

## 28. Deal

I was *stinking* mad. As I entered the living room, I scoured the area for a suitable object on which to vent my rage. The nearest breakable item was Emmett’s sixty-inch, flat-screen, high-definition, plasma television that he’d had shipped by special order from Korea, as they were not yet available in the United States. The number of adjectives in front of the word “television” indicates just how much money it had cost him.

I approached the wall-sized screen and jammed my fist through the center of it, shattering the glass, which sprayed in every direction. The plastic casing behind the screen splintered and my hand smashed through it too and into a wall stud, tearing it from the ceiling joist. Still angry, I yanked what was left of the TV off the wall, twisted it fiercely into a gnarled mass, and chucked it into the gaping hole in the wall where it had hung. Despite the impressive racket of the destruction, it didn’t make me feel better.

If my father supported Bella’s decision to the degree that he would change her himself, then it was a done deal. The only thing I could do now was try to talk her out of it somehow.

“That’s all I needed,” Bella said from the other room. “Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel exactly the same way about all of you, too.”

I was wracking my brain for a plan. *Somehow* to convince Bella not to go through with it or at least to postpone it as long as possible so that she could live out more of her human life. And maybe by then, she would have changed her mind.

Then Bella spoke again. “Well, Alice. Where do you want to do this?” I couldn’t believe my ears!

“No! No! NO!” I bellowed, storming into the dining room. I loomed menacingly over Bella, livid. “Are you insane?” I yelled. “Have you utterly lost your mind?”

Bella put her hands over her ears and ducked her head. I put my body between her and my sister.

“Um, Bella,” Alice said nervously. “I don’t think I’m ready for that. I’ll need to prepare...”

“You promised,” Bella protested, trying to talk to Alice around me.

“I know, but... Seriously, Bella! I don’t have any idea how to not kill you.”

“You can do it. I trust you.”

I snarled. I couldn’t *believe* she wanted to go through with this...and *immediately!* It was *crazy*, not to mention risky for my family. But Alice appeared to be backing out of her offer, at least for the moment.

Bella called to my father.

“Carlisle?” she asked, stretching to see him behind me.

I grabbed her face in one hand and forced her to look straight at me. I warned my father away with my other hand raised in his direction. He *ignored me. Ignored me!*

“I’m able to do it,” Carlisle said to Bella calmly. “You would be in no danger of me losing control.”

“Sounds good,” Bella mumbled, her jaw still trapped in my hand.

I could not believe it! *What can I do? What can I do?*

“Hold on,” I growled. “It doesn’t have to be now.”

“There’s no reason for it not to be now,” Bella argued.

“I can think of a few.”

“Of course you can. Now let go of me,” she demanded.

I released her chin and adopted Charlie’s intimidation stance with my arms crossed over my chest and my legs slightly apart.

“In about two hours, Charlie will be here looking for you. I wouldn’t put it past him to involve the police.”

“All three of them,” Bella replied sarcastically, but I could see her think about that. She remained silent for several long moments and I knew I’d found the right argument. My body was still stiff with anger, but I had regained control of my temper.

“In the interest of remaining inconspicuous,” I said to Carlisle, who would particularly care about the issue, “I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Bella finishes high school, and moves out of Charlie’s house.”

“That’s a reasonable request, Bella,” Carlisle granted.

*Yes!*

Bella grew quiet for a bit and then relented.

“I’ll consider it,” she said grudgingly.

*Whew!* I’d won the argument...for now. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“I should probably take you home,” I said hastily, wanting to end this night before anyone had second thoughts. “Just in case Charlie wakes up early,” I explained.

Bella looked at my father. “After graduation?” she asked.

“You have my word.”

I felt another snarl building in my chest.

“Okay. You can take me home,” Bella agreed.

I hurried her out the back door, avoiding the demolition zone I’d created in the living room. I couldn’t remember ever being so angry, at least not in a long while. I would owe Emmett—big time.

