

NEW MOON

through Edward's Eyes

A fanfiction by **PA Lassiter**

from

Twilight: The Missing Pieces

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Twilight Saga © **Stephenie Meyer**

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

New Moon: Edward

I began writing *New Moon (Edward)* in mid-August 2011 after completing *Midnight Sun, Part II* and *Breaking Dawn (Edward)*. Readers participated in a poll and selected *New Moon* as their next most-desired story from Edward's point-of-view, edging out *Eclipse (Edward)* by only a few votes.

Many of us want to know what was happening with Edward during his time away from Forks when he leaves Bella to allow her a normal human life. Bella falls into a deep depression after his departure, but Edward suffers enormously too.

We know from Bella's version of *New Moon* that the Cullens move to Ithaca, New York, and take up their various pursuits. Edward joins his family for a short time before he leaves to pursue a vendetta against Victoria, the evil vampire who helped her mate, James, attempt to murder Bella. The revenge Edward seeks leads him first to Texas and then to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, before his fateful confrontation with the Volturi in Italy.

On the website, you will find a series of photographs that documents Edward's solitary sojourn during *New Moon*. The first photos are images of Edward's childhood home in Chicago. The Masen House, built in 1880, is now owned by Edward and is kept as part of the Cullens' real estate portfolio. Other photos include images of the places he visited and things he saw on his travels.

Find the pictures and more at the "Twilight: The Missing Pieces" website:

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5/23/2013

N.B. This fan fiction is based on characters created by Stephenie Meyer in her Twilight Sage. Some of the chapter titles and all the non-interior dialogue between Edward and Bella are copyright Stephenie Meyer.

1. Excuses

I knew right away it had been a mistake. It was the night of prom, an event I more-or-less had coerced Bella into attending. At the end of the evening, we'd gotten into an argument—the same argument we'd had in the hospital after James attacked her. She wondered why I hadn't let his venom take hold rather than do what I did, which was to suck it out of her bloodstream, nearly killing her in the process.

Why hadn't I? Because it would be better for her to die someday and be reunited with God than to live forever without a soul. In the hospital, I had promised to stay with her as long as it was best for her. But after the prom, I rashly promised that I would stay with her until the end of her natural life.

Though I wished to, of course, the problem was that exposure to my world repeatedly put Bella in mortal danger. She'd nearly died twice already and I had begun to realize that when the time came to let her go, I would not be able to do it. I *would* change her and I could not allow myself that opportunity.

She wanted me to do it, to steal her soul, so that we could be together always. Selfishly, I wanted that too. I wanted to keep her forever, but I knew it was wrong. I couldn't let Alice's vision of her and Bella's matching marble arms entwined in friendship come true. I had to leave.

Leaving would be hard, gut wrenchingly hard. Just thinking about it hurt more than anything had ever hurt me before. I would gladly live through the fire again rather than tear myself away from Bella.

I began to make excuses, such as Bella was still healing from James's attack. Or, though James was gone, his mate might return and Bella needed my protection. Or, it was too disruptive to leave while school was still in session. Or...well...that was the extent of the excuses I had come up with so far. They would suffice for a time.

While Bella was still in the hospital, her mother had made plans to take her back to Jacksonville, Florida. Renee's husband, Phil, had signed with the Florida Suns baseball team and they would be settling there. Though agonizing to contemplate, it was the perfect solution to my dilemma. Bella could get away from me and all the dangers I brought into her life and I would be released from the torture of trying to leave her against my will.

To my surprise, though, Bella had refused her mother's proposal, adamantly insisting that Forks was her home. I knew Bella much preferred heat and sunshine to rain and chill and

that she originally had moved to Forks so that her mother would be free to travel with her husband. Bella's decision to return to Forks was because of me, *damn my eyes!* I had underestimated the strength of her attachment. That was the first time.

After Bella had finally healed enough for Carlisle and myself to escort her back to Forks, Alice began visiting Charlie's house every evening to help Bella bathe. Her attendance and affection contrasted sharply with Rosalie's actions. Rose, who'd had to be pressured into helping protect Bella from James, didn't ask once how she was doing, never mind try to befriend her. I wanted to keep Bella away from Rosalie as much as possible, since I knew my sister's behavior hurt her feelings and Rose's attitude was unlikely to change anytime soon.

Not that Bella spent a lot of time at the Cullen house when we returned from Phoenix. Charlie had grounded her for running off and she wasn't allowed to go anywhere except to school and work until the end of the school year. Charlie didn't want me at *his* house, either, because he blamed me both for Bella's leaving and for her accident. He was right, though. It *was* my fault. If it hadn't been for me, James never would have set his sights on Bella. She argued the point, though, and Charlie agreed to allow me to visit, but only when he was home. Since he was home every evening for dinner, there were only a couple of hours after school when I was forbidden to see my love.

Charlie made a point of taking me aside after Bella won the argument to warn me that I would be banned from his house if anything more happened—if she ran away, or got hurt, or did something else he couldn't predict. Charlie was unable to verbalize exactly why I was a threat to Bella, but he knew that I was. Trust a father's intuition to recognize when his daughter is dating the wrong fellow. I figured I wouldn't be around too much longer—if I could force myself to leave—so I planned to spend every possible minute with Bella while I could.

As soon as the school year ended, Rosalie and Emmett left on an extended trip to Africa. They didn't even stick around for graduation this time. Emmett told me that he wanted to get Rose away from "Forks" for a while. He didn't know that much of Rosalie's antagonism toward Bella wasn't because she was human, specifically, but because I loved her.

Rosalie was accustomed to commanding all the male attention wherever she went. By her reckoning, as a single man, I should have been among her admirers, but I had never taken the bait. Eventually, she'd decided that I was strange, or immature, or a homosexual, and had let it go. It galled her when she discovered that I *could* fall for a lady's charms, just not hers. Never mind that Rosalie had found her perfect mate in Emmett and that she wasn't interested in me in the least. It was utterly illogical, but Rosalie's vanity knew no bounds.

The public story about Emmett and Rose was that they had moved to New Hampshire in preparation to attend Dartmouth College. Emmett hadn't really wanted to leave—he liked Bella—but he decided it would be for the best.

When school ended, so did Charlie's restrictions and Bella and I were free to spend time at my house too. I could tell that Bella breathed easier, knowing Rose wouldn't pop out of the woodwork and frighten her, or say something thoughtless or cruel. It still bothered Bella that Jasper kept his distance from her. She thought they had gotten past that during their trip to Arizona, but I insisted that Jasper continue giving her a wide berth.

Bella's scent was extraordinarily enticing to me, but it was plenty tempting to other vampires too, especially Jasper. Despite many years on a vegetarian diet, his self-control remained shaky. He didn't hunt as often as he needed to, for one thing, but I couldn't criticize, because I found myself postponing my own hunting trips to avoid leaving Bella. The truth was that I didn't know how long I would have her so I hoarded every minute.

I stayed in Bella's bedroom at night, exiting through the window at dawn and returning after Charlie left for work. I dropped her off at Newton's Olympic Outfitters on her scheduled work days and picked her up when her shift was over. On errand days, I chauffeured her to the grocery store, the post office, and the bank. I hung out with her while she cooked Charlie's dinner and helped with the dishes afterwards. I left her house at ten p.m., but sneaked back in as soon as Charlie went to bed.

I also helped Bella study trigonometry. While in the hospital, she had missed a crucial exam, which officially meant that she would fail the class and have to retake it during her senior year. After a lot of back and forth with Mr. Varner, they made a deal that he would give her an incomplete rather than an "F" in the course and if she was able to pass the test at the beginning of the school year, then the "I" would change to a letter grade and she could continue with the next course, calculus. She had to study, then, so that she wouldn't be overwhelmed by the coursework as a senior. It was not as though you could skip sections of math curricula, because everything you learned in the future was based on what you had learned in the past.

I had missed the trigonometry exam too, but Mr. Varner had let Alice FAX me a copy of it and I FAXed it back. I had taken so many mathematics exams in my day that I didn't need to study. Mr. Varner knew as well as I did that I would ace it whether I sat in his classroom and took the test or copied all my answers from the book. It didn't matter to him that I wasn't present.

When Bella got tired of studying on a Saturday, sometimes I would swing her onto my back and trot into the woods behind her house, going far enough that nobody was likely to see us. Then I'd shimmy up one of the towering Douglas fir trees from where we could look out

over the expanse of green that went on for miles and miles, broken only by the squiggly lines of roads, and by clear-cuts that looked like massive scars on the land. To the west beyond the trees lay the vast, gray Pacific Ocean, mirroring the cloud cover above.

Though Bella had gotten sick the first time she rode on my back returning from the meadow, it no longer bothered her. If she closed her eyes and I took care not to jostle her, she did fine. She was surprisingly comfortable with heights too, as long as I held her securely when we reached the treetops. She knew I wouldn't let her fall.

I wasn't too happy about Bella's summer job. She was clerking three or four days a week at the sporting goods store to build up her college fund. My annoyance wasn't due only to how often she saw Mike Newton at work—I hated missing the time with her. I told Bella I wanted to pay her college tuition. Having her with me over the summer meant far more to me than the money did. Besides, I had as much extra cash as she would need, as well as the means to acquire more.

“No, Edward! I won't accept your money. I can pay my own tuition.”

“But why should you, Bella? The money doesn't matter to me and if you weren't working, we could spend more time together.”

That was the essence of an argument that recurred throughout the summer. I tried every persuasion I could think of, but Bella would not be moved. She preferred to earn a paltry wage at a job she didn't especially like than to accept money from me. Only Esme was happy that Bella had the job, because she got to see my face at home when Bella went to work. I hadn't been there as much as she would have liked in recent months.

Bella and I had similar arguments about her truck. I wanted to buy her a car, something faster, more reliable, quieter, more comfortable, and that got better gas mileage. I would have settled for getting her a used car, but she would accept neither new or “pre-owned.” When I pressed her to explain herself, she claimed that she was already getting more than she could give back by having me in her life and that when I gave her gifts, it threw us even more out of balance. It was a ludicrous belief. Bella was one-of-a-kind, the only being—human or vampire—who had ever made me feel the way she did. Loving her was everything to me. I couldn't give her enough gifts to equal the value she had brought to my cursed existence.

Bella rejected my reasoning and flat-out refused any tangible gifts I offered her. It was understandable in a way. Those who'd never had a lot of money often afforded it great significance, while those of us who'd always had more than we needed didn't. If our attitudes could be reversed, then we would have no disagreement.

As a tiny concession, Bella would accept gifts of entertainment. It was the rainiest summer in the Olympic Peninsula's recorded history, which meant that the Puget Sound region east of the Olympic Mountains lay beneath more cloud cover than was typical there during the summer months.

Gray Sundays became our "out-and-about" days of fun. While Charlie went fishing, we visited some of the ubiquitous festivals and fairs in the area. We drove to see the tulip fields of La Conner while the flowers were in bloom, creating red, yellow, orange, and purple blankets for miles. We joined the enthusiastic crowd for the annual basset hound parade in Woodinville. I took Bella to the garlic festival in Chehalis just to prove my imperviousness and to see her taste garlic ice cream. We rode the Ferris wheel at the Puyallup Fair with me holding Bella tightly around the waist the entire time, just in case. We held our hands over our ears while watching the hydroplane races from a lakeside park in Seattle and over our eyes for the nude bicyclist portion of the Solstice Parade in Fremont. (Entrants wore nothing but body paint and cycling shoes.)

One afternoon, I took Bella to the Pink Door restaurant at Pike Place Market in Seattle. It's an eclectic, warehouse-type space with fancy food, an artsy clientele, and aerialists performing feats of wonder and beauty while hanging from ropes and swaths of fabric attached to the soaring ceiling.

Though festivals were usually free, lunch was not, and Bella complained that there were no prices on the menu. I encouraged her to relax and enjoy the food and ambience, but she was uncomfortable and nothing I could say made any difference.

"You have to eat," I protested when she suggested that we leave.

"McDonalds would be fine."

"Sure, but why go there when you can come to this extraordinary place and eat what I understand is excellent food?"

"You know why," she chided, though she did eat some soup and bread.

Bella did not want me to spend money on her. I hid or downplayed any cash that came out of my pocket on these occasions, but Bella was vigilant and never failed to object. I think she enjoyed the outings, though. I sure did. I loved to walk around with her and hold her hand or her waist depending on the amount of support she required and it gave me great pleasure to see her laugh and cut loose on occasion.

We spent some blissful sunny afternoons in our meadow. While we never did anything we wouldn't do at Charlie's house, it was wonderful to have some real privacy. We touched and

held one another on the sweet-smelling grass and shared gentle kisses. We talked of love and life and nothing in particular. We talked for talking's sake.

In spite of my doubts—in spite of everything—I found myself relaxing and enjoying this precious time with Bella. Sometimes I was able to put aside thoughts of right and wrong for entire days or even several days at a time.

There were other days, though, when guilt got the better of me and I felt duty-bound to point out to Bella that she shouldn't be so comfortable with me and my kind, that I was dangerous and unhealthy for her. At times, I would fall into a mood of remorse and self-reproach for letting Bella get so close when I knew I would have to leave her eventually. Sometimes, I considered setting a date to break things off before doing so became impossible, but I quickly realized that that day had already come and gone. I simply could not make myself do it.

Once in a while, reality broke into my idyll, reminding me of the sad meaning of mortality. After Bella was freed from her walking cast, her sense of balance was more out-of-whack than ever. Although her legs had never been well-coordinated and her feet always seemed to trip her up, her newly healed leg was even more awkward than usual. Much to Bella's embarrassment, I asked Carlisle to take a look at it one evening when we were at my house.

"What for?" Bella demanded.

"You know how it's been giving you trouble since you got the cast off and I thought he might be able to feel whether the bones have healed properly," I explained.

"I'm sure they have, Edward, I just can't operate them all that well. That's normal for me."

"Have you ever considered that maybe it's *not* normal?" I pressed.

"No, not really."

"Come into the kitchen. It'll only take a moment," Carlisle directed, interrupting our argument before it could get started. I appreciated his intervention. Nobody defied Carlisle when he used his "doctor knows best" voice and like everyone, he had noticed Bella's awkwardness on more than one occasion.

"I'm sure it's fine," Bella maintained, but she followed my father obediently and sat down in the chair he pulled out for her.

Carlisle did a series of operations, palpating her thighs and calves, knees and ankles, and then asking her to press her leg against his hand in different directions, both sitting down and standing up. I held her upright when she tried to balance on one leg.

“That’s straight,” Carlisle murmured to himself. “Those are fine. Hmm. Try this, Bella. Put your foot in my hand and press down as hard as you can,” he directed, crouching down to the floor and offering his hand palm up. I held Bella around the waist as she raised her left leg and placed her foot in his hand. I couldn’t detect any movement on the part of either of them as Bella pushed downward. “Now the other foot.” She did as he asked and, of course, couldn’t budge his hand with that foot either. Carlisle stood up.

“Your bones, ligaments, and tendons seem normal. Sometimes a break can stretch ligaments that then need time to tighten up, but yours feel fine. Try this,” he said, holding his palms facing Bella. “Press your palms against mine as hard as you can.” She did, and again, neither of them showed any motion as she strained. “Good. Now press my palms downward.” Again, Bella complied. Carlisle led her through a few more of these exercises, lifting her arms from her sides against pressure from his hand, squeezing his wrists as hard as she could, and finally, he asked her to do the sobriety test given by troopers on the highway. She tried to walk a straight line by putting heel to toe, but this maneuver was impossible for her. I followed along, ready to catch her on each step as she lost her balance.

“I’m just uncoordinated,” she explained as Carlisle asked her to look at him, hold her arms at shoulder level and touch her nose with each index finger in succession. She poked herself in the eye once and stuck her finger in her nostril the second time.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had been drinking,” Carlisle said, smiling.

“Okay, that’s enough humiliation for one day, don’t you think?” Bella complained with mild irritation. Carlisle didn’t respond, just asked more questions as he touched her skull gently with his fingers, moving her hair about and throwing her lovely scent into the air.

“Have you had a recent growth spurt or change in body weight?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Migraines or excessive tiredness?”

“No.”

“Are you doing unusual stretching exercises, like yoga or gymnastics?”

“Good gosh, no!”

Carlisle smiled. "My guess is that your proprioceptors are not working as well as they might. That would explain why balancing is difficult for you. Or you could have an inner ear defect. It would be worthwhile to come to the hospital and get an MRI."

"This is your fault, Edward," Bella accused. "Carlisle wouldn't have thought about it if you hadn't insisted he examine me. No, I can't go to the hospital. It would worry Charlie. Besides, there's nothing wrong with me except maybe bad genetics. I appreciate your concern, Carlisle, but I'm fine. Come on, Edward. I need to get home." Bella took my hand and started pulling me behind her. I looked back at Carlisle.

I'm not convinced, my father said silently. She should have a full work-up as a precaution. I nodded in acknowledgement. Carlisle was implying that there could be something amiss in her brain, an injury, perhaps, or possibly a lesion or tumor. It would take time to persuade her. Maybe when she had her next accident or injury, Carlisle could work in the test.

Don't worry, Edward. If something aggressive were in there, then she would be deteriorating and, more likely than not, I would feel the heat from it.

"Thank you," I said as we left the room. If Carlisle thought she had a pressing problem, he would have insisted that she come in for testing immediately. I also knew that Carlisle would keep an eye on her, which was reassuring.

"I'm not going to the hospital," Bella asserted when we were in the car on the way back to her house, "so just forget it. I've always been a klutz. If you wanted a cheerleader, I'm sure you could have gotten five or six."

I chuckled.

"Don't you dare!" she added.

"Never fear, my darling. I promise you are the only human I will ever want." I lifted her hand from the seat and brought it to my lips.

"No vampires either," she clarified.

"No vampires either," I agreed.

2. Frailty

“No, Bella,” I whispered, reaching for her wrists and extracting her hands as they began creeping up the inside of my sweater.

“Why not? I want to touch your skin.”

“Here,” I said, pushing my sleeves above my elbows.

“Not the same.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s much less dangerous,” I replied.

“I trust you,” she whispered, trying to free her wrists.

“You shouldn’t. I don’t.”

“But—”

“Shhh... Roll over and go to sleep,” I said, removing myself from beneath the covers and resettling on top of them, leaving Bella more decidedly separated from the front of my body. Sometimes she drove me crazy...in a good way, of course.

“Don’t leave. I’ll be good,” she promised, turning herself to face away from me, but then scooting backward so that her backside touched my front, the covers between us. I put one hand on her back, moved slightly away, and wrapped the other arm around her waist.

“Goodnight, Bella,” I said firmly.

“Oh, all right,” she sighed. “Good night.”

I began humming softly and my mind started to wander. *Why do lullabies work?* I wondered. It must be the gentle, repetitive rhythm, like a heartbeat. I wish I still had a heartbeat. One thing I liked about being with Bella at night was listening to, and feeling her heart beat against my chest. It was the closest thing to having my own that I would ever get. It was also a lure for drinking...sure...but I no longer let myself think that way. Reacting to the temptation of her scent is what got me into so much trouble that first day when Bella walked into biology class and sat down in the chair beside me.

Thump, a-thump, a-thump, a-thump... I had replayed the memory so many times that it no longer had the overwhelming impact it had had those first few weeks when I was trying to overcome my shocking visceral attraction to Bella. I had held my breath so much during biology

class last winter and spring that it became a habit for a long time. I'd automatically stop breathing when I'd see her between classes or find her after school. The reflex seemed to be gone now.

After our pivotal day in the meadow together and then my first night in her room, I stayed as close to her as I could. I feared that the tolerance I'd built up over those hours would vanish when we separated and that when I saw her again, my impulses might get the better of me. Now, though, after all those days and nights in the hospital with Bella, being away from her for a few hours, or even overnight if I needed to hunt, caused no serious backsliding.

It had been hard work, though, fighting the instinct to go for her throat. It was still there, too, the only change being that I now expected that first punch of desire when I saw her anew and could brace for it. The fire in my throat had never lessened either. It was as painful as ever each time I inhaled...sizzling...burning. Resistance was also more complicated by the fact that I struggled both against my lust for Bella's blood and the memory of drinking it. When the memory resurfaced, desire overtook me and the shame followed in lockstep. I had loved it...so much.

One evening, a week after we returned from Phoenix, I rose from my seat beside Bella on Charlie's couch and prepared to leave at the prescribed time, 10:00 p.m. I pulled Bella up too and held her arm as she thumped along beside me in her walking cast. She followed me outside to wish me goodnight—for Charlie's sake mainly, since I planned to be back in about ninety minutes.

When I wrapped both arms around her waist and prepared to give her a goodnight kiss, she gestured for me to bend down so that she could whisper in my ear.

"Maybe you shouldn't stay over tonight," she breathed.

"Why not?" I asked in surprise, preparing to be offended. She had never not wanted me before.

"Because it's my time...," she whispered.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" *Did she want to be alone? Did she need time to herself?* It hadn't occurred to me that she might, because all I wanted was to be with her every second. Changeable human that she was, maybe she was getting tired of me. I froze as I considered that thought, knowing it would be for the best, but also bracing myself for immense pain.

"You know...."

"I'm afraid I don't," I returned stiffly.

"...of the month," she finally finished, her face flooding with color. "It usually starts in the night."

"Oh." I looked down at our feet, embarrassed by my thick skull, but also relieved...disgracefully so.

Of course I knew about the human female's menstrual cycle. Hadn't I seen that drawing of an upside-down "pear" a million times in freshman health class? The class was always taught by some gone-to-flab, athletic has-been in the boys' locker room during physical education hour. Though it was part of his contract to spend a few days each semester talking about puberty and the differences between girls and boys, the coach-cum-teacher never seemed comfortable with it and the sessions usually degenerated into snickers and offensive jokes about girls.

I'd gotten an even bigger dose of the topic in medical school. I could, of course, name every part of the female reproductive system, including a few parts that lots of women probably didn't know about themselves. (Bartholin's glands, anyone?) And yet, it hadn't crossed my mind that my human girlfriend bled several days each month.

"How long does it go on?" I finally asked, raising my eyes to Bella's face.

"Four days, give or take," she said softly, the color in her cheeks deepening seductively.

Four days! It might as well be four-*ever!* "I don't think I could stay away that long," I fretted. "At least I wouldn't want to."

I considered quickly. Statistically, on any given day, roughly fifteen percent of the girls in high school were having their periods and it had never bothered me. Of course, I could pick out the individuals easily enough, but something about menstrual blood...it wasn't the same as blood from an artery. The scent was "dead," as if whatever was in arterial blood that attracted and sustained us was no longer present. I'd have to ask Carlisle about that. Frankly, I was surprised that the topic had never come up between us in a hundred years or so. I guess it hadn't been relevant to my life before. In any case, it was undeniable that I was no more likely to bite a menstruating woman than anybody else. Therefore, I concluded that it wouldn't be a problem for me, though maybe it would be if it was Bella's blood.

"What are you kids whispering about out there?" Charlie yelled. "It's past your curfew, Bella. Say goodnight and get in the house!"

“Coming, Dad,” Bella called. To me, she whispered, “I don’t want you to stay away either. Come back if you can...if you want to, I mean.”

“I do,” I said, taking her beautiful, warm face between my hands and pressing my marble lips against her soft, full ones...touching, moving, touching again. *Mmmm...* Her breathing accelerated and her heart galloped in the way I adored. She wove her fingers through my hair and began to press her body into mine in a dangerously exciting way. Reluctantly, I moved my hands from her face to her waist and pushed her back gently. Then I ended the kiss by pulling my lips away. My breath was coming faster too.

“You’d better go inside,” I murmured, turning her around to face the door. Bella pushed it open and thudded in, clinging to the doorframe for balance.

Turning her head toward me, she mouthed, “Come back.” I smiled and walked to my car.

I came back, of course. I couldn’t stay away; it was impossible. She attracted me like a bug to a flame. Flying too close to the fire...it was a good analogy for what I was doing. Bella might think I’m a celestial being, but I’m far from it. *Call me Icarus.*

She did start her period that night and I was relieved to discover that it didn’t make the burn any worse—how could it?—or drive me wildly out of control. Her scent was more lavender and less freesia, that was all. The change was subtle, but definitely a change. After one month with her, I would have smelled her scent at every stage of her cycle. After two months, I would be able to identify exactly where she was in her cycle of fertility on any given day. Not that it mattered. It was just interesting...like everything about Bella was interesting to me.

Carlisle had told me once that his sense of smell was one of his best assets in diagnosing human disease. I could understand why now. He had smelled so many humans with such a variety of diseases that I bet, for example, he could tell when somebody had cancer or liver disease just by their scent and maybe even what stage it was. Perhaps he could even tell by someone’s scent how long they might live.

I had no doubt that he could smell infection from quite a distance and perhaps even buried deeply in the body. Gangrene would be obvious from miles away—not that Carlisle encountered much gangrene in the current age except for the occasional diabetic. But he had seen a vast amount of it during the American wars of the 18th and 19th centuries. Carlisle was famous for “curing” it in those days.

Battlefield hospitals were notoriously filthy and disease-ridden places in the days before germ theory was introduced. When Carlisle related his wartime experiences, I saw images in his

mind of doctors moving from one surgery to the next, gowns soaked in blood and dotted with remnants of human tissue, pus, and waste matter. Clean water for washing was often scarce and Carlisle gravitated to the areas where conditions were the worst, partly because he was immune to disease, and partly because he could do the most good there.

Due to the near-certainty of infection, the preferred treatment for a gunshot wound to the hand, foot, arm, or leg was to remove the limb above the injury. If gangrene had set in, the same remedy became necessary to keep the patient alive. Therefore, in the days before anesthesia, a war surgeon was most highly prized for his speed at sawing off limbs. Carlisle's supernatural quickness, sensitivity, and dexterity made him the most sought-after bearer of amputation tools. He could slice the skin around a thigh, change knives and cut through the muscle, switch to the bone saw and sever the femur bone all in under five seconds, where a competent human surgeon required at least five minutes for the procedure. He could not bear to remove a soldier's leg slowly just to appear more human, so he didn't.

By the time of the American Civil War, chloroform and ether had been discovered and were used to render a patient senseless for surgery. However, shortages of supplies, especially in the ravaged South, very often meant that anesthetic was unavailable for amputations—still the number one battlefield procedure. Doctors reverted to using whiskey as a sedative if it could be had, or if not, a sturdy piece of wood for the soldier to bite on.

Carlisle would travel from one field hospital to the next carrying his amputation kit. At each site, he would remove several dozen limbs in an hour and then be on his way to escape the inevitable attention he drew. Those were some of the periods in his life when Carlisle was believed to be an angel from heaven. I've seen entries in old diaries from both the American Revolutionary War and the American Civil War that describe the miracle of the "Angel Sawbones." It was a sequel to the work he did in Italy among the poor and suffering, which earned him the name *Stregone Benefico*, meaning "beneficent wizard."

I would love to write Carlisle's biography—as fiction, of course. His good works on behalf of humanity are not just extraordinary, but legendary. It was no coincidence that he found me while working in a Chicago hospital during World War I.

After I returned from my ten-year, rebellious sojourn apart from Carlisle and Esme, I became inspired to follow in my father's footsteps and study medicine (which Rosalie later did as well). I worked as his assistant when he was a country doctor who made house calls. I was not capable of assisting in surgeries where blood was likely to be spilt, so I was of limited use to him. Still, I learned a great deal about Carlisle as well as medicine. If I was fated to be a vampire, I was fortunate to have been chosen and changed by him.

Goodness! How did I get here?

At night, holding Bella as she slept, I found that my mind traveled its many highways and byways of memory, ideas, curiosities, and experience. On this night, it had wandered far from the moment. I retraced my mental steps back to how Carlisle uses his extraordinary senses to care for the sick and injured. I was reminded of what he said earlier about being able to feel the heat of a malignant tumor. Remarkable...and comforting. If there was something wrong in Bella's brain, it wasn't likely to be cancer.

I remembered when Carlisle saw X-rays of Bella's head after Tyler nearly crushed her with his parents' van.

Look at all the healed contusions! How many times did her mother drop her? he'd quipped silently to me.

It wouldn't surprise me if Bella did have some minor brain injury that affected her coordination and balance. With so many scars on her skull, one might assume negative repercussions. Maybe it even explained her silent, unreadable mind.

Hmm... If Bella had an actual illness or disease in her brain that was certain to shorten her lifespan, would it be wrong to change her? *Yes, you idiot!* I chastised myself. As Carlisle has already pointed out, Bella *will* die—that's what being human *is*. Stealing her soul if she was ill would be the same as stealing her soul when James hurt her. *That's the whole point of getting away from Forks*—so I won't find some excuse to initiate Bella into the world of the godless.

"Don't go, Edward." The words rose clear as a bell from a slumbering Bella. "Stay..."

I smiled to myself and then quickly lost the smile when I thought about it. I wondered how much Bella knew of my doubts and recriminations—mostly at night— about remaining in Forks and entertaining fantasies of a long future with her. Bella groaned suddenly and I rubbed light circles between her shoulder blades to calm her. It would be fascinating to know her dreams.

One cloudy afternoon when I drove to pick up Bella from the sporting goods store at the end of her shift, Tyler Crowley drove into the parking lot and pulled his parents' car into a parking spot a few spaces over from where I was waiting for Bella. Mike Newton was with him and I gathered that Tyler was dropping Mike off to replace Bella for the evening shift. I opened my

car door and got out, and then stood leaning against the Volvo with my arms crossed over my chest.

After his embarrassing (to him) misunderstanding about Bella's choice of dates for prom, Tyler had shown up near the end of the festivities, not wearing a tux or even a suit, but khakis and a sweater. I had heard him grumbling inside the gym while Bella and I sat outside. We were having an argument about my refusal to change her. Otherwise, I would have escorted Bella back into the gym and twirled her around the dance floor once or twice just for fun.

Mike opened the passenger's side door of Tyler's car and stepped out.

"Mr. Cullen," he offered in greeting.

"Mike."

"Tyler's been looking for you."

"Is that right? Why would that be?"

"I'm not sure. Hey, Tyler, Cullen's here!" Mike called to Tyler who had remained in the car, looking straight ahead.

"Tyler! You getting out or what?" Mike prodded. Apparently, he didn't know about the "mix-up" on prom night. Tyler was obviously still angry.

"I don't know what the matter is," Mike said, swinging the car door shut. "He said he had to talk to you."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, a smile playing at the corners of my mouth. *For now*, I reminded myself. Tyler refused to look at me.

Mike turned his back on Tyler and said under his breath, "I think he wants to know what the deal is with you and Bella. I told him you two were dating, but he said 'she owed him,' or something like that."

I suppressed a growl and then said, "Is that right? Well, here she comes." I walked over to help her with the heavy commercial door.

"Edward!" she called enthusiastically. Though I waited for her every afternoon that she worked, she still seemed excited to see me, as I was to see her.

"Hello, my darling," I murmured. I pulled the swinging door wide and took Bella's arm while she walked through. Her right foot snagged on the door jamb, pitching her weight

forward. I slung my arm around the front of her waist and tilted her upright almost before the stumble was noticeable. She'd been several weeks without her walking cast, but her coordination hadn't improved. I leaned forward and gave her a light kiss on the forehead. "How was work?"

"Fine. Hey Mike," she said as he approached us to enter the store. He gave a goodbye wave to Tyler, who was still sitting in his car, facing forward, now with *his* arms folded across his chest.

"What's he doing here?" she said, gesturing toward Tyler.

"I think I'll let him tell you himself." With her arm held firmly in my own, I escorted Bella to the driver's side of Tyler's car.

His thoughts were loud and clear. *Don't come over here...don't come over here...!*

"Hey, Tyler, what's up?" Bella asked the sullen boy when he reluctantly rolled down his window. He avoided looking at me. I wore a slight, perhaps smug, smile.

"Hey, Bella. Nothing much, I guess. How're you doing? I see you got your cast off."

"Yes, a few weeks ago."

"So you're doing good, then?"

"Yeah, fine. Did you want something?" she asked, completely innocent of the silent battle playing out between him and me.

"Oh no, not really," he mumbled.

"How's your summer going?" Bella took a stab at conversation.

"Pretty good. Well, I better get going," he said, turning on the engine. "Bye, Bella."

"Bye, Tyler."

"See you later, Tyler," I added. After he turned out of the parking lot, I started laughing.

"What was *that* about?" Bella asked, suspiciously. "You didn't threaten him or something, did you?"

"Not out loud," I said, chuckling.

"Edward!" she chided, though she was smiling too.

"It would seem that you owe Tyler a date," I told her.

"I do?"

"He seems to think so. He'd much rather ask you out when I'm not around, though."

"Oh, no!" she cried in dismay. "He's not still on about *that*, is he?" I laughed and pulled her to me by the waist.

"Everybody loves Bella," I murmured as she looked into my face.

"But I only love you," she replied, reaching for a kiss. Normally, I didn't go in for public displays of affection, but she was irresistible. I bent down, shut my eyes and felt her lips give softly against mine. Bella melted in my arms as our lips moved together and I longed to let it go on and on, but she was gasping for air and I felt her body move closer to mine. I took her face between my hands and held it still as I separated my lips from hers and looked into her eyes.

"I love Bella," I said as I lifted her chin to close her jaw and mouth. Then I gave her a quick peck on the lips. "We'd better stop making a spectacle of ourselves. What would Charlie say?" I asked rhetorically and laughed. Then I escorted Bella to my car, settled her in, and buckled her up. Once she was trapped, I stole another kiss. She twined her fingers through my hair.

Ahhh...I do not want to stop! So tempting..., I moaned inwardly.

3. Promises

As the summer progressed, I was glad to see no more of Billy Black, the nosy Quileute elder who had stalked Bella and myself in the spring. After he'd gotten his message to Bella by way of his hapless son, "We'll be watching..." I'd been watching for him too. So far, he hadn't shown up at Charlie's house while we were there, which was a blessing, and I hadn't seen him or Jacob around Forks either. Billy had wanted to warn Charlie about me, but he couldn't do that without serious repercussions, so he sent his son, Jacob, to warn Bella instead.

Jacob had come to prom to deliver his father's message because Billy had insisted he do it in a public place. The other part of the message was likely to rile me—that Billy wanted Bella to break up with me—and Billy must have assumed Jacob would be in less danger if we were surrounded by people than if we weren't. How wrong he was!

If I wanted to harm Jacob, I could do it as easily with a crowd around as without. When I nearly drank Bella's blood that first day in biology class, I had my strategy worked out for how to "take care of" the twenty witnesses. When she followed me into the office, I yearned to take her in front of Ms. Cope. It would have been trivial, especially if one didn't care how many humans he destroyed in the process. Fortunately for the Blacks, I do care and it has been a long time since I killed a human. I was glad I could say that after having drunk Bella's blood recently. (Remembering made the fire rage down my throat which was a good incentive to stop thinking about that!)

We'd had run-ins with the Quileute tribe in the past when we lived on the Olympic Peninsula in the 1930s. We liked the region because it got so little sunshine. Rosalie, especially, preferred to get out where she could be seen and admired and in Hoquiam, where we settled, she could go to school every day as we did now and live a relatively normal life.

We didn't stay long in Hoquiam, one hundred miles south of Forks, because the presence of the Quileute made living there moderately uncomfortable. They came upon us one day while we were hunting and three tribal elders decided to approach in their human forms. It was a brave thing to do. If we hadn't been vegetarians, we easily might have turned on them. Probably they'd watched us as wolves for some time and already determined that we only hunted animals. We'd noticed the malodorous scent of werewolf in the woods, but it was unfamiliar to us then.

We were drinking when they made themselves known. Because of their calm, carefully measured approach, we understood that they recognized our kind and their thoughts

confirmed it. Surprisingly, though, they were not frightened. As tribal chief, Ephraim Black stepped forward and informed us that we were on Quileute land, hunting their game.

Carlisle also stepped forward and in his diplomatic way said, "I am Carlisle Cullen, head of this family. I apologize. We did not know. Is there some way that we can compensate you for your loss?"

Ephraim Black saw that we would not attack so he let his curiosity get the better of him and asked why we were drinking the blood of animals.

Never having been in such a situation before, Carlisle chose to be straightforward and honest. "We hunt animals because we need blood to survive," he explained simply.

"Why do you not hunt humans for blood?" Ephraim asked, confirming my belief that they had been observing us unseen and knew what we were.

"We do not wish to take the lives of human beings. That is a choice we have made as a family. Please meet my sons, Edward and Emmett."

Ephraim, Quil Ateara Sr., and Levi Uley did not know what to make of us and did not know how to respond. A vampire family? We seemed nothing like the vicious predators described by their ancestors, but they knew we were related because the three of them had phased, something which hadn't happened for generations and which they previously thought was merely an old legend. When they found themselves manifesting the legend in fur, paws, and tails, they had been shocked beyond belief.

Ephraim Black explained to Carlisle that it had been the charge of their tribe from earliest memory to destroy "the cold ones" in order to preserve human life.

Taken aback, but maintaining his composure, Carlisle said, "As you observed, we survive on game. It is our sole source of nutrition. We only wish to carry on our lives as best we can in privacy and peace."

"There are five of you?"

"Yes, our two wives are not with us today."

"Where do you live?"

"We have a home in Hoquiam."

"You have ventured north to hunt."

“Yes, we try to spread ourselves across a large geographical region to avoid overhunting, though game seems almost excessive on the Olympic Peninsula.”

“The game is good.”

We stood there matching their “traditional” native silence with our vampire stillness. Eventually, Ephraim looked at his companions and said, “We do not want you to hunt on our land and we wish for you to keep your distance from our people.” He went on to explain the boundaries of the Quileute reservation. He finished with, “In return, we will not attack you unprovoked, nor will we incite other humans against you by revealing what you are. However, should you break your word and bite a human, we will commence with our charge. Do you agree to this treaty?”

Carlisle looked at Emmett and then me. *What do you think, Edward? Are they worthy of our trust? Do you see any duplicity in their minds?*

I answered the last question by shaking my head slightly from side to side. Ephraim appeared to be genuine in his proposal and I saw no subterfuge in the minds of the others.

“We accept,” Carlisle replied. “We will stay clear of the boundaries of your land and we will bite no humans. In a few years, we will move on.”

“We will keep our silence. It is done.”

“It is done,” Carlisle repeated. With that, the elders turned as one and slipped away silently in single file. As we watched them move through the trees, we saw each one phase in succession and continue into the forest until they disappeared.

“Shape-shifters,” Carlisle exclaimed softly.

“What the hell?” Emmett interjected. He and I were both standing there with wide eyes.

“You might think of them as werewolves in the sense that they can change form from human to wolf, but they are not the same. I believe that they are genetic shape-shifters, born with this ability. That explains the unpleasant scent we’ve come across in these woods.”

“They can change into other animals?” I asked in disbelief.

“Quite possibly.”

“They’re huge!” Emmett declared. “Do you think they could actually kill us?”

“Quite possibly,” Carlisle repeated. “Natural vampire slayers,” he added in awe. “So vampires have lived here before.”

"It was a long time ago," I said. "These warriors have no memory of our kind. What they know comes from tribal legend."

After our successful negotiation, we kept our distance from the Quileute reservation and moved away three short years later. There was little point in stirring up the indigenous people any more than necessary.

Judging by Billy Black's reaction to us, the Quileute still believed those old legends. It was such a coincidence that I should fall in love with a human girl whose father is a close friend to a descendant of Ephraim Black.

"Have you seen Jacob Black this summer?" I asked Bella one night in August when we were sitting in my car outside her house. I'd been with her so continually for the past three months that I probably would have known if she had, but I was curious anyway.

"No. Have you?"

"No, but I don't think Billy Black would send Jacob to see me."

"Probably not. I don't think my dad and Billy have gotten together this summer either."

"Wasn't Charlie annoyed with Billy for his attitude towards my family?" I asked, recalling the two times I'd seen the Blacks at Bella's house. Billy had come to make amends with Charlie and to watch baseball when his television broke, as I recalled.

"Yes, but they made up, I think."

"Billy's attitude toward us hasn't changed, though, and he's not happy that I'm spending time with you."

"Yeah, maybe he's afraid he won't be able to keep his mouth shut about that and he'll make Charlie mad again."

"But your father doesn't like me either."

"Maybe not," Bella grinned, teasing. "But he likes your dad."

"Everybody likes my dad. Rightfully so."

"Did I ever tell you that Charlie thought I was talking about Emmett when I first told him you were my boyfriend?"

"No, you never mentioned that," I said, chuckling. "That must have given him a scare."

"It did. That's one reason he was so nice to you when you first met him."

