

5. Party

“She was very explicit, Alice,” I told my sister. “She wants everybody to ignore her birthday.”

“Wants, schmants. It’s not really about her, is it? It’s more about you and your family and how we care enough to ignore her silliness and celebrate her big day anyway.”

“That’s pretty weak.”

“Okay, I know, but I want to throw her a party!” This came out almost as a whine. “I never get to throw real birthday parties in this family. The last time anyone got older was in the 1930s and we hadn’t even joined you yet, so it’s only fair that we have a chance to—”

“Truly, Alice, you don’t have to convince me. I’m just warning you that it’s unlikely to be appreciated. She might even refuse to attend.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Nobody stands me up when I invite them to a party. Not and live to tell about it, anyway.”

“I hope that’s an exaggeration.”

“Well, back in the good old days, I used to invite people to parties and sometimes they didn’t actually live to tell about it if you want to know the truth.” She laughed her high, tinkling laugh and I saw images in her mind of her “Vampyre” costume parties from the 1930s and ‘40s where she dressed as a vampire in gothic black and wore fangs. Guests came dressed as characters from gothic horror novels, including Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and a number of characters from Edgar Allen Poe’s works—the raven, Fortunato, and the Ushers among the favorites. Invariably, at least one guest would “get lost” on the way home and never be heard from again.

“But I don’t throw those kind of parties anymore,” Alice clarified. “Do you want to have input on Bella’s gifts or just let me decide everything?” She was hoping for the latter response.

“She doesn’t want gifts, as I said, but if you’re going to do it anyway, then I might make a few suggestions. It is imperative, though, that she not be told of my involvement because I am not allowed to spend money on her.”

“Okay, then, lay it on me! We’ll assign the gifts to the rest of the family. She can’t get mad at Carlisle and Esme, can she? No, she can’t,” she said, answering herself.

“Since Bella will not allow me to buy her a real vehicle, we are both forced to listen to AM radio, no less. It’s intolerable. A stereo for her truck would be a godsend. It’ll have to include installation. If you give it to her still in the box, she might return it to the store.”

“Done.”

“Here’s another idea. Neither she nor Renee has money to spend on plane tickets and I know she misses her mother. A gift of a visit might be nice. Maybe assign that one to Carlisle and Esme, nonrefundable. I can tell her it would hurt Esme’s feelings if she didn’t use it.”

“Two tickets. Then you can go with her.”

“Brilliant. I’ve already started making a recording of my piano compositions. For the price of a blank CD, I think she’ll like it.”

“Oh, she will, definitely! You’re a good present giver. Have I ever told you that?”

“No, I don’t believe so, Alice. Nice of you to say. What is it that you want?”

She laughed lightly. “I haven’t decided yet. I’ll let you know.”

“Her parents are getting her a camera and a photo album to record her senior year.”

“So *everybody* is ignoring her wishes, I see.”

“Yes, except for you. You will be the perfect boyfriend who always does the right thing, though some might argue that when a girl says she doesn’t want something, she probably does.”

“Never fear. I think she’ll like my homemade gift.”

“Okay, Tuesday evening then.”

“Bella works at the store on Tuesdays, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know, but I’ll take care of that. I’m asking Emmett and Rosalie to come back for the party. *That’ll* surprise her.”

“It certainly will. Maybe not in the way you intend, though.”

“Oh, I’ll handle Rosalie. She *will* be good, *or else!*”

“Or else what, Alice? Are you going to pick a fight with Rosalie?”

“No, but I might accidentally drop all her lip gloss into a bag of kitty litter. It could happen!” Alice would do it, no doubt about it. I chuckled.

“Bella will be glad to see Emmett, at least. Are you thinking of inviting Charlie?”

“Well, you know Charlie and I are friends now.”

I did know. Alice came with me to Bella’s house in the evenings sometimes to visit with him. She also stayed there to keep Bella company while I went hunting. Alice had helped my case with Charlie a great deal, I suspected.

She continued, “I think parties aren’t high on his list of fun things to do unless it’s a gathering to watch a game on the sports network. I will informally invite him, though, knowing in advance that he won’t come. That way, he won’t feel left out. I’m sensitive, but practical. That’s why he likes me.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” I said wryly.

