

26. Conversation

It was after midnight when Bella began to stir. For an hour, she mumbled a lot, sometimes sighing contentedly and other times becoming agitated, her feet kicking and her arms flailing like she was trying to fight off something. I hoped to heaven that it wasn't me. Perhaps she had a fever. I placed my hand across her forehead as gently as possible.

Her eyelids scrunched closed and then suddenly flipped open.

"Oh!" she cried and immediately hid her eyes behind her fists, rubbing them like she could make my image disappear.

"Did I frighten you?" I asked softly, concerned that she didn't expect, or maybe even want, me there with her.

Bella's eyes popped open again, then slammed shut, and she gasped in surprise. Her eyes opened once more. She blinked and looked at me and blinked again, and then her face melted into a portrait of disappointment.

What in the world is she thinking? Does she not want me? Is she afraid of me?

"Oh, *crap*," was what she said. She was *impossible* to understand!

"What's wrong, Bella?"

She was deeply distressed now, a mixture of sadness and anger marring her beautiful face. *What have I done?*

Then she spoke, but the words that came out of her mouth made no sense at all.

"I'm dead, right? I *did* drown. *Crap, crap, crap!* This is gonna kill Charlie."

What is she saying? "You're not dead."

"Then why am I not waking up?" she countered, raising her eyebrows in challenge.

"You *are* awake, Bella."

"Sure, sure. That's what you want me to think. And then it will be worse when I do wake up. *If* I wake up, which I won't, because I'm dead. This is awful. Poor Charlie. And Renee and Jake..." She absolutely had run off the rails.

"I can see where you might confuse me with a nightmare," I said, propping my head on one hand. "But I can't imagine what you could have done to wind up in hell. Did you commit many murders while I was away?"

She frowned. "Obviously not. If I was in hell, you wouldn't be with me."

She was utterly irrational. *Perhaps this is a new, more vivid version of Bella's sleep-talking*, I thought.

Then slowly, the blood began to flood up her neck and into her face, hot and tantalizing.

"Did all of that really happen, then?" she asked hesitantly.

“That depends. If you’re referring to us nearly being massacred in Italy, then, yes.”

“How strange.” She pondered for a moment. “I really went to Italy. Did you know I’d never been farther east than Albuquerque?”

“Maybe you should go back to sleep,” I told her. “You’re not coherent.”

“I’m not tired anymore,” she insisted. “What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?”

“It’s just after one in the morning. So, about fourteen hours.”

“Charlie?” she asked.

I sighed. “Sleeping. You should probably know that I’m breaking the rules right now. Well, not technically, since he said I was never to walk through his door again, and I came in the window... But, still, the intent was clear.”

“Charlie banned you from the house?” Bella burst out angrily.

“Did you expect anything else?”

A flash of fire crossed her face before she abruptly changed the subject.

“What’s the story?” she asked, like she didn’t know why I was there.

My heart sank. This was not going well at all. Perhaps she’d found someone new and I was making a fool of myself. If so, I didn’t care. If this was the last time I was ever to lie beside her, then I would revel in it and memorize every sight, sound, and smell to relive throughout eternity.

“What do you mean?” I pressed warily.

“What am I telling Charlie? What’s my excuse for disappearing for... how long was I gone, anyway?”

Oh. It’s not that then.

“Just three days. Actually, I was hoping you might have a good explanation. I’ve got nothing.”

“Fabulous,” Bella said sarcastically.

“Well, maybe Alice will come up with something.”

Bella hesitated and then asked casually, “So, what have you been doing, up until three days ago?”

She was stalling... spinning out the time until she had built up her courage. Soon she would get to the part where it was over between us, that I had nearly cost her her life, that she didn’t love me anymore, and that she no longer wanted me in her house or in her life. I tensed, waiting for the blow.

“Nothing terribly exciting,” I replied. That was the kind of question one asks when making obligatory small talk. I didn’t want to discuss it anyway. It might frighten her to be reminded of Victoria.

“Of course not,” she muttered and then puckered her face in disgust, maybe, or irritation. Maybe she wanted me to leave. I felt the old knife stab through my heart at the thought.

“Why are you making that face?” I asked, though I already knew.

“Well...,” she began. “If you were, after all, just a dream, that’s exactly the kind of thing you would say. My imagination must be used up.”

