

## 6. Disaster

*If only, if only, if only...*

If only Bella had refused to come. If only our fight had escalated and we'd had to leave. If only I had helped Bella unwrap her presents. *If only...* Those two words would haunt me for the rest of my bleak existence.

Alice had outdone herself, of course. Japanese lanterns and bowls of flowers decorated the porch, and inside there were flowers, candles, crystal, more flowers, white linen, more flowers, presents wrapped in silver paper with pink ribbon, and more flowers—pink roses, signifying love and romance. And in their midst stood the six Cullens, beautifully turned out, forming a cinematic tableau, the lighting perfect. Alice had even commissioned an elaborate pink layer cake with roses made from darker pink frosting suffocating the surface.

Bella was instantly overwhelmed. I held her firmly around the waist and kissed the top of her head in support.

My parents greeted Bella first, Esme with a careful kiss on the forehead and Carlisle with a hug around Bella's shoulders and a stage-whispered comment, "Sorry about this, Bella. We couldn't rein Alice in."

Rosalie and Emmett stood behind them. Rosalie's thoughts were guarded, but Emmett greeted Bella with "You haven't changed at all. I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always."

"Thanks a lot, Emmett," Bella responded, her face turning a deeper shade of tomato.

He laughed, happy to see her. "I have to step out for a second," he said, winking at Alice. "Don't do anything funny while I'm gone."

"I'll try," Bella answered grudgingly.

Emmett had been instructed to install the stereo in Bella's truck. I had secretly prepared the slot for it, running the appropriate wiring while Bella slept the night before, so the installation would be quick.

Jasper nodded to Bella, but hung back twenty feet as I had requested. It was almost two weeks—*again!*—since he had hunted. Two weeks was too long for him, but his pride couldn't withstand having to hunt twice as often as the rest of us.

"Time to open presents," Alice sang out, directing Bella to the table beside the piano which held the gifts, the cake, and the crystal serving plates. She handed Bella the largest box first. It was from Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper.

"Alice, I know I told you I didn't want anything—"

"But I didn't listen," Alice cut in cheerfully. "Open it."

Bella unwrapped the gift and looked in confusion at the empty box covered with numbers and Kanji characters.

"Um, thanks," Bella managed.

Rosalie smiled for the first time since Bella had entered the room. Jasper laughed. "It's a stereo for your truck," he explained. "Emmett's installing it right now so that you can't return it."

Bella herself even cracked a smile at that, remembering, I was sure, my earlier comment about her terrible truck radio. She was having fun, after all!

"Thanks, Jasper, Rosalie," she said. Then she yelled "Thanks, Emmett!" in his general direction. Emmett was having a good laugh in the front yard which started Bella laughing too. It was all going to work out fine. Maybe Bella's objection to parties was more about stage fright than actual displeasure.

*Yay! She likes it!* Alice was patting herself on the back for the success of the first present. "Open mine and Edward's next," she ordered Bella, handing her the obviously shaped gift.

Bella turned to me and gave me the evil eye. "You promised," she accused.

"Just in time!" Emmett boomed out, as he returned through the front door. He crowded in behind Jasper and pushed him forward to get a better view.

"I didn't spend a dime," I reassured her. I brushed a lock of hair away from her face and heard her heart flutter in her chest. I smiled.

With a martyr's great sigh, Bella extended her hand toward Alice. "Give it to me," she said flatly. Bella the Long-Suffering. Emmett laughed at her lack of enthusiasm.

*If only* I hadn't been lured into a false sense of security. *If only* I had been more on my guard. *If only* I had taken Jasper hunting myself—but I hadn't.

When my love slipped her finger beneath the silver paper and yanked at the tape, the edge of the paper sliced into her skin.

“Shoot,” Bella mumbled, as a single drop of bright red blood oozed from the cut.

*BLOOD!!*

It was the only coherent thought in his mind, before all semblance of the humanity we tried to cultivate abandoned Jasper. He responded instinctively, like the predator he is—that we all are.

“NO!!” I thundered.

In the fraction of a second it took Jasper to leap to the spot where Bella was standing, I flung my arm into her body, throwing her backward, and absorbed the force of Jasper’s momentum. A multitude of sounds created instant cacophony: the bone-jolting crash of the two of us colliding, the vicious growl emanating from Jasper’s throat, the clatter of shattering glass and crystal as Bella’s frail body toppled the gift table, and the gasps and exclamations of my family at the sudden pandemonium.

