

Midnight Sun, Part II

by PA Lassiter

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N.B. These chapters are based on characters created by Stephenie Meyer in Twilight, the novel. The title used here, Midnight Sun, some of the chapter titles, and all the non-interior dialogue between Edward and Bella are copyright Stephenie Meyer.

The first half of Ms. Meyer's rough-draft novel, of which this is a continuation, can be found at her website here:

http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/pdf/midnightsun_partial_draft4.pdf

12. COMPLICATIONS—Part B

It was well after midnight when I found myself slipping through Bella's window. This was becoming a habit that, in the light of day, I knew I should attempt to curb. But after nighttime fell and I had hunted—for though these visits might be irresponsible, I was determined they not be reckless—all of my resolve quickly faded.

There she lay, the sheet and blanket coiled around her restless body, her feet bound up outside the covers. I inhaled deeply through my nose, welcoming the searing pain that coursed down my throat. As always, Bella's bedroom was warm and humid and saturated with her scent. Venom flowed into my mouth and my muscles tensed in readiness. But for what? Could I ever train my body to give up this devilish reaction to my beloved's smell? I feared not.

Cautiously, I held my breath and moved to her bedside. I untangled the bedclothes and spread them carefully over her again. She twitched suddenly, her legs scissoring as she rolled to her other side. I froze.

"Edward," she breathed. "Please."

The thrill of hearing her call my name had not diminished. If only I could know what she wished of me. I would do almost anything to give her what she wanted.

My fingers burned at the memory of touching her skin. The sensation flashed up my arm and across my chest, causing me to inhale sharply. The breath carried the electric burn through my midsection and lower, spreading downward in a rush.

*Aaahhh...*the pain, the pleasure...a confusing mixture. Hastily, I retreated to the corner rocking chair to calm myself. A new level of urgency had been unleashed in my body. The electrical charge between Bella and myself continued to awaken my dormant human side.

Our plans for Saturday began to seem more and more reckless as I measured my growing desires against Alice's visions. How selfish would I prove to be when I had Bella alone, with no witnesses to curb my appetites? It was a mistake, a huge mistake, even to consider pursuing this path—it was taunting the monster.

Bella's breath quickened and she spoke, "I'm okay...miss you." The endless rain drummed on the roof. Neither of us was at peace tonight.

As usual, the hours passed like minutes as I sat, fascinated, watching her eyelids flutter, her hands twitch, her feet kick. I heard my name several times, but the context was unclear. Once she softly said, "Perfect," and I longed to know her dream.

As dawn approached, Bella seemed to relax and settle. I tread silently to her bedside, tidied her covers, then carefully...so carefully...pulled a wayward lock of hair away from her eyes and smoothed it behind her ear. Resisting the urge to stroke her creamy white cheek, I thrust my restless hands into the pockets of my trousers and stepped back.

Recalling an earlier curiosity, I knelt on the floor and examined the stack of books lying near her bed. Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, a trio of Shakespeare's plays, the compendium of Jane Austen novels which had frustrated her that afternoon outside, a book of Flannery O'Connor short stories, and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. I recognized several titles from the junior's English reading list, but noted the others she had collected. She seemed to prefer classic authors closer to my era than her own. I shuffled through a stack of CDs sitting on her bedside table, smiling to learn we had musical, as well as literary, preferences in common.

When the sun pushed its way up near the horizon, I reluctantly left through the window and raced home to change clothes for school. I longed for a day, an impossible day, when I never would be compelled to leave her side.

After changing and retrieving my car, I drove aimlessly around Forks as I awaited Charlie's departure and the appointed time to meet Bella for the drive to school. I felt drained, but oddly lighter, by the outpouring of secrets I had divulged yesterday. It was time to turn the focus away from me and back onto Bella. I began enumerating questions in my head. It seemed impossible to discover all there was to know about another person without the benefit of mind reading. How did unendowed souls ever accomplish it? There weren't enough hours in a day to ask everything that I wanted to know.

Bella approached my car with a slight hesitation before climbing in. I wondered if she were remembering the electrical charge between us the afternoon before. It had lingered all night with me, though she had been asleep and dreaming.

"Good morning. How are you today?" I examined her face closely for any trace of memory from the preceding night.

"Fine," she replied, though the dark rings under her eyes spoke clearly of her restless sleep.

"You look tired."

"I couldn't sleep," she said, hiding her face behind her hair.

I chuckled. "Neither could I."

She laughed at the joke.

"I guess that's right. I suppose I slept just a little bit more than you did."

"I'll wager you did." *And dreamed your private dreams. I wish I could have joined you there,* I thought.

"So what did you do last night?" she asked. Did she sense something of my secret life? Regardless, I could not allow her to glean more information from me while I still had so many unanswered questions.

"Not a chance. It's my day to ask questions," I insisted.

"Oh that's right," she allowed reluctantly. "What do you want to know?" I could tell that this was a trial to her in some way, as she wrinkled her forehead and frowned. I would start with some easy ones.

"What's your favorite color?" She rolled her eyes and sighed.

"It changes from day to day." So, she had a changing favorite. Could a changing favorite really be called a favorite? I let it go.

"What's your favorite color today?" I pressed. She wasn't going to dodge me all day.

"Probably brown."

I snorted. "Brown?" *Brown?* Isn't brown just a muddling of all the other colors together? Her mind baffled me.

"Sure. Brown is warm. I *miss* brown. Everything that's supposed to be brown— tree trunks, rocks, dirt—is all covered up with squashy green stuff here." (Once, in her sleep, she had said, "It's too green." Now I understood.)

I considered her milk-chocolate eyes, which were hidden behind her mahogany hair and changed my mind, "You're right. Brown is warm."

My hand launched itself, unbidden, to touch her hair, as it had done during the night. *Oops, don't startle her.* I slowed my hand, but allowed myself to smooth her hair behind her shoulder, unveiling her face. Her tantalizing scent wafted through the close air. I inhaled deeply and flinched at the scorching of my throat.

At Forks High School, I pulled the Volvo into an empty space and turned off the engine. “What music is in your CD player right now?” My question was disingenuous, since I’d peaked last night.

She named the hard-rock CD I played whenever I needed to blast away my own thoughts or those of others around me. On that awful afternoon, back from Alaska, when I’d fled biology class to escape the temptation of Bella’s blood, I had huddled in my car blasting this CD to drown out the monster. I wondered if Bella had been drowning out demons of her own—this music was so different from anything else she owned. I pulled my copy of the CD from under my seat and smiled at her, hoping she might comment on the coincidence.

“Debussy to this?” I questioned, but Bella kept her thoughts to herself as we exited the car and walked to class.

Time had begun to feel short. It was impossible to see how we could move forward together with Bella under constant threat. Not only did she risk her life every time she was with me, but she also risked her chance for a normal human life by entangling herself with mine. I couldn’t give her what she deserved and I so easily could take away everything.

But I was hopelessly smitten. I could not stop myself from walking this treacherous path. I hoped (and feared) that we would soon get our answer, perhaps as early as Saturday. Either we would find some way to move forward, at least for a while, or this relationship would end, perhaps badly. It all depended on my ability to control my basest, and most powerful, inclinations.

There was so much I wanted to know and only two more days to get answers before things surely would change. Setting to the task, I started by asking about the movies and books she loved and those she disliked, the stories serving as shorthand for her views on real-world themes. She showed a preference for stories with strong female characters, those who wanted to control their own destinies, and stories with strong moral messages, though her morality didn’t seem to follow any traditional set of beliefs that I could identify. She also seemed to favor themes of self-determination and struggle against stultifying realities. She loved *Romeo & Juliet*, though that couple foolishly perished in their attempt to defy societal rules. I already knew that Bella was a good person, brave, self-sacrificing, and kind, but she inexplicably loved *Wuthering Heights*, whose characters embodied the opposite traits.

I asked her about her preferences in food, flowers, friends, school subjects, and vacation destinations. I inquired about her favorite teachers, sports, gemstones, and scents. The latter three topics each drew a blush to her face and her subsequent silences tormented me. I couldn’t tolerate not knowing why she was embarrassed. I pressed the questions until she

admitted that her preference for topaz and onyx coincided with the dichotomous colors of my “dazzling” eyes. Her answer pleased me, but I was immediately annoyed at my pleasure.

She disliked participating in sports due to her perceived clumsiness and ineptitude at physical activities. When I asked her about her favorite scent, she inexplicably flushed crimson and refused to answer. Stubborn, stubborn girl.

Each tidbit of knowledge was precious to me. I carefully filed her answers away for later examination. Today was the day for collecting information—I could weigh and sort through it all while I watched her sleep. It irritated me when the school bell interrupted my interrogations and we had to hurry to separate classes.

Over lunch, caught up in my questions, I was able (mostly) to tune out Rosalie’s silent screeching and hurling of insults—*idiot! fool! traitor!*—and Alice’s recent, disturbing visions, which I *would* prove wrong.

Right now, I only wanted to think about today and tomorrow, the hours remaining to me before Saturday—*the Saturday*—but traitorous thoughts that Alice might be right tormented me. I could only pray, if God even heard the blasphemies of my wretched kind, that Bella would live to see Sunday.

Banish the thought! I commanded myself. *More questions!* Perhaps the questions would distract me from all my doubts and fears. I focused intently on the list in my head and continued collecting Bella’s answers.

“Do you participate in religious activities?”

“No, though Charlie considers himself Lutheran and Renee’s traveled all over the spiritual map. I don’t feel connected to any particular religion or group. It’s never interested me much.”

“Did you go to summer camp?”

“Once, with the Girl Scouts. It was a nightmare, literally. Sleeping in the woods does not improve the quality of my dreams.”

It didn’t seem to matter what I asked her. Her answers were always fascinating, and led to more questions with more fascinating answers.

I was so involved with our dialog that I forgot about the second installment of *Lorenzo’s Oil* that Mr. Banner was setting up in biology. Yesterday had proved an interesting exercise in

control—a different kind of control than I was used to practicing. Today, I scooted my chair farther away from Bella’s when the lights went out. No mistakes!

Even at this distance, the heat of Bella’s body warmed my skin, her scent engulfed me, and her magnetic pull urged me closer. When she looked up and caught my eye, I felt a jolt of electricity shoot between us and form a charged connection. Her heart seemed to be beating in my chest and my breath sped up to match the cadence of hers. My hands craved...ached...to touch her.

I began forming arguments to justify my desire. *Holding her hand wouldn’t hurt her, and would prevent me from stroking her hair...or curving my palm around her cheek...or...touching her waist...or...*

Ahhh!

I had to exert a concentrated effort to keep myself and my chair where they were. I crossed my arms, clenched my fists, and sat utterly still. It seemed Bella was faring no better than I, leaning forward onto the tabletop with her chin resting on her arms. Her fingers were white with the pressure of gripping the table’s edge.

The problem with touching Bella was the escalation of desire. One touch increased my longing for the next, and the next, which opened the door to even greater, more dangerous cravings. I remembered the burning in my hand and the jolt of electricity through my body. The blazing thirst was secondary now, distracted as I was by the softness of her pale skin, the thick tresses of her hair pooling on the tabletop, the delicate pink bow of her lips... Escalation, yes, that was clearly the problem.

Another problem was the heightening of my senses when I was this close to Bella. I could detect every twitch in her fingers and every tiny tightening of the muscles around her eyes. The sound of her breath moving in and out of her lungs seemed to drown all other sound, her heartbeats vibrated through the space between us and entered my body. The air was saturated with her fragrance, which deepened and grew more complex as her heart raced.

It would be shockingly easy to let go and allow my senses to lead me where they would. That urge was so like the act of hunting, though, that I dared not let my mind wander for a millisecond in that direction. What would happen if I did? Would satisfying my desire to touch her unleash my hunting instinct?

My anguish was immeasurable. If there was a God, why would he make me thus? Why would he torment me in this way?

I am not human—I am not a child of God, I reminded myself grimly.

At long last, when the hour was over and Mr. Banner turned on the lights, Bella released a great sigh and glanced sideways at me. She bore a look of relief mixed with what? Longing?

I stood at once and waited for her to gather her things, staying close enough to feel the heat roll off of her. We remained silent as we made our way to Bella's gym class. *She wishes to be touched*, my evil self argued. *Don't you want to give her what she wants?* Yes, yes, of course I did!

When we reached the gym door, Bella turned toward me, the longing still in her eyes. I gazed at her and though I knew better, and though I had promised myself *no escalation*, I reached to touch her face—her temple to her jawbone, one slow stroke with the back of my hand. Her heart stuttered and raced, and her skin grew warm under my touch. *If we could have this, only this...* But it just wasn't possible...was it? I yearned to pull her close, to feel the length of her body crushed against mine.

Abruptly, I turned and hurried away before my desire undid me completely.

To interrupt the direction of my thoughts, I listened for Mike Newton's abrasive inner voice as I walked to Spanish class. It was noisy, as usual.

Bella seems a little distracted today. I didn't notice Cullen say anything to her in biology. I hope they're fighting. He's such a butt-in-sky. If he weren't monopolizing Bella's attention, I bet she'd go out with me. I can't believe she's interested in that freakshow!

Mike remained sullen as he stood with Bella on the badminton court. He continued to play for both of them, but never looked at her or spoke to her. This pleased me in one way, but angered me in another.

If he hurts her feelings, I promised myself, I'll backhand him to the other side of campus. I'll toss him into a tree. I'll pound him to mush.

As soon as Spanish was over, I jumped up and walked swiftly—perhaps more swiftly than was prudent—to meet Bella at the gym door. I considered growling at Mike as he passed, but that thought quickly faded when Bella appeared. She saw me standing there and her whole body relaxed, her face opening into a smile. She hastened toward me, stopped short an inch or two away, and enveloped me in her scent.

Instantly, the desire to touch her welled up again. I wanted to wrap my arm around her waist and walk side-by-side with her to my car. It was such a simple thing for a human couple, but not for us. I forcefully banished the thought and returned to my questions as I drove her home from school.

Bella's life before Forks was a mystery to me. I knew that she came from Phoenix where she had lived with her mother. She had spoken of both in her restless dreams. I asked her about her life there, what she loved, what she missed, and what she remembered of growing up. This was clearly a beloved topic, for words poured from her without hesitation and seemingly without censure. She rarely spoke as fluidly and at such length as she did about "home." Every detail fascinated me.

Time sped by and the sun dropped toward the horizon, as we sat parked in front of her house. With regret, I noted Charlie's muted inner voice approaching. He was vaguely hungry and seemed distracted by something I couldn't decipher. As I was listening for him, Bella spoke. "Are you finished?"

Ah, the questions. "Not even close—but your father will be home soon."

"Charlie!" she exclaimed, seeming startled by how long we'd been sitting there.

I had never been with Bella at this time of day and I suddenly realized that even in the tight confines of the car, my thirst barely disturbed me. I inhaled her fragrance, tasted her flavor on my tongue, and welcomed the fire. It almost felt like we could be ordinary lovers lingering over conversation, our bond untainted by monstrous desires. I wished this moment didn't have to end.

"How late is it?" Bella inquired.

"It's twilight," I replied, returning from my reverie. "It's the safest time of day for us, the easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way...the end of another day, the return of the night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?"

Bella's reply was not. "I like the night. Without the dark, we'd never see the stars. Not that you see them here much."

I laughed, appreciating her high regard for darkness...and perhaps, the creatures of the darkness.

I heard Charlie approaching and warned, "Charlie will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him that you'll be with me Saturday..." I paused, half hoping she would invite me in and do just that.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Is it my turn tomorrow, then?"

"Certainly not! I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?" So, so far from done. There would never be enough time to know everything before I'd have to let her go.

“What more is there?” she demanded.

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” I replied, indulging myself by reaching across her body to open her door. The frenzied pounding of her heart thrilled me, distracting me almost enough to miss what was coming right at us.

“Dad, please don’t embarrass me in front of Bella.”

“Ah, Jacob, don’t be so sensitive. I won’t tell her that you’re in luuuuuv with her.”

“Not good,” I groaned. Just what we needed—more problems. *Jacob*. After Bella’s fortuitous trip to the Quileute reservation, I’d asked Carlisle about Ephraim Black’s descendants. Now here they were in the flesh.

I pushed Bella’s door open and encouraged her to climb out as the car approached. “Charlie’s around the corner.” I glared into the headlights of the oncoming car as it pulled to the curb, facing us.

“Who’s this? Oh my word! Oh no! Oh, Charlie,” the elder Black exclaimed.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

I hoped Bella couldn’t hear them speaking. She stood on the curb, staring first at me, then at their intruding vehicle.

Why can’t the Quileutes mind their own business? I grumbled to myself. *That boy, Jacob, has already broken the treaty. They’d better not push me too far...*

I punched the gas pedal and fled. As I retreated, I heard Bella’s father call out, “Billy!”

13. BALANCING

Fuming, I sped away through the back streets of Forks until it occurred to me that it would be better to know what Billy Black had to say to Charlie than not. I turned my attention back toward Bella's house and looked for her image. There she was, approaching her front door through the eyes of someone following behind. It had to be Jacob. He had a crystal clear mental voice, deeper in tone than I had expected. I watched as Bella reached under the eaves to retrieve a spare key and unlock the front door.

I pulled my car to the curb a safe distance away to eavesdrop. Bella had led Jacob to the kitchen where she was working at the stove while he watched. Rather than listen for his father's voice, as I had intended to do, I couldn't resist watching Bella instead.

Jacob was distinctly curious.

"Is something wrong with the truck?" he asked.

"No," she replied curtly, avoiding his probing eyes.

This was the Jacob who'd let Bella in on our secret—unknowingly, since he didn't believe the legends. Nevertheless, it was still a violation of our treaty with the Quileutes. Her flirting had definitely had an effect on him—he held more than a passing interest in Bella.

He persisted. *"Oh. I just wondered because you weren't driving it."*

Bella kept her back to him and replied, *"I got a ride with a friend."*

Friend, indeed. Irritation crackled through me, as I realized she did not want to tell him about me. Why not?

"Nice ride. I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around here."

Did I detect jealousy in his words? Is that what sparked the fury I felt toward him as well? Why was he questioning Bella, anyway? What did he want?

When Bella failed to reply, Jacob went on, *"My dad seemed to know him from somewhere."*

Bella continued to dodge his implied questions.

"Jacob, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink."

How well I knew that technique! Jacob was not going to let it drop. Annoying as it was, I rather admired his persistence.

"Sure. So who was it?"

Bella sighed heavily and finally gave in. *"Edward Cullen,"* she admitted. Once again, I thrilled to the sound of my name on her tongue.

Jacob seemed unfazed. He laughed and said, *"Guess that explains it, then. I wondered why my dad was acting so strange."* Though Jacob didn't believe the old stories about us, his father knew from his own father that they were true.

"That's right," Bella said, pretending—unconvincingly—that she didn't remember the vampire story Jacob had told her. *"He doesn't like the Cullens."* That was the understatement of the year.

"Superstitious old man." Jacob seemed embarrassed. So he thought none the worse of us at least.

"You don't think he'd say anything to Charlie?" Bella blurted out.

So Bella doesn't want her dad to know that she's hanging around with this Edward Cullen. I wonder why, Jacob thought. *Hmm...surely, she's not serious about him. Is she?*

"I doubt it," Jacob finally responded to Bella's question. *"Charlie chewed him out pretty good last time. They haven't spoken much since—tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don't think he'd bring it up again."*

I had to give Charlie credit for disregarding the gossip and rumors about the Cullens. To be sure, Carlisle is impressive by anyone's standards, and no doubt Charlie had met him more than a few times in the hospital emergency room, where he was always at his best.

I cringed, reminded of my cruelty to Bella at the hospital. It had seemed necessary at the time to protect my family from her knowledge that I was not an ordinary human being—she had seen me lift Tyler's van with one hand, after all. And I regretted being unforgivably rude to her for several weeks afterward in an attempt to protect her from my insatiable interest. In hindsight, the first effort had been entirely unnecessary—Bella had never told anyone anything—and the second, an utter failure. So much for controlling fate.

Bella seemed acutely uncomfortable with Billy Black in her home and I didn't fully understand why. Billy wouldn't dare divulge what he knew about us to Charlie. He would never

break the treaty his grandfather had made with my family seventy-odd years ago. Surely Bella knew that.

So perhaps she just didn't want her father to know about me, period. My heart sank at the thought. If I were human, she would have no reason to be ashamed of me. Or maybe she just thought her father would disapprove.

Seriously, Edward, what father wouldn't? I had to smile at the thought, but it was a sad smile.

I left then, no longer concerned about Billy Black turning Charlie against me. I was a little troubled by Jacob, though. It seemed I had yet another rival for Bella's affections.

I had a few hours to kill before Bella and Charlie went to bed and I could safely creep in through Bella's window. I decided to go find Alice. Though I dreaded seeing her visions of Saturday, I also wanted to be prepared for the worst.

Jessica, and therefore, Mike (and probably the rest of the lunch gang as well) knew that Bella would be spending the day with me. It wasn't necessary that they know where we were going—just knowing we were together was enough insurance for Bella's safety. Should Bella not return, my entire family would be in danger from the townspeople, then the authorities, and eventually—through too much publicity—our vampire law enforcers, the Volturi. Of course, the worst possible consequence for me, if things went badly, would be her death. Were I to hurt Bella, I would wish for my own swift death. Still, I could not endanger my family.

Alice was waiting for me on the porch as I drove up.

Yes, I'll take a walk with you, she thought before I had asked the question.

We walked around the house toward the Sol Duc River that separated our home from the deep forest adjacent to Olympic National Park. I leaped across the river with no fanfare, not feeling particularly joyful. Alice's indistinct visions had rattled me. In an effort to improve my mood, Alice bunny-hopped over the river, grabbed a tree branch with one hand and cart-wheeled around it, landing adroitly by my side. She grinned.

"Sorry, Alice. I'm in a filthy mood. Billy and Jacob Black from the Quileute tribe are visiting Bella's father tonight."

And that's significant why? she inquired.

“You weren’t with us back then, but Billy is the grandson of Ephraim Black, the former chief. Billy wants to warn Bella’s father to keep her away from me. And he’s right, of course—she *should* stay away from me, especially considering your vision.”

Alice blanked out for a moment while she tried to clarify Bella’s immediate future.

Edward, I still see Bella in danger in the meadow, but the danger doesn’t feel imminent now. It comes later, I think. She paused again, her eyes empty, before returning to the present.

I’m eighty percent sure that Bella won’t die on Saturday.

“Eighty percent, Alice? That’s just great. Thanks a lot.” My words oozed sarcasm.

“Well, that’s better than it looked earlier in the week, Edward! Your confidence must have had an off day,” she said, flashing me an impish smile. “Anyway, it looks like you’re strong enough not to commit any grave (ha! ha!) errors on Saturday.”

“That’s not funny, Alice! Don’t even JOKE about that!” I yelled. I snarled too, for good measure.

“Oh, Edward, you need to lighten up. All this worrying will just make you more prone to accidents. Anyway, I don’t see you hurting Bella on purpose anymore.”

“Well, thank God for small favors!” I snapped. “Alice, what do you mean about danger in the meadow? Obviously, I’m a danger to Bella, but is there something else?”

I don’t know, Edward. Look...see what I mean?

The picture in Alice’s mind had Bella standing on the edge of the familiar clearing, gazing toward the forest on the other side, her body trembling uncontrollably. A figure had stepped out of the trees and was moving toward her. The image was fuzzy... was it me? All I knew for sure was that Bella was utterly terrified. As the figure got closer, it, Bella, and the meadow itself, suddenly faded to black.

This image is sometime in the future, Edward. I don’t know when exactly. As you can see, even though Bella seems extremely fearful, nothing happens. The picture just goes black. Sort of like a dream.

“Could that be because she—” I could barely think the word; my body froze in place “—dies, Alice?” I couldn’t look at her, or move, or breathe.

No, Edward. That’s not how it works. I’ve never seen this kind of, umm, blackness before. A death is just another image, but this scene ends in no image at all. It’s baffling. I don’t know.

Maybe you should take her someplace else. It doesn't seem like a real threat, but it is very strange...

Her thoughts trailed off. Well, one thing seemed clear—if Bella *was* in danger and if the figure in the image wasn't me, then it was all the more reason for me to stay close to protect her. That conclusion fit so well with my chosen role as Bella's guardian vampire, that I half smiled. I could live with that.

As we turned toward home, Alice threw one more thought at me. *You know, Edward, the other image hasn't faded.*

I knew immediately what she meant. "No, Alice! I don't accept that!" I shouted, as if yelling would make her vision less true.

It's always been a choice, Edward, one or the other. Either you kill her or you (or someone else) changes her. Since the chance of your killing her—on purpose, anyway—seems to be lessening, the other possibility grows stronger.

"You're wrong, Alice! I won't do it. I won't risk her soul."

You know I love you, Edward, but you might not have a choice. I'm sorry.

A stab of pain stole my voice and I could formulate no reply. The possibility was too dreadful to consider. I launched myself toward the river as fast as I could run, leaping much farther and higher than necessary to clear it. The air rushing over my face soothed the sudden ache in my chest.

"Bye Alice," I murmured as I raced toward Forks and my beloved.

It was not yet midnight when I arrived at Bella's house. It was a little earlier than usual, so I listened carefully from outside the house before I opened her window and stole through. I told myself that these nightly sojourns were good practice in acclimating to Bella's scent and tolerating the searing pain in my throat. If I shut her bedroom window, the heat of her respiration filled the room. Her scent intensified overnight, increasing the burn, but slowly enough that I could adjust gradually to it. My tolerance for the pain and for the blood cravings grew stronger every day.

But in truth, that wasn't why I kept returning. Being separated from Bella was far more painful to me than my scorched throat. Each time we parted, I felt like a piece of me was being ripped out. I became aware of a void in the center of my chest that I'd never noticed before I met Bella. It gaped open painfully when I left her and healed instantly when I returned.

She knew me. She knew what I was and she still wanted to be with me. It was a miraculous gift—one I never expected—and I was afraid it would destroy me to lose her now.

Nighttime had always been a lonely time for me, but loneliness was such a part of who I was that I gave it little thought. Before I met Bella, another lonely night was like a raindrop falling on the ocean. It melded with the whole of my experience, not significant enough to be regarded.

Loneliness is a chronic condition of our kind, almost integral to our nature. When Carlisle changed me, he was seeking a remedy for the pain of his isolation. Though he had spent some of his three-hundred-plus years with other vampires, they were so unlike him in the way they lived that he remained always singular, always alone. I know that creating me eased his pain. He had waited so long to find a kindred soul. He taught me what he believed to be the meaning of our existence. He taught me of honor, loyalty, and love.

Then he found Esme, and suddenly there were three of us. I never begrudged Carlisle his Esme and she became a mother to me. But there was always something extra between them than between he and I. Carlisle changed profoundly. He was no longer restless. He was more content, and though he had always been compassionate and giving, his medical service to humans no longer taxed him. Esme filled him with a joy and love that spilled over in an endless font. He was truly happy.

We lived as a family and spent our days together, but when nighttime came, they celebrated each other. Though I tried to give them privacy, it was next to impossible. Their thoughts—and images of one another—popped into my head no matter how I tried to block them. I frequently resorted to traveling far afield to hunt or to pursue my own interests.

Then Carlisle discovered Rosalie, broken and dying in the street. Out of compassion, he changed her, and then there were four of us. I'd known Rosalie Hale as a human teenager. She was the town prize, daughter of a banker, beautiful and wealthy. Boys wanted her and girls wanted to be her. She was haughty and self-absorbed before her death, and desperately bitter and unhappy afterwards. She took particular exception to me because I had been unmoved by her charms. Rosalie was not easy to love. Still, nighttime was less lonely with someone to talk to and quarrel with. Our relationship was often difficult, but Carlisle and Esme embraced Rosalie, despite her bitterness and pain.

Two years later, Rosalie found Emmett, and I returned to my solitary nights. I pursued my studies and various diversions. I followed Carlisle's example and studied medicine, though I never attempted a hands-on practice. Humans were not interesting to me except in theory, and the discomfort of being near their heated breath and pulsing blood removed any desire I might have had to become a doctor.

Emmett was a godsend. He changed all of our lives, but especially Rosalie's. He soothed her resentment and taught her to love in spite of herself. He made us all laugh and lightened every difficult situation, eased every transition and every uprooting. He was constant and caring, large and loud. Everything he did, he did with gusto, and without reservation. We fought and played and laughed, and he pulled me out of myself. He was the only brother I had ever known.

We carried on. My days were spent with family and my nights were spent alone. True to Emmett's nature, he and Rosalie shared a noisy, boisterous, physical love. Their coupling shook walls and collapsed roofs. It was so disturbing that Carlisle and Esme encouraged them to live apart from us, though nearby. Of course, they couldn't live apart from my head. Emmett, especially, was easier to read than anyone I had known. His thoughts had no protection, no masks, no subterfuge. Without realizing it, I learned about a man's love for a woman...again, in theory. I couldn't understand a lot of his feelings for Rosalie. They did not resonate with anything I had ever felt.

Alice and Jasper brought with them more of the same—a perfectly matched pair, sharing a world unto themselves. Their thought patterns were different than either Carlisle and Esme's or Emmett and Rosalie's. They were knit tightly together, perhaps because of the terrible traumas they both had suffered in their previous lives, or maybe because of their special talents.

As for me, I was still the odd man out, but Alice became the best friend I'd ever had. We both lived with many others in our heads—me, reading their thoughts, and Alice, seeing visions of their futures. It was disabling in some ways and made blending into human society more difficult.

Jasper also had become disabled as a human predator. Where I had heard my victims' thoughts before killing them—the good and the bad, the pathos and the cruelty—Jasper had felt his victims' feelings. Both of us would have gone mad if we hadn't stopped killing humans. Drinking a human's blood was also next to impossible for Alice, who, all the while she was feeding, would see her victim's potential future fade before her eyes.

But none of these connections with my family had prepared me for what I now felt for Bella. My feelings went far beyond the familial love that I had known. I became a moon in her orbit, iron to her magnet, a river to her sea. Every part of me was unalterably drawn toward her.

Nighttime is when I noticed the changes most, the time that heretofore was my own, when mates turn to each other and I had always turned inward. Since beginning my nocturnal visits to Bella's room, the old loneliness stands in high relief to the fullness of my present feelings. Now that it's gone, I truly understand what loneliness is. I can never return to who I was before, now that I know what I know. I am forever altered.

It made me happy just to stand in a corner or sit in Bella's rocking chair and watch her sleep—to see her chest rise and fall, to watch her restless eyes follow the pictures in her dreams, and to be a ready audience for her words. She was quiet tonight, peaceful, though she still spoke a few words.

"Green," she said abruptly about halfway through the night. I wondered if our long conversation about Phoenix had made her homesick for the brown of the desert. To soothe her mind, I softly sang her lullaby and she grew quiet.

As dawn approached, she became restless again and began to speak.

"Edward," she whispered. My heart soared.

Some time later, she began to moan and mumble. The words were mostly unintelligible until she said, "Kiss me." Dare I hope that it was me she wanted to kiss? Was it possible?

In our darkened biology lab, it had seemed like she was fighting the same urge to reach for me as I was for her. Also, I'd seen her hand twitch toward mine once or twice in the school parking lot before she'd snatched it back. And the electric current flowing between us was palpable. But to *kiss* her?

My own desire was abundantly clear. Whenever I looked at her full lips, I longed to touch them, to trace their outline with my fingertips, to feel their soft heat against my cool skin. I wanted to press my lips to other parts of her too: her eyelids, her cheekbones, the line of her jaw, the base of her throat, and lower, along her collar bones and the gentle curves below.

Bella suddenly shifted in her bed and her unconscious movement jerked me sharply from my fantasy. With a shock, I found that I had moved across the room to Bella's bedside and was slowly lowering my face toward hers. I flung myself backwards and hit the far wall with a thud. My breathing was fast and ragged. If I had had a working heart, it would have been pounding like a drum. I froze where I landed and listened for sounds from Charlie's room. There

was no disruption in his snoring pattern and I gradually relaxed my vigilance. Bella rolled over in her sleep. As I looked toward her still slumbering face, my breathing began to quicken again.

What had I almost done? Was Bella safe from me? With mounting concern, I realized that I didn't know the answer to those questions. Without a doubt, my desire for her contained an element of blood lust...perhaps a lot of blood lust. But it wasn't torturing me as it would have just two short weeks ago. To be here in this overheated room amidst clouds of her sweet fragrance should have overwhelmed me, but it didn't. The burn was there, but it was tolerable.

I was starting to wonder whether I should be worrying more about my desire for physical contact in its myriad forms. These new cravings were more difficult to control in a way. I wasn't accustomed to this kind of desire and it kept catching me by surprise. I was acting on impulse before I even knew what I was doing. I *must* be careful...very, very careful. I clasped my hands together in a belated attempt to prevent their wandering.

Just then, Bella spoke, soft and clear: "I love you, Edward."

My heart leaped with joy! She loved me! Was it true? It shouldn't be true. It was not safe for Bella to have these strong feelings for me. I would hurt her...one way or another, I would hurt her. But I refused to dwell on that now. I blocked the thought from my mind so I could revel in my elation.

She. Loved. Me.

As dawn began to break, I made my exit from Bella's room and sprinted home. I didn't want to be separated from her for a second longer than necessary.

As usual, Alice saw me coming and was sitting outside on the porch steps. She smiled knowingly as I walked by and my wide smile met hers.

Can I meet her now, Edward?

I sighed. "Yes, Alice, I will introduce you at lunch. Do you want to take the afternoon off and go hunting with me? I need to prepare for our outing tomorrow."

Yes, of course, Edward. Wouldn't miss it. She grinned and I went inside to change my clothes.

Bella would need her own vehicle to drive herself home from school today, but I could not resist picking her up anyway. Though it took only a few minutes to drive from her house to the high school, they were minutes I cherished. I positioned my car on Bella's street past her house, far enough along that Charlie wouldn't notice me when he left. As he drove around the corner, I rolled forward to Bella's curb.

We were playing a little game. She made a habit of rushing out the front door as soon as Charlie was gone, but no matter how quickly she appeared, I was always parked and waiting for her. Today, I was quick enough to kill the engine and roll down the windows, as if I'd been sitting there for an hour. Her eyes widened when she saw me, and she approached the car laughing.

"How did you sleep?" I asked disingenuously, suppressing a grin.

"Fine. How was your night?" she countered.

"Pleasant," I said, unable to hide my amusement. If she only knew just *how* pleasant!

She eyed my expression with suspicion. "Can I ask what you did?"

You can ask..., I thought, chuckling. Aloud, I said, "No. Today is still *mine*."

As we rode to school, I continued with my questioning. I knew from her dreams that she missed her mother, Renee. I wanted to know more about Renee. Was she anything like Bella? I had already identified many similarities between Bella and her father: their taciturnity, their seriousness, their sense of responsibility, their tempers. She had implied that her mother was very different—flighty, intuitive, impulsive, somewhat out of touch with the realities of everyday living. That helped explain Bella's maturity. But what was their life together like? How did they relate to each other? What did they do together? I looked forward to meeting Renee.

Between classes, I turned my questions to a topic about which I was extremely curious—Bella's romantic history. How many boyfriends had Bella had before she came to Forks? What were they like? Did she keep in touch? And especially, *how did they compare to me?* I wanted to know what distant rivals I might have. Even as that thought occurred to me, I knew by the sharp pang in my chest that it was wrong...*very* wrong...to view myself as competition for any human boy. True to form, I forged ahead anyway.

"Did you date a lot in Phoenix?" I asked Bella, trying to sound casual.

"No," she replied.

Though I was impatient with her short answer, I tried to keep my tone level. I wanted to know every detail about every one of them! Clearly, she was not eager to talk about it and that made me even more curious.

“How often did you go out?” I kept the question generic, hoping to elicit more information while masking my intense curiosity.

Her prolonged hesitation frustrated me. Finally, she looked down at her hands and replied, “Uh...never.” An appealing blush colored her cheeks.

“You *never* went out?” I responded in disbelief. I couldn’t let her dodge the question and that blush had to mean *something*.

“No, never.”

I was baffled, but my heart soared with hope. Could it be that Bella had never said “yes” to anyone until now, until me? Was that possible?

“So, you never met anyone you wanted?” I pressed, even more anxious for details.

Bella refused to elaborate. “Not in Phoenix,” she said.

So what did *that* mean? Was there someone here in Forks she’d been interested in? Who? *Tell me it wasn’t that weasel, Newton!* I suppressed a growl. *Crowley? Yorkie? Jacob Black? Someone else I hadn’t yet met?* How she frustrated me!

I decided to end this line of questioning and address our plans for tomorrow. “I should have let you drive yourself today,” I told her.

“Why?” She raised her tone slightly. Annoyed? Angry?

“I’m leaving with Alice after lunch.”

“Oh,” she said, her face falling. She was disappointed! Would she miss me? “That’s okay,” she continued. “It’s not that far of a walk.” How could she imagine that I would be so unchivalrous? She must not think very highly of me after all.

“I’m not going to make you walk home. We’ll go get your truck and leave it here for you.”

“I don’t have my key with me,” she sighed, as if that were some kind of deterrent to me. “I really don’t mind walking.”

I refused to budge. “Your truck will be here and the key will be in the ignition— unless you’re afraid someone might steal it.” I laughed at my own joke.

“All right,” she finally conceded. I knew she was wondering how I would retrieve her truck without the keys. How little faith she had in me. Or...how little she knew of my wily ways.

“So where are you going?” she asked, seeming not all that interested.

I hated to admit my weakness, but I had to be honest.

“Hunting. If I’m going to be alone with you tomorrow, I’m going to take whatever precautions I can.” Remembering last night’s incident, a wave of concern for Bella’s safety washed over me and took my confidence with it.

“You can always cancel, you know.” She *should* cancel, of course. Could she see that in my eyes?

She dropped her head and whispered, “No, I can’t.” Then she raised her eyes and peered sadly into my face. Backwards instincts, again.

“Perhaps you’re right,” I replied. *But I could. And I should to protect her from herself as well as from me!* But I was not strong enough—or perhaps, not good enough—to say the words out loud. My selfishness knew no bounds.

“What time will I see you tomorrow?” she asked. Why did she sound sad?

“That depends...it’s a Saturday, don’t you want to sleep in?”

“No.” Her forceful response amused and gladdened me.

“The same time as usual, then. Will Charlie be there?” I hoped so. A witness.

“No, he’s fishing tomorrow.” She grinned widely as if this were a good thing.

“And if you don’t come home, what will he think?” I barked, my worry automatically compensating for her seeming lack of concern. Why wasn’t she afraid?

“I have no idea,” she continued. “He knows I’ve been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he’ll think I fell in the washer.”

So she refused to tell Charlie that we’d be together! That angered me in more ways than one and I glared at her. She responded with her own kittenish anger and attempted to stare me down. I almost laughed.

“What are you hunting tonight?” she asked calmly, as if this were an ordinary, everyday conversation.

“Whatever we find in the park. We aren’t going far.” It was impossible to stay angry with her.

“Why are you going with Alice?” she continued.

Remembering my family’s reaction to my recent activities sobered me at once. I tried to be honest. “Alice is the most...supportive.” *At least she will still talk to me*, I thought.

“And the others? What are they?” Bella seemed concerned.

How should I reply? “Incredulous, for the most part.” That was certainly true. No matter what else they thought about my pursuing Bella, none of them could believe I was doing it. And they especially didn’t understand why. I had no convincing argument for them. Bella’s eyes wandered toward my siblings.

“They don’t like me,” she concluded.

“That’s not it,” I countered. *They don’t like that you’re human*, I thought, but even that wasn’t quite it. “They don’t understand why I can’t leave you alone.” To my knowledge, not one of my vampire family had ever been attracted to a human, though I knew that Carlisle had become attached to my mother and me in the hospital where we both lay dying of the influenza.

“Neither do I, for that matter,” Bella interrupted my wandering thoughts. How could I make her understand?

“I told you—you don’t see yourself clearly at all. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever known. You fascinate me.” She gave me an evil look. She thought I was kidding! Silly Bella.

“Having the advantages I do,” I began, pointing to my forehead, “I have a better than average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you...you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise.” Can she understand how remarkable that is? How extraordinary? How intriguing?

But, of course, that wasn’t the most important thing. Not at all. It was perhaps an initial lure and it kept me on my toes—Bella was never boring—but there was much more to it than that. My voice softened.

“That part is easy enough to explain, but there’s more...and it’s not so easy to put into words—” I was thinking of the words she’d spoken to me in her dreams, but I couldn’t return them now. I didn’t want to scare her away.

Glancing at Bella’s face, I saw that she was staring over my shoulder with a look of terror—*terror!*—in her eyes. What was frightening her? I followed her gaze to find Rosalie staring fiercely at her. Then I heard Rosalie mentally screaming at me and silently threatening Bella. *I can still take her out! If I hear that she’s spoken one word about us to anyone, I will do it!* Either I had been so engrossed in this conversation or had gotten so good at tuning her out that I was missing her latest tirade.

No matter what she thought, I would not allow her to threaten Bella. Without turning around, I sent Rosalie a warning hiss I knew she could hear. She turned her eyes away from Bella, but she didn’t stop yelling silently at me. That was fine.

Imbecile! Idiot! How dare you tell Bella anything about us! How dare you risk everything! I tuned her out again. She was frightening Bella and wasting our time together. I would deal with her later.

“I’m sorry about that. She’s just worried,” I said, trying to downplay Rosalie’s reaction. “You see...it’s dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly...” A stab of remorse cut through me.

“If?” Bella pressed.

I hesitated, not wanting to frighten her. “If this ends...badly.” What was I thinking? Of course she should be frightened! How could I be so reckless?

Run, Bella, run!

But like her, I was already in too deep to stop, come what may. Her calm voice broke through my torment.

“And you have to leave now?”

At least my hunting would improve her odds.

“Yes.”

But I hate to go! I miss you already! I declared to myself. Then I remembered biology class.

"It's probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in biology—I don't think I could take any more."

At least not without breaking the furniture or hauling her off to my monster's lair. I almost smiled at the image in my mind of the evil vampire in his black cape, his fangs bared, with the innocent maiden slung over his shoulder.

Time to introduce me, Edward! Alice had stepped up behind me and was smiling at Bella.

At least one of the Cullen sisters is anxious to know her, I thought.

"Alice," I greeted her.

"Edward," she answered aloud, for Bella's benefit.

"Alice, Bella—Bella, Alice."

Finally! Thank you, Edward!

"Hello, Bella. It's nice to finally meet you." *You're going to be my sister some day! If Edward doesn't kill you first,* Alice added in her head. She just couldn't help herself, could she? And what did she mean by "sister," anyway?

"Hi Alice," Bella replied.

"Are you ready?" Alice asked me. *You've told her, right?*

"Nearly." I answered both questions at once. "I'll meet you at the car." Happy now, Alice left us discreetly alone.

"Should I say 'have fun' or is that the wrong sentiment?" Bella inquired, the corners of her mouth drooping slightly as she tried for a smile.

Ah, she *would* miss me! My heart sang.

"No, 'have fun' works as well as anything." I used to, but all I could think about now was getting back as quickly as possible. The separation was necessary, though.

"Have fun, then." Bella attempted to sound cheerful, but her ability to fool me was limited. *She's an extremely poor liar,* I thought. My smile widened.

"I'll try. And you try to be safe, please." That was a problem, of course. Worrying that she would fall out a window, or pass out and drown in the school drinking fountain, or attract hungry, wild animals. *Like me?*

“Safe in Forks—what a challenge,” she mocked.

“For you it *is* a challenge.” Visions of roving vampires danced through my head. “Promise,” I demanded.

“I promise to try to be safe,” she intoned slavishly. “I’ll do the laundry tonight—that ought to be fraught with peril.”

Laundry...okay. I remembered her joke about the laundry being a dangerous endeavor.

“Don’t fall in.” The image amused me, in spite of myself.

“I’ll do my best,” Bella replied, as we both rose from our seats. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She sighed. I knew how she felt.

“It seems like a long time to you, doesn’t it?” I ventured.

She nodded unhappily and I was pleased I’d gotten it right.

“I’ll be there in the morning,” I promised, though I knew I wouldn’t have to miss her for as long as she would miss me. I fully intended to see her as soon as she fell asleep.

I reached across the table to let my fingers say goodbye. Slowly, my fingertips stroked her silky cheekbone. *Ahh...* I tore my hand away as a warm blush rose up her neck and across her face.

Mmm...the smell of her...the heat...the galloping heart...the bottomless chocolate eyes...the blood swirling beneath her skin... Everything about her was an invitation to me. I wished I could stay. Instead, I rose abruptly and hustled myself out of the cafeteria before I got too carried away. Time to hunt.

Alice was waiting in the car with the stereo turned up. She was singing along in her inimitable way.

“Thanks for being nice to Bella, Alice. Rose was giving her the evil eye. And I think she senses everyone’s ambivalence.”

“I have no—o—o am—bi—valence wha—a—at—so—ev—errrr,” Alice replied in time and in tune with the music. *I’m just going to assume that you won’t kill her. Or if you simply can’t keep from biting her, that you’ll stop before you drain all her blood.*

“That’s not funny, Alice! Don’t even think that in jest!” But the evil thought had already been planted in my head.

To taste Bella's blood! I could imagine the profound pleasure it would be. Was such a thing possible? It *was* possible in the vampire lore of movies, television, and books. Vampire “love bites” were commonly depicted as the climactic moment of making love with a human.

Myth.

The truth was that if a vampire indulged in any biting behavior, then the human didn't survive—at least not as a human. Venom was venom. There was no “safe” way for a vampire to bite. Wouldn't it be something if there were...?!

Ahhh!! No, no, no, no, no! What am I thinking? If I harbor secret thoughts of tasting her blood, I *will* kill her! And if, miraculously, I *don't* kill her, the venom would still end her human life...very, very painfully. Unthinkable! Well, clearly, not unthinkable—I was thinking it, wasn't I? *Ahhh!*

My head was a mess!

This was one of those times when I was glad Alice couldn't read my mind. My thoughts had traveled in exactly the direction her visions and her little asides had suggested.

“Ah, damn it, Alice!” I didn't even bother to explain myself. My teeth would never, ever touch Bella's skin and that was the end of it.

We'd arrived at Charlie's house and I stepped out of the car. I was angry with Alice, but also, and especially, with myself.

“You take the car. I'll find the truck keys and meet you back at the school parking lot.” She was already sitting in the driver's seat, so obviously, she'd seen my plan.

You can go in the window, as long as you do it in the next four minutes forty-five seconds, Alice thought. She was one step ahead of me. I shut the car door and she zipped off without another word—or evil, suggestive thought.

Though I could have used Bella's hidden key to enter through the front door of the house, I was accustomed to going in through the window. Anyway, the window put me right into Bella's room, where I expected to find her truck keys. I definitely didn't want to be seen climbing through Bella's window in broad daylight, but four minutes was an eternity to me. I leaped to the window, grabbing the eave with one hand while I opened the casement with the other. I slipped in and inhaled deeply.

Ahh, the lovely, familiar scent of her bedroom. I would never get enough of it. But no keys in sight, not on the dresser or the desk. I'd noticed that Bella didn't choose to tell me

where to find her keys when we were talking at lunch. That explained her dubious look when I told her we'd bring her truck to the school. She was challenging me. She had no idea....

Now that I thought about it, I should have asked Alice where the keys are. She could have watched me searching for them and told me where I would eventually find them without my actually having to look. Oh well, sometimes it was good to go manual.

Okay, where to start. Hmm, Alice had touched those keys last week when we brought Bella's truck home. The leather "B" on the ring would hold her scent. Maybe I could locate Alice's scent somewhere in the house. I sniffed. Not in the bedroom. I went down the hall. Not in the bathroom. I headed downstairs toward the kitchen. Nope. Living room. Nope.

It can't be that hard. Wait! Bella has laundry to do. It's natural to stuff one's keys in a pocket, especially a coat or trousers pocket. If I didn't find her keys in the laundry, I'd check the coat closet. I located the laundry room off the kitchen and caught the tiniest trace of Alice's scent amidst the stronger odors of Bella's and Charlie's dirty clothes. Getting warm. I followed my nose to a pile of clothes on the floor, among them a pair of Bella's jeans. *Got 'em!*

I was rather pleased with myself, actually—found in under two minutes. I made sure the laundry pile looked completely untouched, just to mess with Bella's head a little. Maybe she'd think I could summon the keys into my hand from wherever they were in the house, just like Harry Potter.

"*Accio, keys!*" I ordered. Okay, that was just silly. We're talking reality here, not fantasy.

I decided to exit the house the same way I'd come and reiterate my message to Bella—the one she didn't take seriously—along the way. Back in her bedroom, I found a sheet of paper and a pen on her desktop. I wrote two words:

Be Safe.