I sighed. She confounded me, but I would let the game go on as long as she wished. I would not be the one to usher myself out of her life one moment sooner than necessary.

“If I tell you, will you finally believe that you’re not having a nightmare?”

“Nightmare!” she scoffed. “Maybe. If you tell me.”

I didn’t really want to. I was not proud of my performance. I’d hoped that I wouldn’t have to talk about it so soon, if at all, but it appeared that I did.

“I was... hunting.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Bella complained. “That definitely doesn’t prove I’m awake.” She was going to make me spit out the whole sordid story.

“I wasn’t hunting for food... I was actually trying my hand at... tracking. I’m not very good at it.”

“What were you tracking?”

“Nothing of consequence,” I said, trying to brush off the question.

“I don’t understand.”

My heart quailed. This was the worst of my many failures. It made me ill to think about the evil creature who had outsmarted me at every turn and now was stalking my precious Bella. My words tumbled out in a rush.

“I—I owe you an apology. No, of course I owe you much, much more than that. But you have to know... I had no idea. I didn’t realize the mess I was leaving behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So safe. I had no idea that... *Victoria*... would come back.” The name came out as a growl.

“I’ll admit, when I saw her that one time, I was paying much more attention to James’s thoughts. But I just didn’t see that she had this kind of response in her. That she even had such a tie to him. I think I realize why now—she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never occurred to her. It was her overconfidence that clouded her feelings about him—kept me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

“Not that there’s any excuse for what I left you to face. When I heard what you told Alice—what she saw herself—when I realized that you had to put your life in the hands of *werewolves*, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there besides *Victoria* herself—” I shuddered in disgust.

“Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my core, even now, when I can see and feel you safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for—”

“Stop!” Bella interrupted forcefully. I glanced at her in surprise.

“Edward—” she began gravely and then paused.

This was it then, and I deserved whatever I got. She should kick me to the gutter after what I’d allowed to happen. I should have watched to make sure she was okay. I should have checked on her welfare. I should have—

Bella’s words cut into my self-recrimination.

“This has to stop now. You can’t think about things that way. You can’t let this...this *guilt*...rule your life. You can’t take responsibility for the things that happen to me here. None of it is your fault, it’s just part of how life is for me. So, if I trip in front of a bus or whatever it is next time, you have to realize that it’s not your job to take the blame. You can’t just go running off to Italy because you feel bad that you didn’t save me. Even if I had jumped off that cliff to die, that would have been my choice, and *not your fault*. I know it’s your...your nature to shoulder the blame for everything, but you really can’t let that make you go to such extremes! It’s very irresponsible—think of Esme and Carlisle and—”

I could not believe my ears. She had completely and utterly misunderstood everything! Or more correctly, she had bought my lie. Even now, with all the evidence to the contrary, she still did.

“Isabella Marie Swan,” I began, hearing the deep frustration and pain in my voice. “Do you believe that I asked the Volturi to kill me *because I felt guilty*?”

“Didn’t you?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Feel guilty? Intensely so. More than you can comprehend.”

“Then...what are you saying? I don’t understand.”

No...she didn’t. She couldn’t possibly love me to the degree that I loved her. It made my heart ache.

“Bella, I went to the Volturi because I thought you were dead,” I whispered, looking intently into her eyes. “Even if I’d had no hand in your death—even if it *wasn’t* my fault—I would have gone to Italy. Obviously, I should have been more careful—should have spoken to Alice directly, rather than accepting it secondhand from Rosalie. But, really, what was I supposed to think when the boy said Charlie was at the funeral? What are the odds?”

It sounded familiar...young lovers battling cruel Fate, which throws them curve ball after curve ball.

“The odds...” my sentence petered out as I considered it, then I started again. “The odds are always stacked against us. Mistake after mistake. I’ll never criticize Romeo again.”

“But I still don’t understand,” Bella said in confusion. “That’s my whole point. So what?”

“Excuse me?”

“So what if I *was* dead?”

Ack! She didn’t get it at all. How could that be?

“Don’t you remember anything I told you before?” I queried.

“I remember *everything* that you told me.”

And believed it too...even the lie...*especially* the lie. Of course she did. If I told her the truth about the lie now, would she believe that? I could only hope.

