I say trying to get his attention.

I'm developing a better understanding of his behavior and strange speech patterns. He reminds me of the youths I use to work with; an innocent light surrounded by rough edges. An unexpected wave of protectiveness washes over me as I think about him trying to take on the Volturi. Seth is in way over his head, and we need to help him.

"You don't look like Aro. You must look like your mother," he blurts out again.

"That's probably the best compliment anyone could give me," I respond lightly, trying to help decrease his unease.

"Do you know humans and cabbage share between forty and fifty percent of common DNA?" Apparently Seth copes with his anxiety not only through rituals, but through logical facts.

"What the fuck?" Emmett questions.

I imagine Seth's comfort lies in tangible data. It is probably why he is so good with computers but finds social situations and emotions difficult. I need to help him focus if we are going to get anywhere in this discussion.

"Tell me about your moniker, Seth. Why Reaper?" Seth's face lights up as confidence shines through the anxiety.

"Because I categorically bring death to computer system firewalls. My area of expertise is breaking into the unbreakable." He proudly smiles at me.

"And that's how you hacked into my computer?"

"Oh, that was straightforward, but it was the best way to contact you on the down-low."

"Because you think we should work together to get Aro," I state, hoping to turn the conversation toward his connection to the Volturi.

"It's the most logical solution. I knew when I saw you that you could give me the information I
need to break through his systems. They are the most complicated ones I've tried to breach. Once I break those walls, I can create havoc. He won't know what hit him."

"Okay, I understand what you want to do, but I don't understand why you want to do it."

Seth suddenly looks down, sadness overcoming him. "He murdered my parents. I have to avenge them," he whispers, and for the first time anger colors the conversation and his tone.

"What happened to your parents, Seth?" I find myself using my psychologist's voice; calm and collected, gently probing him in the right direction to share information.

"Um, my dad owned a security company in Italy. His specialty was developing security systems for corporations. He was a genius and developed some unique programs. Aro wanted to use what he developed to take over companies, but my dad refused to work with him." He pauses for a moment.

Fold, unfold, smooth, 1,2,3,4,5.

"According to the police report, my parents' death was a result of a murder suicide. My father, believing my mother was having an affair, shot her in his office, started a fire and then shot himself. His office burned to the ground."

"When did that happen, Seth?" I ask cautiously.

"Um, 16 years ago. I was three. My mom was American, so afterwards I went to live with my aunt in Texas."

"How do you know all of this if you were so young?"

"My mom religiously wrote my aunt letters. When I was in high school, I found a bunch them. Right around the time of their murder, she wrote about Aro and my father's concern something was going to happen. My aunt always told me she never believed the reports. She said my dad loved us too much to kill my mom and leave me. So I started using my computer skills to find the truth and gather information about Aro." He leans over, and reaching into the front pocket of his bag, pulls out a worn picture.

"This is the last picture I have of my Dad. My mom sent it to my aunt about a week before their death. According to the letter, the guy is someone who was trying to help them. I guess he was also teaching me soccer. My dad said I was born with a computer mouse in my hand, but my mom wanted me to try new things."

I take the picture and as soon as I look at it my stomach drops. Staring back at me from the worn photo is the face of Jacob Black. He is kneeling next to a young Seth holding a soccer ball. Seth's father is standing behind them with a huge smile on his face.

What the hell was Jake doing with this family?

"I've tried to find him, but my aunt didn't know his name and I haven't had any luck searching for pictures of him. Do you recognize him?"

The picture shakes slightly as I look at it, not knowing how to respond. I am not ready to tell him I know his identity.

"Bella? You okay?" Edward questions. He must have noticed the shake in my hand through the camera.
"Don't lose focus, Bella. You need to convince him to talk to us," Jasper warns. Forcing myself to push all questions about Jake to the side, I finally respond to Seth, but avoid answering the question.

"I think you're right, Seth. I think we can help each other, but there is something I need you to do for me first."

"What?" he asks slowly, suspicion seeping through. Crap. Calling again upon my persuasive doctor's voice, I hope I can get him to agree.

"I need you to talk to some friends of mine. They came with me and-

What I was not ready for, given Seth's small and vulnerable stature, is his fierce determination to flee. As soon as the words "came with me" pass through my lips, he shoots out of his chair and grabs his bag in one fluid motion. Pivoting in a move rivaling professional basketball players, I watch helplessly as Seth maneuvers around other customers and dashes out the side door.

"He's running!" I yell, warning Edward and Emmett.


Jumping up after him, I reach the door in time to witness Seth leap over the fence. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Emmett closing in, moving quickly but also trying not to cause attention to his presence. The sidewalk has more traffic than when I arrived. People busily trying to reach their destinations unaware of the brewing situation.

There is a group of children separating Emmett and Seth; they look about five or six years old, most likely on a field trip. As if sensing the trap, Seth spots Emmett stalking him through the crowd. His anxiety magnifies as he stares at Emmett who moves quicker now that Seth has spotted him. Making a decision, Seth suddenly switches from anxiety to determination.

Shit, he has a plan.

Times slows as my mind tracks every detail of the scene, the subtle shifts in movement and the hectic colors. In a desperate split second decision, Seth starts to make his move just as I realize his plan.

"Seth! No!" I scream, running out the door.

With adrenaline fueled strength, Seth grabs the man closest to him. The abrupt action causes the stranger's balance to falter, giving Seth the upper hand and using him as a human battering ram; Seth thrusts him into the crowd. The man stumbles, falling on several of the children. A thunderous crash echoing as they hit the concrete. Chaos ensues, the surrounding crowd rushing to help the kids. The mayhem effectively blocks Emmett's path giving Seth an opportunity to bolt down the street.

"Fuck! Go!" Emmett screams in frustration.

Whirling to the left, I jump over the fence to chase Seth down the street. The stunt allows him to gain more than a half a block's lead. My lungs burn as I sprint down the sidewalk, trying to keep up my speed and avoid people at the same time. Out of nowhere, Edward passes me. Running at full speed and with practiced agility, Edward weaves in and out of the crowd remarkably gaining on Seth. Glancing quickly over my shoulder, I find both Emmett and Jasper also sprinting in our direction.
Seth, managing to stay slightly ahead of Edward, makes a sudden break to the left running down a street at the end of the next block. Pushing harder to catch up, Emmett, Jasper and I turn down the street and find Edward attempting to jump up the side of the building on the corner.

"God damn it! Get down from there!" he screams.

Looking at the building Edward is jumping at, the four of us stare in amazement as Seth scales a worn drain pipe to the third story ledge. The five-story dilapidated building is a strange combination. The bottom houses a bustling nail salon, while the upper stories appear unoccupied, most of the windows are covered with boards and the few exposed are broken and dark.

"I was this close to grabbing his ankle. He's too goddamn fast." Edward leans over placing his hands on his knees winded from his sprint.

Seth continues to climb until just above the minuscule ledge and reaching his toes down, he releases the pipe. I hold my breath as I watch him precariously teeter on the edge. Grasping the cracks in the stone building with his fingers for traction, he slowly starts inching his way over to a fire escape. One slip and he will fall thirty feet to the sidewalk below.

"Christ, does this kid think he's Spiderman?" Emmett questions.

"Okay, any ideas?" Jasper inquires. All of our focus is on Seth as he inches his way towards safety and possible escape.

"I don't think that drain pipe is going to hold any of us and I'm sure as hell not stepping on that ledge." Emmett scoffs.

"Watch him, Jasper. Tell us where he goes in. Come on, Emmett, let's find a way into that building," Edward commands taking the lead.

I follow Emmett and Edward around the corner and into the nail salon. Not wasting any time, Edward flashes his badge and demands to know how to get upstairs. A frightened salon worker walks us to the back of the store and points to a door in the narrow hallway.

"That leads upstairs but the landlord is the only one with a key. I could call him," she stutters.

"He just broke into a third story window," Jasper's voice says in our ears.

"We don't have time for this, stand back," Edward yells at the employee, and with impressive force, kicks the door open almost taking it right off the hinges.

"Hey!" she yells. "You can't do that!"

"Bill us," Emmett responds as we rush the stairs quickly reaching the second floor. "We need to split up and check each floor. Who knows how quickly he moved," Emmett states rationally. I nod in agreement while Edward shakes his head looking at me with concern.

"We can cover more ground if we each take a floor," I suggest looking directly at Edward, knowing he doesn't want me going by myself. "We don't have time to argue, we need to find him."

Taking a deep breath, Edward reluctantly concedes knowing logically there is no other option. Switching back to his agent persona, he organizes a plan of attack. "Okay, Emmett take the fourth floor, I'll take the third, and Bella you go to the fifth. If he's heading down he's looking to get out of the building, Jasper you copy?"
"Yup, I'm here."

"Keep your eyes out, man. He may come back out."

"Got it."

"Okay, let's go. Bella, watch your back and check in!" Edward says as we run up the stairs, both of them breaking off at their assigned floors as I continue running up.

"Jasper, look sharp, there is another way in. The third floor is covered with drug paraphernalia. People were here recently." Edward's voice booms through the earpiece breaking the silence.

"I'm on the corner. He has to come out one side or another. The back is right up against another building. I'll spot him," Jasper responds.

"Everyone watch your step, there are needles everywhere," Edward adds. His breath is still heavy, the adrenaline pumping through all our veins.

"Jesus Christ!" I hear Emmett exclaim.

"Did you find him?" Jasper jumps in.

"Not yet, but if anyone is interested in some lovely crack house real estate, I have a spacious offering for you on the fourth floor." I roll my eyes at his sarcastic comment as I round the last turn for fifth floor. "Oh wait, let me revise my last statement, make that crack-whore real estate judging by the used condoms all over the floor. Safety first, people."

"Emmett, will you shut up!" Edward growls. "Bella, talk to me. Where are you?"

"I just got to the fifth floor, I'm good."

Reaching my destination, I fling open the stairwell door and rush in finding myself suddenly shrouded in darkness as the door clicks shut behind me.

Maybe this wasn't such a good plan.

Apparently, the fifth floor window boards are intact, keeping the room encased in black shadows. I creep into the cavernous space, hoping my eyes adjust quickly. There is an unnatural glow coming from small spaces between the boards over the windows and the wall. Not enough to see the room, but enough to define its dimensions. The room feels dank; the smell of mold and mildew overwhelming my senses.

I slowly pull the gun from my side and level it in front of me while clumsily pulling out my phone. Fumbling, I finally find the flashlight app. It is awkward holding both objects, but the uncomfortable nature of the grip is worth the added security of the gun.

The flashlight illuminates several feet in front of me, but the area is small and contained, leaving the surrounding areas mercilessly black. My anxiety peaks, images of ridiculous horror film scenes filling my thoughts. Ones I yell at the screen for, irate at the character's stupidity. Yet here I am, running into the darkness instead of away. I nervously glance around convinced that in shadows lies a creature watching my every move, waiting for the perfect time to strike.

My heart hammers against my chest as I maneuver around, the beat pounding in my ears. The silence is eerie, my ears keenly listening for any movement. Several feet from the stairwell door, I come to a separate room, most likely an office as the open nature of this floor lends itself to some
sort of loft or warehouse.

I slink along the wall and peer inside. The added barriers prevent any muted light from the door frames or window boards to enter, making the space impossibly dark.

Fuck.

My logical side once again berates my impending stupidity as I gather the courage to plunge into the room. Illuminating the room by small segments, I see my assumption is correct. Stacks of boxes and old papers are in the corner next to a broken wooden desk. I am moving carefully around the room when my earpiece comes to life.

"Status," Jasper barks.

"Still checking the fourth floor. No sign of monkey boy," Emmett quips.

"Same, lots of rooms to check on the third, but so far no sign," Edward chimes in.

"Still checking," I whisper focused on my task.

"Bella, why are you whispering, is someone there? Are you okay?" Edward asks panic tingeing his voice.

"No, I'm okay, I'm just concentrating," I explain.

Telling Edward about the dark nature of the room will only cause distraction and right now he needs to stay focused. The last thing I want is for Edward to get hurt because he is too concerned about me to pay attention to his own surroundings. Besides, logically I know when push comes to shove, I can take care of myself.

"Keep talking to me, Bella. I need to know you're okay," Edwards requests.

"Okay, but I'm fine. Focus on you," I counter. Although I know I can take care of myself, hearing his voice helps ground me, knowing we are still connected and he is close.

Turning to check the far right corner, I suddenly feel something grab for my ankle. I spin around and in my haste to get away, fall backwards over a stack of papers. My phone slides across the concrete. My grip failing as I hit the ground, the glow from the light almost nonexistent as it lands upside down. I watch it spin like a top before stopping. Trying to calm my breath, I lie still listening for the sounds of my would-be attacker.

"Seth?" I whisper, hoping my reading of him is correct and he is not out to harm me. I hear a faint rustling in front of me, but straining my eyes through the darkness, I cannot see any movement.

Quietly sitting up, I raise the gun, while slowly scooting my body towards my phone. Reaching out, I maneuver it closer with my fingers until I can grab it and quickly swing it around toward the noise.

The space in front of me lights up revealing boxes and papers but nothing more. Confused, I duck my head looking closer between the boxes preparing myself to find Seth or some other person. I hear the rustling again, but can't see the source. Wondering if I am crazy, I finally spot movement by the middle stack of papers. I move the light closer when suddenly a rat runs past me and out the door. Relived by the ridiculous situation, I laugh, wondering if maybe I am in the middle of a cliché horror film.
"Bella?" Three voices question simultaneously.

"I'm fine," I reply containing my laugh. "A rat just scared the crap out of me," I explain, getting up off the floor. I hear Emmett chuckle.

"Watch out for those, they will get you every time," he utters.

Satisfied Seth is not in the room, I move out into the larger space. Like the office, boxes and papers cover the floor as well as old equipment. Moving towards the windows, I hear a voice muttering quietly in the corner.

"Seth?" I question pointing the light in the direction of the noise. "Seth, I don't want to hurt you. Please, talk to me."

His anxious muttering continues without acknowledging my presence or request. Moving forward, the light finally reaches the corner, Seth coming into view. He is sitting with his knees up, his arms securely around them. He is holding a piece of paper in his hand. Putting the gun away in an effort to show him I'm not a threat, I move forward with my hands slightly raised.

"I'm almost done and then I am heading up to you, Bella," Edward says.

"He's here. Hang back for a few so I can talk to him first," I whisper. Colored in panic, I watch Seth fold and unfold a worn newspaper he found on the floor.

"I'm coming up!" Edward responds stubbornly.

Damn it, that doesn't give me much time. Reaching the wall, I sink down next to Seth and lay the light between us. He tenses looking over at me.

"Do you know Cladosporium, Penicillium, Aspergillus, and Alternaria are the four most common types of household molds and ten percent of the United States population is allergic?" he asks.

"I didn't, but I will always remember it now." I smile softly at him. "I didn't mean to scare you," I say apologetically.

"I thought you understood. I wanted to work with just you. I don't like talking to a lot of people, especially cops," he states.

"I understand, but I don't think we can do it alone. Honestly, Seth, I wish you would stay out of it all together, but since I know you won't, we need all the help we can get."

"You really trust them?"

"I really do. I think together we stand a chance. I finally understand what you meant earlier, we do have a lot in common and maybe this is a chance for both of us to find peace."

Seth looks at me with wide soulful eyes and nods in agreement. Although we barely know each other, both of us feel connected. We are survivors of Aro's terror, and not too many people can understand what that is like.

"What do we do next?"

"Well, I need to get out of Seattle for a bit, and you need to help my friends find the mole."

"Wait, can't I go with you?" he asks, looking panicked.
"Um, not right now, but I will make sure we see each other soon." I promise, watching him fold and unfold the paper.

"**Bella!**" Edward shouts accompanied by the sound of a door slamming open.

"Fuck, it's dark," Emmett says shortly after.

"Bella?" Edward asks again as I notice beams of light coming from the entrance.

"We're over here," I answer waving my phone in the air as a point of reference. Edward rushes over, his eyes gazing over my body looking for sign of injury. I smile at him in reassurance.

"Guys, meet Seth. Seth, this is Edward and Emmett. They are much less intimidating than they seem."

"Next time an officer tells you to stop, you better fucking stop! That was a stupid stunt you pulled!" Edward chastises. I cut my eyes to him silently communicating to back off.

"Don't worry about Edward. His bark is worse than his bite," I say to Seth, who is looking at both Edward and Emmett with trepidation.

"Hey kid, what's up, I hear you have some serious computer skills," Emmett jumps in and I smile. Leave it to Emmett to know what to say; he was obviously paying attention my conversation with Seth.

"I have exceptional computer skills. I'm one of the best," Seth asserts.

"Well, those are just the type of skills we need. What do you say, kid, want to join our team?" Emmett asks.

"If it means taking down Aro, I guess I'm in, but for the record I'm only working with you because Isabella asked. I don't like working with cops. They slow my process down," Seth states, his anxiety slowly decreasing.

"You're in luck, because we are off the radar for this mission. I think your, um, unique ability is going to come in handy." Emmett holds out his hand to Seth who looks at it a moment before taking it and allowing Emmett to pull him up.

"You need back-up?" Jasper asks through the earpiece.

"No. We're coming back down," Edward replies. He reaches out his hand to pull me up and as soon as I am standing he wraps his arms around me. "I'm not happy with you. Why didn't you tell us it was so dark up here?" he whispers in my ear.

I pull back and look at him. "I knew you'd worry and I wanted you to watch out for yourself. Besides, I'm a big girl," I retort as the group starts moving toward the exit.

Seth is following behind Emmett who obviously made a positive impression on him. Edward gently grabs my arm, stopping our movement.

"I know you can take care of yourself, but I have some plans that I kind of need you around to make happen. So, can we limit the risk-taking please?" he requests leaning down to give me a kiss.

"Yes, sir," I answer, rolling my eyes playfully, taking his hand and following the group down the stairs.
Jasper is waiting for us in the salon along with the irate employee. He is handing her some cash, which I assume is for the door along with his card. As we walk outside, Emmet and Jasper flank Seth in case he decides to run again.

The parking garage is across from the building, so the walk back to the SUV is short. There is little talk as we all pile into the vehicle. Each of us is lost in our own thoughts and contemplating what comes next. I look back and smile reassuringly at Seth as we pull out of the garage.

"Okay, Bella, we've got to get you out of Seattle," Jasper announces as the SUV turns onto the street.

Edward grabs my hand and squeezes. Turning my head in his direction, his eyes capture mine as he tries to communicate everything left unspoken. The lump in my throat builds, watching fear and sadness flash in his eyes.

It's time to say goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time…

A big shout out to Google maps for allowing me to run around the streets of Seattle planning the scene with Seth! :)
Chapter 14: Letters From The Sky

Chapter Notes

A/N:
Twilight and anything associated with it is unfortunately not mine, however, I am responsible for all the other crazy musings of the story.

This chapter has a brief description, with no details, of sexual assault; the victim is not a main character.

On with the show….

Update: Thank you to my betas beautifulnightmarex and Tds88! I can't thank them enough for their help and support.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Letters From The Sky

I leisurely sip my coffee before taking in a lung full of fresh mountain air. The view is picture perfect with the sun low in the eastern sky. The glass lake looks untouched and the crisp October air chills my nose. It's my favorite time of day here. The world feels at peace, and for a moment, it is easy to pretend life is simple.

The lake house has been my home for two desolate weeks. After the meeting with Seth, things happened quickly, everyone feeling there was no time to waste with James on his way. We took Seth directly to Jasper's condo where he set up precautions to not only monitor Seth, but to also make sure his involvement was kept hidden.

Jasper wanted to investigate Seth before including him in our plans. The decision was frustrating because I knew Seth was harmless, and given his already skittish nature, it was a risk. However, since Jasper is unaware of my ability, there was no logical way to explain my confidence in Seth's trustworthiness. It didn't help that Edward agreed with Jasper about needing time to question Seth further.

When it comes to my safety, Edward has decided not to take anything at face value, including my "visions". At first, his lack of faith irritated me, but watching his troubled eyes as he explained his rationale quieted my argumentative tongue. If I was in his shoes, I would most likely make the same decision, and it was hard to stay angry when his actions came from a good place.

Seth knew I was leaving, but he was not told where. During the drive, I could tell Seth was regretting his decision, and by the time we reached the condo, his anxiety was off the charts. I pleaded with Edward and Emmett to take it easy on him, giving both some ideas on how to reach him and help decrease his anxiety. At least Emmett had warmed up to Seth quickly and vice-versa.

I felt guilty about leaving Seth after convincing him to work with us, so knowing he at least felt comfortable with Emmett helped ease my concern. I had talked to Emmett several times about Seth, requesting he tolerate the fact sharing and folding. I specifically told him not to confront Seth's ritualistic behaviors, not even as a joke. I also asked him to be the buffer for Jasper and
Edward's intensity. Somehow, in the matter of a few hours, Seth had me acting like a nervous mother leaving her child at camp. Once they determine Seth is trustworthy, they will ask him to follow through with his initial promise to help smoke out the mole. Finding them is crucial to taking down the Volturi. We need to have the upper hand, and right now, we don't have it.

After getting Seth settled, Edward, Jasper and I quickly finalized the plans for my departure. We retrieved my treasured suitcase, clothes, money and an untraceable car. Before nightfall, I was on my way to Montana. The hardest part of my stay here is the lack of contact. Jasper is adamant I stay off the radar until we set up some impenetrable security measures. It's the part of the plan Edward argued against the most; he hated the thought of not having contact with me. However, contact is too risky given the mole is unknown. We have no idea what information about my involvement with Felix's case was shared or how closely everyone is being monitored. The Volturi could know nothing or everything. The plan is for Edward and Emmett to return to work and put on a show proving to anyone watching that outside of work they have no connection to me.

Honestly, I didn't expect the lack of contact to go on for so long. I hoped after clearing Seth, he would quickly work his computer magic to set up a safe line of communication. I try not to focus on the different scenarios running through my head wondering if everyone is okay, especially since James must have shown up in Seattle by now.

The only solace keeping me from going crazy is that no one's activated the emergency plan which is only initiated if either side runs into trouble. If any one of us utilizes it, we are to leave immediately and meet up in Phoenix at a predetermined location. Since that hasn't happened, I have to believe everyone is okay and I will hear from them soon. Until then, I continue to do my part and mentally prepare for the battle ahead.

Life feels dramatically different here, the crazy intensity of recent events quietly falling away in the stillness of the forest, the last two weeks giving me nothing but time to finally process it all: Aro, my mom, and most importantly, Edward. The eastern philosophy of mindfulness teaches finding acceptance by quieting your mind and allowing thoughts to come and go without judgment. Sounds easy enough, but after years of blocking my emotions and memories, being left alone to face them is a bit of a struggle.

I am in unfamiliar territory with these feelings, and I selfishly admit some days a part of me wishes I could just stop caring. Instead of finding acceptance, I find myself battling my insecurities and survival skills. The skills that kept me distanced from others. The longer I'm away, the more I fight the voices in my head arguing all the reasons this plan won't work. I made promises to help bring Aro down, but a part of me wants to do what I do best; run away from it all. Now is the time to do it, because there is no one around to stop me.

I find myself in a strange push and pull most of the time. When my survival skills kick in telling me to run, it's the thought of Edward that stops me. But then my insecurities kick in, questioning my worthiness or his true intentions, all of which leaves me spinning.

Miraculously, it is Edward who indirectly reminds me to fight when those two fears are at their strongest. He has provided reminders that strengthen my resolve to stay. I smile softly wondering how he was able to pull it off and if he knew just how important his gesture was to our relationship.

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Edward has become my shadow as I complete the final preparations for my departure. Not only does he seem unable to leave my side, but he also cannot stop touching me in some form, whether it is holding my hand or standing close enough to brush against me. All of his touches hold a restrained tension, as if I am the most important and fragile thing in his world. It hurts to look at
him, the vibrant green of his eyes dim with sadness, his face pained.

We stand by the car staring at each other, both unsure of what to say. Edward is the first to make a move, sighing quietly as he brushes a strand of hair from my face.

"I never understood why you would do it, but it all makes sense now," he whispers.

"Do what?" I question, as he continues to brush the now invisible hair behind my ear.

"You always say goodbye like it is the last time I will see you." I look at him confused. "It's hard to describe, there's a tone and look, like there is finality to everything you do. I always thought it was because you had a fear of letting people in, but now I understand you've lived your life always ready to leave."

I stare into his glassy eyes, they are a contradiction of water and fire. Suddenly he grabs my face and our bodies collide as he leans in for a frantic and desperate kiss. Our tongues battle in a passionate fury, hands grasping for a closer connection. Just as swiftly it ends, both of us panting for breath. Still holding my face, he looks at me with an indescribable fervor.

"This is not goodbye, Bella Swan." He kisses me again before resting his forehead against mine. "I'm going to fight for this, baby; however long it takes, I will fight for you. Please don't stop fighting for me."

Standing in the safety of his arms, I struggle for words. Instead of responding verbally, I hug him closer, hoping my actions speak for me. I memorize his scent; it's become a huge source of comfort and I will miss it. Squeezing one last time, I pull away.

Slowly opening the car door, Edward stands closely watching as I adjust my seat, check the mirrors, and click my seatbelt. Each task takes longer than usual. It's a stall tactic to avoid the inevitable. Edward kneels down inside the door frame, placing his hand on my leg as we double-check my supplies. Yet another stall tactic since this was already discussed before I walked to the car.

Kissing me one last time, Edward stands. Still holding my hand, but slowly moving away, our fingers stretch until the distance separates all physical touch and he shuts my door. Pain is the only way to describe the loss of contact. I'm a pro at leaving, but this is new. Never have I felt so out of sorts, and for the first time, I question my ability to do this alone.

I glance in the rear-view mirror, watching as Edward stands stiffly in the driveway. The look on his face as I make the final turn out of the driveway haunts me. The shift in our relationship is new, but suddenly it feels as if my entire being is wrapped up with Edward Cullen.

Pulling on the main road, I pull down my sun-visor, surprised when something falls out. Looking down, I find a small ruby shaped heart attached to delicate necklace. Taped to the clasp is a small folded piece of paper. Too curious to wait, I pull to the side of the road and stop. Carefully pulling the note off, I hold my breath as I unfold the paper. Written in a delicate script is a note from Edward.

Please take care of my heart. I have left it with you.

Yours always, Edward

I still don't know how he managed to pull off finding and leaving a necklace in the rushed frenzy of my departure. Holding the heart between my fingers, the necklace appears to have an antique look
and feel to it. It's beautiful but slightly weathered, adding even more mystery to its origin.

The note attached to the necklace was just one of many I've found. Notes were left hidden in my shoes, taped to my shampoo and buried throughout my suitcase. All contained little messages of encouragement or funny sayings. Each time I discovered one, it renewed my strength to carry on, and on my worst days, they made me believe that everything was worth the risk. Even far way, Edward continues to ground me. He is truly my rock.

Taking sanctuary in the quiet moment of the morning, I inhale the fresh forest scent once more before walking back into the modest, but comfortable house. The spacious great room takes up the majority of the space, the vaulted ceiling adding to its openness. Towards the back of the house is a small kitchen, as well as two small bedrooms and a bathroom. The second story includes two other bedrooms, and a small loft, which the previous owners converted to an office. It's a nice hideout.

Closing the door behind me, I move to the dining room table to start work on Jasper's assignment again. He requested I write out all the people and factions involved with Aro and the Volturi. Specifically, he wants to know not only who they were, but anything I can remember about their lives and what they did for him. It's a daunting task because although I remember their faces, I've spent years blocking out the details of Aro's business. Sitting back down at the table, I focus on the paper before me.

The process of laying out Aro's empire is more difficult than I expected. It is awaking memories long forgotten. Some days feel like an emotional roller coaster as I battle through them. The hardest days come when the process triggers memories of my mom. Logically, I know this is another step towards healing. However, in the moment when the pain sits raw in my gut and the memory chokes me, it's hard to see the good. I can deal with pain and death, but my mother's memories leave me breathless and lost.

Reviewing the most recent entry listing out the members from the Italian coast, the memories released last night flood back. Sitting back, I allow myself to succumb to the visual, praying that eventually it will stop feeling like I am sinking into a tub of broken glass.

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_The sun is high in the sky, which is the best time of day to come to the beach. I'm sitting next to my mom building a sand castle when my childhood curiosity gets the better of me._

_"What does my daddy do?" She looks at me with furrowed brows._

_"I've told you many times, Isabella, your father is a busy man. He doesn't have time to go to the beach with us."_

_I huff in response, unsatisfied with the answer. "No what does he do? GiGi's daddy is a doctor and Angelo's daddy works at a bank. They were fighting about whose daddy was better and then they asked me what my daddy did. They laughed when I didn't know."_

_My mom gives me a sad smile. "Oh, my love, your father is a very powerful man."_

_"Like Superman?" I ask excitedly. If he's like Superman, that is way better than a doctor or bank man._

_"My sweet girl," she chuckles and then sighs. "No, sweetheart, your father is nothing like Superman."_

_"Well, what do I tell them?" I frown._
"Tell them," she hesitates, "tell them that he runs a kingdom."

"Kingdom? Is he a king? Does that make me a princess?" I ask excitedly. This is so much better than Superman.

She looks at me with a sad smile before brightening. "You're my princess." She smiles standing up and dusting off the sand. "A princess who is about to get thrown in the water!" she states dramatically, reaching for me as I screech and jump up to run down the beach.

"You have to catch me first!" I giggle running through the sand with my mom close behind, forgetting why I cared about what my father did for a living in the first place.

An echoed giggle follows me back to the present. It gets worse before it gets easier, I remind myself.

I look around the room feeling incredibly alone, the silence mocking me. I wish Edward was here, or that I could at least talk with him. Standing up to stretch and shake myself out of my pity party, I tell myself to get it together.


Concentrating back on my work, I suddenly hear the unmistakable rumble of a car. My pulse quickens. No one has driven down the isolated road since my arrival. On heightened alert, I jump into action, running to the kitchen to grab the gun from one of the drawers. The rumble grows louder, bringing the car closer to my safe haven.

I sprint to the front door, locking the doorknob and securing the dead-bolt. Turning quickly, I run out the back door, shutting it tightly. Locking it, I shove the keys roughly into my pocket. My keen ears listen as the car comes closer. I creep to the side of the house and peek slowly around the corner. The driveway is now within my vision. I hold my breath as a SUV pulls into the driveway, the gravel grinding as it abruptly stops. The menacing black vehicle looks expensive and the windows are tinted preventing me from clearly seeing who is inside. My stomach turns to ice as I prepare for the worst. Quietly, I pull back the trigger when an unfamiliar man steps out and walks towards the front door.

Peering through the bushes, I look at the intruder. I can't fully see his face, but his well-built body does nothing to decrease my anxiety. Dressed in a black leather jacket, blue jeans and bulky black boots, he strides towards the door with an air of authority. His footsteps echo as I try to calm my breath, afraid that he will hear me. I steel myself for a fight if his intention is one of harm. He may be massive and strong, but I'm quick and crafty, which is a dangerous combination too.

As he nears the door, I can no longer see him from my vantage point, but I can hear him knock. I wait, hoping he will leave once no one opens the door. He continues to knock, his voice suddenly ringing out.

"Bella? Bella, are you in there? Look, I've been sent by friends. Open the door."

Shit, he's obviously not going to leave. Gathering my courage, I move stealthily out of my spot and place myself behind him. The gun pointed squarely at his head.

"Turn around slowly," I command.

His body gradually pivots, his eyes widening when he sees the gun, but then just as quickly his shocked face turns to a cocky smirk. "Well, you certainly don't disappoint. They warned me you
were a spitfire," he chuckles.

My eyes narrow, annoyed by his lack of fear. Shades of amusement dance around him. "Who are you and what do you want?" I question. My voice sounds steadier than my pounding heart suggests.

"My name is Jenks. I'm here to help."

I watch him carefully. Sincerity flows around him, but I hesitate to let my guard down without more information. "You're mistaken. I don't know any Jenks, and there's no Bella here."

"I'm not mistaken and you're Bella," Jenks smirks, calling my bluff.

"The name is Carly, and I'm not asking you again. What do you want?" I lie easily, lifting the gun a bit to remind him I'm armed.

Raising his hands in defeat, I watch frustration overtake Jenks' amusement. Tilting his head to the side and looking at me for a moment, he changes his tactic. "Edward says hello, Bella. I promise I'm a friend." I continue to hold the gun steady, unsure of my next move.

Could Edward have sent him here?

Jenks' colors say he is telling the truth, but my survival instincts don't allow me to give in. He has more to prove before I take him at his word, no matter what his emotions say. I can't take any chances.

"I have something for you. It's in my pocket. Can I get it?" Jenks asks.

I nod my head in permission, gripping the gun harder. "No sudden moves. I won't hesitate to shoot!" I warn.

Slowly, he reaches in his pocket and pulls out an envelope. "It will explain everything," he says, reaching his hand towards me.

I assess the dynamics of his offer with unsure eyes. He could easily grab my hand when I go for the letter, giving him the advantage. Seeing my internal struggle, Jenks suggests a different option.

"Okay, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to put this on the porch and then I will step back and sit down. I mean you no harm, Bella."

Staring intently into my eyes, trying to convey his sincerity, he reaches down and drops the envelope on the ground. He then walks backwards until he reaches the railing of the porch. As promised, he sits down, crosses his legs and holds his hands up.

Stepping forward, I bend down to retrieve the envelope, never taking my eyes off the man across from me. Glancing down, I see the script I've become familiar with after reading his tiny notes over and over again. It is from Edward. Quickly looking up at Jenks, he softly smiles and nods towards the envelope.

"It's okay. It will answer your questions, I promise."

Backing up until I am against the opposite rail, I awkwardly pull out the paper while keeping the gun on Jenks. Carefully, I open the letter with a shaky hand, letting the envelope fall to the ground. I bring the paper eye level and slightly to the left, allowing me to glimpse at it while maintaining Jenks in my peripheral vision at the same time. My heart continues to pound as I anxiously read
Edward's words.

Bella,

The man who gave you the letter is Jason Jenks. I promise he is trustworthy and a good person to have on our side, so don't be afraid. Jenks is an old friend of Emmett's and mine. I guess you could say he works outside the mainstream of law enforcement. He is well-connected and has skills we need to take down the Volturi.

Bella, I cannot describe how difficult these last two weeks have been, being away from you is agonizing. I worry about you every minute, praying nothing has happened. I couldn't take it anymore, and since it is still not safe for me to come there, I had to send someone. I trust Jenks implicitly, and it helps to know he is there to keep you safe. I don't think I have to tell you that your life is pretty important to me, so please do as he says. He's one of the best.

Please stay safe, and most importantly, keep fighting. Don't let the doubt and fear win. We belong together, I feel it in my soul, and know you do too. We will make it, baby, there is no other option, I won't allow it.

I'll see you soon.

Always yours, Edward

His words bring me warmth, but I don't have time to linger in the moment. I glance at Jenks again who is still sitting quietly.

"So your name is Jason?" I ask.

"Yup." He smiles. "Now, is it too much to ask for you to put away that gun?" Sensing no ill will and feeling better knowing Edward trusts him, I lower the gun and tuck it into my jeans.

"Bella," I state, moving towards him and sticking out my hand. Jenks jumps up from his position and meeting me halfway shakes my hand with a firm and callused grip.

"The pleasure is mine. Looks like we need to get you a proper holster for that thing, an ankle holster is probably a good idea too." He pauses, analyzing me further. "Do you even know how to use a gun or was that all for show?"

I narrow my eyes, irritated at his inference that I can't take care of myself. Instead of verbally expressing my frustration, I quickly draw the gun and shoot past his head hitting a pinecone in a tree to his right. I hitch my eyebrow and smirk while tucking the gun back into my jeans. He stares dumbfounded and then bursts out in a robust laugh.

"Well, Ace, looks like you and I are going to get along just fine." He continues to laugh as he points to the door. "So, can we go in, or are we going to stare each other down all day?"

His personality reminds me of Emmett, full of bright colors, and for the first time since arriving here, a genuine smile crosses my face. I've always lived in solitude, but I am realizing how much better my life is with people in it. Even though he's not the person I want, I'm glad to have someone here to help offset the quiet. I softly shake my head at the thought while unlocking the door to let us inside. Jason Jenks will be an interesting addition to our little group.

"Wait," Jenks says suddenly. "Hey, kid, it's clear, come out now," he yells in the direction of the SUV.
Confused, I wonder what in the hell he's doing. When the back door opens, revealing a lanky leg, I turn back to Jenks with worried eyes. Seeing my concern, he simply smiles motioning back towards the vehicle. Looking back at the SUV, the unknown leg steps out to reveal its identity.

"Seth!" I exclaim. Seth smiles nervously and waves before reaching back into the SUV. Turning to Jenks, I punch him hard in the shoulder.

"Fuck! What was that for?"

"Why in the hell didn't you just bring Seth out in the first place? I would've known you were okay without having to put a gun to your head!"

"But where is the fun in that, Ace?" he laughs, but stops when he sees the expression on my face. "Okay, in all seriousness, I wanted to see how you handled yourself, and I'm honestly impressed. You didn't hesitate and you were able to get the upper hand."

Nervousness surrounds him as I stare, purposely letting him stew for a bit. I actually understand his intention, but I don't have to let him know that just yet. I like having the upper hand in more than just emergency situations.

Seth finally ambles his way over, his worn laptop bag slung over his shoulder and a large black duffel bag in his hand. "Hello, Bella," he says. "Did you know there are more fish and deer in Montana than people?" I laugh at his fact while Jenks rolls his eyes.

"I did actually. It's good to see you, Seth. How are you?" He smiles brightly, his eyes and colors lighting up. He is less anxious than the last time we saw each other. It looks like the boys were good to him during my time away.

"I'm satisfactory. You were right about your friends. I like them, especially Emmett. He brought me Burger King every day and let me update his computer. The condo building is cool and the wiring system is perfect for setting up a surveillance system," Seth rambles in his manic way, his arms waving animatedly.

"Okay, kid, take a breath, we don't have to catch up all at once, and you need to get going on that surveillance system," Jenks says, effectively ending his story without causing Seth anxiety. I'm impressed, Seth must like Jenks too.

"Oh okay, Bella, can you show me where the breaker is?" he asks, with a serious tone, focused on whatever task Jenks is talking about.

"What system?"

"Edward wants a stronger security system in place. And since we will be working from here now, I need to hook up a computer system that allows access to the servers and surveillance system I set up in Seattle. I just need to finish writing the code for the firewalls to make sure they're secure before we go live. I was almost done when we needed to leave," Seth explains quickly.

I cut my eyes to Jenks when Seth talks about leaving. It doesn't sound like the timing went according to the plan. He softly shakes his head, and whispers, "later." I open the door to let Seth inside, telling him where to find the breaker in the crawl space. Before I am able to follow, Jenks stops me.

"Okay, doc, the kid, what kind of crazy is he?" I look at him incredulously.

"What?"
"You know, is he 'it puts the lotion in the basket' or 'I'm a good driver' kind of crazy?"

"He's neither, you ass! Be nice to him, or you deal with me," I warn.

"Hey, don't misunderstand, I like the kid, and he's a fucking genius with computers, the best I've seen, but I also tend to like crazy, and it gets me into trouble. So, I just want to make sure he's not a ticking time bomb or anything." He holds up his hands in submission, his colors matching his stated feelings toward Seth.

"He's not crazy. He's just...socially awkward and nervous around people. He just developed some idiosyncratic ways of dealing with it, that's all."

"Good to know," he mumbles. "On the plus side, this road trip alone gives me enough facts to kick some major ass during trivia night at my local bar. Free beer makes almost anything worthwhile." He smiles widely, motioning for me to enter the house ahead of him.

I laugh at the truthfulness of his joke. I have a feeling Seth will improve all of our trivia abilities by the time this is over. We walk into the house and I move towards the kitchen while Jenks wanders over to the table.

"Would you like some coffee?" I ask, watching him look over the papers.

"Um, coffee? Um, yea sure," he murmurs, clearly distracted by my work, interest brightening the room. "This is pretty impressive," he states, picking up the list of names and occupations connected to Aro's London faction fifteen years ago.

"Thanks. How do you take your coffee?" I inquire, moving off the topic of my project. I'm not ready to go there with him quite yet. There are some other questions I need answers to first.

"Straight black," he mutters, continuing to peruse the papers. Moving to the door leading down to the crawl space, I yell down to Seth.

"Seth, do you want anything to drink?" The sounds of a drill and clanging metal echoes up the stairs. Seth must have found everything he needed.

"No," he yells back through the noise. I have a feeling I will be forcing Seth to take breaks. I imagine once his obsessive nature takes over, he loses himself in any task he's given. Taking the coffee, I bring it over to Jenks.

"Here you go. You want to sit down?" I question, leading the way to the living room and sitting in the big reading chair in the corner. Jenks hesitates, looking at the table, and then begrudgingly follows me, disappointment clouding his walk.

"So, Jason, tell me exactly what 'works outside of the mainstream and well connected' means?"

He laughs cryptically, taking a sip of coffee. "Way to cut to the chase. Let's just say I don't like playing by the rules." I wait for more than his obscure statement. "I'm one of the good guys, but since I'm independent, there's no red tape. I'm the go-to person when someone needs a quick and quiet solution. Simply put, I'm the best," he states with a cocky grin.

"Wow, I'm shocked humility is not part of your description," I retort sarcastically. "How do you know Edward and Emmett?"

"We've worked a couple of cases together, they're good people. So, Dr. Swan, tell me how you got Edward?" he asks, turning the interrogation table on me.
"Pardon?"

"I've known Edward for 7 years, and I've never seen him so twitterpated. I think he would cut off his right nut and eat his own arm just for a chance to talk to you."

"Wow, thanks for that visual. Now I know why charming was left off the list of your qualities."

"Ouch, you wound me, Ace." he smirks again. "But seriously, how did you get Cullen to drink the Kool-Aid?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"For as long as I've known him, he's been a player among players. Then you come into the picture and he's suddenly a love-sick puppy. And what I want to know is how you finally did it?"

Jenks' topic throws me. Edward and I came a long way during our last couple of days together, but the relationship is new. I haven't discussed it with anyone else. I find myself wanting to protect it from prying eyes, especially since there is still so much to sort out and discuss.

"Sorry, no secrets to share. Edward and I are barely anything at the moment," I fib.

Jenks looks at me for a moment before bursting out laughing. "You don't even believe that line of bullshit! But that's fine. Keep your secrets for now," he declares before drinking more of his coffee.

"Are you related to Emmett?" I question with mock seriousness. "You guys seem to use the same playbook, yet neither of you are successful in actually getting all this info you swear you will get from me." I laugh at Jenks' look of horror when I compare him to Emmett. His magnetic personality is hard to dislike.

"Wow, cut me to the quick why don't you. I admit Emmett and I rank high in the awesomeness category, however, my skills for interrogation far outweigh his. You'll see, just give me time, Ace."

I laugh again. "Remind me again why humility was left off your list of qualities?"

"Touché," he says, holding up his cup in a salute.

We sit quietly for a moment before I decide to switch the topic to more serious matters, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"So, what's happening in Seattle?" I ask, hoping my anticipation isn't obvious, but I'm desperate to hear anything about Edward.

"Not much to tell, which is good. There's no sign that anyone is aware of you. The leak in the department is still a mystery, which makes everyone nervous. We've spent our nights researching everything we can on your father, and finally having those agency files on the Volturi helps."

"I thought those files were inaccessible to the CIA?" I question, wondering what changed in the last two weeks to allow them access.

"This is where working outside of the mainstream with connections helps. I have friends who don't mind sharing when I ask. Edward is pouring over the files looking for anything that will give us the upper hand."

"Wait! Who knows those files went to Edward? If you think the Volturi doesn't have spies in most agencies you're insane. They will tell Aro and then Edward will become his target!" My heart
races, my brain visually flipping through the worse case scenarios.

*I told them how connected Aro was, didn't they consider that, idiots! They are taking too many risks. I should have been there to stop them.*

"Whoa, slow down, I'm not stupid. Aro is none the wiser, trust me," he insists, sitting back with a satisfied grin.

"Yeah, well every time I hear the words 'trust me', someone usually ends up dead. So forgive me if your word doesn't hold much weight."

With determination, Jenks takes a deep breath and leans forward in the chair. "And yet here you are. Seems to me, Ace, if Aro was really as all-knowing as everyone believes, you wouldn't have made it this long. Even the most powerful empires have cracks. It just so happens that my specialty is finding them. Believe me, no one knows those files were given to our friends." Confidence swirls around him and I again wonder at the specifics of his background.

"What about Felix?"

The Felix situation was the biggest complication for my sudden "vacation" given he was being held on charges of assaulting me. Edward hoped since both his assault and attempted assault occurred at a law enforcement office in front of several witnesses, my need to testify would be slim to none. He and Emmett had set up a meeting with Rose to convince her to plead out the case, so my testimony could be avoided. If that fell through, I would need to return to Seattle.

"That did not end well. In fact, Felix is why we're here sooner than planned," he states, setting his cup down on the table.

"What happened?" Any circumstance that forced a change in plans worries me. None of the possibilities were good.

"After you left, they found Heidi Roberts' body. She was floating in the river and had probably been dead for at least a week and a half. There was tons of trace evidence on her, all of which pointed to Felix as her killer. It's strange really, all that evidence still being there given the timing of her death and being in a river." Jenks drifts off with a knowing stare, hinting that Felix was obviously set up.

"Anyway," Jenks continues, "Newton decided to share the news with Felix and the guy lost it. It took five guys to take him down. The next day, he was found dead in his cell. Hung himself out of guilt, at least that's what his note said."

"Shit," I whisper. Clearly Jenks and no one else in our circle believe he committed suicide. One of Aro's men must have got to him.

"Yeah, shit. That was a week ago, and everyone, especially Edward, is apprehensive about the fallout. The Volturi are stepping things up, and still not knowing who is working for them in that office is making everyone a bit crazy. There is a lot of chatter recently about "accidents" on the docks and people going missing. Aro is getting ready to make a move."

"Any clues about what that will be?"

"No, but I think Seth will help. With things heating up, we all agreed it is safer to have Seth working from a distance. That's why he moved here sooner than planned." Jenks pauses, taking another sip of coffee. "I don't think I need to tell you that Edward is extremely worried about you too, especially after Felix. He's desperate to get to you, but now more than ever he needs to play his
part. Jasper was afraid his anxiousness would cause him to slip up. Emmett suggested inviting me to the party, and here I am."

"I'm not sure what to say. That's a lot of information to process. What do we do next?"

"Jasper thinks they should stay put for a while longer to avoid suspicion. In the meantime, you, Seth and I are going to figure out who that goddamn mole is."

"So umm, how long are they going to have to stay there?" I ask quietly, looking down and pushing my hair behind my ear, hoping I am not too obvious about my disappointment at a longer separation from Edward. After nothing but silence, I glance up and find Jenks looking at me with amusement.

"You're just as bad as him. Edward misses you too, Bella. Believe me, as soon as possible, he will be rushing here. In fact, the three of them are discussing going on some sort of big fishing cruise together." He winks.

A wide smile spreads over my face. "Really?" I ask, unconsciously grabbing my necklace.

"Jesus, the two of you are ridiculous. When you finally do see each other, the room is going to combust. For our own safety, I'm clearly going to have to keep everyone at a distance during this reunion, especially the kid. Trust me, cara, I will take care of it!"

He continues to laugh, mumbling about sexual tension, but my focus is on his casual use of the Italian nickname, and the words "trust me" falling from his lips for the second time. I find myself evaluating him closely, my suspicion increasing.

"Why did you call me that?" I growl. Jenks suddenly stops laughing and looks at me in confusion.

"What?" he asks genuinely confused.

"Cara, why did you call me cara?" My body tenses. Hearing the name triggers an unexpected anger, and the trust I thought I could develop with Jenks fades away as I question his intentions.

"Cara is an Italian term of endearment, is it not?" he questions innocently. "Aren't you Italian? What's the big deal?"

"Don't call me that!" A part of me realizes I'm overreacting, especially when I see sincerity flowing from him, but the raw nerves exposed over the last few days make it difficult to stop.

"Just because I let you into my house and took your letter doesn't mean I trust you! I have no connection to you, and I learned a long time ago, trust is just a recipe for betrayal. You don't get to call me that, and you don't get to expect my trust! Are we clear?" I peer at him through narrowed eyes, my breathing heavy.

Jenks calmly leans back. "Did you know I'm Russian?" I'm taken aback by the strange switch in topic.

"What?"

"Did you know I'm Russian?" he asks again.

"How the hell would I know you were Russian? It's not like the name Jason Jenks screams 'I'm from Russia'," I yell sarcastically.
"Jenkowsky"

"What?" Christ, he's confusing the hell out of me, and his calm demeanor is beyond annoying.

"Jasha Jenkowsky, that's my birth name, not Jason Jenks." I look at him skeptically.

"We all have our stories to tell. Our own demons to battle, Bella. Did Edward ever tell you he worked a case in Russia?" I slowly shake my head no, unsure of where exactly this topic is taking us.

"Well, I guess I need to tell you a story then. I'm proud of my heritage, but I also wanted to protect my family when I followed this career path. That protection came in the form of a name change. When I was young, most of my family moved to America to avoid the unrest of the country, however, my oldest sister chose to stay." He smiles softly when mentioning his sister, the love he feels for her is clear.

"Seven years ago, I was working a case on a particularly nasty Russian sex trade group. I was close to nailing the ring leader when he figured who I was and that my sister was still in Russia." He pauses, clenching and unclenching his fists, anger suddenly swirling around him.

"The motherfucker took her. I've never felt so helpless in all my life." Taking a breath in trying to calm his anger, he continues. "Ironically, in Seattle, a young and arrogant newbie named Edward Cullen caught a murder case which ended up being tied to the same group."

"Wait," I interrupt. "I thought all the international cases went to the CIA, not FBI?"

"Well, when you're young and arrogant, you want to prove a point. When they tried to turn the case over, Edward insisted on staying with it till the end. He even bought his own ticket to Russia when the CIA was ready to raid their headquarters."

He leans forward and looks at me with an intensity that is staggering. "Now here's the important part of this story. When they raided that house, Edward happened to bust into the ring leader's bedroom who was just about to rape a woman." My eyes widen in shock.

"Motherfucker had his dick out when Edward rushed in and shot him. That woman...that woman was my sister. So believe me when I tell you that Edward Cullen owns me." He struggles to gain control over the emotions the recollection provokes. Sitting back in his chair, Jenks continues to hold my shocked stare.

"You're right, I don't know you and you don't know me, but I will never betray Edward. If he says keeping you alive is his priority, then I am on board one hundred and fifty percent, regardless of whether you trust me or not. It's not just you anymore, Bella. Those people are working their asses off in Seattle right now for you, so accept their help."

I sit in stunned silence, not quite sure what to say and embarrassed by my earlier outburst. Thinking about all the risks being taken by the people I care about triggers my insecurities.

"What if I'm not worth all the risks?" I whisper, looking down wringing my hands anxiously.

"Well, Ace, that's not for me to say. Edward says you're worth it, and that's all I need to know. You know you mean everything to him don't you?"

"I know he cares about me," I respond, still uncomfortable talking about my feelings for Edward.

"For someone so smart," he mumbles. "That boy doesn't just care, he's been crazy about you since
the first day you met."

Jenks continues his rant as I try to take in his words. "The week you started working with Edward, we actually met up for drinks. It was the first time I'd ever seen cool, calm and collected Edward Cullen a twitchy mess. He kept going on and on about this woman who was the most infuriating, know-it-all woman he'd ever met." He laughs, lost in his memory, and I smile softly imagining a flustered Edward in my head.

"The strangest part about that night was the end. There was a never a night when Cullen didn't go home with some hot dish. That night he honed in on this hot blonde, she was a 10 or maybe an 11, great ass and tits that-"

"I get the picture, get on with it." I interrupt angrily. The last thing I want to think about is Edward's former conquests.

"Anyway," Jenks continues smirking at my reaction, "he went over to do his thing. They were getting all hot and heavy on dance floor...umm." He stops seeing my irritated reaction to his insensitive need to share the graphic details of the story.

"Um, yeah, so all of a sudden, Edward comes back mumbling about 'god damned brown eyes'. Then he grabs a shot and leaves solo, which was a first."

He continues to smile at my discomfort. "And now here I am, sitting across from you, the girl who finally got under Edward's skin. And surprise surprise, you have brown eyes. I mean the boy cannot shut up about you."

"Really?" I whisper, trying not to show how giddy his affirmation makes me feel.

"Why do you think his family was so excited to meet you? I see your smile, Ace. I know you have a clue."

"Yes, but it's still nice to hear," I admit shyly, the confirmation easing the nagging insecurities.

"What's hilarious is that with all the yapping he did about you, suave Edward Cullen was too chicken shit to make a move. I admit, I kind of loved giving him a hard time about it too. In fact, this one night, I was so sick of his moping that I decided to push his buttons a bit."

"How?" I question, a little afraid to hear the answer but too curious not to know.

"Oh it was priceless!" Jenks laughs. "I told him since he wasn't going to make a move then maybe I should look you up and see if you tasted as good as he described." I narrow my eyes at his sexual suggestion and he smirks at my reaction.

"Yeah, he took it about as well as you did, asshole actually broke my nose. He's lucky I love him like family because I don't normally take that shit lying down. Aww, good times."

"You're a little crazy," I state, shaking my head at his described antics.

"Come on, Ace, give me some credit here. That was about a month ago, I'd like to think I had a part in this little fairytale finally getting off the ground."

"Now I know you're crazy." I smirk back.

There is a pause in the conversation when I notice Jenks' colors darkening, his facial expression losing all humor before he addresses me again. "Okay, all joking aside, I have a request."
"Okay," I respond hesitantly, surprised by his sudden mood change.

"I don't think you fully grasp how far Edward is willing to go to save you. So if this thing is one-sided, you need to walk away right now. I may joke and laugh a lot, but I protect those closest to me. I don't want to see Edward hurt." His protective nature and concern for Edward impress me, reinforcing how stupid I was to doubt his sincerity. I'm glad Jenks has Edward's back.

"It's not one-sided," I whisper staring straight into his eyes, conveying my intentions.

"Good… good," he states.

"I'm sorry I freaked out on you earlier. I'm a bit sensitive to that name."

"No harm, no foul. I think with everything you've been through, you deserve to freak out from time to time," he says with a warm smile.

Standing up to stretch, Jenks walks back to the kitchen to refill his coffee cup just as Seth comes bounding up the stairs, his shirt dusty and duffel bag empty.

"The breaker upgrade is complete and should hold the wattage we need. I can start setting up the security system now."

"Great, kid. How long until the computer system is online?" Jenks asks.

"Um, it will probably take me a couple of hours to set up the security system and then a few hours to finish the code. I'm thinking probably tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Can I help?" I jump in.

"Can you and Jenks set up the cameras?" Seth requests.

"Cameras?" I query.

"I brought several security cameras to set up around the property. If you guys can place them, it will save me some time."

"You got it!" Jenks responds. "Come on, Ace. The more we help, the quicker the computer gets online and then we will finally have a secure way to communicate. You know what that means, right?" he asks winking at me.

"I can talk to Edward?" I ask hopefully, finding it hard to control the smile on my face when Jenks nods his head.

"Okay people, let's get moving. The girl wants to talk to her man!" Jenks exclaims grabbing his keys. "Let's go set up some cameras."

Soon, I think happily. The desolation is finally over.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know the heart line is used a lot, but it is one of my favorites from the book so I just couldn't help myself. :)}
Until next time…..
Chapter 15: Turning Tables

Chapter Notes

I own nothing related to Twilight.

A huge thank you to my beta Tds88!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15: Turning Tables

"Come on, Swan! A five-year old could do better, now focus!" Jenks growls as he tightens his hold on my arm.

Jason Jenks reminds me of the uncle everyone worries will embarrass them in public, but secretly loves having around. He's loud, crass, and arrogant, but above all else, a loyal friend. Bright and early this morning, the pounding on my door and bellowing voice was his way of letting me know I was starting self-defense training. When I complained about the earliness of the morning, he barked that bad guys don't wait until you're rested and then gave me the choice of getting my ass up or being thrown in the lake. Begrudgingly, I scrambled out of bed and went outside to his make shift wrestling mat where I started learning how to get out of holds.

Seth's system didn't get up and running until this morning. He sent a message to the boys back in Seattle to set up a time to talk, but frustratingly, Jasper said all three were at work, and as soon as possible, they would contact us. The wait is maddening.

"This all you got, Swan?" I know he's purposely taunting me, but I still can't help the slow boil stirring in my blood. "Maybe you want to get caught? Maybe you secretly love having James touch you? Is that what you like? His greasy hands grabbing you, is that what gets you off?" he hisses in my ear.

I see red. A surge of strength warms my body, and in an instant, I move to the right breaking his hold. Quickly turning, I sweep his legs, jump on his chest, and grab his throat.

"Don't ever fucking talk to me that way again, you son of a bitch!" I try to hold my hand steady despite my shaking body, fury fueling my adrenaline.

Jenks, however, beams and laughs, bringing his hands up in surrender, pride swirling. "Bravo, Ace!"

Coming out of my rage-filled haze; I slowly move off him and glare. "I hate you," I sneer.

"No you don't." He smiles, sitting up and playfully ruffling my hair. He's right of course, but I didn't have to agree so easily.

"Whatever. Just don't talk to me like that again," I warn with as much defiance as I can muster given his technique worked.

"Okay," he states, suddenly serious, "let's be honest. You are small and inexperienced in comparison to Aro's men, but there's one thing you have that they don't...fire, and when push
"Can't fire and anger also make me lose control?" I question, knowing how overwhelming emotions also limits our ability to make sound decisions.

"True, if you lose control, but I can help you turn it into drive. Besides, if you think James or one of Aro's cronies won't taunt you just as much, if not worse, you are sorely mistaken." Standing up he moves to the middle of the mat and waves me over. "Okay, let's go again."

We continue to spar for another hour, before collapsing to the ground exhausted and sweaty.

"Good job, Ace! Tomorrow, I show no mercy," he declares, sitting on the grass, drinking his water.

"Great, cause today was a walk in the park," I retort sarcastically, lying down next to him to catch my breath.

I close my eyes reveling in the momentary stillness and think about everything he taught me. I can't help but smile at my accomplishments, especially when I took him down the first time. The unexpected sound of the door swinging open disrupts my quiet moment. Sitting up, I see Seth walking towards us, determination surrounding his movements. His characteristically nervous eyes are instead focused directly on Jenks. His stare unwavering even as he brushes his hair back when the breeze blows it over one eye.

"Did they contact you?" I ask, trying to ascertain the reason for his mood.

"Not yet. I came to see if I could spar too?" Seth asks seriously. Jenks and I look towards him stunned.

"You want to spar with me?" Jenks asks incredulously.

"Seth-" I start before he cuts me off.

"I can do this, I've been watching how he works with you, and I know his weakness," Seth states nonchalantly.

Jenks laughs and shrugs his shoulders. "It's your body, kid," he says standing up.

"Go easy on him," I whisper, getting up and moving to the side of the mat. Jenks looks at me, and winks before moving to stand in place.

"How do you want to do this?" Jenks asks.

"Just start like normal." Colored in confidence, Seth stands in front of Jenks, his face scrunched in concentration and head tilted as if solving a puzzle.

He may feel assured, but I'm nervous given Seth's anxious nature and their sizable body difference. Jenks makes a show of jumping around and stretching, before clapping his hands and getting into a crouched position.

"Alright, kid, you ready?" Seth nods his head.

Jenks lunges forward, a predatory smile on his face, and grabs Seth's wrist for a submission hold. However, Seth moves swiftly and before I can comprehend what's happening, Jenks is unexpectedly on the ground several feet from Seth, who is standing with a triumphant smile.

"Holy shit!" I yell. "Seth that was brilliant." I laugh, watching the dazed expression on Jenks' face
as he sits up and rotates his neck.

"What the fuck was that?" he asks, irritation and embarrassment clouding around him.

"Heaven and earth throw," Seth replies simply.

"What?" Jenks and I ask simultaneously.

"It's Aikdo. My aunt made me take it when people started bullying me. All the moves involve redirecting the force of the attack and using the person's size against them. Picking a mode of attack in Aikdo is like an equation. Evaluating which move will assert the amount of force needed to unbalance your opponent." Seth rambles while Jenks and I gape, slacked jawed and wide-eyed. Seth is certainly a surprise and not as vulnerable as I first assumed.

"You attack the same way every time. You start from a forward position and grab right because it's your dominant side. It's easy to map out a move when you're predictable in yours," Seth states very matter of fact. Coming from any other person, the comment would be an insult, but I know that is not Seth's intention and I hope Jenks understands that too.

"Well shit, kid, I'm officially inviting you to our training party. I'll show you some of my moves, if you show me some of yours." Jenks stands dusting himself off and walks over to Seth, patting him on the back. He looks down shyly, the invitation means a lot to him. I don't think he has many friends.

"Okay, that sounds like an agreeable trade," he says with a crooked smile. "Thanks for letting me practice. I guess I better go back and check for contact," he mutters, excited but uncomfortable with the positive interaction.

Once Seth is back in the house, Jenks sits dramatically on the ground and reaches for his water. "You can't tell anyone about what happened. My whole rep is at stake here, Ace."

"Hmmm, the upper hand." I contemplate out loud as he silently pleads for mercy. "I don't know… what's it worth to you?" I exaggerate as if pondering an important choice just to mess with him.

"How in the hell does a computer geek, and mafia princess get over on me on the same day? I'm losing my touch," he grumbles.

"You know, I rather like having the advantage for once, so I don't think I'm ready to agree to anything just yet." I smirk. Jenks rolls his eyes, mumbling under his breath. I try to control my laughter thinking about what Emmett would say to him if he knew.

Lying back again, I watch the fluffy clouds drift surrounded by a vibrant blue sky. It's an uncharacteristically warm day, and the light breeze blowing through the pines creates a soothing sound, almost as if the trees are whispering their secrets. I try to calm my mind, and appreciate the stillness, but my fingers can't stop tapping nervously, wondering when they will contact us.

"Hey, Ace, can I ask you a question?" Jenks interrupts my restless thoughts.

"Sure."

"If you were on the run, why in the hell did you start working for the FBI?"

I contemplate his question; it's something I've often asked myself. My life is a world apart from fading into the background of the private sector like I intended. "I didn't plan it, which is funny because I plan everything. I just kind of fell into it."
Okay, I could see going with the flow if you were anyone else, but why take the risk?" he asks genuinely curious.

I sit up and face Jenks. "I've spent too many years watching the fallout of evil. I lost count of how many lives were lost when I was living in Aro's world. I sat there day after day, and did nothing. Once I realized I could make a difference, I just couldn't walk away."

"That's fucking ballsy, or stupid depending upon how you look at it."

I laugh at his brunt response. "I guess for me, the risk is worth it when we get justice or prevent someone else from getting hurt. It gives me a chance to make up for all the people I couldn't save."

I look away when I feel tears fill my eyes.

"Hey," Jenks says, touching my knee to get my attention. "Aro's actions are not your responsibility. Don't take on something that isn't yours to take."

I laugh humorlessly. "I appreciate the sentiment, but when people die simply because of their involvement with me, it's hard not to take the blame."

The guilt feels like a noose around my neck, choking me in penance. Not wanting to talk anymore, I abruptly stand and end the conversation. "I'm going to grab a shower," I mumble, but before I can leave, Jenks quickly grabs my hand.

"You're a good person, Bella. Don't let anyone tell you any different, even yourself." I nod, not in agreement, but in appreciation of his kind words.

"Thank you," I whisper sincerely, before walking to the house and up to my room.

After taking a long hot shower to ease my aching muscles and distract from my negative thoughts, I head back to the kitchen where I hear Jenks and Seth talking to sorely missed voices. Jenks looks up and smiles.

"Speaking of the devil, look whose finally out of the shower." I rapidly maneuver around the counter, shoving Jenks out-of-the-way, to sit in the unoccupied chair by the computer. I look expectantly at the screen only to feel disappointment when I see Emmett's face.

"Bells! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

"Hi Emmett," I respond, barely containing my unhappiness.

"Em, I get the feeling yours is not the face she was looking for," Jenks laughs beside me.

"Shut-up," I grumble, shoving Jenks with my elbow. "Don't listen to him. It's great to see you, Emmett."


"Bella," Edward breathes out. His intense eyes scan my face, almost as if he is verifying I'm really here.

I sink in the chair, the tension leaving my body seeing him alive and well. I can't stop the wide smile from over taking my face, until I notice the dark mark under his eye.
"What happened to your eye?" I question hastily.

Edward smirks and shakes his head. "It's nothing. Newton and I had a little disagreement," he responds cryptically.

"What kind of disagreement?"

Before Edward can answer, Emmett squeezes back in the frame. "Newton didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. Don't worry about Edward, you should see him. Edward gave him a free shot, and then it was on."

I look towards Edward for a further explanation. "He was trying to start shit about you leaving. The prick took it too far, and got what was coming to him, end of story," Edward clarifies in a gruff tone, his agitation lingering.

"I thought the plan is to prove we don't associate outside of work. How does attacking Newton do that?" I question, frustration lacing my voice. I appreciate him defending me, but the risk scares me. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to Edward because the Volturi figured out he is important to me.

"Bella, I wouldn't let anyone talk about you before either. Fighting with Newton doesn't change anything," Edward huffs in annoyance.

"You aren't in trouble?"

"No, that was the purpose of the free shot. Witnesses can verify I didn't start it," he says with a cocky smile. "But it didn't matter anyway. The director didn't want to suspend anyone, so we just got our asses chewed and had to promise to play nice from now on."

"Okay, but just remember, I have plans that I need you around for, so can we limit the risk taking?" I smile, using his own words to drive home the importance of his safety.

His brilliant smile lets me know he understands the message. "God, it's good to see you," Edward whispers, reaching out to touch the screen.

"I missed you," I whisper back.

For a moment it feels like we are the only two people in the room, until in a coordinated act of childishness, behind me and on-screen, I hear whistling and cat calls. Both Emmett and Jenks laugh poking fun at us while Seth stands awkwardly to the side trying to make sense of their antics. Edward turns to glare at Emmett, but I have a better solution.

"Hey guys, do you want to hear what happened this morning? Jenks was-" Suddenly a hand is over my mouth preventing me from going further.

"No one has time for that, Ace. You know what, how about we give you some privacy to catch up. Emmett, vacate the room, and Seth and I will do the same." Edward looks at me with a questioning stare while I smirk in victory.

"What the hell, Jenks? You're no fun," Emmett protests, but complies and walks out the door located behind Edward.

"Come on, kid, let's make sure the wind hasn't disrupted any of the cameras," Jenks says.

"The wind is not strong enough to disrupt the cameras. The speed verse weight disruption would
make it impossible."

"Kid, you got a lot to learn about excuses. Let's go." Jenks smirks pulling Seth behind him and out the door.

Butterflies erupt realizing we are finally alone. I've waited two weeks for this, but now I'm not sure what to say.

"You gonna tell me what that was about?" Edward questions.

"Umm, probably later, but for now, I'm enjoying holding it over his head," I laugh, feeling more relaxed as we settle into an easy dialog.

"So, how are you really?" Concern puckers his brow as he searches my face for some unspoken truth.

"I'm okay. Really." I reinforce when he gives me a questioning eyebrow. "It helps having Seth and Jenks here. Thanks for sending them."

"Believe me, it helps me just as much. I couldn't stand the thought of you out there alone anymore. Is Jenks behaving? I know he's a bit much, but I feel better knowing he's with you."

"He's a character, but I like him."

"Good," he murmurs, our eyes drinking each other in. "That looks really good on you," Edward says gesturing around his neck.

Holding out my necklace, I smile brightly. "Yeah, it's the most amazing thing, this little trinket and several notes just magically appeared during my time here. I must have a little fairy running around or something."

"Or something," he laughs.

"I love it, Edward, and I loved every word on the notes. You have no idea how much they helped keep me sane over the last two weeks. How did you do it?"

"Maybe I'm a magic fairy," he suggests. I laugh, but wait for him to continue. "It was a bit tricky, but was worth it to see that beautiful smile."

"Thanks." I smile shyly, still not use to his compliments. Unable to contain my curiosity, I ask another question. "But seriously, how did you have time."

His face flushes red as he looks down. "Um, the notes were easy and I didn't have to go far to get the necklace. I've had it for a while."

"In the habit of keeping trinkets around, Cullen?" I joke, but feel my heart quicken at the thought that he's done this for others in the past. His eyes shoot up quickly.

"What? No, of course not." He pauses a moment. "It was my mother's."

"Oh, Edward, I can't accept this, it is-"

"Yours," he says sternly. "Our relationship is important to me, Bella, and since we didn't have time for me to properly show you before you left, I wanted you to have a reminder."

"It's beautiful." I don't know what else to say. The loaded meaning behind the necklace feels wrong
to discuss long distance, but my heart warms at the thought just the same.

"I like seeing it on you. Keep it close okay. When those doubts creep up, I want you to look at it, and know nothing is going to stop us. Nothing," he states with conviction, fire burning in his eyes.

"I will," I say simply, once again speechless. Someday, I hope my words will flow just as easily as his when it comes to matters of the heart.

"So, what else is going on?" he asks.

"Not much, I'm working on Jasper's task, other than that it's pretty quiet here, which is good." I pause gathering my thoughts before switching to a more difficult topic. "Jenks told me about Felix."

"Yeah, the fact that Aro's men got to him in a FBI holding cell worries me. The Volturi are feeling pretty confident if they were willing to take that risk. I'm hoping Seth can get a solid lead before anything else happens."

"I think Seth was working on something this morning. I'm sure he will find a lead soon," I state confidently.

"Good, because the quicker we find something, the quicker I can get to you. I don't think I can stay away much longer," Edward admits honestly.

"It's harder than I expected, especially when my fear gets the best of me," I admit.

"What are you afraid of, Bella?"

"Losing you," I speak quietly. Unable to keep eye contact, I watch my hands anxiously twine together while I wait in silence for his response.

"Never going to happen, baby. You're stuck with me." His soothing voice washes over me. "You've enchanted me, Bella Swan, I'm here to stay."

I look up to see him smiling and I smile back trying to soak up his confidence for my own. Suddenly Jenks and Seth barge back into the room, breaking the spell.

"Sorry to interrupt the reunion, but we don't have much time and Seth has something to show us," Jenks jumps right in.

"Why don't we have much time?" I question.

"We are just on a lunch break. Emmett and I need to go back to the office soon," Edward explains sadly.

"Oh, let's get to work then," I say, clearing my throat to stuff down the disappointment.

On the screen, I see Emmett and Jasper walk in the room, after receiving a text from Edward to return. Finally, the gang's all here.

"Okay, Seth, show us what you got," Jenks says.

I stand so Seth can take my spot at the computer. He has connected three different screens to allow him to work with several windows at the same time. The middle screen is currently showing the boys in Seattle, who also have several screens that connect directly to Seth's monitors. Almost like a choreographed ballet, I watch Seth's fingers gracefully fly over the keyboard. Boxes pop up and
fill the screens in time with some unheard melody. I have no idea how he tracks it all, but it's amazing to watch.

"Okay, I already breached the FBI mainframe, so it was easy to get back in once the server was up and running. This gives us access to almost everything, including files, e-mails and video."

"Wow, that's great, kid," Emmett commends.

"Oh, that was nothing, but I do have something to show you guys. I reviewed the security tapes around the time of Felix's murder and found an abnormality." His fingers continue to dance along the keyboard as he searches for the right file. "This footage is from the camera monitoring the door of the evidence lab two nights before Felix was found dead."

Silence fills the room as we anxiously watch the screen for Seth's discovery. After several minutes of watching an empty hallway, Jasper vocalized the question running through all our minds.

"What the hell am I looking at, Seth?"

"It's looped," he responds.

"Huh?" Jenks says.

"Someone messed with the tape. Here watch," he states, fingers flying as he enhances the picture and increases the size of the video. "They replaced the tape with earlier footage and luckily, did a poor job. Look." He points to various shadows on the screen as the footage plays.

"I still don't see what you're seeing," I state, straining my eyes.

"Whoever did it missed some frames. It's not a clean loop." He enhances the picture again and then slows it down. "This morning, I went frame by frame, pulling up pieces of the lost footage and when I did, look at what I found."

The screen switches to a freeze frame of someone walking out of the evidence room, which typically means nothing, but this footage is time-stamped at one in the morning.

"Do you guys know who this is?" Seth asks curiously.

"Oh my god!" I yell, shocked by the person I recognize on the screen.

"Jessica Stanley? There's no freaking way," Emmett exclaims right after me.

"What am I missing?" Jasper questions, his interest piqued by our reaction.

"Jessica is an office technician. She doesn't have the access or the brains to pull this off," Edward responds. I can see him studying the screen.

"Maybe her stupidity is part of her cover? An office technician is actually a great under cover position because no one suspects them," Jenks surmises.

"No, she's a leech. Her worth is tied to the people around her. She's out for status, but I don't see her taking a leadership role. She's doing someone's dirty work," I say, providing a different perspective based on years of watching her. Not to mention that I know her stupidity is not an act. Her dim and superficial colors can't be faked, however, I can't say that out loud in this crowd.

"Okay, looks like we need to get to Jessica," Jasper states.
I study the grainy shot, assessing her body language. It doesn't shout confident, it shouts nervousness. Unless someone is threatening her, she will be easy to turn. We just need a worthwhile prize.

"Edward needs to talk with her," I blurt out as an idea forms.

"Why?" Jenks asks.

"Like I said, Jessica is all about status and Edward's attention is something she's desperately after. He could turn her." I look into Edward's eyes as he realizes my train of thought, a slight panic erupting on his face.

"You know I'm right, Edward. Take her out and get her to talk to you. You throw a little Cullen charm her way, and she will be putty in your hands," I state confidently, pushing back the returning insecurities of Edward's past.

"She's right, E," Emmett jumps in. "The girl trips all over herself if you smile in her direction."

"Fine, I'll take her out, but damn it, I want a decontamination shower ready to go so I can wash the sleaze off after this debacle," Edward relents, joking to ease the tension.

"We can wire you up and connect the feed to the system," Seth says, trying to help.

*Great, watching Edward take Jessica on a date, that's something I always wanted to witness.*

"How quick can we do this?" Jenks asks.

"The sooner the better," Jasper answers, "We need to contain the mole quickly."

"I'll ask her when we get back. We can do it tomorrow," Edward jumps in.

"Okay, I will have the system ready to watch you on both ends. Oh, one other thing," Seth says quickly, "Watch what you are e-mailing at work. The director is having reports sent to him on e-mail activity and internet use. Big brother's watching closely."

"Why the fuck would he do that?" Emmett ponders.

"I'll find out soon. I pinged his computer, so whatever he does on his screen will show up on mine," Seth responds.

"Jesus, kid, I'm glad you are on our side," Jenks remarks, giving Seth an awkward high-five.

"Shit, we have to go, Edward," Emmett interrupts looking at his watch.

"Fuck, okay let's schedule our next contact for tomorrow morning. Let's say seven," Edward says, also looking at his watch.

"Why not tonight?" I question, hoping my voice doesn't sound as desperate as I feel.

"Emmett and I are helping with a stake out, so we'll be out of touch tonight."

"Oh."

"It's all part of the cause. We're helping Ben with one of his cases. You know, keep your friends close and your possible enemies closer. It will be just Emmett, Ben, and I in an empty apartment with nothing to do but talk. Hopefully we can either clear him or have another lead by morning."
"Sounds like a plan," Jenks says.

"Come on, Edward, we have to move," Emmett says.

"Okay, Bella, I…umm..., be careful, okay," he stutters with a sad smile.

"It's you who needs to be careful. Watch your back tonight."

"I always am. Don't worry, I'll be fine. Talk to you soon, baby." He smiles, still waving when the screen goes black.

I stare at the computers a few more moments; the ease in my heart leaving when Edward does. I feel Jenks walk up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Don't worry, Ace. Edward's gonna be fine. In the meantime, we have lots to do. Seth, I want to know what that fucking director is up to, show me what you got on him," Jenks orders, taking command, and refusing to let me wallow.

Several hours later, Jenks is going over the new information I'd written out. He's currently hunched over the table staring at the list of Brazilian associates. Seth finally passed out few hours ago, exhausted after writing code the previous night. When his body started to sway at the desk, I convinced him to go to bed, especially because the director's account was quiet so far, basically getting us nowhere at this point. Jenks and I powered on, focusing instead on the information I've compiled.

"You know, Ace, this is all great and helpful, but when are you going to focus more on Aro?"

"What do you mean? This is about Aro."

"No, this is about Aro's business," he argues, waving his hand at the paperwork spread across the table. "I want to know about Aro the man. How much time did you spend with him?"

"Before my mom died, nothing. Afterwards, I was with him all the time. I sat in his office most days while he met with people."

"Wait, you mean to tell me you were a direct witness to most of his business dealings?" Jenks asks astonished.

"Yes," I say hesitantly, not sure if I want to get into this conversation.

"Fuck, this is amazing!" I look at him absurdly. The tortuous hours spent inside that office were anything but amazing. "Why did he have you there do you think?" he ponders.

"I was another possession to show off. Like his house, cars and artwork. He would dress me up in expensive clothes and set me in a corner like his own live porcelain doll."

"Christ, do you realize that you know the inner most workings of his life. You need to write that down," he exclaims, grasping for a notebook.

"Jenks, I spent years putting that out of my mind. Most of the time, I was lost in my own little world. I honestly don't know if I can remember any of it."

"You have to try," he states with conviction. "One of those conversations could be the key to bringing him down."
The room is stifling. I feel hot and cold all at the same time; sweat beads develop on my forehead while my body shakes uncontrollably. I don't like thinking about Aro.

"Just start with one thing," he coaxes. "Tell me about the first day. What stands out in your mind?"

Taking a deep breath, I plunge into my memories. It was 3 days after my mother's murder. My new nanny woke me up earlier than usual, and dressed me in a fancy, uncomfortable dress that itched terribly. I remember thinking she was mean, especially when she painfully pulled my hair into two perfect pig tails with bright red bows. Afterwards, Caius came in and led me down a long hallway to my father's office. All of my life I had been forbidden to enter it, so I was nervous walking into the intimidating room.

The office seemed cavernous to my six-year-old eyes. The walls were a brick-red, accented by dark brown furniture. Wooden shelves lined several walls filled with leather-bound books, nothing that appealed to my young mind. Aro's desk was large, surrounded by several leather chairs. His chair was the biggest of all, tall and thrown-like.

He was sitting at his desk scribbling furiously on a paper in front of him. Once I crossed the threshold, he looked up and narrowed his sinister eyes in my direction, before briefly nodding his head at Caius and returning to his writing. That was the extent of his interaction with me that day.

