

## 27. Vote

It wasn't something I could have predicted and *definitely* not something I supported, but she was absolutely determined to follow through on this misguided idea. It didn't matter what my family said. Despite what she had told Bella on the airplane, Alice wouldn't dare change Bella against my wishes. So I would humor her.

With one arm behind her knees and one behind her back, I picked her up and leaped into the front yard before she could jump out the window on her own.

"All right then. Up you go."

I didn't pretend to be happy about it as I swung her onto my back, tightened her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck, and started running toward home. It had been a long time since I'd carried Bella on my back. With her chin on my shoulder and her cheek against my neck, plus the always soothing feel of the wind flying past my ears, my irritation and frustration softened a little.

Then I felt Bella's lips against my neck, a kiss. It was another gesture—the second—that I could hope meant she might forgive me and take me back.

"Thank you," I said sincerely, without slowing my pace through the forest. "Does that mean you've decided you're awake?"

Bella laughed lightly, music to my ears after the contention and turmoil of the last couple of hours.

"Not really," she replied. "More that, either way, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight."

So she wasn't ready to take me back, but apparently, she still wanted to join the ranks of the damned.

"I'll earn your trust back somehow," I promised. "If it's my final act."

"I trust *you*," Bella claimed. "It's me I don't trust."

"Explain that, please," I requested. Again, it made no sense to me. We were close to home, so I slowed down to give us more time to finish the conversation.

"Well—" Bella began hesitantly. "I don't trust myself to be...enough. To deserve you. There's nothing about me that could *hold* you."

I had planted this seed of doubt in her mind—no question about it. I had *told* her that I didn't want her anymore, which she probably read as boredom on my part. I'd stressed that we are easily distracted, which she would think meant she wasn't interesting enough to keep my attention. I could hardly feel worse, but suddenly, I did.

I stopped walking and pulled Bella from my back, setting her on her feet. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, pulling her close to my chest.

“Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,” I whispered in her ear. “Never doubt that.” Obviously, she did, but I intended to change that. Then I remembered a loose end from our previous conversation.

“You never did tell me...” I began, slightly apprehensive.

“What?”

“What your greatest problem is.”

“I’ll give you one guess,” she said softly, looking into my eyes. Then she touched the tip of my nose with her index finger.

*Damn! Just what I feared.*

“I’m worse than the Volturi,” I said dejectedly. “I guess I’ve earned that.” I didn’t know how I could ever overcome it.

“The worst the Volturi can do is kill me,” Bella explained.

*And I do worse...?! She was reluctant to say what she meant. Once she did, I knew it would haunt me for the rest of my days.*

“You can leave me,” she told me. “The Volturi, Victoria...they’re nothing compared to that.”

Each word was like a separate bullet through my heart. I was no longer sure whether what I had put her through *was* forgivable. A sense of despair began to take hold of me, nothing like what I’d felt without her in my life, but bad enough. And *I* had brought all this on her and on myself. I turned my face away so she couldn’t see the hurt.

“Don’t,” she whispered pressing her hand to my face. “Don’t be sad.”

It wasn’t possible for me not to feel sad, and guilty, and pained, but I gave her half a weak smile. It wouldn’t have fooled anybody.

“If there was only some way to make you see that I can’t leave you,” I lamented.

“Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you.”

“Okay,” Bella responded agreeably. Then she changed the subject. “So—since you’re staying, can I have my stuff back?”

*Her stuff!* I chuckled. I knew right away what she was referring to.

“Your things were never gone,” I admitted. “I knew it was wrong, since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, but I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the pictures, the tickets—they’re all under your floorboards.”

“Really?” Bella’s eyes brightened. She seemed exceptionally pleased.

I nodded, glad to see her cheered in some way by my bad behavior.

“I think...I’m not sure, but I wonder...I think maybe I knew it the whole time.”

“What did you know?”

Bella spoke haltingly as if she was figuring out her answer as she spoke it.

“Some part of me, my subconscious maybe, never stopped believing that you still cared whether I lived or died. That’s probably why I was hearing the voices.”

