

(Notes: You'll recognize portions of this chapter—small bits survived and were combined with what is now Chapter 20 "Impatience." This chapter slowed down the pace of the "hunt" part of the story, but I feel like I cut out a lot of Alice's personality when I sacrificed it.)

Shopping with Alice

The car was sleek, black and powerful; its windows were tinted limo black. The engine purred like a great cat as we sped through the deep night.

Jasper drove one handed, carelessly it seemed, but the muscular car flew forward with perfect precision.

Alice sat with me on the black leather back seat. Somehow, during the long night, my head had ended up against her granite neck, her cool arms enfolding me, her cheek pressed against the top of my head. The front of her thin cotton shirt was cold, damp with my tears. Now and then, if my breathing grew uneven, she would murmur soothingly; in her fast, high voice, the encouragements sounded like singing. To keep myself calm, I focused on the touch of her cold skin; it felt like a physical connection to Edward.

Both of them had assured me—when I realized, panic stricken, all my things were still in the truck—that leaving it behind was necessary, something to do with the scent. They told me not to worry about clothes or money. I tried to trust them, making an effort to ignore how uncomfortable I was in Rosalie's ill-fitting outfit. It was a trivial thing to mind.

On the smooth highways, Jasper never drove the brawny car below a hundred and twenty miles per hour. He seemed utterly unaware of speed limits, but we never saw a patrol car. The only breaks in the monotony of the drive were the two stops we made for fuel. I noticed idly that Jasper went inside to pay cash both times.

Dawn began to break when we were somewhere in northern California. I watched with dry, stinging eyes as the gray light streaked across the cloudless sky. I was exhausted, but sleep had eluded me, my mind too full of disturbing images to relax into unconsciousness. Charlie's broken expression—Edward's brutal snarl, teeth bared—the keen-eyed stare of the tracker—Laurent's bleak expression—the dead look in Edward's eyes after he kissed me the last time; like still slides they flashed in front of my eyes, my feelings alternating between terror and despair.

In Sacramento, Alice wanted Jasper to stop, to get food for me. But I shook my head tiredly, and directed him to keep driving in a hollow voice.

A few hours later, in a suburb outside L.A., Alice spoke softly to him again, and he exited the freeway to the sound of my feeble protests. A large mall was visible from the freeway, and he made his way there, pulling into the parking garage, down into the underground level to park.

"Stay with the car," she instructed Jasper.

"Are you sure?" he sounded apprehensive.

"I don't see anyone here," she said. He nodded, consenting.

Alice took my hand and pulled me from the car. She held on to my hand, keeping me close by her side as we walked from the dark garage. She skirted the edge of the garage, keeping in the shadow. I noticed how her skin seemed to glow in the sunlight that reflected off the sidewalk. The mall was crowded, many groups of shoppers passed, some

of them turning their heads to watch us go by.

We walked under a bridge that crossed from the upper level of the parking garage into the second story of a department store, always keeping out of the direct sunlight.

Once we were inside, under the fluorescent lights of the store, Alice looked less remarkable—merely a chalky pale girl with alert, but shadowed eyes and spiky black hair. The circles under my eyes, I was sure, were more evident than hers. We still caught the attention of anyone who glanced our way. I wondered what they thought they were seeing. The delicate, dancing Alice, with her striking angel's face, dressed in thin, pale fabrics that didn't quite downplay her pallor enough, holding hands with me, obviously leading, as I shambled tiredly along in my awkwardly fitted but expensive clothes, my dull hair twisted into knots down my back.

Alice led me unerringly to the food court.

"What do you want to eat?"

The smell of the greasy fast foods turned my stomach. But Alice's eyes were not open to persuasion. I asked unenthusiastically for a turkey sub.

"Can I go to the bathroom?" I asked as we headed for the line.

"Okay," and she changed direction, never letting go of my hand.

"I can go alone." The commonplace atmosphere of the generic mall made me feel the most normal I had since our disastrous game last night.

"Sorry, Bella, but Edward's going to read my mind when he gets here, and if he sees that I let you out of my sight for a minute..." she trailed off, unwilling to contemplate the dire consequences.

She at least waited outside the stall in the crowded bathroom. I washed my face as well as my hands, ignoring the startled looks of the women around me. I tried to comb my fingers through my hair, but quickly gave up. Alice took my hand again at the door, and we walked slowly back to the food line. I was dragging, but she didn't seem impatient with me.

She watched me eat, slowly at first and then faster as my appetite returned. I drained the soda she brought me so quickly that she left me for a moment—never taking her eyes off me, though—to get another.

