

## 7. The End

Throughout the night, I searched my soul, or whatever filled the space where it used to be. I was past the point of fighting the death of my dream and was well on my way to killing it off myself. No mercy for me. I deserved none.

In the hours while the love of my life slept, I only had to consider the bandaged arm she protected even in her sleep to prop up my willpower. I was likely to falter more than once, but whatever weakness or doubt I suffered, I would not allow Bella to see it. I would use whatever strength of will I could rally to persuade her that my black lies were truth. I'd had decades of practice, though never before had I tried to sell a lie that I didn't want to sell. This lie would destroy me, but that made no difference, because it would save her.

Despite the pain of my impending loss and remorse for the pain I had yet to inflict, I savored those last intimate hours with my Bella. I would never be able to think of her as anything but "my Bella." Nevertheless I was not "her Edward." That door had to be shut, latched, and bolted for her sake.

As gently as only a vampire can, I touched the delicate skin of her neck as she slept. I buried my face in her hair. I traced the line of her body from hipbone to shoulder as she lay on her side—her hourglass shape moved me in the deepest way. I stroked her eyebrows, her cheekbones, and touched her soft lips. I listened to the thumping of her heart and savored her sweet, sweet scent.

### Wednesday, September 14

Sadly, morning came and with it, the beginning of the end. I had to begin taking the painful steps that would destroy my happiness. If I didn't love Bella to the degree that I do, I never could have gone through with it. But she was human and I was not, and every vampire I knew would sell his soul—if he had one—to go back.

As soon as Bella awakened, I kissed her forehead, leaped out the window and sprinted home. Alice already would know my decision, but I had to follow through with the rest of the family. There was much to be done. At least I wouldn't have to deal with Rosalie's wrath any longer, only her smug *I told you so*, which she wouldn't have to say aloud.

Alice was waiting for me on the front porch.

*I want to say goodbye. She's my friend.*

"No Alice. That will just make it harder for her. We need to leave, to disappear immediately, and without a trace. It will allow her to start healing faster than if we drag things out. A clean break. We owe it to her." I couldn't say anything more. I felt like a

sword was being shoved into my chest and each word thrust it in a little farther. I went inside.

Carlisle and Esme sped down the stairs holding hands. They read my feelings on my face.

“Oh, Edward, is it true? What Alice has told us?” Esme asked, stress tightening her vocal chords.

I nodded. I could not speak.

“Edward doesn’t want us to say goodbye to Bella!” Alice cried, looking for support from Carlisle. He turned to me and I raised my eyes to meet his.

“Is that right?”

“I think a clean break will make it easier for her to move on.”

“I think it’s cruel! I want to tell her I’m leaving!”

Jasper had joined us. “Alice, it’s not up to us. This is for Edward to decide.” She looked at him and tilted her head to the side. Her eyes went blank as she scoured the future that would result from my decision.

“Oh!” Alice exclaimed. Then her thoughts switched abruptly as she considered how one would spell “Jasper” in the Thai alphabet. Random mental ramblings were how she hid thoughts or visions that she didn’t want me to see. I couldn’t look anyway. Things were hard enough already. “Let’s go, Jasper,” Alice said abruptly. “I have to pack.”

“What is your plan, Edward?” Carlisle asked.

“I have to convince Bella that I don’t want her anymore. If she knows I don’t want to go, that I’m leaving only for her sake, she will never let go of me. I think it would be best if we disappear, as we have done before. How long would that take?”

Carlisle and Esme looked at each other. “Two days to close up the house,” Esme said to him.

“I can wind up at the hospital in three, I think,” Carlisle added.

“I’ll go to school as usual and think of an excuse for Alice’s absence. I assume that Emmett and Rosalie will have no problem with it.”

“I doubt it, since they’re only visiting here anyway,” Carlisle assured me. He paused then and exchanged another look with Esme before continuing.

“Edward, it should be said that we all have grown very fond of Bella. Are you sure you can’t see your way clear to bringing her into our family?”

“You love her, Edward,” Esme said. “She could be one of us.”