*Hearing voices?* A memory from the year before suddenly came back to me with perfect clarity. Bella’s behavior after she learned what I was had been utterly illogical—

backward, even—to the point of self-endangerment. I'd been concerned that she was suffering from a mental disorder. Had my behavior this year driven her completely over the edge?

"Voices?" I inquired, keeping my voice as even as possible. There was no need to distress her with my alarm.

Bella amended, "Well, just one voice. Yours. It's a long story." She looked uncomfortable at the admission.

"I've got time," I said mildly.

"It's pretty pathetic," she stalled.

I kept my expression neutral and said nothing. Already I was considering the conversation I would have with my father when Bella next slept about appropriate care for her. He could help me get Bella the best treatment available.

"Do you remember what Alice said about extreme sports?"

"You jumped off a cliff for fun," I said without emotion or judgment.

"Er, right. And before that, with the motorcycle—"

"Motorcycle?"

*She had been trying to kill herself!* I kept my vampire face smooth and expressionless.

"I guess I didn't tell Alice about that part."

"No."

"Well, about that... See, I found that... when I was doing something dangerous or stupid... I could remember you more clearly," she admitted timidly. "I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it, like you were standing right there next to me. Mostly I tried not to think about you, but this didn't hurt so much—it was like you were protecting me again. Like you didn't want me to be hurt. And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was because, underneath it all, I always knew that you hadn't stopped loving me."

I was *shocked*. "You... were... risking your life... to hear—"

"Shh," Bella cut me off. "Hold on a second. I think I'm having an epiphany here."

I watched her face as her expression became thoughtful and then startled. After a time, her face lit up.

"Oh!"

"Bella?"

"Oh. Okay. I see."

"Your epiphany?"

"You love me," she stated with a bright smile and an air of self-assurance.

A sea change had taken place. Through no reason I could see, she'd abruptly accepted the truth. I gave her a crooked smile. I still felt uncertain about what was going on inside her head, but I welcomed this development with all my heart.

"Truly, I do," I confirmed, noting with unexpected pleasure the particular words

that had just come out of my mouth. A seed had been planted.

The air between us crackled with electricity. It was the same phenomenon I remembered from a year ago when we were sitting in biology class in the dark. Though it was dark now too, I could see the joy in Bella's eyes. I took her face between my hands and gently pulled it toward mine, as love and desire and overwhelming happiness flooded through me. Unlike back then, I could touch her without fear now. I pressed my marble lips to her soft, heated mouth, feeling her breath on my face and her hands begin to twine through my hair.

She kissed me back like it was the first time. All the passion in me that had been thwarted, last year by fear and this year by separation, poured out and Bella met me touch for touch, breath for breath. She crushed her body against mine and I did not resist, but wrapped my arms around her and pulled her closer. If my heart still beat, it would have been racing a hundred miles an hour. As it was, I found myself breathing fast and hard, taking in the warm air Bella exhaled and exhaling cool air back to her. We kissed each other like there was no tomorrow, but there would be...and that was the true source of our joy.

When the intensity threatened to suffocate her and overwhelm me, I finally pulled away, my stone body feeling more human than ever before. It was deeply tempting to lay her down on the soft forest floor among the trees and never get up again—but not for sorrow this time.

"You were better at it than I was, you know," I said after our breathing had calmed.

"Better at what?"

"Surviving. You, at least, made an effort. You got up in the morning, tried to be normal for Charlie, followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively tracking, I was...totally useless. I couldn't be around my family—I couldn't be around anyone. I'm embarrassed to admit that I more or less curled up into a ball and let the misery have me. It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know I do that, too."

I smiled, a little self-conscious about my weakness, as Bella had been about hers. It was clear that we'd both had an extraordinarily difficult time coping with our separation. Bella became a danger to herself; I became a danger to no one—not even when I wanted to be.

"I only hear one voice," Bella reminded me, teasing.

I laughed and with one arm around her waist began escorting her toward the house.

"I'm just humoring you with this," I told her. "It doesn't matter in the slightest what they say."

"This affects them now, too," Bella insisted. I wasn't convinced or particularly worried about that. We would leave the area if the Volturi decided to visit.