In spite of the turmoil this conversation stirred up, I became distracted suddenly by

Bella's full lower lip which she'd pushed forward in the hint of a pout. I examined its delicate softness and felt a now familiar longing rise in me. I wanted to press my mouth to it, feel it, taste it, and breathe in the scent of her. I wanted other things too...so much...but the wary expression on Bella's face constrained me. She did not feel the same way.

Even so, I allowed myself to press the tip of my finger against her vulnerable, pouting lip. It sent a shiver up my spine. Bella's heart stuttered and began to quicken. Perhaps she didn't want all of me, but some part of her still wanted some part of me, it seemed. I shut my eyes to block the distraction.

"Bella, you seem to be under a misapprehension. I thought I'd explained it clearly before." I took a deep breath to calm myself and then opened my eyes to look into hers. "Bella, I can't live in a world where you don't exist."

She stared at me as if I had spoken in an alien tongue.

"I am...confused," was all she could say.

She had taken my every word at face value, even the calculated lies. How could I convey to her now what was in my heart? The truth was all that I had.

"I'm a good liar, Bella, I have to be," I began.

Bella's body stiffened and her hands clenched into fists. I shook her shoulder gently to try and loosen the tension out of her. What was she expecting?

"Let me finish! I'm a good liar, but still, for you to believe me so quickly." I flinched, remembering the look she'd had on her face that day. "That was...excruciating."

Bella remained rigid as a statue. She seemed braced for a blow.

"When we were in the forest, when I was telling you goodbye—" I began. "You weren't going to let go. I could see that." My voice was a whisper, soft and intense. "I didn't want to do it—it felt like it would kill me to do it—but I knew that if I couldn't convince you that I didn't love you anymore, it would just take you that much longer to get on with your life. I hoped that, if you thought *I'd moved on*, so would you."

"A clean break," Bella replied robotically.

"Exactly. But I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be next to impossible—that you would be so sure of the truth that I would have to lie through my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head. I lied, and I'm so sorry—sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. Sorry that I couldn't protect you from what I am. I lied to save you, and it didn't work. I'm sorry.

"But how could you believe me? After all the thousand times I've told you I love you, how could you let one word break your faith in me? I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly *believed* that I didn't want you anymore. The most absurd, ridiculous concept—as if there were any way that *I* could exist without needing *you!*"

She was still locked in her robotic state. I shook her by the shoulder again to wake her up to the truth.

"Bella, really, what were you thinking!"

Suddenly, tears welled up in her eyes and she began to cry. I didn't understand why,

but it was better than the blank rigidity.

“I knew it,” she spluttered. “I *knew* I was dreaming.”

“You’re impossible,” I complained. “How can I put this so that you’ll believe me? You’re not asleep, and you’re not dead. I’m here, and I love you. I *have* always loved you, and I *will* always love you. I was thinking of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second that I was away. When I told you that I didn’t want you, it was the very blackest kind of blasphemy.”

She shook her head in disbelief, tears flowing like raindrops down her cheeks.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” I whispered, desperate to get through to her. “Why can you believe the lie, but not the truth?”

“It never made sense for you to love me,” Bella declared, her voice breaking in a sob. “I always knew that.”

Ahhh! She is so frustrating! She can accept that I don’t love her in the blink of an eye, but she resists the truth with every fiber of her being.

“I’ll prove you’re awake,” I vowed, taking her face between my hands. She tried to shake me off, but I wouldn’t let go. I moved my face closer to hers, so close that I could feel the warmth radiating from her lips.

“Please don’t,” she whispered at the last second, the pain in her words a lance through my heart.

“Why not?” I objected. I wanted to kiss her...so badly.

“When I wake up,” she began. I opened my mouth to argue and Bella quickly rephrased. “Okay, forget that one—when you leave again, it’s going to be hard enough without this, too.”

Finally, I began to understand. She was pretending this was all a dream so that when it ended, she wouldn’t be devastated. She didn’t want to love me because she didn’t believe I loved her! My heart sank to the depths of the ocean. Now I had to face the hardest question of all.

Steeling myself, I began. “Yesterday, when I would touch you, you were so...hesitant, so careful, and yet still the same. I need to know why. Is it because I’m too late? Because I’ve hurt you too much? Because you *have* moved on, as I meant for you to? That would be...quite fair. I won’t contest your decision. So don’t try to spare my feelings, please—just tell me now whether or not you can still love me, after everything I’ve done to you. Can you?” I whispered, not daring to hope.