“No!” I bellowed, covering my ears as if that would shut out the idea. “I can’t!” It was the only time I had ever raised my voice to my mother. I lowered my hands and my voice and said, “I can’t do that to her.” Esme stroked my hair once and left the room.

*Edward, we will do whatever you need us to do.*

“Thank you, Carlisle. Tell Esme I’m sorry.”

“She knows, son.”

I turned away and raced to my room on the third floor, trying not to look at my

surroundings because everything reminded me of Bella. She had been *here*, sat on *this* couch, drank water from *that* tap, rolled her eyes at *that* Picasso, stumbled on *this* stair. I couldn't be here. I dressed as quickly as I could and ran out.

It hurt to sit in my car where Bella's scent lingered in the carpet and upholstery, in the air vents. I drove uncharacteristically slowly, needing time to get my violent emotions stuffed back inside so I could feign remoteness, even indifference. I would have to minimize the time I spent with her or the love and pain and the words I couldn't say would explode out of me.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot—without Alice for the first time that year—I knew it was happening. I had taken steps. I had asked my family to drop everything and give up the lives they had built here. The millstone was rolling. I had to finish things off and escape before it crushed me.

I met Bella at her truck, opening her door and hurrying to speak first—"How do you feel?"—to take her mind off the fact that Alice wasn't with me. I knew Bella would want to talk to her and get the scoop on me and the future. That's why Alice couldn't be here to say goodbye. I could not manage any of this if I had to consider anyone else's feelings or convince them of what had to be done. It was all I could do to keep the neutral mask on my face and put one foot ahead of the other. I sensed Bella's tension, her anxiety, her need to ask questions, and her fear too. I concentrated on being unapproachable, as if in my mind I was already gone.

Bella's arm had to be hurting despite her denials. She had a nasty wound and probably hadn't taken any pain relievers. I didn't pry, though, because I had to stop trying to take care of her. I would break the habit somehow. But first, I had to remove the danger from her life so she wouldn't need me to protect her from the likes of me. And I had to set her free.

Another difficulty occurred to me. What could I do with myself that would have the tiniest possibility of preventing me from returning to her? I would have to make a plan before the three days were up and start executing it immediately.

At lunchtime, I walked Bella to the cafeteria and sat with her at our usual table to fake eating. I didn't know why I was bothering, really. After two more days, I would never see any of these humans again.

"Where's Alice?" Bella asked meekly after it became obvious that my sister wasn't coming. She seemed a little frightened of my answer, which, though she didn't know it, would be the first of many half-truths. I couldn't look Bella in the eye, so I watched my fingers crumble a granola bar into dust. Human food was disgusting. I hated this part of my life, having to buy food, touch it, rearrange it so it looked like I'd eaten some of it, and then throw it away. If we didn't live among humans, I wouldn't have to play this stupid game every day.

"She's with Jasper."

"Is he okay?"

“He’s gone away for a while.”

“What? Where?”

I shrugged. “Nowhere in particular.”

“And Alice, too,” I heard the pain in Bella’s voice as she realized that her friend had left without saying goodbye.

“Yes. She’ll be gone for a while. She was trying to convince him to go to Denali.” That was a reasonable answer and, actually, a reasonable strategy for Alice and Jasper—to get away from me and my folly.

Bella’s body seemed to turn in on itself and grow smaller.

“Is your arm bothering you?” I asked, knowing that her arm wasn’t the problem.

“Who cares about my stupid arm?” Bella grumped, laying her head on the table. I didn’t answer. It was the only pain I had caused her that I could afford to be attentive to at that moment. Anything deeper and all this gut-wrenching effort would be wasted. I didn’t speak, though I tried to maintain a neutral expression. If I supposedly did not love her anymore, then there had to be some sign of it before I told her it was over. Silence was the safest strategy, because I didn’t trust my voice or my words.

“You’ll come over later tonight?” Bella inquired as I walked her to her truck after school. Normally, I rode home with her or took Alice home first and then came back to her house right away.

“Later?” I asked, not sure what she meant.

“I have to work. I had to trade with Mrs. Newton to get yesterday off.”