"What do you remember most?" Jenks presses.

"I remember being afraid of him," I whisper. "I mean, I just watched him kill my mother. I was honestly waiting for him to kill me too."

"So what happened?" Jenks pushes me past the memory of my mother, keeping me on track.

"I was invisible to him. Caius sat me in a chair in the corner, and I just stayed there as he went throughout his day. He barely acknowledged my presence." Jenks sits with an odd mixture of fascination and sympathy as he listens intently.

"He spent most of the day on the phone or in meetings with people parading in and out of his office. I remember he yelled a lot while making demands and deals. I barely understood any of the content." Feeling nauseous, I try to calm my quaking body.

"What do you remember about his discussions? Did he speak about specific people or places? Any codes or numbers?" Jenks bombards me with questions as he scribbles notes.

"No I don't think so."

"Come on, Ace, try. He had to have mentioned something of importance, something we can use," Jenks inquires, his relentless pushing starting to anger me.

"I told you I don't remember!" I scream, closing my eyes. I need time to calm down, I'm losing control. "Can we take a break?"

"No!" Looking into his hard eyes, I realize I am sitting with integrator Jenks. "This petty list shit isn't going to get us anywhere. We are trying to take down the largest and most dangerous crime syndicate in the world! Your memories are the only chance we have of coming out of this alive. Your mom died and your life was shit. So what are you going to do about? Continue to hide or stand up and fight? Because this weak little girl act is really starting to piss me off!"

I jump out of my chair, the quickness of my actions causing it to crash loudly to the floor. Jenks stares me down, but it does little to temper my rage.
"I am not weak! You know nothing about my life or what I've done to survive, so shut your fucking mouth or leave. I never asked you to come here, and I never fucking asked for your help."

"You angry, Ace?"

"Yes!"

"Good, because these memories are killing your spirit and you have to make a choice right here and now. You think I don't see what this is doing to you? Like I said earlier, you either lose control or you direct it. Take all of those emotions hurting you and target them at that son of a bitch sperm donor. If you don't figure out a way to do it, he's already won." I stand quietly, contemplating his words.

"Bella, I can't imagine your childhood and to come out the other side successful…I'm in awe. But understand something, I'm here to make sure we win, and if that means kicking you in the butt from time to time, better believe I'm going to do it. We need you on your best game. If you give up we all lose, Edward loses, so let's try again," he says calmly walking over to kiss my forehead before returning to the table.

"Now, where were we?" Jenks asks sitting down again with his notebook ready to capture important pieces of information hidden in my memories.

I slowly sit back down and realize as much as I hate it, Jenks is right. I need to do this for everyone's sake. "Okay, tell me what I need to do."

"Tell me about the second day," Jenks suggests.

I again delved into the recess of my mind and share more experiences of my Aro's filled days. After about three hours, we decide it's a good time to stop. Tomorrow is a big day. Hopefully Edward's manipulation of Jessica will prove fruitful, and bring us closer to resolution in at least one area.

"Okay enough of this depressing shit. Let's get drunk!" Jenks exclaims, pulling a bottle of scotch out of his backpack sitting next to the table.

Exhausted by the day's events, tense from talking about Aro and saddened that I can't talk to Edward until tomorrow; I decided he is right, getting drunk sounds like a perfect plan at this point.

"Bring it on." I smile as he opens the bottle.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time. :)
Chapter 16: Enter Sandman

Chapter Notes

A/N

There is a lot happening in this chapter, so I hope you enjoy it.

I own nothing connected to Twilight, but I'm having fun playing with the characters and appreciate Stephenie Meyer for creating them.

Thank you to my beta Tds88! She is awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16: Enter Sandman

Jenks' laughter fills the living room. He is the definition of a comedy of errors. He's leaning precariously over a table, his face etched in concentration while he shakily attempts to pour us another shot and failing miserably in his drunken state.

"Hey, Ace, stop the room. I'm trying to pour here!"

I snicker at the sight, barely able to hold my head up and leaning heavily against the couch cushions. After filling the glasses about half way, he hands one over.

"Cheers," he states before throwing back the shot.

Our terrible coordination and slurred speech is a sign we should stop, unfortunately we are both too hammered to care. After successfully keeping the drink down, Jenks continues telling tales of his early mercenary days. He is currently over-sharing details about his time in a Bangkok strip club, but I am too spellbound by the colors and lights floating around him to grasp the point of his story. My alcohol drenched brain enhances his naturally vibrant colors, and my own spinning vision makes them especially entertaining.

"Your colors are pretty," I giggle.

"My what?" he laughs. "You're definitely drunk. You're making no sense."

"No your colors," I say again, not understanding why he isn't following my train of thought. "You know, around you. Your feelings. They tell me you're a good guy. You're a good guy right? I like having you here, good guy. I was lonely before you came," I mumble incoherently. My inebriated mind, however, is positive that it sounds logical.

"Yup, you're drunk," Jenks mutters lying down on the floor by the chair across from the couch. "Drunk, drunk, drunk. Edward's gonna kill me. I don't think this is what he meant when he made me promise to take care of you." He closes his eyes and his breathing slows. The colors mute around him, a quiet snore breaking the sudden silence.

The forest is dense with large trees reaching towards the sky. They block the sunlight from fully illuminating the floor below, and I shiver in the dampness left untouched by the warmth above. Stumbling over the branches and rocks on the decaying path, I try to remember why I'm here. Feeling lost, I frantically look around hoping to find my destination and purpose. Through the trees ahead, I spot a glimmer of sun, and carefully moving forward to investigate, I discover a clearing. Peering between the trees, I see Caius sitting at a table in the middle of a flower filled meadow looking at the documents I've written about the Volturi. I rub my eyes in disbelief, but move forward quickly, anxious to see him again.

"You've done a lot of work here, cara," he says without turning. Although a part of my brain realizes this is not real, my heart swells at seeing him after so many years. I walk closer and lay my head on his shoulder. I don't know how long I have in this world, and I want to absorbed as much of his light as possible.

"How come when you call me cara I feel loved, but from anyone else, it makes me afraid."

He sighs deeply. "Isabella, it's just a word, and like any word, the only meaning they bring are the ones we give them. He turns to look at me, gently taking my face in his hands. "And sometimes we give words too much power."

"I miss you," I whisper.

"I miss you too." He leans in and kisses my forehead. Pulling back again, his stormy eyes stare into mine while his hands move down to my shoulders, squeezing them painfully. The intensity of his look scares me.

"It's time to face him."

"But I'm afraid. How can I run towards him instead of away?"

"Your perspective changes when you see life from the other side. I picked Swan for a specific reason, remember." I nod my head, recalling the story. "It's time to become the Swan and rid yourself of your past. You are the only thing Aro fears, Isabella. It's why he kept you so close."

"I don't understand," I yell. The sunlight fades around me, casting dark shadows on the field.

"You know more than you realize," Caius declares, unexpectedly turning me around until I'm facing the forest. I see what looks like an apparition looming at the edge of the tree line.

"I'm sorry I can't be there for the finish," he whispers in my ear.

The apparition steps out into the clearing, the light slowly eating away the darkness to reveal the face of my father. Caius holds me in a painful grip as I fight for freedom.

"There is nowhere to run, Isabella. Time to face the devil!" Evil laughter fills my ears, a foreign sound coming from my guardian angel. I'm trapped. Aro continues to move forward, his menacing eyes penetrate the depths of my soul.

"You have something that belongs to me," Aro hisses, pulling out a knife. Caius tightens his hold as I struggle to free myself. Aro is suddenly in front of me, his teeth glistening between his evil smile.

"My daughter," he says running a hand down my face.

Before I fully register the visual, I hear the slicing of flesh as he cuts through my skin. Pain explodes, life dripping down my side. I strive to look him in the eye, refusing to bow down even at
I'm okay, I'm okay, I chant over and over trying to calm down.

"What? What's happening?" Jenks' yells, jumping up from the floor into a fighter's stance and searching wildly around the room. He quickly looks in my direction; recognition dawning on his face when he takes in my frightened state.

"Nightmare?" he whispers, walking forward to kneel beside me, softly rubbing my back.

"Yeah," I choke, still trying to break free of the fear that seeing Aro caused. After several minutes, my heart finally slows as the panic subsides.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really," I whisper. The sharpness of the nightmare is fading, but a nagging thought in the back of mind tells me there's something I need to remember.

"So you're okay?"

"Yeah." I smile softly, hoping to ease his tension.

"Oh thank god, because my head's about to explode. What the hell happened last night?" Jenks questions, slinking his body down to lie on the carpet.

"I have no idea, but let's never do it again." Now that the adrenaline has left my body, the familiar nausea and headache of a hangover replaces it. "Oh, I feel like crap."

"At least you feel like crap, I feel like fucking shit." Jenks smirks with closed eyes. "Lucky for you, Swan, I know a guaranteed Russian hangover cure. Now, if I can only get my body to work, I'll get you fixed up in no time." He slowly stands and looks me up and down. I have no doubt that I'm a disheveled mess.

"Yup, Edward's going to kill me," he laughs, carefully moving to the kitchen.

"Don't walk so loud," I grumble, hearing him rummaging through the refrigerator. Several minutes later, he comes back handing me a foul drink that smells strongly like pickles.

"I know it smells horrible, but it works. So man up and suck it down," he says, gulping down a similar drink.

Grabbing the glass, I look at him and swallow the most disgusting drink to ever touch my lips. "God I hate you," I grumble.

Jenks' chuckles and takes both glasses back to the kitchen. Falling back against the couch, I pray his miracle drink works soon. Looking through cracked eyelids at the clock across the room, I realize I only have an hour to get myself together before the check in with Edward. Slowly getting
off the couch, I see Jenks has again taken residence on the floor. *Miracle cure my ass.* Moving to the kitchen, I start a pot of strong coffee in the hopes it will shake the grogginess.

"Good morning, Bella!" Seth bellows from behind me.

"Son, if you know what's good for you, you'll use your inside voice," Jenks growls.

"Umm, what happened?" Seth asks looking between us.

"We drank a little too much last night," I mutter, leaning against the counter and propping my head up with my hand to watch the coffee drip into the pot.

"Oh. Did you know it is the ethanol in alcohol that causes hangovers? It increases urine production, which leads to dehydration. You should drink lots of water and eat some eggs. Eggs have albumin, which is a protein that helps to re-hydrate cells," Seth rambles.

"Very helpful, Seth. Instead of quoting facts, why don't you make yourself useful and cook us some of those re-hydrating eggs," Jenks grouses from his spot on floor.

"Umm, I tend to burn things, so it's not advisable to have me cook," Seth says anxiously.

"You don't have to cook. He is just being grumpy, don't mind him." I smile reassuringly.

"I am not." Jenks whines from the living room.

"You are too." I roll my eyes, realizing we've been reduced to the conversations of five-year olds.

"Okay, well I'm just going to work on setting up surveillance for tonight," Seth mumbles, unsure and nervous about the earlier banter. "Jenks, you want communication between us and the car, but only audio from Edward and no feedback to him, right?" he questions.

"Yeah, we need to talk with Emmett and Jasper, but I don't want our chatter to go to Edward. We just need to hear him. You can do that right?"

"Of course I can," Seth exclaims offended by the question. "I keep telling you guys-"

"I know you can do it all…blah, blah, blah. I was just checking, kid, don't get your panties in a wad." Jenks huffs. Seth turns and looks at me with a worried expression, pulling out a piece of paper from his pocket. Fold 1,2,3,4,5. I softly shake my head.

"Grumpy," I mouth quietly, giving Seth a wink and slight pat on the shoulder. "Don't pay him any attention. He'll be back to his charming self soon," I whisper.

Seth nods and moves over to the computers and within a few seconds I hear frenzied typing. The coffee maker continues to brew at a painfully slow pace adding to my own grumpiness. *Screw this.*

"I'm going to shower," I announce, turning to drag myself up the stairs.

After a hot shower and feeling a bit more human, I walk back to the kitchen just in time for the meeting. Jenks is finally off the floor and talking to Seth while he connects to the chat. Stopping first to grab some coffee, I take my cup and sit down in the chair next to Seth's, watching as the blank screen fills with Edward, Emmett and Jasper's faces.

"Hi, Bella," Edward says immediately with a brilliant smile. My heart warms at the sight. Giving me a once over, his face scrunches in concern. I guess the shower didn't erase the effects of the hangover like I thought. "Are you okay?"
"I'm fine, Jenks shared his love of scotch last night and I went a bit overboard," I admit, laughing at my stupidity.

"Way to go, Bells," Emmett says. Edward on the other hand, silently cuts his narrowed eyes to Jenks.

"See, I told you he was going to kill me," Jenks whispers in my ear as he leans over, before clearing his throat nervously. "Hey, man, it was just a bit of fun, no worries."

"Damn it, Jason! You're there to watch her, not party," Edward growls.

"Hold on! I'm an adult, and I made my own choice. No need to get upset with him," I snap feeling the need to defend Jenks.

"That's not the point, Bella," Edward retorts, keeping his eyes on Jenks. "What if someone had shown up last night?"

"Now wait a minute, I've fought in worse shape. Believe me, Bella was perfectly safe. In fact, when she woke up screaming this morning, I was right there ready to throw down."

I cringe at his description of my nightmare. "Thanks a lot," I mutter, reaching over to discreetly pitch his leg.

"Ow! What?"

"Not helping, you ass," I hiss quietly.

Edward swings his concerned eyes back to me. "Bella?"

"I had a nightmare, no biggie. Just dragging up all this stuff…nothing to worry about." I gloss over the incident, not wanting to talk about it in front of everyone. Edward studies me for a moment, and then in apparent understanding, gives me a tight supportive smile.

"Later," he mouths into the camera. I softly nod my head, agreeing to the request.

"So, how did it go with Ben?" I inquire, effectively moving the topic off of my nightmare and drinking episode.

"We're pretty sure Ben is a dead-end," Edward answers.

"Yeah, the guy talked a lot last night about his problems. He's pretty overwhelmed, and once he started spilling all his shit, he just couldn't stop." Emmett jumps in.

"He talked a lot about his drinking and gambling. His marriage is on thin ice and he's starting counseling to try to sort it all out. I don't think he'd be as forthcoming about his issues if he was on Aro's leash," Edward adds.

"We can move him to the back burner for now. I'm not ready to completely clear him, but I think our time and effort is better spent with the other suspects," Jasper adds in an authoritative tone. It still bothers me when he tries to take charge. I don't want his narrowed vision taking over.

"What about Director Banner? Any leads from his e-mail?" Edward inquires, looking at Seth.

"So far, there isn't anything abnormal. It's all straight forward. He's still getting reports on the e-mail and internet usage of everyone in the office, but nothing stands out in the reports he receives, and from what I can tell, he isn't sending them to anyone."

"Nothing suspicious?" Edward probes further.

"No. Oh wait, there was one thing. Just in case you didn't know, I found out Banner will be at Quantico all next week. Not sure if that matters or not, but there it is."


"Speaking of action, let's talk about tonight. Seth, I need you to set up--" Jasper starts to order, before Jenks unexpectedly cuts him off.

"Before you start telling us your plan, I think we need to reconsider things."

"What do mean?" Edward asks.

"After talking to Bella yesterday, I think exposing the mole is the wrong move."

"Hold up. We already agreed to this plan," Jasper argues.

"Jasper, no offense, but I think your plan is going to fail. You're thinking like an agent and if history has proven anything, that mindset gets nowhere with the Volturi. So, why don't you calm down and hear me out," Jenks chastises. There is a calm authority to his voice, but I hear the agitation stirring underneath.

"Fine. The floor is yours," Jasper says condescendingly, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

"After listening to Bella's experiences with Aro, I believe that chaos is not only his greatest frustration, but also his biggest weakness. The only time she saw him lose his temper was when something didn't go his way," Jenks conveys, laying out the foundation of his newly formed plan.

"Okay, so what?" Emmett asks. Edward sits quietly, contemplating Jenks' words while Jasper sulks to the side.

"So, exposure will do nothing. The Volturi have the connections and fortitude to recover easily, that's been the downfall with every other agency. I think infiltration is the better option. Someone working from the inside to cause problems. The more chaos we create, the more things will unravel, and then we strike."

"He's right. I've never been able to get anywhere from the outside, but if we were on the inside, we could do some major damage. Like a virus, we can affect everything," Seth adds. He looks blankly across the room as he talks, most likely mentally writing codes to bring the Volturi to its knees.

I hate to admit it, but there is a certain simple genius to Jenks' plan. "You're probably right, especially if you started with James. His tendency for distraction could cause all sorts of problems for Aro. But, no matter if you are right or not, it's not worth discussing. There's no way to safely infiltrate the Volturi," I assert. Fear tingles up my spine when I consider exactly where Jenks is going with this plan.

"Think about it, I'm the only one not connected to a formal agency and no one knows I'm involved with any of you. The timing is perfect because they are recruiting. If I can get on the Seattle crew, we can do a lot of damage from the inside." I look at him wide-eyed, shaking my head back and forth.

"You really want to do this, man?" Edward asks.
"No! There's no way. It's too dangerous!" I shout. The familiar feeling of guilt bubbles up when I think about another person sacrificing their life trying to save me from Aro.

"Hey, danger is my middle name," Jenks jokes before turning to face me. "Ace, this is not like before. Between everyone here and Seth's computer skills, I truly believe we can stay one step ahead. If we don't do this, we'll chase our tails until we are discovered, and then what? Remember, I'm here to win, and this is the only way."

"What are you thinking?" Emmett asks. Everyone else is contemplating his plan, while I struggle not to hyperventilate. Pictures of faces and death flood my mind.

"Tonight, instead of turning Jessica, I say we feed her false information. If Edward offhandedly mentions he has new information on the Felix case, we can see what Ms. Jessica does with that tidbit."

"Except Jessica wants Edward. She's not going to betray him if she thinks he's interested in her." I'm grasping at straws, hoping to dissuade everyone from this path.

"If Jessica is as desperate as you all say, we can use her like a yo-yo. Edward pulled her in with the dinner invite, but tonight he'll push her away." He turns back to the screen and focuses on Edward.

"You can bet with your reputation of fucking anything that moves, Jessica is expecting a happy ending tonight. If you reject her, she'll be humiliated. My guess is she will go looking for some revenge, and your little tidbit of information is her opportunity."

Edward looks over to me in embarrassment when Jenks mentions his reputation. Under any other circumstance, my heart would clench at the thought of his history, but at the moment, I'm preoccupied with figuring out a way to deter Jenks. I give Edward a quick, soft smile to let him know I'm okay, and focus back on the conversation.

"That does make sense," Jasper says, speaking for the first time since Jenks challenged his plan.

"Seth, can you set up some way to track her? My bet is she will lead us right to the mole," Jenks requests.

"Easily. I also think we should set up a tracking program for the false lead. If Edward tells Jessica the information is on his computer, I can create a file embedded with a tracking program to tag anyone who accesses it."

"But if we find the mole by tracking Jessica, why would you want to tag them?" Emmett asks.

"Even if we know who they are, tagging them allows me more access, especially if they have cyber contact with the Volturi. If you guys get me in, there is little I can't do," Seth explains with confidence. I imagine his mind is a fascinating place of ones and zeros.

"That's brilliant, kid!" Jenks exclaims.

"Okay, with all that, it seems to me we don't need Jenks to go undercover," I argue rationally.

Jenks sighs beside me. "Ace, I appreciate your concern, but this is what I do. Yes, getting into the system is going to help, but there is nothing we can do from a distance that is going to do as much damage as me working from the inside. If you want out, there's no other option. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

I stare into his sincere eyes, confidence floating around him. He believes in this plan. Looking back
at the screen, Emmett is nodding his head in agreement and Edward is looking at me with hopeful eyes. They all agree with Jenks. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes. Logically I know he is right, emotionally I don't think I will survive someone else dying for me.

"Okay. But you are absolutely not allowed to die. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am," he says, saluting me. "And for the record, I didn't need your permission. I would have done it anyway." Jenks smirks giving me a sideways hug. Edward smiles through the screen and I can't help but wish it was him giving me the hug instead. I miss the calming nature of his touch.

"Now that we've settled that issue, what time are we going on this date, Cullen?" Jenks asks.

"Seven. I told Jessica to meet me at the restaurant," Edward answers, looking at me nervously.

"Perfect. It will be easier to reject her advances if she meets you there." Jenks laughs.

"I have to say, I'm kind of looking forward to seeing her throw a temper tantrum tonight," Emmett remarks. All eyes turn to him. "What? The chick annoys me." He quickly justifies. I can't help but laugh at his innocent expression, which completely contradicts the unsympathetic comment.

"Yeah, Em, it should give us some entertainment if anything else." I smile, attempting to ignore my increasing apprehension about watching the Edward Cullen operate.

We spend another half an hour planning the logistics and talking to Seth about his idea for the planted "evidence". By the end, we are confident about tonight. Now the only thing left to do is wait for the date to begin.

Right before signing off, Jenks clears the room with a knowing look to Edward. I look curiously at him while everyone else says their goodbyes, and Jenks again pulls Seth from the room mumbling about excuses.

"Want to tell me why everyone ran out of here?" I question once the rooms are clear.

"You don't want to spend some quality alone time with me? I think I'm offended, Swan," Edward jokes, but there is a hesitation behind his words.

"Of course, I want to spend time with you," I admit, looking down and fussily pushing hair behind my ear. "But I also know you, and something's going on."

Edward hesitates for a moment, before clearing his throat. "I wish I was there with you," he whispers, avoiding the issue. "I trust Jenks with my life, and I'm glad he's there with you, but I really hate that he can touch you when I can't."

"I miss you too," I whisper back. I prevent my hand from reaching out towards the screen. It aches to hold his, desperately searching for the tranquility of his touch.

"It's hard to believe that it's only been a few weeks since things changed for us. I'm so comfortable with you. Like we were always meant for each other." My heart flutters at the declaration. "But, I'm so angry we didn't get a chance to start our relationship like a normal couple." He pauses and looks down, building courage to get out whatever it is he wants to say. "I don't think you should watch tonight, Bella."

"You can't read people through a screen. There's nothing you can do that the others couldn't. I just think it would be better if you didn't watch."

"You still didn't answer me, Edward. Why? I'm a big girl, if you're worried that-

"Of course I'm worried!" Edward interrupts. "How could I not be? You try to hide it, but I see the uncertainty in your eyes. Sometimes it feels like I'm just trying to keep you with me. One false move and I'll lose you forever. You're so quick to cut ties and run."

"Edward, I trust you more than anyone. It's hard some days, but I fight through because I know we're worth it." Doesn't he understand how much I've opened up to him, how vulnerable I've allowed myself to become in his arms?

"You may trust me more than anyone else, but you don't trust me completely, not yet." I try to argue, but he stops me. "It's okay, I understand why. I have no problem earning it, but it's this damn situation. Fuck, Bella, I haven't taken you on a date yet. And now, you're going to watch me play a role with Jessica that I never wanted you to see again? It scares me, okay. I don't want to risk losing you. I can't lose you," he chokes.

"You won't lose me. I can handle it, I know what I will see won't be real," I say reassuringly, although I'm not sure who I am trying to reassure more.

He looks down for a moment and shakes his head. "You're so stubborn. Okay, if you insist on watching, I want you to remember that I've never played twenty questions with anyone else. I've never brought another girl to meet my family, and I've never wanted to have a picnic under the night sky before. Bella, you are the only one I am 'real' with. No matter what you see or hear tonight, believe and trust in that."

"I will, I promise," I state with conviction. Watching tonight will be difficult, but not succumbing to those fears is a good step towards proving to Edward that I do trust in our relationship.

"Shit. I have to go to work." Edward realizes looking at his watch. "Remember, Bella, it's only ever been you. I…I'll talk to you soon."

"I'll talk to you soon," I whisper back as the screen fades to black.

Now, there is really nothing to do but wait. Recognizing my restlessness, Jenks suggests another defense lesson. He wasn't kidding about showing no mercy, but I'm able to use my feelings about Jessica and Edward's date and Jenks plan to my advantage, allowing me to gain the upper hand more than once.

After the brutal, but successful session, I decide to walk down to the dock to cool off. The sun is high in the sky, but unlike yesterday, the chill of October lingers in the air. Sitting with my legs dangling over the edge and leaning back to let the sun warm my face, I think about my nightmare. I cannot let go of the nagging feeling that there is something I need to remember. Using Jenks' pep talk from yesterday, I force myself to wander back into my memories, trying to think of anything that would explain what Caius meant in my dream. After several minutes of flipping through mental pictures, a fuzzy memory from when I was twelve pushes its way to the forefront.

Per usual, after my tutoring session, Caius is taking me to Aro's office for another miserable day at his side. My life is on an endless loop: eat, sleep, study and sit with Aro. Each day blurs into the next and every day I wonder if today is the day he finally kills me.

"So, what went wrong this week?" I ask walking down the hallway leading to Aro's office. The
walls are dark, with dim lights scarcely scattered along the way, giving it a morose feel. It was most likely an intentional choice, a way to portray doom to all who visited.

"What do you mean?" Caius inquires, turning to look at me with confusion.

"I mean, Aro is extra cranky."

"Too smart for your own good," he comments softly. "Well smarty pants, you should know the answer to that question."

"Why would I know?"

"Tell me, when did you learn to play poker?" Caius counters with his own question.

"Poker?" I ask perplexed.

"Yes, poker. You suddenly developed a really great poker face. It's ruined his whole week." Caius smirks before opening the door to Aro's office and ending the conversation.

Caius abruptly switches to his enforcer face, nodding at Aro as we walk in. Aro looks up with a sneer and evaluates my attire, making sure I am presentable. Ignoring the icy chill of his eyes, I walk over and sit in my chair.

"Hello, Isabella. Let's have a better day today, shall we," he states cryptically, before calling his secretary to bring in his first appointment, which is my cue to let my mind wander.

Stunned, I sit up straight and concentrate on the memory again. It can't be, I think unconsciously pulling at my hair.

"Ace!" I turn and see Jenks jogging towards the dock. "Seth and I need your help, time to stop slacking." Still unnerved by the memory, I try to pull myself together before Jenks reaches me. His timing really sucks.

As with many situations over the last two weeks, I find myself desperately wishing Edward was here. I need to sort out my thoughts, but this is one thing I cannot discuss with Jenks. Tomorrow, I need to talk to Edward alone. He can help me put the pieces together and make sure I'm not jumping to the wrong conclusion. God I hope I'm wrong.

Shaking my head, to regain focus, I stand up and dust off my pants just as Jenks reaches me.

"Whatcha doing down here all by yourself? You okay?"

"I'm fine, just trying to sort out my nightmare," I answer with vague honesty.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Nope," I lie, shaking my head.

"Well, you know where to find me if you do." Jenks bends slightly to look me in the eye, concern and care shine around him.

"Thank you," I say sincerely. "So, what do you need me for?"

"Seth needs the names of some people in your office."
"Why?"

"It's a surprise for tonight," Jenks answers enthusiastically. I stop walking and look over with a raised eyebrow. "It's nothing bad, I swear. Come on, Ace, let us have our fun, and it might just give some comic relief to make this night easier to swallow."

"Fine," I grumble, but smile in his direction. Yup, Jason Jenks is a good guy.

After providing Seth a list of names, I decide to kill time by taking another shower, feeling grimy after the sparring session. Time is moving slowly, anticipation my enemy as I try to wait patiently for tonight. The uneasiness of watching Edward on a date is in direct competition with my desire to get things moving. I'm restless and tired of waiting, if for anything else than to end this separation from Edward.

I feel an energy increasing as the night draws near, like the electricity that flows through the air before a lightning storm. We are on the precipice of something big. Tonight things will change, I can sense it.

Back downstairs, I find Jenks taking a nap on the couch, while Seth continues to type away. Out of pure morbid curiosity, I sit down to watch Seth's magical fingers. He appears oblivious to my presence, completely in a zone. His headphones are securely in his ears, his head slightly bopping to the tune. The computer screen is a frenzy of boxes and lines of code.

His focused state gives me a chance to observe him closer. His colors are dark and intense; a sign of determination. Whatever he's doing is not easy. His nose slightly wrinkles when he starts working a particularly difficult code, frustration shining through as his fingers pound with a little more force. Looking across the paper-scattered desk, I notice Seth has propped the worn picture of his dad against the computer. The face of Jake stares back at me. His once familiar eyes, now holding a million secrets within their sparkle. Unable to look away, I can't help but think of Seth's story.

"Hey, Seth." I tap him on the shoulder interrupting his furious typing.

"Yeah?" he asks, pulling the headphones off, but continuing to type.

"Remember when you asked if I recognized the guy in your picture?"

"Yes," he drags out.

"I do…know him that is. His name was Jacob Black. He worked for Aro." I pause, before asking the question that has plagued my thoughts since I first saw the picture. "Are you sure your aunt said he was helping your father?"

The typing halts, the room now suddenly silent. Seth's face drains of color. He sits frozen in his chair, staring straight ahead. I can see his chest moving in and out with exaggerated breaths.

"I'm positive. You're sure he worked for Aro?" He forces the words from his lips. The chaotic colors telling me he is trying to hold himself together.

"He was my personal guard. We, umm, had a relationship. Aro killed him because he was working on getting me out," I whisper, the guilt of his death still crushing to me.

"Why would your personal guard help my Dad?" Seth asks slowly, grabbing a piece of paper to begin his ritual.
"I don't know. Apparently there was more going on with Jake than I knew. I honestly don't know what to make of it."

"You loved him?"

I humorlessly laugh at his innocent question. This is something I've thought a lot about recently. Since admitting my feelings for Edward, I've found myself reflecting more on my time with Jake and the differences between the two. Jake was a safe haven away from Aro. He helped me escape from my reality. Edward on the other hand, challenges me both intellectually and emotionally. Never once did I experience with Jake the intense spark I feel when Edward touches me. The more I evaluate it, the more I realize it was the situation and not the person that cause my feelings.

"I think I was too young to really know whether it was love. At the time, he was the only bright light in my world. I think it was probably easy to mistake what he made me feel for love," I admit honestly.

"But you trusted him?"

"Yes, I did."

"He's dead?" Seth clarifies thoughtfully.

"Yes," I say quietly. "But, I think we still need to find out why he was involved with your father, for both our sakes."

"Now that I know his name, I can start searching for information. I mean, if that's okay with you?"

I'm amazed at Seth's loving capacity. Out of everyone else on our team, he is the one who has the right to demand answers, but instead concern pours out of him, as he worries about me. Seth deserves his own truth, he deserves to find peace.

"Of course. It's time for the truth to come out for everyone. I want you to find justice for your parents, Seth."

"Okay, after we're done tonight, I'm going to get started."

"Sounds like a plan. Keep me updated with what you find, okay." He nods his head in agreement, acting more like his old self now that there is a plan of action. Putting his earphones back in, he focuses on the screen, his frantic typing filling the air once again.

I smile softly, but swallow the lump in my throat hoping this is not one stone better left unturned. I lean over to give Seth an awkward hug before standing up and leaving him to his work. I walk over to work on my pile of papers and list in an attempt to distract my restless mind. Once again, too many priorities are fighting for my attention: the dream, Jenks' plan, and the picture. I need to focus on one thing at a time, which right now is Jessica.

Finally all the seconds blur together until the clock reads 6:30, the next scheduled contact time. Jenks and I surround Seth as he readies the equipment and programs. Seth has one computer screen set up for Edward's camera feed, one for the camera in the car and the last screen is dedicated for Seth's programming. This screen will also initially host the pre-date face chat.

That screen comes to life as Seth signs-in. We've caught everyone in the middle of their preparation. Jasper's playing with the camera equipment, Emmett's checking his gun, and in the background stands Edward, looking into a mirror on the back wall, giving me a moment to study his profile.
He is striking. His suit pants hang perfectly off his hips, secured with a leather belt. His dark green shirt highlights the green eyes I see looking back in the mirror, the collar slightly open. It's a shirt that could easily take a tie, but looks sophisticatedly dangerous without one. For a moment I imagine the smell of his cologne. It's a combination of amberwood and spice, a scent that is simply Edward. Irrational jealousy bubbles up, and for a moment I allow myself the childish thought of it's not fair.

Caught up in my thoughts, I miss that the conversation has started between Jenks, Emmett and Jasper. Edward walks over to the screen and as always, acknowledges my presence before anything else.

"Looking good!" Jenks remarks. "If I weren't a straight man, I'd be tempted to fight Ace for you," he jokes, playfully shoving me in the shoulder.

"Bring it!" I respond back. Smirking at him and winking at Edward, trying to ease the tension. He smiles tightly, clearly anxious about tonight.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road. Everyone ready?" Jenks ask. Multiple responses fill the room as everyone prepares to leave.

"Bella," Edward says softly. "Don't forget what I said earlier. You're the only one I want to take on a date. No matter what you hear tonight, it's always been you. Understand?"

"Yes. Don't worry about me, just watch yourself. Be safe," I warn. He smiles and blows me a kiss. Right before we disconnect, I watch with fascination as Edward transforms before my eyes. With a concentrated look, a veil of indifference takes over the warm nature of his eyes. His body becomes straighter, almost rigid. The combination creates a distant and arrogant appearance. This is Edward Cullen the F.B.I agent, the arrogant player. It strikes me how often I've seen this side of Edward without realizing how much of it was a mask. This is not my Edward. The thought solidifies our conversation from this morning. No matter what happens tonight or what happened in the past, none of his previous conquests ever met the "real" Edward. Knowing that he's only opened himself up to me means more than a thousand dates would ever mean.

Emmett and Jasper leave first to position the car in a spot that is hidden, but still provides a visual of the entrance to the restaurant. Their camera is positioned on the dash, so we can see it as well, while Edward's camera will provide a view from his perspective. The restaurant is expensive looking and touted as one of the trendiest spots in Seattle. I wonder briefly at the choice; was it Edward's or Jessica's? Edward pulls up to the valet and smoothly gets out, turning over his keys before walking confidently into the building.

The hostess looks up with a bright smile, slowly gazing over Edward's body while he gives her his name. Jessica is waiting at the table and stands with jittery excitement as soon as she sees him. She is wearing a tight black dress with red stiletto heels. Her breasts are barely contained and the dangerously short dress, is one slight bend away from providing a show. She is wearing more make-up than usual, her bright red lips particularly standing out against the dark dress. The outfit screams desperation.

"Edward!" she squeals, running over to give him a hug.

"Jessica," Edward purrs. "You are looking particularly gorgeous tonight. I'm going to have a hard time keeping my mind on dinner." He leans down to kiss the side of her ear and whispers, "We may need to take dessert to go." Jessica giggles loudly and grabs his hand to lead him back to the table.
"I think I just threw up in my mouth a bit," Emmet mocks from the second screen. "I can't believe those lines actually work for him."

"They don't work with me," I scoff, a bit appalled by the sight of Jessica soaking up every cheesy line being thrown her way.

"Well of course not, Ace. You actually have a brain. No offense to your kind, but there are some desperate girls out there who will fall for any load of crap if it gives them a shot at a pretty boy," Jenks comments.

"Forget about Jessica, I want to know how Edward can pull off those lines with a straight face. You look gorgeous? She's one step away from Tammy Lee Baker," Emmett says, Jasper laughing in the background.

"So you guys are telling me, you've never used a cheesy line to get laid?" I ask incredulously.

"Whoa, Ace, we don't need to talk about us. We're just providing you some support. Right, Emmett?"

"Yeah, Bells. I mean look at that bitch, trying to steal your man. You want us to pull her extensions out later?" Emmett adds.

I burst out laughing. "Hmm, what an intriguing idea, but let's see how it goes first," I say trying to ignore visions of Emmett pulling on Jessica's hair. Once this is all over, I really need to get some better "girlfriends".

Focusing my attention on Edward's camera, I tune in just in time to hear him ordering drinks. Edward really is a master. He plays Jessica like a fiddle. A comment here, a touch there; Jessica is eating up everything he does. He has her exactly where we want her, and as the night wears on, she starts oozing signs of desire and anticipation. By the time dinner is almost done, she starts hinting about later, and at one point, even mentions her friend dropped her off, so she doesn't have a way home. Pathetic.

"Okay, Seth, it's time. Hit her," Jenks says.

"Hit her with what?" Jasper asks.

"A little surprise we cooked up. Want to explain, kid?" Jenks asks, watching Seth work his computer magic.

"Jessica is helping to oversee a new scheduling system for the FBI office. It incorporates scheduling rooms for meetings and interviews as well as sending out notices for staffings and trainings. Once something is scheduled, the program automatically e-mails a confirmation to people."

"Is that why you needed those names?" I ask.

"Yes, in case I had to do it manually, I wanted to have the right names. Turns out though, the program lends itself to easy sabotage," Seth explains.

"And? What does this have to do with tonight?" Jasper asks in an exasperated tone.

"Edward needs access to her phone, so Seth and I decided messing with her a bit was a good way to get that access," Jenks answers.
"I'm going to inject a virus into the program to screw with the notification system. As the overseer, it's programmed to e-mail Jessica for every transaction. Her scheduling system is about to combust."

"But how will that help get access to her phone?" I ask, not quite following all the pieces of this plan.

"Truthfully, it doesn't guarantee anything. We are just playing the odds that it will annoy her enough to leave her phone on the table," Jenks responds.

"Why would she leave in the first place?" I question again.

"That part is on Edward. Look, how about we just watch it unfold instead of analyzing the shit out of everything before we are even able to do it." Jenks huffs annoyed. I swish my hand toward the computer in a sarcastic sign to precede and then sit back crossing my arms.

"It's a go," Seth says hitting the command button, before bringing his hands up in front of his face. "Come on baby, come on," he whispers anxiously watching the screen.

Everyone holds their breath with him, watching for a sign that what he did worked. Finally, a low buzzing comes from the small purse next to Jessica. Excusing herself, she pulls out her phone and looks at the screen with a frown. Staring for a moment, she quickly puts it back into her purse and takes a large gulp from her wine glass.

"Everything okay?" Edward asks with concern.

"Umm yeah, just work e-mails. You understand."

Edward chuckles at the comment. "Hey, what can you do? The FBI is not the job you take if you want an eight to five, right."

"Right." Jessica laughs quietly, but is clearly distracted. Her phone starts in again, buzzing consistently from the confines of her purse. "I'm sorry. I just need to see what this is about," she apologizes again, pulling her phone out and looking at it. "What the fuck?"

"What is it?" Edward asks.

"Something's messed up with the scheduling system. I'm getting tons of incorrect e-mails," she says, looking down at her phone agitated.

"Hey babe, there's nothing you can do about it tonight. Let's focus back on us. Here, try this, it's fantastic," Edwards says reaching forward and offering her some type of orzo pasta with spinach.

Realizing that Edward wants to feed her, Jessica forgets about the buzzing phone for a moment. She leans forward to eat the offered bite with as much sexual innuendo as possible, all the while smiling flirtatiously in Edward's direction. Jessica leans back to chew, lightly caressing Edward's hand. The two sit quietly, but as the sound of buzzing continues, I can see the frustration increasing on her face.

"Umm, Jessica, you have something stuck in between your teeth," Edward says hesitantly.

"Oh my God," Jessica looks down in embarrassment and subtly picks at her teeth. "Did I get it?" she asks.

"No, it's still there." Edward stops speaking, most likely gesturing with his hands.
"Seth, hit her again," Jenks directs. Seth presses another button to execute the command.

"Umm, I think I'm just going to go to the ladies' room," Jessica mutters, standing up. She reaches for her purse, just as a new round of buzzing starts. Groaning loudly, she drops it back on the table and marches towards the restroom.

"Bingo," Jenks exclaims.

"That was awesome," Emmett pipes in.

Pulling up another box, Seth initiates another command and starts talking to Edward. "You hear me?" he asks quickly.

"Yup," Edward whispers.

"Okay, on your phone open the file I sent you and just tap hers to yours." Taking Jessica's phone out of her purse, Edward quickly puts the two phones back to back to start the transfer of data.

"How long is this going to take?" Jasper asks.

"Not long, I wrote it to download quickly. Okay, Edward, once the file has transferred, you are safe to put her phone back."

"Won't a download notification show up when she opens her phone?" Jasper asks.

"No, I programmed it to hide." Seth's genius knows no bounds.

"What exactly will this do again?" Jenks asks.

"It tracks her. The program gives me access to everything on her phone and allows me to control things. Smart phones are primed for surveillance. The GPS will track her location and microphones will allow us to listen her conversations. Technology almost makes this too easy," Seth comments.


"Welcome to the revolution... okay, we're in," Seth says, working again on his computer. "Edward, I'm shutting off your audio again."

"Gotcha," Edward whispers.

"Seth, stop whatever you did with that schedule system. We don't want her messing with her phone anymore," Jenks commands.

Pulling up another text box, Seth punches in some codes and ends the program. Just as he executes the command, Jessica returns to the table, none the wiser that she is now wired. Glancing briefly at her purse, she seems relieved to hear it is now quiet. The only thing left to make this a complete success is to tell Jessica about the fake evidence.

Edward is waiting for a good time to bring up the discussion of Felix. So far, Jessica has frustratingly kept the topic off of work and mainly on herself, yammering on and on about her beauty pageant history and yoga workouts. Finally, she provides a door.

"I'm so impressed by you, Edward. You are so good at what you do. I'm sure you will be a director in no time," she oozes in a sickeningly sweet tone. Her nails slowly move up and down his arm in a suggestive way.
"Here we go," Jenks whispers next to me.

"Thank you, Jessica. I do have a knack for it." I can't see his face, but I can imagine the cocky smile he gives her. "Can you keep a secret?" he questions.

"Of course," Jessica responds seriously, fluttering her eyelashes.

"I'm about to blow the lid off a huge case. If I play my cards right, it should land me a big promotion."

"Really? What case?" She breathes out enamored, falling right into the trap.


Jessica, who is unfortunately in the middle of taking a drink, chokes when Edward says his name. There is a slight shake to her hand as she puts her glass back on the table.

"Are you okay?" Edward asks with fake concern.

"Umm yeah, just went down the wrong pipe. I'm fine," Jessica chokes out, trying to control her cough. Finally settled, she focuses back on Edward. "Didn't he kill himself? I thought that case was closed?" Her voice squeaks slightly in her attempt to portray indifference.

"Wow, you weren't kidding, Ace. There's no way she's the mastermind."

"That's the understatement of the year." I hear Emmett's voice once again. "However, I think I'm going to invite her to my next poker night."

"What the hell are you talking about, Emmett?" I ask.

"What? Do you see how obvious her tells are? Talk about easy money." I roll my eyes, listening to Edward reel her in.

"Yes, but I have some evidence on my computer that proves his innocence. I think someone set him up, and," he lowers his voice, briefly looking to the side, "I think I can connect it to a huge crime syndicate." Edward straightens back up. Jessica sits frozen.

"What kind of evidence?"

"I can't really get into all the details yet. I want to talk to the director first." He

"Wow," she mumbles uncomfortably. Looking down at the table, Jessica seems to consider the situation before morphing back to her flirtatious persona, directing her non-subtle eyes once again at Edward.

"Maybe I can help you? I could take a look at what you have, make sure it gets to the director quickly and then we can celebrate together," she says in a breathy tone and then winks.

"Thanks for the offer, sweetheart, but I've got this one. No worries. As for the celebrating, we'll just have to see," Edward says in a playful voice.

Jessica's face is a strange combination of hopeful and worried. Clearly her role in this is minimal. She's concerned but not terrified. Jessica must think she can come out clean.

"Do you want any dessert?" the waiter asks, interrupting the conversation. Edward pauses, apparently sending Jessica a suggestive look, if her responding giggle and blush is any indication.
"No, I think we have that covered, right?"

"Yes, we're good. I think we need the check," Jessica says fidgeting in her chair.

"I thought the plan was for him to reject her after dinner?" I ask, confused with the direction of the conversation.

"Just watch, Ace. Edward and I planned something a little more humiliating for Ms. Jessica," Jenks explains.

After paying the bill, Jessica and Edward walk outside to wait for his car. He's holding her close and nibbling her ear. I turn my head away not wanting to watch, my hand unconsciously clenching. My leg starts bouncing wondering how he's going to end this, especially when I hear her moan.

"Here's my cue," Jenks says, pulling out his cell phone and dialing. He turns and winks at me, waiting for the caller to pick up. Simultaneously, I hear Edward's phone on-screen. My eyes widen suddenly realizing what Jenks is doing.


"Hey, big boy. Want to date?" Jenks asks.

Edward laughs on-screen. "What a pleasant surprise. I thought you didn't have a layover in Seattle until next week?"

"I just couldn't stay away from those eyes. Want to see my thong?" Jenks taunts. I hear Emmett howling on the other screen at the ridicules conversation.

"No, nothing important. You know I'd never miss an opportunity to see you. Where do you want to meet?" Edward asks in a sultry voice.

He's facing Jessica during the conversation, which allows us to see her reaction. At first she looks shocked, but as the conversation continues, her shock quickly turns to anger. A part of me feels sorry for Jessica. I can understand her excitement of believing she and Edward are together, and then to have it crushed in such a humiliating way...I can't imagine.

"Okay, see you in a few." Edward ends the call and moves closer to Jessica.

"Umm Jessica, I need a rain check on dessert," he says calmly, pulling a fifty out of his wallet and handing it to her. "Here, this should get you home, sorry about the ride, but hopefully we can do this again sometime."

Jessica stands slack-jawed for a moment before finally exploding. "How dare you!" She reaches forward and slaps him across the cheek. "You're on a date with me! How can you schedule a hook up right in front of me and then ask me out again? What kind of girl do you take me for?" she screams.

"Whoa, Jessica. I never guaranteed you anything. You knew the score when I asked you out. If you can't handle it, you should have said no. Now be a good girl and stop making a scene," Edward growls as his car pulls up.

"Look, take some time and calm down. You're a fun girl and if you're game maybe we can do it again sometime. If not, it was fun while it lasted." He must have smirked because Jessica goes to strike him again, but he moves quickly to the side of the car to get in and drive off.
Almost simultaneously, three sets of eyes move over to the second screen to watch Jessica's reaction from the viewpoint of Emmet and Jasper's camera. She stands still for a moment, probably still stunned by what just happened.

"What is she doing?" Edward asks. Seth reaches over and clicks the button that allows us to talk to him.

"She's just standing there. That was cruel, man," Jasper comments and I nod my head in agreement, no matter how much I dislike Jessica that was a bit brutal.

"We need quick results. With Jessica this pissed, I'm hoping she contacts the mole within the next couple of days," Edward retorts. "I know it was cruel, but right now there are more important things than Jessica's feelings."

On the screen, Jessica pulls out her phone to text someone, before walking over to the valet attendant, most likely to get a cab. The texting continues as she paces and waits for a ride. Several minutes later a cab pulls up, and Jessica rushes over, shoving the phone in the driver's face.

"Seth, start tracking her location. I also want that microphone working," Jenks directs watching the screen intently.

"Is that microphone going to work well enough for us to hear anything?" Edward questions skeptically.

"If she keeps it out it will be fine. I did program a component to increase its range and sensitivity, but I didn't have a chance to properly test it, so we will just have to wait and see," Seth mumbles, setting up the command to start tracking her. "Okay, cross your fingers."

Seth hits the button and like before the seconds tick by as we anxiously wait for something to happen. Just when I'm sure it failed, the speakers come to life with Jessica's muffled voice. It is not the clearest connection, but it is enough to hear what she is saying. Seth raises his fist in victory, while Jenks pats him on the back.

"You sure you want me to take you to this address miss? It's a pretty rough neighborhood," the cab driver asks.

"I'm not paying you for advice. Just drive to the damn address," Jessica barks.

"Yes ma'am," the driver bites back.

"Holy shit, this is working out better than we expected. I think she's leading us right to them," Jenks exclaims.

"Edward, meet us at the gas station at the corner. We'll pick you up and then follow her. Seth, keep us informed on where she is going," Emmett says.

"Will do."

The screen that had the feed from Edward's camera is now showing a map, with a moving red dot. Several minutes later, we hear Edward enter the car and the three of them start in pursuit of Jessica.

"Hey Edward, I'm going to e-mail you the link to the GPS so you can see where she is instead of me telling you," Seth says, once again thinking three steps ahead.

"Perfect. Thanks," Edward responds. "Bella, you there?"
"Yup, I'm here."

"You okay?" Edward asks quietly.

I smile at his concern. "I'm good, don't worry about me."

"I'll always worry about you," he says with conviction. Even though there is more each of us probably wants to say, the conversation stops there, knowing we need to focus on the task at hand.

Jessica's cab continues to wind through the streets of Seattle until it comes to the wharf area. I watch the dot travel past the trendy tourist spots to the more desolate areas. The cabbie was right; this is not the best area of town.

"Fuck, she's heading right into Volturi territory. They've purchased a lot of these old buildings," Jasper explains.

The tension in the room increases, all three of us leaning slightly forward in our chairs in anticipation. I don't think anyone expected tonight to lead here. On the screen, the red dot finally stops.

"Here you are," the cabbie says gruffly.

"Keep the change," Jessica snaps followed by the sound of a door shutting and a car driving away.

The boys are not far behind. In their camera, I can see the neighborhood surrounding where she stopped is dark, most of the street lights are not working.

"There's a street that faces where she is. If you turn left on the next street and then take a right, it's dark enough for you to watch without exposing your position," Seth instructs looking at a map of the area on his screen.

"Good looking out," Jasper says, following his directions and shutting off the headlights of the car. Sure enough, like the others, the street is dark. They pull the car over about a half a block away from where Jessica is and although not the clearest view, the camera now has a visual of Jessica standing in front of what looks like a deserted building.

"Okay, you can do this," Jessica mutters.

On screen, I watch her walk over to knock on a small door. Everyone holds their breath waiting to see who answers. The ominous door slowly opens, but from our viewpoint reveals nothing but an arm, which holds the door open just wide enough to grant her access.

"You made it," a familiar voice says over the speaker. My eyes narrow, the anger bubbling up at the person who betrayed us.

"Fuck me," Emmett says.

"Newton. That fucking asshole, I knew he was slimy," Edward growls angrily.

"I did," Jessica purrs. *Jesus Christ, now she's going to throw herself at Newton? "So you want to know what I found out."

"Not yet, I called someone else who needs to hear it. He'll be here soon. So why the hell were you out with Cullen anyway? The guy's a prick."

"It's not important why I was out with him, what's important is how I can help you," Jessica says
coyly. "What I learned tonight will help you get ahead and Edward Cullen will finally get what he deserves."

"Jesus, I think you released the Kraken with your little stunt," Emmett comments dryly, but he's right, Jessica is the picture of a woman scorned.

"Hold it. There is another car pulling up," Jasper interrupts.

Watching on-screen, a black SUV pulls up along the curb, close to the door Jessica went through. The driver's door opens revealing a burly man dressed all in black. He steps out and looks around before knocking on the back passenger door. That door opens to reveal a lanky man wearing a black hoodie and jeans. His head is tilted down, so it is difficult to see his face. I'm straining my eyes hoping to get a better visual, when he lifts his head to take a drag off his cigarette.

"That's-" Jasper starts in.

"James." I finish for him. My stomach churns seeing him for the first time in fifteen years. The sight still drives fear into my heart. I feel Jenks put his arm around my shoulder, in support.

"He can't get to you here," Jenks whispers, gently rubbing my arm.

My eyes are unable to look away from the screen. James moves around the car and walks into the same building. We sit in silence for a moment until their conversation starts through Jessica's microphone.

"Michael, you better have something good for me," James says gruffly. "My, my, my, what do we have here? Did you bring me a present?" he asks suggestively, most likely seeing Jessica. My body starts to shake. I can imagine his leering face, flashes of all the times I saw it directed at me rushing back. Jenks tightens his hold.

"Yes, she has information for us. Go ahead, Jessica, tell him," Mike says enthusiastically.

"Umm, I have some information about Felix." Jessica's voice is shaky, she sounds afraid. She's in way over her head.

"What kind of information?" James asks lowly.

"I was talking to Agent Cullen tonight, he's in charge of the case, anyway, he says he has evidence to prove Felix was innocent and can connect the cover up to a large crime syndicate. Umm, I guess that is you guys right?" she asks nervously. The speaker is silent for a second. "Umm, Mike thought you would want to know, so umm yeah, that's what I know," she says hastily. Something's wrong.

"You know what I find funny, Michael?" James asks with an arrogant tone.

"What?" Mike asks hesitatingly.

"That you would actually think telling me this information will earn you favors. You know what this information tells me, Michael?" The speaker is silent again for several seconds. "It tells me that you don't know how to do your fucking job!" James says screaming the last part. "I pay you to make sure there are no loose ends. What I just heard is you let a big fucking loose end get into the wrong hands!" Jessica whimper in the background.

"I-I can f-ffix it," Mike stutters. Clearly Jessica is not the only one in over her head.
"I'm not so sure about that. You've lost control of this Felix situation more than once."

"I don' think that's true, I-

"Really, let's look at the facts shall we. Felix should have been arrested and released. We only wanted him to know about our connections in the FBI, so we could scare him into submission. Then suddenly he's charged with assault. Losing the ability to use his docks screwed us, Michael. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we give you a chance to clean it up and now this? The Volturi doesn't normally give second chances, Michael. I think you've worn out your usefulness."

Jessica screams as the click of a gun arming echoes through the speakers.

"Shit! What do we do?" Emmett asks.

"You can't barge in. You don't know how many Volturi guys are in there. You'll all end up dead," Jenks hisses.

"We can't just let them get killed, either," Edward argues. My breath hitches at the thought, they can't go in there.

"Please, I can fix it, please." Mike sobs.

"I don't know, my boss-" A phone rings cutting James off. "Speak of the devil. Maybe we'll see what Aro has to say about this situation."

"Shh, it's okay," Jenks whispers into my ear. I focus on keeping myself together, but in the background I can still hear James explaining the situation to Aro. Newton's going to die.

"Here let me put you on speaker," James says. The microphone again falls silent.

"Michael Newton." Aro slowly enunciates. Due to the multiple devices it's traveling through, his voice sounds muffled. However, even muted, it is just as menacing as I remember. My stomach churns violently at the sound. I jump up and make it to the garbage just in time to throw up.


"What happened?" Edward asks frantically.

"She's shaken by this whole thing," Jenks responds quickly, handing me a napkin as I sink to the floor and put my head between my knees. In the background, the horrific scene continues to play out.

"Hello sir," Newton utters, fear dripping from his voice. "Let me explain-

"Shut-up! I don't want to hear your excuses and James already explained the situation. Mr. Newton, today is your lucky day. I need that evidence taken care of immediately and right now you're the only one who can do it, so I've directed James not to kill you tonight."

"Thank you! You won't be sorry sir, I promise."

"I better not. This is your last shot, there are no more chances. I want an update by tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." The microphone falls silent again.
"Well, isn't it your lucky fucking day," James snarls. "You heard him. You have till tomorrow and believe me, I will take pleasure out of killing you if you fail." James' evil laugh sends chills down my spine. I can hear Jessica and Mike whimpering in the background.

"Speaking of killing, what's going on with that Bella chick?" My heart drops and I lean over the trash can again as another wave of nausea hits.

"Umm, she went out-of-town. I'm trying to get information," Mike stutters.

"I don't like it. She gets assaulted by Felix and there is no information on her? Her file is missing, the video tape is ruined. I want some answers."

"Okay, okay."

"And how about you, sweetheart? What do we do with you?" James asks menacingly.

"She's with me. She won't say anything, I swear." Mike jumps in, trying to protect Jessica.

"Hmm, I guess we'll just have to see about that. Now get the fuck out of my building!"

The speaker fills with the scrambling sounds of Mike and Jessica leaving the building. My stomach rolls again, but this time there is nothing left to come up.

"God damn it. Seth, shut that speaker off. Calm down, Ace." Sitting with my head between my legs again, I'm hazily aware of the conversations going on around me. Hearing my name, I tune back in.

"We need to jump on all of this now," Jasper is saying.

"You jump in all you want, but I'm telling you Bella needs a break. We're done for the night," Jenks yells.

"Hey, you can't-" Jasper starts to argue back.

"Everyone shut-up! Bella, talk to me," Edward pleads.

"I'm here," I say gruffly, my throat still burning with acid.

"Jesus, are you okay?"

I laugh, at the stupidity of the common question. "Not really," I say honestly.

"God damn it!" Edward yells reacting on pure emotion. "I should fucking be there," he says softly, not intending the latter comment for everyone's ears.

"She'll be fine, Edward. You focus taking care of things in Seattle. You guys need to figure out a way to get Jessica secured. Then make sure that Mike gets back into their good graces by destroying our fake evidence," Jenks says, logically laying out the next steps. He is still sitting next to me on the floor, keeping his arm around my shoulder. "We're going to sign off on our end, okay."

"Bella!" Edward shouts. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, baby. Jenks, I'm counting on you to take care of her!"

"You know I will. Seth, shut it down."

"Bella?" Seth asks unsure of what to make of my current state.
"I'll be okay, Seth. I just wasn't ready to hear their voices again," I say trying to reassure him and myself.

"Hang tight, I'll be right back," Jenks says standing up and walking into the living room. Within a few seconds he is back. "Do you feel steady enough to get up?"

"Yeah." I slowly stand, my legs feel shaky, but my stomach appears settled. "Where are we going?"

"Upstairs."

"What? I'm okay, I should help out," I argue, not wanting to feel like the weak link of the group.

"Come on, Ace. You've barely had any sleep and it's been a really long day. There's nothing else we can do tonight," he counters, leading me across the living room and up the stairs.

Reaching the bedroom, he moves over and pulls back the covers. From his pocket, he pulls out a prescription bottle. "Here, this will help," he says handing over a pill.

I look at it skeptically. "What is that?"

"Something to help you sleep."

"I don't want to take anything," I complain.

"Tell you what, look me in the eye and tell me you won't worry about things tonight and I will take these back downstairs with me," he challenges. I think about bluffing him, but not being at the top of my game, I give up that thought pretty easily.

"That's what I thought. Things will look a lot better in the morning." He places a tiny white pill in my hand. Maybe he's right. Lying back in the bed, I try to relax.

"Stay until I fall asleep?" I ask quietly.

"Of course. Rest, Bella, no one's going to hurt you," Jenks says with conviction. He leans over to kiss my forehead before walking over to sit in the chair by the window. The pill is quick acting and soon I feel my consciousness fading away into a dreamless sleep.

When I open my eyes, the sun is bright. Looking at the clock, I'm surprised to see it is already mid-morning. For a moment I wonder if it was all a dream, until I see that I'm in the same clothes from yesterday and the prescription bottle is still on my bedside table. I was right about being on the precipice, now we need to deal with the aftermath.

Feeling groggy from the sleeping pill and needing some time to work through all the emotions from last night, I decide a run is in order. It takes some time to convince Jenks that I will be fine on my own. He begrudgingly agrees to let me go after I promise to take a gun.

I run quickly through the forest, pounding my feet to drive away the negative emotions and memories. When I stop to take a breath, I realize I've gone a lot further than I meant. If I don't get back soon Jenks will start to look for me.

Following the return path, I hear the crunching footsteps of someone walking towards me. Knowing it's probably Jenks, but not wanting to take any chances; I quietly step off the trail. Staying low to the ground, I see a lone figure walking up the trail, dressed all in black. His baseball
cap and the tilt of his head make it impossible to see his face, but I can tell by the shape of his body it's not Jenks. Slowly, I pull out my gun and quietly pull back the trigger. Wanting to catch him off guard, I wait until he passes before creeping out of my hiding spot.

"You're trespassing on private property," I state calmly. "I'm armed, so I suggest you slowly turn around and tell me what you are doing here."

"You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, would ya copper?" A smooth voice responds, quoting the famous line.

The man slowly turns, his face lighting up with a blinding smile as green meets brown.

"Edward," I whisper.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This chapter was brought to you by the word "clues". Did you catch them all? :)

Until next time…
Chapter 17: Gravity of Love

"Edward," I whisper.

I stand frozen, wondering if my eyes are playing tricks on me. Edward was just in Seattle last night, and never once did he mention any plans to visit Montana.

"Surprise!" Edward's brilliant smile gleams, his arms tentatively reaching out in my direction.

Several more seconds pass before my brain registers that this is real, and he is actually standing in front of me. Finally broken out of my stupor, I put the gun back in its holster. My body instinctively moving towards his, the weeks of separation resulting in a desperate need to feel him close.

Melting into him, my senses become immersed in all that is Edward: the softness of his shirt; the warmth of his body; the sound of his sigh; the smell of spice and fresh air. He feels like home.

Edward pulls me closer and straightens to his full height causing my legs to dangle in the air.

"God I missed you," he whispers, his face nuzzling into the side of my neck.

Edward pulls back until we are face to face and still encased in his arms, his mouth finds mine. I savor the sensation of his lips, the pace deliberate and meaningful. Slowly, our bodies disconnect as he gently sets me down on shaky legs. His arms stay loosely around my back, and for a moment we simply drink each other in; Edward's eyes dancing with happiness.

"Hi, baby."

"I can't believe you're here." I smile, still in shock that I'm in his arms.

"I couldn't stay away anymore."

"I don't understand. With everything that happened last night and discovering Mike, I thought-"

Edward halts my babbling by gently putting his finger against my lips. "None of that is more important than you. How could I stay away knowing how yesterday affected you?"

I smile, letting his words wash over me. Standing on tip toes, I wrap my arms around his neck,
hoping to express through my actions how much his declaration means.

"How did you get away?" I ask, pulling back once again.

"Family emergency," he says with a smirk, but then pauses, his eyes dropping to the ground before continuing in a low tone. "Last night, I couldn't get the sound of your voice out of my head. Before I knew it, I e-mailed Banner about needing time off and then jumped in my car. I barely stopped trying to get here as quickly as possible."

"Oh," I say, overwhelmed by his explanation. "How did Jasper and Emmett take your decision?"

"Well, umm, I didn't exactly tell them, I just left. Needless to say, Jenks was shocked to see me. Since you were jogging, he convinced me to tell them before I came out to find you. We contacted everyone a few minutes ago."

"How did it go?" I ask, already knowing the answer, at least on Jasper's end.

"You can say it didn't go over well." Edward laughs humorlessly. "But I don't care. No one could have stopped me last night."

"I'm glad you came. I needed to see you too," I admit quietly, looking down. "I hope it doesn't cause too many problems. We have enough to face without us fighting."

Edward's finger gently moves under my chin to pull my head back up. "Hey, don't worry, we worked it out. Jenks argued that my sudden exit actually works in our favor, which helped to calm the fires."

"How does it work in our favor?"

"Since Mike needs to get into my computer, having me gone gives him the opportunity to do it. Jenks, the manipulative master, kept everyone focused on that point, and by the end everyone was on board with my sudden trip."

"That's sounds like Jenks." I laugh imagining him working his magic on Emmett and Jasper. "When do you have to go back?"

"I don't know. Soon," he whispers pulling me close, both of us already dreading his departure. "But I'm here now, and that's what matters."

"You're right, let's just focus on now," I say, snuggling into his chest.

"Not that I want to ruin this moment, but you want to tell me why you thought it was a good idea to go running in the middle of the forest by yourself?" Edward asks, his protective side emerging. "And don't think I didn't give Jenks hell for letting you out of his sight either."

I pull back out of his arms and look at him with a raised eyebrow. Once again his protectiveness and my stubborn independence are about to clash. "Okay, first off, we all heard last night that they don't know where I am. I doubt someone is hiding in the middle of the forest waiting to grab me."

Edward starts to disagree, but I put up my hand to stop him. "Secondly, I took precautions," I say, pointing to the gun. "Running helps clear my head, and after yesterday, I needed a quiet moment before I had to face everything again. I appreciate your concern, but that won't stop me from making my own decisions. Besides, I'm not completely helpless. I got the jump on you, didn't I?"

"You, my stubborn girl, drive me crazy," Edward says, running a hand across his face in
frustration. "I understand what you're saying, but that won't stop me from worrying. You always express your concern for everyone else, and yet you forget it goes both ways."

It's hard to challenge that line of reasoning. Just yesterday I argued the same point when trying to dissuade Jenks from his plan.

"Just try to remember, that's why I worry. Not because I don't trust you, and not because I want to control you, but because I care about you. Okay."

"Okay," I whisper, considering his words.

"Oh and for the record, you did not have the jump on me. It was all part of my plan."

"Right, just keep telling yourself that, Cullen. You better watch out, Jenks taught me some new moves. I can take you down at a moment's notice." I threaten puffing up my body as if I am gearing up for a fight.

"Sounds like you're issuing a challenge?"

"Bring it!" I smile, enjoying the return of our playful banter.

"Alright tiger, you're on! Just name the time and place." Edward winks, mockingly ruffling my hair. Grabbing my hand and intertwining our fingers, he starts walking back down the path. "But before you kick my ass, let's find a place where we can sit down and talk some more."

"Okay," I say looking down at our hands. I've missed the image of our fingers mingled together, as well as the electric sensation it causes.

Instead of going back to the house, Edward veers off in the direction of the dock, leading us to where I sat yesterday contemplating my dream. He sits down against the railing, pulling me down to sit with him. Sitting between his legs, I lean back against his chest, his arms encircling me. His warm body helping to offset the breeze that feels particularly chilly after my run.

"Truth time, Bella. How are you doing, really?"

"In truth, yesterday was a bad day," I whisper.

"I'm so sorry. None of us expected last night to lead to James or Aro." He lightly kisses the side of my head.

"I didn't realize how much it would affect me until I heard Aro's voice. I guess the lesson learned is that I need to prepare myself better for the next time. I don't want to cause another a scene like I did yesterday."

"Bella, no one blames you for your reaction. It doesn't make you weak."

"I just hate that he has power over me. My psychologist's brain understands my reaction. Logically I know it doesn't make me weak, and already being on edge didn't help, but I still hate it!" I yell, clenching my fists in aggravation.

"I know, baby." Edward whispers against my head, soothing me with gentle touches. "Why were you on edge? Was it Jessica?"

"Umm, partly." I hesitate, thinking about the best way to answer the question. "My feelings about that changed a lot yesterday. I admit at first I was feeling a little insecure about watching you and
Jessica. However, after we talked, and I saw you put on your game face-

"My what?" Edward interrupts.

"Right before you left, you morphed into 'Edward the player'. It's hard to describe, but watching it happen made me realize you've never put on that mask for me. Knowing I get the 'real' Edward made things a lot easier."

"Huh. I didn't realize I did that," Edward mutters against my hair. "I'm glad though that you're finally listening to what I've tried to tell you. It's always been you, Bella."

I smile thinking about the steps we continue to take forward together. I never imagined I could have something this good in my life.

"So if it wasn't the date, what was it?" Edward asks, bringing me back from my entrancing thoughts.

"My nightmare mostly. It haunted me all day long."

"We were going to talk about it," Edward states, recalling our early morning conversation yesterday.

"Yeah, but I remembered something else. I was going to try to finagle some alone time after our chat today to talk to you about it."

"Well, I'm here now. What happened in your nightmare that scared you so much?"

"Umm, Aro and Caius were in it. Aro found me and…hurt me." I struggle with the words remembering how real the knife felt as it slashed my skin.

"Hey, not going to happen. You're safe. It was just a dream," Edward whispers, tightening his hold.

"But I feel like it was trying to tell me something about Aro. It bothered me all day."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes. I remembered something that scares me more than my nightmare."

"What did you remember?" Edward asks hesitantly.

"I think Aro knows about my ability." My veins chill saying the words out loud.

Edward stills behind me, sucking in his breath. "Why?"

I quickly explain about Caius' words in the dream and the memory from when I was twelve. Edward sits quietly taking it all in.

"You think that's what Caius was talking about when he said you had a poker face?" Edward questions. His investigative tone returning as he gathers all the facts.

"It's the only thing that would explain the strange comment. Maybe when I was little, I reacted to people more than I remember," I hypothesize.

I'm having a hard time wrapping my brain around the fact that Aro could know about me. I thought my mom successfully kept it hidden. I can't even begin to comprehend how or when he found out.
"It makes sense," Edward states. "Kids don't generally hide their emotions well. Do you think Aro is afraid of your gift?"

"I don't know. God this is so frustrating!" I jump up and start pacing back and forth. "The dream could mean something or nothing. Then there's Jenks telling me I know more than I remember too. Just what am I suppose to know?" I yell exasperated. Our success hinges upon information hidden in my memories, but whatever it is feels just out of my grasp.

"Bella, beating yourself up isn't going to help you remember anything." Edward stands to block my path. Placing his hands on my shoulders he holds me in place, bending down to look into my eyes. "We'll figure this out," he declares running a hand gently through my hair. The action creates a comforting feeling, helping me focus.

"If Aro did know, he would have tried to use it to his advantage. I just don't remember anything I did that would have helped him."

"I know it's hard, but I think you need to follow Jenks' advice and write things you remember about Aro instead of focusing on the people who work for him. If there is something there it will reveal itself."

"I just hope it reveals itself in time," I mutter looking down.

"Baby, putting pressure on yourself isn't going help either. Let's just take it step by step, and today's step is dealing with what happened last night."

"I guess we should go back to the house," I say sadly, not quite ready to leave our little bubble.

"Yeah, they're probably waiting. On a bright note, at least we get to work in the same room instead of over a screen."

"Come on, mister glass half-full, let's go face the world," I say, laughing at his attempt to add a positive spin to the situation.

Edward leans down to kiss me one last time before leading us into the house. Walking into the living-room, I see Jenks and Seth working over the computers. The inevitable sound of frantic typing fills the air, both men engrossed in their task until they hear the door shut. Their heads snap up at the sound, a combination of anticipation and curiosity, replacing the colors of determination.

"Well, well, well. I was about to send out a rescue team. Can I ask what took you two so long, or is it not appropriate for Seth's innocent ears?" Jenks asks.

"Ha, ha, ha," I say in response.

"You look better, Ace. I guess a visit from Edward was just what the doctor ordered." Jenks laughs.

Although continuing to joke, Jenks' colors show me the sincere happiness he feels at seeing us together. Seth, however, shines with uncertainty as he nervously watches Edward. I had forgotten that Seth is not as close to Edward as he is with Jenks and Emmett. Edward tends to intimidate him, adding to the typical anxiety he feels in new situations. Hopefully, Edward's time here will help improve their relationship.

"Enough of the comedy routine. What's the status of things?" Edward asks.

"Things are quiet," Jenks responds.
"Umm, yeah, nothing new from either Jessica or Banner, but I'm monitoring both closely," Seth answers nervously.

"After you left to find Bella, I contacted Emmet and Jasper. As of now, Emmett is tailing Mike and Jasper is tailing James. Mike hasn't left his apartment since last night, and has made no move to contact Jessica. Cowardly bastard is probably still shaking after his run in last night."

"What about James?"

"He went back to the building from last night and hasn't left. Since things are quiet on that front, Seth and I are working on a plan to subtract Jessica from the equation. I think we all know James is not going to let her out easily. We have a few more loose ends to tie up though before we can safely make a move."

"Sounds like things are secure," Edward comments thoughtfully. Jenks looks at him with a knowing smirk and nods his head.

"Secure for what?" I ask, confused by the unspoken conversation occurring between the two.

Jenks smiles again before looking down at the computer, pretending to focus on the screen. Seth continues to look at us curiously, until Jenks leans over and says something. Right afterwards, Seth also looks down at the screen.

"I was thinking you deserve a night off from all of this stuff," Edward finally responds.

"What are you talking about?"

"Like you pointed out earlier, your location is safe and nothing is going on in Seattle at the moment. So I was thinking-" Edward pauses, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

"Edward?"

"Bella, would you like to go to dinner with me?"

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

His request stuns me. The girly part of me is jumping up and down at the invitation, while the realistic side worries about the timing. There are so many things to sort out, it doesn't feel right to take a break, especially now.

"Umm," I start to respond, only to be cut off by Jenks.

"Ace, stop over thinking things. I was here last night, remember? Sometimes, the best way to stay on top of our game is to take a step back and recharge. Once we pull Jessica out and I go in, things are going to get crazy fast. Take advantage of this moment while you can," Jenks says, walking over to where Edward and I are standing.

"But what if-"

"But nothing. Seth and I can watch things for a few hours. You have your guns and phones, if something comes up. Which it won't. What's the point of any of this, if you don't use your freedom to live?" Jenks challenges.

"Come on, Bella. What do you say?" Edward asks again, staring at me with puppy dog eyes. *He's too irresistible for his own good.*
"Let's do it," I agree, smiling when Edward's face light up.

"See, that wasn't so hard," Jenks utters, lightly squeezing my shoulder. "Now, before you love birds run off. I need to clear up something from yesterday."

"What?" Edward asks.

"Last night, when James asked about Bella, he mentioned her file was missing. What was he talking about?"

"Oh, when I first found out about Felix, I deleted my personal file. I didn't want the Volturi to get ahold of it because my picture was in there," I state.

"How did you erase the file?" Jenks asks.

"I hacked into the system."

"You know how to hack?" Seth asks incredulously.

"Oh hell no, not even a little bit. Caius gave me a device that hacks into systems. I used it to find my file."

"What kind of device?" Seth asks, his interest peaking.

"I don't know exactly, it looks like a flash-drive. Honestly, I didn't think it would work since it's so old, but it worked perfectly."

"The nature of programming doesn't change, everything is still ones and zeros. It's the sophistication level that revolutionizes things," Seth says quickly, spinning his pencil around his fingers and loudly chewing his gum. He is processing an idea. "Do you still have it?"

"Yes, I have it up stairs. Why?"

"Can I take a look at it?"

"Of course, but you still haven't said why."

"It might be nothing, so I don't want to say anything yet. I will also need to double-check to see if your file was completely deleted. It's getting harder and harder to make things disappear. I just want to make sure there is no trace since James is asking," Seth rambles in his manic fashion.

"Good catch, kid," Jenks says jumping back in the conversation. "Bella, go get that thing before you leave. It's probably best if Seth and I work on it alone until he gets his thoughts together."

"Subtle, Jenks. I already agreed to go, remember. You don't have to find excuses anymore," I murmur, walking up the stairs to grab the device.

Staring at the mirror, I fluff my hair and look over my outfit again, deciding it will pass. We're not going anywhere fancy, so my jeans, dark red sweater and black boots seem appropriate. A part of me still feels strange taking time away from everything to go on a date, but Edward's right, we deserve this. After one last look, I walk down stairs and find Edward pacing across the living room floor. Like me, he is wearing jeans, except somehow they make him look like a model. Suddenly losing my nerve, I am just about to turn around when off to my right I hear a whistle.

"Damn, Ace! You clean up good!" Jenks says giving me a once over.
Edward stops pacing and turns. His eyes move slowly up and down my body before looking up with an electric smile. "You look amazing, baby."

He walks forward to meet me, reaching out to take my hand. However, before he can, Jenks grabs it and pulls me over, placing his arm squarely across my shoulders. Edward looks at him, surprised by the bold move.

"Seth, it's time!" Jenks shouts. He and Edward are unexpectedly embroiled in a staring match, both with serious expressions.

"Something you want to talk about?" Edward asks calmly, but I hear an underlying frustration.

Seth walks up beside me. He is trying to stand taller with a serious expression, but every few seconds he looks over to Jenks for reassurance. What the hell are they doing?

"Edward Cullen. I hear you want to take out our Bella?" Jenks asks seriously, never taking his intimidating eyes off Edward.

Seth also attempts to stare Edward down, but it just comes across as awkward, his face switching from a stern to anxious as he tries to mimic Jenks. I shake my head in embarrassment, catching onto their game.

"Are you kidding me?" I burst out.

"Shush, Ace, this is serious business. Tell us, Edward, what are your intentions?" Edward rolls his eyes realizing the playful nature of the set up.

"Kill me now," I mutter. Jenks gently pokes me in the side to stop my comments.

"Well, I thought I would take her out for a cheap dinner, get drunk and have my way with her. You know, take a page from the Jason Jenks playbook," Edward responds sarcastically.

I stifle a laugh as Jenks’ snorts and tightens his arm around my shoulder. "Hmm, not the answer I was looking for. Mr. Cullen, I don't think you deserve to take Bella out with that attitude. She's something special you know, and not just anyone is worthy of her time." My skin flushes at his comment even though I know it's all part of the game.

"You don't seriously expect me to answer that, do you? Sorry, Jenks, but the only one I plan on discussing my intentions with is Bella. So, kindly get your hands off my date, so we can leave."

"Seth, you have anything to add about Cullen's intentions?" Jenks asks instead of responding to Edward.

"Did you know that Chlamydia is the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States, and an infected person typically shows no symptoms? So, Mr. Cullen, do you practice safe sex?" Seth asks in a serious tone, standing at his full height.

Jenks bursts out laughing. "Excellent question, kid. I want to know the answer to that too."

"Oh my God! Okay, that's it! Fun time is over you two. I roughly pull away from Jenks' arm and grab Edward's hand. "Let's go before this gets any weirder," I mumble.

"I think we're already there," he mumbles back as we walk towards the door.

"Have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Jenks yells.
"That leaves it wide open! Thanks Dad, don't wait up!" I yell back before closing the door behind me.

"Your charm knows no bounds, Bella. I think those two would walk through fire for you." Edward chuckles opening the car door and letting me in before smoothly walking around the car to slide into the driver's seat.

"Where are we going?"

"There aren't too many choices, but Seth managed to find a restaurant with good ratings."

Edward's face is full of concentration as he navigates the narrow, twisty road leading the several miles from my house to town. The feel of his hand in mine, helps to calm my nervousness about our date. Logically, my apprehension doesn't make sense, but emotionally, I feel like a teenager going out for the first time.

Looking out the window I find myself amazed by the blackness outside of the car. It is easy to forget how dark night really is when you live in the city. Here, there are no lights to lighten the sky, the forest an impenetrable dark shroud. The narrow headlights shine along the road, but between the evening mist and surrounding dark; the light appears more haunting than bright. I shiver thinking about all the creatures lurking in the surrounding trees, cloaked by the night. In this part of the country, it is often nature that poses the most risk to its residents. My nightmare drifts back into my mind and I try not to think about Aro lurking in the dark as well.

"You okay?" Edward asks, squeezing my hand.

"I'm fine." I turn to look at him with a small smile.

"Hey, we're taking the night off remember. Tell those negative thoughts to fuck off because tonight you're all mine," Edward says smirking through his concern.

"It's hard to just let it all go," I whisper.

"I know, baby, but try, for me." He pulls my hand up to his lips for a gentle kiss before focusing back on the road. "Tonight, no one exists except for you and me."

"You're right," I say, strengthening my resolve. Tonight Aro and James can stay hidden in the darkness.

