

8. Away

I heard her footsteps behind me as I ran into the woods. All I could think about was getting away as fast as I could. I couldn't bear to see the betrayal in her eyes or worse, her acceptance of the fiction that I did not want her. She had reacted as if that were logical, completely understandable, almost to be expected. I could not fathom her reaction nor understand how she could let go of me so easily.

I ran at top speed for three minutes before I remembered that I had to return to Charlie's house to pick up my car. I doubled back through the woods, running in a wide arc around the trail. There was a fallen log a short ways down the path where I had smelled Bella's scent in the past. I thought she might walk there to be alone for a while. I couldn't imagine her running back to Charlie's house after the blow I had dealt her. I hoped that she stayed in the woods, because I did not want to face her again after that final goodbye.

Halfway back, I stopped running to listen. A large animal was crashing through the thick brush nearby. What if it were a bear? Bella was in these woods! I had to make sure she got out safely. I sniffed, trying to determine what the creature was, but Bella's scent seemed to permeate the air, or perhaps stress had merely distorted my senses. Listening carefully, I pinpointed the sound and tracked it by ear. When I knew I was close, I leaped into a tree to get a better view and that's when I saw her.

Bella hadn't gone to sit alone in the woods, nor had she turned around and walked home. Despite my leaving her in view of her house so that she wouldn't get lost, she had gone bushwhacking through the forest. She was trying to follow me! Bella had no ability to hike in the woods, or even on flat, empty ground. She couldn't keep her balance and her feet caught on everything. As I watched, I saw why she sounded like a large animal lumbering through the brush—because she was moving like a bear, partly crouched over, slapping at branches and ferns that were nearly as tall as she was, trying to find a way through. She tripped on a root and I had to grip a tree branch to prevent myself from jumping to her side to make sure she was all right. Of *course* she wasn't all right! But there was nothing I could do about that. I'd given up my right to look after her.

Now very much concerned about her welfare, I considered what I could do to make sure she didn't injure herself and end up deep in the woods with a twisted ankle or worse. Silently, I jumped to the ground and took off running for Charlie's house. Someone had to be told where she had gone in case she got lost or hurt. Within a minute, I had exited the woods, reached her house, and entered through her bedroom window, an experience painful beyond words. I located paper and a pencil and wrote a quick note to her father:

Going for a walk with Edward, up the path. Back soon, B.

I'd gotten good at mimicking Bella's handwriting. I didn't think Charlie would notice any difference. Where to put it? I didn't want to go downstairs to the kitchen—the obvious place—because it was hard enough to be in the house at all without walking around and being flooded with memories in every room. Charlie might not find the note in her room...or worse, Bella might get back first and find it herself.

The bathroom! That was the one room in the house where I had spent no time at all except to retrieve medicine for Bella once or twice. And Charlie was sure to go in there when he got home. I opened the medicine cabinet and then shut it with the note stuck between the magnets that held the door closed. Charlie couldn't miss it.

Back in Bella's room, I glanced around to be sure I'd left nothing behind. There on the floor beside the bed I noticed the scrapbook her mother had given her. Curious, I opened it to the first page and met my own face smiling back at me from Charlie's kitchen. I looked happy.

Leave no trace.

I slipped the photograph from the tiny metal corners holding it in place and set it aside. Then I turned the page and found a photograph of Bella and myself, but inexplicably she had folded her image beneath mine and attached the picture with only my image visible. Why would she do that?

Quickly, I flipped through the pages of the book, finding one more photograph of myself and Charlie watching television. When I compared the first picture with the other two, it was shocking how different I looked. In the hours before Bella's birthday party, I appeared relaxed and very much like the human I pretended to be. In the latter two pictures taken the evening following the party, I looked not at all human. The camera had caught the stiff solidity of my stance, the sense of the carved object. Worse, the way my hand was sitting on Bella's shoulder gave the impression of a tourist-trap photo opportunity, like a cardboard cutout of the President who appears to have his arm around a tourist's shoulder. I could see the hard exterior of the shell I had constructed around myself to get me through the last three days.

I tucked the three photos containing my image in my jacket pocket and shut the scrapbook, placing it precisely where it had been. On the nightstand, I saw the rectangular box containing the plane tickets my parents had given Bella for her birthday and I took those too. *What else?* The stereo wasn't a personalized gift and it held no reminder of its origins, so I didn't consider removing it from Bella's truck. She might enjoy it, anyway.

I headed for the window. It was time to go. Bella might come back at any moment and I needed to get my car and myself away before she did. There was no point in dragging things out any longer.