Alice absolutely loves to throw parties. It’s not the parties that she likes, per se, it’s more the designing, planning, shopping, and taking everything way over the top that appeals to her. It’s one of the few areas in her life where she can pull out all the stops and show off the extent of her abilities. Give her a few days and she can singlehandedly pull off

what would require half-a-dozen, human event-planners a month to accomplish.

“Alice wants to celebrate your birthday,” I told Bella the following day. By warning her, I would avoid being considered part of the conspiracy to torture her, which is how she would see it if I didn’t tell her in advance. I knew Alice would get her way, regardless. She always did.

The day started inauspiciously enough, a regular, cloudy, gray day in the Pacific Northwest with a nearly constant drizzle. Alice had gone to hysterical lengths to throw this party for Bella. It had been a long time since she’d gotten to spread her wings. It was a shame that Bella wouldn’t be able to appreciate it.

Bella had told Alice straight out that she did not want any gifts, no celebratory greetings, and *definitely* no party. Alice had ignored it all, of course. I warned my parents that, though I would be sure to get Bella to the party—Emmett and Rose had come all the way from Africa, after all—she was unlikely to be happy about it. I didn’t want Esme to be caught off-guard by Bella “The Scrooge” Swan on her eighteenth birthday.

Alice and I waited for Bella before school in the parking lot, as usual. When she arrived, Alice skipped over to meet her, carrying one of the presents. Bella was not receptive.

“Happy Birthday, Bella!”

“Shh!” Bella shushed her, clearly not wanting anyone nearby to hear and risk getting more unwanted attention.

“Do you want to open your present now or later?” Alice enthused.

“No presents,” was Bella’s reply.

Alice wisely backed off. “Okay...later, then. Did you like the scrapbook your mom sent you? And the camera from Charlie?”

“Yeah. They’re great,” Bella answered with obvious displeasure.

“I think it’s a nice idea. You’re only a senior once. Might as well document the experience.”

“How many times have you been a senior?” Bella asked sarcastically.

“That’s different.”

Bella walked over to where I’d remained standing by my car and gave me a genuine smile. I took her hand and squeezed it and felt her heart flutter in her chest, which gave me a smile of a different kind. I pulled her close and then ran the tip of my finger around the edges of her lips, feeling them yield to the slight pressure. Bella’s heart began to gallop.

“So, as discussed, I am not allowed to wish you a Happy Birthday, is that correct?” I asked, subtly wishing her Happy Birthday in the process.

“Yes. That is correct,” Bella replied, trying to mimic my tone.

“Just checking,” I said. “You might have changed your mind. Most people seem to

enjoy things like birthdays and gifts.”

Alice’s voice rang in a peal of laughter. “Of course you’ll enjoy it. Everyone is supposed to be nice to you today and give you your way, Bella. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I later looked back on Alice’s rhetorical question with superstitious grief. Perhaps if she hadn’t asked that question, the worst would not have happened.

“Getting older,” was Bella’s non-rhetorical reply and I tensed at her implication. She was not getting what she really wanted for her birthday because I was not willing to destroy her soul.

“Eighteen isn’t very old,” Alice told her, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension. “Don’t women usually wait until they’re twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?”

“It’s older than Edward,” Bella muttered unhappily.

I sighed. The impasse...again.

“Technically,” Alice said. “Just by one little year, though.” I appreciated Alice’s effort. I really did. It was unlikely to make a difference, though. “What time will you be at the house?” Alice suddenly demanded, ready to lock Bella in to an acceptance.

“I didn’t know I had plans to be there.”

“Oh, be fair, Bella!” Alice’s voice rose dangerously. “You aren’t going to ruin all our fun like that, are you?”

“I thought my birthday was about what I want.”

I broke in before things could turn ugly. “I’ll get her from Charlie’s right after school,” I told my sister.

“I have to work,” Bella countered.

“You don’t, actually,” Alice informed her. “I already spoke to Mrs. Newton about it. She’s trading your shifts. She said to tell you ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“I-I still can’t come over,” Bella said, grasping at straws. “I, well, I haven’t watched *Romeo and Juliet* yet for English.”