“He wasn’t *that* nice,” I reminded her with a smile.

“Well, he didn’t get his gun out, which he might have if Emmett had picked me up. But you’re so wholesome-looking.”

It was like a punch in the face. I felt my body freeze up as a tidal wave of guilt washed over me. What was I *doing*?

“Edward, what’s wrong?” Bella asked in alarm. I could not answer, tangled as I was in a web of pain, disgust, and helplessness.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Still, I could not reply.

“Edward, tell me right now!”

The sharpness of her words cut through my self-absorption.

“Bella...,” I said, hearing the tone of despair in my voice, “I’m *not* wholesome. I’m the *opposite* of wholesome. I should not be here.” Saying the truth made my heart sink further and my head dropped into my hands behind the steering wheel. “You should be dating boys like Tyler, or Connor, or Jacob Black...somebody *human*. I can’t believe I could be so deluded. It’s just so—”

“Stop it, Edward! Don’t say any more. I don’t *want* anybody else, do you hear me? I want you!”

Even that hurt. “That doesn’t matter. Don’t you see, I’m stealing your chances to meet someone who’s better for you than I am...somebody who can give you a normal life, children, a future... I’m so sorry, Bella. I’m sorry that I’m so weak...” The last word came out a whisper.

“But you’re not, Edward!” Bella countered vehemently. “Please don’t do this! Shouldn’t I get to vote on what’s best for me?”

“Not in the situation I’ve put you in. You should never have had me as a choice. I’m not right for you, not good for you...”

“Okay, that’s it! I’m leaving until you stop this! I won’t listen to it!” Bella announced as she got out of the car. Then she slammed the door shut with all of her might.

Caught up in remorse and grief, I didn’t see exactly how it happened. I only saw her falling as the car door closed and I heard the unmistakable thump of skull hitting metal.

“Ow!” Bella wailed as her hand flew to her forehead.

I was out of the car and beside her in a flash, but I was too late.

“Bella! Bella, are you all right?” Her cry of pain had shaken me loose from my downward spiral of guilt and misery. “Bella, look at me!”

She was leaning into the car with the entire front side of her body and she cradled her forehead in her palm. Her head moved slowly side-to-side in her hand.

“No, you’re *not* all right or no, you don’t want to look at me?”

She nodded her head.

“Please let me see it. *Please*, Bella!”

“I’m fine,” Bella said softly, but her voice shook with emotion. She was crying!

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...” I pulled her shoulder away from the car and slowly rotated her body to face me. Her hand stayed on her forehead. Her eyes were brimming.

“Let me see,” I said as I gently pulled her hand away from her face. Already, she had a swollen red lump just below her hairline. “Oh, darling, you’re hurt,” I said, pulling her to me and pressing her head against my shoulder.

“It’s fine, Edward,” she insisted.

“Then why are you crying?” She didn’t reply, but she didn’t try to push me away either.

“I’m sorry, Bella,” I said, stroking her smooth mahogany tresses with my hand. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I promise I won’t mention it again tonight. Just please don’t do yourself in on my account.”

Bella snorted softly. “That’s nothing! Give me a badminton racket and I’ll do us both in.”

I smiled, remembering how she once had whacked both herself and Mike Newton in a single forehand stroke, giving each a minor injury. “Let’s take you in and get some ice on that. Maybe we can keep it from swelling too much.”

Well done, Edward! Just what Bella needs...another head injury! I rolled my eyes, disgusted with myself. How many *more* ways could I hurt her?

“Shall I carry you?”

“No, I can walk.” I put my arm around her waist and paced with her to the front door.

“What’s Charlie going to say?” I asked.

“Nothing, because I’m not going to let him see me. Let’s head straight for the kitchen, okay?”

“Okay.” We entered the house and heard a TV announcer talking excitedly on one of the sports channels.

“Hi, Dad!” Bella called as we walked past the living room without stopping.

“Hi,” Charlie answered mechanically. “No way! Bad call!” he yelled at the television set.

I pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and gestured for Bella to sit down.

“Plastic bag?”

Bella pointed to a drawer by the stove. I pulled out a zip-close bag and filled it with ice cubes from a frosted-over tray in the freezer.

“We’re going to my room to listen to some music, Dad,” Bella said as I reached for her arm to help her up.

“Okay,” Charlie replied automatically before realizing what she had said. “Bella!” he barked. “The door stays open and the lights stay on. He leaves before 11:00. Thirty minutes.” As usual, Charlie avoided saying my name.

“Okay, Dad,” Bella responded, humoring him. Eleven o’clock was Bella’s summer curfew now that she wasn’t grounded. It suited us fine. I supported Bella as she trudged up the stairs and then I sat her down on the bed, sitting beside her.

“Here, hold this to your forehead. It’ll be easier if you lie down.”

“I better put on a CD since that’s why we’re up here.”

“I’ll do it. You lie down. I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“No, Edward, it’s fine. It doesn’t hurt that much.” I’d heard *that* one before.

“Shhh, no arguments,” I insisted, putting the first mellow CD I touched into the player and switching it on. Then I dashed to the bathroom for the aspirin and some water and dashed back. “This will help with swelling.”

I sat next to Bella’s prone shoulder and held the icepack to her quickly darkening lump.

“What happened?” I asked softly.

“Oh, I got my hand caught in the door handle and it pulled me over. The usual.”

“Bella, my Bella, what am I going to do with you?”

It was a question I could not answer. I promised myself that I would think about it again and try to reach a conclusion...soon.

4. Back to School

School was starting in less than a week and I was beginning to lament the loss of the most amazing, wonderful summer of my long life. It was an indulgence I didn't know how to let go of. I could hardly remember what my life felt like before Bella came into it and made it shine like the sun.

Maybe I *could* do it. Maybe I *could* stay with her until she grew old. Maybe we could have sixty more summers like this one before I had to let her go. It was my heart's desire. I knew it wouldn't be best for her. If she stayed attached to me, she would miss out on all the human experiences that would make her life rich: love, marriage, sex, children, extended family, legacy. If I stayed with her, all she would get from her life was false hope, sadness, isolation from other humans, and death, with nothing left behind except me. Dead me. It was wrong.

When I thought about it at greater length, though, I realized that whether I stayed with her or not, Bella was unlikely to have sixty more summers. She was so unlucky that probably she'd get hit by a bus before she was twenty. *Ack!! Perish the thought!*

In that case, wouldn't it be better if I stayed with her, protected her, and made sure that she got the long life she deserved? But then again, what about the danger I brought into her life every day, from myself, from my family, from unknowns like James? Was Bella simply cursed? Was there nothing I could do to save her from the evil hag who had thrown her into my path? These were hard questions and I hadn't made any progress in answering them since my last crisis of conscience a week ago.

Bella had awakened the morning after her "car accident" with a cannot-be-missed, cannot-be-covered-up goose egg on her forehead. She avoided Charlie by "sleeping in" and carefully timing her movements so that while he was getting dressed, she sneaked by him into the bathroom, and when he hollered up the stairs to say goodbye, she pretended she was not yet dressed. He left for work without actually seeing her face. She wouldn't be able to hide it from him for long, though. Bumps like that one didn't disappear in a day.

I was grateful that Charlie knew his daughter well enough to recognize that her injuries were generally of her own making (except for the terrible ones caused by James...*damn him to hell!*), and that I was not assaulting her, accidentally or on purpose. Otherwise, such might be the natural conclusion of a sheriff.

There was a way in which I *did* wish to “assault” her, though. My mind and my body were awash in desires unrelated to her blood. Feelings of physical passion were still new to me, and forceful, and never far from the surface. As I lay in bed with her, I wanted to remove her clothing piece by piece...to see and touch her soft, warm skin, and listen to her heart race and her breath turn to gasps. What would it be like, I wondered, to touch her in her most tender places and give her pleasure? Or to lie atop her slim, curvaceous body and feel her rise to meet me when I pressed against her? Imagining these things took my breath away. These were insane fantasies, I knew. She was so fragile and I so dense and strong, that I certainly would hurt her. I might even kill her accidentally.

Bella was no help in coping with these potent feelings. If I allowed her to touch me as she wanted to, I might easily be provoked into dangerous intimacy that I didn't know how to contain. That side of my nature, my newly awakened human side, was so insistent that I dared not let myself turn one foot down that road. I had no idea if I could stop once I got started, so I set strict limits on Bella's amorous advances. Just kissing her ardently for more than ten seconds felt risky, much less letting her touch my bare torso with her warm, soft hands. Consequently, I only allowed her hands on the skin of my face, neck, and arms, though she wanted more...much more, it seemed.

It wasn't just my strength that concerned me. If I loosened the restraints on our physical relationship, I feared that my resistance to her blood might also be compromised. I had to remain in control of myself at all times or I was bound to hurt her, one way or the other. Losing control could even end in my changing her.

Perhaps I never should have allowed myself into her bed. It had been impulsive, but I couldn't give up that pleasure now, could I? I so treasured these moments, lying beside her with her arms wrapped around my neck and her head on my chest. I could feel her hot breath penetrating my shirt and her cheek creating a warm patch on my skin underneath. Sometimes, I succumbed to my urges while she slept. I might lay my hand on her back for a time to warm it slightly and then stroke her arms, her hands, or her throat. When I did that, she made the most enticing sounds, soft moans and cries. Often, she said my name. Once, when I kissed her throat, she moved her hand between her legs and moaned in a deeper tone. I wanted to touch her there too. But I didn't.

Alas, those final few days of freedom flew by. The sun came out on Labor Day Monday, one day before school started, so I asked Bella to come with me to the meadow and she gladly agreed. It would always be a special place...so far from everywhere and everyone. No clamor of voices in my head. The place where Bella and I first tested the proverbial waters.

“Bella...my beautiful Bella.” We were lying on the grass facing one another, both of us with our heads propped in our hands.

“I’m not beautiful. You shouldn’t say it.”

“Have you not looked in a mirror for the past fifteen years? You are blind to your own beauty.”

“Are you ready for school tomorrow—to get back to the old grind?” Bella asked, changing the subject.

“It’s not my favorite place in the world, but as long as you’re there, I’ll be ecstatic.”

“Stop teasing me.”

“Oh, I’m not, not at all. You seem a little down, actually.” Bella didn’t reply, so I knew I was right. I tried to read her mind through her eyes, which rarely worked. “What is it, Bella? What’s bothering you?”

“Oh, you know. Getting older...”

“Wait a minute! Do you have a birthday coming up?” I asked enthusiastically.

“Yes, but I’m not celebrating it.”

“Why not? You’ll be eighteen. You could join the military!”

“Funny, ha ha.”

“You can vote!”

“Whopty doo.”

“You can drink alcohol at home with your father’s permission!”

“Yeah, like that’ll happen.”

“What’s the date?”

“September 13th.”

“Alice will be thrilled.”

“No! No celebrations, no gifts, no ‘Happy Birthdays’, no nothing! I’d rather you didn’t mention it at all.”

“What’s wrong with being eighteen? It’s official adulthood. You could leave home if you wanted to, not that I recommend it.”

“What’s *wrong* with eighteen??” Bella’s voice rose to a dangerous pitch. “You want to know what’s *wrong* with eighteen?” She paused either in fury or for effect, I wasn’t sure which. “YOU...ARE...SEVENTEEN!” Bella ended her outburst by rolling onto her back and crossing her arms over her chest.

“Oh, Bella...darling...” I said softly, scooting against her side and propping my head up so that our faces were close. “Don’t be upset. I would be eighteen with you if I could.” I looked into her eyes, possibly dazzling her; I touched her cheekbone with my finger, traced a line downward and then dragged it along her jaw.

“You know that’s not what I want,” she replied, the edge gone from her voice and her heart beginning to race.

“Isn’t it?” I inquired in a soft, smooth voice. Then I touched my lips to her jawbone, smoothing them from side-to-side before I kissed her just underneath.

“No,” Bella replied softly, but I could tell that her anger had morphed into something else. I kissed her neck down to the base of her throat and then brushed my lips across her left collarbone and over to the right. I kissed the right side of her throat and finally came around to her lips. I touched my lips to hers and she kissed me back with all the fervor I’d come to expect—and guard against. I touched her neck with my fingers and felt her lips move beneath mine.

Then suddenly, she put her hands on my chest and pushed forcefully. I lifted myself away to look at her, startled. Then I realized she was only half finished with the movement. I let her push me onto my back, which perhaps was ill-advised. Now *she* was lying with her chest against mine and kissing me with great intensity. I couldn’t resist, though I knew that I should. Her hair flowed around us, creating a private, dark tent. I quickly reached the limit of what I could tolerate without losing my head, and I pushed her shoulders back until she could no longer reach my lips with hers.

“I must stop,” I said, hearing the jagged edge of desire in the sound. Surprisingly, Bella didn’t argue. Perhaps she heard an element of danger there. Still holding her aloft, I shut my

eyes to re-collect my senses, quiet the excitement in my body, and beat back the lust for her blood. It took a few moments.

“Are you all right?” Bella asked, concerned. I opened my eyes and slowly rolled her onto her back. Then I propped my head in my hand to look at her.

“Yes, very.” My breath was still fast. “You’ll be the death of me. Or worse, the death of you!” I warned.

“Didn’t you like it?” she inquired coquettishly.

“Much too much,” I replied. She tried to lift herself up again, but I held her down with a hand on her chest. “That’s enough danger for one day, I should think.” Bella did not reply, but instead, reached up with her right hand and touched my face.

“I love you, Edward Cullen.”

“And I you, dearest Bella.”

School began with little fanfare. I left Bella’s room as usual a short while before Charlie awoke and went home to change. Alice was enthusiastic about the first day of school, having bought herself, me, and Jasper new clothes for the occasion. Jasper had graduated along with Rosalie and Emmett, so it would be just Alice and myself at school this year, but Jasper was a regular beneficiary of Alice’s shopping sprees, whether he liked it or not.

“Here, Edward,” she sang out. “These are the latest Tommy Bahamas. They suit you perfectly!” She handed me a pair of light blue trousers with large pockets on the sides.

“What are these for?” I asked, unbuttoning one of the pockets, which was roomy enough to hold a carton of cigarettes.

“Whatever,” trilled Alice. “It’s better if you leave them empty, though. It makes a smoother line. Here’s your shirt. It might feel tight but it’s supposed to be. It’s an Italian cut.” Alice skipped off in search of her next fashion victim. “Jasper,” she called out. I donned the clothing, brushed the dust out of my hair, and let it flop the way it wanted to. There was no arguing with my wayward hair.

I'd been through a lot of first days of school, so there wasn't anything particularly special about this one, except that I would spend it with Bella. I had finagled a great schedule that coincided closely to Bella's so that I could be with her most of the school day. I'd had to work a little charm on Ms. Cope to get into a couple of classes, but neither of us minded that. The middle-aged, red-headed, office secretary liked to give me what I wanted when she could.

Bella was driving herself to school this semester. Alice was riding with me since she didn't have a car. She hadn't found anything she liked yet, she told me when I questioned her about it. I knew she could easily afford whatever automobile she chose.

We arrived a little early and waited for Bella in the school parking lot. Alice and I had to stick together this year because we were too conspicuous to remain solitary in a crowd. If there were two of us with white skin and either yellow eyes or black ones with dark circles under them, then people thought about our odd coloring less.

Not that other students looked at us much. We carried with us an aura of danger that— with the obvious exception of Bella—humans subconsciously recognized, and they maintained their distance. Most people didn't look us in the eye long enough to notice our eye color, for example, though Bella had discerned that mine changed soon after we met.

We heard her 1953 Chevy truck miles before we saw it. It sounded like a diesel tractor coming down the road and drove about that fast too. School started September 6th, only seven days before Bella's birthday, which as expected, delighted Alice no end.

In the meadow after Bella revealed her birthdate, I'd started kissing her before she could get too wound up about the topic of aging. I knew she wanted me to make her immortal. For some reason, it drove her mad to be a year older numerically than I was. She had this crazy idea that she looked older at eighteen than at seventeen. It would make no difference if Bella were seventy-five, wrinkled, and saggy— she would always be beautiful to me. It was the latest fad, being a "cougar"—an older woman who paired up with a younger man. I should think the prospect would appeal to her.

Bella's truck chugged around the last corner and pulled into the school parking lot. Focused solely on her driving, she did not notice us standing there until she parked and got out of the truck. Her face beamed when she saw me, as I'm sure mine must have done. I started walking toward her so that she wouldn't be tempted to try running...heaven forbid!

"Edward! Alice!" Bella called out.

"Bella!" Alice answered with equal enthusiasm, though with a slightly sarcastic delivery.

“Hello, darling,” I said, reaching for her hand. “Shall we go? Alice, are you with us for History, first hour?”

“No, I’ve got Language Arts, but I’ll walk with you anyway. I miss Jasper not being here.” I understood that. I’d hate going to school now if Bella weren’t here. She’d completely eliminated the chronic boredom and monotony of days gone by.

“There’s Jessica and Lauren,” Bella noted. Jessica was a friend to Bella most of the time, but Lauren only ever thought evil things about her. Lauren was jealous that Bella had stolen all the boys’ attention when she’d arrived at the school the previous winter. Bella didn’t realize she had done that until I brought it to her notice and then she didn’t believe me.

“Oh, hey, there’s Bella,” Jessica said to Lauren. “Wait for me a second.” She turned and flitted over. “Bella, did you hear what happened to Stacey McAllister?”

“Hi, Jessica, no I haven’t heard anything. She’s the tall spiker on the volleyball team, right?”

“Yes, well, the team’s been practicing the last two weeks. Deedee Warick was supposed to set the ball, but she tripped, so Stacey leaped over her to save it and ran into the net pole. Well, it had a screw or something sticking out and it caught her shirt and when she came down, it ripped all the way up the front and her bra got caught and yanked up so her big boobs were hanging out. She started screeching like a banshee which made everybody who wasn’t paying attention, pay attention. The whole wrestling team was practicing and they got a *good* look! Stacey turned her back on them, but the weight-lifting crowd was just coming in the gym to work out, so *they* all got to see too. She’s been getting asked out all over the place, even though she’s as plain as paper! Isn’t that hilarious! Okay, I gotta go. See you in Spanish or math, or ...whatever!”

Alice and Bella turned to each other at the same time.

“Well, that’s a nice ‘howdy-doo’ on the first day of school!” Alice chirped, laughing, and then rushed off to her first class. I tried to keep a straight face, but I felt the corners of my mouth twitch when I looked at Bella, who was blushing.

“I hope she wasn’t hurt,” Bella said, suppressing a giggle in spite of herself.

Bella and I walked from class to class holding hands and sat by one another throughout the day. I’d scheduled myself to join her in all of her classes except for two. The first was Physical Education—gym—which in Forks was required all four years of high school. I had to take gym too, but I chose to do so with Alice. It was easier to fake playing sports when she could cover for me if I hit a tennis ball into the next county and I could cover for her if her

volleyball serve took a chink out of the cinderblock wall. It was our least favorite class because we had to constantly hold back without looking like we were goofing off too much. Games happened at such slow speeds that Alice could hit a ping-pong ball, do a series of *chaînés tournes* (ballet turns) from the center of a basketball court to the far wall and back before the ball returned to her side of the table. It was nearly intolerable to do anything in such extreme sl-o-o-o-w m-o-o-o-tion.

The main reason I didn't join Bella's gym class, though, was that she would have hated for me to watch her perform. If I had my way, I would have preferred to be there so I could prevent her from getting injured, but I knew it would humiliate her. *Silly Bella!* She didn't get just how much in love I was.

The other class I didn't schedule with Bella was calculus. She had studied hard for her trigonometry final, which she'd missed at the end of the previous school year. Mr. Varner was requiring her to take it the first week of school before she continued with calculus. She would do fine, I thought, though she had her doubts. But she found advanced mathematics challenging and it was old news to me, so I thought it best not to be in the same class. It would make her uncomfortable.

It was the third day of classes when Bella went to school early to take the test. Though it annoyed Alice, I insisted on going early too because I wanted to wish her good luck and try to boost her confidence. She pulled into the parking lot at the last minute— running late—jumped out of her truck and dropped her books. I rushed over, surprising her a little, and gathered them up before they could absorb water.

"Edward!"

"Bella," I said, smiling a crooked smile. "You're going to do great. I'm absolutely confident that you'll ace this test."

"I'm glad somebody is. Ugh. But I've gotta run; I'm late." Even so, she puckered her lips for a quick kiss. Her heart was racing, but I wasn't sure whether it was because of me or the exam.

"Do good! Maybe you shouldn't run, darling."

"Break a leg!" Alice called after her.

"Alice!" I frowned.

"We have an hour, Edward. What should we do?"

"Let's listen to some music. Or we could climb some of those tall trees over there."

“In those brand new, perfectly distressed, Diesel jeans? What are you thinking?”

“Music it is, then,” I said, smiling. We headed back to the Volvo and I pulled a selection of CDs from under the seat. “TV on the Radio, The Hold Steady, or Sunset Rubdown,” I offered.

“Ah, it must be new–music–appreciation week.”

“It is, indeed.”

“I like the sound of “TV on the Radio.”

We sat there for about forty–five minutes and half of two CDs, when I heard Mr. Varner call out, “time’s up” from three buildings over.

“Okay, I’m done, I think,” Bella answered him.

“She’s done. I’m going to find out how she did,” I said to Alice. She just nodded and kept bobbing her head to the odd beat.

“Thank you, Mr. Varner, for coming in early for me.”

“You’re welcome. See you in calculus class.”

“If I don’t pass, I guess I’ll see you back in trig,” Bella said gloomily.

“Yep, that’s the deal. I’ll let you know tomorrow,” Mr. Varner told her.

When she came out of the building, she looked pensive, like she was ruminating over an answer. I dashed to her side.

“How’d you do?”

“Okay...I think. Though it seems like when you’re most confident, that’s when you really screwed up.”

Students had started pulling into the lot in greater numbers.

“There’s Angela and Ben. Let’s go say ‘hi,’” Bella suggested. “I haven’t seen her this week. Sick or something.”

“Angela!” Bella called, “I was wondering when I’d see you.”

“Hi Bella, Edward. Yeah, my little brothers have lice, so—”

“Lice?” Bella repeated warily. “Isn’t that supposed to be really infectious, or whatever you call it?” Bella had backed away a couple of feet.

“Kidding. I had the flu,” Angela said, smiling.

“Oh, good. I mean, that’s too bad.”

“Ben took care of me,” Angela said, glancing at Ben with starry eyes.

“Hey, Ben,” Bella greeted him.

“Bella, Edward,” Ben replied.

“Ben,” I said.

“How was your summer?” Bella asked them.

“It was great,” they answered in unison.

The two looked at each other and laughed and it was clear that they were enjoying their relationship. I was pleased. It had only taken a little interfering to get them together and they seemed happy. Angela was a full six inches taller than Ben, but it hadn’t been much of a problem for them once they took the plunge.

In response to Bella’s question, they both started thinking about fun times they’d had during the summer months. Ben was picturing sitting in his used Corolla hatchback out by the ocean while he pointed out where different constellations would be if he and Angela could see them through the clouds. Angela was thinking about the sunny day when she and Ben took her little brothers to the beach to dig clams.

“Jessica and Mike broke up last week,” Angela whispered to Bella, “so you might not want to mention it at lunch.”

“Oh no, I thought they were doing good,” Bella replied. “He didn’t say anything about it at work.”

“Ben heard Mike say that he wants to ‘play the field’ now that school’s in session.”

“So Newton’s back on the dating market,” I remarked, thinking that he’d better not start chasing Bella again. One motivation I’d had for chauffeuring Bella to and from work was to remind Mike that Bella was mine. He’d stopped being such a jackass while he was dating Jessica and had even been pleasant to me on occasion. It was a welcome change, though obviously Tyler was still interested in my girlfriend. Fortunately, Tyler was easy to intimidate.

Bella got her test back from Mr. Varner the following day. She’d gotten a “B.”

“Studying paid off. I’ll have to keep it up for calculus this year, though. I still feel like I’m behind.”

“We can do that,” I agreed. “Happy to help.” I smiled to myself. She needed me.

5. Party

“She was very explicit, Alice,” I told my sister. “She wants everybody to ignore her birthday.”

“Wants, schmants. It’s not really about her, is it? It’s more about you and your family and how we care enough to ignore her silliness and celebrate her big day anyway.”

“That’s pretty weak.”

“Okay, I know, but I want to throw her a party!” This came out almost as a whine. “I never get to throw real birthday parties in this family. The last time anyone got older was in the 1930s and we hadn’t even joined you yet, so it’s only fair that we have a chance to—”

“Truly, Alice, you don’t have to convince me. I’m just warning you that it’s unlikely to be appreciated. She might even refuse to attend.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Nobody stands me up when I invite them to a party. Not and live to tell about it, anyway.”

“I hope that’s an exaggeration.”

“Well, back in the good old days, I used to invite people to parties and sometimes they didn’t actually live to tell about it if you want to know the truth.” She laughed her high, tinkling laugh and I saw images in her mind of her “Vampyre” costume parties from the 1930s and ‘40s where she dressed as a vampire in gothic black and wore fangs. Guests came dressed as characters from gothic horror novels, including Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and a number of characters from Edgar Allen Poe’s works—the raven, Fortunato, and the Ushers among the favorites. Invariably, at least one guest would “get lost” on the way home and never be heard from again.

“But I don’t throw those kind of parties anymore,” Alice clarified. “Do you want to have input on Bella’s gifts or just let me decide everything?” She was hoping for the latter response.

“She doesn’t want gifts, as I said, but if you’re going to do it anyway, then I might make a few suggestions. It is imperative, though, that she not be told of my involvement because I am not allowed to spend money on her.”

“Okay, then, lay it on me! We’ll assign the gifts to the rest of the family. She can’t get mad at Carlisle and Esme, can she? No, she can’t,” she said, answering herself.

“Since Bella will not allow me to buy her a real vehicle, we are both forced to listen to AM radio, no less. It’s intolerable. A stereo for her truck would be a godsend. It’ll have to include installation. If you give it to her still in the box, she might return it to the store.”

“Done.”

“Here’s another idea. Neither she nor Renee has money to spend on plane tickets and I know she misses her mother. A gift of a visit might be nice. Maybe assign that one to Carlisle and Esme, nonrefundable. I can tell her it would hurt Esme’s feelings if she didn’t use it.”

“Two tickets. Then you can go with her.”

“Brilliant. I’ve already started making a recording of my piano compositions. For the price of a blank CD, I think she’ll like it.”

“Oh, she will, definitely! You’re a good present giver. Have I ever told you that?”

“No, I don’t believe so, Alice. Nice of you to say. What is it that you want?”

She laughed lightly. “I haven’t decided yet. I’ll let you know.”

“Her parents are getting her a camera and a photo album to record her senior year.”

“So *everybody* is ignoring her wishes, I see.”

“Yes, except for you. You will be the perfect boyfriend who always does the right thing, though some might argue that when a girl says she doesn’t want something, she probably does.”

“Never fear. I think she’ll like my homemade gift.”

“Okay, Tuesday evening then.”

“Bella works at the store on Tuesdays, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know, but I’ll take care of that. I’m asking Emmett and Rosalie to come back for the party. *That’ll* surprise her.”

“It certainly will. Maybe not in the way you intend, though.”

“Oh, I’ll handle Rosalie. She *will* be good, *or else!*”

“Or else what, Alice? Are you going to pick a fight with Rosalie?”

“No, but I might accidentally drop all her lip gloss into a bag of kitty litter. It could happen!” Alice would do it, no doubt about it. I chuckled.

“Bella will be glad to see Emmett, at least. Are you thinking of inviting Charlie?”

“Well, you know Charlie and I are friends now.”

I did know. Alice came with me to Bella’s house in the evenings sometimes to visit with him. She also stayed there to keep Bella company while I went hunting. Alice had helped my case with Charlie a great deal, I suspected.

She continued, “I think parties aren’t high on his list of fun things to do unless it’s a gathering to watch a game on the sports network. I will informally invite him, though, knowing in advance that he won’t come. That way, he won’t feel left out. I’m sensitive, but practical. That’s why he likes me.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” I said wryly.

Alice absolutely loves to throw parties. It’s not the parties that she likes, per se, it’s more the designing, planning, shopping, and taking everything way over the top that appeals to her. It’s one of the few areas in her life where she can pull out all the stops and show off the extent of her abilities. Give her a few days and she can singlehandedly pull off what would require half-a-dozen, human event-planners a month to accomplish.

“Alice wants to celebrate your birthday,” I told Bella the following day. By warning her, I would avoid being considered part of the conspiracy to torture her, which is how she would see it if I didn’t tell her in advance. I knew Alice would get her way, regardless. She always did.

The day started inauspiciously enough, a regular, cloudy, gray day in the Pacific Northwest with a nearly constant drizzle. Alice had gone to hysterical lengths to throw this party for Bella. It had been a long time since she’d gotten to spread her wings. It was a shame that Bella wouldn’t be able to appreciate it.

Bella had told Alice straight out that she did not want any gifts, no celebratory greetings, and *definitely* no party. Alice had ignored it all, of course. I warned my parents that, though I would be sure to get Bella to the party—Emmett and Rose had come all the way from Africa,

after all—she was unlikely to be happy about it. I didn't want Esme to be caught off-guard by Bella "The Scrooge" Swan on her eighteenth birthday.

Alice and I waited for Bella before school in the parking lot, as usual. When she arrived, Alice skipped over to meet her, carrying one of the presents. Bella was not receptive.

"Happy Birthday, Bella!"

"Shh!" Bella shushed her, clearly not wanting anyone nearby to hear and risk getting more unwanted attention.

"Do you want to open your present now or later?" Alice enthused.

"No presents," was Bella's reply.

Alice wisely backed off. "Okay...later, then. Did you like the scrapbook your mom sent you? And the camera from Charlie?"

"Yeah. They're great," Bella answered with obvious displeasure.

"I think it's a nice idea. You're only a senior once. Might as well document the experience."

"How many times have you been a senior?" Bella asked sarcastically.

"That's different."

Bella walked over to where I'd remained standing by my car and gave me a genuine smile. I took her hand and squeezed it and felt her heart flutter in her chest, which gave me a smile of a different kind. I pulled her close and then ran the tip of my finger around the edges of her lips, feeling them yield to the slight pressure. Bella's heart began to gallop.

"So, as discussed, I am not allowed to wish you a Happy Birthday, is that correct?" I asked, subtly wishing her Happy Birthday in the process.

"Yes. That is correct," Bella replied, trying to mimic my tone.

"Just checking," I said. "You might have changed your mind. Most people seem to enjoy things like birthdays and gifts."

Alice's voice rang in a peal of laughter. "Of course you'll enjoy it. Everyone is supposed to be nice to you today and give you your way, Bella. What's the worst that could happen?"

I later looked back on Alice's rhetorical question with superstitious grief. Perhaps if she hadn't asked that question, the worst would not have happened.

“Getting older,” was Bella’s non-rhetorical reply and I tensed at her implication. She was not getting what she really wanted for her birthday because I was not willing to destroy her soul.

“Eighteen isn’t very old,” Alice told her, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension. “Don’t women usually wait until they’re twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?”

“It’s older than Edward,” Bella muttered unhappily.

I sighed. The impasse...again.

“Technically,” Alice said. “Just by one little year, though.” I appreciated Alice’s effort. I really did. It was unlikely to make a difference, though. “What time will you be at the house?” Alice suddenly demanded, ready to lock Bella in to an acceptance.

“I didn’t know I had plans to be there.”

“Oh, be fair, Bella!” Alice’s voice rose dangerously. “You aren’t going to ruin all our fun like that, are you?”

“I thought my birthday was about what I want.”

I broke in before things could turn ugly. “I’ll get her from Charlie’s right after school,” I told my sister.

“I have to work,” Bella countered.

“You don’t, actually,” Alice informed her. “I already spoke to Mrs. Newton about it. She’s trading your shifts. She said to tell you ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“I—I still can’t come over,” Bella said, grasping at straws. “I, well, I haven’t watched Romeo and Juliet yet for English.”

Alice dismissed that argument with a snort. “You have Romeo and Juliet memorized.”

“But Mr. Berty said we needed to see it performed to fully appreciate it—that’s how Shakespeare intended it to be presented.” I rolled my eyes. That excuse was bordering on the ridiculous.

“You’ve already seen the movie,” Alice accused.

“But not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Berty said it was the best.”

Alice was done with fooling around. Her voice became menacing. “This can be easy, or this can be hard, Bella, but one way or the other—”

“Relax, Alice,” I quickly cut in. “If Bella wants to watch a movie, then she can. It’s her birthday.”

“So there,” Bella gloated. My intervention had given her a false sense of security.

“I’ll bring her over around seven,” I went on. “That will give you more time to set up.” Bella could not escape so I had decided to ensure she wouldn’t get on Alice’s bad side. You didn’t want to get on Alice’s bad side.

My sister’s mood instantly improved and she laughed. “Sounds good. See you tonight, Bella! It’ll be fun, you’ll see.” Alice kissed Bella on the cheek—no hard feelings—and pirouetted away before Bella could think of another excuse.

“Edward, please—” Bella started before I put a finger to her lips.

“Let’s discuss it later. We’re going to be late for class.” Postpone an argument to a later time and then make sure that that time never came. It was a good strategy for prevailing.

Neither Alice nor I brought up Bella’s birthday again during school, in an attempt to keep her hackles down, but at the end of the day, Bella didn’t really have a choice. We walked to her truck together. Alice had driven my car home so that Bella couldn’t run off and hide somewhere. I was her prison escort. I opened the passenger door for her.

Bella took on a stubborn stance, ignoring the rain hitting her in the face. “It’s my birthday, don’t I get to drive?”

“I’m pretending it’s not your birthday, just as you wished.”

“If it’s not my birthday, then I don’t have to go to your house tonight...”

“All right,” I replied calmly. I walked to the other side of the truck and held open the driver’s side door. “Happy Birthday.”

“Shh,” Bella said, but I could tell we were wearing her down.

As she competed with a tortoise in a race to get home, I made a show of turning on her radio and complaining about its lousy reception.

“You want a nice stereo? Drive your own car,” Bella snapped.

I tried to keep a straight face. It was one of those situations where a child might have said, “Ooooooh, scarry,” but fortunately I wasn’t a child. Bella might hurt herself trying to slap me or something. Time for mood enhancement therapy. My specialty.

When the truck was parked safely at Charlie's curb, I scooted close to Bella, took her face gently between my hands, and prepared for the buildup of romantic tension. "You should be in a good mood, today of all days," I whispered, breathing on her face, which always seemed to intoxicate her.

"And if I don't want to be in a good mood?" Bella asked, already relinquishing some of her grumpiness as I looked into her eyes.

"Too bad," I answered, and leaned in slowly, deliberately, and pressed my lips to hers. I maintained the exquisitely gentle contact until Bella's breathing sped to a pant and she began responding with the fervor of a hormonally enhanced teenager. I smiled while I removed Bella's arms from around my neck to take back some breathing room.

"Be good, please," I chided with my lips against her cheek, and I gently kissed her again while holding her arms at bay. Bella's heart was beating manically.

"Do you think I'll ever get better at this?" Bella wondered. "That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?"

"I really hope not," I replied truthfully.

Bella rolled her eyes this time. "Let's go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?"

"Your wish, my command." We went into the house and I lay back on the couch and put my feet up while Bella located the beginning of Franco Zeffereilli's lush 1968 film *Romeo and Juliet*. I pulled Bella down to snuggle with me using an afghan to take the edge off of my chilly skin.

"You know, I've never had much patience with Romeo," I observed when the movie began.

"What's wrong with Romeo?" Bella inquired, her hackles beginning to rise. He was obviously a favorite of hers.

"Well, first of all, he's in love with this Rosaline—don't you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet's cousin. That's not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his own happiness any more thoroughly?" Oh, the irony. If I'd had the foresight to predict my own missteps, perhaps I would not have been so judgmental.

Bella was annoyed. "Do you want me to watch this alone?"

“No, I’ll mostly be watching you, anyway,” I told her, dragging my fingers along her forearms and watching goose bumps appear. “Will you cry?” I asked.

“Probably,” Bella confessed, “if I’m paying attention.”

“I won’t distract you then,” I promised, but it was one of many promises I would break on this day. I pressed my lips to Bella’s hair and inhaled her delicious scent.

As the movie played, I spoke Romeo’s lines softly into Bella’s ear, listening to her heart thump harder in her chest. When Juliet awoke at the end of the movie and found Romeo deceased in the tomb, tears popped out of Bella’s eyes. I wiped them away with a finger and a smile.

“I’ll admit, I do sort of envy him here,” I told her, using her hair to wipe away more of her tears.

“She’s very pretty.” Trust Bella to misunderstand that particular comment.

“I don’t envy him the girl—just the ease of the suicide. You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts...”

“What?” Bella interjected, surprised.

“It’s something I had to think about once, and I knew from Carlisle’s experience that it wouldn’t be simple. I’m not even sure how many ways Carlisle tried to kill himself in the beginning...after he realized what he’d become...” The memory made me a little sad. “And he’s clearly still in excellent health,” I finished lightly, trying to drive that feeling away.

Bella turned around to look me in the face. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, this is something you had to think about once?” She was growing agitated.

“Last spring, when you were...nearly killed...” This memory was *much* worse! It was every bit as painful now as it had been then, but I tried not to let it get its hooks too far into me on this celebratory day. “Of course I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. Like I said, it’s not as easy for me as it is for a human.”

Bella unconsciously touched the bite scars on her hand where James’s teeth had sunk in. “Contingency plans?” she repeated with trepidation.

“Well, I wasn’t going to live without you,” I said a little impatiently. Didn’t Bella already know that? I continued, “But I wasn’t sure how to do it—I knew Emmett and Jasper would never help...so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Volturi.”

I remembered that day with a clarity that brought back all the terror I'd experienced leaping off the airplane before the attendant had barely opened the exit hatch, and running through the airport as fast as I could, ignoring the bewildered onlookers.

"What is a Volturi?" Bella demanded, angrily.

"The Volturi are a family. A very old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Carlisle lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America—do you remember the story?"

"Of course I remember."

"Anyway," I explained, "you don't irritate the Volturi. Not unless you want to die—or whatever it is we do," I added dismissively.

I had distressed Bella with my rambling. She turned to me with a shocked look on her face and placed her hands on my cheeks, holding tightly.

"You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!" she said, looking intently into my eyes. "No matter what might ever happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!"

I took the order with a grain of salt. What I did if and when she was gone was my business. Anyway, I wouldn't let anything like that happen ever again. I wouldn't let her be hurt or killed due to my negligence.

"I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point," I promised. Where did I get the overconfidence that let me believe I had any control at all? I will never know.

"Put me in danger!" Bella burst out. "I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault? How dare you even think like that?"

"What would you do, if the situation were reversed?" I inquired.

"That's not the same thing," she responded lamely. I chuckled.

"What if something did happen to you?" Bella asked, her face going pale. "Would you want *me* to go off myself?"

Now *that* wasn't the same at all! Bella had lots of reasons to exist without me, where the reverse was patently not true. But the idea of her killing herself hurt...a lot.

"I guess I see your point...a little, but what would I do without you?" I asked bleakly.

“Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence.”

I sighed. “You make that sound so easy.”

“It should be. I’m not really that interesting.” Now she was descending into the ridiculous.

“Moot point.”

Just then I heard Charlie’s police cruiser turn the corner onto the street. I sat upright and rearranged us on the couch so that we appeared to be a little less “comfortable” and were no longer touching.

“Charlie?” Bella asked. I just smiled and she took my hand defiantly.

“Hey, kids.” Charlie walked in carrying a pizza box and looking pleased with himself. “I thought you’d like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?”

“Sure. Thanks, Dad.”

After the two of them had eaten their fill, I asked Charlie, “Do you mind if I borrow Bella for the evening?” Charlie was expecting my question. Alice had come by recently and invited Charlie to the party and he had carefully found a reason not to attend.

“That’s fine—the Mariners are playing the Sox tonight. So I won’t be any kind of company... Here,” he said, tossing Bella’s camera to her. That was an ill-considered move. I readied to grab it after Bella missed the catch, which she did.

“Nice save,” Charlie commented. I realized then that Charlie had mellowed out a lot over the summer. Recently, he had seemed more friendly to me than he had been after we returned from Phoenix—for Charlie, anyway. He was regaining his trust in me to an extent.

Charlie went on. “If they’re doing something fun at the Cullens’ tonight, Bella, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets—she’ll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.”