Of course she tried to dodge the inquiry.

“What kind of an idiotic question is that?”

“Just answer it. Please.”

She stared at me like I was thick as mud before relenting.

“The way I feel about you will never change,” she declared. “Of course I love you—and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

Her words surged through me like a bolt of lightning, setting every cell in my body

aflame.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” I whispered before taking her face in my hands and pressing my lips to hers, gently at first, then with increasing passion as I felt her respond. A wall inside her collapsed and she surrendered herself to me, body and soul, as her lips joined hungrily with mine.

Our time apart had sharpened and intensified the physical longings I felt for Bella. With my newly enhanced control over the bloodlust, I was freer with her than ever before. I pressed my body against hers from tip to toe, our lips devouring each other, our torsos connecting, our legs and feet intermingled. My fingers followed every line of her face, felt every softness, and explored every delicate curve, remembering all the details and discovering new ones I hadn’t had the self-control to linger over before.

“Bella, my love...” I whispered, my lips moving on hers. She was kissing me back with all the ardor she’d ever expressed, but this time, I didn’t try to stop her or pull away. I longed for more, like nothing would satisfy me until every part of us was joined.

I was overcome by the sweet smell of her skin, her blood, her hair, and I ached to pull her even more tightly against me, to let my hands wander over her body following the curves of her waist and hips, her lower back, her soft, round buttocks below... *Ahh...* I groaned with desire.

Bella’s heart pounded so violently that I could feel it pulsing throughout my own body, as if my stone heart had come alive. She was panting so hard and fast that I feared she would faint.

Please God, let this not be the last time...

With great reluctance, I separated my lips from hers and laid my ear against her wonderfully human heart. My own heart sang to its jagged rhythm and I marveled at the miracle that allowed me to be so close to her. To me, her blood was like sweet, sweet wine flowing beneath her skin, enhancing my attraction to her, but no longer tempting me to imbibe. I could not endanger her life.

I kept my head to her heart while it gradually calmed and my own excitement eased. In case she still hadn’t understood—a real possibility given her deep resistance—I said, “By the way, I’m not leaving you.”

Bella didn’t respond and I couldn’t be sure even now that she believed me. I raised my head to look into her eyes, needing to see her response when I repeated the words.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not without you.” When she didn’t reply, I continued, “I only left you in the first place because I wanted you to have a chance at a normal, happy human life. I could see what I was doing to you—keeping you constantly on the edge of danger, taking you away from the world you belonged in, risking your life every moment I was with you. So I had to try. I had to do *something*, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn’t thought you would be better off, I could have never made myself leave. I’m much too selfish. Only *you* could be more important than what I wanted... what I needed. What I want and need is to be with you, and I know I’ll never be strong enough to leave

again. I have too many excuses to stay—thank heaven for that! It seems you *can't* be safe, no matter how many miles I put between us.”

“Don't promise me anything,” Bella murmured, with pain written on her face.

“You think I'm lying to you now?” I demanded in frustration.

“No—not lying,” she hesitated. “You could mean it...now. But what about tomorrow, when you think about all the reasons you left in the first place? Or next month, when Jasper takes a snap at me?”

That Bella could doubt me so thoroughly was distressing, but I felt the truth in her words. There would be times, possibly, when her vulnerability would haunt me again, but leaving was not the solution. I knew that now.

“It isn't as if you hadn't thought the first decision through, is it?” Bella asked, watching for my reaction to her question. “You'll end up doing what you think is right.”

I paused to consider that for a moment.

“I'm not as strong as you give me credit for,” I admitted. “Right and wrong have ceased to mean much to me; I was coming back anyway.”

At that moment, the reality of the statement hit me full force for the first time. By the time I reached Rio, I was holding onto my threadbare resolve by my fingernails. Apart from death, I'd had only one choice of action.

“Before Rosalie told me the news, I was already past trying to live through one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to make it through a single hour. It was only a matter of time—and not much of it—before I showed up at your window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now, if you'd like that.”

Bella made a face. “Be serious, please.”

“Oh, I am,” I replied forcefully, frustrated by her inability to trust me, though she had every reason not to. “Will you please try to hear what I'm telling you? Will you let me attempt to explain what you mean to me?”

I looked at her to be sure she was giving me her permission and her full attention.