“Oh.” Keep it neutral. No emotion.

“So you’ll come over when I’m home, though, right?”

“If you want me to,” I replied, trying to sound indifferent.

“I always want you,” Bella said forcefully. I tightened my jaw to keep from reacting.

“All right, then.”

I kissed her forehead, holding my breath to avoid the stab of pain in my heart and my throat that smelling her would cost me. Then I quickly turned and jogged to my car before I could say or do something that would give me away.

I returned home to discover that progress had been made. Alice and Jasper *had* left, as it turned out. I could only imagine that Alice didn’t want me to see what the future held for Bella or for me. That was fine with me. I had chosen this path and must follow it to its end. I would do better not knowing what awaited me there.

The usual procedure when the Cullens left somewhere was to hire a truck, fill it with whatever we decided to take with us, and then hire a driver to transport it to our destination. Usually, Esme would go ahead of us to find a place to live and Carlisle would stay behind to close down whatever needed closing down. If we were leaving a place that we wanted to return to in seventy or eighty years (after everyone who knew us had died off), we would leave the house intact, only covering the furniture to keep off the dust. Then

we would pack our cars, secure the structures, and leave.

When I got home, I found Carlisle in his office, preparing to go to the hospital.

*Hello, son, how are you holding up?*

I looked at the floor and shook my head from side-to-side slightly. I couldn't put words to my feelings without having my carefully constructed defenses collapse around me.

"Have you thought where we might go?" I asked, almost caring.

*Your mother and I were thinking of New York State. We haven't lived there since Rosalie joined us. If you or the others still want to go to college, Cornell would be a good place for you.*

"Don't base the decision on what might work for me because I don't know yet what is going to work for me. I don't know how I'm going to..." I didn't have the heart to finish the sentence.

*The others too. New Hampshire is out for now. Someone might come looking for us since we've let people believe that Rose and Emmett have moved there. I've told the hospital that I'm accepting a job offer in L.A. and have to start right away.*

"Thank you for making this easier for me. I'm sorry it's come to this so suddenly."

*It's not your fault.*

"I didn't see Rosalie and Emmett this morning."

*I sent them off to look around Ithaca and see what they think of it. I figured you didn't need any more of us around right now than necessary. Your mother and I are not packing a truck this time. We're going to start fresh.*

My father was trying to hide his thoughts about why they were abandoning the contents of the house. He thought anything from Forks would remind me of Bella and he didn't want to inflict more pain on me. I appreciated his thoughtfulness and also his not speaking of it. He was right. I wanted nothing to remind me of Forks.

*Alice and Jasper have gone to Denali, as Alice suggested. She thought getting away from humans would help Jasper get past this incident. He's sorrier than you know.*

"It's not his fault. It was bound to happen. The only way to keep her safe is to get away from her and give her her life back. Perhaps all of us will seem like a dream to her after a few years."

*Oooohhh!* I doubled over, as if I were human and someone had kicked me in the diaphragm. The air rushed out of my lungs and I wrapped my arms tightly around my stomach and squeezed. The pain did not lessen. It wasn't physical.

*Are you all right?* Carlisle asked silently, coming to my side and wrapping an arm around my waist as if to hold me on my feet. "Edward."

After a time, I forced myself upright. "I feel like I'm going crazy, having fits." I couldn't meet my father's eyes. "How did they treat fits in your day?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"It depends on the century, but the most common treatments were bedrest and

maybe a little whiskey or laudanum if you were wealthy, or a straitjacket and ice-cold baths if you were not. And electroshock, of course. Earlier, you might have been chained to a wall in a damp basement. Later, you could have been given a prefrontal lobotomy. Now, of course, we resort to psychoactive drugs.”

“Well, whiskey won’t help, will it? Opiates won’t work. Electroshock would probably just hurt a lot. I can’t slash my wrists and I’m pretty sure you can’t sever my frontal lobes, so I don’t know...I just don’t know...” My voice trailed off at the end.

Carlisle wrapped his stone-solid arms around me and hugged me to his chest. I felt the “vampire tears” coming on—the waterless crying that makes us gulp air and shudder, but produces only burning eyes and no true relief. We are trapped in these immortal bodies with no means to deaden our pain as humans can do.