“Good idea, Charlie,” I agreed. Bella couldn’t take pictures if she didn’t go, now could she? I handed her the camera. Bella aimed it at me and took the first picture.

“It works,” she said. I wondered if she still entertained the silly idea that vampires didn’t appear on film. It was a common misconception, one of those myths perpetuated by the Volturi to ensure that they could prove they weren’t vampires. *Their* pictures could be taken, after all.

“That’s good. Hey, say ‘hi’ to Alice for me. She hasn’t been over in a while,” Charlie said with a frown.

“It’s been three days, Dad,” Bella pointed out, “but I’ll tell her.”

“Okay. You kids have fun tonight.” Alice obviously had gotten to Charlie. He was assisting her by pushing Bella out the door. Alice could be quite devious, really.

I drove this time, with no argument from Bella. It was hard to find our driveway in the dark, purposefully so. As we rode along, I tried to push the truck a little beyond its usual putt-putt speed and the engine and exhaust system complained loudly.

“Take it easy,” Bella cautioned.

“You know what you would love?” I asked cheerfully, raising my voice above the noise. “A nice little Audi coupe. Very quiet, lots of power...” I was trying to build her up for the possibility that I might have bought her a car against her wishes, so that whatever extravagance Alice had planned for the evening would seem much less by comparison. I *did* want to get her a decent car, though. For myself, if not for her.

“There’s nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what’s good for you, you didn’t spend any money on birthday presents.”

“Not a dime,” I said, smiling. I’d already owned plenty of blank CDs.

“Good.”

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked, playing on the good will I’d just earned.

“That depends on what it is.”

I decided to tell her the truth of the situation. I really didn’t want her to hurt anyone’s feelings after they’d made such an effort to treat her like family and celebrate her big day.

“Bella, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmett in 1935. Cut us a little slack, and don’t be too difficult tonight. They’re all very excited.”

“Fine, I’ll behave,” she agreed with little grace.

“I probably should warn you...”

“Please do.”

“When I say they’re all excited...I do mean all of them.”

“Everyone?” Bella gasped. “I thought Emmett and Rosalie were in Africa.”

“Emmett wanted to be here.”

“But... Rosalie?”

“I know, Bella. Don’t worry, she’ll be on her best behavior.” I hoped. Alice had given her the wrath of God speech and I had begged her to be nice, so I thought at the very least she would not be offensive or outright rude. I changed the subject quickly. “So, if you won’t let me get you the Audi, isn’t there anything that you’d like for your birthday?”

After a short pause, Bella whispered her answer, which I hadn’t seen coming for some reason. “You know what I want.”

Not this again! Arggggh! I remained calm, though. “Not tonight, Bella. Please.”

“Well, maybe Alice will give me what I want.”

I growled my displeasure. “This isn’t going to be your last birthday, Bella,” I promised us both.

“That’s not fair!”

I was in serious danger of losing my temper. How could any one person be so *obstinate*? This did not bode well for the rest of the evening. I was reduced to playing the heavy. I took a deep breath.

“This is a party. Try to be a good sport.”

“Sure,” Bella muttered unconvincingly. I knew it was hard for her, but it was also hard for me to understand why. And it was immensely frustrating!

I walked around the car to open her door.

“I have a question,” Bella said.

Uh oh, here it comes...

“If I develop this film, will you show up in the picture?”

Thank you, God! Bella was going to behave. I began to laugh as I helped her from the car, lifted her up the stairs to the front door, and opened it to what lay ahead.

6. Disaster

If only, if only, if only...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll try," Bella answered grudgingly.

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

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

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

“Alice, I know I told you I didn’t want anything—”

“But I didn’t listen,” Alice cut in cheerfully. “Open it.”

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

“Um, thanks,” Bella managed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BLOOD!!

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

“NO!!” I thundered.

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

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

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

Thank God for Carlisle!

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

“Come on, Jasper,” Emmett said to our brother, who kept twisting, flinging his weight around, and snapping, trying to free himself from Emmett’s grasp. Rosalie stepped up to help

and the two dragged him from the house through the sliding glass door that Esme held open for them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Here Carlisle.”

“Too much glass in the wound.”

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

“Here, please.”

“I’ll get your bag.”

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

“How are you doing, Bella?” Carlisle asked.

“I’m fine.”

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

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

“Just go, Edward,” Bella finally said.

“I can handle it.”

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

“I’ll stay.”

“Why are you so masochistic?”

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

“Yes,” Bella agreed. “Go find Jasper.”

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

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

Jasper had returned to his senses. I could hear the thoughts of Emmett and Rosalie in the woods in the direction he'd fled. I took off after him, running at top speed through the ferns and vine maples. I caught up to him several miles away, where he stood perched in the highest branches of a cedar tree. I scurried up after him. He stood on one branch with his left arm wrapped around another, looking toward the horizon. I climbed up next to him and crouched with my back against the trunk.

"I'm sorry, Edward."

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

"Jasper? Edward?" Alice called.

"Up here," I answered softly.

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

"There's nothing to be done."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes. She'll heal."

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

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

"Of course not!" Alice exclaimed. "She's going to be fine."

"I'm going hunting," Jasper said. "You two go look after Bella."

"You sure?" Alice asked.

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

"I'm sorry, Edward. He's furious with himself."

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

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

He's in a bad way.

Serves him right for bringing her to our house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Goodnight, Bella," Carlisle offered quietly.

"Take care, dear," Esme added.

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

"Say something."

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

"Tell me you forgive me."

What? "Forgive you? For what?"

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

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

“It’s still my fault.”

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

“Your fault? If you’d cut yourself at Mike Newton’s house, with Jessica there and Angela and your other normal friends, the worst that could possibly have happened would be what? Maybe they couldn’t find you a bandage? If you’d tripped and knocked over a pile of glass plates on your own—without someone throwing you into them—even then, what’s the worst? You’d get blood on the seats when they drove you to the emergency room? Mike Newton could have held your hand while they stitched you up—and he wouldn’t be fighting the urge to kill you the whole time he was there. Don’t try to take any of this on yourself, Bella. It will only make me more disgusted with myself.”

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

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

“I’d rather die than be with Mike Newton. I’d rather die than be with anyone but you.”

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

“Well then, don’t you be ridiculous.”

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

“Will you stay tonight?”

“I should go home.”

“For my birthday.”

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

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

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

"You don't have to take those."

"I want them."

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

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

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

"Thanks." She smiled at me.

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

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

"Hi," I said, my voice flat.

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

"Where did the enthusiasm come from?"

"You made me curious."

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

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

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

“We’re going to Jacksonville?”

“That's the idea.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How does your arm feel?"

"Just fine." I don't know why I bothered asking her this type of question anymore.

"I'll get you some Tylenol."

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

"Charlie," she whispered nervously.

"He won't catch me," I assured her.

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

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

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

"Thanks again," she murmured.

"You're welcome," I replied softly.

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

"What are you thinking about?" Bella whispered.

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

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

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

“Yes.” She wanted something.

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

“You're greedy tonight.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Try to sleep, Bella.”

“No, I want you to kiss me again.”

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

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

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

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

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

7. The End

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

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

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

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

Wednesday, September 14

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

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

Alice was waiting for me on the front porch.

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

"No Alice. That will just make it harder for her. We need to leave, to disappear immediately, and without a trace. It will allow her to start healing faster than if we drag things out. A clean break. We owe it to her." I couldn't say anything more. I felt like a sword was being shoved into my chest and each word thrust it in a little farther. I went inside.

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

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

I nodded. I could not speak.

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

"Is that right?"

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

"I think it's cruel! I want to tell her I'm leaving!"

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

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

"What is your plan, Edward?" Carlisle asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She knows, son.”

I turned away and raced to my room on the third floor, trying not to look at my surroundings because everything reminded me of Bella. She had been *here*, sat on *this* couch, drank water from *that* tap, rolled her eyes at *that* Picasso, stumbled on *this* stair. I couldn’t be here. I dressed as quickly as I could and ran out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She's with Jasper."

"Is he okay?"

"He's gone away for a while."

"What? Where?"

I shrugged. "Nowhere in particular."

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

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

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

"Is your arm bothering you?" I asked, knowing that her arm wasn't the problem.

"Who cares about my stupid arm?" Bella grumped, laying her head on the table. I didn't answer. It was the only pain I had caused her that I could afford to be attentive to at that

moment. Anything deeper and all this gut-wrenching effort would be wasted. I didn't speak, though I tried to maintain a neutral expression. If I supposedly did not love her anymore, then there had to be some sign of it before I told her it was over. Silence was the safest strategy, because I didn't trust my voice or my words.

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

"Later?" I asked, not sure what she meant.

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

"Oh." Keep it neutral. No emotion.

"So you'll come over when I'm home, though, right?"

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

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

"All right, then."

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

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

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

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

Hello, son, how are you holding up?

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's not your fault.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It depends on the century, but the most common treatments were bedrest and maybe a little whiskey or laudanum if you were wealthy, or a straitjacket and ice–cold baths if you were not. And electroshock, of course. Earlier, you might have been chained to a wall in a damp basement. Later, you could have been given a prefrontal lobotomy. Now, of course, we resort to psychoactive drugs.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do you want company?

“No, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

Will we see you in the morning?

“Yes.”

Running didn’t change anything, neither my feelings of sadness nor of impending disaster. I had to become increasingly remote with Bella so the end would seem slightly realistic

when it came. It would be so much easier just to disappear as I had asked my family to do, but that wouldn't work with Bella. If I wasn't absolutely clear that I no longer loved her, that I didn't want her anymore, she would hang on. Even my absence could ruin her life. If I made her believe that I was ending it for myself, that would release her from the torment of protracted longing. Perhaps she would hate me and that strong feeling would propel her into getting on with her life and ultimately finding a human to love.

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

Charlie was sprawled on the couch watching SportsCenter, a half-eaten pizza on the coffee table. "I'm done, but help yourself," he said, not watching as I reached for the box, then took it into the kitchen to abandon it. I came back and sat in the armchair.

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

"Okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the second TV show ended at nine o'clock, I stood and announced, "I'd better get home." I couldn't take any more tension and I had stayed just long enough not to require an excuse for leaving earlier than usual. I walked to the front door and sensed that Bella was following me. Without turning around, I continued to my car and reached for the door handle.

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

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

I ran that night, nearly all night. I ran north until I reached the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the fifteen miles of waterway that separated Washington State from Canada. I thought about swimming across, but no matter how far north I ran, I would still have to come back and face the end of the only part of my existence that had made sense, that had made being alive seem

worthwhile. I would never recover from what I had to do—I knew that—but I hoped Bella would and that was all that really mattered in the end.

Thursday, September 15

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

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

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

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

My mother was on the telephone in her office when I got home. It sounded like she was discussing real estate. Probably she was arranging somewhere to live in Ithaca. Or maybe Emmett and Rosalie were looking at options. I tried not to listen. I couldn't think about that or anything else except how to get through the next twenty-four hours.

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

"Where's Carlisle?" I asked.

"He's at the hospital, taking one last shift before he turns over his patients to Dr. Gerandy and Dr. Snow. They were caught very much off-guard, as usual in this situation. He's told them that we're moving to Los Angeles and he'd like them to avoid sharing the news until

after we leave. We don't want any kind of fanfare that might get back to..." Her voice faded away before she ended the sentence. "I'm sorry, Edward."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The third stage is bargaining. Looking back, I realized that I had been bargaining for quite a while. *If* I protected Bella from danger, *then* maybe I could keep her for another fifty or

sixty years. The bargains I was proposing were proven hollow when my own brother tried to kill her. I could not promise something I could not guarantee and Fate was not bound by my wishes anyway.

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

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

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

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

Friday, September 16

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

When I left for school, our house looked like the fortress it is. The steel shutters had been lowered to protect the glass windows and the inside of the house was much darker than

usual. I didn't bother to turn on the lights. Perhaps the electricity was already shut off, along with the water, the cable, and the natural gas heat. I didn't need any of it anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course not."

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

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

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

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

“Okay.” Bella didn’t smile back. Maybe she suspected what was coming.

After returning to my car, I tucked the envelope in the glove box and aimed toward Bella’s house. When I arrived, I pulled into the driveway, a clear signal that I would be moving the car before Charlie got home in a couple of hours. I wouldn’t stay for the evening. When she pulled up, I met her at her truck and took her book bag from her, but instead of carrying it into the house I put it back on the seat.

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

“Okay, let’s talk,” Bella began.

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

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

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

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

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

“I mean my family and myself.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m no good for you, Bella.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bella was angry now.

“No! This is about my soul, isn’t it?” Bella shouted. “Carlisle told me about that, and I don’t care, Edward. I don’t care! You can have my soul. I don’t want it without you—it’s yours already!”

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

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

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

“You...don’t...want me?” The shock was clear in her flat tone.

“No,” I replied, though she had mistranslated my words.

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

“Well, that changes things,” Bella finally said.

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

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

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

“Don’t.” Her voice had dropped to a searing whisper that burned in my ears. “Don’t do this.”

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

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

“If...that’s what you want.”

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

“I would like to ask one favor, though, if that’s not too much.”

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

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

She nodded dumbly.

"I'm thinking of Charlie, of course," I lied. "He needs you. Take care of yourself—for him."

She nodded again. "I will."

I breathed a little easier.

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

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

"And your memories?" Bella asked poignantly.

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

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

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

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

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

"Goodbye, Bella," I said as gently as I could.

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

"Take care of yourself," I whispered. And I was gone.

8. Away

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

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

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

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

Now very much concerned about her welfare, I considered what I could do to make sure she didn't injure herself and end up deep in the woods with a twisted ankle or worse. Silently, I jumped to the ground and took off running for Charlie's house. Someone had to be told where she had gone in case she got lost or hurt. Within a minute, I had exited the woods, reached her

house, and entered through her bedroom window, an experience painful beyond words. I located paper and a pencil and wrote a quick note to her father:

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

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

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

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

Leave no trace.

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

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

I tucked the three photos containing my image in my jacket pocket and shut the scrapbook, placing it precisely where it had been. On the nightstand, I saw the rectangular box containing the plane tickets my parents had given Bella for her birthday and I took those too.

What else? The stereo wasn't a personalized gift and it held no reminder of its origins, so I didn't consider removing it from Bella's truck. She might enjoy it, anyway.

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

As I opened the window sash, another stab of pain tore through my chest and I gasped. This departure was so final, but I still felt deeply connected to Bella and I knew I would for the remainder of my days. Without letting myself consider the implications or possible consequences of my actions, I opened the top drawer of Bella's desk and found a letter opener that resembled a dull knife. Clutching it in my hand, I examined the hardwood slats of her floor to detect whether any of them were loose. Remembering a squeaky spot near the closet, I went to inspect it. A nail had worked itself loose in a board there and when I pushed it, the board moved slightly with a creak. I slid the blade of the letter opener between the end of the loose board and its neighbor, easing it upward. Soon, I could get my finger beneath it and I gently lifted out the board, pulling the nails that attached it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the museum’s Hall of Murals, there is a painting of an unknown surgeon performing a Civil War battlefield amputation. If you look closely, you can see that he has Carlisle’s face. The murals were painted in the 1950s, but were based on old daguerreotypes whenever they could be found. Carlisle eventually donated the daguerreotype to the museum too, but only after modern technology allowed him to scan a copy of that antique photograph of himself performing the surgery. The enlarged copy is framed and hanging in his office in one of our houses.

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

“Alice.”

“Edward, where are you?”

“Chicago. You?”

“We’re in Denali. Tanya says ‘hi’.”

“Great. What do you want, Alice?”

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

“Did you see something?” I asked anxiously.

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

“But she’s okay?”

“Well, yes...”

“What, Alice? What is it?”

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

“Why are you telling me this now?”

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

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

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

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

“We don’t *know* that.”

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

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

“Bella promised.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Carlisle.”

“Edward, where are you?”

“Erie.”

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

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“More or less.”

“You talked to Alice?”

“Yes...” I hesitated.

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

“She’s not in danger, is she?”

“No, Alice doesn’t see that.”

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

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

“It would.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you.”

“Which way are you coming in from?”

“Highway 13.”

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

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome.”

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

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

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

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

9. There

It was twilight when I pulled into the Citgo station. Carlisle flashed his lights once and I followed him back onto the road so that neither of us would have to get out of our cars. I could use a refill on gas, but it wasn't critical yet. Carlisle led me in his Mercedes to a wooded area northeast of the city called Cayuga Heights. I followed him down an isolated private road at the end of which was a large Tudor-style home with extensive gardens backing onto a small forest. He pulled up to a three-car garage and one of the doors opened automatically. It hadn't taken the family long to get settled, it appeared.

I drove up behind him and another garage door rose, obviously for me. I pulled in and parked before getting out and looking around. This was a truly cavernous garage with room to park six cars, two in tandem for each of the three garage doors.

Esme came darting out of the house through a door off to the side, which I guessed led to the kitchen. Carlisle joined us there.

"Edward! We're so glad you're here!" my mother cried.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Come in and see our new temporary housing."

"It looks huge!"

"Yes, a doctor at the local medical center is on an overseas sabbatical, so it was offered to Emmett and Rosalie for our family after the hospital administration saw Carlisle's CV. He's got an interview tomorrow, but they badly need a surgeon, especially one willing to work night shift. Of course, if we like it here, we'll find our own home. What do you think?"

It was obvious that Esme was excited about the house, so I tried to sound enthused.

"It looks very nice. Do I get my own room?"

"Yes, of course! Your choice, if you like. How was your trip?"

"Probably very much like yours, but less enjoyable. I almost stopped in Chicago, but I got distracted by Alice and I didn't."

"Did you go by your house?" Carlisle asked.

"I got very close."

“You look like you could use a hunting trip,” he noted.

“Probably so. It’s hard to concentrate on anything, even being thirsty.”

“Shall we go then? Esme?”

“I’ll stay behind. I want to study the real estate listings.”

“Okay, then. Edward?”

“Sure. I might as well see the options. Where are Emmett and Rosalie?”

“Hunting also. I waited for you.”

New York State is a hospitable place for vegetarian vampires, as we discovered when we lived in Rochester in the early 1930s. The eastern part of the state boasts 3.5 million acres of federally protected forests in the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains, as well as half a dozen smaller state forests within running distance of Ithaca. Farther south are the forested Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania, and several large forests still exist in Vermont and New Hampshire. All of them are classified as “broadleaf deciduous,” which are quite different than the coniferous forests of the Olympic Peninsula. Here, the deciduous trees lose their leaves in the fall, so the forests are rather bare even as early as September, which makes us much more visible as we race through the trees.

New York is also much more populous than the Olympic Peninsula, with hunters and trappers scattered all over during hunting season. We had to remain alert not to come into contact with them and accidentally get shot or be discovered feeding. The primary large game in New York, both for human hunters and us, is white-tailed deer and black bear. Back in the 1930s, one could also find the occasional caribou and moose, but they are long gone now. Sometimes, I wonder whether vegetarian vampires might eventually become extinct, as humans gradually take over more and more of the planet and destroy animal habitat. Maybe we would be reduced to drinking rats one day. Or armadillos. It is said that armadillos and rats will survive even a nuclear holocaust.

On this occasion, we ran to Hammond Hill State Forest about ten miles away, and since it was dark, we didn’t worry about hunters or hikers, but we kept our noses alert for campers, which fortunately we did not encounter. We also did not find any bear, but we scared up a family of white-tailed deer, which still seem rather abundant.

After Carlisle and I had both fed, we began to talk.

“Bella is not in danger, Edward.”

“You checked?”

“Yes, I called the hospital under the auspices of checking on some records I might have misfiled. It seems that Bella got lost in the woods the night you left, but some local boys found her and took her home. Dr. Gerandy checked her over for injuries and exposure and says she was suffering only from exhaustion.”

I assumed that Carlisle was putting a positive slant on the news, because I heard the word *melancholia* in his mind, but he did not elaborate. Bella must be suffering some depression since I left. I was sorry for that—terribly sorry, and guilty too—but it was to be expected. She just needed some time to recover.

“She’ll be fine, right?”

“Dr. Gerandy sees no reason why she shouldn’t be. She had a shock, but she’s strong.”

The word *breakdown* also slipped through, but I didn’t stop to analyze what that might mean. I just nodded and said “thank you.” I didn’t want to know any more details, afraid that I would find reasons why I must return to Forks immediately. It was imperative that I not do that. Bella deserved a life.

When we got back to the house, Emmett and Rosalie had returned.

“Hey, brother!” Emmett greeted me jovially. I couldn’t summon much enthusiasm, though I was glad to see him.

“Em, Rosalie.”

“It’s great here, Edward! There are forests everywhere and lots of black bears. I got one today, in fact!” Emmett enthused.

I think I merely grunted in reply. It was not possible for me to share anyone’s joy at the moment.

“Edward, do you want to go to the Cayuga Medical Center with me tomorrow for my interview? You could look around, see what you think. You too, Rosalie, if you’d like. I hear it’s quite advanced for a semi-rural area.”

“I’d rather go look around Cornell. Do they have a medical library?” Rosalie asked. Rose has a graduate degree in medicine, as do I. Over the decades, she has taken on the job of helping Carlisle stay up-to-date with medical research, something he has to work at constantly.

I didn't bother to reply. I couldn't imagine feeling any more enthusiastic about looking around town tomorrow than I did today. Carlisle was just trying to engage me in something, which was kind of him.

"Esme, which room is mine?" I asked my mother.

"Come with me. I'll show you the rooms you can pick from," she replied, holding out her hand. I wanted to go somewhere and shut the door and try to block the thoughts all around me.

He looks bad. Why doesn't he pull himself together? She's just a human! (Rosalie)

Poor Edward. He finally finds someone to love and... (Esme)

Did we do the right thing coming here? Perhaps I should have intervened in his decision. His sense of right and wrong puts him in such a bind... (Carlisle)

I wish Alice was here. She could cheer him up. (Emmett)

I wanted to put on a less grim face for my family and pretend that I was okay, but I simply didn't have the energy to try. I took my mother's hand and let her lead me around the large, complicated house and show me the three bedrooms that weren't in use. I chose the smallest room on the third floor—servants' quarters, probably—because it was the farthest away from all the others.

What would Bella think of this area? I wondered. She probably wouldn't like it in the winter. The temperature regularly dropped to twenty degrees Fahrenheit and below, and winters were long. That was fine for us...we didn't feel the cold and the longer the nights, the more hours we had to move about freely.

I retrieved my duffle bag from my car, along with the pictures I'd stashed in the glove box, and returned to my new bedroom to unpack. The room was minimally furnished with a bed, a desk, and a dresser, but it had an attractive gabled window set into a box-like space under the eaves. I walked over to it and looked out. It faced the back of the house and the forest beyond, whose trees already had lost most of their leaves. The bare trees seemed a little sad to me, but their starkness mirrored my mood. The leaves on the oak trees had turned brown and wrinkled—dead—but they still clung to their branches, as they would continue to do all winter.

Like me, I suppose.

I began to count them, each crumpled brown pendant on every branch, starting at the bottom and working my way up. When I finished the first tree, I started on the one adjacent to it. The oaks were the hardest. Most of the other trees had few leaves left.

“Edward,” my father’s voice broke into my reverie. When I turned around, I saw the look of concern on his face.

“Carlisle?”

“Do you want to go to the hospital with me?”

It was still dark outside the window. I was confused for a moment.

“I thought that was tomorrow,” I replied.

He looked at me oddly.

“Son...” He paused before continuing. “It *is* tomorrow.”

“Oh!”

It had been twenty–four hours. It was dark *again*, not *still*! That was mildly alarming.

“I’m running late, actually.”

“You’d better go on then. Good luck with the interview,” I said, trying to sound cheerful. The words came out tight and forced instead.

“Thank you,” Carlisle replied aloud. His thoughts continued silently. *I’ll ask Esme to check on him while I’m gone. Maybe leaving him alone isn’t the best policy after all.*

I turned back to the window and continued counting the leaves that still clung to the bare branches. I heard the garage door open and close and Carlisle’s car pull away. Some time passed and then my mother knocked softly on the door and stuck her head in.

“Edward?” she asked softly.

“Yes?” I answered without turning around.

“Won’t you come downstairs with us? I would love it if you would try out the piano in the living room. It’s a beautiful Yamaha.”

“Yes, okay. Down in a minute.”

I continued my counting. Something about the number of leaves still hanging on seemed vitally important to me. I didn't want to lose my place. Later, I heard Carlisle return. He spoke with Esme in a hushed voice.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Well. They'd like me to start immediately as the nighttime attending physician, including emergency service, working with interns and residents."

"So you'll be teaching then?" She sounded pleased.

"Yes. Cornell has an affiliated medical college in New York and those students often come back here, as well as others. I can keep my hand in."

I heard all this and my mind registered it, but in a detached manner, as if it were coming from a television program I never watched. If someone were to ask me later whether Carlisle got the job, I might have to think about it for a second before being certain.

Then in lower, barely audible voices...

"How is he?"

"No change. Shouldn't we do something?"

"Perhaps."

"I'll get him."

Immediately, I heard Emmett's heavy footsteps moving through the house, up a flight of stairs, around a landing, up another flight of stairs, down the hallway, stopping at my doorway.

"Hey, Edward! Let's go throw some tree javelin. Or boulder shot put. Your choice! You need to get out of the house, bro! Come on, best out of seven. Hundred bucks?"

I didn't turn around. I didn't have any energy for sports.

"Not right now, Em. Maybe later."

"Ah, come on! I'm bored! Let's go out in the woods. We could have a fox hunt with us as the hounds. Owoooooh!" Emmett howled like a hound dog and then howled with laughter.

I ignored him.

"We can just goof off if you want. Just do *something!*"

He said more things. He might have yelled at me, but I'd tuned him out. Eventually, it grew quiet again. I'd finished with the leaves and decided to inventory the trees in the big back yard...ten pines, three oaks, three flowering cherry, five dogwood, three crabapple, five holly, four unknown. It was really quite challenging to identify deciduous trees in the winter, in the dark, from a distance, through dirty window glass. I wasn't sure I had classified them all correctly. I was starting on the shrubs and hedge plants when I heard more footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Edward!" It was Rosalie and her voice was harsh. "Stop being a jerk and come talk to us. You are upsetting everybody acting like this. Why don't you think about somebody besides yourself once in a while?"

"Okay. Down in a minute," I replied. My voice sounded hollow and remote. All I wanted was for the gnats buzzing in my ears to go away. I needed peace. That's all.

It was easier to count things when the sun was up. Ants were good. There were lots of them and they usually traveled in single file. It got tricky when they went into a hole and came back out because they look remarkably alike.

Sometimes small animals or birds exited the forest and ventured into the cultivated part of the yard, which was at least an acre. They didn't seem afraid of the noise that we made, but they drew a certain line between the forest and the house beyond which they would not venture. I assumed that was where they started to smell us. As far as I know, nobody has done any studies of what it is about us that alerts animals to our danger. I've always assumed that it was something about our smell, but how do they know to equate that scent to danger? It was instinctive, that was clear.

What? Who? Oh.

"Carlisle?"

"Son, what are you up to?"

"Oh, the usual."

"Your mother and I are concerned about you."

"You are?"

"Yes. Do you realize you've been standing by that window for four days?"

"It's dark out."

“Yes, it has been dark out three separate times since you came up here to watch. What are you watching?”

“Life, you know, trees, ants, shrubs. I’ll make a list for Esme.”

“Okay. She’ll appreciate that.” *Why...I’m not sure exactly.*

He didn’t say that last part aloud. I noticed the thought, but didn’t process or quite understand it.

“Edward, can you turn around and look at me?”

“I don’t want to lose my count.”

“Okay, can you finish your current count and then turn around?”

I realized that I could. Black beetles were more of a challenge than ants in the dark. They required a lot of time. I liked that. I would count just to that rock and hope that none of them crossed the imaginary line beside it while I wasn’t looking. When I was sure there were no beetles within five inches of the line on either side, I whipped around.

“What?” It sounded a little more abrupt or aggressive than I had intended.

Carlisle did not respond in kind, but remained calm, soft-spoken, and gentle. Something was wrong with that, I thought, but I wasn’t sure what it was. There was something wrong with his face too, maybe. I couldn’t be certain.

“Edward, son. Where are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You aren’t here with me.”

That was confusing. Of course I was.

“You are suffering.”

Was I? The way he said it made it sound true. *Was it true?* I could feel someone or something inside me preparing to fight.

“No...”

Carlisle stepped toward me slowly. He is two inches taller than me and I found my eyes looking up at his eyes, he was standing so close. I noted in my mind that his arms were moving upward, one at the level of my shoulders and one at the level of my waist. I should know what

this means. He was moving very slowly for a vampire, in slow motion. I wasn't afraid, but I thought maybe I should do something. I just didn't know what it was.

Then I felt my body being squeezed tightly, my chest compressed slightly with my arms hanging loosely by my sides. I suppose it almost hurt in a way, the hug was so tight, but in another way, I suddenly felt safe, though I didn't know I had felt unsafe before. I knew intuitively that if I went completely limp, I would not fall down. If I breathed in a regular rhythm, exhaling even, neither myself nor my world would collapse. Nor would it explode and destroy everyone and everything around me. Safe.

Suddenly, a tidal wave of emotion hit me so hard I should have been knocked down. It took my breath away completely. I felt the sword in my chest finally pierce my body, the point jamming through and sticking into the wall behind me. I was stuck there like a butterfly on a pin.

The pain was tremendous, cataclysmic, beyond what any creature should feel and survive. And yet, I was still here, the powerful trusses of Carlisle's arms holding the pieces of me together. Someone nearby was screaming, the sound rising by degrees, a penetrating wail that filled all the space in my head and in the room too. I wished it would stop—it hurt my ears. My body began to shake uncontrollably, as if lightning were striking from the sky and grounding through me. I was convulsing, maybe. Do vampires convulse?

My eyes burned. Somebody stop the screaming! I opened my mouth to tell Carlisle, but it was already open and so I shut it. The screaming stopped. It had been me the whole time.

I don't know how long I stood there with Carlisle's arms encasing me like armor. It could have been a long time. Eventually, though, I became aware that I was still and quiet and that the sword pinning me to the wall was gone. In its place was the empty well, deep, cavernous, and hollow. It felt like a place I could easily fall into and never be heard from again.

"What's happening to me?" I rasped when I could accumulate enough air to speak.

You are in a great deal of pain, son.

"Yes," I acknowledged quietly.

Does your body hurt anywhere? he asked, loosening his arms from around me. He moved back a step and grasped my upper arms with his hands.

"My chest was hurting terribly, but it's...changing." I didn't know how to describe it exactly. I wasn't sure that "hollow" was better than piercing pain.

"Am I going crazy?"

Some doctors believe that most of what is called “crazy” is an indirect expression of pain...of being hurt. Strong emotions tend to make themselves known in one way or another. Even in our kind.

“I think I have to leave, Carlisle.”

Leave?

“I don’t think I can stay here with everyone.”

What do you want to do?

“Run.”

Carlisle took my response literally. He opened the window I had been staring out of, took my hand, and pulled me through after him.

A week passed. And then two. I never got back to counting black beetles. After the incident with Carlisle, I couldn’t remember why it had been important. He made me realize that I couldn’t just stay in my room and look out the window, though. It worried Esme.

I tried harder to cope. I came out of my room and went outside. I trimmed trees, cut hedges, raked leaves, and mowed the grass. I didn’t count the leaves that I threw onto the compost pile.

Through the Ithaca Historical Preservation Society, Esme had located a rare, old, Federal-style mansion that had been left to crumble in the forest after the family who built it had died out. It had needed too much work and too much money for the society to take it on, so Esme decided to buy the house and rebuild it. It was more than a renovation. She wanted to do everything with historical accuracy, which made her very popular with the Historical Society. She insisted on maintaining a low profile, however, and politely declined the invitation to be the featured guest at an upcoming dinner.

“Let’s see what I can do with it first,” she had told the eager members, many of whom had close connections to Cornell University. Once those folks found out about Carlisle, word spread, and he was asked to teach evening courses for pre-med students at the University. The

administration would give him as many courses as he could handle, so we began seeing less of him at home.

I dutifully accompanied my mother on trips to “The Ruins,” as I dubbed her new project, and I helped my father move into his office at the medical center. I hunted with Rosalie and Emmett and even threw “tree javelin” with my brother. He beat me in both the javelin and the shot–put contests because the two sports rely on sheer power and momentum. My speed and mind reading ability couldn’t help me. When I got bored (quickly), he set up a course for running hurdles, at which I beat him handily.

None of these activities was fun for me, or even slightly diverting. The hollow well in my chest seemed to suck away all my *joie de vivre*. Everything I did was mechanical; every conversation a struggle; every movement an effort. For my family, I forced myself to behave as normally as I could manage, though.

I took to running and swimming a lot—the only activities that eased my distress at all. Often, I ran down to Cayuga Lake and swam long distances up and down it. After I got farther out than four or five miles, I rarely saw anyone. When boats came near me, I dove under. No human in his right mind would be swimming in a northern lake in the fall, alone, miles from shore with no boat. I liked the isolation of it and declined Emmett and Rosalie’s offers of their company. Thoughts around me dimmed a lot when I was under water.

After several weeks of concerted effort on my part, my family seemed to relax a little where I was concerned. I still heard their thoughts about me, though.

Finally! He’s getting over this stupid breakup! (Rosalie)

He seems much better. I don’t dare ask him any questions, though. I don’t want to set him off. (Esme)

It’s great here! I wish Jasper and Alice would join us. (Emmett)

He’s acting like he’s better, but I don’t think he is, much. I should have challenged his decision. Can he recover? An image of the Italian vampire, Marcus Volturi, depressed for centuries, passed through Carlisle’s mind.

My thoughts were never far from Bella. I often found myself talking to her in my head. What would she think of this? Of that? What was she doing? Had she forgotten me? Time and time again, I wrestled against the urge to return to Forks to see how she was faring. How the desire consumed me! I wanted her to be happy, of course, but if she’d found someone else...well...perhaps it was better I didn’t know. And I had promised her. She deserved to live her life without my interference.

I avoided closing my eyes, though, for each time I did, her face appeared behind my eyelids like a three-dimensional tattoo, reproaching me, the pain in her chocolate eyes as palpable as the day I left her. *Agony!*

As time passed...so very slowly...it began to be clear that I could not exist forever in such misery. As long as Bella was somewhere in the world, hope for her happiness was enough to keep me there too, but when she was gone, I would have no incentive to continue. I shared this truth with no one, though sometimes I considered how I would end myself when the time came. I hadn't come up with any ideas except what I'd already considered—the Volturi. I had some time to think more about it and make a decision.

Then I got a phone call that changed everything.

10. Tracking

The cell phone on the desk in my garret room began vibrating and dancing across the glass surface. I liked to watch it move around and buzz. It gave me the sense that the caller was inside the phone waiting to be let out. I marveled at the technology that allowed someone four thousand miles away—Alice, I saw—direct something in my room to dance. Remarkable.

I picked up the phone and flipped it open.

“Alice.”

“Hi, Edward.”

“You have news?”

“Yes, interesting news that I think you’ll want to know.”

“Try me.”

“Remember Laurent?”

“Of course.” *Stupid question.*

“Remember when he said he was coming to Denali?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s here. Actually, he’s been here the whole time. Irina’s sweet on him, I think. Anyway, guess who called him.”

“Why don’t you just tell me, Alice?”

“Victoria.”

“Victoria. The female from James’s coven?”

“Yes, his mate. Laurent didn’t know I was listening. Well, anyway, when we first got here, Laurent asked Jasper where he got his accent and Jasper told him Texas, of course, and they started talking and Laurent asked him how he got all his scars and Jasper told him about the Southern Wars. Laurent’s French...he didn’t know much about it. So that was a while ago, right? Well, Laurent must have been in touch with Victoria...gosh, I wonder why? Maybe he’s two-timing Irina. Do you think I should tell her? Hmm...”

“The story, Alice. Get back to the story.”

“Oh, right. Well, anyway, so in this phone call—which was this morning, actually—I overheard him talking to somebody...a female...and he said, ‘You are? Why?’ and then she said something and he said, ‘Because of that? Really?’ and then she said something and then he said something and then he said, ‘Texas, huh? What’s it like?’ and then she said something and blah, blah, blah...but you know what?”

“What?”

“I think Victoria is in Texas.”

“Yeah, so?”

Alice just waited until the light bulb came on in my head. *Oh... OH!!!*

“That’s very interesting information, Alice,” I finally replied.

“I thought you might like to know.”

“You were right. Thank you.” I hung up the phone to give the seed Alice had planted a chance to sprout.

That vicious, redheaded bi...! If it hadn’t been for her, James never would have found Bella in Phoenix! She was just as responsible for hurting Bella as he was. If she hadn’t disappeared after we killed that S–O–B James, and Bella hadn’t been stuck in the hospital for so long, and if the summer hadn’t been so wonderfully distracting.... I sighed heavily at the memory of a life lost to me now.

Victoria should be dead too. She doesn’t deserve to take up space on the planet after what she did! Why didn’t I think of this before? She *needed* killing! And that was my job, my privilege. It would actually be my *pleasure*! Maybe this was something I could rally some enthusiasm for—finding Victoria. Not only would I get to *KILL SOMEONE*, which might be cathartic all by itself, but I could pay back both James and Victoria for what they had done. And they had hounded Bella for no more reason than a springtime lark! James had tried the same thing with Alice eighty years before and he almost succeeded with Bella. Who knows how many others they had tormented in their time together? Victoria had to go!

Suddenly, I wished Jasper were here. Undoubtedly, he could provide useful information about the big state of Texas, “big” being the operative word. Only Alaska would have been a more difficult location as far as the United States was concerned. How to find a vampire in—I opened my laptop and pressed a few keys—268,820 square miles?

We didn't have anyone in our family who was a particularly gifted tracker. Jasper was probably as good as anyone. But I should be able to do it—I was a vampire, wasn't I? I wanted to do this job alone, anyway. It was my responsibility as Bella's—

No. I wasn't Bella's anything. I mustn't let myself think that way any longer. However, the task might give me some direction. I badly needed a project and this one appealed to me.

I know of two individuals of Carlisle's acquaintance who are gifted trackers. One is an old misanthropic Englishman, as I recall...Alistair. Yes. I don't know where or how Carlisle met him, but he told me once that Alistair has an amazing ability to find others. He thinks about whom he wants to find and then he feels pulled in a particular direction. When he follows that pull, he eventually comes face-to-face with his target. Carlisle says it's ironic, because Alistair doesn't like being around anyone. I suppose he could use his gift to avoid others too, though, by doing the opposite of what his instincts tell him.

The other tracker Carlisle knows is a famous member of the Volturi guard named Demetri. He's a regular bloodhound. Nobody can escape his nose, or his intuition, or whatever makes his talent work. I'd have to ask Carlisle how it does work, just out of curiosity. I couldn't exactly borrow Demetri from the Volturi for the price of a week's rental. Well, probably not. And apparently, Alistair is notoriously difficult and self-serving, someone who wouldn't blow his nose to help out somebody else. Of course, my father would never say such a thing, but sometimes you can piece together what he really thinks by what he *doesn't* say.

Oh, and not to forget the dead—and-gone James. He had an extremely well-developed skill based on what I gleaned from his thoughts when we first met him. He'd been playing tracking games his entire vampire life. I couldn't tell how his talent worked, but he was extremely cunning. He had sent Victoria to Forks High School to dig up information about Bella. When Victoria found Renee's address, he immediately flew to Phoenix, almost as if he knew Bella would hide there. He may have had some precognition. Thankfully, that didn't matter now, because he was as dead as a doornail. He was a pile of ashes in a burned-out studio that had been torn down, loaded up, and hauled away to the city dump. A fitting place. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted Victoria to join him.

I was anxious to get going suddenly. I had no obligations in New York except what I owed my family, but I didn't think they would miss my barely there, barely functioning self. Esme was the only one likely to make a fuss when I told her I was leaving. She hated having her family split up. After only a month, she was fretting about how long Alice and Jasper had been away.

Then it hit me. Maybe Alice was staying away *specifically* because I was around. Though she disagreed with my decision to let go of Bella, she had left Forks abruptly and with nary an

argument after she saw something that she quickly covered up with word games in her head. Then she argued with me about Bella over the telephone. I could see now that she didn't want to be near me because she was trying to hide something. The notion that Jasper needed to "get away" was just an excuse. I knew Alice wasn't angry with me, or holding a grudge, or anything of that nature, so it had to be a vision that she didn't want me to see.