Polson is the definition of a sleepy town. Most of the 4,448 residents are dispersed throughout the surrounding region, so the actual "town" is contained to a small area. Route 35 cuts through the center of town, and the majority of the businesses reside along its path. The buildings aligning the old highway are a rustic combination of wood and brick, just what you would imagine in a small western town. Polson is busiest during the summer months when tourists and families flock to the lake. The chill of fall has chased mostly everyone away, leaving the residents to their quiet life.

Driving into town, the car bounces and jerks several times over the pothole-filled road, the asphalt no match for the harsh winters. Edward pulls the car over to park alongside of the curb. Across the street, I notice a red flashing arrow pointing to a sign that says "Dukes". The light is the brightest on the street and judging by the number of cars, this is a popular spot in the small town. I can't help but laugh at the differences between this place, and where Edward met Jessica. I don't think trendy would ever be used to describe the building I see in front of me.

Edward motions for me to stay put while he gets out and walks around to open my door. Taking my hand once again, we walk into Dukes. Entering the smoke-filled room, laughter and noisy
conversations immediately surrounds us. Country music blares from a jukebox in the corner, and a few couples are spinning around a small dance floor doing what looks like the west coast swing.

"Welcome to Dukes. Take a seat wherever you like and I'll be right with you," a middle-aged woman says from behind the bar.

She is wearing a tight black tee-shirt, and pouring beer for a couple of men sitting at the long wooden bar. Edward leads me over to a small table in the corner, pulling out my chair to allow me to sit down first, before taking the chair across from me.

"Interesting place," he says, looking around at the animal heads decorating the walls.

"I think it has a certain charm." I laugh, tilting my head to get a closer look at the antlers hanging over the bar decorated with baseball hats.

"Hi! My name is Judy, and I'll be your waitress. Can I start you off with something to drink?" the chipper waitress from earlier asks. Edward looks at me, silently suggesting I go first.

"I'll take a Coors Light, and a glass of water." I imagine this is not a place that has many fancy drink options.

Edward looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "I'll take the same. When in Rome right?" He smirks.

"Great. I'll be right back with those. Here are your menus," Judy says before hustling away.

"What do you think?" Edward asks, looking over the limited choices.

"I'm going for the cheeseburger. How about you?"

"Umm, I think I'm going for the steak." He looks up with a smile, taking my hand again. "Is it completely crazy that I'm nervous?" Edward asks.

"No, I'm right there with you." I laugh.

"I guess, I never really cared whether I impressed someone before. I don't want you changing your mind if tonight ends up being a complete disaster."

"I highly doubt that's going to happen. Besides, we're off to a good start so far." I smile.

"I only wish I could wine and dine you a bit more, instead being limited to the only option in this tiny town."

"Oh I don't know. I kind of like this, it's something new, something only we've experienced together. I'll take that over an overrated restaurant you've visited before any day."

"Bella Swan, you amaze me," Edward says, the intensity of his look quickening my heart rate.

"Here you go. Two Coors Lights, and two waters. Ready to order?" Judy asks, setting our drinks on the table and taking out a note pad.

After placing our orders, Edward and I fall into a comfortable conversation. I tell him more about my time in graduate school, and he shares stories about his parents. We laugh and talk all throughout dinner, making the time fly quickly.

"Ever play pool, Bella?" Edward asks looking over at the worn table in the corner.
"Nope, can't say that I have."

"Well, that's about to change. Come on," he says standing up and holding out his hand.

"I'm not usually good at things like this," I admit, completely unsure of what I'm doing, but following anyway.

"Don't worry, I'll go easy on you," he says with a smirk.

Once we reach the table, Edward puts a quarter on the end, which he explains is the universal sign that the table is occupied. He then leads me over to pick out a stick from the holder on the wall.

"Now, the trick is to find a straight stick, which is hard to do in bars because people use and abuse them."

He pulls a couple of pool sticks off the wall and proceeds with a strange-looking ritual. Finally satisfied with his choices, he triumphantly brings back two sticks.

"Do you want strips or solids?"

"Umm solids," I respond, not really sure what that means. I watch with fascination as he aligns all the balls in a triangular frame, moving them around the table until they are in position.

"The point of eight ball is to pocket all your balls first. Normally, you also have to call your shot, but since you are a beginner, your balls will count no matter where you pocket them. I will still call mine. As long as you pocket one of your balls, you can continue to play. When you foul, your turn is over and I get to play. If you pocket the cue ball your turn is over, and if you pocket the eight ball before the other balls you also lose. Got it?"

"Sure," I stutter, completely lost by everything he just said.

"I'll break and then you can go first." Edward carefully removes the triangle and then leans over the table, aligning the white ball. In one quick move, his arm pulls back sharply before rebounding, the stick hitting the ball with a resounding smack. The white ball crashes into the other balls scattering them across the table. "Okay your shot. Do you want me to help you?"

"No, I think I got the gist of it by watching you. I'm good," I say stubbornly, even though I have no clue about what I'm doing.

I take the stick and walk around the table, looking for a shot. I don't know much about this game, but I'm hoping what I've seen in movies will help me fake it. Seeing a possible shot, I maneuver over to the white ball. Trying to remember exactly what Edward did, I lean over, line up the shot and push the stick forward. The pool-stick, loose in my hand, bounces off the table and barely hits the ball.

Edward laughs beside me. "Nice one. Here, let me show you how it's done," Edward says cockily, walking around the table with ease, looking for his shot. "Nine-ball, right corner pocket." He quickly lines up and moves the stick forward perfectly, easily connecting and putting the nine-ball into the hole.

"I'm screwed."

Edward continues for several more shots before finally missing, turning the game back over to me. "You sure you don't want help?" he taunts.
"Fine. Show me what to do." I concede, moving back expecting him to take me step by step over what to do, but instead I feel him come up behind me.

"The best way to show someone how to play pool is to help them experience what a good shot feels like. Pool is all about sensing the right amount of force and movement for the perfect shot. You can't learn that by watching," he whispers, moving us forward towards the table. My body shivers involuntarily having him so close, his breath skimming through my hair.

"Pick up the stick and find your shot," he whispers against my ear.

"Umm the seven-ball?" I ask having difficulty concentrating.

"No, there are too many obstacles and not a straight shot to the pocket. Look at the four. That is probably your best shot on the table."

"Okay."

"Now, line it up behind the cue ball." I pick up my stick and do as he asks. "Take your fingers and hold them like this," he says showing me with his and I copy with my own.

"You want the pool stick to slide easily in and out of your fingers, but you also want them strong enough to keep the stick on target. See how the stick moves through my fingers." He continues to whisper softly in my ear.

"Yes." My body feels warm against his, butterflies erupting in my stomach at his touch.

"The strength of your shot comes from the back of the stick. Position your other hand along your hip, right here." Edward's hand lightly grasps my hip demonstrating the placement. "This end is where you want the motion to come from. The hand in front is just to guide."

While Edward is giving me directions, he moves his body over so that his arms are mimicking mine, basically caging me between him and the table. I find myself struggling to keep my breath calm.

"Okay, let's practice, pull the stick back and move it forward. Hold it steady and follow through. Feel that?" he asks as we move the stick back and forth together.

"Yes," I whisper, barely able to speak.

"Don't grip it too tightly, stay in control but relaxed at the same time," he warns. I consciously try to loosen my grip, but the tension from our current position makes that difficult.

"Ready to give it a shot?" he asks, and I softly nod my head. "Okay, you want to hit the cue ball in the center with a quick hard motion to get the most force and the straightest line." I nod my head again.

Moving the stick back over behind the white ball, we pull the stick back and move it forward quickly. The stick hits the ball perfectly, and I watch in amazement as the ball hits the four sending it soundly into the pocket.

"I did it!" I shout, jumping up and down a couple of times before spinning around and hopping into Edward arms. He slowly moves forward until our lips meet in a passionate kiss. Aware of our surroundings, we pull away before things get out of control.

"Ready to go again?" he asks with a wide smile.
"Did you plan this?" I ask looking at him sideways.

"So suspicious. I'm just trying to teach you how to play pool," he says with a wink.

"Uh huh," I answer back getting back into position, so Edward can once again wrap his arms around me.

Edward and I continue to play for several more hours. After about the fourth shot with Edward's help, I started getting the hang of it and by the end of second game was making some pretty good shots myself. It was bitter-sweet because I missed the feel of Edward's arms around me, but the competitive side of me wanted to try to win a game by myself before the night was over. Before we know it, the bar is starting to close down, and by the time we arrived back at the house, it's almost two o'clock in the morning. Not quite ready for the night to end, I decide to show Edward something before we go back inside.

"Want to see my favorite part of the house?" I ask after we get out of the car.

"Absolutely, lead the way."

Instead of walking to the porch, I pull him around the corner of the house. Several feet from the side of the house, sits an old porch swing left by the previous owners. Pulling Edward over to sit down with me, I lean my head back and look up at the sky.

"Look," I state, pointing up. Edward follows suit, leaning back as well. Above us, shine a million stars, brighter than anything you could ever see in the city.

"Wow," Edward mutters.

"I know it's amazing. I've sat out here a lot over the last few weeks. Whenever things get too overwhelming, sitting under this huge sky helps me put everything back into perspective." I feel Edward nudge me forward a bit, so he can maneuver sideways across the swing. Sitting back against the side he motions for me to sit in-between his legs. Lying back against his chest, I look up again.

"Now it is amazing," he retorts. We sit together for almost an hour before Edward disrupts the peaceful silence.

"As much as I love sitting out here with you, my ears are freezing, and I can feel you shivering. How about we go inside?"

"I can make us some herbal tea to warm us up." I offer, thinking of ways to prolong our time.

"Okay, but I can think of some other ways to help warm us up too," Edward says suggestively.

"Mr. Cullen! That's a rather presumptuous suggestion to make on our first date," I say with mock disgust.

"What? Whoa, Swan, mind out of the gutter! I was talking about cuddling. What are you talking about? Maybe I'm the one who needs protection from scandalous intentions."

"You're an idiot." I laugh as I turn the knob.

"Yeah, but I'm your idiot," Edward whispers leaning down to kiss me, my body flooding with indescribable emotions.
Laughing, we walk into the living room only to find Seth and Jenks standing by the computers with serious looks. Worry and anger float around them. The pressure in the room effectively extinguishes the good feelings of just a few seconds ago. Jenks looks up when he hears the door, cutting right to the chase before Edward and I can even ask.

"We've got a problem."

Chapter End Notes

Until next time.....
Chapter 18: Runaway Train

Chapter Notes

A/N

I own nothing related to Twilight.

Now about that problem…

Update: Thank you to my beta Tds88! She is working overtime to help me update these older chapters. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18: Runaway Train

"We've got a problem."

Jenks stands stiffly next to the computer desk, his fists tightly clenched at his sides. Seth is sitting in a chair next to him, staring at me with wide eyes, his face looking particularly pale. The tension is thick, the colors of fear and anxiety chaotically dancing between them. What ever happened is bad.

Edward tenses, his arm pushing me slightly behind him as he steps forward. His protective instinct is taking over, although the gesture itself is irrational. If there is a threat, it's not waiting here in the living room. I try to ignore my own rising panic, the fear slowly choking me. I find myself unconsciously grasping Edward tightly, my hand fisting his shirt in an effort to feel grounded. Edward's touch has become my lifeline.

"What kind of problem?" Edward asks gruffly.

Seth looks nervously back and forth between the two men, folding and unfolding a paper. My breath quickens waiting for one of them to answer, the suspense agonizing. Things were wonderful not five minutes ago, how could it all change so quickly?

"The Volturi took Jessica tonight," Jenks finally responds thickly, guilt coloring his words.

"What?" I ask disbelievingly. My heart drops and my blood runs cold.

"This is my fault."

"How the fuck did that happen?" Edward asks, grabbing my hand tightly and pulling me across the room. His laser focus is on Jenks, demanding answers.

"It happened thirty minutes ago. Jessica went clubbing, and since Jasper and Emmett were still tailing Mike and James, we were monitoring her. We were listening when it happened," Jenks reports and then turns away in frustration. Even with his back to us, I can see the movements of his heavy breath. Suddenly, he slams his fist down on the counter, rage coloring the action.

"Damn it! I knew they would make a move, I just didn't expect it this fast," Jenks mutters.
"Where does the GPS say she is now?" Edward asks.

Jenks turns back around, placing his hands on his hips, his head dropping to look at the floor. "That's the problem. Her phone didn't make the trip with her. We lost her, man."

"God damn it!" Edward yells. Pulling his hand from mine, he starts pacing. "What do we have then?"

"Play the recording, Seth," Jenks replies cryptically.

Seth solemnly nods his head, turning towards one of the screens. He clicks the mouse with one hand while turning up the volume on the speakers with the other one. "We decided to record her last night in case she mentioned something important about Mike or the Volturi." Seth pauses for a moment, looking up with sad eyes. "We recorded her kidnapping."

He clicks a button and the room falls deathly silent as the horror show starts to play. Due to the less than stellar quality of the recording, static pops over the speakers from time to time, adding to the chilling nature of the recording. Seth obviously cued the start in a specific spot as Jessica's voice jumps in mid-conversation.

"Can you believe the fucking nerve of that guy? I know seriously, who does he think he is?"

Jessica chatters loudly, it sounds like she's on the phone. By the slurring of her voice, it also sounds like she's had several drinks. In the background, there are sounds of cars driving on a nearby street.

"That's why I dumped his ass. He was begging me to give him another chance, but I told him where to shove it. Who does Edward Cullen think he is? God's gift to women? I don't think so. He can just pine away for me. I'm too good for him," she drunkenly rambles.

"Yeah, well." The speakers go silent. Seth looks at me with concern as we wait for the inevitable bad ending. "Hey, can I call you back? Okay, bye." Jessica rushes suddenly. The speakers rustle as she moves the phone around.

"Hi! I recognize you! We danced together. What are you doing here? Did you track me down? Couldn't get enough?" She slurs. So far, the person she recognized has yet to speak. Jessica's clueless about what is going to happen.

"Sorry, princess, not my type, but someone wants to see you," a cold voice responds. I don't recognize it as anyone we know.

"Who wants to...oh my God!"

"Don't fucking speak. Got me, princess?" His voice is clearer, which can only mean he's physically closer to her. In my head, I can imagine him pinning her against his body, most likely threatening her with a gun or a knife. "Now, we're going to take a little ride."

Along with Jessica's whimpers, I can hear the engine of a car getting closer and then the sound of brakes screeching close to Jessica and her captor.

"Noooooo! Help me!" Jessica screams, sounds of scuffling come across the speakers.

Jessica put up quite a fight. The noises of a struggle continue for several long seconds before a car door slams, followed by the sound of a vehicle driving away. Then there is nothing but silence.

"The phone hasn't moved since. Best we can figure, it fell when she was resisting," Jenks says.
"Fuck!" Edward shouts, returning to his aggressive pacing.

My ears fill with static, my eyes frozen on the speakers in front of me. Everything else fades into the background as my mind replays Jessica's desperate scream for help over and over.

This is my fault.

"Bella? Bella?" I hear Edward's voice, but it sounds far away. Before I can respond, Edward's face appears in my line of vision, breaking my visual hold on the speakers. I feel his hands on my shoulders as he bends down to my eye level. "You okay?" he asks, his face pained with worry.

"We have to find her," I demand.

"We will. We found out right away, that will help," Edward tries to say with confidence, but I hear doubt in his voice.

"We need to call someone, our office or the Seattle PD. We need to file a report, so they can start looking for her," I say quickly, my thoughts racing for the best solution.

"That won't help. The Volturi are masters at covering their tracks, you know that. The local PD won't get far, and Mike will try to shut down any lead if it comes through our office. Not to mention, we still don't know if Banner is a part of all of this," Edward argues.

"He's right, Bella. Our group has the best shot at finding her." Jenks jumps in. "We contacted Jasper and Emmett right away, both are trying to find a lead to her whereabouts. Emmett says Mike is still at the warehouse and so far, there is no sign she is there. Jasper is getting a list of all the known property bought by the Volturi. That will hopefully help us narrow down a possible location."

"This is my fault. I should have never suggested you try to get information from her. If you hadn't gone on the date, she never would have met James, and she would be fine," I rant, pulling back from Edward.

"No, Bella. You're not responsible," he says, stepping forward to reach for me again.

"Really? This whole thing is about me. Everything about this is my fucking fault!" I scream. Edward looks at me stunned, taken back by the intensity of my reaction.

"Ace!" Jenks yells, gaining my attention. "I hate to tell you but the world doesn't revolve around you. This would have happened eventually with or without your involvement."


"Fine, let's look at the evidence," Jenks says matter-of-factly, holding up his hand to count off as he speaks.

"One. Felix decided to fight the Volturi, that act got this whole ball rolling. Nothing to do with you. Two. Mike decided to work for the Volturi. Nothing to do with you. Three. Jessica chose to do Mike's dirty work. Nothing to do with you."

I stare at him, while he lays out his argument. What he's saying makes sense, but this specific situation started last night as a part of our game plan. Logic can't argue that fact away.

Jenks walks over and stands right in front of me, grabbing me by the shoulders. "It's almost guaranteed that Mike's dumb ass would have eventually messed up. And Jessica would have
happily helped out. So, it was just a matter of time." He pauses, taking a breath. "The good thing is *because* of you, we were watching, so we have a better chance of saving her. If this had happened without our involvement, she'd have no chance."

"That's true, Bella," Edward adds in agreement. "It doesn't help anyone to think about the 'what if's'. God knows, I regret what I did a couple of nights ago, but rethinking things isn't going to change what happened. All we can do is focus on how to deal with it."

"You're right," I concede, in part. I'm not ready to release my responsibility in this situation. However, wallowing in guilt isn't going to help Jessica. I need to focus on the task at hand, and luckily I have years of practice with numbing my emotions and moving forward. Shoving the guilt to the side, I turn all my energy toward figuring out how to save her.

"Break-down what happened last night," Edward says, walking over to the table. He grabs one of the notebooks and sits down ready to write down anything important.

"Most of the night was quiet on all fronts. Then several hours ago, all three subjects became active. Mike left his apartment and went back to the warehouse. James left the warehouse and went to a club, and then Jessica left her apartment to go to several different clubs," Jenks explains.

"Jasper and Emmett stayed on the two men, and we followed Jessica's activities," Seth adds, repeating what Jenks indicated earlier.

"Jessica's behavior is most likely not related to any specific agenda, but Mike and James behavior seemed strategic in setting up what happened."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It was the timing of things that is suspicious. Mike holds up in his apartment all day and then suddenly leaves like his pants are on fire. I don't know what triggered it, bu-"

"It was Aro," I interrupt.

"What?" Edward and Jenks ask together.

"Granted, I was a little out of it last night, but I'm pretty sure Aro said he wanted an update today, or I guess yesterday," I clarify glancing at the clock and seeing the early morning time staring back. "If Mike stayed in his apartment all day, I doubt he remember that directive. Aro doesn't forget those things and my bet is someone reminded him. He knew he'd be screwed if he didn't have something to report."

"The phone call," Seth says.

"Shit, kid, you're right!" Jenks exclaims.

"What phone call?" Edward questions.

"Jessica called Mike a couple of hours before he left. Fuck, I totally missed that piece, I should have caught it," Jenks mutters to himself.

"Caught what? You need to slow down and take me step by step. What exactly did they talk about?" Edward asks.
"You," Seth comments distractedly, looking at his computer when he hears the sound of a notification pinging. Edward looks back to Jenks with questioning eyes, waiting for him to fill in the blanks.

"Banner forwarded your e-mail to Jessica. Since he is out-of-town next week, he wanted to make sure the schedule reflected that you were out. Jessica called Mike to give him the heads up, since she knows he needs to get into your computer."

"Jesus, even after everything, Jessica is still aligning with Mike," Edward states stunned.

"Not really. Jessica basically told him where he can shove it, but she also said she doesn't want him killed. She decided to pass along the information to help him one last time," Jenks clarifies.

"Then Mike took the information to James, to placate Aro and save his own ass," I hypothesize, gathering all the pieces.

"Son of a bitch sold her out! That fucker needs to die." Edward growls.

"I don't understand. If Mike gave Aro an update, and things were in motion to get the evidence, why take Jessica?" Seth asks, looking up from his computer in confusion.

"Because that's how Aro works. Mike screwed up and there are consequences when you fail," I state simply, remembering all the lessons I witnessed and experienced at the hands of Aro and the Volturi.

"Do you think she's dead?" Edward asks quietly.

"No, not yet. They will use her as leverage with Mike until he completes his task. Once he destroys the evidence, Aro will order both their deaths."

"Then we don't have much time," Jenks states. "They can't wait too long, especially because her disappearance will raise concerns with the FBI."

"Umm, that's not true. They just bought themselves some time," Seth declares looking at his screen.

"What do you got, kid?"

"They just sent Banner an e-mail from 'Jessica' stating she will be out of the office for an unknown amount of time due to a family emergency."

"Clever," I utter, thinking about the web this weaves.

"How is that clever?" Jenks asks. "Anyone who knows her could easily follow-up and find out it's not true."

"It's clever, because of the timing and gossip factor." Everyone in the room looks at me in confusion. "Think about it. Jessica probably bragged to everyone in the office about her date with Edward. Now suddenly, both are gone due to family emergencies. The office gossip mill will have this spun and twisted in no time. Everyone will believe the family emergencies are just an excuse for Jessica and Edward to get away together. It will become a scandalous rumor, and take the focus from anyone being concerned about her actual whereabouts."

"Fuck," Edward hisses.
"We need a plan," Jenks states, reaching for some paper and sitting down next to Edward. The pressure in the room increases, we all know there is a short window of time to get Jessica back alive.

"What about James?" I ask.

"What about him?" Jenks looks up confused.

"You said earlier that his behavior was suspicious, but you didn't tell us why."

"Oh, right. When Mike first arrived at the warehouse, James was still there. A couple of hours later he left to go to a club, and stayed there well after Jessica's kidnapping."

"He was making sure he had an alibi," Edward mumbles.

"Yup. Jasper kept a close eye on him, but he didn't do anything that could be connected to Jessica's kidnapping. Speaking of Jasper, what's up with him?" Jenks questions, suddenly switching topics.

"What do you mean?" Edward asks tightly.

Although I've often wondered the same thing, I'm surprised at Jenks' timing. We have too many other things to focus on right now besides Jasper's behavior.

"I had to stop him all night from making stupid mistakes. He wanted to arrest James for every little law violation he saw, which would not do us any good in the long run. He's like a freaking pit bull with this case. Are we sure he doesn't have a separate agenda? You said it yourself, Edward, he's been acting strange lately."

Edward and I look at each other with curious eyes. Is there something we missed?

"A few weeks ago, I would have said no, but I don't know, man, it's getting hard to keep track of all the players, and what side everyone is playing on." Edward's nostrils flare in frustration.

I walk over and grab his hand in support. I know better than anyone what it feels like to start suspecting everyone around you. It's not an easy feeling to deal with, especially since we are talking about his cousin's fiancé.

"What did he want to arrest him for?" I ask, hoping to focus the conversation on something more tangible. I don't think we can resolve the Jasper issue tonight, but what he saw might help us develop our plan.

"Umm, a bunch of petty shit. The biggest was drugs. He followed him into the club instead of waiting in the car. It seems James has quite the nasty coke habit. Jasper says he was doing lines all night."

"You're kidding!" I exclaim in shock.

"What? Why is that so surprising?" Edward asks.

"Because doing drugs is a huge breach of the Volturi code of ethics." Edward and Jenks look at me incredulously at the terminology. "I know, it's ironic they have a code of ethics, but how do you think Aro keeps one step ahead. He chooses his people carefully and keeps them on a short leash. Drugs leads to mistakes and sloppy behavior. It's too much of a liability if you want to evade the authorities."
"You can't seriously tell me that everyone working for the Volturi is drug free," Jenks scoffs.

"No, what I said is drugs aren't allowed. The punishment if caught is severe, and that is for the soldiers. But for the Volturi's top guard, it's unheard of. I can't fathom the punishment if Aro ever finds out. James is playing with fire in more ways than one."

"That's it," Jenks says, suddenly jumping up.

"What?" I ask.

"The only way we are getting Jessica back is if we go get her, which means I need to get in good with the Volturi and James as soon as possible. The drugs may be our way in."

"What are you thinking?" Edward asks cautiously.

"James has a taste for partying, right? What if we set up a drug bust at the club he goes to and I help him escape from the authorities? If what Bella says is true, James will be indebted to me for saving him from getting caught."

"It just might be crazy enough to work," I mumble, considering his plan.

If the cops arrest James for drugs, he knows Aro would have him killed without a second thought. James makes stupid decisions from time to time, but he's not suicidal. As much as I'm against Jenks joining the Volturi, we need to save Jessica, and right now this is our the best option.

"Okay, but we can't set up the bust through the FBI, we need to go local," Edward adds.

"We can make an anonymous tip. Seth, could you-" Jenks turns to look at Seth, who looks at him with a frustrated gaze. "Right, okay, Seth can set it up so the tip is untraceable. We just need to make it juicy enough for the Seattle P.D. to bite and go in."

"They will want to get a team in place. We need to set it up where we can let them know where to go, but they'll wait until we say to bust it."

"Let me work on something. Just get me a name of a cop in the vice department, and I'll set up the rest," Seth says confidently.

I walk over to stand next to Seth to see what he' doing, always fascinated by his work. His desk, like usual, is scattered with papers and files. Glancing across the desk, I see the picture of his father still propped up against the screen, and next to it is the device I gave him earlier. Seeing the two together gives me a strange feeling. I don't like it. With Jenks and Edward continuing to discuss plans over at the table, I take the opportunity to ask Seth if he learned anything about the device.

"Hey, Seth, did you look at that device yet?"

Seth turns towards me, his eyes lighting up. "Yes, it's fascinating. Really quality work for something developed so long ago. Since you brought it up, can I ask you something?"

"Okay, although I don't know if I can tell you much more than I already did."

"Was it ever used on a Volturi device?" Seth looks at me in anticipation.

"Yes, briefly when Caius showed me what it did. Why?" I ask hesitantly, this is obviously an important question, but I don't understand why it would matter.

"I think it left fingerprints," Seth says excitedly. He looks like he is about to start one of manic
speeches, but stops when he sees my blatant confusion.

"All computers have fingerprints, and like humans, each is unique. This could be just what I need to gain access into their system," he clarifies, smiling happily.

I find myself wanting to ask him how, but realize I won't understand half of what he says anyway, and I don't want to take too much time away from his current task. "That's great, Seth. Access will help us, right?"

"More than you know. Hey, one other question? What kind of data is on it?"

"What?"

"There's a huge file on it, but it's corrupted. I think I can retrieve it, but I was just hoping you knew what it was in case it wasn't worth the amount of work it will take to do it."

"I have no idea. Caius never said anything a file, but if he put it there, it was for a good reason. Do what you can to retrieve it." I'm at a loss about what the information could be, but if Caius put it there, it's important. What I really don't understand is why didn't he tell me it was there.

"You got it," Seth mumbles, focusing again on setting up the drug bust.

I walk back over to the table, where Jenks and Edward are leaning over a paper, arguing various points of a part of the plan. I sit down heavily and stifle a yawn, allowing myself a wistful moment to look longingly at the stairs. My body wants sleep, but there is too much to do. I doubt Jessica is sleeping, so we won't either. Jenks plans to get on the road by eight, which leaves us little time to get everything in order. Sleep will just have to wait for another day.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time, when Bella makes an important decision.
"Thank you, Marco, just put them over there," my mom tells the man carrying our groceries.

"Yes, ma'am," he says with manners and a big smile.

Marco is a new helper. His job is to drive us to town, and help with errands. He acts very nice, and says 'hi' to me. Most of my daddy's helpers don't like talking to me, but Marco smiles, and even got me ice cream today at the store.

I don't like him.

His colors are like bad dreams and monsters. Marco pretends he's nice, but he is really wicked. A mean shadow follows him, and I think he wants to hurt us. I stand behind Mommy, holding her skirt and trying to hide. I don't like looking at him, it hurts my head. He's scary, and the colors never go away. Mom looks down and gives me a funny look. I don't know why she can't see that he's bad. When Marco leaves, my head stops hurting. He takes the bad feelings with him.

"Isabella Volturi, what is going on with you? You were very rude all day today." She sounds mad.

"He's mean."

"Isabella, don't be ridicules. He is perfectly nice."

"He's a liar, and his colors are mean."

My mom looks at me for a long time and then kneels down to grab my shoulders. "What did you say?" she whispers.

"His colors are mean."

"How are his colors mean?"

"I don't know. They just are. When kids at school are mean they have the same colors, 'cept theirs change back. His stay mean. I don't like it!"

"The colors you see change?"
"Yes."

"Oh my God," she whispers, looking out the window.

She doesn't talk for a long time, but keeps ahold of my shoulders so I can't move. Did I do something wrong?

"Am I in trouble?"

She turns back and brushes the hair from my face. It always gets in my eyes. She looks sad. I hope I didn't make her sad.

"No, sweet girl. I was just thinking about what a special and burdensome gift you have."

"B-burr-d-densome?" I stutter, trying to say the funny word.

"It just means...," she closes her eyes, "it means you see more than you should at your age. You see into the window of a person's soul, Isabella. You see their true nature."

"Nobody else sees colors?"

"No, sweetheart, they don't. Isabella, promise me that you will never tell anyone about what you see. They won't understand, and will try to hurt you. Especially your father's helpers. Promise me you will always keep this to yourself." She squeezes my shoulders. It hurts.

"I promise," I whisper. She is scaring me.

"Always trust your feelings, Isabella. If you believe someone is bad, you need to protect yourself. In fact, let's start today. I will tell Marco he is not allowed to help us anymore."

"Thanks, Mommy!" It makes me happy that I won't have to see him again. "I'll make sure to tell you right away if I see any more bad men. You'll protect me, right?"

"Always," she whispers, pulling me into a hug.

I feel safe and cozy, but the sound of a door shutting makes her pull away. I turn to see who is here, but no one comes into the kitchen.

"Isabella, wait here," she says, getting up and walking out of the kitchen. After a long time, she comes back by herself. I guess no one came to visit.

"That was strange," she says quietly, grabbing some pans to start our dinner. Her hands shake when she gets the pasta out of the refrigerator. The sound must have scared her. I hope it wasn't the shadow man coming to get us.

The lake is eerily smooth, and covered in mist, the chill in the air allowing it to linger into the late morning. My eyes feel heavy, and my body's exhausted. I hoped sitting on the dock would calm my racing thoughts, but the quiet has only magnified them.

Jenks left as planned, and the goodbye was harder than I expected. He barged into my life only a few weeks ago, but managed to worm his way into my heart. I hugged him tightly before he got in his SUV, trying to silence the inner voice questioning whether this will be the last time I see him alive. I told him under no circumstances is he allowed to die. Being Jenks, he laughed off my request, ruffled my hair, and said I couldn't get rid of him that easily.
Seth is also struggling with Jenks' departure. They are really quite the pair; Jenks a strange Yin to Seth's Yang. Polar opposites in so many ways, and yet they fit. Seth stood with me in the driveway watching with sad eyes as his vehicle pulled away. Although he won't voice it, I know Seth shares my fears.

After Jenks left, I tried to make breakfast for the three of us. However, before I even put the ingredients together, the boys crashed; Seth lying over the keys of his computer and Edward on the couch. With both dead to the world, I slipped away to gather and organize my thoughts.

Earlier this morning, I sat at the table listening while Edward and Jenks discussed the best way to infiltrate the Volturi. They talked about the importance of distinguishing between those deeply invested; those interested in the money; and the wannabes who think they will get fame and glory, but unbeknownst to them will become the scapegoats.

During the conversation, Edward would subtly glance my way, both of us understanding the irony of Jenks discussing the best way to carry out this plan. In many ways, they were discussing the hot and cold game, but Jenks was playing without the most important component; me. Maybe it was time to change the rules.

I find myself thinking about the long ago promise I made to keep my ability a secret. Knowing that Aro probably knows, and apparently used it to his advantage makes me sick. It was my mom's worst fear. All the years I've spent hiding and running seems pointless as we speed along on this inevitable collision course, and I'm starting to believe my promise actually hinders our ability to win.

"What are you doing out here?"

I jump at the sound of Edward's voice. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear him coming. "Just thinking."

Still looking across the lake, I listen to him move closer, the wood creaking under his weight. A blanket unexpectedly surrounds my shoulders as Edward sits down and wraps me in his arms.

"You're freezing," he whispers against my ear, before kissing my temple. "What are you thinking about?"

"How long I've run away. I run, people die, and nothing really changes about the Volturi. I was thinking that it makes me a coward."

"Baby, you are not a coward. You're a survivor. There's a big difference."

"But I'm still running while everyone else takes the risks. You, Emmett and now Jenks. He's running directly into the fire. And what am I doing? Sitting by a lake. Why is it okay for everyone else to put their life on the line when I'm not?"

"Bella-"

"And then there's Jessica. Yes, she made a stupid mistake to involve herself with Mike, but if she dies, it's one more death to add to an already too long list. I can't change what's already happened, but I can stop hiding and start making different choices."

"What exactly are you saying?" Edward asks. His body becomes rigid, his arms tightening around me.

"I'm saying I can help Jenks. I think I should tell him about my ability."
"Really?" I can't see Edward's face, but I hear the shock in his voice. "You know I will support you if that's what you decide, but I don't understand how telling Jenks will help?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet. I just know that Jenks needs to pick the right people, and I can help. If he picks wrong…well, how can I not help him avoid that?" I swallow the lump in my throat, my emotions getting the better of me.

"Hey, it's okay. Jenks is a smart guy, and he's probably already three steps ahead. We'll figure something out, but, baby, I don't think you can do much from here."

I turn my head to the side to look at him. His eyes intensely stare back into mine. He's worried about my train of thought.

"Maybe I shouldn't be here."

Edward eyes widen before filling with anger as he shakes his head almost violently. "Absolutely not!" His arms tighten in an almost painful grip around my body. "If you want to tell Jenks, fine. But you are not going back to Seattle."

"I came here because there were too many unknowns. But now we know who the mole is, and we are tracking James. Plus, Seth thinks he can get into the Volturi system, which will keep us ahead of the game."

Edward stares at me, his jaw clenched, obviously not buying any of my justifications. I knew he wouldn't be happy about the idea, but with his protective nature being fueled by his stubbornness, he appears unwilling to even discuss the potential benefit of going back.

"I don't plan on walking back into my life. I will stay in hiding, but I think I can help with surveillance."

Edward abruptly stands, the blanket around my shoulders falling to the dock with his movement. The sudden loss of warmth causes a violent shiver to run through my body. I twist towards him, watching as he stands against the railing. Holding it tightly with both hands, his knuckles turn white under the pressure. Looking like a statue, he stands there for several moments, staring across the lake, not saying a word. Suddenly, he lets out a long breath. The stiffness of his body relaxes as the air purges from his lips. The transformation is perplexing, and I once again wish for insight into his emotions.

"You know, your compassion is one of things that drew me to you from the beginning," Edward says softly. His words throw me.

"And then when I found out about your history…" He turns back to me, his eyes staring into the depths of my soul. "You have every reason to hate the world, and yet, every day I see you fight for justice. You show compassion to everyone around you with smiles and warmth. And watching you deal with everything over these last few weeks…well, you amaze me." He comes back, and kneels before me. Reaching out, he cradles my face in his hands.

"I don't think you realize how easily you charm people. You work so hard to keep things hidden, but your goodness can't help but shine through. You're warmth is like a magnet to those around you." He smiles softly, rubbing my cheek when an unexpected tear rolls down, my emotions overwhelmed by his words.

"But, I also see how it causes you to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. You're convinced that every bad thing that occurs is because of you, but it's not. And you don't seem to
comprehend that everyone is here because we want you safe. Please, don't put yourself at risk trying to fix things that aren't yours to fix."

"I don't want to put myself at risk, but I can't stand back and watch everyone else be at risk either. It doesn't seem fair," I whisper, placing my hands over his, which are still holding my face.

"How about this? Let's tell Jenks about your ability, and together we can decide if there is anything else you can do to help."

"I don't know," I say hesitantly. I am not sure I want to put off this discussion. The sooner I can get back, the better for Jenks.

"Look, tonight when Jenks scopes out the club, hopefully James will be there, and we need you to watch him. You are the only one with enough knowledge to get Jenks in. I think that is more than enough for you to do right now. We don't need to rush into anything else. Remember, one step at a time."

He slowly leans forward until our lips touch. The kiss is soft and gentle, almost reverent. Pulling back, we rest our foreheads against one another, quietly breathing each other in. Once again, Edward's presence is able to calm me. I haven't completely given up the idea of going back, but he is right, now is not the time for rash decisions.

"You're right. I need to help tonight. We can decide the rest later."

"Wow. Did it actually work?" he asks in amazement.

I pull back to look at him with a raised eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"I finally figured out the more I argue with you, the more you dig your heels in. At first, I admit that I wanted to drag you off this dock and lock you in a room. But, I realized it would only piss you off, and make you want to leave more. So, I decided to try the mature and honest route instead." He smiles.

"I don't know if I'm impressed or insulted," I respond, my mind spinning a bit. I'm not sure if he played me, or if we just took another important step forward in building our relationship. The one thing I know is that Edward Cullen is certainly going to keep me on my toes as we navigate our changing dynamic.

"Have you slept yet?" Edward asks, officially taking us off the topic of Seattle.

"No, I couldn't shut my mind down long enough to rest."

Edward pulls me closer, rubbing his hands up and down my back. "How about we go back in and take a nap. God knows I could use some more sleep."

"Yeah, sleep sounds good," I say, with a yawn, rapidly feeling the impact of my exhaustion.

Edward stands, giving me his hand to pull me up too. Turning around, he pats his back. "Hop on, Bella. Let's get you to bed."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. You can barely stand. Come on, the quicker you hop on, the quicker I can get you tucked in."
I laugh at his boyish nature, but climb on anyway, wrapping my legs and arms around him. My face snuggles into his neck trying to soak up his warmth and absorb his comforting scent. Walking quickly back to the house, he goes directly up the stairs to my bedroom. Sitting me on the bed, he leans down to help me take off my shoes, and then pulls back the covers.

"Are you staying?" I ask shyly, scooting up the bed and lying down.

"There is nowhere else I'd rather be," Edward says, taking his own shoes off and lying down next to me, pulling me tightly against his body. "Rest, Bella. I'll be here when you wake up, and we'll figure everything out then."

My eyes flutter shut as I start drifting away. Somewhere between consciousness and sleep, I think I hear Edward mumble something else, but sleep overtakes me before I can ask him what he said.

My eyes open to a darkened room. I take a moment to stretch, my muscles tingling as they lengthen and release. Still a bit disoriented, I find the clock, surprised to see it is ten at night. I've slept the day away. Edward is no longer beside me, but on his pillow is a piece of paper and a Hersey's Kiss. I find myself smiling at the gesture as I unwrap the candy and open the note.

"Hello lazy bones,

Seth and I are working downstairs. Come find us when you wake up.

P.S. I wanted to leave you a rose, but a kiss will have to do for now.

Yours always, Edward.

After taking a long hot shower, I change into a comfortable pair of jeans, and loose sweater. Walking downstairs, I stop short, stunned by the sight before me. Unorganized piles of scattered paper cover almost every square inch of the dining-room table. Files are lying on the floor next to several chairs, and Seth's desk appears more disorganized than normal.

Edward and Seth are leaning over the table reading through what looks like an old, worn file. The cover is light green and covered in stains. I've never seen it before. Hearing my footsteps, both boys look up with a smile.

"Well, look who has finally decided to join the land of the living?" Edward says sarcastically.

"Hey, Bella, did you know that not sleeping for sixteen hours leads to a decrease in performance that is equivalent to having a blood alcohol level of point zero five percent?"

"Um, yeah, I think I read that somewhere." Seth's facts shouldn't surprise me anymore, but he still catches me off guard from time to time with what comes out of his mouth.

Edward walks over to meet me at the stairs. Grabbing my hand he pulls me in for a brief kiss before giving me a hug. "Feeling better?"

"Much. What the heck is going on down here? It looks like a paper truck exploded."

"I brought a bunch of the Volturi files with me. Seth wanted to see if there was any information related to their computer systems." Edward's face flushes as he looks over at the mess. "Sorry, we, uh, kind of took over your table."

"Oh. So, these are the files, huh?" The mess is forgotten as I move away from Edward and walk
over to the table, glancing at all the documents containing years of information about my father.

"It's some of them. The rest are at the condo. These were the ones I was working on when I decided to come here. Most are the Italian files from CISR."

I reach out and grab one of the files. It's filled with scribbled notes and dates, nothing of significance jumping out. Putting it back on the table, a small stack of files in the corner catches my eye. They are neatly piled, and have markers on several of the pages. They stand out amongst the chaos, which tells me there is something important in them. Moving quickly around the table, I hear Edward scrambling behind me, just as I reach out to take the files, Edward's arm grabs mine to stop me.

"Bella, I don't think-"

I turn and glare at him, motioning with my eyes towards his interfering hand. My curiosity is now piqued by his reaction, whatever is in these files are significant, and there is no way he can stop me from looking. He nods in defeat, worry shining in his eyes as he slowly lets go of my arm.

Opening to the first marked page, I understand why Edward is so concerned. There staring up from the page is a picture of me and my mother. I slowly sink into the chair next to me, my eyes frozen on the page. I am barely aware of Edward kneeling down to put his arm around my shoulders, but my body recognizes his comforting touch.

The picture was taken at the beach, and obviously from a distance. I was probably about three or four. My mom is chasing me in the sand with the ocean sparkling behind us. It is the look on our faces that steals my breath. Both of us are laughing with big smiles; my eyes carefree and innocent. The girl in the picture has no clue that in only a couple of years, she will lose that innocence violently. A traitorous tear breaks free, landing on the page and marring the perfect picture. I frantically wipe it away before it ruins it completely.

"Bella," Edward whispers, leaning closer and resting his head against mine.

"I'm okay," I say, trying to convince myself as well as him.

Shaking myself free, I flip through the other marked pages. They are all pictures of me; family pictures, school pictures, as well as close-up and long distance surveillance shots. Taking the other files, I find the same thing, pages upon pages of pictures. Each file is a different period of my life. The bottom file apparently taken during my last few years with Aro. I look up at Edward for an explanation. There is nothing helpful in these pictures, so there is no reason to mark them.

"I don't understand? Did you mark these?"

Edward looks at me with apologetic and remorseful eyes. He is silent for several moments as he struggles to find the words to explain his actions. I am at a loss as for why he would want to mark them. Wanting to know about me is one thing, but this feels almost voyeuristic.

"It was your eyes that got to me, so bright and innocent. I just couldn't shake them. Then I saw the other files, and it was like watching the death of your soul. With each picture, your eyes became duller, your smile non-existent. It was physically painful to see."

"But why mark them? Why go back and look at them again?"

"Being apart from you was harder than I expected. These pictures became my motivation." He pauses to clear his throat, his emotions also surfacing. Placing his hand on the side of my face, he continues.
"I hate the man who did this to you. Aro will get what's coming to him. You deserve to have peace, Bella. I can't bring back your innocence, but I can damn well do everything in my power to bring you at least that."

I look back down at a picture taken just after I turned seventeen. I am sitting at a large table in a restaurant sandwiched between Aro and Marcus. The camera caught me looking straight ahead, almost as if I knew the shot was being taken. He's right, my eyes are lifeless. Slamming the file closed, I look up at Edward, who is watching me cautiously.

"Thank you," I whisper, reaching out to touch his face.

Leaning forward, I briefly kiss his lips, feeling incredibly lucky to have him in my life. I was never a big fan of fairytales, but Edward is definitely changing my mind about the possibility of a happily ever after.

"Umm, sorry to interrupt, but we need to set up. Jenks is heading to the club soon," Seth says uncomfortably from his desk.

"Right, we need to get ready," Edward says, standing back up.

With one last glance in my direction, he walks over to Seth. As usual, there is not much time to linger on any one thing for long. Putting the file back on the table, I walk over too, watching as Seth bring up the various screens and programs needed for tonight's activities.

"What's the plan?" I ask.

"Basically what we discussed earlier. Jenks is going to scope out the club, hopefully setting the stage for tomorrow's drug bust. Since it's likely that James knows what Emmett looks like from Mike's Intel, it is too risky for him to go inside, so he is going to monitor things from the car."

"What about Jasper?"

"Jenks doesn't want him there tonight. So, Jasper is going to focus on narrowing down the possible places they could be keeping Jessica."

"Wow, I bet that went over well. How did you get Jasper to agree?" Looks like I missed a lot during my nap.

"There is really no choice when it comes to Jenks telling you something. He's a force I would never want to go against, and today, Jasper found that out the hard way."

I look between Edward and Seth waiting for a detailed explanation, a part of me bummed that I missed the fireworks.

"Jenks knocked his ass out!" Seth says with a huge grin.

"Jasper needed a reality check. I don't know exactly what the hell is going on with him, but Jenks was right to put him out of commission tonight." Edward acknowledges, but doesn't go into any further detail about the conversation that led up to the aforementioned ass kicking. I know Jenks would not strike without cause.

"Here we go," Seth says as the screen in the middle comes to life with Jenks' camera.

Tonight, Jenks has both a hidden camera and a "Seth specially" rigged phone. We all agreed that once he is officially a part of the Volturi, the hidden camera will be too risky. However, tonight he
doesn't plan on making contact, which allows for the extra visual.

"Hello, sports fans! Am I live?" Jenks' voice bellows through the speakers. I feel myself smile at the sound.

"Good to go on my end," Emmett says, checking in as well. "I'm parked a block away facing north."

"Good on our end," Seth responds.

"Hey, kid! You behaving yourself?"

"Yup," Seth says seriously, but I see the smirk in his eyes. He misses Jenks.

"How about you, Ace? I know Edward is a meager replacement for me, but I want you to keep up with your self-defense practice, okay."

"Gotcha. And just to make you proud, I'll make sure to kick his ass good!"

Edward looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "Bring it, Ace," he mocks.

"Okay, enough with the foreplay you two, I've got work to do," Jenks scoffs. I smile, shaking my head at his playfulness. If I were honest, Seth is not the only one missing Jenks.

"Alright folks, let's get this show on the road," Jenks says.

From his camera, we watch as he walks from his car to the club. There is a line, but Jenks moves his way to the front and hands the bouncer three hundred dollars to let him in. The club is loud and packed with people. Techno music blasts from the speakers of a DJ's booth sitting above a small dance floor in the back. Sweaty bodies moving in sync with the beat, crowd the tiny space. The strobe lights make the already difficult quality of the camera worse. I feel slightly dizzy trying to watch as Jenks weaves his way through the crowd to the bar.

Turning my head to the side to avoid the screen until Jenks stops moving, I notice a folder sitting on top of Seth's pile with the name Jacob Black scribbled on top. I guess he started his research and found something worthwhile.

I am starting to feel a bit like Hercules fighting the Hydra. For every mystery I think we solve, two more open in its wake. If we are ever to get ahead, we need to get to the core of the monster soon. Maybe Seth was also able to make progress on getting the information off that device. My instincts are telling me whatever is there is important to our success. My leg bounces, thinking about all the possibilities with both situations. When the mission tonight is over, Seth and I need to talk.

"He's here," Jenks mumbles.

I turn back to the screen just in time to see Jenks swing around so the camera faces the corner. There at a table sits James. I feel my heart rate jump at the sight, but I am doing better than the first night I saw him. Edward moves closer to me in support, and I look over to give him a small smile letting him know I'm okay.

James is wearing a black hoodie, and is sitting in-between two large breasted and barely clothed blondes. Sitting to his right, is the man who drove him to the warehouse, and to his left, sits Newton.

Newton is looking around the club nervously. He is trying to play it cool when James talks to him,
but I can see the anxiousness in his body language. He knows he is in way over his head, but he's in too deep to get out.

"Why would Newton be with James? Aro isn't happy with him. Why risk bringing him out to party?" Emmett asks.

"That's exactly why James brought him," I explain. "James can't bring people loyal to Aro if he's doing drugs. He needs his own groupies to cover his back. My bet is he promised to save Mike, if he works exclusively for him."

"Okay Bells, you obviously know James best. Let us know if you see anything of interest or importance," Emmett says.

Jenks maneuvers closer, leaning against a wall across from James' table. I stare at the screen, forcing myself to focus on a man who tormented me. He looks older, and his dirty blond hair is longer, pulled into a low ponytail. He has an arm around each girl, both hands reaching and grabbing, the girls giggling at each inappropriate touch. James says something to the lackey on his right, who immediately pulls something out of his pocket and hands it over to James.

"Party time," Emmett says.

James takes the bag of powder, pours some on the top of his fisted hand and snorts it. Wiping his nose, he leans back against the booth with a blissful smile. Several seconds later, he springs forward, waving for the waitress to come over. Once she arrives, he enthusiastically orders, slapping Mike on the back after asking him a question. He is defiantly riding his high.

"Seth can you zoom in or something? I want to take a closer look," I ask, squinting my eyes at the screen.

"Sure, just give me a second."

Taking the mouse, he clicks on the area around James. Bringing up a box and clicking a button, the screen fills with James' image. Leaning closer, I push my personal feelings to the side and just evaluate the differences I see in him.

The pony tail should have been my first clue. Even though James' behavior was a bit more unorthodox in comparison to Aro's other guards, his appearance was clean-cut. His hair was neatly trimmed, his face clean-shaven, and he always wore a suit. Today he looks disheveled.

His ponytail is greasy, his face scruffy, and his t-shirt wrinkly. He is on the edge. This is going to work well for us.

"He's losing it," I comment.

"What do you mean?" Edward asks beside me, also leaning in trying to see what I do.

"The drugs are taking over. He's lost the sharpness of his presence. If his focus is on his next high, it will be easy to cause him problems. The more problems that occur, the angrier Aro will become, which will fall on James since his job is to get Seattle in order."

"Sounds like a perfect job for me. I am a master at creating chaos," Jenks whispers.

"It looks like we can safely assume he's a regular patron here. He can't do his drugs as easily in front of the Volturi crew. I say, let's get the ball rolling on the bust for tomorrow night," Emmett adds.
The crew discusses the bust further, but something on James' hand distracts me from the conversation. Looking closer, my eyes widen when I recognize the ring stuffed on James' pinky.

"Shit! He's wearing Jessica's ring!"

"What? Are you sure?" Edward asks, the other conversation suddenly stopping.

"Yes. It is one of the only legitimate conversations we ever had together. It was her father's ring. She inherited it after he died and she kept it on a chain around her neck."

"Okay, I've had enough of the waiting," Jenks mumbles.


"Fuck," Emmett hisses.

"Seth can you fix the camera again?" Edward requests hastily.

Seth nods his head, quickly clicking the screen and bringing it back to normal.

"Wait? What does he mean? No contact tonight, right?" I ask frantically, hoping Jenks is not doing what I think he's doing.

"Jenks tends to roll with his instincts. I guess his instincts are telling him to make contact," Edward mutters, focused intently on the screen.

Jenks has yet to move, but I notice activity at James' table. Mike gets up and points at each person, most likely taking their drink orders. Sure enough, after talking to the last person, he walks through the crowd and over to the bar. After Mike leaves, Jenks places himself closer to their table, weaving around until he is only a couple of feet away. Being so close, I can hear James' laughter as he runs an ice-cube down the neck of one of the girls.

"You like that?" he asks loudly. She giggles in response. His voice sends a shiver up my spine. I hate the sound. "Yeah, you love my touch don't you, dirty girl?" His words are boisterous and rapid, the result of the cocaine flowing through his system.

To the far right of the screen, I see Mike unsteadily weaving his way back through the crowd with a tray of drinks. Mike's waiter skills are sorely lacking. The tray is precariously perched on his arm, one wrong move away from losing it completely. Just as he is about to reach the table, Jenks moves forward, subtly bumping into him. The tray and drinks fall, scattering across the floor. Jenks was incredibly strategic in his movements, and I'm sure to an outside observer it looks like Mike ran into him.

"What the fuck, mate?" Jenks asks in a perfect British accent.

I whip my head around to look at Edward. "British? When did he decide that?"

"No idea," he says, shrugging his shoulders still intently watching the screen.

"Welcome to Jenks undercover, Bells. The key is to just roll with it. He's brilliant at this stuff," Emmett explains, not sounding at all concerned with the ever-changing plan.

"Hey, man, you ran into me!" Mike shouts.

"You're barmy. I was just standing here."
Mike puffs up his chest and attempts to stand toe to toe with Jenks. However, Jenks has a good couple of inches and twenty pounds of muscle on him. Even with the camera capturing only part of Mike, I can imagine how ridiculous he looks.

"Oh. You want to have a go, do ya?" Jenks asks incredulously, stepping into Mike's space.

"Hold up!" James interrupts, walking over to the two men. "Mike, we don't want a scene. Back off."

Mike hesitates, still attempting to stare Jenks down, but glancing over at James; he realizes he needs to follow the order since he is already on thin ice. "Yes, sir," he bites out.

"That's a good boy. Why don't you run along and get us a replacement for those drinks."

Mike begrudgingly turns and stomps off towards the bar. The only way James could be more condescending was if he patted Mike on the head before sending him off for the drinks.

"He's kind of a wanker isn't he?" Jenks asks, turning to face James.

"That he is, but he serves a purpose." James laughs.

The effects of the drugs have yet to wear off. His eyes are dilated, and his uncharacteristic smile indicates he is still riding the wave of euphoria. Any other time, James would not be so generous or forgiving.

"Jack Moore," Jenks says, holding out his hand.

"James." He reaches out and shakes Jenks hand. "You want to sit?" James motions to the table.

"No mate. I was just leaving."

"You sure?"

"Yup, I was on my way out for a good nosh up. I wish you luck though with your arse of an errand boy. He seems like more trouble than he's worth."

James simply laughs and then he goes back to his table. Jenks turns and walks towards the door without looking back. Without the camera facing James, we can't see what he is doing anymore. I'm surprised as I watch Jenks leave the club, get in his car, and drive away.

"You're ending it there?" Emmett questions, also sounding surprised.

"Always leave them wanting more. I accomplished what I wanted. He knows my face now."

"Only if he remembers you once he's sober," I clarify.

"True. But his lackey was watching closely, and so was Mike. The most important thing I established tonight is that I have no interest in spending time with him. This will hopefully buy me some creditability tomorrow night when I claim to have no agenda for why I helped him escape."

"Genius as always," Edward says, praising him.

"Seth?" Jenks asks.

"I'm here."
"I need you to set up some fake records for Jack Moore. Nothing too outlandish, but dirty enough to prove to James that I'm a player. Establish them primarily through Scotland Yard. Got it?"

"I'm on it," Seth responds, turning towards his other computer. His fingers fly over the keyboard as he pulls up Scotland Yard's arrest records. Apparently he already had access to their system.

"What now?" Emmett asks.

"You keep an eye on old James tonight. Maybe luck will strike, and he'll pay a visit to Jessica. I'm going to get my stuff in order. As of tomorrow, I will hopefully become one of James' crew."

"What do you need from our end?" Edward asks.

"Just any other information you find that will help me once I'm in. Seth, I also need you to finish the communication options we talked about."

"They'll be ready," Seth says confidently, still typing away.

"Okay, let's break for the night and reconvene tomorrow morning around seven," Edward states.

Once everyone says their goodbyes, and Emmett promises to call if anything happens with Jessica, Seth shuts down the lines of communication. Once off, I lay my head on the desk, feeling exhausted after the emotional roller-coaster ride Jenks just put me on.

"Bella?" Edward asks, kneeling down beside me.

I sit back up. "Jenks will be the death of me if he keeps this up."

Edward chuckles. "His style is a bit unusual, but it works. We just need to trust him. He knows what he's doing."

"You're right." I concede. It's not that I don't trust Jenks, but his improvisation style directly conflicts with my desire to plan everything. Learning to let go of that will be a challenge.

"Jenks fake files are complete," Seth says.

"Already?" I ask stunned.

"I had a lot of it already done. Jenks asked me to work on it before he left. He just didn't know the name yet. He said the name and background usually come to him in the moment. I just needed to fill in the blanks."

"Well, at least someone knew about his plan," I grumble.

"What else do you need to do, Seth?" Edward asks.

"Just finish with securing the communication, which shouldn't take me too long."

"Okay. Did you see anything in those files that would be helpful for Jenks to use?"

"No, nothing we don't already know," Seth responds.

"What about the hacking device?" I ask.

"It's going to take me quite a bit of time to retrieve them. The file is pretty damaged. I was able to determine that they are pictures, but there is no identifier to tell me what they are of."
"Bella, do you have any idea what they could be?" Edward asks.

"I have no clue. But like I said, Caius put them there for a reason. They must be important."

"I guess there is not much more to do tonight," Edward says.

"What about Jake?" I ask, specifically looking at Seth.

"Jake? Isn't that the guy who tried to help you?" Edward looks at me in confusion.

"Yes. He's the man in Seth's picture, the one who promised to help his dad. Seth and I agree there is more to the story, so he's looking into Jake's background." I know Edward probably has more questions, but I need to know what is in that file. His questions will have to wait until later.

Focusing back on Seth, I steer the conversation back to what he found.

"I saw the file on your desk. What did you find?"

"Most of what I found so far is limited to his childhood. I haven't found anything yet about his time with the Volturi."

"What did you find?" Edward asks.

"Umm, it wasn't good. How well did you know him, Bella?"


Seth hesitates, looking at me almost as if he wants confirmation that I am ready. "Go ahead, Seth. It's okay."

Taking a breath, he grabs the file, opens it, and starts summarizing the information he discovered. Looking at the thickness of the file, he is obviously skipping the details.

"Jacob Black was taken away from his home when he was two. According to records, he was severely abused by both parents. He was a difficult child to place due to a multitude of behavioral problems. So, he bounced from placement to placement. When he was six, he tortured and killed the dog of the family he was staying with. He was placed in a children's hospital for a brief amount of time after that incident for homicidal ideation. At age ten, he was sent to a secured group home after starting a fire at a different foster home. His arrest record documents dozens of police contacts for various crimes up until the age of sixteen, when he suddenly disappeared off the map. That's as far as I got. He went somewhere when he was sixteen; I just haven't found the trail yet."

"Jesus," Edward utters beside me.

I'm shocked. That history sounds impossible for the person I remember. The person, who I read and seemed to have no malicious intent. How could I be so wrong? It makes no sense.

"Are you sure?" I question, my voice sounds rough even to my own ears.

"Yes. I'm sorry, Bella," Seth answers. His voice is thick with sympathy.

Hearing it makes me cringe. I jump out of my chair and walk towards the door, the room suddenly feeling claustrophobic.
"Bella?" Edward stands up to follow me, but I turn and put up my hand.

"I need a minute." I whisper, barely hanging on.

Edward slowly nods his head. "I'm here, Bella. When you need me, I'll be here."

He stands with his fists clenched at his sides, his face pained. I know it is taking all of his resolve to not follow me. I appreciate him even more for respecting my need for time. Right now, he feels like one of the only true things I can depend on. I always thought I knew the truth about my past. As horrible as it was, at least I knew the role of all the players. Apparently, I barely knew anything.

A frigid wind hits me as soon as I walk out on the porch. The painful chill feels good. It jolts me awake and reminds me that I'm still alive. I close my eyes and inhale the cold, trying to temper the rage boiling inside of me. It's not just Jake's betrayal that I find upsetting, but the circumstances around how he did it. What is horrifying to me is he was able to fool me, to fool my ability. That scares and angers me more than anything else.

I am so tired of not knowing who to trust and I am especially tired of feeling like a victim. I want to feel like I am in control of my life, and I want a future free of this madness. The only way I can see that happening is if I stop running. First thing tomorrow, I need to tell Jenks and Seth about my ability. Jake may have fooled me, but I still believe I can use it to help Jenks. Now I just need to convince everyone that returning to Seattle is the best option to get us ahead.

It's time to step the game up a notch and take back my life.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time…

CISR = Comitato interministeriale per la sicurezza della Repubblica (One of the divisions of the Italian Intelligence Agency.)

Barmy = crazy

Arse = basically means ass

Good nosh up = a meal
Chapter 20: Uprising

Although, I feel calmer, I am not quite ready to face Edward and Seth. The thought of being in a room surrounded by their sympathy feels suffocating. Seth with his colors and Edward with his eyes. To avoid going back in, I walk over to the swing, hoping to rely once again on the quiet beauty of the stars to focus and regain perspective. I'm fueled by determination, but I need a strong plan to dissuade the others from Edward's arguments for me to stay.

Lost in my thoughts, I realize I have no idea how long I've been sitting here, but it's long enough for my hands and face to become numb with cold. So far, Seth and Edward have respected my request for time. However, I suspect the sliver of light I catch from time to time in my peripheral vision is Edward pulling back the curtains of one of the windows to check on me. A few moments later, he finally runs out of patience.

"Baby?"

Edward is standing by the corner of the house with my coat, silently asking permission to come closer. Lifting my hand up, I wave him over. Giving me a small smile, he walks in my direction wearing a dark red jacket and brown hiking boots. He looks like he stepped off the pages of a trendy outdoor magazine. My heart beats a bit faster at the sight.

"Bella, it's too cold to sit out here without a coat. You're going to get sick," he warns. "If you still want time alone, I'll leave, but I can't sit back and watch you freeze."

"Thank you," I murmur, reaching for my coat. "You don't have to leave." The genuine emotion I feel saying those words surprise me. Seeing him doesn't feel as suffocating as I feared. I guess the time of considering myself a loner is over.

After helping me into my coat, Edward starts rubbing my arms in an effort to help me warm up. "Jesus, what is it with you and sitting outside in the cold?" Not content with just rubbing my arms, he pulls me into a hug, rubbing up and down my back.
"I don't know. I guess it's becoming a new habit."

"Well, stop it! I don't want to have to start carrying around spare coats just to make sure you're warm. That would just be awkward, especially when I have to pull my gun," he jokes.

"Not to mention the extra baggage would ruin the whole 'G.Q.' thing you have going on," I add, smiling against his chest.

"G.Q.? Does that mean you think I'm handsome?" he asks, his tone a notch lower than before.

"Stop fishing for compliments," I chastise as he laughs softly against my head.

Gently, he repositions us until I am lying back against his chest, his arms wrapped around me. "Tell me, star-gazer. How much do you know about the constellations?"

"I know the major ones, but that's about it. I admit I love the view more than the details."

Taking my hand in his, he points our index fingers to the sky. "See those stars there?" he asks, circling our fingers around specific stars.

"Yes."

"That's Andromeda. She's most visible this time of year. Do you know her story?"

"Umm, she's the heroine in Clash of the Titans, right?"

Edward chuckles. "Yes, but have you ever read the myth?"

"No, can't say I was ever interested."

"I always thought it ironic that most of the Greek mythological characters honored in the night sky are not really honorable. Many are creatures who killed or tried to kill people based on the directive of one God or another. Then you have your impossible heroes like Hercules or Orion, neither of their legends are pure. And then there's Andromeda."

I am not quite sure where Edward is going with this, but the sound of his voice is soothing. I could listen to him talk all night.

"Andromeda was an innocent victim of her circumstances. She was chained to a rock as punishment for her mother's arrogant behavior. A sacrifice to a horrible sea monster to save the people of her kingdom, that is until Perseus saved her. After slaying the monster, he took her away and the two lived happily ever after. At least as happy as you can get in Greek mythology."

"I'm not sure I'm following you. Am I chained to some sort of symbolic rock? And if that's the case, are you Perseus?"

"Umm no, that's not exactly where I was going. Although for the record, I would battle monsters for you," Edward speaks softly into my ear. "I was thinking more about her circumstances and how in the midst of selfish and evil behaviors, Andromeda remained good and pure."

"Does that mean you won't wear Greek armor?" I ask teasingly, trying to keep the conversation light. My old friend, deflection, is a hard habit to break when I'm trying to avoid issues.

"You want me to dress up, huh?" he says seductively, but then I feel him shake his head against mine. "Stop distracting me. I'm trying to be profound here."
"Okay, okay. Be profound, I'm listening," I say in a slightly sarcastic tone, nervous about where this conversation is headed.

"My stubborn girl," Edward mumbles. "What I'm trying to say is; you are not limited by your history or the circumstances you were born into. Tonight was bad, but it's one night. Your future is much brighter."

"Will you be a part of that bright future?" I blurt out, my verbal filter failing. So much for keeping things light.

"There is nothing else I want more. The only person who can stop me is you," Edward asserts.

We sit quietly for a few moments, the weight of the conversation sitting heavy between us. The declarations made were significant, but neither of us is willing to speak directly about the emotion behind them.

"Come back inside," Edward requests. "I banished Seth to his room for the night so you don't have to deal with him. I just want to get you warm."

"Okay, let's go," I say, finally giving in to both Edward and the cold.

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me behind him to walk around the house and back inside. The lights are dim and a fire is going in the living room. The sudden change in temperature makes my face flush and hands tingle.

"Go over by the fire. I made some coffee to help warm you up. You sit and I'll bring it over."

"That sounds great. Cream with…"

"Two sugars. I know," Edward says with a wink before walking into the kitchen.

Taking off my coat, I walk over to the sofa and sit down. Grabbing the blanket over the back, I wrap myself up and watch the fire dance behind the glass.

"Here you go," Edward says, handing me a cup before sitting next to me with a cup of his own. We sit quietly for a moment, both entranced by the flames and lost in our own thoughts.

"Do you miss him?" Edward asks quietly, staring straight ahead. His hands clenched tightly around his cup. I guess we are no longer avoiding the issue.

"Jake?"

"Yeah."

"I think I miss the idea of him."

"What do you mean?" He turns towards me confused.

"For a time, Jake was the only good thing in my life. He became an oasis and made me feel safe. That magnified the intensity of our relationship. After he died, I missed that feeling. Besides my mother, he was the only thing in my past that I could look back and smile about. I think that's why hearing what I heard tonight was so hard."

"I don't often see you shocked by people's behaviors. You really had no idea about his background?"
"None. I don't understand how he could fool me so completely. It's never happened before. I don't get it." I grind my teeth in frustration.

"Maybe there's more to the story? Seth could have missed something."

"I don't know, maybe. But regardless, there was a whole side to him I didn't know about. He's in the picture with Seth's dad. That right there tells me he kept things from me." I lower my head feeling like I failed, the frustration building again. "God, I really hate that I had no clue. I feel pretty fucking stupid."

Edward bangs his cup down on the table, coffee sloshing out with the force. I look up shocked at his unexpected reaction.

"You are not stupid," Edward says harshly.

"Knowing and feeling are two different things," I counter. "I'm tired of my life being nothing but one big betrayal."

Edward looks at me for a moment, before pulling me against him. "Bella, I hope you know that I will never betray you. I'm not Jake."

"I know, deep down I think I've always known. I'm not good at depending on others. It makes me feel weak. I think that's why this thing between us scared me so much. It was safer to ignore it. But now…well, now I don't know what I would do without you, which is a whole new kind of fear."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I know what I have, and there's no way I'm letting you go."

"Promise?" I whisper. I feel like I can face anything as long as I know Edward will be waiting on the other side.

Edward turns me so I'm facing him, our eyes locking together. The amber glow of the fire extenuates the green in his eyes, making them seem even more intense.

"Promise," he states with conviction, leaving no room for argument.

Edward carefully takes the cup out of my hand and places it next to his. We maneuver our bodies until we are lying on the sofa, my head resting against his chest. He gently runs one hand through my hair, while the other traces his mother's necklace down my neck to the red heart resting just above my chest. The action causes my body to shiver with pleasure. Our bodies slowly intertwine and our mouths melt together. Sensually and seductively, his hands explore my back, his fingers ghosting under edges not previously explored. His fingers crawl under my shirt, his touch on my skin is like fire.

Taking initiative from his example, my hands begin their own exploration. Gently, I run my hand up his arm and down his chest. Finding the hem of his shirt, I travel under, my exploration braver than his. I graze my nails across his chest, eliciting a low moan. He shifts again, our bodies finding a friction that is slowly driving me insane.

Time fades as we get lost in the moment. Each taking and receiving from the other. Just as we are reaching a point of no return, Edward slows us down, both of us trying to catch our breath.

I know Edward is holding back, keeping to his earlier commitment to make sure our first time is more than a reaction to what is happening. Although not spoken, I suspect he also wants to prove that his relationship with me is different. He can do the physical side of things, but intimacy is new.
Even though he is trying to take this slow, there is an uncontrollable passion building between us. We are on the course towards a significant change in our relationship, and although a part of me is fearful of this step, I am ready to take it. If our lives were simple, I think we would have taken it long ago, which adds another reason to finish things with the Volturi as soon as possible. I want that bright future Edward spoke about earlier, and I want it soon.

By the glow of the firelight, we spend the next couple of hours talking about everything and nothing between kisses and passionate touches. At some point, I feel my eyes grow heavy, and I start missing large parts of the conversation. Before I know it, I fade away into a dreamless sleep. For the second time in a row, I'm spoiled by the comfort of Edward's arms. I don't know if I can go back to falling asleep without them.

The sound of incessant beeping wakes me up. It takes me a moment to realize that I am still on the living room sofa encased in Edward's arms. Snuggled against his chest, his arms are holding me tightly to prevent me from falling. Even in his sleep he protects me.

The beeping continues. Suddenly, a door slams open and footsteps run down the hall.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Seth chants.

I attempt to untangle myself from Edward, which proves challenging considering his iron clad grip around my waist. Finally free, I walk over to Seth who is sitting at his computer frantically typing and looking distressed.

"What's up?" I croak, my voice still hoarse with sleep.

"Mike is making his move."

"What?"

"He's breaking into Edward's computer," Seth says, but clearly distracted by what he's doing.

Leaving Seth to his task for the moment, I walk back over to Edward to wake him up. He's sprawled out on the couch, the blanket sliding off most of his body to the floor. Leaning over, I gently drag my hand through his hair.

"Edward," I whisper.

He grumbles a bit before slowly blinking his eyes open. "Hey, baby." He smiles.

"Morning." I can't help but smile back, waking Edward up feels comfortable, normal. "Hey, Mike is getting the files off your computer. Seth is tracking the progress now, but I thought you would want to know."

Edward eyes widen going quickly from sleepy to awake. Getting up hastily from the couch, he walks over to Seth with me trailing behind.

"Seth, what's going on?" Edward questions.

"Mike's opening the file. I set up my computer to notify me if anything happened to it," he mumbles.

"What's the plan?" Edward asks.

"We hope the file goes where we need it to…yes, he's as idiotic as I thought." Seth laughs.
"What'd he do?" I ask.

"Remember when I said the mole was stupid enough to use the FBI computers, well he did it again. He just e-mailed the file to someone, I assume James… interesting."

"What?" Edward and I ask together.

"He just downloaded the file…” he stops to stare at the screen quietly, "to a flash-drive, according to the save route."

"Why would he download it instead of just erasing it?" Edward asks.

"Maybe he wants some insurance for himself," I hypothesize.

"Jesus, this guy has no idea what he's doing. He just erased the file from your computer and deleted the history. At least, he thinks he did,” Seth scoffs.

"What do you mean?" I ask, trying to keep up with Seth's train of thought.

"He did the superficial part. Most people don't realize that even when you delete things, they are still there. He actually thinks by deleting the trash and history, he's covered his bases. You have to dig deeper to really make sure they are gone. I'll take care of it from my end to cover our own tracks."

"Okay, that sounds good," Edward comments, also trying to keep up with Seth's fast paced thoughts. "What's next?" he questions.

"We wait for someone to open the e-mail. Once they open the file, the virus I attached will attack their system and allow me access. If James and Mike both open it, I will be able to search both their computer files. Even better, once I have access, I can start all sorts of trouble."

"Like what?" I wonder. Thinking about everything I have seen Seth do so far, I imagine the possibilities are endless.

"Mess with their finances, send false information to people, change all of their personal information. Basically, create the chaos that you said will drive Aro crazy. Between this and getting into Aro's main system, we will be unstoppable."

"You're making progress with that?" I ask, surprised he is able to get anywhere given everything else he's working on.

"Yes. I'm using the fingerprints to create a program that will trick the firewall into thinking it is already part of the system."

"Your mind is amazing, Seth," I comment. He looks up giving me a big smile, colored in a combination of embarrassment and pride.

Our plan is moving full steam ahead with the progress Jenks and Seth are making on their end. Feeling eager and restless to do more, I find myself biting my tongue from telling them about my plan to return. I need to pick the right moment.

The first step is telling them about my ability. Even though I'm committed to my decision, my stomach flutters at the thought. They have both come to mean a lot to me, and I don't want this to change how they see me. Looking at the clock, I realize I only have a little over an hour before we contact Jenks and Emmett.
"I think I'm going to take a run," I blurt out, deciding to clear my head before it's time.

"I'll go with you," Edward says.

"Umm, I kind of wanted to clear my mind before we talk about things this morning," I say pointing to my head, silently trying to communicate with Edward why I want to run alone.

"I get it, Bella, I do." Edward walks closer to me. "I just think safety in numbers is better with everything that's going on. How about this? I'll run behind. You won't even know I'm there," he proposes, his soulful eyes causing me to relent.

"Fine, but I hope you can keep up, Cullen."

"Oh don't worry, Swan. I can keep up," he says lowly, leaning in and giving me a passionate kiss. "The question is, can you?" He walks away, heading to the bedroom to change.

Shaking my head, I walk to my room. Now I want to run for more than one reason. Edward needs to stop making comments about things he's obviously not willing to follow through on yet. Even I only have so much control.

"Hello from Seattle!" Jenks sounds like he is trying to imitate a sports broadcaster.

"Hey, mate," I say in return with my own imitation.

Jenks laughs at my attempt at a British accent. "Did you like that, Ace?"

"It was a surprise."

"What can I say? It felt right in the moment," he says giving me a brilliant smile. I shake my head, unable to stop myself from smiling back. There is no doubt that Jenks' spirit makes my life brighter.

"Where's Emmett and Jasper?" Edward asks.

"Emmett was following James around until early this morning, to no avail by the way. We have no new information on Jessica's whereabouts. Anyway, he needed to crash for a few hours before heading into work. I'll catch him up later."

"Well, we better catch a break soon. We don't have much time to find her. Mike took the evidence off my computer today. They won't need her as a bargaining chip much longer," Edward says.

"Shit. Let's hope tonight goes as planned then."

"And Jasper?" I ask, hoping that someone will share the details of what exactly happened between the two of them.

On the screen, I see Jenks' eyes narrow and his fists clench. "He's working on the list of buildings still," he says, irritation dripping from his voice.

"Is he coming tonight?" Edward questions.

"I have no choice. They might spot Emmett, and I need someone else in that club when the bust occurs."

"Why?" I ask.
"The cops will try to keep everyone organized and in one spot. I need chaos to escape with James. Jasper basically needs to yell 'fire' when the time comes to create panic."

"That makes sense," I say. Jenks certainly knows how to cover all the bases.

"Speaking of tonight, you were right about the building, Jenks," Seth says, unfortunately moving the topic off Jasper.

"I knew it. You can't run an undercover business without a few hiding spots."

"It took me awhile to find the correct set of blueprints. I hacked into the owner's files and found them attached to an old e-mail. Anyway, there is a secret room and escape route."

"Just tell me where to go, kid."

"In the hallway next to the bathrooms, is a small closet." Seth pauses to pull up the blueprints on his computer. "It's directly across from the door of the women's restroom. Inside, underneath the back shelf, there is a trap door on the floor. It leads into a small room directly below the closet. Looking at the blueprints, there is some sort of tunnel or crawl space that should take you to the alley. I assume there is a hidden door, not easily visible from the outside. I'll send you the blueprints so you can see for yourself."

"Seattle P.D. will have the building surrounded during the bust. Even if you can't see the door from the outside, they will spot you as soon as you leave." Edward points out.

"Yeah, I figure we will need to lay low and wait for the dust to settle before we try to leave. It will give us a chance to have a nice 'get to know you' chat," Jenks says.

"I already planned to tap into the P.D. communications tonight. I will monitor their activities and then let you know when the coast is clear," Seth proposes.

"Are you wearing a wire?" I ask concerned. Wearing a wire so close to James is unbelievably dangerous.

"No, too risky. But I will have my phone from Seth so everyone can hear what's going on."

"How is Seth going to contact you if you won't have an ear piece?" I ask confused.

"Keep your phone on vibrate and I'll text you," Seth suggests.

"Sounds good," Jenks says. "I assume we're set with the P.D.?"

"Yes. The name you gave me didn't work, he was too strait-laced. So, I researched other vice cops, and found one with the right background to manipulate."

"What exactly do you mean by 'manipulate'?" Edward asks.

"We needed the cops to hit the club on our time, that's hard to pull off with vice. This cop lost his sister ten years ago to a drug overdose. According to reports, she ran away from home, got into the wrong crowd, and ended up being pimped out by her drug-dealing boyfriend. It's the reason he joined vice."

"Tragic as it is, what does his story have to do with anything?" Jenks questions.

"I called him with a similar story. Told him that I tracked my sister down to this club, and one of her druggie friends told me she and her drug dealer boyfriend will be there tonight. I produced
some compelling evidence convincing him that the dealer is a huge supplier in Seattle, and the owner of the club lets him do business in their back room. I begged him to do something so I can save her life. He bought it hook, line, and sinker. Promised to raid the joint and find her."

"I assume you did some magical computing to make sure whatever alias and false information you gave him to support your story can't be traced back to us?" Edward asks.

"There's nothing to worry about. My kung fu is the best."

"Good work, kid," Jenks replies.

Seth smiles at the screen. Jenks' praise means a lot to him. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," Seth yells with excitement. "There was a hit on the name Jack Moore today. I think James or one of his crew was checking up on you."

"Perfect," Jenks exclaims. "Now when we talk, he'll already know that I'm not opposed to a little criminal behavior."

"What's the plan if he doesn't bite?" I ask; voicing the concern no one has spoken aloud.

"Then we try again another day. There aren't many places for him to go with his habit and have it not get back to Aro. If he's needy enough, he'll be back."

"But hopefully we won't need to worry about that. I think we have tonight dialed in," Edward says with conviction.

"Okay, I'm all for rallying the troops for battle, but I need to catch some sleep before the festivities begin. So unless there's something else, I'm going to sign off."

"Wait!" I yell, my heart pounding in anticipation.

"What's up, Ace?"

"I uh, need to tell you and Seth something," I mumble nervously. Edward comes closer, putting his arm around me in support, giving me courage to continue.

"You okay, Bella?" Jenks asks with concern. Seth simply looks up at me with worried eyes.

"Yeah, I just, God, I don't even know how to start."

"It will be okay, baby," Edward whispers in my ear.

Taking a deep breath, I begin. "There's something I haven't told you guys. I don't tell anyone really, I mean Edward and Emmett know, but that wasn't by choice, and Edward told Carlisle," I ramble quickly.