Aware of the irony of my writing those words to her, but unwilling to regard it, I folded the paper in half and stepped to the open window. I listened for anyone in the immediate area and, hearing no one, leaped through, grabbed the eave, and closed the casement in one motion before dropping to the ground.

I sat in Bella's truck and started the engine. *Unbelievably loud. But it's easy to find her when she's driving, so I suppose it's not all bad. But the speed! Ugh! How can she stand it?* Fortunately, it wasn't far to the school. Of course, nothing was very far away in Forks.

I parked the truck where the Volvo had been so Bella would find it readily, placed the folded sheet of paper on the seat, and joined Alice. She took us home, driving only slightly slower than I would have. I could tolerate it.

Since I wouldn't be using it for a while, I motioned to Alice to pull the car around to the garage. We got out and started walking toward the forest. *Are you still mad at me?* she wondered, almost to herself.

"I suppose not. But really, Alice, this is all hard enough without your unhelpful contributions."

"Women. Ya can't live with 'em. Ya can't eat 'em." She intoned, then chuckled at her own joke.

"Alice, pleeeeeease," I begged.

Try not to worry so much, Edward. I have every confidence in you. You love her. Love can do miraculous things. Just look at Jasper and me. Where would we be without each other?

"Speaking of Jasper, I haven't checked in lately," I noted, changing the subject. "How are things going at school? He's not keeping up this ridiculous exercise in building tolerance, is he? He was running a little too close to the edge last week."

I convinced him that he should hunt every week instead of trying to wait for two weeks. He sees the good sense in that, but it's hard on his pride. I don't know if he'll follow through. She paused and shut her eyes. No, looks like he won't. If you could check in with him when he tries to stretch it, that would be really helpful. If I bug him too much, he just goes all silent and stoic.

"I'll do my best, Alice. Remind me if you want to. My attention has been elsewhere recently." I looked at her and smiled wryly. All was forgiven.

I wanted him to come with us today, but he's going with Esme and Rosalie tomorrow. He's not pleased with the Bella situation.

"That's fine, as long as he doesn't interfere. Jasper is my brother, but I will fight him if he threatens Bella."

I don't see him doing that, Edward. Especially now that I've officially met her and we're going to be friends. I can't wait to do some girlie stuff with her. She needs serious help with her wardrobe.

It was no use trying to dampen Alice's enthusiasm and I wouldn't even try. "Just please don't say anything to her about—"

The visions. I know, Edward.

I let the subject drop. It was not something I wanted to think about right now and I certainly didn't want to argue the future with Alice. We'd reached the river anyway.

"Ready, Alice?"

Ready.

We leaped over the river and started running.

Charlie had just dropped off to sleep when I entered Bella's window. I recognized a CD of Chopin nocturnes playing softly. Bella was lying on her back, her hands crossed over her chest, almost as if someone had posed her in a coffin.

Yikes! Where did that thought come from? Alice's influence, again. I sighed.

By the heavy sound of her breathing, I knew Bella was deeply asleep, but the bedcovers were perfectly folded under her elbows and lay unruffled clear to the foot of the bed. She looked like she had made the bed, slid carefully under the blanket, crossed her arms, then hadn't moved since. It wasn't like her. Normally, she was a wild, restless sleeper with her sheets and blankets all untucked and tangled together.

I checked the CD player and found that it was set on Auto Repeat. I turned it off, deciding to sing to her instead. Her head turned slightly and her lips moved silently when I began, but she said nothing intelligible.

It had become my habit to sit in the rocking chair. It made me feel more human in this very human place. Standing like a statue, though my natural state, looked eerie to human eyes, I knew. It was one of the first lessons you learned living amongst them. Sit, don't stand. Twitch and fidget. Cross your legs. Move your hands. Blink. Humans were, by and large, very restless

creatures. That's why Bella's position seemed so strange. She hadn't moved at all since she'd lain down. Was there something wrong with her?

I stepped to her bedside and leaned over to listen to her heartbeat. Perhaps a little slower than usual, but strong and regular. Slower, hmm. Surely she doesn't take sleeping pills! That could account for her stillness. Or alcohol, I supposed, though I'd never seen her drink or even heard her talk about it. Nope, no alcohol on her breath.

Curious, now, I opened the drawer of her bedside table. Books. Earplugs. A miniature book light. MP3 player. No drugs. Since I now knew the layout of the house, I headed to the bathroom to look in the medicine cabinet. I knew that I shouldn't snoop around, but now that I'd thought of it, I was worried that maybe Bella had taken drugs of some kind. She wouldn't, would she? It didn't seem like her. Or was she sick?

The medicine cabinet contained a selection of the usual creams, salves, shaving supplies, aspirin, cold medicine, toothpaste and floss. No prescription drugs. Wait a second...cold medicine. Does Bella have a cold? I hadn't noticed any tissues by her bed or any sneezing or coughing today at school. Humans were so fragile. She could catch anything at any time. It was frightening, really.

I wondered if Bella had been keyed up and turned on the nocturnes to relax. And maybe she even took some cold medicine to make her sleepy. Was she more worried about being alone with me tomorrow than she would admit? Not that I would get a straight answer if I asked. Well, I would give her every chance to back out. It might be for the best anyway. Alice had seen danger for Bella in the meadow. She said it wasn't imminent, but she could be wrong...it might be.

I returned to Bella's room and sat down in the rocking chair. I began singing softly and watched as the corner of her mouth curved up. She rolled to her side and murmured, "Edward," as if she knew I was watching over her. I wonder what she would say if she discovered I actually was. Would that frighten her? So many, many questions.

Dawn arrived more quickly than I expected. It was so peaceful here, listening to Bella's breathing, knowing she was safe. Though the burn was always there in my throat, along with the hollow ache in my stomach, I had grown accustomed to it. It was like walking a long distance with a missing shoe heel. At first it seems intolerable, impossible to walk any distance at all. But by putting one foot in front of the other, your body gradually adjusts around the discomfort, easing it by bending one knee slightly or putting more weight on the toes.

I could partly compensate for the ache in my throat by focusing on Bella's intoxicating scent or by listening to the sound of her heartbeat or breath. I was also learning to mentally

block the pain in my throat by concentrating on more pleasurable sensations in my body: the pleasant “burn” in my fingers after I’d touched her face, the electrical buzz that flowed between us when we were close, or a new sensation that I’d noticed in my lower torso, a tingling heat. Turning pain to pleasure. It required some effort certainly.

It was time to take my leave. Charlie would depart early on his fishing trip, no doubt, and I needed to run home, change clothes, and run back. I could use the distraction about now.

I was not feeling particularly hopeful when I knocked on Bella’s door a couple of hours later. There was so much potential for the day to go wrong.

Bella was fumbling excessively with the front door lock. When she finally released it and opened the door, I looked her up and down and laughed.

“Good morning,” I said, suddenly cheerful.

Responding to my amusement, Bella asked, “What’s wrong?” It was just like her to assume that something was wrong—with her.

“We match,” I said.

She was wearing blue jeans and a long tan sweater with a white, lacy collar peeking from the neck. I was dressed just like her—blue jeans, white shirt, tan sweater—sans lace. Her expression as she looked at my clothing was oddly comical. She seemed surprised to have her attention drawn to it, as if she’d never noticed that I wore clothes. She laughed at the coincidence, though she began biting her lip and she avoided meeting my gaze. What did that mean? Was she frightened?

As we walked toward her truck, I dragged my feet, exaggerating my displeasure at being her passenger.

“We made a deal,” she reminded me. “Where to?”

“Put your seatbelt on—I’m nervous already.”

Humans were so fallible behind the wheel of a vehicle and vampires never were—or at least we had plenty of time to correct mistakes before accidents could occur. But she seemed to take great pride in driving me.

“Where to?” she repeated, and I submitted gracelessly to the inevitable.

“Take the one—oh—one north,” I directed, then distracted myself by gazing at her face, trying to detect any misgivings she might have about being alone with me. She was trying to concentrate on the road. She was also driving intolerably slowly.

“Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?” I asked impatiently.

“This truck is old enough to be your car’s grandfather—have some respect,” she snapped. *More like great-grandfather*, I thought, but kept it to myself.

“Turn right on the one—ten,” I instructed, a second before she asked. There was much one could read in body language and expression if need be. I was getting better at it. “Now we drive until the pavement ends.”

“And what’s there, at the pavement’s end?” Bella inquired. Her question reminded me of John Russell’s delightful book of short stories by that name from my much younger days. A *surprise*, was generally the correct answer.

“A trail.”

“We’re hiking?” she sounded concerned.

“Don’t worry, it’s only five miles or so, and we’re in no hurry.” *I would be happy if this day could last forever. And I can always carry you.* But I kept that thought to myself. She wouldn’t accept help easily.

Bella turned strangely quiet, her lip-biting the only evidence that her mind was unsettled. How frustrating it was that her mind was closed to me! I could take the tension for only so long.

“What are you thinking?” I had to know. Was she afraid? She was so stubborn that she’d never admit it if she were.

“Just wondering where we’re going.”

I didn’t believe her, but let it slide.

“It’s a place I like to go when the weather is nice.” *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as it were. There were parallels between Thomas Hardy’s hero and myself, including the pursuit of impossible love. I set the thought aside, wondering why book titles were so much in mind. Perhaps because of all the questions I’d asked Bella about her taste in books.

“Charlie said it would be warm today,” Bella noted, breaking the silence.

“And did you tell Charlie what you were up to?” I inquired.

“Nope.”

“But Jessica thinks we’re going to Seattle together?” It didn’t matter who knew we were together as long as someone did and I knew they did.

“No, I told her you canceled on me—which is true.”

“No one knows you’re with me?” I asked, alarmed. *Bella...Bella...what have you done?!*

“That depends...I assume you told Alice?”

“That’s very helpful, Bella,” I said sharply, sarcastically. No reply. “Are you so depressed by Forks that it’s made you suicidal?” I pressed.

“You said it might cause trouble for you...us being together publicly.”

“So you’re worried about the trouble it might cause *me*—if *you* don’t come *home*?”

Bella nodded.

Had this girl no sense of self-preservation at all? Insanity!

“You *will* take the risk seriously when you find me at your throat sucking the life out of you,” I blasphemed, too rapidly for Bella to understand my words.

I should tell her to turn the truck around, to give up the whole venture. It said a lot about my character that I couldn’t force myself to do it. Yes, I was in way too deep. So be it.

When the road ended, Bella pulled the truck to the shoulder and turned off the engine. I dared not look at her, angry and apprehensive as I was. If *I* was worried about what I would do to her, *she* should be positively terrified. But if she was, she wasn’t going to show it.

I removed my sweater in preparation for our hike. It would be sunny by the time we got to the meadow. I liked to feel the sun’s warmth on my skin, something that was only allowed when I was far away from human eyes. Bella would be the first and only exception to that rule.

“This way,” I directed, glancing back to check that she was following me into the forest. I saw that she had removed her sweater and tied it around her waist.

“The trail?” She stared at me in shock.

“I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it.”

“No trail?” She seemed greatly disturbed, but I wasn’t sure why.

"I won't let you get lost." I smiled in spite of myself and turned to face her. As I did, her face transformed into a wretched mask of despair.

Finally, she's beginning to understand the danger! I thought, both relief and anguish washing over me in a confusing flood of emotion. I'd promised myself that I would give her every chance to back out.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

She stepped toward me with a determination that belied her desolate expression.

"No."

"What's wrong?" I inquired gently, desperate to know what was going on in her mysterious, closed mind.

"I'm not a good hiker. You'll have to be very patient." She seemed discouraged by this admission. I was certain there was more to her distress than that, but I couldn't force her to tell me what she didn't want to say.

"I can be patient—if I make a great effort," I joked, realizing that I was not demonstrating patience to any degree at all today. At least I could do something about that.

She tried to smile, but the attempt faded before it reached her eyes. And her heart had begun pounding wildly. She must be very frightened, but was trying to put up a good front. I couldn't allow her to defy her better judgment for my benefit...again. I must put a stop to it.

"I'll take you home," I said, my heart sinking with disappointment.

Then Bella surprised me, of course. "If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way," she snapped.

Really? She's seriously upset by the prospect of hiking through the forest? I didn't truly believe it, and she seemed determined to proceed, so I reversed course again and headed into the woods.

I tried to make the journey easier for Bella. Her feet seemed a great curse to her, as they unflinching found and faltered on every protruding root, stone, and patch of moss. This *was* difficult for her, I realized. Ashamed of my insensitivity, I focused on easing her way without calling attention to her awkwardness. She seemed to appreciate the assistance when I pulled aside ferns and branches, and cupped my hand under her elbow to help her over obstructions.

What a convenient excuse I had to touch her! I felt a powerful zing of electricity flow between us each time I did so. Her heart raced and thumped whenever I reached for her. Did the chill of my hand on her elbow put her off?

Then I remembered my earlier conjectures about Ms. Cope and her similar physiological reactions whenever I drew close to *her*. I recalled her erratic, speeding heartbeat, the subtle flush of blood under her skin, and the dilation of her pupils. Her thoughts were easy to read—she was physically attracted to me. With a deep thrill of hope, I wondered if Bella’s racing heart and flushing skin were also due to attraction. Perhaps the surreptitious glances she cast toward my chest were not merely an attempt to avoid my inquiring eyes.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I was baring far more of my body today than I ever revealed in public. On these private sunny days, it was my habit to enjoy the sunshine and expose as much skin as was seemly. Today I had worn a shirt, but it had no sleeves and I’d left it unbuttoned to catch more of the sun’s rays. Was it possible that Bella was reacting to me just as I would to her if she were to do the same?

Instantly, my mind raced down that forbidden pathway, imagining Bella with her sleeveless shirt unbuttoned. I felt sensations in my body that I recognized as physical desire, my version of Ms. Cope’s reactions to me. A warmth spread through me, beginning in my lower torso and flowing toward my head, my feet, and my hands in waves. I stopped walking and rested my hand against the nearest tree, allowing myself a moment to process the sensations. I was surprised to have such a strong physical reaction to mere mental pictures.

I knew that fantasizing about Bella was a dangerous pleasure. First came desire, then came contact, and then she died. I must *never* forget that. The thought dampened my ardor immediately, but I refused to let despair overtake me on this glorious day. Bella and I were together and I must make the most of this time.

To distract myself, I decided to ask more questions as I resumed walking. What was her favorite school subject?

“English.”

Which year of primary school had she liked best?

“First grade.”

Why?

“That’s when I learned to read.”

What were your favorite birthday presents?

“Books and music.”

Did you have any childhood pets?

“Three goldfish, killed them all.”

So she could take care of her childlike mother, but couldn't keep fish alive. The irony tickled me.

I'd had no idea that the five-mile hike would take this long, but I was in no hurry to arrive. I just wanted to enjoy the pleasure of Bella's company for as long as I had it. I had decided that I would let her see me for exactly what I was on this pivotal day. It was the only way she could freely choose whether she wanted to be with me or not.

It was a difficult resolution to keep. At every revelation about my wretched existence, I expected her to turn and run away. Which disclosure would stretch her tolerance beyond its limits? Would it be my appearance in the sunlight? I grew tense as we got closer to the meadow, fearing that she would bolt, or worse, that I would repulse her. But there was no avoiding the moment. I was determined to move forward.

Much of our hike was spent in silence, marked only by our breathing, the beating of her heart, and the sounds of wild creatures in the woods. I wondered if she noticed that the birds grew quiet at my approach, and that small animals skittered away in terror. Perhaps not, human senses being what they are. Animals had a much more adaptive reaction to my presence than Bella did. That was undeniable.

When the sun appeared above the trees, Bella's pace quickened, though I was pretty sure her human eyes could not detect the upcoming clearing in the forest.

“Are we there yet?” she inquired with humorous impatience.

I smiled. “Nearly. Do you see the brightness ahead?”

“Um, should I?” she replied, mystified.

“Maybe it's a bit soon for *your* eyes,” I teased.

“Time to visit the optometrist.” As if that would help. I smiled and we pressed on.

I knew that my time with her might end abruptly when we reached the sunlit clearing, so I dragged behind as we approached it.

When Bella stepped into the meadow, *my* meadow, as I liked to think of it, she seemed entranced by its beauty. I watched her proceed alone into the circle of sunshine amidst the

colorful wildflowers and waving grasses. She looked so beautiful in this natural setting with the light glinting off her hair. I felt a pang of sadness in my nonexistent heart. How could she care for such as me?

I had another reason for hanging back in the shadows of the tall trees. I didn't want Bella to be too close to me when I stepped into the light. My appearance would startle, probably frighten, and perhaps repel her. If I kept my distance, I hoped that she wouldn't run. I watched her move forward, dread gripping me.

Suddenly, she spun around, her eyes scanning anxiously when she realized I was no longer beside her. Then she spotted me twenty feet back and turned around as if to retrace her steps. I raised a hand to caution her against approaching me. I couldn't bear to be close to her if she screamed, or fainted, or bolted in terror. I braced myself, took a deep breath, and stepped into the sunshine.

14. CONFESSIONS

Nothing could have surprised me more. Bella had not reacted with revulsion to my startling appearance. On the contrary, and beyond all my expectations, I no longer had any doubt that Bella—unbelievably and inexplicably—was physically attracted to me. It had become increasingly clear over the course of our afternoon together.

When I moved into the sunlight, her jaw dropped, her eyes grew huge and round, and a long, soft “Ohhh!” escaped from her lips. Her knees trembled as if they might buckle and I resisted the urge to run forward and catch her. This was a moment I could not protect her from. My stony, white skin sparkled and gleamed in the sunshine, throwing off rays of rainbow-colored light as if thousands of tiny crystals were embedded in the surface. It took some getting used to.

Bella stood frozen for a moment, her mouth gaping, her eyes moving from my face to my neck, to my shoulders, across my bare chest, down to my stomach, to my hands and up my arms. Her close scrutiny sent a shiver through me.

She took a step forward as if in a daze, one arm reaching in my direction. Then she stopped, seeming confused, before taking hold of herself. She closed her mouth, dropped her arm, and stood motionless, her eyes wandering again over every inch of my exposed skin. I suddenly understood how she must feel when she blushed. A ripple of heat swept through my body and my stone-cold skin became electric with sensation.

Watching her examine me, I did not detect fear. Her eyes were filled with wonder and curiosity. I remained motionless, allowing her to become used to my appearance from a distance. Minutes passed as she gazed at me, mesmerized, before she came to herself again.

Slowly, but with a sure intention, Bella stepped toward me, her eyes seeking mine as she crossed the twenty feet that separated us. As she approached, her scent floated toward me on the air and I closed my eyes and inhaled, holding my ground as the familiar burn scorched my throat.

When she grew close, Bella reached for my hand. I allowed her to take it and pull me into the clearing. To hold her warm, pliant hand in mine—it was one of my fantasies come true. I felt the electricity spark between our palms. A surge of joy shot through me.

When we reached the center of the clearing directly beneath the sun, I disengaged my hand reluctantly. Had its cold temperature disturbed her? I folded my legs and dropped to the ground. She followed my lead and sat near me.

Her eyes settled on my face, then scanned downward slowly, resting on my chest and shoulders before moving lower. The thrill of her eyes on me was overwhelming. I lay back on the grass and closed my eyes, giving her some privacy as she grew accustomed to my sparkling skin. I began to sing softly to myself. It was both an expression of my joy and a soothing palliative to my tension. I couldn't read Bella's thoughts, of course, but her reaction to me had been clear in her wide eyes.

Today, we existed outside of time in our own private world. I had never been in the presence of a human without adopting the façade of dress, mannerisms, and behaviors that allowed us to blend in. I was exhilarated by the sense of freedom I got from just existing, without artifice and without effort, allowing Bella to see me for what I am.

At some point in that timeless idyll, I felt Bella's finger stroke the back of my hand. The electrical charge was soft, a warm buzzing sensation. I remained still, allowing her to explore my skin, knowing that it must seem inordinately strange to her. After a few moments, I opened my eyes to try reading hers. She seemed calm and untroubled, with wonder in her eyes.

I ventured a smile. "I don't scare you?"

"No more than usual," she replied.

It was an amusing—and surprising—answer. Satisfied that she was more or less at peace, I closed my eyes to absorb her touch. Her heated fingers skimmed along my forearm, tracing the lines of muscle and sinew. They trembled slightly against my skin, but I understood now that this was not due to fear, or at least, not *only* to fear. She enjoyed touching me.

"Do you mind?" She spoke softly, tenderly.

"No. You can't imagine how that feels."

I released a deep, long-buried sigh. In my existence, I had never been touched like this by someone who wasn't my mother or sister. And even then, it was a profoundly different experience.

Her fingers trailed softly to the sensitive, inner surface of my elbow, an exquisite sensation. She pressed the side of my hand as if to turn it over and I flipped it for her. Startled at the speed of my movement—natural to a vampire, shockingly fast to a human—she froze for

a moment and held her breath. I opened my eyes just long enough to see that she had recovered from the surprise.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “It’s too easy to be myself with you.”

Never before had I so completely lowered my guard, neither with human nor vampire. And because her mind was silent to me, I expended no energy to read or to avoid reading her thoughts as I did around others. It is hard to exaggerate the tranquility that this gave me.

Bella lifted my hand and rotated it back and forth, presumably to see the crystalline sparkles dance in the light.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I whispered, unable to keep my curiosity at bay for long. “It’s still so strange for me, not knowing.” I gazed at her face, trying to read her mind through her eyes.

“You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time.”

“It’s a hard life,” I admitted. “But you didn’t tell me.”

“I *was* wishing I could know what you were thinking...” Her voice trailed off.

“And?” I coaxed.

“I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. And I was wishing that I wasn’t afraid.”

“I don’t want you to be afraid.” Though I knew she should be, I wished so much that she didn’t have to be.

“Well, that’s not exactly the fear I meant, though that’s certainly something to think about.”

Her statement surprised me and I wanted to understand what she meant, immediately. I flipped myself onto my right side, my free hand propping up my head. My eyes were near hers now, my palm in her hand. This time she was not startled by my speedy, vampiric movement, but I realized that her heart rate and respiration had increased and her translucent skin was coloring with blood. She looked into my eyes.

“What are you afraid of, then?” I asked, a little nervous to know.

She seemed poised to answer, but instead, leaned toward me precipitously. Her eyes looked dazed and she began breathing in short gasps. I felt the sweet heat of her breath on my face as her lips parted and approached mine. The smooth arc of her throat stretched beneath,

her veins pounding visibly with blood. Unwisely, I inhaled, tasting her breath on my tongue and feeling the dry, burning ache I knew so well. I shuddered as venom poured into my mouth and my muscles coiled to spring.

Disaster was imminent.

With only a fraction of a second to contain the monster, I leaped away from my would-be prey, back to the forest's edge. Panting, I clung to a massive spruce tree, borrowing its strength to fix me in place.

It would be so easy...so easy...

Using every bit of will I could muster, I somehow held my position. I clenched my jaw viciously against the unholy desire and focused on calming my frantic breath. Gradually, I regained sufficient control to know that I could run if I had to. I raised my eyes to Bella.

She looked stunned.

"I'm...sorry...Edward," she stuttered, unable to hide her bewilderment and pain.

Her eyes had misted over and the anguish I saw there completely short-circuited my hunting instinct. That was an unexpected blessing, something I could use.

"Give me a moment," I called from my cautious distance.

When I had fully mastered myself, I stepped into the sunlight and paced toward Bella. I remembered the principles of preventing fear in humans: move slowly, keep a distance of three to four feet, and look into their eyes. I followed all of these rules while approaching Bella, then sat on the ground opposite her. I felt chastened and raw, determined never again to see that expression of shock and dismay on Bella's face.

"I am so very sorry." In an effort to ease her distress, I joked gently, "Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?"

She nodded, a slight trembling apparent in the line of her mouth. There could be no doubt that Bella finally grasped the danger she had invited today. The scent of fear floated toward me in her perspiration.

I flashed a sardonic smile. Wasn't it my duty to demonstrate the extent of the danger so that she would fully understand? Maybe it excited me, in a perverse way, to frighten her; or perhaps the day's tension was suddenly too much for me; or maybe I simply wanted to release the last of my habitual bindings. For whatever reason, I pressed the point home.

"I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my *smell*. As if I need any of that!" I leaped to the spruce tree in a single bound, then raced around the circumference of the meadow in a fraction of a second.

"As if you could outrun me!" An evil-sounding laugh erupted from my lips.

I grabbed the largest limb I could reach on the massive spruce and snapped it like a twig, tossing the huge object effortlessly across the meadow. Where it crashed, a gigantic domino effect rippled through the woods from tree to tree. Before the noise dimmed, I reappeared in an instant at Bella's side, rigid and motionless.

"As if you could fight me off." I spoke quietly, dangerously, predator to prey.

Her fear was tangible now. She huddled where she sat, trembling, pale as snow, her breath halted altogether. But, miraculously, unaccountably, her gaze never swerved from me and she made no move to flee. As I met her frightened eyes, their liquid depths spoke to me—the human part of me—and brought me back to myself, to her, and to the tender moment we'd lost.

From wanton and fearsome, my mood swiftly rebounded to sadness and remorse. Now that I had proved to Bella how dangerous I was, I wanted desperately—unreasonably—for her to disregard it, to trust me, to feel safe with me.

"Don't be afraid," I begged, knowing it was far too much to ask. "I promise..." but the word felt wholly inadequate, "...I *swear* not to hurt you." If I said the words with enough certainty, perhaps I could make them true forever.

"Don't be afraid," I whispered again, craving to re-enter that space close to her. I moved as cautiously as I could, crossed my legs and sank to the ground, still watching her eyes, which were now a mere twelve inches from my own.

"Please forgive me." The gentleman I had been as a human re-emerged. "I *can* control myself. You caught me off guard. But I'm on my best behavior now."

Bella remained as silent and inscrutable as the moon. I tried again.

"I'm not thirsty today, honestly." I winked at her, enlisting all of my charm to disrupt her rigid immobility. It worked. She laughed a subdued, shaky laugh.

"Are you all right?" I inquired in my gentlest voice, seizing the opportunity to place my hand carefully back in hers. I awaited her verdict, searching her face for a sign, a *yea* or a *nay*. She looked at my hand, then up at my eyes, then back down at my hand. Finally, her index

finger resumed stroking my palm. The corners of her mouth rose slightly and she looked up at me with absolution. My heart soared—she'd forgiven me.

After a long pause, I asked, "So where were we before I behaved so rudely?" I wished to return to that magical moment before the beast in me had surfaced.

"I honestly can't remember," she admitted. I had frightened it from her mind.

I was ashamed, but my curiosity had not lessened and, of course, I had not forgotten a thing.

"I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason." As if that weren't enough cause to stay away from me.

"Oh, right," Bella answered, but offered no more.

Impatient, I prodded, "Well?"

Bella continued to stroke random lines across my palm. I could have shut my eyes and sunk back into the amazing sensation of it, but my need to know her fears overrode the desire. Still, she remained silent.

"How easily frustrated I am," I admitted sadly. It was a human discomfort I found hard to bear. She took pity on me.

"I was afraid...because for well, obvious reasons, I can't *stay* with you. And I'm afraid that I'd like to stay with you, much more than I should."

She couldn't meet my eyes and I realized then how difficult it had been for her to admit this. It was certainly a valid fear. I could barely breathe, though, with the thrill of hearing her say the words—she wanted to be with me! If she truly wanted me, I would suffer anything, bear anything, to make it come true! But it had to be her choice and she had to fully comprehend the danger. And it was wrong of me to want her to choose me. I knew that.

I selected my words carefully. "Yes, that is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That's really not in your best interest." I forced myself to continue, to tell her the truth as I knew it.

"I should have left long ago. I should leave now. But I don't know if I can."

"I don't want you to leave." I heard the sadness in her voice.

“Which is exactly why I should.” *Someone here should be strong enough to protect you from me...and from yourself*, I thought. “But don’t worry. I’m essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should.”

“I’m glad.”

“Don’t be!” My better nature struggled to assert itself and I returned my hand to my side. “It’s not only your company I crave! Never forget *that*. Never forget that I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else.” Must I tell her this? She *will* run away from me, screaming.

“I don’t think I understand exactly what you mean—by that last part anyway.”

No, how could she? I smiled at the rarity of such a conversation. But I must answer all her questions. I must not withhold any information as vital as this.

“How do I explain? And without frightening you again...hmmmm.” I noticed my right hand move back into hers of its own accord. She grasped it with both of her hands. I wanted her never to let go. “That’s amazingly pleasant, the warmth.” I could be happy just sitting here for days with my hand in hers. But the explanation. I owed it to her.

“You know how everyone enjoys different flavors? Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?”

She nodded.

I suddenly regretted my choice of words. “Sorry about the food analogy—I couldn’t think of another way to explain.”

She let me off the hook with a gracious smile. I returned it, chagrined.

“You see, every person smells different, has a different essence. If you locked an alcoholic in a room full of stale beer, he’d gladly drink it. But he could resist, if he wished to, if he were a recovering alcoholic. Now let’s say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac—and filled the room with its warm aroma—how do you think he would fare then?”

I paused, allowing her to come to her own conclusions and trying to gauge her reaction. Her eyes were asking questions, more questions. I pressed on, willing her to understand something that was possibly beyond a human’s comprehension.

“Maybe that’s not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin addict instead.”

“So what you’re saying is, I’m your brand of heroin?” She offered me an unflinching smile and I was exceedingly grateful. She understood.

“Yes, you are *exactly* my brand of heroin.”

“Does that happen often?”

This was a question I couldn’t answer with any certainty. There weren’t many vampires who had the relevant experience and even fewer of whom I could ask such a sensitive question.

“I spoke to my brothers about it,” I told her, reviewing their responses in my mind. “To Jasper, every one of you is much the same. He’s the most recent to join our family. It’s a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn’t had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor.” The word escaped before I had considered its effect on my audience. “Sorry,” I apologized with a quick look to see how Bella responded to my words.

She was generous. “I don’t mind,” she answered my questioning eyes. “Please don’t worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whichever. That’s the way you think; I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can.”

Bella’s equanimity on this subject was startling, but appreciated. I inhaled deeply, then gathered my thoughts.

“So, Jasper wasn’t sure if he’d ever come across someone who was as”—how could I say this delicately?—“*appealing* as you are to me. Which makes me think not. Emmett has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger than the other.”

“And for you?” Bella inquired.

“Never.” Which would help explain my extreme discomposure when I first caught her scent. I recalled the shock as if it were today, but it was a memory I couldn’t afford to replay when in Bella’s presence. It was much too dangerous.

My thoughts had wandered in their own direction for a moment, so Bella’s next question caught me by surprise.

“What did Emmett do?”

Immediately, I recalled the scene that ran through Emmett’s mind when he’d told me the story. Reviewing his experience was almost as dangerous as reliving my own. I turned my face away from Bella and locked my muscles down to prevent myself from reacting instinctively to Emmett’s memory. I waited while the urges lessened, then cleared.

"I guess I know," Bella admitted.

How it pained me now that I had revealed this information about Emmett to Bella! Emmett, like all of my family, was in that rare tenth of one percent or so of vampires who even *attempted* to modify their eating habits. We were the most humane of our kind. The fact that even we had made such mistakes and taken human lives revealed how truly damned we all were. I wished now that I could erase the memory of Emmett's blunder from her mind.

"Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?"

"What are you asking? My permission?" Her words cut me to the bone. I felt the misery in them. "I mean, is there no hope then?"

"No, no!" Regret coursed through me at the implication I had made. "Of course, there's hope! I mean, of course I won't..." My words trailed off, but she knew what I meant.

Was it really a promise I could keep? I believed so, or at least I hoped so. Wanting to be as honest as possible, I recognized suddenly that I was still unsure about my ability to control myself. But when I thought about where I was now, with the feelings I had for Bella, it became clearer that something had already changed in my basic makeup.

I tried to explain. "It's different for us. Emmett...these were strangers he happened across. It was a long time ago, and he wasn't as...practiced, as careful, as he is now." I waited to gauge her reaction to my backpedaling.

"So if we'd met...oh, in a dark alley or something..." she abandoned the sentence. We both seemed determined to avoid the actual words.

Telling the absolute truth at this juncture was excruciating, but perhaps more vital than it ever had been before. I forced myself to continue.

"It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class of children and —"
Too vulgar.

I started again. "When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself." The memory of that near disaster galled me. "You must have thought I was possessed."

"I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me so quickly..." It was the first time she had revealed her pain in that moment.

I tried to explain. “To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin...I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow....” I peered into her eyes as my words entered her consciousness and struck their mark.

“You would have come.” I knew this as surely as I knew my name. The ability to seduce was one of our weapons.

“Without a doubt,” Bella conceded and I wondered how *she* knew that.

But there was even more to the story and she was still sitting here with me. It was my duty to continue to the bitter end. I dropped my eyes in shame.

“And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there—in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there—so easily dealt with.” The worst had been said. Now just the fallout remained.

I glanced up. Remarkably, Bella, though shivering, stayed where she was. Perhaps she was too afraid to run. I continued.

“But I resisted. I don’t know how. I forced myself *not* to wait outside for you, *not* to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn’t smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home—I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong—and then I went straight to Carlisle, at the hospital, to tell him I was leaving.”

Bella’s eyes grew wide and her mouth slackened, but I pressed on.

“I traded cars with him—he had a full tank of gas and I didn’t want to stop. I didn’t dare to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn’t have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn’t necessary...”

“By the next morning I was in Alaska. I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances....but I was homesick. I hated knowing I’d upset Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I’d dealt with temptation before, not of this

magnitude, not even close, but I was strong. Who were you, an insignificant little girl”—the word amused me now— “to chase me from the place I wanted to be? So I came back....”

“I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it.”

“It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn’t simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn’t used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica’s mind...her mind isn’t very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that. And then I couldn’t know if you really meant what you said. It was all extremely irritating.” How clearly I remembered that feeling. I had it still.

“I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting. I found myself caught up in your expressions...and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again....”

“Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes. Later, I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment—because if I hadn’t saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don’t think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are. But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, ‘Not her’.”

I had completely relinquished control of my words and allowed them to flow however they would, to lay everything out before this angel and let her face the devil in me. Whatever she thought, however she responded, it was all in her hands. I would fulfill my duty.

She gently pushed me to continue. “In the hospital?”

I looked her in the eyes and said, “I was appalled. I couldn’t believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power—you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you.” The baldness of that word in this peaceful place felt sacrilegious. I hurried on...

“But it had the opposite effect. I fought with Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper when they suggested that now was the time...the worst fight we’ve ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Alice.” *Though Alice still saw you dead in my arms or changed at my hand.* “Esme told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay.”

Then I thought of something that I couldn’t say out loud, but the inference was easy to make. Bella was concerned that my family didn’t like her. Now she would know exactly where each of them stood on the issue of taking her life. We Cullens are not your typical neighborhood family. It would almost be amusing if it weren’t so real.

“All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn’t understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn’t become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair...it hit me as hard as the very first day.”

“And for all that, I’d have fared better if I *had* exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here—with no witnesses and nothing to stop me—I were to hurt you.” That was as deep a truth as I knew. And now she would know it too.

But she didn’t understand. “Why?”

I prepared myself to be as clear as I could be.

“Isabella...” saying her beautiful name aloud filled me with joy; I reached toward her to ruffle her shining mane of hair. The fragrance was heavenly. “Bella, I couldn’t live with myself if I ever hurt you. You don’t know how it’s tortured me.”

“The thought of you, still, white, cold...to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses...it would be unendurable.” I held nothing back now. I had nothing left to retain, not even my pride.

“You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me ever.”

I let the words sit there. I had no heart left to conceal myself, to demand a response, or even to hope for any future at all. I had revealed myself to her, with no attempt to hide what would surely turn her away. An eternity passed in those moments.

Then I remembered something Alice had said to me recently. “Don’t underestimate Bella.” Perhaps I had been, for she remained where she was, quietly contemplating, her eyes focused on our hands. She wasn’t running away from me, screaming...yet.

When time no longer had any meaning to me, Bella answered all of my words with just a few of her own. Her soft, even voice assured me of their truth.

“You already know how I feel, of course. I’m here...which roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you.” Her face crumpled into a frown. “I’m an idiot,” she added.

Her words shocked me with their simplicity. The tension I had been holding onto for hours broke free in that moment. “You *are* an idiot,” I concurred, and we gave ourselves over to laughter at the impossibility of our situation.

“And so the lion fell in love with the lamb,” I quoted. Bella looked away shyly, then replied.

“What a stupid lamb.”

“What a sick, masochistic lion.”

What would become of us? Yes, there was hope. But was there a future? Any at all? I had no idea.

Bella broke into my thoughts with a word. “Why...?” Even her inexpressible curiosity gratified me.

“Yes?” I pressed.

“Tell me why you ran from me before.”

Owww...The memory of losing control stung.

“You know why.” I couldn’t bring myself to repeat the words. But I had misunderstood.

“No, I mean, *exactly* what did I do wrong? I’ll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn’t do. This, for example”—she stroked the back of my hand—“seems to be all right.”

Yes, it *was* all right. More than all right. I smiled reassuringly.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Bella. It was my fault.” It would always, always be my fault.

“But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you.” That was so Bella. Even when her life was threatened, she was concerned for the would-be murderer. It was no wonder I loved her. But it *was* important to know what particular thing had tripped my hunting trigger.

“Well...” I considered each step leading to my panic and identified the precise moment it rose. “It was just how close you were,” I realized. “Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness....I wasn’t expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your *throat*.” I reveled in the memory before realizing the word’s likely effect on Bella. I turned my eyes her way.

When I looked at her, she dropped her chin, covered her throat with her hands and said, “Okay, then, no throat exposure.” Her silly expression, along with the idea that her little hands could prevent me from doing *anything* I chose to do, made me laugh in spite of myself.

“No, really,” I told her, “it was more the surprise than anything else.”

I sought to prove it to myself. I reached out and placed my free hand on the smooth, ivory skin of her neck. I could feel her racing heart and the blood pumping beneath her skin. Absolutely enticing. The burn that had been with me all day intensified sharply. I held myself still and waited for it to subside.

“You see? Perfectly fine.”

Bella seemed to react as strongly to my touch as I had to hers. Her heartbeat quickened markedly and the rush of blood to her pale face turned her skin a soft pink color.

“The blush on your cheeks is lovely,” I murmured, almost to myself. I would allow myself to touch her heated skin. I was testing my control, after all.

I loosened my left hand from her grip and stroked her cheekbone gently before molding both hands to the heart shape of her face. *The warmth!* Electricity flowed through my palms with a soft buzz. *Heavenly.* The welling of joy inside me made it easy to ignore the fire clawing my throat. Bella’s heartbeat was so compelling, so enticing, that I wanted to be nearer to it.

“Be still,” I warned, as I drew my face closer to hers. She became as motionless as a human could be. I examined her eyes for any sign of fear, then laid my right cheek at the base of her throat. Pressing my face against her flushed skin was as profoundly pleasurable as listening to the rush of her blood beneath it.

My craving for Bella’s blood had not lessened, but I was experiencing another kind of desire that was becoming more urgent, nearly rivaling the thirst. If I focused my attention on the new sensations, the burn faded somewhat from my consciousness.

While keeping my cheek at Bella’s throat, I allowed my hands to drop slowly from her face onto her neck, an embrace familiar from the habitual hunting of humans. It had been so long since my hands had touched a human thus that I wasn’t compelled to follow through with my teeth. Instead, I concentrated on the friction of my cold hands against Bella’s soft flesh and the warmth that her skin transferred to mine.

As my hands moved slowly down her neck, a shiver traveled through Bella’s body. It passed into my hands and face and vibrated through me. The excitement of it throttled my breath, but I kept my hands moving, settling them on her shoulders. Then ever so slowly, I trailed my nose across her right collarbone, finally placing my cheek over her galloping heart.

“Ah,” I exhaled heavily, as the sound, heat, and electricity from Bella’s body entered mine. A sense of fullness in my chest radiated through me. Her heart throbbed against me until

it felt like my own. I savored my borrowed humanity for ten minutes, fifteen... Gradually, Bella's frantic heart and ragged breath, as well as my own, slowed to a calm, even rhythm. I let my hands drop and raised my face to look at hers.

"It won't be so hard again," I said, knowing this truth in my bones. I had made contact with the part of her most likely to provoke my hunting instinct and it had not. Without a doubt, this had been a dangerous experiment, but something in me had changed today. I knew now that I could never intentionally hurt her.

"Was that very hard for you?" Bella asked, no fear evident in her voice.

"Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be," I told her. "And you?"

"No, it wasn't bad...for me." I smiled at her implication that it had been the opposite, happy that she hadn't been afraid.

"You know what I mean," I chastised.

She smiled mysteriously.

"Here." I placed her hand against my cheek. Her body heat had transferred to me. Maybe she wouldn't mind touching me there now. "Do you feel how warm it is?"

She didn't reply, but gazed at my face with a look of what? Longing?

"Don't move," she whispered. It was easy to submit to her wishes. I calmly locked my muscles, closed my eyes, and settled into stillness.

Bella leaned slowly toward me, her temperature hotter and her scent sweeter the closer she came. Her careful approach gave me time to adjust to the proximity of the heady fragrance. Her soft hand stroked and cradled my cheek, then her fingertips explored the contours of my closed eyes, down the length of my nose, and finally, around the sensitive curves of my lips. They parted at her touch and I inhaled her scent, tasting her essence at the back of my throat. Taste, touch, and scent prompted an array of physical responses in my body. Incompatible urges competed for precedence, building a confusing tension. Remaining silent and absolutely still allowed me to feel each one while resisting acting on any of them.

Abruptly, Bella withdrew her hands and leaned away from me. I opened my eyes slowly, my head swimming in sensation, my breath uneven.

"I wish..." My voice came out in a whisper; my thoughts were difficult to organize. "I wish you could feel the...complexity...the confusion...I feel. That you could understand."

I wanted to touch Bella, too. I reached out to smooth her hair from her face, then stroked her cheek once with the back of my hand.

“Tell me,” she implored, her voice husky.

“I don’t think I can. I’ve told you, on the one hand, the hunger—the thirst—that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though, as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can’t empathize completely.” I smiled ruefully.

“But...” I touched my fingertips to the bow of her tantalizing upper lip, then along her plump lower lip. I wanted to press my lips against them. “There are other hungers. Hungers I don’t even understand, that are foreign to me.”

Bella’s breath became rapid and jagged. “I may understand *that* better than you think.” It was then I knew with certainty that Bella felt the same desire for me as I did for her. It was a heady moment.

“I’m not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?”

“For me?” Bella responded. “No, never. Never before this.”

I collected her soft hands and held them between my own. Again, I told her the raw truth. If she wanted to be physical with me, as she seemed to, she needed to know my doubts... and my limitations.

“I don’t know how to be close to you. I don’t know if I can.”

In silent reply, Bella looked into my eyes and leaned slowly toward me. I remained very, very still and watched as she moved her face toward my chest and placed her cheek against my bare skin. Her warmth where my heart should have been and the scent of her hair so near my face were intensely pleasurable.

“This is enough,” she assured me. Whether that was true, or if so, whether it would always be true, were unanswerable questions. But this I *could* do and I would hold onto this new experience for as long as she would allow. I wrapped my arms around her waist and nestled my face in her hair.

“You’re better at this than you give yourself credit for,” Bella remarked.

“I have human instincts—they may be buried deep, but they’re there.”

And this was another truth I suddenly recognized. Holding Bella was as natural to me as breathing. I couldn't escape the burning in my throat when I inhaled or the intrusive thoughts of her arteries pulsing with blood, but these troubling reactions were balanced and contained somehow by the delicious electricity that flowed between us wherever we touched, by her softness and warmth, and by the intimate connection I felt with her that I had never felt with anyone before. Love and desire intertwined.

We remained there, my arms holding Bella against me, and we listened to the sound of one another's breathing until daylight began fading toward twilight. The time of endings. Bella sighed.

I knew what she was thinking. "You have to go."

"I thought you couldn't read my mind."

"It's getting clearer." Or at least more predictable over time. I smiled.

It had been a miraculous day! I had shown Bella who—what—I was and she was still here. She seemed to want to be here. The sense of freedom this loosed in me was indescribable. As vampires in a human world, we could be ourselves only at home or far from human civilization. It was a glorious revelation that I could love Bella in this new way *and* be myself with her.

With my newfound liberty, I wanted to share something with Bella, one of the joys of my existence.

"Can I show you something?" I asked her, enthusiasm ringing in my voice.

"Show me what?" She seemed a little suspicious.

"I'll show you how *I* travel in the forest." Bella scowled slightly.

"Don't worry, you'll be very safe, and we'll get to your truck much faster." She couldn't possibly want to repeat that five-mile hike in the semi-darkness. How could she resist my offer? I seduced her with a smile.

"Will you turn into a bat?" Was she *serious*? The thought of her buying that old myth was hilarious and I laughed with great amusement. Transfiguration was definitely not one of my talents.

"Like I haven't heard *that* one before!" I couldn't contain myself.

“Right, I’m sure you get that all the time,” she said, poking fun. *Humans*. But she was just stalling.

“Come on, little coward, climb on my back.” She hesitated like *she* thought *I* was joking. I stretched my arms toward her and she allowed me to swing her onto my back. I wrapped her arms tightly around my neck and her legs tightly around my waist to secure her to me. The warmth of her torso and limbs encircling me and the pounding of her erratic heartbeat against my back were exciting, and comfortable, and felt natural to me.

“I’m a bit heavier than your average backpack,” Bella apologized.

“Hah!” How she made me laugh! Impulsively, I took her hand and pressed it to my nose and mouth, inhaling deeply. The combination of scent, heat, and electricity was intoxicating, and wonderfully—rather than painfully—stimulating.

“Easier all the time,” I noted, before dashing into the woods at vampiric speed. Running fast was one of my favorite activities. I hoped Bella liked it too.

As I ran, my mind reviewed everything that had happened between us today. Our careful balancing act was over. We had fallen from the razor’s edge. Now we could pick ourselves up, examine the landscape, and decide where to go—together.

Our closeness had encouraged me greatly. Though I would love and honor Bella with or without physical contact, I was overjoyed that we could touch each other in some limited way. I did not want to deprive Bella of anything that wasn’t absolutely necessary to keep her safe. I aspired to give her all that a human man could give her.

In particular, I had not forgotten the conversation Bella had had with Jessica after our fateful night in Port Angeles. Jessica was *sure* that Bella wanted me to kiss her. At the time, it had seemed highly improbable that Bella could want that, knowing what I was. More importantly, I didn’t think I was remotely capable. It would take monumental self control.

After today, however, it did seem possible. I’d just held Bella’s palm to my nose and her wrist next to my teeth (!) and it was fine. Better than fine! And I wanted more...I wanted to press my lips to her eyelids...cheekbones...jaw...throat...*and* lips. I wanted to feel her hot breath on my face and her warm, silky skin against mine. The desire was overpowering.

Our journey soon ended. Running back from the meadow, even carrying Bella, was fifty-four times faster than our morning hike. Not that I minded hiking at Bella’s pace. Any time spent with her was precious and any excuse to touch her, if only to assist her around obstacles, was a pleasure. She clearly didn’t enjoy hiking off trail, though. She probably didn’t like hiking on trail much either with her physical awkwardness and faulty sense of balance.

When we reached Bella's truck, I stopped to set her down.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" No reply and no movement was forthcoming.

"Bella?" Surely she hadn't fainted. No, she was still clinging tightly to me.

"I think I need to lie down," she croaked.

"Oh sorry," I said, and released my grip to let her slide off. Again, no response from Bella.

Then finally, she squeaked, "I think I need help."

The run must have done her in. Chuckling, I released her grip around my neck and pulled her into my arms before setting her on some soft ferns.

"How do you feel?" I inquired.

She looked dazed. "Dizzy, I think."

"Put your head between your knees." I'd gotten the remedy from decades of high school gym classes. I sat down beside her while she tried to recover.

"I guess that wasn't the best idea."

Typically, Bella tried to brush off her distress as nothing, a wasted effort in this case. "No, it was very interesting," she said, her head still between her knees.

"Hah! You're as white as a ghost—no, you're as white as *me!*" I was not exaggerating.

"I think I should have closed my eyes."

"Remember that next time."

"Next time!" Her desolate tone tickled me and I laughed out loud.

"Show-off," she accused. She seemed to be recovering.

Sitting beside her, my body still warm from our close contact, my wants caught up with me. I wanted to distract her from her discomfort; I wanted to give her something from my heart; I wanted to know; and I just plain wanted her...

I leaned my face close to hers, just as she had done so disastrously to me in the meadow. Maybe I could redeem myself.