After I’d run the several miles through the woods with Bella on my back, I’d calmed down enough to direct my energy toward planning—or perhaps “scheming” was more accurate. When we reached Charlie’s house, I leaped through Bella’s window, pulled her from my back, and set her on the bed without a pause. I needed to think. She watched me as I paced back and forth across the room.

“Whatever you’re planning, it’s not going to work,” she warned me.

“Shh. I’m thinking,” I replied. An idea was taking shape in my mind, a way to buy more time.

“Ugh,” Bella complained, dropping onto her back and hiding her head under the blanket.

I couldn’t *stand* it! I darted to her bed and lay down beside her. Then I pulled the blanket off her face and smoothed the hair away from her eyes.

“If you don’t mind,” I said mildly. “I’d much rather you didn’t hide your face. I’ve lived without it for as long as I can stand.” I was feeling more confident and conciliatory. “Now...tell me something.”

“What?” Bella asked suspiciously.

I’d accepted that I could not prevent Bella from going to Carlisle to be changed. The only possible thing I could affect was *how soon* she acted. I’d already gotten her to postpone until after graduation. Perhaps I could extend that time.

“If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?”

“You,” she responded.

“Something you don’t already have,” I replied impatiently.

Bella paused to think. If she was honest with her choice, I might have a bargaining chip.

“I would want...Carlisle not to have to do it. I would want you to change me.”

As I’d thought. Could I do it? Could I put aside everything I believed in to give her what she wanted? Possibly, if the trade was significant enough. I *wanted* to keep her forever, of *course* I did. I just didn’t want to condemn her to an eternity of night. But I had to remember that she would go ahead whether I agreed to it or not. If she was going to do it anyway, I *did* want to be the one. I wanted to inject her with poison from my own mouth.  
*Ugh!*

“What would you be willing to trade for that?” I asked.

Bella looked shocked. It was the first time I had given her any indication that I might go along with her decision.

“Anything,” she said breathily, her eyes wide.

“Five years?” I suggested.

Bella looked absolutely mortified. She hadn’t seen that coming.

“You said anything,” I reminded her.

“Yes, but...you’ll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it’s just too dangerous to be human—for me, at least. So, anything but *that*.”

*Grrr.* “Three years?”

“No!”

“Isn’t it worth anything to you at all?” I asked, slightly offended.

“Six months?”

Patently ridiculous! I rolled my eyes. “Not good enough.”

“One year, then,” Bella relented. “That’s my limit.”

This wasn’t going as well as I’d hoped.

“At least give me two.”

“No way. Nineteen I’ll do. But I’m not going anywhere near twenty. If you’re staying in your teens forever, then so am I.”

*Oh, right.* The numbers meant something to Bella, though it was completely illogical. That idea wasn’t going to work then. *What else? What do I really want?*

I recalled two words I’d said earlier in the day under other circumstances and suddenly I *knew*. Pleasure flowed through me when I recognized what would give me the ultimate bliss and also might convince Bella to postpone changing. If she didn’t want to wait, then I would still get my heart’s desire!

“All right. Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one—then you’ll just have to meet one condition.”

“Condition? What condition?” Bella was guarded.

As soon as the idea had entered my mind, I knew I wanted it...badly. I tried to hide from her just how much when I said the words.

“Marry me first.”

Bella looked at me without comprehension. “Okay. What’s the punch line?”

*Seriously?* “You’re wounding my ego, Bella. I just proposed to you, and you think it’s a joke.”

“Edward, please be serious.”

“I am one hundred percent serious.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Bella said in disbelief. “I’m only eighteen.”

“Well, I’m nearly a hundred and ten. It’s time I settled down.”

She turned to the window, unable to look me in the eyes. Her discomfort was obvious.

“Look, marriage isn’t exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Renee and Charlie,” she said with unintended irony.

“Interesting choice of words.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re afraid of the commitment,” I said, pointing out the lack of logic in that.