"Whoa, Ace. Slow down, you're making no sense. What do you have to tell us?" Jenks interrupts, allowing me time to focus my thoughts.

"Okay, here's the thing. I have this ability. I've had it since I was a kid. It allows me to see the emotions of others. Basically, I can tell what other people feel."

"Come again?" Jenks asks.

"I can see people's emotions," I repeat, holding my breath and anxiously waiting for their reaction once what I said sinks in.
Jenks stares across the screen in disbelief before busting out in a huge laugh. "Very funny, Ace. You almost had me there."

"I'm serious."

Seth continues to stare at me; he has yet to comment. He is trying to analyze me, disbelief coloring his features. Jenks cuts his eyes to Edward.

"She's telling the truth, man. I've watched her use it for years. I don't understand how it works, but she's amazing in the interrogation room because of it."

"I'm a good lie detector," I add, trying to make the concept more tangible for them to understand.

"Fuck," Jenks mutters, "I'm not quite sure what to say. It's a rare occurrence that I'm speechless, but you've done it."

"How does it work, Bella?" Seth finally speaks, his analytical brain trying to make sense of the nonsensical. I don't think this ability quite fits into his one and zero world.

"It's kind of hard to describe." I pause trying to figure out the simplest way to explain it. "For me, all emotions are colors and lights. Each emotion has a different look. The colors just float around most people."

"Most people?" Jenks asks, catching the clarifier.

"About seventy percent. I don't know why, but that's how it's always worked."

"And you can see us?" Jenks asks.

"Yes. At least I could. I can't read you through a screen."

"You can read me now?" Seth's voice squeaks nervously.

"Yes. My ability scares you, but you are also intrigued. That interest peaked when I was talking about how it works. You want to understand the components of it," I state matter of fact.

"Shit. Is she right, Seth?" Jenks asks.

"Y-yes," he stutters.

"Well, I'll be damned," Jenks says.

"Please don't let this change how you see me," I plead. "You both mean a lot to me, and I don't want you to act differently around me."

I find it difficult to look at them. Instead I look down, twisting my hands nervously. Edward gives my shoulders another squeeze, but the silence is deafening. I'm afraid of losing two people who are becoming like family to me.

"You're still Bella," Seth says quietly. I look up to see him staring at me, care and acceptance floating around him. "People tell me all the time that my mind doesn't work right, but you always accepted me. As far as I'm concerned, it changes nothing except for making you even cooler. This ability kind of makes you like a superhero, which is awesome."

"Same goes for me, Ace," Jenks chimes in from the computer. "It's not often I find people who can dish it out as much as I give it. I agree with Seth, this is amazing. Talk about having an ace in the
hole for difficult situations." Jenks laughs at his own lame play on words. "But seriously, this thing has to come in handy."

"It's helped solve a case more times than I can count," Edward says proudly.

"Don't ask me why, but it works best with criminal minds, which is what brought me to the FBI in the first place. It does give me a huge advantage during interrogations," I admit.

"Damn, if only you could give it to me for a few days, it would get us way ahead with the Volturi."

I think I just found an advocate for my return to Seattle. "That's why I wanted to tell you guys. We are all working so hard to succeed and I started feeling like I could contribute more if I let you know."

"There's no doubt this gives us a major advantage, but how can you use it from there?" Jenks asks.

"That's the thing. I was thinking-"

"We could brainstorm ways for her to use it," Edward cuts in trying to stop me before I mention returning to Seattle.

Turning to glare at him, I continue. "I think it would be best if I return to Seattle so I can use it."

"How?" Jenks asks.

I turn back to him confused. From what he said earlier, I thought he would be more supportive of the idea. "I can help you figure out the best people to target once you get in."

"But how? It's not like you can walk around with me. If you are anywhere close to me, James will spot you. So in theory, I agree, your ability would be extremely helpful, but realistically I don't see how we could use it without exposing you."

"How far away can you see these colors, Bella?" Seth ponders.

"I'm not sure, I never really paid attention."

"What are you thinking, Seth?" Jenks asks.

"If she can do it from a distance, maybe there will be a way to keep her hidden, but still allow her to look. I say lets test the distance factor and then decide," Seth argues.

Previously, Seth has never weighed in on our plans. He just helps make them happen. This is the most opinionated I've ever heard him. I should have known that Seth would end up being my biggest advocate. He is also risking everything to bring Aro to justice. He understands the sacrifices I'm willing to make.

"I don't think that changes anything," Edward counters.

"No, let's look at that," Jenks cuts in. Edward is about to argue, but Jenks continues. "We don't have to decide anything right now. Let's get all the facts and then decide on the best plan. Edward, I don't want Bella hurt either, but this is her fight. I think we need to weigh the option before we dismiss it."

Edward grumbles under his breath before reluctantly nodding in agreement to at least considering the option.
"Well, this was sure eventful," Jenks mutters. "Okay, I really need to get some sleep before tonight. We can continue this later."

"I'll send you those blueprints and any other updates you need," Seth says before reaching to sign-off.

"Bella," Jenks says before Seth shuts the session off.

"Yeah?"

"I know it took a huge amount of trust to tell us about your ability, and I take that responsibility seriously. I want you to know that you mean a lot to me too."

"Thanks, Jenks." His words touch my heart.

After signing off, we are once again left waiting for the night's activities.

The tension is thick, all of us knowing we are about to take things to a whole new level. Tonight feels different from the previous nights we've sat here monitoring things from hundreds of miles away. Tonight, we are blind.

Emmett is on-screen at Jasper's condo, listening from his end. Since the neighborhood will be swarming with cops, it is too risky for him to do surveillance from the car. Jasper is in the bar, but without gear. His job is not only to create panic, but also play the role of an agent in the wrong place at the wrong time. Since he will most likely be detained, he cannot get caught wearing a wire. After Jasper is cleared, he is going to offer to stay and help to make sure the cops don't find the hidden room.

Seth has Jenks' phone programmed so we can hear him and turned on the speakers several minutes ago. Jenks, knowing we are captive listeners, decided to serenade us on his way to the club with a horrific rendition of Don't Stop Believing. Jason Jenks is clearly no American Idol; my ears may never be the same.

According to Seth, the police will hit the club in a few hours. He has his headphones on and is monitoring their conversations over the secured channel he hacked. Jenks plans on using the time before the bust to reintroduce himself to James. They will need to be near each other when it all goes down.

"Shit," Jenks mumbles. "Um, I need to take care of something really quick. Sorry you have to hear this." Edward, Seth and I look at each other in confusion.

"Hey, pretty boy. How's the eye?"

"Fuck you!" Jasper's voice drifts through the speakers. I'm surprised to hear him. Jenks said everything was all set with Jasper.

"Cross me again and you'll have more than my fist to worry about."

"You're really going to threaten me? You do realize who I'm engaged to don't you?"

"Dude, I don't like you. I get you're close to the Cullens, but I have no ties to you. I'm not going to put up with your bullshit!"

"Regardless of what you think of me, I would never hurt that family. That's the point. You don't
understand..."

"I don't really care about what you think I don't understand. I care about Bella. The way I see it, no one has ever stood up for that girl and it's about time someone did. Right now, that someone is me. So, play your little fucking games if you want, but put her at risk again and you're dead. It's that simple." Jenks voice is chilling.

"I was hoping we could talk this out, but you really are a prick. You don't understand what's going on here."

"And you don't understand that I don't trust a single word coming out of your mouth. You started this dance and I'm just letting you know, I'll be the one to end it."

Things are silent for several moments. I can only assume they are having a silent standoff. I am at a loss for how to react to their conversation. I turn to look at Edward. He's staring intently at the speakers. This isn't easy for him to listen too either. I don't want Edward to feel caught in the middle of two of his closest friends, but I would be lying if I said I didn't love hearing Jenks stand up for me. Jasper's words are bothering me though, he knows something.

"Look, I'm done here. If you want to prove that you're not out to start trouble, then get into position and follow through with your task. I don't have time to keep you in check tonight."

"Don't worry, I'll do my job. You just focus on yourself," Jasper snarls.

"Oh, don't you worry about that. See you later, pretty boy," Jenks mocks.

A few moments later, the sound of a car door shutting and the engine of the car starting, come through the speakers. Jenks says nothing else the rest of the drive to the club. Apparently we are not discussing what happened tonight, but I intend to make sure it is discussed soon whether he wants to or not.

The speakers come to life with the sounds of thumping music and loud conversations as soon as Jenks walks into the club.

"He's here," Jenks muffled voice says.

I sit staring at the speakers as if they will suddenly show me what is happening. My legs won't stop bouncing. I hate waiting. Edward reaches over and grabs my hands, which are twisting around one another. He gives me a reassuring squeeze and smile.

"Jenks knows what he's doing. It's going to work."

We listen to indistinguishable noises for several long minutes. Jenks orders a drink and then maneuvers around the club, greeting people and flirting. Finally, James' voice comes through the speakers.

"Hey, Jack, right?"

"Oh, hey, mate. No lap dog today?" Jenks asks.

"Mike's not there," Edward concludes.

James laughs. "Not tonight. He needed a time out." Edward and I glance at each other wondering about the meaning of his cryptic comment.
Jenks laughs in return. "That's good. I didn't feel like kicking anyone's arse tonight. Have a good one." Jenks says, acting completely indifferent to James' presence.

"Wait. I still owe you for the trouble yesterday. Why don't you sit down and let me buy you a drink." James' voice is calmer than yesterday, he must not have used yet.

"Why the hell not. I'd be daft to pass up a free drink twice," Jenks says.

For the next couple of stomach turning hours, we listen in while Jenks and James bond. The alcohol flows freely, and shortly after sitting, the drugs are passed around. Jenks skillfully declines the continuous offer to take a hit. Various visitors stopped by the table to talk. It is hard to keep track of who is officially in James' entourage and who is just floating by. Several girls start hanging around, and by the sound of things, both James and Jenks are enjoying their company.

"Okay, they are getting in place. Give Jasper the heads up," Seth says, listening to his headset.

Edward pulls out his phone to text Jasper. "Seth, we need to time this just right. Tell me when they give the five-minute warning," Edward requests.

"They do have the surrounding buildings covered, so Jenks will need to stay hidden for a while." Seth is listening intently to all the police chatter. "It's time. Tell him to go. Now."

Edward nods, quickly typing his message to Jasper. Within a few seconds, over the speaker we hear the sound of the crowd escalating.

"What the fuck is going on?" James slurs. The noise is getting louder. Even through the speakers you can hear the panic.

"The cops are busting the place." Someone yells close by.

"Get the fuck out of here." Another voice shouts. The sounds of chaos explode, making it difficult to hear Jenks and James.

"Come with me," Jenks yells.

"What happened to him?" James asks.

"Who the fuck knows, but we've got to get out of here."

It's hard to track what they are talking about with all the background noise. I believe they are talking about James' bodyguard. Jenks mentioned he would have to figure out how to take him out so he couldn't follow them. The noise becomes louder, making it even harder to hear.

"Overheard the owner...back here...trap door." I can barely make out Jenks' explanation. Suddenly the noise dramatically decreases. I can only assume they made it into the closet.

"Where the fuck are we going?" James asks sounding more alert, the adrenaline resulting in a temporary ability to focus.

"I told you, I overheard the manger yesterday talking about a hidden room. He said it was behind this door. Now we just need to find it. Come on, help me look."

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know about you, but I can't afford to go back to the nick. We don't have too much time before they start checking doors, so I'm going to keep looking. If you want to take your chances
out there, be my guest."

"Fuck. Look under the shelves," James grumbles.

Their conversation ends and is replaced by the sound of metal being scraped across a concrete floor.

"Found it," James says suddenly. Scuffling sounds fill the room as they make their way through the trap door. From the sound of it, they were able to pull the shelf back over the door, hiding their escape route from anyone who enters the closet after them.

The speakers go silent, the only sign the phone is still working is the quiet sounds of their breathing. Minutes tick by as we anxiously wait for something to happen. Seth continues to listen through his headphones, but anxiously folds and unfolds his paper. Edward is now bouncing his leg along with mine. Emmett is uncharacteristically quiet, looking between his own speaker and the screen. He catches my eye and winks with a reassuring smile. I smile back, realizing how much I miss him.

"What's the plan?" James asks, finally breaking the silence.

"We wait it out."

"Fuck, I'm bored. Want to hit a strip club after this?" James slurs nonchalantly.

"Why not, it would certainly salvage this cluster fuck of a night." Jenks sighs.

"I know this one joint that can hook us up with some unique services. An anything goes type of deal, if you know what I mean." James is more talkative than what I remember, most likely a side effect of the substances.

"Sounds brilliant."

"Yeah, there's a really tasty treat there that I want to get my hands on. She's exactly what I need after a night like this."

"Blonde and busty? That was always my American dream." Jenks laughs.

James laughs with him. "Plenty of girls like that there, but I prefer brunettes. It's a bonus when they have brown eyes."

His voice takes on a frightening tone. The bile rises in my throat as he describes his preferred girl. Edward stiffens besides me, his fists clenching on his lap. Like me, he knows exactly who James is describing.

"Long lost love?"

"Hardly. Try a bitch that needs to be taught a lesson. I like practicing on look-a-likes until I find her and once I do..." his voice trails away. My body shakes while my mind processes his confession.

"Fuck," Edward hisses.

"Sounds like an interesting story," Jenks says, playing his role perfectly. He sounds completely unaffected by what James said.

"It is, but not one you'll get tonight," James snarls, his demeanor radically changing. "Why the hell did you help me in the first place? What do you want from me?"
"Whoa, what are you on about? Bloody hell, no one forced you to come with me. We were having a few pints when the cops busted up the joint and I happened to know about this room. Nothing more, nothing less," Jenks snarls back.

"Don't you know who I am?"

"No, mate, should I? I drifted into town this week, I have no agendas here. Fuck, this is the last time I try to lend a hand."

"You a drifter by trade?" James asks, suddenly interested in Jenks' background. The earlier suspicion is forgotten, at least for the moment. The fact that Jenks says he doesn't know James seems to have calmed his agitation.

"I like to think I'm an opportunist. Things were getting a little hot where I was, so I bounced."

"Hot how?"

"Sorry, you want more detail, you've got to do a little quid pro quo. I'm not putting any of my shit on front street when I know zero about you."

"Fair enough." The speakers go silent. Apparently James doesn't feel like sharing. After several agonizing minutes, James speaks again. "So tell me, Jack, you looking for a new opportunity?"

"I'm always interested in something new. You offering?"

"I'm a bit of an opportunist myself, and I see a chance to make a name for myself here. But, I need people in my corner that will back me up. I have to admit, the fact that you don't know who I am intrigues me. You might be just the type I'm looking for."

"Like I said, I don't know who you are or what your deal is, but if the price is right, I'm open to doing just about anything."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

"I'm not opposed."

"Here's the deal. For whatever reason, I think I like you, but I need you to prove your loyalty."

"I can be loyal, but if you're looking for another lap dog you have the wrong person. I'm nobody's bitch."

"Don't worry. The lap dog position is already filled. You met him yesterday." James laughs. "I'm looking for something else, and I think you may just fit the bill."

"Can you be any more vague?" Jenks scoffs.

"Like you said; quid pro quo. Prove yourself and then we'll talk."

"And how exactly do you want me to do that?"

"Tell you what." James hesitates. I can just barely hear some sort of movement happening. "Come by that address tomorrow. I have something in mind."

"Okay, I'm game. But just so we're clear, I'm not committing to anything yet either."

The speakers fall silent again, giving me a chance to take a breath and process my thoughts after
their nerve-racking conversation.

"I can't believe that James is actually arrogant enough to think he can separate from Aro. He really has lost it," I state, still shocked by his plan.

"Is that bad?" Seth asks.

"Not for our group. If we pin the two of them against each other, they might do most of the dirty work for us."

Things are working to our advantage, which should make me relieved, but I don't want to get my hopes up. For whatever reason, I feel like the other shoe is about to drop. The fact that James has an immediate target makes me nervous.

"The cops are pulling back from the roof tops," Seth says. "They should be clear to leave out the back soon. The remaining cops are pretty much occupied inside or guarding the front."

"Good work, Seth," Emmett says over the screen. "I would say between your skills and Jenks pulling off the performance of a lifetime, this night was a complete success. Too bad we can't celebrate together."

"It's time," Seth mutters while texting the all clear to Jenks.

"Do you think it's safe to leave yet?" Jenks asks over the speaker.

"Maybe. It's been a while."

"I wonder if there is another way out of here. Seems to me this room is pretty worthless without an escape route."

"You're probably right," James said. "Let's look around."

The next few minutes are filled with the sounds of their search.

"I'll be damned. Found it," Jenks says ecstatically. It takes several more minutes for them to crawl out to the door.

"Once out, we need to run in separate directions," Jenks states.

"Of course. That strip club is off of 5th if you're interested. If not, come by that address tomorrow."

"Got it. Ready, on the count of three; one, two, three."

The sound of a door squeaking open is quickly replaced with the sound of Jenks' ragged breath as he runs.

"I'm in the clear," he pants still out of breath from his sprint. "Let's meet up in a couple of hours. We need to talk before I meet with James tomorrow." By habit, all four of us nod our heads and agree even though Jenks can't see or hear us.

"Oh, and mark my words, Bella. I'm going to kill that son of bitch."

Chapter End Notes
Until next time…

Nick = British slang term for prison.

What are you on about = what are you talking about.
Chapter 21: View to a Kill

The sun feels warm against my face. I stretch up to capture its heat and hopefully bring some back. Ironically, regardless of my recent behavior, I'm not really a fan of the cold. I handle it okay, and for winter I love the look of snow, but the feeling I can do without.

"Your life has become complicated." My mom sits down beside me. She is also looking up at the sun. Her face is glowing and her hair is blowing in the warm breeze. She looks beautiful.

"In more ways than one. I kind of like it," I admit.

"You mean you like the people, especially Edward," she clarifies with a knowing smile.

"Yes." I look down, not able to stop the flush I feel on my skin.

"You found a family. A bit of a strange family, but a family none the less." She laughs brushing the hair back from my face. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I don't know. I wanted to talk to you," I say shrugging my shoulders. This visit feels different, but I don't know how to voice it.

"He makes you happy. You've changed because of it."

"Changed?"

"You were always strong, Isabella, but there's new strength shining through. You're healing. You believe in the future. It's beautiful to see."
I look across the sunflower field contemplating her words. She's right.

"Why can't you be real?" I ask sadly. "There are things I need to ask you. Things I need to say."

"Sweetheart, not all questions have answers. But I'm always listening."

I turn towards her, frustrated by her vague response. "I've learned some things that are confusing and I need answers. Did you know? Did you know he knew about me? Is that why you decided to leave?"

She looks at me with a sad smile, but does not speak.

"What's the point of coming here if you won't respond?" I stand and start pacing back and forth, my frustration boiling over into anger.

"How did he find out about me? Why didn't you tell me he knew? You should have prepared me better!" The speed of my pacing increases as my anger builds. "Why didn't we leave earlier? Caius would have helped you. I didn't deserve that life. You could have changed that. You could have prevented all of this!"

The long-buried thoughts are spewing from my mouth like water from a broken pipe. "I'm so angry at you for leaving. You left me defenseless! Why? Why did you leave me?"

Slapping my hand over my mouth, I stop dead in my tracks shocked by my own words. I've never blamed my mom before. In a moment of clarity, I realize that although Aro is responsible for her death, the six-year-old in me is still mad at her for dying. With the poisonous words finally out, my anger deflates, leaving behind the sadness and confusion I've run from for years.

"I don't understand. I don't understand," I chant falling to my knees. I feel her arms wrap around me, pulling until I'm almost sitting on her lap.

"I'm sorry, Isabella. I'm so sorry."

We sit for what feels like hours. My mom softly strokes my hair as I shed years of grief and sadness. I cry for everything I lost and everyone I've seen harmed. Finally releasing the emotions I had refused to show, fearing that Aro would take them for weakness. When my tears finally slow, I move out of her arms. She stands and I follow.

She places her hands on my face and I try to memorize the feeling. "I love you, Isabella. We are a part of each other and that will never change, but you don't need me anymore. It's time to let me go."

"I'll always need you," I whisper. "But, I think you're right."

"It's time to say goodbye," she confirms.

"I love you, Mom. I'll never forget you."

She leans in and kisses my forehead. Pulling back, she looks at me with a brilliant smile, fading before my eyes until I'm left on the hillside alone.

Looking across the field, I wipe the lingering tears from my eyes. Feeling lighter than I have in years, I can't help the smile from forming. I will miss this place.

The morning light peaks through my bedroom window. I am warm, snuggled against Edward's
The light touch of Edward's lips on my ear draws my attention away from the sight of the beautiful morning. I smile at the sensation.

"Good morning," he whispers, now trailing his lips down my neck. "This is what I missed out on the last couple of days."

"What do you mean?"

"Waking up with you. It's a fantasy of mine, you know."

"We woke up together the night you stayed in my apartment."

"Yeah, but things were awkward. I couldn't appreciate the feeling. I was too worried about you freaking out and pulling away from me."

"You're right. This is much better," I mumble turning to kiss him. The next few moments we lose ourselves in each other. All too soon in what is now becoming a frustrating habit, Edward pulls away.

"How are you doing? You were really quiet last night," Edward asks. I can hear the concern in his voice. Last night, it showed in his eyes.

After Jenks’ great escape, instead of going back to the condo, he went to the dump of an apartment he rented under his alias. Since James' people are most likely watching him, he can no longer afford to contact Emmett or Jasper in person. Using a high-tech shopping list provided by Seth, Jenks had already bought and installed computer equipment to communicate with us over a secure system. We spent several hours last night talking about our next steps now that Jenks had James' attention.

Jenks decided against going to the strip club even though James invited him. James was clearly agitated when he suspected Jenks had an alternative motive for helping him. Playing aloof worked best, so Jenks didn't want to seem overly eager to see him again. This morning, Jenks will meet with James at the address he provided, which interestingly enough is not the Volturi warehouse.

The worst part of last night was listening to James talk about his preference in women. I had prepared myself for listening to James' voice, and my reaction was almost non-existent compared to that first night. However, hearing him talk about me was difficult. It shook me.

"I'm okay. I figured he wouldn't have forgotten about me, but hearing how much of his obsession still exists was disturbing."

"Baby, he won't touch you," Edward states with conviction, hugging me tightly.

"I know." I look over my shoulder and give him a small reassuring smile. "So, when are you going back to Seattle?" I inquire, changing the subject from James' obsession.

Edward has yet to bring up his plans to return, but I know his time here is running out. The concern of when he will need to leave constantly lingers in the back of my mind. I'm not ready for another long separation.

"Mike took the file. I can't stay away for much longer. But I think we need to wait until James trusts Jenks."

"Because of Jessica," I state.
"Yes. If people think we're together and I show up without her, they will start questioning her whereabouts and then-"

"James will need to move quicker to get rid of her."

"Exactly. We need Jenks close enough to either be involved with the plan, or at least hear about it."

"Then what?"

"Hopefully, we can intervene before it's too late. The specifics of how we do that without exposing everything...well, we have a lot to figure out in order to make that work."

"They will need you there to help."

"Probably. The more hands the better," Edward mumbles, tightening his hold on me. His hand starts to slowly run up and down my arm. It feels comforting, but I am not sure if the gesture is to reassure me or himself.

"I want to go back with you," I whisper.

"Bella," he says warily.

"I know you don't agree with me, but I can't keep sitting by a computer every night just listening to what's happening. I want, no, I need to do more."

"You heard James last night. He hasn't forgotten about you. The sick bastard is 'practicing' his revenge on women who look like you, for God's sake. You really think that Seattle is the best place for you?"

Moving out of his arms, I turn to face him. Still lying down, I hold my head up with my hand looking directly into Edward's eyes. "It's not like I'm saying I want to go and have a chat with James, but we have a real chance to bring Aro and the Volturi down. With James coked up and thinking he can defect from Aro, it's the perfect time."

"I agree, but I also think Jenks and Seth have it covered."

"I'm not asking for your permission, Edward. I'm asking for your support," I state, making it clear I intend to go one way or another. I'm tired of dancing around the issue.

"Baby."

"I want a life," I say cutting him off before he starts pleading his case. "I want to settle in one place, and the only way to make that happen is to bring down the Volturi. Isn't that what everyone convinced me of a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah, but-"

"But nothing. I won't have closure with Aro unless I do this. I need to stop making all my choices out of fear. I need to take a stand."

Edward is quiet for several moments, before finally speaking quietly. His fingers reach out to gently twirl a strand of my hair. "Why did I have to fall for the most stubborn, independent and incredibly brave woman on the face of this planet?" he asks with a slight sparkle in his eye. He's close to backing down.

"Just lucky, I guess," I joke.
"I can't argue that, but you still drive me crazy." He smiles, leaning forward to kiss me. "Okay, how about this? After I cook breakfast, we can start testing the distance factor with Seth. If you are doing this, I need to make sure we take every precaution to keep you hidden."

"Thank you," I whisper. Giving me one last smile, he gets out of bed and grabs some clothes to change. "Hey, wait. Did you say you're cooking breakfast?"

"Yup. Grilled cheese is not the only recipe in my repertoire. Come on, Swan, get moving! We've got a lot to do today," he says, pulling the covers off of me and running from the room to the bathroom at the end of the hall before I can retaliate with my own childish gesture.

Leaning back against the pillows, I close my eyes savoring the playful moment. Edward makes everything brighter. Finally getting up, I also grab some clothes and go into my own bathroom to prepare for the day.

"Wow," I say, coming down stairs and looking at the feast Edward prepared. Wonderful smells waft from the kitchen, and my stomach grumbles in response to the goodness.

On the table are several plates filled with French toast, eggs, and bacon. Three place settings are in front of the chairs we normally sit at, including glasses filled with orange juice. I find myself once again impressed with Edward's kitchen skills. Seth is already sitting looking hungrily at all the food, but waiting patiently until I sit down. Edward is still at the stove finishing up a couple more slices of French toast.

"Come on, dish up before it gets cold. I'll be there in just a second," Edward says, flipping the bread like a pro. The room fills with the sizzling sounds of the wet egg mixture hitting the hot pan.

Seth happily starts piling the food onto his plate. I shake my head, amazed at the amount of food that boy can put into his gangly body. "This is so good," he mumbles with a full mouth before stuffing more in.

Grabbing my plate, I go straight for the French toast. It has always been a favorite, but one I rarely have time to indulge in making. After slathering the slice in butter and syrup, I cut into it and take a bite.

"Oh my God," I say groaning in pleasure. The bread is fluffy with a hint of vanilla and cinnamon. "Grilled cheese and the perfect French toast? I knew there was a reason I loved you," I blurt out. Mortified by my slip up, I glance up at Edward, hoping he didn't catch it.

He is standing still, holding the spatula and looking down at the stove. "I can only hope," he mumbles before continuing his task of cooking with a slight smile.

Hearing laughter, I turn toward Seth who is rolling his eyes. "Shut it," I warn quietly pointing my fork in his direction.

It was just an innocent comment, I tell myself, trying to justify the slip even in my own mind. Deep down, I know the sentiment is true, but regardless of how brave Edward thinks I am, I'm terrified of being the first one to say it out loud.

Shaking his head, Seth leans closer to me. "I may be the socially awkward one, but you two are ridiculous," he whispers.

I narrow my eyes at him. "So, Seth, we need to test the distance factor with my ability. I'm going to need you because I can't read Edward," I state taking the topic somewhere safe. Edward, now
finished cooking, comes over and sits across from me, looking towards Seth as he eats.

"We should test all aspects," Seth says excitedly. "We need to try not only distance, but through windows and binoculars. Do you think being close to the person is the key?" Seth pulls out a little notebook and starts jotting down notes.

"I'm not sure. I just know I can't pick anything up through a television or computer screen."

"That's because of the pixels," Seth says with certainty. "Everything shown on a screen is a recreation using pixels, which wouldn't include the abnormalities only you see. But, do you think a window would distort the colors?"

"Not necessarily. I can see people through car windows."

"What about from a window further away? Like a second or third story."

"I'm not really sure. I know that if someone is far away, the colors look muted, but I've never tested how far is too far. I've never tried to use it this way before."

"Let's test it this afternoon," Edward suggests. "We can use the second story windows, car windows, and I also have some binoculars."

"I'll list out the various situations to makes sure we test all aspects," Seth mutters while writing furiously in his notebook.

"What about the dark?" Seth asks suddenly looking up. "Does it work better in the dark?"

"Umm, yes and no. It's not like people glow or the colors are brighter, but a darker room does make it easier to distinguish all of the hues."

"Interesting," he says, continuing to scribble in his notebook. "And it's constant, right? You can't turn it on and off?"

"I wish I could, but no, there's no off switch."

"So, you can read me now?"

"Yes. You're way too excited about trying to figure me out." I smile. He looks up from his notebook suddenly embarrassed. "I don't mean it in a bad way, Seth. I appreciate your help." I place my hand on his arm, squeezing reassuringly.

"What about the seventy percent thing. You don't know why you can't see everyone?"

"No. I've never noticed anything that specifically distinguishes the difference."

"But you can see James?" Seth asks.

"Yeah."

"What are his colors like?" Seth asks curiously.

"Umm, dark. He's sadistic. It's hard to describe what it looks like, but I always thought if evil had a color, it would be what I see in him. He's just so glib about everything."

"Glib?"
"It's a term used to describe one of the characteristics of a psychopath. The psychological assessment developed to assess psychopathology actually rates individuals on it."

"How does psychology define it?" Seth questions again, always looking for ways to clarify and categorize things.

"In the simplest terms, a person who is smooth talking and shallow. They don't really care about anything and nothing fazes them. All their interactions are for their own gain."

"That does fit what we heard last night. How about Aro?" Seth asks.

"I can't read Aro. It's always drove me crazy. There have been lots of times in my life when I've wished to not have this ability, but the one person I would give almost anything to get a glance at is Aro."

"Do you think he knows that you can't read him?" Edward asks.

"Whoa, wait. Aro knows?" Seth asks.

"We think so. It's a recent development," I grumble. "I doubt that he knows I can't read him, I never told anyone."

"Then you could still use it against him. You just need to pretend that you can read him," Seth comments.

"Hold it!" Edwards yells. "There is no fucking way she's going near Aro. Whether she can play him is a pointless discussion."

"Edward," I state calmly. "He didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm sorry," Seth says quietly, worried by Edward's outburst.

Taking a breath to calm his irritation, Edward responds, "I'm sorry for yelling. I know you didn't mean anything by it, Seth, but, I want everyone clear on the plan. Bella is going to help Jenks, but getting close to James or Aro is out of the question."

"I understand. My thoughts got away from me. They tend to do that when I'm focused on figuring something out. I'm just fascinated by what Bella can do and want to understand it," Seth answers in his typically rapid fashion.

Edward nods in understanding, which decreases Seth's anxiety. "Okay. I think it's time to take a break and clean up," Edward says starting to pile the plates together on the table. Apparently, he doesn't want to discuss testing my ability anymore.

"Wait, there's another thing we need to discuss first," Seth declares before we leave the table.

"What?" I ask.

"James opened Mike's e-mail early this morning, so I'm officially in. Do you guys have any thoughts on the first order of business? I could change all of his documentation and send ICE after him?"

"No, we need to play James and Aro against each other. Aro is expecting James to keep things in order here. If things start falling apart, Aro is going to take it out on James," I reason.

"She's right. Subtly is the key. We don't want it to look like someone is messing with them from
"the outside," Edward agrees.

"I can do subtle," Seth replies. "The great thing about business today is everything is electronic. All transactions, notices, and banking are online and mostly paperless. Those things previously protected by paper are now easily accessible to us hackers. I saw a few e-mails about needing some permits related to their 'legitimate' business. If I interfere with those and make it look like it's due to James' carelessness, that should piss off Aro nicely."

"That sounds perfect," I say.

"Okay, I'll get something rolling this morning. Mr. James is about to have a very bad week." Seth laughs, and I can't help but smile with him.

"I guess we have a plan. Keep us informed on how it's going once you start, okay?" Edward requests as he gets up from the table with the dishes.

"Of course," Seth replies also getting up from the table.

While Seth goes over to his computer to check on some things, Edward and I clean up. We work in tandem clearing the table and putting the dishes in the dishwasher. Laughter fills the kitchen when we have a few silly moments of dancing around each other in the narrow space between the counter and the sink. It feels almost too normal, like we have lived together for years.

"Hey, Bella, I was thinking since we have some time to kill before we hear from Jenks, how about we go practice those defense skills Jenks was working on with you."

"Really? You think you're up for it, Cullen?"

"Oh definitely. As you say, game on, Swan. Meet me outside, in fifteen minutes, ready to go. I think I'm really going to enjoy this," he whispers seductively before turning and walking up the stairs.

I smile at his enthusiasm. He has no idea what he's in for.

"Holy shit!" Edward shouts, his chest heaving as a bead of sweat rolls down his flushed face.

He is lying on the ground looking up at Seth in shock. I am sitting on the grass off to the side of the mat unable to contain my laughter. When Edward mentioned practicing defense skills, Seth asked to come too. Like Jenks, Edward "placated" him, thinking he was harmless. And also like Jenks, Edward found out how quickly Seth can take control.

"You think this is funny, chuckles?" Edward grumbles, sitting up and rolling his shoulders.

"Oh, I think it's hilarious!" I laugh.

"You knew, didn't you? And you didn't warn me?" he asks glaring in my direction.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, you boys bring this on yourself with your 'better than everyone' attitude. It would be wise to learn that looks can be deceiving."

"Just remember, baby, it's your turn next. You should probably stop laughing so hard or I might forget to play nice."

"Oh please. Don't feel like you need to go easy on me. Apparently, you didn't learn your lesson about underestimating people. I might just surprise you, Cullen."
"Seth, how many years have you been training?" Edward asks, focusing his attention back on Seth.

"About four years now."

"You know your stuff. Good job," Edward says, giving Seth a pat on the back after he stands up.

"His looks may be deceiving, but I know you've only been training since Jenks came up here. I think I can take you," Edward taunts, walking over and offering me his hand to pull me up.

Seth takes a seat off to the side on the grass, apparently deciding to stay for the show. Now standing, I take a moment to stretch my muscles. Walking away from Edward, but still in his line of sight, I turn and slowly bend forward to touch my toes. Hearing a strangled sound behind me, I stand back up and look over my shoulder. Edward is still standing in the same spot, but looks a bit shell-shocked, his mouth hanging open slightly.

"You okay?" I smirk amused.

Edward clears his throat and shakes his head. "Yup. I'm good."

"Good. I wouldn't want you distracted or anything."

"Don't worry, baby, I'm focused. The question is, are you?" he asks, stalking towards me.

Using his right arm to snake around my back, he pulls me roughly to him. Looking down with a predatory stare, he crashes his lips into mine, his tongue quickly finding entrance. The kiss is different from others we've shared. It's passionate, but there's an intensity that's hard to describe. His other hand reaches up into my hair, weaving around my ponytail.

Then, just as quickly as it began, it ends. Edward is now the one with the smirk, while I'm left breathless and shaky. Letting me go, he winks and walks over to the other side of the mat. Tricky bastard.

"Don't let him distract you, Bella. You can take him," Seth says confidently.

I nod my head, appreciative of his support, but slightly embarrassed about the scene he just witnessed. It's easy to forget we're not alone when Edward kisses me.

"Okay, let the lesson begin," Edward states, enthusiastically jumping up and down.

I shake my head at his foolish display and his underestimation of what Jenks taught me. I try to hold in my smile knowing that his self-assurance will be his downfall.

"How do you want to do this, Bella?"

"Anyway you want," I say with confidence.

"What specifically has Jenks taught you?" he asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry, not telling. Just attack and you'll see."

Edward moves forward quickly, bending slightly and attempting to rush me. Watching closely, I jump to the side just as he reaches me, I stick my leg out to trip his forward movement. As he falls, I spin and use my knee to pin his spine to the ground.

Leaning down, I whisper in his ear using a sing-song voice, "Say uncle."
"Nice," he grunts. "But..."

Suddenly Edward flips around, somehow managing to turn and grab me at the same time until I am lying on the ground. He is kneeling between my knees, hovering above me and holding my arms above my head.

"Never rest until you're sure that your opponent is out of commission. Now what do you do?"

Keeping my focus as Jenks taught, I quickly evaluate his position. Pulling my left knee in and across his stomach, I quickly move my right foot to push away as I twist my wrist to counter his hold. In a quick one, two, three, I successfully push him back and jump up on my feet in a crouched position, poised to strike if he moves forward again. Edward sits back up and looks at me with a brilliant smile.

"Well done, baby, I'm impressed. Jenks taught you well."

"Go, Bella!" Seth yells from the side clapping. He also has a big smile on his face. "Well, that's all I wanted to see. You guys have fun. I should go and work on those e-mails." He stands up and dusts himself off.

"Thanks for the practice, Edward," he says, waving goodbye and walking back to the house.

"He's definitely an interesting kid," Edward mumbles before focusing his attention back in my direction.

"So, Obi-Wan, what's next?" I ask sarcastically.

"Something that I'm sure Jenks didn't teach you."

"What's that?" I ask curiously.

Edward is plotting something. His eyes are full of mischief. Slowly scooting closer, he sits right in front of me and places his arms gently around my neck, resting them across my shoulders.

"I think we should work on getting out of close holds today."

"Close holds?"

"Yes," he whispers, moving even closer and leaning his head in until his nose is almost touching mine. I can feel his breath upon my lips as his hovers close to mine.

"You should always know how to get out of every situation, even ones where it seems like the person has complete control."

"Oh, I think Jenks taught me a few of those already," I fib nonchalantly.

"What?" he asks, moving back, his nostrils flaring slightly.

I figured my statement would get a reaction out of him, but I never expected this much intensity. Not able to contain myself, I burst out laughing causing Edward to look at me in confusion.

"I totally got you!"

Quickly changing from shocked anger to indifference, he shakes his head. "You didn't. I knew all along you were bluffing."
I roll my eyes at his attempt to bluff. "Whatever, you were jealous. Admit it."

"I admit to nothing." He smiles, once again moving into my space.

His approach causes me to lean back until I am lying down and he is above me. The lesson is abruptly forgotten. His liquid eyes capture mine, his face suddenly serious. The heat of his body overcomes the chill of the day, making it difficult to think about anything except how it feels to have him so close. Gently, his lips touch mine. After the brief kiss, his nose rubs softly against my own.

His face is radiant as he captures my lips again. His lips tease mine by nipping at them. Unexpectedly, his usual tentativeness disappears as his body pins me to the ground, his lips traveling down my neck. I wrap my legs around his waist, my hands roaming up and under his shirt, our bodies finding a natural rhythm. Using the leverage of my hold, I roll us over so that I am now sitting above him. He looks slightly surprised, but impressed. Feeling playful, I grasp his hands and hold them above his head while leaning down to kiss him with my own fiery passion.

"Bella," he whispers.

His hands wiggle against mine. I know he wants to touch me. Taking pity, I decide to release them. He quickly places them on my head, tangling his hands in my hair.

"What you do to me." His voice is husky and seductive.

"And what exactly do I do?" I whisper back.

"Everything. You have no idea how much I-"

"Bella! Edward!" Seth yells, running out of the house. "Jenks needs to talk to you guys."

Our moment is suddenly lost, the real world crashing in on our time. Edward and I jump up quickly and move towards Seth.

"What is it?" I ask nervously, several worse case scenarios running through my head. What if he's hurt? What if James figured out who he is?

"James gave him his first assignment," Seth says gravely. Jenks is already on the screen when we come in. The tiny apartment behind him is a stark contrast to the upscale condo we usually see. The walls are a dingy grey, and it is hard to tell if that was the intended color or just the result of years of dirt and smoke. The pewter colored carpet looks worn, and from the little I can see, it looks like the furniture came with the place. The couch behind Jenks is covered in stains and is just as worn as the carpet. I shudder to think what caused the stains.

"How's the back, Edward?" Jenks questions with a smirk. Seth must have told him about their match.

"Hey, from what I understand, you have no room to talk. I think we can both agree that these incidents are better left between us. Emmett will never let either of us live this down if he finds out," he says in a serious tone, but there is a smirk on his face.

"Now I have blackmail on both of you. Fantastic!" I laugh, dramatically rubbing my hands together.

"Wait, I have a better solution that will save our reputations, as well as stop Bella with her
blackmail scheme. I think Seth needs to take on Emmett," Jenks suggests.

"I'm game," Seth says with a smile.

"I like it. Embarrassment across the board and," Edward turns to me with a glare, "no blackmail."

"You guys take all my fun away." I huff.

"Okay, okay, back to business. I don't have much time," Jenks says, his face becoming serious. "I met with James this morning."

"Seth said he gave you your assignment," Edward states.

"Yes, but before we discuss my job, I'm almost positive that the building I went to today is where they're keeping Jessica."

"Why?" Seth asks.

"On the fourth floor down a secluded hallway, there was a door being heavily guarded by several men. James moved me along pretty quickly when we walked past it, especially when a woman started yelling. I tried to question him about it, but he became pretty defensive."

"How do you know it was Jessica?" I inquire.

"I don't, but unless he's kidnapped more than one woman this week, chances are pretty good it's her."

"It's the best lead we have so far," Edward says agreeing with Jenks' postulation.

"But here's the most interesting thing," Jenks utters. "The building is James', not Aro's. All the people there, he hired. It makes me wonder if Aro believes that Jessica is already dead, but James decided to keep her alive for leverage, maybe to keep his lapdog Mike under control."

"James is dead if Aro finds out about his deception," I state.

"That's the understatement of the year, Ace. We need to figure out how to get her out before we start the war between them."

"What's the job? Proving your trust to James is the only chance we have at getting Jessica out," Edward replies.

"He wants me to kill a prostitute. Some girl named Irina. He didn't tell me specifics, but he said she betrayed him. He actually wants me to bring back her tongue, not only as proof, but a trophy to add to his collection. This guy is as sick as they come. The smile on his face while he was describing what he wants me to do…I'll just say the sick fuck has a flair for the dramatic," Jenks spits out disgustedly.


"Are you going to kill her?" Seth asks, looking wide-eyed at Jenks.

"What? Of course he's not! Right, Jenks?" I look back at the screen, waiting for Jenks to confirm my assumption that he wouldn't actually kill her.

"No, but it needs to look like I did."
"So, we need to plan a fake murder and get you a tongue," Edward states matter-of-factly.

"And just how are you going to do that? It's not like there's a 'Tongues 'R' Us' store," I reply sarcastically.

"I have a contact in the morgue. He can get me one," Jenks answers.

"Are we seriously talking about getting someone's tongue?" I ask incredulously.

"Would you rather plot an actual murder, Ace? We don't have too many options."

"Of course not! It's just hard to stomach. Mutilating a body is a bit gruesome."

"But doing it will save one, possibly two lives if it helps us get to Jessica. There's really no other choice," Edward declares, trying to take the edge off the horrific plan.

"I know, I just don't like it." I've seen too much blood spilt in my life. Some people are able to become immune to the horror, but for me, it never gets any easier.

"What do we need to do next?" Seth asks.

"We need to contact her. I already talked to Emmett. James will probably have someone following me, so it needs to look believable," Jenks asserts.

"She will have to go into hiding afterwards," I point out.

"I have some friends who can help. They've helped me before with some of my previous sex trade cases. They're very discrete, and will help her set up a new life. But first, I want Emmett to question her to see what she has on James. It could be helpful to us."

"When is this all going to happen?" I ask.

"We've got to do it tonight. I need to show James I can act without any hesitation. The quicker I get into his good graces, the quicker we can figure out a way to get Jessica out."

"Emmett is going to meet with Irina this afternoon, and I already have a call into my contact for the tongue."

"Are we going to listen in?" I ask.

"I don't think there's anything for you to do. It will probably be better if I just contact you once it's all over," Jenks responds. "However, we should coordinate having you participate in Irina's interrogation with Emmett."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Seth retorts.

"We also need to figure out where we can stash her," Jenks says.

"You're not using the condo?" Edward asks.

"No." Jenks doesn't elaborate on his response. I suspect it has to do with Jasper since it is his condo building.

"I have a place we can use," Seth blurts out. Everyone turns and looks at him in surprise. "What? I was living in Seattle for a few months before you picked me up. It's small, but safe."
"Nothing came up when we investigated you," Edward states, still looking curiously at Seth.

"What can I say? I know how to cover my tracks." He looks at Edward with a smile. "The place can't be traced back to me. What's more, it is already hooked up, so if Emmett takes her there, we can participate in the interrogation."

"What's the address, so I can let Emmett know?" Jenks asks, and Seth rambles off the address of a loft apartment in downtown Seattle. "Be ready to meet with Emmett later tonight. The quicker we get this information, the quicker we can get this girl out of town."

"Right. Good luck tonight. Be smart, man," Edward says getting ready to end our chat.

"You know me." Jenks winks. "I'll check in sometime tomorrow."

"Wait," I jump in before we sign off. "Before anyone goes anywhere, I need to know what the hell is going on with Jasper."

"What do you mean?" Edward asks hesitantly.

Looking directly at Jenks, I answer. "Oh, I don't know, maybe the fact that Jenks hit him, not to mention that nice little conversation yesterday. I think I deserve to know what happened."

All three are silent for a moment. Jenks and Edward look at one another before Jenks finally breaks down and answers.

"It's what I've said before. I think he has another agenda, and I don't trust him."

"No, something else happened. What was it?" I'm frustrated that they are keeping things from me.

"Fine. I caught him going through my notes from our conversations about Aro. I think he was going to take some of them. When I confronted him, he wouldn't give me a reason for doing it."

"Do you think he's working for the Volturi?"

"No! No way," Edward asserts. "I agree that something is going on, but I don't believe he's working for the enemy."

"I know you still trust him, Edward, but he's up to no good. However, I do agree that he is not working for the Volturi. He has a major hard-on for busting James. I think he's so caught up in getting them that nothing else matters. He doesn't care about you, Bella, or keeping you safe."

"What do you think he was going to do with that information?" I ask

"I don't know and that worries me. He's a loose cannon, and was nervous as hell when I caught him."

"I can monitor him," Seth says. "If he's working with anyone else, I'll find out."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea," Jenks replies.

"What do you think he meant when he said you didn't understand what was going on?" I ask. I've pondered that comment a lot since last night.

"Honestly, I think he was just pulling things out of his ass because he wanted back in the circle. As far as I'm concerned, he's no longer a part of this."
"Agreed," I state, probably a little too enthusiastically. Edward silently nods his head, understandably he is the person most conflicted by Jasper's strange behavior.

"You need to keep him out of my way, Edward. I'm done with him, understand?"

"I understand. I'll talk to him," Edward says earnestly.

"Umm, Jenks, thank you for what you said yesterday. I really appreciate it," I say quietly, still overwhelmed by his words to Jasper.

"Anytime, Ace. You're family." He winks into the camera with a warm smile.

After signing off with Jenks, Edward, Seth and I spend the rest of the afternoon and early evening testing my ability. It was a nice distraction and kept all of us from worrying about Jenks' job. Although he doesn't admit it, missing out on the action tonight is frustrating for Edward. Being here always limited our involvement, but tonight is the first time we are not involved at all. All we can do is wait for Emmett to contact us, hopefully with the girl, which means the mission was successful.

The test of my ability was fairly lucrative. I can definitely read people from a distance. The second story window was a success, as well as reading Seth from what would be the equivalent of a couple of city blocks away. This means I can keep hidden in a car and still help Jenks.

The binocular test was not as successful. Edward and I took a row-boat across the lake and used them to look at Seth while he sat on the dock. Looking through the binoculars, I could see no colors. Whether it was the tool or the distance, it's hard to say. Seth took notes the whole time, still looking to quantify what I do. I think he plans to figure it out one way or another. I gave up on finding specific answers a long time ago, so it's funny to watch someone else so invested in solving the mystery.

By the end, we all feel confident that we can make this work. The only thing is that Jenks will need to set up meetings outside so I can read the other person. Between me helping Jenks target the right people on the inside, and Seth messing with things from the outside, James' world will crumble in no time. James' demise will not go over well with Aro. Hopefully, Aro's reaction will turn the two against each other. While they are tearing each other apart, we bring Aro's kingdom down piece by piece until it crumbles beneath his feet.

The thought of his reign of terror coming to an end makes me giddy. Aro's is the one death I hope to witness. I will take great pleasure in watching the life drain from his eyes.

Dangling my feet off the docks, I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the lake. It is peaceful, the rest of the world quiet in the dusk of the day.

"You remembered a jacket this time," Edward jokes from behind me. "What deep thoughts are we contemplating this evening?" He sits behind me, pulling me against him until I am comfortably resting against his chest.

"Isn't the waiting driving you crazy?"

"Yes, but we need to trust Jenks. If anyone can pull this off, he can."

For several minutes we sit quietly in a comfortable silence. The truth is, Edward was not wrong to ask about my deep thoughts. The agony of waiting to hear back from Emmett and Jenks has
solidified my desire to return to Seattle sooner rather than later.

"I want to go back tomorrow. Seth and I can stay in the loft. It will be safe. No one will even know I'm back."

"There's no chance of you changing your mind is there?"

"Nope. Seth agrees with me too. Both of us can do more if we are closer to the action."

Edward doesn't say anything right away. He simply intertwines our hands together, his fingers gently caressing mine.

After several moments, he finally responds quietly. "Okay."

"Okay," I whisper.

"I may have reservations about you going to Seattle, but I do believe we are stronger together than apart. I don't think I can be apart from you again."

"Good, because I don't think I can either."

There is no need to detail the plan or discuss the next steps. This conversation wasn't about the specifics as much as coming to a final agreement. Knowing that our time here is now rapidly coming to an end, we sit looking across the lake and enjoy the stillness. We will need to come back one day when there is no danger or secrets. Maybe visit Dukes again, the memory of that night still makes me smile.

Edward kisses my temple, his lips skimming down until they rest upon my ear. "Bella, can we talk about what happened on the mat before Seth interrupted us?"

"Sure. Feel like finishing our sparring match, Cullen?" I whisper, freeing one of my hands to grasp his thigh.

"Don't tempt me," he whispers gruffly, kissing my neck. "But no, there was something I wanted to say before Seth cut me off."

Freeing myself of Edward's grasp, I turn around to face him. I'm surprised to see him looking nervous. Reaching up, I place my hand on his cheek. "Edward, you can tell me anything."

He closes his eyes and presses his face into my hand. Taking a breath he opens his eyes, the intensity of his look causes my heart to beat faster.

"I've struggled with the concept of the right moment, but I don't know if there will ever be one, and I don't want to miss out on saying something because the right moment never comes."

"Okay," I say shakily.

"Three years ago, you charged into my world and changed me forever. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but now that I have you, I'm not going to let you go."

"I feel the same way. I always thought I'd be alone, and honestly, for many years I was okay with that reality. But, I don't want that anymore."

"Good, because you won't ever be alone again." We lean in, our lips gravitating together. Most of our kisses are powerful, electric even. However, this one feels more spiritual than physical, a deeper meaning beyond an expression of passion.
Pulling back, Edward looks into my eyes. "I love you, Bella Swan. I've loved you for a long time. You're it for me."

My eyes fill with tears, happiness bursting from my chest. I've never felt anything like it. I've never imagined actually hearing the words would mean so much.

"I love you too." I smile, my voice hoarse with emotion.

Edward's face explodes into a brilliant smile. His hands grab my face to pull me into another powerful kiss. Afterwards, Edward folds me into his arms, each of us soaking up the moment and the love flowing between us.

For the first time, the future doesn't feel like something I'm chasing, but something that is finally here.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time. :)

ICE = U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
Chapter 22: The Game

Perfect.

It is a word used recklessly and said often to describe various situations. Heck, I've been guilty of saying it in many situations: the perfect cup of coffee; perfect weather; the perfect day. In reality, "perfect" is almost impossible. However, sitting wrapped in Edward's arms after expressing how we feel is indeed a perfect moment.

We've sat on the dock for a couple of hours talking quietly, not quite ready to face the rest of the world. Edward doesn't seem willing to release me, and there is a huge smile on his face that has yet to fade. Of course, if I looked in the mirror, I would probably see my own lovesick smile staring back.

I will remember this moment forever.

Unfortunately, real life has a nasty way of interfering in our relationship. This time it is the impending arrival of Emmett and Irina to Seth's loft. Waiting until the last possible moment, we finally leave our sanctuary on the dock. Walking into the house, Edward holds my hand tightly, refusing to lose physical contact. Even sitting at the computer, he moves his chair closer, placing his arm across the back of mine, his hand gently twirling a strand of my hair. It reminds me of when we went to his aunt and uncle's house for dinner. At that time, the gesture was unexpected. Now, instead of wondering what it means, I let myself simply enjoy the sensation of it.

"Are we ready?" Edward asks, his official tone a sharp contrast to his gentle touch.

"Yes. My apartment is all ready for their arrival," Seth responds.

Seth's computer skills were impressive with the equipment set up here, but that was nothing compared to what he had set up in his loft. Through a multilayer, pass-code protected system, Seth remotely started his computer in preparation for Emmett and Irina's arrival. Since he also has the place hooked up and wireless, Seth turned on the lights and adjusted the temperature as well. Finally, using various cameras located throughout the loft, Seth gave us a quick tour of what will be our new location when we arrive in Seattle.

The loft is modest in size. On the right side of the room, filling most of the wall space, are large
windows that overlook a busy street. On the same side, along the windows closest to the far corner is the bedroom area. In the middle of the room is a seating area with a futon couch, a couple of chairs and a coffee table. At the far end of the apartment is a kitchen with a high counter and two stools. The kitchen looks modern and recently renovated. The new appliances and granite countertops look almost misplaced in the older building. To the left of the kitchen is a hallway which I assume leads to the bathroom. Across from the windows is a red brick wall that looks worn and faded. I imagine the brick is as old as the building. Against that wall is where Seth keeps his computer equipment. Multiple monitors and towers sit on a long make-shift desk. There is probably more money sitting on that desk then the rest of the apartment combined.

Looking around the loft, I see the signs of Seth's hasty departure the day he met me at Starbucks. Papers and fast food wrappers clutter the coffee table. The bed is messy and unmade with clothes strewn all over it. Dirty dishes fill the kitchen sink and more wrappers and takeout boxes cover the surrounding counters. His desk looks like the same organized mess as the desk here with piles of files and papers scattered across the flat surface. Amazingly, I've learned that he knows exactly where everything is located in the chaos. I've also learned that he doesn't like anyone moving things around. Hopefully, he will not be opposed to cleaning up the rest of the loft.

Even more impressive than Seth's computer setup is his security system. He changed the regular locks into electronic ones and built in an advanced system that includes the use of his finger prints and a retina scan. Unsuccessful attempts to enter sets off a self-destruct program that will destroy any data in his computer. However, Seth also created pass codes that allow him remote access to deactivate it. He made sure to disarm this feature in order for Emmett and Irina to enter the loft successfully.

After disarming the system and completing our tour, Seth, Edward and I are left to anxiously wait for Emmett and Irina to contact us. Emmett kept in touch throughout the evening with updates, but the limited information has us all on edge. Earlier today, Jenks tried to downplay the complicated nature of the mission, but everyone knows it's not as simple and straight-forward as he tried to make out. Although told to act on his own, it is almost certain that James had Jenks followed. If that person saw anything that made Irina's "murder" seem suspicious, Jenks is dead.

Emmett also informed us that James decided he wanted the body disposed of in Elliott Bay. The manner in which he wanted it disposed of was rather specific and graphic. Jenks was given a large duffel bag and told to fit the pieces of her body in it. Whoever was following Jenks would look for the bag as confirmation that Jenks followed the plan.

Beyond the bag, the murder itself has to look professional and real enough to pass if James' people check up on Jenks. By pure luck, the plan finally came together when they discovered that Irina's bedroom window faces an alley. If Jenks "killed" her in the bedroom, anyone following him could watch and report back to James without a high risk of other unwanted witnesses watching too. With the help of theater blood, Jenks will take a picture of Irina's "dead" body, and then use butcher's blood in the bathroom to create the gruesome dismembering scene. Oddly, Jenks will need to not only create the bloody scene, but then clean it up as a part of proving he can not only commit a murder, but hide it. The use of the butcher's blood will provide "proof" of a bloody slaughter if one of James' people checked the scene with an ultraviolet light.

However, all of this hinges upon Jenks' shadow staying hidden. If at some point the person following Jenks decides to join him, the game will be over.

Emmett had met with Irina earlier in the day. It took a lot of convincing on his part, but she finally agreed to play along. Understandably, her first instinct was to run, but Emmett rightly convinced her that as long as James thought she was alive, she would never be safe.
Emmett is in charge of the rescue and transfer of Irina to Seth's. He plans on sneaking into her apartment several hours before showtime to not only prepare, but make sure he arrives before James' guy. After Jenks uses Irina to act out the murder, she and Emmett will sneak out of her apartment and into the basement storage room for several hours. They will need to wait long enough to make sure the coast is clear and before leaving, Irina will change into baggy clothes and put on a wig to disguise her features. Using the back entrance, an untraceable car will be waiting for them in the ally to use, to take her to Seth's.

Watching the seconds tick by on the clock is excruciating. I hate not knowing what's going on and the building tension adds to the awkward silence between the three of us. Seth is quietly typing on his computer, preparing for different ways to attack James and the Volturi. His plan is to hit them with one thing at a time, but consistently, so that once they resolve one issue, another will occur. That means once he starts, he will need to have the next assault ready to go. Although focused on his task, anxiety and fear are floating around him.

Edward is reviewing more of the Volturi files, scribbling notes from time to time with a furrowed brow. I, however, find it difficult to concentrate on anything but the time. Unable to sit and stare at the clock any longer, I start to busy myself with getting things ready for our departure tomorrow.

Just as I start running out of busy work for myself, Emmett finally calls to let us know they successfully left Irina's apartment. Seth immediately stops his work and prepares the computer for our chat. This time, he set up two of the monitors to show different camera views of the loft, allowing us to see all angles, as well as the hallway leading to his door. The screen in the middle is ready to chat with them once they arrive.

Ten minutes after his call, Emmett rushes into the loft after punching in the security code. He walks quickly towards the computers, dragging a hysterical Irina along with him. They did a good job of disguising her. The baggy trench coat and wig/hat combination make it difficult to see any of her features clearly. About halfway to the computer, she roughly pulls her hand from Emmett's grasp.

"Stop pulling me," she shouts.

"I'm sorry, but we needed to move. The longer we were outside, the more time someone had to spot you. Come and sit down," he suggests with a calming voice.

She stares at him for a moment before nodding her head in agreement. Irina takes a step forward before stopping again. This time her reason is not to argue, but to get out of her outfit. In what looks like an act of frustration, she quickly pulls the wig and hat from her head. Throwing them down on the floor, she fervently takes off the trench coat and leaves it in a pile with the other items. Once free of her disguise, I finally get a good look at the girl cast by James to play me.

Irina appears taller than I am with a slim figure. Fake blood is covering most of her green tee-shirt and part of her jeans, which I imagine is cold and uncomfortable. Her long brown hair is up in a loose ponytail, several strands falling around her face. The color of her hair, compared to her eye brows and skin tone, make me believe that brown is not her natural hair color.

As she moves closer to the computer, I can see mascara smeared around her eyes. Her face is also red and blotchy. Both are evidence of her understandably fragile emotional state. Emmett continues to lead her over to one of the chairs by the computer and once seated, I can also see how violently she is shaking. She's terrified.

"How did it go?" Edward asks right away, his thumb rubbing my back while he speaks.
"I think we're good. Everything looked realistic, and Jenks left without any problems. He will try to make contact later tonight after his meeting with James. Right now, he's on his way to the bay to toss the bag in. If this doesn't get him in with James, I don't know what will."

Irina is looking down and sniffing during the entire conversation, her poor body continuing to shake. It's hard to tell if she's paying attention to the conversation or not, but it's clear that she's not doing well. Oblivious to Irina's distress, Emmett and Edward continue to talk about the evening's activities and next steps.

"Hey, can you two shut up for a second," I interrupt loudly, irritated by their thoughtlessness. Both stop and look at me in confusion.

"Irina, are you okay?" I ask. "Emmett, can you find her a blanket or something. She's probably in shock."

For the first time since sitting down, Irina looks up, her eyes widening as she looks at the screen. Apparently, she wasn't paying attention as she seems surprised to see us. Suddenly, her eyes become even wider and unbelieving, the quakes of her body increase.

"You're her," she whispers horrified.

"What?" I ask confused. Emmett, who had started to move towards the living room to find a blanket, turns to look at her in shock.

"He has your picture," she says again, this time a bit more forcefully.

"Who has her picture?" Edward asks slowly.

I glance over to give him a questioning look. Edward has to know she is talking about James. I don't understand the point of asking such an obvious question when she is already barely hanging on. I'm about to say something, when Edward subtly squeezes my leg in a non-verbal message to keep quiet. I guess he wants to hear the confirmation from Irina's mouth.

"James," she says answering Edward's question, but not taking her eyes off of me. "He asked me to look like you. He had me dye my hair and wear brown contacts. He said it helped get him in the mood," she spits out.

Edward tenses beside me, his hand suddenly grasping my leg tightly. Although shocked by her words, I don't want to add to her hysteria. We need to get a lot of information from her tonight, and her revelation just adds to that list. However, we won't get anywhere if she remains this upset.

"Emmett, will you please get that blanket," I ask calmly, holding eye contact with her. "Irina, do you want some water or something?"

Turning quickly to Seth, I direct my next question to him. "What do you have there? Tea or something stronger?"

He shakes his head at me. "I've got soda and coffee. I'm not much of a drinker. I don't like how it makes my head fuzzy."

Logical as always, but that doesn't help in this situation. A good stiff drink would probably be the quickest way to help calm her nerves. Emmett comes back and wraps a thick blanket around her body before sitting back down in the chair next to her.

"Sorry there's not much to offer. Do you want something warm to drink? It might help stop the
"No thanks, the blanket is helping," she whispers, still looking at me like I am some sort of apparition. "I can't believe you're really her."

"Shocking, but true," I answer, not quite sure what else to say and a little tired of feeling like a zoo animal on display. Hoping to focus on something else besides me, I turn the conversation back to her experiences with James. "Can you tell us what happened with James?"

She appears to contemplate my request before answering. Now that her shaking has stopped, she is more focused on the conversation. Although this is what I wanted, I see a subtle shift in her demeanor that triggers a warning signal in my head and a shiver down my spine. I just can't put my finger on why.

"I met him a few weeks ago. He booked me through a guy I know who owns this club downtown." Edward, Emmett and I share a brief glance. It's probably the owner of the club that Jenks set up. Irina continues with her story, oblivious to our silent communication. "He told me that James was looking for a particular type of girl and could pay a lot of money. I couldn't pass it up." She looks down nervously.

"It's okay, go on."

"The first night must have been like a test. He was nice and charming and didn't ask for anything too weird. He also paid more than twice what I usually get, so when he called to set up a second meeting, it was a no brainer. The second meeting is when things started to change and become strange. But the money was too good, so I kept seeing him anyway. Eventually we started meeting every night."

"Strange?" Emmett asks.

"At first it was just little things like asking me to wear clothes he brought. Then it was perfume, the contacts, and dying my hair. He also started to bring in different pictures of you and ask me to do my hair like yours. I thought it was strange, but with each new request he paid me even more, so I just went with it, until a week ago."

"What happened a week ago?" Edward asks.

"He turned violent. I'll put up with a lot for the right price, but I'm not into that getting beat shit."

"What did he do, Irina?" I ask quietly.

She hesitates, tears running down her face. "At first it was more bizarre than violent. James asked me to act like I was scared of him. He also wanted me to yell at him. Get feisty is what he would say, but then it started getting scary. He would trap me in corners and block my way when I tried to move. I didn't have to pretend anymore because he was really scaring the shit out of me, and he liked it. The last time I met with him, he pushed me up against a wall and started choking me."

Irina pauses again.

"It's okay, you're doing great. What happened next?" I ask in a soothing voice.

"I didn't think I was getting out of there alive." She stops to take a breath and looks down. "I was about to black out, but then I thought about my family. I guess my survival skills kicked in. When he shifted his position to get better leverage, I shoved my knee in his dick and he dropped to the floor. Then I kicked him in the face and ran out the door. He never called me again, so I thought I was rid of him until Mr. McCarty showed up. I can't believe that psycho put a hit out on me!"
"I know you're scared, and we want to help you, but you need to tell us everything. Is there any other reason why he would want to kill you?" I ask. Irina quietly shakes her head. "Think carefully because he told our friend you betrayed him. I don't think he would have chosen those words if all you did was assault him. Did you threaten to tell the authorities about what he did?"

"No," she whispers wringing her hands. She's a terrible liar.

"Come on, Irina. The guy almost killed you. He deserved a lot more than discomfort and a bruised face. What did you do?" I push, looking deftly at the screen. "We can't help you if you don't tell us everything."

She looks at me quietly. I am about to say something else, when suddenly she speaks. "Before I left, I told James that I was going to tell Aro about his drug habit," she says softly.

Fear floods my body and the warning signals from before are now full blown alarms. Does she know Aro?

"How do you know Aro?" Edward asks brusquely. He leans forward in his chair, taking on his Agent Cullen persona. To him, Irina is now a suspect. Under the table and out of the sight of the camera, Edward's hand grabs mine, holding it tightly in silent reassurance.

"Aro and the Volturi are the talk of the town. In several conversations, I've heard people discuss Aro's obsessive rules. After watching James snort cocaine in front of me, I put two and two together. I figured if I threatened to tell Mr. Volturi, James would leave me alone. I guess I didn't think it out."

"Have you ever had any contact with Aro?" Emmett asks.

"No," she says slowly, her eyes moving in my direction. "But I know you're his daughter."

"What?" I sputter, choking on the word.

"James talked about you a lot. Who you were and what you did. He's obsessed with finding you. He also said that finding you is Mr. Volturi's priority. Apparently, there's a huge reward for anyone with information about you."

Irina's eyes and face light up when she mentions the reward. The panic and seriousness of the situation she's in has suddenly taking a back-seat to her love of money. Listening to her and watching the transformation cause the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end. I also notice a worried look pass between Emmett and Edward.

This is bad.

"What's the reward?" Edward asks with a deadly tone.

"I don't know. He never said."

"How many people know about it?" Edwards asks immediately after her answer, his voice becoming louder.

"I don't know."

"How does he tell people? Is it advertised? Is he recruiting people to find her?" Irina is shaking her head quickly, frightened by the increasing volume of Edward's voice. "Tell me right now!" he shouts into the camera. His red face stares intently at the screen, his chest heaving while he waits
for her answer.

"Edward, stop!" I yell, placing my hand on his arm. "She doesn't know."

Edward leans back into his chair, covering his face with his hands. He takes in a large breath, trying to rein in his frustration. The information about a reward scares him. Seth, who was quietly watching the exchange, is now furiously typing on his keyboard. He's looking at the monitor to his left, which is now full of numbers instead of the security camera shots of the loft. From my vantage point, it is hard to tell what he's doing, but something definitely sparked his analytical mind.

"Irina, why don't you go into the bathroom and clean up a bit. It might help you relax and then we can talk more," Emmett suggests.

He's obviously trying to get her out of the room so we can talk, but if she realizes the reason, she doesn't show it. Still staring at me, Irina nods her head. Looking in my direction one last time, she stands and shuffles into the bathroom with Emmett's help. Once she is safely behind the door, he rushes back over to the screen.

"We're fucked," Emmett hisses, trying to keep his voice down.

"No we aren't!" Edward baulks. "We just need to watch her and make sure she doesn't contact anyone. You did make sure she doesn't have a phone right?"

"This isn't my first rodeo. I took it before we left the apartment," Emmett says.

"Sorry, man, it just…well, you know," Edward mumbles in the form of ambiguous guy speak.

"I understand," Emmett answers, subtly cutting his eyes in my direction.

"You've got the information for Jenks' friend, right?" Edward asks, moving the conversation back to the task at hand.

"Yeah, but they're for relocation not containment."

"You should keep her there until we can talk to Jenks. He probably knows someone who can watch her," Seth suggests.

"I agree. We need to put her somewhere where she can't make contact with anyone," Edward replies.

I sit contemplating Irina's words. It's hard to know exactly what James meant by a reward. Knowing Aro, he wouldn't advertise it. Aro wants people to believe he is infallible. Announcing that I've evaded him for fifteen years is admitting a failure, basically showing a weakness. However, his need for revenge wouldn't allow him to let me go either, and the right price always works to get information. Most likely, if there is a reward, it would only be shared with people who would keep the information quiet. No one new to the organization would fall into that group. If not for James' loose lips, I doubt anyone outside of the Volturi's inner circle would know about it.

"Seth, what are you doing?" Edward asks gruffly, before I can share my thoughts about the reward.

"I'm turning on Jenks' phone," Seth says resolutely.

"Why?" I ask confused by his sudden decision.

"We have a girl who would sell you off to the highest bidder, James conducting violent role plays
and a possible bounty on your head. I think the more information we hear the better," Seth says in his typical fast paced way, but with an aggressive tone I've not heard before.

"He's right. We need to get ahead of all of this, especially if we are going back to Seattle tomorrow," Edward adds.

"Not if. We are going." I jump in.

Seth continues before anyone responds to my comment. "I'm also searching through James' files to see if there's any communication about a reward. If we find anything, we can at least get a better handle on how big of an issue it is."

"Bells," Emmett states, getting my attention. "Maybe it's not the best time for you to come back." Edward turns to look at me. He's obviously in agreement with Emmett's implied request to stay here.

"It's not up for discussion. The only time I'm going outside will be in the safety of a car or behind a building. No one will even know I'm back. The situation is escalating. Now is not the time to back away."

"Hey, guys, we really don't have time for this debate. Emmett if we don't want Irina to hear what is going on with Jenks, which I believe we don't, you need to log off now," Seth rushes.

"Yeah, okay," Emmett mutters.

"Watch her, man. Don't let her out of your sight, we can't let her contact anyone. I will call you when we figure out the plan," Edward says.

"I'm on it," Emmett responds before the screen goes black.

Almost immediately, the speakers come to life with Jenks and James mid-conversation.

"Sign, sealed, and delivered," Jenks' muffled voice says.

"Is that it?" James asks excitedly.

"Yup, one tongue as requested. I don't know exactly what you want it for, but there you go."

"And how about everything else?"

"It went fine. The apartment is clean and the body disposed of as requested. No issues."

"Good work, Jack."

"So, is it my turn now?" Jenks asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Quid pro quo, mate. You said I had to prove myself before you gave me more information. I didn't botch the job, so I think I proved myself."

"I guess that's true. You certainly know how to deal with difficult situations. There is a slight pause. "And you don't seem upset by the nature of the job. You didn't throw up did you?"

"Was I supposed to?" Jenks asks sarcastically. "Don't insult me or my intelligence. I did my part. Do you want me or not? There are plenty of other jobs out there without all the fucking games."
"You really don't give a shit do you?" James chuckles. "Okay, I think you've proven that you're the right man for the job. Tell you what, tonight we celebrate the death of a bitch and tomorrow we talk business."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Let's hit that strip club you missed the other night."

"Isn't that how you got into this mess in the first place?"

"Exactly," James laughs.

"You're a sick man. I think I like it. Okay, let's go," Jenks laughs along with James.

"Fuck! We don't have time for Jenks to party," Edward yells frustrated.

"But we can't call him out, not now. If he bails after supposedly committing a murder, James is going to get suspicious," I rationalize.

As the conversation continues over the speakers, I notice Seth frantically typing. After hitting the last command, he turns and watches the speakers intently, folding and unfolding his paper anxiously. Before I've had a chance to ask him what he did, a phone rings over the speaker.

"What?" James barks. "What? I thought that feature was disabled! Is there a fire? Then fucking call it off! We don't need a bunch of firefighters running through the warehouse!"

"Seth, what did you do?" I ask.

"I hacked into the security system at the Volturi warehouse and tricked it into calling the fire department," Seth says smiling.

"Call them back and tell them it was a false alarm. And then figure out why it fucking sent the call in the first place," James continues to yell.

"I don't think so," Seth mutters, turning back to his keyboard. "Deal with that, evil ones." He again punches in a command and turns back to the speaker.

"Hello? Hello?" James is hollering. "What the fuck!"

"Seth?" Edward asks expectedly.

"I just blocked cell reception in the building, which means they can't call off the fire department. I imagine James will have to go to the warehouse instead of to the club now."

"How in the hell did you do that?" Edward asks astonished.

"It's a variation on the technology that prisons are using to prevent illegal cell phone use. I just used their system to do it instead of a tower." Seth shrugs as if the task was no big deal.

"Amazing," Edward says, patting Seth on the back.

"But what about land lines?" I ask.

"They don't have any," Seth answers distractedly.

"Fuck!" James yells. "I need a rain check for the club, Jack. I have some unexpected business to
"Everything okay, mate?" Jenks asks.

"Yeah. Come by my building tomorrow morning and we'll work out the details of your position."

There is shuffling and then silence on the phone for several minutes. A sudden ringing, surprises us, and it takes a moment to realize it is the Tracfone Jenks gave Seth before he left.

"It's Jenks," he says, answering the call and putting it on speaker. "Hello?"

"I'm assuming that quick departure was due to you. What's up?"

"We have a problem," Edward says. "Irina knows who Bella is and believes Aro will pay for information."

"Shit!" Jenks hisses. "Does she know where you're at or that Bella is coming back tomorrow?"

"No, but the simple fact she recognized her is enough," Edward says gravely.

"So, we need someone to sit on her instead of just relocating her."

"Basically. Any ideas?"

"Umm, I think so. Let me make some calls. I have a pretty secure place in Russia where we can put her. We just need to get her there."

"Russia?" I ask.

"Yeah, she can leave when this is all done, but I'm not taking any chances."

"What kind of place are you talking about?" I ask nervously.

"Ace, I wouldn't send her anywhere bad. They're good people, but will keep her from contacting anyone. She probably won't be happy, but she'll be alive and we'll be safer. It's the best we can do for now."

"Okay," I whisper. Things are moving too quickly for me to fully process, but I trust Jenks.

"Tell Emmett to watch her tonight. I have a transporter who owes me a favor. I'll call him after we hang up. He should get there by tomorrow morning to fly her to Russia."

"He has his own plane?" Edward asks.

"Yes. I doubt she'd go quietly on an airline. He's done similar jobs for me with other witness I've had in difficult cases. He knows what he's doing."

"What about the reward?" Edward asks.

"What about it?" Jenks asks in return.

"You're connections are great Jason, but they aren't always above-board. You sure this guy won't turn over a phone if she starts talking about a hefty reward?"

Jenks chuckles into the phone. "Edward, she won't be the first witness to blabber about a reward. My guy also knows I pay more than most 'guaranteed' rewards. Most importantly, like I said, this
guy owes me, and in my world, repaying a debt is more important than money."

"As long as you're sure," Edward states.

"I am. I wouldn't do it if I thought it could put any one of you in jeopardy."

"I just sent Emmett a text to let him know the plan," Seth says.

"Thanks, kid. Did Irina share anything else I need to know about?"

"Not really, but her description of James is right out of a serial killer's biography. He's an evil bastard," Edward responds.

"Evil doesn't begin to describe him. Try having to buddy up to him," Jenks scoffs. "Look, I better go if I'm going to secure transport for Irina by tomorrow morning. When are you guys leaving?"

"In the morning sometime," I reply.

"Hopefully by the time you get settled, I will have more information from James. It's not safe for me to stop by the loft, but let's plan a chat tomorrow night."

"Sounds good. Call if this guy doesn't work out," Edward requests.

"Be careful!" I yell before he hangs up.

"I always am, Ace. Watch your back too."

We sit there quietly after the call ends, each processing the information of the evening. In many ways, we are making progress, but the road there is getting more treacherous. Although not overly religious, I find myself saying a silent prayer that we will make it out okay.

"We've got a long drive ahead of us tomorrow. We should all get some sleep," Edward says standing up and offering me his hand to lead me to the bedroom.

The hallway is familiar, but hated. I've never walked to Aro's office alone before. It makes it feel even more terrifying. I can see a light coming from the open door of his office, the brightness a sharp contrast to the dark hallway.

Reaching his door, I stand outside for a moment. The room is jarringly silent. Peering around the corner, I see Aro sitting at a table. He's dressed in a tailored black suit, crisp white shirt and dark red tie. His gold cufflinks gleam in the light and an expensive watch peeks out from under his sleeve. With his coiffed black hair and clean-shaven face, he is the picture of sophistication and wealth. The table has a chessboard laid out and he is staring intently at all the pieces.

"Isabella, I've been waiting for you. Sit," he commands without looking up.

Moving slowly to the empty chair across from his, I sit down carefully. The chessboard is strange. The pieces are all the same color and have faces on each piece. Taking a closer look, I realize each piece represents someone I know. Edward, Jenks, Seth, Jasper, Emmett, James, Mike, Jessica, Banner, Marcus, Jake, my mother, Caius, Irina, Aro and myself. Several other pieces are turned away making it difficult to see whose face is there.

"This wasn't the plan," Aro says focusing on the board. "Things could have been different. We should be ruling the world together. Our combined talents would've made us unstoppable. But I could never undo the influence that your bitch of a mother had over you."
"Shut your mouth about my mother. You don't get to talk about her," I yell. His words ignite my anger.

"Agree to disagree on that front, my Isabella." Aro finally looks up, his evil eyes staring into mine.

"You murdered her! There's nothing to agree or disagree about, and I'm not your anything."

"As usual, you're missing the point. Besides, we're not here to discuss your mother."

"Then what are we here to do?"

"Play, of course," he says waving his arm across the board.

"Which pieces are mine?" I ask confused by the singular color.

"Ah, that is part of the challenge. I've made my moves. Have you paid attention to them?"

I focus on the layout of the board, trying to look for a pattern and a possible move. It is unnerving to have the faces of everyone staring back at me. I don't know whose piece to use. Finally, I see a move. If I use Jenks' piece, I can overtake Marcus. Deciding, I quickly make the move and hit the game clock to signify the end of my turn. Aro assesses the board, a smirking smile plastered on his face. He places his hand over a piece I can't see. The placement of his hand making it impossible to tell who he picks to make the play.

"Isabella, when will you learn, this is a game you cannot beat me at."

He slowly moves the piece towards F7 where the King's bishop pawn sits. I can't see whose face is on that piece either. It only adds to my frustration of this game. How can I play without knowing the rules? Knocking down the piece, he looks up with a wide grin.

"Check mate."

My eyes fly open to the dark of my bedroom, but the panic from the dream remains. Quickly sitting up, I try to regulate my breath and calm down.

"Bella?" Edward asks. The sheets rustle as he sits up. "What's wrong?"