As I opened the window sash, another stab of pain tore through my chest and I gasped. This departure was so final, but I still felt deeply connected to Bella and I knew I would for the remainder of my days. Without letting myself consider the implications or

possible consequences of my actions, I opened the top drawer of Bella's desk and found a letter opener that resembled a dull knife. Clutching it in my hand, I examined the hardwood slats of her floor to detect whether any of them were loose. Remembering a squeaky spot near the closet, I went to inspect it. A nail had worked itself loose in a board there and when I pushed it, the board moved slightly with a creak. I slid the blade of the letter opener between the end of the loose board and its neighbor, easing it upward. Soon, I could get my finger beneath it and I gently lifted out the board, pulling the nails that attached it.

Into the shallow hole between the floor joists, I slipped the airline tickets and the photographs. Then, as I took one last glance around the room, I noticed Bella's CD player on her bedside table and the empty jewel case next to it. I had to take my music with me. It was much too personal a reminder of who I was and how much I loved her to be left behind. With a deep sigh of grief, I clicked open the lid of the player and extracted the compact disc. I tucked it into its case and added it to the stash under the floorboards. At least a part of me would stay here with my love...my Bella. It gave me one, tiny connection that wouldn't hurt her, but would make the separation just a fraction easier for me. I pushed the board back into place and pressed the nails in securely with my thumb. No one would be any the wiser.

I was beginning to hit the Chicago rush hour the following afternoon before I remembered that there would be one. I had not given the drive across the United States much thought, except to look at a map and memorize the roads and highways. Actually, I hadn't given anything much thought for the previous twenty hours. Now that I was here, though, I considered driving into the city to look around at the place I had grown up—or almost grown up. It was where Carlisle had found me eighty-seven years ago and made me what I am.

Why not? I wasn't going anywhere anyway. There was no point in hurrying to get nowhere. Why not take a look at the house I still owned and that I inherited from myself every twenty-five or thirty years? I hadn't visited for a long time, not since Esme renovated it for me in the 1950s, bringing the plumbing, wiring, and kitchen up-to-date. All of that would be outdated again by now. We retained a service that looked after the house, rented it out, and used the money to make repairs and pay the taxes. I got quarterly reports that I never read.

I wouldn't mind living in Chicago again if I were still drinking humans. The city contained a large number of people, which meant a lot of unsavory humans who deserved to die. Maybe I should drink a few for old times' sake. Pay back Fate—that old hag—for making me the monster that I am. Why not wreak havoc on the world, throw a huge vampire tantrum? Maybe I'd have considered it if I thought it would make me feel better, but I was pretty sure it would only make me loathe myself more.

During the drive, I had been doing everything I could to avoid thinking about *her* and the interactions between us in the last three days. I wondered if there was any chance she was coping better than I was. I hoped so.

Ack! Out of gas again. Thank goodness clouds had moved in over the course of the afternoon. It was hard to find a full-service gas station anymore and during the day, full-service was the only way to fill my tank safely—by staying in the car.

It was a good time to get off the freeway. Traffic would be at a complete standstill soon enough, a fact of modern life that drove me insane. I took the next exit I saw that had a gas station and pulled up to a pump. Humans were everywhere. We didn't live in cities very often. Generally, it was hard to get out of a city quickly to hunt and human temptation was a bit too abundant. Within the last ten minutes, hadn't I already considered drinking a few? In highly populated areas, I always got this feeling that someone needed to thin the herd. Psychos with machine guns were not a bad adaptation for a species that was overpopulating its habitat. And the more crowded everyone got, the more maladjusted individuals were created. It was proven to be true with rats, anyway. Darwinism at work.

We had lived outside of Washington D.C. in the 1990s when Carlisle worked at the Bethesda Naval Hospital during and after the Gulf War. As skilled a doctor and surgeon as Carlisle was, he became well-known in cities where he worked. He still had human friends among the political elite of Washington, though he could not see them in person any longer. He was also renowned in Chicago for work he did in the 1950s when Chicago proper contained a million more people than it does today. None of us liked big cities much, but often it was where Carlisle could find the most interesting and challenging jobs.

I happened upon a full-service Shell station on my first try. I cracked the window and told the attendant to fill the tank with premium. When he came back, I reached into the glove compartment to get a credit card and found the envelope addressed to Renee. The photographs!