Alice dismissed that argument with a snort. “You have *Romeo and Juliet* memorized.”

“But Mr. Berty said we needed to see it performed to fully appreciate it—that’s how Shakespeare intended it to be presented.” I rolled my eyes. That excuse was bordering on the ridiculous.

“You’ve already seen the movie,” Alice accused.

“But not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Berty said it was the best.”

Alice was done with fooling around. Her voice became menacing. “This can be easy, or this can be hard, Bella, but one way or the other—”

“Relax, Alice,” I quickly cut in. “If Bella wants to watch a movie, then she can. It’s her birthday.”

“So there,” Bella gloated. My intervention had given her a false sense of security.

“I’ll bring her over around seven,” I went on. “That will give you more time to set

up.” Bella could not escape so I had decided to ensure she wouldn’t get on Alice’s bad side. You didn’t want to get on Alice’s bad side.

My sister’s mood instantly improved and she laughed. “Sounds good. See you tonight, Bella! It’ll be fun, you’ll see.” Alice kissed Bella on the cheek—no hard feelings—and pirouetted away before Bella could think of another excuse.

“Edward, please—” Bella started before I put a finger to her lips.

“Let’s discuss it later. We’re going to be late for class.” Postpone an argument to a later time and then make sure that that time never came. It was a good strategy for prevailing.

Neither Alice nor I brought up Bella’s birthday again during school, in an attempt to keep her hackles down, but at the end of the day, Bella didn’t really have a choice. We walked to her truck together. Alice had driven my car home so that Bella couldn’t run off and hide somewhere. I was her prison escort. I opened the passenger door for her.

Bella took on a stubborn stance, ignoring the rain hitting her in the face. “It’s my birthday, don’t I get to drive?”

“I’m pretending it’s not your birthday, just as you wished.”

“If it’s not my birthday, then I don’t have to go to your house tonight...”

“All right,” I replied calmly. I walked to the other side of the truck and held open the driver’s side door. “Happy Birthday.”

“Shh,” Bella said, but I could tell we were wearing her down.

As she competed with a tortoise in a race to get home, I made a show of turning on her radio and complaining about its lousy reception.

“You want a nice stereo? Drive your own car,” Bella snapped.

I tried to keep a straight face. It was one of those situations where a child might have said, “Ooooooh, scarry,” but fortunately I wasn’t a child. Bella might hurt herself trying to slap me or something. Time for mood enhancement therapy. My specialty.

When the truck was parked safely at Charlie’s curb, I scooted close to Bella, took her face gently between my hands, and prepared for the buildup of romantic tension. “You should be in a good mood, today of all days,” I whispered, breathing on her face, which always seemed to intoxicate her.

“And if I don’t want to be in a good mood?” Bella asked, already relinquishing some of her grumpiness as I looked into her eyes.

“Too bad,” I answered, and leaned in slowly, deliberately, and pressed my lips to hers. I maintained the exquisitely gentle contact until Bella’s breathing sped to a pant and she began responding with the fervor of a hormonally enhanced teenager. I smiled while I removed Bella’s arms from around my neck to take back some breathing room.

“Be good, please,” I chided with my lips against her cheek, and I gently kissed her again while holding her arms at bay. Bella’s heart was beating manically.

“Do you think I’ll ever get better at this?” Bella wondered. “That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?”

“I really hope not,” I replied truthfully.

Bella rolled her eyes this time. “Let’s go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?”

“Your wish, my command.” We went into the house and I lay back on the couch and put my feet up while Bella located the beginning of Franco Zeffereilli’s lush 1968 film *Romeo and Juliet*. I pulled Bella down to snuggle with me using an afghan to take the edge off of my chilly skin.

“You know, I’ve never had much patience with Romeo,” I observed when the movie began.

“What’s wrong with Romeo?” Bella inquired, her hackles beginning to rise. He was obviously a favorite of hers.

“Well, first of all, he’s in love with this Rosaline—don’t you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet’s cousin. That’s not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his own happiness any more thoroughly?” Oh, the irony. If I’d had the foresight to predict my own missteps, perhaps I would not have been so judgmental.

Bella was annoyed. “Do you want me to watch this alone?”