Emmett was there instantly, trapping Jasper’s arms in his more powerful ones, but one could never underestimate the surge of strength available to a vampire in full hunting mode. His empty, dark eyes saw only Bella as he struggled and strained against his captor, thrashing his head around, trying to bite. The scent of Bella’s blood had suddenly saturated the air—her bleeding must be far worse than before—and a combination of thirst and despair walloped me with the wrecking ball I met when I had first inhaled Bella’s scent.

I stopped breathing and hunkered defensively in front of Bella, eyeing the room for threats, prepared to rush anyone who approached. Growls tore from my chest, warning everyone to keep away. Jasper, whose eyes had gone bestial with no more human awareness than an attacking grizzly bear, differed from me in that moment only in his goal. He wanted to steal my “kill” to slake his thirst and I wanted to protect it. It was only a matter of motive that differentiated us.

*Thank God for Carlisle!*

“Emmett, Rose, get Jasper outside,” he ordered, taking control of the situation. I saw now that blood was pouring from Bella’s arm, arousing the deadly bloodlust in all of us.

“Come on, Jasper,” Emmett said to our brother, who kept twisting, flinging his weight around, and snapping, trying to free himself from Emmett’s grasp. Rosalie stepped up to help and the two dragged him from the house through the sliding glass door that Esme held open for them.

The raging thirst was no longer limited to Jasper. My mother was suffering, holding her hand over her nose and mouth to contain herself.

“I’m so sorry, Bella,” she whispered in shame as she followed the others outside.

Carlisle moved toward me and my muscles coiled automatically. Another warning growl vibrated through my chest.

“Let me by, Edward,” Carlisle said calmly, but with authority.

*Oh.* After a second or two, my brain adjusted itself and I was able to override my predator’s instincts. I straightened my body and felt my muscles relax. The danger of attack had passed.

Alice was still there. Though she was suffering, I trusted her to remove herself before the thirst became uncontrollable. Bella was safe with Carlisle. With the danger past, I looked down at Bella huddled on the floor in a pile of crystal shards, bloody linen, and pink frosting. Blood was running down her forearm and pooling in her hand, and tiny bits of crystal glittered in the ten-inch gash that extended from her wrist to her elbow. Only chance had prevented a severed artery. She could have been bleeding to death at that very moment.

I couldn’t separate my feelings. Everything was a jumbled, confusing mixture of intense emotions...horror, fury, and self-hate vied with one another for the top spot. Perhaps relief would have been appropriate as well, but it wasn’t there. It was too weighed down by recriminations and self-reproach, disgust.

My actions became mechanical as I struggled to keep what was inside me from exploding. Everything I most worried about had happened. And wasn’t it just earlier today that I’d promised I would never put Bella in danger again? The evil hag was laughing at me now. Bella was injured and it was all my fault...AGAIN!

I heard conversation going on around me, but it was all just disconnected words.

“Here Carlisle.”

“Too much glass in the wound.”

“Bella, do you want me to drive you to the hospital, or would you like me to take care of it here?”

“Here, please.”

“I’ll get your bag.”

*Edward.* Carlisle's thought caused me to turn my head toward him automatically. "Let's take her to the kitchen table." Carlisle was holding a tourniquet around her arm. I lifted her from the midst of the broken glass that was stuck to everything with pink icing and carried her to the kitchen.

"How are you doing, Bella?" Carlisle asked.

"I'm fine."

I sat this most precious package gently in a chair. Still holding my breath, still holding in my pain and fury, I don't know what expression was on my face, but my body felt like a canon with a great stone plugging the end. I wasn't sure whether I was going to implode or explode. And the thirst was starting to drive me mad.

Carlisle was digging in Bella's long, open wound with a pair of tweezers, the tourniquet having slowed the blood's exodus from her body. I was rooted to the floor near her, still needing to guard, to keep my eyes moving, to protect her from attackers, from the thirst.

"Just go, Edward," Bella finally said.

"I can handle it."

"You don't need to be a hero. Carlisle can fix me up without your help. Get some fresh air." She winced in pain.

"I'll stay."

"Why are you so masochistic?"

"Edward." My father again. "You may as well go find Jasper before he gets too far. I'm sure he's upset with himself, and I doubt he'll listen to anyone but you right now."

"Yes," Bella agreed. "Go find Jasper."

"You might as well do something useful," my sister added.

I looked at them all through narrowed eyes, realizing finally that what I was protecting her from was me. My thirst. My wants. My selfishness. *My fault.* With that painful truth in my head, I flew through the kitchen door into the cool evening air and took a deep breath. The thirst eased. I looked around for my brothers.