After the bout of emotion eased, Carlisle released me, put his hands on top of my shoulders and looked into my face.

*Perhaps you should leave now and let your mother and I finish things for you.*

“No, that wouldn’t be right. It’s my responsibility and I’ll get through it. I’ll tell her Friday after school, if you’ll be gone by then.”

*We will. You can count on it. We want you to follow us as soon as you can. We want you with us.*

I nodded without promising anything. “I’m going running.”

*Do you want company?*

“No, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

*Will we see you in the morning?*

“Yes.”

Running didn’t change anything, neither my feelings of sadness nor of impending disaster. I had to become increasingly remote with Bella so the end would seem slightly realistic when it came. It would be so much easier just to disappear as I had asked my family to do, but that wouldn’t work with Bella. If I wasn’t absolutely clear that I no longer loved her, that I didn’t want her anymore, she would hang on. Even my absence could ruin her life. If I made her believe that I was ending it for myself, that would release her from the torment of protracted longing. Perhaps she would hate me and that strong feeling would propel her into getting on with her life and ultimately finding a human to love.

I knocked on Charlie’s front door a few minutes before seven and he invited me in, muttering that Bella was not yet home. Charlie and I gradually had settled into a comfortable, if not precisely cordial, relationship over the summer. He’d begun to trust me again as he observed me with his daughter and realized that I did love her and wanted only what was best for her. That new trust would be utterly destroyed soon, and I regretted it, but if Charlie hated me for leaving Bella, then perhaps he would influence her against me too and that would make things easier for her.

Charlie was sprawled on the couch watching SportsCenter, a half-eaten pizza on the coffee table. “I’m done, but help yourself,” he said, not watching as I reached for the

box, then took it into the kitchen to abandon it. I came back and sat in the armchair.

“Hey, Bella,” Charlie said when she got home from work, barely glancing up. “We just had cold pizza. I think it’s still on the table.”

“Okay.”

Hard as it was, I gritted my teeth and said nothing. I focused on the TV, though I cared not at all about what was on. Bella didn’t move from the doorway and I felt her eyes boring into my back. After ignoring her presence long enough that she would get the message how little interest I had in her arrival, I turned around with a polite, but not a warm, smile.

“I’ll be right behind you,” I said tonelessly and turned back to the television as if it were the most interesting thing in the room. How it tore at my heart to behave this way! I could feel the confusion and pain in the silent air behind me. If she only knew that my pain was even greater than hers! But she mustn’t know.

After a time in the kitchen, I heard Bella go upstairs to her room. Maybe she would stay there and ignore me and I could leave without facing her pain. Would that be better or worse? I didn’t know. This was a new kind of torture for me. I couldn’t analyze it or figure out how to escape it. I could only move through it step-by-step, suffering as much as I had to suffer, hurting her as much as was necessary.

I heard Bella’s camera click upstairs and a little later, heard her feet coming down the stairs, each step an accusation. Bella slipped into the doorway and snapped a picture of Charlie and I. I ignored her presence as if I hadn’t heard her, looking at her only when I had to, the remote smile etched on my face.

Bella was doing her best to remain upbeat and try to engage us—me—in her project of taking pictures to share with her mother. I reacted as little as possible without being downright rude. Bella asked me to snap a picture of her and Charlie. I did. Charlie offered to take a picture of Bella and I together. Standing rigidly, I set my hand on Bella’s shoulder without pulling her close and without looking at her. After the click, I removed my hand and turned away, causing the arm she had wrapped around my waist to fall impotently to her side.

When I sat down in the armchair again, preventing her from sitting next to me, I registered her shock. She didn’t recognize my behavior, but it was similar to how I had acted after saving her from being crushed by Tyler’s van. I’d told her later that my feigned disinterest was all an act. Would she remember that now?

I let the television take center stage for the evening, which freed me from explanations that I wasn’t yet strong enough to face. Feeling my distance, Bella sat on the floor near her father and drew her knees to her chest in a variant of the fetal position—the universal self-protection against devastating pain. Though I was all too aware of her pain, it was imperative to hide the fact that I hurt in the same way that she did. I could *not* let her see.