"Bad dream," I mumble, my voice gritty.

"Oh, baby," he sighs, wrapping his arm around my shoulders to pull me into him. "Want to talk about it?"

"It was strange. I was playing a game of chess with Aro." I pause shaking my head a bit. "It was just strange," I repeat.

"Are you okay?"

Turning to face him, I lightly kiss his lips. "I'm fine. What time is it?" I ask turning around to look at the clock. It's only been a couple of hours since we went to bed.

"It's early. We need more sleep if we are going to make the trip back," Edward mumbles, pulling me down to lie on his chest. Gently, he runs his hand through my hair in a comforting motion. "Go back to sleep. I've got you," he whispers.

Closing my eyes, the thought of the chess game lingers in my mind. The weight of everything is
making it difficult to go back to sleep. A couple of hours later, instead of lying awake tossing and turning, I decide to just get up.

Standing, I lightly brush Edward's hair back while he sleeps peacefully. Once again, I'm overwhelmed by my feelings for him. It is still hard to believe that he loves me. Walking downstairs, I find Seth sitting at the desk yelling at his computer screen. His fingers are banging on the keys aggressively.

"Seth?"

He looks up quickly, embarrassment overtaking the color of his frustration. "Hey, Bella. I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"No, couldn't sleep. What's going on?"

"This file is defying me. I can't get to the data and it's making me crazy!"

"Maybe it's too damaged," I say, realizing he is working on my flash drive.

"No, it's the hacking part of the program that's blocking me. Every time I try to fix the file, I'm blocked by the codes that help it to avoid detection in other systems. There's a way around it, I just need to find it," he grumbles.

Looking at Seth, I can see that his frustration is back in full force. Although he is having a hard time, I can't help but smile at him. Seth may struggle to understand social cues and is more comfortable dealing with logic and not emotion, but he also has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met. He is not overly expressive and would probably deny it if I said anything, but love and loyalty colors everything he does. His frustration is not only about his need to beat the computer program, but his fear of failing us.

"Seth, you are the smartest person I know. If anyone can get to those files it is you, and if you can't, no one will be upset. You're amazing. Don't be so hard on yourself, okay."

He stops typing and looks up for several moments before finally giving me a small smile. Then he quickly shifts his eyes back down to his work. His colors, however, let me know he understands.

"Bella, did you know that according to urban dictionary loins means cold pancakes in Latin?" The fact is the most random he has ever spoken, but the smile on his lips while he watches his screen tells me that was his intention.

"I care about you too, Seth," I whisper quietly while walking over to the kitchen to start packing up the food.

When Edward wakes up a couple of hours later, there is a flurry of activity to finish preparing the house for our departure and pack everything up, especially Seth's equipment.

Once the packing is complete, while Edward and Seth map out our route back, I sneak away for a moment to gather my thoughts before the trip. I'm ready to return, but I also know that we are heading to the front line of the battle.

Standing on the dock, I hear the now familiar creaking of Edward's footsteps as he comes up behind me. Wrapping his arms around me, he places his head on my shoulder and for several moments we quietly look across the lake.

"Ready to go?" he asks.
"Yes. I'm just saying goodbye."

"We'll come back soon. And when we do, it will be for an actual vacation. Just the two of us," he whispers against my ear before kissing it.

"That sounds wonderful."

"I'm glad you own this place. It holds my favorite memories, you know." Edward nuzzles my neck, his arms tightening around me.

"Me too," I whisper, squeezing his arm.

"We've got to go, baby."

"Okay," I say turning around in his arms. "I love you."

Edward smiles at my words. "I love you too."

Although his arms move away from me when we start to walk to the car, our hands instinctively gravitate towards each other. We will be driving back caravan style since both Edward and I have vehicles, and there is too much equipment to take in one car. Seth decides to drive with me, while Edward decides to follow instead of lead. He made a joke about needing to keep an eye on me, but the sentiment behind the statement is sincere. Edward is being supportive of my decision to return, but it doesn't mean that he isn't worried.

Later that evening, our weary crew finally pulls into the underground parking garage across from Seth's loft. Emmett has remained in contact throughout the day. Irina was safely picked up this morning, so the place is clear for our arrival.

There is a light mist in the air as we use the cover of night and our lowered baseball caps to run across the street and into the building hopefully unnoticed. Seth's loft is on the top floor and like most industrial buildings turned into residences, the elevator is a lift with a pull-down rusting grate as a door. The old lift looks like it is on its last leg. It groans and creaks on our way up, each jerk making me jump a bit. Edward looks over laughing at my nervousness.

"Has anyone ever told you that you are afraid of all the wrong things?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask slightly irritated by his laughter.

"You're fearless about coming back to Seattle, but put you in an elevator that makes a little bit of noise and you look terrified."

"Stop making fun of me," I pout.

"I think it's adorable," he mumbles, leaning down to kiss me. I dodge away just in time to avoid his kiss. Now it's his turn to pout.

"I think it's adorable," he mumbles, leaning down to kiss me. I dodge away just in time to avoid his kiss. Now it's his turn to pout.

The lift finally stops and Seth pushes up the gate so that I can maneuver out. Turning back to a still pouting Edward, I shrug my shoulders with a smile. He shakes his head and follows Seth out of the lift. We walk down the short hallway towards a tall metal-looking door at the end of the hallway. Seth walks to the right of the door and moves a hidden panel out of the way. Behind it is a lighted keypad that he uses to punch in a code. Once entered, Seth moves over and opens the door.

Walking in, I recognize everything I saw on the computer screen last night. It is strange being
familiar with a place I've never set foot in before. Before I can take another step, I am suddenly swept into a hug. My feet swing above the ground as familiar arms squeeze me tighter.

"Emmett," I whisper.

"It's good to see you, Bells."

Setting me back down, I smile up at him. "I missed you. I can't tell you how good it is to see you again."

I feel Edward move up beside me, placing his arm around my shoulders. "How's it going?" he asks Emmett, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Like clockwork," he comments before stopping and looking behind me. A big grin brightens his face. "Seth, my main man! How's it going, kid?" Emmett moves around to walk over to Seth to give him the hand shake, one-armed hug/pat combo.

"Good," Seth mumbles unsure of the hug, but I can tell he is happy to see Emmett too.

We spend the next couple of hours unpacking and catching up. After bringing in everything from the cars, Emmett orders a pizza for a very late dinner. We sit around Seth's coffee table catching up and laughing at Emmett's hilarious stories. I am happy to hear that since I left, Rose and he are back on track. Taking my advice, he didn't give up. It paid off a few weeks ago when she called him out of the blue and asked him to dinner. By the twinkle in his eye and the brightness of his hues, I would say Emmett is smitten.

"So what's your plan, Edward?" I hear Emmett ask as I take the plates over to the kitchen.

Looking at the sink full of dishes, I decide we need to clean this place up if we are going to stay here for any length of time. Grabbing a garbage bag, I walk back over to the coffee table to clean up the remnants of our dinner as well as the older wrappers and left over garbage. Selfishly, I also want to hear Edward's answer.

"In terms of what?"

"Are you staying here or going back to work?"

"Honestly, I need to figure that out. I can't be away for too much longer, but I don't know if it's the right time to go back either," he says glancing in my direction.

"Oh my god!" Seth yells suddenly from the other side of the room where he is working on more computer codes.

"What?" All three of us ask simultaneously.

Seth jumps up and walks quickly over to us. "Last night in the middle of the Irina stuff, Banner got another e-mail. I didn't notice it until today and I meant to tell you earlier, but I got caught up in getting stuff ready to go, and then it slipped my mind."

"What did it say?" I ask.

"It was from 'Jessica' letting Banner know she will be out for at least another two weeks. That should clear the way for you to return to work without people looking for Jessica."

"Two weeks?" I ask.
"Whatcha thinking, Bells?"

"I'm thinking that we're missing something. Mike already did his job, so why keep her alive? They must need her for another reason."

"What's the other reason?" Edward asks.

"I have no idea, that's the problem," I reply. "I agree that it makes going back to work easier, but your return will also squash the Edward and Jessica getaway rumor. People are going to worry about how she's doing and will want to contact her. It just seems a little reckless on James' end to open that door," I say.

"Once Jenks is more involved in James' organization, we will get more information on Jessica and their plans for her. All we can do until then is watch the situation at work and hope it doesn't spin out of control," Emmett says logically.

"I'm going to stay here for at least a couple of days before I officially return to Seattle and work. I think going back right after her e-mail looks a little too suspicious," Edward declares apparently making up his mind.

Emmett nods his head in agreement and I softly smile. Although the loft is a little small for three people, I'm not quite ready to fall asleep without Edward next to me. Our contact will become limited once he returns to work and although it's not as bad as being separated by hundreds of miles, I still can't see him as often as I want either.

Continuing to pick up, I'm amazed to find an expensive looking coffee table underneath all the wrappers. I guess I was expecting something that matched the inexpensive futon. It makes me wonder if it's a hand me down from his aunt or maybe his parents. In some ways, I feel like I know Seth well, but in truth, beyond the knowing about the circumstances of his parent's death, I've never taken time to learn the details of his life. It is a fact I want to change and soon.

"What time are we talking to Jenks?" I ask, closing up the garbage bag.

Emmett looks at his watch. "Wow, in about twenty minutes," he says sounding surprised by the time.

"Good! That gives us plenty of time to do some dishes," I announce in an overly excited voice. I hear groans from around the table. "Sorry boys, I don't believe in gender stereotypes. We all need to help."

"Isn't that why God invented dishwashers?" Emmett whines.

"Do you see that pile over there? The dishwasher will need a little help." Begrudgingly, everyone gets up and follows me to the kitchen.

After a marathon cleaning, we make it to the computer with a couple of minutes to spare. In what has become a common occurrence, we once again find ourselves sitting around a computer screen. The only thing that changes are the people sitting around it with me. Someday, I hope we can all be in the same room together.

Seth hits a key and Jenks' face is suddenly in front of us. However, instead of the dingy apartment, his face is closer up and the scenery behind him is dark.

"You're not on your computer," Seth states.
"Nope, I'm on a phone and don't worry, Seth, I'm trashing it as soon as we're done."

"Why are you on a phone?" Seth asks.

"We need to try something that can't be done from my apartment. I'm in with James. He told me this morning that he wants me to lead up his recruiting. It sounds like he's looking for a second-in-command. This is my chance to prove that I can handle the job."

"Isn't burly guy his second?" I ask.

"Burly guy's name is Sam," Jenks laughs. "But no, he's not. He's the head muscle, but James doesn't think he has the brains to lead. His words not mine."

"So, what do we need to try?" I ask curiously.

"Being in charge of recruiting will work out beautifully for our plan. I just need to pick people who look solid, but I can still easily manipulate. That's where you come in, Ace."

"Right," I say understanding his train of thought.

"But, I was thinking about the reward and the risk you would take walking out that door. So, I might have figured out a way you can do your thing without leaving the loft. Go look out the window, Ace."

"Okay," I say slowly. Getting out of the chair, I walk over to the window and look out. "I'm looking out of the window. Now what?"

"Look at the building across the street, almost directly across and one floor down." Jenks yells through the speaker.

Edward is now standing next to me and we both follow his directions. Finally, I think I see what he is talking about; there in a darkened window across the street is a lone figure waving a phone.


"Can you read me, Ace?"

Through the window I can clearly see his hues of hope and excitement. "Yup!" I say feeling my own excitement.

"What?" he asks loudly.

"She said yes," Emmett relays.

Walking back to the computer, I smile brightly at Jenks. "You're a genius!"

"What's your plan?" Edward asks.

"James told me he expects discretion, so I need a place to interview new recruits. What's more discrete than an empty room in an almost empty building? More importantly, you can watch all the interviews, Ace."

"Watching is one thing. I can tell you what they are feeling, but it works better if I know the context of the conversation or better yet if I can help guide it."

"Way ahead of you," Jenks responds. "I got my hands on a tiny ear piece. You can't spot it unless
someone looks directly into your ear. We will set that up so you can talk to me, and Seth's super phone already allows you to hear."

"But, she just can't stand in front of the window the entire time. All the person has to do is look across the street and see her," Edward says, concern tingeing his voice.

"This thing isn't something that you need to concentrate to do, right, Ace?"

"Right."

"Well, why couldn't you keep the blinds closed and just peek out?"

"That should work," I say.

"Don't guess. Go try it," Jenks replies.

Walking back over to the window, I wait for Seth to shut the blinds. Like everything else, those are electronic as well. Once they are shut, I walk over and lift up an individual slat to peek across the street. Sure enough, I can read Jenks just as easily as when the window was open."

"Ask him if he can see me," I utter.

"Can you see Bella?" Seth asks.

"Umm, no. It just looks like the blinds are uneven. Can she see me?"

"Tell him we're good to go." I would never say this aloud, but I was nervous about how we are going to make this work. Once again, Jenks comes through. This is the ideal plan.

"Alright, sports fans, interviews start bright and early tomorrow. Seth, it's time to make sure the city denies those permit applications. I want James distracted with problems on the Volturi side of his job. The more problems he has with them, the more he is going to rely on me to take care of the recruits. The more freedom I have, the closer I can get to Jessica."

Looking across at Jenks, I smile at his excitement.

Let the games begin.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time! Thanks for reading. :)


Chapter 23: Passion Play

I sit by the window watching the rain. The drops falling into the puddles gathered on the street is almost hypnotic. Today's storm is more of a downpour than the steady drizzle of the last few days. With Thanksgiving a few short days away, the sun and warmer temperatures of early fall are long forgotten. The warm blanket wrapped around me and the hot coffee cup in my hands help to guard against the cold of the drafty windows. With all the conveniences and added extras Seth put into the loft, the one thing he didn't improve was the heat, and as the weeks go by, the chill gets a little bit worse with each passing day.

They say time flies when you're having fun, or in my case, when you're interviewing dozens of criminal bottom feeders. Starting the morning after Jenks' call, he and I have spent endless hours "interviewing" potential soldiers for James and scapegoats for us. Jenks' plan with the window has worked perfectly so far. Armed with a comfy chair, a notebook, a microphone connected to Jenks' ear piece and a speaker connected to his phone, we've become an unbelievable team.

He and I quickly learned each other's habits, which has made it even easier to communicate in such an unorthodox manner. Once this is all over, I've decided that we need to have another game night at the Cullen's, only this time Jenks and I will take everyone on. Our uniquely developed communication skills, which now include hand gestures, will make us a formidable team at charades or Pictionary. And in my crazy musings, I also imagine us having a cool handshake or complicated high-five that we can do after we crush everyone. Or maybe I've just watched one too many Will and Grace re-runs trying to kill the time being stuck inside.

As for the cast of characters we've interviewed, we've done a good job so far of creating the right team. We decided the trick was to find a balance in the types we picked. Some of the candidates Jenks brought to James, especially in the beginning, were the real deal. As sickening as it was to do, we needed James to trust and believe in Jenks. Sending him some hardcore individuals first was the best way to gain that trust. Chances are the more he trusts the people being sent; the less likely he is to check all of them closely. Unlike Aro, James doesn't have an obsessive need to control.
everything, which works in our favor.

The people we picked to stack the deck for our team were men that from all appearances look hardcore, but internally were insecure followers. Approval from others is a big part of what drives them, they just happen to want that approval from all the wrong people. This, however, doesn't make them any less dangerous. Their dangerousness comes from a willingness to do just about anything for acceptance. Gang and cult leaders love individuals with these traits because they are blind followers and easy to manipulate into doing their dirty work. Those same characteristics are the ones Jenks intends to use to our advantage.

From the perspective of my ability, they were also some of the easiest to read. When challenged with scenarios, they would verbally come off strong and decisive, however, their colors revealed a different story. Shades of doubt, insecurity and anxiousness would float around them until they felt Jenks approved of their answer. Jenks thought this aspect was hilarious, and on particularly long days, he would purposely make some of them sweat it out before responding.

Anyone Jenks interviewed that fell into the unreadable thirty percent were quickly dismissed. Jenks and I both agreed they were just too much of a wild card to consider. Even with the ones that didn't fit well for what we needed, I still knew their intentions. A known enemy is always better than an unknown one.

"Morning, Ace!" Jenks' voice bellows through the wireless speaker sitting on the table next to me, breaking my trance of watching the rain.

"Morning, Jenks," I respond back, looking across the window and waving my fingers through the crack in the blinds.

The first day of interviews, Seth and I rigged up a way to keep one of the slats up in order for me to peak out without having to hold it the entire time. It was wide enough for me to see, but Jenks said from a distance, you couldn't really tell if anyone was there or not.

"Ready for another fun-filled day?"

"Waiting with bated breath," I say sarcastically. "How's Crazy today?"

"Oh man, the dude is losing it. Today he went off on someone for hiding his coffee. James totally lost it on the poor kid. Come to find out later, he had just forgotten it in the car. He's unraveling more and more by the day," Jenks says proudly.

Over the last few weeks, the combination of his drug use and Seth's hacking skills creating chaos on the Volturi side has resulted in James becoming even more of a loose cannon. Jenks says his spiraling out-of-control behavior is exactly what we need and plays right into our hands.

James is also demonstrating an increased paranoia about everyone around him. Luckily for us, the more paranoid he becomes, the more he seems to rely on Jenks. The combination will make it easier to place the blame elsewhere when we start making our internal moves. Jenks is hoping to get more access to files and documents soon so that he can start stealing information. Since most of the "employees" see James as being a bit on the crazy side, they won't pay much attention if he starts ranting about something missing. It will also make it easy for Jenks to plant seeds of doubt with James on the people working for him.

Once involved with James' group, Jenks realized quickly that even without us actively trying to take him down; James' goal of making something of his own is pretty unrealistic. James tends to lose sight of the big picture. In order to run a criminal organization, you not only need to
understand the larger picture, but also have the ability to stay ahead of inevitable issues. This is what Aro is brilliant at and why he's evaded authorities for so long. According to Jenks, James' preoccupation with his obsessions and drugs has resulted in him neglecting several important aspects of his "business".

The fact that Jenks so quickly recognized James' weaknesses as a leader makes me wonder about Aro's knowledge of the situation. With James not paying attention, I find it hard to believe that Aro doesn't already know. And if he does know, he's being very calculating in his response, which concerns me. Although our goal is to play the two of them against each other, we need it on our terms and in the context of the information we send. Not knowing if Aro was savvy to James' behavior even before we started worries me. If he makes a move and we can't get out of the way first, we are all at risk, especially Jenks.

"Sounds like things are on track," I say, trying to feel as optimistic as Jenks sounds.

Ever since dreaming about Aro and the chess game, it feels like I'm missing something. I know our plan is solid and we have the right players in place, but my intuition is warning me that something big is on the horizon.

"Any luck on getting access to her room?" I ask.

"No and it's fucking pissing me off!"

A solution to Jessica's situation continues to elude us. Although James is handing more and more over to Jenks, he has yet to disclose the name of the girl behind the door and why he is holding her. What's even more frustrating is that the guards watching her are just as clueless, so Jenks can't even get anything from them. James has kept all information surrounding the girl very close to his chest, along with the single key to open her door. He carries it on a chain around his neck.

I still don't understand what James is gaining by keeping her alive, if it is even Jessica at all. After hearing Irina's story, the girl could easily be another violent role play target. I suspect the only one who knows the truth is Sam, and possibly Mike, but neither is very forthcoming, especially with Jenks. Both see him as a threat to their position with James.

"Is there anything else we can do? This extension of holding her won't last forever."

"I'm keeping my ear to the ground for any discussions or hints that they are moving her. If that happens, we'll need to act quickly."

"I still don't see how your plan is going to work."

Jenks, Edward and Emmett are working on a plan to get to her. The only way to successfully do it will be to set up the new hires as the ones responsible. Jenks will probably still take a hit for hiring the wrong people, but that will be better than being found out as the traitor. However, it terrifies me every time the boys discuss going in after Jessica. There are so many variables that make it an impossible mission.

"Trust me, Ace, I never do anything without a solid plan. It's all about timing and access."

"I do trust you, it's just-"

"Look, we aren't there yet. This is just preparation. No need to stress about it," Jenks interrupts before I can finish my argument.

"The longer this goes on, the more likely that scenario will play out. So I don't think it's premature
for me to worry," I scoff.

"And we're big boys trained to deal with this type of situation. Sometimes you just have to have faith, Ace, and I have faith that we will get through this."

"I don't know if I do," I whisper, my worst fears weighing heavily on my heart.

"Then I guess for now, I will believe enough for the both of us," Jenks say with a quiet confidence.

"Thank you," I whisper, thankful to have Jenks in my life.

"It doesn't do us any good to sit and worry about possibilities. Like I've said before, all we can do is deal with what's in front of us. And right now, what we've got in front of us is about ten minutes until our next victim arrives. Any updates on your end that I should know about before they get here?" Jenks asks.

"Seth is about to infiltrate the Volturi system with a virus he developed," I answer, trying to do what he asked and focus on the present moment.

"Really? Where's the kid, I want to hear about it."

"He's in the shower."

"Crap. Do you know what it is?"

"I know the basics. He said now that the permit schemes are complete, he wants to pull back and change things up a bit,"

"What's he thinking?"

"He said the virus will slow down programs, mess up printers, and make it difficult to save documents. Basically things that will drive everyone crazy, but looks like a systems error rather than someone interfering from the outside. He said it should keep their tech guy busy for a while and make conducting the day-to-day business slow and frustrating."

"Can't another IT geek find the virus?"

"Seth coded it specifically to prevent that from happening. Take this all with a grain of salt because I don't understand half of how he described it, but I guess it mimics other programs so it is particularly tricky to find. Then once it completes the job, it will delete itself."

"I'll take your word for it. God knows I don't understand it any better when he describes it," Jenks replies laughing.

"I guess he's also monitoring their system and any changes to it. It sounded like he'll know when they start looking, and if it looks like they are on the right track to finding it, he will hit the kill switch and delete it early."

"Remind me never to piss off Seth. That kid is too smart for his own good. I'm just glad he's working for our team."

"Me too." I smile.

Seth has worked tirelessly over the last several weeks working on the hacking schemes and running backgrounds on all the people we interview. There is no doubt that he has helped us stay a step ahead on more than one occasion.
"Is he anywhere close to getting those pictures off the flash drive?"

"Umm, he told me yesterday that he's programming a 'work around' to prevent it from blocking his efforts. He's believes he can have them for us in the next week or so. This whole thing has become his personal nemesis. Seth is bound and determined to beat it one way or another."

"Well, I don't want to put more pressure on him, but from everything you told me about this Caius guy, I don't see him putting petty shit on it. My gut tells me that whatever those pictures are will help us take this thing to a whole new level."

"I agree, they must be important. He wouldn't have put them there if they weren't." I pause for a moment deciding to switch topics before we run out of time. "How's Irina?"

"She's contained," he answers simply.

"Okay," I say softly.

"Stop worrying, Ace. She's not going to contact anyone, and she's doing just fine. I mean, she's not happy, but she's alive."

"Has she said anything else about the reward?"

"She's tried to bribe a couple of people, but didn't give any of them any more specifics than she gave us. It doesn't sound like she even knows how to contact Aro. I think she had enough information to be dangerous, but not the smarts to come up with a plan. With all the precautions we took, I don't consider her a viable threat anymore. So like I said, stop worrying."

"You're right."

"Of course I am." He laughs. I can imagine his smirk that went along with it. "And speaking of focusing, it's game time. Our first contestant is about to arrive. Hold on to your hat, Ace. I'm feeling a bit cheeky today," he jokes, switching into his British persona.

"I'm ready. Let's do this."

By the time Wednesday rolls around, we have three more candidates to take to James. There are no more interviews planned for the rest of the week, which means lots of downtime on my end. James has decided that he and Jenks need to spend his first Thanksgiving in America at his favorite strip club. Jenks took him up on his request because he's concerned that James has a new girl targeted to cater to his Isabella fantasies. Given the story Irina told us, Jenks wants to monitor things closely, and if needed, step in and take her out before things get out of hand.

Sitting on the couch, I'm surrounded by papers with information collected from the last few interviews. For each candidate, I've created a file with my notes and Seth's background check information. The notes include specific thoughts on their strengths and weaknesses and how each could be used to our favor. It will come in handy when we start picking people for different situations.

The room is quiet as Seth sits in front of his computer working on more codes. Both of us are working in a comfortable silence, each focused on our tasks. The scene is not an abnormal one. This is the about as exciting as it gets for us lately.

Not expecting visitors, I jump slightly when the door suddenly opens and Edward walks in. This visit is unexpected and my heart flutters at the sight of him walking towards me. As anticipated,
my time with Edward is much more limited since his return to work two weeks ago.

We aren't sure if anyone is following him, but most likely someone may still be following Jenks. Since Jenks uses the building across the street, we don't want Edward and Emmett connected to this one. Therefore for every visit, Edward uses a complicated route to expose any followers. As an extra precaution, he usually parks a few blocks away and then hidden under hoodies and baseball caps, walks through back alleys to get here.

"Hey! I didn't expect to see you for a couple more days." I stand up and meet him halfway. Once within his reach, he pulls me into a hug, my legs dangling as he stands to his full height. This is usually a sign that he's had a bad day.

"I needed to see you," he whispers into my neck.

Setting me back down, I take his hand and lead him to the couch. He waves to Seth as he passes him and after waving back, Seth quickly focuses back on his work. I also see him take out his headphones and plug them in to allow us some semblance of privacy.

When we first moved into the loft, especially when Edward was staying here, the lack of privacy was difficult. The limited space and Seth's quirks made for some intense moments between the two guys. Seeing the increasing tension, Jenks took it upon himself to have a private discussion with Seth. I don't know what he said, but after that conversation, Seth was better about giving Edward space and the two of us privacy.

Quickly clearing a spot, I pull him down so we are sitting next to one another. "Bad day?"

"I'm seriously going to kill him," he says.

"Mike?"

"Every time he asks about you, I want to punch him in the throat. I know what his fucking agenda is and that he tries to sound so concerned infuriates me," he growls.

Mike has continued playing his double agent role. Jenks says he's only seen Mike a handful of times with James, but according to him, Mike is still trying to work his way up the ranks. However, it is clear that James sees him only as a means to an end, but to what end, we aren't sure.

Edward is actually surprised at Mike's ability to play it cool at work given everything that's going on. He said the only concerning behavior Mikes shows is his constant hounding for information about me, which we know is for James. Jenks overheard a conversation a week ago between them where James made it very clear how displeased he is that Mike hasn't found out where I am yet. He still wants answers about my role with Felix's case and the lack of information on me is driving him crazy. Mike is getting desperate to find out my location.

After coming back to Seattle, I wrote an official letter requesting an extended leave. In a personal e-mail to Banner, I told him that during my time off I realized that I needed a break from the Bureau. I didn't say it was permanent, but I also didn't give an estimated timeframe of when I would return. Luckily for our cover story, this is not that uncommon within our field given the stressful nature of the job. Since my assault occurred in front of lots of other agents, no one has questioned my decision.

"We just have to keep focused on the big picture. Mike's choices will catch up with him eventually and then you can tell him whatever you want."

Edward turns to lie sideways, putting his head in my lap so I can run my fingers through his hair.
It's become a favorite request of his, which I'm more than happy to do. I love running my hands through it.

"I know. God, that feels good," he mumbles. "I just need to vent. I can't wait until I pull the rug out from under him."

"How long can you stay?"

"Not long. I promised Esme I would go to their house tonight so I can help them get ready for tomorrow."

"Right," I say, remembering that tomorrow is Thanksgiving. Edward said that holidays are a huge deal in the Cullen household and Thanksgiving is one of the biggest.

"I wish you could come with me," he whispers.

"Me too."

"I don't want to leave you alone for Thanksgiving."

"Honestly, it's not a big deal. It's never been an important day for me. Besides, it will be nice to have some alone time."

"When does Seth's aunt arrive?"

"Early in the morning."

Seth found out this past weekend that his aunt wanted to see him for the holiday. He rarely talks about his family, but after the phone call, he admitted they have not been on good terms since he decided to pursue the Volturi. This trip is his aunt's way of trying to smooth things over. She will be staying in a hotel and will only be in town until Friday. Seth didn't want to go into details about their relationship, but from his colors, I can see he is uneasy about the visit.

Edward moves his head closer to my stomach, almost nuzzling against me as his hand reaches for mine, clasping our hands tightly.

"Okay, but be ready for multiple texts and maybe a couple of phone calls," he murmurs.

"I doubt you'll need extra entertainment given what I know about your family."

"But I need you," he says, kissing my knuckles and pulling me down to lay with him. We spend the next couple of hours wrapped in each other's arms, trying to soak up the sensation knowing it will be several more days before we see each other again.

Thanksgiving brought another day of rain, which seemed to match my mood. The quiet time I thought I wanted, now just feels isolating and lonely. True to his word, Edward sent me lots of texts. The highlight was our sarcastic texting commentary about the parade. Although each of his funny comments brought a smile to my face, it quickly vanished when I looked around the room that was starting to feel like my prison.

I've heard of cabin fever before, but I've never fully appreciated the difficulty of it until now. Sitting there quietly in a room I can't leave, my skin started to feel like it was about to crawl off of my body. I felt trapped and restless. The most frustrating aspect of the situation is that it was my
idea, so I had no one to blame but myself. It seemed like the perfect plan, being able to stay here and still get involved. It was logical and safe, and now, it is driving me crazy.

Later that evening, Seth finally returned, which relieved part of my loneliness. Although he didn't share any details with me, it must have gone well with his aunt, his colors were relaxed and happy after the visit. Whatever issues were between them, they must have worked through it or at least found a middle ground.

Unfortunately for Seth, his arrival did not help my frustration. And as Thursday blurred into Saturday, my resentment about the room only got worse. Everything that was tolerable for the last several weeks is now grating on my last nerve. Seth in particular became the unlucky target of my grumpiness. His paper folding and fact citing are suddenly intolerable, and the constant occurrence of both makes me want to lock him in the bathroom. Not to mention that his less than cleanly habits have me searching for painful torture options on Google.

At the moment, I am fantasizing about how great it would feel to break his keyboard as the constant clicking is like nails on a chalkboard. Logically, I know I am overreacting and of course I would never hurt Seth, but damn it, he's driving me crazy!

A sudden sound interrupts me from my inappropriate thoughts. I'm surprised that the noise is the buzzer indicating a visitor. Immediately, I'm on high alert. No one has ever rung that buzzer.

"Seth, are you expecting anyone?" I look over at Seth assuming that I will find a similarly shocked expression, but instead I see a sly grin.

"Yup," he says, his grin widening.

"Seth, what are you up to?" I ask hesitantly.

He doesn't answer, but simply walks over to the door and opens it. In rushes a tiny figure bundled in an overcoat with a wide hood and large sunglasses covering her face.

"Alice?" I ask stunned

Taking off the glasses and coat, Alice rushes over to me and pulls me into a tight hug. "Bella! It's so good to see you."

"What? Why are you-" I ask stuttering, still shocked to see her here.

"I'm here to help Edward with a surprise," she says giving me a sly wink.

"Isn't it dangerous? How could Edward send you? I don't understand," I mutter illogically.

"No one knows I'm here. Besides, even if they did, I wouldn't be identified with that get-up," she says pointing to the accessories she took off earlier. "And Edward didn't ask. I volunteered when he told me what he wanted to do. Its fine," she responds confidently to my babbling questions.

However, her answer gets me no closer to knowing why she is here and what exactly this plan of Edward's is.

"What does Edward want to do?" I ask. Seth is smiling off to the side of Alice. He apparently knows about Edward's plan.

"He's giving you a night out," Alice says with a huge smile. She bounces slightly as she talks, her feet rising until she's almost on the tips of her toes and then falling again. It looks like she's trying
"Okay," I draw out. "And how exactly is he going to do that considering everything that's going on?"

"Just leave that to him. But now it's time to get ready," Alice says holding up a shopping bag and a small duffel bag.

"Should I be afraid?" I recoil a bit seeing her supplies. I'm not a huge fan of dressing up; I did too much of that for Aro's benefit.

"Please, I'm harmless. Come on!" she says excitedly, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the bathroom.

I've never had a close "girlfriend" before. Chatting with Alice as she fixes my hair and make-up is the most fun I've had in weeks. It is nice to laugh about things that don't involve planning interviews or hacking schemes. I was right about needing to find a proper girlfriend when this is all over. Emmett doesn't hold a candle to Alice when it comes to girl talk. I will have to break his heart gently when I tell him he's fired from that position.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm stunned by what I see in the mirror. Alice did an amazing job. My make-up looks flawless but subtle and my hair is hanging in soft relaxed curls. The dress Alice brought is gorgeous. It is a floor length sapphire blue gown with a high neck halter and an empire waistline. Wearing it makes me feel beautiful.

"Wow," I whisper.

"It's all you, Bella. I just know how to add the final touches," Alice says smiling. "Besides, my cousin would kill me if I dressed you up as a fake Barbie doll. He loves your natural beauty."

I blush at the compliment. "Okay, I'm ready. Now what?" I ask extremely curious about this plan.

"Now comes the tricky part. We need to cover you up without ruining my masterpiece and sneak you out of this building."

"How exactly are we going to do that?"

"Well, you are going to wear my coat and I'm going to wear this," she says pulling out a hat, sweater and flats from the duffel bag.

"The hood of my coat will cover you up and not ruin your hair as much as trying to fit it in a hat. I brought some clips to put your dress up, so if you put on some jeans underneath your dress, you won't look fancy. Girls in coats and jeans aren't memorable, but fancy dresses are, so we need to cover that up. If we walk out together, and anyone was paying attention to my arrival, it will look like you were the one who came to pick me up."

"Wow. You guys thought a lot about this."

"Edward doesn't want to take any chances on someone connecting that you live here. Your safety kind of means a lot to him," she comments with a wink. "And if you couldn't tell, Edward is a little protective of the people he loves. You better get used to that right now."

I flush at her words. The fact that she used the word love warms my heart. Whether Edward said something or she simply noticed doesn't change the fact that she knows. It just makes me feel even more included into their lives.
"We need to leave if we are going to get you there in time. I don't think Edward wants to wait any longer than he has too."

Grabbing the coat, I walk over to Seth. "Thanks, Seth."

"I didn't do anything," he says quietly.

"You helped plan and that's enough. Not to mention you've put up with my crankiness." He smiles at my admission. "Have a good night and don't get into trouble okay."

"No more than usual," he says laughing. "You look really pretty, Bella."

"Thank you. I don't know when I'll be back," I say, realizing I still have no idea what is happening tonight.

"No worries. I'll see you when I see you."

I smile before turning around and walking back to Alice while putting the oversized coat on. "Okay, let's do this."

Alice and I walk to the lift and take the noisy trip down. I'd forgotten how much I hate this thing as it creaks and groans its way to the first floor. Getting out, we quickly make our way outside. Luckily it looks like the chill of the evening is keeping the foot traffic pretty light and no one appears to pay us any attention as we walk quickly to the car and pull away from the curb.

"I feel like a secret agent," Alice laughs. "We should have theme music or something playing for our successful escape."

"I think a lot of situations would be better just by having the right theme music," I say with mock seriousness as I pull off the jeans from under my dress and put them in a bag.

"Oh! I think I have that 'Moby' song from the 'Bourne' movies on my iPod. That's perfect." Sure enough, soon we are listening to "Moby" while we drive quickly through town, laughing at our own foolishness.

When we hit a lull in the conversation, the mood in the car suddenly becomes uncomfortable. It is a drastic difference from our interaction all afternoon and I notice immediately a shift in Alice's colors from happy and relaxed to extremely anxious. Turning a corner, she sighs loudly as if trying to decide something.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, worried and confused by the sudden change.

"Edward's going to kill me," she mutters under her breath. "Okay, I promised I wouldn't say anything, but I can't help myself. I really like you, Bella, and I hope we can become really good friends."

"I like you too, Alice," I say sincerely.

"Okay, then as your friend, I feel like I need to say something about Jasper."

"Alice," I say cautiously.

"I don't know any specifics, but there is a tension between Edward and Jasper that I've never seen before, and I know it has something to do with you."

"Alice, I don't think-"
"Like I said, I don't know any of the specifics, but I do know that Jasper's a good man and would
never do anything to hurt Edward. Whatever happened is tearing him up inside."

"I don't know what you want me to say," I whisper. The fact that he feels bad, in my opinion, is just
more damning evidence against him.

"You don't have to say anything. All that I'm asking is that you give him the benefit of the doubt. I
love him. I don't want to have to choose between my family and my fiancé," she says sadly.

"I don't want that for you either, but I'm also not responsible for the choices he's making. If he's
feeling guilty, that's on him, not me."

"All I'm asking for is to give him the benefit of the doubt. Please." Alice glances over with a
pleading look. Jasper is not the only one being torn apart by this situation.

I understand Alice's need to try to resolve this situation. Both Edward and Jasper play important
roles in her life, so of course she wants things between them fixed. But like she admitted, she
doesn't know the facts, which means she doesn't know about Jasper's strange behavior on this case.
I shudder to think of the fallout if it turned out that he fooled us all. Something is just not adding up
about the whole situation. I don't trust Jasper and can't pretend that I do, but Alice does and I want
to believe for her sake that it is not misplaced.

"I'll try. That's the best I can do right now."

"That's all I ask. I really didn't want to ruin our time or put a damper on your evening with Edward,
but I just needed to say that," she says quietly. Although we didn't really resolve anything, she
clearly feels better getting it off of her chest.

"I understand. No harm done." I smile softly in her direction. I hope for my friend's sake that
everything will work out for the best.

Shortly after our awkward conversation, Alice pulls up in front of the Four Seasons Hotel. The
building is impressive and screams luxury.

"Here you go," Alice smiles brightly. "You're going to have a great time!" she says with a slight
squeal to her voice. I think she is almost as excited as I am for this evening.

"Thank you, Alice. This afternoon was really fun," I say sincerely, reaching across to give her a
hug.

"I hope it's the first of many. Now get going, my cousin is probably freaking out waiting for you."

Adjusting my hood and grabbing the overnight bag Alice suggested I take, I carefully climb out of
the car into the chilly breeze. I turn back and give a small wave to Alice. She waves back, giving
me a big smile before driving away.

The air smells like seawater due to the building's close distance to Puget Sound, and before
walking into the hotel, I take a moment to breathe in the fresh air. After being cooped up in the loft
for so long, being outside feels amazing, and just by simply standing here in the breeze, I can feel
the tension of the last few days melting away.

Clutching the keycard tightly, I walk into the hotel and down the first corridor towards the
elevators, just as Alice instructed. Stepping into the narrow space, I push the button to take me to
the penthouse. Since I'm alone, I carefully push the hood back trying my best not to disturb the
curls in my hair. Miraculously, it looks like they survived. Glancing once more into the mirrors, I
smooth the front of my dress in preparation.

My stomach is in knots. I don't know if I've ever been this nervous before, at least for something exciting. I have no idea what Edward's planning, but the mere fact that he went to so much trouble is enough to already make it the best night of my life.

It also hasn't escaped my notice that Edward chose to meet in a hotel. The lack of privacy of the last few weeks has slowed down any progress with the physical side of our relationship. However, the inability has only increased the desire and the few moments we've stolen were indescribably passionate and intense. After expressing his feelings on the dock, Edward lost the hesitation I've felt from him since our relationship changed. Finally, both of us were ready to take the next step. Butterflies erupt in my stomach thinking about the fact that tonight there is nothing and no one to stop us.

The elevator finally reaches my destination. Stepping out, I walk to the penthouse door and pause for a moment to gather my courage. Tonight will change things. I just hope I don't do anything to screw it up. Taking one final breath, I steady my hand long enough to slide the plastic key into the slot. The light flashes green as I quickly push the handle and open the door.

The penthouse is amazing. I walk quietly into the room and close the door. I don't see Edward, but I see signs that he's here. Instead of announcing my presence, I take a moment to survey my surroundings. The room is illuminated in a romantic glow from a dimmed light in the corner and several candles lining the mantle over the fireplace. The large living room has several chairs and a couch, and in the corner furthest from me is a small black baby grand piano. The curtains are open, the windows offering a view of the Sound. Taking off my coat, I walk over to take a closer look and notice that several boats are already decorated for the holiday season.

"Beautiful," Edward says from behind me. I can see him walking toward me in the reflection of the glass.

"I know, the lights make the water almost enchanting," I whisper, eagerly awaiting his touch.

"I wasn't talking about the scenery."

When I turn around, he's right in front of me. For several moments, his fiery eyes burn into mine. With slow deliberation, his heated stare moves down to evaluate the length of my body. The electric intensity between us causes me to shiver with anticipation of what is to come.

"You look amazing, Bella."

"You don't look so bad yourself," I say lightly, trying to hide my nervousness.

Edward is wearing a black suit with a dark red shirt and black tie, the red bringing out the emerald of his eyes even more so than normal. The suit fits perfectly and the fabric looks shinier than his typical work attire. He is gorgeous. He flashes a crooked grin before leaning in to give me a passionate kiss that leaves us both breathless.

"God, I missed you," he whispers, pulling me against him and leaning his forehead against mine.

"It's only been a couple of days," I say quietly.

"Yes, but it was a couple of days too long." For several seconds, we stand quietly, simply enjoying the moment.

"So, are you going to tell me what this is all about?" I ask unable to contain my curiosity any
"Can't a guy give his girl a night out?" he asks with a smirk.

"Yes, it's just a bit unexpected."

Taking my hand, he looks at me seriously. "I decided you needed to get out of that room. We could all see you were going a bit stir crazy."

I look down humiliated. I know I've not been on my best behavior the last couple of days, but it's still embarrassing to know that everyone thought it was bad enough to plot an intervention.

Taking his hand, he softly pulls my chin up until I'm looking in his eyes again. "But most importantly, I decided that we deserved a night alone." Leaning down, he gives me another passionate kiss, the two of us quickly losing ourselves in each other until we are once again breathless.

"I can't believe you did all of this for me. This room is amazing," I say, looking around again before focusing back on Edward. "But I hope you know that I don't need any of it. Just spending time with you, even if it is in a shack would be perfect."

"I know you don't expect any of this, it's partly why I wanted to give it to you. I mean you are-"

"Please don't say a princess," I mumble. Over the last few weeks, Emmett has jokingly commented on my mafia princess status more than once. It was funny at the beginning, but now it just makes me cringe.

"I wasn't," he says seriously. "What I was going to say is that you are worth it."

"Sorry." I smile up at him apologetically. "I guess I need to work on accepting things instead of automatically questioning them."

"Good advice to take, baby."

"Can I ask what the plan is for tonight?" I feel like a kid waiting to open a big fancy present.

Giving me a mischievous smile, he gently takes my hand and leads me through the living room over to the dining room table which looks ready for a special meal. On top of a red table-cloth, are bronze colored cloth napkins that surround two fancy place settings and in the middle sits two candles. I also notice a cart against the wall filled with silver covered trays.

Letting go of my hand, Edward faces me to spread his arms open wide. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

"What?"

"When I was with my family, I started thinking about how you said Thanksgiving was not a big deal for you. Then I realized that you've probably never really experienced Thanksgiving before. Am I right?"

I've lived in the States for fifteen years, but Edward's right, I've never celebrated the holiday. Being raised in Italy, Thanksgiving didn't really mean much to me when I first arrived. The longer I stayed, the more interested I became in the concept and traditions. However, the distance I needed to maintain from others made it difficult to partake in any holiday festivities, and eating my first Thanksgiving meal alone at a random restaurant seemed pathetic even for me.
"You're right," I whisper.

"Well, baby, tonight that is going to change. And to commemorate the occasion, you and I will feast upon the second best Thanksgiving dinner in Seattle."

"Second best?" I ask, jokingly.

"Yes, second best. The best is Esme's, which you will have to wait until next year to experience. She was pretty pissed I didn't bring you on Thursday. My life is on the line if I don't bring you next year," he laughs as he starts taking the lids off the trays.

Next year. The certainty with which he says it makes my heart beat faster. Walking over to the cart, I peek around Edward and glimpse at the multiple dishes assembled.

"Are we feeding an army?"

"First rule of an American Thanksgiving is that you eat way too much. These are all the traditional Thanksgiving dishes we cook in my family. I wanted to make sure you had a chance to experience everything, just in case you haven't tried any of them before."

Taking a closer look at the cart, I can identify mostly everything. Turkey, gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and rolls.

"Is the dish with the marshmallows the yams?" I ask curiously.

"Yup. Have you had it before?"

"No, but I've wondered about it every time they show it on television," I say excitedly. "What's that?" I ask pointing to another dish.

"Oh, that's green bean casserole. I had to pay them extra to make it. Apparently it is not considered cuisine and was an insult to the chef to request it. But it's my family's tradition so there's no way you can experience your first Thanksgiving without it. Apparently for the right price, the chef was willing to let go of his moral outrage," Edward says chuckling.

I laugh with him, still amazed at the amount of food on the cart. I am suddenly glad that I ate a small lunch. Edward uncovers all the dishes and then walks back to the table to hold out a chair.

"Ms. Swan, your table awaits," he says formally.

Playing along, I slightly curtsey before taking the seat. "Thank you, sir."

Pulling the champagne bottle from the ice bucket next to the table, Edward pours some in both of our flutes. Then he turns back and proceeds to fill each of our plates with a little of each dish. Returning to the table and sitting down, he holds up his glass in a toast.

"To the most beautiful woman I've ever met. I hope that this is the first of many Thanksgiving toasts we will share together. To us." Reaching forward, he gently clinks our glasses together.

"To us," I repeat quietly, overwhelmed by the love behind his words.

"Shall we?" he asks, gesturing to our plates.

Smiling up at him, I take a big bite of the yams, pleasantly surprised by their sweetness. Smiling back, Edward digs into his food as well. For several moments, we simply enjoy our feast listening to the music playing softly in the background.
"Tell me, Swan, what was your impression of me when we first met?"

I choke slightly on the sip of champagne I just took. "What?"

"Come on, first impressions. I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours."

"You sure about this, Cullen?" I ask. My first impression of Edward was not favorable. I don't think he realizes what he is asking. He nods his head smiling and gestures for me to continue.

"Okay," I say dragging out the word. "I thought you were an arrogant asshole." I smirk as his wide-eyed expression. "Hey, you asked. Your turn." I don't imagine his impression was much better than mine, so it is only fair that I share in his humiliation.

"I thought you were a stuck up, umm," he hesitates.

"Bitch," I respond for him, laughing.

"In my defense, I really hadn't met you yet when I developed that impression."

"Huh?" I ask confused.

"I was pissed about Banner putting some head shrink on my case. I thought he was basically saying I couldn't solve it on my own. Then I saw you walk through the office, and I decided right then and there that I was going to hate you."

"When did you change your mind?"

"During the first interview we did together. You impressed the hell out me with the way you handled yourself. And then afterwards, when you didn't take any of my shit, well, you pretty much had me from that point on." He looks down at his plate and shakes his head a bit, smiling. "How about you, when did yours change?"

"You're assuming that it has?" I ask seriously.

"Hardy, har, har," he says sarcastically.

"Fine. I hate to say mine didn't change as quickly as yours. It was actually on the third case we worked together. I overheard you talking to the family of one of the victims. You were so sincere, and I could tell that finding justice for them was more important to you than the recognition of the capture. Then I watched you talk to the little boy who was with them. You were amazing with him. It made me realize the jerk I saw most days was not the whole picture. From that point, I started to recognize the front that is Agent Cullen."

He looks at me intently. "It was always the hardest to keep that front up around you," he admits quietly.

There is a sudden silence in the room as the song ends. Looking deeply into his eyes, I'm captivated by the powerful emotions I see dancing behind them. When the next song starts, Edward stands and walks over to me. "Can I have this dance?"

I lift my hand up to take his and follow him back to the dining room. Twirling me around, he brings me into his arms. I tuck my head into his chest and hold on tightly, his arms encircling my body. I breathe in the smell of spice that is now only attributed to Edward, trying to memorize every detail of the moment. There is no safer place in this world than being in the comfort of Edward's arms. The song is familiar, but in this moment as I move in sync with Edward, the words
take on a whole new meaning.

*When the road gets dark and you can no longer see, just let my love throw a spark and have a little faith in me.*

One song melts into the other as we continue to dance closely. I don't know how many songs later, but during "Glitter in the Air", I feel Edward's lips ghost along my neck. When I shift my neck in response to the sensation, the force of his kisses increase and my body tingles from the contact. He moves slowly from my neck, to my face, and eventually my lips.

"Stay with me tonight," he whispers between kisses.

Without any hesitation, I nod my head in agreement, moaning quietly when his lips hit a particularly sensitive spot under my ear. Suddenly, I find myself moving backwards until I am against a wall. The passion and intensity of Edward's kisses is more than I've experienced up until this point. My hands roam his body. I feel almost desperate in my need for us to be closer. Edward reaches down and pulls one of my legs over his hip, the position adding to the maddening pleasure building between us.

Pulling back to look at me, Edward reaches his hand up to brush my hair out of my face. "I love you so much. You have no idea how much tonight means to me."

"Show me," I say, capturing his lips again, gently placing kisses across his face, until I work my way around to his ear. "I love you," I whisper.

Reaching down, Edward lifts me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist, my dress being pushed up around my thighs with the movement. Carrying me, Edward walks towards the bedroom.

"I guess we're done with dinner?" I ask as we pass by our forgotten meal.

"Dinner's overrated," he says gruffly.

Reaching the bedroom, I notice that, like the living room, several candles are lit around the room. "Confident, were you?" I joke.

"Hopeful," he responds, setting me gently on the floor, his arms still wrapped around my body.

Reaching around my neck, he holds my eyes as his hands reach the button to the halter of my dress. I nod my head at his unspoken question. Releasing the button and then finding my zipper, he slowly drags it down. Still keeping eye contact, he moves the dress off my shoulders, allowing it to fall quickly to the ground.

Returning the favor, I use my hands to push his jacket off of his shoulders. Once it too falls to the floor, I start working on his tie and shirt, throwing both to the side once they are free from his body. Grabbing his belt, I pull him closer, and standing on my tip toes, reach up to kiss him as I undo it. Edward groans as I unbutton his pants and teasingly push them down, my fingers lightly touching him in the process.

Suddenly, he pushes me back until I am lying on the bed. Edward hovers above me before capturing my lips. His hands and mouth roam my entire body. It feels like he is everywhere at once, igniting my body in a passionate fire. Soon we are both stripped and naked to one another.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers as his eyes take me in.

Although we've exposed our bodies, looking into his eyes, both of us understand that tonight is also
about exposing our souls.

"I love you," Edward says when we finally connect, our bodies intertwining effortlessly.

"I love you too," I whisper back breathless as we move together, reaching peaks I've never experienced.

I am lost in the overwhelming sensations, suddenly realizing that although I've been touched before, I've never been loved. In this moment, I understand the difference.

A couple of hours later, Edward and I are still lying in bed. My head is on his shoulder, my hand lightly moving up and down his chest. I can feel his heart still beating fast.

"Do you think people would miss us if we never left?" I ask, moving my leg up and down his.

"At this moment, I really don't care," he mumbles, kissing my head.

Moving my hands under my head, I lean on them to look up at Edward. The look on his face takes my breath away again. His eyes are happy and sated. His face light and smiling. I don't think I've ever seen him this relaxed.

"I'm hungry," I say, smiling at his raised eyebrow. "What? We just worked off some major calories."

Edward laughs. "That is most certainly true. What are you hungry for, baby?"

"I was wondering if your Thanksgiving feast included any pumpkin pie?"

"You like pumpkin pie?" he asks. I nod my head happily. I haven't experienced a Thanksgiving meal before, but I have had pumpkin pie and it's one of my favorites.

"Lucky for you, it does indeed include pumpkin pie. Complete with whipped cream."

"Whipped cream? That adds a whole new set of possibilities." I lean up and kiss Edward. Groaning, he rolls us over. The weight of his body on mine has become my new favorite feeling, an intoxicating combination of comfort and passion.

"I like how your mind works." Edward smiles before focusing his attention on my neck.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I use them to turn us back over. Edward smirks as I hold his arms above his head, similar to when we were sparing in Montana. "As much as I would love this to continue, I wasn't joking about being hungry."

Edward looks shocked when I quickly jump up. Reaching towards the floor, I grab his shirt and put it on. Edward's shocked face now turns into a frown when he realizes my intention to leave the bedroom. "You coming with me? Or are you going to stay here and pout?"

Begrudgingly, Edward gets up and I try hard not to stare as he pulls on his boxers. My grumbling stomach reminds me of my goal, and staring at him will only distract me.

"Okay, Swan, I'll go with you, but only if the whipped cream comes back with us," he says with a wink. Reaching for my hand, he leads me back to the living room, both of us laughing.

Grabbing a couple of slices of pie and the can of whipped cream, we quickly go back into the bedroom. We take turns giving each other bites, my grumbling stomach finally satisfied. Once done, Edward pulls me back down with him.
We spend the next several hours fluctuating between gentle touches and conversation to indescribable moments of passion. When the early morning light peaks through the curtain, Edward finally falls asleep, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I smile softly at the peaceful sight, feeling incredibly grateful to have him in my life. I have never felt so loved. Snuggling my head into his shoulder, my eyes start to drift shut, my smile still lingering on my lips. I think Thanksgiving just became my favorite holiday.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

The lyrics written above are from Have a Little Faith in Me by John Hiatt.

Honorable mention for Glitter in the Air by Pink

A couple of things:

First, this is the first lemon I've ever written (very anxiously), so please be gentle. :)

Second, for my drama/suspense lovers, don't worry the next chapter is jammed packed with both.
Chapter 24: Come Undone

Chapter Notes

A/N:

As always, thank you to my betas Beautifulnightmarex and Tds88 and pre-reader Beachlover. I'm so incredibly lucky to have them on my team.

I own nothing related to Twilight or its characters. Everything else is mine own crazy musings.

Important: This chapter contains graphic descriptions of violence.

The dots are there, but I would love to hear your theories on if you were able to connect them. :) Okay, buckle in and hang on tight! It's going to be a bumpy ride…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24: Come Undone

I can't move. Looking around the field, I search for the best escape route while struggling to free myself from the chair and the rope that holds me to it. I don't have a lot of time. I know he's close.

The bindings cut into my raw skin. I twist and turn my wrists, biting my lips to prevent myself from crying out in pain. I don't stop, knowing the temporary discomfort is a small price to pay for my escape.

"Will you walk into my parlor? Said the spider to the fly." I hear Aro's voice taunting me, but I can't see him.

I intensify my efforts to get free, my eyes scanning the tree line for his location. I look down to see if I've made any progress with the rope, only to glance back up to find Aro suddenly standing right in front of me. My breath catches at the predatory look in his eyes. He laughs as I struggle, the bindings still painfully tight. There's no escape.

My body jerks back into consciousness and it takes a moment to process my surroundings. Sitting up, I look around the dark loft and see Seth sleeping soundly on the couch. Nothing seems out of place. Glancing at the clock, I sigh at the early morning hour. My mind is too restless to try to go back to sleep. Once again, a full night's rest eludes me.

Grabbing my phone off the night-table, I tiptoe into the bathroom and quietly shut the door behind me. Switching on the lights, I slam my eyes shut when the sudden light blinds them. Blinking to help them adjust, I walk over to the toilet to sit down and make a call. My legs bounce as I wait for my salvation to answer. It doesn't take long.

"Bella, what's wrong?" Edward answers, his voice thick with sleep.

All of a sudden, I feel guilty for waking him up for such an insignificant reason. "Umm, crap. I shouldn't have called. I'm sorry. Go back to bed, it's nothing," I mutter.
"Bella, stop. You can always call me, you know that. Tell me what's wrong," Edward requests. I can hear the rustling of sheets as he moves.

"I had another dream about Aro. I'm having a hard time getting back to sleep."

"Baby," Edward whispers sadly. "I wish I was there to hold you."

"Me too. I sleep better when you're next to me," I whisper back.

"Soon, I promise," he says firmly.

Being apart from Edward was always difficult, but after our time together at the hotel, it is now torturous. Our night together was better than I'd imagined, but the hard reality of our situation came crashing in as soon as we returned to the loft. Between the constant working and lack of privacy, we are back to stealing all too brief moments. I don't know how much longer I can do it.

"Not soon enough," I mumble.

"Tell me what I can do."

"Can you talk to me until I feel sleepy again?"

"Of course, for as long as you want. I'm not going anywhere."

For a couple of hours, Edward keeps my mind occupied with mindless conversation. When my yawns start to overtake my words, he convinces me to give sleep another chance.

"I love you, Bella. Now, go back to bed," he says sternly.

"I love you too. Talk to you later?"

"Absolutely."

Crawling back into my bed, I fall asleep smiling to thoughts of Edward.

November melts into December as our team continues to chip away at James and the Volturi. Jenks is gaining more access to information and Seth is close to infiltrating the larger Volturi system, while Edward and Emmett are watching Mike closely, trying to find any information that leads us to what James wants with Jessica. With all the steps forward, we recently agreed it was time to turn up the heat. For Seth and I, this equates to a lot more planning and research.

For what feels like the hundredth day in a row, Seth and I are sitting in the loft working on our individual tasks. Looking over the most recent candidates' background checks, I am trying hard not to laugh at Seth's grumbling comments in the background. He is currently working on getting access to the pictures on the flash drive. Seth typically doesn't swear, but right now he is swearing up a storm, mumbling under his breath as he hits the keyboard harder than normal. He hoped to have this resolved by now, but he keeps running into roadblocks. This nemesis of his is proving to be a tough one to conquer. Whoever Caius bought this from really knew what they were doing. However, Seth told me this morning he refuses to give up until we have access to those pictures.

"Take that!" he suddenly yells, gesturing towards the computer.

"Did you get it?" I ask.

"Almost. I'm running it through my program now. I should have them soon," he exclaims with a
confident smirk. I shake my head smiling back. I don't know what makes me happier, getting access to those files or seeing the look of triumph on Seth's face.

Unexpectedly, both our phones ping indicating a new text message. We glance at each other before grabbing them. This is not a good sign.

"Shit!" I utter looking down at the 911 text from Jenks.

"This means something is wrong, right?" Seth asks concerned.

Nodding my head, the phone pings again. The new text indicates we need to meet as soon as possible. The message is abrupt and offers no further details about the situation that has Jenks so concerned. Another ping comes through, but this time it is from Edward indicating that both he and Emmett are on their way.

My recent dreams with Aro rush into the forefront of my mind as I think about all the possibilities. Jenks would not send that message without just cause. I remind myself to not overreact until we know what's going on, but the fear and concern I've experienced in those dreams are making it difficult to stay calm. Both had a common theme that disturbs me.

Twenty minutes later, Edward and Emmett rush into the loft. "What's going on?" I ask right away.

"We're not sure. Jenks didn't give us any information, but he wouldn't have called a 911 meeting if it wasn't an emergency," Emmett says, taking off his jacket and heading towards Seth who is setting up the video conference.

Edward walks over to me and pulls me into a hug. "This is bad isn't it?" I ask, holding him tightly.

"I don't know, baby. Let's wait to get all the information before we start jumping to conclusions." His hand gently runs up and down my back.

"We're on," Seth calls.

Immediately, Edward grabs my hand and leads me over to the computer where we take a seat next to each other. In front of us is Jenks' apartment, but Jenks himself is not on the screen.

"He's almost there. I just got it up and running to avoid any delays," Seth answers my unspoken question.

Just then, the sound of a door slamming comes through the speakers, followed by a breathless Jenks sitting in front of the screen.

"They're moving Jessica tomorrow," Jenks blurts out before any of us can even acknowledge his arrival. "We need to make our move tonight."

"Fuck," Emmett hisses. "I know we discussed this option, but you really think we can pull it off so quickly?"

"We have no choice."

"Whoa, slow down. We need to think about this," I say.

"We all knew this was a possibility. There is nothing to think about unless you want to run the risk of losing track of her," Jenks counters.

"Of course not! I just don't want to lose any of you either." Edward reaches over and grabs my hand
to help calm me down. He has yet to comment, but I can see his mind working.

"Ace, I appreciate your concern, but you aren't hearing me. We have no time. This is why they pay us the big bucks. If you want to help, we need to stop wasting time arguing and start finalizing our plans," Jenks says with an edge to his voice.

"Jenks," Edward warns reacting to his tone. Turning to get my attention, he continues. "I know you're worried, but he's right. This is what we discussed. We always knew that if it came to this, it would happen quickly."

"I know," I say softly, nodding my head in understanding. What they're saying is true, but it doesn't mean I like it.

"Let's get started then. What do you need first?" Seth asks quickly opening up various programs and text boxes.

"I want you to create a diversion tonight at the Volturi warehouse. We need to make sure there's no chance of James or Sam showing up at the other warehouse until we're done."

"Gotcha."

"Then you need to tap into the security system. I need you to be our eyes," Jenks directs. "Oh shit, I just realized we also need to disable video for them."

"No problem, I can easily loop the footage. I will switch it to the loop when you get there and then I can route the live feed through my computer so I can monitor things from here."

"Perfect. Emmett and Edward, we will need to go in fully wired. I want both microphones and cameras so Seth can keep us updated. We need to know exactly what we are walking into in order for this to have any chance of working."

"The plan is still going in through the roof, right?" Edward asks, now focused intently on the screen.

"Yes, I think that's still the best route," Jenks mumbles, looking around his computer and unfolding what looks like blueprints. "Seth, can you put the building specs up on one of the screens for everyone to look at?"

"Pulling it up now," Seth mutters, his fingers flying across the keyboard. The screen to the left fills with a blueprint. Edward and Emmett get out of their chairs to move closer.

"Okay, if we go in from the roof, we have access to the air ducts. Look at the fourth floor, there is a vent we can drop from right around the corner from Jessica's room."

"Yeah, we see it," Emmett says, pointing to the screen. Edward nods his head in agreement.

"That part of the hallway is usually empty. The corner will give us the advantage to take out the guards before they even know we're there."

"Did we decide how we want to take them out?" Emmett asks.

"We do this as quietly as possible. If you can take someone out without using the rifles, do it. However, we can't take the risk of being identified either, so if things get dicey, go for the kill," Jenks responds.
"I agree, we aren't taking any chances," Edward says, looking over at me. I suspect there is more than one meaning behind his words.

"We need equipment. Assault rifles, suppressors, flash grenades and vests at the very least. Can you two get that stuff?" Jenks requests.

"I can get it. The guy in the armory owes me a favor, so he shouldn't give me too much hassle," Emmett says.

"Ace, I need you to go through your files. Get me a list of the weakest candidates. I'm going to make sure they're the ones guarding the door tonight."

"Okay," I say, getting up to get the files.

A part of me can't believe this is happening, and I feel a bit numb walking over to retrieve the files. Taking them over to the couch, I take a moment to gather my thoughts. Looking up, I see everyone looking closely at the blueprint and talking about infiltration strategies. My heart clenches at the sight. They have all become so important to me. I couldn't bear to lose any of them, and I know there is a very real possibility that it could happen tonight.

"Ace, did you find those files?" I hear Jenks bellow through the speaker. Pulling myself together, I decide I can't wallow in my fears. A team is only as strong as their weakest link and I refuse to play the role of that cliché.

"Got them," I state with more strength in my voice than I had before. We will get through this, I vow. There is no other option.

Everyone works tirelessly over the next several hours; the clock is our enemy as night begins to fall. Finally around midnight, the guys prepare to leave and meet Jenks at the building across the street from James' warehouse.

I'm impressed with how prepared we are, given the short time frame. Seth sent a new virus into the Volturi system a couple of hours ago that shut it down completely and started deleting important files. The electronic disaster should keep James more than occupied. The groundwork is complete and now the only thing left to do is act.

Emmett and Edward are organizing their equipment, both dressed in black swat clothes. They need to leave in a couple of minutes. Taking a deep breath, I walk over to Edward and lightly touch his arm. He looks over with a questioning look. Acting on instinct, I grab his head, pulling him roughly towards me, attacking his lips with mine. Once the shock wears off, Edward reacts reaching around me and drawing me closer, his kiss just as frantic and passionate as mine.

Pulling back, I stare deeply into his eyes, still holding his face gently in my hands. "Edward Cullen, you watch your ass out there. I need you to come back to me. Do you understand?" I whisper gruffly.

"Believe me, baby, I know exactly what I'm fighting for, and I don't plan on losing it." He gives me a confident smirk, before leaning forward to give me another kiss.

"I love you," I say returning his smile, trying to feel as confident as he does.

"I love you too. I promise I'll see you soon."

"We've got to go, Edward," Emmett interrupts, walking up beside us.
"Yeah, okay."

Turning to Emmett, I give him a stern look. "Same goes for you, buddy. Watch your back out there."

"We totally got this in the bag, Bells," he says, grabbing me in a huge hug.

"I know you do, but for my benefit, please be careful and tell Jenks the same thing." He sets me down, playfully ruffling my hair before grabbing his equipment.

Seth and I walk them out. The room is silent and solemn. Reaching the door, Edward leans in to kiss me one more time.

"For luck," he whispers.

"Be careful," I say softly, running my hand across his cheek.

"Always," he says with a wink. Turning to Seth, he pats him on the shoulder. "Remember, you're our eyes out there. Keep a good look out."

"I've got it. You guys will have everything you need," Seth says, but I can see the underlining anxiety floating around him. This is not an easy mission and we all know it.

During the time Emmett and Edward drive to meet Jenks, Seth and I prepare our side of things. Seth sets up the screens in front of us to show everything we will need to watch for. We will be monitoring both the surveillance cameras in James' building and their individual cameras to let them know the location of James' men. As requested by Jenks, each has a microphone and night vision camera.

The speakers suddenly crackle followed by Jenks' voice. "Okay, it's go time. Turn them on, Seth."

"Check." With a click of a button, all three cameras come to life. The cameras are attached to their helmets which makes the view shaky. They are also wearing masks to conceal their identity along with standard F.B.I. body armor.

Seth and I anxiously wait and watch as they make their way to the roof of the building next to James'. With the help of equipment designed for snipers, they secure a wire rope between the two buildings, and using metal clasps, secure themselves to the wire. Hanging upside down by their arms and legs, they start pulling themselves backwards. The camera angle makes it impossible to get the full picture, however, in my mind I can see them moving stealthy along the wire as well as any spy hero I've watched on the big screen.

While I am watching them, the computer next to Seth starts beeping. "Yes!" he yells out looking at it.

"What is it?"

"I won! I can open the pictures." Typing quickly, he focuses on the screen as file after file pops up. Looking back at the screen showing the guys' cameras, I see that they are almost across. As much as I want to look at those files, getting them through this mission is my priority. "Seth, they're almost there, we need to be ready!" The pictures will just have to wait.

One by one, all three successfully make it to the other roof. Once to the other side, they drop down into a crouched position and check their weapons waiting for Seth's all clear.
"You've got a guy to the far left by the access door, smoking a cigarette. From what I can see, he has a pistol tucked into his jeans. It looks like he's just taking a break, so you should be able to surprise him easily," Seth says closely monitoring the camera.

"Emmett, go left. Edward and I will work our way right to distract him. You ambush him from behind and knock him out," Jenks whispers.

My eyes scan back and forth between the surveillance cameras and our teams' cameras. My leg is bouncing anxiously as I watch, keeping vigilant for anything that they need to know about. On the screen, I can see Emmett's shadow creeping up slowly to the side of the unsuspecting man. I don't see Edward or Jenks on the surveillance camera yet, but through Edward's camera I see Jenks pick up something off the rooftop. Winding his arm back, he throws the object in front and to the side, where it ricochets loudly against a mental vent.

The guy quickly turns to look for the source of the noise, which allows Emmett to make his move. I sit in amazement at his speed. He rushes the guy and places him in a headlock with one arm, while his other hand covers his mouth to prevent him from yelling. The sleeper hold works quickly as the man's body becomes limp.

Emmett drags the unconscious man to a more isolated area of the roof to attach him to a pipe with handcuffs. Taking a cloth, he then stuffs it into his mouth and wraps it around his head to prevent him from easily yelling once he regains consciousness.

With the threat clear, they silently move over to a vent. Taking out a screwdriver from the large pocket on the side of his leg, Edward unscrews the nuts and bolts. Jenks and Emmett come in behind him to gently pry the lid off. After softly setting it on the ground, Jenks flashes military-type hand gestures at them. Emmett turns and slides into the vent first, followed by Edward and finally Jenks.

Switching my view to the guys' cameras, Seth switches on the night vision feature so that we can track their progress down the long, tiny, dark vent. Before he left the loft, Emmett studied the blueprints intently to memorize which turns and passages to take in order to end up at the right vent on the fourth floor.

Seth and I scan the surveillance screens trying to determine how many men are in the building and their relative location to the fourth floor. If the guys use flash grenades or one of James' men return fire, the noise will alert the other men to a problem, which means they won't have much time to get Jessica and get back to the vent.

"How is it looking, kid?" Jenks asks gruffly.

"Not bad. In fact, there's barely anyone. There are a couple of groups here and there. I would say maybe a dozen including the ones watching Jessica. I thought you said there's usually more?"

"There is," Jenks says hesitantly.

"What does that mean?" I ask, my anxiety increasing at the tone of his voice.

"Nothing, it's probably nothing," he mumbles quietly. I can tell he's lying.

"Whoa," Seth suddenly calls out. "Turn left."

"No, the map said right," Emmett hisses back.

"There are two ways to get there," Seth says looking at the blueprint. "If you keep going that way,
you will travel over a room with five guys in it. The creaking of the vent will probably alert them to your presence. You need to take an alternative route. It's going to take a bit longer, but you will still get there."

"He's right," Edward whispers.

"Fuck," Emmett hisses. "Okay, turning left. Seth, let me know where I'm going."

Fifteen minutes later they finally reach their destination. Emmett stops and looks down through the vent. Taking out a screwdriver to loosen the screws, he moves towards the first one when Seth suddenly yells out.

"Wait! Two guys are about to walk right under you. *Don't move,* " he warns.

Looking over to the surveillance video, I see the two armed men walking down the hallway. They are two of the recruits Jenks and I interviewed. Several feet from the vent they stop to talk, apparently in the middle of a discussion. Their voices are close enough for the microphones to pick up on, although the conversation is faint. Holding my breath, we all silently wait. I close my eyes briefly, sending up a silent prayer that they don't see or hear the guys above them.

"It's just fucking weird. All of us are standing outside of a door and for what reason?" the first man asks.

"I don't know, but she must be important," the second man responds.

"Have you even heard her? Isn't it strange we have been here for hours and nothing? Not even a peep."

"Maybe she's sleeping?" The second man asks.

I remember him. During his interview, I noted that he probably has a borderline I.Q. given the concrete way he approached things and his inability to understand abstract concepts. He tended to blindly follow everything without questioning the request.

"I don't know it just seems strange."

"Are you going to say something?"

"Fuck no. I'm not questioning James. That dude is crazy! But I was hoping to do something more exciting than this," the first man grumbles.

"Me too."

"Well, I guess if we have any chance of working our way out of grunt work, we'd better get back to our post before James finds out," the first man says, starting to walk forward once more.

After they both turn the corner, we collectively let out a breath. "Jesus, that was close," Jenks whispers.

"Okay, go," Seth directs.

Emmett returns to loosening the screws. Leaving one side attached to hang down, he opens the vent.

"You're clear. Jump down now," Seth commands.
Looking at the surveillance video, I see Emmett jump cat-like from the vent, landing on both feet. Holding his rifle up, he looks in both directions down the hallway before gesturing to Edward.

Edward follows suit, and like Emmett, lands perfectly. Together, they focus their rifles in opposite directions, covering both sides of the hallway, while Jenks jumps down. I'm fascinated watching their extensive training at work. Each one quickly and silently getting into position; slowly working their way up along the wall towards the corner that leads towards Jessica's room.

"All four are close to the door. Once you come around the corner, you will be in their direct line of vision," Seth says.

Using more hand gestures, Jenks pulls out one of the flash grenades. Silently counting down, he pulls the pin and rolls it toward the door. As soon as it explodes, the guys rush around the corner and take out each of the four men in a matter of seconds. Standing around the carnage, they cautiously look around to make sure no other men arrive.

"No sign of movement from anyone," Seth says looking at the cameras. "You're clear for now."

"Are they far enough away not to have heard the grenade?" I ask, turning to Seth. He simply shrugs his shoulders focusing intently on the screen.

Leaning in, I take a closer look at one of screens with three men sitting around a table playing cards. Each sits calmly, not reacting at all to the explosion. I don't see anything outside of the ordinary until I notice one of them subtly hitting a button on his watch before looking back at his hand. The gesture appears innocent enough, but it bothers me. Looking again, I realize that I don't recognize any of the men. Except for the ones guarding the door, none of the men I see are the ones Jenks' and I interviewed. Struck with fear, the hairs on the back of neck stand up. Something is wrong.

"Hey, guys," I say, not quite sure what else to say, but feeling the need to tell them my concern. "Something's not right about this."

"What?" Edward asks.

"I'm not sure, but something feels off. Almost like it's too easy."

"Off or not, we're here. Let's just get this done and get out," Jenks responds.

"On it," Emmet mutters, taking a tool out of his backpack.

Taking a closer look, I realize it's a blowtorch used to cut through steal. Since they don't have a key, they have to get in the door forcefully. Using the tool, Emmett cuts around the door handle and lock mechanism, both falling to the floor and releasing the door in the process.

Edward and Jenks, who were in the ready position, rush into the room while Emmett stands back up and guards the door. I switch my gaze back over to the guys' screen since the room does not have a camera that we can see on the surveillance feed. Another apparent precaution James took to keep the information limited about the person behind the door.

The room is completely dark, but instead of relying on night vision, Edward quickly turns on a flashlight. Sweeping the room, the light reaches the corner illuminating several objects.

"Shit," Jenks hisses.

Leaning back in my chair, my hand flies to my mouth at the shocking sight. There in the corner are
three lifeless bodies. All are laying face first, their hands and legs bound. They were obviously executed.

"Emmett, get in here. Seth, watch our backs," Edward yells, rushing forward towards the bodies.

"Who are they?" I ask gruffly. My stomach rolls, this is bad. Something is very, very wrong.

"Fuck me!" Emmett says once he gets to the room.

Both Jenks and Emmett shine their light in the corner as Edward conducts the gruesome task of identifying the victims. I can tell that two of the bodies are female and one is male. I prepare myself for the identity of at least two of the individuals. The possible identity of the third victim has me at a loss.

Turning the male body over, my prediction is proven correct. "It's Mike," Edwards says.

When he turns the second body, I'm sickened but not surprised when I look at her face. "Jessica," Edwards chokes out.

When he turns the third body over, I can't help but gasp. "What the fuck?" Emmett yells.

"Who's that?" Jenks asks looking at the second female victim.

"Bree Tanner," Edward answers quietly.

"No, no, no," I chant, putting my head in my hands trying to fit the pieces together. "What the hell is going on?"

"Didn't we just see her? What the fuck is she doing here?" Emmett asks, obviously as shocked as I am.

"I don't." Edward abruptly stops talking when the lights in the hallway turn off.

"Surveillance is down. It looks like the power is off in the whole building," Seth mutters typing frantically on his computer. "I'm blind. I can't see anything. Fuck, the system just locked me out."

"It's a set up," Jenks says. I can see him raising his gun in front of Emmett's camera.

"Get out of there!" I yell.

"Wait, what's that?" Edward asks, using his flashlight to look down at Mike's body.

In the corner of his pocket is a piece of paper. The way it is sticking up is not an accident. It was left there on purpose. Someone wanted us to find it. Edward grabs the paper, but before he can read it, the sound of gunfire erupts.

"Shit, find cover!" Jenks yells.

I try desperately to track all the movement in the chaos. Flashes of light come from the hallway; our team fire their guns in return.

"Got one," Jenks yells. "I think there are two more, each at different corners. Edward, lay down some cover fire. I'll take out the fucker on the left. Emmett, get the one on the right."

Almost before my brain processes their plan, they all move. Each hit their targets. The lack of gunfire suddenly leaves the room in a deafening silence.
"Seth, what floors were the other people on when you checked last?" Edward asks.

"One and three."

"My bet is that they came up, so we need to go down," Jenks hypothesizes. "On the count of three, move out. Go left. We need to get to the stairwell down the hall."

Moving quietly, they reach the stairwell door without any another incident. Opening the door, they start their decent down.

"Wait," Edward says breathing heavily. "This may tell us what we're up against." I watch as Edward takes the piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolds it. The night vision camera makes it impossible for me to read.

I hear Edward suck in his breath. "Bella, get out-" he starts to yell before the sounds of gunfire erupt again.

"It's coming from above," Emmett yells. Suddenly, I hear a grunt of someone in pain.

"Edward!" I shout out terrified.

"Take the asshole out!" Jenks yells.

Glancing anxiously at the screen, I look for any sign of whether someone is seriously injured. The shaky and chaotic picture makes it difficult to see anything well. Just then, the computer abruptly goes off and the loft is swiftly shrouded in blackness. Within seconds, the computer comes back to life, while the loft remains dark.

"Someone cut the power," Seth whispers. "I have the computer hooked up to a generator, but not anything else."

"They're here, aren't they?" I ask knowing the answer, but dreading the confirmation.

"Probably," Seth mutters, frantically typing.

"What are you doing?"

"We can't risk them getting anything on my computer. I'm sending everything to Jenks and then I'm going to destroy the hard drive."

"You've prepared for this possibility," I state matter-of-fact.

"I knew when I started going after them that they might catch up with me, so yeah."

I watch as he quickly sends everything to Jenks and hits a kill switch. Switching into survival mode, my emotions numb as my mind starts to organize a plan. We need to move quickly.

"Come on, Seth. We need to go now," I say, grabbing him by the shirt and running to the door. Reaching it, I place my hand over the knob but stop when I hear the sound of footsteps running down the hall. "It's too late," I whisper almost more to myself than Seth.

We step back and stare at the door. The door is heavy steel and since the electronic lock has a failsafe that keeps it engaged during a power outage, there is no easy way to gain access. However, that knowledge does not ease my mind. James has overcome larger obstacles to get to his prey. The best it will do is buy us a bit more time.
"Seth, you need to hide," I state, deciding that my first priority is to protect Seth.

"I can't leave you," he says turning towards me.

"Seth, listen to me. I need you to get out and tell Edward what happened. They're going to need your skills to find me." Seth shakes his head defiantly. "Please, for me, do as I ask," I beg.

"Okay," he says hesitantly, glancing nervously at the door. The sounds of several voices and metal clanging come through as they try to figure out a way in.

"Go to the bathroom and try to climb out the window." He looks at me strangely. "Seth, I watched you scale that building. There's gutter pipe right by that window. You need to get out and climb down. I will keep them distracted."

I'm really not sure if Seth can fit out of that window, but he has a better chance than I do. We don't have enough time for both of us to try, and saving Seth is more important than saving myself.