“That’s not it exactly,” she said slowly. “I’m...afraid of Renee. She has some really intense opinions on getting married before you’re thirty.”

“Because she’d rather you became one of the eternal damned than get married.”

“You think you’re joking.”

Though it probably wasn’t reasonable, I recognized that Bella’s resistance hurt my feelings a little. I thought she loved me, but it was always possible that she wanted immortality more than she wanted me. It was a distressing thought.

“Bella, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for an eternity as a vampire... If you’re not brave enough to marry me, then—”

“Well, what if I did?” she challenged. “What if I told you to take me to Vegas now? Would I be a vampire in three days?”

I knew she was bluffing.

“Sure,” I said agreeably. “I’ll get my car.”

Her face fell. “Dammit. I’ll give you eighteen months,” she conceded.

“No deal,” I said, smiling. “I like this condition.”

I had her! It was fair, though. We each would have to give in to something abhorrent to us. I tried not to think too hard about what I was agreeing to do or what seemed to be abhorrent to Bella.

“Fine,” Bella rejoined. “I’ll have Carlisle do it when I graduate.”

“If that’s what you really want,” I said nonchalantly, grinning for all I was worth. Like me, she’d seen the possibility of getting something she *really* wanted and I didn’t think she’d be able to give it up.

“You’re impossible,” Bella complained. “A monster.”

“Is that why you won’t marry me?” I teased.

Bella groaned.

I wasn’t above exploiting my charms to get what I wanted. I leaned in close, invoking all my powers of persuasion...the eyes, the voice, the breath.

“Please, Bella?” I whispered, looking into her eyes and exhaling across her face.

Bella’s expression went blank and her mouth hung open slightly. She seemed confused for a moment before she came back to herself and shook her head.

“Would this have gone better if I’d had time to get a ring?” I asked forlornly.

“No! No rings!” Bella cried out, a note of terror in the sound.

“Now you’ve done it,” I told her.

“Oops.”

“Charlie’s getting up; I’d better leave,” I said with a forsaken sigh.

Bella’s expression became anguished, which made me feel better. I didn’t really want to leave.

“Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?” I asked, not mentioning that I’d dodged Charlie that way repeatedly in the last twenty–four hours.

“No,” Bella assured me. “Stay. Please.”

I smiled happily and disappeared into Bella’s sweet–smelling closet.

Bella had gotten plenty to think about in the last hour. I was confident I’d found the one thing that might make her wait to be changed...marriage. Now that she knew I would be willing to change her myself, though, she was in a quandary. In truth, the act of transforming a human was intimate...not just physically, but also spiritually. If I did it, she would know without a doubt that I wanted her forever. And my venom, though no different

than Carlisle's in chemistry, was symbolically very different.

"Morning, Dad," Bella said after her door creaked.

"Oh, hey, Bella," Charlie replied uncomfortably. "I didn't know you were awake."

"Yeah. I've just been waiting for you to wake up so I could take a shower." Clever. She was trying to scare him out of her room with hints of nakedness.

"Hold on," Charlie said and turned on the overhead light. "Let's talk for a minute first." I wondered if he was suspicious and needed the light to look around. "You know you're in trouble."

"Yeah, I know."

"I just about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry's funeral, and you're gone."

So it was someone named *Harry* who had died when I'd thought it was Bella.

"Jacob could only tell me that you'd run off with Alice Cullen, and that he thought you were in trouble. You didn't leave me a number, and you didn't call. I didn't know where you were or when—or if—you were coming back. Do you have any idea how...how..." Charlie faltered.

*Jacob* again. Jacob with the "pack." Things were starting to add up to something I didn't like at all.

Charlie was still carping at Bella. "Can you give me one reason why I shouldn't ship you off to Jacksonville this second?" he demanded.

"Because I won't go," Bella said stubbornly.

"Now just one minute, young lady—"

"Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I've learned my lesson. And I guess you're within your rights if you want to kick me out, too—but that won't make me go to Florida."

I could feel Charlie's tension building though I couldn't see his face.