Jasper had returned to his senses. I could hear the thoughts of Emmett and Rosalie in the woods in the direction he'd fled. I took off after him, running at top speed through the ferns and vine maples. I caught up to him several miles away, where he stood perched in the highest branches of a cedar tree. I scurried up after him. He stood on one branch with

his left arm wrapped around another, looking toward the horizon. I climbed up next to him and crouched with my back against the trunk.

“I’m sorry, Edward.”

“It was inevitable. If not you, then someone else. A lamb in a lion’s den. I was deluding myself.”

“Jasper? Edward?” Alice called.

“Up here,” I answered softly.

“What can I do? How can I make it right?” Tension strained his voice.

“There’s nothing to be done.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes. She’ll heal.”

“Should I leave?” He looked into my face, his eyes dark wells of remorse and regret.

Alice leaped from the ground to just below us, then scampered up to stand beside him. She took his hand, but said nothing. I couldn’t answer Jasper’s question because I knew in my heart that it wasn’t he who should leave.

“Of course not!” Alice exclaimed. “She’s going to be fine.”

“I’m going hunting,” Jasper said. “You two go look after Bella.”

“You sure?” Alice asked.

Jasper nodded and was off, dropping downward to one tree then another until he touched the ground and was gone.

“I’m sorry, Edward. He’s furious with himself.”

I shook my head, then jumped from the tree to run back to my love, the only love I would ever know.

*Oh well*, Alice thought, and followed. Rosalie and Emmett watched silently as we passed.

*He’s in a bad way.*

*Serves him right for bringing her to our house.*

I ignored their thoughts as I ran by. I was too embroiled in my own to deal with anyone else's. Quietly, I reentered the kitchen.

Carlisle was telling Bella of my mother, whom I remembered only darkly, a few tidbits here and there. He'd known her better than I did at the end of our lives. "...so many centuries earlier in London. I felt bad about that later. It was more painful and lingering than necessary. I wasn't sorry, though. I've never been sorry that I saved Edward."

*He's never been sorry that he changed me. Would I be sorry if I changed Bella? Yes. Not for myself, though, only for her.*

"I suppose I should take you home now," Carlisle said.

"I'll do that." I had regained control of my feelings enough to keep them from my face. I couldn't share my torment with anyone, least of all Bella.

"Carlisle can take me," Bella said. I don't know whether she was trying to protect herself or me.

When I looked at her again, I saw that her blouse was drenched in blood, large patches and smaller dots. She looked like an extra in a horror film—one who had gotten too close to the chainsaw. Incongruously glopped on her shoulder were roses made of dark pink frosting. Now that the blood was dry and no longer leaking from Bella's transparent skin, I found it easier to beat back the thirst and ignore the searing pain in my throat.

"I'm fine," I said. "You'll need to change anyway. You'd give Charlie a heart attack the way you look. I'll have Alice get you something." I returned to the fresh outside air and saw that Alice was jumping the river.

"Edward needs you," Rosalie said as Alice sailed by. She joined me and we returned to the house.

"Carlisle sews faster than any other doctor I've had," Bella said as we followed her voice to the living room. My parents, who were both with her now, laughed. Esme swished a mop over the floor near the piano.

The scent of blood still floated on the air, but was rendered inert by the powerful overtones of alcohol and bleach. Alice, now freed from temptation, hurried to Bella's side. "C'mon, I'll get you something less macabre to wear."

My parents approached me where I stood frozen near the kitchen and Esme stretched up to kiss my cheek. I held myself tightly contained, unable to respond. If I allowed one tiny hole or crack to open, my emotions would surge through the breach and tear me apart. My father wrapped his powerful arms around my body and held me together, relieving a little of the strain of doing so myself.

*I know a little of what you're going through and I cannot tell you what to do, but we are here for you and will help in whatever way we can. Just ask.*

Still I could not respond. I was too overwhelmed with disgust, helplessness, and a sense of impending doom. When Carlisle released me, I walked stiffly to the front door to wait for Bella. She appeared at the top of the stairs, dressed in a clean blue shirt very similar to what she'd been wearing before. Charlie wouldn't notice the difference. She reached the bottom of the staircase with no mishaps and I silently opened the door.

"Take your things!" Alice called before Bella had reached me. She gathered up the camera and the two smaller packages, one half-opened, and tucked them under Bella's good arm. "You can thank me later, when you've opened them."

"Goodnight, Bella," Carlisle offered quietly.

"Take care, dear," Esme added.

I went through the motions. It was the best I could do. Bella was wary and tense, but I could not help her. The world felt too heavy on my shoulders, the pressure inside me too dangerously unstable.

"Say something."

"What do you want me to say?" What *does* one say when the painful truth he's been trying to hide from himself punches him in the face? What does one do when all his options have evaporated, when everything that was good about his life suddenly is destroyed?