“Open your eyes, Bella.” I felt her heated breath sweep across my face. “I was thinking, while I was running...” How to proceed from here?

“About not hitting the trees, I hope,” Bella interrupted.

“Silly Bella, running is second nature to me, it’s not something I have to think about,” I informed her, amused.

“Show-off,” she reiterated.

“No, I was thinking there was something I wanted to try.”

There was only one way to know...I took her face in my hands and very slowly, very carefully, moved closer to her, at each moment weighing the strength of my self control. I felt the electric fire in my hands and tasted the sweetness of her breath on my tongue. I inhaled her flowery scent and braced against the searing of my throat. When at last I pressed my cold stone lips gently to hers, the sensation was profound, intense...and extraordinarily pleasurable.

Bella’s response was immediate and shocking. Her heart pounded frantically, flooding the capillaries under her skin—and her lips—with blood. It sang to me as it raced and swirled and throbbed. Her hands reached for me, lacing themselves tightly through my hair as she pressed her body into mine with startling force. Her lips parted as she inhaled in jagged gasps and exhaled her delicious breath over my face. I inhaled fire.

It was too much. Abruptly, I froze, locking my muscles—especially my jaw—against a rising tide of conflicting desires: to touch, caress, to pull her body powerfully against me, to kiss her face, her neck, to pierce her transparent skin, to drink...to abandon control and take all that I craved.

I have no idea how I prevented myself from committing the worst kind of atrocity at that moment. Perhaps some part of me never forgot that I held Bella, my beloved. I clutched her face and detached it from mine, calmly, but firmly, shifting her head back a few inches. I held us there in a vice of restraint, trying to avert the dangerous panic that had pained and frightened us both this afternoon. One by one, I mastered my worst impulses.

“Oops,” Bella whispered, contrite.

“That’s an understatement,” I uttered through clenched teeth.

“Should I...?” Bella tried to move away from me, but I couldn’t let her go.

“No, it’s tolerable. Wait for a moment, please.” I breathed in, breathed out, and struggled to calm myself. Slowly, my muscles uncoiled, the venom slowed, and the intense sensations in my body receded. I smiled and released Bella’s face.

“There,” I said, triumphant.

“Tolerable?” Bella mocked.

I laughed, reveling in my victory over myself.

“I’m stronger than I thought. It’s nice to know.”

“I wish I could say the same. I’m sorry.”

“You are only *human*, after all,” I teased.

“Thanks so much,” she replied tightly.

It was time to go. I leaped to my feet, not bothering to slow my movements, and extended my hand to assist Bella. She looked at it for a moment, seeming almost puzzled, then reached to take it. I lifted her to her feet where she swayed slightly, unable to find her equilibrium.

“Are you still faint from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise?” I joked, exuberant with joy. I had imagined a hundred different scenarios for this day with Bella, ranging from an avowal of love, to her violent demise. Today’s events had so far exceeded my expectations that I could not contain myself. Not only was Bella still alive, but she loved me too! And beyond anything I had dreamed was this new possibility of loving Bella in another way, a physical way. I was ecstatic, though I knew the future would be perilous and would require more from me than anything ever had before.

“I can’t be sure, I’m still woozy. I think it’s some of both, though.” I was delighted.

“Maybe you should let me drive,” I said.

“Are you insane?” she retorted.

Bella hated to show weakness. It was an endearing, if frustrating quality. “I can drive better than you on your best day. You have much slower reflexes,” I countered, grinning.

“I’m sure that’s true, but I don’t think my nerves, or my truck, could take it.”

“Some trust, please, Bella.”

“Nope. Not a chance.” How stubborn she was!

She started to walk around me toward the driver's side of the truck when she lost her balance. I caught her around the waist and boosted her upright.

"Bella," I said, "I've already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive. I'm not about to let you behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can't even walk straight. Besides, friends don't let friends drive drunk." The cheap joke was too obvious to ignore.

"Drunk?" she questioned with a sideways look.

"You're intoxicated by my very presence," I accused, laughing.

Her protest collapsed, but not her resistance. "I can't argue with that," she admitted, lifting her keys above her head and releasing them. I snatched them out of the air effortlessly.

"Take it easy—my truck is a senior citizen," she added.

"Very sensible," I agreed.

"And are you not affected at all?" She scowled at me. "By my presence?"

Despite her irritation, her insecurity touched me and I felt a rush of tenderness for her. But really, how could she not know? I leaned in and touched my lips to her jaw, then gently swept them across her soft skin from her ear to her chin, back and forth, back and forth. With smug satisfaction, I felt her heart race, watched her lips turn a luscious scarlet, and heard her breath quicken to a pant. A thrilling shiver passed from her body into mine.

"Regardless," I finally responded, "I have better reflexes."

And thank heaven, better control. Easier all the time.

I couldn't stop smiling.

15. MIND OVER MATTER

On the drive back to Forks, I kept glancing at Bella, marveling that she was sitting there beside me. We could have been any human couple spending a Saturday together. I reached for her hand and held it on the seat between us. Now that I knew I could do so safely and that she didn't object, I wanted never to stop touching her. It was another dream coming true.

Her old Chevrolet truck was not part of my fantasy, though. I didn't have much appreciation for classic vehicles unless they were of the high-octane, high-speed variety. The evolution of transportation in general, and automobiles in particular, was one of the most worthwhile advances of the twentieth century. I was in no way nostalgic for old-time cars or trucks. One of these days, I would buy Bella a new car, especially if I would be driving her around in it. Fortunately, her ancient radio worked and I twirled the dial until I found a station to my liking.

"You like fifties music?" Bella asked.

"Music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties, or the seventies, ugh! The eighties were bearable." I hadn't seen where this conversation was heading until we were already there. It was one of the many pitfalls of not being able to read Bella's mind.

"Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?"

"Does it matter much?"

"No, but I still wonder...There's nothing like an unsolved mystery to keep you up at night." Always curious, she was.

"I wonder if it will upset you." So far, Bella had maintained a remarkable equanimity through all of my startling disclosures. I kept wondering what bit of information would finally push her over the edge and away from me.

"Try me," she prompted when I hesitated.

I sighed in resignation. She'd heard more frightening things about me than my age. I supposed one more disquieting fact would make little difference. Still, I gazed into her eyes to try to predict her response. She looked calm.

"I was born in 1901." Her reaction seemed carefully controlled. She didn't flinch, at least. So I continued.

“Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and dying of the Spanish influenza.” Bella inhaled sharply and I could see that this news hurt her. I hastened to reassure.

“I don’t remember it well—it was a very long time ago, and human memories fade.” I wondered how much of this Bella should hear. “I do remember how it felt when Carlisle saved me. It’s not an easy thing, not something you could forget.” The words carried me painfully back.

“Your parents?” she interjected.

“They had already died from the disease. I was alone. That was why he chose me. In all the chaos of the epidemic, no one would ever realize I was gone.”

“How did he...save you?”

The details of how to create a vampire were not something I wanted to reveal to Bella. I hadn’t thought it through, exactly, but the idea of discussing it with her made me uneasy. Becoming a vampire was not something I would ever wish on anyone, especially someone I loved. Every member of my family, if given a choice, would choose to be human. But I owed Bella at least part of the truth.

“It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane, the most compassionate of us.... I don’t think you could find his equal throughout all of history. For me, it was merely very, very painful.”

I paused for more questions, but Bella remained silent, so I went on. “He acted from loneliness. That’s usually the reason behind the choice. I was the first in Carlisle’s family, though he found Esme soon after. She fell from a cliff. They brought her straight to the hospital morgue, though, somehow, her heart was still beating.”

“So you must be dying, then, to become....” We each finished the question silently.

“No, that’s just Carlisle. He would never do that to someone who had another choice. It is easier he says, though, if the blood is weak.” Perhaps that was more than I’d needed to say.

“And Emmett and Rosalie?”

“Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next. I didn’t realize until much later that he was hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him—he was careful with his thoughts around me. But she was never more than a sister.” I couldn’t hide my disdain at the memory.

“It was only two years later that she found Emmett. She was hunting—we were in Appalachia at the time—and found a bear about to finish him off. She carried him back to Carlisle, more than a hundred miles, afraid she wouldn’t be able to do it herself. I’m only beginning to guess how difficult that journey was for her.”

I gazed at Bella, raising our joined hands to caress her cheek. As contentious as my relationship with Rosalie could be, I had gained a new respect for her today. Carrying Bella, bleeding, for one hundred miles without succumbing—it was almost beyond imagining.

“But she made it,” Bella brought me back from that horrific image.

“Yes. She saw something in his face that made her strong enough. And they’ve been together ever since. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple. But the younger we pretend to be, the longer we can stay in any given place. Forks seemed perfect, so we all enrolled in high school.”

I recalled a silly picture from the 1990s called *Groundhog Day*. The memory made me laugh. “I suppose we’ll have to go to their wedding in a few years, *again*.” That was our existence in a nutshell, reliving the same milestones, over and over, *world without end. Amen*.

“Alice and Jasper?” Bella cut in.

“Alice and Jasper are two very rare creatures. They both developed a conscience, as we refer to it, with no outside guidance. Jasper belonged to another...family, a *very* different kind of family. He became depressed, and he wandered on his own. Alice found him. Like me, she has certain gifts above and beyond the norm for our kind.”

“Really?” Bella was intrigued. “But you said you were the only one who could hear people’s thoughts.”

“That’s true. She knows other things. She *sees* things—things that might happen, things that are coming. But it’s very subjective. The future isn’t set in stone. Things change.” Like with Bella. I could no longer even imagine hurting Bella, let alone killing her, and I definitely wouldn’t change her. So Alice was just wrong in this case. Surely.

“What kinds of things does she see?”

Does Bella suspect? I glanced at her expression. *No, I think not.*

I attempted an answer. “She saw Jasper and knew that he was looking for her before he knew it himself. She saw Carlisle and our family, and they came together to find us. She’s most

sensitive to non–humans. She always sees, for example, when another group of our kind is coming near. And any threat they may pose.” And that answer led to another question.

“Are there a lot of...your kind?” She seemed a little alarmed by that prospect.

I reassured her. “No, not many. But most won’t settle in any one place. Only those like us, who’ve given up hunting you people” — I monitored her reaction from the corner of my eye—“can live together with humans for any length of time. We’ve only found one other family like ours, in a small village in Alaska. We lived together for a time, but there were so many of us that we became too noticeable. Those of us who live...differently tend to band together.” We’d arrived at Bella’s house. I pulled the truck to the curb and turned off the engine.

“And the others?”

“Nomads, for the most part. We’ve all lived that way at times. It gets tedious, like anything else. But we run across the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North.”

“Why is that?”

“Did you have your eyes open this afternoon?” I smiled. “Do you think I could walk down the street in the sunlight without causing traffic accidents? There’s a reason why we chose the Olympic Peninsula, one of the most sunless places in the world. It’s nice to be able to go outside in the day. You wouldn’t believe how tired you can get of nighttime in eighty–odd years.”

“So that’s where the legends came from?”

“Probably.” And another reason why twilight was often a sad time for me—too many nights spent alone.

“And Alice came from another family, like Jasper?”

“No, and that *is* a mystery. Alice doesn’t remember her human life at all. And she doesn’t know who created her. She awoke alone. Whoever made her walked away, and none of us understand why, or how, he could. If she hadn’t had that other sense, if she hadn’t seen Jasper and Carlisle and known that she would someday become one of us, she probably would have turned into a total savage.” Alice was the true miracle among us. She was a great treasure and a comfort to me in a myriad of ways.

Bella's stomach growled. *How inconsiderate I am!* It hadn't come to mind that Bella would need food in the middle of the day, especially after a five-mile hike. I couldn't delay her any longer. "I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from dinner."

"I'm fine, really," Bella demurred, minimizing her needs. Typical.

"I've never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget." *But never again!* I promised myself.

"I want to stay with you," Bella confessed timidly.

Joy!! And I you...! Fortunately, that could be accomplished quite easily.

"Can't I come in?" I inquired.

"Would you like to?" she asked with surprise, as if it hadn't occurred to her that I might want to follow her everywhere, forever. What was she *thinking?*

"Yes, if it's all right." I exited the truck and opened her door for her in the same instant.

"Very human," she remarked, ignoring my speed.

"It's definitely resurfacing," I told her, marveling at how much closer to human I felt in her presence. Then I did something not at all human. Perhaps I was showing off a bit. Having reached the front door first, I retrieved the key, used it, and replaced it, all in a fraction of a second. I held the door open for Bella to enter.

"The door was unlocked?" she asked, puzzled. My quick movements had been too fast for her eyes to detect.

"No, I used the key from under the eaves." The secret, hidden key. This admission would open a can of worms, no doubt. She stepped inside, then turned and raised her eyebrows at me, the question unspoken.

"I was curious about you," I confessed.

"You spied on me?"

I couldn't apologize for my obsession, for wanting to know everything about her, or for wishing never to be separated from her. And I felt too blissful right now to fret about her reaction. "What else is there to do at night?"

I led her to her kitchen and sat down at the table like I belonged there. She stared at me with deep, unfathomable eyes, then proceeded with the task at hand.

It was fascinating to watch Bella work in the kitchen. This was not a time of day I had ever spent with her. Her waking hours inside her home were a mystery. I'd never seen her cook, get ready for school, interact with her father, or do homework or household chores. As she fixed herself something to eat, I absorbed everything—what she was doing, how she moved, where she stored things, what was in her refrigerator.

“How often?” Bella’s question came after several minutes of silence.

“Hmmm?” I was much too distracted to have followed her train of thought.

She remained facing away from me and clarified the question. “How often did you come here?”

“I come here almost every night.” I was not shy to admit it. It was impossible to feel remorseful for something that made me so happy.

Bella whipped around to face me. “Why?” she demanded.

In for a dime, in for a dollar.

“You’re interesting when you sleep. You talk.”

“No!” she protested, a deep red blush coloring her face.

Okay, I was a *little* sorry for her distress, after all.

“Are you very angry with me?”

“That depends!”

“On?” I prodded. Might as well get it all out.

“What you heard!” she cried, overcome with dismay. I rushed to her side and took her hands in mine.

“Don’t be upset!” I begged, looking deeply into her eyes. I could see that she felt embarrassed, exposed. She didn’t understand that everything about her was beautiful to me. She had nothing to be ashamed of. I tried to calm her with my gentlest voice.

“You miss your mother. You worry about her. And when it rains, the sound makes you restless. You used to talk about home a lot, but it’s less often now. Once you said, ‘It’s too *green.*’ ” I chuckled at the memory.

“Anything else?” Bella pressed, obviously wanting to know something in particular.

I relented. "You did say my name."

She sighed, resigned. "A lot?"

"How much do you mean by 'a lot,' exactly?" I stalled.

"Oh no!"

She knew by my answer that it had been more than a little. And each time had been a treasure to me. I reached for her and hugged her to my chest.

"Don't be self-conscious," I pleaded. "If I could dream at all, it would be about you. And I'm not ashamed of it."

Holding her had been such a natural reaction to her distress that it didn't occur to me until later that doing so would have been impossible a mere twelve hours ago.

Just then, Charlie pulled into the driveway and Bella tensed.

"Should your father know I'm here?" I asked.

Charlie's mind was so clouded and vague that I didn't know how he would react to finding me in the house alone with his daughter. Judging by Bella's stress level, it wouldn't be the ideal way to meet him.

"I'm not sure..." She seemed befuddled, so I made a quick decision.

"Another time then..." I said and retreated to her bedroom, making myself at home on her bed. I loved the smell of her sheets.

"Edward!" Bella called in a half whisper. It must have looked to her like I had disappeared into thin air. I chuckled.

"Bella?" Charlie called.

While Bella fed Charlie and asked him about his day, I reviewed our day together with enormous satisfaction. Alice's "eighty-percent certainty" hadn't given me eighty-percent confidence that things wouldn't go badly today. And when Bella revealed that not only had she withheld her plans from Charlie, but also had gone out of her way to mislead Jessica, my self-confidence had dropped well below that eighty percent.

Bella's initial reluctance, or fear, or whatever had soured her mood before our hike had further eroded my faith that everything would turn out all right. I still couldn't understand why Bella had followed me into the trees when the bottom so plainly had dropped out of her

resolve at the last minute. I would give a lot to know what she'd been thinking. But she would not tell me then and I was pretty sure she would not tell me now, either.

Once in the meadow, I'd given her plenty of reasons to be frightened—such as nearly sinking my teeth into her neck. I wonder if she knew how close I'd come to losing control. It was one thing to test my own limits—apparently, it was quite another for Bella to test them so unexpectedly. Still, her provocative reaction to my touch was enormously gratifying.

I had avoided killing Bella at least twice today, demonstrating to myself that I had enough self-control—barely enough, perhaps—to thwart my deadly instincts when highly provoked. This gave me hope for the future because I felt sure that today, when everything was so new and intense, would prove to be the most difficult of the days to come.

And Bella had survived. Not only that, but she had neither run away nor been repulsed by what she had seen and heard. She wanted me to stay. I wasn't going to think about how long that might be possible. Not now. Now was the time to relish the moment—to feel what it was like to be truly happy.

Something downstairs caught my attention. I felt anxiety enter Charlie's mind—suspicion.

"No plans tonight?" he interrogated Bella.

"No, Dad, I just want to get some sleep." Bella's voice sounded a little higher and tighter than normal to me. A police chief, even one from a tiny jurisdiction, was unlikely to miss that. He didn't.

"None of the boys in town your type, eh?" His attempt at sounding casual made me chuckle. He might be a better actor than Bella, but that wasn't saying much.

"No, none of the *boys* have caught my eye yet." Fortunately, Charlie missed the emphasis. I didn't—it would seem that Bella didn't consider me to be in the same category as the *boys*. That was flattering.

"I thought maybe that Mike Newton...you said he was friendly." I stifled the growl that rose in my throat at the mention of his name. It angered me that they ever had discussed the vile Mike Newton.

"He's *just* a friend, Dad." I appreciated Bella's disavowal of Newton, but I resented her use of the word "friend." Possibly that was unreasonable.

“Well, you’re too good for them all, anyway.” That was certainly true. Even me. *Especially* me. “Wait ‘til you get to college to start looking.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Bella humored him. Not convincingly, I thought.

Bella’s steps were so heavy and slow on the stairs when she finally ascended that she could have been carrying a body. Lying on the bed, arms behind my head, I watched her enter the room, slam the door, tiptoe noisily to the window, and open it.

“Edward?” she hissed.

I laughed silently at her amusing performance and answered, “Yes?” from behind her. The look on her face when she whipped around and saw me was priceless. Unconsciously, I presumed, she slapped a protective hand across her throat. I could not control my grin.

“Oh!” She exhaled in surprise and slumped to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized reflexively, trying to suppress my smile.

“Just give me a minute to restart my heart,” she gasped.

Watching her eyes for fear, I slowly sat up and reached to help her off the floor.

“Why don’t you sit with me?” I wrapped my hands around her waist and lifted her into place beside me on the bed. Then I took her hand and queried, “How’s the heart?”

“You tell me—I’m sure you hear it better than I do.” That was true. I was eminently aware of her excitable heartbeat. I laughed, remembering some of its gyrations today. We sat quietly on the bed until she had recovered from her fright. Her heart slowed and steadied, then fluttered as she inquired, “Can I have a minute to be human?”

“Certainly,” I acquiesced, wondering what thought had prompted the glitch. So frustrating it was not to know!

I laughed again when she ordered me to “Stay!” like an errant puppy. That was something I could do well.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, watching her eyes as I froze my body into the perfect stillness of the vampire.

Though I had spent many secret hours in this room, it was an utterly new experience now. Sitting on Bella’s bed, waiting for her to return, I was a guest rather than an intruder. It felt very different.

As a vampire, my entire existence was that of an outsider. We lived hidden from the humans among whom we mingled. As Edward Cullen, the vampire, I was a constant intruder, privy to the thoughts, wishes, and dreams of everyone around me. Except, of course, for the one whose thoughts I most longed to know.

Listening to Bella talk in her sleep was a poor substitute for my usual capabilities, but even had she not revealed some of her thoughts in her sleep, I likely would have visited her bedchamber just to observe her, to be near her. I was too besotted to stay away. Intruding on others was such a part of who I was that I hadn't thought anything of entering her window without her knowledge or permission.

I could see now that being asked in, being welcomed, was an intimate act. It was more satisfying to be here knowing I was truly wanted. Paradoxically, it also made me feel vulnerable, an emotion that, until now, had been largely foreign to me. Having been given this gift meant that it could also be taken away. I was beginning to understand what Bella meant about being afraid I would disappear.

Though I was engrossed in considering this new perspective, I was also aware that Bella was taking a shower and brushing her teeth. I heard the door open when she exited the bathroom and noted her rushing footsteps on the stairs.

"Night, Dad," she said, a little too loudly.

"Night, Bella," he replied.

She raced back up the stairs to her room and shut the door behind her. The lights were still off, but I could see her as clearly in the dark as I would have in the light. I had faithfully obeyed her order, having not moved a millimeter from my frozen position. She smiled, noticing that, and I returned her smile, marveling at this new, post-shower Bella in her nightclothes. Of course, I had seen her in her holey t-shirt and ragged sweatpants many times before, but never upright and awake. Animation changed everything!

"Nice," I commented.

She thought I was making fun of her.

"No, it looks good on you." I meant it, though of course, I would have appreciated her dressed in a potato sack.

"Thanks," she murmured, sitting down beside me. Shyly, she dropped her eyes toward the floor.

"What was all that for?" I asked, tilting my head toward the door.

“Charlie thinks I’m sneaking out.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Apparently, I look a little overexcited.”

I had missed that in Charlie’s murky mind. I seldom heard anything he was thinking. My first impression of him was that he had a slow-moving, uncultivated mind. Eavesdropping on his conversations had revealed that, in fact, he was smarter than most of the humans around him and plenty literate. I just couldn’t read him. His mind wasn’t as frustrating as Bella’s, but nearly so.

Charlie had said Bella looked “overexcited.” To see for myself, I lifted her drooping chin and scrutinized her face. She was flushed and her eyes were bright. So, so appealing.

“You look very warm, actually.” I yearned to feel the heat of the blood that colored her skin. I leaned forward and placed my cheek against hers.

“Mmmmmmm....” Yes, warm. And that intoxicating scent! It held me enthralled.

Bella stuttered an observation with uneven breath. “It seems to be...much easier for you, now, to be close to me.”

“Does it seem that way to you?” I questioned softly as I brushed my nose along her jaw line, inhaling her sweet fragrance. Drawing her hair aside, I pressed my lips to the hollow beneath her ear, feeling the thrum of blood in her carotid artery.

It was miraculous, really, that I was strong enough to kiss Bella’s neck and not pierce her skin with my teeth. I felt the inevitable searing of my throat, but the thrill of touching Bella’s smooth, ivory skin with my lips completely overshadowed the impulse to drink. A different kind of desire was ascending now.

“Much, much easier.” Bella continued, her voice raspy.

“Hmm,” was all I could offer. Her sensuous, curving collarbone had distracted me. I placed my fingers there, tracing the enticing line it drew to her sternum.

“So I was wondering...” Bella croaked, then stopped and took a ragged breath.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Why is that, do you think?” Her voice trembled, charming me.

The answer boiled down to that pivotal moment when I had laid my cheek against her heart in the meadow. Before that, a beating heart had always signified the quenching of thirst. There had never been any other reason for its existence in my vampire's life. Now, it had an entirely different significance—one that made it easier to suppress my thirst.

"Mind over matter," I simplified.

Without warning, Bella recoiled from me. I snapped my jaw shut, held my breath, and froze into a statue—the opposite of a predator's natural reaction to retreating prey.

I assessed the moment, scanning for potential danger. Reading no threats, I slowly relaxed and resumed breathing. Bella's breathing had evened out.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked warily.

Her reply amazed me. "No—the opposite. You're driving me crazy."

"Really?" My face opened into the widest of smiles. How thrilling!

All through the day, I had registered Bella's accelerated heart rate whenever I drew close to her. I knew now that her response signaled her attraction for me, though she'd never said so directly. And although I understood this in theory, in my innocence, I never considered that my touching Bella in the ways I longed to do might be as exciting to her as to me. Perhaps I did have a guardian angel.

Bella brought me back down to earth. "Would you like a round of applause?" she said tartly.

I couldn't stop grinning. "I'm just pleasantly surprised. In the last hundred years or so," I joked, "I never imagined anything like this. I didn't believe I would ever find someone I wanted to be with...in another way than my brothers and sisters. And then to find, even though it's all new to me, that I'm good at it...at being with you..." It was hard to find the right words.

"You're good at everything," Bella stated flatly. In my euphoria, I just smiled and shrugged, as if it were entirely true. We both laughed.

"But how can it be so easy now? This afternoon..."

"It's not *easy*," I admitted. "But this afternoon, I was still...undecided. I am sorry about that, it was unforgivable for me to behave so." I was ashamed.

"Not unforgivable." She was being generous...again.

“Thank you.” I took her hand and held it gently against my face. “You see, I wasn’t sure if I was strong enough....And while there was still that possibility that I might be...overcome,”—I inhaled the scent radiating from her wrist—“I was...susceptible. Until I made up my mind that I *was* strong enough, that there was no possibility at all that I would...that I ever could...” Again, I couldn’t find the words. My sentences kept veering off into the macabre. But I think she understood.

“So there’s no possibility now?”

“Mind over matter,” I declared.

“Wow, that was easy.” The incongruity of her comment laid next to the effort involved, struck me as hilarious. Or perhaps I was just glad that she could joke about it.

“Easy for you!” I poked the tip of her nose. But it was also time for some serious truth. “I’m trying,” I confessed. “If it gets to be...too much, I’m fairly sure I’ll be able to leave.” That was as much as I could honestly promise at this moment. “And it will be harder tomorrow. I’ve had the scent of you in my head all day and I’ve grown amazingly desensitized. If I’m away from you for any length of time, I’ll have to start over again. Not quite from scratch, though, I think.” There was no way to know for sure. I’d never seen a self-help book titled *For Vampires Who Love (Humans) Too Much*.

“Don’t go away, then,” Bella responded hurriedly. Did I detect a pleading note in her voice?

“That suits me.” I would happily stay, of course. “Bring on the shackles—I’m your prisoner.” I grasped her wrists, one in each hand, as if to demonstrate. I could not remember ever feeling this lighthearted. I didn’t want it to end.

“You seem more...optimistic than usual. I haven’t seen you like this before,” Bella marveled.

“Isn’t it supposed to be like this?” I observed. “The glory of first love, and all that. It’s incredible, isn’t it, the difference between reading about something, seeing it in the pictures, and experiencing it?”

“Very different. More forceful than I’d imagined,” Bella agreed.

I nodded.

“For example, the emotion of jealousy. I’ve read about it a hundred thousand times, seen actors portray it in a thousand different plays and movies. I believed I understood that one

pretty clearly. But it shocked me..." I was reliving a moment. "Do you remember the day that Mike asked you to the dance?"

Bella nodded. "The day you started talking to me again."

"I was surprised by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt—I didn't recognize what it was at first." My words spilled out faster as the emotion of the memory gripped me.

"I was even more aggravated than usual that I couldn't know what you were thinking, why you refused him. Was it simply for your friend's sake? Was there someone else? I knew I had no right to care either way. I *tried* not to care. And then the line started forming. I waited, unreasonably anxious to hear what you would say to them, to watch your expressions. I couldn't deny the relief I felt, watching the annoyance on your face. But I couldn't be sure."

"That was the first night I came here. I wrestled all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was *right*, moral, ethical, and what I *wanted*. I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, until you were gone, that someday you would say 'yes' to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry."

"And then," I murmured, almost to myself, "as you were sleeping, you said my name. You spoke so clearly, at first I thought you'd woken. But you rolled over restlessly and mumbled my name once more, and sighed. The feeling that coursed through me then was unnerving, staggering. And I knew I couldn't ignore you any longer." Bella's heart pumped faster. I paused to listen for a moment.

"But jealousy...it's a strange thing. So much more powerful than I would have thought. And irrational! Just now, when Charlie asked you about that vile Mike Newton..." A surge of anger shot through me again just thinking about it.

"I should have known you'd be listening," Bella commented.

"Of course."

"*That* made you feel jealous, though, really?"

"I'm new at this; you're resurrecting the human in me, and everything feels stronger because it's fresh."

"But honestly, for that to bother you, after I have to hear that Rosalie—Rosalie, the incarnation of pure beauty, *Rosalie*—was meant for you. Emmett or no Emmett, how can I compete with that?" I couldn't tell whether Bella was trying to pass this comment off as kidding, or if she was serious. I took it seriously.

“There’s no competition,” I assured her. With her wrists still shackled in my hands, I stretched my arms behind my back, pulling her close. I held her against me; she laid her face in the crook of my neck. *Mmmm, the warmth...*

“I *know* there’s no competition,” she murmured, her heated lips moving against my throat. “That’s the problem.” Her breath on my neck distracted me and it took a moment before I could respond.

“Of course Rosalie *is* beautiful in her way, but even if she wasn’t like a sister to me, even if Emmett didn’t belong with her, she could never have one tenth, no, one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me. For almost ninety years I’ve walked among my kind, and yours...all the time thinking I was complete in myself, not realizing what I was seeking. And not finding anything, because you weren’t alive yet.”

“It hardly seems fair,” Bella mused. “Why should I get off so easily?”

I laughed. “You’re right. I should make this harder for you, definitely.” I took both her wrists in one hand behind my back and touched her damp hair with my other hand, stroking slowly from the crown of her head down to her waist. Her body trembled against mine. I couldn’t help myself—I loved to feel her respond to me.

I continued, “You only have to risk your life every second you spend with me, that’s surely not much. You only have to turn your back on nature, on humanity...what’s that worth?”

“Very little—I don’t feel deprived of anything.”

“Not yet.” Perhaps she didn’t now. But as time passed and her human desires changed, how would she feel then? Surely, she would resent my intrusion into her life. And if I hadn’t killed her by then, I had little doubt that she would leave me. It was unbearable to imagine. Of course, I shouldn’t have put her in this position in the first place, but I couldn’t see myself turning back now.

She felt my change of mood and tried to peer into my face, but I held her tightly against me. I couldn’t allow her to see my sudden desperation—my expression was not under my control.

I was caught up in dejection and almost missed Charlie’s step on the stairs. His mind was amazingly quiet.

“What—” Bella started, when she felt my sudden tension.

I leaped for her closet, causing her to teeter and almost fall onto the bed.

“Lie down!” I hissed and she understood just in time, throwing the covers over herself. She began heaving her chest up and down in a tortured imitation of a sleeping girl. Fortunately, it was too dark for Charlie to see as clearly as I could. He cracked the door, peeked in, and seemed satisfied that Bella had not escaped on some nefarious midnight adventure. Little did he know, the adventure was right here, only a short distance down the hallway from his own bedroom.

As soon as he shut the door, I joined Bella in her bed, her back to my front, my arm around her waist under the covers. It was a true miracle that this closeness was even possible. My heart soared, all my joy returned.

I put my lips to her ear and teased, “You are a terrible actress—I’d say that career path is out for you.”

“Darn it,” she said with fake disappointment. I smiled at her in the dark.

I felt Bella’s heart racing—she was entirely too wound up to sleep. Without thinking about it, I began to hum her lullaby. After a moment, I thought to ask. “Should I sing you to sleep?”

“Right,” Bella scoffed. “Like I could sleep with you here!”

“You do it all the time,” I pointed out.

“But I didn’t *know* you were here.” I refused to acknowledge her implicit reproach for my “spying.”

“So if you don’t want to sleep....” I flirted with the open-ended sentence, but she didn’t take the bait.

“If I don’t want to sleep....” Savvy. I laughed.

“What do you want to do then?”

Bella was silent for a long moment before answering. “I’m not sure.”

“Tell me when you decide,” I said cheerfully. Until then, I would do what I wanted. I raised myself up on my elbow and inhaled the scent at the base of her neck beneath her now, almost-dry hair. I skimmed my nose along her jaw line and inhaled again.

“I thought you were desensitized.”

“Just because I’m resisting the wine doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the bouquet. You have a very floral smell, like lavender...or freesia,” I told her. Yes...a combination of sweet and musky. “It’s mouthwatering.”

“Yeah, it’s an off day when I don’t get *somebody* telling me how edible I smell.”

I laughed, but I also felt an irrational twinge of jealousy. Who? I sighed at my own absurdity.

Bella interrupted my thoughts. “I’ve decided what I want to do. I want to hear more about you.”

“Ask me anything.” After having risked her desertion many times today, I was prepared to tell Bella whatever she wanted to know, with only one or two exceptions. I watched her choose her first question.

“Why do you do it? I still don’t understand how you can work so hard to resist what you...*are*. Please don’t misunderstand, of course I’m glad that you do. I just don’t see why you would bother in the first place.”

“That’s a good question, and you are not the first one to ask it. The others—the majority of our kind who are quite content with our lot—they, too, wonder at how we live. But you see, just because we’ve been ...dealt a certain hand...it doesn’t mean that we can’t choose to rise above—to conquer the boundaries of a destiny that none of us wanted. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can.”

Bella was inexplicably quiet. I lay with my arm around her and listened to her breathing. After a few minutes, I grew curious.

“Did you fall asleep?” I whispered.

“No.”

“Is that all you were curious about?”

“Not quite.” She probably didn’t realize I could see her roll her eyes in the dark.

“What else do you want to know?”

“Why can you read minds—why only you? And Alice, seeing the future...why does that happen?”

“We don’t really know. Carlisle has a theory...he believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified—like our

minds, and our senses. He thinks that I must have already been very sensitive to the thoughts of those around me. And that Alice had some precognition, wherever she was.”

“What did he bring into the next life, and the others?”

“Carlisle brought his compassion. Esme brought her ability to love passionately. Emmett brought his strength, Rosalie her...tenacity. Or you could call it pigheadedness.” I chuckled. “Jasper is very interesting. He was quite charismatic in his first life, able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he is able to manipulate the emotions of those around him—calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd, conversely. It’s a very subtle gift.”

Bella lapsed into silence. I waited.

“So where did it all start? I mean, Carlisle changed you, and then someone must have changed him, and so on...”

“Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn’t we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don’t believe that all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?”

“Let me get this straight—I’m the baby seal, right?”

“Right,” I chuckled. Then with a sudden surge of tenderness, I pressed my lips against the back of her head. I inhaled the scent of her hair, feeling the burn of the denied predator, but also the wonder of our proximity.

“Are you ready to sleep? Or do you have any more questions?”

“Only a million or two.”

“We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next...”

“Are you sure you won’t vanish in the morning? You are mythical, after all.”

“I won’t leave you,” I promised. I would do everything in my power to make it true. The pain of leaving her now would be unbearable.

“One more, then, tonight...” The warmth emanating from Bella’s face told me she was blushing. She was embarrassed about something.

“What is it?” I was extra curious now.

“No, forget it. I changed my mind.”

“Bella, you can ask me anything,” I encouraged her. She remained silent and I groaned in frustration. Why couldn’t I just read her mind already? “I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse and *worse*,” I complained.

“I’m glad you can’t read my thoughts. It’s bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep–talking.”

“Please?” I begged in my most seductive tone.

She shook her head “no.” *Arrrgh! So frustrating!*

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll just assume it’s something much worse than it is. Please?”

“Well,” she began, seeming to relent.

“Yes?” I encouraged.

“You said that Rosalie and Emmett will get married soon... Is that...marriage... the same as it is for humans?”

Oh! I laughed in amusement. Her embarrassment made sense now—I should have seen this one coming.

“Is *that* what you’re getting at?”

Bella fidgeted, but offered no reply.

“Yes, I suppose it is much the same. I told you, most of those human desires are there, just hidden behind more powerful desires.” Although for me, the two seemed to be converging or, possibly, even switching precedence. One held sway at one moment, the other at another moment—an altogether new experience.

“Oh,” was Bella’s only response. I knew there was more to the question and I was anxious to hear it.

I pressed her. “Was there a purpose behind your curiosity?”

She hesitated less this time. “Well, I did wonder...about you and me... someday...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, but she didn’t need to.

Her words sent a rush of desire through me and I froze, not sure how closely physical passion might be linked to my desire for her blood. Could the former ignite the latter? If I allowed the first, would the second be unleashed as well?

Enjoy the bouquet. Forego the wine, I reminded myself.

After a moment, I calmed enough to consider my answer and a feeling of sadness came over me. It didn't take much thought to predict how lovemaking would end, even if I *could* control my thirst.

"I don't think that...that...would be possible for us."

"Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that...close?" she asked.

I had to restrain my imagination to keep it from rushing headlong down that road right now.

"That's certainly a problem," I acknowledged. "But that's not what I was thinking of. It's just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we're together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident."

The knowledge pained me. I didn't want to frighten her, so I softened my voice to a whisper. I rested my hand against her cheek.

"If I was too hasty...if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you."

Her silence was unreadable. "Are you scared?" I asked.

More silence. Then, finally, "No, I'm fine."

This was her standard reply when she was hurt or *not* fine, of course. I wondered whether it was fear or something else that distressed her.

Suddenly, I was distracted by a powerful pang of...what? Anger? Ah, no... jealousy... I recognized it now, but it was misplaced. I disregarded the feeling, but had to ask the question. I tried adopting a carefree tone.

"Have *you* ever...?" I let her fill in the blank.

The blood rushed beneath her skin in an enticing, warm flush.

"Of course not. I told you I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close."

Relief. "I know. It's just that I know other people's thoughts. I know love and lust don't always keep the same company."

"They do for me. Now, anyway, that they exist for me at all." Bella sighed.

“That’s nice. We have that one thing in common, at least.”

Though it shouldn’t matter what Bella had done with human boys before she met me, I felt unreasonably happy that there had been no one else.

“Your human instincts...,” Bella began. I waited for her to continue. “Well, do you find me attractive, in *that* way, at all?”

How could she not know? I laughed and ruffled her mostly dry hair.

“I may not be a human, but I am a man,” I told her with a smile. She couldn’t see it in the dark, but surely it was evident in my voice.

My answer must have satisfied her, for I felt her relax in my arms. She yawned. What a long, wonderful day it had been!

“I’ve answered your questions, now you should sleep,” I encouraged her.

“I’m not sure if I can.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” Bella almost shouted. I laughed, pleased.

Then I began to hum Bella’s lullaby softly in her ear. After a time, her breathing slowed and evened out. “Are you asleep?” I whispered.

Her silence answered my question. I settled happily next to her and continued humming her song. Our song.

Four blissful hours later, I disentangled myself from Bella’s arms and legs, which she had wrapped around me in her sleep. I gently lifted her head from my chest and slid my arm out from beneath her. Then I tucked the blanket around her and emerged from her bed. Though I had visited Bella’s bedroom on other nights, this had been our true first night together. How glorious it was to hold her in my arms all night! My joy was matchless.

Though Bella had said some delightful things in her sleep a couple of hours earlier, she had settled into a deeper slumber afterwards. It was a good time to run to the forest and hunt

for small game. I intended to keep myself as blood-sated as possible whenever I spent time close to Bella, and I would spend as much time being close to Bella as she would allow.

I ran by my family's house on the way to the forest behind it and heard Emmett clicking through the television channels inside. He was grumbling to himself about Rosalie, annoyed at her annoyance with me. I was disrupting his sex life, apparently, and as physical a man as he was, Emmett considered this a great hardship. I decided to invite him to join me. Perhaps I could take his mind off Rosalie and possibly gather some information as well.

Emmett was the most forthright person I knew. He took things as they came and never worried about the past or the future. He was difficult to offend and never held grudges. He was also fearlessly honest about anything you might ask him. He didn't keep secrets (even if he *could* keep them from me) and he wasn't shy about speaking his mind.

Being bored, he quickly agreed to join me. Rosalie was working out some of her tension on the engine of her BMW. Working with iron and steel took less focus than other hobbies, simply because we didn't have to concentrate so hard not to break them. And Rosalie had trouble with breaking things. She was quick to fly into a temper and anything within her reach could be at risk.

You've been at Bella's? Emmett inquired.

"Yes, as usual."

So I guess things went fine yesterday in the woods? Emmett had an ulterior motive in asking. He had bet against Bella's safe return in the sibling betting pool. I didn't hold it against him. He tended to measure others' motives and actions by his own. He was upfront about his failure of will when he'd encountered a particularly enticing scent—or two.

"It went remarkably well, actually. Better than I had hoped."

Please tell me you struggled just a little bit!

"No doubt about it, Emmett. There were a couple of dicey moments."

Well, I'm glad you didn't lose it, Bro, even if I had my doubts. Alice informed us about halfway through the afternoon that you'd be bringing Bella back, though I told Jasper I wanted evidence before I paid him.

"I appreciate your faith in me, Em," I said with heavy sarcasm.

It's nothing personal, you know.

“Yeah, I know. It doesn’t matter.”

So what do you do with her all night when you’re over there? She sleeps, doesn’t she?

“Yes, she sleeps. We talk. Actually, last night was the first night we talked. Before that, she didn’t know I was there.”

She didn’t know? What, you broke in? That’s a little stalker–y, don’t you think?

“Maybe it was. I really couldn’t help myself, though. And I did tell her last night.”

How’d she take it?

“Surprisingly well. She was embarrassed when I told her she talked in her sleep.” I smiled, remembering.

Emmett came to a complete stop, stared at me, then erupted in hilarity. He cackled. He guffawed. He howled. Between gasps, he choked out, “No wonder you couldn’t stay away. I would have hung out there myself if I’d known!”

“I shouldn’t have told you. You mustn’t let on that you know. It would truly distress her.”

“You aren’t going to tell me everything she said, then, I take it.” He laughed harder.

I let him have his fun while we loped through the woods. After a short time, I said, “Em,” and raised my chin in a north–westerly direction. He quieted and crouched, then we ran purposefully toward a group of mule deer about fifty yards away. It wasn’t long before we were satisfied and heading back home.

“How’s Rosalie? Has she calmed down at all?”

Ah, you know Rose. It might take awhile. She wasn’t exactly rooting for you yesterday and now she’s miffed about losing her bet. Jasper is going to clean up.

“I’m sorry about setting Rosalie off, but why would she bet against Alice? Why would you?”

Jasper gave us 3–to–1 odds and Alice wasn’t sure about anything until halfway through the afternoon, so we were well in by then. And, by the way, Alice freaked out around two–thirty. Did something happen? She wouldn’t talk about it.

“Like I said, there were a couple of dicey moments. I don’t think it will happen again.”

So you’re going to keep seeing her.

“I don’t know how to stay away. I don’t think I can.”

Sucks being you.

“Actually, Emmett, I wanted to ask you something.”

Sure, go ahead.

“I know this is personal and you can tell me to get lost if you want to, but” —*Am I really going to ask this?*— “did you have physical relations with human women before you were changed?”

We both know that as soon as you ask me a question, you already know the answer because I’ll think about it whether I want to or not. It’s like that old joke, “Think about anything you want, except a purple–polka–dotted elephant.”

“I know. It’s not fair. But you can still decline to answer if you want to.”

Oh no, man, I don’t mind at all. Sure, I was a favorite with the ladies. I was a starter on the high school football team. Defensive tackle, of course. Emmett grinned.

“So you were a teenager when you had your first sexual experience?”

Yeah, sixteen. It was kind of a disaster. He laughed, recalling.

I tried to block out the scene playing in his head, but it was already too late. An eighteen–year–old, blonde senior had dragged him under the bleachers after a football game. His hands were up her blouse and hers went down his dungarees. And then it was over. I laughed along with him and he gave me a wry smile. *It got better. What about you?*

“No, actually. I was thirteen when the war in Europe began and sixteen when the United States declared war. I grew up playing war and dreaming of being a soldier. Girls weren’t yet on my radar, so to speak, when the influenza epidemic hit Chicago.”

I’m surprised we’ve never had this conversation.

“I guess I never had reason to be curious before.”

But you do now?

“Yes...well...no, not really, I guess.”

“What’s going on?” He stopped running and turned to look at me, all ears. I snarled at the rude images of Bella that were popping into his head, but kept walking. I had asked *him*, after all. He caught up to me.

“No, nothing like that!” I preempted him. “Bella just asked me—though not in so many words—whether vampires had the same sex lives as humans. I told her “yes,” but as I have no direct experience of either, I was curious.”

“So the lady wants you, eh?” he teased. “That’s always good.”

“No, I can’t agree with you there,” I said, trying to divert his attention away from Bella. “I’ve never found that to be a particularly good thing in the past.”

Oh! I guess nothing ever happened in Alaska then. We kind of wondered with the way the Denali ladies were lining up for you at the time. Alice wouldn’t tell us anything.

When I didn’t respond to his comment, he chuckled, then considered how to answer my original query.

Okay...when I was a newborn vampire, sex was definitely not the first thing on my mind. It was all about the blood. Rosalie had been a vamp for two years, though, so she was ready for me. It wasn’t too difficult to oblige her. He smiled widely, a glint in his golden eyes. We all knew about Emmett and Rosalie’s relationship. They could be unbearable to live with at times.

“Is sex very different as a vampire from what it was like as a human?” I asked, knowing it was intrusive, but who else could I ask if not my own brother? Emmett, being Emmett, didn’t seem to mind.

Well, you know how vague human memories are. My sexual encounters as a human were always memorable, though... He cackled loudly to himself as a Rolodex of images flashed through his mind.

I wished I could put my hands over my ears like a human child and holler “La, la, la, la, la,…” to block them out, but, regrettably, that is not an effective technique against mental pictures. I just had to wait him out. Eventually, his inner voice returned to a more thoughtful tone.

There is one thing I remember from my first experience with Rosalie. At the time, I was amazed at how much more intense sex was as a vampire than it had been as a human. It was way beyond anything I’d ever had. Once I was with Rosalie, the past quickly faded out, but I know my previous encounters were pretty pale in comparison. I can’t say whether that’s because my human experiences were casual, one-time things, mostly. There’s nothing casual about Rosalie!

He laughed again and I grinned at the truth in that.

“Are you thinking about, um...,” he started to ask. I heard his mind flounder for words in an attempt not to be crude. “...being physical with Bella?”

“I can’t help *but* think about it,” I admitted.

“So, you *can* touch her? Without losing it?”

“So far, so good. It’s getting easier.”

“I cannot even imagine how you could manage such a thing or why you’d want to, but hey, power to you, my brother!” It seemed ungentlemanly, but he raised his fist for a knuckle bump and I obliged, if only because he’d been so open and uncritical with me.

“To be honest, I can’t see it going much further in that direction. It just seems dreadfully risky. I would sacrifice sex to keep Bella safe, but I’m not sure that *she* could. And I never want to deprive her of anything, either. Changing her or giving her up are still the only solutions I can think of. I won’t do the former and I don’t think I can do the latter.”

Well, no one can ever say that you choose the easiest row to hoe. No pun intended. He grinned at his pun. I ignored it.

“If it weren’t so hopeless, it would be almost funny, wouldn’t it?”

I am not laughing at your dilemma. But don’t give up hope. If you’re truly in love with her, then you’ll both be motivated to solve the problem. Hell, even I could probably come up with a couple of ideas for you.

My hopes soared for a second, before I felt the metaphoric waggling of his eyebrows and caught a couple of his pictorial suggestions. In current vernacular, I *so* did not want to go there with him right now. I interrupted his train of thought the surest way I knew. “Beat you home!”

“Hey, wait a second! Play fair!” Emmett hollered, but I was already gone.

16. THE VISIT

Dawn was on its way when I climbed through Bella's window and sat in her rocking chair. Charlie had just departed on his fishing trip after fiddling under the hood of Bella's truck for a few minutes. He must not have bought her acting job the night before. I chuckled to myself.

Despite my frequent visits to Bella's bedchamber, I had never met the sunrise with her. On this special morning, I could be there when she awoke. Bella was sleeping soundly when I arrived. I listened to the gentle beating of her heart and watched the subtle rise and fall of her chest under the blanket. I was absolutely content. It had been a minor shock returning to her room after a couple of hours away. After all the fresh outdoor air, her concentrated scent burned my throat, but I could tolerate it. The continual exposure to her hair, skin, and breath yesterday had built my tolerance to such a degree that two hours away set me back only a little.

I was thinking a lot about my conversation with Emmett. Though nothing had been solved, I felt better for having gotten some worries off my chest and I had learned something too. It seems that in the world of desire, vampires and humans had more in common than I might have thought. If it weren't for the possibility of killing Bella in an uncontrollable fit of bloodlust, or by squeezing her to mush in an excess of passion, we might even be physically compatible. Perhaps what I was could satisfy what she needed. Though it was no real consolation, it was good to know. I had to laugh at the absurdity of this situation. For now, I decided to put these concerns aside and just enjoy my time with Bella to the fullest extent possible. The future was unknowable, despite Alice's visions.