"Bella, I don't think-"

"No arguments," I interrupt. "They're here for me. They won't care about anyone else if I keep them focused on their goal."

The noises through the door are getting louder and now include pounding. "You have to go. Now!" I hiss, pushing him back towards the bathroom. We don't have much time.

Seth looks at me for a moment, before grabbing me in a tight hug. Surprised by his overt display of affection, it takes me a moment to hug him back. All too quickly, we pull back.

"Seth, no matter what you hear, don't come back out here. Do you understand?" He nods slowly and then runs to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

With Seth taken care of, I turn my attention to my own strategy as the noises continue. Running over to the bed, I dive underneath and pull out my suitcase. Throwing open the case, I move everything over to grab my guns. Shutting the suitcase again, I shove it back under the bed, hoping to keep it safe. Still in the dark, I fumble my way over to the kitchen and grab a couple of knives deciding that the more weapons I have the better.

Squinting into the blackness, I look around the room trying to figure out the best placement. The open design of the loft leaves few spots to find cover. Even the kitchen is open to the front door since the counter is to the side and not in front. Cutting my eyes back over to the living room, I see the coffee table, remembering the expensiveness of the wood; heavy and hard. That's it.

Running over, I scoot the table so that the long side is facing the door. Kneeling down, I push it over on its side providing me a barrier between myself and the door. Breathing heavily from the exertion, I sit with my back against the table, listening as the door starts to give way. They are almost in.

I place the knives on the floor and take out my guns to check each clip. Both are fully loaded, so between the two of them I have a total of twenty-eight rounds. I don't know how many are out there, but I have a feeling that every bullet is going to count if I have any chance of escaping. Scooting down so that my head is below the table, I take a deep breath, click off the safety and wait.

Suddenly, the door falls making a thunderous noise as it slams into the floor, light from the hallway spilling into the room. Apparently, they only cut power to the loft. I hold my breath,
waiting for the right moment to make my move. Adrenaline courses through my veins and my heart pounds in my chest. I need to stay focused on my task and calm my shaking hands if I have any hope at hitting my intended targets.

"Isabella? Come out, come out wherever you are," James calls out in a sing-song voice.

Scooting quietly to the side of the table, I carefully peek around and see James and another person standing in the doorway. It's difficult to see any of their features, both are wearing dark hooded jackets, but I recognize James' colors.

"Go," James demands to the person next to him, pushing him forward.

Leveling my gun, I point it at the man. Taking one more breath, I pull the trigger and watch triumphantly as he falls to the floor. James dives to the side and takes cover outside of the loft, taking away any clear shot I had on him.

"Clever girl," James murmurs. "Don't be stupid, Isabella. You're clearly outnumbered. Just give up. Why waste all this time if we don't have to?"

Peeking around again, I see another man scooting forward. Aiming, I shoot and hit the man's leg. He screams and falls to the floor grasping his leg in pain. If I'm going down, I am going to take as many of them with me as I can.

"Okay. A fight it is," James declares.

Everything is silent for several seconds before gunfire explodes in the loft. Suppressors mute the sounds of the guns, so it is not the shots I hear, but the sound of the bullets flying by. Ducking, I cover my head. When the gunfire stops, I peak around the corner and shoot several times emptying the clip in the first gun.

I grab the second gun, but before I can shoot, they return fire. Cowering behind the table, the bullets fly all around me. It stops as suddenly as it began. When I go to make my move, I shockingly feel metal at the back of neck.

"Put the gun down, princess."

I recognize the voice from the audio of Jessica's abduction. Laying the gun on the floor, I slowly put my hands up. I look over my shoulder and see Sam standing behind me, an assault rifle in his hands.

"Get up," he demands. He reaches over to grab the gun and then throws it out of reach.

Jenks' voice echoes in my mind, reminding me to assess the situation. "Your size and demeanor can be used to your favor. Chances are they will never expect you to make a move. Use that to your advantage," he would say. Channeling his strength, I prepare to make my move.

Keeping my hands raised, I stand up. Glancing over my shoulder at Sam, I notice that his finger is not on the trigger. Instead, both hands are wrapped loosely around the handle. Perfect.

Taking Sam by surprise, I grab the gun and turn my body backwards. Hastily, I pull the gun over my shoulder, twisting it out of his grasp, while elbowing him hard in the sternum. I can hear him gasp as the wind is forced out of his lungs, the gun clanging loudly as it falls to the floor. Spinning again, I punch him square in the face. My fist throbs, but the pain is worth it knowing the hit was effective.
"Son of a bitch!" he yells, moving his hands up to cover his nose when it starts to bleed.

Crouching down, I prepare for his return attack. In the background, I can hear James laughing. "Come on Sam. You gonna let a little girl beat you?"

"Shut up! Is someone going to help me out here?" he asks continuing to wipe at his nose.

"Angelo, take her down," James yells menacingly.

Another man comes in from the hallway. He is about as tall as Sam, but leaner. I watch him closely as he stalks towards me trying to anticipate his move. He looks at me with a smirk, also underestimating my ability.

When he moves to strike, I step to the side just in time to avoid his punch. Using his own forward motion to my advantage, I push him watching as he falls against the table. Quickly jumping up, I see colors of determination when he moves towards me again. This time, the couch prevents me from moving quick enough. He grabs my hand to pull me forward, his other hand striking me hard against the side of my head.

My vision blurs, but I don't have the luxury of waiting for it to recover before making my next move. Quickly squaring off, I swing at the fuzzy target in front of me hitting him with the hand that is not being restrained. His face jerks to the side with the force of my punch, allowing me to turn and break the hold on my arm. Before I have the chance to move out of his reach, he swings hitting my face again. The force knocks me off-balance, resulting in my body slamming to the floor.

My head pounds and I can taste blood, but I can't allow myself to focus on the pain right now. Blinking several times to clear my vision, I get back up and face Angelo again. He smirks, but this time I strike quickly, hitting him before kicking the side of his knee causing it to snap. He drops down to the floor, grabbing it and groans in pain. The sound of his pain renews my strength.

I breathe heavily, watching him closely while glancing around. James and Sam are still standing off to the side. James is holding up his hand preventing anyone else from joining. Apparently he is enjoying the show.

Suddenly, Angelo rushes me, grabbing me around my waist and knocking me into the side of the table. The air leaves my lungs when my spine crashes into the hard wood. Lying on the ground, Angelo takes advantage and swiftly kicks me in the side. My ribs burn as I choke from the force of the hit.

Refusing to give up, I get up again. James laughs brashly from the sideline. "Come on," I growl, watching as Angelo limps, his knee obviously damaged.

"Sam, it's your turn again," James says calmly, indirectly letting me know how this game is going to go.

Turning my attention to Sam, he is already moving towards me. His nose is no longer bleeding, but his colors clearly show how badly he wants retribution for my earlier hit. I walk backwards away from the furniture to give myself more space to maneuver. With my fists bruised and sore and my head pounding, I replay Jenks instructions from his self-defense lessons over and over in my head trying to gather courage for the next round.

Sam moves quickly, but somehow I am able to move quicker and avoid his attack. James continues to laugh in amusement behind me. For several moments, we dance around each other, both
avoiding contact. Finally, I am able to turn and sweep his leg, causing him to fall hard to the floor. Using this to my advantage, I kick him and then look around for a hard object I can use to hit him. My intention is to knock him out. Seeing a lamp, I rush to grab it.

Unexpectedly, I feel someone yank backwards on my foot as I am moving forward. The abrupt pull causes me to fall, my hands barely able to brace my body before hitting the floor. My wrist screams with pain upon the impact.

I can feel Sam's hands still on my feet, preventing me from moving. Looking up, I see the knives I left on the ground. Stretching my arms and fingers forward, I try desperately to reach one of the handles. At the same time, Sam starts to pull me backwards. Determined, I reach again and am able to use my fingers to pull a handle close enough to grab. Taking the knife I quickly move it under my arm. I need the element of surprise.

He continues to pull me backwards, while I try to crawl forward. Sam starts climbing over me, his body heavy on mine. I carefully push the knife under my sleeve, hiding it from view. Once he is almost completely covering me, he turns me over.

His eyes are deadly, hatred floating all around him. He wants to kill me. Reaching up with a smirk, he wraps both hands around my neck. The sudden pressure cuts off my air supply. Struggling, I claw at his hands, realizing it is now or never. Moving my arms under his body, I pull the knife out. Sam's hands continue to squeeze, and I fight hard to not pass out as I feel the blackness creeping in. I push against him with all my strength trying to get enough leverage. Tilting the knife as much as possible in the limited space, I brace my elbow with my hand and push it upwards.

I can't tell how far I was able to get, but it is enough for him to scream out in pain and roll off of me. Unable to move, I lay on the ground choking and sputtering trying to regain my breath. Sam is groaning in pain beside me. The knife is no longer in my hand. I am not quite sure where it ended up.

"Bravo!" James says clapping. "That was fun, but playtime is over. Bring her over here," James demands.

Still fighting off unconsciousness, I see two large boots walking over to me. Harsh hands suddenly grab me by the shoulders yanking me off the floor. Looking up at the person, I'm shocked to see that it is Demetri.

What is Aro's errand boy doing here? I wonder, my mind having a hard time processing this turn of events.

Demetri pulls me up roughly. I stumble trying to regain my balance as he drags me over to James. Pushing me forward, he holds my arms behind my back. I feel cold metal slapping around my wrists as he cuffs me. He squeezes them once they are secure, the metal cutting into my skin. James is still shrouded in the shadows, making it difficult for me to get a clear look at him.

"My, my, my. Little Isabella all grown up," he says, clicking his tongue in a disgustingly suggestive way. "I think you look even more delicious than you did before. I wonder if you taste better too?" he asks tauntingly.

My stomach churns at his suggestion. James finally steps forward into the room, his colors dark and menacing. I try desperately to prevent my body from shaking. The last thing I want to do is portray weakness.

Once he's directly in front of me, he moves his hand up and slides back his hood. My breath
hitches, shocked at what I see in front of me. His face is clean-shaven, his hair is neatly cut and his eyes are clear and focused. The disheveled James I'd seen on-screen is gone.

"You look shocked, Isabella. Aren't you happy to see me?" he asks with a slight pout before his face morphs into an evil glare. "Or perhaps you were expecting a different version of me?" he hisses. "Did you really think that Aro wouldn't find out about your pathetic little task force?"

I'm confused by his choice of words. We are not a task force. But regardless of whether I understand exactly what he's talking about, looking at him, I realize that the behavior we've been witnessing was to lure us into a false sense of security. He never intended to leave Aro's business.

He leans in, his foul breath hot across my face. "We've worked long and hard to take that group down. Imagine our surprise when we learned we could capture you at the same time. Things couldn't have worked out more perfectly."

Reaching out, he grabs my hair and yanks me toward him until we are almost touching. "You have no idea how long I've thought about this moment," he whispers, pressing his lips roughly to mine. I clench my mouth together, preventing him from taking the kiss further. Luckily, he pulls back quickly, a satisfied look on his face and lust floating around him. I hold my chin up defiantly and looking him directly in the eye, spit in his face.

"Always so feisty," he laughs.

Letting go, he walks behind me. Demetri turns around too, allowing me to track his movements. "Come on in boys," he yells, staring at the table with Seth's computer equipment. Glancing behind me, I watch several other armed men walk in. James obviously took this task seriously and intended to get me at any cost.

"Where's the geek?" James inquires.

"What?" I ask playing dumb.

"I was told you would be here with some sort of computer geek. I see his equipment, but where is he?"

"Left. He ran to the store before you got here."

"Hmm, I can't tell if you're lying. You're even better at covering up your emotions than you were before." He tilts his head and assesses me closely. "Search the room," James barks out, not breaking eye contact with me.

I stare back, keeping my face neutral, hoping he can't hear my pounding heart. Please be gone, I silently chant. It isn't long before I hear them breaking down the bathroom door.

"Well, look what we have here. Found him," one of the men shouts out.

I close my eyes in defeat. My head is spinning and my entire body aches. It is taking all my strength to just stand up. I don't know what else to do. Looking over, I see a man dragging an angry and scared Seth from the bathroom. Once they are close, Seth assesses me with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, Bella. I should have come out to help you," he whispers sadly.

"It's okay. You did the right thing," I whisper back, conscious of the fact that several ears are listening, but still wanting to relieve Seth's guilt.
Desperate, I play the only card I have left. "Okay, James, I'll go with you quietly if you leave him here. You don't need him."

"Funny, I don't remember saying this was a negotiation."

"You and I both know the cops are most likely on their way. Your guns had silencers, but mine didn't. Unless you want to fail, you need to leave now. And I bet Aro is expecting you to bring me back alive."

"You know your father well. Let's just say he is very anxious to catch up," James says smirking.

"Seems to me that I can make this a lot more difficult for you. The harder I make it, the more likely you're going to get caught."

James laughs loudly. "Look at you! You're barely able to stand. Aro doesn't care about how damaged you are when you arrive, just that you arrive. So go ahead, give it your best shot, sweetheart."

Before I can respond, movement out of the corner of eye catches my attention. I turn my head just in time to see Seth do some sort of move on the man holding him, breaking free and throwing him to the ground at the same time. Another man rushes forward to attack, but Seth is quick to throw him off as well.

I can't help but smile, astonished at his ability, until I see a glint of metal in James' hand. As with so many other times in my life, everything seems to slow down as my brain processes the situation.

"No!" I scream as the gun goes off. Seth immediately falls to the floor groaning in pain. I can't tell where he was hit.

"We don't have time for this. Grab her and let's go," James says gruffly.

Demetri suddenly picks me up and carries me out the door. I strain my neck to look behind as we leave. My eyes focused on Seth's unmoving body. I can see blood slowly seeping out from under him. Please be alive, I pray.

Holding me tightly as we move, Demetri's grip hurts my damaged ribs. My injuries are slowly getting the better of me. Taking the lift down and moving out into the street, I barely have time to wonder whether anyone is watching before I'm shoved into a van waiting right outside of the building.

The door barely closes before the van screeches away from the curb. My eyes feel heavy and I struggle to keep them open as we travel to an unknown destination. James is quiet as he sits across from me, intently staring in my direction. Even in my woozy state, I can still see the lust floating around him. It just reinforces why I need to stay awake. I don't know how long we travel before we stop, but when the door opens, I realize we are at a private airport.

"Come on, Isabella. Daddy's waiting for you."

He grabs my elbow to drag me out. Pulling me after him, we walk towards a jet. I stumble several times, my legs giving out. Keeping my head down in an effort to not fall, we walk up the stairs into the plane. James pushes me in front of him, but keeps his hands on my arms. Still looking down, I see a person's feet in front of me. By the size and style, I can tell they are a man's. Slowly looking up, my breath leaves my body when I see his face.

Oh my god.
There are moments in life that don't make sense; moments you will never be ready for, that seemingly come out of nowhere. I guess everyone deals with them in their own way: some run, some fight, others cry…but me…maybe it's my mind, the one that has always been just left of center, but when faced with this moment, my vision blurs and life becomes a carnival of lights. Colors twist and turn with a melody of a carousel playing in the background, one that is a bit off tune. Part of me wonders at the weird beauty of it all, while another part is still trying to make sense of the person I see in front of me, the person I watched die, the person I believed was the love of my life. How can this be? I think as the colors finally blur to black.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone still with me? Have I mentioned I believe in HEA?

The line quoted by Aro during the dream is from the poem The Spider and the Fly by Mary Howitt.
Chapter 25: Hangin' By a Thread

Chapter Notes

A/N:

A huge thank you to TWCS for choosing this story as one of their featured stories, I'm honored.

My betas beautifulnightmarex, Tds88 and pre-reader Beachlover, make each chapter better. Thank you!

I own nothing that is related to Twilight, although like many others I often wish I did.

Important: This chapter contains graphic descriptions of violence.

Now on with the show!

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Chapter 25: Hangin' By a Thread

EPOV

Beep

Beep

Beep

The early morning hour envelopes the hospital room in an uneasy stillness. The nauseating smell of disinfectant permeates the air and the only noises are coming from the machines performing their vital tasks. All else is silent, which does nothing to temper my racing thoughts.

Seth came back from surgery just a short time ago after suffering a gunshot wound to his abdomen. The bullet damaged both his spleen and left kidney. The doctors said he would have easily bled out if we hadn't found him when we did. His surgery was extensive and included a splenectomy due to the amount of damage done to his spleen. The removal was necessary to control the bleeding and allow them to repair the trauma caused to the kidney. No other organs were hit. He is extremely lucky, considering.

Beep

Beep

Beep

Sitting by Seth's hospital bed, I watch him closely, keeping an eye on the peaks and valleys of his heart monitor and checking to make sure his chest rises and falls. If watching over Seth is the only thing I can do right now, then I'm damn well going to do my best...for her. Seth is important to Bella. He needs to recover before she comes home. And she will come home. My goal is singular
and my determination unrelenting. I will get her back, or die trying.

Taking a deep breath, I try to calm my anger, but it's impossible. My fists clench and unclench. My body feels wired and on edge. She's returned to her worst nightmare, and I will never forgive myself for allowing it to happen. Knowing that she is with them and not knowing what is happening is terrifying. It's killing me having to wait here, but acting on impulse will only make things worse. Our next move needs careful planning. However, I'm prepared to do whatever it takes, even if it means taking on the devil himself.

Several hours have passed since all hell broke loose, but it feels like years. I still don't know exactly how it all went wrong. We were stupid enough to believe that we had all the angles covered. Laying my head back against the chair, I close my eyes, unable to stop thinking about last night's events, wondering if there was anything we could have done different.

"Wait," I say, trying to catch my breath. "This may tell us what we're up against."

Grabbing the piece of paper, I quickly unfold it, knowing we can't stay in one spot for long. My gut feeling tells me this note is important. Fear courses through my body when I read the message. It's a picture of Bella, with the words "You're too late" scrawled in red at the top.

Fuck! They know where she is.

"Bella, get out-" I yell trying to warn her, but before I can finish, gunfire rains down on us again.

"It's coming from above," Emmett yells.

"Edward!" I hear Bella yelling in my earpiece.

"Take the asshole out!" Jenks shouts.

Backing into the corner for coverage, I take aim in the direction of the shots. Successfully hitting the target, all of us watch as he falls over the rail. Wasting no time, we start our decent down again.

"Bella, you need to get out of there," I say quickly. There's no response, my earpiece chillingly silent. "Bella? Bella!"

We're too late.

"What the hell is going on?" Emmett questions.

"They know about Bella," I spit out. "We need to get over there now!"

"What?" Jenks chokes. I've never heard terror in his voice before.

"The note was a picture of Bella saying we're too late."

"Fuck me!" Emmett yells. "Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse."

"God damn it! Okay, how many guys have we taken out?" Jenks asks with renewed resolve.

"Eight, I think," Emmett answers, still running down the stairs.

"According to Seth's count, there are at least four more guys hanging around, so keep sharp," Jenks instructs as we round the corner leading to the last set of stairs.
Glancing over at Jenks, I see him reach up and grab his arm, hissing at the contact. "You're hit," I state.

"The bullet just grazed me. I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'll wrap it when we get to the SUV. We have bigger concerns than this tiny scratch," he scoffs.

Finally reaching the ground floor, we sneak quietly towards the door. Opening it slowly, I look to both sides before gesturing to Emmett and Jenks. Kneeling down to cover the hallway, I motion for them to leave the stairwell first.

Once in the hallway, Jenks carefully leads us towards the main door. The adrenaline pumping through my body makes it almost impossible to move cautiously. Every instinct in me is screaming to rush forward and get to Bella, but logically I know if we don't get out safely, I'm no help to her.

Rounding the last corner, we are again bombarded with gunfire. Dropping to the floor, each of us takes aim. Luckily, the men James assigned to this task are not well-trained. Their shots are imprecise and their current position makes them easy targets. These are men that were expendable.

Emmett crawls forward as Jenks and I cover him, returning the chaotic shots. Taking position, Emmett fires and easily takes out three of the men. In a state of frantic desperation, the last man runs from behind the corner trying to rush us. He doesn't get far before each of us shoots.

Sprinting out the building and to the SUV, we barely close the doors before Emmett screeches away. He expertly weaves in and out of traffic in an effort to get to the loft as quickly as possible.

Ripping off my mask, I turn towards Jenks and focus my attention on his wound. I need something to distract me from going crazy worrying about Bella. My rage is building. If they've hurt her…I close my eyes, unable to finish the thought.

"Let me see your arm."

"It's fine."

"Don't be so stubborn and let me see your fucking arm. I need you on your best game when we get there," I growl.

Moving his sleeve to the side, I assess the wound. He's right, it's just a graze. Grabbing a cloth, I wrap it around his arm to stop the bleeding.

"Any thoughts on what the hell happened?" Jenks questions, gritting his teeth as I finish tying the cloth in a tight knot.

"It's obvious they knew we were coming. But how they found out, I have no clue," Emmett mumbles paying attention to the road.

"Who was that Bree Tanner chick?"

"She worked with the director," Emmett answers. "But I have no idea why she was there."

"What do you think, Edward?"

"Right now, I don't fucking care. I just need to get to Bella. I'll worry about the details once I know
she's safe."

"Edward-"Jenks starts.

"Don't say it'll be fine because you and I both know things don't look good." The SUV falls silent. Everyone knows there's really nothing else left to say. We just need to get there.

Finally arriving at the loft, the three of us jump out and run up the stairs not wanting to wait for the lift. Reaching our destination, we carefully walk out of the stairwell. Inching along the wall, I raise my gun and prepare for battle once again. When I turn the corner, my heart sinks at the sight of the busted door.

We're too late.

Rushing ahead, I notice a body in the doorway. I don't recognize him. Reaching down, I feel for a pulse. He's dead from what looks like a gunshot wound to the chest. There's more blood to the side of the door, but no body to determine who it belongs to. I swallow the bile rising in my throat trying not to think about it being Bella's.

"Bella!" I shout, my heart seizing at the returning silence.

The loft is dark, so it's hard to make everything out. Emmett, Jenks and I slowly move forward, all of us ready to take out any threat. Pulling out my flashlight, I shine the light into the room. The nightmarish scene takes my breath away. The walls are covered with bullet holes and the furniture trashed. Scanning the room, I spot Seth lying on the floor.

"Fuck, Seth!"

I run over to him and drop to my knees. Reaching over his blood soaked shirt, I feel his neck, breathing a small sigh of relief when I feel a pulse. It's weak but it's there. "He's alive," I mutter to Emmett, who's also kneeling beside me.

Lifting up his shirt, I see a bullet wound on his left side. Emmett quickly pushes his hands down on it trying to stop the bleeding. I can hear Jenks in the background calling for an ambulance. Although I'm worried about Seth, my priority is Bella. With Emmett taking care of Seth, I get back up to investigate the rest of the loft, hoping to find a clue about what happened. In my heart, I know she's not here, but I still need to check.

Walking over by the couch, I see Sam lying on the floor bleeding profusely from his abdomen. I take a leap that the bloody knife next to his body is the culprit. I'm surprised that they left him behind; it's a huge liability. Stalking towards him, I reach down and pull him up by his collar.

"Where is she?" My voice sounds deadly even to my own ears.

He laughs. "Fuck you."

Red colors my vision. Striking out, I punch him directly in his stab wound. Sam screams in pain. Noticing movement out of the corner of my eye, I see that Jenks is now standing beside me.

"I'll ask again. Where is she?"

"Where do you think, asshole," he sputters out. "As far as I'm concerned, that bitch is about to get what she deserves."

An unexpected primal roar bursts out of me as I throw Sam to the floor, my fists pounding on his
flesh. Lost in a haze, it takes a moment to grasp that Jenks is trying to pull me off of him.

"Knock it off, Edward. We need him alive," he yells, finally successful in his attempt to separate us. "He has information that will help us find Bella."

Bella. Her name is like a beacon cutting through the fog. I close my eyes trying to calm down.

"I'll never talk," Sam smirks, spitting out blood. "And you have rules to follow G-man."

"Well, lucky for you, I don't," Jenks growls, getting directly in Sam's face. "I think you'll talk. You just need to decide how badly you want it to hurt until you do."

"Jack? You're the fucking rat?" Sam asks incredulously, finally recognizing Jenks. "James is going to have a field day ripping you apart."

"I'm surprised you're still siding with the person who left you here to die. You're as stupid as you look," Jenks taunts.

Hearing sirens in the distance, I quickly throw Sam at Jenks. "Take him somewhere isolated. If he's here when the cops arrive, they'll take him into custody. We need to question him alone."

"Agreed. Come on, sunshine, let's go for a ride," Jenks says, spinning Sam around and cuffing him. He grunts in protest, but his blood loss has left him unable to fight back. Dragging him towards the door, Jenks stops to look over at me, his cool facade dropping for a moment.

"Tell the kid that he's not allowed to even think about dying or I'll kick his butt good."

"You got it." Jenks has developed a soft spot for both Seth and Bella. I know this situation is killing him too.

"I'll meet you at the hospital as soon as I can," he says before walking out the door.

Looking around the room, I can't help but feel dread.

"Hang on, baby. Hang on," I chant, waiting as the sirens get louder.

"How's he doing?"

Jenks' voice shakes me from my reverie. "Umm, he's holding his own. The next twenty-four hours will be critical, but the doctors are hopeful."

"He's tough and so is Bella. From everything I saw at the loft, it looks like they really held their own considering the gravity of the situation."

I nod my head in agreement. I know intuitively that Bella is responsible for both Sam and the other body. She clearly fought hard. A part of me is proud of her strength and courage, but the sickening fact that she had to even go through it doesn't allow me to linger on the positive feelings for long.

"She's alive, Edward. You and I both know Aro wants her back alive. That gives us time to go and get her," he says confidently.

"It's not going to be easy, especially if he took her to Italy."

"Difficult, but not impossible. I'm reaching out to several people who can help us," Jenks says, patting me on the shoulder in support.
"Good," I mutter continuing to watch Seth's monitors. "Where's Sam?"

"In my apartment. I patched up his stab wound enough to keep him alive, but we should probably head over there soon and have a little chat."

"My uncle's on his way here to help with Seth. I don't want to leave him alone. I can go once he gets here."

"Okay, I'll wait with you. Sam's not going anywhere."

For several moments we sit quietly, both of us watching Seth. An unexpected knock on the door pulls our attention away from his motionless body. Looking over, I watch as Emmett walks in with a solemn look on his face.

"I need you guys to come with me. There's, umm, a couple of people here to talk to us."

Emmett's rigid body language makes me nervous about his request. Jesus, what else can go wrong tonight?

"Law enforcement?" Jenks asks.

A number of agencies showed up at the loft and James' warehouse. They are all fighting for jurisdiction. The FBI especially wanted answers from Emmett and I about our involvement, but neither of us were willing to answer any questions. At the time, my biggest concern was getting Seth to the hospital. Besides, I don't really give a damn about who takes the case or whether they'll sanction me for my participation. I just want Bella back.

"Just come with me," he says cryptically.

Jenks and I look over at each other curiously before getting up and following Emmett down the hallway to a private meeting room. It looks like a place that is used to go over test results with family members. Walking in, I'm surprised to see Jasper, Director Banner, and Peter Marshal, Jasper's supervisor at the CIA, all sitting stiffly around the table.

"What the hell is going on?" I ask right away, not liking the feel of this at all.

"Agent Cullen, take a seat," Banner commands.

"No. I'm not sitting down until someone tells me what the fuck is going on."

The three men look at each other, silently deciding their direction. I, however, narrow my gaze at Jasper. Out of everyone in this room, he owes it to me not to play games, especially since I argued on his behalf several times over the last couple of months.

"Jasper, are you going to give me a straight answer?"

Before Jasper can answer, Banner jumps in. "I'll be straight with you, Agent, but we will do it in a civil fashion. Have a seat."

Jenks snorts at the directive. "This is why I don't work for the government. It's all about politics and fake pleasantries. I'm with Edward. If you boys have something to say, I suggest you spit it out. I have better things to do than sit in a room with a bunch of suits and chat." Jasper tenses at Jenks' jab, but doesn't react.

"Fine," Banner spits out before returning to his professional tone. "First off, let me start by saying
that I'm extremely disheartened by tonight's turn of events."

"Disheartened," I laugh humorlessly, angered by the causal word.

"None of us wanted this to happen to Dr. Swan or the boy."

"Sounds like you know something we don't. Care to enlighten us?" Jenks snarls.

Looking each of us over for a moment, Banner finally begins his explanation. "About five years ago, top administrators from several international organizations developed a classified task force to bring the Volturi down. Since no one single law enforcement agency has been successful at making any charges stick, the countries who participated agreed that combining their efforts was the only way to stop Aro for good. However, since they also knew that he has eyes and ears everywhere, the membership to this task force was very exclusive."

"Sounds like a fun club," Jenks comments sarcastically. He's in rare form due to the shallow arrogance being demonstrated before us. "How did you get an invitation?"

"Peter and I joined because Intel indicated that Seattle was the first city they were going to take over."

"How does all of that connect to what went down tonight?" Emmett asks harshly wanting to cut to the chase. I can tell he's also angered by the unemotional display.

"Part of being on that task force meant I had access to the Volturi files of each agency. Imagine my surprise when I was signing off on a contract for a new consultant and realized that the person was none other than Isabella Volturi."

"Jesus. You've known this whole time," I whisper.

"I have to admit she was good at covering her tracks. If I hadn't seen those files, I would have never known who she really was."

"So if you knew, why hire her?" Emmett asks.

Jenks laughs sarcastically. "It's a timeless move. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right, director?"

"Something like that."

"You and this international group of assholes basically hired her to use her," Jenks states.

"Yes and no. Peter and I never shared her identity with the other agencies. We wanted to see how it panned out first."

"Keeping secrets from the group that vowed to keep no secrets. That's ballsy," Jenks says.

"It was the golden ticket that gave us an edge no one else ever had before. That's not the type of leverage you give up easily."

"Like I said, politics and pleasantries. You're all a joke," Jenks says disgustedly. "So what, you watched her to see if she was reporting to them?"

"Yes. In the beginning, I believed her father sent her to get information."

"In the beginning?" I question, wanting him to clarify his statement.
"She genuinely seemed to care about getting justice on her cases. Watching her work, it was hard to believe that she was Aro's daughter." He pauses, looking over to Peter before continuing.

"No one knew what happened to Isabella Volturi. The longer I knew her, the more I started to believe that she really did run away. However, there was too much at stake to simply rely on my instinct. I had to know for sure."

"What did you do?" I ask lowly, narrowing my eyes.

"We figured out early on that Mike was working for them. He wasn't very good at covering his tracks, but with Bella, I couldn't get a handle on her. So when an opportunity presented itself, I took it."

"Felix," Emmett states.

Finally, the pieces fall into place, creating a horrific picture."You set her up," I snarl. My fists clench remembering how Bella looked in the hospital and having to worry about whether she was going to live or die.

"Putting them in the same room seemed like the best option. If they knew each other, there was a good chance one of them would slip up. I never in a million years expected him to attack her."

I feel Jenks lightly placing his hand on my arm to prevent me from moving forward. No matter how much I want to punch Banner right now, I appreciate Jenks' silent warning to hold off. We need to hear the whole story to know exactly what we are up against.

"What about the second time?" Emmett asks, his face red. Like me, he's barely holding himself back. "You demanded she come in to give her statement, and then all of sudden they're in the same hallway." I cut my eyes back to Banner, not sure I can handle his answer without exploding.

"I told Mike to approve the visit for the lawyer knowing it would occur at the same time. Their interaction in the interview room didn't help to prove my theory. It actually made things worse when Felix accused her of working with them. I wanted to see how she responded if she saw him again."

"I can't believe this," I hiss.

"In my defense, I tried to watch the video, but I didn't have a chance before the footage was damaged."

"You're a fucking piece of work," Jenks mutters.

"I'm not heartless. I knew he couldn't touch her with everyone around. It was the perfect set up to allow me to observe her reaction to him," Banner defends.

"And what was your conclusion?" I sneer.

"That he scared her, but he still believed she worked for them. So, it didn't help to clarify anything."

"Oh good. At least it was worth it," Jenks says sarcastically.

"That's why you insisted Mike interview her," I blurt out, realizing just how twisted everything was from the beginning.
"I was trying to hedge my bets, Agent Cullen. Like I said, Mike wasn't good at covering his tracks. If he knew Bella was working for them, his behavior would've given him away."

"So if you didn't get any real proof of Bella's involvement from either Felix or Mike, why not just accept that she was an innocent bystander in this whole thing?" Emmett asks.

"Aro is the most cunning and savvy criminal I've ever run up against. Just because they didn't know each other doesn't mean they weren't working for him. It wouldn't surprise me if he sent several people in without them knowing about each other," Peter responds for the first time, cutting his eyes to Banner in the process. I get the sense that Bella's innocence is a topic of contention between the two.

"Did you know they were going to kill Felix?" I ask, wanting to get every detail of this cluster fuck out in the open.

"We thought it was possible. It was clear from the beginning that the Volturi wanted him released quickly. I was trying to prevent that and Bella's attack played right into my hands."

The fact that Banner sees her attack as a win for his side disgusts me. "You didn't try to stop it?" I question through clenched teeth.

"We couldn't," Peter answers. "We needed Mike to look successful in the eyes of the Volturi. We are in the middle of a war. Felix was unfortunately one of the casualties."

"What about Jessica? How does she fit in?" Emmett asks gruffly.

"Jessica's role was a surprise. I don't think she intended to work for the Volturi. She saw an opportunity with Mike and took it. She didn't understand what she was getting herself into," Banner responds.

"What about her kidnapping? Did you know what happened to her?" Jenks asks.

"We assumed as much, yes. After they took her, we became concerned that maybe the Volturi were onto us. I'm pretty sure her kidnapping was in part to see if we showed our hand. If we made a move to get her, it would confirm we knew about the mole. For the sake of the task force, we couldn't afford to do that," Peter explains coldly, neither he nor Banner showing any concern for Jessica or the fact that she was needlessly killed.

"Unbelievable," Jenks mumbles. "And how about you, pretty boy? Where do you fit into this lovely little tale?"

Turning my attention to the man I've considered a brother, I narrow my eyes, waiting to finally hear the truth behind his behavior.

Jasper looks at me with remorseful eyes and clears his throat. "I didn't know about the task force until recently. They were actually the ones preventing me from getting the Volturi files in the first place. They wanted to keep Bella's identity as secret as possible."

"How considerate of them. Too bad it was only to serve their own selfish needs," Jenks scoffs.

"Hey, watch your tone. You shouldn't even be part of this conversation," Peter yells back.

"Fuck you! Two people I consider family were screwed by this little game, so like it or not, I'm not going anywhere."
Listening to the back and forth between Peter and Jenks, I'm desperately trying to contain my own reaction, knowing once I start I won't stop. If that happens, things will quickly spiral out of control. Focusing my attention back on Jasper, I make another appeal.

"Tell me the truth. You owe me that much."

"Edward, you know how much I love Alice, and your family means the world to me."

"I don't see what that has to do with this," I huff, annoyed by his continued avoidance.

"I couldn't stand the thought of Bella hurting them, either intentionally or unintentionally. If Aro connected her to your family, they would all be in danger. I couldn't sit back and let that happen. Since your feelings for her were clouding your judgment, I did what I thought was best," he pauses for a moment, averting his eyes before continuing. "A week after she left for Montana, I went to Supervisor Marshal and told him everything."

"You son of bitch!" I shout lunging towards him. Jenks and Emmett grab me, both struggling to pull me back. I want somebody's blood.

"I'm sorry!" he yells. "I really thought I was doing the right thing."

"Then what happened?" Jenks asks roughly, still holding me back.

"They came to me and I asked Jasper to become our eyes and ears for your operation," Banner answers. "We actually hoped you might have more success than we did, but we were ready to step in if necessary."

I look back at Jasper, who is hanging his head. He knows he sold all of us out. "I don't understand Jasper. After looking at those files, how could you for one second believe she worked for them or worse yet, that she deserved to be sacrificed?"

"The more I got to know Bella, the more difficult it became," he whispers, clearly ashamed. "But I was already in too deep. I didn't know how to get out of what I started. That's why I wanted to bust James. The quicker it ended, the quicker I thought we could find a resolution where everyone wins."

"Don't give me that shit! They weren't watching you every moment. You should have fucking come to me! You left us vulnerable!"

"I'm still waiting to hear exactly how all of this explains what happened tonight," Emmett asserts, fury radiating off his tense body.

"About eight months ago, I brought Bree Tanner on board to help us track and monitor how the Volturi and Mike were interfering with evidence. I, umm, trusted her," Banner mutters, looking down suddenly.

"Oh, I get it," Jenks snorts. "She got really close to you. Share a little too much during pillow talk, Director Banner?" Banner's silence says it all.

"Fuck me," Emmett hisses. "She was working for Aro the entire time, wasn't she?" Banner nods his head. "So, Jasper here tells you about Bella and Seth, and then you told Bree."

"Who ran to Aro," Jenks finishes. "Son of a bitch."

"Please believe me when I say we didn't intend for this to happen. I appreciate how difficult this is
for all of you, but I also want you to understand that it's time to let us take this over. We are getting a team together to determine the best way to resolve the situation, and your interference will only make things worse."

I'm amazed at his arrogance and the nonchalant manner he's asking me to step away from the most important thing in my life.

"Let me get this straight," I state, barely containing my rage. "This all fell apart because of you and your team's shortcomings, and yet you expect me to step back and trust that you can clean it up?"

"Agent Cullen."

"Don't Agent Cullen me. Our group was making progress until you interfered. We wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for you. So no, I will not step back."

"I don't think you understand. This isn't a request, Agent Cullen. I'm giving you a direct order."

"Ha," I bark out. "In that case," I say pulling my badge out from my back pocket, "I quit."

"Same goes for me," Emmett declares, throwing his badge on the table next to mine.

"Well gentlemen, as informative as this little chat was, I think we're done here," Jenks adds, turning and opening the door so we can leave.

I hear Banner calling me back, but I ignore his request and keep walking down the hallway towards Seth's room. Suddenly, I hear footsteps running behind us.

"Edward, hold on," Jasper yells quickly catching up. "I want to help."

"That's rich," I hear Jenks mumble.

Spinning around, I confront him. "Go to hell! I don't want your help."

I start to walk away when he grabs my arm. Turning quickly, I swing around and punch him in the face. His head jerks to the side from the force and when he looks back, there is blood in the corner of his mouth. I admit the sight makes me want to smile. Jenks and Emmett move to flank me as we stare each other down.

Jasper is the first to break, holding his hands up in submission. "Edward, please understand I was only trying to protect the woman I love." His straining voice sounds pained, but at the moment I don't care.

"Funny, so was I," I say starkly looking him dead in the eye. "I don't think I can ever forgive you for this. If you want to help, stay out of my way."

Before walking back to Seth's room, I decide to leave Jasper with a final warning. "If something happens to her, you and I haven't even gotten started yet," I declare, pointing my finger in his face.

"Come on, Edward," Emmett says pulling me back. "We've got other things we need to focus on. We can deal with him later."

Dropping my hand, I walk away without looking back. Once we're back in Seth's room, I'm too agitated to sit down. Pacing back and forth, I focus on calming my rage and shaking body. Emmett and Jenks watch me closely, but know not to interfere when I'm in this mood. I trust them to
intervene if I go too far, but right now I need space to calm down.

The door suddenly opens and my hand automatically moves to the handle of my gun. If those motherfuckers think they're stepping foot inside this room, they have another thing coming. I quickly relax watching as Carlisle and Esme come through.

"Edward." Esme rushes over pulling me into a hug. "Are you okay?"

"They took her," I whisper, leaning into the comfort of her hug. For the first time tonight, I let my guard down.

"You'll find her. Everything will be okay," she whispers back, running her hand through my hair at the back of my head. The action reminds me of Bella. Pulling away, I get myself together. I don't have time to break down. She needs me to be strong.

"Thank you for coming," I say clearing my throat.

"We're glad to help," Carlisle answers. "I spoke with Seth's doctor. He's progressing well and as long as he doesn't develop an infection, they expect him to make a full recovery."

"Thank God," Jenks whispers, looking over at Seth.

"That's great." For the first time tonight, I breathe a small sigh of relief. However, it doesn't last long. There is a lot more to accomplish before I can celebrate. Turning to Carlisle and Esme, I get right to the point.

"I have to go, but I need you to stay with Seth. Carlisle, he has an aunt, but I don't think anyone has called her yet."

"I'll take care of it. We planned on staying as long as we need to. It's no problem."

"Thank you," I whisper, feeling grateful to have my family's support. "I have one more request," I say, looking up at both of them. "Do not let any cops or agents talk to him. I don't care what they say or what they offer, he is not to speak to them, no exceptions."

"Okay, but what if they push the issue?" Carlisle asks.

"Here, call Rose," Emmett says, writing her number on a piece of paper and giving it to Esme.

"Hold on, Emmett. I get that you trust her, but she's a federal prosecutor. Her supervisors will expect her to help the feds."

"I talked to her tonight, she's going to do her best to run interference and buy us some time, but she also knows a lot of criminal attorneys. She can recommend someone good to come down and represent Seth. If anyone tries to push the issue, they will know how to get them to back off."

"That's a good point," Jenks jumps in. "Dr. and Mrs. Cullen, I would make that call now, so you don't have to scramble when they start asking to talk to him."

"We'll call her right away. Thank you, Emmett," Esme says. "Now go and do what you need to do to bring Bella home. Don't worry about anything here, we've got it covered."

"Is Jasper staying here or going with you?" Carlisle asks. "We saw him down the hallway talking to a couple of men."

"He's not going with us, but he is not allowed in here either," I say gruffly.
"What's going on, Edward?" Esme questions with concern.

"I don't have time to get into it right now. Please, just do as I ask," I huff, frustrated.

I don't know what I'm going to tell my family about Jasper. He is still a part of this family, whether I like it or not. It will not be an easy problem to navigate. However, I'm too angry and worried about Bella to deal with the fallout of his behavior right now.

"Okay," Carlisle says hesitantly. "But you need to tell us soon."

"I know." There is nothing else to say.

Giving my family a brief hug, the three of us leave quickly to go to Jenks' place and confront Sam. The trip is quick and tense, none of us are very talkative. Arriving at the apartment, Jenks leads us into the bedroom where he has Sam tied to a chair with a gag stuffed in his mouth. His head is hanging forward and his body is limp.

Jenks checks his pulse and looks up with a smirk. "Bastard is just passed out."

Emmett and I watch as Jenks turns around and walks out the door. Following him back out to the living room, I watch in disbelief as Jenks casually sits at his desk and turns on his computer.

"What are you doing?" I ask, anxious to talk to Sam and get moving. I don't want them to get too far ahead of us.

"I'm checking to see if anyone has responded to my request for assistance. Since he's out, let's talk about a plan first."

"How many people did you contact?" Emmett inquires.

"Over a dozen."

"Do you think anyone is willing to take on Aro?" Given his reputation, I can imagine most people will hesitate to respond or not respond at all.

"I don't know, but I'm willing to cash in every favor owed to me to make this work," Jenks utters, logging onto his account. "Holy shit!"

"You got some hits?" I ask rushing around to look at the screen.

"No. Looks like the kid sent me everything on his hard drive before they got to him."

"Seth did good," Emmett comments quietly from the other side of the living room.

"No, the kid did great," Jenks contends. "There are things on these files about the Volturi system that is going to come in handy if we have to go into Aro's complex."

Jenks is right, this information is invaluable. Sorting through the files, Jenks comes across one that is not labeled and is time stamped with today's date. Clicking it open, both of us suck in our breath at the shocking sight.

"Fuck me! He finally got access to those pictures," Jenks exclaims, verbalizing my exact thoughts.

"What are the pictures of?" Emmett asks anxiously, moving rapidly across the apartment to look at the screen too.
Jenks clicks a button and almost immediately, picture after picture fills the screen. I knew that the pictures were important, but nothing prepared me for just how important. Caius was a sneaky genius, he sent Bella into the world with a huge protective bargaining chip. The only lingering question is why he didn't tell her about the powerful information she's had with her all these years.

"Do you guys realize what this is?" Jenks whispers, flipping through each image.

"Yup," I whisper back still astounded.

The file contains hundreds of pictures providing concrete evidence of Aro's criminal activities. There are long distant shots of him committing several murders, as well as pictures of documents detailing fraud, bribery and various other felony crimes. The pictures of the murders are the most damning, each cataloging the date, name of the victim and where it took place. It will be enough to prosecute him in several countries, a couple of which still have the death penalty. Agencies are going to salivate over this evidence. I can imagine the feeding frenzy now, including the fight for which country will get a piece of him first.

"I wonder what these pictures are worth to Aro," Jenks mutters.

"What are you thinking?" Emmett asks.

"I'm thinking we offer him a trade. Bella for the evidence."

"You really think he's going to trade so easily?" I scoff knowing how badly Aro also wants Bella.

"No, but I think it will get us access," Jenks smirks with a quirk of his eyebrow.

The crazy bastard is brilliant. We just found our way in.

BPOV

"Edward?" I mumble turning my head, keeping my eyes closed. I feel groggy and sore.


The terror I've experienced over the last couple of hours comes flooding back when I recognize it as James'. My eyes fly open, suddenly remembering what happened before I blacked out.

I discern right away that I'm on a plane and the motion I feel confirms my fear that we are already in flight. When I try to move, I find I can't. Looking down, I see each of my hands cuffed to the chair and my feet tied together. Pulling at my restraints, I hiss as the metal cuts into the already damaged skin on my wrists. Demetri and James are sitting across from me colored in satisfaction and amusement as I struggle to free my hands.

To their right, Jake is sitting stoically. I look away quickly trying to ignore him and his colors, which are only adding to my confusion. I was hoping the vision of him before I passed out was something I imagined. Nothing that makes any sense can explain why he is sitting here alive. A part of me desperately wants an answer, but I bite my tongue from asking. The last thing I want is to give him or anyone else the satisfaction of thinking I care.

"How are you feeling?" James asks sweetly. "Do you want something to drink?"

I glare in his direction, not fooled by the friendly tone. I refuse to respond, but using my finger, I hope my non-verbal communication is enough to tell him where he can shove his offer.
James smirks. "Still feisty. I think that's the quality I've missed the most. It makes the game that much more fun."

He looks at me and licks his lips. The sight doesn't help my already queasy stomach, which is sickened by the combination of my injuries and fear. I know my situation is grim. There is nowhere to run, and being tied to the chair eliminates any chance for me to fight them.

Looking across, I decide to assess their colors again on the slim chance a closer look can give me an advantage somehow. At this point, I will take any little thing. As before, the three men are a variety of emotions and colors. Starting with the easiest, I look at James. His colors are dark and lustful, while Demetri is red with hatred. Nothing about their mood or demeanor is helpful.

Taking a moment to prepare myself, I finally focus on Jake. He has yet to speak, but an unexpected amount of sorrow fills his eyes. His colors are hues of sadness, regret and fear. Shaking my head, I turn towards the window again, my eyes filling with tears.

I trusted his colors years ago, but I don't know if I can believe in them anymore, not with everything I've learned. I have never felt so lost or confused. I don't know what to do. I trust Seth and his ability to find reliable information, but trusting in my ability has saved my life more than once. Both are telling me different things, so for now it is just easier not to look.

"So quiet. You're not even going to say hello to your long-lost friend? Come on, Isabella, aren't you happy to see good old Jakey here?" James taunts. I keep my head turned to the side, refusing to acknowledge him.

"Sorry, Jake. I don't think she likes you anymore."

"Like I give a fuck," he says cruelly, the tone of his voice foreign to my ears. A tear falls down my cheek as my situation starts to look more hopeless by the second. I keep my head to the side, knowing the sight of him will only make it worse.

"It's time. Bring me the computer," James commands.

I hear rustling and various noises as they move around. I still refuse to look over, wishing I could just fade away.

"Hey boss, I've got her," James says. My heart drops at his words. "Demetri, could you?"

Suddenly, cold hands twist my head to the front. Not paying attention, I missed Demetri moving around to stand behind my chair. James is sitting with a computer across from me. Jake is now sitting next to the window furthest from me. He's avoiding my gaze, but regret is floating around him.

"Someone wants to speak with you," James smirks, twisting the computer around. On the screen is Aro, his face breaking into a sickening grin when he sees me.

"Isabella, la mia lunga figlia perduta. Non posso aspettare fino al vostro arrive. Abbiamo tanto da recuperare."

Unable to control my rolling stomach any longer, I break free of Demetri's grasp to lean forward and throw up on the floor. Aro laughs in the background at my humiliation while Demetri slaps the back of my head, yelling about messing up the plane. James smirks and tells Demetri to get someone to clean it up. Jake glances over with indifference, the conflicting emotion of concern shadowing him.
Leaning my head against the window, I close my eyes praying that the blackness finds me once again.

Edward, I need you.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time, when we will officially meet Aro and find out more about Jake's sudden apparence. ;)

Translations:

Isabella, la mia lunga figlia perduta. = Isabella, my long lost daughter.

Non posso aspettare fino al vostro arrivo, abbiamo tanto da recuperare. = I cannot wait until your arrival, we have so much to catch up on.
Chapter 26: Face the Dark

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone.

As always I own nothing related to Twilight.

A huge shout out to my betas beautifulnighmarex and Tds88, and pre-reader Beachlover. They are the best!

Important: This chapter contains description of violence and dark subject matters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 26: Face the Dark

"We're beginning our initial descent and should be on the ground in about twenty minutes."

The pilot's voice echoes through the intercom bringing me back from my inner musings to the harsh reality I'm facing. Closing my eyes, I awkwardly lean down so that my cuffed hand can grab the necklace Edward gave me. Touching it makes me feel closer to him. During the flight, I've thought a lot about the people I left in Seattle. Each one of them means so much to me. They are my family.

I've gone over what happened a thousand times trying to piece together how it all went wrong. The logical but horrifying conclusion is that someone leaked information. The specifics of whom and why, I'm still trying to sort out. I have my suspicions about Jasper, but no reliable evidence to prove it. The scariest part of yesterday's events is that I don't know how it ended. Things became chaotic so quickly, I'm not sure if they made it out alive or if they made it to Seth in time.

My thoughts of Seth are the most distressing. The image of him bleeding on the floor haunts me. I've tortuously replayed those last moments, questioning whether there was something else I could have done differently. Seth has to live. The alternative is not something I can accept or contemplate.

Happy memories of Edward have kept me from losing my mind when the agonizing thoughts become too much, his loving words giving me hope and courage.

*I need you on your best game, Swan, if you and I are going to take on the world.*

I've spent the last several hours becoming primed and focused. I refuse to have another embarrassing and weak moment like I did earlier.

*I will always fight for you, Bella. Only you.*

Brick by brick I restore the defensive walls that Edward crumbled over the last several months. Although I don't want to become the hollow person I was before, those barriers will protect me from Aro and his games. He uses people's emotions against them, and I cannot allow him to get the best of me.
I'm going to fight for this, baby; however long it takes, I will fight for you. Please don't stop fighting for me.

Aro will not win. I am stronger than I was when I left.

You deserve to have peace, Bella.

Underneath my numb exterior, I stay wrapped in the warmth of Edward's love. I'm relying on it to keep me from losing myself.

Baby, you are not a coward. You're a survivor. There's a big difference.

I have to survive. There is no other option. Unlike before, I have something to live for and people waiting for me to come home.

Hey, I'm not going anywhere. I know what I have, and there's no way I'm letting you go.

I refuse to give up my dream of a future with Edward.

I love you, Bella Swan.

The plane shutters and shakes as we start our final descent to Aro's private airfield. A storm is rolling in making the air turbulent and difficult for the jet to navigate. I watch the clouds float by the window, preparing myself for the challenges ahead.

I've successfully dodged any interaction with my three escorts. Demetri hates me as much as I hate him, so he was the easiest to avoid. James was the most difficult with his taunting and verbal jabs, but knowing my lack of reaction frustrates the hell out of him made biting my tongue worthwhile.

Jake sat stoically the entire time. He did not attempt to talk to me, however, every once in a while I could feel his stare. Thousands of questions sit at the tip of my tongue. The fact that he is alive makes no sense, especially considering I was there when he died.

I'm glad the day is over. Aro was in a particularly foul mood all day long. However, no matter how bad it was, nothing could keep my spirits down. Tonight Jake and I have a date. A date night with Jake always makes me smile, but tonight is particularly important. He finally figured out a way for us to leave. Soon I will be free of this torturous existence. Tonight is the beginning of my new life.

I feel like I'm flying as I run all the way out to the barn that is our secret meeting spot. Aro never comes out here and there is no surveillance. I don't think I've ever been this happy.

Turning the corner, I stop dead in my tracks. Jake is lying on the floor in front of me, blood pooling all around him. I'm frozen for several moments, unsure of what I should do. Finally I break out of my haze and rush over to him.

"Jake!" I'm afraid to touch him. There is so much blood. "No, no, no."

"Isabella," he groans.

Relief floods my body. He's alive. "I'll get you help," I choke out before getting up.

I sprint over to the main stable hoping that someone is still here. Running inside, I scream for help, but silence is the only response. Frantically looking around for something that can help, I spot the truck used to transport the horse trailer by the side door. Grabbing the keys hooked on the wall, I run out and drive the truck over to the barn.
Somehow, I manage to maneuver Jake to the truck and get him into the cab. His body is heavy against mine as I support his weight. Jake tells me to sit him up and cover him with a blanket so we can get past the gate. I'm not allowed to leave without a guard. Pulling up to the gate, the man guarding it lets us through once Jake waves.

I speed to the hospital and pull up next to the emergency room entrance. Running in, I scream for someone to help me. When the team gets to the car, Jake is lying on his side unconscious. They rush him into the hospital. I follow numbly, watching as the doctors and nurses' work, saying things I don't understand but sound bad.

The machines suddenly go crazy, the trauma team jumping into action at the sound. All too soon, the commotion starts to slow. The doctor shakes his head, and then looking at the clock, calls the time of death.

I stand staring at the scene in front of me. I don't know what to do. Once again, everything that mattered to me is gone.

Scrutinizing the day through older eyes, I realize a number of things. I never checked his wound, and getting out of the gate was a little too easy. However, those inconsistencies still don't explain the hospital. It just doesn't make sense, but that he is here on this plane tells me that Aro had something to do with it.

All too soon the plane touches down. James, Demetri and Jake stand up and grab their gear, preparing to get off the plane. Demetri is the first to acknowledge me, his hatred rolling off of him.

"I hope Aro doesn't think I'm going back to being her fucking babysitter. I've earned my way above that grunt work," he says with disdain.

"I'll watch her," James taunts, leering in my direction.

"God, you're both children," Jake sneers. "I'll take her."

The cabin becomes quiet after James and Demetri deplane. I'm interested in the dynamic between Jake and James. The fact that James didn't argue with him makes me wonder who is really the second in Aro's command. Their dynamic may give me some leverage to pin the two against each other.

Jake has yet to look at me as he makes his way over and kneels down. I can't help but stare at him. His eyes are hollow with dark circles underneath them. His face looks worn and lined with signs of stress. It's the kind of aging that occurs due to circumstances, not from simply growing older.

For several moments, he focuses all of his attention on undoing my bindings. He starts with my legs, carefully cutting the zip ties used to fasten them together. Then he moves to my hands, gently releasing the cuffs, being careful to keep the metal away from the damaged skin. After letting the cuffs fall to the floor, he moves his hand down to mine, covering it and lightly squeezing. Slowly he looks up. His eyes are full of sadness and concern.

"It's going to be okay, Isabella. I promise," he whispers.

The conviction of his words and colors continue to confuse me. His touch is not one of someone who doesn't care. I'm about to ask him to explain what happened when I hear James yell behind me.

"Come on, Jake. The boss is waiting!"
Suddenly, his caring and concerned face morphs into indifference. "I'm coming!" he yells back, pulling me roughly out of the seat and pushing me toward the door and James.

After leaving the plane, I'm led to a limo that will take us the rest of the way to Aro's. The car is thankfully quiet on the short journey to the complex. I try to catch Jake's eye during the ride, but he is back to ignoring me. I need to understand what's going on with him.

Reaching our destination, I look around seeing that not much has changed over the last fifteen years. The main house is still ostentatious in its size and grandeur. Off to the side in the back, I see the guesthouse where I lived with my mom. The size is larger than most houses, but in comparison to the main house it's small.

James insists on being the one to walk me into the house. I'm sure it's because he wants the recognition of being the one that successfully brought Aro his prize. My body hurts as he jerks me along, my various injuries still painful. My head is pounding, my ribs ache and the wrist that I fell on during the fight is sore. I don't think it's broken, but I'm positive it's badly sprained. I try to ignore the pain and instead focus on making sure my gait is upright and steady. I'm determined to march in with my head held high.

Walking into the house, I'm surprised that Aro is not there to greet us. However, when we turn the corner, I realize they are taking me directly to his office. The dark hallway is familiar and still makes my heart beat faster with fear. Reaching the office door, I close my eyes briefly before we enter, preparing myself to see Aro again face to face.

Give me strength, Edward.

Walking in, I see him sitting in his throne-like chair at his desk. He's looking down signing documents, purposely prolonging the agony of our anticipated interaction by refusing to acknowledge me. I know he knows we've arrived. He wants to establish who has control.

Finally looking up, his face breaks into a huge grin. To an outside observer it would look welcoming and warm, but I know he is neither. It is all part of his repulsive game. Standing a bit taller, I look him directly in the eye, challenging him to get on with it already.

"Isabella," he says too sweetly, getting up and walking around the desk. "Look at you, all grown up."

He grabs my hands and kisses each of my cheeks. His lips are cold and rough against my skin, the smell of his cologne just as revolting as ever. Pulling back, he holds my arms up, his dark eyes appraising my appearance.

"You look so much like your mother. Such a pity." I roughly pull my hands back and glare. "Isabella, aren't you happy to see me?" he asks with a sinister smile.

"I think you know the answer to that, Aro. Let's stop with the games shall we?"

Aro gazes at me evenly. If not for the slight twitch I notice in his hand, no one would know he's angry. Sighing heavily, his eyes stare intently into mine as he picks up his phone and barks out orders.

"Get down here. She's arrived and she looks absolutely dreadful," he says glancing once again at my clothes. "You have a lot of work to do. I want her looking acceptable for dinner."

"Dinner?" I ask hesitantly as he puts his phone down.
I did not expect him to play the game this way. Given how badly I humiliated him, I prepared for an angry and violent reaction. This abnormal act of pretending that nothing has changed is disturbing.

"We still have expectations in this household, Isabella. Nightly dinners have not changed."

"Are you fucking serious?" I laugh starkly.

Suddenly, he strikes me hard in the face, my head jerking to the side. I taste blood, the slap re-opening my split lip from my fight with Sam. I'm almost relieved at his expected reaction. I know how to deal with this Aro.

"It would be wise to remember your place, Isabella," he growls, and for a moment his mask falls showing nothing but hatred. He quickly returns to his calm facade, but a dark edge lingers in his tone. "Do not disobey me again."

We're still staring each other down when the door opens revealing my father's personal assistant, Gianna. She breezes over dressed in designer clothes and high heels, her hair hanging in perfect waves down her back. She's adorned with various pieces of jewelry, the gold and diamonds glittering under the lights. When I was little, I used to think she was a princess with her fancy clothes and jewels. As I became older, I realized she sold her soul for all of those riches. Apparently she's not developed the moral fortitude needed to leave and still prefers playing the role of his beck and call girl.

"Sweet Gianna, thank goodness you're here. Look at my poor Isabella," he says moving around and showing me off like a prop. "Her clothes are retched and her face is a mess. Can you work your magic before dinner?"

Gianna looks me up and down with an appraising eye before grinning from ear to ear. "Of course."

"Perfect. James, follow them," he says dismissively with a wave of his hand.

Gianna moves forward and grabs my elbow, her fake manicured nails digging into my skin. I pull my arm back, glaring. She gives me a pointed look before walking towards the door. James comes up behind me and pushes me forward.

Once at the threshold, she turns to wait. When I refuse to move she gestures to James, but before he can do anything, I give in deciding this is not a hill to die on.

"Stop manhandling me," I yell, looking fiercely at James. "I can walk myself." I need to pick my defiant moments carefully if I am going to survive and escape.

Our awkward trio silently makes our way to the third floor which holds the majority of the bedroom suites. Opening one of the doors, Gianna motions me inside. I shuffle forward, glancing behind when I hear the beginning of an argument.

"I don't think so. You stay out here," Gianna whispers sternly pushing James backwards.

"I'm supposed to watch her, and last time I checked, you are not my boss," James hisses.

"And last time I checked, Aro trusts me more than he does you. You need to keep your little perverted mind in check and your eyes on the prize. Now, stay out!"

She pushes him back again before quickly closing the door and locking it. "Porca miseria," she mutters before turning her eyes to me.
Since I've stepped off of the plane, my mind has cataloged information about the Volturi. Although many of the players are the same, I can tell their status with Aro is in flux. The more I can learn, the more ammunition I'll have to play his closest advisors off each other.

Gianna's conversation with James has piqued my interest about her relationship with Aro. She exudes a commanding confidence and feels secure in her role. It makes me wonder just how close she is to Aro. Something has changed over the last fifteen years, and there is definitely tension between her and James. This is another dynamic I can use to my advantage. Any chaos I can help create within the group will help Edward, Jenks and Emmett.

Instinctively, I know that as long as he is able, Edward will come to get me. He's made it clear time and time again that he won't let me go. A part of me hopes he comes quickly, while another part is afraid of what will happen when he arrives. My life would be worthless if the Volturi kill Edward during his attempt to rescue me. I need to help him as much as I can.

Walking over, Gianna evaluates me again, her penetrating eyes roaming up and down my body. Shaking her head slightly, she clicks her tongue in disgust.

"What have they done to you?" she asks, her eyes fixed on the bruises and scrapes on my face. "Have a seat, Isabella." She motions to the bed and then walks into the bathroom.

Taking her up on the suggestion, I sit down, my aching body appreciating the relief. Looking around the room, I notice several personal touches and pictures of people I don't know. I assume this is where Gianna stays. Coming out of the bathroom with several cloths and what looks like ointment, she stands in front of me.

"Let's see your face," she utters grabbing my chin.

Taking one of the wet cloths, she gently runs it over my face carefully cleaning my injuries. She is quiet during her task, neither overly concerned nor angry. She appears indifferent to my well-being.

"Are you injured anywhere else?" she inquires.

"My wrist and ribs," I say softly.

"Hmm," she mumbles carefully picking up my wrist.

She turns it slightly and I hiss in return. Digging through the pile of materials, she pulls out an ace bandage. Picking up my wrist again, she gently wraps it, the added support helping to ease the ache.

"That should help. There is really nothing we can do about your ribs. I don't think they're broken, and you wouldn't be talking if you were seriously injured," she says.

It appears like she's patched people up before. However, I doubt she has much medical expertise. I agree with her conclusion, but her explanation sounds like something you learn from watching medical dramas on TV, not from going to school.

"So, what exactly is the plan tonight?" I ask gathering information for my arsenal.

"Your father wants you at dinner."

"Yeah, I got that part. Why the facade?"

"Facade?" she asks innocently. Her colors suggest she knows exactly what I'm talking about.
"Don't play dumb. I've evaded him for fifteen years and yet when he finally sees me, he wants to sit down for dinner? I've watched him kill people for less, so what's the deal?"

"I guess you'll just have to ask him," she mutters, walking into the closet.

It's clear she knows more than she's saying and her comment to James lets me know that Aro has a plan. I just need to figure out what it is.

Gianna comes out of the closet holding a dark red floor length red dress. "Here, go put this on, we don't want to be late."

Sighing, I take the dress and walk into the bathroom to change. Although I'm not looking forward to dinner, I need to play the game if I intend to gather more information.

"Game on," I mutter looking into the mirror before taking off my clothes and putting on the dress.

Afterwards, Gianna announces that she's also going to do my hair and makeup. I couldn't help but compare the experience to the one I had with Alice only a few short weeks ago. I fight to keep my emotions in check, desperately wishing I was back in Seattle preparing for a magical night with Edward instead of a horrific dinner with Aro. Forty minutes later, I'm ready. Gianna opens the door and calls James to escort me to the dining room.

"Aren't you coming to dinner?" I question, still trying to sort out exactly how her relationship with Aro has changed.

"I'll be there shortly," she says cryptically.

I can tell she's trying to keep her emotions hidden. Aro must have warned her about my ability. However, her attempt is pointless. Trying to hide emotions doesn't keep me from seeing them. She's nervous about something.

Begrudgingly, I walk out the door to an awaiting James. He grabs my elbow roughly, my feet tripping as I try to keep up with his pace in the uncomfortable heels I'm wearing. When we turn the corner into an isolated hallway, he suddenly slams me up against a wall, bringing his face nose to nose with mine.

"Do you remember what I said to you before you left?" I stare at him blankly and shake my head no. "I said you'd become useless to him someday and when that happened he wouldn't care what I did to you."

I continue to stare at him with indifference, refusing to show the fear that is coursing through my body. I remember that conversation well.

"Well, Isabella, I'd say that day is here, and I can't wait to do what I've always wanted with you," he hisses while burying his face into the side of my neck.

On instinct, I lift my knee and slam it into his groin. Groaning, he falls to his knees, holding himself protectively.

"You bitch," he grunts out, still struggling.

Free of his grasp, I move around him quickly and start back down the hallway hoping that I can reach the side exit before he recovers. Before I get far, the sound of a gun arming stops me in my tracks.
"Hold it," Demetri says.

Turning around, I see him standing at the edge of the corner with his gun raised in my direction. Jake is standing behind him. Stepping around Demetri, Jake walks forward smirking at James.

"What's wrong, James? Lost your touch with the ladies?" he taunts.

"Fuck you," James grumbles getting back up.

"Better let me take it from here," Jake scoffs.

James grumbles and glares at me, but starts walking ahead of us with Demetri. Jake stands still and motions for me to wait. We stand for several moments before walking in the same direction. When we turn another corner, he unexpectedly pushes me into a darkened room. Shocked, I stand silently watching as he locks the door and turns on a light.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yell, tired of all the games.

Jake looks at me and holds his finger up to his lips in the universal sign for quiet. He then starts walking around the room looking for something under the tables and lamps. His colors are intense. He's nervous and fearful. Whether it is due to what he is looking for or being alone with me, I'm not sure.

Satisfied with his search, he rushes over and pulls me into a tight hug. Shocked by his actions, my arms remain limp at my sides. His arms feel wrong, they no longer hold the feeling of comfort they once did. They are not the ones I want around me.

Realizing I'm not returning his gesture, he pulls back colored in shades of embarrassment and disappointment. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed that would be okay given everything that's going on."

"Everything that's going on?" I ask incredulously. "You mean being kidnapped and taken back to Aro, or that you died but are somehow standing in front of me working with the man you swore you hated?"

"This is probably incredibly confusing. I never intended for you to find out this way," he pauses and looks at the ground. "You deserve an explanation," he whispers.

"You think?" I blurt out sarcastically.

"Look, I get your angry, but you need to calm down. We don't have much time and if you want to get out of this alive, you need to trust me."

I can't help but burst out laughing at his request, even though I see sincerity floating around him. "Are you seriously asking me to trust you?"

"Right now, you don't have much choice. I promise that I will explain everything when we have more time. Just believe me that not everything is what it seems."

"Since when have things ever been what they seem?" I spit out.

"Isabella, I know you can see the truth. Why don't you trust your instincts? I'm not going to hurt you," he says with exasperation.

"I trusted my instincts before and missed a lot, didn't I, Jacob. I don't know what to trust anymore."
"Everything between us was real," he replies sadly.

"Then explain it to me. Explain to me how in the hell you are here!"

"I…I can't." I glare at him. "I want to, but I can't. We can't be late for dinner. Soon, I promise. Please just trust me. I will get you out of this, I swear."

"Funny, seems like I've heard that before," I bark out sarcastically.

The color in Jake's face drains. "Not helping you is the biggest regret of my life. I won't fail you again," he whispers, his tone both broken and intense at the same time.

"I'm not going to hold my breath. Are we leaving or what?" I ask callously.

If he's not going to tell me the truth, I don't want to stay here. Jake nods, dropping his head slightly before walking back over to the door. He opens it and looks both ways before gesturing in a rapid fashion for me to walk out.

The rest of our journey is silent. I keep my eyes forward, not wanting to look at him and his colors. Until I understand what he's doing here, I refuse to trust or believe anything he says or what I see.

Like everything else, the dining room remains unchanged. A long table sits in the middle of the room, several formal looking chairs sitting around it. The table is already set, each plate filled with Italian dishes. Aro is sitting at the head of the table with Gianna, James and Demetri sitting off to the side.

"What took you so long?" Aro asks in a deadly tone.

Off to the side, I see James smirking; he likes that Jake is getting called out by Aro. James clearly wants to know he's Aro most trusted adviser, but given what I see, I don't think Aro has an identified second in command. Most likely the information reported by Jasper several months ago was part of the ruse and not reality. From the looks of it, James, Demetri and Jake are all vying for the same spot. Internally I smile, knowing that I can use this to my advantage.

Jake pushes me roughly into the room. The sudden movement causes me to lose my balance. Luckily, I'm able to catch myself before embarrassingly falling to floor. I look over my shoulder and glare at Jake.

"Isabella wasn't being cooperative, so it took a bit longer. But at least I was able to get her here," he says, smiling in James' direction.

"Enough," Aro yells, seeing the tension increasing between the two. "Everyone sit down so we can eat."

Gianna sits quietly next to Aro, but is glancing at him with admiration and love. She clearly has deep feelings for him, and I suspect their relationship has taken on an intimate quality. Unfortunately for her, I doubt Aro reciprocates those feelings. I would bet he is simply using her to satisfy his own needs. This adds another interesting dynamic to play with during dinner.

"So, I imagine you have many questions?" Aro asks while sipping his wine.

"I'm here. What else do I need to know?" I ask nonchalantly, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of reacting.

"Come on. We played all of you. My performance alone was mind-blowing!" James exclaims
wanting me to react to his subterfuge.

"Oh sure, a dead beat, loose cannon is such a stretch for you," I scoff. Jake laughs in his chair next to me.

"It was enough to fool you," he says darkly. Although he's right, any reaction will decrease my chances for success with my own con.

"It is interesting that Aro chose you to go. Doesn't being picked for such a risky mission make you expendable?" I ask casually, picking at my dinner. Glancing up quickly, I see him contemplating my suggestion that Aro considers him dispensable.

"When will the authorities learn that I'm always one step ahead of them," Aro comments haughtily, ignoring my jab at James.

"This particular plan was fairly elaborate," I point out, wanting more information about exactly what happened. I have a feeling there was a lot more going on than I knew.

"Five years of elaborate planning," Aro uncharacteristically admits.

The number of years only adds to my confusion. I hadn't even started working with the FBI at that point. Whatever "task force" James was talking about at the loft was not us. So, was it a coincidence that our group became targeted or was someone in our group a common denominator between the two? Jasper's face once again comes to the forefront of my mind as the most logical suspect.

"But I imagine your biggest questions don't have to do with what happened in Seattle as much as who's sitting beside you," Aro remarks, looking at me in amusement. Jake stiffens slightly in his chair.

"I admit, Isabella, you were always stronger than I gave you credit for, but I really did want us to get along after your mother died."

"Died?" I bite out. "You mean after you murdered her."

"Details, Isabella. You're not paying attention to the important part." His words are chillingly similar to my dream.

"Fine, what's the most important part?"

"The fact that I wanted to be closer to you," he says as if that should impress me.

"I think you and I differ on what's important," I sneer.

"Oh but it is, because I came to realize that no matter what I did, the influence of your mother remained too strong."

"I'm still not following why this is important."

"I could see it every time I looked in your eyes…hope. I needed to extinguish it, and that is where Jake came in."

I turn my head and glance quickly at Jake. His face and body are not reacting to Aro's words, but his chaotic colors are all over the map.

"I knew that if you lost someone else who had become close to you and offered you hope, it would
finally crush your spirit. Once that happened, I could come in and turn you into what I wanted."

"You set it all up?" I ask unbelievably, forgetting my goal of remaining detached.

"Yes, Isabella. I hired Jake to take you under his wing, romance you and then 'die'." His steely gaze pierces my heart as he answers. "Hmmm, I guess I've done elaborate plans for a while."

"But I was at the hospital when they pronounced him dead. There was no one else with me. How could you have planned that?" I ask trying to comprehend everything.

"Don't be obtuse, Isabella. If I set up you finding his injured body, don't you think I would know that you would take him to the nearest hospital? Money can buy a lot of things, including staging a fake trauma emergency."

"You're pure evil," I hiss. "You claim that you want us closer and yet the way you try to do it is setting up a convoluted scheme to break my spirit? That's insane!"

"But it worked. If not for Caius' interference you would've stayed lost."

"If not for Caius' interference, I would be dead," I correct him ruthlessly. "Do you have anything to add?" I ask turning to Jake.

"Yeah, it was fun to watch you fall for it hook, line, and sinker," he laughs darkly, his colors indicating a conflicting amount of guilt and shame.

I unconsciously reach up and grab my necklace. The simple touch helps me focus. The truth about why Jake became my guard is devastating, but I can't linger on the betrayal and anger I feel if I am to survive what is happening now. Looking around the table, I strategize my next move to play on the emotions that I see around me.

"Wow, well you certainly earned your stripes with Aro. I can see why he relies on you so much," I say to Jake. Both Demetri and James bristle at the comment.

"What?" Jake asks, suspecting there is another purpose behind my words.

"Nothing, I'm just commenting on what I see, is all."

"And what is it that you think you see, Isabella," Aro asks challenging me.

"That not much has changed. James still follows you around like a puppy looking for a bone, and Demetri is still your errand boy. Both believe you rely on them more than you do, but you'd sacrifice them over Jake any day simply because he pulled off the role of a lifetime. I feel kind of sorry for you two," I say looking pitifully at James and Demetri.

Aro glares. He is the only one in the room that knows I'm bluffing, but saying it has the effect I hoped, watching as James' and Demetri's anger flies off the chart.

"Shut the fuck up! You don't know anything," James yells, but his colors betray him. I've touched on a sore spot.

"What the hell is she talking about?" Demetri asks.

"She's playing you! I told you about her mind games. Don't fall for her tricks," Aro states continuing to glare.

"I don't know boys, who's playing who? Sounds like Aro told you about my ability. Do you think
he always tells you the truth? How can you be so sure that's not what I see? When has Aro ever been loyal?"

Gianna's been sitting quietly throughout this whole conversation, but I can tell that my last statement affects her as well.

"That's enough, Isabella! Gentlemen, I think it's time for you to retire," Aro barks, still refusing to take his eyes off of me.

"You want me to take her to her room, boss?" James asks, wanting to test Aro's trust in him.

"No. I have some business I still need to discuss with her." Quickly glancing to the side, I can see shades of doubt creeping into James' anger. Victory.

I continue to pick through my food as Jake, James and Demetri get up and leave the room. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Jake subtly trying to get my attention, but I refuse to acknowledge him. I have no time to sort through the truth with him or care about his feelings.

Deciding to focus on my next target, I'm the first to break the silence. "So, Gianna, I'm surprised to see that you still work here."

"Why is that, Isabella?" she asks coldly, trying to hide how nervous I make her.

In a sudden moment of clarity, I realize what she's trying to hide. Gianna believes she can worm her way into Aro's heart, but she's smart enough to know that if she expresses those feelings too soon, he will get rid of her. If Aro told her about my gift, she's probably worried that I will tell him about her feelings. Luckily for her, telling Aro about her feelings won't help my cause. I need to capitalize on her fears that he will leave her instead.

"It's just a lot of people in your position don't tend to stick around. It's not the most glamorous of jobs after all."

"I like it just fine."

"I remember before I left that you hated when you had to entertain one of his many female companions. Do you still do that for him?" I ask innocently. Her confidence diminishes a bit when I mention Aro's many conquests.

"Isabella," Aro hisses.

I know I'm pushing the boundaries, and I can tell Aro knows exactly what I am doing. However, it's worth the risk if I can plant a few well placed seeds of doubt. Keeping everyone preoccupied, worrying about the security of their roles, will hopefully make it easier for Edward and his team when they arrive.

"No, I don't do that anymore," she says lowly.

"Oh, I guess Aro has lots of other places to entertain his women these days then. I mean, he never could stick with any one person for long."

Gianna looks down at her plate, taking a mouthful of food as if nothing is wrong. However, her feelings betray how hurt she is at the possibility he's seeing someone else. My guess is that it is one of her worst fears.

"She's doing it again. Don't listen to her," Aro says gruffly. "Leave us. My daughter and I need to
I sit back in my chair with my arms crossed, preparing for the long overdue showdown as Gianna leaves the room. My heart is pounding in my ears, but I refuse to show any outward reaction.

"Having fun, Isabella?" he asks quietly.

"The best," I sneer.

"I think it's time we put all of our cards out on the table. It's not like I can hide things from you anyway," he growls, roughly pushing his plate over to the side.

He doesn't know I can't read him.

This is both good and bad. Good because he thinks I have an advantage, but bad because he will know if I read him wrong. I need to play this very carefully.

"You brought me here, why don't you start?"

"I never wanted children. So you were not a happy surprise. I'm not building an empire for someone to take over. Whatever I've created, I did it for myself. I don't care what happens to it after I'm gone, and I certainly have no emotional needs to fill, as you know."

I shake my head in agreement, a bit thrown by how far he went back to start his discussion.

"If it were up to me, you wouldn't even be here, but your mother wanted you. And she was willing to bargain a lot to keep you. Want to know just how much?" he asks evilly.

"No," I say through clenched teeth, realizing that things were even worse for my mother than I thought. "I don't need a history lesson, just get to the point. If you didn't want me, why do you care so much about what happens to me?"

"Do you have any idea what it takes to build the kind of organization I have? To have the success I do at not only expanding, but evading authorities?" he stops and waits for me to respond.

"I can imagine," I state not really caring, but remembering everything I've witnessed over the years. All I care about now is the truth.

"I have a unique ability to see things clearly. The possible moves people will make, the pitfalls and mistakes. I can also pick up on the nuances of body language."

"What do you mean?" I ask hesitantly, trying to sort out exactly what he is talking about. Does he have a gift too?

"The subtlety of people's body language is like a beacon to me. It's a talent I developed at an early age. How someone shifts their eyes, pupils and body can tell you a lot about a person. I use it to my advantage."

"And?" I ask frustrated, still not a hundred percent sure what he means.

"About a year before your mother's death," he says with a wink.

"You're a fucking bastard!"

"Language. Do you want an answer to your question or not?" I nod my head knowing if I open my mouth again, my anger will get the better of me. "Anyway, I overheard a conversation you were
having about your unique ability. I'm not often shocked, but you, Isabella, shocked me."