“Before you, Bella, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, but there were stars—points of light and reason... And then you shot across my sky like a meteor. Suddenly everything was on fire; there was brilliancy, there was beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen over the horizon, everything went black. Nothing had changed, but my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn't see the stars anymore. And there was no more reason for anything.”

I could see the doubt in her eyes.

“Your eyes will adjust,” she muttered, granting me nothing.

“That's just the problem—they can't.”

“What about your distractions?” she countered. I *had* told her that my kind are easily distracted and that is true...in general...but not always in the particular.

“Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from the...the *agony*. My heart hasn't beat in almost ninety years, but this was different. It was like my heart was

gone—like I was hollow. Like I'd left everything that was inside me here with you.”

“That’s funny,” Bella said, though I failed to see the humor.

I raised an eyebrow. “Funny?”

“I meant strange—I thought it was just me. Lots of pieces of me went missing, too. I haven’t been able to really breathe in so long.” Bella took a deep breath and exhaled, which seemed to relax her a little. She lost some of her rigidity, though I could feel the pain in her words. “And my heart. That was definitely lost.”

I put my ear to her heart again, closing my eyes to focus on the beating that broadcast her humanity, the most valuable thing of all. She laid her cheek against my hair. Aside from our kiss, it was the first sign she had given me that she might be able to return my affection; that I hadn’t damaged her love so completely that I could never recover it. I was willing to work for it—happy to do so—if only she would give me another chance, but she was still hesitant. My ill-advised desertion had hurt her terribly, nearly as much as it had hurt me, perhaps.

“Tracking wasn’t a distraction then?” she probed, testing me. I was patient. I could wait for her.

“No.” I sighed remembering how difficult it had been to care about tracking Victoria with so much pain inside me, so much loss.

“That was never a distraction. It was an obligation.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that, even though I never expected any danger from Victoria, I wasn’t going to let her get away with...” I’d been ready to say “hurting you,” but I didn’t want to remind Bella of how close she had come to death then too.

“Well, like I said, I was horrible at it. I traced her as far as Texas, but then I followed a false lead down to Brazil—and really she came here.” I was reminded of my hopeless ineptitude. “I wasn’t even on the right continent! And all the while, worse than my worst fears—”

“You were hunting *Victoria*?” Bella screeched. Her cry was so loud that we both froze to listen for Charlie’s snoring, which halted briefly, but then resumed.

“Not well,” I explained feebly. She was right to be upset—I had failed her completely. It was disgraceful. “But I’ll do better this time,” I promised. With Bella back in my life, with the emptiness filled, I knew I could dispatch Victoria easily enough. “She won’t be tainting perfectly good air by breathing in and out for much longer.”

“That is...out of the question,” Bella replied, confusing me. Wasn’t she angry at my failure?

“It’s too late for her,” I pledged. “I might have let the other time slide, but not now, not after—”

She cut me off again, this time more calmly. “Didn’t you just promise that you weren’t going to leave? That isn’t exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?”

Well...perhaps not. Did that mean she wanted me to stay?

“I will keep my promise, Bella. But Victoria...”—a snarl was building in my chest—“is going to die. Soon.”

“Let’s not be hasty,” Bella admonished.

That didn’t make any sense. Surely she wanted me to remove the threat that had been hanging over her head.

“Maybe she’s not coming back. Jake’s pack probably scared her off. There’s really no reason to go looking for her. Besides, I’ve got bigger problems than Victoria.”

Jake? Who’s Jake? “It’s true. The werewolves are a problem,” I said. In more ways than one, perhaps. I stifled a growl.

Bella was dismissive. “I wasn’t talking about *Jacob*. My problems are a lot worse than a handful of adolescent wolves getting themselves into trouble.”

Jacob Black? Bella’s beau-hopeful from the prom? He’s the one with a pack? I put that disconcerting thought aside for the moment. “Really? Then what would be your greatest problem? That would make Victoria’s returning for you seem like such an inconsequential matter in comparison?”

“How about the second greatest?” Bella backpedaled.

“All right,” I agreed, certain that besides Victoria, nothing could be more dangerous than werewolves. That was even more true now that I knew that Bella’s new *best friend*, as Alice had put it, was *Jacob Black*, the werewolf. I waited.

“There are others who are coming to look for me,” Bella finally whispered.

“The Volturi are only the *second* greatest?” I teased, now that I knew what she was referring to.