Just then, Bella began to stir. She threw her arm over her eyes as if to block the light, then moaned and rolled to her side.

"Oh!" she cried, then sat straight up, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging loose. She was not quite awake.

"Your hair looks like a haystack...but I like it," I said.

"Edward! You stayed!" Bella launched herself off the bed, flew across the room, and landed in my lap. Though she couldn't move fast enough to actually surprise me, such a rambunctious attack would have been disastrous yesterday. I'd had neither the knowledge or the self confidence to hold myself in check. Today was altogether different. I wanted to press my face into her hair and inhale her scent.

When she realized what she had just done, Bella froze and nervously checked my reaction. I just laughed. It felt so good to just laugh.

“Of course,” I said, rubbing her back. She laid her head against my shoulder and I got my wish, burying my nose in her hair.

“I was sure it was a dream,” she said, referring, I assumed, to our day together.

“You aren’t that creative,” I joked.

“Charlie!” she squealed, jumping off my lap, only to stand awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“He left an hour ago—after reattaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?”

She didn’t answer, just stood there, apparently stalled by indecision.

“You’re not usually this confused in the morning.” I stretched my arms out to encourage her to return to my lap.

“I need another human minute,” she confessed.

“I’ll wait.” Bella was manic, her heart racing, her head befuddled, her skin flushed. It was endearing.

She came back a few minutes later, slightly less disheveled, her heart still racing. I reached toward her and she returned to my lap. I held her and rocked, relishing the contact, barely believing it was possible.

“You left?” Bella challenged, noting my clean shirt.

“I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in—what would the neighbors think?” I teased.

She gave me a disgruntled look.

“You were very deeply asleep; I didn’t miss anything,” I smiled to myself. “The talking came earlier.”

“What did you hear?” Bella demanded.

I paused, remembering her words. “You said you loved me.”

She hid her face. “You knew that already.”

“It was nice to hear, just the same.”

"I love you," she reiterated into my shoulder.

"You are my life now," I told her, rocking gently back and forth.

"Breakfast time," I announced. I was not going to be guilty of starving my love again.

Bella stiffened on my lap, her eyes wide, and slapped her hands over her throat.

She thinks...I meant...?! Shocked, I went rigid.

"Kidding!" she hooted. "And you said I couldn't act!"

"That wasn't funny," I groused.

"It was very funny, and you know it." She looked into my eyes and I gave her a disapproving frown.

"Shall I rephrase? Breakfast time for the human."

"Oh, okay," she agreed reluctantly.

I stood up, lifting her by the waist, and slung her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She howled at me, but I held her firmly in place and carried her down the stairs to the kitchen where I flipped her upright and set her in a chair. That'll teach her to tease the monster!

"What's for breakfast?" she inquired, as if waiting for service.

The surprise question stumped me. "Er, I'm not sure. What would you like?" I could give it a try...

She grinned.

Got me again! *I must be extraordinarily unguarded*, I thought. *It's not at all like me.*

"That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well," Bella went on. "Watch me hunt."

I observed the steps she took to prepare herself a bowl of boxed cereal. It was not something I'd had as a kid. The Kellogg brothers invented cold cereal before I was born, but it

didn't become standard American breakfast food until automobiles replaced horses and all that cheap grain had to go somewhere. It still seemed like horse feed to me.

Bella sat down to eat, then interrupted herself. "Can I get you something?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Just eat, Bella." I could hardly have what I wanted.

I watched her every move. I rarely paid attention to humans eating, but like everything else, it was fascinating to see her do it.

"What's on the agenda today?" she asked.

I had been toying with an idea and wondered how she'd take it. I hesitated. "Hmmm...What would you say to meeting my family?"

She swallowed hard.

"Are you afraid now?" I asked, equal parts hope and concern.

"Yes."

It was not like her to admit it. I was taken aback.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "I'll protect you."

"I'm not afraid of *them*," she corrected. "I'm afraid they won't...like me. Won't they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone...like me...home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?"

"Oh, they already know everything. They'd taken bets yesterday, you know, on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alice, I can't imagine. At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alice seeing the future and all that."

"And Jasper making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that."

"You paid attention."

"I've been known to do that every now and then," Bella asserted. Then she frowned. "So did Alice see me coming?"

What could I say? I turned to look out the window so she wouldn't see my reaction. I would not tell her about Alice's predictions. There was no point.

"Something like that." I turned back toward her and changed the subject. "Is that any good?" I asked, indicating her bowl. "Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing."

"Well, it's no irritable grizzly...." Bella quipped.

I scowled, but my mind was already somewhere else. Being here in Charlie's kitchen reminded me of something that had troubled me more than I liked to admit. When Charlie had pulled into the driveway yesterday, Bella became agitated about my being in the house with her. I could understand why she didn't want to surprise Charlie with my presence in his kitchen. If he were the suspicious type—which as the Chief of Police, he undoubtedly was—he might think that I was sneaking around to see his daughter and that we were up to no good. I had seen no need to set him off.

But that begged the question of when I should meet him formally. It would be best to introduce myself and put everything aboveboard from the beginning. And though I hated to admit to being possessive, my newly awakened human side wanted Bella to acknowledge me, to let it be known that I was hers and she was mine. I wasn't sure she'd see it my way, though, and I was preparing to charm her into it. I turned and gave her my most brilliant smile, looked into her eyes, and spoke.

"And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think."

"He already knows you," she replied.

"As your boyfriend, I mean."

"Why?" she challenged, immediately resistant.

"Isn't that customary?" I smiled sweetly.

"I don't know." Bella seemed confused. "That's not necessary, you know. I don't expect you to...I mean, you don't have to pretend for me."

"I'm not pretending."

Bella bit her lip and fidgeted, both signs of anxiety. Her resistance made me feel insecure and suspicious—less than admirable human traits—but I couldn't help myself.

"Are you going to tell Charlie I'm your boyfriend or not?" I asked petulantly, annoyed at her avoidance.

“Is that what you are?” Stalling.

“It’s a loose interpretation of the word ‘boy,’ I’ll admit.” My voice was harsher than I intended.

“I was under the impression that you were something more, actually,” Bella mumbled.

Oh. That softened my temper a bit, but she was still avoiding the question. What was she thinking? It was impossible to know.

“Well, I don’t know if we need to give him all the gory details.” I needed to read her eyes, so I reached across the table and lifted her chin. “But he will need some explanation for why I’m around here so much. I don’t want Chief Swan getting a restraining order put on me.”

“Will you be? Will you really be here?” Bella asked.

“As long as you want me.”

“I’ll always want you,” Bella replied. “Forever.”

My heart melted, but an inevitable sadness touched me too. This beautiful, loving girl shouldn’t set her sights on a creature such as me, but I was too selfish to stop her. I moved to her, looked into her eyes, and reached out to stroke her cheek.

“Does that make you sad?” She was perceptive.

I could not explain myself...my doubts, my regrets. I sank into her eyes for a long time. Finally, I decided that I wouldn’t let melancholy ruin this day.

“Are you finished?” I asked, referring to her breakfast.

“Yes,” she said, rising.

“Get dressed—I’ll wait here.”

Bella bounded up the stairs to her bedroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Apparently, I was going to proceed as if I were a legitimate human suitor, rather than a cruel joke of nature. I couldn’t stop myself.

I looked forward to taking Bella home with me. I wanted to share the private side of my life with her and show her off to my family. Alice and Esme would share my happiness, I knew. Carlisle would too, though tempered with legitimate concern for my well-being...and hers.

Just then, Bella appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Okay,” she chirped, “I’m decent.” She descended enthusiastically, but awkwardly, misjudging the last step and stumbling into me. I set her upright, then stepped back to look at her.

I was overcome by the beauty of her long mahogany hair and pale skin set against the deep blue color of my favorite blouse. She took my breath away.

“Wrong again,” I whispered, my lips now at her ear. “You are utterly indecent—no one should look so tempting, it’s not fair.”

She misunderstood. “Tempting how? I can change...”

I shook my head and sighed. She had no idea how desirable she was.

“You are *so* absurd.” I pressed my lips to her forehead and felt her heart wind up. *Tempting, yes.* I paused to listen to the beating inside her chest and remembered then that the last thing she’d asked last night was whether I was attracted to her. Perhaps my feelings had not been as obvious as I’d thought.

“Shall I explain how you are tempting me?” I held her close and dragged my fingers gently down her spine, tracing the curve of each vertebra through the soft, clingy fabric of her blouse. My own breath accelerated as my body responded to the pressure of her breasts against my chest, the scent of her hair, the pounding of the blood through her veins, and the delicate geography of her spine. My lips burned with the memory of yesterday’s aborted kiss. I looked into her chocolate eyes, then leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, inhaling her heated breath. A jolt of electricity shot through my body and burned fiercely in my groin. I longed to carry her back up the stairs to her bedroom.

Without warning, Bella went slack in my arms.

“Bella?” I exclaimed, as I caught and supported her body. She remained unconscious only briefly.

“You...made...me...faint,” she gasped.

I exhaled with relief, but my voice was agitated.

“What am I going to do with you? Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!” She remained limp in my arms, chuckling.

“So much for being good at everything,” I lamented.

“That’s the problem,” she whispered. “You’re *too* good. Far, far too good.”

Hmmm...was that it? It was nice to know. Her physical collapse did concern me, though.

“Do you feel sick?” I inquired, not sure what course to take.

“No—that wasn’t the same kind of fainting at all. I don’t know what happened. I think I forgot to breathe.”

“I can’t take you anywhere like this.”

“I’m fine,” she asserted. “Your family is going to think I’m insane anyway, so what’s the difference?” Holding her close like this, I couldn’t attend to her words. I was wholly distracted by the subtle curves beneath her blue blouse.

“I’m very partial to that color with your skin,” I said, my voice gravelly. Bella blushed and averted her eyes.

“Look, I’m trying really hard not to think about what I’m about to do, so can we go already?” she complained, jolting me from my trance. Funny, that *she* should curb *my* excess passion today.

“And you’re worried, not because you’re headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won’t approve of you, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re incredible.” Incredibly odd, incredibly funny, incredibly appealing.

Bella handed over the keys to her truck without resistance. It seems I had won her trust on our return trip yesterday. It was still a chore to drive the slow, old truck, but I kept my comments to myself.

She was unusually quiet the entire trip—nervous, perhaps. Her eyes grew large as I turned into the dense forest several miles outside of town and proceeded along our circuitous driveway through ancient trees. Our land was natural rainforest, with huge sword and deer ferns covering the ground, along with native salal, salmonberry, and huckleberry bushes. The trees were cedar and Douglas fir, with some spruce and hemlock sprinkled around. Closer to the house, clusters of native vine maples decorated the landscape, leafless now, their red-edged branches creating sculptures in the air.

The house stood in a meadow shaded by six majestic cedar trees. They blocked the sunlight so that uninvited human visitors would not see our sparkling skin even on sunny days. This beautiful house—northwest traditional with three stories, soft white paint, and a large wrap-around porch—was all Esme’s doing, as she enjoyed restoring old houses, remaking them into modern homes. We relied on her architectural and design skills to create a suitable home for us wherever we lived. What you couldn’t see from the front of the house was that the entire back side had been converted to glass and overlooked the forest and river view.

“Wow,” was Bella’s first word in half an hour.

“You like it?”

“It...has a certain charm,” she said, downplaying her reaction. I laughed and gave her ponytail a yank.

“Ready?” I asked as I opened her door.

“Not even a little bit—let’s go.”

I was feeling a sense of ceremony in this classic human occasion, bringing the girlfriend home to meet the parents. It might have happened this way ninety years ago if my human life had continued. Seeing their son enact this rite of passage—at one hundred eight years old—would be a new experience for Carlisle and Esme. Alice had told them we were coming and they were waiting to welcome us.

Bella uncharacteristically fussed with her hair and clothing.

“You look lovely,” I told her, taking her hand as I led her to the front door.

Bella’s eyes grew wide when she stepped into the house. Esme had converted the entire downstairs into a great room with a large staircase on one side. The floor-to-ceiling windows at the back brought in lots of light despite our forest setting. The whole house was decorated in the white-on-beige color scheme Esme favored. It was a very clean look and, along with warm lighting, made us appear less pale.

Captured by the beautiful view, it took a minute for Bella to notice my parents. As I expected, Carlisle and Esme were standing to the side of the foyer on the raised platform where my grand piano sat. They made no move to approach us as we entered. When Bella’s attention returned from the view, I introduced them, though of course everyone already knew who everyone was. This was a ritual ceremony of sorts and my family members were all from more formal eras than the present one.

“Carlisle, Esme, this is Bella.”

“You’re very welcome, Bella,” Carlisle declared. His natural kindness put humans at ease, but because Bella knew what we were, he was careful to move slowly and predictably toward her in case she was frightened. He offered his hand and Bella stepped forward to shake it.

“It’s nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen.”

“Please, call me Carlisle.”

“Carlisle,” Bella echoed and smiled. She was suddenly confident and seemed completely at ease, even when grasping Carlisle’s—to her—ice-cold hand.

Esme smiled and stepped forward, also offering her hand. “It’s very nice to know you,” she said warmly. I could see my mother’s eyes sparkle with delight at the occasion. Bella grasped Esme’s hand, again behaving as if touching ice were the most natural thing in the world. I suppose it was, in a way, given how much I had touched her in the last twenty-four hours.

“Thank you. I’m glad to meet you, too,” Bella responded. It was obvious that she was not addressing Carlisle and Esme as vampires, but as her new boyfriend’s parents. It was such a skewed version of a Norman Rockwell moment that I almost laughed.

Edward, I’m glad you brought Bella to our home and that she’s so much at ease here. She’ll always be welcome, Carlisle conveyed silently. I blinked at him and raised one side of my mouth in response.

Esme also shared her elation. *Edward, she’s beautiful! I’m so thrilled she’s here! I can’t believe you found her after all this time. And look at you two together, holding hands. Sorry, I don’t mean to embarrass you, but this is just wonderful. I’m so happy for you.*

I smiled and dipped my head minutely to thank her.

“Where are Alice and Jasper?” I inquired just before they appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hey, Edward!” Alice bounced down the stairs toward us, stopping short a foot away.

“Hi, Bella!” she enthused, springing forward to kiss Bella’s cheek. I tensed at her quick movement and close proximity to Bella’s throat—it was unnerving—but I knew Alice wasn’t a threat.

Carlisle and Esme, however, were not so placid. They threw disapproving looks at Alice and reprimanded her in their minds. Alice couldn't hear them, but I knew she had received their messages loud and clear—not that it would do any good. Wisely, my parents remained silent, knowing that to do otherwise might frighten Bella more than Alice had.

As for Bella, she was surprised by Alice's enthusiasm, but did not seem alarmed. Anyone else surely would have been, but inexplicably, Bella didn't see us as human predators. She *was* unused to being embraced by semi-strangers, though. Alice already felt that Bella was her close friend, forgetting, as she often did, that others weren't always caught up to her reality.

"You do smell nice, I never noticed before," Alice announced unselfconsciously. Bella, now quite self-conscious, blushed scarlet. Carlisle and Esme were aghast. There was just no containing Alice, but that was part of her charm once you got used to it.

True to form, Jasper chose that awkward moment to step closer to the circle. He radiated his soothing energy around us and everyone relaxed. I raised an eyebrow both to acknowledge his effort and to remind him of my warning.

"Hello, Bella," he said, keeping his distance.

"Hello, Jasper," she replied with a smile. "It's nice to meet you all—you have a very beautiful home."

"Thank you," Esme responded. "We're so glad that you came." Esme was amazed at Bella's courage, surprised that she dared to enter our house. So few humans had ever passed through our doors, and nobody ever shook hands with us. We'd never seen Alice kiss a human before, either.

Edward, Carlisle interrupted my thoughts. I glanced over to acknowledge him. *Alice says that we will soon have visitors—nomads. They know we are here and will seek us out. The timing is a little unclear. You may or may not want to tell Bella, but you should be aware.*

I nodded discreetly, hiding my immediate concern. I'd have to keep a close eye on Bella.

"Do you play?" Esme asked Bella. I noticed then her fascination with my piano.

"Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?" she asked Esme.

"No," Esme laughed and looked at me with mild reproof. "Edward didn't tell you he was musical?"

"No." Bella gave me a mock-churlish look. "I should have known, I guess."

Esme raised her eyebrows, a question.

“Edward can do everything, right?” Bella said.

Yeah, everything except make love to his girlfriend! Jasper teased silently. I shot a vicious glare at him when Bella looked away.

That’s great, Emmett, just great. Good thing he’s keeping his distance. He might get that fight he wanted.

I returned to the moment when Esme addressed me. “I hope you haven’t been showing off—it’s rude,” she chastised. Just like a mother.

“Just a bit,” I told her, laughing.

“He’s been too modest, actually,” Bella amended.

“Well, play for her,” Esme pressed.

“You just said showing off was rude.”

“There are exceptions to every rule,” Esme replied.

“I’d like to hear you play,” Bella added.

“It’s settled then.” Esme nudged me toward the piano. It was almost as hard to refuse Esme as it was to refuse Bella. They had just ganged up on me, I realized.

I grabbed Bella’s hand and pulled her onto the piano bench with me. I didn’t want to stop touching her just because my hands would be busy.

To please Esme, I began playing the song I’d written for her. It was a fun piece to play, with complicated counterpoint melodies, and it kept my fingers moving as fast as the piano could respond.

Alice and Jasper were chuckling at Bella’s wide-eyed, loose-jawed expression. Esme chuckled at Bella’s reaction too, before herding the family upstairs. They were all gone in a split second, leaving us alone.

I winked at Bella. “Do you like it?”

“You wrote this?”

I nodded. “It’s Esme’s favorite.”

Bella closed her eyes and shook her head in dejection.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m feeling extremely insignificant.”

I began weaving the melody to Bella’s lullaby through Esme’s love song, then bit by bit, dropped Esme’s melody until the piece became a simple, soft paean to Bella at rest.

“You inspired this one,” I told her.

She remained quiet.

“They like you, you know. Esme especially.”

Bella realized I was speaking only to her and looked around for the others. She hadn’t heard them leave. “Where did they go?”

“Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.”

Bella sighed. “*They* like me. But Rosalie and Emmett...”

She was so concerned about what my family thought of her; it was touching. And Rosalie had already hurt her feelings by not making an appearance. *Damn her pigheadedness!*

“Don’t worry about Rosalie,” I soothed. “She’ll come around.” I could hope, anyway.

“Emmett?” she asked.

“Well, he thinks *I’m* a lunatic, it’s true, but he doesn’t have a problem with you. He’s trying to reason with Rosalie.”

“What is it that upsets her?”

I didn’t want to have this conversation particularly. No matter what I said, Bella was going to feel badly, through no fault of her own and with no way to resolve the problem. This was a vampire thing—our attitudes were petrified, like our bodies, and very difficult to alter. But I owed Bella some explanation. I sighed.

“Rosalie struggles the most with...with what we are. It’s hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she’s a little jealous.” A lot jealous, in truth.

“*Rosalie* is jealous of *me*?”

“You’re human. She wishes she were too.” What I didn’t say was that Rose, with her enormous, immutable ego, also resented Bella for turning my head when she never had.

“Oh.” Bella let it drop. “Even Jasper, though...”

“That’s really my fault. I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.” *Plus, he vowed to kill you a few weeks ago*, I thought ruefully.

Bella shuddered as if she had heard my thoughts. She *should* be afraid of Jasper... of all of us really, but I still didn’t want her to be. Or rather, I didn’t want her to *have* to be.

“Esme and Carlisle...?” Bella continued.

“Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Esme wouldn’t care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she’s been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Carlisle changed me....She’s ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.” And I am more than happy to indulge her. I smiled at the thought.

“Alice seems very...enthusiastic,” Bella went on.

“Alice has her own way of looking at things,” I said, tightening my jaw. I could almost hear the words in Alice’s musical voice...*It doesn’t matter if somebody bites Bella, because she’ll be changing anyway—if you don’t kill her*. Alice could be a little cold in a loving, sisterly sort of way.

“And you’re not going to explain that, are you?”

No. Hell, no! Not now, at least. I looked at Bella and she looked at me. As much as I wanted to be honest with her, this was something I couldn’t talk about. She would just have to understand. I looked away.

“So what was Carlisle telling you before?” Bella changed the subject.

I scowled, surprised. “You noticed that, did you?”

“Of course.” She spoke as if it were obvious.

I didn’t know how she would take this news...run screaming?

“He wanted to tell me some news—he didn’t know if it was something I would share with you.”

“Will you?”

“I have to, because I’m going to be a little...overbearingly protective over the next few days—or weeks—and I wouldn’t want you to think I’m naturally a tyrant,” I explained.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, exactly. Alice just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we’re here, and they’re curious.”

“Visitors?”

“Yes...well, they aren’t like us, of course—in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably won’t come into town at all, but I’m certainly not going to let you out of my sight until they’re gone.” *And not even then, if I have my way...*

Bella shuddered.

“Finally, a rational response! I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.” Bella looked away. She was examining our living space.

“Not what you expected, is it?” She’d probably envisioned something more gothic. I smiled.

“No.”

“No coffins, no piled skulls in the corner; I don’t even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you,” I teased.

She ignored the jab. “It’s so light...so open.”

“It’s the one place we never have to hide,” I told her, easing her lullaby to its melancholic, irresolvable end. I let the final notes fade to silence, then looked up.

Bella had tears in her eyes. I wondered if she could sense my ambivalence about *our* ending.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Her tears reminded me powerfully of her humanity. Though we were capable of feeling the kind of love and joy and pain that made humans cry, that release was no longer possible for us. In that moment, when my music moved my love to tears, I wanted to share that part of her humanity. Impulsively, I touched a tear in the corner of her eye and it transferred itself to my index finger. I examined it for a second, then touched it to my tongue. Slightly salty, slightly floral, entirely lovely. Not at all connected to my thirst, I was pleased to find. Bella was

regarding me curiously. I let myself fall into the depths of her milk chocolate eyes. They were soft with tenderness—I basked for a long while.

Finally I smiled, breaking the spell.

“Do you want to see the rest of the house?”

“No coffins?” she queried, not entirely joking.

“No coffins.”

I led Bella up Esme’s grand staircase to the second floor and down the long hallway, identifying the rooms along the way.

“Rosalie and Emmett’s room...Carlisle’s office...Alice’s room...”

Bella halted in her tracks at the end of the hall where Carlisle had hung an odd, but beloved artifact of his history. The large wooden cross had followed our family all over the continent and, before that, traveled with Carlisle across Europe.

“You can laugh,” I told Bella. “It *is* sort of ironic.”

She raised her hand toward it reverently, recognizing, perhaps, the heavy weight of its history. She extended a finger as if to touch it, but stopped before she did.

“It must be very old,” she speculated.

Its history no longer surprised me. “Early sixteen–thirties, more or less.”

She stared at me, gaping. “Why do you keep this here?”

“Nostalgia. It belonged to Carlisle’s father.”

“He collected antiques?” she guessed, dubious.

“No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.”

Bella tried to cover her shock, but I saw it before she turned her head and rested her eyes again upon the cross. Stunned into silence, she stood inert for so long that I inquired, “Are you all right?”

“How old is Carlisle?” Bella finally spoke, her voice shaky.

I had decided the best way to deal with these disturbing revelations was head on. I could only hope that she wouldn't be scared off.

"He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday." I watched Bella's expression, but she just looked curious. "Carlisle was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though."

Bella still seemed calm and curious, so I went on.

"He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves...and vampires."

Bella froze at the word.

"They burned a lot of innocent people—of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

"When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Carlisle was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived."

"The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course"—the image was silly to me, but not funny—"and waited where Carlisle had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged."

This part of the story always troubled me, but I went on.

"He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Carlisle heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Carlisle—he was twenty-three and very fast—was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Carlisle thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Carlisle first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Carlisle bleeding in the street."

I paused to carefully compose my next sentences, telling the story, but withholding a few details.

“Carlisle knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned—anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Carlisle acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It’s a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.”

“It was over then, and he realized what he had become.”

Bella was moved or stunned or catatonic. It was hard to tell.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, thinking of caffeine and sugar and wondering whether we had any in the kitchen.

“I’m fine,” Bella said. Of course. Coming from her, those words didn’t mean much to me anymore. Then I saw the cross-examination she was biting her lip to contain and I smiled.

“I expect you have a few more questions for me.”

“A few.” Curiosity was preferable to catatonia, so I was willing to accommodate her. I grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward Carlisle’s office.

“Come on, then. I’ll show you.”

17. CARLISLE

No doubt Carlisle had heard me telling Bella his story. I knocked on the door to his office and waited for him to acknowledge us.

“Come in,” Carlisle invited. He marked his place in the large medical book he was reading and stood. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to show Bella some of our history. Well, your history, actually.”

“We didn’t mean to disturb you,” Bella apologized.

“Not at all. Where are you going to start?”

“The Waggoner,” I said putting one hand on Bella’s shoulder and rotating her to face the wall behind us. Covering the wall and surrounding the doorway was Carlisle’s collection of paintings and lithographs that served as a centuries-long record of his life.

Bella’s heart began to race and with his doctor’s ear, Carlisle automatically noted it. I heard him wonder whether her reaction was due to the impressive wall of paintings, his own presence, or the fact that my hand was on Bella’s shoulder. The latter, he decided, because he’d noticed it downstairs as well. I smiled to myself. Bella *definitely* wasn’t frightened.

I pulled Bella toward the left side of the wall where the 17th-century painting by Waggoner hung. It was a small, but detailed depiction of London from across the Thames. The old London Bridge, with its collection of residences and shops and even a tiny cathedral perched on it, spanned the river. Waggoner, who is famous for his 1666 painting called “The Great Fire of London,” had painted this one from the same perspective before the fire.

“London in the 1650s,” I told Bella.

“The London of my youth,” Carlisle added. Bella flinched when he spoke. He had stepped up quietly beside us, forgetting, no doubt, that Bella couldn’t hear him move. I squeezed her hand.

“Will *you* tell the story?” I asked Carlisle. Bella and I both turned toward him.

“I would, but I’m actually running a bit late. The hospital called this morning— Dr. Snow is taking a sick day. Besides, you know the stories as well as I do.” With a parting smile for Bella, he left for work. I loved and admired my father, not only for his singular qualities of integrity and compassion, but also for the respectful, loving way he treated me. He knew as well as I did

that telling a human about us was an infraction punishable by death in our world. But after I'd saved Bella's life and she learned what we are, he trusted my judgment to handle the situation. When I knew that I loved Bella, Carlisle didn't question my decision to pursue her. And now that I was bringing her into our lives, Carlisle accepted her as one of us, human or not.

Bella, likewise, treated my family as if we were human. It was remarkable how well she was absorbing all this information that would startle even some vampires. Still, I was keeping an eye on her, watching for signs of shock or overload.

After a few more minutes examining the London painting, Bella asked, "What happened then? When he realized what had happened to him?"

Because I couldn't read her mind, it took me a second to realize that she wanted me to continue with Carlisle's story. I glanced at the painting of the English countryside and the cliff from which Carlisle had jumped in a failed suicide attempt, and decided not to share the details of that episode.

"When he knew what he had become," I continued the tale, "he rebelled against it. He tried to destroy himself. But that's not easily done."

"How?" Bella blurted out, seeming to surprise herself.

"He jumped from great heights. He tried to drown himself in the ocean...but he was young to the new life, and very strong. It is amazing that he was able to resist" —I chose my word carefully—"feeding...while he was still so new. The instinct is more powerful then, it takes over everything. But he was so repelled by himself that he had the strength to try to kill himself with starvation."

"Is that possible?" Bella asked.

"No, there are very few ways we can be killed." I hurried on, before she asked the obvious next question.

"So he grew very hungry, and eventually weak. He strayed as far as he could from the human populace, recognizing that his willpower was weakening, too. For months he wandered by night, seeking the loneliest places, loathing himself.

"One night, a herd of deer passed his hiding place. He was so wild with thirst that he attacked without a thought. His strength returned and he realized there was an alternative to being the vile monster he feared. Had he not eaten venison in his former life? Over the next months his new philosophy was born. He could exist without being a demon. He found himself again."

“He began to make better use of his time. He’d always been intelligent, eager to learn. Now he had unlimited time before him. He studied by night, planned by day. He swam to France and—”

“He *swam* to France?” Bella interrupted.

“People swim the channel all the time, Bella.”

“That’s true, I guess. It just sounded funny in that context. Go on.”

“Swimming is easy for us—”

“Everything is easy for *you*,” she complained.

I looked at her with exaggerated patience, waiting for her to let me finish the sentence.

“I won’t interrupt you again, I promise.”

I doubted that. “Because technically, we don’t need to breathe.”

“You—”

“No, no, you promised.” I laughed, shushing her with my finger on her lips. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“You can’t spring something like that on me, and then expect me not to say anything,” she said, speaking around my finger. I moved my hand to the side of her neck—another of my favorite spots—and listened to her heart accelerate.

Bella pressed her question.

“You don’t have to *breathe*?”

“No, it’s not necessary. Just a habit.”

“How long can you go...without *breathing*?”

“Indefinitely, I suppose; I don’t know. It gets a bit uncomfortable—being without a sense of smell.”

“A bit uncomfortable,” she repeated, incredulous.

It hit me again, the fear that each new revelation could be the one that pushed Bella too far and sent her running. I dropped my arm to my side and grew still, sad about the inevitability of it. Already I missed her. Already I could feel a new kind of loneliness.

“What is it?” Bella interrupted my downward spiral by placing her hand on my frozen cheek. Her touch reanimated me.

“I keep waiting for it to happen,” I said.

“For what to happen?”

“I know that at some point, something I tell you or something you see is going to be too much. And then you’ll run away from me, screaming as you go.” I knew my smile was sad. “I won’t stop you. I want this to happen, because I want you to be safe. And yet, I want to be with you. The two desires are impossible to reconcile....” I watched her face.

“I’m not running anywhere,” Bella declared.

“We’ll see.” I smiled, but remained doubtful.

She saw the doubt and frowned at me.

“So, go on—Carlisle was swimming to France.”

“Carlisle swam to France, and continued on through Europe, to the universities there. By night he studied music, science, medicine—and found his calling, his penance, in that, in saving human lives.” Talking about Carlisle like this always reminded me of how remarkable he was, unique among our kind.

“I can’t adequately describe the struggle; it took Carlisle two centuries of torturous effort to perfect his self-control. Now he is all but immune to the scent of human blood, and he is able to do the work he loves without agony. He finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital....”

I drew Bella’s attention to the largest painting on the wall, a court scene by the Italian painter, Solimena, also mid-17th century. I continued the story.

“He was studying in Italy when he discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers.” I pointed to four figures depicted on the highest balcony, looking down over the crowd below. After a few seconds, Bella laughed with surprise. She recognized Carlisle.

“Solimena was greatly inspired by Carlisle’s friends. He often painted them as gods. Aro, Marcus, and Caius: Nighttime patrons of the arts.” I laughed. The Volturi, as they were collectively known, pretty much considered themselves to be gods too.

“What happened to them?” Bella asked.

“They’re still there. As they have been for who knows how many millennia. Carlisle stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades. He greatly admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to cure his aversion to ‘his natural food source,’ as they called it. They tried to persuade him, and he tried to persuade them, to no avail. At that point, Carlisle decided to try the New World. He dreamed of finding others like himself. He was very lonely, you see.”

“He didn’t find anyone for a long time. But, as monsters became the stuff of fairy tales, he found he could interact with unsuspecting humans as if he were one of them. He began practicing medicine. But the companionship he craved evaded him; he couldn’t risk familiarity.”

“When the influenza epidemic hit, he was working nights in a hospital in Chicago. He’d been turning over an idea in his mind for several years, and he had almost decided to act—since he couldn’t find a companion, he would create one. He wasn’t absolutely sure how his own transformation had occurred, so he was hesitant. And he was loathe to steal anyone’s life the way his had been stolen. It was in that frame of mind that he found me. There was no hope for me; I was left in a ward with the dying. He had nursed my parents, and knew I was alone. He decided to try....”

My mind wandered and I found myself staring out the window, remembering the vague image I had salvaged from my human life of my mother, Elizabeth. Carlisle told me that she’d destroyed her own chances of survival by nursing me from her sickbed. When she knew her life was ending, she told him she believed he could do things no one else could, and begged him to do everything in his power to save me.

I often wondered if my mother had figured out, much as Bella had, that Carlisle was not human, and in some great leap of faith asked him to perform his miracle for her son. Carlisle wasn’t sure what my mother had discerned or how much she knew, but her desperate request convinced him to try to change me.

Not wanting to explain to Bella how Carlisle had done that, I ended the story there.

“And so we’ve come full circle.”

“Have you always stayed with Carlisle, then?” she asked.

“Almost always.” I’d said enough for one day. I wrapped my arm around Bella’s waist and walked her out of Carlisle’s office, toward the stairs to the third floor. She stopped me with another question.

“Almost?” she prompted. I couldn’t seem to deny her anything, so I reluctantly replied.

“Well, I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence—about ten years after I was...born...created, whatever you want to call it. I wasn’t sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite. So I went off on my own for a time.”

“Really?” Bella seemed truly curious, rather than disgusted or scared. Her reactions always surprised me.

“That doesn’t repulse you?” I couldn’t quite believe it.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I guess...it sounds reasonable.” I chortled in surprise. She was unbelievable. Here she was sympathizing with my rebellion against my parents, when it included sucking the blood out of human beings.

We climbed the stairs and I led her down the third-floor hallway.

“From the time of my new birth, I had the advantage of knowing what everyone around me was thinking, both human and non-human alike. That’s why it took me ten years to defy Carlisle—I could read his perfect sincerity, understand exactly why he lived the way he did.

“It took me only a few years to return to Carlisle and recommit to his vision. I thought I would be exempt from the...depression...that accompanies a conscience. Because I knew the thoughts of my prey, I could pass over the innocent and pursue only the evil. If I followed a murderer down a dark alley where he stalked a young girl—if I saved her, then surely I wasn’t so terrible.

“But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes. I couldn’t escape the debt of so much human life taken, no matter how justified. And I went back to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me back like the prodigal son. It was more than I deserved.”

And this was more than I’d wanted to tell Bella. I was not proud of that part of my life and I would not expect a human ever to accept it.

“My room,” I announced, opening the door at the end of the hallway and pulling Bella through it. I watched her take in the beautiful view of the Sol Duc River, the Olympic National Park, and the Olympic Mountains through the southern wall of windows. Then she turned to examine my music library tucked into shelves along the west wall.

“Good acoustics?” she inquired, noting the carpet and the fabric-covered walls.

I nodded, chuckling. She missed nothing. I turned on a jazz recording to demonstrate while she perused my music collection.

A sudden lightness came over me as we stood together in my bedroom. I felt like a yoke had been lifted off my shoulders or I had suddenly lost a hundred pounds. I wanted to dance, sing, celebrate.

“How do you have these organized?” Bella’s question cut into my thoughts.

“Ummm, by year, and then by personal preference within that frame.” I turned to look at Bella, marveling at the change she had wrought in me.

“What?” Bella prodded, referring to my gaze.

I decided to share my thoughts with her.

“I was prepared to feel...relieved. Having you know about everything, not needing to keep secrets from you. But I didn’t expect to feel more than that. I *like* it. It makes me...happy.” I’d rarely used that word before I met Bella. I shrugged and smiled.

“I’m glad.” Bella returned my smile. It was so hard to read her eyes sometimes. For a second, I began to worry that the smile wasn’t real, that perhaps it was a kind prelude to her exit from this bizarre stage.

Bella read my face this time. “You’re still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren’t you?”

I nodded, a little surprised.

“I hate to burst your bubble, but you’re really not as scary as you think you are. I don’t find you scary at all, actually.” It was a bald statement, overconfident, and nothing if not an invitation to mischief.

“You *really* shouldn’t have said that.” I menaced her with an evil, horror-film chuckle. Then I issued a baby growl and bared my teeth at her as I bent into a hunting crouch, ready to spring.

“You wouldn’t.” She stepped back, shooting fire from her eyes, warning me away. Warning *me!* Ha!

I leaped at her then, snatching her off her feet and trapping her in the protective armor of my arms while we soared through the air together. My black leather sofa slammed against the wall when we landed on it.

After catching her breath, Bella began struggling to free herself from my “evil clutches,” but I wouldn’t allow it for at least two reasons. First, I was enjoying our physical contact tremendously and, second, she was so soft and pliable, like Play-Doh or Silly Putty, that I couldn’t resist playing with her a little. Gently, and with her tacit permission—nonresistance—I pressed her knees toward her torso and her calves toward her thighs, forming a little human ball which I squeezed against my chest. A new game, this. I’d call it “The Monster and the Maiden.”

She glared at me, trying to hide her alarm at being trapped with mock anger. I leered at her, daring her to challenge my fearsomeness.

“You were saying?” I growled, enjoying the moment.

“That you are a very, very terrifying monster,” Bella conceded.

“Much better.”

She wriggled in my arms, but I held her firmly. This scene represented such a triumph over myself that I didn’t want it to end. Plus, holding her in this way was a *lot* of fun...

“Um...Can I get up now?”

I just laughed.

At that moment, I heard Alice and Jasper approach.

“Can we come in?” Alice inquired.

Bella tried to squirm away again, but I wasn’t ready to let her go. Instead, I tilted her upright and set her on my lap in a more customary position. I felt the blood rush to her face, but there was no reason to be shy here. This was my home. Besides, I was pretty sure that she didn’t mind being held.

“Go ahead,” I replied to our visitors, still grinning as they entered.

Alice didn’t hesitate, but moved to the center of the room and flopped onto the carpet, while Jasper hung back by the door. My sister, of course, wasn’t surprised at all by our playful shenanigans, but Jasper’s mind was spinning.

My gawd, how can he hold her so close? Is he losing it? Is she in danger?

Alice recognized Jasper’s tension and decided to tease him and Bella at the same time. She remarked, “It sounded like you were having Bella for lunch, and we came to see if you

would share.” She kept a straight face as if nothing could be more natural. Bella tensed in my arms, her heart racing. *Finally, a little fear!*

“Sorry, I don’t believe I have enough to spare,” I refused, my mouth within inches of Bella’s carotid artery and an evil grin plastered on my face. Bella couldn’t see my expression, so the act was more to scandalize Jasper than anything else...and to show off a little, if I were being honest.

Of course, one couldn’t fool Jasper for long with false drama. His shock lasted only a couple of seconds before he recognized my love, my joy, and, probably, my lust in the air.

He smiled at our joke before speaking. “Actually, Alice says there’s going to be a real storm tonight, and Emmett wants to play ball. Are you game?”

I loved our family’s baseball games. There weren’t a lot of thunderstorms on the Olympic Peninsula—more of a constant drizzle—so we didn’t get to play often. Still, I didn’t want to leave Bella.

“Of course you should bring Bella,” Alice said, reading my expression.

That can’t be a good idea, can it? Jasper wondered to himself. Jasper, who until recently was determined to kill Bella to protect Alice from any possible threat of exposure, was now worried that I might lose control and kill Alice’s new friend. As edgy as Jasper could be sometimes, he loved Alice to distraction and I loved him for that. Still, it was fun to tease him.

“Do you want to go?” I asked Bella, unable to hide my enthusiasm. I wouldn’t go if she didn’t want to join us.

“Sure,” she said immediately. “Um, where are we going?”

“We have to wait for thunder to play ball—you’ll see why,” I told her.

“Will I need an umbrella?”

That struck all the vampires as quaintly amusing, since we were impervious to the rain.

“Will she?” Jasper asked Alice.

“No,” Alice replied. “The storm will hit over town. It should be dry enough in the clearing.”

“Good, then.” Jasper was onboard now and a happy anticipation settled over all of us.

We'll leave you two alone, now that we've got that settled. Have fun! Alice directed her thoughts at me. Aloud, she said, "Let's go see if Carlisle will come." She jumped up and pulled Jasper along.

"Like you don't know." Jasper read the ruse and pulled the bedroom door shut discreetly behind him.

"What will we be playing?" Bella inquired, suddenly nervous.

"*You* will be watching. We will be playing baseball." I felt her relax. *Not a sports fan*, I remembered from the hike.

"Vampires like baseball?" Bella rolled her eyes, disbelieving.

"It's the American pastime," I intoned solemnly.

18. THE GAME

“So what happens now?” Bella inquired.

“We take you and your truck home, though at the moment, I’m quite content going nowhere at all.” I bent my head to Bella’s hair and inhaled her lovely floral scent. “Mmmm....”

Still sitting on my lap, Bella turned her face toward mine and looked into my eyes. No doubt they were “dazzling,” if feeling blissful had anything to do with it.

“So...,” she started, then lost her train of thought.

“Yes?” I prompted. Bella’s deep eyes widened and her heartbeat quickened. I pulled her hair back from her right ear and touched my lips to her jaw just below it.

“... Emmett will be there. Will Rosalie and Esme come too?”

“Rosalie will play. Esme will come if Carlisle can get away from work.” I spoke against Bella’s warm skin, sliding my lips down her jaw to her chin. She began to pant invitingly. It was profoundly satisfying—and more than a little exciting—to observe the effect of my touch on the one I loved. I brushed my lips across the bow of her lower lip and her left arm rose toward my neck. I caught it in mid-air and held it to my waist. Her other arm was trapped against my body. If I could keep her still, my predatory instinct was less likely to be triggered, it seemed.

Intimate contact with Bella was dangerous territory, I knew, but after more than twenty-four hours together, I had become less sensitive to the scent of her blood. I felt strong enough to experiment and Bella seemed willing.

I placed my left hand at the back of her waist and stretched my fingers to rest on the curve of her left hip bone. I squeezed her waist gently and felt her soft flesh give beneath the pressure. She began gulping air.

“Breathe slowly, Bella, slowly Bella, slowly,” I said softly and rhythmically, like a mantra, my lips moving down the side of her throat and across her left collar bone. I didn’t want her to faint again, or hyperventilate, but I loved the way her flushed skin pulsed against my lips. The burn in my throat was fierce, breathing as I was against her skin, but it was offset by intense new pleasures.

I stroked her ribs with my fingertips, feeling each ridge down the left side of her back, across her waist, and up the right side. She shuddered, then, as I ran my middle finger down her spine from her neck to her waist.

“Slowly, Bella, slowly,” I whispered, my cool hand against the back of her neck; my lips touching the hollow at the front.

I drew my lips up her neck and along her jawline before pressing them gently against hers, which parted softly in response. I inhaled her sweet breath, then moved slightly away and became still to let my excitement subside. Bella’s heart was knocking wildly inside her chest, but she froze when I did and gradually her panting eased. When it had, I brushed my lower lip slowly across her upper lip, then pressed my lips to hers once more. Her breathing quickened again. I became still, my lips touching hers, inhaling her breath, slowly in, slowly out. When her panting subsided, I leaned back and gazed at her face. Flushed and beautiful, she opened her eyes. I held her against my chest and stroked her hair. Her heartbeat gradually returned to somewhere near normal.

“Are you all right?” I murmured into her hair.

“Yes, I...I think so,” she replied in a raspy voice. “Your breath is so...sweet...so intoxicating.”

As is the scent of your blood. Alice’s teasing had put evil thoughts in my head again. If Bella’s fragrance was any indication, and I was sure that it was, her flavor would be delicious beyond anything I could imagine. Sadly, we weren’t made to sample blood—once we’d tasted it, the frenzy began. I was unable to imagine being strong enough to stop at that point. But of course, it could be done—Carlisle had done it four times.

It occurred to me that forty-eight hours ago, I could not have indulged these forbidden thoughts without instigating a crisis. Even now, my desiccated, flaming throat was telling me it was time to remove myself from temptation. I had learned something new, though...with Bella contained on my lap, unable to make any sudden movements, my hunting instinct was not engaged. Perhaps it was not a necessary condition, but it was someplace to start.

“Perhaps we should go,” I said. My words rumbled in my chest.

“Mmm hmm,” Bella agreed.

I cradled her in my arms and stood up. She rested her face on my chest and pressed her hand against my silent heart. I held her close for a few moments, then gently kissed her forehead and set her on her feet. When her legs wobbled, I wrapped my arm around her waist and we walked side-by-side through the hallway and down the staircase.

According to Alice, we had several hours before the thunderstorm would arrive. It started drizzling in Forks just as I turned Bella's truck onto her street. I'd left my thoughts back in my bedroom or I would have caught it sooner.

Billy and Jacob Black were at Charlie's door, their car parked in the driveway. They were not speaking aloud, but I caught Billy's intention.

"Damn interfering aborigines," I muttered, too softly for Bella to hear.

Billy was wondering how he could alert Charlie to the dangerous nature of the Cullen clan, and of me in particular, without breaking the treaty or incurring Charlie's wrath. He had angered Charlie once before by disparaging our family.

"This is crossing the line." I was very angry, but controlled.

"He came to warn Charlie?" Bella asked.

I nodded. Billy and I stared each other down as I pulled the truck to the curb. I knew Charlie had great respect for my father and I was hoping that that would give me some positive currency with Charlie as well. The last thing I needed, besides meddling Quileutes, was the Chief of Police watching my every move.

"Let me deal with this," Bella offered, no doubt sensing my fury.

I considered it for a second before assenting. "That's probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea." I didn't want to lose my temper in my recently heightened emotional state. And I didn't want to give them an excuse to break the treaty.

Bella objected. "Jacob is not that much younger than I am."

"Oh, I know." *Psychological warfare.* I grinned. I could hear Jacob's thoughts too and they were all about Bella. I didn't appreciate his excessive interest, or as I liked to think of it, his "adolescent crush." He did have the decency to be embarrassed by his father's behavior, though.

Bella sighed.

"Get them inside so I can leave. I'll be back around dusk."

"Do you want my truck?"

I rolled my eyes. "I could *walk* home faster than this truck moves."

“You don’t have to leave.” Bella sounded forlorn. I didn’t want her to feel sad, but knowing she would miss me lifted my spirits. I smiled.

“Actually, I do. After you get rid of them”—I indicated the unwelcome guests—“you still have to prepare Charlie to meet your new boyfriend.” I smiled with glee.

“Thanks a lot,” Bella groaned.

I didn’t let her lack of enthusiasm dampen mine. This was a human experience I’d never had and for Bella to declare me to her father...well...I became exuberant thinking about it. I flashed her my sideways smile—the lopsided grin that always seemed to cheer her up.

“I’ll be back soon,” I assured her.

I looked to see if Billy was still staring at us. He was, so with impish delight, I bent my lips to Bella’s throat and kissed her just under her jaw line. I might have kissed her there if Billy hadn’t been watching, but it was even more satisfying that he was. My lovely Bella’s heart leaped and, once again, I marveled at the magic of love and the miracle of desire. I saw her glance toward the porch and my eyes followed hers. The shock on Billy’s face was highly amusing, as was the death grip he held on the armrests of his wheelchair.

“*Soon,*” Bella reiterated, as she exited the truck and rushed through the drizzle to the porch.

“Hey, Billy. Hi, Jacob. Charlie’s gone for the day—I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” Bella sounded excessively cheerful.

“Not long,” Billy replied. “I just wanted to bring this up.” He indicated a bag in his lap.

“Thanks. Why don’t you come in for a minute and dry off?” Bella suggested. She motioned for them to precede her through the front door, then turned and met my eyes. I wished her luck, but knew she would handle the situation better than me. I had no patience for Billy’s meddling or Jacob’s pining. Jacob, especially, had a noisy mind. He had interrogated Bella about me the last time he was here and he was disappointed to see me with her again.

Never mind. You’ve got other things to do, I reminded myself. As soon as the front door closed behind Bella, I started running for home.

When I arrived, Emmett was sitting in front of the big, flat-screen television, watching Sunday sports.

“Hey, Bro,” he greeted me. “You’re coming to play, right?”

“Yes. May I borrow your Jeep to drive Bella to the end of the road?”

“Sure, no problem. The keys are in it. I guess if Bella is coming to the game, her visit today didn’t freak her out too much.”

“She is remarkably resilient. How’s Rosalie?”

Ah, same–same. There’s definitely more to it than being exposed. It seems personal almost, but I don’t see what Bella’s ever done to her.

“Change is hard.”

Yeah, I guess. Later. He turned back to his game.

Alice poked her head around the partial living room wall to greet me. She was at the computer, playing with a new fashion design program Esme had bought for her.

“Hi Edward! It was fun having Bella here today,” she chirped. “I’m designing some new clothes for her. She really needs help with her wardrobe.”

“Okay, Alice, but you might want to break it to her slowly.”

Just then, Jasper stepped out from behind Alice and queried, “Are you headed upstairs?”

“Yes, I need to make some preparations for the ride up the mountain.”