"Tell me you forgive me."

*What?* "Forgive *you*? For what?"

"If I'd been more careful, nothing would have happened."

"Bella, you gave yourself a paper cut—that hardly deserves the death penalty."

"It's still my fault."

Bella's insistence on taking the blame for everything inflamed my self-loathing. She was too good for the likes of me, though she could be a little thick at times.

"Your fault? If you'd cut yourself at Mike Newton's house, with Jessica there and Angela and your other normal friends, the worst that could possibly have happened would be what? Maybe they couldn't find you a bandage? If you'd tripped and knocked over a pile of glass plates on your own—without someone throwing you into them—even then, what's the worst? You'd get blood on the seats when they drove you to the emergency room? Mike Newton could have held your hand while they stitched you up—and he

wouldn't be fighting the urge to kill you the whole time he was there. Don't try to take any of this on yourself, Bella. It will only make me more disgusted with myself."

"How the hell did Mike Newton end up in this conversation?" she asked angrily.

"Mike Newton ended up in this conversation because Mike Newton would be a hell of a lot healthier for you to be with." *Obviously*.

"I'd rather die than be with Mike Newton. I'd rather die than be with anyone but you."

"Don't be melodramatic, please." She was human. She would get over it. But I wouldn't. Not for a thousand years if I could stand to survive for that long, which I doubted.

"Well then, don't you be ridiculous."

I couldn't answer her. What Bella thought she wanted was no longer relevant. As the more powerful creature in this situation and as its instigator, it was my responsibility to fix it. And I would somehow. Unfortunately, my choices had decreased to one. I noticed my fingers clenching the steering wheel as I pulled up to Bella's house and killed the truck's engine. I didn't move.

"Will you stay tonight?"

"I should go home."

"For my birthday."

"You can't have it both ways—either you want people to ignore your birthday or you don't. One or the other."

Bella sighed. "Okay. I've decided that I don't want you to ignore my birthday. I'll see you upstairs."

Changeable human. Another reason why we were unsuited for each other. Bella let herself out of the truck and turned around to pick up the packages.

"You don't have to take those."

"I want them."

"No, you don't. Carlisle and Esme spent money on you."

“I’ll live,” Bella said as she scraped the packages from the seat with her one good arm and tried to contain them beneath that same arm. The operation wasn’t going to work. I jumped from the truck and darted to her side.

“Let me carry them, at least. I’ll be in your room.” It was self-indulgence. I knew it was wrong. But the shock of what had happened was too fresh. It had all been too fast. I needed more time...just a little more time.

“Thanks.” She smiled at me.

“Happy Birthday.” I leaned down to steal a kiss and I could see that it made her happy. She stretched upward on her toes as I pulled away, trying to make it last longer. *How I loved her!* I gave her a crooked smile and then headed to her window.

Bella hurried through the formalities with her father and successfully downplayed the disaster and her injury. Then I heard her climb the steps and turn on the water in the bathroom. I sat on the bed and let the truth wash over me. The time had come. My decision had been made for me, but I would savor this one precious night before I took the action that would break my heart.

“Hi,” I said, my voice flat.

She crossed the room and climbed into my lap. “Hi. Can I open my presents now?”

“Where did the enthusiasm come from?”

“You made me curious.”

She picked up the long, narrow box containing an envelope from my parents.

“Allow me,” I said, taking it from her and pulling the paper off before I handed the box back to her.

“Are you sure I can handle lifting the lid?” Bella asked sarcastically. She pulled the mass of papers out of the envelope inside the box and stared at them until it dawned on her what they were.

“We’re going to Jacksonville?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I can’t believe it. Renee is going to flip! You don’t mind, though, do you? It’s sunny, you’ll have to stay inside all day.”

“I think I can handle it,” I told her and frowned. “If I’d had any idea that you could respond to a gift this appropriately, I would have made you open it in front of Carlisle and Esme. I thought you’d complain.”

“Well, of course it’s too much. But I get to take you with me!”

I chuckled. “Now I wish I’d spent money on your present. I didn’t realize that you were capable of being reasonable.”

Bella reached for the present from me and Alice. Alice hadn’t liked the quality of the recording I was getting on my own, so she insisted we start over with her running the equipment, timing the lead-ins and the fade, and shoos everyone out of the house except for Esme, who could stay quiet while she listened to me play. Alice’s efforts had produced a nice quality recording.

I pulled off the silver paper and handed her the CD jewel case.

“What is it?” Bella asked. I was surprised she couldn’t guess, though I did have a large CD collection.