"It's definitely more convenient, the food you eat," she commented as I finished, "but it doesn't seem like much fun."

"Hunting is more exciting, I imagine."

"You have no idea." She flashed a wide mouthful of glittering teeth, and several people's heads turned in our direction.

After throwing our trash away, she led me down the wide corridors of the mall, her eyes lighting now and then on something she wanted, hauling me along with her at each stop. She paused for a moment at an expensive boutique to buy three pairs of sunglasses, two women's and one men's. I noticed the clerk look at her with a new expression when she handed him an unfamiliar clear credit card with gold lines across it. She found an accessories shop where she picked up a hairbrush and rubber bands.

But she didn't really get down to business until she towed me into the sort of store I never frequented, because the price for a pair of socks would be out of my league.

"You're about a size two." It was a statement, not a question.

She used me as a pack mule, loading me down with a staggering amount of clothing.

Now and then I would see her reach for a size extra-small as she picked something out

for herself. The clothes she selected for herself were all in weightless materials, but long sleeved or floor length, designed to cover as much of her skin as possible. A wide brimmed, black straw hat crowned the mountain of clothes.

The salesgirl had a similar reaction to the unusual credit card, becoming more servile, and calling Alice 'miss.' The name she said was unfamiliar, though. Once we were out in the mall again, our arms loaded down with bags, of which she carried the lion's share, I asked about that.

"What did she call you?"

"That credit card says Rachel Lee. We're going to be very careful not to leave any kind of trail for the tracker. Let's go get you changed."

I thought about that as she led me back to the restrooms, pushing me into the handicapped stall so I would have room to move. I heard her rummaging in the bags, finally hanging a light blue cotton dress over the door for me. I gratefully tugged off Rosalie's too long, too tight jeans, yanked off the blouse that bagged on me in all the wrong places, and flung them back over the door to her. She surprised me by pushing a pair of soft leather sandals under the door—when did she get those? The dress fit amazingly well, the expensive cut apparent in the way it flowed around me.

As I left the stall I noticed that she was stuffing Rosalie's clothes into the trashcan.

"Keep your sneakers," she said. I put them on top of one of the bags.

We headed back to the garage. Alice got fewer looks this time; she was so covered in bags that her skin was barely visible.

Jasper was waiting. He slid out of the car at our approach—the trunk was open. As he reached for my bags first, he gave Alice a sardonic look.

"I knew I should have gone," he muttered.

"Yes," she agreed, "they would have loved you in the women's bathroom." He didn't answer.

Alice dug quickly through her bags before putting them in the trunk. She handed Jasper a pair of sunglasses, putting one pair on herself. She handed me the third pair, and the hairbrush. And she pulled out a long sleeved shirt of thin, transparent black, pulling it on over her t-shirt, leaving it open. Finally, she added the straw hat. On her, the makeshift costume looked like it belonged on a runway. She grabbed one more handful of clothes and, rolling them up in a ball, she opened the back door and made a pillow on the seat.

"You need to sleep now," she ordered firmly. I crawled obediently onto the seat, laying my head down at once, curling onto my side. I was halfway asleep as the car purred to life.

"You shouldn't have gotten me all those things," I mumbled.

"Don't worry about it, Bella. Sleep." Her voice was restful.

"Thank you," I breathed, and slipped into an uneasy slumber.

It was the soreness from sleeping in a cramped position that woke me. I was still exhausted, but suddenly jittery as I remembered where I was. I sat up to see the Valley of the Sun laid out in front of me; the wide, flat expanse of tiled roofs, palm trees, freeways, smog and swimming pools, embraced by the short, rocky ridges that we called mountains. I was surprised to feel no sense of relief, only a nagging homesickness for the dripping skies and green enclosures of the place that meant Edward to me. I shook my head, trying to push back the edge of despair that threatened to overwhelm me.

Jasper and Alice were talking; aware, I'm sure, that I was conscious again, but they gave

no sign. Their quick, soft voices, one low, one high, wove musically around me. I determined that they were discussing where to stay.

"Bella," Alice addressed me casually, as if I were already part of the conversation, "which way to the airport?"

"Stay on the I-10," I said automatically. "We'll pass right by it."

I thought for a moment, my brain still foggy with sleep.

"Are we flying somewhere?" I asked.

"No, but it's better to be close, just in case." She flipped out her cell phone and apparently called information. She spoke more slowly than usual, asking for hotels near the airport, agreeing to a suggestion, then pausing while she was connected. She made reservations for a week under the name of Christian Bower, rattling off a credit card number without looking at one. I heard her repeating directions back for the operator's sake; I'm sure she didn't need help with her memory.