I could accept that. If she didn't want me to see it, it might be something she was protecting me from as easily as something sly or underhanded. I decided to assume that her motives were good and not press her about it. I didn't really want to know anyway. I was having enough trouble keeping my head above water as it was. But if I left New York, then Alice and Jasper could come home, Emmett would have a better brother for a playmate, and I could take a much-needed break from Rosalie. She was getting on my last nerve.

Sometimes I secretly cursed "ol' what's his face"—Rosalie's dead ex-fiancé—for hurting her so badly, which led Carlisle to smell her bleeding in the street, which led him to change her, which led her to join our family. Then I would feel guilty for my lack of compassion and remember that Rosalie had brought us Emmett, and that Emmett was a godsend. One must take the good with the "less good," I suppose.

I needed to do some research on the Lone Star State. Maybe I could ask Alice to pump Laurent for more information also. Any details could help. A city, a region, a purpose for her trip...any one of those could lead me to her. All of a sudden, I couldn't *wait* to hear the screeching sound when I tore off her head with my teeth. Then I'd "Flic-a-Bic" and it would be lights out for the nasty redhead.

I picked up my cell phone and speed-dialed Alice. It was the first action I had done with any gusto since, well...since *that* day.

"Hi Alice."

"I knew you'd call back."

"You were right, as usual."

"I *will*, Edward, but I haven't had a chance to do it yet. I have to make it seem natural, like I'm not really interested, like maybe I'm just making conversation. You know." I hadn't needed to ask the question for Alice to answer it. She already knew what I wanted.

"Yes, I do know. But could you hurry it up? I would like to get out of here."

"Not enjoying New York?"

“Not enjoying anywhere at the moment and I need to *do* something. Texas could be the answer.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best and then call you back. This having to say everything out loud to you kind of stinks, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it’s certainly less private on your end.”

“Oh, by the way, Tanya says ‘Hi’ again.”

“Super.”

“Should I tell her ‘Hi’ back?” Alice asked like we were sixth graders.

“Probably, it would be better if you didn’t tell her you were in touch with me at all.”

“Hey, did you know that Cousin Kate can shock the stuffing out of you if you touch her by surprise?”

“Yes, you have to keep away from her hands.”

“No, really, I mean if *you* touch *her*, *anywhere*, not just her hands.”

“I guess I didn’t know that.”

“She says she’s been working on it for centuries, but it’s only now really starting to get lethal.”

“Good for her. Now would you *please* hurry up?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Alice.”

“You’re welcome, Edward.”

My sister called me back a couple hours later and gave me some news...very little news, but it was something. She said her eavesdropping had led her to believe that Victoria was working some scheme and trying to enlist Laurent’s assistance. So far, he had declined, which was good. I was feeling very suspicious of Laurent.

Alice had something else too—Victoria’s cell phone number. It wasn’t a great clue, but it wasn’t useless. Unlike in the old days where you could locate someone by their telephone area code, cell phone area codes didn’t necessarily match geographic regions. You could buy a cell phone in California and use it in Florida. However, cell phone tracking is an intrinsic part of how

they work. All kinds of data are collected by cell phone companies. Maybe I could steal some phone records and find out the origin of Victoria's phone calls. They did that sort of thing on CSI all the time. If I had been of a mood to chuckle, I might have chuckled at that thought.

The television show, *Crime Scene Investigation*, was all the rage in the U.S. Carlisle said the number of students applying to colleges to study criminalistics has grown exponentially since that show became popular. I've heard that the job is actually extremely tedious. Often, evidence doesn't magically produce DNA and even if DNA is found, getting test results can take months—not like on the TV show where DNA analysis is instantaneous and matching DNA to a suspect on the computer is a sure thing.

With Alice's secret intelligence in hand, I immediately began to search the Internet for information about locating a cell phone. Usually, a law enforcement agency must ask a judge to issue a warrant for cell phone data based on having probable cause to believe a crime has been committed. If the judge agrees that the probable cause is legitimate, then the wireless phone company is directed to turn over its records for a particular phone number.

From these records, one can determine the general location of the phone by checking which cell tower relayed its most recent phone call. Or the company can find out exactly where the phone is by reading its GPS coordinates. Either kind of information for Victoria's phone would get me close enough to her that I could then track her by her scent.

Since I have no affiliation with a law enforcement agency and I wasn't going to ask Victoria for permission to track her phone, acquiring location data was undoubtedly illegal. However, experience tells me that such things can be accomplished if you know whom to ask and have plenty of money to spend. I happen to have both.

"Alice?"

"Edward?"

"Is Jasper around?"

"Yes."

"Can I speak to him?"

"You could...but you don't need to!" Alice laughed. "Not that he wouldn't love to hear from you, I'm sure." She laughed again.

"Alice..." I warned.

“Okay, okay. The answers are ‘yes,’ ‘yes,’ and ‘he’s already working on it.’” I could envision her face as she gave me this information. Of course, she would know what I wanted and who I would ask, so she did it for me. Even I almost smiled—but not quite.

“You’re rather amazing, you know that?”

“Yes, but thank you for saying so.”

“Have Jasper call me when he gets the information, please, and tell him ‘thanks.’ By the way, the family misses you two, especially Emmett.”

“Tell him that we’re coming to New York soon.”

“As soon as I leave, right?”

“Pretty much, yes. But you know I love you, Edward!”

“I do. Thank you, Alice.”

“You’re welcome, Edward.”

Now all I had to do was wait for Jasper to contact his sleazy, but useful, lawyer in Seattle to find someone to get me the information I needed. In the meantime, I had better prepare Esme for my departure. She wouldn’t be happy about it, but it shouldn’t be hard to convince her that I would feel better if I had something constructive to do. She probably wouldn’t approve of my chasing after a dangerous vampire either, but I did not intend this trip to be a suicide mission and I had lots of advantages...probably. Victoria wouldn’t know I was coming, for one thing.

On second thought, though, she might. I’d better warn Alice to keep my plans secret from Laurent. If he and Victoria were friends, then he might reveal the information to her. Perhaps we should watch our backs with regard to him too.

It took Jasper only two days to come through for me. Thank God! Now that I had found something useful to occupy my time, I was anxious to get started. Maybe chasing Victoria would ease the torture of sitting in one place, trying not to think about her...who she was with, what she was doing, how she was feeling, whether she ever thought of me.

After a month with my family, the “major crazy” seemed to have passed—I’d had no more fits—but the agony of my loss hadn’t eased. It had changed from the stabbing pain in my chest to an aching hollowness. I felt like a man made of balloons—just thin skin and air. I was sure that if someone poked me with a pin, I would deflate into a pile of unrecognizable scraps.

“She wasn’t in Texas after all,” Jasper told me over the phone. “She was in Shreveport, Louisiana, which is almost Texas, but not quite. Her phone records show that she traveled southwest from Little Rock, Arkansas, and though she could have gone to Texarkana and from there directly into Dallas, she didn’t. After getting to Texarkana, which is barely inside the Texas border, she veered back out and headed south through Louisiana. I have no idea what she would be doing in Shreveport.”

“She was probably looking for Sookie Stackhouse or visiting the Fangtasia nightclub,” I said drily, making a joke that Jasper wouldn’t get, not being a TV-watching vampire. As expected, he did not react.

The Home Box Office channel had a popular new series called *True Blood* which featured vampires who had “come out of the coffin,” so to speak, and were living among humans, drinking synthetic bottled “blood,” and trying to gain acceptance as equal citizens. It was a ridiculous show, really, one that furthered all the myths the Volturi had created about how we slept in coffins, couldn’t go out in the sun without being incinerated, could be killed by silver bullets or wooden crosses, and how vampire blood was an addictive drug to humans. It also perpetuated the myth that vampires could have sex with humans whenever they wished and that killing them afterwards was completely optional, love-biting being part of their sexual pleasure. If only *that* were true!

“But Victoria told Laurent she was in Texas?” I clarified with Jasper.

“She might have said she was ‘going’ to Texas. Alice isn’t clear on that after seeing the phone records.” I opened my laptop to find a south-central map of the United States.

“If she’s planning to go into Texas, then she could still head straight west from Shreveport and end up in Dallas, which Wikipedia says is the biggest metropolitan area,” I commented to my brother, whom I usually thought of as my brother-in-law, probably because I was so close to Alice.

“Or she could be cutting southwest from Shreveport and heading to Austin.”

“Isn’t Austin supposed to be the ‘hippest’ town in Texas? I understand it has an active music scene,” I said, “though I don’t know why Victoria would care about that.” Jasper wasn’t up-to-date on such considerations and didn’t know.

“If she’s looking for cities where she could get away with feeding on a lot of humans, she might be heading to Houston. It’s the biggest city in Texas,” Jasper guessed.

I countered, “On the other hand, didn’t Alice say you told Laurent war stories about the South? Maybe she’s interested in history, for some reason.”

“Yes, could be. San Antonio is the oldest city in Texas, straight west of Houston, and there is indeed a lot of vampire history there. It’s also home of the famous Alamo.”

“Maybe she’s looking for her American vampire roots,” I sort of joked, though neither of us thought it was funny.

“The port city of Galveston is also near Houston and that’s where I was heading when Maria found me.”

“Did you tell Laurent about Maria?” I asked.

“Yes. We were exchanging stories of our creators. He’s a personable fellow. He’s trying to do as I have and switch to the vegetarian lifestyle—and having an extremely hard time with it.”

“I’d consider being careful around him if he’s keeping in touch with Victoria.”

“He must be, since Alice stole her phone number from his cell phone.”

“That says danger to me, Jasper. Watch yourselves, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Can you get an update on Victoria’s location in a few days and let me know which way she seems to be moving?”

“Yes, I’ll ask my man to get another range of cell phone data.”

“Thanks, Jasper. Call me when you have something. I’m going to leave New York and head south.”

“Are you sure Emmett or I shouldn’t go along with you if you’re going to engage this woman?”

“Probably should, but I want to handle this myself. It’s something I can do for Bella. I guess you could say that I want some personal revenge. I didn’t get the satisfaction of ripping James apart.”

“All right, but remember that you can change your mind. Alice will be worrying about you.”

“Yes, okay.”

I began preparing to leave by packing my duffel. A short time later, Esme found me in my room doing so and was stunned.

“Edward? What are you doing? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, Mom. I was just getting ready to tell you.”

“Where? Why?” I saw her face fall in disappointment.

“Don’t worry,” I said, stepping over to give *her* a hug for a change. “I spoke to Alice. She and Jasper are coming back, so I’m leaving, but you’ll get two in exchange.”

“But I don’t understand, Edward,” she said, taking my face between her hands and looking into my eyes. “You’ve been feeling better, haven’t you?”

“I’m coping better, certainly, but I have something I need to do.”

“What could be so important that you would leave your family?”

I hesitated before answering. “I found out where Victoria is.” I hadn’t wanted to tell her. I knew it would frighten and upset her to know my plans.

“You’re going after Victoria?” Her voice rose in anxiety. “Have you told your father?”

“No, I haven’t seen him yet.”

“What did you find out?”

“Alice called me, and Laurent—you know he’s in Denali, right?—has been in touch with her. Jasper’s been helping me locate her and we think she’s headed to Texas.”

“But what are you going to do?” she inquired.

“Whatever I can. She can’t get away with hurting Bella. She doesn’t deserve to live.” As I spoke, my voice lowered in volume and I heard the vicious edge to it. I *did* want her dead.

My mother just stood there and looked at me beseechingly, but she didn’t say anything more. She must have seen the determination on my face.

“You’ll wait until Carlisle gets home?” I could see that this was not a question, but a demand and I wasn’t going to argue.

“Of course.”

11. Shreveport

I was glad to be on the move, leaving New York State and heading south. I had a mission now and though the pain of loss did not ease, moving seemed preferable to sitting still. At least it gave the appearance of progress.

Carlisle wasn't thrilled about my leaving on a murder mission, but just as he had done when Rosalie stalked and killed her tormenters in Rochester seventy years ago, my father would look the other way. He felt it was not unreasonable for me to seek payback for what Victoria had helped James do to Bella. He would never choose to kill when it could be avoided, but he believed in protecting his family, and James and Victoria had seriously threatened ours.

I'd considered driving from New York to Texas until I looked at a map, traced a few highways and realized it was fourteen hundred miles to Shreveport, Louisiana, where I thought I would start. That was half again as far as I'd driven from Forks to Ithaca and though driving was easy, it gave me a little too much time to think. When I did that, my internal engine began to lose power, slowly decreasing in speed until it was more or less idling, and then—to carry the metaphor one step too far—the fuel line clogged up and my engine stopped altogether. It would be better, I decided, to leave my car at the Ithaca airport and fly to Shreveport. Alice and Jasper could drive the car home when they flew into town.

After discussing my intentions with Carlisle, saying goodbye to everyone, and promising my mother that I would keep in touch, I left our new home that would never feel like home to me.

On the way to the airport, I called to book the next flight from Ithaca to New York City. From there, I could fly to Atlanta and then on to Shreveport. There was no route more direct than that, but I didn't mind much. I couldn't get to Shreveport in less than eight hours no matter what flights I took. I wanted to start in Shreveport because I had a feeling that something there interested Victoria and I thought that she might still be there by the time I flew in. I had no basis for that belief, but if I followed *my* intuition, like real trackers do, perhaps I would find that I had a knack for it. Tracking was the most common vampire talent and I'd never tested myself at it. My only real experience was when Carlisle, Emmett, and I had to track James on Vancouver Island when he inexplicably stopped tracking *us* as we intended him to do, and took off in another direction. We sniffed out his trail eventually and followed him to the Vancouver airport. It was too bad that our guess for what flight he took from there was utterly wrong.

During my day-long journey to Shreveport, moving from city to city and changing from one flight to the next, something Jasper said came back to me—he had told Laurent about his creator, Maria. If Laurent was a friend to Victoria (or even something less than “friend”) and he knew Victoria was in Texas, might he not want to warn her about Maria? Maria was a powerful and dangerous vampire even this long after the Volturi had intervened in the Southern wars. According to Jasper, when he left Maria in 1938, the wars continued, only on a smaller and less visible scale. Newborns were still being used as cannon fodder to fight rival covens, except that the leaders now tried to fly under the Volturi’s radar.

We had last seen Maria in Calgary, Alberta, where we were living in the 1960s and she caused so much of a stir that we had to abandon Canada and the western side of the continent altogether. From what I could glean from her thoughts then, she had never stopped wanting Jasper to come back to her and whether that was because she missed him or only because she had found him useful was never clear. In Calgary, she had taken an immediate dislike to Alice, so much so that I warned my family that we must keep Alice away from Maria. Jasper insisted that she leave immediately for Denali, which she did.

Maria visited our home three times while she was in the area and made much of our “odd lifestyle,” which she could not comprehend. Most human-drinking vampires did not, so that was nothing new, but Maria couldn’t leave it alone. While she was there, she continually taunted Jasper about his tamed ways and how he seemed rather more like a eunuch than when she had known him. Jasper held up to it well. As long as Alice was safe, he wasn’t disturbed by Maria’s opinions any longer, but it irritated Emmett a great deal and we had to keep him away from Maria too.

Finally, after hanging around for several weeks, Maria announced that she was leaving Canada to return to her much-preferred, southern climate. Upon her departure, Jasper took her aside and politely requested that she stay away from his family in the future. As a final gesture of disdain, Maria swept through a downtown Calgary shopping center, breaking human necks at random and leaving the bodies lying scattered about. She hadn’t even killed them to feed, just to cause trouble for us. If the Volturi got wind of the incident—an invisible force streaking through a public place and twisting human necks three-hundred-sixty degrees around—they would certainly know that it was a vampire on the rampage and we were the only coven living in that area. It was our worst nightmare and we high-tailed it out of Calgary as fast as we could scramble.

It occurred to me that Maria might appeal to someone like Victoria, who had followed James—a similarly powerful and ruthless vampire—for who knows how long. If she did go looking for Maria, she would undoubtedly mention her run-in with the odd, animal-drinking coven in the Northwest, and Maria would know immediately that it was Jasper’s family to

whom she referred. When Maria learned that the Cullens had killed James, she was likely to assume that Jasper was the killer. I could see Victoria coming back to take revenge on Jasper, perhaps with Maria's blessing.

Before being told by Laurent, I hadn't assumed that James and Victoria were mates. The bond between them seemed so much less than was the norm in my family. Because of that, I hadn't thought much about Victoria's being a threat to us after James was dead. Perhaps she wasn't, but I wouldn't let that stop me now that I'd decided on my course of action. Anyway, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed possible that we were looking at potential trouble from Victoria, especially if she teamed up with Maria. Normally, Maria didn't tolerate other vampires moving into her territory, but it was clear (to me anyway) that Victoria was a follower rather than a leader and, for that reason, might be an acceptable companion to Maria. The last I had heard, Maria had killed or chased off all her coven members and was alone.

It was nearing twilight when the airplane from Atlanta set down in Shreveport and I considered what I should do. In an ideal world, I would step out of the airport and instantly catch Victoria's scent, but I had no reason to believe that she had even flown into the city. In fact, if she had come down from Arkansas as Jasper had said, she probably ran, feeding along the way.

With all the thoughts I'd been processing about Maria and Victoria and how they could be lethal if they teamed up, I decided to call Alice again.

"Edward?"

"Hi Alice. Do I have to ask?"

"No. Jasper thinks that your idea about Victoria looking for Maria is very interesting. I can't tell whether she's going to do that or not, unfortunately. She seems to be winging it, changing her mind frequently and bobbing around from place to place almost like she's trying to avoid detection or she's dodging something, but I don't know what it might be. Anyway, I do see Maria. She's in a city with lots of old stone ruins. The skyline has a tower that looks a little like the Space Needle in Seattle... Wait a second." Alice must have put her hand over the phone mouthpiece because her voice became muffled, but not so muffled that I couldn't hear her.

"What?" she asked someone on her end. "Um...let me see...okay, yes, the front is shaped like a bell and it has big liberty-looking bells hanging high up in the walls. Okay, thanks Jazz." She came back to me then.

"Jasper says it's San Antonio. Maria's in San Antonio, Texas. There are a lot of old Spanish missions there, so it has a distinctive look. The Space Needle thing is called the 'Tower

of the Americas,' apparently." Again, her voice became muffled. "Is that right?" Then back to me. "Yes, that's what it's called and it's in San Antonio."

"But you can't tell whether Victoria is looking for Maria?"

"No, sorry. It kind of makes sense, though, doesn't it?" Her voice then faded to a whisper. "Jasper talked to Laurent about Maria; Laurent probably talked to Victoria; suddenly, Victoria calls from the South, heading toward Texas. Too bad you're not here—you could read Laurent's mind and see what's going on. It seems like he might be scheming against us. Or maybe not, because he refused to join her when she called. But Laurent probably told Victoria that Jasper's from down there and he's a scarred-up warrior. I'm just free—associating now, but what if Victoria thinks that Jasper killed James? Since Maria and Jasper are kind of on the outs, maybe she's thinking... Well, you can follow the dots as easily as me." Alice finally took a breath.

"I already have and came up with the same conclusion as you. What I don't get is why Shreveport?"

"Well, maybe she's just stopping off on her way to Texas. Jasper got some more cell phone information and as of this morning, she was still in Shreveport. I checked with the Chamber of Commerce and found out that there's a big river festival going on down there right now. If she's looking to drink up in preparation for running into Maria—which she might be, because Laurent probably told her how dangerous Maria is—then she might be looking for easy prey. I'd check out the river festival."

"That's quite a few more 'mights' and 'ifs' than I was hoping for, Alice."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was hoping to get more out of Laurent, but Victoria hasn't called him again and asking him outright is too obvious. He's wary, I think. Anyway, we're flying home tonight, so that's all I can do with that. Jasper can probably check into phone records again if you need it."

"No, let me poke around Shreveport and see if I can catch a scent anywhere. I'll go to the festival. It can't hurt."

When Alice said that she and Jasper were flying "home," I heard "Forks," and felt the familiar ache intensify. It was always there, that hole in my center. Focusing my attention on Victoria didn't change it at all. I could feel the utter devastation of losing my love and my future as much as ever. Nevertheless, here I was in Shreveport, Louisiana, and I had set this mission for myself, so I would push through it. I could see, though, that life was going to be very long if I

had to push myself through every single day like I had this one without Bella to make any of it seem worthwhile.

As expected, I found no trace of Victoria's scent at the airport and so I grabbed a taxi to the downtown river area. I would rather have run, but the area was urban enough that there wasn't much tree cover and city lights were bright for miles around. I had gotten spoiled living in Forks for the last few years. Not only was it rural and heavily treed, but it was cloudy all year around. The Southern states were much more restrictive to our movements, with bright sunshine on most days.

The driver dropped me off on Crockett Street, a few blocks away from the "Red River Revel," as the fall festival is called. When I arrived, the evening schedule of music and dance was well underway. I heard bluegrass banjo coming from one direction and indie rock guitar from another. The grounds, which ran perpendicular to the river, rather than alongside it, were lined with rows of patriotic red-, white-, and blue-striped booths from which artists and food vendors sold their wares to passersby.

At the far end of the grounds nearest the river was a large children's area with an "archeological" dig, a trampoline, ongoing art projects, and a ten-foot-tall man in a tailcoat, striped trousers, and a top hat gliding his way through the crowd on invisible stilts. Using a very long ribbon on the end of a stick, a clown was making beautiful patterns in the air while a group of children jumped up and tried to grab the ribbon as it floated by just out of their reach. Nearby, I saw a large mosaic mural under construction. A cluster of adults was busy mortaring pieces of broken tile over the underlying design bit-by-bit.

Through the air, which was thick with the odors of deep-fat frying grease, grilling meat, and the pumping blood of hundreds of human bodies, I suddenly caught a whiff of it. It was fresh, but faint. I moved quickly then, with purpose and efficiency, wholly fixated on the hunt. It was Victoria's scent—I was sure of it.

My eyes darted back and forth watching for a streak of bright red hair while I tried to locate the direction of the scent. Shifting my duffle to carry it like a backpack, I crossed some railroad tracks that bisected the fairgrounds and slipped under the eaves of a large concrete building on the other side. With my back to it, I crept forward until I could peer around the corner. I saw nothing, but the scent was stronger. If she was here and I could smell her, then she could smell me too, depending on the wind's direction. I was downwind of her at the moment and I intended to keep it that way, making it more difficult for her to scent me. I wasn't sure if she would recognize my scent from our brief meeting in the baseball field, but there was no point in tipping her off to my presence if she did. She would certainly recognize the smell as vampire, whether she knew me or not.

I followed her scent trail swiftly through the children's entertainment area and, when I reached the chain-link fence on the far side, hoisted myself over it and out of the bright lights. Across a busy parkway, the Red River gleamed under the light of the rising moon. For a fraction of a second, I thought I saw a streak of red move through the air and disappear into the water, but I couldn't be certain. Timing the traffic just right, I raced across the four-lane parkway between moving cars, running at nearly full speed so that I wouldn't be detectable to human eyes. When I reached the other side, I took one long leap and landed on the riverbank, then stood there for ten seconds, scanning the water thoroughly from left to right and across to the opposite shore. Seeing nothing, I ran along the water for two or three minutes, searching for a stronger scent. Nothing. I turned around and ran along the shore in the other direction, stopping short when I found it—the place where the scent approached the water and disappeared. She had been here recently and gone into the water. I was sure of it.

I saw that the railroad tracks crossed the river nearby, so I ran to the bridge and dashed across its seven hundred feet as fast as I could. The water below was a murky gray-green color and had a noticeable current. When I reached the other bank, I took off running, first to the left and then to the right, but found no scent trail at all. She *had* to have come out of the water somewhere. I looked around trying to see what alternatives there might be. A barge was making its way downriver and I realized that Victoria could have grabbed onto the underside of a barge or boat and let it carry her a great distance downstream. She might be underwater even now.

Then I noticed a scraggly line of trees about fifty feet from the bank. They had been planted along a mostly empty roadway either as a windbreak or to screen an ugly view. When I saw them, it occurred to me that Victoria easily could have leaped from a barge into the trees to hide both herself and her scent trail. It was a good idea. I rushed over to the trees—which this far south still held onto their leaves—and jumped into the branches of the nearest one. That might have been a careless move, for there it was again—Victoria's scent.

I moved from tree to tree away from the river until the stand ended abruptly after one hundred feet. As I peered out through the leaves of the last tree, I saw that I was in an industrial-looking area with large factory buildings stretching in every direction. It would be easy to jump from one flat roof to the next for a long distance. Perhaps Victoria had done that too. The nearest building, about one-hundred-fifty feet long, sported an oversized Nike logo on its side and Victoria's scent trail on its roof. After following her scent for the length of six such buildings (having to backtrack to find the right roof a couple of times), I was faced with an expansive parking area that was rather sparsely populated with cars. There were no more roofs within a jumping distance that would prevent me from being seen, so I hopped to the ground where Victoria's trail ended and dashed back and forth, trying to pick up the scent again. She

had clearly followed the same rooftops as I had, but once off of them, her scent disappeared. I searched the area for ten minutes before giving up. *Damn!*

This surprising outcome brought two questions immediately to mind. First, where did she go? Second, why was she using evasive measures? Surely she had not detected my presence. I had stayed downwind of her and her scent wasn't absolutely fresh, so she must have run this circuitous route before I ever got close enough for her to have seen me. It was distinctly puzzling.

One thing I realized, however, was that I had not thought through this endeavor very thoroughly, which was unlike me. I hadn't expected to find Victoria's trail so soon and so abruptly, if at all, and I hadn't considered the implications of actually finding her in an urban area. It posed problems for keeping myself both safe and hidden from human view while I performed unnatural feats of strength or speed. It would be better to chase Victoria to an uninhabited area before killing her, though this industrial zone at night probably would have sufficed.

That's when I realized that this wasn't exactly an industrial zone. Each of the large, warehouse-looking buildings was freshly white-washed and they all matched, more or less. These were not warehouses, but factory outlet stores—lots of them. In addition to the Nike building, I saw a large Adidas outlet, and an even larger Bass Shoes outlet. Shreveport must be a well-shod city. The factory stores appeared to be intermixed with restaurants and a few large hotels.

I spent the rest of the night scouring horizontal surfaces for miles in every direction trying to find where Victoria's scent picked up again. Though I thought I caught whiffs of her every now and then, none of these hints of scent created a trail that I could follow. I didn't understand it. The only possibility I could think of was that she had hidden herself on some form of conveyance and left the area without her feet touching the ground. She could have hidden herself in the undercarriage of a truck, possibly, or perhaps she floated down the river after all.

Then I got it! Of course! She must have retraced her steps back to the river on the same scent trail and then headed down the river in one manner or another. She could have caught a boat or clung to a barge, or even swum underwater, but any way you looked at it, she had to be long gone by now. I sighed in irritation. Perhaps this task was not going to be as straightforward as I had hoped.

At the edge of the horizon, I noticed the faintest gleam of light and knew that I must quickly find somewhere to hide from the sun for the day. And just as I recognized the problem, I saw the solution—a casino hotel along the river. Perfect.

I hurried to the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino with my duffel still slung over my back. I was glad now that I had bothered to bring it along. It would make checking into a hotel a less-conspicuous endeavor. I moved the bag to one shoulder, straightened my clothing, and ran my fingers through my hair before walking through the grand entryway to the hotel lobby, which was white marble from floor to ceiling, including massive white columns standing like sentinels throughout. It seemed excessively posh for what I'd initially thought was an "industrial" district, but I could hear the musical notes of slot machines singing in the background.

One nice thing about casino hotels is that the staff never looks at you askance if you show up near dawn to check in. They're just glad to have you if you look like you have a couple of bucks to spend. Walking to the registration counter, I saw two staff members on duty. A large, young, white woman welcomed me with a broad Southern accent.

"Hello, sir. How may I 'hale-ulp' you this mornin'?" She said the word "help" in two syllables, with an extended long "a" sound. I was indeed in the South, a place known for strong accents, friendliness, and hospitality. I was certainly being welcomed.

I rented a room, which was shockingly cheap compared to a Seattle hotel, or even a Las Vegas casino hotel. As I recall, Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the nation, along with its neighbors, Mississippi, Texas, and New Mexico. Much of that can be explained in Texas and New Mexico by a heavy influx of poor immigrants from Mexico and South America and by the large native populations living on reservations, but not so much in Louisiana, which seems less explainable. It is also one of the most obese states in an obese nation, but whether that is due more to poverty or to the effects of the famous Louisianan diet—an eclectic mix of Southern-fried cooking and Cajun and Creole fare—is beyond my knowledge. To me, the scents coming from the restaurants and cafes I'd come across were as revolting as any other human food.

My hotel room was well-furnished with all the amenities, including a detailed map of the area. It turns out I was in the shopper's mecca of Bossier City, which is what "the other half" of Shreveport—across the Red River—is called. I had twelve hours to kill and shopping wasn't in my plans. I had a choice, though. I could spend the day watching cable television and staring at the walls in my fancy room, or wandering around the casino.

Casinos are a great place for vampires to roam. Not only are they sunlight-free all day, but if you're outside of one just before dawn, Jasper tells me, you can frequently find willing prey. There are those gamblers who creep away from casinos just before morning, having lost their entire life savings at the high-stakes blackjack or poker tables and would rather commit suicide than return home one more time to their exasperated spouses and hungry children. Jasper says you can spot them a mile away and often, they are almost grateful to be spared facing what awaits them at home. There are also those who have drunk a few too many free

cocktails and wouldn't know what bit them. Having someone either disappear after a night at the casinos or wind up dead nearby with signs of self-inflicted wounds are acceptable ways to dispatch prey in Jasper's experience. I wasn't planning to take any human prey, so I would have to accept his word on that.

I turned on the television and flipped through its many channels until my thoughts began to wander in dangerous directions. I didn't mind being still during the daytime, but I did mind the hours that would pile up one on top of another, giving me long periods to do nothing but think of Bella. The relentless sunshine of the South might be difficult to handle in more ways than just the obvious one.

When I could stand my own thoughts no longer, I forced myself out of my hotel room and down to the casino. Designing casinos without windows is a clever way to keep players from noticing the time pass as their money drains away. You will never see a wall clock in a casino either.

I played some cheap slot machines and then some high-roller slots and came away a few hundred dollars ahead. Then I wandered to the blackjack tables and stayed there, taking fake bathroom and food breaks and accepting, but not drinking, the alcoholic beverages foisted upon me. At the end of my gambling jag, I was up about twelve hundred dollars, which was a nice little bonus for a wasted day. My mindreading skills didn't help me much at blackjack, not as much as at poker, but in my current state of mind, it was simpler. I bet the odds mindlessly without paying much attention, which once again left my thoughts free to wander back to the only thing I really cared about—Bella, of course.

How I longed to see her again, to talk to her, or just to lie alongside her in her bed and watch her sleep. It made my body throb with pain just to think of it. Eventually, that was all I could think of and so I gave up on the casino and went back to my room.

I decided to give myself a good spraying down in the shower and wash my hair since I might as well use some of the amenities that were offered. I didn't shower often. Dirt didn't stick to our bodies and our stone skin did not sweat, or shed cells, or get oily. Our hair could collect dust after a while, but usually a good brushing took care of that. Still, showers could be pleasant from time to time.

Afterwards, I lay naked on the bed with the television remote in my hand, clicking through the channels in a way that irritated everyone when Rosalie did it, more as a reflex than because she was looking for something to watch. Then my ears caught some startling words from a local news report. I immediately flipped back to the channel where a newswoman was standing in front of the half-finished mosaic I had seen at the festival grounds the night before.

“...at the Red River Revel last night after the gates were closed and workers were cleaning up in preparation for today’s events. She was found in a dumpster behind the food court and it was clear to anyone observing that her neck had been broken viciously. Police Chief Rene Beaufontaine says that she was fully clothed and did not appear to be the victim of a sexual assault. When asked for a possible motive, he said that it is too early to speculate. How her neck was broken remains a mystery since the coroner has reported no sign of head trauma. This is Dixie Dawson reporting from Shreveport.”

She *had* been there. I already knew it, but to see such blatant evidence was still a shock. Throwing a woman’s body in a dumpster might not have been the best means of disposal, though the reporter said nothing about bite marks. If we drank carefully and stopped just before the heart failed, we could use our venom to close the bite wounds. However, once the victim’s heart has stopped, that is no longer possible because our venom cannot heal dead tissue. So Victoria was being careful in that way, unless the police were merely keeping details of marks on the body a secret to help them catch the killer.

Alice’s guess was right. Victoria had used the crowd and the bustle of the fair as a means of feeding in plain sight. It wasn’t a great strategy, since the city would now be under siege and news reports would be unrelenting until the killer was found which, if results followed the truth, would never happen.

This sort of behavior was not how we kept ourselves discretely hidden among humans. Not only that, but other vampires in the area would immediately recognize the presence of a nomad who was endangering their feeding grounds. The southern United States and Mexico were known for territorial disputes between vampire covens over high population areas. Maria was famous for her warring exploits that allowed her to take control of Texas and a large chunk of northern Mexico in her heyday when Jasper was at her side.

Perhaps Victoria had intended to dispose of the body of her prey in a better fashion, but had been forced to take expedient action before being discovered. Whatever the reason for what she did, she had endangered both of us. And who knows how many other persons had disappeared from the fair and hadn’t been reported missing yet?

I knew Victoria couldn’t have been running from me. I didn’t see how she would have known I was there. She must have been running from the evidence she had left of her presence. If I did not want to get caught up in a war not of my own making, I would be wise to leave town immediately.

It was time to “get outta Dodge.”

12. Roots

So now what?

At twilight, I checked out of the hotel and decided to make a dash for the border. A quick look at a borrowed map told me that the Sabine National Forest lay just across the state line. It would be a good place to go to collect myself. I had no idea where Victoria had gone and not the first clue how to find out except for the means I had already employed—Alice—and I wasn't ready to talk to her yet.

It took no time to run the forty-five miles into east Texas and it was a relief to be there. The forest consisted primarily of different species of pine trees, which provided good cover from the daytime sunshine. There were places to hide and game to hunt. With that level of comfort, I could afford to let everything go for a while.

The first thing I did was turn off my phone. Then I went racing through the forest, seeking relief from the aching in my chest that barely allowed me to breathe. The place where my heart used to be was an empty void and without even my petrified version of a heart, I was losing my will to continue. I could understand the distress of the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*. Without a heart, it's hard to feel "real." You have no connection to other living creatures of the earth. You belong nowhere and can neither love nor be loved. In my present state, I was worthless to my family and I felt relieved not to have them hovering, waiting for the reappearance of the son and brother I used to be. I was afraid that that Edward might be gone for good.

I'd had an acceptable existence before I met Bella. I was content with my music, my studies, and my curiosity and desire to learn. I had the love of my parents and the companionship of my siblings and it had been enough...then. Now, I knew more. Bella had changed me from who I had been to someone else, someone better, and I could never go back. That was the sad truth. I no longer knew how to exist in the world. The fact that she was alive was enough to keep me alive, but without access to her, it could not keep me "living." I no longer cared for the life I'd had and I had no strength to reinvent myself. I was tainted by the knowledge of what *could* be and I had serious doubts whether I now could accept what had satisfied me before.

When sunshine first peeked into the forest, I scratched out a grave-shaped hole in the earth and sank down among the roots of the trees, covered myself with duff and pine needles, and lay there like a corpse, peering out from my hiding place. At first, my eyes followed every

sound and movement in the woods until I became familiar with the swaying of pine branches in the breeze, the calls of anxious birds, and the hushed noises of the animals who knew to keep their distance. Then I closed my eyes and noted only the scents of squirrels, pine sap, rodents, and the occasional deer that moved through the area.

I don't know how long I remained still. Time passed in a vacuum. I stopped counting the days that went by, though my idle brain automatically recorded the dawns and the sunsets. I could have accessed that number if I'd wished to, but I didn't. I floated in a river of nothingness, but was unable to achieve the relief of oblivion. There was no respite from the emptiness that stole my breath, stole my self, devoured my will to exist.

I was reminded of my father who had exiled himself from civilization and went to starve in the wilderness after he was changed, unable to abide what he had become. I was starving too—not for lack of blood, which I did not care about—but for something more vital than physical nourishment. Even after several weeks had passed, I didn't care enough about the searing, clawing thirst to chase after prey. Perhaps I would remain in the earth's embrace until the end of Bella's lifespan. Then I would drink to fortify myself for the journey to Italy, where I would goad the Volturi into doing away with me. It was the best plan I could think of.

Then much to my surprise, something changed. Suddenly, a sense of urgency awakened me. There was something I must do, that I was compelled to do. Though I wasn't sure what it was, the feeling was strong enough for me to wiggle my toes beneath the comforting weight of the forest debris. That experiment led me to move my feet, then my legs, my hands, and my arms, until finally I opened my eyes, blinked, and sat up. The environment had changed noticeably. The air was colder, with a crisp edge to it and I realized that winter was coming even to this southern outpost of the country.

I left the ground then and began to move through the forest randomly with no goal and no thought. When my nose caught the scent of deer, I involuntarily began to chase. Taking down the beast was more challenging than I remembered, but was accomplished soon enough and that soothing taste of blood aroused a fierce thirst I had not noticed before. I hunted actively then, pursuing the herd that had fled. I pulled down another and drank greedily until it was no more and then searched for another. Sniffing the air as I moved through the forest, I located a lone buck foraging for grass. I remained downwind of him and so silent that he did not sense my presence until it was too late.

He was a majestic beast. His head held seven-point antlers and his eyes held the wisdom of the ages. I sank my teeth into his throat hungrily. As I drank, I felt the life draining from him and as his soul left his body, I grabbed for it in my mind's eye, pulling it back to me as

it floated away. I held onto his spirit and thanked him for his great gift. Perhaps God had sent him to me as a beacon of hope.

But no, hope was too big a word. What I felt was more like will...the tiniest will to go on. It was time to reenter the world for a while.

As I patted myself down, trying to remove the dust from my clothing, I touched the stiff edge of something in my shirt pocket. Sticking two fingers inside, I pulled out some photographs...four photographs. How could I have forgotten they were there? Emblems of my former life when I was happy, when living meant something to me. It no longer did, but *she* did and she was still out there, going on with her life. I would try too, at least for now.

I felt the familiar burn in my eyes and the catch in my throat as I tried to breathe. I let it take me over, giving in to the vampire tears that meant nothing and did nothing for me, except remind me that I was alive. I could still feel something.

It was some time before I became ready to face the world again, to face my family. There would be fences to mend, but I hoped that they would forgive me for abandoning them. I'd had no choice really and perhaps I would abandon them again, but for now, I would try to make amends.

I pressed the button to power up my phone and saw that the battery was dead. So I would be spared the discomfort of explaining myself for a little bit longer. I would rejoin civilization, though, locate my charger, and call my family.

With new resolve, I headed west out of the forest, saying goodbye to that haven of peace, if not resolution, and began to run for the nearest town. Nacogdoches was its name. Winter must be near, for the sun began to rise behind a heavy cloud cover and I could smell the rain that surely would come soon. I walked the main street of the town, looking for...what? Perhaps I needed a hotel room, somewhere to clean up, recharge my phone, and regroup.

Fortunately, I'd had the foresight to hang my duffle bag in a tree before going to ground. Stupid of me, I suppose. A hunter or camper could have ripped it open and stolen my wallet or taken the whole bag. Not that I would have missed it, particularly, but losing it would have made this particular day more difficult.

When I found a small mom and pop motel on the edge of town, I stepped into the office and clinked the bell sitting on the counter. With a lot of grumbling and coughing and great sighs, an old man appeared from a side door, still wrapping the tie of his bathrobe around his ample waist, his sparse gray hair flopping unattractively from the dome of his balding head. I presumed that these long strands were intended to wrap over his crown in sad mimicry of a full head of hair, but at that moment, they were simply signposts to his lack in that area. He yawned without covering his mouth and I saw that his discolored teeth were missing a few of their companions.

I pulled out a credit card to pay for the room, which made me wonder if Jasper's man was watching the activity on my cards to see if I was still alive. That's when I realized what I must have been putting my mother through for the past few weeks. I had left home on a mission to do away with a killer vampiress and then—as far as they were concerned—had disappeared from the face of the earth. Esme must be worried sick. I'd better call before my family had to resort to roundabout means to locate me. I unlocked the door of the basic, but sufficient, motel room and immediately shut the curtains in case the sun came out. Then I opened my duffle to extract the cell phone charger and I plugged in my phone just in time to feel it vibrate in my hand.

"Edward?"

"Hi, Alice. You found me."

"Yes, and you should be glad it's me because Esme will want to wring your neck—now that she knows you're alive, that is."