The conversation I had with my mom about Marco's colors suddenly comes to the forefront of my mind. I remember her fear after returning from checking on the door. Was that what Aro overheard? The timing fits with his sudden interest in getting me involved in his work, which was the catalyst for my mom wanting to leave.

Guilt fills my heart. Aro learning about my gift is what set off the chain of events that lead to my mother's murder. If only I was normal, maybe she would still be alive. Lightly touching my necklace, I push the guilt down, knowing I don't have time to wallow. I need to stay focused.

"I'd never felt any connection to you before then, but I understood in that moment that whatever gave me my talent also gave you your gift. It made us one in the same."

My stomach twists watching his face light up as he talks about our connection. I've always wanted to know why I had my gift, but the fact that it could have come directly from his twisted genes sickens me.

"Then I realized what our combined talents could do. The limitation of reading body language is that I can only evaluate the person in the present moment. But you can see their true character. That amazing ability would give me the advantage in every situation." His eyes almost look full of pride as he talks.

"I can't believe you. You didn't want to be close to me! You just wanted me to help you become a better homicidal maniac."

"Think what you will, but it takes dedication and sacrifice to become the most powerful man in the world."

"Sounds like you didn't need me."

"Not need, want. But your interfering mother actually thought she could take you from me. She's lucky I allowed such a quick death for her disloyalty."

"I hate you," I seethe. "I've always hated you. I would have never worked for you."

"Don't be so sure. You were close to breaking between Jake's 'death' and the arranged marriage to Marcus."

"Wait, if you wanted me to work with you so bad, why sell me off?" I ask suddenly confused by his arrangement.

"My plan was to use you to infiltrate his organization. Marcus was another fool who thought he was successfully working behind my back to take my kingdom away. The marriage was simply to lull him into a false sense of security. With you and your gift on the inside, I could destroy him faster."

"That plan would have only worked if I was willing to help you, which I wouldn't have," I say confidently. I can't believe the amount of arrogance he has in setting up such a detailed plan without the key player on board.

"You would have broken long before the wedding. However, I never had the chance to put it into play did I? Because you ran away, it ended up taking me over a year to dismantle him."

"Now we get to it. I ruined everything and what's more, humiliated you." Aro's eyes narrow and
darken as I challenge him, but I'm tired of listening to his delusional story.

"Don't flatter yourself. No one humiliates me."

"Don't lie," I state, taking a chance. His eyes widen slightly letting me know my assumption was correct. "So what is the point of all of this? Do you actually think I'm going to come back and work with you?"

"I think that you will eventually see the benefit of our partnership," he says matter-of-factly.

"You're delusional. How can you actually think that after everything you did to me, I would ever consider working with you?"

"Everyone has a weakness, Isabella. And now you have several, especially back in Seattle. It would really be a shame for something tragic to happen to Seth, Jason Jenks or Emmett McCarty. Better yet, what about the poor innocent Cullens? Esme, Carlisle, Alice and Edward. I hear you have a quite a special connection to him."

My heart drops as he methodically lists all the people I love and care about. "You leave them alone," I growl.

"No I don't think I can do that, but I would be willing to trade their safety."

"For what?" I whisper.

"Oh, I think you know. But before we talk about the specifics, you need time to really consider all of your options."

Aro stands up, his calm façade fading away as he becomes the man I know so well. The man I watched kill dozens of people. Walking over, he grabs my hair and yanks me out of the chair.

"I think it's time to visit the basement," he hisses in my ear. My blood runs cold. The basement is where he keeps his torture chamber. "Remember your lessons, Isabella? I think you have broken several of the most important rules I taught you. I already gave you chances by showing you what happens to others who break them. Now it's your turn."

I struggle as he pulls me towards the stairs, but his grip is strong and his pace quick. I unwillingly follow him down the dark staircase. Reaching the bottom, I shiver as the thin dress does nothing to protect me from the colder temperature. The concrete walls and floors hold little warmth.

Opening the first cell, he throws me in. The room is dark and the overwhelming smell of dirt, mold and urine fill my senses. A single cot takes up the length of the back wall, the mattress thin and stained. In the corner closest to me is a small sink and toilet. My eyes fill with tears when I realize his intent. My punishment is not one of pain, but of isolation and deprivation. Aro intends to break me.

"Think about my request, Isabella. I'll be back."

The door slams shut and I hear his footsteps fade away as he climbs the stairs. The room is now pitch black, so I carefully make my way to the cot and sit down, wrapping my arms around me for warmth. I was stupid not to have eaten more at dinner. I have a feeling that was my last meal for a while.

I can only hope that the seeds of doubt I planted at dinner work and wreaks havoc among Aro's team. James in particular seemed affected by my suggestions. Like so many of the other "empty
balloons" I've interrogated, James' hidden insecurities are his greatest weakness and his out of control response could become Aro's biggest problem.

Once my eyes adjust to the dark, the dim light from the crack under the door allows me to investigate my room further. Looking around the tiny space, it's hard to not feel hopeless. The walls are filled with desperate scribbles from previous occupants asking for mercy or death. The floor is dirty and the mattress is worse than I first suspected.

I try not to think about the cause of the stains. My dress is not a good barrier against the dirt or the cold. Sitting back against the wall, I grasp my necklace once again and finally let my tears fall. Closing my eyes, I focus on thoughts of Edward, hoping they will again give me clarity and strength to figure out how to get out of here.

I've been here for what feels like hours when I finally hear noises outside of my door. Sitting up straighter, I listen intently for any indication of what's happening. Although, I don't hear any voices, the scuffling noises are getting louder. I back against the wall trying to prepare myself for anything.

Suddenly, a blinding light fills my room along with what sounds like loud death metal music. I throw my hands over my ears trying to block the noise. The light pulsates and the combination of the two is very disorienting.

Fear creeps up my spine when I realize what is happening. It's a classic torture technique. Restrict sleep and break people down faster. I close my eyes and hold my hands tighter against my ears trying to block everything.

Time blurs together.

Without anything to orient me, I've completely lost track of time. My stomach growls and I wonder how long it will be until my next meal. Every so often someone pushes a small bottle of water and a granola bar through the food slot in the door. It's enough to keep me from starving, but not enough to fulfill my hunger.

The strobe light and blasting music continue to invade my room. My body feels the effects of the sleep deprivation and my mind is groggy. I don't know how much longer I can take this. I feel like I'm going crazy. Looking in the corner, I see that another visitor has arrived. They are coming more often.

"Hi, Bella. Did you know that sleep deprivation causes hallucinations?" fake Seth quotes.

"I do. Are you okay? I hope you're okay," I mumble, watching his sad face fade away.

Time passes.

I feel grimy. The dirt from the room is now covering me. I'm sure I look like a horrible mess. I giggle when I think about what Alice would say if she saw me. No amount of "finishing touches" can fix this disaster.

"Ace, you need to block it out. Let your mind rest," fake Jenks lectures standing against the wall.

I jump at the sound of his voice. I hate it when they just suddenly appear. "I'm trying."

"Try harder."
Time passes.

The door opens revealing Aro and Demetri. I sit up and watch as they walk to the bed in order to talk to me over the blaring music. Both are wearing sunglasses to protect their eyes from the pulsing light.

"Hi, Isabella. How are you doing?" Aro asks.

"Peachy," I say gruffly. My throat is dry and scratchy.

"Have you learned your lesson?"

"Oh, you mean the lesson that you're an evil bastard? Yup, I've learned that lesson well," I spit out sarcastically.

"It sounds like you need more time," Aro calmly responds.

"Hey, Demetri, does Aro ever give you a job that doesn't include you following him or someone else around? You really like being his lap dog, don't you?"

"Shut up!" Demetri yells.

I lean forward and gesture with my finger for him to come closer. "Shhh, I'll tell you a secret. Aro is never going to trust you, so don't expect to get much higher up on his food chain," I say laughing.

Demetri doesn't overtly react, but through the red of his anger, I can see shades of doubt. I'm starting to get to him.

"That's enough. We'll try again another day, Isabella," Aro's declares before turning and walking out the door with Demetri.

My mother and Caius suddenly appear in their place, both expressing disappointment.

"This isn't what I wanted for you, Isabella," my mom whispers.

"I gave up my life for you. What are you doing just sitting here? Fight, God damn it," Caius says harshly.

"I'm sorry," I sob. "I'm trying."

Time passes.

Suddenly everything goes quiet and dark. My mind is at a loss. I don't know what to do with the sudden silence. My body begs for sleep. Lying down, I close my eyes, hoping the reprieve is not due to another visit where I tell Aro to go fuck himself and then the torture starts all over again. Just a few moments of rest would be a relief.

Noises outside of my room grab my attention. I listen for Aro's command to open the door, but instead I hear scuffling.

"Get your fucking hands off of me."

This is a new development my cloudy mind contemplates. I hear the key in the door. Backing closer to the wall, I prepare to stand up to Aro again. No matter how tired I am, I refuse to let him break me. At least that is what I keep telling myself and everyone who comes to visit.
Demetri opens the door and pushes a man inside. Squinting to get a better look, my heart constricts when I recognize him. It's only fake Edward coming to visit. Maybe I've finally gone deaf and blind. No that doesn't make sense either because I can still see my hallucinations, whatever the reason for the sudden silence, at least I can get some rest.

"Jesus! What did you do to her?" fake Edward yells moving over to me.

"Aro said to give you two some privacy. Torture time is over for now, Isabella," Demetri sneers.

"I'm going to kill you," fake Edward threatens as the door slams shut once again.

I close my eyes, even the sight of Edward is not enough to stop my body from seeking the sleep it desperately needs. However, before I can succumb to the darkness, I feel hands on my face. This has never happened before.

"Bella? Bella, can you hear me? What did they do to you, baby?"

Hands continue to roam my face. They slide down and reach behind my back, pulling me up and into a warm embrace, words of love and comfort filling my ears. My mind is nudging me, telling me something's not right. This is more than a hallucination.

Opening my eyes, I pull back and look at Edward sitting in front of me. Reaching up with a shaky hand, I touch his face expecting air like all the other times I've tried to touch him. However, unlike before, I feel only warm skin and a scruffy beard.

"You're here?" I whisper.

"I'm here. Jesus, you're freezing." Edward takes off his jacket and quickly wraps it around me. I breathe in his sent as the warmth surrounds me. "You look so tired," he whispers, tracing his finger down my face. "How badly are you hurt?"

"I don't know," I whisper. My brain feels mushy, I can't think straight. "How? Why?" I stutter. I'm so happy to see him, but I don't understand what this means.

"I'll tell you when you're more coherent." Leaning closer, he whispers softly in my ear, "Don't worry, we've got a plan." Pulling back, he winks before giving me a soft kiss.

"I can't believe you're here," I mumble.

"You need to sleep, baby. Don't worry, I've got you," he whispers lying down with me.

"Please be real," I whisper as my body finally shuts down.

Chapter End Notes

Only a few more chapters to go.

Translations:

Porca miseria = miserable pig
Chapter 27: Holding Out For a Hero

Warmth surrounds me and I snuggle into the softness. It smells familiar, like spice, like Edward. I try to bury myself deeper, afraid that if I open my eyes, the warmth and comfort will disappear like the wisps of a forgotten dream.

"Shh, Bella, it's okay," I hear Edward's voice say. *Is it true? Is he really here?*

I feel arms tightening around me and for the first time since coming here, I feel safe. Opening my eyes, I see Edward looking at me with a small smile.

"There are those beautiful eyes," he whispers running his hand down my face.

"Am I dreaming?" I ask. My head still feels groggy and my memories are hazy.

"No, you're not dreaming. I'm here."

Sitting up, the room spins a bit. "Take it slow," Edward chastises, concern lacing his words.

"How long was I out?" I ask trying to gather my bearings.

"A while. How are you feeling?"

"A little out of it, but better than before. What's happening?"

"A lot. I'll explain everything, but first I want to make sure you're okay. What happened?"

"From what point? I don't even know what day it is," I mumble looking around the room.

Getting up off the bed, Edward kneels in front of me and runs his hands along my body evaluating my injuries. His face looks pinched as he catalogs each wound: the fading bruises and cuts on my face, the chaffed skin from the cuffs, as well as the dirty ace bandage surrounding my wrist.

"What did they do to you?" Edward asks in a deadly tone.

"Um, James knew where we were and he and Demetri came to get me. Oh God, Seth. They shot Seth!" I yell, the fog finally lifting from my brain.
"Shh, he's okay, Bella. We got there in time. He's on the road to a full recovery, I promise."

The weight on my heart lightens knowing he's alive. "Thank God," I whisper having trouble controlling my tears. "Was Sam dead? I think I stabbed him." I don't regret my actions. I did what I did out of self-defense, but it doesn't mean I like knowing that I might be responsible for someone's death.

"He was alive when we got there. We took him back to Jenks' place."

"Why would James risk that?"

"He was bleeding pretty heavily. I don't think James thought we would make it out of the warehouse as quickly as we did. Or at all. My bet is he assumed Sam would die long before anyone could get there."

"Where is he now?"

Edward looks at me gravely. "He didn't make it."

"Because of his stab wound," I say quietly.

"No. Jenks was responsible for his death. And believe me, Sam brought it on himself."

"Oh." I really don't know what else to say, especially because I'm not interested in hearing the details of his death. Using my ace bandage, I wipe at the tears that refuse to stop.

Edward raises his hand to help wipe them away. "I was so scared, Bella, when I realized they were coming for you. And then seeing the destruction at the loft." He pauses to take a shaky breath. "You have no idea how terrified I've been."

Looking closely, I can see the results of our separation. He looks slightly thinner. His haggard and scruffy face a clear sign of his anguish. The dark shadows under his haunted eyes evidence that he hasn't rested. My abduction has worn on him significantly.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, running my hands down his face trying to erase the distress I see.

"No, I'm sorry. I should have protected you," he chokes, grabbing my hand and linking our fingers. He hasn't stopped touching me since I woke up.

"It's not your fault, Edward. There was no way you could have known it was a trap. Please don't blame yourself."

"Never again, Bella. I will never let anyone hurt you ever again. I swear."

His nostrils flare as he makes the declaration. I can feel his need for revenge radiating from his tense body. The intensity of his words scares me. Emotion magnifies risk, and I don't want him to lose focus. I still don't know how or why he is here, but we have no room for error when it comes to Aro.

"I know. It's okay." I reach forward to pull him close, trying to reassure him that I'm here. His arms hold me tightly. "I love you, Edward."

As I say the words, his body melts into mine, most of the tension draining out. "I love you. I was so afraid that I'd never be able to tell you again," he whispers into my neck.

I feel his mouth ghost along my neck, traveling slowly across my cheek before capturing my lips in
a kiss filled with desperation and love. For a moment, I allow myself to succumb to the comfort, trying to pretend we are in the loft instead of a cell. All too soon, the spell breaks, both of us knowing we don't have the luxury to enjoy our reunion.

With the moment over, the tension of our situation once again fills the space between us. Although I am happy to see him, I'm still unsure of why he is here and what this means. I vaguely remember him mentioning something about a plan. I need to know what it is so I can help, but first things first; I need to know how much time I've lost.

"How long have I been gone?" I ask.

Edward looks at me strangely. "Six days counting today. Bella, why don't you know that? What exactly did they do to you?"

"I lost track of time. There was music and lights. I couldn't sleep. Everything got confusing," I stutter, my memories painfully raw even in their hazy context. I may not remember all the details, but I remember that my hope was slowly fading away.

"That's what Demetri meant," Edward whispers quietly. Suddenly he jumps up and starts pacing the length of the cell, his fist clenching and unclenching. "Your own fucking father tortured you?"

"You expected something different?" I ask sitting up straighter, feeling a little more awake and coherent. Six days. I can't believe I went that long without sleeping. I wonder how long it will take until I don't feel tired anymore. My body still feels achingly exhausted.

"To what end?" Edward asks lowly, standing stiffly with his head down trying to reign in his temper.

"He has some delusional belief that I'll work for him. He wants to use my ability to for his own personal gain."

"So he does know," Edward states.

"Yeah, he's known for years. It's why he killed my mom," I say softly. My tears return, the lack of sleep is making it more difficult to keep my emotions in check.

Edward rushes back over to comfort me. "You are not to blame for your mother's death. The only one responsible is Aro, and he's going to pay for all of it, I swear," he whispers in my ear.

"I'm so glad you're here," I murmur, sinking into his comforting warmth.

These are the arms I've longed to have around me. It's hard not to compare the stark differences between Edward and Jake. I've known for a while that the feelings I have for Edward are deeper than anything I felt for Jake. However, knowing the betrayal that Jake committed solidifies the differences between the two men. Edward would never betray me. He's risked everything to come here and I know without a doubt that I can always trust him.

"Jake's alive," I blurt out.

Moving back, he looks at me shocked. "Jake, Jake?" he asks.

"Yes. He faked his death. He and Aro planned everything, including Jake starting a relationship with me. Aro said he needed to break me, and Jake was the way he intended to do it." Even though tears continue to run down my face, it's hard to contain my anger. I hate them.
Edward pulls me close again and whispers in my ear. "Jesus, have you been able to figure out how he was able to hide it from you? What do you see in him now?" I try to pull back so I can look at him when we talk, but Edward holds me tighter. "I'm pretty sure Aro can hear and see everything," he whispers. "We have to be careful about what we say out loud."

I lean in closer understanding his request. We have to protect any information that might be helpful to our escape, like what I might see in Jake. Therefore, we need to continue our conversation by awkwardly whispering in each other's ears.

"I don't know. He was always filled with regret and remorse. I just assumed it was because he didn't like working for Aro."

"Or maybe he didn't like betraying you," Edward says hesitantly.

"But that doesn't fit with what Seth found in those files. The person he described is a psychopath incapable of remorse, not the person I'm reading. I don't know if I can trust what I see in him."

"And what do you see in him?"

"Everything I see in him tells me he's feeling guilty and that he cares about me," I admit slowly, uncomfortable about talking about Jake's possible feelings for me with Edward. "He claims things aren't what they seem and that he's going to help me escape."

"He said he was going to help you?" Edward asks.

Even though I can't see his face, I can tell he is trying to figure things out. Something tells me he has information that he hasn't shared yet, probably connected to this plan.

"What?" I ask.

"There's someone working on the inside for the Italians. We weren't given his name, but they've been deep undercover for a long time. I'm wondering if it could be Jake."

"How do you know someone's undercover?"

"Whoever it is let his handler know he wasn't going to sit back and watch you get hurt. Word got to us that he was looking for a way to get you out. Anyway, it sounds like something only someone who cared about you would do."

"So, it's a double cross of a double cross? Fuck, I don't know what's real anymore or what to believe," I say hoarsely.

My head is spinning with the implications of what Edward revealed. If Jake is undercover, maybe what I see in him is the truth and he really does regret not helping me all those years ago. However, even if it is true, it still doesn't change the fact that he willingly helped Aro try to destroy me. How does that fit into his undercover mission?

Sliding out of our embrace, Edward moves his hand to my face and tilts my chin until our eyes lock. "This is real, Bella. You and me. No matter what else happens or what you learn, trust in me. Trust in us."

"I do. You're the only thing I believe in. I won't survive if something happens to you," I sob falling back on to his chest, the dread of the situation finally catching up to me.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," he whispers, softly kissing my head.
He holds on tightly, gently rubbing up and down my back, allowing me time to pull myself together. Although I don't know exactly what's going on, I imagine we don't have much time before Aro interrupts us. I need to control my emotions better, there's a lot more we need to discuss.

"Your turn, what exactly are you doing here? Did Aro take you?"

"No, he didn't take me. I'm here to broker a deal for your freedom."

"What?"

Edward leans in closer. "Remember, there are people listening, so don't react to anything I say." I nod my head letting him know I understand. "Jenks received the files from the flash drive when Seth sent everything to him."

The flash drive. In the chaos of everything, I had completely forgotten about those files. "What were they?"

"It was evidence against Aro that included enough pictures and documents to prosecute him in several countries."

"Why give me the files but not tell me they were there?"

I'm shocked by the risk Caius took gathering that kind of evidence. However, I don't understand why he would take such an extreme risk and then not tell me about the information. It doesn't make any sense.

"Seth looked closer at the flash drive and file after he woke up-"

"He really is okay," I interrupt, breathing a sigh of relief knowing he is well enough to work.

"The kid's a fighter. He woke up asking for his computer. He's worried about you too and wants to do whatever he can to help get you back."

"He's pretty special," I mumble, thinking about everything Seth has done for me. Although I haven't known him for long, it's hard to imagine my life without him in it. I've never had a sibling, but I think Seth is the closest thing I will come to having one. Our bond is not one of blood, but of tragedy and survival.

"He cares about you," Edward comments.

"What about the files?" I ask getting back on topic before my emotions get the best of me once again.

"He said the corrupted files messed up Caius' plan. Reading the code, Seth said the files should have opened when you used it, most likely with instructions. I guess he didn't want to risk exposure before you left. Whatever corrupted the files stopped that from happening."

"Does he know what corrupted them?"

"Possibly, he said the code written for the hacking program and the one written for the files weren't done by the same person."

"How does he know that?"

"The code for the files looked like the work of an amateur. Whoever wrote it knew just enough to write the program, but didn't understand how the two programs would interfere with each other. I
guess the original code corrupted the files. Seth suspects that Caius bought the flash drive from someone and then tried to write the other code himself, which makes sense because I don't see him trusting that information to anyone else."

"Wow," I say, stunned at the planning that must have gone into that flash drive. I didn't realize that Caius knew anything about computers.

Thinking back, he probably was right not to tell me about the files. I was feeling pretty desperate before I left and there's no telling what I would've done with that information back then. Doing something impulsive and stupid against Aro before I escaped would have led to my death one way or another and that was the exact thing Caius wanted to prevent.

Ironically, my focus after I left was to avoid everything in my past. If the file had come up, I don't know what I would have done. At that point, I wanted to avoid exposure at all costs. I don't see myself willingly bringing the information forward. It makes me curious about the possible instructions he left. I wonder if his intention was for me to turn it over or to hold onto it in case someone found me.

"He loved you and wanted to protect you," Edward whispers, running his hand through my hair.

"So what exactly does that have to do with you brokering a deal?" I ask hesitantly, afraid of his answer.

"We offered him a trade, the evidence for you."

"Are you crazy?" I ask loudly, forgetting for a moment that someone is probably monitoring us.

"Shhh." Edward reaches out pulls me closer again. "It's okay. Like I said, we have a plan."

"There's no way Aro will make a trade. He'll just kill you," I whisper harshly.

"We know that he won't trade. We just need him to believe that's why I'm here. It was the best way to get in here to find you."

"Is that why you're down here? Are you being held by Aro as a part of the trade?"

"Not really. Aro thinks he has me where he wants me, but really we have him where we need him."

"I have no idea what you just said," I grumble. My head is clearer, but apparently still a bit sluggish.

"He thinks I'm here simply to bargain, but he's wrong."

"Okay, he thinks you're here to bargain. But why bring you down here?"

"I refused to discuss the trade until I saw you. Come on, you know it's all about quid pro quo with these types of deals," he jokes with a wink.

Not finding the humor in the situation, I try to get more clarification. "But letting you see me is more leeway than Aro normal gives in his business transactions. It doesn't make sense."

"That is what I meant earlier. He's 'giving in' to my request, but in reality he's using this time for his own gain. That's why I'm sure he's watching us. He is trying to gather information about me and our relationship."

"Edward, what exactly are you planning?" I ask nervously. It sounds like a lot of thought went into
setting up this meeting with Aro, but so far, I don't see anything about it that gives our team the advantage.

"When I said never again, I meant it. We're here to take him out. Nothing less."

"We?"

"Emmett, Jenks and several of his friends. We've got everything covered."

"I've heard that before."

"What happened in Seattle had nothing to do with us. We're ready this time," he says confidently.

"People have tried to destroy Aro before."

"But with a second agenda, either to bring him to justice or take over his businesses. I don't give a fuck about any of that. I want to obliterate him, nothing more nothing less."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It means he won't know what hit him. I don't have time to get into all the specifics, just follow my lead and do as I ask, okay."

Scooting away from Edward so that I'm sitting against the wall, I lean my head back frustrated by the conversation. The lingering effects of sleep deprivation are making it hard to keep up. However, it doesn't stop me from also feeling aggravated about the details he's not sharing. It's not that I don't trust him, it's just that the details he's shared scare me and I don't like feeling out of the loop. Aro is not an easy person to outwit. I think our recent failures are clear examples of that.

Speaking of which. "Can we at least talk about what did happen? I don't think that's a secret," I spit out.

"What do you want to know?" Edward asks nervously, moving to sit against the wall beside me.

"How Aro knew where I was and who the hell is this task force?" Edward whips his head around apparently surprised that I know about them. "Aro gloats," I say shrugging my shoulders.

"It might be hard to hear. You sure you want to know now?"

"Yes, it can't be worse than what I've imagined."

"Ha," Edward barks out. "I wouldn't bet on that yet."

"Come on, Edward. I don't like being kept in the dark. You can at least tell me about this."

"I know," he sighs taking a breath. Edward knows me well enough to know that I'm upset about not knowing everything about his plan. "Okay. The task force involves several different agencies and countries with the goal to catch Aro. Banner and Jasper's supervisor were a part of that task force."

"Okay."

"Because of that, Banner had access to international files." He pauses, closing his eyes. "There's no easy way to say this."

"Just say it," I sigh, terrified of what he's going to say, but desperate to know anyway.
"Banner knew who you were from the beginning. He hired you to see if you were working for Aro. The fucker set up the whole Felix situation as a way to trap you."

I feel sick. I knew someone had to betray us, but knowing that it started so long ago is hard to accept. My work with the FBI is something I'm proud of, a way I've given back for all the lives lost when I was younger. Once again, something I thought was real was nothing more than a betrayal.

"That's not all. Umm, Jasper told his supervisor about you after you left for Montana. They went to Banner and he kept them informed of our activities."

"I thought Jasper was probably involved, especially given his behavior," I say gruffly, not surprised by this news. Jasper has always acted suspiciously. It's Banner's involvement that has left me reeling. Something Edward said earlier, clicks in my head. "So the task force is how you found out about the person undercover?"

Edward laughs sarcastically. "No, that tidbit of information came directly from Banner and Jasper. They are trying to ease their conscience about what they did to you by volunteering to help. I took the information and told them to go to hell."

I can hear the rage in his voice. I'm not the only one who feels betrayed. "Okay, but that still doesn't explain how they found out about where I was."

"That was Bree. She was working for Aro, and it sounds like one of her tasks was to develop a relationship with Banner. He brought her into the task force to track Mike's activities with the evidence, not knowing she was a double agent. He told her all about you."

"I've always tried to stay cautious, but not overly paranoid. Turns out I wasn't paranoid enough," I groan. "I knew I was taking a chance working for the FBI. I guess it was stupid to believe that I could keep my identity hidden. I should have stayed in the private sector like I planned. If I did, we wouldn't be in this spot."

"Don't do that, Bella. Don't regret your choices."

"Look around you, Edward. How can I not regret the choices that brought us here?"

"Okay, our current situation leaves a lot to be desired, but if you had faded away into the private sector, I wouldn't have met you. That's something I can't even contemplate," Edward whispers, grabbing my hand again.

"I don't know how you can see anything about this situation as good."

"Hey, don't misunderstand, I'm not happy about you being here, but maybe this is what needed to happen in order for us to finally take Aro down."

I shake my head at his unrealistic optimism. "You're crazy. Seriously, have you seen where we are?"

Before he can respond, we hear the sound of footsteps. Edward tenses beside me and sits up taller. After hearing the familiar sound of the key unlocking the door, it opens and standing on the other side is James, Jake and Aro.

"Aww how sweet," Aro gushes with a sickening grin. "Did you two catch up?"

"Are you ready to discuss my offer?" Edward asks, ignoring the sarcastic comment.
"I am. Let's go to my office and discuss the details," he suggests waving his hand in the direction of the stairs.

I don't move, unsure if he means me as well or just Edward. My body starts to shake thinking about him leaving and the music and lights starting again. Edward doesn't wait for Aro to clarify as he blatantly links our fingers and stands up, pulling me with him.

Wrapping his arm protectively around me, he looks at Aro. "Let's go," he says confidently.

I wonder if he feels as confident as he sounds. I, however, am not feeling confident. Edward tightens his arm around me, probably trying to help calm my shaking body. I'm prepared to deal with my fate, but watching Edward get hurt is a kind of torture I would never survive.

"Jake," Aro says calmly.

Jake steps forward into the room. His body is tense and stiff, his eyes focused on Edward's arm. Jealousy and anger float all around him. Edward instinctively tightens his hold even more and glares at Jake. Aro smirks, watching the dynamic, apparently enjoying the testosterone fueled standoff.

"Isabella, come with me," Jake says gruffly, the cold indifference back.

"Over my dead body," Edward growls.

"That can be arranged, Agent Cullen," Aro barks.

Edward starts to move forward, when I lightly place my hand on his chest. "It's fine. We're all going to the same place," I whisper.

With a smirk, Jake steps forward and grabs my elbow, most likely adding to the host of bruises I've accumulated from being dragged from place to place. Quickly walking back towards the door, I stumble, my body still feeling weak.

"You son of a bitch!" Edward yells. "You don't need to drag her around."

James laughs off to the side. "Not at your best? That should make it fun later." He winks in my direction.

"Not man enough to try when I'm at my best, James?" I taunt, tired of his leering and innuendos.

"Bitch," he spits out moving forward.

"You'll never touch her, you bastard!" Edward snarls, getting into the mix.

"James!" Aro barks. "Knock it off. We don't have time for your nonsense, there's business to discuss. Focus on your job and escort Agent Cullen to my office."

Edward tenses, setting his laser focus on James, his knuckles turning white under the pressure of his clenched fist. When Edward glances in my direction to check on me, I subtly shake my head. Both of us need to reign in our feelings. If we react every time something happens to the other, we won't get very far. Now is the time to detach so we can play the game. I certainly know Aro will be watching our reactions closely. I hold Edward's eyes, trying to silently communicate my thoughts. I see him take a deep breath and nod his head softly. I hope that means he understands and agrees.

Aro turns and walks out the door and up the steps, motioning for all of us to follow. Jake gestures
to James to go first. Edward glances at me with concern before begrudgingly walking up the stairs.

James stops to glare at me. "Soon," he whispers, before walking after Edward.

I start to move forward, when Jake stops me. "Are you okay?"

"Umm let me think. I've spent the last six days being tortured, so I'm thinking no," I say scathingly.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't figure out a way to get you out sooner. But I will get you away from him, I promise."

Once again, his colors support his words. He appears sincere in his desire to help and his concern for me is the driving force behind his decisions. I'm tempted to ask him about being undercover, but if I've learned anything over the last few days, it's not to trust anyone or anything. If Jake isn't undercover, asking him will risk exposure of the real agent. More importantly, whether he's undercover or not, it doesn't change my anger towards him.

"Whatever, we should go."

Looking at me sadly, he nods his head. Walking up the stairs, his grip changes from painful to supportive as I take each step slowly. "So you and Agent Cullen, huh?"

Stopping, I turn and glare at him. "Are you really asking me that? I find out that we were nothing more than a game and you have the balls to ask me about Edward? Fuck you!" I yell before breaking out of his hold and walking up the stairs a little faster.

"I want to explain that to you. There's more going on than you know."

Stopping again, I whirl around to face him. Because of the differentiating height of the stairs, I'm now standing eye level with him. "There is nothing you can say that will change what you did. How disturbed are you to mislead a girl into thinking you loved her as a way to break her? Aro is pure evil for crafting the plan, but you're no better for carrying it out. I don't want anything from you, let alone your pitiful excuses."

"I'm sorry. I never wanted to hurt you," he whispers. His guilt and sadness are almost blinding, but I'm still too angry for them to affect me.

"Thanks, that makes it all so much better," I spit out sarcastically, turning once again to continue our journey up the stairs.

The rest of the way to Aro's office is silent. Walking in, Aro looks pointedly at Jake, most likely wondering what took us so long. Edward is standing anxiously off to the side. I can tell our delay bothered him as well, but for very different reasons. I give him a brief smile letting him know I'm okay. I notice that Demetri has also joined the group and is sitting in a chair in the corner. As usual, he glares heatedly in my direction colored in viscous hatred.

"You two get lost a lot when you're together," James comments suspiciously.

"Jealous?" Jake quips. "It's not my fault she likes to struggle."

Demetri smirks, watching the back and forth between the two men. I can see the tension between the three has increased. Lingering colors of doubt highlight James and Demetri. I stop myself from smiling at the sight; my seeds of doubt have clearly taken root. The fighting between them is worse and by the look on his face, Aro's patience for it is wearing thin.
"Don't worry, Jakey boy, I'll get my turn soon enough, and I love it when they struggle," James retorts.

"You bastard!" Edward yells, suddenly rushing James and knocking him to the floor with a loud crash.

James, taken off guard by Edward's quick movements, is unable to defend himself from the assault. Edward successfully lands several punches to his face before James is able to attack. Quickly recovering, James strikes back. The hit allows him to get the upper hand and roll them over so he is now in control. I step forward intending to help Edward when Jake's hand abruptly snakes around my arm halting my movements. I struggle to get out of his grasp, but he holds tighter.

"Don't," he hisses, pulling me further from the fight.

I watch in horror as James lands a solid punch against Edward's solar plexus causing him to gasp. Tears fill my eyes watching the battle, and just when I'm sure it will end badly, Edward somehow gains the upper hand and switches their positions. As soon as he's above James, he starts a quick assault landing several more blows to his face.

"Enough!" Aro yells, banging his hand on the table.

At the command, Demetri stands and points his gun at Edward's head. "Stop," he demands coldly pulling back the trigger, making his intentions clear.

Jake releases my arm and moves to help Demetri cover Edward with his own weapon. My heart stops at the sight. I glance desperately around the room looking for something to use as a weapon, even though I know there's not much I can do at this point.

Raising his hands, Edward gets up, still glaring at James. His lip is split and his left eye is a little puffy, but overall it doesn't look like he's hurt too badly. James, however, clearly took the brunt of the attack. His nose is bleeding and his eye is already blackening. He is also glaring at Edward and when he moves forward to continue the fight, Aro intervenes.

"I said enough!" His thunderous voice echoes in the room as he sets his steely gaze on James. I sigh in relief when I realize that Aro wants Edward alive for now.

James stops, but his entire body is humming with rage. He hates the fact that not only did he need help with the fight, but that Aro won't let him enact revenge. Demetri smirks in amusement, enjoying James' humiliation. Watching the various colors around the room, I can see that the fight added more fuel to the conflict between Aro's closest guards. Although Edward needs to do a better job of controlling his emotions in front of Aro, this particular outburst appears to have worked to our advantage on that front.

"We have business to discuss. Leave us," Aro orders, and like the good followers they are, Jake and Demetri quietly walk out the door. However, James lingers refusing to take his eyes off of Edward. "I said leave us, James. I won't ask again."

Filled with anger at both Aro and Edward, James walks towards the door. Before leaving, he stops in front of Edward. Both men stand at their full height staring at each other in a tense stand-off. Glancing up and down at Edward with disdain, James finally stalks out the door, slamming it loudly.

An awkward silence fills the room as the three of us wait for someone to make the first move. I
hold myself back from running to Edward wanting to make sure he's okay. I know such a display will only pique Aro's interest in our relationship and give him more ammunition to use against each other. Edward finally glances in my direction, silently mouthing an apology. I slightly shake my head and ask my own silent question about his well-being. He gives me a small wink while wiping the blood from his lip. It's a tiny gesture, but one of reassurance.

"Have a seat," Aro says moving around the desk to sit in his chair. Leaning forward, he places his elbows on the desk, holding his hands together waiting for Edward and I to follow his command.

Edward slowly moves over and sits in the chair closest to him. Following his lead, I take the seat next to him. I look at Edward and notice him playing with his sleeve. Curious, I watch as he maneuvers it just enough to touch his watch. The move is small and subtle, but something tells me it was important. Luckily, it looks like Aro didn't notice.

"You're a brave man for attacking one of my men right in front of me," Aro remarks with a chilling tone.

"If you're so concerned about your men being attacked, maybe you should teach them some manners," Edward responds with his own deadly tone.

Aro sits quietly assessing Edward. "So, you're the man who has captured my daughter's heart," Aro says staring directly into his eyes. His sudden change of topic takes me off guard for a moment. I'm surprised he let the fight go so easily.

"It's interesting to me that you have the gall to call her your daughter after locking her in a cell for several days," Edward responds avoiding his question.

"Behavior doesn't change biology, Agent Cullen. You're avoiding my question."

"I didn't come here to answer questions. I came to make a deal," Edward says coldly. I sit quietly letting things unfold, watching closely for any sign of what Edward needs me to do.

"Ahh, yes, the deal. The one you refused to talk about without seeing my Isabella first." His use of "my" does not escape mine or Edward's notice. Glancing to the side, I can see Edward's hand grasp the arm of the chair. "I kept my end of the bargain. Now it's time for you to keep yours."

"Fine, I need to use your computer," Edward states calmly. Aro looks at him incredulously. "I'm not as dumb as I look, Aro. Do you really think I'm going to bring the goods here? I need to access my e-mail and then I can show you a taste of the merchandise."

Aro sits quietly for several moments contemplating his request. I try desperately to stop my leg from bouncing nervously awaiting his answer. Instinctively I know the request is about more than just showing Aro the evidence. I've been around Seth long enough to know that access to a system is the key to taking it down. I'd be willing to bet that Edward is trying to get Seth access to Aro's computer.

"Okay. I'll give you a little leeway, but you better make good on your promise that it will be worth my while." Aro takes the laptop on his desk and turns it towards Edward, pushing it in his direction.

"Oh, it will be," Edward retorts.

Edward stands up and quickly starts working on the machine, the room falling into another awkward silence as Edward accesses his account. I watch as he logs on the internet and opens a random e-mail account obviously created for this exchange. Clicking on the only e-mail in the
inbox, he opens the attachment. Several pictures load on the screen and I squint my eyes trying to get a clear look. Edward clicks on one of the boxes, allowing it to fill the screen. I lean back in my chair shocked by the sight. Edward wasn't kidding, the evidence is beyond damning.

Turning the screen towards Aro, Edward sits back in his chair with a satisfied grin. "Ready to talk?"

Aro looks at the screen and although he tries to cover his reaction, I can see the shock in his eyes. Leaning back in his chair, he looks at Edward. "You have my attention."

"The file contains hundreds of similar pictures. You can have everything in exchange for Bella."

Aro sits calmly contemplating his offer. "And how do I know that you won't keep copies."

"You won't. I guess we're going to have to trust each other a bit, because how will I know that you'll never come after her again?"

"Touché. You're a smart man, Agent Cullen, but you should know that I don't make deals, I offer them. What makes you think this situation will be any different?"

Edward leans forward in his chair, staring him down like a suspect in an interrogation. "Here's the thing, Aro, I don't think that anyone has ever had this much leverage on you before. You've spent your whole reign of terror avoiding legal sanctions for your crimes. You know as well as I do that agencies are going to love these pictures. They'll fucking fight over who gets to put you to death. This situation is different because I'm the first one who's pulled your fucking card."

Aro's blood is boiling. I've never seen his face so red. "Except you're in my house and you don't make the rules here," he growls.

"Hey, if you want to play, let's do it. Do you really think I came here without a backup plan?" Edward asks, leaning closer to the desk. His confidence and courage amaze me. I've never seen anyone hold up this well against Aro.

"I admit your grit impresses me, Agent Cullen. I can see why my daughter fell for you." Aro turns focusing on me. "What do you think, Isabella? You've seen my business dealings before, do you think he can win?" Aro is baiting me, wanting me to remember everything I've witnessed.

"I think this is the most you've had to lose, and if I were you, I wouldn't take this situation so lightly," I declare with my own confidence. Watching Edward has given me strength to believe this may just work.

Aro glares before turning his attention back to the picture on his screen. The room falls silent once again. I look at Edward while we wait, he turns giving me a small smile. He doesn't seem overly worried. Suddenly the door bursts open. I look over my shoulder and see Demetri rush in.

"I told you not to bother us!" Aro yells.

"I need to talk to you. There's been an incident," he says carefully, limiting the information he's sharing in front of us.

"What kind of incident?"

Demetri looks in our direction. "Boss, I don't know if-

"What incident?" Aro shouts. He's losing his control. Behind Demetri, Jake and James come into
the room with solemn faces. Whatever happened is big.

"We've lost the yard at Livorno."

"What do you mean we lost it?" Aro growls.

"It's been destroyed. It's all over the news. I doubt there are any survivors."

Turning back around toward Aro, I find myself holding my breath. I know the guys had something to do with this. Aro will blame Edward and his temper will unleash. As feared, Aro quickly turns his deadly eyes to Edward who is smirking back.

"You wanted to play, right?" Edward asks smugly. "For every hour you take to decide, you lose another dock. It's that simple."

"You realize I can just kill you right now," Aro threatens. I hear several guns arm behind me. The shaking returns as my heart pounds in my chest. I hope to God that Edward knows what he's doing.

"You do that and my people will go straight to the authorities. You'll have a dozen agencies busting down your door before you even know what hit you, and for good measure, they'll still destroy the rest of your docks."

"And how would they know?"

"They have their ways," Edward responds cryptically. "The clock is ticking, Aro. What's your decision? All I want is Bella. Is holding her really worth losing everything?"

"Boss?" Demetri asks waiting for instructions.

"Take them back downstairs," he yells. "I need time to think."

"I'll take them," Jake volunteers.

"I suggest that you don't take too long. I look forward to hearing from you," Edward says snarkily as Jake grabs his arm to walk him out of the room.

I carefully stand and walk over to Edward. Jake motions for me to walk out first. I don't know what to think about all of this. Edward doesn't seem concerned, but I can't tell if this is part of the plan or if his confidence is an act to not let on that the plan failed.

Once we reach the prison cell, Jake motions for us to go in. I walk in first, turning to watch Edward enter. Just as he is about to walk in, Jake stops him and puts something in his hand. Edward starts to respond when Jake hushes him while glancing up at the vent in the ceiling.

"It's fine, Aro can't watch or listen anymore. So I take it you're him?" Edward asks calmly.

"Yup. You sure this room is secure?"

"Yup, my people blocked the surveillance. You sure this stuff will work?" Edward asks gesturing to whatever is in his hand.

"Is someone going to tell me what the hell is going on?" I finally ask, confused by their conversation.

"This is the plan, baby," Edward responds. Jake cringes at the term of endearment, which I suspect was purposeful.
"Being put in a cell is part of the plan."

"Yes," Edward says distractedly. "You better be ready to back our play when it's time," he says gruffly moving into Jake's space.

"Oh don't worry, I'm ready."

"Good, now get out of here before they question what's taking so long. Remember to wait for the signal. Don't make a move before you get it."

"Got it," Jake says, glancing forlornly in my direction before walking out the door and locking us in once again.

"I guess that clarifies it. Jake is the person undercover."

"Looks like it."

Edward walks over and pulls me into a hug, my eyes still focused on the locked door. "How is this part of the plan?" I whisper.

"Aro needs to think we are secure. It will be fine, I promise." Edward's hand rubs gently up and down my back trying to soothe me. "Let's go sit down. We have a bit of time and you should get some more rest."

"Aro won't deal. He'll just kill you for what you did at the dock," I argue as Edward maneuvers us to the bed, pulling me down to lay with him. I don't understand why he can't see the seriousness of this situation.

"He won't get the chance."

"You seem very calm."

"Baby, I told you we have a plan and so far we're right on track. Don't worry, it's going to work out. Just have faith."

"Okay," I whisper, not really believing it. I trust Edward, but he doesn't seem to understand how over his head he is right now.

"Rest and gather your strength. We have about two hours before the action starts. I need you on your best game. Once it starts, things are going to move fast."

"What exactly are you talking about?"

"The final showdown. One way or another, Bella, it all ends tonight."

Chapter End Notes

I know, I am a horrible, horrible person. If it's any consolation I not trying to be cruel, this it just how the chapters are naturally breaking. However, I can promise that this is the last suspenseful ending of the story. :)

Fun fact...depending on the source the longest a person has ever gone without sleep is between 11 and 18 days.
Chapter 28: In the Air Tonight

The scene is all too familiar; the eerie glow from the light under the door, the stale smell and the dank nature of the concrete room that chills my exposed skin. The room is silent except for a slow drip coming from the dilapidated sink in the corner. The soft plink every several seconds slowly grates on my nerves. It's a sound I didn't notice before because of the music, and even though I'd take the drip over that any day, it doesn't make it any less annoying.

I feel gentle fingers run through my matted hair. The action is soothing and reminds me of the biggest difference between when I was first put in this cell and now. Edward. His warmth protects me from the cold and his gestures remind me that I'm not alone. Knowing this is my only comfort as we wait for the final act.

The tension in the room almost chokes me as I stare at Edward's dimly lit watch, slowly watching the seconds eat away at the two-hour wait. They say your life can change in an instant. I know that reality better than most. My mother's murder, Jake's "death", escaping Aro and meeting Edward are all moments that changed the course of my life. Lying quietly on the stained cot in my dirty dress and Edward's jacket, it's hard not to wonder what the next moments will bring and what my life will look like afterwards.

My biggest fear is not for myself but for Edward. I can deal with a lot, but losing him…it's a reality I can't even fathom. The irony of that thought doesn't escape me considering it was only several short months ago that I had accepted the limitations of my life. I believed the sacrifices I made to stay hidden were worth it. I'd convinced myself that love was not meant for me because my life was limited to one of lonely isolation, a life among the shadows. Edward changed all that.

I sigh loudly, frustrated by my wandering thoughts. I need to stay focused and stop waxing poetic on what brought us here. In reaction to the sound, Edward's arms tighten around me. Although he suggested I rest, there's no way I can relax or close my eyes. The adrenaline pumping into my system is over-riding any lingering effects of my sleepiness while my mind keeps running various scenarios of how this might play out. My systems are all running on fight or flight mode, so even in my weary state, my body feels primed for action.

Unable to lie still any longer, I sit up and turn towards Edward. Frowning, he tries to gently tug me
back down into his side. Shaking my head, I scoot back further out of his grasp.

"I can't just rest. You said the room is secure, it's time to tell me the plan."

Sighing, Edward reluctantly nods his head in agreement. "I'm not trying to keep you in the dark. I'm just worried about you. You're exhausted and hurt."

"I'm tired, not dead," I retort. "I think I've proven more than once that I can take care of myself."

"The loft, I know," Edward says lowly, closing his eyes. "It kills me every time I think about what happened there." Focusing again on me, he reaches out to caress my cheek. "And I'm in awe of how you handled the situation, but this battle is different. The goal is to get you out. Leave the rest to us."

"Tell me," I challenge, not agreeing to anything. "How about we start with your watch, what does it do?" Edward looks at me with surprise. "I saw the move in the office. It was subtle, but I could tell it did something."

"I'm impressed, Swan," he smirks. The familiar nickname and light tone eases the pressure a bit. Edward and I have always been a good team, tonight is no different. "It's wired. This button here," he says pointing to his watch, "set off an alert. It was the signal to attack the dock."

"Who did that?"

"Associates of Jenks', and we've got a couple other surprises planned for Aro's property tonight too."

"You're really going to blow another dock in an hour?" I ask incredulously.

I still don't understand how continuing to anger Aro will help us escape. The image of my tutor comes rushing back, and I can't stop the shudder from running through my body. His bloody end came simply from trying to help me. I can only imagine the torturous death Aro is planning for the people who destroyed part of his empire.

"We're targeting several properties around this area in about thirty minutes."

"Please explain to me how pissing him off is going to help us, because I don't get it."

"I have no doubt he wants to kill me, but he'll have too much chaos to deal with first. Believing we're locked in a cell gives him a false sense of security."

"So you blow up his world, then what?"

"Hopefully, he sends some of his men out to the sites of the explosions, which will even the odds when Jenks brings his team here."

"Attacking from all angles at once," I mutter, beginning to see the logic. "But this is an impossible complex to break into regardless of how many men there are."

"That's where Jake comes into play. He was able to get a set of blueprints to his handler so that Jenks knows exactly where to go. And I guess he has a few surprises of his own set up once Jenks' team starts their advance."

"Like what?"

"He placed some explosives around the complex to take out key defense points and the security
"Aro is going to lose his mind." I mumble, thinking about how irate he gets when things don't go his way. This is going to flip his world.

"And if that wasn't enough, Seth is now in Aro's system."

"I assumed as much. What's his plan?"

"He's going to make sure that Aro's blind. No surveillance and no lights. I think Seth is looking forward to giving him a taste of his own medicine."

I nod my head in understanding. That's exactly what they did to all of us in Seattle. Edward's plan is detailed and thorough. Each piece delivers a blow to Aro, but having all occur at the same time will create a chaos he's never dealt with before. Edward was right about this being different from the previous attempts to bring him down. Those were all subtle. This is an all out assault.

"What do you need me to do?" I ask feeling a bit more reassured.

"Like I said, I need you focused on getting out of here, no matter what else is going on."

"This is my fight too, Edward. Don't ask me to sit on the sidelines."

"Bella, this isn't about you not being capable or saying that it's not your fight. Aro's destruction will be worthless if you become a casualty of it. Let us do the heavy lifting on this one. Please, for me, put your stubborn nature aside for the moment and do as I ask."

I know Edward's request is reasonable, however, I'm struggling to let go of my desire for revenge and the need to see with my own eyes that the devil is destroyed. Taking a breath, I let logic prevail knowing that my desire could never outweigh the necessity of making sure everyone I care about walks away unscathed. I'm not at my best and not following the plan could lead to others getting hurt.

"Fine, you win this time, but I'm not helpless. If things get dicey, don't expect me to cower in the corner."

"I won't. Just promise me that you won't take unnecessary chances."

"I will if you will," I retort back. His words go both ways; my safety means nothing without him.

"Deal." He smiles, leaning forward to kiss me.

The feel of his lips sparks another type of adrenaline. The rush of emotions I feel for Edward are overwhelming. The power of his touch and its effects still amaze me. For a moment, I allow myself to succumb to the thoughts of life after Aro. Thinking about having the time, space and freedom to simply enjoy moments with Edward without interruption or the threat of danger gives me strength. We deserve that life, and I will do everything in my power to make it happen.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs causes us to abruptly separate. Edward instinctively takes a protective posture beside me, his body tense and poised to attack the possible threat. We sit quietly holding our breath. According to Edward's timeframe, nothing has happened yet. I anxiously wait for the sound of the key, but instead hear the familiar sound of the food tray slot being unlocked and opened.

Silently, someone pushes two bottles of water and two protein bars through the slot. Instead of
closing it right away, the person also shoves several articles of clothing, including shoes through before slamming the slot shut and running quickly up the stairs. Edward's body relaxes next to me. The sight of the protein bar causes my stomach to growl loudly. My face flushes slightly at the sound.

Edward turns to me with a questioning look. "Hungry?" he chuckles, but then his face suddenly changes, a horrific understanding crossing his face. "Wait. Have they been feeding you?"

"What you see is what I've gotten from time to time. I wasn't able to really track the frequency though, so I'm not sure when the last time was."

"Jesus," he exclaims, jumping off the bed and grabbing the items off the floor. He shoves both bars into my hands. "Here, eat them."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Bella, I've eaten more than you have today. You need to keep your strength up. No arguments."

My hollow and growling stomach halts any argument I had against Edward's request. Clumsily tearing the wrapper, I stuff a huge bite into my mouth, savoring the taste.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing to the clothing.

"Looks like they're for you," Edward says, holding up a shirt and a pair of pants.

"Jake," we say together.

Only Jake would know that my current state of dress might hinder our escape. Taking the clothes from Edward, I look them over. He brought black yoga pants and a long sleeve blue shirt as well as socks and tennis shoes. The size is a bit larger than what I normally wear, but it should work. It makes me wonder where he got them.

Finishing the first bar, I get up from the bed to change, looking forward to getting into clean clothes. Lifting my dress over my head, I hear Edward hiss. Freeing myself from the ruined garment, I look up confused by his reaction. Reaching out, he glides his fingers along my side. Following his fingers with my eyes, even in the muted light, I see the fading remnants of Sam's attack still marring my skin.

"What happened?" he whispers gruffly.

"Sam," I say quietly, his eyes snapping back to mine. "We got into a fight at the loft. He kicked me."

Edward's blazing eyes once again focus on my side. "The bastard is lucky he's dead. If I'd known, his death wouldn't have come so quickly."

"I'm okay," I say reassuringly.

Slipping into the new outfit, I sigh in contentment. Never before had changing my clothes felt so good. Putting on the socks and shoes, I feel almost human again. Grabbing the second bar, I sit next to Edward and lay my head on his shoulder.

"So you haven't told me the most important part of this plan," I say taking slow bites. I know I need to eat, but my shrunken stomach is filling quickly and I don't want to feel sick.
"What part?"

"How we're getting out of here."

"Ahh, with these," he answers, pulling out the items Jake gave him earlier from a wide pocket on his cargo pants. The only thing I recognize is a lighter.

"And what are those?"

"Thermite charges." At my confused look he continues. "We put these babies on the door and we'll be out of here in no time."

"This is a small space. Isn't setting off an explosive a bad idea?"

"These work by creating a localized burn, they don't explode. With the exceptions of some sparks, they're pretty safe to use in a small area. Plus they are fairly silent."

"How in the hell did you know we would need them?"

"Jake said it was a good possibility that Aro would lock me down here. The more Jenks and I talked about it, the more we realized it could play into our hand."

"Wait, I thought you didn't know Jake was the one undercover. How could you plan all of this with him?"

"We worked with his handler, who passed messages back and forth. I knew we were getting information from an undercover agent, but they never told us the person's name. CISR didn't want his cover blown just in case he needed to stay with the Volturi after it was over."

"You weren't kidding about having a plan," I state impressed.

"We weren't going to take any chances," Edward says sternly. Looking down at his watch, he takes a deep breath.

"How much time do we have?"

"Not a lot. The properties should be hit in a couple of minutes."

The room fills with silence. I feel fidgety and find it hard to control my nervous leg as I wait for the time to pass. In a moment of déjà vu, I think back to waiting on my bed the last time I escaped Aro's complex. I'd never been more terrified. I close my eyes focusing on that moment, remembering that it all turned out okay. I need to hold onto that hope.

"Bella," Edward burst out suddenly, grabbing both of my hands, "I want you to listen to me."

"Okay," I drag out, his harried tone concerning. Up until now, he's been so calm and collected.

"Things are going to move fast once this starts, so you need to listen to me out there. It will be a war zone. Our team and their team will be shooting at each other. You need to stay sharp and stay low. Follow my lead and do what I do, okay."

"Okay," I respond quickly, my leg bouncing a bit quicker. I appreciate that he is trying to make sure I'm ready, but his instructions just make me more anxious.

"It's started," he comments, looking down at his watch. "Okay let's get ready. I need you to get up."
I move off the bed wordlessly and watch as he turns it on its side. Moving behind the bed, he pushes it forward to make space between it and the wall. Satisfied with the placement, he moves around taking the thermite out of his pocket and walking to the door. Using a clay-like substance, he attaches a charge to the three hinges and the lock. Unwinding the fuse on each, he takes out the lighter.

"Bella, get behind the bed."

"I thought it wasn't going to explode?" I ask confused, but following his directions anyway.

"It shouldn't, but they will spark. Besides, the first lesson of explosives 101 is always take precautions."

I kneel on the floor behind the bed so that I can peak over and watch. I hold my breath when he lights the first charge, hoping that the lighter doesn't fail for the remaining ones. The longer it takes him to light each fuse, the less time he has to take cover.

Lighting the last one, he rushes across the room and jumps over the bed. Landing beside me, he quickly sits down and wraps his body protectively around mine. I close my eyes, listening as each fuses burns like a sparkler on the fourth of July, the smell of sulfur filling the air. When the first "pop" occurs, I jump slightly, causing Edward to tighten his hold. One by one the charges detonate, the last pop followed by a loud crash as the door falls to the floor in the hallway.

"Let's go," Edward says in a commanding voice. He's in agent mode, his face etched in concentration, his eyes focused and deadly.

Grabbing my hand, we walk out of the room and up the stairs. At the top, Edward pushes me against the wall and peeks around the corner. In the distance, I can hear commotion, but it's not clear enough to tell exactly what it is or where it's coming from. Suddenly, the walls shake as a loud explosion fills the air. Edward instinctively ducks down and covers me. I can hear pictures falling from the walls and vases crashing to the floor. Given the power of the explosion, it originated somewhere close to our location.

"You okay?" Edward whispers, searching my face.

"Yes."

Looking around the corner again, he quickly pulls me into another hallway. Creeping along the wall, Edward moves quickly, but is hyper-vigilant to the noises around us. Muttering under his breath, he scans the doors.

"What are you doing?" I ask quietly.

"Counting doors. Jake left something for me in one of these rooms."

"Which room?"

"The library."

"It's three doors down on the left."

Moving along the wall, he looks back quickly. "I forget you use to live here."

"See, there is a benefit to being Aro's daughter. I have the inside track," I try to joke, but the levity of the situation makes the lighthearted statement fall short.
Reaching the library, Edward guides me inside before closing and locking the door behind him.

"What did he leave for you?"

"Equipment," Edward utters searching the room. "Help me look around."

I scan the library looking for something that is out of place. Most of the large space is taken up by two rows of bookcases that surround a large reading area in the middle of the room. I'm guessing that Jake hid the equipment before tonight. If he tried to get away when everyone was strategizing, it would evoke Aro's suspicion. Therefore, he'd need a secure spot.

Trying to think of what I would do, I suddenly remember the times I met Jake here to steal moments away from prying eyes. In the far back corner is a spot you can't see from most vantage points. The designers miscalculated the size of one of the book shelves against the wall which left a small space between two of the shelves. It was the perfect place to meet Jake, because if someone came in, they couldn't see us from the door or main sitting room. Running over to the spot, I find a black bag tucked into the small space.

"Found it," I say trying not to yell in my excitement.

I'm just about to reach Edward when another explosion rocks the house. The walls shake, but not as bad as the first time. I'm guessing that this explosion was further away. Edward frantically waves his hand towards him. Once I'm close, he grabs the bag and throws it on a table.

Reaching in, he pulls out what looks like a bulletproof vest. "Here, put this on," he says, throwing it in my direction before continuing to look through the bag.

"What about you?" I ask holding the vest awkwardly. I know that Edward is going to do everything he can to keep me out of the line of fire. He needs this more than I do.

"Don't worry, I've got one too." Edward pulls out another vest, his focus still on the other contents of the bag.

Finally satisfied with his inventory, Edward straps on the vest, gesturing for me to do the same. Next, he pulls out several guns, expertly checking and arming each of them. Grabbing more clips, he stuffs them into his pockets. Reaching into the bag again, he takes out communication gear and night vision goggles. I recognize the communication equipment from the last time we did this, and I assume it will connect him to Jenks and Emmett. Checking his watch again, he quickly puts on the gear.

Grabbing the last gun, he hands it to me. "You ready?" he asks.

"As much as I'll ever be."

Edward looks up, his eyes burning into mine before encircling me in his arms and capturing my lips in a searing kiss. "I love you."

"I love you," I whisper back.

Linking our hands, he leads me to the door. He stops and puts his ear against it, listening for any movement outside. Putting his ear piece in, he switches it on. "This is Cullen, we're in position."

Unlocking the door, he places his hand over the handle, pausing. Suddenly, the lights go out. bringing the goggles down, Edward quietly opens the door. It's hard to see so I grab onto the bottom of Edward vest as he moves forward. He has one of the guns held out in front of him ready
to shoot if we run into any of Aro's men. Just as suddenly as the lights went off, the emergency lights come on, a soft glow of orange coming from the lights along the floor and the ceiling.

"Generator," I whisper.

Edward lifts the goggles and keeps moving forward. I can hear commotion coming from another area of the house and what sounds like people running.

"Status," Edward barks into the microphone. He's silent for several moments, listening to the report.

"What about the fucking generator?" As he listens, we continue to creep along the wall. "I need the path cleared to the gate. Okay, we're ready."

"Brace yourself," Edward says quickly, turning to cover me just in time for another explosion. The walls creek under the shockwave and the lights go out. Jake must have blown the generator. Using his goggles to see, Edward starts moving along the wall again bringing us to another corner. Gun fire suddenly erupts outside.

"Jenks has arrived," Edward whispers.

"Is everything going okay?" I ask, knowing that he is listening to the chatter on his ear piece.

"So far so good. It sounds like they were able to get the upper hand on Aro's men."

Unexpectedly, Edward stops short, his hand reaching back to brace me against the wall. Peeking around the corner, he quickly pulls back, holding his gun up and lifting his finger to his lips. A few moments later, one of Aro's men ambles out from the direction Edward was just looking. He's heavily armed, but the darkness is making him move with uncertainty. Edward waits until he passes us and then shoots, the man dropping instantly.

Rushing over to him, Edward shoves the gun he was using into his pants and grabs the man's assault rifle. I stand by the wall anxiously waiting until he comes back. Grabbing my hand once again, he leads me down the hallway in the direction the man came from. A noise from behind us makes Edward whirl around, pointing the gun over my shoulder.

"Jesus Christ! Identify yourself next time unless you want to get shot," Edward hisses.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I see a shadow moving towards us. When he gets closer, I recognize Jake. Wasting no time with formalities, Jake starts talking to Edward in a fast yet hushed voice.

"Aro knows this is about getting Isabella out. He's positioning all of his men at the exits and told them the priority is keeping her secure."

"Fuck! What's our best option?" Edward asks running his hand through his hair in frustration.

"The side towards the back is the best bet, but it's going to be a fire fight no matter where you go." He hesitates looking intently at Edward. He's anxious about something. "I think I should take Isabella."

"No fucking way!"

"Listen, I can walk out of here with her. You can't. Aro has a safe room in the back of the complex. With the communications systems down, I can tell the guards that Aro told me to bring her there."
They won't question me."

"I don't know."

"Have your team cover you at the side door and then circle around back and meet us in the barn. We can figure a way out from there."

"Fine, but Bella's staying with me," Edward argues standing a bit taller and leaning towards Jake in an effort to intimidate him.

"Did you hear me? Guns will blaze no matter where you go. Are you really going to risk her just because you're afraid to leave us alone?"

Edward growls and steps forward again. The testosterone fueled stubbornness is thick between the two men, but Jake's colors show his sincerity. Thinking about his proposed plan, I realize that the danger of a gun battle is not just to me, but Edward. His focus will be protecting me with no regard for his own safety. In this instance, I agree that separating might be the safest plan for both of us.

"Edward," I say gently touching his arm. "I think Jake's right."

"What?"

"We don't have time to argue, so you just need to trust me. I think this is the best plan," I say confidently.

Edward stares at me for several moments before reluctantly nodding his head in agreement. I can tell he's not happy, but he's respecting my decision. Turning his focus back to Jake, he takes another step forward until they are standing toe to toe.

"You better not screw this up. There will be no force on this planet that will stop me from ending you if she's hurt. Understand?"

"I understand. Just focus on getting yourself out, Cullen. We'll be waiting in the barn."

Grabbing Edward's arm to get his attention off of Jake, I pull him back until I can reach up and hug him. "Be careful," I say softly into his ear.

"Always am. Watch your back. If you sense something's wrong, run and I will find you," he whispers back before kissing my temple and quickly pulling away.

"Love you," I mouth so that only he can see.

"We've got to go," Jake interrupts, moving to my side and taking my arm.

Edward's eyes zone in on his hand, "Just remember what I said," he says brusquely. With one more look in my direction, he runs down the hall, looking back only once before disappearing around the corner.

"Let's go," Jake says, leading me in the opposite direction towards the front door.

"You think this is actually going to work?"

"Yes." He stops and grabs a pair of cuffs out his back pocket. "But it will help if you put these on."

"I understand."
I tuck the gun into my back, making sure my shirt and vest hide it before holding out my hands. Taking a look at me, Jake frowns.

"You can't wear that vest."

"Right," I mutter looking down.

"Give it to me. I'll put it on and then give it back to you once we get to the barn."

"Okay." I quickly take off the vest and hand it to Jake.

He loosens the straps to fit him and then puts it on. Once he's done, Jake brings the cuffs up again. Holding my hands out, I cringe when the cold metal touches my skin. Jake is careful as he clicks them together making sure to keep them loose.

"Let's go," he says, grabbing my arm again. We walk silently the rest of the way, Jake being watchful for other Volturi guards.

When we get close to the door, Jake stops. "Let me take a look to make sure that James and Demetri aren't around. Stay here and hide if you hear anyone coming."

I stand against the wall, my eyes scanning from side to side, my ears listening for any movement. Thankfully, Jake comes back quickly and motions for me to follow him. As we approach the door, he grabs my arm and his face morphs into cruel indifference.

"Play along," he hisses when we get closer.

The guards turn hearing our approach, their guns drawn. "Any new activity to report?" Jake asks roughly.

"We think they are moving their way to the front."

"Keep an eye out. As soon as I get her secure, I'll be back. If you allow a breach there'll be hell to pay, do you understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Let's go." Jake pulls roughly on my arm.

"Fuck you! I can walk myself," I yell, playing the role of the angry prisoner.

"Always so feisty," Jake chuckles darkly walking me outside, none of the men are any the wiser to the real reason we are leaving.

Once free from the view of the door, Jake and I sprint towards the barn, the sound of gunfire reverberating behind us. Safely reaching the barn, we run in and close the door. Standing in the middle of the open room, I take a look around. I haven’t stepped foot in here since finding Jake bleeding on the floor. The wood walls are gray and splintered and the smell of old hay permeates the air. It looks like it hasn't been used in a while.

"Aro had a new barn built several years ago, but never torn this one down. No one comes out here anymore," he says taking off the cuffs.

Once free, I rub my hands up and down my arms, trying to ward off the cold. Unfortunately, my shirt does not provide a strong barrier against the December night air.
"Here, you need to put this back on," Jake says taking off the vest and handing it back to me.

I grab it actually looking forward to wearing it again. Although the vest isn't comfortable, the bulky nature of it does keep the cold out better than my shirt. After putting it on, I walk back over to the door and peek through one of the cracks, anxiously looking for any sign that Edward is on his way.

"He'll be here. You obviously mean a lot to him."

I let the statement go without responding, still not feeling comfortable talking about Edward with Jake. An awkward silence follows while we wait, the muted sound of gunfire the only noise penetrating the quiet night.

"So you're undercover," I blurt out, still looking out the crack.

My curiosity about his past is too strong to let this opportunity pass by and it might be my last chance to get the truth. Looking over my shoulder, I see Jake sitting on an old hay bale colored in apprehension and fear.

"Yes."

Still not seeing any sign of Edward, I turn around and sit on the floor, focusing my attention on Jake. "How does that work exactly?"

"I get information, I tell CISR. It's not rocket science."

"Don't get defensive. I think I have a right to ask questions."

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's just not easy to talk about."

"Well then, tell me this. Why is Aro still free if you've had inside access this whole time?"

Jake laughs bitterly. "You should know better than anyone that your father is a brilliant criminal. Even with inside access, I've never gathered enough evidence to shut him down. CISR isn't interested in a short-term sentence. They want enough to put him away for life."

"Then what have you accomplished?" I ask with my own bitterness. A part of me needs to know that his betrayal was at least worthwhile for his mission.

"The main point of my placement was Intel. I'm the only agency person to get this close. It's a victory in the eyes of CISR."

"That's a big commitment on your part."

"I knew the score going in. Taking a long-term undercover assignment means you're willing to do whatever it takes."

"Like fake a death?" I grind out angrily.

"Yeah, like fake a death," Jake says quietly. "I was trained not to get emotionally attached or react to what I was asked to do. Developing relationships, committing crimes, killing people, it's all part of the job. I knew that going in, but-" Jake stops talking and focuses intently on his anxiously twisting hands.

"But?" I prompt, wanting him to continue.

"Nothing prepared me for how much I would lose myself in the process and it never gets any
easier. It's like parts of you just slowly die as time goes on. I sometimes forget that I'm supposed to be the good guy."

"It sounds like a horrible life."

"It is, but I still believe in the cause. It's what I hold onto."

"What's the hardest part?" The psychologist in me is fascinated by what it must take to live his life.

"You were," he says simply. "You made staying detached impossible." Looking up suddenly, his eyes seek out mine. "I did care about you, and I really did intend to get you out."

"Then what happened?"

"Aro hired me to be your guard and get close to you, but he never mentioned anything about the rest. I was actually working with my handler on a plan for your escape when Aro informed me of the final stage of his plan." He pauses again.

"Don't stop now, we're just getting to the good part," I say sarcastically.

Hurt suddenly highlights his nervousness. "I went straight to my handler to let him know that we needed to get you out sooner. What I didn't expect was that CISR would see it as the perfect opportunity to get into Aro's inner circle. They refused my request to get you out and ordered me to carry out Aro's plan as intended."

"So you followed their order," I whisper.

"And I've hated myself ever since," Jake whispers back, looking down.

"That's why you're helping now."

"I wasn't going to stand by and do nothing again." Standing up, he walks over and kneels in front of me. "I've never stopped caring about you, Isabella. If you don't believe anything else, believe that, see that." He reaches out to touch my face, his eyes searching mine. Apprehension, hope, and love float around him.

His words and colors stun me. A part of him actually believes there might be a chance between us. Although his story takes away some of my anger, it doesn't change the fact that I no longer have those feelings for him. I open my mouth to tell him as much when a voice in the corner interrupts us.

"Well, isn't this sweet," James' voice sneers. Sitting quietly, I carefully move my gun behind my back before James sees it.

Jake jumps up and faces him. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you the same question. How did she get out of her cell?"

"Aro told me to make sure she's secure," Jake responds without blinking an eye, years of lying working in his favor.

"Interesting, because I just came from him, and he's losing his shit because he found out that she and Agent Cullen are missing. Want to try again?"

The two men circle one another, staring each other down. "Not really."
"You know I've never liked you, but I'd never pegged you as a traitor. Aro's going to eat you alive." James smirks taking out his gun and aiming it at Jake. "I think it's time for us to take a walk."

Squeezing my gun tightly, I slowly stand preparing to make my move. Luckily, James is focused on Jake and doesn't react to my changing position. Shuffling closer, James finally looks over in time to see me raise my gun at him.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You never cease to amaze me. You really want to go toe to toe with me?" James asks, leveling his gun in my direction.

Not hesitating, I shoot, hitting him in the shoulder and knocking him to the floor. Jake takes the opportunity and rushes him, the two engaging in an all out brawl. I try to track their movements, but it's difficult, both moving quickly and switching positions often. Suddenly, a gunshot echoes throughout the barn. I hold my breath watching the now two still bodies, unsure of who shot the gun. Jake is on top and James is underneath. For a moment, it looks like both are dead, but then James pushes Jake off of him.

"Jake!" I scream rushing forward realizing he was the recipient of the bullet. Reaching him, I see blood pouring from his chest. His eyes look shocked and unfocused. "Jake," I whisper, and without thinking, use my hands to put pressure on his wound.

"It's almost funny," he whispers, "this happening here. Talk about karma." He chokes, blood sputtering from his lips. Looking into my eyes he takes a raspy breath. "I always loved you."

His body jerks as he struggles to take a couple more painful breaths. Then everything stills, his eyes looking hollow as the life leaves him. Tears run down my face. I'm not sure of what to do next. For just a moment, stupidly, my sadness makes me forget about the dangerous situation I'm in until I feel the cold steel at the back of my head. Reaching out a bloody hand, I try to grab the gun I dropped to cover Jake's wound, but James pushes his gun further into my skull before I can reach it.

"I don't think so. Stand up."

Raising my hands, I do as he requests, my mind racing to figure out my next move. Although James has the advantage now, I know he's hurt which gives me at least a chance. As soon as I'm standing, James snakes his arms around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

"I just realized that we're finally alone, Isabella." With the gun now pressed into my throat, James rubs his face across the side of mine and down into my neck.

I can feel his blood saturating my shirt and knowing that he's still bleeding gives me hope. If I can get loose and turn around, I can stick my finger into his bullet hole, hopefully distracting him enough to take his gun or make him drop it. Unfortunately, his arms remain locked around me. I wiggle in an attempt to get loose, but his arms just tighten further, the action hurting the injury to my ribs.

"Let. Her. Go," a familiar but deadly voice says from behind us.

James spins us around until we come face to face with a fierce-looking Edward holding his assault rifle. "Agent Cullen, so glad you could join us," James mocks. I can feel his smirk against my cheek as he holds me closer.

"I said let her go," Edward repeats, keeping the gun aimed in our direction. James slowly circles
around, Edward matching his steps until we have switched positions. We are now closest to the
door.

"No, I don't think so. You see, I don't think you're going to risk her life." James jams the gun further
into my throat. "Put your gun down."

Edward hesitates before lowering his gun to the floor and raising his hands. My heart drops at the
sight. "My gun's down. Now what?"

James moves the gun from my neck and points at Edward. "Now-" he starts.

The next seconds pass in a contradiction of clarity and confusion. I recognized the sound, but too
late to recognize what is about to happen. Before James can finish his sentence, we are on the
ground, James' body heavy against mine. Looking to my right, I see his vacant eyes staring back,
my wrist and ribs screaming in pain from the fall.

"Bella!" Edward shouts as the weight of James body leaves and I'm unexpectedly wrapped in his
arms. My mind is still desperately trying to catch up with exactly what happened. "Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"Clear." Another voice rings out. Looking behind me, I see Jenks carefully walk in the door with
his gun raised.

Edward stands and helps me up. "God damn it, Jenks! That was too fucking close."

Looking down, I see James' lifeless body. "You shot him?" I ask, turning towards Jenks.

"Damn right I did. I told you I was going to kill him." Jenks smirks.

I smile brightly freeing myself from Edward to run over to Jenks. Reaching him, I throw my arms
around him. "I'm so glad to see you."

"You're a sight for sore eyes too, Ace." Pulling back he looks me over. "Did those bastards hurt
you?"

"Not too bad, I'm fine," I say reassuringly, although he lifts his eyebrow questioning my answer.

"What's the status?" Edward asks, coming over to stand beside me.

"Things are still going as planned. We've had a couple of casualties, but overall we're in good
shape."

"What he means to say is that we're kicking ass and taking names," Emmett adds walking in the
barn.

"Emmett!" I rush over giving him the same greeting as Jenks.

"Hey, Bells. Ready to break out of this Popsicle stand?" he asks giving me a crooked smile.

"You have no idea," I exclaim. "What's the plan?"

"Jake said the side gate is our best bet," Edward answers, looking at Jenks and Emmett.

"Is he going to lead us there?" Emmett asks.
"No," I whisper, glancing over at Jake.

"Fuck," Emmett mutters seeing his body for the first time. "I'm sorry, Bells."

"Yeah, so am I." Shaking my head, I break away from the sight of Jake. "We probably don't have much time. I can get us to the side gate. It's the same one I used when I escaped the first time."

"Is the path clear?" Edward asks.

"As clear as it can be," another voice answers. It's one I don't recognize, and I find myself moving closer to Edward.

"It's okay. He's one of us," Edward whispers.


"The pleasure's mine," Garrett says, tilting his baseball cap.

"Garrett's a long-time associate of mine," Jenks says, explaining their connection.

"An associate who won't be so long-term if we don't get moving."

"Right," Jenks says becoming serious. "The majority of the fight is taking place towards the front of the house. We have one more set of detonators we can use when we move out. That should help keep them busy."

"Aro told the Volturi to keep Bella secure, so as long as they think she's in the house that should help keep most of them there," Edward adds.

"But they know I'm not there. James said that Aro knows we're gone. He probably has people searching the grounds," I interrupt.

"Fuck," Emmett hisses.

"Why don't we blow the remaining detonators near the main gate? Hopefully they will think we did it to try to escape from there," Garrett suggests.

"Sounds good. Did you get that, Liam?" Jenks asks, talking to someone through his microphone. The guys all listen quietly as the person responds in their ear pieces.

"Perfect. We'll wait for your mark," Jenks says and then looks up. "Let's get ready to move out."

The guys focus on checking their gear, the sound of clips being loaded and guns being armed echoing throughout the barn. Moving over to Jake, I lean down and grab my gun. Standing above him, I find myself unable to move. Jake was right about the irony of being shot in the barn. The scene is jarringly similar to the one I walked in on so many years ago. I don't know how I feel about that.

"Bella?" I feel Edward's arm wrap around me. "Are you okay?"

"I guess so. I think it's going to take a while to process everything." I don't want to take time to evaluate my feelings. There are more important things to focus on right now.

"I'm sorry," Edward whispers against my head.

"So am I." Regardless of everything, I never wanted it to end this way for Jake.
"Let's go," Jenks barks, taking position by the door.

Looking down once more, I mentally shove everything to the side so that I can focus on getting out. Following Edward, we form a line behind Jenks. Edward positions me in the middle. He stands behind me while Emmett stands in front. Jenks has taken the lead position and Garrett is taking flank. Holding their guns in position, we wait quietly for the signal to move. In the distance, another loud explosion disrupts the night, a bright flash and fireball lighting up the dark sky.

"Move out," Jenks commands, rushing forward.

Before we left, I gave Jenks the directions to the gate. In order to get there, we need to go past the back of the main house. Cautiously moving out of the barn and back towards the house, our team keeps vigilant. We are just about to the corner of the house when gunfire erupts around us. Edward pushes my head down as he hustles me forward. Our team shoots back, but when shots ring out again, Edward shoves me to the ground covering my body as he returns fire. The gunfire suddenly stops. I look around and see both Jenks and Emmett lying on the ground not too far away from us. Both look uninjured.

"We're clear," Garrett whispers from the side of the house.

Getting up quickly, our group moves forward, finally resting along the side of house. Although we are no longer under fire, I can still hear the gun battle taking place in the front.

"Any idea how many more we need to put down?" Emmett asks, reloading his weapon.

"No clue, but Liam said the last explosion took out a lot of the Volturi stationed by the front gate. I think we still have the advantage," Jenks responds. "Okay, let's move."

"You guys go, I'll hold back and cover you in case someone starts firing," Garrett says.

"We're going across there, right, Ace?" Jenks questions, pointing in the direction of the gate.

"Yes."

Not wasting any more time, our group continues on. Luckily, there is no need for Garrett to cover as the rest of our journey to the gate is uneventful. Reaching the gate, I suddenly remember why having Caius made a difference during this stage of my escape. The solid steel door stands in front of me like an impenetrable wall. The keypad is dark due to the lack of power, but like Seth's door, the lock is still engaged. Looking up, I know that fence is too high to simply jump. My head drops in defeat not knowing what we are going to do next.