I had intended to mail Bella's letter, but only after removing pictures of myself from the package. I carefully peeled off the tape Bella had applied over the glued flap and then opened it. Seeing Bella's letter to her mother inside, I braced myself against the now-familiar stabbing pain in my chest. I didn't read the letter. It was private, which normally wouldn't have stopped me, but reading her newsy chatter about school and Charlie and Forks would only be painful now. I quickly thumbed through the photos and pulled out the three that contained my image. Then, after a second's consideration, I also removed the picture of Bella's bedroom. The four photos comprised a small collection to remind me of the happiest period of my life.

After placing them back in the glove compartment, I carefully resealed the envelope with the extra tape Bella had applied to it. It was covered with an abundance of first-class stamps—probably too many—so I could slip it into the first mailbox I saw. Charlie thought that Renee would be hounding Bella for pictures soon and I didn't want Bella to find out that I had kept them. Would Renee notice the Chicago postmark?

My father's house, now mine of course, is a three-story brownstone on North Dearborn, which was a quaint cobblestone street when I was a child, but is now a busy parkway a little north of "The Loop"—defined by the tracks of the elevated train—in downtown Chicago. The house was built in 1880, and the most wonderful thing about it, especially for a child, is the small turret on the front of the house that makes it look like a miniature castle. My childhood bedroom was the third-floor turret room, which has the classic, round shape and conical roof of a Rapunzel's tower. It became my imaginary fortress when I played cowboys and Indians. The interior of the house is filled with original carved woodworking, cove ceilings with huge beams, and grand marble fireplaces in most of the rooms. The chandeliers are one hundred twenty years old and have been converted from gaslight.

The Masen house is worth a small fortune because of its city location and, as Esme insists, is too beautiful to sell. The house is one of many bolt-holes that we keep in the large Cullen real-estate collection. We use them as getaways when we have to move unexpectedly, or when one or more of us is traveling around the country. I haven't been there since the last renovation and now that I was this close, perhaps it would distract me to visit. I could stay for a couple of days in the coach house, which we don't rent out, and also see the Lakeside Hospital where Carlisle first found me. Not that that is a particularly uplifting thing to do, but it's good to update one's point-of-reference every few decades. Everything changes so fast. Come to think of it, I'm not even sure whether Lakeside Hospital still exists.

As I drove mindlessly toward downtown amidst the intolerable traffic, I recalled that the Masen house is just a few streets away from the International Museum of Surgical Science. The museum is the reason that my family came back to Chicago in the 1950s. As a "descendent" of a well-known Chicago surgeon during World War I, Carlisle was invited to donate family artifacts and to participate in planning exhibits. The museum is located in one of the few remaining lakefront mansions, most of which were built near the turn of the previous century. I vaguely remember when my father (Edward Masen) used to walk with me along the Lake Michigan waterfront when I was a boy and watch the mansions being constructed.

It is an adventure in irony to visit the Surgical Science Museum, where Carlisle's name is engraved in stone as a major benefactor. One of the exhibits Carlisle helped construct is of antique surgical instruments. He donated his amputation kit with its precision cutting knives, the amputation tourniquet still stained with blood, and his bone saw. He donated it anonymously, but included the story of the unknown surgeon of the Revolutionary War who was called the "Angel Sawbones" and who miraculously reappeared during the Civil War to amputate limbs one hundred years later.

In the museum's Hall of Murals, there is a painting of an unknown surgeon performing a Civil War battlefield amputation. If you look closely, you can see that he has Carlisle's face. The murals were painted in the 1950s, but were based on old

daguerreotypes whenever they could be found. Carlisle eventually donated the daguerreotype to the museum too, but only after modern technology allowed him to scan a copy of that antique photograph of himself performing the surgery. The enlarged copy is framed and hanging in his office in one of our houses.

Traffic became more congested as I got closer to downtown Chicago. I was thinking of taking side streets back to the freeway and giving up on the visit when the cell phone in my pocket vibrated. I pulled it out.

“Alice.”

“Edward, where are you?”

“Chicago. You?”

“We’re in Denali. Tanya says ‘hi’.”

“Great. What do you want, Alice?”

“Well, Edward, I’m worried about her.” I didn’t want to talk about this. I was barely holding it together as it was. But I couldn’t help myself.

“Did you see something?” I asked anxiously.

“Well, let’s just say I think that she and Charlie had a rough night.”

“But she’s okay?”

“Well, yes...”

“What, Alice? What is it?”

“I’m just concerned that she’s not doing well.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“I wanted to tell you two days ago, but you wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Alice, if you know something, then just say it, please, and if not, I’m going to hang up.”