"You're right. I wasn't thinking. I hope you could reassure her."

"Yes, but that's beside the point."

"Please tell her I'm sorry."

"I will, but it would still be good if you called her. Anywho..."

"Yes?"

"I have some personal business in Biloxi, Mississippi, and wondered if you want to meet up for a pint."

"A pint of blood, maybe. What's in Biloxi?" I asked, quite curious now.

Alice hesitated. "Well...relatives, actually."

“Living relatives? Of yours?”

“Yes, I think so. Unless they’re all dead.”

“You’ve traced your family?” I was surprised and amazed.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“The website *ancestry.com* is how I got started and one thing led to another.”

“Are you from Mississippi?”

“Yes. I found the asylum where I lived and it still has all the old records hidden away in the dungeon. That’s how I found out I’m from Biloxi. I’m going there to find any family who’s left and...to see my grave.”

“Oh, Alice!” I exclaimed. “You have a grave?”

Her voice became soft. “My file contained an old letter from my stepmother which said the family was relinquishing me to the state. I scoured the newspapers from Biloxi where the records said I was from and I found my death announcement. My family reported me dead the same day they put me in the asylum and then they held a funeral for me, but I wasn’t invited.”

The news was heartbreaking.

“Of course, I’ll meet you, Alice. When and where?”

Her voice brightened. “Let’s meet in New Orleans. I’ve never been there—that I know of. I’d like to go on a vampire tour.”

“The vampires on a vampire tour. That sounds interesting.”

“Okay, then. I’ll go ahead and you call me when you get there so we can find each other. I’ll be in the French Quarter somewhere.”

“Okay, Alice. I lost Victoria, by the way, in Shreveport.”

“You found her then?”

“Yes, she was there and she murdered a woman at the festival you told me about, so I got out of town as quickly as possible. I’d already lost her, though. She eluded me almost like she knew I was chasing her. It was odd, because I never got close enough for her to actually see or smell me, as far as I know.”

"I'm sorry that I wasn't paying better attention to you right then. That's when I started poking around on *ancestry.com* trying to find out more information after what Bel—what James's video said. Jasper didn't do any more tracking of Victoria's cell phone because you weren't answering yours. I saw you dig the hole, though, so I knew you were okay. I didn't tell Esme that you buried yourself. I think that would have scared her."

"You're probably right. That was wrong of me, I guess, but at the time, I just—"

"You don't have to explain it to me, Edward. You gotta do what you gotta do. But come meet me and then I can report back to everybody," Alice said, before changing the subject. "By the way, Emmett and Rosalie ran off to Europe for another honeymoon, did I say?"

"No, you didn't mention it."

"They're traveling around Sweden and then they're going to visit Iceland. The days are getting short up there now."

"What is the date, Alice?"

"You don't know?"

"Well, no, you called me the very second I got to my motel room. I suppose it was on the check-in paperwork, but I wasn't paying much attention."

"November 16th. You've been missing for over a month."

"Please tell Carlisle that I just couldn't—," I started to say.

"He knows, but he's still worried about you. So is Esme, and Emmett got really snarky after you left. I think that's why they left town."

"How are 'The Ruins' coming along?" I inquired, changing the subject myself this time.

"Good, I think. But let's meet up and talk then. 'Kay?"

"Okay, see you soon, Alice."

I had given up my tracking project without resistance, but I cared about Alice and I imagined that discovering her unenviable roots as she had must have been painful. I couldn't imagine why Jasper wasn't with her unless she had asked him directly not to come. He doesn't allow himself to be separated from Alice easily. I felt honored that she had called me, actually. I didn't know who she was trying to bolster, herself or me, but Alice would be the easiest person for me to see...except for the one I couldn't see.

I gasped. The pain hit me unexpectedly and I dropped onto the bed, pulling my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. *Owww...*

The next time I looked up, I could see that the fluorescent light bulb outside my door had come on, which meant the sun must have set. I hoped there had been only one sunset. I didn't mean to keep Alice waiting.

I checked the phone book in the room for the location of the nearest rental car agency before changing out of my dirty clothing and brushing the dust and a few stray pine needles from my hair. Then I stuffed everything back into my duffel, left the room key on the nightstand, and ran the couple miles to the local airport. I rented the best car Enterprise had, a Cadillac DTS—the same vehicle the President had used for his inauguration, though I'm sure his had armor plating, bullet-proof windows, and other safety features I didn't require. This one had dark-tinted windows, though, a feature more commonly found in the South than in the North. It would let me drive during the day if I needed to. For now, I should need only a few hours to cross southern Louisiana.

We met in Lafayette Cemetery in the heart of New Orleans. It was Alice's idea, but I'd never seen the famous burial ground and it was certain to be atmospheric after dark. If anyone saw us inside the iron fence after hours, we could always growl or pretend to be ghosts and they were sure to run away. We were definitely the scariest thing in the cemetery, although other vampires probably haunted the place from time to time. New Orleans was regarded by some as a sort of spiritual mecca for our kind since Anne Rice's famously atmospheric vampire novels had popularized it as such. Perhaps we should be on our guard. Territorial locals could be wandering around too.

It was good to see Alice. Definitely worth the few hours of driving. She wouldn't be at all daunted by my mournful mood, so I wouldn't have to bother putting on a false mask of cheer.

"Tell me about your family in Biloxi, Alice," I said, seating myself on a tombstone. She chose a granite marker of her own and perched on it.

"My name is Mary Alice Brandon and I had a sister named Cynthia who was nine years younger than me. She had a daughter who might still be alive. Maybe I can meet her anonymously. I'm a little curious to see what she looks like. I've never known anyone who looked like me. Our family had orchards, but I don't remember that, of course. My mother died when I was still a girl and my father remarried." She took a deep breath and looked at her feet.

"Go on," I encouraged.

"I found the asylum where they put me. It's still there and still a psychiatric hospital. They don't call them 'Lunatic Asylums' or 'Homes for Idiots and Imbeciles' anymore." She looked up at me with an ironic half-smile.

"I didn't remember the place, but it was built after Dorothea Dix started shaming all the Eastern states into providing more humane facilities for lunatics. Before she came along, they still used chains and provided no heat and just let inmates live in their own filth under the excuse that the insane didn't have the same sensibilities as other people. I must have been a real case if they kept me in the dark, because the building is designed so that most of the cells get light and air from four sides. Of course, they probably used darkness and no fresh air as punishment. I don't know. Anyway, nothing jogged my memory at all, so even if I was unhappy, I don't remember it."

"Do you think they gave you electroshock, Alice?"

"They did—a lot. According to my file, I was considered unruly and disruptive of the other patients. Probably I told fortunes or something." She laughed lightly, but there was little humor in it.

"Electroshock is known for wiping out people's memories," I said gently.

"Yeah, seems kind of obvious, doesn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Alice."

"I would be too, but I guess I'm not because it's made me forget all the bad things, including being changed. I do wish I could remember the vampire who saved me from James, though. At least I had a friend."

I didn't comment. What kind of friend would leave a perfectly sane, young girl to grow up in a dark hellhole when he could have freed her from her prison any time he wished? It took threats from a more powerful vampire than he was to get him to act. Her human life was forfeited for his selfishness.

Alice stood up then and I followed her lead. We walked as we talked, and looked at the interesting variety of above-ground crypts and tombs until we came upon a particular area of the cemetery where all of the dates of death were the same.

"Alice, have you seen how many of these people died in 1853?"

"Yes, there was an epidemic of yellow fever that summer and fall in New Orleans."

"How did you know?" I wondered.

“I asked Carlisle if he knew anything about the city—that I wanted to visit—and he told me the story.”

“Don’t tell me he was here!”

“He was. When word of the plague got out to other parts of the country, a great many doctors and nurses came down here to help, Carlisle included.”

“I should have known. He was in Chicago during the Spanish Influenza epidemic too,” I told my sister, though she’d heard the story many times.

“I guess he feels that his special status demands such sacrifices of him, though I don’t think he sees them as sacrifices, particularly.”

“There are half a dozen to a dozen deaths recorded in 1853 on each of these tombstones, and row after row of them. Whole families were wiped out, according to some of the inscriptions. I wonder how many ultimately died.”

“Probably thousands, but the African–Americans were largely immune to it, Carlisle said.”

“Why?” I knew of no natural immunity to a virus based on the color of one’s skin.

“At the time, everybody thought that African lineage lent immunity, but the doctors eventually figured out that it was the long history of African slavery in New Orleans that gave them immunity. So many generations of exposure to the local, less deadly, versions of yellow fever made them immune when the nasty one came along. Recent black emigrants, whether slaves or Freedmen, caught the virus at the same rate as more recent white emigrants.”

We walked silently then, both of us buried in our own thoughts. Finally, I brought up a subject that was troubling me.

“Alice,” I began, “I don’t know where to go from here. I can’t really go home, especially without having accomplished anything except one day of unsuccessful tracking, followed by weeks of incapacitation. And I’m no good for anyone, anyway, right now.” I might have imagined it, but I suddenly got the feeling that Alice tensed up. Her thoughts began to race and I didn’t have the energy to bother keeping up.

“I was hoping that you would decide to meet me after you rose from your grave, so I asked Jasper to search cell phone records again before I came down here. He’s probably got something for us by now. I’ll call him.”

Jasper did have information. Victoria hadn't used her phone for several weeks and Jasper's man thought perhaps she'd changed her phone number, but then she began using it again.

"She passed through Beaumont," Jasper told me, "and appeared to be moving toward Houston when she made her last call two days ago."

"Do you know whom she was calling?" I asked.

"Not Laurent. Otherwise, no. It's an unlisted number."

"Thanks, Jasper."

"Give me back to Alice, would you?" I handed the phone to my sister.

So, now I knew where to start again and I would. It was my obligation to take care of this ugly loose end. Then what? I had absolutely no idea. I had no idea what to do with my life without her. She *was* my life. My everything.

13. Going Public

I stayed in New Orleans with Alice for a few days before she went east to face more of her past in Biloxi and I went west to put Victoria permanently in my past.

Given our mutual state of mind, we didn't exactly have fun in New Orleans, but we went through the motions by playing tourist. We visited several "Cities of the Dead," which is what locals call their picturesque, above-ground cemeteries. We wandered through the Garden District and admired the grand and diverse architecture of the homes. On a cloudy morning, we sat at a café table in Jackson Square and pretended to eat beignets and drink chicory coffee because Alice insisted that everyone must do that at least once in New Orleans.

We rode the streetcar down Charles Street and roamed Bourbon Street at night, moving among drunken tourists and listening to the blues, jazz, and country music pouring from darkened doorways. We wandered other parishes in the city and discovered that even better music could be heard away from the main tourist haunts in neighborhood dives where the local people go to drink and listen to jazz.

It is easy to see why traditional vampires find New Orleans an agreeable place to hunt—which they obviously do. For decades, New Orleans has suffered the highest murder rate and the most missing persons of any city in the United States. Though the police will deny it, even they entertain questions about *what* (rather than *who*) is abducting and killing so many of their citizens. Some of them secretly believe in our existence, though I doubt if they would recognize us if they met us face-to-face.

One evening on Bourbon Street, a scrawny black man wearing a mud-colored fisherman's cap and sporting a gold front tooth approached us with an overly familiar smile.

"Ah betchoo twenny dollah I know wheah you got dem shoes," he said, expecting to take us unawares. But I knew this scam and wasn't interested in being his mark.

When I saw the startling image in his mind, I calmly replied, "And I bet I know where you got yours." I pointed to his handmade Italian loafers. He regarded me with mild amusement. Looking directly into his eyes like a Grand Inquisitor, I said, "You stole them from a corpse lying in his casket."

Never before had I seen a black man turn pale. Shock drained the blood from his face giving his complexion a gray cast. His eyes widened in fear and he began stepping backwards with his palms raised as if to ward me off. When he had put fifteen yards between us, he

whirled around and darted into the crowd, his mind reeling with thoughts of voodoo curses and zombies bent on revenge.

Perhaps I'd been a little hard on him...the victim was dead, after all, and wouldn't miss his fancy footwear. The con man regarded items such as the Italian shoes, gold rings, and silk ties as a perquisite of his janitor's job at a funeral home. Personally, I didn't have a problem with his pilfering. What was the point of burying valuable items that might be useful to a living person? What puzzled me was why the fellow chose to run that particular scam on tourists when it forced him to think about his vandalizing of dead bodies each time he offered the "shoes" bet. Perhaps his subconscious was punishing him. Not my problem.

"Wow, Edward, that was a little mean, don't you think?" Alice chided.

Was it? Maybe in my pain I was losing the compassion Carlisle claimed I'd acquired when I fell in love with Bella.

"Yeah, maybe so. He's not a very nice person, though," I replied, defending myself weakly.

"That kind of thing has a way of catching up with people, don't you think? He'll get caught soon enough," Alice said with a sideways look at me and a half smile on her face.

I saw her mental image of the huckster hurriedly peeling a pair of Armani trousers from the legs of a dead man when his boss, the mortician, unexpectedly walks into the visitation room. I laughed at the con man's mortified expression and his attempt to sidestep the situation. (*"His pants is wrinkud. Dey need some pressin'."*)

The mood of the city fit my mood perfectly. Beneath the guise of lively music, 'round-the-clock partying, and friendly social banter lies a desperate, mournful quality to the city's crumbling grandeur—and to its people too. The "have-nots" live behind veils that barely conceal their deep pain and hardship; the atmosphere is thick with it.

New Orleans has a long, ugly history as a slave-trading port, first for the French and Spanish, and then for the Americans. White Louisianans fought vigorously during the American Civil War to preserve that tradition in support of their labor-intensive, plantation-based economy. The scars of those years have trickled down through generations of a people living in a place that has found no quick cure for the poverty and disenfranchisement of its freed citizens.

Alice and I found vampire scent trails in the city and steered clear of them as much as possible. They weren't as prevalent on Bourbon Street and in the French Quarter as we had expected, assuming drunken revelers or lost tourists would be obvious prey. We saw more

signs of vampire presence in the poorer districts of the city where drug users and dealers congregate and citizens have grown accustomed to seeing death in the streets. It wouldn't be hard to make someone disappear in these lawless parts of town.

Alice found a "Ghosts-and-Ghouls" tour for us to join one evening, which I didn't mind doing, thinking that it might be mildly entertaining. Our group of twenty was driven around the city in an open-air trolley car while a microphoned tour guide directed our attention to old houses and spooky buildings purported to have some connection to the occult. The guide was dressed as a vampire from Central Casting with a black cape, slicked-back hair, and a set of subtle fangs that he revealed at pivotal moments while telling his stories, which produced squeals of fright from the more impressionable participants.

The first location we viewed was a crumbling old convent with boarded-up windows where a boatload of newly arrived immigrant women were said to have lived while they acclimated to the New World and waited for French colonists to select them as wives. The ratio of men to women in eighteenth-century New Orleans was fourteen to one and no colony could survive long without such infusions of women of child-bearing years.

Each of the young women is said to have arrived with her wedding dowry stowed in a coffin-shaped box. These valuable boxes were placed in the convent's attic where the window shutters were closed and latched. When the nuns found the shutters hanging open in the morning, they nailed them shut. In spite of this, the attic shutters continued to open themselves during the night and are said to do so still after two-and-a-half centuries. Alice and I didn't try to determine whether the story is true, but we noticed no vampire scent in the vicinity. As vampire myths go, this one certainly could have been based on fact, though the part about "coffin-shaped" boxes is an obvious fiction.

Our tour guide told another vampire tale of an ageless European Count who was known to host expensive and elegant dinner parties for high-society guests, serving them the best food and drink while he only sipped red wine. He hosted these parties for fifty years without appearing to age at all, and then immigrated to America and continued the pattern for another fifty years in New Orleans. The punch line to the story is that a guest once grew curious about the gentleman's ubiquitous wine glass and when no one was looking, took a taste of its contents. He discovered that it was not wine at all, but blood—presumably human blood. We were shown the Count's mansion, an overgrown relic that remains standing in the Garden District. He may live there still, though Alice and I didn't detect any signs of that. If he exists at all, which is more than possible, perhaps he has been driven away for the time being by the intrusive tours. Like the Cullens, maybe he will return to his house when everyone has forgotten the stories.

The tour perpetuated the usual myths, including the fictions that we sleep in coffins and burst into flames in the sun. We laughed when the tour guide claimed that a human must be bitten seven times to join our ranks. I'm afraid I found it rather tempting to contradict the "expert" with the microphone.

Had other vampires taken this tour to see how humans perceive us? If so, did the participants realize how close they were to the real thing? Perhaps some of our kind selected their prey from among the curious. I could see how it might be perversely amusing to follow a titillated tourist from the tram into the late-night streets of New Orleans, approach him from behind, and ask how he had enjoyed the tour before initiating him to the real world of the damned.

After two days of exploring the city and keeping each other company—though hardly able to cheer each other up—my sister and I decided to return to the tasks we had undertaken in coming to the South. I would follow the road to Houston and Alice would head for Biloxi.

"You know, the Cullen name is revered in Houston," Alice informed me before we parted ways. "Hugh Roy Cullen struck it rich in Texas oil and used the money to found the University of Houston in the 1930s. He's a descendant of Carlisle's."

"Is that right? Carlisle never mentioned it," I replied, surprised.

"He probably never had a reason to. The Cullens are known in the area as the 'Rockefellers of Houston.' I can't see Carlisle bragging about that, can you?"

"No, though he could. It's certainly an improvement over what *his* father did—hunt vampires and burn witches at the stake." I smiled without amusement. "The Cullens have come a long way."

"We've mostly stopped killing people, anyway," Alice replied drolly.

With a brief hug of mutual support, we said our goodbyes and headed in opposite directions away from New Orleans. I returned to the Cadillac I'd parked near Highway 10 just outside the city and aimed it west toward Texas.

After only a few hours of driving, I approached Beaumont, Texas, where Jasper said Victoria had made her most recent cellphone call several days before. I had no reason to believe that she was still there, but I could track her more easily without my rental car. And since twilight was approaching, I returned it to the local Enterprise office and set out on foot once again.

Before long, it became evident both that Victoria had been in Beaumont and that she was heading toward Jasper's hometown of Houston. It was ninety miles between the two cities and as I ran from one to the other, Victoria's scent trail grew stronger. Approaching Houston, her path curved south around the city's center and then veered north again after she had passed the major metropolitan area. I followed her route by jumping over busy parkways, running through an outlying industrial zone, and entering a suburban area full of traffic lights and automobiles. Eventually, it became clear that the trail was leading to a large mall with a long, arched skylight for a roof. It reminded me of a section of the magnificent Galleria in Milan and when I grew closer, I could see that it was named for it too. The well-lit sign at the entrance to the mall parking lot said "Galleria Shopping Center."

Was Victoria really going to the mall? It was such a silly notion that it might have made me chuckle at an earlier time and a different place. She's a nomad, a vampire who normally avoids populated areas except to feed, but here she was visiting a suburban mall. Her trail, which became fresher as I sped along it, led me to a discrete employee's entrance in the side of the massive complex. I slipped through a heavy, gray fire door and stepped into a long, dark hallway. At the end of the "tunnel" was a rectangle of bright white light from which raucous sounds of shoppers could be heard. The light made me wary, but I walked toward it until the hallway opened into a huge, rectangular area the size of an arena, over which domed the enormous skylight. No doubt it flooded the complex with brilliant sunshine during the day.

The Galleria Shopping Center boasted three stories of high-end boutiques ringing its outside walls and two large department stores anchoring its ends. The second and third floors had balcony railings made of plate glass which hundreds of people leaned against to watch the action in the open rectangle of the first floor.

As I stepped into the bright light of the interior space and peered around an escalator installation, I saw what everyone was looking at. It was an ice-skating rink—a reference to the Rockefeller Center in New York—but this one was large enough to host a regulation hockey game. On the ice, which looked almost blue in color, orange cones formed a dotted oval. Dozens of ice skaters glided around the outside of the oval, while more skilled skaters leaped and performed tricks in the center. It was a beautiful pre-winter scene with one startling component. Through the crowd around the skating rink, I saw a bright, red-orange flame of hair rotating in an impossible spin. Victoria was in the center of things skating a little too brilliantly for a vampire trying to pass as human. I was shocked by her brazenness, but quickly became mesmerized along with everybody else.

Why would Victoria come to such a public place? It was true that I didn't know much about her, but I'd assumed she would be like other nomads I knew and choose not to mingle with humans. Perhaps she was playing a game whereby she would wander into a public place to

make a spectacle of herself before choosing her prey. If so, that implied she had been feeding from the population of this mall or was about to. If I handled the situation well, perhaps I could destroy her before she took the life of another human.

Victoria was skating in the center of the oval with the more advanced skaters and skate dancers. With preposterously short run-ups, she leaped into double axel spins, followed by perfect landings and artistic pirouettes, feats seen only in professional-class competitions, if there. Her showy performance either impressed or discouraged the other skaters into clinging to the side walls to watch. As larger areas of the ice became clear, my red-headed vampire prey claimed more of it. For ten full minutes she took over the rink, skating circles around anyone who dared to remain on the ice. When the piped-in music changed pace, Victoria altered her skating performance from slow and dramatic to fast and energetic.

An athletic human wearing tight-fitting spandex and black skates glided onto the ice behind Victoria and wrapped one arm around her waist, synchronizing his leg movements to hers. They skated one large figure eight around the ice together while the young man whispered something in her ear. Shortly thereafter, Victoria began skating backwards in front of her partner and on some signal leaped into the air. He simultaneously straightened his arms and lifted her above his head, balancing her there. She arched her back and spread her arms in a graceful flying pose as they circled the ice. Then on another signal, the young man flexed his knees to bounce Victoria slightly into the air. As she dropped, she swung her legs forward into a seated position allowing him to catch her cleanly in his arms. Then he set her feet on the ice and they glided forward in perfect synchrony. On the final notes of the popular song, the man dropped Victoria toward the ice with one arm around her waist, bending over her in a dramatic dip.

The floor-to-roof audience began to clap and cheer. Wolf whistles drifted down from the third-floor balconies. I watched Victoria skate gracefully off the ice amidst these accolades, leaving the young man to skate alone and watch after her with a look of confusion. Others soon joined him on the ice in pairs and trios. I moved toward the ice too, walking quickly so I wouldn't lose Victoria in the crowd. I was beyond the opposite end of the rink from where she had exited, but with so many observers nearby, I dared not run to catch up with her.

When I reached the spot where I had last seen her, Victoria was gone. I scanned the crowd of skaters on the ice and those watching from outside the railing. Then I scanned the throng of people toward the far end of the mall, but did not see her bright red hair. She had left in a hurry. I located her scent trail and began following it, moving as fast as I could without drawing attention to myself. When I passed the last of the boutiques lining the walls of the building, a sharp turn took me down another long, dark hallway. I passed a door to a janitorial

closet and two more leading to public restrooms before reaching a set of heavy exterior doors. I raced through them and cast an eye over the parking lot. No Victoria.

I began running then, tracking her west through a quiet commercial district and several suburban neighborhoods before reaching a large park, which was heavily wooded, but well-groomed. Racing into the park, I came upon a small lake and began to circle it to the left, getting nearly all the way around before I realized that I had lost Victoria's trail. *Damn!* It was so difficult to keep my mind on the task at hand when all I really wanted to do was run back to Bella...see her face, smell her scent...touch her hair...but *no!* I must guard against such thoughts! If I let my mind wander too far in that direction, I wasn't certain I could bring it back.

I retraced my steps around the lake, but couldn't locate Victoria's scent. Perhaps she had swum the several acres across it. If she had entered the water, though, she would have to exit somewhere! I tore around the full perimeter of the lake, but found only the one trail leading to it. Either she was hiding underwater or she had pulled the same trick she'd used to lose me in Shreveport...backtracking in her own footsteps. I didn't think she was in the lake and I didn't know how she could have backtracked toward me, because I hadn't been very far behind her. I ran backwards along her scent trail, but couldn't find any point where she had veered off. I continued running all the way back to the edge of the park, but still found nothing except for a sign I hadn't noticed before:

George Bush Park

(formerly Cullen Park)

Damn, damn, damn! Not *again!* Victoria hadn't been behaving evasively, so I'd let down my guard, let my mind wander, and missed it when she changed tactics. Had she detected my presence? I didn't see how she could have, but if not, why had she suddenly become evasive again?

Something else puzzled me. I was close to Victoria, but I hadn't heard her thoughts. *Why not?* Laurent would have told her that I could read minds, something I hadn't bothered to do when I'd met her at the baseball field. Maybe there was something peculiar about her mind that made her hard to recognize. Or maybe she operated so much on instinct that she was able to avoid consciously thinking about any strategy.

Whether she knew I was chasing her or not, Victoria was dodging me very effectively. In spite of her tricks, though, she was leaving a trail of scent behind her, so in theory, all I had to do was find it and I could find her. I decided to run a series of north-south lines about fifty

yards apart over the area between the park and the mall. If I didn't find her scent that way, then I would run a series of east–west lines.

Running a grid can be tedious, but I had no other ideas and nothing but time on my hands. Maybe the chore was a blessing in disguise, because running was one of the few things that brought any kind of relief from the endless ache in the place where my heart used to be. I began running lines crosswise to Victoria's original trail, cursing myself all the while for my ridiculous ineptitude. I couldn't do anything right by Bella, nothing at all, including trying to eliminate the danger from her life.

I continued with my unproductive exercise for ten minutes before it occurred to me that if Victoria had repeated her trick of backtracking on her own footsteps, then perhaps she had also repeated her trick of jumping into the trees to escape. With that inspiration, I bolted back to the park and sprang into the first stand of pine trees I saw, leaping from one tree to another to another, moving fast.

If Victoria's scent had been in the trees above me as I ran, I should have been able to smell it from the ground, but I hadn't and I could think of only two possible reasons for that. Either the trail in the trees paralleled an existing trail on the ground or I hadn't run beneath the right trees. I raced a jagged line through the trees around to the opposite side of the lake.

Then, unexpectedly, I found it. The trail in the trees seemed to start from nowhere, with no ground trail leading to it. Now I understood what Victoria had done. Instead of running into the lake or backtracking from it as I had thought, she'd jumped across it and landed in a tree! I was impressed by the number of clever tricks she had for evading a pursuer. Based on her use of them, I had to assume that Victoria knew she was being followed, though perhaps she didn't yet know by whom. If her nastiness toward my family was any indication, Victoria could have any number of pursuers bent on doing away with her. She had created a terrible stir in Shreveport, for example, and local vampires there might have taken exception to that.

I ran through the trees until the scent dropped to the ground and out of the park on the west side. If Victoria continued in that direction, eventually she would end up in San Antonio, which quite possibly was where she was headed. I prepared myself for a long chase.

Victoria's detour into the Houston mall puzzled me. The way she had run directly to it made me think that she'd been there before. I wondered if she was developing the habit of using such public places as her hunting grounds, which was what she had done in Shreveport. If Victoria hadn't decided to leave the ice so abruptly—*because of me?*—perhaps she would have lured the young man out of the mall and fed on him. It was as good a hunting strategy as any, I supposed, except that it drew a lot of attention to herself.

Oh! That was it!

Finally, I understood. She was *trying* to draw attention to herself. She was sending a signal to other vampires that she was in the neighborhood! Word was certain to get around to those who lived in the area. She was either inviting her own destruction or she was making sure that she met a particular Texas-based vampire. Who else could it be but Maria?

Maria was certain to have enemies—she was that kind of individual—who might discover Victoria's disruptive presence before she did, but one way or another she would hear about Victoria. After all, Maria had taken control of Texas in the days when Jasper was with her. Maybe Victoria was trying to draw Maria out while avoiding being attacked by her or others who caught wind of her. That would explain Victoria's evasiveness and why I was finding it so difficult to catch up to her.

This project was becoming more involved than I had expected when I took it on. Even so, I was finding it difficult to work up much enthusiasm for it. I had no real interest in Victoria. As long as she stayed away from Bella, I couldn't care less where she went or what she did.

Then a thought occurred to me—what if Victoria did decide to go after Bella? If she headed toward Forks, I would *have* to follow her, wouldn't I? *Of course I would!* I could never allow Victoria to get anywhere near my beloved!

Oh Bella... Here I am wishing for the unthinkable just so I can be near you again....

14. Finding Maria

Victoria led me on a fast cross-country chase, followed by a lively tour around San Antonio, Texas, which is where she headed after evading me in Houston. Though I tracked her as fast as I could, somehow she kept ahead of me all the way to her destination. It was true that I had let my mind wander a couple of times and had had to backtrack when I lost her scent, but she didn't seem to be eluding me deliberately.

That changed once we reached San Antonio. Victoria dragged me all over the city and try as I might, I couldn't catch up to her. Whenever I got close enough to detect her thoughts—which weren't particularly coherent—she pulled something from her bag of tricks and escaped before I could get my hands on her. I decided that she must have a gift for evasion. Drawing that conclusion was easier on my ego, anyway, than admitting what an abysmal tracker I was. I had been blessed with a number of abilities beyond the norm for a vampire, but clearly tracking was not one of them.

As I pursued Victoria around San Antonio, I was introduced to a number of sights for which it is known. Outside Sak's Fifth Avenue at a north-end shopping center, I blinked in surprise at a pair of incongruously placed cowboy boots, four stories tall. They seemed to be the long-lost cousins of a similar pair located in South Seattle. I followed Victoria beneath the Tower of the Americas which, like Seattle's Space Needle, is a 460-foot observation tower built for a 1960s World's Fair.

Why does everything I see have to remind me of my true home?

Even as far away as Texas, I could not forget for one moment where I would prefer to be! My desire to return there sapped my strength and weakened my commitment to the task at hand, but I forced myself to persevere.

During one of her sorties through the city, Victoria led me to a place synonymous with America's conquering of the "Wild West." The Battle of the Alamo represents the beginnings of the State of Texas. It was there that fifteen hundred Mexican troops overcame one hundred eighty to two hundred fifty Republic of Texas defenders in 1836, brutally slaughtering all but two survivors. Mass outrage inspired volunteers from around North America to join the Texian army and push the Mexicans back across the Rio Grande, the border between Mexico and Texas that remains today. A few years later, the Republic of Texas became the State of Texas, the 28th state to join the union of American States.

Vampires who care about accuracy in historical accounts take exception to the story of the Alamo, which made men such as James Bowie and Davy Crockett legendary American folk heroes. James Bowie led the grossly outnumbered Texian defenders at the Alamo and Davy Crockett, a former Tennessee senator, fought valiantly, of course, but tales of how they and their men killed two or three Mexican soldiers for every one of their own who died is sheer myth.

The truth is that southern Texas was a major battleground of the Southern Vampire Wars. The back-and-forth fighting between the Texians and Mexicans proved a rich feeding ground for vampires who could easily mingle among the soldiers and hide their killings amidst the war dead. Though modern-day Texans are taught that their brave forefathers possessed superhuman fighting skills, they merely had superhuman assistance. Most of the Mexican soldiers who died were taken by vampires after the battle was over.

Humans who knew this fact never lived to tell the tale, though you will find that northern Mexicans, by and large, have a deeply rooted belief in Satan and his demons, a category that includes my kind. The devout Catholics among them offer prayers for our souls stuck in Purgatory, which is a kindly gesture considering how many of them vampires have fed upon over the centuries.

The Alamo, which was a Spanish mission before it became a military fort, stands in the center of San Antonio and is one of the oldest buildings in the country. It has four sister missions and all together they compose the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. One can take a tour and hear the story of the doomed soldiers who defended the Alamo or attend a Catholic mass in one of the missions.

I received an idiosyncratic tour of the Alamo and its sisters one dark night, courtesy of Victoria. The crumbling stone facades, which are in various states of disrepair, are interesting as such relics go, but I found no pleasure in playing hide-and-seek among them. Victoria kept just enough distance between us to frustrate me completely while compelling me to continue the chase. My frustration was as much a reflex as anything, because I was finding it difficult to care. Nevertheless, I dutifully tracked my prey despite my diminishing interest in whether I ever caught her.

We were into February, the month of the famous San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo, which is one of the largest such events in the country, attracting a million visitors over three weeks. On another night of playing cat-and-mouse, I pursued Victoria onto the rodeo grounds during an evening competition, but the crowd was so thick that I couldn't keep track of her, much less confront her. She took the opportunity to taunt me once again.

I was stunned into stillness when an enormous Brahman bull bolted from the chute where he was being held and charged into the arena bucking and twisting, desperately trying to dislodge the red-headed female on his back. Wearing a white suede cowgirl hat, Victoria clutched the rope handle in one hand and raised her opposite arm in the air, effortlessly riding the dangerous creature for the regulation eight seconds, plus an additional twenty, before casually hopping off his back.

It is practically unheard of for a woman to ride a professional rodeo bull and the audience in the arena went crazy to see Victoria not only compete, but far exceed the efforts of the cowboys. They didn't know that she was not a registered contestant and likely would disappear before anyone could identify her.

Victoria's audacity hadn't shocked only me—this time, she had attracted the attention of another vampire too. I heard her thoughts before I saw her. I knew it was Maria by her instant fury in response to Victoria's presence in San Antonio. Maria's first instinct was to track down the foolhardy female and destroy her immediately. She couldn't abide the intrusion of competitors who might "poach" in the city she called home.

After another moment's consideration, though, Maria grew curious about the brazen creature who dared to put on such a public display. She decided she wanted to meet Victoria and since Maria nearly always got what she wanted, I was certain that she would. Perhaps the territorial matriarch would tear Victoria apart and set her on fire, relieving me of my duty to do so.

Though I suspected that Victoria wanted to cross paths with Maria, I did not, so when I realized she was nearby, I made myself scarce. Maria was bound to recognize my scent when she came upon it, but I had no intention of letting her find me. After her "performance" in Calgary, I remained deeply suspicious of her. She was far too unpredictable to let her touch my life or my family's lives in any way if I could prevent it. I was also concerned that she might be holding a long-term vendetta against Jasper since he had abandoned her so long ago. And now that he had Alice, Maria knew he would never align with her again. Jasper could not replace her mate—who had been destroyed by the Volturi during the Southern Wars—but he was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had. It was natural that she would want him back the next time she decided she needed a companion.

Despite my apprehension about Maria, I did want to know what she would do when she caught up with Victoria so, rather than flee, I retreated several miles from the rodeo grounds. I ran far enough that it would take Maria some time to track me if she wanted to, but stayed close enough that I could hear her thoughts, which were abundant when Victoria flew into the arena atop the massive bull.

Red-headed puta! Who does she think she is? This is my city! How dare she come here and broadcast her presence to humans! What does she want? I should send Volturi after her! Ah no, I don't want los pendejos here. She will dishearten Butch—no me equivoqué—our best bull.

“Get her off! She'll ruin him!” Maria called out uselessly, her voice lost amidst the screams of the crowd. She was yelling at the rodeo clowns, both of whom wore exaggerated, painted smiles, highly arched eyebrows, ludicrous wigs, and puffy white blouses with red polka dots. On the functional side, they also wore rugged blue jeans, leather chaps, gloves, and cowboy boots, and one carried a wooden barrel around his neck into which he could duck if a bull charged him. He was meant to distract the angry beast while his partner helped a thrown rider escape the arena. Without these entertaining, but brave and highly skilled professionals to do their jobs, the rider was likely to get kicked or gored. Bull-riding is deadly sport.

Through Maria's eyes, I saw Victoria retrieve her fallen hat, blithely brush some dirt off of it, and skip a jagged line to the arena fence as the raging Butch charged. The rodeo clowns jumped into his path, endangering their lives to entice the bull away from Victoria. It was unfortunate that they didn't know she did not require their help. She gracefully vaulted over the arena fence with one hand on the top rail.

Arrrgh! I'll kill her myself!

I watched through Maria's eyes as she began following Victoria. I saw her slip through the crowd to the end of the arena where the cowhands were managing the contestants and the bulls. At the opposite end of the arena, the clowns were herding Butch toward the livestock exit. Choosing to remove himself to a quieter place, the bull ambled toward the exit gate after issuing a vicious two-legged kick into the air behind him. The clowns leaped back reflexively, even though they were out of range of his hooves. The black Brahman must have weighed nearly a ton—one of his kicks could liquefy a human's innards. Irritated as Butch was by Victoria's triumph, he rammed the wooden fence with his head before finally allowing himself to be marshaled through the gate.

Maria followed Victoria across the rodeo grounds, losing sight of her, but tracking her scent trail. I moved in the same direction so that I wouldn't lose Maria's thoughts to distance. She had not detected my scent, which was a relief. I kept pace with the two females and watched as Victoria lured Maria through the city of San Antonio just as she had done to me, using this trick and that trick to stay one step ahead. Finally, amidst a colorful outburst of expletives both in English and Spanish, Maria finally gave up trying to track Victoria. I understood how she felt, though I had to gloat just a little.

I didn't try to locate Victoria after she shook off Maria. Instead, I decided to follow Maria under some vague sense that she hadn't seen the last of Victoria. I could let Maria do the tracking and if I was lucky, perhaps she would end the pesky vampire.

Maria was much easier to track than Victoria had been. I stayed a good distance away as I trailed her to an isolated homestead well outside the city. She disappeared into a large red barn, an old structure with a sagging roof that sat on a quarter-section of land. Nearby stood a rundown farmhouse, several other outbuildings, and a corral with half-a-dozen enormous bulls milling about in separate pens.

Now I understood why Maria had been so concerned about Butch. She raised rodeo bulls and Butch was probably one of hers! Renting the services—both athletic and stud—of a champion bull was a lucrative business. The best would be worth \$100,000 or more if sold outright. As a native Chicagoan, I learned all about the cattle industry as a kid. Chicago had the country's largest stockyards and biggest trading market for beef in the early 20th century. Perhaps it still does. I've lost touch with all of that as a vampire, though I have traded quite a bit in the Chicago commodities market. Maria probably has a substantial interest in that market too.

Maria needed a good daytime lair, since San Antonio normally has three hundred days of sunshine a year. Now that I knew where she holed up—seemingly alone—and since we had both lost track of Victoria, I decided to seek my own daytime hiding place. South of the city, I located a good-sized stand of oak and pine trees. With the brown leaves of the oaks clinging to their branches, the small patch of woods provided decent cover. I found a huge live oak whose roots bulged from the ground, creating a nest where I dug into the dirt a little, lay down, and covered myself with duff as I had done before.

Being in the southern U.S. was a huge inconvenience compared to living in the north, but it also removed my obligation to shadow Victoria around the clock. I had the sunny days free to brood and pine for Bella, as I now did from my new burrow. At this juncture, I found it much too easy to let go of the world and just drift. That hadn't been my plan when I found these woods, but letting time pass was easier than making an effort to live with my unrelenting pain.

Eventually, thirst drove me from the ground again. I had been suffering from it for what seemed like a long time without rousing myself to do anything about it. Then one night, a group of unsuspecting, white-tailed deer wandered among the trees, drawing me from my grave before I knew what I was doing. I chased down the family of deer one by one until I had drunk the buck, the doe and two juveniles. Usually, I tried not to take young animals or females of reproductive age, but these periods of semi-starvation taxed my self-control.

Once disturbed, I endeavored to keep moving and not give in to the pull of inertness. As long as I was “up,” I figured I might as well see what Maria was doing. Maybe she had caught up to Victoria and eliminated her. I might reconsider my negative attitude toward her if she had done so.

I had no idea how long I had been out of commission this time. My cell phone, which was my only means for determining that, was dead, of course. I didn't particularly care, but if I'd been *incomunicado* for months, Esme would be worried. I was fairly confident that it hadn't been that long.

Maria's farmhouse and barn were only a few miles away, so at twilight I ran without enthusiasm in that direction. She was not home, judging by the lack of readable thoughts in the area. Rather than try to track her based on her freshest trail, I decided to wait her out.

I had all the time in the world to complete my self-appointed task and I still wasn't ready to face my family. In my deep despondency, I knew I would be no company for anyone, whether they wished for me to return or not. Were my days as part of a family over? I hoped not, for I truly loved my mother and father, my brothers and sisters. It was just so hard to try and pretend to be the man I once was. I seriously doubted whether I could be him ever again.

I hid myself among tree roots closer to Maria's home base and returned to my state of inertia. My mind didn't shut down during these periods—not at all—but I gave up all attempts to direct it. Invariably, it wandered of its own accord back to the one subject I cared about. As much as I knew brooding would do me no good, it took more effort to prevent it than I was capable of. My reason for being was so far from my grasp that I didn't particularly care to *be* at all.