When the second TV show ended at nine o’clock, I stood and announced, “I’d

better get home.” I couldn’t take any more tension and I had stayed just long enough not to require an excuse for leaving earlier than usual. I walked to the front door and sensed that Bella was following me. Without turning around, I continued to my car and reached for the door handle.

“Will you stay?” Bella asked timidly, without hope of a “yes.” How I *hated* myself for what I was doing! Never before had I left her without a few moments of affection. It was torture! I had to get it over with before I could no longer contain my distress.

“Not tonight,” I said simply. Then I got in my car and drove away without looking at her. I avoided her face because I knew that her expression would haunt me. I could not repeat what I had just done. I would enter her house no more.

I ran that night, nearly all night. I ran north until I reached the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the fifteen miles of waterway that separated Washington State from Canada. I thought about swimming across, but no matter how far north I ran, I would still have to come back and face the end of the only part of my existence that had made sense, that had made being alive seem worthwhile. I would never recover from what I had to do—I knew that—but I hoped Bella would and that was all that really mattered in the end.

### **Thursday, September 15**

I did my best to shut myself inside myself for the day at school. I walked with Bella between classes as usual, though I never touched her, and I suppose I was remote enough or frightening enough that she didn’t dare to touch me. I don’t know what she was thinking and it was the first time since I had met her that I was relieved by that fact. Coping with her feelings as well as mine would be too much to take.

Bella seemed to be managing pretty well, though obviously she knew something was seriously wrong. She was focusing on taking pictures of everything and everyone, almost like she was trying to document her life, as if it were about to end. Why would she think that? Impossible to know. Whatever happened, though, I would make her promise not to harm herself. I didn’t think that Bella would do that (on purpose), but I wanted to be sure.

I walked Bella to her truck after school as usual, but in my new, remote persona. I didn’t take her hand or put my arm around her. I was merely polite when I said goodbye. She had to work again and for that, I was extremely grateful. On this day, she didn’t ask whether I would come see her after work and I didn’t offer. It was too hard.

I drove straight home to pack. I wouldn’t take much, one duffel would do—a week’s worth of clothing, some CDs to listen to on the long drive across the United States, a comb, cash and credit cards, identity papers. Esme had packed what she and Carlisle would be taking along. I noticed that it wasn’t much. Like me, it seemed they intended to start over.

My mother was on the telephone in her office when I got home. It sounded like she was discussing real estate. Probably she was arranging somewhere to live in Ithaca. Or



maybe Emmett and Rosalie were looking at options. I tried not to listen. I couldn't think about that or anything else except how to get through the next twenty-four hours.

After she hung up the phone, Esme came downstairs to greet me.

"Where's Carlisle?" I asked.

"He's at the hospital, taking one last shift before he turns over his patients to Dr. Gerandy and Dr. Snow. They were caught very much off-guard, as usual in this situation. He's told them that we're moving to Los Angeles and he'd like them to avoid sharing the news until after we leave. We don't want any kind of fanfare that might get back to..." Her voice faded away before she ended the sentence. "I'm sorry, Edward."

"Me too, Mom. I'm sorry for disrupting the family because of my problems. This whole thing is my fault. If I hadn't—"

"There's nothing wrong with loving someone, Edward," Esme said gently, looking into my face. I felt my eyes begin to burn and my breath begin to catch in my throat—another bout of vampire tears. How useless and tiresome they were!

Esme put her arm around my waist and walked me to the sofa, pulling me down beside her. And though I am over one hundred years old, I found myself with my head on my mother's shoulder shuddering uncontrollably as she held me and patted my back, and told me that everything was going to be all right.

Eventually, I cried myself out. The burning in my eyes was beginning to compete with the burning in my throat. We sat there a long time. The dim autumn light outside was long gone before I heard a car in the driveway and realized it was past midnight and my father was home. I had frozen into a sculpture on the couch, with my mother frozen beside me. When I considered it, I realized that hours earlier she had begun to cry too and that sometime between then and now, we had both stopped and become immobile. My pain was stressing my whole family.