“Mind if I join you for a bit?”

“No, not at all.”

I led the way upstairs and Jasper followed me to my room. “Thanks for giving Bella space, Jasper.”

Sure. It’s for the best, anyway. I just don’t understand how you do it. I could have sworn she was a goner when we came to your room.

“Was Alice worried? Is that why you two showed up when you did?” I asked, alarmed. That would certainly be cause for concern.

Surprisingly, no. She got a kick out of seeing you two together, though. But seriously, Edward, do you have any advice for me?

“I don’t know, Jasper. Mine is something of a special case because I am highly motivated to keep Bella safe. It’s not easy, but it gets easier the more I’m around her and, especially, the

more *continuously* I'm around her. A certain amount of desensitization occurs. But everybody's different, as you know. I'm not convinced that pushing yourself to your limit is the right approach for you. None of us have had anything like your history and who's to say that that hasn't altered your makeup to a certain degree? I hate to see you push yourself so hard. It's just not necessary."

Perhaps. I keep thinking there's a trick or something that I'm missing.

"Not that I know of. The early days are challenging. I've gotten more confident with time. You know, it took Carlisle two hundred years to develop the tolerance he has now and he's barely even tasted human blood. He was also motivated—by his respect for humanity and his dedication to medicine." I thought about that point for a second and came to a new conclusion.

"Perhaps if there is a 'trick,' it's that. You have to have a good reason for trying at all. Having a conscience isn't enough. That's a negative incentive—avoiding depression and self-loathing. You also need a positive incentive, I think. Maybe for you, it's Alice."

Jasper was standing rigidly upright, a habit he'd developed as a soldier. He had cupped his chin in his hand as he contemplated my words. He looked like a standing version of Rodin's "The Thinker." We all resembled statues in our motionless state—we made good artists' models.

That makes a certain amount of sense, Jasper eventually responded. I hate having to hunt more than the rest of you, though. It galls me to be so weak.

"I understand how you feel, Jasper. I got a dose of that after meeting Bella. None of us cares, though, except you. Maybe your first effort should be to conquer your own head. I'm not convinced that pushing the limits of your tolerance will make you more tolerant. It might just be a question of time. If that's true, then there's no point in suffering so much. It's not worth it."

Well, you've given me a lot to think about. I'll consider your suggestions.

"Altering one's natural tendencies is hard, no doubt about it."

Jasper stared at my face for a few seconds, thinking about how much I was changing, then gave me a curt soldier's nod and disappeared. I hoped the talk would help. I just wanted him to stay fed. The less thirsty he was, the less of a danger he would pose to Bella. I was dangerous enough all by myself.

I changed my clothes in preparation for the game, then went looking for Esme. I knew my mother wanted to see me—I could hear her eager thoughts if I listened. I made a point of seeking her out when I was home, as I had been spending most of my time away lately. Esme had dreamed of this day for decades, when I would bring the love of my life home to meet her. I also knew she was concerned about my future, given that my love happened to be human.

I headed to her office where she sat sketching. In the same instant she saw me, her arms were around me in a bear hug, warm and heartfelt.

“Oh Edward, I’m so happy for you! Bella’s a lovely girl! What did she think of us? She was so brave to visit.”

“You’d have to know Bella to understand this, Mom, but she wasn’t afraid of the family...she was afraid the family might not like her.” Esme stepped back and looked at my face in disbelief.

“She wasn’t afraid to visit the Cullen home?”

“No, not at all, but she was quite nervous about making a good impression.”

Esme laughed her melodious laugh.

“She did have a worried moment when Alice and Jasper came upstairs to eat her.” I laughed, remembering the shocked look on Bella’s face.

“Edward, you kids shouldn’t tease her that way! She won’t want to come back!”

“I think it was a one-time joke. She won’t fall for it again, I’m sure. She’s quick that way.” I laughed once more, then added, “She’s coming to the baseball game.”

“Oh, good,” Esme enthused. “I’ll have a chance to get to know her a little better. Did you take her home already?”

“Yes, I’m going to formally introduce myself to her father when I pick her up.”

Esme switched to “privacy mode.” *So, I take it that Bella’s father doesn’t know you’ve been spending nights in his home.*

“No. Actually, Bella didn’t even know until yesterday.”

Don’t you think that’s a little risky?

“There’s not much risk of Charlie seeing me when I shouldn’t be seen, but I don’t like courting Bella behind the Police Chief’s back. That’s the point of introducing myself. I’m hoping

he'll allow me legitimate entry to his home after school and in the evenings. He's quite protective of Bella. We have that in common."

Well, don't be a pest. And I hope you'll bring Bella over here sometimes too. Let me know if you plan to and we'll make sure to have food on hand for her.

"Thank you. It might be a while. Rosalie's not happy about it and I don't want her to hurt Bella's feelings."

We'll work on Rose. Her distress is understandable. Esme pondered for a moment. *You know, Edward, I'm very proud of you. You are becoming so like your father.*

"I'm afraid I'll never be as selfless as Carlisle. It's dangerous for Bella to be with me. I know I should leave her to live her human life in peace, but I can't help myself. I love her."

I know, son. And it's obvious that she loves you too. As long as you're honest with her and she accepts you, then perhaps it's not up to you alone to decide. I don't believe that you will hurt Bella—you're much too good for that.

"I can't be one hundred percent sure that I won't. Even if I can control my thirst, I could hurt her so easily just by accident. I have to concentrate all the time to be gentle enough. On top of that, do you know how many ways there are for a human to die? It's mind boggling."

Do you think you might change her? she asked cautiously.

"No! I won't steal her life and condemn her to our soulless existence!" I snapped. This suggestion always upset me.

Well, Edward, I have faith in you. And whatever you decide to do, we'll stand by you.

"I know, Mom, thank you. I'd better go. I've got a Chief of Police to charm." I smiled to indicate there were no hard feelings.

"And I'm sure that you will." I left her to her architecture and design books and headed downstairs. Time to face Rosalie.

"See you all at the game." I tossed the words out as I exited for the garage, where Rosalie would be working off some steam. She knew it was me and didn't bother removing her head from under the hood of her car as I entered.

"Hey, Rose," I greeted her.

Bite me.

I continued my speech, undeterred by her anger. “Rosalie, I understand that you don’t like Bella with me and I can accept that. What I can’t accept, however, is your actively being cruel to her or frightening her. She’s going to be around here sometimes and if you must be rude, I’m asking, as a favor to me, that you at least keep your mean words, your hisses and growls, and your terrifying glares to yourself. Please. I’m not even asking that you be actively nice, as that appears to be out of the question. I’ve made a point of not telling anyone *why* you dislike her so much and I promise to keep that information to myself if you will try to comply with my request.”

She snarled at me from under the hood, but didn’t hurl any words—or wrenches—at me. I could hear her mind churning in the background, but I tried to block it out.

“Bella will be at the baseball game.” Rosalie’s lack of response was the best I could hope for. If she were still raging as she had been, she couldn’t have kept her mouth (or her mind) quiet. To be sure, her mind wasn’t silent. *...not even pretty...won’t keep me away...won’t end well...*

I left it at that. As I backed the Jeep out of the garage, I reversed a little too aggressively, spinning the tires. Her smug thoughts followed me down the drive as I motored away.

The rain was pelting down when I pulled up outside Charlie’s house. Emmett’s Jeep was an impressive vehicle, with oversized tires, fog lights, light guards, and a roll bar. I drove it rarely, as I preferred speed to climbing, but it would get Bella and I halfway up to the baseball clearing and save her the long ride on my back.

I caught Charlie’s voice inside the house, “You must really like this guy.” So she *had* told Charlie about me. *Good.*

I turned off the ignition.

As usual, though I could hear him speaking, it was difficult to read Charlie’s mind. I couldn’t get many words, but it felt like his hackles were up. Bella had surprised him with her news. Charlie was both suspicious and protective, but he seemed like a fair man. I thought he’d give me a chance.

I rang the doorbell and he was right there waiting for me. He opened the door, using his body to block the doorway. I recognized the posturing of an “alpha” male meant to intimidate an upstart youngster, but I maintained a respectful smile. It was time for me to put away the century-old, human predator that I was, and play the teenage suitor. It was about time I got the chance!

“Come on in, Edward.” Charlie got my name right the first time. Bella didn’t realize he’d been tormenting her for his own amusement when he kept referring to me as “Edwin.” It was funny. I liked him already.

“Thanks, Chief Swan.”

“Go ahead and call me Charlie. Here, I’ll take your jacket.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“Have a seat there, Edward.” He meant for me to sit on the couch, but I took the only chair instead, so he couldn’t face Bella and me together like an interrogator. Now Bella had to sit beside him on the couch, of course. She scowled at me and I winked back.

“So I hear you’re getting my girl to watch baseball.”

“Yes, sir, that’s the plan.”

“Well, more power to you, I guess.” Charlie laughed at a remembered image of Bella, the one summer she’d tried to play softball. It was funny, I had to admit, and I grinned.

Bella was annoyed. “Okay, enough humor at my expense. Let’s go.” Charlie and I got up to follow her to the front door.

“Not too late, Bell.”

“Don’t worry, Charlie, I’ll have her home early,” I told him.

“You take care of my girl, all right?” It’s what I lived for, actually. Bella, who hated being taken care of, groaned in protest.

“She’ll be safe with me, I promise, sir.” I meant it. Bella made us both laugh again by stomping out.

When Charlie spotted Emmett’s Jeep parked in front of the house, he whistled, either in appreciation or uneasiness, I wasn’t sure which. He was having second thoughts about letting Bella go, but he said only, “Wear your seat belts.” Charlie didn’t know me yet, but I would be looking out for Bella’s welfare at least as carefully as he would have himself.

Bella had no hope of climbing into the Jeep without damaging herself, so I hoisted her in with one hand, hiding the maneuver from Charlie with my body.

“What’s all this?” Bella was fumbling with the safety harness when I got behind the wheel.

“It’s an offroading harness.”

“Uh—oh,” she replied.

She wasn’t going to figure out the buckles any time soon, so I leaned over to help. I became distracted by the long line of her neck and the way her open-necked shirt exposed her jutting collarbones. Except for lifting her into the truck, I hadn’t touched Bella for sixty-seven—and-a-quarter minutes and I couldn’t resist. It was raining too hard for Charlie’s eyes to see our movements inside the Jeep. So, when I ran my fingers along her jawline, down her throat, and across her collarbones, each side separately, I was the only one who knew her heart was galloping and her breath was shallow and fast.

I leaned close to taste her enticing breath and, suddenly, my throat blazed with fire. I could hear her blood rushing beneath her rosy skin and I felt a jolt of electricity surge through me and settle in my groin. *Ah!* The burning above, the tingling heat below—it was almost overwhelming. I withdrew my hands and clutched the steering wheel to get a grip on myself. I *must* be more cautious.

A minute later, I turned the key and started the engine. Charlie closed the front door and Bella broke the silence.

“This is a...um...*big* Jeep you have.”

The better to haul you away and ravish you, my dear, I thought, feeling like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.”

“It’s Emmett’s. I didn’t think you’d want to run the whole way.”

“Where do you keep this thing?”

“We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage.”

“Aren’t you going to put on your seat belt?” Bella inquired.

I raised both eyebrows at her, surprised she still had to ask such questions.

Then her mind caught up with my previous comment.

“Run the *whole* way? As in, we’re still going to run part of the way?” Her voice became shrill with stress.

“You’re not going to run.” I smiled, but I knew this was going to be a problem.

“I’m going to be sick.”

“Keep your eyes closed, you’ll be fine.”

She was biting her lip now, a sign of anxiety. I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. The fragrance of her damp hair seared my throat and sent another jolt of electricity through my body.

“Ooohhhh...” A low, guttural moan escaped me.

Bella looked at me, a question on her face.

“You smell so good in the rain,” I gasped.

“In a good way, or in a bad way?” she asked, guarded.

“Both, always both.” I exhaled heavily, releasing some of the tension. The short separation from her followed by the closeness of this vehicle was proving a challenge. I needed to focus on something else.

The drive to our playing field was fun in the Jeep. We headed toward the mountains and turned onto the abandoned logging road that would take us upward for several miles. I liked to drive it at high speed, but the road, which was barely more than a trail, was quite rough. I drove slowly to avoid bouncing Bella’s brain against her skull.

When we got to the end of the road deep in the ancient forest, the rain had slowed to a drizzle and the clouds were lighter. Alice was right, of course, that the sky was clear higher up the mountain.

I looked at Bella and saw her distress.

“Sorry, Bella, we have to go on foot from here.”

“You know what? I’ll just wait here.” She seemed not to be kidding.

“What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning.”

“I haven’t forgotten the last time yet.”

I jumped out of the truck, opened her door, and started unbuckling the harness. I couldn't let my impulsive trip through the forest yesterday ruin her for running with me forever.

"I'll get those, you go on ahead," she tried.

"Hmmm...it seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory." *When all else fails, try the magical monster cure.* I lifted her out of the Jeep and shut the door.

"Tamper with my memory?" Bella looked at me, half-believing.

"Something like that."

I leaned over her with my hands on the Jeep—one on either side of her head—and stared into her eyes. As I moved closer, she pressed her body flatter against the vehicle.

When my face was only inches from hers, I said softly, "Now what exactly are you worrying about?"

"Well, um, hitting a tree...and...dying. And then getting sick," she stuttered.

I suppressed my smile and leaned forward to touch my lips to the base of her throat.

"Are you still worried now?" I murmured, my lips moving against her skin.

"Yes." She struggled to focus. "About hitting trees and getting sick." Her voice was breathy.

I brushed my nose up her throat and onto her chin, exhaling as I went.

"And now?" I asked, speaking the words against her jaw.

"Trees," she panted. "Motion sickness."

I raised my face and pressed my lips against her eyelids, one at a time.

"Bella, you don't really think I would hit a tree, do you?"

"No, but I might." She was losing her will to argue.

I trailed kisses slowly down her cheek, stopping at the corner of her mouth.

"Would I let a tree hurt you?" My lips brushed her lower lip. I felt her body tremble and resisted the urge to press myself against her from stem to stern.

"No," she whispered, emptied of words.

“You see,” I spoke with my lips touching hers, “there’s nothing to be afraid of, is there?”

“No,” she sighed, surrendering.

With a sharp intake of breath, I took her face between my hands and kissed her with more passion than was absolutely safe. I didn’t want to stop. And in my aroused state, I forgot to consider what I had learned earlier today.

Bella responded eagerly to my kiss, twining her hands through my hair, pulling me toward her, and pressing her entire body into mine, point to point to point. Her lips parted, releasing her breath across my face and I felt a powerful urge to devour her mouth, her jaw, her throat...

In a split second of lucidity, I battled for self-control, uncertain which side of my nature would win. But somehow, from somewhere, I summoned enough strength to preempt disaster. I grasped her hands and released their grip on me, then lurched backward, gasping.

“Damn it, Bella! You’ll be the death of me, I swear you will.” *Because I will die if I kill you.*

“You’re indestructible,” Bella gulped.

“I might have believed that before I met *you*. Now let’s get out of here before I do something really stupid.” I was so angry at myself, I couldn’t contain a snarl.

I flipped Bella onto my back and she wrapped her arms and legs around me. “Don’t forget to close your eyes,” I prompted, remembering that motion sickness was what had brought on this crisis.

Bella laid her face against my hair. Though I thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of her body pressed against my back and her limbs encircling me, I blocked my reaction to it and started running. It was a good way to re-channel the excitement in my body and burn off some of my self disgust.

We reached the clearing after a short time and I stopped to let Bella down. She didn’t move a muscle, so I reached behind my head and stroked her hair.

“It’s over, Bella.”

She raised her head and abruptly let go with her arms, but not her legs. She slid down my body like a fireman on a pole before falling off and smacking her rear-end in the mud.

“Oh!” she grunted, wide-eyed astonishment on her face.

For a moment, my mind couldn't grasp that Bella had executed such a silly maneuver. The fall was almost a parody of grace, except for Bella's look of surprise. Her expression converted my displeasure into amusement. I could not control my laughter.

Bella was offended. She rose stiffly and, with a martyred look, slapped ineffectually at the mud and debris on her jacket. With a withering glare in my direction, she stomped off into the forest.

I leaped to her side and wrapped my arm around her waist, mildly remorseful. "Where are you going, Bella?" I tried to stifle my merriment.

"To watch a baseball game. You don't seem to be interested in playing anymore, but I'm sure the others will have fun without you."

"You're going the wrong way."

She reversed direction, staring straight ahead, obviously seething. I grabbed her around the waist.

"Don't be mad, I couldn't help myself. You should have seen your face."

"Oh, you're the only one who's allowed to get mad?"

"I wasn't mad at you."

"Bella, you'll be the death of me?"

"That was simply a statement of fact."

She tried to pull away in frustration, but I couldn't let her go.

"You were mad," she accused.

"Yes."

"But you just said—"

"That I wasn't mad at *you*. Can't you see that, Bella? Don't you understand?" I was now anxious that she should.

"See what?"

"I'm never angry with you—how could I be? Brave, trusting...warm as you are."

“Then why?” she spoke softly, as if she thought it was *valid* for me to be angry with her. I held her face in my hands and looked into her eyes, determined that she not feel at fault for anything.

“I infuriate myself, the way I can’t seem to keep from putting you in danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to—”

Bella covered my mouth with her fragrant hand. “Don’t,” she objected.

I could see that my self–recreation was painful to her, so I let go of it. I moved her hand from my mouth to my cheek and held it there.

“I love you. It’s a poor excuse for what I’m doing, but it’s still true. Now, please try to behave yourself.” I signaled my intention by slowly leaning toward her before pressing my lips to hers. *Mmmm...*

She sighed. “You promised Chief Swan that you would have me home early, remember? We’d better get going.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, though I still felt the pull of longing for her. I released her face, took her hand, and led her through some ferns, under some hanging moss, and around a large hemlock tree. We were there.

Our baseball field was an idyllic setting in the Olympic rainforest. It was a large, former clear–cut, deforested by a lumber company back when replanting wasn’t considered necessary. The logged trees had carried away all the soil’s nutrients within their wood, bark, and leaves, so no new trees would grow there.

The open space was roughly twice the size of Chicago’s old Wrigley Field. We needed at least that much room to make the game any fun. It let us hit hard and get a decent run going from base to base.

We were standing near third base and could see Esme, Emmett, and Rosalie sitting on some granite boulders a distance away. When she spied us, Rosalie growled. *Damn him, he did bring the human! You’d think she was part of our family or something.* She stood and turned her back on us, picking up a bat. That was acceptable. If Rosalie couldn’t be welcoming, at least I wanted her to maintain her distance and keep her comments to herself.

Emmett’s eyes followed her regretfully before he jumped up and, along with Esme, walked over to greet us. *Sorry, Edward, I tried. You know how stubborn she is.* I nodded once.

“Was that you we heard, Edward?” Esme called as she reached us.

“It sounded like a bear choking,” Emmett added, referring to my raucous laughter.

“That was him.” Bella grinned.

“Bella was being unintentionally funny,” I explained, flashing a smile at her. She replied with a twisted expression, all but sticking out her tongue.

Carlisle had just finished marking the bases when Alice left Jasper at home plate and came twirling toward us.

“It’s time,” she called, stopping to listen when she reached us.

On queue, a crack of thunder rolled through the air. Bella flinched and looked at Alice in surprise.

“Eerie, isn’t it?” Emmett winked at her.

“Let’s go.” Alice took Emmett’s hand and pulled him along. They raced toward the pitcher’s mound, where Alice took her position and Emmett veered back toward home plate.

“Are you ready for some ball?” I asked Bella, excited to get started while the storm was in the area.

“Go team!” she piped up. I chuckled at her insincerity, flipped her ponytail, and took off for left field. Carlisle moved to a shallow right field position. He’d cover the infield and the bases and I’d cover the outfield.

“Shall we go down?” Esme asked Bella. I heard Esme tell her that she preferred to referee the games rather than play. She complained about our bad sportsmanship and Bella laughed.

“You sound like my mom.”

“Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I never could get over my mothering instincts—did Edward tell you I had lost a child?”

I hadn’t. I’d said only that Esme had “fallen” off a cliff. Though I knew everyone’s stories in detail, some of the information came from their thoughts, so I kept my retellings primarily to outlines. I hoped that my family would accept Bella and eventually tell her their own stories. Esme was doing that now—she already acknowledged Bella as a potential third daughter.

None of us had happy–ending (or rather, happy–beginning) stories. As far as I knew, there was no happy way to become a vampire. It meant having everything you knew ripped

from you in unfathomable agony and being thrust into an incomprehensible, nightmare existence against your will.

Our stories were different from those of other vampires, though. Carlisle's respect for human life meant he would not change a person unless they were already dying. All of his children had been condemned to die—I through illness; Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett through violence. He had rescued each of us from human death by transforming us into the blood-drinking creatures we are.

Esme had said my name, calling my attention to her next words. "...in one way at least. That's why I'm so happy that he's found you, dear." She continued and I couldn't resist listening, "...far too long; it's hurt me to see him alone." Esme's love was one of the miracles of my new existence. No natural mother could care more or want more for me than Esme did.

"You don't mind, then?" Bella spoke haltingly. "That I'm ...all wrong for him?"

"No. You're what he wants. It will work out, somehow." *Edward is such a remarkable person; he'll find a way. Please let him find his happiness.* Esme's concern showed in her silent prayer to whomever or whatever she might believe was listening. I hoped with all my heart that she was right. It made no difference. I seemed to be pursuing this course regardless of how it would end. I felt a pang of remorse, of inevitability, but I preferred that to the pain of leaving Bella. My thoughts were interrupted by another crack of thunder.

Emmett was at home plate, practice—swinging the aluminum bat. The bat might distort with a particularly hard hit, but it wouldn't splinter and explode or crumble into dust in his hands.

Jasper was squatting behind the plate. The batting team supplied the catcher since we always played with six or fewer players.

"All right. Batter up!" Esme called.

Alice was the funniest pitcher anywhere. She could throw hard, like any of us, but with our fast reflexes, the speed of the pitch wasn't a great advantage. Instead, she used the stealth approach. She would stand vampire still, holding the ball in both her tiny hands. Then faster than a human eye could see, she'd flick her wrist and pop the ball out over the plate. The rest of her body barely moved.

"Was that a strike?" I heard Bella whisper to Esme after the first pitch got by Emmett. Jasper caught it and tossed it back to Alice.

"If they don't hit it, it's a strike," Esme explained.

Emmett hit the second pitch hard. I saw Bella cringe at the moment of impact before I set off running toward the forest. I knew the ball was headed for left field before I saw it and I also knew that it would easily overfly the seven-hundred-plus feet of clearing between home plate and left field.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I registered Bella's comment to Esme, "...home run." Her assumption gave me extra incentive and I reached the trees at full speed, outrunning the ball through the forest. Just before it hit and shattered a tree, I flung my hand in front of the ball and brought it down. I heard Esme call "Out!" when the ball smacked into my bare hand. I loped back to the clearing, showing off the ball to Bella, a huge smile on my face. It was such a human rite of passage, impressing your girlfriend with prowess on the sports field. It pleased me out of all proportion to the meager accomplishment.

Esme was telling Bella, "Emmett hits the hardest, but Edward runs the fastest." Emmett was yelling rude mental comments in my direction, *You suck!* and *I'll beat you on the next one!* being the least offensive of them.

It was an ordinary Sunday game for us with no spectacular plays and no serious accidents. Bella watched, engrossed. I could tell that seeing all of us run, leap, and throw boggled her mind. We were quite impressive when we pulled out all the stops—at least to a human's eyes. We didn't get many chances to do that in our life of mimicry among the mortals. I relished all of our physical activities.

After catching a pop fly to end the third inning, I checked in with Bella sitting behind home plate. "What do you think?"

"One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again."

"And it sounds like you did so much of that before," I teased.

"I am a little disappointed," she admitted.

"Why?" I couldn't imagine.

"Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet."

Silly, silly Bella. She should see me try to throw a pot. Disaster! I smiled Bella's favorite crooked smile and was rewarded with a hitch in her heartbeat.

I trotted off to bat, hitting the ball short to center field, betting I could outrun Emmett's fielding slightly easier than out-hitting Rosalie's catching arm in left field. Emmett fumbled the

ball, allowing me to beat him to second base. Carlisle was up then, pounding the ball over Rosalie's head and we each scored a run. Emmett was going to want a rematch, I could see (and hear). I'd thwarted him a couple of times in this game already and he never took that well.

Occasionally, Carlisle or Emmett would try to outrun a batter to first base and would crash into them instead. The first time Carlisle and Jasper collided, I looked up to see Bella's mouth gape at the colossal *CRACK* as they smashed into one another, and the ground-rattling *THUD* when they hit the ground. Everybody laughed when Bella leaped up to see who was hurt.

I could also see that Bella got a kick out of Alice's baseball-playing technique. Alice had never seen a human baseball game before she started playing with us. So she'd developed a style of play all her own. As with pitching, she would bat surreptitiously, not attempting to hit the ball hard, rather making the infielders guess which pitch she would try for. Sometimes she'd stand and watch the pitch go by, perhaps twitching to pull the pitcher off the mound. Sometimes she'd bunt a foul. When she was ready and had the infielders sufficiently irritated, she'd either bunt the ball between the pitcher and catcher or between the pitcher and base player. Because we all played aggressively, we'd often crash into, or trip over, one another trying to retrieve Alice's hit. But even when the fielding was adept, Alice would often get on base by dancing or cart-wheeling toward first, foreseeing the fielder's intentions and dodging the required tag. We gave her a lot of leeway, but traded her between teams on different occasions, so nobody would get too frustrated by playing against her. Alice is Alice.

It was the fifth inning—Jasper pitching, Carlisle at bat, and I was catching—when the warning came.

Oh no! The words screamed from Alice's mind. She had frozen where she stood waiting to bat. I snapped to attention and saw the picture in her head. Three vampires—two men, one woman—approaching us at running speed. They were nomads, probably unaccustomed to living among humans. Their first inclination would be to hunt Bella.

My defensive instinct triggered, I leapt to Bella's side with a snarl and a growl, my eyes casting about for signs of the unwelcome visitors. Nothing yet.

At my snarl, Jasper materialized at Alice's side, his body curled around her protectively.

"Alice?" Esme's voice resonated with concern.

Sensing danger, Rosalie and Emmett raced toward home plate at full speed.

"What the hell, Alice? You didn't see them coming? I thought you said they were headed east!" I spoke harshly under my breath, not wanting to frighten Bella.

"I didn't see—I couldn't tell," Alice muttered, aghast.

"What is it, Alice?" Carlisle spoke calmly, careful not to overreact.

"They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before," Alice said.

Jasper's eyes darted around the clearing as he hovered over Alice. "What changed?"

"They heard us playing and it changed their path."

Everyone glanced at Bella, all thinking the same thing at the same time, with more or less kindness and concern:

Alice: Bella's in danger!

Emmett: They'll hunt Bella. We'll get to fight!

Carlisle: We must get her out of harm's way.

Esme: Can we hide her?

Jasper: ...protect the human, first, fight, second.

Rosalie: She's nothing but trouble. Why the hell did he bring her? Idiot!

"How soon?" Carlisle asked.

I focused intently, listening for the nomads.

"You know of them?" A male, French accent.

"I've heard rumors of a group in this area." Male.

"There must be at least several if they're playing baseball." Female.

"Perhaps they will let us join in." French accent.

"Victoria and me, not you. Haven't you heard that baseball is the American pastime?"

Male and female laughter.

I was beginning to recognize their location by the images in their minds.

"Less than five minutes," I told Carlisle. "They're running—they want to play." I ran through our options in my mind. *Run—not enough time. Hide—they'll track Bella's scent.*

Fight—seven against three, not a problem, but Carlisle won't like it. Bluff—probably won't work. Reason with them—who knows?

Edward—Carlisle claimed my attention—*we need to get Bella out.* Then aloud, he said, “Can you make it?”

“No, not carrying—” *Bella*, I almost said. There was no need to alarm her any more than necessary. “Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting.”

Then we can't hide her for the same reason. I think we'll have to bluff it out. I don't have much hope of that working, but we shouldn't fight except as a last resort.

I nodded to him in agreement.

“How many?” Emmett looked at Alice.

“Three,” she snapped. She obviously felt bad.

But this is her fault! I thought. No, no, no, it's my fault! I'm the one who keeps putting Bella in danger! What is wrong with me? I knew they were in the area!

“Three!” Emmett sneered. “Let them come.” *That's hardly even sporting. I could probably take them all by myself,* he mused.

Carlisle considered how to meet the visitors. *If we're going to bluff, then we should go on as we were, pretending that we have no concerns. They don't know that we know they're coming.*

“Let's just continue the game,” Carlisle addressed everyone. “Alice said they were simply curious.”

“Edward,” Esme spoke too softly for Bella's ears. “Are they thirsty?”

I listened once more and heard nothing about hunting. They seemed sated. I shook my head minutely and saw her relax slightly. “You catch, Esme, I'll call it now.” That would keep my hands free to protect Bella. Alice and Esme moved to block her other sides without seeming to.

“Take your hair down,” I told Bella. It would partially hide her face and throat. She was pale enough that they might mistake her for one of us if most of her skin was covered.

“The others are coming now.” Bella stated it as a fact, having followed much of our barely veiled conversation.

“Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don’t move from my side, please.” I kept my voice as soothing and calm as possible while I rearranged her hair to cover more of her face. There wasn’t any serious danger, I told myself, knowing that seven against three was very poor odds for the newcomers, especially with Alice’s and my skills. If worse came to worst, we would fight. And we had Jasper, an experienced and accomplished fighter.

Watching me fiddle with Bella’s hair, Alice said, “That won’t help. I could smell her across the field.”

“I know.” I was stymied. Even if Bella changed clothes with Esme, they would smell the human scent within our group. It wouldn’t take them long to figure out which of us had a heartbeat.

Carlisle stepped up to bat and everyone else returned to their positions, prepared to fake it.

“What did Esme ask you?” Bella whispered.

Damn! Why did she have to be so perceptive at the wrong time? But I couldn’t avoid the question. “Whether they were thirsty,” I said reluctantly.

We kept the batting to bunts and the fielding shallow, everyone paying more attention to the forest than to the game.

Edward! Rosalie screamed at me in her head. *I knew this wouldn’t end well! Why are you putting us ...*

I did my best to tune her out. Her tune didn’t vary much and wouldn’t for a good long while, if I knew Rosalie—and I did. But Bella was all that mattered to me now.

“I’m sorry, Bella. It was stupid, irresponsible, to expose you like this. I’m so sorry.” I was furious at myself and my lack of foresight.

Just then I heard faint sounds of our visitors moving through the trees beyond right field. They were no longer running, but approaching more cautiously. My family all turned toward right field at the same time, our vampire hearing on high alert.

I planted myself between Bella and the threat and prepared for battle.

19. THE HUNT

Three vampires entered the clearing one at a time about ten feet apart. The first male to enter—slight, with dark blonde hair—stepped aside for the second, allowing him to take the point position. Though a traditional sign of deference, the maneuver was a ruse. The second male, dark, vaguely European, was not the coven leader. The third vampire was a woman with a full mane of fiery red hair.

Judging by appearance, this coven was nomadic and wild, far removed from any humanity they once might have had. Each moved in a hunting crouch, prepared for attack or defense. They dressed in the style of Northwest backpackers, but were dirty and their clothes were ragged. They wore no shoes. The female's long hair was snarled and full of leaves and twigs. They carried no gear because they needed none.

Carlisle, flanked by Emmett and Jasper, stepped forward to greet the outsiders. The group responded by abandoning their bestial stances, but the two in the back did not relax their vigilance. The woman scanned our group and the clearing continuously, alert for any threat, while the rear male seemed focused on some kind of analysis. His eyes did not move. I listened to his thoughts and found he was studying our scents, differentiating us and trying to determine our relationships to one another. It was just a matter of time before he got a whiff of Bella. I stood ready to answer any aggression.

The leading vampire seemed more civilized than the other two, with more human-like gestures and movements. He stepped forward as their spokesman and offered a smile.

"We thought we heard a game. I'm Laurent, these are Victoria and James." The latter two were partners, while Laurent seemed a more recent addition to the group.

"I'm Carlisle. This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Rosalie, Esme and Alice, Edward and Bella." Jasper was promoting a calm atmosphere to deflect any latent hostility.

"Do you have room for a few more players?" Laurent inquired.

Carlisle returned Laurent's cordiality, but hedged his bets. "Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We're headed north, in fact, but we were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time."

“No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves.”

“What’s your hunting range?” Laurent queried, assuming that we were also nomads.

“The Olympic range here, up and down the coast ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There’s another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali.”

Laurent’s surprise was evident. “Permanent? How do you manage that?”

“Why don’t you come back to our home with us and we can talk comfortably? It’s a rather long story.” Carlisle’s invitation caught the visitors by surprise, more for the word *home* than for the invitation itself. He was being hospitable to discourage violence towards Bella once they realized she was human. Their blood-red eyes proved they had recently feasted on human blood—most likely, they had never heard of covens that did not.

“That sounds very interesting, and welcome. We’ve been on the hunt all the way down from Ontario, and we haven’t had the chance to clean up in a while.”

Unlike the other two, Laurent had a certain air of refinement that indicated experience with a civilized, non-nomadic lifestyle. I guessed he was an old vampire, possibly as old as Carlisle.

The others were younger, more raw. They had not spent much time, if any, among the civilized of our kind. They were rough-edged itinerants, and James had an air of ruthlessness about him. He also seemed to have some agenda, but I couldn’t read what it was.

Carlisle continued the conversation. “Please don’t take offense, but we’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand.”

“Of course,” Laurent replied congenially. “We certainly won’t encroach on your territory. We just ate outside of Seattle, anyway.” He chuckled at the memory of their hunt.

I felt Bella shiver and hoped that she hadn’t heard the cruelty in his voice. Regardless, she couldn’t miss the trio’s gleaming, red eyes. She must be terrified; I touched her arm in reassurance.

Speaking with the newcomers, Carlisle subtly contrived to get Bella to safety, while possibly making some new friends.

“We’ll show you the way if you’d like to run with us—Emmett and Alice, you can go with Edward and Bella to get the Jeep.”

And silently, to me, *Get Bella somewhere safe. We'll escort the visitors home and keep them there until we hear from you.*

I acknowledged his words with a nod. Then, just as I was preparing to do as Carlisle suggested, a light breeze ruffled Bella's hair, sending a wave of her sweet scent into the air. I froze to attention, awaiting the fallout.

It didn't take long. James caught Bella's scent and jerked his head around toward her, his nose in the air, nostrils flaring. *A human? A delicious-smelling human, indeed!* He lowered to a crouch.

Instinct took over. I bared my teeth and snarled at James, matching his crouch, my arms stretched out to protect Bella.

"What's this?" Laurent's mouth gaped in surprise.

James began testing me, feinting first one way then the other. I predicted his moves easily, so that by the time he had moved, I was already blocking his new position. He understood, as I intended, that it would be difficult to get by me.

Ah! A worthy opponent!, he crowed to himself.

"She's with us," Carlisle cautioned James.

But James's self-control was limited, as he had never practiced it. Here was a human for the taking and he was used to taking what he wanted. By challenging him, I had made Bella more desirable.

Laurent only then grasped the situation. He caught Bella's scent and understanding, followed by confusion, flooded his face.

"You brought a snack?" he asked, coming to the only conclusion that made sense to him. He stepped toward Bella.

The offensive word and his advance set me off. I snarled fiercely, baring my teeth in an unmistakable message. Laurent received it and stepped back.

"I said she's with us." Carlisle's voice was harsh, cold.

"But she's *human*," Laurent said, astonished.

"Yes," Carlisle confirmed.

Emmett and Jasper seemed to have expanded to occupy more space, creating a front line of defense beside Carlisle. Emmett was sizing up James, ready to take him on. Jasper's eyes were fixed on Victoria, who had remained in the background, seeming bewildered, but nevertheless, was crouched for a fight. Carlisle and Laurent, the spokesmen, remained committed to a truce.

"It appears we have a lot to learn about each other," Laurent offered, downplaying James' hostility.

"Indeed," Carlisle agreed, standing firm.

"But we'd like to accept your invitation and, of course, we will not harm the human girl." He glanced at Bella and met my eyes. "We won't hunt in your range, as I said."

James suddenly regretted allowing Laurent to speak for the group. This skirmish was not over for him—it had just begun. He'd set his course for Bella and, even as he relaxed his crouch and straightened to an erect posture, his predator's eyes remained glued to her. I read what he was thinking.

"Edward," was it? Ha, ha! You win the first round, but you cannot hide her from me. I've got her scent now—what an appetizing scent it is!—and I will find her. I will take her on the second round. How many are there? Seven...this is going to be fun! He leered at Bella, who was tucked safely behind me.

Carlisle took stock of Laurent for a moment, then decided to trust his words.

"We'll show you the way. Jasper, Rosalie, Esme?" he spoke, rounding up his troops. They stepped forward, blocking Bella, Alice, and I from view, while Emmett stepped back, keeping his eyes on James as he did so.

"Let's go, Bella." I muttered, taking her elbow to urge her stiff body forward. Emmett and Alice took up rank behind us, as we all marched forward with deliberate movements, not wanting to trigger a pursuit in the others.

As soon as we reached the forest, I flung Bella onto my back in a single motion and accelerated as she tightened her grip around me. I channeled my fury into speed. Because of me, Bella was in danger, and I knew that she would not be safe again until either she or James was dead. He was a tracker, a dangerous sort of vampire whose primary skill was to locate creatures by their scent. For James, it was even more than that—tracking was his passion and his self definition. He could not retreat from the challenge I had posed to him. He never would. Ever. *What had I unleashed here?*

When we reached the Jeep, I threw open one of the rear doors and set Bella on the back seat.

“Strap her in,” I ordered Emmett, as he scooted in beside her. Alice took the front passenger seat, while I started the engine. I could not contain my rage at James, at our kind in general, and at myself in particular.

Damn it to hell, why had I brought her? I knew there were vampires in the area! I'll kill that bastard James! Tear his head from his body! Rip his eyes out! Damn it!

I kept my cursing at a volume unintelligible to Bella's ears—Alice and Emmett would just have to cope. I drove like a madman. Though there was no question of my causing an accident, I was mildly surprised that Bella didn't object. She couldn't be comfortable, bouncing around in the back seat like a rubber ball. She would survive that, though, whereas she wouldn't survive James. *Damn it, damn it, damn it!*

When we reached the highway, I turned away from Forks. I didn't know where we were going, just away from there as fast as I could coax the Jeep. I knew our running wouldn't stop him, though. With his skills, he could find Bella anywhere, given enough time. As an immortal, all he had was time, and now a new game with which to fill it.

“Where are we going?” Bella asked, agitated

I didn't know and the others wouldn't cross me, so nobody answered the question.

“Damn it, Edward! Where are you taking me?”

“We have to get you away from here—far away—now.” I didn't want to explain that she had become a walking target.

“Turn around! You have to take me home!” she yelled. I heard her try to unbuckle herself from the harness.

“Emmett,” I commanded.

He grabbed Bella's wrists and held them still. We had no choice!

“No! Edward! No, you can't do this.”

“I have to, Bella, now please be quiet.”

“I won't! You have to take me back—Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family—Carlisle and Esme! They'll have to leave, to hide forever!” My parents would do that for me, I knew.

“Calm down, Bella,” I said flatly. “We’ve been there before.”

“Not over me, you don’t! You’re not ruining everything over me!” She tried to wriggle out of Emmett’s grip, with no visible effect.

Alice cut in with irritating calm, “Edward, pull over.”

She wasn’t going to override me.

“Edward, let’s just talk this through,” Alice insisted.

“You don’t understand,” I bellowed at her. “He’s a tracker, Alice, did you *see* that? He’s a tracker!” How could she not realize?

“Pull over, Edward.”

No, no, no, no, no! My foot got heavier. I was glad Bella couldn’t see the speedometer move beyond one-hundred-twenty.

“Do it, Edward.”

It was impossible to argue with Alice when she wouldn’t argue!

“Listen to me, Alice. I saw his mind. Tracking is his passion, his obsession—and he wants her, Alice—*her*, specifically. He begins the hunt tonight.”

“He doesn’t know where—”

“How long do you think it will take him to cross her scent in town? His plan was already set before the words were out of Laurent’s mouth.”

Bella’s anxiety rose several levels.

“Charlie! You can’t leave him there! You can’t leave him!”

Again, she struggled with Emmett and the harness. This is why I didn’t want to have this conversation in front of Bella!

“She’s right,” Alice said.

Crap! My foot eased slightly.

“Let’s just look at our options for a minute.” Alice’s voice was calm.

Damn it!! My foot eased a little more. *Damn, damn, damn!* I veered off the roadway and slammed the Jeep to a stop.

“There are no options,” I told Alice, an even emphasis on each word.

“I’m not leaving Charlie!” Bella hollered from the back seat.

I don’t care about Charlie! She wouldn’t forgive me if she’d heard that thought.

“We have to take her back,” Emmett said.

“No.”

“He’s no match for us, Edward. He won’t be able to touch her.” Emmett again.

“He’ll wait.”

Emmett smiled. “I can wait, too.”

I was losing ground in this argument. “You didn’t see—you don’t understand. Once he commits to a hunt, he’s unshakable. We’d have to kill him.”

“That’s an option.” Emmett wasn’t troubled.

“And the female,” I pointed out. “She’s with him. If it turns into a fight, the leader will go with them, too.”

“There are enough of us.”

“There’s another option,” Alice stated coolly.

The snarl I directed at Alice contained an implicit threat.

“There—is—no—other—option!”

Do not say it, Alice! Don’t you dare say it! I shouted in my head, though she couldn’t hear me.

Edward, you know it makes sense. It’s the only thing that makes sense for the long term. And I saw it. You know I saw it.

I stared her down, silently threatening. We were caught at an impasse when Bella interrupted us.

“Does anyone want to hear my plan?”

“No,” I growled. I would not be moved.

Alice was angry now. *You are being completely unreasonable, Edward.*

“Listen,” Bella asserted, “you take me back...”

“No.”

She would not give up.

“You take me back. I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix. I pack my bags. We wait ‘til this tracker is watching, and then we run. He’ll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie won’t call the FBI on your family. Then you can take me any damned place you want.”

We all were silenced.

“It’s not a bad idea, really,” Emmett said.

“It might work—and we simply can’t leave her father unprotected. You know that,” Alice added.

They all waited for my response. “It’s too dangerous—I don’t want him within a hundred miles of her.”

“Edward, he’s not getting through us.” Emmett couldn’t imagine losing *any* fight, but I could, and the stakes were simply too high.

After a quiet moment, Alice said, “I don’t see him attacking. He’ll try to wait for us to leave her alone.”

“It won’t take long for him to realize that’s not going to happen,” Emmett asserted.

“I *demand* that you take me home.” Bella, again.

Aaaaaahhhh! I shut my eyes and pushed my fingers into my temples, trying to tune them out. They were allied against me, but I was responsible for Bella’s safety. I couldn’t trust her to put her own life first. And if anything happened to her...

“Please,” Bella begged, finally breaking my resolve. I felt flayed, raw. If it were possible, I would have cried in frustration and fury and defeat.

So I gave in to her, but not without demands. I kept my voice even as I spoke.

“You’re leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not. You tell Charlie that you can’t stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works. Pack the first things your hands touch, and then get in your truck. I don’t care what he says to you. You have fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep.”

I revved the Jeep's engine, punched the gas, spun us around one-hundred-eighty degrees, and shot back toward Forks.

"Emmett?" Bella queried.

"Oh, sorry," he said, for whatever reason. I was too busy planning strategy to pay attention. I'd warned Bella that I would be tyrannical until these nomads were gone. I just wished I'd been more cautious before we reached this crisis. I would try to make up for it.

"This is how it's going to happen. When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk her to the door. Then she has fifteen minutes. Emmett, you take the outside of the house. Alice, you get the truck. I'll be inside as long as she is. After she's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carlisle." *No mistakes.*

"No way," Emmett dissented. "I'm with you."

Though I appreciated his loyalty, it was not helpful at this moment.

"Think it through, Emmett. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you." It was hard to argue with that kind of commitment from someone you loved. I sighed.

"If the tracker *is* there, we keep driving."

"We're going to make it there before him," Alice announced. "What are we going to do with the Jeep?"

"You're going to drive it home," I told her, brooking no dissent.

"No, I'm not."

Damn it Alice! Why will nobody listen to me? Damn it, damn it, damn it!

"We can't all fit in my truck," Bella said. "I think you should let me go alone."

Arghh! Not her too. "Bella, please do this my way, just this once." I gritted my teeth to keep from yelling.

"Listen, Charlie's not an imbecile. If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get suspicious."

"That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters."

“Then what about this tracker? He saw the way you acted tonight. He’s going to think you’re with me, wherever you are.”

Emmett was impressed. “Edward, listen to her. I think she’s right.”

“Yes, she is,” Alice concurred.

“I can’t do that.”

“Emmett should stay, too. He definitely got an eyeful of Emmett,” Bella added.

“What?” Emmett was taken aback.

“You’ll get a better crack at him if you stay,” Alice told Emmett.

I was appalled. “You think I should let her go alone?” What the hell was she thinking?

“Of course not.” Alice said. “Jasper and I will take her.”

Hmm, I saw her reasoning, but...how could I leave Bella? How? It was not possible.

“I can’t do that,” I told Alice.

Then Bella took a shot.

“Hang out here for a week—” I scowled and she altered her words. “—a few days. Let Charlie see you haven’t kidnapped me and lead this James on a wild-goose chase. Make sure he’s completely off my trail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route, of course, and then Jasper and Alice can go home.”

Hmmm. “Meet you where?”

“Phoenix.”

“No. He’ll hear that’s where you’re going.” *No mistakes.*

“And you’ll make it look like that’s a ruse, obviously. He’ll know that we’ll know that he’s listening. He’ll never believe I’m actually going where I say I am going.”

Emmett chortled. “She’s diabolical.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

“There are several million people in Phoenix,” Bella reasoned.

I would not be easily convinced. There was *no* room for errors. None. “It’s not that hard to find a phone book.”

“I won’t go home.”

What was she thinking? “Oh?”

“I’m quite old enough to get my own place.”

What, alone?

“Edward, we’ll be with her,” Alice reiterated.

Yeah, that would work great...just great. “What are *you* going to do in *Phoenix*?” I asked Alice.

“Stay indoors.”

“I kind of like it.” Emmett wanted a chance at James, but it was not his call to make.

“Shut up, Emmett.” *Would he? No, of course he wouldn’t.*

“Look, if we try to take him down while she’s still around, there’s a much better chance that someone will get hurt—she’ll get hurt, or you will, trying to protect her. Now, if we get him alone...” Emmett said, anxious to get started.

I had slowed our speed to give myself some time to think.

After some consideration, I decided that Bella’s plan could work...*if* we executed it perfectly, *if* James behaved predictably, *if* Charlie bought Bella’s story and let her go... *if, if, if....* Regrettably, this was the best plan we had, and it meant being separated from my beloved. I did not want to leave her—at all. But it seemed that my presence only made her more vulnerable. *So what’s new?*

“Bella,” I began, knowing that I had no choice. Emmett and Alice peered through their respective windows, looking for James, but also giving us what passed for privacy in the Cullen household...non-prying eyes and selective hearing. But this wasn’t that moment...not yet. “If you let anything happen to yourself—anything at all—I’m holding you personally responsible. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

I wished my warning would grant her some instinct for self-preservation.

“Can Jasper handle this?” I asked Alice.

“Give him some credit, Edward. He’s been doing very, very well, all things considered.”

“Can *you* handle this?” It was hard to trust Alice’s judgment when we disagreed utterly on the best course for Bella’s future. I wanted her word.

Alice deliberately misunderstood and gave us all a demonstration of her vicious predatory nature. She bared her teeth and issued a highly convincing snarl that made me smile. All was forgiven, of course.

“But keep your opinions to yourself,” I added under my breath.

20. GOODBYES

I did not like this plan. It violated all my instincts even to pretend to use Bella as bait. Not only that, but to set the trap, then abandon her to the care of others, appalled me.

My brother and sister were capable as long as they didn't drink her blood (Jasper), or change her to a vampire (Alice). It was so hard to control our kind, impossible really. Though I trusted my family with most things, I didn't trust even *myself* to keep Bella safe. But Bella was right. James knew she was mine and that we would stay together. Therefore, I served as a useful decoy. If I could get him to follow me, then Bella could escape.

These thoughts consumed me for the remainder of the drive to Charlie's house. Considering everything she had already been through today, Bella remained remarkably composed now that we had agreed to protect Charlie. Of course I cared about Charlie, because she did, but if it came down to saving him or her, there was no contest. Unfortunately for me, Bella felt the opposite, so I had to protect her from herself as well.