“No, I’ll mostly be watching you, anyway,” I told her, dragging my fingers along her forearms and watching goose bumps appear. “Will you cry?” I asked.

“Probably,” Bella confessed, “if I’m paying attention.”

“I won’t distract you then,” I promised, but it was one of many promises I would break on this day. I pressed my lips to Bella’s hair and inhaled her delicious scent.

As the movie played, I spoke Romeo’s lines softly into Bella’s ear, listening to her heart thump harder in her chest. When Juliet awoke at the end of the movie and found Romeo deceased in the tomb, tears popped out of Bella’s eyes. I wiped them away with a finger and a smile.

“I’ll admit, I do sort of envy him here,” I told her, using her hair to wipe away more of her tears.

“She’s very pretty.” Trust Bella to misunderstand that particular comment.

“I don’t envy him the girl—just the ease of the suicide. You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts...”

“What?” Bella interjected, surprised.

“It’s something I had to think about once, and I knew from Carlisle’s experience that it wouldn’t be simple. I’m not even sure how many ways Carlisle tried to kill himself in the beginning...after he realized what he’d become...” The memory made me a little sad. “And he’s clearly still in excellent health,” I finished lightly, trying to drive that feeling away.

Bella turned around to look me in the face. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, this is something you had to think about once?” She was growing agitated.

“Last spring, when you were...nearly killed...” This memory was *much* worse! It

was every bit as painful now as it had been then, but I tried not to let it get its hooks too far into me on this celebratory day. “Of course I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. Like I said, it’s not as easy for me as it is for a human.”

Bella unconsciously touched the bite scars on her hand where James’s teeth had sunk in. “Contingency plans?” she repeated with trepidation.

“Well, I wasn’t going to live without you,” I said a little impatiently. Didn’t Bella already know that? I continued, “But I wasn’t sure how to do it—I knew Emmett and Jasper would never help...so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Volturi.”

I remembered that day with a clarity that brought back all the terror I’d experienced leaping off the airplane before the attendant had barely opened the exit hatch, and running through the airport as fast as I could, ignoring the bewildered onlookers.

“What is a Volturi?” Bella demanded, angrily.

“The Volturi are a family. A very old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Carlisle lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America—do you remember the story?”

“Of course I remember.”

“Anyway,” I explained, “you don’t irritate the Volturi. Not unless you want to die—or whatever it is we do,” I added dismissively.

I had distressed Bella with my rambling. She turned to me with a shocked look on her face and placed her hands on my cheeks, holding tightly.

“You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!” she said, looking intently into my eyes. “No matter what might ever happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!”

I took the order with a grain of salt. What I did if and when she was gone was my business. Anyway, I wouldn’t let anything like that happen ever again. I wouldn’t let her be hurt or killed due to my negligence.

“I’ll never put you in danger again, so it’s a moot point,” I promised. Where did I get the overconfidence that let me believe I had any control at all? I will never know.

“Put me in danger!” Bella burst out. “I thought we’d established that all the bad luck is my fault? How dare you even think like that?”

“What would you do, if the situation were reversed?” I inquired.

“That’s not the same thing,” she responded lamely. I chuckled.

“What if something did happen to you?” Bella asked, her face going pale. “Would you want *me* to go off myself?”

Now *that* wasn’t the same at all! Bella had lots of reasons to exist without me, where the reverse was patently not true. But the idea of her killing herself hurt...a lot.

“I guess I see your point...a little, but what would I do without you?” I asked bleakly.

“Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence.”

I sighed. “You make that sound so easy.”

“It should be. I’m not really that interesting.” Now she was descending into the ridiculous.

“Moot point.”

Just then I heard Charlie’s police cruiser turn the corner onto the street. I sat upright and rearranged us on the couch so that we appeared to be a little less “comfortable” and were no longer touching.

“Charlie?” Bella asked. I just smiled and she took my hand defiantly.

“Hey, kids.” Charlie walked in carrying a pizza box and looking pleased with himself. “I thought you’d like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?”

“Sure. Thanks, Dad.”