I began to raise myself from the dead, so to speak, reanimating my limbs and lifting my head upright when Carlisle entered through the front door. They would be packing their things into his car and leaving soon. He saw us sitting there together and without a word, suddenly he was sitting on the other side of me with his arm behind my back and his hand touching Esme's shoulder. They were holding me firmly between their bodies and looking at each other behind my head. I tried not to listen to their thoughts, their concerns or questions. I merely dropped my head back in resignation, feeling their arms supporting my neck. What would be, would be.

It occurred to me that I had been letting go of Bella for some time. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote a popular book in 1969 delineating the five stages of coping with a loss. Denial is the first stage, the one where you keep saying to yourself, "No, this isn't happening. Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine."

The second stage is anger, where you rail against Fate and ask "Why me?" I recalled my vision of the old hag who was intent on destroying Bella's life using me as her means.

The third stage is bargaining. Looking back, I realized that I had been bargaining for quite a while. *If* I protected Bella from danger, *then* maybe I could keep her for another fifty or sixty years. The bargains I was proposing were proven hollow when my own brother tried to kill her. I could not promise something I could not guarantee and Fate was not bound by my wishes anyway.

The fourth stage of coping with a loss is depression. It was obvious that I was firmly ensconced there. I didn't know how long it would last, but right now, I couldn't see an end to it.

Before the night was over—my last night in Forks—I allowed myself a dangerous indulgence. About three o'clock in the morning, I ran to town and broke my promise to myself by slipping in through Bella's window one more time. I craved seeing her as she was the very first time I crept into her room. I didn't approach her, but stood in the far corner and watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed. She was restless, tossing and turning...and talking.

"Wait! I'm coming," she said once. And "No, Edward!" And "I love you, Edward." These words hurt me, but they heartened me too. She did love me—to the extent that a human can love. Though it couldn't be as deep and irrevocable as the love of an immortal, it was something, and I would cherish it forever.

Well before dawn, I could watch and listen no more. It was time to let go of her. Perhaps acceptance would replace the depression somewhere down the road and someday—if I was very lucky—perhaps I would gain some measure of peace.

### **Friday, September 16**

I returned home to find Carlisle and Esme loading the last of their bags into Carlisle's car. By their thoughts and their surreptitious looks, I knew my parents were worried about me and were reluctant to leave me on my own. I pulled myself together, though, and insisted that they do so. I needed to face the worst and it was important that they be long gone by the time I did. We said our goodbyes then and I watched their taillights swerve and disappear into the trees. When they reached state route 101, I heard the car's engine rev up and then fade as they sped away. When they reached the mainland, they would drive east on Interstate 90, crossing several states before the nation's geography required them to turn either north or south to circumvent the Great Lakes. I felt yet another tug at my heart when I realized that they would probably stop to see Niagara Falls. Throughout much of the previous century, Niagara Falls was the number one honeymoon destination of Americans. With the prevalence of jet travel, I didn't know if that was still true.

When I left for school, our house looked like the fortress it is. The steel shutters had been lowered to protect the glass windows and the inside of the house was much darker than usual. I didn't bother to turn on the lights. Perhaps the electricity was already shut off, along with the water, the cable, and the natural gas heat. I didn't need any of it anyway.

The garage was empty except for my two cars: the silver Volvo and my black Aston Martin Vanquish, which I used only for special occasions. Though Bella had been in the Volvo many times and her scent remained strong, driving the Vanquish would be harder to handle. I had used that car to chauffeur Bella to prom several months before and I couldn't bear to be reminded of how gloriously beautiful she had looked. On that night, I believed that we might stay together for the rest of her natural life.

My car was already packed, my duffle in the Volvo's trunk. I only had to arm the security system and turn the key in the deadbolt lock as I left, possibly never to return. If I did return, it would have to be beyond that sixty- or seventy-year threshold that delineated a human lifespan. After today, I would never see her alive again. Her scent would linger in my car for a long time, though, and perhaps that would be a comfort on the long drive east.