I parked the Jeep and scanned for any signs of James—no scent, no mental activity. Good. He hadn't been here. That gave us a little time to get Bella in and out of the house. Then he could pick up our trail.

"He's not here," I announced. "Let's go."

I didn't know what story Bella was going to tell Charlie. In truth, I didn't care. I only cared that we get her out of here and that she let us do it. If Charlie didn't believe her story and came after me or my family, we would deal with that. Keeping Bella safe was my only concern.

Emmett assisted Bella with the buckles in the back seat. "Don't worry, Bella," he said, "we'll take care of things here quickly."

That was Emmett, always confident, almost always cheerful. Bella had worried that Rosalie and Emmett didn't like her, so I was glad she'd had these moments with Emmett. He was impressed with her plan and happy to help, especially since he'd get the chance to "kick some vampire butt," as he would have put it. He complained constantly that his siblings wouldn't give him a fair fight and grizzly bears weren't challenging enough. The best wrestling he got was with Rosalie in the bedroom, if the noise they made and the destruction they wrought were any indication. I'd have chuckled at the thought if our current situation weren't so dire.

To my surprise, I smelled the salty scent of tears—Bella’s tears. I didn’t know what was causing them...fear? At any other time, alleviating her distress would have been my first priority, but right now, I had an overriding concern. Bella’s life—and mine, come to that—was dependent on what happened in the next few hours, if not the next several minutes.

“Alice, Emmett,” I instructed. They silently exited the Jeep and melted into the darkness. I helped Bella from the vehicle, then held her close to me while we hurried to the front porch. All the while I scanned the darkness for signs of James or his compatriots.

“Fifteen minutes,” I reiterated at the door.

“I can do this,” Bella sniffed through her tears. She cupped her hands ardently around my face and looked into my eyes.

“I love you. I will always love you, no matter what happens now.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you, Bella,” I insisted.

“Just follow the plan, okay?” she said, confirming my resolve. “Keep Charlie safe for me. He’s not going to like me very much after this, and I want to have the chance to apologize later.”

“Get inside, Bella. We have to hurry,” I pressed. We would do our best for Charlie, but I wasn’t going to make any promises.

“One more thing,” she whispered fervently. “Don’t listen to another word I say tonight!” Abruptly, she pulled my face to hers and kissed me, pressing her body fiercely against mine. Caught unawares, I responded in kind before she broke away, turned to the front door, and kicked it open.

“Go away, Edward!” she shouted, stunning me to inaction as she slammed the door in my face. I stood frozen for a moment, gathering my wits, until I realized that getting away from me would be her excuse to leave town. Though Bella was presumably acting, I felt deflated and forlorn. With her tearful eyes and sharp words, her story was more than believable. But there was no time for dwelling on that.

I rushed to Bella’s window and entered her bedroom after she stomped up the stairs and slammed her door on Charlie. At least it wasn’t just me, I thought wryly. I opened the dresser and grabbed whatever clothing was within reach and tossed it to her as she stuffed the articles into her duffle bag.

Bella was crying for real now as she yelled back and forth with Charlie through the locked door. I heard the argument, but didn't listen to it, as I did not need this script floating around in my head. I was vaguely aware that Bella was clearing me of any wrongdoing and that she was breaking up with me. I knew the former wasn't true. I hoped the latter wasn't true either, though I wouldn't blame her for leaving me.

I grabbed some dirty socks and t-shirts from the floor and stuffed them into the bag, then I secured it and placed it over Bella's shoulder.

"I'll be in the truck—go!" I directed under my breath. Exiting through the window, I leaped into the truck, and ducked below Charlie's sightline.

While I waited, I caught the first snatches of thought from the tracker's mind. He was getting closer. Rather than hearing words, I was seeing pictures. He was in his "hunting mind" with his thoughts switched off, operating on instinct. The primary image in James' mind was of a line extending in front of him, sometimes continuous, sometimes broken. Tracking required following a scent line—in this case, Bella's scent—and traversing any gaps.

James had found a mixture of Bella's scent and mine in Forks and was tracking her here just as we had expected. His timing was perfect for us, assuming he didn't try to grab Bella between the house and the truck. The fresh scents of my siblings and me in the area should deter him. His mind revealed his preference for stealth and trickery over direct confrontation. It helped that we had him outnumbered.

James was close now, looking down on the house from some height. Judging from the angle of the image in his mind, he was in one of the tall trees in the woods behind Charlie's house. He was watching and listening, and feeling very smug about how fast he had located Bella. He had not recognized that we were baiting him.

Charlie and Bella continued to argue, something about Renee coming back to Arizona next week. And then I heard Bella's final words: "It didn't work out, okay? I really, really *hate* Forks!"

Charlie's front door flew open. Bella raced for the truck, threw her bag in the back, scrambled behind the steering wheel, and started the engine. Charlie didn't try to stop her. When we were out of sight of the house, I insisted that Bella pull over and let me drive.

"I can drive," she argued through heavy tears. I nudged her foot off the gas pedal, then gently gripped her waist and scooted her across my lap while taking control of the wheel.

"You wouldn't be able to find the house," I said, wanting to keep this drive safe. Regardless of her dubious fitness to drive, I still had faster reflexes.

Bella jumped when Alice turned on the Jeep's headlights behind us.

"It's just Alice," I soothed, taking her hand.

"The tracker?"

"He heard the end of your performance."

"Charlie?"

"The tracker followed us. He's running behind us now."

She stiffened.

"Can we outrun him?"

"No." But I involuntarily pressed the accelerator until the truck's engine balked.

Emmett was watching our backs, running behind us. When he thought we were safely on our way, he leaped into the truck bed with a thump.

Bella, terrified, shrieked.

Ah, I should have warned her! I covered her mouth.

"It's Emmett!"

She quieted and I wrapped my arm around her waist.

"It's okay, Bella. You're going to be safe."

She remained rigid with terror and I momentarily regretted not whisking her out of town against her will. This side trip had put her in much closer proximity to James than I ever wanted her to be. I tried to distract her.

"I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life," I said. "It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well—especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you."

"I wasn't being nice," she said, ashamed, unable to meet my eyes. "That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt."

"Don't worry. He'll forgive you." I smiled in reassurance, but her wild eyes revealed her anguish.

"Bella, it's going to be all right."

“But it won’t be all right when I’m not with you,” she said in a tiny, frightened voice.

No, it will be dreadful for us both, I thought, but I didn’t want to make it worse.

“We’ll be together again in a few days,” I promised, hoping desperately that it was true. “Don’t forget that this was your idea.” That reminder perked her up a bit.

“It was the best idea—of course it was mine.”

I tried to smile at her little joke, an effort not entirely successful.

“Why did this happen? Why me?” Bella’s voice was heartbreaking. Remorse and regret overwhelmed me.

“It’s my fault—I was a fool to expose you like that.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Bella continued. I was almost too distraught to hear her explanation. “I was there, big deal. It didn’t bother the other two. Why did this James decide to kill *me*? There’re people all over the place, why me?”

I reviewed what I had heard from James before he set his sights on Bella.

“I got a good look at his mind tonight. I’m not sure if there’s anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It *is* partially your fault,” I said. “If you didn’t smell so appallingly luscious, he might not have bothered. But when I defended you...well, that made it a lot worse. He’s not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Suddenly we’ve presented him with a beautiful challenge—a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting the one vulnerable element. You wouldn’t believe how euphoric he is now. It’s his favorite game, and we’ve just made it his most exciting game ever.” James sickened me. He was the vampire version of a hurricane...even if you could see him coming, you couldn’t avoid him, or run, or hide. “But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then.”

“I thought...I didn’t smell the same to the others...as I do to you.” Bella stammered out the words identifying her as prey.

“You don’t. But that doesn’t mean that you aren’t still a temptation to every one of them. If you *had* appealed to the tracker—or any of them—the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there.”

None of these nomads ever attempted to abstain when they were thirsty. In all probability, they wouldn’t even think to try.

Bella shivered in fear.

“I don’t think I have any choice but to kill him now,” I uttered, thinking through any possible options. “Carlisle won’t like it.”

“How can you kill a vampire?” Bella inquired.

I wasn’t sure why she wanted to know, since there was no possibility that she could do it herself. It took a vampire to kill a vampire. I didn’t want to tell her how, either, as the procedure was unpleasant and very rarely carried out—by our clan, anyway. It was not something she would ever have to witness. But looking at her inquisitive, frightened eyes, I knew I could hold back nothing.

“The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds and then burn the pieces.”

“And the other two will fight with him?”

“The woman will. I’m not sure about Laurent. They don’t have a very strong bond—he’s only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by James in the meadow....”

“But James and the woman—they’ll try to kill you?” Oh! She wanted to know how I could be ended! Silly Bella.

“Bella, don’t you *dare* waste time worrying about me. Your only concern is keeping yourself safe and—please, please—*trying* not to be reckless.”

“Is he still following?”

“Yes. He won’t attack the house, though. Not tonight.” James was methodical. He was busy assessing our strengths and collecting information. He was in no hurry.

I maneuvered the truck down our three-mile, winding driveway and pulled up to the porch, with Alice following behind in the Jeep. Emmett jumped out of the truck bed and had Bella in his arms almost before we were stopped. He held her close to his chest like a football and rushed into the house, his large body protecting her from every side. Alice and I flanked him.

I heard Laurent’s French-accented inner voice just before I saw him. He was standing in our living room surrounded by the rest of my family. Emmett growled and set Bella down beside me to free his hands. He adopted a stance of protective menace.

“He’s tracking us,” I informed Laurent, as if he could alter the situation.

Laurent looked about as unhappy as I felt.

"I was afraid of that," he replied.

Alice stepped toward Jasper and whispered the plan in his ear before they hurried up the stairs together. Rosalie took her position by Emmett's side as if to reclaim him from Bella. She was as angry as I'd ever seen her. All of this upheaval over a human was beyond her capacity to understand. Bella's being *my* human made the drama almost intolerable. She'd just as soon see Bella taken by James and be done with it. Though I regretted her attitude, her self-centered view of life was unlikely to change.

"What will he do?" Carlisle asked Laurent. Due to our fixedness, predicting vampire behavior was not as difficult as predicting human behavior, especially if you knew the individual in question.

"I'm sorry. I was afraid, when your boy there defended her, that it would set him off," said Laurent.

"Can you stop him?"

"Nothing stops James when he gets started."

Emmett's muscles flexed and his chest broadened. "We'll stop him," he declared.

"You can't bring him down. I've never seen anything like him in my three hundred years. He's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined his coven."

Though the rest of us were given pause by these words, Emmett merely grunted his skepticism. Emmett's confidence, and at times overconfidence, was as fundamental to his personality as Rosalie's self-centeredness was to hers. As a human, he had always been the biggest, strongest male around, known throughout Clay County, Kentucky, as the man to beat in any physical competition. Laurent's words were nothing new to him, a dare, a rousing challenge.

Laurent was still trying to understand my family's response to James' threat. He shook his head in confusion and glanced at Bella.

"Are you sure it's worth it?"

A fierce growl tore through me. That *was* something he could understand. He flinched and took a step backward.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice," Carlisle stated, clarifying our position. Though Laurent could not comprehend our protecting Bella, he chose, nevertheless, not to cross us.

“I’m intrigued by the life you’ve created here. But I won’t get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won’t go up against James. I think I will head north—to that clan in Denali.”

He thought for another moment, then added, “Don’t underestimate James. He’s got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. He’s every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be, and he won’t come at you head on....I’m sorry for what’s been unleashed here. Truly sorry.” He took another baffled look at Bella, then gave a brief conciliatory bow.

“Go in peace,” Carlisle said, dismissing Laurent.

Everyone stood frozen while Laurent made his exit. The instant he was gone, Esme moved to a keypad across the room and released the motorized security shutters that protected the glass wall.

“How close?” Carlisle asked me.

I’d been listening to James’ thoughts and keeping track of his position.

“About three miles out past the river; he’s circling around to meet up with the female.”

“What’s the plan?”

“We’ll lead him off, and then Jasper and Alice will run her south to Phoenix.”

“And then?”

I felt my jaw lock and my whole body tense.

“As soon as Bella is clear, we hunt him.”

“I guess there’s no other choice,” Carlisle said. Silently, he added, *I’ll join you and Emmett going north. Esme and Rosalie will take Bella’s truck and head west. With luck, James and Victoria will split up.*

I nodded once in assent and began to organize the troops.

“Get her upstairs and trade clothes,” I ordered Rosalie. Trying to lead James off Bella’s trail in two directions from the start was worth a try.

I was already turning to brief Emmett when Rosalie hissed at me, her eyes blazing with fury.

“Why should I? What is she to me? Except a menace—a danger you’ve chosen to inflict on all of us.”

“Rose...,” Emmett protested. Rose shook off his hand when he tried to calm her.

I’d gotten so used to ignoring Rosalie’s raving that it took only a fraction of a second to block any visible reaction I may have had to her outburst. I wasn’t going to encourage any more airing of her grievances in front of Bella. And enforcing civility from Rosalie was not my place.

“Esme?”

“Of course.”

Esme swept Bella into her arms and rushed up the stairs with her.

I spoke in a quiet tone. Bella did not need to hear the details of our tactics.

“Emmett, grab a traveling bag from the garage, plus a tent. Carlisle and you and I will lead James north for as long as we can, then ambush him.”

I reached into Bella’s duffle to locate the unwashed items from her bedroom floor that held her scent. We would use them to convince James that Bella was with us.

“Rosalie, you and Esme will drive Bella’s truck west as a secondary diversion,” Carlisle directed.

She opened her mouth to protest, but Carlisle interrupted.

“Bella is with Edward and that makes her a part of this family. We protect our family.”

His voice rang with the authority of the patriarch that he was. Rosalie closed her mouth, though her eyes burned with resentment. Her mind was not quiet, but I was used to that.

Carlisle continued speaking at a speed and volume that Esme would hear from upstairs, but Bella would not.

“We think James will assume Bella is with Edward and will follow him. We hope that Victoria splits off and follows the truck. She will have no reason to attack or engage you—this is James’ game. Esme, if you are followed, keep driving west as far as possible until Victoria stops tracking you. Then return to Forks and take up watch at Charlie’s house. She may go back there to look for Bella when she realizes Bella isn’t with you. We need to keep Charlie safe.”

Alice reappeared at the top of the stairs with a small leather bag, no doubt full of cash, credit cards, and current identification. The latter was something we had to replace every decade or so to update our birth years.

I walked to the bottom of the staircase and issued my instructions in the low, fast cadence that humans could not decipher.

“Alice, you mustn’t let Bella out of your sight for one second. She’s a magnet for danger and acts irrationally when she’s frightened. She has an impulse for self sacrifice that defies logic. You have to stay with her at all times. *At all times!*”

I’ve got it, Edward. You don’t need to worry. She’ll be safe with us.

“Alice, I’m trusting you. If anything happens to her...”

Nothing will. Try not to worry.

“And don’t forget that she needs to eat *several* times a day and drink more often than that.”

I’ve got it! I’ve got it! She will be fine, I promise.

Esme and Bella had finished exchanging clothes and joined Alice in their ill-fitting attire. My mother and sister then took an elbow apiece and lifted Bella down the stairs at near vampire speed. Jasper joined them with a duffle bag over his shoulder. It would contain changes of clothes, including items used to hide the skin: hats, sunglasses, gloves, scarves, and hooded jackets were the usual items.

Carlisle doled out untraceable cell phones, one for Esme, one for Alice, and one for us. We would use them to coordinate our efforts when our adversaries were outside of hearing range.

“Esme and Rosalie will be taking your truck, Bella,” Carlisle said. Bella nodded and glanced surreptitiously at Rosalie, who was wearing a sullen expression.

“Alice, Jasper—take the Mercedes. You’ll need the dark tint in the south.” They both nodded.

“We’re taking the Jeep,” Carlisle added.

He looked around the room at each of us, pausing for any questions. There were none; we were ready.

“Alice, will they take the bait?” he asked.

We all stood in silence while Alice shut her eyes and focused inwardly. When she opened them, she was sure.

“He’ll track you,” she answered Carlisle. “The woman will follow the truck. We should be able to leave after that.”

“Let’s go,” Carlisle said to Emmett and me, as he headed for the back door.

Our moment of separation had come. A heavy weight of dread, anxiety, and loneliness settled in my chest, making it hard to breathe. I moved to Bella’s side, lifted her from the floor, and pressed myself—lips and body—desperately against her. Just for that moment, I forgot where we were and what we were facing, as all of my tangled emotion burned between us.

Then I set her down. I touched her face in farewell and stared into the deep wells of her eyes, willing her to be safe. I didn’t know how I could possibly let her go...but I did, my stone heart breaking as I released her. Then I shut the door on my emotions and turned to face what was to come.

21. THE RUSE

Carlisle drove the Jeep northbound on U.S. Highway 101. The strategy was to convince James that our party—the coven leader, the strongest, most threatening fighter, and the human’s personal protector—comprised Bella’s security detail, when in fact, we were the killing party and Bella was not with us. We would lure James with Bella’s scent to follow us far to the north, while Bella escaped with Alice and Jasper to the south. By driving Bella’s truck west, Esme and Rosalie would provide a secondary diversion for James’ mate, thus separating the two early in the chase.

We turned west onto an abandoned logging road and traveled a short distance into the Olympic National Forest where we parked the Jeep. Emmett knew the entire network of old logging roads and 4-wheel drive trails on the Olympic Peninsula, as offroading was one of his favorite pastimes. He often took the Jeep on hunting trips just for fun, although running straight through the forest was faster.

I listened for James’ mind—yes, he was following us, as Alice had predicted, and he believed that Bella was with us. Perfect. I nodded at Carlisle, then opened the cell phone and dialed Esme’s number. Since James was within hearing distance, I kept it cryptic.

“Yes?” she answered.

“It’s time.”

“Now,” I heard her say to Rosalie before she cut the connection. Heading west toward La Push, Rosalie and Esme would drive about fifteen minutes, then turn north onto a logging road in order to skirt the Quileute reservation, where the Cullens were not welcome. They would drive as far as they could, then continue running into the forest for as long as Victoria followed.

I listened for Victoria and caught the image of the red truck’s taillights in her mind. She had followed the truck. Good. It was safe for Jasper and Alice to get Bella out.

I dialed Alice. She answered silently. *Hi. Did Victoria follow the truck?*

“Yes,” I replied.

Time for us to go then?

“Yes.”

Good luck, Edward.

“You too.” Though I wanted to give Alice any number of additional warnings about caring for Bella, I refrained. The conversation that James had just heard would give him no clues as to what was going on and we had to keep it that way.

I hated reading his mind, seeing his obsession with Bella grow, feeling his excitement over tangling with me. I briefly wondered what James had been before he’d been changed. Hunter? Detective? Mafia hit man? He must have had some tracking ability, since becoming a vampire had undoubtedly enhanced it. Maybe he’d been skilled with scents. Perfume maker? Oenologist? Hound dog? On second thought, he lacked the refinement for any of those vocations.

Like most of us, James didn’t think about his human past, so there was no way to know. All I read from him was intense focus, determination, and cruelty. His mind read like an animal’s while he was tracking—more sensation and instinct than thought.

It didn’t matter. All we needed to know was whether he was behind us, and roughly how far. He was keeping his distance right now, making sure he didn’t lose us, but staying out of sound and scent range. He wanted us to think that we were conveying Bella—who he thought was with us—safely out of the area.

We’d reached the end of the road. Carlisle pulled the Jeep off to the side and we exited, grabbed our gear, and disappeared into the trees. We needed to get a good headstart on the tracker.

We began our run, Emmett carrying the pack. There was a gentle mist falling through the trees. The moon shed enough light that the drops sparkled as they fell from the needles of the firs, cedars, and spruce trees, the giants of this ancient rainforest.

It could have been a pleasant outing were it not for the gravity of James’ “game” and my constant worry over Bella’s welfare. I had to trust that Alice would take care of her until we were reunited. Being apart after all that had happened between us—had it been just a weekend?—was painful in the extreme. My arm ached to encircle her waist. I longed to touch her hair. At least I was carrying her scent with me and that had to do for now.

Carlisle interrupted my thoughts.

Edward?

“Yes?” I said, signaling my attention.

I've got a proposal.

I nodded for him to continue.

I'm thinking we run north toward Neah Bay. We should make it easily by 4:00 am, when the Makah will be getting their boats ready to launch. We can hire a fisherman to motor us across the strait to Vancouver Island.

Crossing the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Canada was a good idea. The farther we got from Forks before confronting James, the better. If anything should go wrong, he might decide to go after Charlie. We needed his return time to be as long as possible. We also wanted any violence that occurred to be far out in the wilderness, away from humans.

Carlisle continued, *If Bella were with us, we wouldn't keep running for several days. We'd have to stop to let her eat and rest.*

I nodded again. This had also occurred to me.

Once across the water, we'll run until we get reasonably far into the forest, then set up camp. James will have to swim the strait. By stopping, we give him a chance to catch up.

I interrupted. "We will have to keep to the forest after daylight. Isn't the western side of British Columbia called the 'Sunshine Coast'?"

Carlisle smiled. "Actually, the term refers to the mainland. The tall mountains on Vancouver Island siphon off the rain before it gets to the mainland coast, which makes the coast sunny. Vancouver Island's west side gets more rain and less sunshine than even Forks. It's a true rainforest."

Emmett broke in. "We're going to Vancouver Island? Crossing the strait?"

"Yes," Carlisle replied.

"Great! I'll swim!"

"That's not a bad idea, Carlisle. Fewer scary strangers to be carried in the boat."

"Boat?" Emmett queried.

I signaled with one finger for him to hold on, and waited for Carlisle to finish.

After a "sleeping" interval, we pack up and go north again, deeper into the wilderness, where we'll set up a second camp. Maybe we can get in some quick hunting. When we know

James is within hearing range, Emmett and I will do some phony reconnaissance then leave you, presumably with Bella, while we “head back to Forks.”

The latter phrase was said in quotation marks.

When James thinks we’re gone, he’ll approach the campsite. We’ll have doubled back, of course, then we all close in.

It was a solid plan and I assented with a nod. Assuming James was a good fighter, as Laurent had said, the only part that might be dangerous was when James engaged me. I’d have fight him alone, as Carlisle and Emmett couldn’t be too near or James might detect them and retreat to escape the ambush. Of course, I would do my best to kill James, but at the very least, I would have to hold him off for a short while to give my father and brother time to return.

Laurent had said that James was “absolutely lethal.” Well, I would be too—he was threatening my Bella. *Damn him!* An involuntary snarl escaped my lips. Carlisle and Emmett both looked up and I shook my head. I would let Carlisle explain the plan to Emmett. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts. We kept moving.

I wondered how Bella was faring. When I’d held her to me, silent tears streamed down her face. They tore at my heart and there was no time to ask what she was thinking. I couldn’t know what was making her so sad. Fright? Separation? The altercation with her father? I knew she was needlessly worried about one of us getting hurt. It was impossible to convince her that we were not in danger—she was!

This danger was my fault. I’d said that she would be the death of me and that was true—if she died, I had decided that I would follow soon after. I could only hope that I didn’t bring her death about prematurely. Somehow, when this was over, I *must* give her human life back to her. What I was doing was wrong in so many ways. But just thinking of leaving her sent a tearing pain through my chest...

I mustn’t think of that right now. First I had to get her and my family, as well as myself, through this calamity intact.

We ran on and on, weaving between the trees. I heard Carlisle explain the plan to Emmett in tones too soft to carry through the forest. I couldn’t hear James’ thoughts now, anyway. He seemed to be staying outside my range. When we stopped, I’d loop back to make sure he was still following us. Or better yet, Emmett could stay behind in Neah Bay until he saw James, then catch up to us.

As we approached the northern tip of the Olympic Peninsula, the forest thinned in places and there were more deforested clear-cuts where logging companies had removed the

trees in large swaths. Carlisle had taken this into account with the timing of our trip through this area. Our running and swimming across national boundaries would be less noticeable to humans—though not to James—in the dark.

We arrived at the town of Neah Bay at 4:30am. Neah Bay is the northernmost outpost in the lower forty-eight states and, along with the surrounding area, is the home of the Makah Nation. Fishing is an important part of the Makah's livelihood, so we were bound to find boats ready to launch at the local boatyard. We were hoping to locate a captain willing to carry Carlisle and I across the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Canada, a not-entirely-legal service for which we would undoubtedly pay a hefty fee. Our cover story was that we were meeting a wilderness guide to go bear hunting. Once Emmett arrived, the story would be mostly true.

The Makahs might be leery of outsiders, but they relied on tourist dollars to help keep their businesses afloat, so it wasn't unusual to see strangers hanging around the wharf looking for a fishing charter or boat ride. The strait was a rough passage for small boats in windy weather, but it was quiet this early in the day.

Later, Bro!

Emmett handed the large duffle bag to me and turned back into the forest. He was in his element, happy to run, excited to swim the strait, and especially looking forward to fighting James.

Carlisle and I ventured down to the waterfront. Walking along one of the floating docks, we soon came upon an elderly native, alone on his boat preparing for the day's work. His hair was platinum silver, long, and plaited in the traditional single braid. His body was lithe, but stooped at the shoulders. The leathered skin on his face contained deep crags from sun exposure and age. We stopped to introduce ourselves.

"Hello, sir," Carlisle began.

The old man turned toward us, one corner of a large fishing net in his hands. He seemed to be sewing or repairing it with a slim ivory tool, which he passed deftly back and forth between the threads. He was working by the light of a bright Coleman lantern and the dock lights lined up on poles along the wharf. His hands didn't pause in their work.

"My name is Carlisle Cullen. This is my son, Edward. We would like to hire a boatman to take us across the strait to Port Renfrew," he said, naming the small fishing village across the water in Canada.

We waited for a reply, but the fisherman remained silent. I listened to his mind and found that it was also relatively silent. Very unusual. I caught individual words such as “strangers,” “money,” and “Robert,” as well as some native words I didn’t recognize.

Does he hear us?

I nodded and remained still.

Should I ask again?

My sense was that he was pondering a reply and would speak in his own time. I shook my head and waited. Carlisle followed my cue and stood still beside me. Vampires were good at this sort of thing. Some time, perhaps three minutes, passed before the fisherman made a decision.

“My son has boat. He will come.” I heard him think *five* and took this to mean the time. The sun didn’t rise until 7:30 at this time of year, so we had time.

I signaled “yes” to Carlisle, who replied politely, “Thank you very much. We will wait.”

The old man did not acknowledge us further, so we walked down the pier taking in our surroundings. No sign of James, no mental activity, no scent. I hoped we would be well gone before he got close. It appeared he did not want us to know he was tracking us. Either that, or he no longer was. We would know soon enough.

I tried to keep my mind on our task, but in these moments of waiting, it was hard not to think of Bella. I wondered where she was now and whether she was all right. I was glad that Jasper was with her. He could soothe her worries and help keep her sane during this ordeal.

Any sign of James? Carlisle inquired.

I shook my head “no.”

Carlisle pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and checked for a signal. Surprisingly, there was one. The Makahs were connected.

I should call Esme.

“It’s safe,” I told him.

Carlisle pressed buttons, then put the phone to his ear.

“Can you speak, love?” he asked, then remained silent, listening.

“Hmmm, I suppose that’s to be expected,” he replied, then waited for a question.

“I’d rather not say where, but we’ll continue.”

He shut the phone and put it back in his pocket. I raised my eyebrows.

The woman, Victoria, turned back after half an hour. Rosalie has been following her all around Forks. She’s methodically traversing the streets and nearby roads, looking for a trail. Esme’s watching Charlie’s house.

“Much as we expected,” I commented. I was pleased that Rosalie was making an effort. It was a good sign. She was probably a bit happier now that Bella was no longer traveling with Emmett.

I wondered where Bella was now. It would be good to call Alice and find out how she was doing, but I didn’t want to risk it while we were still this close to Forks. It would be better if we could lead James well into Canada without giving him any clues to our scheme. Besides, we had nothing to tell them, so there was no point.

Just then, I heard movement down by the docks. Carlisle and I turned simultaneously toward the sound and froze. Ah, another fisherman. Perhaps this was the old man’s son. We started walking back to the pier.

When we arrived at the top of the floating dock, we could see a local man with a short haircut, mid-50s perhaps, standing near the old man’s boat. We made our way down to meet him. He turned toward us with a friendly smile.

“Are you Carl and Edward?” he asked.

“It’s *Carlisle*, but yes we are.”

“Carlisle,” the man repeated, “I’m Robert Ulmer. This is my father, Albert. You’re looking for transportation to Vancouver Island?”

“Yes,” Carlisle replied. “We’re meeting a guide to go bear hunting. He told us we could find a boatman here who’d be willing to take us across the strait.”

“I could take you and fish on the way back. The tides are favorable this morning. When did you want to go over?”

“The sooner, the better,” Carlisle said. “Our guide will be on the clock starting at seven this morning.”

"I could be ready in twenty minutes," Robert offered. "I need to gas up and check my lights. It's good to go early and beat any wind that might kick up after sunrise. The strait can be exciting when the winds are high."

"How long is the crossing?" I asked, speaking for the first time. Humans were suspicious of people who were too quiet, although that might not be true in this case. Obviously, Albert was a man of few words.

"An hour-and-a-half in good seas," Robert responded.

"That suits us fine." Carlisle said.

Fifteen minutes later, we were loaded onto a larger fishing boat with Robert at the helm. At the last minute, Albert had joined us and was busying himself with some lines at the back of the boat.

"How long are you here for?" Robert asked.

"Just a few days," Carlisle answered. "We live in Forks, but we haven't seen Vancouver Island yet."

"Two countries, sometimes seem like a world apart. Speaking of which, we should get in early enough that we can avoid the harbormaster and docking fees. We just need to get in and out quickly. The islanders have a congenial relationship with the Makahs. It suits both sides." He gave us a sly smile.

"That's fine with us," Carlisle said. We just have the one bag of camping gear and we're not bringing in weapons."

Not traditional weapons, anyway.

"Yeah, the Canadian authorities do not look kindly upon Americans bringing in guns. Seriously frowned upon." He grinned. "What do you do in Forks?"

"I'm a doctor at the local hospital and Edward is in high school. Spring break, you know."

If Robert had any thoughts about Carlisle looking more like my brother than my father, I didn't catch them. Minding one's own business seemed to be a valued trait among the Northwest natives, I had decided, after living in the area for a couple of years.

It was obvious that Robert was used to tourists. He kept up a friendly conversation with little effort, seeming to be interested in the people who hired him. My guess was that he'd developed his social skills to balance his father, who fit the stereotype of the silent, stoic Indian.

Old-timers who had seen the kind of changes that Albert had seen were often stubborn about modernizing. This had not varied over the course of the century. They had lost so much in their long lives that they clung to the old ways and many were not interested in mixing with “the white man.”

That was more or less the sense I got of Albert. Though his mind wasn’t giving me a lot of information, he didn’t seem to harbor any particular suspicions about us. Neither did Robert, as far as I could tell. It helped that it was still dark outside—our skin and eyes were less noticeable.

After twenty minutes of silence, Albert suddenly spoke.

“You know any Quileutes?”

Perhaps a human wouldn’t have heard him. He spoke without concern for the low volume of his voice, as if there were no noisy boat engines straining against the swift current. Of course, we heard him fine.

Carlisle was surprised by the question, but answered politely. “Yes, I’ve met a number of tribe members at the Forks hospital.”

“Who?” Albert asked.

I couldn’t hear much going on in Albert’s mind and I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps his thoughts were partially shielded from me like Charlie’s, though what I could hear was of a different tenor than Charlie’s. Albert’s thoughts were disorganized and random. His question seemed to have no malice behind it, though. I nodded discretely at Carlisle.

“Well, let’s see,” he said. “I met Emily Young and Sam Uley several years ago and I’ve delivered babies for a number of families. I know the Black family and the Clearwaters, and perhaps a couple of others. We’ve only been in Forks for a few years.”

“You know Billy Black?”

“Yes, and his son, Jacob.”

“And his other son?”

Carlisle paused and looked at Albert before answering. “I wasn’t aware that Billy Black had another son.”

At that, Albert began to cackle. It was an odd noise, high-pitched and slightly hysterical. I tried to read what he was thinking, but it was clouded. I got “grandson,” and something that

sounded like “alley cat,” but nothing more. It was impossible to decipher his obscured thoughts.

The boat’s engine noise eased as we cleared the heavy, mid–strait current. Albert’s cackling had continued, much to our dismay, and suddenly rang out in the quieter pre–dawn air.

“Dad!” Robert cut in. “What are you going on about?”

Albert quieted instantly, like a little boy caught doing something naughty. Robert’s thoughts were easy to read, though not easy to decode... *Ugh! I hope he wasn’t telling tales about Black again. He just can’t let it go. Lily seems happy enough there and nobody else cares anymore! I’ll have to try talking to him again.*

I guessed that Robert had a close relative—perhaps a sister—named Lily who lived on the Quileute reservation. I wasn’t sure what connection she might have to Billy Black, though, if any. I’d never heard of her.

Robert turned to us and asked Carlisle, “Are you married?”

“Yes, my wife’s name is Esme.”

“How many children do you have?”

“Five adopted children. How about you?” he asked, trying to turn the conversation away from himself.

“Three kids, but they live with their mother off the rez,” Robert replied. “I’m still here looking after my dad and enjoying the fisherman’s life. It’s been in our family, and our tribe, actually, for many generations.”

“That’s a remarkable thing about the Quileutes too. Unlike American immigrants, their family traditions and tribal memories go back a long way.”

“Yes, the old ways do hang around,” Robert replied, glaring at his father.

22. CAMPING

We entered the tiny harbor of Port Renfrew on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island well before the first light of dawn. Carlisle paid Robert the agreed-upon sum while I hauled our duffle out of his boat. After giving us a friendly farewell and a card with his cell phone number on it, Robert pulled away from the dock and motored off with no fanfare.

We hurried to clear the town and take cover in the rugged forests that spread outward and upward from the coast. I still hadn't heard James' thoughts, so I knew he wasn't close enough to see us. Nevertheless, we needed to maintain the fiction of Bella's presence. It was lucky that Robert planned to spend the day fishing. He would not be on the dock to answer any questions James might put to him regarding outsiders in the area. Or to be eaten for lunch, for that matter.

Edward, what did you make of the old man's outburst about Billy Black? Carlisle's question broke into my thoughts.

"His mind was unnaturally silent," I told him. "I couldn't tell whether it was truly empty or if it was blocked to me, something like Bella's. Perhaps he had some dementia."

Did his comment about Billy's "other son" mean anything to you?

"Nothing absolute, but he seemed to be impugning Billy's moral character. I also got the word 'grandson.' One might infer a familial relationship between Billy Black and Albert's progeny."

Carlisle looked thoughtful. *There are numerous connections between the Washington coastal tribes, particularly the Quileutes and Makahs. They share some traditions, legends of origin, and have intermarried often over the centuries.*

"And perhaps didn't marry, as well," I said wryly.

We were running now, but not fast as we had no desire to gain ground on Emmett. We just needed to find a campsite with good visibility of the surrounding area and remote enough to be private. As we went along, I used Bella's clothing to mark the occasional tree with her scent. James would not get a continuous trail of scent, but he would assume we were carrying her.

I spied a steep ridge about 100 yards ahead and suggested we look at it. After running a short while longer, we leaped to the top of the ridge and found a well-sheltered area with good lookout posts. We erected the tent and settled in to wait for Emmett.

“He’s here,” I told Carlisle, a couple of hours later.

Emmett?

I nodded. He had just arrived on Vancouver Island where he would follow the shoreline until he found our scent trail. It wouldn’t take him long to catch up to us.

Less than ten minutes later, Emmett appeared through the trees about thirty yards from the bottom of the ridge. Carlisle stood and called to him. With two giant leaps, Emmett landed next to us, soaking wet, a bright gleam in his eye.

“James?” Carlisle queried.

“He’s trailing,” Emmett replied. “He came into Neah Bay about an hour ago, walked along the pier, then turned back into the forest the way he came. When I was sure he was gone, I ran out of the woods and took to the water.”

“I wonder why he’s going back,” Carlisle mused.

I told him my theory.

“My guess is that he’s keeping track of where we are, but is trying to hide his thoughts from me. I haven’t heard him since we left. From what Emmett said, it appears he is making forays into my mind-reading range, then moving out of it. I just have not been listening for him at those precise moments.”

“How do you suppose he knew about your special skill?” asked Carlisle.

“Again, I’m guessing, but perhaps Victoria spied on our family or maybe Laurent picked up something about it when he visited our home.”

“Laurent promised to return north and I’m inclined to take him at his word,” Carlisle said, “but regardless, James must know about you. Which begs the question... what else does he know?”

Emmett spoke up. "Maybe once he crosses to the island, Edward can backtrack to get a reading on him."

"That's a good idea," I responded. "It's making me nervous to be this blind. I don't want him turning back toward Bella. Victoria's been searching Forks and the whole area. What if we've missed something?"

Emmett tried to reassure me. "Edward, Bella is safe with Jasper and Alice. Even if by some impossible chance, he found her, she's still protected. He couldn't get past those two."

"All the same..." My mind was awash with possibilities for how James could hurt Bella. We had to take care of him, the sooner, the better. I growled with impatience and frustration.

"Emmett," Carlisle spoke, changing the subject, "Do you want to hunt? It's perfect country and we need to stay here for six or seven hours."

"I wish there were some grizzlies. There are only black bears on this island. But a bear is a bear, I guess, and they are quite feisty when they've just risen from their winter naps." Emmett laughed. "I'll go now, then."

"Yes, and I'll go when you get back. Edward hunted on Friday, so he'll be fine until tomorrow. We all need to stay well fed until this situation is resolved."

"See you soon," Emmett replied and flipped off the ridge, somersaulting in mid-air before running off into the woods.

I wished I were here under different circumstances. Vancouver Island is a wild, magical place with thousand-year-old trees and unique animal species. Its central, western, and northern sides are largely inaccessible except on foot. Emmett would be in heaven, as the black bear population was healthy. There was plenty of my favorite, mountain lion, as well, and there were even wolves. Still, it was hard to enjoy the wildlife or even the majestic beauty of the primeval forest while separated from, and worrying about, Bella. It was hard to think of anything else. I needed to be back by her side.

And yet, until James was eliminated, she would not be safe.

How are you holding up? Carlisle inquired.

"Not as well as I could be, but I'm more worried about how she's holding up. She was so frightened and so sad, and she thinks she isn't worthy of our help. She can be so irrational...I'm always afraid she will do something impulsive and I'll lose her forever."

I dropped my head into my hands, fighting despair. "And here we are, doing nothing, just waiting for him to act."

Try to be patient, Edward. You know that if we chase him, he'll only run, then try again. Vampires are tenacious creatures. Which brings me to something else...

I knew that Carlisle was trying to divert my attention, but I didn't protest.

You've decided about Bella then?

"Oh Carlisle..." I moaned, "As much as I wanted to leave her alone, I don't think I ever really had any choice in the matter. The decision to stay was made before I had any chance to effect it."

You know, son, that we support you, whatever happens. We only want what makes you happy.

"I know, and I thank you for that. But if anything happens to her, I will never forgive myself."

You had no way of knowing. What are the odds?

"True, but it doesn't alter my culpability."

Again, Carlisle changed the subject.

How is your control holding up? Jasper said you seemed to be having no trouble at all managing your thirst.

"Well...it might appear that way, but it takes constant effort." I saw his eyes widen, so I hurried to reassure him. "Not that I could ever hurt her now. I am sure that I won't, though the thirst is always present. What I'm struggling with now are these new... more human...desires. I want her...in ways I never have wanted before. And even more surprisingly, she wants me too. In fact, she has quite shocking...quite tempting... responses to my presence. I just don't want to hurt her. It would be so easy to make a mistake."

I can't pretend to understand what you're going through, Edward. I've never been in your situation or even known anyone in your situation, so all I can offer you is the common sense that I know you already have. Take things slowly. Keep yourself fed. As the more dangerous and more powerful creature, it is your responsibility to protect her where she can't protect herself. Apart from that, you shouldn't be afraid to go where your feelings lead you. You are a good man, Edward. You can trust yourself.

His faith in me was stronger than my faith in myself, but it was still good to hear. "I will love her always. That won't change."

Yes. We aren't easily altered, but it is apparent that Bella has already changed you in remarkable ways. I think she is good for you.

"I am not convinced that I'm at all good for her, but she wants me anyway." I sighed heavily, reminded of how much I missed her.

My brooding was interrupted by Emmett's happy hooting. He was playing Olympic gymnast through the gigantic, old, Sitka spruces.

"Emmett's back," I warned Carlisle. "Seven seconds."

We both stared at the top of the ridge, counting down. At zero, Emmett pogo'd into view above the ridge, dropped out of sight, then popped up again, landing on his hands ten feet from where we were sitting before flipping upright onto his feet. I laughed in spite of myself.

Carlisle smiled at Emmett's antics, then said, "If you hear nothing from our 'friend,' I'll hunt."

I focused for a moment, listening to the silent air. It stayed silent. There was no James and no humans in the vicinity. This was one good reason to lead James north—there were very few people to hunt.

"All clear, Carlisle."

"I'll be back soon then."

With that, he leaped off the ridge and out of sight.

"Hey Em. Good hunt?"

"Yeah, two black bears, both testy. Saw some mountain lions."

"Good. Maybe I'll take a jaunt when Carlisle gets back."

"Still no James?"

"No, I hope we haven't lost him," I worried.

If you wanna double check, I'll stay here and guard Bella.

"Do you think you can handle that?" I asked sarcastically.

Sure thing! he enthused in my direction.

I took a running leap off the ridge, grabbed a Sitka branch as I flew by, hand-over-handed my way through a few more, then dropped to the ground, running. I was careful to return along the same scent trail that we'd made before. We didn't want James to think we were going back and forth from the campsite to the shore to check on him, because, presumably, we didn't know he was behind us.

I heard him just before I reached the edge of the forest outside Port Renfrew. His mind sounded like one would expect a bloodhound's to sound, looking for a fresh trail. I inferred that he was moving along the shoreline, searching for our scent. Either that, or he was hunting for dinner in town.

I didn't need to see him to know how close he was. He must have just exited the water—that's why I hadn't heard his thoughts until I was almost on top of him. If I weren't specifically looking for a mind underwater, it was easy to miss. Total immersion destroys a vampire's scenting capability and makes him more reliant on subtler sensory cues and instinct, much like any creature of the sea. I had to make an effort to differentiate a swimmer's mind from that of an animal. It didn't come up very often, since normally I was trying to block minds, not reveal them. Except for Bella's, of course.

Arrrrgh! Thinking of Bella made me want to track down our enemy and destroy him without further strategizing or delay. I knew that was irrational. Three-to-one odds were better than one-to-one. And this battle wasn't for my satisfaction. It was to ensure Bella's safety. I retraced my steps through the woods to Carlisle and Emmett.

Carlisle was already back from his hunt. Out here in the forest, he hadn't needed to go far to find prey. I informed him that James was near and would undoubtedly spy on us. We must be cognizant of his presence now, knowing that he might overhear our conversations. He must believe that Bella was asleep in the tent while we stood guard. Perhaps we could also slip in something about Carlisle and Emmett's return home. That would entice James to follow us for another day before we sprang our trap on him.

Emmett took his position in front of Bella's tent, while Carlisle and I took up posts behind the tent in the woods. Ideally, James should see us keeping watch without knowing that we knew he was there. We expected him to get close enough to verify our position and numbers, then retreat into the woods. Afterwards, we would pick up camp and head northward.

James' visit was uneventful. I could hear his mind as he approached and I signaled to Carlisle when he drew near. Carlisle spoke to me about our phony plans and after a short time,

James left, just as we'd expected. I heard his mind fade as he retreated. He'd probably gone back to Port Renfrew. He might be hunting.

It took us no time to pack and get moving. We traveled north and west toward the center of Vancouver Island to a remote wilderness called Strathcona Park. It was a vast protected area with no roads and few trails, but mountain peaks high enough to sport glaciers. Along with the heavy rain, melting ice and snow drained through countless rivers and creeks, some with breathtakingly beautiful waterfalls. It was among the most magnificent of landscapes I had seen and I'd seen a lot in my one hundred years. Even so, it was hard to appreciate it in my state of distress.

We pitched the tent again within view of a very high waterfall. To keep our ruse alive, we also started a small fire. We didn't need the warmth, but Bella would have. After checking for any sign of James, I left Emmett to guard the tent and Carlisle to patrol the area, while I went to hunt. I wasn't particularly thirsty, but I didn't know when I'd get another chance and I needed to stay strong.

Before finding any mountain lions, I ran into one of the many black bears on the island, and as Emmett had said, found him to be crabby—Bella's word—with hunger. He wanted to feast on me more than I did on him, but ultimately, he gave me no choice when he charged. Bear wasn't my favorite prey, but it would do. As the bear hurtled toward me, I raised my stiffened right arm and made a fist. My pathetic-looking defensive measure didn't slow the bear's attack at all and he caught my outstretched fist right between the eyes. The blow didn't even knock me off balance, but the bear's front legs collapsed and he tumbled forward. I leaped onto him as he rolled, grabbing his snout and lifting his huge head upwards. He had no time to fight back. My teeth sunk through his fur, skin, and sinew to open the large artery in his neck. I drank mechanically, trying not to spill blood on my clothes. I preferred to look civilized after feeding as well as before.

The bear lay limp within minutes and I had no enthusiasm to look for another hapless creature. One bear was worth at least two deer anyway. I made my way back to camp.

We spent the night without incident and when dawn came, we renewed our fire, made coffee, and cooked some oatmeal for the human. The scent would remain on the air and lend credence to our deception. After burying the evidence, we packed the tent and trekked northwest through the rugged mountain country, jumping over fallen trees and wading through creeks along the way.

Late in the afternoon, we decided that Carlisle and Emmett would help set up camp and then leave. They would hike southeast for half a mile—parallel to our original route—then

wait for James to pass by them. James would find me alone at the tent and Emmett and Carlisle would surprise him from behind. At last we were going to end this tedious game!

My longing for Bella—to hold her in my arms, to reassure her, to kiss her—had only increased during the two days since we’d been apart. I had wanted desperately to call and hear Bella’s voice, but the risk that James would overhear was too high. Once he discovered Bella was not with us, the subterfuge was over. We must have our chance at him before then.

I listened for any mental activity in our area. There was none, so Carlisle took the opportunity to check in with Esme. She told him that Victoria had spent Monday night at Bella’s high school and had visited Charlie’s house in the morning after he’d gone to work. There was no danger to Charlie, so Esme didn’t interfere. Since then, neither she nor Rosalie had seen Victoria. They believed she’d left Forks altogether.

After ending the phone call, Carlisle turned to Emmett and me.

“Victoria has left Forks,” he informed us for Emmett’s sake, as I had already heard his thoughts.

“Do you think she could be meeting James?” Emmett asked.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” answered Carlisle. “We must be prepared to fight them both if she joins James here.”

“Three against two still seems like good odds with Emmett’s strength and my hearing,” I noted.

“Yes,” agreed Carlisle. “It will be more difficult, but still within our abilities. We will follow them here and will not attack until they reach you at the camp, Edward. I will take on Victoria and you and Emmett take James.”

Carlisle and Emmett prepared to leave. Our enemies would likely attack at night, so we had only a few hours to wait for them. We said our goodbyes, then I stood outside the tent to wait and brood.

So I waited...and brooded...and waited some more. Hours passed, and the dark slowly retreated from a lightening sky.

"Should we head back to camp?" I read Emmett's thoughts.

He had whispered the question to Carlisle. He and Carlisle had backtracked a mile from camp and taken a position fifty yards to the side of our original trail, then waited for James to appear. Now it was dawn and Emmett had grown impatient, having been on alert all night. Though Carlisle was willing to wait a few more hours, he recognized Emmett's need for action.

"Emmett, why don't you run back a mile or two toward Port Renfrew and look for any sign of James or Victoria. Try to avoid detection," Carlisle had directed.

Half an hour later, Emmett reported back. He had found both their scents, but not them.

Ah! Damn it! That news was disappointing. They must have abandoned the chase. Considering the timing, I wondered if Victoria had found some information in Forks that convinced James to turn around.

As I waited, listening, I heard Emmett's and Carlisle's thoughts coming closer. They were tracking toward me in tandem. It seemed they were closing the circle behind nothing.

Edward? Carlisle called to me. *We're following James' trail, but we have not seen or heard either of them.*

He was right. Neither was anywhere in the vicinity. I loped down the trail to inform them and we returned to the campsite to review alternate plans.