What are you doing now, my love? Do you ever think of your hapless lover? Do you pity me in my pain or am I merely a wisp of a memory wafting into the ether like the smoke from a dwindling cigarette? I miss you, my darling. I am nothing without you...no thing at all...or perhaps just a lost thing, floating. Will you remember my soulless self when you reach Heaven? May God grant me the mercy of insensibility when that day comes and the wherewithal to release myself from this endless night.

Thoughts drifted in and out, both mine and those of the creatures who passed within my hearing. I took no note of them until a familiar mental voice broke into my awareness.

The colonias...she feeds there upon the wretched. It is no care of mine. She cannot reduce their numbers...they are a self-renewing resource. I have other concerns in my city. Still, she is interesting. I will keep my eyes on her. Perhaps it is time to take a companion. If she cannot trust me, then perhaps I can trust her. She is heartless, like me, more interested in the battle even than in the win. Always there is encroachment. Si, maybe it is time.

Colonias? I knew the word translated as “colonies,” but I didn’t know what colonies Maria referred to. Whatever they were, it would seem that Victoria had fled there. Where are the *colonias*? I had no clue. Back to civilization for the likes of me. I needed to do some research.

It was simple enough to find a local library and sit down at a public computer terminal without attracting too much attention. I still had a change of clothes and a brush to my name and late-winter (early spring?) sunset came rather early. Originally, I’d thought I would bring my laptop along on this journey, but I hadn’t done so. Anything vital could be retrieved from the internet via my cell phone—except that it was dead again. Batteries are the weak link in the marvelous inventions of the present century. To store power is a difficult endeavor, both technologically and philosophically, I decided. At least I could rejuvenate my cell phone at an electrical outlet while I did my research.

Through my internet link to the universe of information, I discovered that the word *colonias* refers to primitive settlements along the Texas border with Mexico, and increasingly, on the outskirts of Texas cities. Immigrants trying to make new lives for themselves in the state of Texas purchase small plots of land with loans from unscrupulous developers who sell them divided, subdivided, and further subdivided lots, often located on top of pipelines or oil waste pits, without providing the basic necessities of civilized life, such as roads, water, drainage, and sewer lines.

The new landowners locate an ancient motor home, trailer, tent, or whatever they can find and set it on their property. They live in their makeshift housing while they begin to provide services for themselves, their first priorities being a source of water and some kind of rudimentary septic system.

As more and more people move into the cramped spaces, problems mount. The little shantytowns become flooded with sewage every time it rains as undiverted water fills the poorly-fashioned or old and crumbling sewage tanks. Children play in the dirt tracks that pass for roads, while plastic tarps are strung up against the weather. For those who cannot find or

afford a beat-up, 1970s-era trailer home, pieces of plywood, tin, fiberglass, and even cardboard serve as walls for crude shacks.

According to internet sources, at least two thousand *colonias* exist along the border between Texas and Mexico and dozens, perhaps hundreds, more have developed outside southern-Texas cities. Laws for creating civilized communities have been bypassed so that real-estate developers can make a buck, but in their way, the *colonias* provide some kind of opportunity for the very poor. By all accounts, through their own hard work, the citizens of these slums have worked together to improve them so that the oldest *colonias* have become poor, but functional villages.

I could see how such shantytowns would be ripe hunting grounds for a nomad like Victoria. She could move from one to another with no interference and no risk of discovery. Due to fears of harassment or deportation, whether real or unfounded, the residents of *colonias* are notoriously uncooperative with authorities. They do not report crimes. If the Texas Rangers show up to investigate a murder or missing person, many flee across the border until they feel safe enough to return to their homes. Missing persons are impossible to verify.

Due to their general distrust of the government, the residents of *colonias* are difficult to count, but different sources estimate that 100,000 to 400,000 people live in shantytowns along the border. How would I find Victoria among such a huge population? I decided to head toward the border to find out, still having no understanding of Victoria's motivation for the games she played.

I prowled the *colonias* like a cat on a midnight hunt, scouring one after another during the dark hours and on the odd cloudy day, but I met with no success. I was only slightly aware of time passing—it had become an endless chain of agonizing links, one day curving into the next. At every twilight, I had to renew my resolve to continue the hunt when I longed to escape the pain and return to my Bella. (*No! Not mine!*) Only for one look at her, I told myself, before fighting back the urge.

Each dawn gave me a reprieve from my struggle since the sunlight prevented me from pursuing my true desires. It had become my habit to bury myself between the roots of trees during the daytime and continue the search for Victoria's trail at night. If I were being

completely honest, I would admit that very often one daytime turned into two, turned into several, before I could coax myself from another temporary grave and move on.

The battle to stay away from Bella—to relieve the pain—had become constant. The agony of my loss had not diminished in the least. It seemed only to intensify, though perhaps my tolerance for it was simply lessening.

The ache had become the crux of my existence. It was a living, breathing entity, bent on devouring me from the inside out. I endured every chomp and each nibble as tender parts of me I never knew existed were gnawed into my awareness.

The wind whistled through my hollow center as if I were an outline, a stick figure. Whatever it was that made me me was disappearing bit by bit, but the diminishment didn't relieve the pain. I began to understand the torment of amputees whose missing limbs torture them long after they have been removed. I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them to ease the anguish, but nothing helped. There can be no relief from phantom pain.

I made vows one after another. *You can stand it for two weeks*, I told myself, *just two weeks*. I redoubled my tracking efforts. When two weeks had passed and I had not fled toward what I knew would give me relief, I set myself a new goal. *Hang on for another week, just one more week*. Then that date passed with no sign of Victoria and my ability to care dwindled with each escalation in suffering. *One more week*, I chanted, *just one more week*. In this way, time passed slowly, every night a tortuous battle with myself, each day a relieving restraint on impulsivity. Bella deserved a life!

With each night so mind-numbingly like the last, I no longer knew what time was, but that didn't prevent its passing. Spring was making itself known in the subtropical climate when I finally found Victoria's trail. The night was no different than any other. I ran along the dirt pathways that constituted the streets of a shantytown, this one only a short distance along the border from the last. I dodged the endless stream of raw sewage that flowed from cracked or flooded septic tanks.

Each home was carefully arranged on its allotted sliver of land. A cinderblock cube with black holes for windows neighbored a junker travel trailer with rusting sides and a partially collapsed roof, which neighbored a rustic shelter of old tin and ragged plastic tarps. In other times, the squalor of these proudly owned pieces of property would have elicited an empathic response, but inside the wretchedness of my present existence, I barely noticed the suffering of others. It registered as an external manifestation of my own misery and little more.

As I passed through the provisional streets in the middle of the night, I saw people wandering about or lounging in the open air, no doubt to escape the stifling heat of their dwellings, but no one spoke to me. I was much too white-skinned to be good news to them, though nobody bothered me either.

I was approaching the edge of the shabby community, preparing to move on to the next when her familiar scent drifted up from the packed dirt of a footpath. *Victoria!* The scent was faint, perhaps days old, but unmistakable—a combination of mown grass, coriander, and lime, not to my liking, but as alluring to humans as any of our scents are, I supposed.

Immediately, I began to run, following Victoria's trail from the path I was on to the fresher openness of empty prairie that led to the next slum. It took two full nights of running from one *colonia* to the next to finally locate Victoria. I had reached a particularly crowded, filthy slum where a long, narrow pit served as a community toilet for the newer residents. The untreated sewage was intolerably foul after another hot and sunny day in southern Texas. Unfortunately, I couldn't both hold my breath and track Victoria.

As usual, I heard her before I saw her, a faint whispering of non-human thoughts regarding the ferocity of her thirst and whether she might steal a child from a nearby hammock or grant it mercy and select an adult in its place. My eyes darted in every direction trying to find her position. Then as I took a few tentative steps along her fresh trail, I heard her high, musical voice floating on the air. She was speaking so softly that a human could not have detected the sound.

"...enough of this place. I need time away from here, though I haven't accomplished what I came to do."

A pause.

"No, not yet. It is inevitable, though. I must look over my shoulder constantly. I need a break."

Pause.

"Rio, I think, through Mexico and Central America, or maybe as a stowaway on a boat."

I perked up my ears. Was Brazil Victoria's ultimate destination? What about Maria? Was she not trying to lure Maria from the shadows? Perhaps not. It had been only a theory, after all.

I had no delusions about the difficulty of finding Victoria once she immersed herself among the 6,000,000 residents of Rio de Janeiro. I had to find and destroy her before she left Texas...this miserable hellhole in Texas. I steeled myself for a confrontation, and tried to pluck

up enough strong feeling to fight my enemy successfully. I had promised Alice and myself that this was not going to be a suicide mission.

When I felt ready to face her, I began to hurry along Victoria's fresh trail, intending to overtake her unawares and tear off her head before she knew what had hit her. I was confident that she did not know I was near because she continued to talk on her cell phone, whispering her plans to some unknown friend. Could it be Laurent?

I grew closer, though I still hadn't spotted her, when her conversation abruptly stopped and her thoughts became garbled. I felt her fleeing from me, but I could no longer decipher her intentions. She was leaving behind a mental blur of sorts, not a void of thoughts, but rather a mixture of primal emotions: fear, excitement, and an overwhelming urge to escape.

Victoria knew I had found her! She was racing to get away. I gave up on stealth and ran full-bore in pursuit of her. Every so often, I got a glimpse of her brightly colored hair, but always she stayed just a few seconds ahead of me, dodging between shacks and decrepit automobiles and around waste piles. How did she do it? I doubted whether she had my speed, but there was no other explanation.

And then she was gone. Just...gone. Her scent trail ended abruptly near the edge of the *colonia*, leaving no trace of itself or of her.

"Come out and fight!" I demanded of empty air. "Coward!"

No reply. Nothing.

"This is not over!" I bellowed uselessly into the silent night.

15. Banished

Needless to say, I searched for Victoria...up, down, all around. When that yielded nothing, I waited, thinking that she must be hiding nearby. I waited all night. I listened all day. I came back the next night and listened the following day. Still nothing.

Looking back on it, I think I know what happened. I cannot verify my theory now that I am on the opposite side of the equator, but I hope I was right. I hope Victoria suffered a great deal as she waited for me to end my vigil and go away.

When I finally gave up on finding Victoria in Texas, I still had one advantage on her—I knew where she was headed and I had already decided to anticipate her next move and fly to Rio de Janeiro myself. So as I watched and waited for her to emerge from her hiding place in the *colonia* and face me, I dreamed of kidnapping my love and taking her to South America with me. If I stole her away from everything we knew, perhaps we could escape the dangers that plagued her. In a new environment with a new start, maybe I could protect her better. Maybe I could stay with her for a lifetime.

It was a fantasy, I knew. *Where* Bella resided was not the source of her problems. I was. It was me and my world causing all the trouble—and I couldn't escape from me, nor could I bring her into my world. It was impossible. I already knew that, so why did I torture myself yet again by dreaming dreams that could never come true?

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
The courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

I had nothing but prayers to keep me away from her now. This one—quite suitably—was a page torn from an addict's handbook.

My only other coping mechanism was to try and distract myself from the pain, and I was doing that as best I could. No longer, though, could I tolerate thinking in terms of two weeks, or even one week, of this torture. I borrowed another credo from Alcoholics Anonymous:

One day at a time.

One day at a time to survive the torment, one *night* at a time not to race back to Forks in search of relief. With constant sunshine in Rio, I would not run during the day. I still had the discipline of almost ninety years to keep me from breaking the principal rule of our kind—to keep our

existence secret from humans. On second thought, I guess I'd already allowed myself one exception. Bella...my true love...knew what I was.

I'd last spoken to Alice from San Antonio, to let her and the rest of the family know that I was okay. She'd already known it, but I wanted to give our mother a reason to believe it. I had spoken to my father too, at his insistence.

"Edward, we want you to come home," he had said.

"I can't, Carlisle. I just...can't."

"I know that you're struggling, son, but can't we do anything to help?"

"I don't think you can. I have to make sure that Bella is safe and—besides staying away from her myself—that means eliminating Victoria. I'm close now. I think I have a good chance of finding her," I told him, without mentioning the waning of my drive to do so.

"I won't pressure you then. You must do what you feel is right. Just know that your mother misses you terribly, as do I. And we love you. Don't forget that."

"I won't, Dad. I love you both. I wish I could show it better."

"It's okay. We'll be here for you when you're ready."

It had been what? A month since then? Six weeks? I was no longer sure. Alice and Jasper had been back in Ithaca quite a while, long enough for Jasper to be well along in his Philosophy program at Cornell. Emmett and Rosalie had been on their way back from Europe.

"It's March, Edward," Alice was reminding me now. I'd let her reach me after I'd been in Brazil for two days.

"March, huh?"

"Yes. We're all going up to Denali for Cornell spring break. It would be nice if you tried staying in touch with the real world a little bit," she chastised.

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" I said defensively.

"Yes, but I had to call *you*."

"You would have done it anyway."

"That's beside the point."

"What do you want, Alice?" I grouched.

“So you’re in Rio now, I take it.”

“That’s right. Victoria came down here on holiday or something. I suppose being hounded across two states was too much for her.”

“So she’s there for Carnival?”

“Oh, crap! I didn’t realize—it’s Carnival! That’s why—”

“You really are out of touch! How can you be in Rio and not know it’s Carnival?” she asked without waiting for an answer. “Laurent’s gone, by the way.”

“He’s not in Denali?”

“No, he left a couple of weeks ago. He told Tanya he had something he needed to do. Jasper thinks he went hunting...real hunting.”

“Do you think he came down here to meet Victoria?” I asked with trepidation.

“So you haven’t found her, yet, I take it? I was hoping you could tell me.”

“No, I haven’t tracked her yet, but I haven’t been working too hard at it since I arrived. I will, though.”

“Good. I can’t get any picture of Victoria at all—or Laurent either, for that matter. They’ve both gone off my radar. I don’t know why. It’s bugging me.”

“Well, I chased her to the south Texas border,” I told Alice, “and she said she was coming here, so...maybe it’s too far away?”

“Shouldn’t be. I can see you.”

“Right.” I really was slow today. “I’ll keep an eye out for Laurent too. It could have been him she was talking to about Rio.”

“Ooh, that would hurt Irina’s feelings if it’s true, so if you find him, don’t tell me, I guess, then I can’t spill the beans.”

“If I find him, you’ll know it. Since you see me *so well*,” I retorted. The sarcasm was not lost on Alice.

“Thank God! Since you never call!” she hollered back. I should have seen that coming, but I didn’t. I remained silent. “Okay, Edward, but I want you to know that Rosalie is not happy and when Rose is not happy, none of us are happy.”

“What’s her problem?” I already knew, I thought, and I didn’t really want to. For once, this situation had absolutely nothing to do with Rosalie, though she no doubt thought I was punishing her personally by staying away.

“I think you know.”

“I do, Alice, I do. But I cannot look after Rosalie’s feelings right now. I can barely keep myself together, much less try to make her happy. I’m hanging on by my fingernails here.” I heard my voice fade to a whisper and break slightly on the last word.

“I know,” my sister replied gently. “She’ll survive. Here’s the thing, though. Why don’t you stop this nonsense now? Just give it up already. You can, you know. Your problems are all in your head. Just give in and be happy!”

“Alice...” I growled.

“Okay, okay...you do what you have to do. I promised I wouldn’t interfere, but I didn’t promise I wouldn’t tell you what I thought about it.”

“Bye, Alice.”

“Be that way then, but try to leave your phone on a little more, please. You’re worrying Esme something terrible!”

“Okay, Alice. Bye, Alice.”

“Bye, Edward.”

As much as she infuriated me sometimes, I was eternally grateful for Alice. She was my only link to sanity right now. She disagreed with me completely about Bella, but I knew she understood my difficulties and she cared enough to check in. The others in my family would check in too if I let them, but Alice was the only one who could stay detached enough not to add to my burden. What would I do without Alice?

But I’d been thinking about something else before my sister called...

Victoria had jumped into a septic tank! It’s the only possible way she could have escaped me. Except for the grouping of new shacks, which used an open pit for their toilet, every inhabited plot of that *colonia* wasteland had a septic tank, or some semblance of one. The yard where Victoria’s scent disappeared had one, but I’d only just now put two and two together, probably because the idea was so foul, or maybe because I was too distraught and distracted to think clearly at the time.

I remember seeing the neck of the buried tank sticking up above the dirt. It had a plastic cover that looked like the lid to a gigantic pickle jar with no threads. I didn't know what held it on—perhaps it floated off when the tank got full. But the opening would have been big enough for Victoria to lift the lid and slide in. Once inside, her scent would have been well masked by the odor of sewage.

The corners of my mouth twitched upward the tiniest bit. She'd had to dive into a vat of sewage to dodge me! *Ha, ha, ha!* Even if I never got close enough to destroy her, I had paid her back in some small measure for helping James track and nearly kill Bella. It wasn't enough, of course, but it was something...something tangibly nasty.

Unfortunately, I was already in South America before I'd figured that out. I spent two seconds thinking about how I would have coaxed her out of the tank had I realized she was in there. Perhaps a lit torch... Would a closed septic tank contain enough methane to blow up? I wondered idly. I thought it might. Not the best way to maintain secrecy about our presence, certainly, but *damn*, it would have been funny!

Water under the bridge. Now I was hanging around in Rio waiting for Victoria to arrive. I felt confident that she would come. I'd heard her phone conversation about going to Brazil before she knew I was nearby. It was only later that she began to flee from me. I don't know how she detected me—I'd been downwind of her and moved silently. It remained an unanswered question.

After that incident, I'd returned to San Antonio and caught an airplane to Atlanta, another from there to Brasilia (Brazil's capital city), and a third to Rio de Janeiro. The necessarily indirect route made it a ridiculously long journey—sixteen hours—but the first class seats were tolerable. I had an eternity of time to kill, anyway.

It wasn't until disembarking that last plane that I began to face the reality of the task I'd set for myself. With Rio's six million citizens and four hundred fifty-six square miles, how on God's green earth did I think I would find Victoria? My copious good luck?

It was crazy for me to be in Rio hunting Victoria. It was idiotic and maybe even foolhardy. I think I knew that when I bought my ticket, but getting farther away from Forks seemed like a good idea, regardless of the reason. The hunt could go on forever in such a large city and having that *raison d'être* might keep me from running back to Bella with my tail between my legs. I'd tried everything else I could think of and felt nearer than ever to failure.

So I'd banished myself to Rio. I arrived in the wee hours of the morning, but the airport was still a nightmare of crowds and confusion. I'd had to make an effort not to bruise or break anyone as they were bumped and bulldozed into my path. I escaped as quickly as I could and

started walking toward the Central District of the city, brushing off cab drivers. I knew the airport was close to downtown, which would do for an initial destination.

Downtown Rio is pretty at night, modern and well-lit, with enough elegant old buildings to give it a European feel. I passed the National Historical Museum and several tree-lined plazas just beyond the airport, then a number of stone edifices that looked like courts and legislative buildings. Much to my surprise, the downtown was not deserted. There is little or no residential space in the business district and I had seen no late-night clubs or early-morning restaurants there, but people were still on the street. I avoided them as best I could. They seemed to be a young and raucous crowd and drugs and alcohol were in evidence.

My first goal was to find a daylight hiding place for myself. I had not timed things well, as it turned out, and pre-dawn light already was sliding up the horizon. I passed a beautiful, old, stone church and thought I might stay there if I could get inside it undetected. Churches always have odd closets, empty niches, trapdoors to crypts, and such. I didn't have a lot of time to fool around finding those hidden spaces, though.

I kept walking, hoping to locate something simpler and more obvious to use as my lair. A few blocks on, though, I saw another beautiful stone church and decided that it must be an omen. I gazed upward at the elaborate structure which had two bell towers flanking its front façade and a huge dome arcing over the central building, and tried to figure out the best way to gain access.

Oddly enough, the grounds around the church were filled with dozens of black- and brown-skinned children, some as young as four or five and others as old as sixteen or seventeen, more boys than girls. Many of the children were sleeping on the grass and on the surrounding concrete, but some were awake and prowling the area. When they spied me, they rushed over en masse and swarmed around my legs, giving me shy smiles and firing off a hundred questions in Portuguese. I felt more than one little hand reach into the pockets of my trousers and the back of my waistband. They were looking for a wallet or a money belt, touching me everywhere, seemingly immune to the subtle signs that mark me as "other." Most human beings keep their distance from us intuitively, sensing the danger in our overly pale skin, the odd color of our eyes, the stillness of our bodies, but these children were fearless. When I thought about the experience later, I realized that at least one of those little hands probably was offering me "personal services," which made me very sad, indeed.

So I was meeting the notorious street children of Rio de Janeiro! I had read articles about them in the 1990s after several carloads of men, including off-duty police officers, drove to this very place, Candelaria Church, and opened fire while the children were sleeping. Eight children were killed and many others were wounded that night, purportedly as retribution for

hurling rocks at a police car earlier that day. The internationally reported incident, which became known as the Candelaria Massacre, led to some efforts at reforming the brutal treatment of street kids, but I could see that it had not reduced their numbers. They are said to survive on begging, pickpocketing, and hiring themselves out to do menial tasks. Some prostitute themselves or serve as gofers for drug dealers. Theirs is a sad plight, but they are also a nuisance when one wishes to keep a low profile.

To shoo them away, I pulled some dollar bills from my wallet (which I was holding safely in my hand), crumpled them into tight wads, and flicked them high into the air with my thumb and forefinger. I tossed my pocket change upward for good measure, though I wasn't sure whether U.S. quarters, dimes, and nickels would do them much good. They might have preferred cigarettes. As the children scrambled for the money, I darted away to the refuge of the church, noting their startled thoughts when they looked up and realized that I had "disappeared."

Along the side of the church, outside the light of the nearby streetlamps and behind the taller and wider façade at the front of the building, I jumped to the church's roof and then scrambled up one of the two bell towers until I reached the open enclosure where the church bell hung. I rolled over the stone wall and dropped out of sight behind it, landing softly on my duffle which was still strapped to my back and, remarkably, unmolested.

When I decided that I had gone unnoticed, I peeked over the wall and saw that most of the children had returned to the church grounds—their unfenced and less-than-secure sanctuary—though some of the more industrious (or hungrier) continued to comb the ground looking for cash. I recalled from reading about the massacre that the nuns at this Catholic church feed the children and provide some guidance and basic necessities of life, as well as allow them to sleep on the grounds.

I don't know whether the vendetta against Rio's street kids has lessened in the twelve years since the incident or whether the men who shot the children were ever convicted. Rumor has it that shopkeepers hired the "hit men" to remove the children from around their businesses and that it was far from an isolated incident.

Though any number of street kids may die at the hands of wicked humans, I was as certain as I could be that these unprotected children also provide a continual buffet for Brazilian vampires. Like the people of the Texas *colonias*, their numbers seemed limitless.

I settled into my stone refuge which, for once, was open to the air (though one couldn't call Rio's air "fresh," exactly). I'd have to keep my head below the top of the wall lest the sun reflect off my skin and draw attention. From what I remembered of Rio de Janeiro when I

visited with my family in the 1970s, it is essentially sunny all the time, and March is the end of the summer season...to the degree that Rio has seasons, anyway.

I looked around inside the bell tower where I was bound to stay for the next twelve hours. The huge iron bell, five feet tall and at least as wide, hung perhaps ten feet above my head and had a flat bar across its top. From the bar hung a long, sturdy rope that fell through a ladder hole in the wooden planks where I sat. Presumably, a bell ringer would pull the rope from below to set the bell swinging and ringing. If I had thought about it, I would have assumed that church bells were rung mechanically in the 21st century and that bell ringers were obsolete, but obviously I was wrong. I wasn't sure what day of the week it was, but I hoped I wouldn't be meeting a Catholic priest or sexton when he decided to climb into the belfry.

Wouldn't that be peachy? If I had some wings I could pretend to be an angel...like the angel, Carlisle. Or a vampire bat...I could be the vampire bat in the belfry!

Alice would laugh at that one. I definitely looked more bat than angel in the clothes I was wearing. They were badly rumpled, but less bedraggled than the clothes in my duffle, all of which were covered with good ol' Texas dirt. I should toss the whole thing and get some new clothes, I supposed, if I was going to haunt Rio for the foreseeable future. Where was Alice when I needed her?

Where is Bella? I need her. (A tiny voice whispered in my head.)

That doesn't matter! What I need isn't the point! I lost my life. Bella shouldn't have to lose hers. I won't let that happen! Arrghhh!

The pain, oh, the paaaain...

I curled into a pill bug on the plank floor.

Could a man survive being thus divided? I did not think so...not a *human* man. But I wasn't human and I couldn't *not* survive it, every twist of the knife, every crack of the lash, every turn of the wheel, world without end.

Sanctuary! Please, oh please. I would keep in my bell tower, never come down. Images filled my head of Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which Esme had dragged me out to see in 1939. I considered the parallels. Quasimoto whisked his gypsy love to his bell tower to give her sanctuary from certain death. I climbed into my bell tower seeking sanctuary from relentless pain. The church couldn't save me, that I knew.

If only I could keep her until her end! I would follow after at once, steal her body away and hold her in my arms as I turned to purple smoke floating to the sky... But no. If I followed

my prescribed course, I would not have her...neither before death, neither after. She was lost to me forever.

My body began to shake violently on the floor of the belfry and, like a kindred soul, the bell above me began to vibrate. I heard an infinitesimally soft harmonic note ring through the air. Iron and stone together... alive.

How does one absorb the finality of such a sentence? Humans can do it, of course. Their memories dim; their pain fades; their lives go on. Ours do not. We do not change; we never forget; our pain never eases.

I heard a deep groan of wretchedness echo in the open chamber before I realized it came from me. I shoved my fist in my mouth to stifle the horrendous noise of grief. The citizens would decide that their bell tower was haunted and send priests to remove the demon. Would they could remove the demon from my existence. Free me from me.

But then I remembered Bella. My love exists...and though I cannot see her or hear the pulse of her heartbeat or feel the warmth of her body, she is yet alive. I let that truth flow through every part of my body and settle into my consciousness. It was a thread of hope, a reason to go on. I am not lost as long as she walks the earth.

I felt the cell phone in my pocket begin to vibrate, but I did not look at the number. There was no one I could speak to. Not then.

Looking back, I do not know how I survived that first day in the belfry. When I bury myself in the ground, I can feel the soil and pine straw and the rotting leaves around me and take a small bit of comfort in their weight and blanketing warmth. I feel held by the earth, calmed by its eternal existence. It would be there always. But in the bell tower, exposed to the restless breezes, the shouting of children outside, the grinding of gears, and the endless stench of automobile exhaust, I felt insubstantial, rootless, battered by external forces. I found no peace in my sanctuary.

I could not stay in the Candelaria Church another day. It reminded me too well of my banishment from true eternity. Heaven is not attainable for me...but it *is* for Bella. If I let her live, she would have a natural, happy life, and an infinite, heavenly afterlife. I *wouldn't* take that away from her!

When nightfall came, I decided to make my escape into the slums of Rio de Janeiro. It was a more suitable place for the likes of me. Anyway, I recognized during my agonizing hours in the bell tower that Victoria would come to Rio and head for the poorest of the poor neighborhoods to feed. As she had done in the *colonias*, she would prey on the "wretched

refuse,” the slums jam-packed with humans nobody cared for, including perhaps, the street children whose lives seemed so expendable to the citizens of this teeming metropolis.

16. Rocinha

Even in my terrible distress in the bell tower, it had not escaped my notice that the Central District was full of activity. I didn't remember downtown being so festive when our family visited thirty years ago. Samba music poured into the streets from every direction. The crowds of people I had seen at the airport and in the city before dawn had multiplied all day until by twilight, it wasn't just children inhabiting the area around the Candelaria Church. The streets were mobbed with people. Automobiles had a difficult time making headway from one block to the next.

The street children were too busy working the crowd to take any notice of me as I left the church and fell in amongst the throng. Almost immediately, I caught the scent of vampire and scanned around a little anxiously, wondering where the creature was. It was not feasible to track him (or her) through the glut of people, and because I knew it wasn't Victoria or Laurent, I didn't try. I didn't even try to avoid him, because obviously he wasn't in the middle of this human crowd to challenge me.

I could see where such a glut of humanity might attract vampires, but even so, I found it difficult to understand why they would want to live in this sunny climate. The necessity of hiding for half of every day both in Texas and in Rio was proving burdensome to me. I would have preferred to chase Victoria around Antarctica or the Yukon Territories in their respective winter seasons. The idleness required of me by daily sunshine left me drowning in a swamp of grief and memories and loss that I had to overcome every twilight in order to get myself going again. At least at night, I could use physical action to give my mind something besides my anguish to focus on.

I noticed a tourist map lying abandoned on the sidewalk and picked it up to review the layout of the city. The Central District is the easternmost zone next to the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The famous beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema lie south and west of that. Granite mountains covered in jungle-green foliage rise sharply from the cityscape like spikes on a dinosaur's back.

Bounded by the sea and dotted with mountains, Rio de Janeiro sits among dramatic, immovable geographical features. Its business district and wealthier residential neighborhoods are built on the flatter, more accessible land between these features, while its poor citizens make their homes on the steeper flanks of the mountains. The latter neighborhoods were originally created by freed slaves and their descendants, but in recent decades have ballooned with country dwellers emigrating to the city to find work. With more people to house and less

land to build on, shantytowns have mushroomed over the unstable mountainsides, creating urban slums unsupported by city services. The *favelas*, as these neighborhoods are called, are Rio de Janeiro's version of the Texas *colonias*.

As I looked toward the mountains from downtown Rio, I saw above the bright lights of the city, the dimmer, softer lighting of the *favelas* spreading up and out across the slopes like blankets. These shantytowns have existed for so long that they are embraced as an essential part of an overcrowded city, with one in five citizens now living in the huge, urbanized ghettos.

I was guessing that when Victoria arrived in Rio she would migrate toward the *favelas* to feed. I couldn't know that with any certainty, but the notion suited my current mindset, which was to escape the crowded streets of downtown and move further afield. The only question now was which *favela* should I stalk? There were so many more of them than I had expected. They had multiplied in both number and size in the thirty years since I'd been to Rio.

I examined the city map in detail until I saw a name I recognized: *Favela Rocinha*. It is famous for being the largest *favela* in all of South America. I once saw an episode of *CSI: Miami* that had its heroes traveling to Rocinha in search of a villain. The *favela* was riddled with drug gangs, automatic weapons, and violence, and as far as I know, that depiction is true to life. Like the Italian mafia in old New York, a drug gang controls each *favela*, a situation that creates pervasive danger for the residents when territory wars or shootouts with the police break out. Street children are hired as drug runners or lookouts and are considered expendable when trouble comes. Often, they are the first ones killed in a skirmish.

Drug lords and gang warfare are human problems that don't trouble me as long as they're not in Forks. Getting shot would be less painful than what I was already going through and I was more than capable of defending myself, anyway. Rocinha it would be. I referred to the map and saw that it was located on the northwestern side of the city which suited me fine. I would give up the craziness of the Central District, no doubt substituting a different kind of craziness for it in the slums.

I pushed my way through the crowds that seemed to be filling the streets more solidly every minute. I had decided to follow the shoreline around to the south and west and then cut north overland. That way, I could always escape into the ocean if the excess of humans became too disturbing...or too tempting. How long had it been since I'd hunted? Probably a bit too long. It was hard to focus on keeping my thirst sated when another kind of pain tortured me so much more.

As I moved away from downtown and headed toward the southern beaches, I marveled at the distinctive traits that make Rio de Janeiro uniquely beautiful. The granite formations

around and throughout the city give it a striking dimensionality, especially with nighttime illumination highlighting the contours of the odd formations.

Sugarloaf Mountain rose out of the water ahead of me, a tall, pointy hump of bare granite rising up behind a shorter and wider hump. I saw the aerial tram lines overhead and the cars passing back and forth, hauling tourists to the top of the dramatic peak.

I made my way down to Copacabana Beach, then turned around and looked back toward the city where Corcovado Mountain—another bare granite hump—rises dramatically ten miles inland. It is the tallest mountain in the city and on top of it stands the magnificent Christ the Redeemer statue, which overlooks Rio, arms outstretched. I remember when *Cristo Redentor* was constructed in the 1920s. It was to be the tallest statue of Christ in the world at that time and setting it on top of Corcovado Mountain with the landscape dropping off all around makes it appear that Jesus is standing above the entire world.

The evening lights on the beach created a beautiful setting for the dozens of beachgoers who remained on the sand, drinking alcohol and talking, or wading into the water, or knocking around a soccer ball. Street kids played among the other occupants, laughing and engaging with them, no doubt trying to charm money or trinkets from them, or perhaps trying to steal their watches or Blackberries. Behind the beach, high-rise hotels rose toward the sky.

Copacabana Beach curves in a half-moon shape facing southeast and ending in a sharp point of land. I crossed the point before it extended too far into the ocean and found myself on another half-moon-shaped beach, this one facing southwest. It was Ipanema, a beach made famous worldwide by the 1960s musical hit, “The Girl from Ipanema.”

More than once, I’ve heard Ipanema Beach described as the sexiest beach in the world. If one should measure sexiness by how little attractive individuals can wear in public without being considered naked, then Ipanema would no doubt win *any* sexiness contest, hands down. The beachgoers I saw there wore the skimpiest bathing costumes I’d ever seen by far.

“Sexy” is a relatively new concept for me, something that I didn’t fully understand in my first 104 years of existence. Perhaps I thought I did—like jealousy, it was something I had read about and seen depicted in films too many times to number, but it wasn’t until I met Bella that I truly *felt* what it meant. As I fell in love with her and my buried human side began to emerge, I altered my former definition of the word from “physically beautiful” to “physically desirable.”

I remember with pinpoint clarity when my curiosity about Bella blossomed into desire. It was the day that jealousy got the better of me and I let myself speak to Bella after having ignored her for a month. With her eyes shut, she had growled, “What do you *want*, Edward?” and though she was angry with me, I felt a rush of heat spread through me when she spoke my

name. If I had been breathing freely, my breath would have quickened. Not just me, but my *body* suddenly had become aware of her.

That night, I crept into her bedroom and watched her sleep...the way her full, pink lips parted as she dreamed did something to me and my hand reached to touch them of its own accord. I yearned to stroke that delicate flesh and feel her warm breath on my fingers. I hungered to press my lips to hers, knowing her softness would yield under the slightest pressure. Breathing in her scent...

Ahhhh!

A fierce burn that had nothing to do with thirst ignited somewhere deep in me and spread through my torso. I felt the bitter, aching loss of an aspect of my humanity with which I had only recently become acquainted. Yes, I understood the meaning of “sexy.”

Trying to recover my composure, I gazed at the array of humanity ranged before me on the beach and observed the spectacle of both women and men garbed in small strips of cloth that cover much less of their bodies than seems necessary in a public place. While I can appreciate the beauty in a perfectly turned shoulder or the gentle cinching of a woman’s body from breasts to waist, I also recognize that the near-nudity of a beautiful stranger does not call to me like a single sideways glance of my beloved. I must conclude that for me, it is love that lends meaning to the vocabulary of sex. Considering how I am made, I know that there will be no one else for me. I will never desire another woman. Ipanema makes that fact—and that sadness, too—abundantly clear.

In my modest street clothes I stood out amidst the beachgoers like an Inuit at a tanning salon. I decided to retreat from the beach to the avenue behind it. As I attempted to do so, I was startled to discover that a crowd was blocking much of the roadway. Cars were coming to a stop and drivers were honking their horns either in glee or frustration, I couldn’t tell which. When I got close enough to observe what was going on, I saw that a miniature parade was making its way up the two-lane bicycle path paralleling the avenue on the beach side. Hordes of people were streaming from the hotels and bars across the street to watch forty or more ostentatious women marching along the bike path to the beat of energetic drumming.

The parading women were decked out in outrageous gowns and wearing elaborate headdresses or wigs, lots of feathers, and heavy makeup. Some of them were inexplicably traveling on roller skates. They were gorgeous, though, and appeared to be made up for a beauty pageant or competition.

The odd celebration made me curious and so I approached the bicycle path, slipping easily through the crowd. When I got close, I was surprised by the enormous size of the

celebrants—they looked like Amazons of the first degree and many of them accentuated their large size by wearing shoes with exaggerated platforms and high heels. Everyone was ogling the women, laughing, and cheering and as I looked around the crowd, I saw that there were more men than women in the crowd. No wonder, with such extravagantly outfitted and overtly sexual individuals displaying their wares.

It was only when a particularly large woman with a handlebar moustache paraded by that I finally recognized what I was looking at. This was a group of transvestites! I was watching a “drag queen” parade! It was a first for me. At another time, I would have laughed at their suddenly obvious, tongue-in-cheek imitations of glamorous women, but of course, laughter was not within my capabilities. Feeling like an old stick-in-the-mud, I retreated a few blocks inland to escape the joyful celebration.

It was not difficult to keep my feet pointed in the right direction. At the opposite end of Ipanema Beach from where I started rises a startling double-headed mountain whose pointed tops extend above the city skyline, providing a beacon to my destination. This iconic mountain is called *Dois Irmãos* (“Two Brothers”), according to my map. *Favelas* have sprung up all around its steep slopes and Rocinha, where I was headed, lies on its rear flanks. I kept moving in that direction, walking at a human pace, in no hurry to arrive. Where my body was truly made no difference to me. I was merely trying to maintain some semblance of a destination, a goal. If I didn’t, I was likely to lie down and never move again.

When I turned northward and began to travel upland, the terrain became sharply steeper. Concurrently, homes became smaller, closer together, and more makeshift. This land was not suitable for development, which is why it was available for poor squatters to claim and occupy. The shacks and shanties constructed on the steep hillsides are not set upon sturdy foundations. Just walking through the neighborhood, I could see where huge sections of topsoil had slid off the mountains in the past, presumably taking unstable shanty houses with it. Idly, I wondered how many people were buried beneath their collapsed homes every year.

The upside to this looming disaster was obvious as I proceeded higher up the flanks of *Dois Irmãos*. The view from every shack and precariously stacked concrete box was stunning. Million-dollar views...two million. I considered the irony of the poorest slum dwellers enjoying the most spectacular views I had seen in a long time. It was a modest compensation for their obvious hardship.

I knew when I had reached the edge of Rocinha. A busy thruway curved around *Dois Irmãos* at a point where the incline steepened again toward vertical. Amazingly, the homes seemed more jammed together the sheerer the mountain became, stacked one above another like stadium bleachers. Only one roadway was in evidence moving upward from the base of

Rocinha, and it snaked back and forth as it rose to a higher part of the mountain. I saw motorcycles and small busses navigating the steep rise.

Narrow sets of stairs and shoulder-width alleys provide access to the homes on the mountainside. The individual structures are made of cheap bricking material glued together with concrete mortar. Many, if not most, of the homes' windows had no glass in them and makeshift lumber often filled the space where a door might be. Tap points for electricity were few and far between, resulting in tangled nests of illegal wiring that hung dangerously low overhead. I noticed young men with automatic weapons sitting on steps or low walls here and there, presumably protecting their neighborhood from rivals or perhaps from the police.

I stalked the dark neighborhood, trying to avoid the children who swarmed around me, with little success. Unlike the street kids downtown, these children were not begging or stealing. They were simply curious about my fair skin and air of "foreignness" and were surprised when I spoke to them in their native Portuguese. I wished that I had candy or trinkets or something to give to them. Their faces were so open and happy in stark contrast to my own, I'm sure.

Though Rocinha is exceedingly crowded, each house touching its neighbors, no crowds of people collected outside because there is nowhere for them to gather. The narrow stairways leading up and down the mountainside and the narrow pathways moving across it do not allow for loitering. The residents carry everything from water, to children, to propane tanks in their arms and nobody appreciates having their way blocked by either tourists or locals.

Though my intention in coming to Rocinha was to start looking for Victoria, I had no particular will to do so. I didn't want to expend unnecessary effort since I didn't know if she had come to Rio yet, or if she had come, where she would be. Though I was guessing she would feed in the *favelas*, that was only a guess, and there were a good many more *favelas* in Rio than I had realized. I decided to take a few days off.

It was not as easy to find a daytime hiding place in Rocinha as I had assumed it would be, though. Residents had built their homes in the cheapest manner possible without "extras" such as crawlspaces or attics. Most commonly, a piece of tin was laid over a home's exterior walls to serve as a ceiling for the top floor of the house, which might be enclosed, but often was left open as a covered patio. An attic would merely add cost to a home without providing usable living space.