“You don’t seem that upset about it.”

“Well, we have plenty of time to think it through. Time means something very different to them than it does to you, or even me. They count years the way you count days. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were thirty before you crossed their minds again.”

I was not prepared for the look of horror that crossed Bella’s face. “You don’t have to be afraid,” I cut in quickly, abashed at frightening her. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

“While you’re here,” she said resentfully.

Not this again! I took her face in my hands to be sure she would hear me. “I will never leave you again,” I said slowly, emphasizing each word.

“But you said *thirty*,” Bella muttered and tears began to roll down her cheeks.

I was mortified. I didn’t understand how I had hurt her *again*.

She continued, “What? You’re going to stay, but let me get all old anyway? Right.”

She thought I wouldn’t love her anymore when she got older? Ridiculous. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do. What choice have I? I cannot be without you, but I will not destroy your soul.”

“Is this really...” she began, but didn’t continue.

“Yes?” I prodded.

“But what about when I get so old that people think I’m your mother? Your *grandmother*?”

Bella’s voice had taken on a tone of disgust. I did not share that feeling. Not at all. I kissed each tear that made its way down her face, letting them roll onto my lips.

“That doesn’t mean anything to me,” I whispered, my lips moving against her soft skin. “You will always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course...” I cringed at this new thought. “If you outgrew *me*—if you wanted something more—I would understand that, Bella. I promise I wouldn’t stand in your way if you wanted to leave me.”

That could happen so easily. Just thinking of the possibility hurt.

“You do realize that I’ll die eventually, right?” she blurted, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

I was undaunted. “I’ll follow after as soon as I can.”

“That is seriously...sick.”

“Bella, it’s the only right way left—”

“Let’s just back up for a minute,” Bella said. “You do remember the Volturi, right? I can’t stay human forever. They’ll kill me. Even if they don’t think of me till I’m *thirty*”—Bella said the word like it was poison—“do you really think they’ll forget?”

“No... They won’t forget. But...”

“But?”

I grinned remembering the idea that had come to me while Bella slept. “I have a few plans,” I said mysteriously.

“And these plans,” Bella replied, her tone becoming aggressive. “These plans all center around me staying human.”

“Naturally.” I was as sure of my answer as I was of my name.

She glared at me and I glared back. We lay there, side-by-side, caught in the familiar impasse for quite some time.

Then Bella pushed my arms away and sat up, a stubborn look cemented on her face.

“Do you want me to leave?” I asked, pain stabbing me at the thought. I had promised never to leave her and I intended to keep my promise, even if she didn’t want me anymore, even if she never knew I was there.

“No,” Bella retorted. “*I’m* leaving.” She got out of bed and started thrashing about in the dark. It was bewildering. She was impossible to understand.

“May I ask where you are going?” I asked warily, at my wit’s end.

“I’m going to your house,” Bella announced, still knocking about looking for her shoes. No doubt she was bruising herself in the process. I rose and pulled her shoes and mine from beneath the bed. I didn’t want her to hurt herself.

“Here are your shoes. How did you plan to get there?” *And why?*

“My truck.”

“That will probably wake Charlie.”

She’d already thought of that. “I know. But honestly, I’ll be grounded for weeks as

it is. How much more trouble can I really get in?"

"None. He'll blame me, not you," I said sadly.

"If you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

"Stay here," I proposed, but she was riled up and I didn't think she would listen.

What should I do?

"No dice. But you go ahead and make yourself at home," she suggested as she headed for the door.

I blocked her exit. I couldn't let her go without piecing things together. Would she ask my parents to keep me away from her? Would she demand that Alice change her? Or *what?*

She reversed direction and strode toward the window, glowering. I did not doubt for a second that she would jump the two stories just to prove her point, so I folded.

"Okay," I said grudgingly. "I'll give you a ride."

"Either way," she responded breezily. "But you probably *should* be there, too."

"And why is that?"

"Because you're extraordinarily opinionated, and I'm sure you'll want a chance to air your views."

"My views on which subject?" I inquired grimly.

"This isn't just about you anymore. You're not the center of the universe, you know. If you're going to bring the Volturi down on us over something as stupid as leaving me human, then your family ought to have a say."

"A say in what?" I practically barked each word.

"My mortality. I'm putting it to a vote."

Oh nooooo...!