After the two of them had eaten their fill, I asked Charlie, “Do you mind if I borrow Bella for the evening?” Charlie was expecting my question. Alice had come by recently and invited Charlie to the party and he had carefully found a reason not to attend.

“That’s fine—the Mariners are playing the Sox tonight. So I won’t be any kind of company... Here,” he said, tossing Bella’s camera to her. That was an ill-considered move. I readied to grab it after Bella missed the catch, which she did.

“Nice save,” Charlie commented. I realized then that Charlie had mellowed out a lot over the summer. Recently, he had seemed more friendly to me than he had been after we returned from Phoenix—for Charlie, anyway. He was regaining his trust in me to an extent.

Charlie went on. “If they’re doing something fun at the Cullens’ tonight, Bella, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets—she’ll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.”

“Good idea, Charlie,” I agreed. Bella couldn’t take pictures if she didn’t go, now could she? I handed her the camera. Bella aimed it at me and took the first picture.

“It works,” she said. I wondered if she still entertained the silly idea that vampires didn’t appear on film. It was a common misconception, one of those myths perpetuated by the Volturi to ensure that they could prove they weren’t vampires. *Their* pictures could be taken, after all.

“That’s good. Hey, say ‘hi’ to Alice for me. She hasn’t been over in a while,” Charlie said with a frown.

“It’s been three days, Dad,” Bella pointed out, “but I’ll tell her.”

“Okay. You kids have fun tonight.” Alice obviously had gotten to Charlie. He was assisting her by pushing Bella out the door. Alice could be quite devious, really.

I drove this time, with no argument from Bella. It was hard to find our driveway in the dark, purposefully so. As we rode along, I tried to push the truck a little beyond its usual putt-putt speed and the engine and exhaust system complained loudly.

“Take it easy,” Bella cautioned.

“You know what you would love?” I asked cheerfully, raising my voice above the noise. “A nice little Audi coupe. Very quiet, lots of power...” I was trying to build her up for the possibility that I might have bought her a car against her wishes, so that whatever extravagance Alice had planned for the evening would seem much less by comparison. I *did* want to get her a decent car, though. For myself, if not for her.

“There’s nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what’s good for you, you didn’t spend any money on birthday presents.”

“Not a dime,” I said, smiling. I’d already owned plenty of blank CDs.

“Good.”

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked, playing on the good will I’d just earned.

“That depends on what it is.”

I decided to tell her the truth of the situation. I really didn’t want her to hurt anyone’s feelings after they’d made such an effort to treat her like family and celebrate her big day.

“Bella, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmett in 1935. Cut us a little slack, and don’t be too difficult tonight. They’re all very excited.”

“Fine, I’ll behave,” she agreed with little grace.

“I probably should warn you...”

“Please do.”

“When I say they’re all excited... I do mean all of them.”

“Everyone?” Bella gasped. “I thought Emmett and Rosalie were in Africa.”

“Emmett wanted to be here.”

“But... Rosalie?”

“I know, Bella. Don’t worry, she’ll be on her best behavior.” I hoped. Alice had given her the wrath of God speech and I had begged her to be nice, so I thought at the very least she would not be offensive or outright rude. I changed the subject quickly. “So, if you won’t let me get you the Audi, isn’t there anything that you’d like for your birthday?”

After a short pause, Bella whispered her answer, which I hadn’t seen coming for some reason. “You know what I want.”

Not this again! Arggggh! I remained calm, though. “Not tonight, Bella. Please.”

“Well, maybe Alice will give me what I want.”

I growled my displeasure. “This isn’t going to be your last birthday, Bella,” I promised us both.

“That’s not fair!”

I was in serious danger of losing my temper. How could any one person be so *obstinate*? This did not bode well for the rest of the evening. I was reduced to playing the heavy. I took a deep breath.

“This is a party. Try to be a good sport.”

“Sure,” Bella muttered unconvincingly. I knew it was hard for her, but it was also

hard for me to understand why. And it was immensely frustrating!

I walked around the car to open her door.

“I have a question,” Bella said.

Uh oh, here it comes...

“If I develop this film, will you show up in the picture?”

Thank you, God! Bella was going to behave. I began to laugh as I helped her from the car, lifted her up the stairs to the front door, and opened it to what lay ahead.