"Ace, do you seriously think we'd get this far and get stuck here?" Jenks says beside me, kneeling down to take a rope and what looks like a big fishhook out of his backpack.

Securing the rope to the metal hook, he throws it over the wall and tugs until the hook attaches to something. Once it's secure, Emmett anchors it allowing Jenks to climb by holding the rope and walking his feet up the wall. I hold my breath watching his catlike movements until he reaches the top and disappears over the other side. Waiting anxiously, a knock on the other side finally lets us know he made it.

"Okay, Bella, your turn," Edward says leading me to the rope. "Ever climb before?" he asks.

"No," I whisper, a bit intimidated by the task ahead.

Needing to free my hands, I give my gun to Emmett, so he can put it in his backpack for
safekeeping. Taking a deep breath, I look at the rope as Edward comes up behind me and positions my hands around it.

"Okay, this will be a piece a cake. Let your legs to do most of the work, the rope and your arms are there to hold you steady, got it."

"Got it."

Copying what I saw Jenks do earlier, I use the rope to balance myself and put my feet against the wall. Slowly, I pull myself up trying to do what Edward said and let my legs do most of the work. Halfway up, my arms start to shake from the exertion, my hands burning from scooting along the rope.

For a moment, I wonder if I can make it, but as soon as the thought crosses my mind I brush it away not wanting to fail myself or the team. Channeling my determination, I focus on overcoming the pain to succeed, chanting "one step at a time" in my head to keep myself moving forward.

Reaching the top, I take only quick moment to catch my breath knowing I can't linger too long. Given our situation, I don't have the luxury of rest. Swinging around, I start the journey down, which is much easier on my arms and legs, but incredibly painful for my raw hands. When I'm close enough to jump, I let go and land on my feet. Whirling around to face Jenks, I smile proud of my accomplishment.

However, the smile quickly fades when I turn to the sight of Aro holding Jenks at gunpoint. Aro looks disheveled. His clothes are dirty and covered with blood splatter, his eyes crazed. I've never seen him look so out of control.

"Isabella. You really shouldn't try to escape from the same spot twice. It makes you predictable." His voice is hoarse and deadly. "Demetri!" he yells.

I stand still, unsure of what to do. I don't want to anger him further since his gun is flush against Jenks' temple. His movements are almost frantic, his tone strained. Aro is always deadly, but his current erratic state worries me. One false move and Jenks is dead.

Behind me, I hear the gate opening. Glancing to the side, I see Emmett being pushed through, Demetri holding a gun at his back. I hold my breath when I don't see anyone else come out with him. I didn't hear a shot, so I hope this means that Edward got away and not that he's been hurt.

"Where's Cullen?" Aro asks.

"He wasn't there. It was only him," Demetri responds, shoving Emmett forward. I breathe a small sigh of relief knowing he's okay.

"I told you, he wasn't with us," Jenks says, he sounds calm considering his situation.

"I doubt he would leave my daughter's side," Aro sneers.

"What can I say, we like to shake things up," Jenks smirks. Aro takes his gun and smacks him across the head. "Shut up! Go find him!" Aro screams at Demetri.

Demetri looks shocked by the outburst. Aro is on edge. "Boss, I'm not going to leave you alone with them."

"Fine, then kill them." My heart stops, but before I can react, Aro speaks again. "Wait no, I want to question them later."
Looking around frantically, he points to a light pole against the fence. "Secure these two around that," he says gesturing to Jenks and Emmett, "then find Cullen and take all three of them to the basement."

Demetri pulls Emmett over to the light and cuffs him to it. I can tell that Emmett is struggling not to react, but like me, he sees the perilous situation Jenks is in. Once Emmett is secure, Aro follows, doing the same with Jenks as Demetri covers him.

"Now do your fucking job and find Cullen! Contact me when you have them locked up."

"Yes, sir," Demetri answers, still looking unsettled by Aro's behavior; however, like always, follows the instructions and disappears through the gate.

"What's your plan?" Jenks questions. I bite my tongue from telling him to shut up. Aro won't take his sarcastic nature for long.

"None of your concern," he growls, turning to move in my direction.

"Your men are surrendering. Your complex is destroyed. The authorities will be here any moment. I think it's time to cut your losses."

Aro stops and looks over his shoulder focusing on Jenks. "You're right, but I'm not leaving without my daughter." Moving again, he rushes over, grabs my arm and shoves the gun into my side. "Let's go."

Pulling roughly, he starts dragging me away from the gate into the open field on the side of the complex. I can hear both Emmett and Jenks shouting for him to let me go.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying to buy some time and come up with a plan.

"Away," he says curtly. Walking several more feet, I see the outline of a vehicle sitting in the field. I start to panic knowing that if he gets me in that car and leaves, it's over.

Please hurry, Edward.

I frantically try to think of some way I can stall him until help arrives. "Lots of people will be looking for you. I'm only going to make your escape harder. Just leave me here," I try to rationalize.

Reaching the car, he shoves me against the side and hits the door with his fist. "Why are you always running from me?" he screams. "I'm a God remember. You are supposed to do what I say, but you defy me at every turn. Why?" His eyes are wild, the veins of his neck popping out as his face reddens.

"You ruined me. You've destroyed everything." His face moves closer to mine, his sour breath hot against my cold face. "Maybe I need to just destroy you," he whispers menacingly dragging the gun down the side of my face.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for the end. I try to keep my face neutral, refusing to give him a reaction. Suddenly, the heat of his body is gone. Snapping my eyes open, I see Aro on the ground trying to get up. Edward is standing over him with a gun, his foot quickly moving Aro's gun out of his reach.

Aro sits up with his legs spread out. He brings his hands up and laughs. "Well, well, well, Agent Cullen. Looks like you've done the impossible. You'll be the hero of the FBI," Aro mocks,
continuing to laugh.

Edward stands still, glaring at the man below him. "I'm not here for the FBI," Edward says, his voice chilling calm.

"Then what are you here for?" Aro spits.

"Retribution. This is for Bella and Renee, you son of a bitch," Edward hisses, pulling the trigger.

I watch in shock as the bullet hits Aro in the head, his body crashing to the ground lifeless. Everything seems to stop. I can't believe it's over. My body slides down the car until I'm sitting on the dirt, my eyes unable to look away from Aro's body.

"Bella?" Edward whispers near me. I feel his fingers gently turn my head until his face enters my vision. "Are you okay?"

I just stare, I'm not sure if I can speak, the overwhelming feelings of the last few days rushing forward. My body starts shaking uncontrollably, I feel impossibly cold. In the distance, I can hear the sound of people running.

"You're going into shock," Edward mutters, taking off his jacket and wrapping me in it.

"Is she okay?" Jenks yells, kneeling besides Edward.

"Fucking asshole," Emmett comments standing over Aro's body.

"She's in shock," Edward tells Jenks, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. "Baby, can you hear me?" His voice sounds strained.

"Yeah," I whisper roughly, finally finding my voice. "Is it over?"

"It's over, Ace. The rest of Aro's men surrendered and CISR are on their way to clean up the mess."

"What about Demetri?" I ask.


"It's really over." The reality hits and I'm unable to control my sobs. Throwing myself against Edward, I can't stop the outburst of emotion.

"It's okay, it's okay," Edward whispers against my head. Along with Edward's loving embrace, I can feel Jenks placing a comforting hand against my back.

I don't know how long I sat there crying, finally releasing everything I've held onto over the last six days, but Edward, Jenks and Emmett never left my side. They wait patiently and quietly for me to get it all out. Finally, when it feels like there are no more tears to shed, I stand up.

Walking over to Aro's body, I kneel down to take a closer look. I feel Edward shadowing my movements, but giving me space. The moment feels surreal. I've wanted his death for so long, but I don't know if I was really prepared for the reality of it. I think it will take awhile to fully accept it.

"You didn't win," I whisper. "I'm stronger than you. I'm finally free and you will never hurt me again!" I feel Edward squeeze my shoulder, his body close to mine. "You are not going to control my life anymore. I'm finished and when I leave here I'm going to be happy and loved."

I look again at what is left of the most powerful man in the world. Somehow lying on the dirt,
broken and still, he looks small and insignificant. "You didn't win," I whisper again, getting up.

"Ready?" Edward asks.

"Yes. What should we do now?"

"The complex is secure so we should probably head back there and wait for CISR," Jenks answers.

"Okay, let's go," I say quietly.

Edward comes closer and wraps his arm around me so that we can follow Emmett and Jenks back to the complex. I think he's afraid I'm going to fall down. I turn to look at Aro's body once more, before focusing my attention on the path ahead. With each step, my body feels lighter. I smile, watching as the early light of dawn shines on the horizon. This must be what real freedom feels like.

Chapter End Notes

CISR = Comitato interministeriale per la sicurezza della Repubblica(One of the divisions of the Italian Intelligence Agency.)

There you have it. This journey is just about over. For those keeping score, one more loose end to tie up. Don't worry I didn't forget, the Jake and Seth connection will all be explained. ;) There is one regular chapter left and then an epilogue.
Chapter Notes

As always, this chapter would not be possible without my betas beautifulnightmarex, Tds88 and pre-reader Beachlover. I will miss working with these ladies.

Okay, time to tie up some loose ends. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 29: Tonight and the Rest of My Life

The burial ground is unkempt and depressing. Tiny markers scatter the ground, some old and crumbling. This shouldn't be the final resting spot of a man who gave his life to save me. It was probably all that his sister could afford, but the sight still saddens me. I also realize that many probably felt that Caius deserved even less. With everything he did to help me, I sometimes forget he was a major player for Aro and participated in some horrific crimes. I guess he was redeemable in my eyes because he was the only one who ever cared about me.

The sky is overcast and the air chilly, but regardless of the temperature, I decide to sit on the ground anyway. I promised myself long ago that if I ever got a chance to come here I would, but now I find myself at a loss for what to say.

It's been three days since Aro's death, and I'm still not sure the full ramifications have hit me. There was a whirlwind of activity once we arrived back at the complex. CISR took the lead, but multiple agencies have sent people over to catalog the complex and question the remaining Volturi guards, including Gianna who was found hiding in her room. Once word was out, several agencies sent task forces to raid Volturi properties in various countries, basically dismantling Aro's empire piece by piece. And if that wasn't enough to keep the authorities busy, Edward and Jenks also turned over the evidence from the flash drive.

Although the guys' participation was not officially sanctioned, the success of the mission and the fact that Jake's handler knew about it prevented anyone from asking specifics about why they were there. The circumstance of Aro's death was the main focus of CISR, and ironically, it is the only details of the evening we are trying to hide.

From a law enforcement perspective, Aro was not an immediate threat when Edward shot him because he was "surrendering" and unarmed. When questioned, Edward maintained that Aro was threatening me and he had no choice but to shoot. It is the lie we are all sticking with to protect him. Edward claims he doesn't regret his actions. We all knew that as long as Aro was alive, this would never be over. However, the last thing I wanted was for him to get into trouble.

Luckily, given the state of the complex, the authorities believed that the evening was an all out battle, and since one of their own was lost in the fray, CISR had little sympathy for Aro, or any other surviving members of the Volturi. The agency wanted blood for the loss of their long-term agent, and Jake's death seemed particularly difficult on his handler.

Following one of the agents into the living room, I sit down on the couch nervously bouncing my
leg and wringing my blood-stained hands. I feel disgusting. The clean clothes Jake gave me earlier are now covered in dirt and blood. I'm exhausted and just want to take a shower. Before long, an unfamiliar man walks in and sits across from me. His impeccable state of dress makes me feel even more subconscious.

"Ms. Volturi, my name is Jared," he says formally.

"It's Dr. Swan or Bella," I state firmly. The most frustrating part of interacting with the authorities is having them call me Isabella or Ms. Volturi. Neither of those names belong to me anymore.

"Of course, I apologize. Dr. Swan, I am- or I guess- was, Jake's handler." A sudden sadness overtakes him. I can tell he genuinely cared for Jake, and his death has shaken him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Thank you," he says quietly before clearing his throat. "Um the reason I asked to talk with you is because Jake requested that if something happened to him, I seek you out."

"Really?"

"Yes, it was actually his last request."

"What did he want you to do exactly?"

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Jake sacrificed a lot for his job. One of those was his family. He lost all contact with them in order to become the persona we created."

"I can't imagine," I say quietly. I've spent years wishing for a family and an escape from the Volturi, whereas Jake gave up his family to stay with them.

"Yeah, well they are my next stop. They're about to learn the truth about their son. He left mostly everything to them. But since they haven't been a part of his life, and he wasn't sure how they would take the news, there is one aspect of his estate that he didn't trust to anyone but you."

"What is it?" I ask a bit flabbergasted.

Jared pauses and looks around. Standing up, he moves to sit next to me on the couch. "Off the record," he says quietly, "what I'm about to tell you is not sanctioned by CISR."

"Okay."

"But first, I want to make sure you understand just what Jake gave up. We recruited him to work for us at a young age, he was actually the youngest person ever placed in a long-term undercover assignment. It was a gamble that paid off, but I don't think any of the top administration ever really considered the cost to Jake. The spy business is nasty, and some days it's hard to tell the difference between the good and the bad guys. A lot of the time it comes down to justifying a bad behavior for a good cause. I think you're living proof of that."

"What do you mean?"

"How many times could an agency have stepped in to help you, but chose to back off for a chance to get Aro? I know for a fact CISR knew about the abuse you suffered because I reported it to them. But for the 'greater good' they determined it was not the right time to intervene."

"It does seem to be a common theme in my life," I mutter, thinking about director Banner and
"CISR knew that Jake would need to commit crimes, including murder, in order to get into Aro's inner circle. Like I said, they justified it as serving the greater good. However, knowing how killing someone in cold blood will affect you is not something you can anticipate, especially for someone so young."

I nod my head in understanding. His colors are becoming increasingly anxious, which makes me wonder exactly what he is trying to share that would have anything to do with Jake's estate.

"One of the first missions Jake did for Aro was to get close to a couple and kill them. Aro wanted him to get information on a computer security system they had developed. Since they had previously refused him, Aro wasn't content on just stealing the technology. He wanted them destroyed. Jake was successful, but felt incredibly guilty. In an effort to make up for what he did, he's been sending money to the couple's surviving son ever since."

"Seth," I say, remembering the picture he has of his father and Jake.

"Yes. Jake actually developed feelings for the family, particularly the little boy. I guess he was shy and awkward, and Jake took him under his wing."

"How could he kill them then?" I feel sick to my stomach.

"It's part of his training. He did what he had to, but that doesn't mean it was easy for him. I think helping Seth eased a small fraction of the guilt he felt. It's important to him that those payments continue. You're the only one he trusts to make sure it happens."

Just when I think I finally know everything, this revelation shocks me. I can't help but see the smiling picture of the three of them and remember Seth's tragic description of his parents' death. Thinking back to when I first met Jake, I always wondered about the guilt that hovered around him. Now I know it came from all the evils he had to commit under the guise of his assignment.

"So," I respond hesitantly. "Exactly how does it work? And where does he get the money?" Seth has never mentioned anything about receiving money, and the fact that he didn't know who Jake was in the picture makes me wonder how he transfers the funds.

"Monthly payments go directly to his aunt to use for Seth's care. Those payments will transfer to him on his twenty-fifth birthday. She's been told that an anonymous donor wanted to help support him after hearing his tragic story. As for where it comes from, I'll just say that Aro paid his employees very well, and Jake saved all of it for this trust."

"So it's blood money."

"Yes."

"And the story, Seth's aunt believes that?"

"Actually, I don't think so. She accepts the money because she wants to give Seth a good life, but I think she's always been suspicious. From what I've heard, so has Seth. He's tried to get the name of the donor several times, but we made sure there's no electronic trail to follow."

"That must drive Seth crazy." I laugh thinking about him not being able to find information. My laugh suddenly stops when I realize something. "Wait, you don't expect me to keep the truth from him do you?"
"I think at this point, it doesn't really matter," Jared responds darkly.

"Right," I say softly. "I think Seth deserves to know the truth and decide for himself whether he wants it."

"I understand, but please do what you can to convince Seth to take the money. It was important to Jake."

"I'll do my best, but I won't force him. I understand not wanting to take blood money."

"Of course," he whispers, looking down. "Did you have a chance to talk to Jake before he died?"

"Only a little bit," I answer sadly.

"He really did care about you, Bella. He'd be happy knowing you're safe."

"I know. He died protecting me. I'll never forget that."

"I want you to know that I'm going to do all I can to run interference with the authorities here. They will want to pick your brain for every detail of your life with Aro, but at this point it won't get us anywhere and if anyone deserves to be left alone it's you."

"Thank you," I state sincerely.

"It was nice to meet you, Bella, and I wish you all the happiness in the world," he says, standing up and shaking my hand. "I'll be in touch about the trust."

"Okay. Thank you for being someone Jake could trust. I'm glad to know he had at least one true friend in his life."

Jared nods his head and smiles before walking out of the room. My heart breaks for Jake and the life he had to live, but it breaks even more when I think about the conversation I need to have with Seth. I take solace only in the fact that it will finally put his parent's death to rest for him. Hopefully having that closure will help heal his pain.

Thinking about the closure Seth deserves, I realize what I need to say to find my own peace. "I did it, Caius. I survived." I pause to brush some of the dirt and leaves off his stone.

"I'm sorry I didn't have the chance to repay you for everything you did. I never really told you how much it all meant. I don't have very many happy memories after my mom died, but the ones I do all include you. Whether it was playing a game or giving me ice cream, in those little moments you allowed me to feel like a kid. I think they kept me sane." I smile a little when I remember him trying to play dolls with me. He was a horrible Barbie.

"You saved me from myself, and I want you to know that your sacrifice was worth it. Aro's dead." I stop, realizing this is the first time I've said it out loud.

"It's weird to say, but I'm glad he's dead. Does that make me a bad person?" I question. The sound of wind blowing through the trees is the only response I get. "Edward would probably be mad if I asked him. He hates Aro almost more than I do, I think." I sit quietly for a moment listening to the trees talk in the wind before I continue finally coming to terms with my own conflicting feelings.

"I'm not alone anymore, Caius. It's funny, I'm actually nervous talking about him. I think you would approve. He makes me incredibly happy and loves me more than I ever thought possible,
especially knowing all of my baggage."

"I do," Edward says from behind me.

"I thought you were at the complex?" I ask, surprised to see him here.

"I was, but I didn't want you to do this alone. Plus, I wanted to thank the man who made it possible for you to come into my life."

"Wow, that's kind of cheesy," I joke, still melting at his words.

"Okay, Miss Sarcasm, is this what I have to look forward to now that the danger's over?"

"Maybe, but you still love me."

"That I do," he says. Moving forward, he places a small bouquet of flowers on Caius' stone before coming to sit next to me. "You're all smiley."

"I feel light," I say simply.

Edward smiles brightly and reaches out to link our hands, bringing them up to his lips. Never have I felt so loved or protected. He has barely left my side over the last few days and his first priority is always making sure I'm okay.

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Edward pushes the key into the slot and opens the door to the hotel room. We've been at the complex most of the day answering questions. Edward finally put his foot down when I started falling asleep sitting up.

"Come on, let's get you into bed," he whispers.

"No, I want to take a shower first."

"Bella, you can barely stand."

"Yeah, but I can also barely stand being in my skin right now."

"Okay, baby, but at least let me help you."

"Is that a proposition, Cullen?"

"You know, if it wasn't for the fact that you just said that with your eyes closed, I might have said yes." He laughs leading me into the bathroom.

Helping me out of my clothes, he holds them up. "What do you want to do with these?"

"Burn them," I state semi-sarcastically.

"Sure, I'll call down to the front desk and have them take care of that right after we're done here."

Even in my exhausted state, it's hard not to appreciate Edward's physique watching him strip out of his clothes. Turning on the water, he makes sure the temperature is good before leading me into the large shower stall. Fortunately, it includes a bench on the side that allows me to sit, my legs feeling weak and unstable.

Methodically Edward washes me, taking particular care when he sees a scrape or bruise. My
weary eyes zone in on the drain, watching the dingy suds wash down. To some extent, it feels like the shower is cleansing my soul as much as my body.

Next he moves to my hair. Days of not brushing, dirt and our escape has made it a knotted mess. Gently, he drags his fingers down, untangling and smoothing it out. My eyes close with his ministrations, my skull tingling as I fall into a daze of pleasure.

"Okay, sleeping beauty, time for bed," Edward whispers.

Moving to step out of the shower, I stumble. "Stand here," Edward commands, rushing over to grab a towel for each of us.

Once dried and wrapped in fluffy terrycloth, I find myself in Edward's arms as he carries me out of the bedroom. Vaguely, I remember him tucking us into bed and wrapping himself around me before I fall into a dreamless sleep.

Hours later, feelings of warmth and hunger finally arouse me into consciousness. I feel more rested, but still tired. I could probably sleep for a week and still not catch up on my days of lost slumber. My growling stomach reminds me of the other thing I've missed for the last several days. Suddenly, a vision of a big carb-loaded breakfast enters my mind. My stomach grumbles louder with the visual. I have no idea if it's time for breakfast, lunch or dinner, but my body is craving French toast. Glancing at the clock, I see it's eleven, and judging by the light, it is in the morning. Edward's arms are still wrapped around me, but I can feel him smiling against my shoulder.

"Someone woke up hungry," he chuckles as my stomach makes itself known again.

"Shut up, it's not nice to laugh at the starving girl," I say sternly, turning over on my back to smile at him.

Edward hovers over me, gently pushing my hair out of my eyes. "Good morning," he says huskily before leaning over to kiss me. It's then that I realize we are still naked. Suddenly, my grumbling stomach doesn't seem so important.

"Do you realize," Edward whispers between kisses, "that we don't have anywhere to be, and no one is out to get us."

"Yes, but it's hard to believe it."

"Well, believe it, but more importantly, do you know what that means?" he asks looking at me with wonder and love.

"What?" I whisper.

"I finally have you all to myself."

"Oh," I whisper against his lips. "And just what do you intend to do with me?" I ask coyly.

"So much," he whispers before capturing my lips again.

Rolling over, his body covers mine. Although we've only had one night together, the memory of it has never faded. He makes me feel whole, and my body yearns for his touch. Our kisses become slow and sensuous as we savor the experience, worshiping one another. Both of us trying to reassure the other that we are here and alive.

Edward stares into my soul as we connect. Our bodies move together, my pleasure slowly building.
His hand glides down my body, his fingers leaving an electric path along my skin as they move. After pulling my leg up higher across his hip, his hands find my own, linking them tightly and placing them above my head. The position creates new points of pleasure, our pace almost frantic and desperate. My body explodes; Edward's ministrations and touch continue to drive me crazy as I come down from my high. I will never get enough of him.

Lying sated in his arms, my body tingles as he peppers my head with kisses. His hand continues to run gently up and down my back. I think it's the most peaceful I've ever felt, at least until my stomach once again lets itself known.

"Time to feed you," Edward chuckles, leaning over to grab the guest services directory on the side table. "What do you want?"

"Breakfast, lots of breakfast."

Edward laughs. "I may need to pull some strings given the time, but if my baby wants breakfast, then breakfast you're going to get."

As usual, Edward doesn't disappoint, somehow convincing the kitchen to make French toast. We spend the next several hours savoring the food and each other.

Laying my head against Edward's shoulder, I smile thinking about our isolated time in the hotel. Edward kept everyone at bay claiming I needed rest after being kept awake for so long. It was probably the best two days of my life. We barely left the room, just wanting to stay in our own bubble. Edward ventured out only once and that was to get me something to wear. Although he was happy to keep me the way I was, not having any clothes was a bit awkward.

We only have a couple more days of interviews and then we can finally go back to Seattle. I'm ready to return, but going back brings on a whole new set of unknowns. There is a lot to work out with my documentation, not to mention our jobs. Intuitively, Edward squeezes my fingers reminding me that no matter what we are facing; we will get through it together.

"I guess we should get going," I say looking at my watch, realizing I've been here for several hours.

"What do you want to do now?" Edward asks, helping me to stand.

"Are we done with CISR?"

"At least for today."

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"How about you show me around Italy? I want to know all about your life here."

I turn to him looking incredulous. "Really?"

"Not the bad memories. Show me the Italy that you and your mom shared."

Tears fill my eyes at the heartfelt nature of his request. "Okay."

We spend the rest of the afternoon visiting my mom's favorite spots. I feel more empowered with each location, almost as if I'm reclaiming it as my own. For so long, my country of origin was nothing but a place of pain. Showing Edward around allowed me to remember its beauty. That
afternoon, Edward helped me salvage my past and free it from darkness.

Once released from further questioning, Emmett, Jenks, Edward and I board a plane back to the states. Edward insisted on flying us first class to provide the most comfort. Although we were feeling euphoric about winning the war, our group is also exhausted. I'm anxious to return, especially to see Seth. We have kept in close contact with him during our time here, and although everyone says he is healing, I need to see it for myself.

I spent most of the flight snuggled into Edward's side, asleep. During the times I was awake, Jenks and Emmett kept me entertained. Laughing at their antics, I realized it was the first time we really spent any time together in the same place. I knew they were both characters by themselves, but together...well the word "hilarity" took on a whole new meaning during the flight.

I find myself feeling sentimental watching the three of them interact. They are such an important part of my life and knowing I don't have to give them up is almost too much to comprehend. For the first time, I don't have to worry about the consequences of making attachments, and it feels amazing. Many hours later, our plane starts its decent to Seattle. My body feels wired and on edge with excitement as I watch the familiar skyline come into view.

"What's wrong?" Edward asks, feeling my body tense up.

"Nothing, I'm just excited." Turning to look at him, I can't help but smile. "We made it!"

"That we did, baby. That we did," he whispers, leaning over to kiss me. "And I can't wait to have you all to myself again."

My stomach erupts with only the heat and excitement that Edward creates. "Me neither," I whisper against his ear, holding him close.

The benefit of being taken unexpectedly means a lack of luggage. I bought only the essentials and enough clothes to get me through a few days in Italy, all of which fit easily into a duffel bag. The guys also had minimal luggage making customs an easy and short stop. Reaching the exit, I'm surprised to see all the Cullens waiting for us.

"Edward!" Esme yells, rushing forward to pull him into a tight hug. Alice is directly behind her, anxiously waiting for her turn.

I step back slightly, not wanting to interfere in the reunion. Jenks places his arm around my shoulder and leans in close to my ear. "Wait for it," he whispers, both of us continuing to watch the loving scene.

"Bella!" Esme says, turning towards me. Suddenly I find myself encircled in her arms, Jenks stepping back giving me a knowing smile. "We were so worried about you, Sweetheart." Pulling back, she looks me over, brushing my hair back in a motherly gesture. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

Behind her, I see Carlisle and Alice looking intently at me, waiting anxiously for my answer. Edward has moved behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders in a supportive gesture.

"I'm okay," I say quietly, overwhelmed by the attention.

"Don't listen to her. Carlisle, she hurt her ribs and wrist pretty bad when they took her and then while she was there, they kept her awake and barely fed for six days. Don't you think she should be checked out?"
Esme and Alice cringe at the description of my experience while Carlisle assesses me with a critical eye. "It probably wouldn't hurt," he says.

"Thank you for the concern, but I'm okay. If something was really wrong, I'm sure it would have shown itself by now. I don't want to spend time at a doctor's office or hospital."

"How about this? I have dinner ready at home for everyone. Let's go back to our house and relax. Carlisle can take a look at you there and then everyone's happy," Esme proposes.

I smile at her warm and giving nature. "That sounds great," I say sincerely. It's hard to say no seeing her love and concern.

"Great! I'm starving," Emmett says suddenly. Everyone laughs at his boisterous reply.

"Of course you are," Edward responds laughing.

"Why don't we go get the cars and bring them around front?" Carlisle suggests, looking at Edward.

"Okay. I'll be right back, baby," Edward says, leaning over to kiss the top of my head before following Carlisle out the door.

After they leave, Alice rushes over to wrap me in her arms. For such a small thing, she certainly has a strong grip. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Esme raining her motherly attention upon Emmett and Jenks. Although they appear embarrassed, their colors give away how much they love it.

"I'm glad you're okay. And I'm so sorry about Jasper. I can't believe what he did. I should have realized it sooner," Alice says, holding me tightly.

I step back from her grasp and see tears running down her face. "Alice, you have nothing to be sorry for. Jasper's choices were his own. There was no way you could have known."

She looks at me with watery eyes, wiping at her cheeks. I hate seeing her upset. "Look, he thought he was protecting his family. Please don't let this affect your relationship." I think about the clear love I saw between them. Regardless of how I feel about him, I can't deny that he loves Alice with all of his heart.

"But that's the problem. He didn't consider how losing you would affect Edward. Jasper knows how hard it is for Edward to let people in. I just can't forget that Jasper willingly did something that he knew would hurt him."

"I'm sorry this situation hurt you." I know I am not responsible for Jasper's choices either, but it's not fair that Alice was hurt in the process.

"Thanks. I'm honestly not sure where he and I go from here. I just need time to figure out if I can forgive him."

Hugging her again, I whisper in her ear. "I'm here if you want to talk. I have some experience with betrayal." She smiles sadly at me. Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, we walk outside to wait for the cars.

Pulling into the Cullen's driveway, I'm shocked to see Jasper and Banner waiting by the front door. "What they fuck are they doing here?" Edward growls, his body tensing at the sight.

As soon as the cars stop, Edward, Emmett and Jenks jump out forming a wall between me and the
two nervous men standing on the porch. I can see the guilt bleeding through their various emotions.

"You need to leave," Edward states in a calm and deadly tone. He's barely holding himself back.

"I know you don't want to see us," Jasper says.

"You're damn right!" Jenks yells.

"Jasper, I asked you to leave them alone," Alice says sadly. "This really isn't the best way to earn my trust back." Jasper deflates at the harsh comment.

"Look," Banner interrupts, "the FBI and CIA wants to talk to you and Seth. This isn't going to go away. The sooner you take care of this, the quicker you can move on. I know we aren't your favorite people, but at least we can help provide the right context to the conversation."

"I don't understand why they want to talk to us so badly," I say, trying to move forward, but Edward places a protective hand on my arm.

"Regardless of your circumstances, it doesn't change that you're here illegally, and I don't think I need to get into the numerous crimes Seth has committed through his illegal hacking."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Emmett shouts.

"You're seriously threatening to charge them?" Jenks asks angrily.

Edward remains deadly silent, but the tightening of his hand around my arm is a sign of his building anger.

"Not now, but the longer you take to cooperate, the more likely they will play that card."

"Just come in and give a statement. Rose will be there and so will Seth's lawyer, who has agreed to represent you as well. It won't be over until you do this," Jasper says.

"Fine." Shocked by my agreement, everyone turns to look at me. "I just want to get on with my life, and if this is the only way to do it then I want to get it over with," I explain.

Edward releases my arm, but links our fingers. "I'm going with her, no argument."

Esme moves forward, eying the two men warily as she speaks to us. "We'll wait on dinner until you return. Can I assume this won't take long?" She looks pointedly at Jasper.

"We'll make it as quick as possible," Jasper answers, sadness and shame tingling his words. The coolness in Esme's demeanor hurts him.

Jenks insists on driving us; I don't think he wants Seth to face this alone either. Reaching the CIA office, we follow Jasper to a conference room. Waiting inside is a whole cast of characters, including Seth. Running over to him, I can't help but throw my arms around him.

"Seth!"

"Bella!" His arms tighten around me. "I'm so glad you are okay."

Pulling back, I look at him incredulously. "Me? You scared me to death! Don't you ever take a chance like that again, do you understand me?"

"Yes, but I'm not sorry. I'd do it again if I thought I could save you."
A throat clearing behind Seth disrupts our conversation. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but the quicker we get this started, the quicker it will end," Banner says. Giving Seth one last hug, each of us takes our seats, focused on the panel in front of us.

Several grueling and tense hours later, Edward, Jenks, Seth and I walk out of the room. The lawyer Rose recommended for Seth was fantastic. Every time Jasper's supervisor, Peter, would get a little nasty, Ms. Cope would kindly remind him how strong of a civil case both Seth and I have against the FBI and CIA for willfully placing us in harm's way.

Rose also played the game well. She was stern throughout the conversation, but made sure to acknowledge more than once how both Banner and Peter's behavior weakened any case she had to take either of us to court.

The meeting ended with an uneasy compromise. No charges would be filed against either Seth or I, and in return, neither of us would open a civil case against the government. I would also be allowed to file official documentation to change my name and start the process of becoming a United States citizen. Ms. Cope plans to file my request today, and Rose promised to work with her contacts in immigration to get things approved quickly.

I think both Edward and Jenks wanted more blood from Jasper, Banner and Peter, but for me walking out free and legal was the most important thing. We are close to the exit when I hear Jasper yelling behind us.

"Bella, wait."

Edward stiffens besides me as I turn around. "Did we forget something?"

"No, I just want to explain why I did what I did."

I feel Edward and Jenks move close to me on either side, each stepping forward a bit, showing a united front. Not feeling like pulling any punches, I bluntly refuse his request. "I don't want to talk to you right now."

"I'm sorry, Bella. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have done what I did."

"No you shouldn't have. Seth almost died because of your stupidity," I yell, unable to contain my anger any longer.

"I just wanted to protect my family," he whispers.

The surge of rage I feel is overwhelming. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I strike Jasper across the face, knocking him to the ground.

"What about me?" I scream. "Why wasn't I ever worthy of protection? I'm so sick of hearing that justification. I deserve to have a life too!"

"I'm sorry," Jasper says quietly from the ground.

"You need to go," Edward snarls.

"Look, Jasper, I don't believe in holding grudges, but it's going take a long time for me to forgive you. So please, just stay away from me." With that final statement, I turn and walk out the glass doors.

"Knocked out by a girl. Oh sucks to be you, man." Jenks mocks before walking out behind me.
Edward stays back longer. Since the door is shut, I can't hear what Edward is saying to him, but from their body language, I can tell the conversation is intense. Finally, he walks out and takes a deep breath before grabbing my hand and leading me back to the car. It feels like we are both walking away from a chapter in our lives, and for once I'm excited about what the next chapter might bring.

I can't believe the damage to the loft. I shudder looking around at the bullet holes, images of that night flashing in my mind. Seth is moving back here today, finally healthy enough to take care of himself. Although both Jenks and I offered to help him find a new place, Seth insisted on returning. He said it is the first place in a long time that felt like home and he's not going to let Aro take it away. Understanding his rationalization, I changed my offer from finding something new, to helping him fix the damage. By my request, the guys have left us alone so that we can have some privacy when I tell him about his parents.

"I'll need to buy all new equipment," Seth utters looking at his computer table. Of course that was the first place he went as soon as we entered.

"And a new door too," I say looking at the makeshift barrier between the loft and the hallway. "You need a working door before you can stay here." The protective side emerges when I think of him staying here without protection.

"No one is after us anymore, it will be fine," Seth responds logically.

"Aro is not the only danger in the world, Seth. You live in downtown Seattle," I retort back exasperated.

"Did you know that-"

"Seth, if you're about to share statistics about the crime rate in this area, just stop. I don't care how low it is, you still need a door."

He looks up surprised by my firm tone, but then smiles, his colors bright and happy. "Thanks, Bella," he says shyly.

"Seth, come sit down. We need to talk."

I walk over to the couch and pat the spot next to me. I take a deep breath, preparing myself for the difficult conversation. Reaching in my pocket, I grab the picture I took earlier from Seth's desk.

"What's going on? Are you leaving Seattle?" Seth asks, fear and anxiety coloring his movements as he sits down.

"No, of course not. I think we both found a place here," I say with a small smile. "Umm, I have information about your parents. I found some things out when I was in Italy, and I wanted to talk to you about it."

"Oh," Seth says solemnly, his soulful eyes searching mine.

Taking the picture of Seth, his dad and Jake out of my pocket, I hand it to him. "I told you that Jake worked for Aro."

"Yes," he says hesitantly.

"Well, I found out that he was working undercover. He was undercover the whole time."
"Wow. I guess that explains why the information I found and your experience with him were so different."

"Yeah, it does." Pausing I take another deep breath. "His job was to get close to Aro, which meant he had to do things to build trust with him."

"That makes sense, but what does that have to do with-" His eyes widen as he connects all the dots. He quickly looks down at the picture, his finger tracing his father's face. "He killed them."

"Yes." His colors darken, a tear slowly running down his face. "I'm sorry, Seth."

"They let them die didn't they?"

"Who?" I ask confused by the question.

"CISR. They knew what Jake had to do and they let them die," he states matter-of-factly.

"Yes. They justified it by the greater good of getting Aro, but it doesn't make it right," I say angrily.

"No it doesn't."

"I know it won't change anything, but Jake hated what he had to do. He never stopped feeling guilty about it. I think a part of him died when he killed them."

"I really don't care about how guilty he feels. He took my family," Seth responds, his fist tightening against his leg.

"Of course," I whisper, knowing there is really nothing I can say to help. This is something Seth needs to work through in his own way and in his own time. "There's one more thing."

"What?" he looks up anxiously.

"Like I said, Jake never forgave himself, and to make up for it in some small way he started a trust for you. Since it happened, he's been sending money to your aunt."

"I knew it," he whispers harshly. "I asked her over and over where the money came from, but she'd always lie and tell me some anonymous guy who felt sorry for me sent it."

"Seth, she really didn't know. She had suspicions, but no one told her the truth."

"It still doesn't change the fact that she blindly accepted money. I told her I didn't want it. The money felt tainted, but she wouldn't stop. All of these upgrades," he says waving his arms, "are because she paid someone without my permission. She always goes behind my back."

"Maybe it was the only thing she knew to do," I whisper, scooting over and putting my arm around him. "Seth, you're a pretty talented and unique person."

He looks up with confusion. "I imagine you like to take care of yourself and you're incredibly brilliant. That's intimidating for anyone."

"I told her I hated her before I left for Seattle," he says softly. "And she still fixed my place. It just made me angrier."

"She loves you, Seth."

"I know. We had a good talk at Thanksgiving."
"Jake made plans for you to still get the money. He asked me to make sure the payments continue."

Seth shakes his head. "I don't want it. I imagine the amount of money he sends doesn't come from his CISR salary."

"It doesn't," I confirm.

"Then I don't want it," he says standing up.

"Seth," I stand up too. "I'm not going to force you to take it, but I don't think you should decide right now. Give yourself some time to process everything first."

"No matter how long I take, it doesn't change the facts. It's like a code, the program creates the outcome, there's no changing it."

I lightly place my hands on his shoulders getting his attention. "Humans aren't computers. We can change our minds, feelings and decisions anytime we want, and I know that scares you. Life would be a lot easier if everything fit into a box, but that's not reality. Give yourself some time. No one is going to judge you either way, okay."

"Okay," he whispers.

I can see how conflicted and emotional he is about the information I shared. Seth struggles with intense emotions. He will need time to catalog and organize everything into his own version of ones and zeros. This is a part of Seth that will never change, and I'm glad because it's what makes him special. He will be okay. One way or another, I'll make sure of it.

The smell of cinnamon and burning wood fills the house. It's as comforting as the soft Christmas music playing in the background. I've never experienced a large family Christmas before. The last Christmas I celebrated was the one before my mom died. It was always just her and I for the holidays.

Esme and Carlisle invited everyone over for their annual Christmas Eve party. Jenks, Emmett, Rose, Seth and Seth's aunt are all here. After eating a huge prime rib dinner with all the trimmings, we are getting settled in the living room for games and dessert.

Waiting to get started, I enjoy the view of the room and everyone in it. Seth and his aunt are sitting close together and talking. I can see their relationship is healing. Seth decided this week that he couldn't personally accept Jake's money anymore. However, he surprised me by asking to create a charitable organization for abused women and children instead. He wants to name it after my mother.

Since I have control over the trust, which is fairly large, I can transfer the funds to a business account that allows for easier accessibility. Seth's aunt volunteered to head up the business end of it, and her willingness to accept his choice has helped Seth to lower his guard with her. Making this decision has also made it easier for him to find closure with his parent's death.

Looking to my left, I see Alice in the corner of the room on the phone with Jasper. Their relationship is still uncertain even though Jasper is willing to do whatever it takes to fix things. Edward has asked several times how I would feel if they work things out, but I told him it really isn't about me. Jasper will never be a friend, but I know Alice loves him, and I want her happy. If that means eventually working things out with him, then I will support her. However, judging by her colors, I won't have to deal with it anytime soon.
Esme and Carlisle walk in carrying a tray of peppermint chocolate cake and coffee. Even though I'm full from dinner, the cake is too tempting to turn down. Once everyone has a plate, Esme pulls out the box of Pictionary asking who is ready to play. Edward looks at me with a raised eyebrow gesturing between us.

"Edward and I call partners," I shout out, making him burst into laughter.

The hours fly as each team takes turns and like the last time we played, there is no clear winner. Laughter fills the air as Jenks tries to guess Emmett's chicken scratch drawing on the paper. They are a good comedy team, but for games, their partnership is a disaster. It will be lucky if both of them survive the evening without getting shot by the other.

Colors of contentment, happiness and love light the room. My body feels warm and I can't stop myself from smiling. This is what being a part of a family feels like. Edward drops next to me on the couch, handing me a drink.

"What are you thinking about?" He looks at me, his eyes sparkling.

We've barely left each other sides since we got home, alternating between his place and mine. Neither of us has figured out what we want to do regarding our jobs. Edward told me in Italy that he quit. I thought he might return after things settled down, but he said the politics around what happened to me left a bad taste in his mouth. As for me, I'm technically still out on leave, but like Edward, my work for the FBI feels corrupted after learning that Banner only hired me to watch me. My leave pay and Edward's inheritance has allowed both of us to delay making any decisions, but I know we need to figure something out eventually.

"Nothing, I'm just happy," I say, leaning over to kiss him.

"Good. Merry Christmas, baby."

"Merry Christmas."

The bar is bustling with the New Year's Eve crowd. Edward and I agreed to meet Jenks here, but decided we would leave before midnight. Both of us want to ring in the New Year in our own private celebration.

"Over here!" Jenks yells from a corner booth. Emmett and Rose have already arrived.

"Bells!" Emmett bellows. I can tell he has already enjoyed a couple of drinks, his cheeks flushed and voice louder than normal.

"Hey, Emmett. How's it going?"

"Fantastic!" he exclaims. "I'm still jobless, but what the hell!" Emmett also decided going back to the FBI wasn't for him, but he's struggled to find an alternative. Edward's been helping him until he figures something out.

"Something will come up, I know it," I respond optimistically. "Hi, Rose."

"Hi, Bella," Rose says brightly, snuggling into Emmett's side.

He leans over and kisses her on the head. The love between them is clear, their combined feelings of happiness vibrant between them. I'm happy it worked out between them, and Emmett mentioned more than once that she's the one. I know they are taking things one step at a time, but I wouldn't
be surprised to hear an announcement from the two of them soon.

"Speaking of jobs," Jenks says jumping in. "I have a proposition for all of you."

"Should I be afraid?" I ask, Edward wrapping his arm around me as we settle into the booth.

"Always be afraid when I have an idea, Ace." He laughs. "If you haven't noticed, I've stuck around longer than normal."

"Yeah, I've wondered about that. Usually as soon as one job is complete, you're off doing another. Business slow?" Edward asks.

"Not really. I've been thinking about changing things up."

"In what way?" Emmett asks.

"I think it's time to focus on cases closer to home."

"Seriously?" Edward asks stunned. "I thought you hated being tied down."

"What can I say, working so closely with Bella and Seth made me realize that this solo shit is getting a bit old."

I smile at him. Who knew Jenks could be so sentimental. "You have a plan," I state, evaluating his determined colors.

"I do. Here I am relocating my business to Seattle and three of you around this table are jobless. Seems to me, I could help change that."

Edward leans forward, looking closely at Jenks. "You want to work together?"

"Think about it, we'll get to do all the good parts of the job, but without all the politics and shady deals. Not to mention that between our detective skills, Bella's intuition and Seth's computer skills, we'd be unstoppable."

"Seth?" I ask.

"Yeah, the kid's already on board. In fact, he so excited that he's spending his New Year's Eve wiring the building I bought for our main base of operation. I figure someone's got to keep the kid on the straight and narrow."

"And that's you?" I question laughing.

"Hey, give me a little credit, Ace," Jenks says offended, but his light colors let me know he loves our banter. "So what do you guys say?"

I smile raising my glass. "I'm in."

Edward looks over at me with a wink. "Count me in too."

"Well shit, I never miss out on a party. I'm there," Emmett responds also lifting his glass.

"Excellent!" Jenks smiles and raises his glass too. "To new beginnings!"

"To new beginnings!" we say, clinking our glasses together.
Edward slams the door shut with his foot; his hands too busy freeing me from my clothes to use the handle. We stayed at the bar until around eleven, but as the evening went on, Edward and I became anxious to start our own celebration.

"Oh god," I moan as he attacks my neck.

"I'm so glad that you suggested leaving because I was about ready to drag you into a broom closet." He pulls back to look at me while still walking us further into his house. "You, Bella Swan, are too sexy for your own good. You were killing me on the dance floor."

"Really," I whisper, running my lips along his ear. His body shudders in response. "I definitely don't want to kill you, but I haven't even begun to drive you crazy."

Edward growls as I run my nails up and down his back before pulling his shirt over his head. Grabbing me, he walks over and sets me on the counter. For a moment, he simply looks at me. It's a look I'm now familiar with but drives me crazy nonetheless. It is full of passion and love, and makes my whole body tingle in anticipation.

Abruptly, he attacks my lips, our tongues dueling in a frenzied passion. A bowl crashes to the ground when I move my arm trying to brace myself. The noise barely registers as Edward continues to kiss me.

The rest of our clothes disappear, the sounds of our panting and heated breath filling the room. Our pace is fast and animalistic. We are wild and loving all at the same time. Being with Edward is like nothing I've ever experienced. His mouth and hands feel like they are everywhere at once, teasing my body into peaks of pleasure. Edward buries his head into my neck, groaning as our bodies' frantically move together, pushing and pulling each other over the edge.

"Jesus," Edward pants against my neck. "That was amazing." He looks up and smiles.

"I think I broke a bowl," I whisper, trying to peak around Edward to check out the damage.

"I don't care." Edward wraps his arms around my body and picks me up.

"Where are we going?"

"To bed. I intend to ring in the New Year naked and under the covers."

"Well, we're halfway there," I say, laughing as he rushes quickly up the stairs and into his bedroom.

Lying with my head on Edward's chest, I work on catching my breath from our last round of intense love-making. Edward's fingers are slowly dragging through my hair and I can feel his heart beating fast. He switched on the TV moments ago, just in time to catch the ball dropping. I glance at the screen, watching as the glowing orb starts its descent.

I never imagined this time last year that I would be here; happy, in love, free and excited about the year to come. The screen explodes as the ball completes its journey, people celebrating with those around them.

"I love you, baby. Happy New Year," Edward says, flipping us over and kissing me.

"I love you." I can't stop smiling.

"Move in with me," Edward suddenly blurts out.
"What?"

"Think about it. We've spent every night together since you returned. And I don't know about you, but I don't intend on changing that anytime soon. Do you?"

"No."

"Then why go back and forth?"

"It isn't very practical," I say smirking.

"Is that a yes?"

"I guess it is. You sure you know what you're getting into, roomie?"

"Most definitely," he says kissing me roughly. So much for catching my breath.

The next day, Edward moved me into his house. I really didn't have too much to pack since my life has always been minimalistic in regards to belongings. So it didn't take us long to empty out my apartment. Throughout the day, Edward made an extra effort to show how much he wanted me to feel like his place was mine.

He happily made room for me in his large bedroom closet and even bought a new dresser for the rest of my clothes. He emptied out drawers in the bathroom and switched out his old coffee machine for my fancier model. But nothing prepared me for the biggest change he made in preparation for my move.

After bringing in all my boxes from the car, I take a look around trying to decide which one to tackle first.

"Wait, I want to show you something," Edward says softly, taking my hands and leading me upstairs to the extra room. His actions take me by surprise.

"Close your eyes," he whispers. Doing as he requested, I hear him open the door before leading me inside. "I had Esme help me out with this while we were packing. Okay, open them."

I'm shocked by the sight and never expected him to remember this part of my life. The bedroom furniture is gone, and instead, blank canvases and art supplies fill the room. There is also a new sound system in the corner with wireless speakers connected to each corner.

"I remember you said that painting helped you sort through your visions when it becomes too much. I knew you would still need that ability here, especially when we start working cases again."

Tears fill my eyes. I've never had anyone consider my needs or feelings like Edward does. "I love it," I stutter, turning around and jumping into his arms. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I want you to feel at home here."

Several hours later, I'm sitting on the living room floor making sure I got everything. We've finally unpacked all the boxes and are waiting for a pizza to arrive.

"Bella?" Edward asks hesitantly. I look up and see him holding my treasured suitcase uncertainly.

"Bring it here," I request, reaching out my hand.
He walks over and places it in front of me. Sitting down, he waits patiently as I gather the courage to open it. This suitcase and I have been through a lot together. It's the only thing that has stayed with me during my journey. Flipping open the lid, I look at the contents.

"What is all this?"

"Memories," I say quietly, pulling out a worn dingy white bunny. "This was the first toy my mom ever bought me. She said as soon as I could hold it, I carried it with me everywhere. I kept it in my bed after she died."

"Sounds like a good friend to keep around. What about this?" Edward asks, holding up a statue of an angel.

"My mom kept that on her nightstand. She believed it watched over her and kept her safe. I took it from her room before Aro cleaned it out."

Digging through the suitcase, I pull out the only picture I have of my mom and me together. It was taken at a fair. She is kneeling next to me, both of us holding cotton candy and smiling widely for the camera.

"That's a beautiful picture," Edward says. Taking it out of my hand, he walks over and places it on a shelf in his entertainment center that holds other framed pictures of his family. "Much too beautiful to keep hidden."

For a second, my anxiety automatically increases thinking about taking it out of the suitcase and losing it, but then I remember where I am. Looking around my new place, I realize that I want to make it mine, or what's more, ours. This is not temporary.

"You're right."

"I bet we can find places for all the treasures in that suitcase," Edward says, walking back over to where I'm sitting. "We can start by putting this on our nightstand." He reaches down and gently grabs the angel.

"Thank you," I whisper, standing up and lightly kissing his lips.

Edward nods, realizing how big of a step this is for me. Walking towards the stairs, he glances over his shoulder. "You coming?"

Looking at the shelf and smiling, I call back. "Yup, on my way."

Walking closer, happy tears fill my eyes at the sight of my family picture next to his.

I'm finally home.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who gave this story a chance. I have a lot more to say, but I'm going to save my really sappy thank you and reflections for the epilogue. ;)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

As always my chapter would not be complete without the support of my betas beautifulnightmarex, Tds88 and pre-reader Beachlover. I appreciate all the time they willingly gave to this story. They are amazing and I can't thank them enough. Also a big shout out to PTB for setting me up with them. Their services were extraordinarily helpful.

I own nothing related to twilight. The original aspects of the story are my own crazy musings.

See the bottom for ending thoughts and possible plans.

Now, a glimpse into the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue: Perfect Moments

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about." Haruki Murakami

Paradise.

Standing on the balcony of the Maldives bungalow, I decide there is not a place more fitting of the word. Lifting my face towards the sun, I try to absorb every aspect of the experience. The gentle breeze carries an intoxicating smell of exotic flowers while the mist of the ocean kisses my face. Closing my eyes, I listen quietly to the calming melody of sea birds and soothing waves. I don't think I've ever felt this relaxed, which is ironic considering what today is.

Familiar arms reach around and circle my waist before a welcome pair of lips place a kiss on top of my head. "Beautiful isn't it?" Edward whispers into my ear.

"Beautiful doesn't begin to cover it. I can't believe we're actually here."

"It's a good thing too," Edward says gruffly. "Jenks knew it was his life on the line if we didn't get here in time."

I can't help but laugh at the seriousness of his tone. I think he's more nervous about this than I am. He's been worried all week that something would mess up our plans. "Oh come on. You know Jenks. He always gets it done one way or another."

"I still think he cut it too close. I told him taking on another case right before we left was risky," Edward argues.

"Hey, we're here, that's all that matters." I lightly run my hands up and down the arms surrounding me, trying to get him to relax and enjoy the experience.
"You're right. I'll stop grumbling," he whispers against my head.

I didn't understand what a "mercenary" was until I started working with Jenks. In many respects, the term describes a variety of behaviors, both good and bad. I discovered that for Jenks, it means finding justice for those who would not otherwise get it through "legal" channels. This could mean taking a case that law enforcement agencies wouldn't because of the limitations of the evidence or contracting with those same agencies to help with high-profile cases that needed a swift, but quiet result.

At the end of the day, no matter what the case or client, I went home feeling as though we were serving a greater purpose and giving back some of what evil tries to take from this world. I can't change what Aro did, but helping make sure that no one takes his place makes me feel good. Our little group has become an unstoppable force, and we are slowly making quite a name for ourselves.

I also discovered that I have a knack for working undercover. I particularly love playing different roles alongside Jenks. Our interview marathon in Seattle helped us develop a unique communication style that translates perfectly to undercover situations where you have to ad-lib and go with the flow. Between that and my ability, we are a seamless team.

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for undercover work is often difficult for Edward to stomach. His protective nature is as strong as ever, regardless of how many times I've proven that I can take care of myself.

Broken pieces of furniture and the occasional dirty needle punctuate the floor of the grimy living room. The smell of the stale air is thick and almost sickening. I watch the man in front of me anxiously pacing and muttering under his breath. I need to reach him before this gets even more out of control.

"Hey, relax," I say in a calm and soothing tone. Todd is tall, and the way his clothes hang off his thin frame makes him look almost malnourished. His hair is unkempt and his face aged and scarred, which is result of his lifestyle not his biological age.

Our goal was simple; make contact with an informant for the drug ring we are trying to bring down. Sources told us that Todd was the person who kept his ear to the ground and made sure his bosses were up to date with any competing dealers. We need his inside knowledge to bring them down. My job was to "bump" into Todd at the seedy club, flirt a bit and then lead him outside where Jenks and Edward were waiting to grab him. Emmett was in the club watching from a distance, and like always, Seth was our technical guardian angel watching everything from afar.

However, once inside, the plan crumbled. Partly because he was incredibly jacked up on some type of illegal substance, but mainly because a fight broke out causing major chaos. Todd, who was already paranoid, freaked and dragged me outside with him. In the mess of bodies trying to push their way out of the club, Emmett and I lost sight of each other. While the guys were scrambling, Todd was dragging me around the corner and into his car. I could have fought him off, but if we lost him it would cost us a lot of unnecessary time. Logically, I knew that Seth would track me and the guys would follow, which I felt decreased the risk enough to warrant leaving with him. Now, I just need to keep an increasingly agitated Todd calm until they arrive at the abandoned house he drove us to. Whatever drugs he took is making him edgy and fidgety. Reasoning with him will be difficult. I continue to monitor Todd carefully while listening to all the anxious chatter in my hidden ear piece.

"God damn it, I need the exact location, Seth," Edward shouts.
"Hang on, Ace. We're almost there," Jenks says.

"You're two minutes out. Turn left at the next intersection, and the house will be at the end of the street on the left," Seth interrupts, the sound of his frantic typing clear in the background.

"Todd, let's sit down," I suggest as he continues his anxious pacing.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he mumbles.

Walking over, I stand in his path and lightly place my hand on his shoulder stopping him. "I thought we were having fun earlier." Flashing him my best smile, I lightly run my fingers down his arm suggestively. "How about we get to know one another better?"

I can't tell if Todd is armed, and I'm worried that if he is, he will just start shooting once the guys arrive. I need to keep him distracted so that he doesn't see them. After several seconds of standing in his way, Todd finally focuses his attention on me. Tilting his head to the side, he contemplates my request. I smile again, rubbing my hand back up his arm. I realize this was the wrong choice as I watch his colors suddenly darken and his eyes narrow.

"Who are you?"

"What in the hell kind of drugs did you do?" I ask incredulously trying to play the role of a frustrated party girl. "I'm Carly, remember. You're the one who dragged me here. What's your problem?"

"Girls don't flirt with me. Who sent you?"

"I can't speak for other girls, but I know what I like, and I like you. Now do you want to have some fun or not?"

Before I can react to the emotional change I see in him, his hand suddenly strikes me hard across the face. His drug induced adrenaline giving his scrawny body more strength than normal. Pain explodes across my cheek. "You're lying," he hisses.

"Almost there, Bella," Edward's voice says tightly into my earpiece.

"Okay, I'm done playing," I mutter angrily.

Swinging around, I punch Todd directly in the nose. He screams and doubles over in pain. Moving quickly, I grab his arm and twist it around behind him, holding it in a position that puts pressure on his shoulder. Keeping a hold of his arm, I follow him as he falls to his knees. Using my own knee, I push on his spine until he is lying on the floor in a prone position. Just then, the door flies open and the guys rush in with their guns drawn.

"Looks like Ace has it covered." Jenks smiles proudly lowering his gun.

Emmett laughs and comes over to quickly place cuffs on Todd's wrists. Once secured, Emmett hauls him up into a standing position. Edward rushes over to me, concern and anger flashing in his eyes when he reaches out and touches the red mark on my face.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," I say reassuringly.

"Looks like he got you, Ace," Jenks says pointing to his face before he grabs one of Todd's elbows.
Emmett is still holding the other.

"Only once." I smile triumphantly. Jenks laughs, but Edward doesn't seem to share in his humor. Although I'm not looking at him, I can feel his heated stare.

"Okay, Todd. Let's take a drive," Emmett says, walking towards the door. About halfway there, Jenks trips him. At the same time, both Jenks and Emmett let go of his arms, watching as he falls face first onto the floor.

"Fucking pricks!" Todd yells.

"Oh, I'm sorry, how clumsy of me," Jenks says with fake sympathy. Emmett and Jenks pick him back up and start moving again. When they reach the door way, Jenks slams him into the frame. "Oh crap. Sorry again," he mutters as Todd yells out in pain.

Heading out the door, he turns and winks. Out of everyone, Jenks gives me the most leeway when it comes to taking on slightly more dangerous roles. However, that doesn't mean he likes it when I get hurt. Todd is in for a rough night.

"We'll wait for you out here," Emmett says, eyeing Edward carefully.

Glancing over, I see Edward standing with his hands on his hips and head lowered as he tries to regulate his breathing. Looks like Todd is not the only one in for a rough night. After everyone leaves, Edward and I stand in an awkward silence. My annoyance with his behavior builds the longer he takes to say something. If I'm a part of this team, he needs to stop treating me like I'm fragile. I know he's upset, but I'm not going to apologize for doing my job. Edward is the first to break our silent stand-off.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he asks gruffly, keeping his head lowered, his arm twitching slightly as he clenches his fist.

"I was thinking our case was screwed if we lost him."

"Bullshit. We could have found him again."

"And lose needless time?" I ask, my voice getting louder. "I knew you guys were right behind me."

"What if he had a gun? It only takes a few seconds to shoot someone, Bella."

"Actually, it only takes .25 seconds to pull the trigger," Seth's voice echoes in my ear.

"Shut up, Seth," Edward and I yell simultaneously before pulling the earpieces out and turning off our microphones.

"When are you going to realize that I can take care of myself? You don't give this much flack to Emmett or Jenks when they take risks, which they do all the time."

"Taking a risk is different from being reckless," Edwards spits out.

"Are you being serious? You're telling me that you would have let him go?" His silent glare is all the answer I need. "I thought so."

"It doesn't matter what I would've done. We're talking about what you did and the fact that you could have gotten yourself killed."

I can't help the sardonic snort in response. "It's not like we sell ice cream, Edward. Our job is
dangerous. You guys put your lives on the line everyday too. How is what I did tonight any different?"

"It just is."

"That's not a reason. You need to start treating me like everyone else. I'm a part of this team too," I yell defiantly.

"Yeah, but I'm not planning to marry the rest of the team, Bella!" Edward yells back, stopping short when he realizes what he just admitted.

A different kind of silence fills the room as his words sink in. Edward looks as shocked as I feel. Neither one of us have talked seriously about marriage. It's not like I haven't thought about it, but since things are going so good, it was more a fleeting thought than an overwhelming desire or concern.

"Shit! That's not how I wanted to bring this up," he mutters.

"You want to marry me?" My anger fades, replaced suddenly by nervous excitement.

"Of course I do," he whispers, moving closer. Suddenly he smirks. "I guess this fits. We've never really done anything in the traditional sense. You know, I had this all planned out."

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted to take you to dinner and surprise you. Sweep you off your feet."

"I'm not stopping you," I say quietly, overwhelmed by the intense look in Edward's eyes as he continues to move closer.

"You drive me crazy, you know that." I nod my head before he wraps his arms around me and lowers his lips to my ear. "I want forever with you, Bella. Just remember that next time you decide to play Superwoman, okay?"

"Okay." It's hard to argue with him when my emotions are spinning.

"Just out of curiosity, if someone were to ask you a question related to a lifelong commitment, what would your response be?"

"Well, if someone were to ask, I wouldn't be opposed to the idea," I say hesitantly "Especially if that someone was Bradley Cooper or Adam Levine." Nervousness tends to bring out my sarcastic side, and I can't help but tease him given the vagueness of his proposal. However, butterflies still explode in my stomach as I contemplate his question.

Edward tightens his grip growling a bit. "I don't think so." Pulling back he looks at me, brushing my hair back before touching my injured cheek. "I'm sorry for yelling, but you can't ask me not to worry. I love you, you know."

"I know, but I still need you to treat me as an equal. On the job, I'm your colleague, not your-" I stop, struggling for the right word. Girlfriend doesn't quite fit.

"My everything. You're my everything, Bella."

"Edward," I whisper.

"How about this? I promise to rein in my feelings a bit on the job, if you promise to be more
careful," he suggests. His eyes plead with me to accept his compromise.

"I think I can live with that. And just for the record, I worry about you too. I'm just more rational about it than you are," I joke, poking him softly in the stomach.

"Haha. We better go. I'm sure Jenks is anxious to interview Todd," he says, putting an arm around my shoulder to walk out of the house. "So, can I take you out Friday?"

"I'll check my schedule and let you know," I answer having a hard time keeping the grin off my face. Edward wants to marry me.

As promised, Edward swept me off my feet. After taking me to an exclusive restaurant, he drove out to Lincoln Park to propose, presenting me with his mother's ring. It granted me a second perfect moment, the first being when he told me he loved me.

The feel of Edward's foot gliding over the top of mine, disrupts my mental musings. Turning to look up at him for an explanation, I see him looking down with a big smile.

"Perfectly warm," he mumbles before kissing me deeply.

"What?" I question once our kiss ends.

"Just checking for cold feet." He smirks.

"Funny. Maybe it's your feet we should be checking. Giving up any chance of reclaiming a legendary player status would make anyone a bit nervous," I say casually. My insecurity about our relationship and Edward's devotion to me are long gone.

"Now whose being funny, Swan," he says tickling my ribs, causing me to jerk and giggle. "I think you know my response to that."

Turning around, I glide my arms up around his neck. "You're right, I do." Standing on my tiptoes, I reach up for another kiss.

Before we can get too lost in each other, a knock interrupts the moment. Looking around Edward, I see Alice and Esme standing in the doorway with wide smiles.

"Sorry to interrupt," Alice says, "but it's time to go away, Edward. We have things to do."

Edward looks down with a pout. "Fine," he grumbles, giving me one last kiss before reluctantly letting me go and walking towards the open door. He stops just short of the door frame to turn around. "I'll see you tonight."

"See you tonight. I'll be the one in the dress," I say sarcastically.

The three of us watch him go and as soon as he is out the door, Alice turns and pulls me into a tight hug. "I can't believe you're getting married."

"Me neither," I whisper, my body tingling with anticipation.

"I'm so excited to share this day with you," Esme adds, coming over to pull me into a loving embrace.

I feel lucky to have Esme and Alice's bright spirits here to celebrate with us. Both welcomed me with open arms into the Cullen family and as time goes on, I continue to feel closer and closer to
both of them. I have no doubt this will be one of the best days of my life. Edward and I agreed that we didn't want a big, elaborate wedding. The moment was more important to us than having a party. We simply wanted our closest friends and family to celebrate in a ceremony that was personal and meaningful to us. After going around and around on where, we finally settled on the beach. It was always a happy place for me and just seemed right. We also decided on an evening ceremony because we wanted to get married with the stars in recognition that some of our most important conversations occurred under them.

"Okay, we've got a full day of spa treatment ahead of us. Are you ready?" Alice asks, her eyes shining with excitement. Just then her phone comes alive in her pocket. "Excuse me," she mumbles, pulling it out and looking down at the number with a smile.

"Hi, Jaz," Alice utters before walking out on the balcony to continue her conversation.

Alice and Jasper continue to trek on a winding road when it comes to their relationship. A few months after our return from Italy, Alice decided that she needed a break. They spent several months apart, and for a while, I was sure that things were over between them. However, when Banner and Jasper's supervisor were brought up on administrative charges related to inappropriate behavior, including their handling of my case, Jasper willingly testified against them. The choice had difficult consequences since most of his fellow agents thought he went against the "blue code of silence". Alice was impressed by his conviction to follow through with his testimony regardless of the consequences. She felt it showed that the person she fell in love with was still there. Their rekindled relationship is still new, but it seems headed in the right direction if her bright colors are any indication.

My relationship with Jasper is tenuous at best. I don't know if I can ever fully trust him, but I can support my friend. I thought about inviting him to the wedding as a gesture of good faith, but realized I'm still not quite ready to share something so personal with him. Edward is actually the one struggling the most with their reconciliation. I don't know if he and Jasper will ever repair their friendship. His biggest concern is that Alice will get hurt again. I hope that as time goes on he can let go of his anger enough to support Alice in her decision. Who knows, we may all be family one day.

Done with her conversation, Alice comes back into the room with a bright smile. "How is Jasper?" I ask smiling at her happiness.

"He's good. He wants to make sure I give you and Edward his best."

"Tell him thank you from me, okay."

"That will mean a lot to him. Thank you, Bella," she says, reaching out to hug me. I can see Esme smiling over her shoulder. Although she was upset with Jasper too, I know she is hoping that her family can reconcile for the sake of Alice.

"Now, let's get our spa on," I suggest happily. "Today is my wedding day!"

Standing in my room, I stare in the mirror. My strapless dress is simple but elegant. It has a fitted bodice and a small beaded belt with a floor length satin gown that flares towards the bottom. My hair is swept into a braided up-do with small white flowers highlighting aspects of each curve. I feel beautiful.

In the reflection, I watch as Esme walks up behind me, lightly placing her hands on my shoulders. "You look beautiful, sweetheart." I smile shyly at her compliment. "Bella, your mother and I never
had the chance to meet, but I know if she was here, she would tell you how proud she is and how much she loves you. I truly believe that her light will shine on you and Edward tonight."

"Thank you," I whisper, a tear softly falling with the sentiment of her words.

"It's time," she says, looking at her watch. "Are you ready?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm going to head down. Don't wait too long, I have a feeling Edward is anxious to see you." She smiles brightly before walking out of the door.

Grabbing the bouquet of sunflowers, I take one last look in the mirror trying to calm my breath. I've felt serene all day, but now that it's finally here, my nerves are showing themselves. I'm not nervous about getting married as much as I'm overwhelmed by the moment. I know that Edward and I belong together, but having it become official causes my body to hum in anxious excitement.

Stepping out of bungalow, I see Seth nervously pacing, waiting to walk down with me. When Edward and I announced that we were getting married, Jenks declared that he was going to "give me away". However, Edward and I had already decided to ask him to perform the ceremony. Since we aren't very religious, we decided that having one of our most trusted friends officiate would make it more meaningful. Although shocked, he was extremely honored and agreed immediately.

My intention was to walk alone, but about a month after our engagement, Seth asked to speak to me. He amazed me by laying out a logical, yet emotional request to walk down the aisle with me. He made it clear that he didn't want to give me away, stating it was an antiquated concept and I was much too independent for that tradition. However, he pointed out that walking down the aisle also represented the journey between your old life and new life. Seth admitted he's always felt a special connection to me, and that connection is what helped him heal and move forward with his life. He thought the least he could do was give me the same support as I walked to the next stage of my life. There was no way I could say no to such a heartfelt request.

"You okay, Seth?" I ask, causing him to stop his nervous pacing.

Wonder colors his features when he turns to look at me. "You look beautiful, Bella."

"Thanks. You ready to do this thing?"

Seth nods his head and holds his shaking arm out for me to grasp. "Let's go."

As we start our walk down to the beach, Seth leans over to whisper into my ear. "Did you know that the feeling of being in love is produced by the same part of the brain that is stimulated by cocaine use?"

I burst out laughing, not at his words, but because the statement is so classically Seth. "I love you," I say leaning over to kiss his cheek. He doesn't respond but the red of his face and the colors swirling around him let me know how he feels.

The sound of the string quartet starts as we get closer, the music a perfect accompaniment to the beautiful scene. Tea lights guide our way to an archway covered in tiny white lights. Only the vibrant stars above out shine their brilliance. My breath leaves me when I finally glimpse Edward standing tall next to Jenks. He is in a simple but handsome black suit. The moon reflecting on the ocean behind him creates a radiant glow all around him. He is beautiful.

Surrounding him are our friends and family: Carlisle, Esme, Alice, Jenks, Emmett and Rose, who
recently celebrated their own engagement. Their warm and loving feelings are swirling around, adding to the enchanting glow of the night. To the left of Jenks stand three white pillar candles surrounded by frosted glass. The candles represent the parents Edward and I lost. It was important to both of us that we honor their memory, the glowing light a symbolic reminder that they are never far.

When he sees me, Edward's face lights up, and I find myself automatically returning the brilliant smile. His fidgety hands in front of him are the only signs of his nervousness, and it brings me an odd sort of comfort knowing I'm not the only one. When I'm within his reach, he steps forward and grabs my hand.

"Bella, you take my breath away," he whispers. The emotion shining in his eyes pierces the depths of my soul.

"You look amazing yourself. I don't know how I got so lucky."

"I could say the same thing, baby. Last chance to back out," he jokes winking.

"No way, you're stuck with me. Let's do this." He laughs and together we turn to face Jenks, our fingers tightly intertwined.

"Okay people, let's get this show on the road, shall we," Jenks starts in typical Jenks fashion. "To say I was shocked when Edward and Bella asked me to do this would be an understatement. At first, I was honored, but then I started thinking about exactly what their request meant. First off, I needed to take a class, which Edward knows I hate. Then I needed to prepare, which Bella knows I hate. So the more I thought about it, the more I realized this was probably some sort of strange payback. For what, I don't know, because God knows I'm always on my best behavior. You are just lucky that I didn't bail in retaliation and leave you stuck with an islander and some bizarre native ritual."

Everyone laughs at his joke while Jenks winks in my direction. His humorous and loving nature is exactly why we chose him. Suddenly, his bright face becomes earnest and heartfelt as I watch the colors of love and respect swirl around him.

"In all seriousness, I've never met two people more suited or deserving of each other. I feel privileged knowing them and that I was lucky enough to watch their love unfold. In my line of work, it is common to become isolated, but somehow I defied the odds and actually found another family. I look forward to being a part of their lives for years to come, and I know that their love will continue to grow."

Releasing Edward's hand, I step forward and wrap my arms around Jenks' neck. "I love you too," I whisper into his ear.

Jenks' arms squeeze me tightly. He is not the only one that feels privileged. I can't imagine my life without him. Letting go, I move back to Edward, reaching for his hand again.

"Okay, no more emotional speeches from me, I'm not a pretty crier," Jenks jokes. "Edward and Bella decided to write their own vows and it is now time to share them with each other. Edward."

Turning towards Alice, I hand her my bouquet. Edward clears his throat nervously before grabbing my other hand. We turn to face each other while our friends and family tighten their circle, surrounding us with warmth and love. Even though I feel their presence, as soon as Edward's passionate eyes capture mine, the rest of the world drifts away, leaving just the two of us.
"Years ago, I thought I was content with my life. I had a family that loved me and a job I enjoyed. I didn't think I needed anything more nor did I want the complications of what I thought commitment would bring."

I nod, remembering when I first met Edward and the stories he shared about how the loss of his parents changed him. Back then, both of us unknowingly shared similar fears about getting close to others. It is one of the many reasons we understand each other so well.

"But then this wonderful and frustrating woman walked into my life, changing things forever. The only thing I regret is waiting so long to tell you how I felt, but I will spend the rest of my life making sure you never forget how much you mean to me."

I struggle to keep my tears at bay listening to his declaration. He pauses and looks down at our hands, glancing down myself, I watch his fingers ghost along mine. I feel nostalgic remembering how wonderful it felt the first time Edward intertwined our fingers.

"Bella, I promise to always love and support you even when you drive me crazy. But mostly, I promise to never forget how lucky I am to have you in my life. I may not know exactly what the future will bring, but I know it will be good because we'll have each other. Thank you for honoring me by becoming my wife," Edward says quietly, pulling my fingers up to his lips for a gentle kiss.

"Bella," Jenks states gesturing in my direction.

His heartfelt words have left me speechless. My body starts to quake thinking about saying my own vows. I'm worried that my words will not live up to the sentiments Edward easily expressed.

"Hey, it's just you and me," Edward whispers, somehow recognizing my inner struggle and knowing exactly what to say to give me the courage I need.

Taking a focused breath, I begin. "Expressing my emotions is not easy for me, so I'm going to try my best to put into words how much you mean to me." My voice sounds strangled by the powerful emotions coursing through my body.

"Even though my days are surrounded by color, my world always felt gray, and I grew up believing that my happiness would always be limited. Then you walked into my life and turned it upside down. You taught me the value of love and that life was more than just surviving. I will never take for granted who you are and what you bring to me. I can only hope to give you as much happiness as you give me every day."

Edward smiles through watery eyes and reaches up with our combined hands to brush away my tears. "Edward, I promise to support you no matter what obstacles we may face. I promise to share your joy and pain. But most of all, I promise to love you unconditionally just as I know you love me." I glance towards Jenks letting him know I've finished. He gives me a reassuring smile in return.

"Edward, do you have the ring?" Jenks asks, clearing his throat a bit.

"Yes," he answers, letting go of my hands to reach into his pocket and pull out my wedding band. Holding my hand again, he holds the ring just outside of my ring finger waiting for the cue. His eyes hold mine, another tear drifting down my cheek.

"Do you, Edward Cullen, take Bella Swan to be your lawfully wedded wife?" Jenks asks.

"I do," he whispers, continuing to hold my eyes as he slides the ring on.
"Bella," Jenks says, giving me my own cue. Turning, I take Edward's ring from Seth. "Do you, Bella Swan, take Edward Cullen to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do." I smile slipping the ring on his finger.

"Then by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you officially hitched! You may now kiss the bride. Just remember that your family is present."

Edward's smile is blinding as he wraps his arms around me, crashing his lips into mine. Our kiss continues as the sound of whistles and claps permeate the air.

As soon as Edward releases me, our family bombards us with hugs and congratulations. Together our party moves to the tent next to where the ceremony just took place. Walking inside, I'm taken back by the beautiful sight. A gorgeous table sits on the side covered in fine china and stem wear. Dozens of candles light the room, highlighted by small white lights hanging from the ceiling. It is captivating.

The night flies by quickly in the blur of our happy celebration. The food was wonderful and the drinks flowed freely, making everyone a bit giddy. Luckily we have video to capture all the precious moments, including Jenks trying to show Seth how to dance. It's been an indescribable, fantastic evening.

Sitting at the table, I watch as Carlisle and Esme swing around the dance floor next to Emmett and Rose. They clearly have had lessons, their happiness shining brightly. I admit I was a little shocked by Emmett's dancing skills. He's been successfully rocking the moves all night and he and I even spun around the room a few times.

"How you doing, Ace?" Jenks asks, sitting in the chair across from me.

"I'm amazing."

"Good. That's how it should be."

"Hey, baby, want to dance?" Edward asks, coming over to sit in the chair next to me. Like everyone else, Edward and I have burned up the dance floor as well.

"Not right now, I need a break. This dress is hot." Edward nods and leans over to kiss me.

"So Mr. and Dr. Cullen, you better rest up because we have a huge case when you get back next week," Jenks says casually, taking another swig of his beer.

"Hold up. We agreed on two weeks," Edward retorts.

"No way, we said a week. There's too much going on for you to slack that long."

"Too bad because my wife and I are off for two weeks."

"Oh come on. What about that prostitution ring? Taking them down will be lots of fun. You really want to miss out on that?"

Still feeling warm and not wanting to engage in their debate, I stand quietly, patting Edward on the shoulder as he and Jenks continue to argue. Whether we're gone one week or two, there's no doubt that between the two of them my life will never be boring. Walking outside of the tent, I let the ocean breeze cool my heated skin. Looking up, I stare at the stars. The isolation of the island makes them as bright as they are in Montana.
"Making a wish?" Edward asks, his arms wrapping around me.

Turning my head, I look up at him and smile. "I don't have anything to wish for. I have everything I want right here."

"Good," he whispers, leaning down to kiss me. "I love you."

"I love you too," I whisper, kissing him deeply.

I never imagined that my heart could feel so full. I really do have everything I could ever want, and it is more than I thought I deserved. We stand quietly wrapped in each other, drinking in the beauty around us. The sounds of the party behind us a comforting reminder of all the family I've gained.

It's another perfect moment and only just the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

It's been 9 months since I posted the first two chapters of this story. My hands were shaking and I think I posted and deleted it about four times before I forced myself to leave it. I did it as a challenge to see if I could write a story as well as find a bit more balance in life between my work persona, my mom/wife persona and my creative self. It's been an amazing ride. I cannot express enough gratitude for the support and kind words all of you have given me! It means more than you will ever know and on many weeks motivated me to keep going.

As for future stories, just this week I had a spark of an idea for a new story, so stay tuned to see if I'm able to do anything with it. I also haven't ruled out a sequel, but I don't want to do one for just the sake of having a sequel. I want a plot worthy enough to continue to characters' stories. However, I did learn an important lesson about having the story pre-written before posting. So, you won't hear from me right away. :)

Ironically, when I started posting this story, I did have about 15 rough draft chapters written. However, if you were to read those verses what actually posted, they are very different. One of the best parts of this process was experiencing how a story can evolve and change based on where the characters take you. For example, Seth originally was a minor character who was a friend of Jenks and wasn't going to show up until the last few chapters. When I started getting Chapter 6 ready to post, I didn't like it and wanted something to beef up the suspense, thus the introduction of a new and improved version of Seth. That changed every aspect of what I had already written, but I'm glad I did it.

Okay, I blathered on enough. Thank you again to everyone who read, reviewed, followed or favorited this story. I hope you enjoyed the journey as much as I did. I would love to hear from everyone one last time including my more silent readers.

Until next time. :)
End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!