"We need to find their trail and track them down," said Emmett, anxious to go.

"Emmett found Victoria's scent along with James'," said Carlisle, "but it stopped cold not too far from where we were waiting for them."

"I suppose they turned around. I wonder if Victoria followed James to give him some kind of information. Perhaps she discovered where Bella is," I fretted.

"How could she have?" queried Carlisle.

"If Victoria or James were moving toward Alice, she would see it and call us, right?" asked Emmett.

"Yes, I presume she would," answered Carlisle. "Therefore, I think we should go under the assumption that James, at least, is still here tracking Bella."

"His trail came nearly all the way to this campsite," I noted.

"Yes, I smelled it too," said Carlisle.

"Then he must have been here when I was hunting. That's odd, though. I didn't go very far," I said, puzzled. Why hadn't I heard his thoughts?

"Okay then," Emmett concluded, "We need to find James' trail and follow it. At least then we'll know where he went, even if we can't catch him. There's no point in staying out here if he's gone."

"Emmett's right," I told Carlisle. "I think it's time to break camp and track him down."

"I concur."

In no time we were on our way again. With Emmett carrying the duffle, we began to backtrack along our own trail. We would continue until either we found James, we found where James had veered off, or we reached Port Renfrew where we had begun.

After retracing our steps for one hundred miles, Emmett found it.

"Yo! Bingo!" he cried, in an excess of enthusiasm for modern lingo. Carlisle laughed and I smiled in spite of myself.

"How fresh is it?" I asked Emmett eagerly, while bounding over to check for myself.

"A few hours," said Emmett.

"I'd guess six to seven," I clarified, "so he would have been closest to the camp when I was hunting. Damn! I shouldn't have gone!" I slapped a nearby tree and watched it sway sideways before straightening again.

"You couldn't have known, Edward," assured Carlisle. "It was wise for you to stay fed."

"So let's track *him*," Emmett prompted.

"There's no other choice now," I said. "He's headed off to the east. We need to know where he's going and why."

"What's east of here?" asked Emmett.

"Just forest between here and the coast," Carlisle told him. "On the east side of the island is Nanaimo, where there's a ferry to the mainland...Vancouver, BC."

"He doesn't need a ferry, obviously," Emmett said.

"But what about a plane? He might fly back to Seattle," I worried. "Let's follow him." It was the only plan we had.

We began running, Emmett leading the way. James had a hefty lead on us, so there was no need for stealth. As we got closer to civilization, that changed. There were more roads, fewer trees, and more people. We had to stay to the forest, be cautious. That slowed us down enough that it was nearing twilight when we reached Nanaimo. James' trail was strong leading all the way to the ferry terminal. We took our cue and boarded the next ship leaving for the mainland.

During the hour and forty minute crossing, I stood on the frigid outside deck and stared into the water. Why was this damn ferry so *slow*? I felt helpless and forlorn, at the mercy of a psychotic, sadistic vampire. It sounded like something out of a bad horror picture. In fact, it *was*...and *I* was too. What was I *doing*?

A severe attack of self-loathing bent me double over the railing. I probably appeared to be seasick, but I felt much worse than any human sickness I could imagine. My soul was dead, and like a zombie, I was haunting a beautiful, innocent, and very much alive, human girl. There was no reason *at all* for my continued existence and yet I lived on. Destroying myself was the right thing to do. If I couldn't leave her alone and stop poisoning her life, it was the only thing left to do. I wished I did have the power to alter Bella's memory...to wipe it clean of me and all my kind.

Carlisle appeared at my side and threw his arm around my waist, preventing me from tumbling into the dark water below us.

What is it, Edward? When I couldn't answer, he went on, *It's going to be fine. We'll catch him. It won't take much longer. Just hang on, son. Bella is safe.*

Disgust had closed my throat and I could make no reply. I didn't want to worry Carlisle, so I propped myself up on the railing and nodded. Unlike me, Carlisle *did* deserve to live. He was doing so much good in the world. What had I ever done but take up space and now, endanger what I loved more than anything else? My body began to shake with revulsion, and self pity, and despair.

Carlisle spun me toward him and stared into my face. I don't know what he saw there, but it prompted him to wrap his arms tightly around me and hold me to his chest.

We stood there like that, in the dark, for a long time.

When the engine noise eased and we began slowing down, Emmett joined us. By the time the ferry pulled to the dock on the mainland, I had recovered sufficiently to propel my aching body onto dry land.

23. RESCUE

"It's time to call Alice," I said as we followed James' trail through the West Vancouver ferry terminal and outside to a nearby taxi stand. As discouraged as I felt, I was still anxious to check on Bella. The thought of talking to her lifted my spirits.

"Let's look for James at the airport first. If we locate him, then we'll have a little more information to share," Carlisle suggested. He was right. We hired a cab to take us to the airport Hilton where Emmett ditched the duffle in a large waste bin. We knew the camping gear would set off the metal detectors at the airport and we preferred to avoid scrutiny whenever possible.

When we entered the airport terminal, we located the check-in area for U.S.-bound passengers and paced the vicinity looking for signs of James. We found his scent there, but it was hard to tell how new it was or where it led, since there was so much olfactory interference from the hundreds of people who passed through the terminal each day. We could only assume that he was flying back to Seattle, and then running to Forks to start over with his search for Bella.

While Carlisle dialed Alice's cell phone, Emmett went to the departures board to find the next flight to Seattle.

"Hello, Alice."

"Carlisle."

"Is Bella with you? Is she okay?"

"Yes."

"We've lost James. Victoria joined him up north, possibly gave him some information, and they ran. We think he's boarded a plane, probably to Seattle. Can you give us any more information?"

"I just saw him. He's in a dark room running a tape on a VCR and watching and waiting. Later, he'll go to a bigger room full of mirrors with some kind of gold band around the center and a light wood floor. There's a VCR, TV, and stereo on a black table. I don't know where it is, but he'll be there tonight or tomorrow. Whatever made him get on that plane...it was leading him to those rooms."

"I see. Thank you Alice. Is Bella able to speak with Edward now?"

"Yes. *Bella?*" Alice called.

Carlisle held out the phone to me.

"Hello?" Bella answered.

"Bella." I exhaled with immense relief. The pain in my chest lessened slightly. She was all right.

"Oh Edward! I was so worried."

"Bella, I told you not to worry about anything but yourself."

"Where are you?"

"We're outside of Vancouver. Bella, I'm sorry—we lost him. He seems suspicious of us—he's careful to stay just far enough away that I can't hear what he's thinking. But he's gone now—it looks like he got on a plane. We think he's heading back to Forks to start over."

"I know. Alice saw that he got away."

"You don't have to worry, though," I assured her. "He won't find anything to lead him to you. You just have to stay there until we catch up to him again."

"I'll be fine. Is Esme with Charlie?"

"Yes—the female has been in town. She went to the house while Charlie was at work. She hasn't gone near him, so don't be afraid. He's safe with Esme and Rosalie watching."

"What is she doing?"

"Probably trying to pick up the trail. She's been all through the town during the night. Rosalie tracked her through the airport, along all the streets in town, at the school... she's digging, Bella, but there's nothing to find."

"And you're sure Charlie's safe?"

"Yes, Esme won't let him out of her sight. And we'll be there soon. If the tracker gets anywhere near Forks, we'll have him."

"I miss you," she whispered.

"I know, Bella. Believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half my self away with you."

"Come and get it, then," she challenged. I wanted to do that so badly I could taste it.

“Soon, as soon as I possibly can. I *will* make you safe first.” Anger flared in me.

“I love you,” she said and the anger cooled.

“Could you believe that, despite everything I’ve put you through, I love you too?”

“Yes, I can, actually.”

“I’ll come for you soon,” I promised.

“I’ll be waiting.”

I ended the call reluctantly, but with renewed determination to rid the world of the vampire, James. And the female too, if she got in the way. I *was* a killer after all.

Emmett had rejoined us with news of a Seattle flight in an hour. After purchasing first-class seats, we ducked into the nearest airport shop and bought clean clothes and some hand luggage to hold our discarded clothes, money, passports, some toiletries, and a couple of books and magazines. Nothing looked more suspicious than boarding a plane without luggage, especially on international flights.

Within two hours, we landed at SeaTac airport, located between Seattle and Tacoma. We dumped our new traveling bags in the trash behind a Starbucks coffee shop and ran northwest to Forks. Going on foot was fast, we could keep searching for a scent trail.

We reached the outskirts of Forks having found no fresh trace of James. Carlisle called Esme, who was alternating with Rosalie to watch over Charlie when he was home from work. They’d seen no sign of Victoria or James there, either. We split up and began tracking systematically through town, covering every street and road. We also went to our house, the high school, and the airport, repeating Victoria’s earlier steps.

We found Victoria’s scent, but it wasn’t fresh. This jibed with our discovery that Victoria had come to Vancouver Island to meet James. What could she possibly have told him that caused them both to disappear? I didn’t believe for a moment that they had given up. As we were contemplating our next move, Carlisle’s cell phone rang.

Carlisle remained quiet and listened while Alice updated the picture for us. She saw James in a room with dark paneled walls and Bella had recognized Alice’s drawing as her mother’s living room! James was either in Phoenix or soon would be! Not only that...he would find Renee’s house!

Was he waiting for Renee? For Bella? How had he known to go there? Neither he nor Victoria had been inside Charlie’s house to find the address. We knew that much. Where else...?

Wait, wait, wait...the school must have Renee's address on file. Did Victoria go through the school records? Clever. That would explain it.

Alice had also seen James in a room surrounded by mirrors. What did that mean? Then abruptly, I realized that it simply didn't matter. None of this mattered! I had to get to Bella as quickly as possible.

Carlisle looked at me with a questioning eye and made the obvious suggestion.

I think we should fly to Phoenix now. Do you agree?

"Yes! Yes! Let's go now!" I didn't want to waste another second.

Carlisle spoke briefly with Alice, then hung up the phone.

"Emmett, Alice sees James at Bella's mother's house in Phoenix. Are you with us?" Carlisle asked him, already knowing the answer.

"Hell, yes!" Emmett agreed. "I'd hate for all this effort to end in nothing!"

"Then let's go," Carlisle directed.

I was already two miles gone.

Edward, when you reach SeaTac, get us three seats on the first flight to Phoenix. We'll catch up with you after we retrieve the bags we tossed at Starbucks.

"Done," I said to myself, knowing I was too far away for Carlisle to hear me.

We were on our way to Phoenix and that was the best we could do. I knew that Jasper and Alice were capable of protecting Bella until we got there, and that James wouldn't even try to get past them to hurt her, but still, I was nervous. Worse than nervous, actually, I was distraught. I couldn't get to Phoenix fast enough. My brother and sister were bringing Bella to the airport to meet us. We would arrive and there she'd be, no delay. It was a small blessing.

Edward, how do you want to proceed when we get there? Carlisle asked me from across the aisle.

"Get Bella out!"

And her mother?

“After I take Bella away, everyone converges on Renee’s house and takes care of him. And the female too, if she’s there.”

And what if it’s a trick? Perhaps you shouldn’t go alone.

“Three on James, two guarding Bella?”

It seems prudent, Edward. Jasper, Emmett, and Alice can handle James, or even James and Victoria. I would come with you. Or Jasper could, but he might resist leaving Alice.

“Yes, he would.”

What do you make of the mirrored room? Carlisle was trying to distract me, but I didn’t mind.

“Nothing at all. Where are there mirrored rooms?”

Clothing stores, gyms.

“Hmm...ladies’ boudoirs, dressing rooms.” I was remembering the old vaudeville houses turned movie theaters with their red velvet curtains, opulent wall decorations, chandeliers, and “resting rooms,” that contained brocade or velvet chaises longue, and lots of mirrors for ladies to use while “powdering their noses.”

Hotel rooms, banquet halls, Carlisle continued with the list.

“Dance studios, spas.”

Halls of mirrors.

“The mirrored room is a hall of mirrors.”

But no funhouse.

“It gets us nowhere.” Impatience and frustration overcame me, and I retreated inside my head for the duration.

Unlike a human who might fidget, or pace, or talk excessively, a vampire under severe stress goes still...dead still...the kind of unnatural stillness that humans notice. I sat in my seat, inert, for some time before Emmett, sitting next to me, took notice and kicked my foot. The force would have broken a human ankle, but I couldn’t be bothered to respond. He waited for ten seconds, then elbowed me with a pointed thrust that would have shattered a mortal’s arm. Again, I barely noticed. Irritated, and determined to snap me out of my statue-like state, he

began cursing in a voice too low for human ears...the crudest, filthiest curse words and combinations I'd ever heard, some I hadn't heard, and some whose meanings were a complete mystery to me.

It did the trick. I blinked several times and inhaled sharply. I must have looked like a mannequin coming to life. Across the aisle, Carlisle was pretending to sleep. I glanced over and saw the corner of his mouth twitch upward in amusement. Mine curved up slightly too.

Good old Emmett. My brother could be relied upon to drag me out of myself. Still, I was impatient. The minutes crawled by.

Then all of a sudden, I was desperate for time to stop so that somehow I could alter what was happening at that very minute. As our plane approached the airport runway, preparing to touch down, I heard Alice's frantic mental voice.

Edward! She's gone! She's gone! She's gone to meet him!! Oh Edward, I am so sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!

I leaped to my feet in panic, wrenching the seatbelt from its mooring with a clean snap. Emmett, his hand lightning fast, grabbed my shoulder and bounced me back down into the seat. It was unlikely that the human passengers had noticed. My movement would have looked like a blur of color, if anyone had noticed it at all.

Edward, what is it?!

What's wrong?!

Both Carlisle and Emmett hurled alarmed questions at me.

I spoke so quickly that only my family could understand the words.

"It's Alice. She says Bella's meeting him! HE'S GOT BELLA!"

How?

Where?

But I was listening for Alice's thoughts, trying to glean anything I could. I had never felt such terror in my long existence.

...ballet studio in Scottsdale, corner of 58th Street and Cactus. It's around the corner from her mother's house. I've got a car.

I saw a map image moving through Alice's mind... the airport, then Phoenix proper, then northeast Phoenix to Scottsdale, 58th Street and Cactus. Alice couldn't know whether I was hearing her thoughts, so she repeated everything from the beginning. I made sure I received it all before retelling Carlisle and Emmett. Now I was *frantic* to escape this suffocating tin torpedo and find Bella.

"Carlisle, I'm going to run off the plane. Alice has a car waiting."

"Yes, Edward. We'll be right behind you."

"How did he get her, Edward?" Emmett asked.

"She's meeting him, that's all I know. He must have tricked her somehow."

"But how did she get away from Jasper and Alice?" Emmett pressed.

"I don't know, I don't know..." I anguished.

The plane was pulling into the gate—finally! What were they doing now? *Open the doors already!*

"Carlisle, I'm gone!" I timed my leap from the seat so that I was at the exit hatch the instant it opened, and was through it before the flight attendant had turned around. Thank goodness for our first-class seats! I never would have gotten out of coach so fast without hurting someone. I raced through the concourse, not being careful, not caring who saw me. It wasn't like anyone could catch me or even identify who I was.

Emmett and Carlisle followed my lead, escaping the plane quickly—I heard them running through the concourse not far behind me. I exited the airport terminal at the arrivals level, where Alice and Jasper were waiting at the curb in what I knew to be a very capable Cadillac sedan. I slid behind the wheel as Alice bounced into Jasper's lap on the passenger's side. Carlisle and Emmett stuffed themselves into the back seat, yanking the doors closed as I stomped on the gas pedal.

Please, if there is a God, let me not be too late!

I drove that Cadillac like a rocket through Phoenix, running every red light and dodging the other vehicles on the road. I remained silent. There was no point in chastising Alice—she was as terrified for Bella as I was. She was explaining in a stricken voice how Bella had tricked her and Jasper to make her escape. Her words tumbled over one another as she spoke. I saw the ending to the story in her mind before she'd finished telling it to Carlisle and Emmett.

“I saw that she might get separated from us, so we were watching her every move. We’d smelled James’ scent outside the airport and I thought he might make a grab for her. When she asked Jasper to escort her to breakfast, I started seeing her separated from us, but I didn’t realize it was her decision and not James’ that was changing the images. At the last moment, when Jasper agreed to wait for her outside the ladies room, I finally saw the outcome, but I couldn’t get there fast enough to warn Jasper. It still seemed okay, because I saw that we’d catch her at the taxi stand, but she jumped on a passing shuttle bus at the last second and that’s when I knew he would get her.”

Hearing that, I roared in rage and helplessness.

Alice was practically babbling now, spilling everything that came into her head.

“With this car, there’s a chance we can get there in time to catch her. It depends on how fast we get through traffic to Scottsdale. Oh, hurry, Edward, hurry...!” she cried, then continued her story without pausing.

“You were due to land any minute, so I grabbed this Cadillac out of short-term parking. Carlisle’s Mercedes is buried in the bowels of the long-term parking lot. But I always think it’s better, anyway, to do any major speeding and dangerous maneuvers in a stolen car.”

I was half listening to Alice’s words and half reading other details in her mind. I could see that Bella had been terribly distraught and frightened. Despite that, she had been clever in escaping her guardians. We had to assume that James was holding Bella’s mother hostage. There was no other explanation that made any sense whatsoever.

That coward, James!! Tormenting defenseless humans for his amusement! It was no wonder I loathed what I was, when such as he were among my kind. He would kill Renee anyway. Two for one—I was sure he wouldn’t bother to save one for the other.

I focused on getting to 58th and Cactus as quickly as possible, pulling any stunt that would help. I drove on sidewalks, raced through alleyways, and ignored one-way street signs to bypass traffic clogs. I didn’t slow down for corners and we rose up on two wheels more than once. Even while driving like a “bat out of hell”—that phrase *must* be somehow connected to vampire lore—there was plenty of space in my mind to compile a list of the one hundred most excruciating ways to destroy James. It was a good outlet for my rage until I got to James and could tear him apart, limb from limb.

In another part of my mind, I was desperately begging whatever superior being might exist to save Bella, not to take her away so soon after I had found her. To *please* spare her life—I would sacrifice anything...*anything*...including myself.

Finally, I was planning how I would end my own life if...I was too late. I had realized with utter clarity during this ordeal that I could not continue if Bella did not.

It takes a vampire to kill a vampire. From Carlisle's experience, I knew a vampire could not kill himself. My family would not help me, so I'd have to find another vampire to do it. If we caught James, and Bella was already...gone, perhaps he would oblige me. But if my brothers got their hands on him first, he would be dead before he could kill me. Still, I would find a way, if need be. I cared nothing for my life without Bella. And if not James, then perhaps the Volturi—they could be provoked. I would go to Italy.

The time for chasing such eventualities was ending. We were on 58th Street and approaching Cactus. *There! There it was! The dance studio!* Part of my mind veered off to wonder why he had chosen this place. Why not Renee's house if he were holding Renee hostage? Perhaps he thought we could find him there, but not here. He seemed to know about my telepathy, but perhaps he didn't know of Alice's precognition.

I could not hear Renee's mind in the vicinity. That did not bode well. Of course, I could not hear Bella's mind, either, but I heard James's evil thoughts. He was enjoying his game, toying with me by tormenting Bella.

Was she still alive?? *Please God, let me not be too late! Listen...listen...YES!* I could hear one heart beating, but no human thoughts. It must be her! Did that mean Renee was already gone? How would Bella cope...?

"Bella's alive!" I exclaimed, a flicker of hope returning, though I could not yet be certain. Renee could be unconscious and Bella could be...

"And James is here!" A deep growl began to rumble in my chest, when a memory—James' memory—burst into my head. It was the sound of Bella's shin bone shattering when he stomped on it, and her tortured scream.

"HE'S HURT BELLA!"

Our tires squealed around the last corner and screeched to a halt in the parking lot. I leapt out and ran, dragging the car door with me for a few feet before I remembered to let go. Jasper and Emmett were on my heels and Carlisle and Alice were on theirs. I crashed through the double doors of the studio, forearms first, smashing them into splinters. And everywhere, in every direction, I saw reflected images of *HIM* in the mirrors. He was crouched over Bella—MY BELLA!

"JAMES!!" I thundered, loud enough to rattle windows in the neighborhood.

He raised his head in time to see me coming, then lunged at Bella, his teeth bared. I was on him in a fraction of a second, my arm whistling through the air, bashing his head with the thunderous sound of granite crushing granite. His body flew across the room and crashed into a mirrored wall, an explosion of mirror shards falling around him.

I leapt on the villain before he could rise. Unable to contain my fury, I gripped his throat in my hands and pounded his head into the floor, over and over. The wood was splintered and the concrete below pulverized to grit before James got an angle to kick me off. He leaped up, sneering, his head dented, his body crouched and circling, his arms stretched outward in defense. I faced off with him as he feinted toward me, anticipating each of his movements with my own. Distracted by my threat, he didn't see Emmett and Jasper as they leapt on him from behind, each grabbing an arm. They would tear him to pieces. I hoped they would work slowly.

It was then that my mind fully registered the scent filling the room—the sweet aroma of Bella's blood. Fear gripped me. *Was she lost?* Rushing to her, I saw she was lying in a crumpled heap amidst mirror shards floating in a pool of her blood. One leg was twisted into an improbable angle below her knee.

"Oh no, Bella, no!" I cried, shock and horror knocking my legs out from under me. I collapsed at her side.

Carlisle was already there, kneeling near Bella's head. Alice stood stunned and immobile at her feet. As I began to grasp what James had done to her, rage and fear dissolved into despair. How had I let this happen?

"Bella, please! Bella, listen to me, please, please, Bella, please!"

Perhaps if I begged and pleaded hard enough she would stay with me. But she gave no indication that she could hear or feel anything now.

"Carlisle!" I cried, begging for a miracle. He squeezed my arm encouragingly, then continued his methodical examination of her injuries.

Some part of my mind heard the demise of the sadistic vampire behind us—the vicious growling, the wrenching metallic sound, and the final, fatal screeching—but it meant nothing to me in my anguish.

"Bella, Bella, no, oh please, no, no!" My body was wracked with the torment of the soulless creature who has no right to pray and no tears to weep.

Then through her paralysis, she sucked in a great whoosh of air and released it in a wretched sound of suffering, neither a word nor a scream, but eloquent of raw pain. The sound was torturous.

“Bella!”

“She’s lost some blood, but the head wound isn’t deep,” Carlisle reassured me. “Watch out for her leg, it’s broken.”

A guttural howl of fury and pain escaped me.

“Some ribs, too, I think,” Carlisle added, calmly taking inventory of her bones.

Again, I howled, my body shaking and shuddering.

“Edward.” The word, barely recognizable, floated on the air. Somehow, Bella had reached out from her darkness and called my name! It was the miracle I’d prayed for.

“Bella, you’re going to be fine. Can you hear me, Bella? I love you.”

“Edward,” she said again, more clearly.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“It hurts.”

“I know, Bella, I know,” I cried, my heart wrenching in two. To Carlisle, I complained impatiently, “Can’t you do anything?”

“My bag please...Hold your breath, Alice, it will help,” Carlisle advised, noticing her tight grimace as she wiped blood from Bella’s face.

“Alice?” Bella moaned.

“She’s here,” I answered for her in her distress. “She knew where to find you.”

“My hand hurts,” Bella slurred.

“I know, Bella. Carlisle will give you something, it will stop.”

Suddenly she screamed out. “My hand is BURNING!”

Her eyes snapped open, blood from her head wound pooling around her lids.

“Bella?” I didn’t understand. Was she hallucinating?

“The fire! Someone stop the fire!” she screamed again, trying to be understood.

Her pain tortured me. I grabbed her hands and scanned them for an overlooked wound—and then I saw it. I gasped, horrified. For there, in a pattern etched in blood, were the unmistakable bite marks of the recently deceased James.

“Carlisle! Her hand!”

“He bit her.” Carlisle echoed my thought in a stunned voice.

“Edward, you have to do it,” Alice stated matter-of-factly as she tried to wipe more blood from Bella’s eyes, while resisting her—undoubtedly, fierce—desire.

“No!” I roared. What was she saying? I would not steal Bella’s life! But had James already done that with his bite? No! No! No!

“Alice,” Bella cried, as if in supplication.

Then Carlisle shocked us both.

“There may be a chance,” he said as he continued methodically plucking glass from Bella’s bloody head wound.

“What?” I exclaimed, ready to grasp at any straw.

“See if you can suck the venom back out,” he directed, quashing my fledgling hope with his ludicrous words. “The wound is fairly clean.” He spoke calmly as if his insane suggestion were possible.

“Will that work?” Alice asked, surprised. The idea intrigued her, but also intensified her thirst. Despite that, she was coping remarkably well with the mouth-watering fragrance that saturated the air.

“I don’t know,” Carlisle admitted. “But we have to hurry.”

I was astounded, thunderstruck, by the thought of pressing my lips to Bella’s wound and pulling her warm, sweet blood into my mouth. Hadn’t I dreamed of this?

Ahh! My throat was in flames. And then I was horrified, ashamed, repulsed by my own monstrous nature.

“Carlisle, I.....I don’t know if I can do that.” My voice stuttered and broke. It was degrading—mortifying—to admit my weakness, even to myself.

“It’s your decision, Edward, either way. I can’t help you. I have to get this bleeding stopped here if you’re going to be taking blood from her hand.”

A Solomon’s choice! There must be no God! How could a higher being persecute me thus?

In that moment, as my mind wrestled with this excruciating dilemma and its potentially fatal outcome, my choice was made for me when Bella screamed.

“Edward!” Her agony was palpable. As much as I wished to keep her alive, I wished not to hear that tortured cry again. I *must* end her suffering, even if—*God forgive me!*—she never suffered again.

Carlisle’s authoritative voice rang out.

“Alice, get me something to brace her leg!” Then he said, “Edward, you must do it now, or it will be too late.”

No choice...no choice...no choice...I can do this...I can do this...I must do this... I must do this...I will do this! I will...! I chanted the words in my head.

With doomed determination, I clutched Bella’s hand in both of mine and pulled the abominable bite wound toward my mouth. My trembling lips touched her skin, followed by the teeth of the monster, sinking in, reopening her wound. Swooning, I began to suck her sweet, sweet blood onto my tongue.

The taste! I moaned deeply as I drew her into my body. My throat was met with a soothing balm of ecstasy. Her blood was more potent than I had ever dreamed. My thoughts became incoherent, disconnected, as my unholy desire raged.

Want...her...more...her...all...mine...her...her...me... As I sunk into that velvet well of no return, Bella screamed and thrashed, struggling against the searing pain of James’ venom—and now mine—burning in her veins. Carlisle and Alice held her still, like a sacrifice, as I continued to draw passionately on her precious blood...filling me, soothing me. It was a heaven I’d never imagined, this pulsing of Bella’s essence into me. It was a place I would gladly go to die. And yet, I recognized somewhere at the back of my dim awareness that her glorious flavor was tainted, first by the enemy’s venom and now by the bitter note of opiates, as Carlisle’s morphine injection spread through Bella’s body.

The corruption of the foreign substance in her blood slowed, but did not stop, me. It did stop her screaming and her eyes fluttered closed, but she fought her way back to the surface and whispered my name.

“Edward.”

“He’s right here, Bella,” Alice’s musical voice rang out, as if I, and not the monster, were crouched over my love.

But I had heard my name on her lips. It was another kind of desire fulfilled... something deep, deeper than the bloodlust. It pulled me back from the abyss, granted me a pinprick of lucidity.

I must wean myself from Bella’s lifeblood, a part of me recognized, but the monster was strong. So strong!

Carlisle, sensing my torment, settled his strong, reassuring hand on my shoulder. He spoke silently to me, protecting Bella from his words. *You must stop now, Edward, or she will die. Find the will, my son. Find the will.*

From some buried reserve I didn’t know was in me, I located a kernel of resolve. I clung to it and, with a herculean effort, wrestled her hand from my lethal mouth. I laid it down at her side slowly and deliberately.

“Stay, Edward, stay with me...,” Bella begged as she felt me detach from her. She did not know what she asked.

“I will,” I choked out, the flavor of her still thick on my tongue, in my throat. My love for her had achieved the impossible—it had released Bella from the monster’s grip.

“Is it all out?” Carlisle inquired.

“Her blood tastes clean. I can taste the morphine,” I replied, chastened by my hideous inclinations, but relieved to have overcome them at the critical moment.

“Bella?” Carlisle disturbed her drug-induced fog.

“Mmmmm?”

“Is the fire gone?”

“Yes...thank you Edward,” she uttered dreamily.

“I love you,” I said, my voice shaky.

“I know.”

Such audacity. I laughed with joy and relief.

“Bella?” Carlisle pressed.

She scowled, intent on drifting off to sleep. “What?”

“Where is your mother?”

She sighed. “In Florida. He tricked me, Edward. He watched our videos.”

“Alice,” Bella continued. “Alice, the video—he knew you, Alice, he knew where you came from.” Her voice was softly floating.

The startled look on Alice’s face turned to consternation then to wonder. She looked at me with curious, but frightened, eyes. I raised my eyebrows in astonishment.

“I smell gasoline,” Bella croaked.

It was our duty to destroy all evidence of our presence here. Emmett and Jasper had ripped out some floorboards, soaked them in gasoline siphoned from the car, and set them on fire, tossing the bits and pieces of James into the flames. A dense, almost animate, lavender smoke snaked upward from his pyre. My heart was glad...and relieved.

“It’s time to move her,” Carlisle stated.

“No, I want to sleep,” Bella whined.

“You can sleep, sweetheart, I’ll carry you.”

Very gently, I picked her up and cradled her to my chest, happy that she was alive...happy I had let her live.

“Sleep now, Bella,” I soothed, as her eyelids closed.

24. AN IMPASSE

Standing under fluorescent lights in a white room with white blinds and white linens, I was in my element. If I took off my clothes and stood in a corner, no one would know I was here—except for the hair and the eyes.

I was going a little mad. Bella had been in the hospital under sedation for two days and two nights. I had already counted the tiny black dots in each linoleum tile on the floor of Bella's room—three times. I had translated the Gideon Bible into Farsi and Urdu in my head. (I could always use more practice with the Eastern tongues. Alice liked to throw riddles at me in unlikely languages during boring lectures or at lunch hour at school to help kill time.)

It was one of those days when I wished I could sleep. I would like to have avoided hashing and rehashing the disaster of the previous week and to escape the boredom of this place. But I couldn't sleep and I wasn't going anywhere. It was my fault that Bella was in this hospital, and I wouldn't be separated from her until she was well enough to go home. The saving grace was that James was dead and could never hurt her again.

After Carlisle had stopped Bella's bleeding and stabilized her broken bones, and I had successfully—*thank you, merciful God!*—extracted James' venom from her bloodstream, I carried her in my arms back to the hotel. It was necessary to devise our cover story. Alice constructed the perfect accident scenario...a loose carpet, a broken stair railing, and a shattered picture window, below which Bella lay, injured from her "fall." Carlisle was on the scene immediately, providing emergency care while we waited for an ambulance to carry Bella to the hospital. Every detail was perfect.

I rode with Bella while Alice and Carlisle followed in a taxi. We left Emmett and Jasper at the ballet studio where they finished covering our tracks, making sure the fire they started would take hold and destroy all evidence of our activities. They abandoned the Cadillac where it sat—Carlisle would send an anonymous envelope of cash to the owner for the broken door—and joined us at the hotel in time to see Bella driven away.

While Carlisle got Bella admitted to the hospital, the emergency room doctor started an intravenous blood transfusion. I couldn't watch. Knowing that he was replacing what I had taken was distressing enough without watching him stick needles into Bella's veins. It was even more distressing that—despite my revulsion at a stranger's blood entering Bella's body—my venom began to flow when the nurse hung up the IV bag. Now that I had tasted Bella's blood, the slightest reminder of the experience invited the monster to the surface.

Alice distracted me by relating the contents of James' video, since I couldn't bear to watch it myself. Even secondhand through Alice's memory, it was horrifying. I had never felt so helpless in my life. The easy death Jasper and Emmett had granted James was far too good for him.

To goad me and to prolong his fun, James had filmed the entire hideous episode—from Bella's courageous entry into the studio, to his taunting me on tape, to his hurting her. My brave, brave Bella had willingly walked into his trap, sacrificing herself to save her mother; then, even under torture, begged me not to endanger myself by avenging her.

I couldn't be angry with such a noble soul, but I would never forget the sound of her tibia and fibula snapping or the agonized scream that she couldn't contain. I would never forget the blood streaming down her face or the death I almost dealt her trying to save her humanity. All of these memories would torment me for the remainder of my existence.

And poor Alice. The revelation of her origins was as hurtful to her as it was heartbreaking to me. A family, blessed with an extraordinary child who could see into the future, regarded her gift as a curse of the devil and consigned her to an asylum for the rest of her life. Who knows what had happened to her there? Her lack of human memories suggested that she may have been incarcerated in that dark cell as a mere tot, in which case she'd been too young to retain memories. Or perhaps more likely, and equally horrifying, she had been given a long course of electroshock—common in those days—which had erased whatever memories she'd had.

James' version of the story was that an old vampire had befriended Alice in the asylum, and when James set his sights on Alice's sweet-smelling blood, the creature changed her before James could take her life. If that were true, it seemed a poor kind of friendship to visit a young girl in her dark prison, no doubt filthy and cold, for years and never take a step to free her until forced to do so by James' threats. It was beyond comprehension. Knowing Alice, somehow she would turn these revelations into something worthwhile...though it might take time.

Carlisle and Esme had made up for a lot of what Alice had missed as a human and she'd been a treasured part of our family since she found us. By now, she'd had at least four times more lifespan as a vampire than as a human and, among all of us, seemed uniquely suited to it. She was not bogged down by human memories like Rosalie, and was not plagued by unrealized human dreams like Esme. I was certain she would overcome this sad knowledge.

While technicians were X-raying Bella and plastering her leg into a cast—Carlisle had set it perfectly, securing it to two broom handles—Alice had phoned Charlie to inform him of

Bella's "terrible fall at the hotel." As Alice told it, she and Carlisle had accompanied me to Phoenix so I could plead with Bella to return to Forks. When Bella came to meet me at our hotel, she tumbled down two flights of stairs and fell through a window.

"She's going to be fine, Chief Swan." Alice spoke from the waiting area, while I listened from outside Radiology.

Alice paused for a moment, listening.

"Thank you, Charlie. Yes, Carlisle was there immediately and got the bleeding stopped. She has a broken leg and some broken ribs and a cut on her head."

She paused.

"Carlisle stabilized her before the ambulance got there and Edward rode with her to the hospital. He's stayed with her every minute since the accident. It wasn't his fault, Charlie."

Alice waited.

"No, she's going to be absolutely fine. A few stitches under her hairline, some cuts on her hand and the broken bones. Nothing that won't completely heal. No big scars."

Pause.

"None of us has. They've kept her sedated so she won't move around too much and to make sure she rests. She lost quite a lot of blood." I cringed. I didn't know how much she had lost from her head wound, but I suspected she'd lost more to me.

"Probably two or three days before she's awake. We won't leave her alone, regardless. Also, I will call Renee and tell her."

Pause.

"You're welcome, Charlie. I'm just sorry that this happened."

She hung up the phone.

"How'd he take it?" I asked Alice when she found me, though I'd already heard or extrapolated most of what he'd said.

"Rather well, considering. Now I will call Bella's mother."

The second call was much like the first, except that Renee panicked and Alice had to calm her down. When Alice rejoined me, she said that Renee was coming to Phoenix as soon as possible.

“Emmett and Jasper are flying back to Seattle tonight. Carlisle and I will stay until Renee arrives. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Alice, thank you for everything...and Alice...”

“Yes, Edward?”

“I’m very sorry about James. Of all the vampire baseball games in all the towns in all the world...”

“He walked into ours.” She gave me a crooked smile.

“Yes, something like that.”

“At least I know more about myself now. Genealogy—my new hobby.” She was trying for upbeat, but I felt the well of loneliness and pain she knew she couldn’t hide from me. Once again, I was glad she had Jasper—with all of his talents—to console her. I gave her an encouraging smile.

“I’m going back to the hotel to see Jasper before he leaves, but I’ll be back tonight to check in with you.”

“Okay, Alice....and Alice...?”

“Yes, Edward?”

“I love you, Alice.”

“I love you, too, Edward.” She twirled around, blew me a kiss, and was gone.

I followed Bella’s gurney to her room, sat down in the plastic chair beside her bed, and listened to her breathe. She was covered in a spaghetti of tubes... tubes for breathing, tubes for nutrition, tubes for waste, tubes for medication, tubes for blood, and a wire attached to a clip on her index finger to monitor her heartbeat. It was devastating to be reminded so vividly of her human frailty.

I wanted to cry. Instead, I set my chin on Bella’s pillow and breathed along with her, trying to ignore the disturbing scent of her adulterated blood. Carlisle found me there, one thousand, three hundred, and twenty-two inhalations later.

Edward, how are you feeling?

“Honestly, I’ve been better.”

It’s been a hard week for you.

“Truly, the worst of my life...and the best.”

That’s what happens when you love someone in this way, Edward. The highs are higher, the lows are lower.

“I wouldn’t give back the good to avoid the bad, not for myself. But I would have to for her sake. I do love her, Carlisle.”

There’s nothing wrong with pursuing what makes you happy, son. You have no reason to blame yourself.

“Thank you Dad,” I responded, though I didn’t agree. “And thank you for saving Bella’s life.”

No, you did that, Edward. Would you like me to stay here with you?

“No, that’s all right.”

Call me, then, when Renee gets here or if you need anything. I’m going to check in with the hospital at home, and see off Jasper and Emmett. Alice and I will drive the Mercedes back here from the airport.

“Bye, Carlisle.”

“Bye for now, son.”

Renee had arrived in tumult around midnight Wednesday, disrupting the air in Bella’s room and the tenor of my thoughts. She came fluttering in, escorted by a nurse, and threw both hands over her mouth with a gasp. Tears popped from her eyes. I was standing against the doorway wall in the corner, so she didn’t realize I was there. I had been alone with Bella for hours, except for the occasional nurse checking the machine readouts and changing IV bags.

Standing alone watching Bella, I had relaxed my strict regimen for passing as human and had reverted to my naturally immobile state. The transition back could be a little jarring. Sometimes it took a moment to shift from neutral to first gear and reanimate.

Renee sensed my presence and turned to look. When she saw me standing motionless, she flinched reflexively and gasped.

“Hello,” I said in a soothing voice and flashed Bella’s “dazzling” smile to appear less scary and unnatural. “I’m Edward Cullen. You must be Bella’s mother.”

“Oh, hello! What are you doing here?” She was startled, but seemed to recover as she looked into my eyes. Her tears ceased.

“I don’t want Bella to be alone if she wakes up.”

“So you’ve been here the whole time?”

“Yes. My father took care of Bella after the accident.”

“Your sister called me?”

“Yes, Alice.”

“Oh, Bella, my baby girl, what have you done?”

Now in possession of the essential facts, Renee abruptly forgot I was there. She moved to Bella’s bedside and leaned over to touch her, discovering what I had been struggling with—Bella had virtually no exposed area of skin that wasn’t bandaged or bruised. Renee’s hands dangled uselessly in the air for a moment before she dropped them and curled her fingers around the bed rail.

Renee leaned over again and kissed Bella’s forehead, though Bella was too heavily sedated to respond. Then she began speaking softly, continuously, saying nothing much, just hoping Bella could hear her voice. After a few minutes, she seemed to remember I was present and turned toward me, tears back in her eyes.

“So why was Bella in Phoenix?” she asked me.

“Well, she could tell you better herself when she wakes up, but she said she wanted to leave Forks.”

“So what were you doing here?”

“My father and my sister came here with me so I could try to change her mind. She left very abruptly and I thought she was making a hasty decision.”

“I take it that you are Bella’s boyfriend? Did you two have a fight?”

“ ‘Yes’ to the first question and ‘no’ to the second. I think I should let her explain for herself, though.”

Just then, the door opened and Carlisle and Alice walked in.

I saw that she was here, Edward. We came to help, Alice conveyed to me.

I nodded slightly.

“Hello,” Carlisle offered his hand. “I’m Dr. Carlisle Cullen and this is my daughter, Alice. You’ve met Edward, I see. You are Bella’s mother?”

“Yes, call me Renee. I’m pleased to meet you. And thank you so much for saving my daughter,” Renee said as the tears started flowing again. “She lost a lot of blood, they told me. She could have died if you hadn’t been there, right?”

Carlisle smiled. “Shall we step into the hallway to talk?” He ushered everyone out. When he looked at me, I shook my head.

“I’ll stay with Bella.”

I listened as Carlisle related the entire fabricated story to Renee and detailed Bella’s injuries. I took the chair beside Bella, leaned over the rail, and began singing softly.

How are you doing, Edward? Alice asked a short while later, as she reentered the room.

“I’m okay.”

Are you going to stay here?

“Yes, I won’t leave her.”

All right. We’ll go double-check the ballet studio, then head back to the hotel.

“Did Emmett and Jasper return to Forks?”

Yes, they flew out earlier. Esme called. They haven’t seen anything of the female, Victoria, since you left.

“We didn’t find any fresh signs of her in Forks. Was Esme saying that they did?”

Rosalie found a trail through the woods toward the airport.

“Toward SeaTac Airport?”

Yes.

“So Victoria watched us leave. She would have known that we were coming to Phoenix.”

And she told James...

“But he must have been in Phoenix already, because he lured Bella to the studio before we arrived, right?”

Yes. We checked the cell phone. He called Bella around five o'clock in the morning from Renee's house. We thought it was Renee calling her. I could have sworn I heard Renee's voice at the beginning of that phone call.

Alice screwed up her face in puzzlement.

After the phone call, the vision changed to James attacking Bella at the studio. And that's when I called you.

There was something about Bella's running away to meet James that was bothering me.

“Alice, tell me again what happened at the airport...how Bella got away from you and Jasper.”

Oh, Edward. We are so, so sorry about that! She wanted something to eat and asked Jasper to escort her instead of me because she was so stressed out. Then she made a detour to the ladies' room and he waited for her at one exit while she sneaked out a different exit. Bella had obviously been there before and knew about that back door, but we didn't. I was seeing things change for the worse, but Bella was really good at hiding her deception, so we didn't realize it was her decisions that were making things go wrong...

“Bella must have been terrified trying to keep her mother alive and having to trick you and Jasper to do it.” It was a little frightening to realize that Bella had fooled Alice. That was something not easily done. *What had she been thinking?* I wondered. Didn't she realize that I and my family would have a better chance of saving her mother than she did all by herself? Probably, she was afraid one of us would get hurt. As if!

Alice interrupted my thoughts.

I forgot something, Edward. Bella wrote a note to her mother, she said, that I was supposed to leave at Renee's house. After she dodged us, though, I opened it and found it was really a letter for you.

“Alice, you read it?”

Sorry, Edward. I saw my name. And then I was glad I read it, because it explained her disappearance. We were frantic!

Alice searched her pockets until she found the crumpled envelope. By the time it was in my hand, I didn't have to read it. Alice had the image of it in her mind.

Edward,

I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alice and Jasper. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alice especially, please.

And please, please don't come after him. That's what he wants, I think. I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me, especially you. Please, this is the only thing I can ask you now. For me.

I love you. Forgive me.

Bella

It was so poignant. Bella *was* self-sacrificing and brave—and deluded, of course—but there was my answer. It was clearer than ever that I should not expose her to our world. It was far too dangerous, *especially* for Bella, because she didn't have even a nominal instinct for self-preservation. She put everybody else ahead of herself. How could I not love her?

"I don't blame you, Alice, in case you were wondering. My brave Bella. She seems determined to get herself killed. I don't know what to do with her."

You're doing all you can do. She's alive because of you.

"No! She almost died because of me! Twice!"

But she didn't. And you did save her human life. You did the impossible, really. I'm not sure why, but you did, so be happy.

"You did too, Alice, coping with all that blood. Thank you."

Of course! I love her, Edward! You know that.

I nodded and smiled.

So...see you later, gator!

When Carlisle and Renee finished talking, Renee reentered Bella's room.

"Are you going back to the hotel with your family?"

“No, I’ll stay here,” I said.

“I’m going to stay with her, so you can go get some rest if you want to.”

“No thank you. I can’t leave her.”

“Well, alrighty then!” she said with false cheer. She was thinking that I was a little odd and much too intense for a teenager—her mind wasn’t difficult to read. She was right on both counts, too. I was far too old to be a teenager and I would never be cavalier about my reason for existing. She’d just have to get used to me.

I picked up a magazine and went to sit in the chair by the door, giving Renee space to be closer to Bella. She could stay, but I wasn’t leaving. At some point, I knew, she would fall asleep in the big, turquoise, lounge chair.

Renee and I danced politely around each other for the rest of that day—actually, I was polite and she was wary. *Who is this boy who won’t be separated from my daughter? What are his intentions? Does she share them? Bella’s been holding out on me!*

I was relieved when she fell asleep on Thursday night, though I would have been happier if she had gone home to sleep. I was tired of pretending to take bathroom breaks and eat food and sleep. I could relax my vigilance when Renee left to call Phil, or run some errands, or get something to eat. She kept inviting me out for food, but I made excuses, as usual, and avoided the uncomfortable social interaction.

Renee was nice enough, but she was far too perceptive for my comfort. I had to stay sharp and practice my poker face when she made startlingly accurate assessments of me and my feelings for Bella. It wouldn’t surprise me if she eventually figured out that I could read her mind.

I did enjoy picking images out of her head when she thought about Bella’s childhood. Judging from Renee’s recollections, Bella had abandoned childhood at a tender age. Was that because Renee herself was so childlike and Bella had compensated, or was Bella just particularly mature? Did her parents’ early divorce have something to do with it? It was difficult to know.

Alice and Carlisle had said their goodbyes Thursday morning. Carlisle needed to get back to the hospital in Forks, as this fiasco had kept him away for a week. He planned to call Charlie when he got home and update him on Bella’s condition, though it hadn’t changed much. She was still sleeping.

As for me, I was staying for the duration. I would not let Bella out of my sight, not even in the hospital—except when I had to fake some activity for Renee’s benefit. I hadn’t heard what Carlisle said to her when he left, but she didn’t question my continual presence anymore.

Renee was in the cafeteria and I was sitting in my usual spot beside Bella, singing softly to her, when I saw her eyes begin to flutter. After a moment, they opened slowly, then she squinted them shut against the bright fluorescent lights. Her fingers groped at her face and curled around her breathing tube.

“No, you don’t.” I took her hand in mine, overjoyed to see her eyes. The doctors had reduced her medication in order to talk to her and check her pain level.

“Edward?” She turned her face toward mine. The beginning of a smile stretched across her slack cheeks, then morphed to an expression of guilt and remorse. “Oh, Edward, I’m so sorry!”

“Shhhh. Everything’s all right now.”

“What happened?” she was dazed and groggy. Her question brought it all back, the fear, the mortification. My voice came out barely a whisper.

“I was almost too late. I could have been too late.”

“I was so stupid, Edward. I thought he had my mom.”

“He tricked us all.” We’d thought he was in Canada when he was on his way to Arizona.

“I need to call Charlie and my mom,” she said, a little foggy.

“Alice called them. Renee is here—well, here in the hospital. She’s getting something to eat right now.”

“She’s here?” In her surprise, she tried to sit up. I pressed her shoulder back down to the pillow.

“She’ll be back soon. And you need to stay still.”

“But what did you tell her?” She was starting to panic. “Why did you tell her I’m here?”

“You fell down two flights of stairs and through a window.” I smiled to myself. “You have to admit, it could happen.”

Bella glanced down at herself to take inventory of the damage.

“How bad am I?” she asked.

“You have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises covering every inch of your skin, and you’ve lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I didn’t like it—it made you smell all wrong for a while.”

“That must have been a nice change for you.” Huh? What was she *thinking*?

“No, I like how *you* smell.”

“How did you do it?” Bella whispered, uncertainty shading her words.

“I’m not sure.” I held her fingers gently in mine, but I could not meet her eyes. I knew it had been touch and go and it could have gone either way. I sighed at the reality of that.

“It was impossible...to stop,” I whispered. “Impossible. But I did.” I gave her a crooked smile. “I *must* love you.”

“Don’t I taste as good as I smell?” she teased.

“Even better—better than I imagined.” I groaned inwardly, remembering.

“I’m sorry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of all the things to apologize for.”

“What *should* I apologize for?”

“For very nearly taking yourself away from me forever.”

“I’m sorry,” she offered again.

“I know why you did it.” I paused. “It was still irrational, of course. You should have waited for me, you should have told me,” I chided.

“You wouldn’t have let me go.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

She shivered and winced. I was instantly concerned. “Bella, what’s wrong?”

“What happened to James?”