I led Bella into the house and turned on the lights. Everyone was there—I could hear their thoughts—but we didn't need the lights and usually left them off unless it was an hour when we wanted the house to look "lived in." Esme, no doubt with Alice's help, had

already removed the dust sheets, cleaned, and placed flowers about. It looked like we had never left, which made me wonder if the whole family had decided to stay in Forks. I would be staying there with Bella, at least, as I was sure Alice had informed everyone.

“Carlisle? Esme? Rosalie? Emmett? Jasper? Alice?” I called to my family, though I was sure Alice had warned them we were coming. Carlisle appeared immediately.

“Welcome back, Bella,” my father said, greeting her warmly. “What can we do for you this morning? I imagine, due to the hour, that this is not a purely social visit?”

“I’d like to talk to everyone at once, if that’s okay. About something important,” she told him.

She was going through with this no matter what I thought, so I just kept my mouth shut. My father noticed that I didn’t look particularly happy about it.

“Of course,” he said. “Why don’t we talk in the other room?”

It was a family conference that called for the use of the antique dining table Esme had selected for that purpose. We never used it for dining, of course. Carlisle pulled out his chair at the head of the table for Bella and sat on one side of her while I sat on the other. Everyone else filed in and took seats.

When we were all there, my father said, “The floor is yours.”

I could see that Bella was nervous looking around the table at seven vampires, several of whom needed to hunt. I took her hand to reassure her—not that I supported this charade, but that I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her—while I looked around the room to see how much everyone knew. Alice *had* warned them about the vote, but not what they’d be voting on. I took a straw poll in my head, guessing which way each of them would go.

Alice would vote *yes* and Jasper would vote with her, having no reason to oppose changing Bella. Rosalie was bold enough to vote how she wanted—*no*. With me, that made the count two to two. Esme would want Bella to have her choice, so she would be a *yes*. Emmett would *want* to vote with Rosalie, but he liked Bella enough that he might go the other way. I didn’t know how my father would vote. He had never taken the life of anyone who was not certain to die anyway and Bella was one hundred percent healthy. I didn’t think he’d want Alice to change her given that fact, but I couldn’t be sure. It didn’t matter, though, because I wouldn’t allow this to move forward no matter how any of them voted. Bella’s soul was *sacrosanct*. Changing her was not an option.

I stared fixedly at everyone, telegraphing my displeasure should they vote the wrong way.

Bella began. “Well, I’m hoping Alice has already told you everything that happened in Volterra?”

“Everything,” my sister confirmed, smiling.

“And on the way?” Bella checked, meaning Alice’s promise to change her. I couldn’t read what Carlisle thought about that. He was reserving judgment.

“That, too,” Alice said. I wanted to growl at her.

“Good. Then we’re all on the same page.” Bella exhaled heavily and looked down

at the table.

“So, I have a problem,” she began after collecting herself. I squeezed her hand for reassurance. Everybody was gazing at her and they weren’t all remembering to blink. That must be disturbing to her.

“Alice promised the Volturi that I would become one of you. They’re going to send someone to check, and I’m sure that’s a bad thing—something to avoid. And so, now, this involves you all. I’m sorry about that.” Of course Bella would apologize for what *I* had caused. “But, if you don’t want me, then I’m not going to force myself on you, whether Alice is willing or not.”

My mother hurried to reassure Bella that we did want her, but Bella signaled for her to wait.

“Please, let me finish. You all know what I want. And I’m sure you know what Edward thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote. If you decide you don’t want me, then...I guess I’ll go back to Italy alone. I can’t have them coming here.”

I started growling at the insane thought of Bella going to the Volturi. Even though Aro would want to change her, I thought it unlikely she would survive long enough in Volterra for that to happen.

“Taking into account, then, that I won’t put any of you in danger either way, I want you to vote yes or no on the issue of me becoming a vampire.”

Bella half-smiled. I knew she was uncomfortable with that word, even though she wanted to be one of us. She gestured at Carlisle, but I didn’t want her to start with him because once he stated his opinion, the vote would tend to go in that direction and I couldn’t be sure which direction that would be. As the head of our family, his opinion carried the most weight.