"Would you like to explain where you've been?"

Bella paused and I knew she was trying to think fast.

"There was...an emergency." Bella hesitated again. I could imagine Charlie's skeptical expression.

Bella made a funny noise that sounded something like resignation.

"I don't know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand."

The silence in the room was deafening.

"See, Alice told Rosalie about me jumping off the cliff..."

Bella was digging herself in worse every second, but I couldn't help her with Charlie. I could imagine his expression about now.

"I guess I didn't tell you about that," she admitted guiltily. "It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Jake. Anyway, Rosalie told Edward, and he was upset."

She sort of accidentally made it sound like I was trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn't answer his phone, so Alice dragged me to... L.A., to explain in person."

"Were you trying to kill yourself, Bella?" Charlie probed, a cloud of fear suddenly radiating from him and filling the room.

"No, of course not. Just having fun with Jake. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing."

*Jake, Jake, Jake...again! Grrrr.*

"What's it to Edward Cullen anyway?" Charlie stormed. "All this time, he's just left you dangling without a word—"

"Another misunderstanding," Bella interrupted.

Bella tells her father she's been jumping off cliffs and what he latches onto is my name as the worst thing in Bella's explanation. I deserved it, I guess.

"So is he back then?" Charlie demanded.

"I'm not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are."

"I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don't trust him. He's rotten for you. I won't let him mess you up like that again." I stifled a snarl.

"Fine." I was taken aback at Bella's easy dismissal of me. *Would she...?*

"Oh." Charlie sounded surprised. "I thought you were going to be difficult."

"I am. I meant, 'Fine, I'll move out.'"

Panic and anger and fear all poured out of Charlie, though I couldn't catch any particular thoughts.

"Dad, I don't want to move out," Bella cut in before he could speak. "I love you. I know you're worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you're going to have to ease up on Edward if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?"

"That's not fair, Bella. You know I want you to stay."

"Then be nice to Edward, because he's going to be where I am."

I felt the air rush out of me in an abundance of relief. She *did* believe in me! She wanted me! I was thrilled.

"Not under my roof."

Bella sighed. "Look, I'm not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight—or I guess it's this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Edward and I are sort of a package deal."

"Bella—"

"Think it over," Bella insisted. "And while you're doing that, could you give me some privacy? I really need a shower." More threats of nakedness. I smiled.

The door slammed and Charlie stomped down the stairs. I hated that Bella was fighting with her father over *me*. I exited the closet and sat in Bella's rocking chair.

"Sorry about that," she whispered.

"It's not as if I don't deserve far worse," I told her. "Don't start anything with Charlie over me, please."

“Don’t worry about it,” Bella said as she gathered her things for the shower. “I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?”

She looked at me with wide, frightened eyes. I think it was meant as a joke.

“You’d move in with a house full of vampires?” I tested. It sounded like she’d be willing to *live* with me, but not *marry* me. Great.

“That’s probably the safest place for someone like me,” Bella went on. “Besides... if Charlie kicks me out, then there’s no need for a graduation deadline, is there?”

She grinned provocatively.

*Grrr.* “So eager for eternal damnation,” I groused.

“You know you don’t really believe that.”

“Oh, don’t I?” *Of course I did!*

“No. You don’t.”

I frowned and tried to think how to respond to that blatant challenge when Bella cut in.

“If you really believed that you’d lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn’t—you said ‘Amazing. Carlisle was right,’” she reminded me. “There’s hope in you, after all.”

I was floored by that assessment. I guess...I guess...she was *right!*

“So let’s both just be hopeful, all right?” she added. “Not that it matters. If you stay, I don’t need heaven.”

Still in shock by the truth she had pointed out to me, I rose and approached her slowly. Gazing into her eyes, I took her face in my hands.

“Forever,” I vowed.

“That’s all I’m asking for,” Bella responded. She rose onto her toes as I leaned forward to meet her lips with mine.

She *was* my heaven.