As I prowled the alleys and stairways that serve as Rocinha's streets, I saw motorcycle taxis climbing the one road and observed residents riding up the steep mountain and then walking laterally along pathways and downward on stairs to reach their residences. Some of the homes were accessed using ladders much like the pueblos of the indigenous cliff dwellers of the

American Southwest. In fact, that's exactly what Rocinha reminded me of—pueblos made of bricks and mortar in place of stone and clay.

I spent the rest of that night trying to find a suitable place to hide from the sun. What I eventually found was a one-room shack that appeared to be abandoned. It had one hole for a window and was full of junk and construction debris. I could discern no recent human scent attached to it. I glanced around to make sure nobody was nearby and then vaulted through the hole in the wall, landing on what appeared to be a bag of sand. If I kept my head away from the window, I would be unobservable.

I lay on my sandbag and listened to the sounds of the *favela* coming to life. Dawn was near enough that roosters had started to crow. I had seen no vacant spot of land where someone could raise chickens, so I assumed that they lived inside someone's home or on a rooftop. As the morning progressed, the noise of television sets and radios began to fill the air, but unusually, because of the single roadway, I heard almost no automobile noise.

Rocinha was not peaceful, though. The rat's nest of electrical lines buzzed at a pitch that was nearly intolerable to my sensitive ears. Maybe one in a hundred homes had official electrical service and everybody else tapped into the lines illegally. The situation was visually absurd and deadly for humans. It is fortunate that the majority of homes are made of concrete and brick; otherwise, fire could devastate the entire community, like the Great Chicago Fire had leveled my city in 1871.

I heard a tour guide say—yes, visitors can tour the *favelas*—that 250,000 people live in the less-than-one square mile that constitutes Rocinha, though as in the *colonias*, estimates must be difficult to make. It was unbelievably crowded.

Each household consists of one or more rectangular boxes stacked up like a child's toy blocks. The boxes are typically twelve by fifteen feet, with each house having an average of three or four floors, though some have as many as eight or nine. Looking in a few windows, I saw that the interiors were relatively open inside, often with a tight spiraling staircase in one corner that rose through all the floors. The kitchen areas had sinks and water spigots fed by catchment basins on the roofs and cooking was accomplished by means of small propane tanks attached to tiny stoves.

As my first day in Rocinha wore on, I heard the sounds of music drifting up and around the neighborhood, sometimes drumming, sometimes instrumental. I had read in a brochure that samba—the music that practically defines the character of the Brazilian people—originated in the *favelas* and that the urban shantytowns still produce some of the best musicians in the city.

This day was not as tortured as my previous one, though it was painful enough. I was oddly more comfortable as a slum dweller than a church dweller, though I did not feel as safe from discovery in my abandoned shanty (or in the bell tower, for that matter) as I had when I buried myself in the earth.

When nighttime rolled around again, I heard new sounds. Police sirens blared from the bottom of the mountain and became louder as they advanced up Rocinha's roadway. I heard the opening of heavy doors and the rustling of bodies emptying from vehicles and spreading out into the neighborhood. Then automatic rifle fire.

The action was fairly close to my hideout, so I decided to leave it and see what was happening. I listened to identify the direction the noise was coming from before making my way towards it. As I neared the area of the skirmish, I saw citizens fleeing as best they could in the congested pathways where gunfire was being exchanged. I kept my distance and listened to both frantic and resigned conversations in Portuguese inside the windowless homes.

This was yet another battle between police and the members of a local gang, a common occurrence in Rocinha. Drug lords escape the law by disappearing into their *favelas* and groups of police follow them into the neighborhoods with guns drawn. Gang members confront the police directly. Frequently, innocent bystanders are injured or killed, but the police never succeed in wrenching control of the *favelas* away from the criminals. The fighting just goes on and on. I got the impression that the citizens are as disgusted with the police as they are with the gangs. Little regard is given to the safety of the slum dwellers and as I heard it in many minds: *At least the drug dealers provide us some services.*

As I crept around observing the showdown in the alleys and on the stairs, I caught the scent of another vampire. Cautiously, I looked around, examining every window and rooftop until I saw a pair of unmistakably red eyes set in an alabaster face. He was peering from an open window about fifty yards across and ten yards above my location. He had seen me too, though if he noticed my strange eyes, undoubtedly he had more questions about me than I did about him. The color of our skin stood out equally brightly among the brown and black-skinned residents of Rocinha, but he had the black hair more common to the locals. It hung down his back in a thick braid. We stared at one another without moving as I focused on reading his mind.

Well, well...another. Not the first, but a horse of a different color, this one!

The vampire's thoughts came to him in Spanish—he was a visitor to the city too, I guessed. I could not detect where he was from, though. He could have been anyone from an indigenous Argentinian to a very old Spaniard. I had no way of knowing unless he thought about

his origins, which admittedly, few of us ever did. His reason for being in Rocinha was obvious, though.

If he does not disturb my feeding, I do not disturb his. More than enough blood for us both.

With that, the stranger disappeared from the window and try as I might, I could not determine which way he had gone. I decided to adopt his attitude and leave well enough alone. It was clear that neither police nor drug dealers were entirely responsible for the high death rate in the *favelas*.

The visitor was wrong about one thing, though—there was not enough blood in Rocinha for me, at least not of the type Carlisle had taught me to prefer. Trash and sewage ran down many of the alleyways in equal, disgusting amounts and so, of course, rats were present in large numbers. But other than them and the odd stray dog or cat, birdcages hanging outside shanty windows contained the only non-human blood I smelled in Rocinha.

Alice rang again the following day and I answered my cell phone. When she reminded me that it was Carnival season, I finally caught on to why the airport and the streets in the Central District had been so crowded and what the occasion was for the drag-queen parade in Ipanema. There must be Carnival activities going on all over the city, though I saw nothing particular in Rocinha, except for the samba music, which, for all I knew, was heard year around in the *favelas*.

Days passed and I continued to haunt Rocinha with no real goals or direction. I just existed as a ghostly presence in the neighborhood, listening to children at play, blaring TVs, and impromptu musical concerts during the day, and additionally at night, smelling the scent of marijuana in the air. I was a stranger in a strange land.

I scrounged up places to hide, though none as restful as Mother Earth herself. Rio was altogether too crowded to find a safe patch of dirt for that purpose. Once in a while, I did locate an attic atop an “apartment building,” particular shanty-like buildings rented to newcomers while they constructed their own homes. They had varying numbers of “floors,” but were always narrow and of dubious quality. Some of them had attics of a more traditional form, with roof vents on either end of a triangular tin roof. Attics gave me more privacy than other hideaways, so I kept an eye out for them in my ramblings.

During long days of much too much awareness, I thought about Victoria...once in a while. I'd begun to accept that I was not going to find her in Rio de Janeiro. The city was simply too big and I had no clues to follow. I didn't have to ask Alice to know that Victoria's cell phone had gone quiet. More than likely, she had discarded it after being pursued so doggedly through Texas.

Sometimes when I felt guilty for giving up the hunt, I justified my lack of effort by imagining that Victoria would perform another public stunt or do another obvious killing. Then I would find her easily by following newspaper reports and listening to the thoughts of witnesses. In my deluded state of mind, all I had to do was wait and she would come to me. I was good at waiting, too, especially in my present condition, since idleness was easier to maintain than any kind of purpose.

On the nights that I bothered to rouse myself, which were getting rarer as time passed, I wandered. I read city and neighborhood newspapers and watched the television news once in a while in tourist bars down the mountain. In spite of my inertia, nighttime required me to exercise every iota of self-control I possessed to prevent myself from returning like an abandoned dog to Bella's door—or rather, to her window—my only true sanctuary in all the world.

I spent the days (and increasingly, the nights) crouched in filthy, cramped spaces and did battle with myself. Each circuit of the sun became a separate skirmish in the war against my selfish desires. Alice may have been right. I didn't know how much longer I could hold up under the pain...the anguish...the torture. It would never recede, never improve, and recently it had become compounded by bouts of directionless anxiety and rage, wondering whether Bella had found someone else. I couldn't stand to think of it, but I couldn't keep from thinking of it either.

I was a train wreck waiting to happen, a satellite ready to plummet, an absolute, unmitigated disaster. What was I going to do with myself?

17. News

[Note: The title of this chapter is mine, but its contents are copyright Stephenie Meyer. I altered it by fixing typographical errors and by changing a “Spanish clamor” to Portuguese, the national language of Brazil. The original text appears on Stephenie Meyer’s website as an unpublished New Moon extra: http://stepheniemeyer.com/pdf/nm_extras_rosalie.pdf]

The phone in my pocket vibrated again. It was the twenty–fifth time in twenty–four hours. I thought about opening the phone, at least seeing who was trying to contact me. Perhaps it was important. Maybe Carlisle needed me.

I thought about it, but I did not move.

I wasn’t precisely sure where I was. Some dark attic crawl space, full of rats and spiders. The spiders ignored me, and the rats gave me a wide berth. The air was thick with the heavy scents of cooking oil, rancid meat, human sweat, and the nearly solid layer of pollution that was actually visible in the humid air, like a black film over everything. Below me, four stories of a rickety ghetto tenement teemed with life. I didn’t bother to separate the thoughts from the voices—they made a big, loud Portuguese clamor that I didn’t listen to. I just let the sounds bounce off me. Meaningless. All of it was meaningless. My very existence was meaningless.

The whole world was meaningless.

My forehead pressed against my knees, and I wondered how much longer I would be able to stand this. Maybe it was hopeless. Maybe, if my attempt was doomed to failure anyway, I should stop torturing myself and just go back....

The idea was so powerful, so *healing*—like the words contained a strong anesthetic, washing away the mountain of pain I was buried under—that it made me gasp, made me dizzy.

I could leave now, I could go b ack.

Bella’s face, always behind the lids of my eyes, smiled at me.

It was a smile of welcome, of forgiveness, but it did not have the effect my subconscious probably intended it to have.

Of course I could not go b ack. What was my pain, after all, in comparison to her happiness? She *should* be able to smile, free from fear and danger. Free from a longing for a

soulless future. She deserved better than that. She deserved better than me. When she left this world, she would go to a place that was forever barred to me, no matter how I conduct myself here.

The idea of that final separation was so much more intense than the pain I already had. My body shook with it. When Bella went on to the place where she belonged and I never could, I would not linger here behind. There must be oblivion. There must be relief.

That was my hope, but there were no guarantees. *To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub*, I quoted to myself. Even when I was ash, would I somehow still feel the torture of her loss?

I shuddered again.

And, damn it, I'd promised. I'd promised her that I wouldn't haunt her life again, bring my black demons into it. I wasn't going back on my word. Couldn't I do anything right by her? Anything at all?

The idea of returning to the cloudy little town that would always be my true home on this planet snaked through my thoughts again.

Just to check. Just to see that she's well and safe and happy. Not to interfere. She would never know I was there....

No. Damn it, no.

The phone vibrated again.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," I growled.

I could use the distraction, I supposed. I flipped the phone open and registered the numbers with the first shock I'd felt in half a year.

Why would Rosalie be calling me? She was the one person who was probably enjoying my absence.

There must be something truly wrong if she needed to talk to me. Suddenly worried for my family, I hit the send button.

"What?" I asked tensely.

"Oh, wow. Edward answered the phone. I feel so honored."

As soon as I heard her tone, I knew my family was fine. She must just be bored. It was hard to guess at her motives without her thoughts as a guide. Rosalie had never made much sense to me. Her impulses were usually founded on the most convoluted kinds of logic.

I snapped the phone shut.

“Leave me alone,” I whispered to nobody.

Of course, the phone vibrated again at once.

Would she keep calling until she passed along whatever message she was planning to annoy me with? Probably. It would take months for her to grow tired of this game. I toyed with the idea of letting her hit redial for the next half year...and then sighed and answered the phone again.

“Get on with it.”

Rosalie rushed through the words. “I thought you would want to know that Alice is in Forks.”

I opened my eyes and stared at the rotten wooden beams three inches from my face.

“What?” My voice was flat, emotionless.

“You know how Alice is—thinks she knows everything. Like you.” Rosalie chuckled humorlessly. Her voice had a nervous edge, like she was suddenly unsure about what she was doing.

But my rage made it hard to care what Rosalie’s problem was.

Alice had sworn to me that she would follow my lead in regards to Bella, though she did not agree with my decision. She’d promised that she would let Bella alone...for as long as I did. Clearly, she’d thought I would eventually fold to the pain. Maybe she was right about that.

But I hadn’t. Yet. So what was she doing in Forks? I wanted to wring her skinny neck. Not that Jasper would let me get that close to her, once her caught a whiff of the fury blowing out of me...

“Are you still there, Edward?”

I didn’t answer. I pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingertips, wondering if it were possible for a vampire to get a migraine.

On the other hand, if Alice had already gone back...

No. No. No. No.

I'd made a promise. Bella deserved a life. I'd made a promise. Bella deserved a life.

I repeated the words like a mantra, trying to clear my head of the seductive image of Bella's dark window. The doorway to my only sanctuary.

No doubt I would have to grovel, were I to return. I didn't mind that. I could happily spend the next decade on my knees if I were with her.

No, no, no.

"Edward? Don't you even care why Alice is there?"

"Not particularly."

Rosalie's voice turned a trifle smug now, pleased, no doubt, that she'd forced a response from me. "Well, of course, she's not exactly breaking the rules. I mean, you only warned us to stay away from Bella, right? The rest of Forks doesn't matter."

I blinked my eyes slowly. Bella had left? My thoughts circled around the unexpected idea. She hadn't graduated yet, so she must have returned to her mother. That was good. She should live in sunshine. It was good that she'd been able to put the shadows behind her.

I tried to swallow, and couldn't.

Rosalie trilled a nervous laugh. "So you don't need to be angry with Alice."

"Then why did you call me, Rosalie, if not to get Alice in trouble? Why are you bothering me? Ugh!"

"Wait!" she said, sensing, rightly, that I was about to hang up again. "That's not why I called."

"Then why? Tell me quickly, and then *leave me alone.*"

"Well..." she hesitated.

"Spit it out, Rosalie. You have ten seconds."

"I think you should come home," Rosalie said in a rush. "I'm tired of Esme grieving and Carlisle never laughing. You should feel ashamed at what you've done to them. Emmett misses you all the time and it's getting on my nerves. You have a family. Grow up and think about something besides yourself."

“Interesting advice, Rosalie. Let me tell you a little story about a pot and a kettle...”

“I *am* thinking about them, unlike you. Don’t you care how much you’ve hurt Esme, if no one else? She loves you more than the rest of us, and you know that. Come home.”

I didn’t answer.

“I thought once this whole Forks thing was finished, you would get over it.”

“Forks was never the problem, Rosalie,” I said, trying to be patient. What she’d said about Esme and Carlisle had struck a chord. “Just because Bella”—it was hard to say her name out loud—“has moved to Florida, it doesn’t mean that I’m able... Look, Rosalie. I really am sorry, but, trust me, it wouldn’t make anyone happier if I were there.”

“Um...”

There it was, that nervous hesitation again.

“What is it that you’re not telling me, Rosalie? Is Esme all right? Is Carlisle—”

“They’re fine. It’s just...well, I didn’t say that Bella *moved*.”

I didn’t speak. I ran over our conversation in my head. Yes, Rosalie *had* said that Bella had moved. She’d said: *...you only warned us to stay away from Bella, right? The rest of Forks doesn’t matter.* And then: *I thought once this whole Forks thing was finished...* So Bella wasn’t in Forks. What did she mean, Bella hadn’t moved?

Then Rosalie was rushing through her words again, saying them almost angrily this time.

“They didn’t want to tell you, but I think that’s stupid. The quicker you get over this, the sooner things can go back to normal. Why let you mope around the dark corners of the world when there’s no need for it? You can come home now. We can be a family again. It’s over.”

My mind seemed to be broken. I couldn’t make sense of her words. It was like there was something very, very obvious she was telling me, but I had no idea what it was. My brain played with the information, making strange patterns of it. Nonsensical.

“Edward?”

“I don’t understand what you are saying, Rosalie.”

A long pause, the length of a few human heartbeats.

“She’s dead, Edward.”

A longer pause.

“I’m...sorry. You have a right to know, though, I think. Bella...threw herself off a cliff two days ago. Alice saw it, but it was too late to do anything. I think she would have helped, though, broken her word, if there had been time. She went back to do what she could for Charlie. You know how she’s always cared for him—”

The phone went dead. It took me a few seconds to realize that I’d shut the power off.

I sat in the dusty darkness for a long, frozen space. It was like time had ended. Like the universe had stopped.

Slowly, moving like an old man, I turned my phone back on and dialed the one number I’d promised myself I would never call again.

If it was her, I would hang up. If it was Charlie, I’d get the information I need through subterfuge. I’d prove Rosalie’s sick little joke wrong, and then go back to my nothingness.

“Swan residence,” answered a voice I’d never heard before. A man’s husky voice, deep, but still youthful.

I didn’t pause to think about the implications of that.

“This is Dr. Carlisle Cullen,” I said, perfectly imitating my father’s voice. “May I please speak to Charlie?”

“He’s not here,” the voice responded, and I was dimly surprised by the anger in it. The words were almost a snarl. But that didn’t matter.

“Well, where is he then?” I demanded, getting impatient.

There was a short pause, as if the stranger wanted to withhold the information from me.

“He’s at the funeral,” the boy finally answered.

I shut the phone again.

18. Dead Man Walking

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,
uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, owwwwwwwwww, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

Vowels. They escaped from me like the air from a punctured tire. I don't know for how long. I wasn't even sure if I'd made audible noise. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now—nothing but the excruciating pain rolling through my body in ripples, waves, tsunamis, and the syncopated pounding of the bass drum in my head...*she's gone, she's gone, she's gone...*

God knows I had been suffering for months, suffering worse than ever before in my long life. But this was an excruciating new level of torture that I hadn't known existed. How could I still be alive?

I felt like I was drowning and I gasped for air like a suffocating human, but air gave no relief. I felt my fists pounding the sides of my head, the physical pain of it having no impact at all on the searing agony in my...what? Heart? How could a dead organ produce so much anguish?

*She jumped!?! But she promised, promised not to harm herself! What have I done?
Oh...what have I done...?Owwwwwww, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, nooooooooooooo....*

I'd thought that my previous, self-imposed sentence—never to see her again—was an unbearable torture. But knowing that she was no longer there to see...I never could have imagined this agony, how bad it would be. This pain was far, far worse.

Bella...dead...gone...forever....

My body bent into itself as I struggled to defend against the brutal battering of this truth.

Never again would I see her eyes peering into mine, warm chocolate melting at my gaze; never would she surprise me with the workings of her strange, silent mind; never again would she challenge my deceptions, break down my defenses; no more would I touch her soft, soft, skin...silk over glass...so fragile, so beautiful; never again would my lips meet hers.

No, no, no! It isn't true! It isn't! It can't be true!

I wanted to deny it, to scream the contrary—but it *was* true. I knew it was. I had been wrong...so, so wrong...wrong in the worst possible way. Bella didn't go on as I knew she could,

perhaps to grieve for a time at my treachery, learn to hate my memory, but to *continue*, to find a happy life. In the end, I had accomplished exactly what I had torn myself away from her to avoid—I had *murdered* my one true love.

How could I not have foreseen this? The very night when the end began, Bella had tried to avoid her birthday party by claiming she *must* watch *Romeo and Juliet*—a play she knew almost by heart. It was such a cliché. Bella was much too practical and level-headed to choose a dramatic, irrevocable end. Or so I had thought.

Now I was in the same position and I saw very clearly how it was *not* a cliché, not at all. Going on was simply too much. Needless torture. Though I had thought Bella would get over me, would let go of her love given time, I had never had such delusions about myself. I always knew that I would not—could not—live if Bella did not.

Isabella Marie Swan...my love...gone forever. Ohhhhhhhhh....

It hit me again like a hammer to the head...the *pain*. Just then, I heard the clanging of a church bell. It was dark outside my attic, so it must be calling Catholics to evening mass. Seeking comfort, distraction, anything to relieve even the smallest part of my torment, I began quoting the Reverend John Donne:

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that....

As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness....

The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God.

Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? But who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were:

Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

I didn't realize at first that I was speaking aloud. My voice slid over the words—barely touching them at all—in a whispered rush.

More than any bell that had ever rung before or should ever ring again, this one tolled for me. I only wished—wished with all my heart and with the soul I no longer possessed—that I could do as Donne promised and go to God with my beloved. I knew it was not possible, wretched thing that I am, but still, may God grant me the mercy of insensibility, of an ending to my anguish. If there is a God, may He be kind enough for that.

My time was nigh and I needed to move with all haste to meet it. I had to act before Alice saw my decision and my family could intervene. They would not want my end. But my choice was not for them—it was only, selfishly, for me. If I was barred from being with my Bella forevermore, I did not want to be. I could not be.

I turned on my cell phone and quickly opened the line to block Rose or Alice, either of whom might be speed-dialing me. I called for airline information and booked a flight that left in a little over two hours. It was the earliest I could leave Rio. I didn't know how I would tolerate the torment for as long as it would take me to get to Volterra. There was no question that I *would* survive it, though, and that was the whole problem.

In agony and motivated by ending it, I uncurled myself from the fetal position I had unconsciously adopted. Moving more like a human than a vampire, slowly and clumsily, I crept to the end of the roof and pushed aside the vent cover. I clambered down story by story, until I was three stories from the ground and then dropped. I didn't want anyone in this crowded place to see me drop from too high a height and come looking for a body they wouldn't find.

In my distress, I had tuned out everyone around me, but now that I had begun to move, I automatically scanned the minds around me to catch anything unusual. The thoughts were all in Portuguese, of course...

Put your sister down and come...

...out of rice. Maybe feijoad, or açorda, no money for meat...

"Yes, I'm sure! In the attic..."

I perked up my ears. That last comment was spoken aloud and precipitated a tense conversation between a boy and a man, I thought. It seemed to be coming from inside and near the top of the building.

"No such thing!"

"But I heard it! 'Owwwww, oooooohh...' I heard it, Papa! I did."

"It's probably an animal. But if you're sure, we will see. Come."

So, the father and son would go to the attic and look for ghosts. That was fine. I wouldn't trouble them any longer with my noisy grief. They would find nothing.

The international airport was farther north than the domestic one I had flown into some weeks before. I ran down the snaking stairs and pathways of Rocinha, not bothering to move slowly. Anyone who saw me would be unable to make sense of the nearly invisible flurry of motion that sped by and I would never come back, so what did it matter?

When I reached the city's South Zone, I hailed a taxi to the airport. At the end of the trip, I donated all my *reias* to the driver, who looked at me in shock. I hadn't bothered to count it. Perhaps he would feed his children a little better in the next few days.

"Muito Obrigado! Thank you, sir!" he called as I began to walk away.

I simply nodded.

Strange one! Looks like an albino. Must color his hair. Ay yi yi! Minha esposa will be happy. Sexo oral tonight!

I hoped his wife gave him what he wanted. If only money could give me what I wanted! What I needed... But it wouldn't matter much longer. I wouldn't need anything soon.

On the long overseas flights, I had plenty of time to ponder how to approach my end. I would ask the Volturi for help and perhaps Aro would take pity on me. That would make things easy and leave no mess for Carlisle to clean up. A different kind of pain stabbed me in the chest.

Carlisle...my creator and father. I so hated to hurt him. He was the best father a vampire could have had, or a human, for that matter. I regretted seeming ungrateful, but I knew he would understand. Still, it would hurt him for a long time, probably forever.

But he has Esme, I quickly justified. And his work. And the family. The same goes for Esme and the rest of them. Let them lose their partners and then they would understand!

I hoped they didn't, of course. Nobody should have to suffer the torment I was going through. It was *inhuman*. In any case, I couldn't worry about my family. I couldn't even take their feelings into account. This was the only way for me.

A sudden calm descended over me suddenly. A feeling of peace amidst the agony. The pain wouldn't lessen, I knew, but I took a small bit of comfort in my decision. I had thought about this eventuality before—when James nearly killed Bella the previous year—so I knew what to do without thinking about it overmuch now.

What would be my last thoughts on this earth? I wondered idly. The answer was too obvious even to consider. They would be for my love. A prayer.

I had abandoned my duffle of dirty clothes some time before and never bothered to replace anything. In order to remain inconspicuous on my journey, I had purchased a small carry-on bag, a brush, a shirt, and a pair of trousers at the airport duty-free Gucci shop and changed out of the rumpled and filthy clothing I'd been wearing for...*hmmm*...I couldn't say how long. While tidying up my appearance in the men's room, I noticed my onyx-black eyes—*one of Bella's favorite colors...ohh, owww*...I mustn't think of it...—and the purplish circles beneath them. I hadn't bothered to go hunting while I was in Rio. Not really. I'd gotten too thirsty a couple of times and snatched a rat...or two, maybe three...when they came too close in my attic hovels.

Lately, I'd been staying in my daytime hiding places for days (and more tellingly, nights) at a time. Rats were less than appealing, and the flavor was foul, but a rat or two did take the edge off the thirst just enough that I could postpone hunting for a short while. I'd been stringing myself along like that for too long, though...especially now that I was stuck on an airplane full of hot, pulsing, human blood.

Oh well, what was the worst that could happen? Did it even matter now? Only for my father, I reminded myself.

When leaving Rocinha, I had dropped my cell phone in a trashcan by a bus stop. I'd finished talking to everyone. Though I didn't care to hurt my family, I couldn't cope with their input either. It was over. I didn't even have the strength to feel bitter about how Rosalie had

broken the news to me because she was feeling sorry for herself. That was just Rosalie. I sent her and the rest of them a soundless prayer of goodbye and vowed to try not to think of my family again.

The plane would land in Pisa an hour before dawn, local time. Yet another sunny city in another sunny country. I'd grown weary of the sun and the machinations required to avoid it. It wasn't far to Volterra, though. I could run the distance in less than ten minutes. Worrying about the sun at this late stage of my life seemed a little redundant, but if Aro had to send his guard to destroy me because I was careless, Carlisle could be held accountable as my creator. So I would be a good vampire and take cover before dawn.

Volterra was a beautiful tourist destination. I knew pretty much everything there was to know about the city through decades of stories Carlisle had told me and the pictures in his mind as he did so. I knew of the ancient wall surrounding it and how its visitors were monitored from a good distance away by the duty guard—the Volturi guard, not the human one, though there would be plenty of human guards around too, no doubt.

The humans wouldn't trouble me, and the Volturi guard probably wouldn't grab me as long as I got out of sight before the sun came up. Once in the city, I would go directly to the castle and seek an "audience" with the Volturi.

Honestly, I hated to have to ask them for any favors. My impression was that the three "rulers," for lack of a better word—Caius, Marcus, and Aro—were schemers who sought some advantage for themselves in every interaction. Aro could read minds—not in exactly the same way as I did; he had to touch his subject—but he could also glean memories without requiring the subject to actively think about them. He could read the entire contents of a vampire's mind in a few minutes. One could hide nothing from Aro.

The Volturi also were concerned about appearances to a great degree, not only among the humans, but among the vampires. They had had their authority challenged once many centuries ago and didn't care to invite challenge again, so they were careful to behave according to their own elaborate rules of decorum that were mostly for show. Aro would be able to see my entire history and know what I wanted, as well as how far I was willing to go to get it, but that also meant I shouldn't have to explain myself.

In meeting the Volturi, I would have a great advantage over most others who came to "court." I would be able to read the minds of the three principles and detect any subterfuge or ill intent toward me or my family. I wasn't sure whether Aro knew about my special ability—probably he did. According to Carlisle, one of Aro's hobbies is to seek out vampires with special talents and try to recruit them to the Volturi guard. He had wanted Carlisle to remain with them longer than he had chosen to several centuries ago, but Carlisle had always felt slightly under

threat there, and his intentional lifestyle was not at all compatible with that of the Volturi. Besides, compassion—Carlisle’s great gift—was not particularly valuable to them, so they let him go with limited resistance.

It was possible that the Volturi would rather I join them than die at their hands. I was pretty sure they would make me welcome, at any rate, but being a member of the Volturi guard was not an option for me. Not ever. Even if I weren’t in the situation I was in. I knew too much about them from Carlisle’s experience and it was clear that Volterra was no place for the likes of me. I was much too independent and opinionated to be a follower unless I absolutely believed in the leadership.

The airplane flights were uncomfortable to say the least. As far as I knew, flight attendants did not keep live rats as part of the safety equipment of an airplane. They should. As brokenhearted as I was and as indifferent to feeding as I possibly could be, my aching body still was tempted by the sound, the heat, and the scent of human blood in that airless tin tube. Though I had a mighty thirst, it ranked lower down my list of torments than my insurmountable loss, so I had been ignoring it. I only fully realized my vulnerability once I was on the plane. To prevent a slipup, I locked myself in the toilet for a large part of the long overseas flight, pretending to be ill.

Considering everything, my life had certainly taken an ignominious turn since I left Be—*Forks*. I had been reduced to wallowing in my own misery in filthy hovels and airplane toilets and drinking the blood of rats to get by. I could have been one of the wretched sewer wraiths that Carlisle “flushed out” in London in the seventeenth century.

It was a great relief when the third plane finally touched down in Pisa. I raced off it almost as fast as I had done when I flew into Phoenix to save Be—*her*.

Owwwww!

How was I still alive, so utterly consumed with pain? Rats tearing the flesh from my bones could be no worse. Having my joints pulled apart on the rack would hurt less. I couldn’t think of a torture I wouldn’t rather suffer than the one I now had to suffer.

Running across the Italian countryside, even for the short time that it took me to reach Volterra, was the most relief I’d had in weeks. Feeling the wind race by my ears in the familiar way soothed me the tiniest bit.

When I reached the gates of Volterra—iron arches with spikes, which could be lowered in front of, or on top of, unwanted visitors—I raced through them at a speed that made me undetectable to human eyes. Instantly, I had two vampire pursuers on my flanks and I slowed

down so as not to antagonize them. They were doing their job, monitoring visitors and making sure we didn't break the rules in their city. Running at full speed was borderline bad behavior, but the sun was starting to lighten the sky.

"Come with us," boomed a deep voice. It came from an exceptionally tall vampire on my left side who was dressed in a gray cape with a large hood that could be pulled up against the sun, I presumed. The vampire on my right side was only slightly shorter, and dressed in the same way. Their size was no doubt intended to be menacing since they were members of the Volturi guard responsible for physical coercion, or so I supposed.

I obliged them wordlessly, hearing in both their minds that they would take me to the Volturi castle in the center of the city, which is what I wished anyway. I did not speak, as I saw no reason to tell them anything. Aro could read my memory and spare me the agony even of thinking the words. Dying would be a relief, but until then, I would avoid adding to the mountain of pain I carried.

When we reached the castle—an imposing stone edifice with a round tower and turrets—we walked swiftly down a dark, stone corridor, making two turns before stopping. The smaller of my companions—I read *Santiago* in the mind of the other vampire—lifted a beam of wood that would have taken a dozen or more humans to budge from a specially designed iron cradle attached to the stone wall. The ends of the long beam settled into dugout niches in the stone and looked built in to the wall. No one taking a casual look at the construction would assume that the beam could be moved.

I won't let Felix take credit for this one, thought Santiago. With the former at least six feet, seven inches tall, "the smaller vampire" was still taller than me and much more powerful, built like Emmett.

I mustn't think of my brother. I knew how sad Emmett would be at my decision and that he would do everything in his power to stop me as soon as he discovered my intentions. Considering that, I realized that the family probably knew by now that I was in Italy and why. Maybe. It was possible that Alice had missed it, since she had gone to Forks. She would be sad and trying to do what she could for Charlie and that would distract her from thinking about me.

If I knew Alice, once she saw a vision of me in Italy, though, she would try to stop me from following through on my decision. She would understand my torment, but I didn't think she would let me go easily and when she told the rest of the family, Jasper wouldn't let her intervene on her own. Emmett would insist on joining she and Jasper, and Rosalie wouldn't want Em to go without her, so they would all come here to "save me from myself." That's how they would see it, anyway.

Even if Alice was on the West coast and Jasper had joined her there, the others would only have to fly from Ithaca, New York. With jet travel, New York State wasn't that far from Europe. I must try to expedite the process I was initiating.

Felix and Santiago took me on an unintentional tour of the labyrinth beneath Volterra Castle. It had many winding hallways, hidden passages that weren't entirely hidden from a vampire's eyes, and a variety of security mechanisms that humans would be unable to breach. I paid little attention. I kept my head and eyes down and tried not to think—or to listen either. The best thing to do was simply to follow one step with another, plod along to my demise, a dead man walking.

19. Negotiations

With Santiago leading and Felix following me, we proceeded through a tunnel-like, stone walkway that passed under the castle at street level. Its walls and arched ceiling were built with the same sienna-colored stone used to construct the walls of the ancient city and the castle whose round turret towered above it. Halfway along the passage, Santiago pushed open a heavy, oak-plank door which led through a stone corridor into an empty reception room. It was a pleasantly lit and carpeted area with leather couches, pictures of Tuscany on the walls, and a high reception desk, though no one was there to receive us at this hour.

This must be where they bring human visitors for tours of the castle, I thought, remembering that one of the Volturi's number was responsible for traveling as far afield as necessary to acquire sustenance for the entire guard. Humans who took tours of the castle never reemerged from it. *Ugh.* Carlisle told me that he had always taken himself to the countryside to hunt on days when humans were scheduled to be brought into the castle. He could not bear the spectacle of watching thirty or forty excited tourists being herded into the Volturi's "dining room," oblivious to their impending demise.

We passed through some double doors at the back of the room into an opulent chamber with wood-paneled walls, two chandeliers, and at the opposite end, another set of double doors which were fully clad in gold. Instead of exiting through the latter, however, Santiago stopped halfway there and slid aside a section of the paneling to reveal a simple wooden door. He opened it and stepped into a stone chamber. I followed and Felix came in behind me and then reset the paneling and closed the door behind us.

On the far side of this room was a large, arched doorway in which hung an oak door with iron straps and heavy iron hinges. As we approached it, the foot-thick door swung inward for us, opened by a member of the guard who shut and latched it behind us.

The round chamber beyond appeared to be a receiving room in the castle turret meant only for vampires for it had no human comforts about it. Its sienna-colored stone walls were pierced with tall, narrow slits twenty feet above our heads which appeared to be its only source of light. At this time, they were just beginning to turn violet-gray with the dawn. During the day, they would throw sunlight into the cavernous chamber which our eyes didn't require. The stone floor sloped almost imperceptibly downward in the center of the room where a heavy iron grill covered a large drain hole in the floor. A high-pressure water hose hung discretely inside a nearly hidden niche in the wall. Though clean, the room exuded the unmistakable scent of death.

I looked up to see Aro and Caius gazing down at me from an elevated area at the far part of the chamber. They were seated against the walls in heavily carved chairs that looked like thrones. Aro sat in the center with Caius on his right-hand side; a third, matching chair sat empty to Aro's left. Several large vampires stood at attention nearby and a dark-haired female vampire stood next to Aro with her hand on his shoulder. The personal security team, I assumed.

At a second glance, I saw Marcus leaning against the far stone wall, staring into space. His thoughts were jumbled and inchoate, but inundated with feelings of hopelessness—the depressed brother. Centuries ago, he lost his mate and has never recovered from the devastation. If Marcus could be roused enough to care even a little bit, he at least should be able to comprehend the distress behind my request and perhaps be willing to grant it.

"Welcome, young one!" Aro said, greeting me warmly. *So who is this rogue vampire who visits us without warning?* Aro wondered silently. His face never betrayed a hint of doubt or disapproval of any kind, but remained open and friendly, his wide eyes taking in every detail of my appearance. *American*, he thought. It was beyond me how he could tell. I was wearing Italian designer clothes and hadn't spoken a word yet.

"Felix," Aro commanded with a nod.

"Yes, Master," the largest of my two escorts replied, stepping forward and offering his hand to Aro who took it in the two of his.

"Ah, I see," Aro said with an amused smile on his face. He had seen my fast dash into the city and also that I had put up no resistance to the guard's "capture."

"Tell me your name, my young friend," Aro said, maintaining his look of welcome, but wondering why I had let myself get so thirsty and whether they shouldn't find me a human to drink immediately.

"I am Edward Cullen, son of Carlisle." He would discover the connection soon enough, anyway.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Aro enthused, clapping his hands together. Caius looked at me with mild interest, while Marcus appeared not to know I was there. "Brothers, we must be mindful of our thoughts in the presence of this young one!" Aro said gleefully. "He is Carlisle's first," he added when neither brother replied. Caius raised his eyebrows, but remained silent.

"How is our dear, dear friend, Carlisle? It has been much too long since we have had the pleasure of his company."

“He is well.”

“Oh, that is very good news, indeed!” Aro said excitedly and then paused for a brief second before changing the subject. “I understand that you have a very special talent, Edward. One that you and I share. Is that true?” Aro asked with a friendly, but patronizing air.

“I don’t know,” I answered. It’s not why I was there.

“But you do read minds, do you not?” Aro probed.

“Yes...most,” I clarified.

“Not all, then?”

“No.”

Aro watched me as I closed my eyes against the stabbing pain that cut through my chest when I realized belatedly that the one mind I could not read was no more.

No more.

Aro waited until I had recovered my tenuous composure and opened my eyes.

“Would you mind very much if I read yours?” Aro asked, shaking his head almost imperceptibly at the woman next to him—*stay here, Renata*—and she dropped her hand from his shoulder. Aro stood and floated down the two steps of the platform and across the room, stopping when he was three feet from me. He held out both of his hands, open-palmed. I knew what he wanted. It was what I wanted too...sort of.

Silently, I placed my right hand into his left palm and he covered it with his other hand. His clouded, black eyes took on a faraway look and his expression changed several times as he sifted through my memories—from concern, to surprise, to delight, and back. I saw the entire contents of my life flash by in his mind, but his scanning was so fast that it took some effort to keep up. Watching as he squeezed every last drop of information out of my head and into his own would have been a devastating experience if I weren’t already too devastated to care. It felt like a violation, having my entire being exposed and assessed by Aro’s greedy mind.

“I see we have a little problem,” Aro commented, looking into my eyes with apparent concern while his mind grew excited by the possibilities (for him) of my mind-reading capability. He saw me seeing that and immediately dropped my hand, whirled around, and made his way back to his regal chair. Aro was not used to feeling mentally vulnerable himself. At another time, it would have cheered me immensely to give him that experience.

While Aro had been emptying my mind of its contents, two young vampires—barely more than children—had quietly entered the room through the door behind me, holding hands. I recognized Jane and Alec, two of the Volturi’s most-valued guard members.

“I deeply regret your loss,” Aro said to me and I could see that he meant it. He’d been able to read the depth of my misery, which set his thoughts toward his brother and the similarity between Marcus and myself. Before his mind traveled too far down that path, though, Aro abruptly redirected his thoughts. Perhaps he did not want to divulge Marcus’s private despair out of respect for his brother. Aro had moved on to thinking about something much more interesting to him anyway—Alice.

“Now you know why I have come. I would rather not repeat it,” I told him.

“No, no, of course not. Hmm.” Aro stood and began to pace. Renata held onto a corner of his cape and paced with him. “Such a dilemma. It seems a great misfortune to meet you, only to say goodbye forever.”

Aro stopped pacing and gazed at me with his eyes slightly narrowed. Then he spoke to Caius and Marcus, though everybody in the room could hear him.

“Brothers, we have here a very unusual situation,” Aro announced.

Caius glanced at him with mild interest. Marcus still hadn’t moved.

Aro continued. “It seems that young Edward has lost his mate and wishes for our assistance in joining her.”

Bored, Caius looked away again. Aro’s eyes twinkled with delight.

“His *human* mate.” The punch line.

Caius’s head whipped around toward his brother and Marcus’s head turned slowly in my direction.

“Human mate?” Caius asked, thinking he had misunderstood.

“Yes,” Aro responded as he tapped the fingertips of one hand animatedly against those of the other. Marcus glided toward his brothers.

“Isabella. *La tua cantante*,” Aro said, finishing with an Italian phrase. The second punch line.

Hearing my love’s name on Aro’s lips suddenly infuriated me, a feeling that quickly burned out and faded to the familiar ache deep in my center.

"*La tua cantante?*" Caius repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, marvelous, isn't it?" Aro said with a subdued smile. "Our young Cullen has rare qualities."

Caius's eyes widened; Marcus showed no response. I thought Aro's tone sounded gleeful again, but perhaps I was reading him wrong. I restrained a grimace.

"But his Bella has died and he wishes to follow. Is there anything more that you would like to add to my assessment?" Aro inquired, looking at me.

"No. That covers it," I responded as levelly as I could manage. Aro peered at me like he was trying to read my mind from across the room.