Of course! She needed to know that or how would she feel safe? What was *I* thinking? “After I pulled him off you, Emmett and Jasper took care of him.” If she hadn’t been broken and lying in a heap on the floor, I would have done it myself.

“I didn’t see Emmett and Jasper there,” she commented, confused.

“They had to leave the room...there was a lot of blood.”

“But you stayed.”

“Yes, I stayed.”

“And Alice, and Carlisle...”

“They love you too, you know.” They had proved that over and over these past few days.

Bella’s face looked pained. “Did Alice see the tape?”

“Yes.” A wave of anger and revulsion hit me.

“She was always in the dark, that’s why she didn’t remember.”

“I know. She understands now.” I involuntarily replayed the tape in my head.

“Ugh,” Bella’s groan brought me back to the present.

“What is it?”

“Needles.” She had noticed one sticking out of her arm and was trying to avoid fainting. We’d been through this before.

“Afraid of a needle.” I shook my head in disbelief. “Oh, a sadistic vampire, intent on torturing her to death, sure, no problem, she runs off to meet him. An *IV*, on the other hand...”

“Why are *you* here?” she asked suddenly.

I was stunned. She didn’t want me here? It took a moment to collect myself. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No! No, I meant, why does my mother think you’re here? I need to have my story straight before she gets back.”

“Oh.” My relief was greater than was warranted, given that I *should* leave.

“I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to come back to Forks.” I put on my sincere face, as if to convince her now. “You agreed to see me, and you drove out to the hotel where I was staying with Carlisle and Alice—of course I was here with parental supervision—but you tripped on the stairs on the way to my room and...well, you know the rest. You don’t need to remember any details, though; you have a good excuse to be a little muddled about the finer points.”

She absorbed the tale for a moment.

“There are a few flaws with that story. Like no broken windows.”

“Not really. Alice had a little bit too much fun fabricating evidence. It’s all been taken care of very convincingly—you could probably sue the hotel if you wanted to. You have nothing to worry about.” I stroked her pale cheek with my fingertips. “Your only job now is to heal.”

The heart monitor which had been beeping in the background jumped into high speed when my fingers met Bella’s skin. I smiled.

“That’s going to be embarrassing,” Bella said to herself, disgruntled.

I chuckled as a thought occurred to me.

“Hmm, I wonder...”

I bent to kiss her. As my lips approached hers, the beeping became frenetic. I paused there for a moment before leaning in closer and pressing my lips to hers. The beeping stopped altogether! *Yikes!* I jerked my head away from her and, with great relief, heard the beeping resume. It was extremely disconcerting.

“It seems that I’m going to have to be even more careful with you than usual.”

“I was not finished kissing you,” Bella piped up. “Don’t make me come over there.”

Talk about idle threats! I grinned and leaned over to kiss her again, gently. The monitor went crazy. As distracting as that was—and fun!—I needed to compose myself.

“I think I hear your mother.”

“Don’t leave me!” Bella cried in a panic.

“I won’t,” I promised her. “I’ll take a nap.” I grinned and darted to the turquoise recliner at the foot of Bella’s bed. I laid it back as far as it would go and allowed my head to loll sideways. I shut my eyes.

“Don’t forget to breathe,” Bella mocked. She could tease me all she wanted to—I was ecstatic to have her back. I inhaled an exaggerated breath to satisfy her criticism, but remained “asleep” with my eyes closed.

Bella’s mother was complaining to a nurse’s aid outside the door about the lack of comfortable facilities for relatives who want to stay overnight with their loved ones. She had had a rough night on the recliner. It wasn’t that comfortable.

“Mom!” Bella called in a whisper when her mother entered the room.

“He never leaves, does he?” Renee was puzzled and perhaps a bit irritated. “Bella, I was so upset!”

“I’m sorry, Mom. But everything’s fine now, it’s okay.” Bella was comforting her mother while she herself was lying in a hospital bed, mangled and in pain! She was a caretaker, obviously accustomed to mothering her mother.

“I’m just glad to finally see your eyes open.”

“How long have they been closed?” Bella seemed to panic again. I tensed.

“It’s Friday, hon, you’ve been out for a while.”

“Friday?” She *was* panicked. I should have told her about the days she had lost.

“They had to keep you sedated for a while, honey—you’ve got a lot of injuries,” Renee told Bella.

“I know,” she replied dully.

“You’re lucky Dr. Cullen was there. He’s such a nice man...very young, though. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...”

“You met Carlisle?” Bella seemed surprised.

“And Edward’s sister, Alice. She’s a lovely girl.”

“She is,” Bella confirmed.

“You didn’t tell me you had such good friends in Forks.” Renee was digging.

Bella moaned and I snapped my eyes open.

“What hurts?” Renee asked anxiously.

“It’s fine. I just have to remember not to move.”

I got it...Bella was trying to distract her mother from asking about me.

“Where’s Phil?” she asked, apropos of nothing. She was *definitely* trying to change the subject.

“Florida—oh, Bella! You’ll never guess! Just when we were about to leave, the best news!” It might be big news, but the ease with which she was distracted from her concern for Bella convinced me of her self-absorption.

“Phil got signed?” Bella, of course, was instantly ready to listen.

“Yes, how did you guess! The Suns, can you believe it?”

“That’s great, Mom.” Bella wasn’t all that enthused, I could tell.

“And you’ll like Jacksonville so much. I was a little bit worried when Phil started talking about Akron, what with the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the cold, but now Jacksonville! It’s always sunny, and the humidity really isn’t *that* bad. We found the cutest house, yellow...”

I stopped listening, having lost interest. Was Bella moving to Florida? I couldn’t stop her, of course, if that was what she wanted. She’d be much safer far away from me. I felt a stab of sadness.

“Wait, Mom!” Bella finally interrupted her mother. “What are you talking about? I’m not going to Florida. I live in Forks.” Oh. I wondered if she was trying to spare my feelings. I’d have to make sure she did what was in her own best interest.

“But you don’t have to anymore, silly. Phil will be able to be around so much more now...” I lost interest again.

“Mom,” Bella clarified to her mother and maybe to me. “I *want* to live in Forks. I’m already settled in at school, and I have a couple of girlfriends—”

Suddenly, I felt at least one pair of eyes on me.

“—and Charlie needs me. He’s just all alone up there, and he can’t cook *at all*.”

Why did I get the feeling that Bella didn’t want to tell her mother about me?

“You want to stay in Forks?” Renee seemed flabbergasted by the idea. Then her tone changed to suspicion. “Why?”

“I told you—school, Charlie—ouch!” Bella was trying to distract her mother again. I was on to her tricks.

“Bella, honey, you hate Forks.”

“It’s not so bad.”

Renee paused and I could only assume she was choosing her words carefully or making a face of some kind. “Is it this boy?” she asked.

“He’s part of it,” Bella said grudgingly. “So, have you had a chance to talk with Edward?”

“Yes..., and I want to talk to you about that.”

“What about?”

“I think that boy is in love with you.” She was still speaking softly in case she might wake me, I supposed.

“I think so, too.” Bella was not going to give her mother *anything* without Renee’s dragging it out of her, as usual.

“And how do you feel about him?” Aye, there’s the question. I waited anxiously for her reply.

“I’m pretty crazy about him.” I was not sure what I thought about that response. It didn’t sound quite serious somehow.

“Well, he *seems* very nice, and, my goodness, he’s incredibly good-looking, but you’re so young, Bella...”

I had to give Renee credit. She was beginning to discern, despite Bella’s efforts to hide it, that Bella was serious about me too and that concerned her. Renee’s mind was very childlike—innocent, immediately responsive to external stimuli, unable to focus on logical analysis, operating almost exclusively on intuition—but right on target every time. Interesting.

“I know that, Mom. Don’t worry about it. It’s just a crush.” A crush? What a strange thing for Bella to say. Was she trying to keep her mother calm? To protect her from what?

“That’s right.” Renee was easy to lie to, I saw, easily mollified.

“Do you need to go?” Bella asked. I must have missed some cue with my eyes closed.

“Phil’s supposed to call in a little while...I didn’t know you were going to wake up...” She seemed a little regretful, but not willing to put him off. Self-involved, certainly.

“No problem, Mom. I won’t be alone.”

“I’ll be back soon. I’ve been sleeping here, you know,” she said.

Yes, which required me to be on my best human-like behavior at all times. It was getting old, but I’d do it for Bella for as long as necessary.

“Oh, Mom, you don’t have to do that!” Bella protested. “You can sleep at home—I’ll never notice.”

“I was too nervous,” Renee admitted. “There’s been some crime in the neighborhood, and I don’t like being there alone.”

“Crime?” Bella was frightened for her mother, having not caught on yet.

“Someone broke into that dance studio around the corner from the house and burned it to the ground—there’s nothing left at all! And they left a stolen car right out front. Do you remember when you used to dance there, honey?”

“I remember,” Bella winced. I opened my eyes to see if she was okay. She seemed disturbed by her memory of the place. I didn’t blame her. She was remarkably composed considering everything she had been through. Again, she was trying to protect her mother.

“I can stay, baby, if you need me.”

“No, Mom, I’ll be fine. Edward will be with me.” It felt good to be needed.

“I’ll be back tonight,” Renee promised. It sounded more like a warning. Could she possibly think that Bella and I would get up to—what was the word?—“hanky-panky” in her absence? I clenched my jaw to keep from breaking into a smile.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Bella. Try to be more careful when you walk, honey, I don’t want to lose you.”

It was no idle comment. Bella’s mother *did* have to worry about Bella walking around safely. She was so accident-prone that she *could* hurt herself this badly just by getting out of bed in the morning. I couldn’t restrain my grin.

As Renee left, somebody else walked into the room. “Are you feeling anxious, honey? Your heart rate got a little high there.” I peeked at the nurse checking the monitor.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll tell your RN that you’re awake. She’ll be in to see you in a minute.”

As soon as the door shut, I leapt to Bella’s side.

“You stole a car?” Bella raised her eyebrows and made me smile again.

“It was a good car, very fast.”

“How was your nap?”

“Interesting...” I let my voice trail off.

“What?” Bella asked, suspicious.

I hesitated. “I’m surprised. I thought Florida...and your mother...well, I thought that’s what you would want.”

She seemed utterly confused. “But you’d be stuck inside all day in Florida. You’d only be able to come out at night, just like a real vampire.”

She was trying to amuse me, but I was serious. It was necessary that I push this option. Though it wasn’t what I wanted, it *would* be best for her.

“I would stay in Forks, Bella. Or somewhere like it. Someplace where I wouldn’t hurt you anymore.”

She seemed at first to be fighting her way through a fog trying to understand what I was saying. Only slowly, very slowly, did she start to make sense of it and as she did so, her heart rate sped up. I waited for her to say something.

A nurse must have been monitoring Bella, because she walked into the room, clearly intent on checking the equipment. I sat completely still, pretending I wasn’t there.

“Time for more pain meds, sweetheart?”

Bella did seem to be in pain, but of course, she would deny it.

“No, no, I don’t need anything.” Her voice was tight and the heart monitor was beeping rapidly.

“No need to be brave, honey. It’s better if you don’t get too stressed out; you need to rest.” Bella shook her head, not speaking.

“Okay,” she said reluctantly. “Hit the call button when you’re ready.”

She gave me a dirty look, as if I was to blame. I was, of course, for everything. When the nurse left, I was at Bella’s side again immediately. I smoothed my cool hands across her cheeks trying to comfort her.

“Shhh, Bella, calm down.”

“Don’t leave me.” Her eyes were frightened.

“I won’t,” I reassured her. “Now relax before I call the nurse back to sedate you.”

She seemed completely unable to settle down. What had I done?

“Bella. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be right here as long as you need me.” I was pleading with her now.

“Do you swear you won’t leave me?” she rasped.

I cupped her face between my hands and leaned in very close. “I swear.” I gazed deeply into her eyes until she seemed to enter that semi-entranced state I’d seen many times before. I was entranced myself. Her sweet floral scent and the rushing of the blood beneath her thin skin brought back the memory of pulling her blood into my mouth, letting it roll down my throat—the most seductive, luscious blood in the world.

I hadn’t hunted since when? I was suddenly so thirsty...and she was *so* delicious. But I kept my head, of course I did. My eyes trapped hers until the heart monitor slowed. I exhaled in relief, both for her lessening anxiety and for my release from the frantic pounding that inflamed my thirst...and my desire.

“Better?” I asked, my voice husky.

“Yes.” But she was still on edge.

I complained to myself too softly for her to hear. *All I said was that you’d be safer away from me. What an absurd overreaction!*

“Why did you say that?” She was calmer, but still unsettled. “Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you *want* me to go away?”

“No, I don’t want to be without you, Bella, of course not. Be rational. And I have no problem with saving you, either—if it weren’t for the fact that I was the one putting you in danger...that I’m the reason that you’re here.”

“Yes, you are the reason. The reason I’m here—*alive*.”

“Barely,” my voice became softer as my self-disgust rose. “Covered in gauze and plaster and hardly able to move.”

“I wasn’t referring to my most recent near-death experience. I was thinking of the others—you can take your pick. If it weren’t for you, I would be rotting away in the Forks cemetery.”

I was still stuck on the ghastliness of that horrific day.

“That’s not the worst part, though.” My voice was so soft now, it came out a whisper. If I *could* cry, I would be crying now. “Not seeing you there on the floor... crumpled and broken. Not thinking I was too late. Not even hearing you scream in pain—all those unbearable memories that I’ll carry with me for the rest of eternity. No, the very worst was feeling...knowing that I couldn’t stop. Believing that I was going to kill you myself.” I suddenly wished that I could throw up and rid myself of the revulsion for what I was that churned in my stomach.

“But you didn’t.”

“I could have. So easily.” If it weren’t for the blood transfusions, she *would* have died.

“Promise me.” Bella’s voice was determined now.

“What?”

“You know what.”

“I don’t seem to be strong enough to stay away from you, so I suppose that you’ll get your way...whether it kills you or not.”

“Good.” She was becoming more stubborn by the minute. But I was shocked, astounded, by what she said next.

“You told me how you stopped...now I want to know why,” she finished the sentence almost angrily.

“Why?” I stretched the word out, afraid to hear her next words.

“*Why* you did it. Why didn’t you just let the venom spread? By now I would be just like you.”

Alice! I cursed her in my mind. Of course she didn’t keep her mouth shut. Why had I ever thought she would? I could not think straight—I certainly couldn’t compose a reasonable, calm reply to Bella’s statement, so I said nothing at all.

At my silence, Bella continued.

“I’ll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships. But it just seems logical...a man and a woman have to be somewhat equal...as in, one of them can’t always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other *equally*.”

I had calmed down enough to soften my face and hide my fury from Bella. It wasn't her fault, after all, that Alice had led her this way. I crossed my arms on the bed rail and set my chin on top of them.

"You *have* saved me," I told her softly. It was true. She had given me a reason to go on living.

"I can't always be Lois Lane," she continued. "I want to be Superman, too."

"You don't know what you're asking."

My mind reeled off all the implications of her becoming one of us. For me, it would be ideal, the next best thing to my being human again. But not for her.

"I think I do," she insisted.

"Bella, you *don't* know. I've had almost ninety years to think about this, and I'm still not sure."

"Do you wish that Carlisle hadn't saved you?"

"No, I don't wish that." I thought about how to explain the difference. "But my life was over. I wasn't giving anything up."

"You *are* my life. You're the only thing it would hurt me to lose." She couldn't understand, of course she couldn't.

"I can't do it, Bella. I won't do that to you."

"Why not? Don't tell me it's too hard! After today, or I guess it was a few days ago...anyway, after *that*, it should be nothing."

It probably would be even harder to stop a second time, but she was completely missing the point, anyway. Maybe it would be more convincing to focus on the tangibles.

"And the pain?"

That worked. She paled to my color, reliving the pain of James' bite. And she'd been on morphine then.

But she was still being stubborn. "That's my problem. I can handle it."

"It's possible to take bravery to the point where it becomes insanity."

"It's not an issue. Three days. Big deal."

Alice again! Damn her for making Bella even more determined to become a vampire! I would deal with her later.

“Charlie? Renee?”

Silence was her response. I waited. Bella’s mouth dropped as if to speak, then closed again. She had no answer for that.

Finally, she managed to speak, but she was unconvincing. “Look, that’s not an issue either. Renee has always made the choices that work for her—she’d want me to do the same. And Charlie’s resilient, he’s used to being on his own. I can’t take care of them forever. I have my own life to live.”

“Exactly. And I won’t end it for you.”

“If you’re waiting for me to be on my deathbed, I’ve got news for you! I was just there!”

Would she never stop? “You’re going to recover.”

We stared each other down for a while before she said, “No, I’m not.”

Now I was confused. “Of course you are. You may have a scar or two...”

“You’re wrong,” she pressed. “I’m going to die.”

“Really, Bella. You’ll be out of here in a few days. Two weeks at most.”

“I may not die now...but I’m going to die sometime. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I’m going to get *old*.”

Ahh, she was giving me a headache!

“That’s how it’s supposed to happen. How it should happen. How it should have happened if I didn’t exist—and *I shouldn’t exist*.”

Bella snorted. Snorted! Completely dismissing what I had said. I stared at her.

“That’s stupid,” she informed me. “That’s like going to someone who’s just won the lottery, taking their money, and saying, ‘Look, let’s just go back to how things should be. It’s better that way.’ And I’m not buying it.”

“I’m hardly a lottery prize,” I snapped.

“That’s right. You’re much better.”

I was out of patience for this argument. We shouldn't be arguing anyway. She would never get well at this rate.

"Bella, we're not having this discussion anymore. I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it."

"If you think that's the end, then you don't know me very well. You're not the only vampire I know."

Fury gripped me. "Alice wouldn't dare," I said in my most dangerous voice.

"Alice already saw it, didn't she?" Bella accused. "That's why the things she says upset you. She knows I'm going to be like you...someday."

"She's wrong. She also saw you dead, but that didn't happen, either."

"You'll never catch *me* betting against Alice."

We were at a standoff. I glared at her; she glared at me. Neither of us wanted to give in first. Eventually, the glare-fest became a little funny.

"So where does that leave us?" Bella asked finally.

"I believe it's called an *impasse*." I chuckled without mirth.

Bella sighed, then said, "Ouch."

It seemed to hurt her just to breathe.

"How are you feeling?" I had been neglecting her best interests. I should ring the nurse.

"I'm fine." Why did I even bother to ask?

"I don't believe you." I was frustrated, but I spoke gently.

"I'm not going back to sleep."

"You need rest. All this arguing isn't good for you."

"So give in," she suggested.

"Nice try." This was degenerating. Now I *would* summon the nurse. I pressed the Call button.

"No!" Bella protested.

“Yes?” from the wall speaker.

“I think we’re ready for more pain medication.” I was being imperious and it irritated her, but I ignored that.

“I’ll send in the nurse,” the voice answered in a monotone.

“I won’t take it.” So, so stubborn.

“I don’t think they’re going to ask you to swallow anything,” I said, touching the bag of fluids hanging by her bedside.

Her heart monitor started accelerating and her eyes went wild with alarm. She was frightened to sleep. Was it because of James and the trauma she’d been through, or was she afraid I would leave? I wouldn’t. Not now.

“Bella, you’re in pain. You need to relax so you can heal. Why are you being so difficult? They’re not going to put any more needles in you now.”

“I’m not afraid of the needles. I’m afraid to close my eyes.”

I flashed her favorite crooked smile and took her face between my hands.

“I told you I’m not going anywhere. Don’t be afraid. As long as it makes you happy, I’ll be here.”

She smiled at my words. “You’re talking about forever, you know.”

“Oh, you’ll get over it,” I teased. “It’s just a crush.”

She shook her head. “I was shocked when Renee swallowed that one. I know *you* know better.”

“That’s the beautiful thing about being human,” I told her. “Things change.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

I laughed at the idea of holding my breath until she changed her mind. She knew that I could if need be.

The nurse entered the room with a syringe full of fluid.

“Excuse me,” she said to me, a bit rudely.

I moved to the other side of the room out of her way and waited, holding Bella's gaze, trying to reassure her.

"Here you go, honey." The nurse injected the medication into Bella's IV drip bag. "You'll feel better now."

"Thanks," Bella muttered, more to please than because she was pleased. It took only a moment before her eyes started to close. I stepped to her side and placed my hand on her cheek.

"Stay," she breathed to me.

"I will. Like I said, as long as it makes you happy...as long as it's what's best for you."

"S not the same thing," she slurred.

I laughed at her. "Don't worry about that now, Bella. You can argue with me when you wake up."

She was fading away, but tried to smile. "'Kay."

I moved my lips to her ear. "I love you," I whispered.

"Me, too," she answered groggily.

"I know," I repeated the words she'd said to me after James' attack. It made me smile.

She turned her head toward me, leading with her lips. I indulged her by pressing mine against hers lightly.

"Thanks," she breathed.

"Anytime."

"Edward?" It was difficult now for her to speak.

"Yes?"

"I'm betting on Alice," she slurred before dropping off to sleep.

The irony almost made me smile.

Epilogue: AN OCCASION

Bella was absolutely stunning. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

It was the evening of the much ballyhooed prom and Bella and I were on our way. She, of course, was not happy about it. I'd picked her up at her house—grumpy, but gorgeous—after my sister had tortured her for most of the day in “Alice's Bathroom of Horrors.”

The results were magical. Bella was wearing a deep blue, shoulder-baring gown, with nothing holding it up but her curves and a side zipper. It had a snugly fitted top with tiered ruffles cascading down from the waist. Alice had made up Bella's eyes to appear even larger than they are, and arranged her hair in a partly-up, partly-down design with wisps of hair around her face and long, soft curls in the back. She wore a simple silver necklace and high-heeled shoes. Well, *one* high-heeled shoe...and one walking cast.

Bella had finally healed enough to be released from the hospital. Carlisle had returned to Phoenix and accompanied us back to Seattle—parental supervision and all that. It was reassuring to have him there, knowing that if Bella became ill or experienced pain during the trip, he could help. Charlie couldn't argue with that logic when Carlisle had suggested he fly down and escort us home. Bella had said goodbye to her tearful mother at the hospital and we'd whisked her to the airport.

When we delivered Bella to Charlie's house six hours later, his mind was a jumble of mixed emotions. First, he was happy and relieved to have Bella back, more or less intact, after two-and-a-half weeks away. Next, he was utterly grateful to Carlisle for having been on the spot to save Bella after the accident. Finally, he was furious at me for inciting Bella to leave—as he saw it—and only slightly less angry at her for going.

After I'd escorted Bella into the living room and she'd asked me to help her up to her bedroom, Charlie had moved between us and taken Bella's hand from my arm and placed it on his. She protested, but—all in all—I thought it better not to make a fuss. I would come back in a few hours anyway and climb through Bella's window. Besides, it had been ages since I'd hunted. I was starting to feel a little unsafe.

I could use a short break, too. I wanted to think about our disastrous experience of the last three weeks and what to take from it. The problem was that what I *should* take from it and what I *could* take from it were not the same thing. What I should have learned, without a doubt, was that it was time for me to leave. Bella couldn't bring herself to move to Jacksonville

with her mother because I was here. She was not going to accept my leaving either, but I knew now more than ever that I must. My world was simply too dangerous for her, and I wasn't willing to make her one of us...but I couldn't make myself go either.

Carlisle and I rode home in silence. It was only when we'd reached our driveway that Carlisle spoke.

"What's on your mind, son?"

So, my distress was that obvious. His question released a flood of emotion in me. "She's going to die, Carlisle," I blurted out. "If I stay with her, she will die."

"Yes, well Edward, she *is* going to die sometime. Why would you think that you're any more responsible for that than Fate itself?"

"Being tortured to death by a vampire isn't exactly an ordinary human death."

"No, but have you forgotten that if you hadn't been near when Bella was almost hit by the van, she would already be gone? My point is that as a human, Bella has to live according to the rules of human existence, including the certainty that she will die and that her death could occur at any time. You will have to accept that for as long as she remains human."

"Yes...I see what you mean, but the other way is completely untenable."

"Why is that, Edward?"

"Because I don't want Bella to be damned to our way of life! I can't be a party to destroying her soul!"

Carlisle paused for a moment while I pulled myself together.

"You know, son, I find it hard to believe in an omniscient being that doesn't care for you, or Esme, or Alice just as much as any human. I'm not saying that we are the same, but perhaps we're part of God's creation too."

"I don't believe it, Carlisle."

"No, I know you don't. That puts you in a tremendously difficult position, doesn't it?"

"Yes, impossible. I want her so much. I'm afraid I'm too selfish to leave her alone."

Carlisle grew quiet as he pulled the car into the garage and cut the engine.

"I'm here for you, Edward. Whatever I can do."

“Thanks, Dad.” It solved nothing, but I felt slightly better for having put words to my misery.

I returned to Bella’s house several hours later after I’d hunted. She was asleep, I saw when I entered her window. I needed to hold her, though; I needed reassurance. As gently as possible, I straightened the covers over my beloved and lay atop them, wrapping my arm around her waist. I didn’t want to wake her with my icy touch.

Bella wriggled against me in her sleep and said, “Edward, stay.”

For now, I thought. I had no will to leave, especially since I was lying beside her again, listening to her heartbeat and smelling her hair. What a cruel joke it was, this existence of mine.

In the weeks that followed, Alice became a fixture at Charlie’s house. She had arrived the evening after we returned, when Bella called to ask her for physical assistance. Bella couldn’t take a shower with her leg in the cast and she needed help to bathe. It became Alice’s routine to show up at Charlie’s house at nine o’clock in the evening to lift Bella in and out of the bathtub and, every few days, to wash her hair. She returned in the morning to help Bella dress for school. Bella had argued vehemently that she could dress herself, but Alice went anyway.

I knew Alice’s secret motive—she was appalled by Bella’s clothing. So, piece by piece, she began to upgrade Bella’s tiny—and in Alice’s view, unfashionable—wardrobe. Bella was like a dry leaf in a stiff wind trying to curb Alice’s enthusiasm for dressing her. Once Bella realized that she could not stop Alice from bringing her new clothes, she changed tack and tried at least to influence the selections.

As Alice had predicted, she and Bella became close friends and her vision of the two of them together came true. It was now common to see Bella with her arm over Alice’s shoulders and Alice’s arm wrapped around her waist as Bella hobbled down the hallway in her dressing gown. Naturally, when Charlie wasn’t watching, Alice simply picked up Bella and carried her like a doll from room to room.

One side effect of Alice’s routine was that, even though I was not present for the bathing, I sometimes caught glimpses of Bella in the bath through Alice. I tried to block the pictures in Alice’s mind, but she liked to tease me by tossing a bathroom memory at me when I was off guard. Though I protested and chastised her, she just laughed and feigned innocence.

Heaven knows, I'm no saint, and I wasn't as disturbed by the images as I pretended to be. Alice had an ulterior motive for her antics and, to my embarrassment, her strategy worked—catching fleeting glimpses of my beloved partially clothed further destroyed my willpower to leave her. I wanted her more than ever.

Charlie had grounded Bella after she returned from Phoenix. She had to be home half an hour after school, and I was allowed to visit only after Charlie got home from work. The latter was a compromise Bella exacted from her father, who would have preferred we not see each other at all.

In addition to our time together at school, I came to Bella's window every night after Charlie was asleep. Except for my continuing anguish over how to do the right thing for Bella, those nights were blissful. I'd promised her in the hospital that I would stay as long as it was best for her. Judging by the near-hysterics she had suffered when I suggested we should separate, it *was* best for Bella if I set aside talk of the future at least until she was healed—or so I told myself.

In the meantime, there was prom. I didn't want Bella to miss any human experiences because of me. Alice had agreed wholeheartedly that Bella should go to prom and began to plan how to get her there. Her idea was to present the evening as a surprise formal occasion, but not tell Bella what the occasion was. I was certain she would know immediately when we told her the date of the event, but she didn't seem to catch on, not even when Alice reserved most of the day with her for doing her hair, her nails, her makeup, and whatever else ladies do for such events. Bella had grumbled for several days beforehand, submitting only reluctantly and with bad humor. It didn't seem to dampen Alice's enthusiasm.

When I arrived to pick up Bella, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. She looked absolutely exquisite, despite the ugly walking cast on her leg. Alice had pulled Charlie into the surprise, so with little resistance, he had agreed to allow Bella out of the house for the evening. Charlie wanted to see Bella go to prom and, since it was not something she normally would have agreed to do, he was pleased that Alice had arranged everything.

I was surprised that Bella was so cranky about not being told our destination. I could hardly believe she hadn't figured it out, and I couldn't fathom where else she thought we'd be going, with her in a French gown and me in a tuxedo.

When my cell phone rang in the car and I saw that it was Charlie on the line, I wasn't sure whether to answer or not. Had he changed his mind? As far as I knew, I'd never given Charlie my cellphone number. Bella must have done so as part of the deal with Charlie that enabled us to go out.

It could be important, I thought. I didn't dare ignore it.

"Hello, Charlie."

"Hello. Listen, I've got this kid on my doorstep who's dressed in a suit and claiming Bella's going to prom with him."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed, laughing.

"Nope. It's the kid that nearly ran down Bella with his parents' van," Charlie said, sounding disgusted.

"Why don't you let me talk to him?" This conversation was going to make my night complete!

"Hey, what's going on?" Tyler queried when Charlie handed him the phone.

"Hello, Tyler, this is Edward Cullen," I said, in a pseudo-friendly voice. "I'm sorry if there's been some kind of miscommunication, but Bella is unavailable tonight." It was right to apologize, given that Tyler had been inconvenienced, but that was as much as good manners required of me.

I put just a touch of menace in my voice and continued. "To be perfectly honest, she'll be unavailable every night, as far as anyone besides myself is concerned. No offense. And I'm sorry about your evening." Okay, so I wasn't *really* sorry.

The idiot child! How could he possibly have maintained the illusion for weeks that Bella had agreed to go out with him? And beyond that, why hadn't he checked with her even once before now? Besides, he must have realized it was no coincidence that Bella and I both had missed over two weeks of school at the same time and that since we'd come back, we walked side-by-side everywhere and ate lunch together every day. I had no sympathy for him—the jackass deserved what he got.

I laughed heartily as I hung up the phone, but when I looked at Bella, I was startled to see her face turning red and tears forming in her eyes. What? Surely she wasn't upset over Tyler!

"Was that last part a bit too much? I didn't mean to offend you." Maybe it *was* offensive to have announced that Bella couldn't date anyone but me. That wasn't really my decision to make and it would be far better for her if she dated human boys.

I had it wrong.

"You're taking me to *the prom!*" Bella wailed.

No! She wasn't going to make a big fuss about this when anyone else would have figured it out days ago. "Don't be difficult, Bella." Alice had invested too much in this evening for Bella to disappoint her.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Bella raged.

Gesturing toward my tux, I asked, "Honestly, Bella, what did you think we were doing?"

Tears ran down her face. I was dumbfounded.

"This is completely ridiculous," I said. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm *mad!*"

Oh. I guessed I would have to turn on the charm.

"Bella." I said, gazing into her eyes.

"What?" Her tears slowed as she stared back.

"Humor me," I said in my most compelling voice. Bella's face was softening. Thank goodness for my secret weapons.

"Fine," Bella retorted. "I'll go quietly. But you'll see. I'm way overdue for more bad luck. I'll probably break my other leg. Look at this shoe! It's a death trap!"

Bella lifted the ruffles to reveal her bare, intact leg and the object of her derision. Beneath her long skirt, she wore the sexiest high-heeled slipper I'd ever seen, with a narrow stiletto heel, and tied on with ribbons wrapped around her foot and ankle. Perhaps we didn't have to go to prom after all, I thought wickedly, as other, more interesting activities came to mind.

"Hmmm," I said as I admired her leg, which was shown to its best advantage by the scandalous shoe. "Remind me to thank Alice for that tonight."

"Alice is going to be there?" Bella asked, her spirits lifting.

"With Jasper, and Emmett...and Rosalie." I'd rather not have brought up my other sister's name, but she *would* be there. Fair warning.

As I expected, Bella's face dropped before she suddenly inquired, "Is Charlie in on this?"

"Of course," I chuckled, "but apparently Tyler wasn't."

This story would keep me in laughs for a good long while. Bella seemed angry at Tyler, rather than amused by him as I was. I hoped he would put in an appearance. It would be extremely pleasant to see Tyler alone tonight while Bella was dancing on my arm. With self-reproach, I realized that much of my delight over taking Bella to prom was in showing off my beautiful prize. Bella had chosen me! I liked it that everybody would know. Selfish, again.

When we reached the high school, I opened Bella's door and extended my hand to help her from the car. She just sat there like a stubborn child, her arms folded across her chest as if I couldn't make her go. We both knew I could, but I wouldn't, of course. I sighed in resignation. She made no sense to me sometimes.

"When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion—and then when someone mentions dancing..." I shook my head in disbelief. "Bella, I won't let go of you once, I promise."

Her expression softened. She was worried about falling or looking awkward, I guessed, but I would not let that happen. I bent over to take her around the waist and lift her from the car and she didn't resist. It seemed she'd changed her mind. *Good.*

"There, now, it won't be so bad."

I carried Bella's weight as she shuffled along beside me. Entering the gym, she seemed to cheer up when she saw the extensive decorations...balloon arches to walk through, twinkling lights, and colored crepe paper hanging from every surface. They'd used that stuff to decorate back in my day, I recalled vaguely. It had been around a long time.

"This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen," Bella giggled.

"Well, there are *more* than enough vampires present," I commented, seeing my siblings whirl about on the otherwise empty dance floor. Everyone had made room for Alice and Jasper and Rosalie and Emmett as they danced in their extravagant formal attire. Perhaps no one else could match their skillful maneuvers. No wonder—even Emmett, the youngest vampire in the family, had had sixty-five years to practice his ballroom dancing. We were naturally graceful creatures anyway...another of our "weapons."

"Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?" Bella whispered to me, finding more humor in that scenario than I thought was warranted.

"And where do you fit into that scheme?" I challenged.

"Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course."

"Anything to get out of dancing." I smirked.

“Anything,” Bella agreed.

I’d thought that we were past the “refusing to participate” stage of the evening. So when Bella became an anchor as I walked her toward the dance floor, I was surprised, but determined.

“I’ve got all night,” I warned.

“Edward, I *honestly* can’t dance,” Bella whispered, a look of true terror on her face. I couldn’t understand this kind of fear. It was ridiculous compared to everything else Bella had braved in the past month or two.

“Don’t worry, silly,” I said, “I *can*.”

I wrapped Bella’s arms around my neck, then lifted her by the waist and set her toes down on top of my feet. The pop song blaring from the speakers was in three-quarter time, so I swung Bella around in a waltz step. It was not your usual, twenty-first-century, prom fare, but all of us preferred the elegance of the classic steps to the random wiggling in place that passed for dancing these days.

“I feel like I’m five years old,” Bella laughed, finally relaxing now that she was whirling and twirling effortlessly.

“You don’t look five,” I assured her, a tinge of lust in my voice.

Bella was wondrously beautiful. She was beautiful without makeup or fancy clothes, but it was a special treat to see her looking so lavishly feminine. In her timeless gown, she looked like the sort of girl I might have married before going off to war in Europe. Given the brutality of that war, it was unlikely I would have lived to see twenty years old. World War I wiped out most British and European men of my age, as well as vast numbers of us from the United States. Those who remained were grossly damaged both inside and out. If I hadn’t contracted the Spanish influenza, I probably would have died in the war. Perhaps I should be more grateful to have survived that decade at all, even as I was now. At least I’d gotten the chance to know my true love.

My reminiscence was derailed when a familiar mind entered the gym. It was Jacob Black and he was looking for Bella. His mind was so loud and clear that it would be easy to mistake his thoughts for words said out loud. Damn this night! All of my irritating, former rivals for Bella’s affection were popping out of the woodwork. Jacob made me especially angry, for he didn’t just want Bella, he was here on a mission to separate me from her. Though I knew Bella would disregard his missive, the continuing interference of Jacob’s meddling old father infuriated me.

“Okay, this isn’t half bad,” Bella started to say before noticing the expression on my face.

“What is it?” she asked. Then she caught sight of Jacob walking toward us across the dance floor.

I snarled at the imminent intrusion. I didn’t practically kidnap Bella tonight just to have Jacob impose himself and his father’s edicts upon us.

“Behave!” Bella chastised.

“He wants to chat with you,” I sneered, irritated almost beyond good manners.

“Hey, Bella, I was hoping you would be here,” Jacob called.

The only thing that kept me from being openly rude was Jacob’s obvious discomfort at being here under such dubious pretenses.

“Hi, Jacob, what’s up?” Bella asked. I remained silent.

“Can I cut in?” Jacob asked, glancing over at my carefully neutral expression. Bella was willing to talk to Jacob, so I lifted her off of my feet and stepped aside.

“Thanks,” Jacob said without looking at me.

I started walking to the edge of the dance floor, but kept an eye on Bella to make sure she could manage with her crippled leg and the one high heel. I’d promised to hold her upright tonight. Jacob had better not let her stumble or fall, or I would...!

As I walked away, I heard Bella say, “Well, I hope you’re enjoying yourself... Seen anything you like?”

“Yeah, but she’s taken,” Jacob replied. I snarled under my breath.

“You look really pretty, by the way,” Jacob went on. I wanted to grab him by the necktie and hurl him across the room. He was pushing it.

Even if I’d tried not to listen to their conversation, which I didn’t, I couldn’t fail to hear Jacob’s message. His father had bribed him with an expensive part for his car if he would come to Bella’s prom and warn her to stop seeing me. I was enraged, but with some effort, held my position by the wall, outwardly calm. I watched for Bella’s reaction. She laughed as if Billy were just a superstitious old native. Then Jacob said something painful.

“He was...kind of over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He didn’t believe...”

"I fell," Bella interrupted.

"I know that," Jacob answered hastily. He was keen not to offend Bella. Too late. I could see that she was irritated.

"He thinks Edward had something to do with me getting hurt." She sounded disgusted. "Look, Jacob, I know Billy probably won't believe this, but just so you know, Edward really did save my life. If it weren't for Edward and his father, I'd be dead."

It felt good to have Bella defend me to her would-be suitor, but I knew she was being generous. Perhaps I had saved her life, but it wouldn't have been at risk at all but for me.

"I know," Jacob replied, seeming slightly more convinced.

Bella tried to soften her criticism of Billy by making excuses for him. She didn't realize that Jacob had more to say.

"'We'll be watching'," Jacob quoted his father's final message to Bella. Of course they would. I didn't blame them, really.

Bella just laughed.

"Sorry you had to do this, Jake," she snickered.

Finally, Jacob was at ease, too. "I don't mind *that* much," he said, ogling Bella in her fancy dress. I hurried across the floor as the song ended, anxious to see Mr. Black remove his hands from my girl and to send him on his way. He offered her another dance just as I cut in.

"That's all right, Jacob. I'll take it from here," I said, standing silently and dangerously just off his left shoulder. I was gratified to see him flinch when I spoke.

"Hey, I didn't see you there," he said to cover his discomfort. "I guess I'll see you around, Bella."

Good. He was leaving. How dare he? I felt especially protective of Bella now. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her slightly off the floor. She leaned her head into my chest and we swayed gently, ignoring the music and the other dancers around us.

"Feeling better?" she smirked.

"Not really."

"Don't be mad at Billy. He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It's nothing personal."

"I'm not mad at Billy, but his son is irritating me," I said, the anger still in my voice. He had a lot of nerve.

"Why?" Bella asked, surprised.

"First of all, he made me break my promise." Bella didn't get it. "I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight," I said, raising one eyebrow.

"Oh. Well, I forgive you." Of course she did.

"Thanks. But there's something else." What really angered me were his wandering eyes, his blatant desire for her, and his vivid imagination. If he knew I could read his thoughts, he probably *would* be afraid of me. He should be. But I wasn't going to reveal Jacob's excessive interest in Bella to her.

"He called you *pretty*. That's practically an insult, the way you look right now. You're much more than beautiful."

She disregarded my irritation with a laugh. "You might be a little biased."

She had no idea how gorgeous she looked, how desirable. Had she not seen the jaws dropping around the room as she entered? If only she could hear the thoughts of half the boys in the room...but I was glad she couldn't. It might put her off men altogether.

"I don't think that's it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight," I reminded her. Her blindness to her own beauty was part of her charm.

"So are you going to explain the reason for all of this?" she inquired.

All of what? Oh, prom, I realized when she looked pointedly at the crepe paper decorations. Since she didn't care about being there and since numerous other males wanted to follow Jacob's lead and get their hands on her, I decided to find a quiet place to be alone with my stunning, desirable date. I guided us around the dance floor, her feet on mine, aiming for the back door of the gym.

When we were outside and out of sight, I lifted my love into my arms and carried her across the grounds to a bench under the madrona trees from where we could watch the tail end of the sunset. We could still see some color in the sky through breaks in the clouds near the horizon. The moon was already glowing too, casting beautiful white light onto Bella's blue silk, which contrasted sharply with her pale skin and dark eyes. She looked like one of us. Remorse swept through me as I considered my failings: my selfishness, my lack of will, my inability to let her go, my very existence in her life.

“Twilight, again.” I spoke almost to myself. “Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end.”

And not just the day. The sun that Bella had brought into my never-ending, midnight existence also would have to set. Transience was part of the beauty of creation...everything changed, all the time. I was reminded of a passage from the Bible, Ecclesiastes, 3:1–8:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die...a time to kill, and a time to heal...a time to weep, and a time to laugh...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; ... a time to love, and a time to hate...a time to keep, and a time to cast away...

This summed up what I knew mattered most in life. That is why my kind were such an abomination—we lived forever, always there, but never changing. Or not much, anyway. It was why Bella and I were never meant to be together.

“Some things don’t have to end,” Bella said very softly. I sighed, knowing that all things that were *good* did come to an end.

“I brought you to the prom because I don’t want you to miss anything. I don’t want my presence to take anything away from you, if I can help it. I want you to be *human*. I want your life to continue as it would have if I’d died in nineteen-eighteen like I should have.”

With all of my being, I wanted her to have her life—but I also wanted to be with her forever, with all of my being.

“In what strange parallel dimension would I *ever* have gone to prom of my own free will? If you weren’t a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this.” Bella responded with anger, but somehow I didn’t think it had anything to do with prom.

“It wasn’t so bad, you said so yourself,” I replied, ignoring what was really bothering her.

“That’s because I was with you,” she said quietly, placing her hand where my heart used to beat.

I gazed at the moon, knowing that it too would set.

Finally, I decided to face the difficult issue I suspected was troubling Bella.

“Will you tell me something?”

“Don’t I always?”

“Just promise you’ll tell me,” I said, knowing she would try to refuse after she heard the question.

“Fine,” she said begrudgingly.

“You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here...”

“I *was*.”

“Exactly. But you must have had some other theory...I’m curious—what did you *think* I was dressing you up for?”

“I don’t want to tell you.” I knew it.

“You promised.”

“I know.”

“What’s the problem?” She must be embarrassed.

“I think it will make you mad—or sad,” Bella admitted. Yes, it probably would.

“I still want to know. Please?”

Bella sighed and stared at her feet, before eventually answering.

“Well...I assumed it was some kind of...occasion. But I didn’t think it would be some trite human thing...prom!”

“Human?” So Bella thought it would be some kind of nonhuman occasion. I knew already, but I waited for her response.

“Okay, so I was hoping that you might have changed your mind...that you were going to change *me*, after all.”

Yes, she was asking me for her own death. She wanted me to take away what was most precious...her life, her humanity. And I wanted to, heaven knows. If I could have my selfish way, I *would* do it—I would take everything from her just to keep her with me forever.

Suddenly, the silly side of Bella's thought process occurred to me. "You thought that would be a black tie occasion, did you?" I smirked, gesturing toward my formal attire.

She was duly embarrassed by her reverse Sleeping Beauty fantasy and scowled at me, the imposter prince.

"I don't know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does." I was still amused by her naiveté. "It's not funny," she added, in response to my grin.

"No, you're right, it's not. I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious."

"But I am serious," Bella insisted.

"I know," I said with a heavy sigh. She couldn't grasp the pain, the horror, the finality of such a choice. And she didn't know how desperately all of us wished we could return to being what she was. "And you're really that willing?" I asked her, already knowing her answer. To imagine taking such a beautiful soul. It was appalling. "So ready for this to be the end," I mused, saddened. "For this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything."

"It's not the end, it's the beginning," she murmured.

"I'm not worth it," I told her. I was no Prince Charming and that was the honest truth.

"Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly? You obviously have the same blindness."

"I know what I am." *Living death.*

Bella sighed heavily, as frustrated as I was. What would she do if I called her bluff? Would she finally feel the fear and aversion that she should feel? "You're ready now, then?" I asked in a lower, more somber tone of voice.

"Um, yes?" Bella said uncertainly.

Exactly! I leaned toward her, touching my lips to the top of her throat just below the hinge of her jaw. "Right now?" I whispered against her skin. She shivered deliciously, but I couldn't be sure whether it was from fear or desire.

"Yes," she whispered back.

She *was* serious. She wanted to give up her life for me. It was a heady realization, but not one I could honor.

“You can’t really believe that I would give in so easily,” I said, drawing away.

“A girl can dream.”

“Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?”

“Not exactly,” Bella replied, sadness evident in her voice. “Mostly I dream about being with you forever.”

My heart touched, I took pity on her then. Though I was a monster, though I was not worth it, though she would lose everything of value in her life, she would do it just to be with me. As I would for her, I supposed, if our positions were reversed. I *could* understand it. I just couldn’t accept it for her. Was there another way?

“Bella,” I said touching my fingertips to her lips. “I *will* stay with you— isn’t that enough?” I said, knowing that she did not understand what a huge concession this—just *this*—would be, given what I knew to be right.

“Enough for now,” she muttered.

I sighed, exasperated, but resigned to Bella’s stubbornness. She simply couldn’t accept reason. It was as much of a concession as I could give her and she still wanted more—or less, actually.

She touched my cheek and looked into my eyes. “Look, I love you more than everything else in the world combined. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yes, it is enough,” I said, smiling, a wicked, unthinkable thought in my mind. What she wanted was what I wanted too, truly. “Enough for forever.”

I leaned in toward her throat. Her heart pounded wildly. Her carotid artery throbbed beneath her translucent skin—I could hear her blood rushing rhythmically through it. If my teeth barely pierced her skin there, her sweet, hot blood would pump into me with the full force of her frantic heart. The thought was enticing, seductive. It made my mouth water. *Would I be able to stop?*

Then I bent over Bella’s thumping artery and pressed my mouth to it. I was a monster, after all.

Author's Note: *Midnight Sun, Part II*

I was a latecomer to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*. I had lived in the Pacific Northwest for many years and when I returned for a visit in 2010, the Twilight Phenomenon slapped me in the virtual face. It could not be ignored. Though not a member of its intended audience—teens and “tweens”—I found the characters engaging, the magic magical, and the setting accurately and beautifully depicted.

On the back of the first *Twilight* paperback edition, *Time* magazine identified the key to the book's remarkable, world-wide popularity: “People do not want to just read Meyer's books; they want to climb inside them and live there.” Most unexpectedly, that's what happened to me. After devouring the novels, I missed the Cullens and their lives in Forks.

Then a friend asked if I had read *Midnight Sun*, Stephenie Meyer's unfinished fifth novel. I hadn't heard about it, but when I found it on her website, I happily reentered the *Twilight* world from Edward's point of view, which diverged wildly from Bella's. I was disappointed when it ended right before the iconic and pivotal meadow scene, which I daresay all *Twilight* fans love. I scoured the internet, looking for chapters Ms. Meyer might have released later or for serious fan fiction that might fill the gap. No luck.

Eventually, it occurred to me that I could learn how Edward's version of the story played out by writing it. I took the challenge of “finishing” *Midnight Sun* seriously and kept at it to the end, trying to maintain Ms. Meyer's tone and writing style. No doubt my version of events varies drastically from what Ms. Meyer herself would write were she to finish the novel. I didn't try to read her mind, though I did lots of research. I wrote these chapters for myself, but realized that other *Twilight* fans might enjoy reading them too.

Midnight Sun parallels Bella's story in *Twilight*, but is written from Edward's point of view. This second half, which I call *Midnight Sun: Part II*, is dependent upon Stephenie Meyer's rough draft of the first half of *Midnight Sun*, which should be read first and is available on her website:

http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/pdf/midnightsun_partial_draft4.pdf

I hope you enjoy reading these chapters as much as I did writing them. The process became addictive and you can now find the rest of the *Twilight Saga* from Edward's point of view plus many extras at the “*Twilight: The Missing Pieces*” website:

<http://palassiter.wordpress.com>

PA Lassiter, 8/14/2012