I put the disk in her player beside the bed and started it. The piano music came on shortly afterward. The first song was the lullaby I had written for Bella after we first met. I waited to hear what she thought of the gift. She was on my lap, with her head bowed, so I couldn’t see her face. When she didn’t say anything for quite a while, I finally leaned forward and looked at her face. Tears had welled up in her eyes and when she saw that I saw them, she wiped them away. She must be in pain!

“Does your arm hurt?” I asked her, alarmed. I hadn’t asked Carlisle for pain pills. I was surprised he hadn’t given Bella some.

“No, it’s not my arm. It’s beautiful, Edward. You couldn’t have given me anything I would love more. I can’t believe it.” Then she fell silent.

In spite of myself, I was inordinately pleased. I had half expected Bella to give me grief for producing anything like a present. But this was not just any present, it was a part of me, of who I was.

“I didn’t think you would let me get a piano so I could play for you here,” I commented. The piano had been my first choice. No recording ever really captured the full, rich tone of a grand piano.

“You’re right,” she said. Now here she was crying, though I wasn’t fully convinced it wasn’t from pain.

“How does your arm feel?”

“Just fine.” I don’t know why I bothered asking her this type of question anymore.

“I’ll get you some Tylenol.”

“I don’t need anything,” she argued, but I moved her off my lap and rose to fetch it.

“Charlie,” she whispered nervously.

“He won’t catch me,” I assured her.

I was through the bedroom door and back before it had had time to close itself. I was holding the bottle of pain relievers and a glass from the bathroom full of water. Bella took the two pills without her usual resistance, which suggested that she was in pain. She should rest after all the drama and the shock.

“It’s late,” I said with authority, lifting her from the bed and pulling back the quilt. I laid her down with her head on the pillow, then I lay beside her on top of the covers and put my arm around her.

Bella leaned her head against my shoulder and sighed. She seemed content, which helped a little. But it didn’t change anything.

“Thanks again,” she murmured.

“You’re welcome,” I replied softly.

We lay there quietly as the lullaby finished and the second piece, Esme’s favorite composition, began.

“What are you thinking about?” Bella whispered.

I hesitated, not knowing if I wanted to talk about it. “I was thinking about right and wrong, actually.”

It wasn’t the answer Bella was hoping for, so she changed the subject quickly.

“Remember how I decided that I wanted you to not ignore my birthday?”

“Yes.” She wanted something.

“Well, I was thinking, since it’s still my birthday, that I’d like you to kiss me again.”

“You’re greedy tonight.”

“Yes, I am—but please, don’t do anything you don’t want to do,” she said in irritation.

I chuckled and then exhaled heavily. “Heaven forbid that I should do anything I don’t want to do.” It was exactly what must be done, heaven or no. I felt a creeping sense of doom, but maybe a kiss would chase it away. I cupped Bella’s chin in my hand and lifted it toward me. Then I touched my lips to hers, gently as always, but instead of sweeping away the feeling of doom, the intimacy released it.

In desperation, I let go of my careful restraint and allowed my pain and grief and longing to reveal themselves. I buried my fingers in her thick, soft hair and held her face to mine, kissing her with rising, uncontrolled passion. I moved my lips and tongue urgently over hers and when Bella responded in kind, I allowed that too. With our hands seeking one another and our breath coming faster and faster, Bella pressed her body into mine and I did not stop her. Instead, I met her desire and multiplied it as I wished desperately for things to be different, that our love could follow its natural course. I could not give her up...I couldn’t... *I couldn’t...*

Somehow, at some point, I came to my senses before my physical excesses could harm her. Harming her emotionally was a different thing, however. Just now I had let her believe that the depth of love she felt for me and I felt for her could be expressed. It wasn’t fair to her and I knew better.

I gentled my hands and changed the direction of their force from pulling to pushing—it was symbolic of what I now must do with my life in Forks and with Bella herself.

“Sorry,” I said between panting breaths, “that was out of line.”

“I don’t mind,” Bella murmured, gasping for air.

She was such a profound temptation. I frowned at my still-raging desire to take her, to make love to her, to change her, to keep her.

“Try to sleep, Bella.”

“No, I want you to kiss me again.”

“You’re overestimating my self-control.” *In every way.*

“Which is tempting you more, my blood or my body?” she asked impertinently.

“It’s a tie,” I told her, smiling sadly. I could not lose sight of what I must do. It would be so easy to turn toward her again, to hang on...but I mustn’t.

“Now, why don’t you stop pushing your luck and go to sleep?”

“Fine,” she said, pressing her body against me, but side-to-front, rather than front-to-front, and I would allow that one last time.