The sight of the phone had reminded me of my responsibilities.

"Alice," I said as she finished. "I need to call my dad." My voice was sober. She handed me the phone.

It was late afternoon; I was hoping he was at work. But he answered on the first ring. I cringed, picturing his anxious face by the phone.

"Dad?" I said hesitantly.

"Bella! Where are you, honey?" Strong relief filled his voice.

"I'm on the road." No need to let him know I'd made a three-day drive over night.

"Bella, you have to turn around."

"I need to go home."

"Honey, let's talk about this. You don't need to leave just because of some boy." He was being very careful, I could tell.

"Dad, give me a week. I need to think things through, and then I'll decide if I'm coming back. This has nothing to do with you, okay?" My voice trembled slightly, "I love you, Daddy. Whatever I decide, I'll see you soon. I promise."

"Okay, Bella." His voice was resigned. "Call me when you get to Phoenix."

"I'll call you from home, Dad. Bye."

"Bye, Bells." He hesitated before hanging up.

At least I was on good terms with Charlie again, I thought as I handed the phone back to Alice. She was watching me carefully, perhaps waiting for another emotional breakdown. But I was just too tired.

The familiar city flew past my dark window. The traffic was light. We made our way quickly through downtown and then looped around the north side of Sky Harbor International, turning south into Tempe. Just on the other side of the dry Salt River bed, a mile or so from the airport, Jasper exited on Alice's command. She directed him easily through the surface streets to the entrance of the airport Hilton.

I had been thinking Motel 6, but I was sure they would brush off any money concerns. They appeared to have an endless reserve.

We pulled into the valet parking under the shade of a long ramada, and two bellhops moved quickly to the side of the impressive automobile. Jasper and Alice stepped out, looking very much like movie stars in their dark glasses. I stepped out awkwardly, stiff from the long hours in the car, feeling homely. Jasper opened the truck, and the obsequious staff quickly unloaded our shopping bags onto a brass cart. They were too

well trained to offer any surprised looks at our lack of real luggage.

The car had been very cool inside its dark interior; stepping out into the Phoenix afternoon, even in the shade, was like sticking my head into an oven set to broil. For the first time that day, I felt at home.

Jasper strode confidently through the empty lobby. Alice kept carefully by my side, the bellhops following us eagerly with our things. Jasper approached the desk with his unconsciously regal air.

"Bower," was all he said to the professional-looking receptionist. She quickly processed his information, with only the tiniest of glances toward the golden-haired idol in front of her betraying her smooth proficiency.

We were quickly led to our large suite. I knew the two bedrooms were merely for convention's sake. The bellhops unloaded our bags efficiently as I sat weakly on the sofa and Alice danced off to examine the other rooms. Jasper shook hands with them as they left, and the look they exchanged on their way out the door was more than satisfied; it was elated. Then we were alone.

Jasper went to the windows, shutting both layers of curtains securely. Alice appeared and dropped a room service menu in my lap.

"Order something," she instructed.

"I'm fine," I said dully.

She gave me a dark look, and snatched the menu back. Grumbling something about Edward, she picked up the phone.

"Alice, really," I started, but her look silenced me. I put my head down on the arm of the sofa and closed my eyes.

A knock on the door woke me. I jumped up so quickly I slid right off the sofa onto the floor and cracked my forehead against the coffee table.

"Ow," I said, dazed, rubbing at my head.

I heard Jasper laugh once, and looked up to see him covering his mouth, trying to choke down the rest of his amusement. Alice got the door, pressing her lips together firmly, the corners of her mouth twitching.

I blushed and scrambled back onto the sofa, holding my head in my hands. It was my food; the smell of red meat, cheese, garlic and potatoes swirled enticingly around me. Alice carried the tray as deftly as if she'd been waitressing for years, and set in on the table at my knees.

"You need protein," She explained, lifting the silver dome to reveal a large steak and a decorative potato sculpture. "Edward won't be happy with you if your blood smells anemic when he gets here." I was almost sure she was joking.

Now that I could smell the food I was hungry again. I ate quickly, feeling my energy returning as the sugars hit my bloodstream. Alice and Jasper ignored me, watching the news and talking so swiftly and quietly that I couldn't understand a word.

A second knock sounded on the door. I jumped to my feet, narrowly avoiding another accident with the half empty tray on the coffee table.

"Bella, you need to calm down," Jasper said, as Alice answered the door. A member of the housekeeping staff gave her a small bag with the Hilton logo on it and left quietly. Alice brought it over and handed it to me. I opened it to find a toothbrush, toothpaste, and all the other critical things I'd left in the back of my truck. Tears sprung up in my eyes.