Before arriving at school, I steeled myself against my feelings and mentally constructed a hard shell to stand in for me. When I met Bella in the parking lot and walked beside her to our first class, I remained silent.

The day continued in that vein. I spoke only when spoken to and said the minimum number of words that politeness required. I did not look at Bella's face. I didn't want to see the pain I knew would be there in her eyes.

When the interminable school day ended, I walked beside Bella to her truck, not touching her, not taking her hand. I was guessing that she wouldn't tolerate the silent treatment much longer. I knew she must be distressed that I hadn't visited her house the previous evening or stayed overnight (as far as she knew). I'd never just not shown up before. The time had come to speak.

"Do you mind if I come over today?" I asked.

"Of course not."

"Now?" I verified, before opening the driver's side door to her truck. I would have understood completely if she hadn't wanted to see me. I had behaved abominably in the last several days. I was glad she agreed, though, because I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible and I didn't know how long it would take to convince her of what I must convince her of. I didn't know to what lengths I would be required to go.

"Sure," Bella answered, uncertainly. "I was just going to drop a letter for Renee in the mailbox on the way. I'll meet you there."

I glanced at the envelope that was stuffed with what appeared to be photographs. Leave no evidence—that was the promise I intended to make. I reached across her and snatched the envelope from the seat.

"I'll do it," I told her. "And I'll still beat you there." I made my mouth form a crooked smile that I didn't feel.

"Okay." Bella didn't smile back. Maybe she suspected what was coming.

After returning to my car, I tucked the envelope in the glove box and aimed toward Bella's house. When I arrived, I pulled into the driveway, a clear signal that I would be moving the car before Charlie got home in a couple of hours. I wouldn't stay for the

evening. When she pulled up, I met her at her truck and took her book bag from her, but instead of carrying it into the house I put it back on the seat.

“Come for a walk with me,” I said gently, taking her hand and pulling her toward the woods where we would be unseen and unheard. I was reminded of how I used to lure humans away from the public eye when I wanted to feed on them. The truth was, I suppose, that I had already fed on Bella’s good will, and now I would leave her empty and deadened inside. But I couldn’t think about that or I would never get through this. After following the trail a few steps into the woods, I stopped and leaned against a tree, dropping her hand.

“Okay, let’s talk,” Bella began.

I looked at my feet for a second and then took a deep breath.

“Bella, we’re leaving.” She took a second to digest that.

“Why now? Another year—” She began arguing, as I had expected. Like an expert telemarketer, though, I had a response ready for whatever objection she could raise.

“Bella, it’s time. How much longer could we stay in Forks, after all? Carlisle can barely pass for thirty, and he’s claiming thirty-three now. We’d have to start over soon regardless.” Bella stared at me blankly. I had surprised her, after all. I kept my face fixed and expressionless.

“When you say we—,” Bella whispered. She was beginning to understand. I could not falter in the smallest way.

“I mean my family and myself.”

Bella began to shake her head slowly back and forth as if trying to clear her ears so that she could understand. Disbelief (a.k.a. denial) would be her first reaction. We stood there for a minute or longer. My words hung in the air between us.

“Okay,” she said finally. “I’ll come with you.”

She’d surprised me. I wasn’t quite ready for the bargaining.

“You can’t, Bella.” I paused, trying to think quickly. “Where we’re going...it’s not the right place for you.”

“Where you are is the right place for me.”

“I’m no good for you, Bella.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the very best part of my life.”

“My world is not for you,” I insisted.

“What happened with Jasper—that was nothing, Edward! Nothing!” Bella’s voice was getting louder and more agitated.

“You’re right. It was exactly what was to be expected.” I heard the coldness in my own.

“You promised! In Phoenix, you promised that you would stay—”

“As long as that was best for you,” I finished for her, ignoring what I had said at prom.

Bella was angry now.

“No! This is about my soul, isn’t it?” Bella shouted. “Carlisle told me about that,

and I don't care, Edward. I don't care! You can have my soul. I don't want it without you—it's yours already!"