I interrupted before he could speak. “Just a minute.” Bella gave me a dirty look. I squeezed her hand. “I have something to add before we vote.” She sighed in resignation.

“About the danger Bella’s referring to, I don’t think we need to be overly anxious. You see, there was more than one reason why I didn’t want to shake Aro’s hand there at the end,” I said. “There’s something they didn’t think of, and I didn’t want to clue them in.” I smiled as I looked around the table at everyone. I was rather proud of myself.

“Which was?” Alice asked doubtfully.

“The Volturi are overconfident, and with good reason. When they decide to find someone, it’s not really a problem. Do you remember Demetri?” I asked Bella.

Her face went white and she shuddered. She did.

“He finds people—that’s his talent, why they keep him,” I told her. “Now, the whole time we were with any of them, I was picking their brains for anything that might save us, getting as much information as possible. So I saw how Demetri’s talent works. He’s a tracker—a tracker a thousand times more gifted than James was. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aro does. He catches the...flavor? I don’t know how

to describe it...the tenor...of someone's mind, and then he follows that. It works over immense distances. But after Aro's little experiments, well..." It was obvious.

"You think he won't be able to find me," Bella said evenly.

I grinned. "I'm sure of it. He relies totally on that other sense. When it doesn't work with you, they'll all be blind."

"And how does that solve anything?" she asked, unimpressed.

"Quite obviously, Alice will be able to tell when they're planning a visit, and I'll hide you. They'll be helpless. It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!"

I laughed, thinking about it—a human getting the best of the Volturi guard.

"But they can find *you*," Bella objected.

"And I can take care of myself."

Emmett laughed. "Excellent plan, my brother," he said and we bumped fists.

Rosalie hissed, "No."

"Absolutely not," Bella agreed.

"Nice," said Jasper approvingly.

"Idiots," Alice grumbled.

My mom gave me a censorious look. The women just couldn't appreciate the pleasure of a good fight. Bella was annoyed but she kept her cool.

"All right, then. Edward has offered an alternative for you to consider," she said. "Let's vote." Then she looked at me. "Do you want me to join your family?"

"Not that way. You're staying human."

She didn't react. Just nodded once, as if she was registering my vote, and then moved on around the table.

"Alice?"

"Yes."

"Jasper?"

"Yes." Of course he would vote with Alice, even though he liked my plan.

"Rosalie?"

"No," she said after a moment. She was trying to be nice to Bella, so I could tell this moment was awkward for her. She stuck to her guns, though. "Let me explain," she added quickly. "I don't mean that I have any aversion to you as a sister. It's just that...this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there had been someone there to vote no for me."

I could see in her thoughts that she was being honest. She *would* accept Bella as her sister, which pleased me. Plus, I appreciated her vote.

Bella turned to Emmett next.

"Hell, yes!" he answered. "We can find some other way to pick a fight with this Demetri."

I snarled. Both Jasper *and* Emmett had abandoned me. Not that it mattered, but still...

Bella looked at my mother.

“Yes, of course, Bella. I already think of you as part of my family.”

“Thank you, Esme,” she replied gratefully.

Bella must have questioned why—since everyone seemed to want her—we’d abandoned her. I didn’t know if she could understand that we all thought she would have been better off without us.

The vote was now four *yeas* and two *nays*. Bella looked at Carlisle and he looked at me.

*I think you have to reconsider, son. Her life is in danger and so is yours. I can change her if you’re worried about her safety.*

I refused to look at him, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

“Edward,” he pressed me out loud.

“No,” I growled.

“It’s the only way that makes sense,” my father asserted. “You’ve chosen not to live without her, and that doesn’t leave me a choice.”

He meant it literally—I had chosen suicide when I thought Bella was dead and Carlisle and Esme didn’t want me to try it again. If Bella remained human, they knew that when her life ended, I would force the hand of the Volturi, so Carlisle would not support my decision. Instead, he would allow Bella to lose her soul!

Fury gripped me. I dropped Bella’s hand and stormed out of the room, snarling all the way. Behind me, I heard my father’s words to Bella:

“I guess you know my vote.”