"You're so kind to me." I looked at Alice and then at Jasper, overwhelmed.

I had noticed that Jasper was usually the most careful to keep his distance from me, so it surprised me when he came to my side and put his hand on my shoulder.

"You're part of the coven now," he teased, smiling warmly. I felt a heavy lassitude suddenly seeping through my body; my eyelids were somehow too heavy to hold up.

"Very subtle, Jasper," I heard Alice say in a wry tone. Her cool, slim arms slipped under my knees and behind my back. She lifted me, but I was asleep before she got me to the bed.

It was very early when I awoke. I had slept well, dreamlessly, and I was more alert than I usually was upon waking. It was dark, but there were bluish flashes of light coming from under the door. I reached beside the bed, trying to find a lamp on the bedside table. A light came on over my head, I gasped, and Alice was there, kneeling beside me on the bed, her hand on the lamp that was foolishly mounted over the headboard.

"Sorry," she said as I slumped back on the pillow in relief. "Jasper's right," she continued, "You do need to relax."

"Well don't tell him that," I grumbled. "If he tries to relax me any more I'll be in a coma." She giggled. "You noticed, eh?"

"If he'd hit me over the head with a frying pan it would have been less obvious."

"You needed to sleep." She shrugged, still smiling.

"And now I need a shower, ick!" I realized I was still in the light blue dress, which was nowhere near as wrinkled as it had a right to be. My mouth tasted fuzzy.

"I think you're going to have a bruise on your forehead," she mentioned as I headed to the bathroom.

After I had cleaned up, I felt much better. I put on the clothes Alice laid out for me on the bed, a hunter green shirt that appeared to be made of silk, and tan linen shorts. I felt guilty that my new things were so much nicer than any of the clothes I'd left behind. It was nice to finally do something with my hair; the hotel shampoos were a good quality brand and my hair came out shiny again. I took my time blow-drying it into perfect straightness. I had a feeling we wouldn't be doing much today. Close inspection in the mirror revealed a darkening shadow on my brow. Fabulous.

When I finally emerged, light was peaking around the edges of the thick curtains. Alice and Jasper were sitting on the sofa, staring patiently at the nearly muted TV. There was a new tray of food on the table.

"Eat," Alice said, pointing at it firmly.

I sat obediently on the floor, and ate without noticing the food. I didn't like the expression on either of their faces. They were too still. They watched the TV without ever looking away, even though commercials were playing. I pushed the tray away, my stomach abruptly uneasy. Alice looked down now, eyeing the still full tray with a displeased look.

"What's wrong, Alice?" I asked meekly.

"Nothing's wrong." She looked me with wide, honest eyes that I didn't buy for a second.

"Well, what do we do now?"

"We wait for Carlisle to call."

"And should he have called by now?" I could see that I was near the mark. Alice's eyes flitted from mine to the phone on top of her leather bag and back.

"What does that mean?" my voice quavered, and I fought to control it, "That he hasn't called yet?"

"It just means that they don't have anything to tell us yet." But her voice was too even,

and the air was suddenly harder to breathe.

"Bella," Jasper said in a suspiciously soothing voice, "you have nothing to worry about. You are completely safe here."

"Do you think that's what I'm worried about?" I asked in disbelief.

"What else is there?" He was also surprised. He might feel the tenor of my emotions, but he couldn't read the reasons behind them.

"You heard what Laurent said," my voice was low, but they could hear me easily, of course. "He said James was lethal. What if something goes wrong, and they get separated? If something happens to any of them, Carlisle, Emmett...Edward..." I gulped.

"If that wild female hurts Carol or Esme..." my voice had grown higher, a note of hysteria beginning to rise in it. "How could I live with myself when it's my fault? None of you should be risking yourselves for me—"

"Bella, Bella, stop," he interrupted me, his words flowing quickly. "You're worrying about all the wrong things, Bella. Trust me on this—none of us are in jeopardy. You are under too much strain as it is, don't add to it with wholly unnecessary worries. Listen to me—" for I had looked away, "Our family is strong. Our only fear is losing you."

"But why should you—" Alice interrupted this time, touching my cheek with her cold fingers.

"It's been almost a century that Edward's been alone. Now he's found you, and our family is whole. Do you think any of us want to look into his eyes for the next hundred years if he loses you?"

My guilt slowly subsided as I looked into her dark eyes. But, even as the calm spread over me, I knew I couldn't trust my feelings with Jasper present.