Those words tore through me. Her soul was the most important thing! I didn't *want* to take it! I would do *anything* not to destroy her soul! How else could I force myself to leave her now? I looked down and focused on hardening the shell I'd put up around me. I tried to make my eyes as cold as I could. I'd hoped I wouldn't have to go this far, but I had no choice. I must continue, even if the sword in my chest could never be extracted.

"Bella. I. Don't. Want. You. To. Come. With. Me." I spoke the words as if each were its own sentence, ignoring the movement of the cold, hard blade with each syllable.

Bella looked stunned, like a deer mesmerized by oncoming headlights. She froze, staring, and I watched as what I'd said sank into her consciousness.

"You...don't...want me?" The shock was clear in her flat tone.

"No," I replied, though she had mistranslated my words.

Bella stared at my face, dumbfounded. I stood there, as hard as a block of ice, fighting the powerful urge to take it all back—to pull her into my arms and tell her it was all a lie.

"Well, that changes things," Bella finally said.

It was clear in her voice and in her eyes that she believed the lie. It was impossible, but she did, and that moment hurt more than all the rest. The many times I had told her of my love and shown her the depth of it—in her mind, it was all wiped away in an instant.

I could no longer meet her eyes. I was sure to give myself away. So I focused on the trees behind her as I filled out the lie with details, things she could grab onto if she began to doubt my story later.

"Of course, I'll always love you...in a way. But what happened the other night made me realize that it's time for a change. Because I'm..."—I struggled to harden my face and myself—"...tired of pretending to be something I'm not, Bella. I am not human." I turned my eyes back to her. "I've let this go on much too long, and I'm sorry for that."

"Don't." Her voice had dropped to a searing whisper that burned in my ears. "Don't do this."

My eyes touched her face and stuck there. I would never forget the way it looked just then, as she begged me not to hurt her. I wanted to scream, to run away, to insist it wasn't true, but instead I told the vilest lie of them all.

"You're not good for me, Bella." Her mouth opened, but no words came out, and then she closed it.

"If...that's what you want."

I could not say the word, so I forced my head to nod. She had bought it. It was done. I tried to conceal the agony of the sword piercing my body.

"I would like to ask one favor, though, if that's not too much."

"Anything," Bella promised. In spite of what I was doing to her, she was ready to give me whatever I asked. She loved me more than herself. I heard my voice change and

become softer, gentler.

“Don’t do anything reckless or stupid,” I pleaded. “Do you understand what I’m saying?” I looked carefully into her eyes.

She nodded dumbly.

“I’m thinking of Charlie, of course,” I lied. “He needs you. Take care of yourself—for him.”

She nodded again. “I will.”

I breathed a little easier.

“And I’ll make you a promise in return. I promise that this will be the last time you’ll see me. I won’t come back. I won’t put you through anything like this again. You can go on with your life without any more interference from me. It will be as if I’d never existed.” Bella’s heart was pumping wildly. I tried to ignore it. I felt some of the hardness in my body soften slightly.

“Don’t worry. You’re human—your memory is no more than a sieve. Time heals all wounds for your kind.”

“And your memories?” Bella asked poignantly.

“Well...”—what to say?—“...I won’t forget. But my kind...we’re very easily distracted.” I smiled gently, but I kept my hard shell intact and stepped away. “That’s everything, I suppose. We won’t bother you again.”

“Alice isn’t coming back.” Bella barely made a sound as she spoke to herself, finally recognizing the truth.

I shook my head, watching her reaction. “No. They’re all gone. I stayed behind to tell you goodbye.”

“Alice is gone?” she asked, incredulous. Alice was her friend, maybe her best friend. It was another cruel blow.

“She wanted to say goodbye, but I convinced her that a clean break would be better for you.” Had I made a mistake? I couldn’t consider it now. It was far too late.

“Goodbye, Bella,” I said as gently as I could.

“Wait!” she cried reaching for me. I couldn’t allow her to touch me. I couldn’t take it. I grabbed her wrists and held them to her sides. Then I leaned over and kissed her softly on the forehead, like the Judas that I was.

“Take care of yourself,” I whispered. And I was gone.