“I don’t know anything specific, Edward, but *overall*, I have a bad feeling about this. She’s my friend and I have doubts about how well she’s going to do on her own. She’s so accident-prone and she attracts danger. If she’s really sad too...”

“The point is to take the danger out of her life, and we are the most dangerous aspect of it.”

“We don’t *know* that.”

“It’s an exceedingly good start. If you go back or contact her, then everything I’ve been going through and all the trouble I’ve caused the family will be entirely wasted. I’ve thought this through, Alice, and it’s the *only* way. Jasper agrees with me.”

“He does, but to be downright honest, I’m afraid she might *do* something...”

“Bella promised.”

“People promise a lot of things. What did you promise her?”

“I promised that we would not interfere in her life again and I need you to honor that. We *must* leave her alone and let her live her life. It’s my call.”

“Okay, Edward. I *promise* you that I will not interfere in Bella’s life until you do. After that, all bets are off.”

“Good, because that’s not going to happen. Don’t be looking for her future, either. We’ve done enough damage.”

“Okay, but I’m keeping an eye on you.”

“Whatever. I have to go now. Bye, Alice.”

I snapped the phone shut. I’d been pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to keep her opinions to herself, even though she’d clammed up before we left Forks. I was a little confused as to why she’d waited to talk to me now, after it was over. To my knowledge, my not listening to her has never stopped Alice from speaking her mind. I suspect she saw something that she didn’t want me to know. She concealed it while we were together and I could have read her mind. Now she was talking to me about it when she was too far away for me to see images in her mind.

The part of me that I had tried to leave behind in Forks desperately wanted to know what Alice had seen. Should I go back to Forks? But the other part of me who had mustered the tremendous will required to leave knew it would be a mistake. I didn’t think I could repeat what I had done and, regardless, I had promised I wouldn’t put her through such a thing again. Even if I tried to remain hidden, I had no confidence that when I saw her, I wouldn’t go crawling on my knees, begging her to take me back. I couldn’t let that happen. I intended to keep my promise.

By the time my conversation with Alice was over and my mind had reviewed it backwards, forwards, and sideways, I had passed downtown Chicago and was already heading around the south side of Lake Michigan. It didn’t matter. I had been grasping at straws for some idea of what to do with myself. I’d told Bella that our kind are easily distracted and that is true. We can keep our minds infinitely busy. However, the stabbing pain in my chest had not eased one iota since I left Forks and I hadn’t become unaware of its presence for a single moment. I just kept driving. It was the easiest thing to do.

The next four hours weren’t exactly a blur. It’s not possible to experience things as a blur with our heightened senses. But for all practical purposes, the drive was one long, painful reliving of each day of my time with Bella. Her scent would never fade, nor would my memory of touching her hair, nor would the sensation of her body pressed against mine. I would never forget the final passionate kiss we had shared.

Just outside of Erie, Pennsylvania, my phone vibrated again.

“Carlisle.”

“Edward, where are you?”

“Erie.”

“Good. We’ll see you in a couple hours then.”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“More or less.”

“You talked to Alice?”

“Yes...” I hesitated.

“What is it? Is there something you want to ask?”

“She’s not in danger, is she?”

“No, Alice doesn’t see that.”

“Then whatever she does see, I can’t know. I have to try, Carlisle. I have to give her a chance.”

“I understand, son. I can make some discreet inquiries if that would help ease your mind.”

“It would.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you.”

“Which way are you coming in from?”

“Highway 13.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you at the Citgo station in two hours. It’s just past Cascadilla Street. Then we’ll go from there.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome.”

Despite my misery and knowing my presence would be a drag on everyone, I was looking forward to seeing my father. In addition to the sharp pain in my chest, I had noticed a new and increasing sensation of a great cavern opening up inside me, a depthless, hollow well. If I tried to look into it, a tremendous vertigo overcame me and I knew that if I leaned into that abyss, I would be lost forever.

My entire body was rigid with stress as I blindly followed the roadways leading to what was to be my new home. Under other circumstances (*if she were here...*), I might have looked forward to this adventure—having a new place to explore and lots of plans to make that would keep me busy and excited about the future.

Not this time. I just wanted to be told where to stand, to be given some black corner where I could be alone and ignored and let be until this torture ceased. Perhaps my family had found a place where that would be possible. If not, I would find the nearest forest, dig a hole, and climb into it, somewhere that I couldn’t be found.

I wasn’t moving toward anything, only away. Away from the love that made me whole, the place that I had come to feel was home, and the only source of happiness I had ever known. How was I to survive?