"What does our dear friend, Carlisle, think of your plan?" Aro asked.

"I haven't told him," I replied, though Alice probably had by now.

"Hmm," Aro murmured. He would hesitate to antagonize my father. So softly that I could only hear his thoughts, Aro said to his brothers, *There is more to this which requires careful consideration. Let us confer in private.* The brothers silently agreed. "Dear Edward," Aro said, turning to me, "we—"

"—would like to confer," I interrupted, reminding him that he didn't have to speak aloud to me. He was doing it for his audience as much as anything, though.

"Yes," Aro said with a quickly suppressed chuckle. "Confer. We would be *terribly* indebted to you if you could return after dark for our response." He wanted plenty of time to consider his options.

"Likewise, I would be grateful if you would proceed with all haste. I have no desire to linger unnecessarily," I replied, not bothering to point out, since Aro already knew, that his "debt" was unlikely to be paid if they waited too long to say yes.

"Yes, yes, of course. With all due haste."

A female vampire entered the room behind me. *Corin, perfetto!* Aro tried not to think of her special gift, but I caught it anyway. She could create a euphoric state in those around her—similar to Jasper, but more so. It didn't matter if she tried to make me feel better for a short while. Perhaps it would lend some relief, but it wouldn't change my decision.

“Corin will show you to a comfortable place where you can wait out of the sun, my dear Edward. You are very thirsty. Can we offer you something to drink while you wait? I’m afraid we don’t keep game.”

I shook my head. Thirst was the least of my pains. *How close was my family to catching up to me?* I wondered, though it seemed I would have no choice but to comply with Aro’s request to wait.

He motioned to Corin and she beckoned me to follow her. I saw him nod to Felix who trailed us out. *Security again.* Nobody wanted the crazy vampire to run off half-cocked into the sun.

Corin led me out the door I’d come in, but from the antechamber, turned into a partially concealed side tunnel. I followed her through several stone corridors before she stopped and pressed a hidden button, which caused a soft ring on the other side of the wall. To my surprise, a portion of the wall that had appeared solid began to swing inward to reveal a short opening. We ducked and stepped through it, but Felix did not follow. He remained outside the doorway while the vampire who had opened it closed it behind us.

Corin walked a short ways and then turned and led me down a long set of narrow stairs into a hallway that had short wooden doors spaced evenly along both sides. Suddenly, I felt like Alice from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Corin proceeded directly to the fourth door on the right side and pushed it open for me. This doorway was much smaller than others we had used, barely wider than my shoulders and a foot shorter than me.

“Monk’s quarters,” said Corin softly. I was familiar with the technique used in some nunneries and monasteries of creating shortened doorways which force entrants to bow to God or hit their heads on the stone as they entered.

Great, I thought. *Now I’m a monk.* I felt more like something unrecognizable that had washed up on shore. On second thought, though, monkhood was appropriate. I would wait in a monk’s quarters and meditate on my end of days before meeting my end. A holier man than me would have spent his time there on his knees in prayer. I didn’t need to do that. I would save my final prayer for the moments before I died...a prayer for Bella.

“No one will bother you while you’re here,” Corin said as she gestured for me to enter. “I’ll come back for you after dark,” she said and shut the door behind her. There was no window in this room because we were underground, but having no windows was another characteristic of monastic quarters. A room with no distractions kept the monk focused on his prayers. For vampires, these windowless rooms served as perfect refuges from the sun.

With surprise, I realized that the stabbing pain in my chest and the hollow ache at my center both had lessened. The change was subtle, but definitely real. I could almost take a full breath. Corin had a powerful effect!

Aro had sent Corin with me on purpose so that she could raise my spirits and thereby eliminate my desire for death. Anyone with half a heart who had such resources at his disposal surely would have tried the same thing. Except for the delay, I didn't particularly mind. Rather than agonize in a fetal position on the floor, which otherwise I might have done, I paced the room in a sort of meditation. Aro had understood my wish, but not my motivation. I wasn't asking to die because I was depressed and in pain. There was simply no reason for me to continue living without her. My decision was not something that could be soothed away.

Eventually, I stopped pacing and became still, but I maintained enough awareness to notice a periodic elevation in my mood. This coincided with hearing Corin's thoughts in the corridor: *I hope he's feeling better. Maybe I can help him.* It surprised me that she seemed to have a true sense of compassion, not just an ability to alter moods. She didn't stay long, but she came back frequently.

Coherent thoughts eluded me as the day wore on, so to sooth my mind, I recited some of my favorite poetry to myself, including parts of *Romeo and Juliet*. The world of literature suddenly seemed full of tormented lovers. I began to believe that all strong emotions derived from this one thing—the passion of love...gaining it, losing it, missing it, finding it. I could think of much more that had been written about its loss, its impossibility, or its waning than its inherent joy, though.

I was not unique in my travail. Millions had gone before me and millions more would follow in the same steps. I thought of the "Prayer of the Afflicted," Psalms 102:

1Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto thee.

2Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily.

3For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth.

4My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.

5By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin.

6I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.

7I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.

There was only one point at which I would be more alone than I was now and that was in the moment that I should die. As it is said, "We come into the world alone and we die alone." But I was ready. More than ready.

Time dragged on and on until finally sunset had passed and Corin came and knocked on the door. I could tell it was her both by her thoughts and by the now familiar sensation of ease that dropped over my head like a blanket. I don't think that Corin's gift had entirely the effect it was intended to have, though. It allowed me to breathe and to remain upright, but it could not penetrate beyond a palliative. It did not touch my deep sense of loss or do anything to fill the gaping hole of a particular shape at my center. It had made these last hours endurable, though, and I appreciated Corin's efforts on my behalf.

"Yes, I am ready." I answered her unspoken inquiry as I opened the wooden door.

"Follow me, then," she said, brightly, giving me a warm smile. I could not return it.

We retraced our steps backwards up the long flight of steps, through doorways, down corridors, and around corners, ending where we had begun in the morning. A different vampire than the one who had opened the door to the turret room that morning opened it for us now just before we reached it.

"Hello, Demetri," Corin said politely.

The famous tracker. He was built similarly to me, tall and slim, but with dark hair down to his shoulders. He was curious about me and unduly impressed, it seemed.

Edward Cullen of the famous Cullen coven! My, my, my...aren't you attractive?

My eyes popped up to his face in surprise. He looked back and gave me the tiniest of smiles, raising one eyebrow.

Oh, great, just what I need...another Jessica! My annoyance didn't last, though, as Demetri would have no time at all to pursue the fantasies that were dancing through his head

as he scrutinized me. I'd never met a homosexual vampire before—that I knew of, anyway. Or maybe Demetri was trying to provoke me to amuse himself. If he knew my name and origin, then he must know I could read his thoughts. I blocked out the salacious images of myself and him that he was directing at me. Had he no sense of decorum at all? Here I was, having requested to be “put down,” more or less, and if I were successful, was within minutes of my demise.

Oh! It was obvious then. Aro would deny my request. Fury suddenly gripped me with a force I didn't think I still possessed and I read the truth in the minds all around me. I was the last to know, apparently. I glared at Aro across the room and I saw that he was watching my face carefully, waiting to see the moment when I would know the outcome before he had said it.

“Edward, my friend,” he said in what I assume was meant to be a soothing voice. “Do not despair. Please give us a moment to explain our point-of-view on the matter.”

“I need no explanations,” I growled. “If the answer is no, then that is as much as I require to know. I shall go now.” I turned around toward the door and discovered Felix and Santiago blocking my path. I saw a reflection of my face in Santiago's eyes and was a little startled at the fury that looked so much blacker when my eyes were onyx-colored with deep purple rings beneath them. My fists were clenched in rage as I slowly turned back around.

“I beg you to give us just a wee second, dear Edward.” He considered invoking Carlisle's name to induce my cooperation, but after looking at my expression, decided against it. Aro was not stupid.

“It would appear that I have no choice,” I hissed.

“Just a moment of your time and you will be entirely free to leave. I...we...,” he gestured toward his brothers, who frankly seemed less than fascinated by the scene Aro would try to set. Marcus stood motionless against the far wall, his mind just...empty. Caius's eyelids were closed and he looked like he was basking in sunshine. Then I realized that Corin had moved forward and was standing only a short distance behind me. Caius was soaking in her soothing vibrations. I felt them too, but they could not touch my fury.

Aro's eyes remained keen. It was clear that his brothers were not nearly as interested in me as he was—and that's what all this was about. I remained silent with my fists clenched and glared at Aro.

“My dear, young friend,” he began, which made my mood even blacker. He was no friend of mine! But I managed to remain still as he continued in a pacifying tone. “We feel that

you are much too remarkable a...individual..."—he had almost said "specimen" before catching himself—"to be dispatched so expeditiously in your time of *great* grief." Aro emphasized the word "great" and paused with a sad expression on his face to be sure that I had registered his sympathy before continuing.

"You still have so much valuable life ahead of you. You have gifts that could be of great service to our community." He paused again to see if his words had had any effect on me. They had not. He went on anyway. "My brothers and I—and indeed, all of our little family here—invite you to leave your life in America where so many sad memories plague you, and join us here in Volterra. You would be most welcome, and even more than that, you would be cherished."

Aro smiled gently at me, while his hands unconsciously twisted together. Even without my ability to read his thoughts, which were centered on acquisition and power, I never would have been taken in by his obsequious words. A feeling of pure disgust flooded through me, followed by a warm glow that dropped onto my head and wrapped around me like a blanket. I fought off the sedative.

Aro had asked Corin to pacify me during the hours I was asked to wait and again at this meeting, and he had expected a much greater impact than he was observing. I saw him glance behind me at Corin and I felt the calming effects of her gift soften my anger slightly.

This must be what it's like to take Valium, I thought. But if Aro believed vampire Valium would seduce me into the Volturi, he was badly mistaken.

"I must respectfully decline your invitation," I said with not much respect evident in my tone.

"But why, *dear* Edward?" Aro asked as he glided toward me. I stepped back in response and he stopped moving.

Anger welled up again and I felt the effects of the "Valium" recede. I was incensed that these ancient ghouls would take it upon themselves to decide what was right and wrong for me. Carlisle had never done that in my life. I managed to keep my voice calm, but it cut with an icy edge.

"My chosen lifestyle is utterly incompatible with how you live here, for one thing," I replied. "For another, if I were to choose to continue my life, I would not leave my family to do so. For a third, I have already made my decision and I see no benefit in prolonging my life under circumstances that I would not freely choose."

“Ah, I see,” said Aro, disappointment clear in his voice. “I was greatly hoping that with a little time to step back from impetuosity, you might see some benefit in living among a select group of gifted individuals like yourself. And, of course, we would not interfere in your choice of diet.” At that statement, Caius opened his eyes and looked meaningfully at Aro.

Not another Carlisle! he complained silently.

“I am very much like my father, I’m afraid,” I stated baldly while looking directly at Caius, “in how I view the world and our place in it, but I have neither his patience nor his tolerance to abide a life that in no way suits me. I would be worth nothing to you.”

“That should be for us to say, don’t you agree? And I very much wish for you to give us a chance to discover that for ourselves.”

“It is impossible,” I said abruptly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have some important business to attend to outside of these walls.” Aro knew what I meant.

“What about your dear sister, Alice?” Aro tried. “Perhaps if she joined us as well, you would feel more comfortable?”

I just glared at him.

“Ah, well. I suppose you have set your mind to your decision. Of course, you are free to leave, but I hope that you will choose to stay with us for a time. We will always welcome you with open arms.”

I did not alter my glare.

“I implore you not to be imprudent in your actions, dear Edward,” Aro added, knowing my backup plan was to compel them to kill me.

I turned toward the door and with a gesture from Aro, Felix and Santiago stepped aside and let me pass. Demetri opened the door and smirked at me. Corin reached for my hand to lead me out through the tangled corridors. I yanked it back roughly, but she continued walking beside me.

If only I could touch him... she mused.

So her talents worked even better if she made physical contact with the person she was trying to influence.

“So *wasteful*,” Aro lamented to himself as we departed.

Corin did her best to influence my mood as she led me through the castle, but I was too angry to let her affect me. When we finally reached the human reception area, Corin escorted me to the exit. I glanced at the reception desk and saw a lovely human watching us with a pleasant look on her face.

“Hello, Corin,” she said.

“Hi, Gianna.”

I ignored the questions like a snowstorm in Gianna’s mind. She wanted to know who I was and why I looked like I was dying of thirst. Had they held me in a dungeon? I glowered at her and she looked away quickly.

“The way out is to the right down the corridor. Please be well,” Corin said to me as I reached the doorway. Though I appreciated her efforts, I had no inclination toward civility at the moment. I bolted out of the castle, fuming.

Now what? My head was a muddle of tactics to force the hand of the Volturi. As I moved into the central square of the city, a large clock above my head clanged twelve times. Midnight.

20. Indecision

The square in front of me was about fifty feet wide with a large, ornamental fountain in the center. The buildings around the square were so tall that you could see only that part of the sky directly above it—or so it seemed. It was the new moon, the darkest night of the moon’s cycle and the darkest night of my life. The stars, bright as they were, could not in any way make up for it.

As I looked around, I noticed that red flags had been hung at intervals all around the square and a presentation area with a red awning above it was set up along one side for a celebration of some kind. I wondered if the flags had been there when I ran into the city before dawn. Most likely they were, but why?

Hmm...yesterday’s plane ticket was dated March 18th, so today is... Oh, yes. It is Saint Marcus Day. How appropriate, I thought with a sneer.

The holiday is Volterra’s most celebrated of the year. It commemorates the day when “Saint Marcus of the Volturi” ended the scourge of the vampires by driving them out of the city, once and for all. It’s a joke among our kind because in a competition of which vampire has drained the most humans of their blood, “Saint Marcus” would rank near the top due to age alone. *And he’s never left Volterra.* His status, his age, and his grief merely keep him indoors most of the time.

The exploits of “Saint” Marcus were a clever ruse by the Volturi to insure their safety at a time when the Romanian vampires had become so flagrant in their activities that citizens of Dacia (ancient Romania) had begun organizing to wipe out our species. When occasionally a vampire slipped up in Volterra or when a visiting nomad fed publicly, the Volturi worried about their personal security in their own adopted city.

The best cure, or so they decided, was to put on a grand performance with garlic, wooden stakes, and (especially) crosses to “eradicate” the vampires in Volterra. After that public success, the Volturi destroyed all but two members of the Romanian coven and then traveled abroad to do the same to other ostentatious covens living elsewhere in the world.

The citizenry of Volterra hasn’t seen vampires in their city for so long—fifteen hundred years—that the modern population no longer believes in our existence. That keeps the Volturi safe in their little kingdom, a region with virtually no crime—the Volturi see to that.

Of all the times I could choose to expose the presence of vampires in Volterra, Saint Marcus Day was ideal. Endangering the safe enclave the Volturi had worked so hard to create would force their hand. A big crowd would be collecting in the square later in the day, providing a perfect audience for my grand gesture, whatever it might be. I had considered this eventuality before, when the vampire James had tracked and nearly killed my beloved Bel—

Ohhhhhhhhhhh, owwwwwwww...

I wrapped my arms tightly around my chest to try squeezing the pain away. It didn't help. I tried to breathe...*in...out...in...out...*but my muscles locked up. The only thing that calmed me slightly was knowing that I wouldn't have to feel this way much longer. So...to get it done.

I had options, all with the theme of exposing the Volturi's secret. I would show as many humans as possible, in the most brazen way I could think of, that we exist. I looked again at the fountain in front of me. It had a ten-foot, tapering obelisk at its center and a twenty-foot round pool at its base, large enough for children or ducks, or the odd swan, to swim in happily.

What would that watery tower look like with an Alfa Romeo balanced on top of it? A little pedestrian, perhaps. A Ferrari or Maserati would be much more impressive. Advantages: easy, noisy, could not be ignored or covered up. Disadvantages: It's a lovely fountain.

What if I attacked one of the Volturi guard? The bigger, the better. Felix or Santiago would do. Advantages: possible prolonged circus effect, major satisfaction. Disadvantages: possibility of being subdued too quickly, might not qualify as a capital offense.

I sighed. Did I have the will to go through with this? I only had to think for a second to know that the answer was yes. Without a doubt. Truly, I did not want to live another day. However, if I handled things badly, then I *could* end up in a dungeon, guarded twenty-four hours a day for...well...forever, which would be much worse than death. Whatever act I chose must be irrevocable, something that couldn't be fixed or explained away. And it had to be egregious enough that the Volturi would kill me immediately.

What if I took a page from Maria's book and snapped a few necks? No, wait! Much better to hunt some criminals. Advantages: extremely satisfying, certain to provoke a death sentence. Plus, this option would not force me to wait until daylight. Is that why Aro had timed his answer the way he had—to discourage me from going berserk in a crowd when he said no? With the hunting option, I didn't have to perform for an audience. In fact, the more surreptitious I was, the more blood I could drink before getting caught. Win-win!

The best way to go about it would be to take a human in private and leave the body in public, move across town, repeat, until the guard caught up with me. That would create terror in the city and draw the attention of authorities from far and wide, anathema for the Volturi.

And I am very thirsty.

I had no idea how long it had been since I'd hunted. Not counting Brazilian rats, it must be in the neighborhood of three to four weeks. Why shouldn't I indulge myself on my way out? A last act. Slaughter a few tourists in the bowels of the city where the guard wouldn't find me immediately. Killing would feel good. Well, not the killing so much as the drinking. *Mmmm*. It was more than a little tempting. I hadn't drunk a human for eighty years. It was by far the best option—no more delays *and* blood.

It was a good time to hunt. Children were in bed, as well as the productive citizens who had jobs to go to in the morning. I took off through the quiet streets in search of a tavern, frequently a good source of criminal prey. Often, you could find one or two nasty drunks who enjoyed beating up on those weaker than themselves, their wives or children. Occasionally, you would find a coldblooded criminal like the murderer who had stalked Port Angeles the previous year. Stalked *Bella...*

Owwwwww, ohhhhhh....

This pain would *never* lessen. I began to run, racing through the streets and alleyways in my impatience to be done with it. I was ready to get to the other side, no matter what I might find there.

Then I heard it—the unmistakable sound of clinking glassware. I stopped running to listen. *Yes*. One street over, a pub was still open. I slowed down to a human pace and began moving in that direction.

There weren't many customers left. A young couple, late teens or early twenties, on their honeymoon. An old drunk at the bar who seemed completely harmless to everyone, except himself, perhaps. The bartender, a handsome Italian in his thirties, was thinking about the affair he was carrying on behind his wife's back. Unkind, perhaps, but not deserving of death.

The owner and his wife, local grandparents, were cleaning up in the back, closing down the kitchen. They were hard-working people who had brought a lot of pleasure to diners in Volterra. None of these seemed to be good choices. Then a man in his fifties exited the washroom and joined a younger man at the bar. They were father and son, visitors...*ah*

ha...grifters. They were carefully not talking about the lack of good marks so far, but they were expecting lots of tourists for the Saint Marcus Day Festival.

Hmm...con artists. By the matter-of-fact nature of their thoughts, I gathered they had worked the grift for a long time. Possibly, it was the family business. Even so, tricking someone out of the thirty or forty euros in his wallet hardly seemed worthy of a death sentence. Even if they worked real-estate scams or large-scale cons, did property crimes ever warrant a death sentence?

Oh hell! What was I thinking? They're just humans! The Volturi suck them down like jellybeans in a candy dish. And this was my final act! I had no reason to confine myself to the worst-of-the-worst. I wouldn't have to live with the guilt.

I watched as the father pulled out his wallet and quickly passed bills back and forth to the bartender, pretending to be confused, while tricking the man into returning twice the amount of change he was due, plus a free meal. The criminals walked out of the café laughing at how gullible the locals were and looking forward to the easy pickings at the festival.

*I grimaced. Which one should I take first? The father looked stronger, but the son would run faster. Faster wouldn't be a problem. I'd take the father first then, wait until the two were some distance from the café, grab him, and drag him into the shadows and enjoy myself. The son would run off, possibly yelling. He would be easy enough to catch, and by the time someone came to his aid, I would be long gone. Or better, I could avoid the yelling by snapping one neck and drinking from the other, and then moving to a different part of town. *Hmm...* Snapping a neck wouldn't be proof of death-by-vampire. Better to separate them and drink them both.*

*I stepped out of the shadows, positively parched now, my throat in flames. Somehow, I had managed to push my need to the back of my awareness for a long time. Now that I was preparing to satisfy my thirst with the best kind of relief, venom was pouring into my mouth. I was *dying* of thirst.*

I walked silently behind the grifters, waiting for them to turn from the lighted street. After they moved around the corner, I would silently grab the older man and bite through his windpipe so he couldn't cry out. If after so long, the taste of the blood was too delectable to hurry through, I would let the son go and linger over the father. When I was finished, I would abandon the body to be found where it lay. No need to hide it.

The duo was just reaching a narrow pedestrian street. I crept closer as they rounded the corner and then darted forward, giving in to the natural instincts of the predator that I am.

Then abruptly, with my arms in motion, stretching forward to grasp the older man's neck, I transformed to a pillar of salt.

My father's face had appeared before my eyes. *What if I'm right?* his voice said in my head. *Why bar yourself from her forever?*

What if Carlisle was right? I had made some egregious mistakes since meeting Bel—*her*. Once, I had been so sure of myself, always knowing the right answer in every situation. But I had been so *horribly* wrong about her.

Before my chosen victims turned to see me trapped in a ghoulish zombie pose, I stepped backwards around the corner, fast as a lightning bolt. I leaned with my back against the stones of the corner building and slowly slid down the wall until I was crouched on the ground with my head on my knees and my arms wrapped around my legs. I wanted the blood so much...*so much*... Fire seared my throat, flames raked up and down, drawing it closed. I gasped for breath and tried to rock away the pain. Forward, back, forward, back...

I can't, can't, can't...

I could not allow myself to injure my father in that way and certainly not as my last act on earth, leaving him with that memory of me forever. And what had he said? *It is always possible that Bella will be there waiting for you.* I didn't believe it, but Carlisle did. *Stop it!* I yelled at my own, too-active mind. I could not afford to think of my father right now. It would make all of this too hard.

Just then, I felt a soft blanketing sensation and, recognizing it immediately, I looked around. Where was she? I listened for a moment.

...said to follow him around until his father gets here. But he'll know I'm here. He reads thoughts, for crissakes, and if he doesn't think to do that, he'll feel the effects. There's no other way, though. I can't just let him die because...

I should chase her off. But no, what was the point? Throwing a car into a public fountain was a useless display of rage if nobody was there to witness it. And what I chose to do had to be done exactly right, be undeniably deserving of death. Let Corin follow me around. I had to wait until daylight to take action, anyway.

I was still furious at the Volturi, primarily Aro. I suspected that neither Marcus nor Caius cared much at all whether I was dead or alive. Aro was the acquisitive one, the one who wanted to own me like a pet.

Yes, Master? Felix had said. What was *that* about? The entire guard thought of Aro as *Master*. It was revolting. And they seemed perfectly happy with it too. Why *was* that? Maybe Corin had anesthetized them all.

No, Aro's not dumb. He thinks that if he can keep me calm until Carlisle arrives that my father will talk me out of my decision. I don't know, actually—he might be right. Very rarely have I said no to Carlisle. But even if I did let him take me home this time, it would only postpone the inevitable; it wouldn't solve my problem. I'm even more convinced of that after meeting Marcus in person. He is a walking dead thing.

Like me, right now.

Except that I wasn't even walking. I remained crouched in a fetal position on a public street in the middle of the night, paralyzed with pain. Maybe it was Corin's influence that finally stilled my futile rocking, that lifted me to my feet. I began to walk, mindlessly heading for the city gates. Then I began to run. The human guards felt a slight breeze when I passed them at the gates, but thought nothing of it. The Volturi guard, on the other hand, didn't miss my exit. I heard two sets of agitated thoughts.

There he goes!

Leaving the city?

What should we do?

Do we follow him or let him go?

They let me go, not having any clear instructions to chase after me outside the city walls. No doubt they would be ready for me if I returned, though.

As I got further from the city, I felt the comfort of Corin's gift fade. I'd thought running would make me feel better and help clear my head, but the pain returned full force until I could no longer breathe.

Here I was, running off half-cocked again. Dawn was approaching and I still hadn't decided what I was going to do. I needed to plan and I had to find a dark place away from the sun to do so until I was ready to show my hand. I would only get one chance to do this right.

Could Alice see how I would end my life? I wondered, wishing I could ask her what would work best. If I threw a minibus into the fountain, would the guards turn me out like a light switch or would they haul me back to the castle first? I didn't like the second possibility. I would much prefer a speedy death, instantaneous.

Sunlight was starting to crawl up the horizon. There was no more time to waste. I made an about-face and raced toward the city as fast as I had left it. At the moment, the only dark place I knew of near the main square was the castle itself. I definitely didn't want to return there, but the walking tunnel underneath it was a good compromise. It was dark and I had seen at least one side corridor. There might be others. Volterra must have hundreds of dark hiding places where the Volturi guard could disappear at a moment's notice.

I wished I could sneak back into the city undetected, but I had no doubt that the guard was watching for me. I hadn't left myself enough time to find a way over the walls. At least the guard hadn't seemed inclined to interfere with me as long as I wasn't breaking the rules—so far, at least. As I sprinted through the gates, two vampires took up pursuit. I kept running full speed through crooked streets, down dark alleyways, and up one or two walls. I couldn't see the guards I was trying to lose, but their minds sent me snatches of thoughts.

Which way?

I thought he was over here...

I didn't recognize them, but they were surprisingly easy to lose. I took a roundabout route back to the castle, approaching the street-level tunnel from the opposite side, dashing in just before the sun broke free of the horizon. There appeared to be no risk at the moment. It would take some time before the sun rose high enough to shine into the town square.

As I entered the tunnel from the back side, I noticed something I hadn't seen the last time I'd been there. Along the castle side of the tunnel, the arch of the stone ceiling did not sit directly on top of the side wall. Instead, the ceiling arched beyond the wall, possibly resting on a second, more interior wall. Or perhaps the side wall was several feet thick, allowing the arch to rest only on the far edge of it. Either way, between the top of the wall and the point where the arch rested, there must be a flat space. At eight feet high, the top of the wall wasn't visible, but if it was constructed as it appeared to be, there should be room for me to hide in the gap.

Quickly, before anyone could follow me from behind, I leaped up and grabbed the top of wall, finding it as I expected. I pulled my legs up behind me and rolled onto it. The flat space was like the eaves of a house, a three-foot-wide stone shelf that appeared to run the length of the tunnel. It was a convenient architectural aberration. A vampire could "disappear" at any point in the tunnel to escape from human eyes without giving away the location of hidden doorways or secret passageways that were unquestionably nearby. *Perfetto*. I could lie there comfortably hidden until I decided exactly what I wanted to do.

After a couple hours had passed, I heard the noise of street vendors rolling their carts into the square and tourists beginning to collect inside the city walls. I heard the shrill blast of

police whistles and the sound of automobiles climbing the steep hill to the city. People would come from all over the region, I supposed, for the ceremony, music, maybe feasting. I wasn't sure of the nature of the Saint Marcus Day celebration, but there was bound to be some kind of religious pomp, such as carrying a statue around the square, that would create a perfect opportunity to make myself known.

I was a bit ashamed of myself for almost taking lives. It wasn't necessary. I could get what I wanted easily enough without hurting anyone and with very little effort. All I had to do, really, was walk into the sunshine. In the midst of a religious festival, perhaps the people would think I was the Angel Marcus come down from Heaven to bless them.

It would be best to reveal myself to the largest possible audience, which meant in the town square after the sun had risen above the high walls and tall buildings. When the clock in the tower struck twelve times, the sun would be centered above the square for maximum exposure. It would be dramatic, portentous even, if the "angel" appeared at exactly midday while the clock was chiming. I would only have to wait a few more hours for the biggest effect.

My abortive hunt—getting so close to drinking the blood and then not doing it—had made my thirst so much worse than it was before. I liked to think that I hadn't drunk human blood in eighty years, but that wasn't exactly true. I had swallowed a good bit of blood when I pulled James's venom out of Bella's bloodstream.

Ahhhhhhh! Owwww!

The stabbing pain wrenched my body from a prone position into a ball, at least until both my head and my knees smashed into the stone arch that tapered down to less than a foot above my face.

Ouch! Corin must have taken a coffee break, I thought, in a part of my brain that was detached from my body. Or...she didn't know where I was. That meant nobody had bothered to ask Demetri to find me, which was good news. Aro must not be *too* worried about what I might do. After reading my mind, including all of my memories, he probably should be.

I hoped I hadn't weakened the masonry above me. Having one of these heavy stones fall on my head wouldn't feel particularly good. However, even if it did, that still would be nothing compared to the other pain I suffered. And now, at the risk of multiplying *that* ten-fold, I let my mind wander back to *her*. These were my final few hours on the lonely planet and she had been my sunshine, my moon, and my stars.

Perhaps because I was still desperately thirsty, my mind flew immediately back to her blood. I remembered the taste of Bella's blood perfectly, every nuance, the high notes, the low notes, the texture, the sweet, sweet flavor...

Mixed in with the sudden crushing pain in my chest and the fierce burning in my throat came a profound sense of guilt. Of all the things to think about when the love of my life has taken her life due to my misguided sense of morality!

La tua cantante, indeed. I understood what it meant.

It wasn't only her blood I remembered, though. There were other things...the lovely arch of her neck where it met her shoulder...the velvety texture of her mahogany hair...the scent of it, musk and strawberry, and the tang of her skin where her carotid artery pulsed beneath the thin membrane.

But I also remembered her soft, rounded lines pressing against the hard planes of mine when I kissed her for the first time...how she melted into me. I shuddered remembering the heavenly sensation of her body and how I had longed to hold her to me forever in that moment until the scent of her blood overwhelmed me and I'd had to push her away.

I recalled how I had tried to decipher the contents of her silent mind by examining her face and how sometimes I'd been right, but more often wrong. I remembered how she always thought of others before herself. She worried about her mother, even in her sleep, and she had arranged our day in the meadow so that nobody would suspect me of the crime if she failed to return.

I thought of her bravery beyond reason that led her to stand up to four attackers on the street and to meet James face-to-face when she thought her mother was in danger. I remember, when I told her that I could read everyone's mind except for hers, how she had bit into her lip worrying that something was wrong with her, not me!

To my surprise, a tiny chuckle broke loose from my throat at the thought. Then I smiled recalling how I'd hidden in her room when Charlie came home one evening and she had performed "nothing's going on" so badly that her father disconnected her truck's battery cables.

I laughed out loud into the stones above my head when I remembered how she had tiptoed noisily across her bedroom to throw open the window and stage whisper my name into the wind. The look on her face when I answered from behind her on her bed was absolutely priceless!

And that night...*ohhh... that night!* I remember the sensation of her soft, soft skin when I brushed my lips along her jaw line and down her neck, pulling back the edge of her t-shirt to stroke her collar bone with my fingers and being startled when she pulled away abruptly.

“You’re driving me crazy,” she had said, thrilling me no end. She had allowed me the great privilege, the unbelievable pleasure, of touching her with my lips and my fingers, and not only that, but she had been excited by it, her heartbeat accelerating wildly whenever I did so.

And with utter clarity, as if she were with me right now, I thought of her question—whether she and I might one day make love ...

I exhaled in a whoosh, the wind knocked out of me by the force of that memory. *Oh, how I loved her!* I closed my eyes and saw her smiling at me with love returned. In our short time together, I had been blessed far more than I ever deserved.

With a deep sigh, I recognized that though I had lost the most important thing in my life, I had also had it to lose. Having her for those few, too-short months had been a true miracle. I had been granted something I never expected or could have predicted in a hundred years. We had been alive on the planet in the same place and at the right moment to know each other.

21. Visions

From my hiding place beneath the tower, I felt the vibrations of the tower clock chiming away the hours, and I listened to the *tick-tock, tick-tock* metering out the remaining minutes of my life. When I first arrived in Volterra, I had hoped that my life would be over by now, that wherever I was to go, if only into nothingness, I would already be there. That had not come to pass.

But finally, the time was drawing near for me to bring my contemplations to a close and lay myself down upon the altar. There would be no godly intervention to stay the hand of the Volturi guard and for that, I was grateful. I felt sure it would be Felix who dealt the fatal blow and a cohort who lit the match. I didn't expect painless, but I hoped for quick.

I reached into the back pocket of my trousers for the two slim pieces of card that somehow I had managed to hold on to for my entire journey. I pulled them out to look at them one last time. It was dark at the top of the stone wall, but the images were burned into my retinas so thoroughly that I could still see them.

There she was smiling into the camera, though she had known by then that something was terribly wrong. I looked at the photograph of her bedroom, where we had spent so many glorious hours together and I felt my breath catch in my throat. With my forefinger, I stroked her paper hair and then touched my lips to her image. There had been two other photographs, but not of her, so I'd discarded them somewhere along the way.

In these final, fateful hours, I had moved past wishing to turn the clock back to that time and had made my peace with the past as best I could. The love we shared had made up for the pain of losing her by a thousand-fold. I was grateful for the reckless angel who had set her in my path and let me love her—though admittedly, very badly—for the months I had been given.

It was time. My highly efficient brain had been counting down the seconds of my life since the clock chimed eleven and twelve was nigh. I put the crumpled and worn pictures back into my pocket so that I would have her near me at the end.

The noise of the festival had increased throughout the morning as the crowd gathered. With each sound echoing around the stone walls, the din inside the square must be nearly intolerable, at least to a vampire's ears. No matter. I peeked below me into the corridor and saw no one, though I could hear both Demetri and Felix's thoughts nearby.

Demetri had alerted the guard to my precise location, but he and Felix were keeping their distance, waiting to see what I would do. So far I hadn't shown any signs of misbehaving and they thought that perhaps I was just waiting in the dark for my father to arrive. Aro had told them to intervene only if I tried "some stunt" to force their hand. While Demetri was approaching the task with amused indulgence, still hoping that I might accept a position with the guard, Felix was looking forward to a fight. He was so frightening that rarely did he get to exercise his skills. His mere physical presence normally convinced everyone to do as they were told. Felix thought fighting a mind reader would be an interesting challenge.

Other guards were in the vicinity, though they weren't focused on me and had no particular interest in my personal drama. Most of them were keeping an eye on the square and the streets where the crowd was heaviest, watching for visiting vampires and for human criminals who were inevitably attracted to public gatherings like this one. Suddenly, I felt rather sorry for the con artist and his son. They were heading for the shock of their lives—likely their last.

Corin had returned and was working on my behalf, and while I had not grown immune to her gift, I disregarded its effects. My decision was not about relieving pain. Even if Corin could eliminate my burden of grief and guilt entirely, I would still follow through with my plan. I could not live with only half a self and the best part of me had departed with *her*.

I said a prayer for my mother and father and hoped that they would not grieve overmuch, but would remember our happy times and how much I loved them. I prayed that Alice and Emmett would never lose their own true loves and suffer this unbearable loss. And I prayed for Rosalie and Jasper, two of the luckiest vampires I knew.

I dropped silently from my hiding place into the dark corridor below and prepared myself to walk into the sunshine beneath the clock tower. When I got close to the opening, I would close my eyes and evoke my heaven of memories from my time with Bella.

Bella. My beloved Bella.

I moved slowly forward toward the arch-shaped light. A sharp wind had risen, creating a slight wind-tunnel effect in the covered walkway. I felt it rustle my hair like the hands of angels coming for me. *Closer, closer.* When I was five feet from the rays of the sun, I unbuttoned my shirt and dropped it onto the stones. The darkness in the corridor seemed to lighten slightly. I shut my eyes to focus inward and as I stepped forward once more, the clock above me began to chime.

One...Two...Three...Four...Five...

In these last moments of my life, I heard my sister's silent voice calling, *She's alive! She's alive!* Yes, even in my hallucination, Alice would try to save me from myself. I smiled at the spectral Alice.

...Six...Seven...

Then...a scent...*her* scent! I had not forgotten it. In fact, quite the opposite. As I advanced to my demise, my vampire brain had so heightened the memory of it that I suddenly felt as if *she* were here with me.

Thank you, God, for easing my passage in the best, possible way!

...Eight...Nine...

I shuffled forward and as my closed eyelids began to register the heat of the sunlight just ahead, *she* called my name.

Edward! Edward! Edward!

If this was dying, I wish I had gone sooner. I turned my palms outward toward my destiny, welcoming it, took another step, and...

Edward, look at me!

I smiled at how *real* her voice sounded as I strode to meet my fate.

...Ten...Eleven...

SMACK!

One chime early, but it's over! And it was nothing! Nothing at all!

Her phantom body had met mine at the very moment of the blow and my arms wrapped around it automatically, feeling the familiar shape, feeling even the warmth, smelling her scent, the strawberry tang of her hair. I opened my eyes into this miraculous new realm.

"Amazing. Carlisle was right," I murmured. *I have joined my angel... Oh, joy!*

Edward, you've got to get back into the shadows. You have to move!

We'll move together, my darling, I thought, brushing my hand against her angel's skin, so very like the human.

"I can't believe how quick it was. I didn't feel a thing—they're very good," I marveled, closing my eyes and pressing my lips against her fragrant hair.

“Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty,” I quoted. It was the same for me as it had been for Romeo when he found Juliet in the tomb. Bella was even *more* beautiful in death, if that were possible.

...Twelve.

“You smell just exactly the same as always. So maybe this is hell. I don’t care. I’ll take it.”
What did it matter where we were if she was here with me? And so real!

I’m not dead and neither are you! Please, Edward, we have to move. They can’t be far away!

The angel struggled in my arms. I didn’t understand.

“What was that?” I asked.

Oooh, isn’t she a tasty morsel. I’d like to sink my teeth into that!

Felix? What was he doing here? That made no sense at all.

“We’re not dead, not yet! But we have to get out of here before the Volturi—”

The Volturi? What was she saying?

I’ll grab them both!

I heard the thought from just a few feet away. *Felix? Felix!* And suddenly, like a missile dropping on the Garden of Eden, the truth hit me with stunning force. I understood the slight pressure I felt against my body. Not angel’s wings. The scent, the feel of her... *This was REAL!*

My eyes snapped into focus and in the lizard depths of my petrified brain, I comprehended that BELLA WAS IN DANGER! I snatched her by the waist and whirled her into the tunnel, her back against the stones, my back to her, my arms poised to amputate the head of anyone who approached. *They* were real too, and they were here with us.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” I said, conjuring a calmness that I did not feel into my voice. *“I don’t think I’ll be requiring your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you would send my thanks to your masters.”*

I was wide awake now, my vampire brain working exceedingly fast. I was not dead! And *neither was she!* Before the reality of it could sink in fully, I recognized that both of us were nearer to death’s door than we had ever been.

Felix and Demetri were closing in on us. Aro had told them to bring me in the moment I crossed the (metaphorical) line. They were prepared to do that now. However, the two of them also had homed in on Bella's scent and Felix was mortally attracted to her. I would NOT allow them near her! I would perish before I let either of them touch her! I stifled the growl I felt rising in my chest.

"Shall we take this conversation to a more appropriate venue?" Felix whispered, threat oozing from his words.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," I replied coldly. "I know your instructions, Felix. I haven't broken any rules."

"Felix merely meant to point out the proximity of the sun," Demetri soothed, trying to keep me calm so near the humans. "Let us seek better cover."

"I'll be right behind you. Bella, why don't you go back to the square and enjoy the festival?" I tried futilely, desperate to get her away from the thirsty guards, but they were determined to include her in their edict.

"No, bring the girl," Felix commanded, thinking, *Spoils of the victor!*

Fury gripped me. I felt the rumbling in my chest, a sound that marked me as a killer.

"I don't think so," I replied with menace. If this was to be a showdown, then *bring it on!*

No, Bella mouthed to me.

"Shh," I breathed as softly as a sigh. What did Emmett always say? *A good offense is your best defense*. Felix probably would agree.

Ah...he's much too pretty to destroy, Demetri lamented. He cautioned his cohort, "Felix, not here," and then he turned to me.

"Aro would simply like to speak with you again, if you have decided not to force our hand after all."

"Certainly," I replied. "But the girl goes free."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," he said regretfully. "We do have rules to obey."

"Then I'm afraid that I'll be unable to accept Aro's invitation, Demetri." I was very much aware that just because Demetri was attracted to me didn't mean that he wouldn't tear my head from my shoulders if those were his orders.

“That’s just fine,” Felix retorted, aching for a fight. If only I could get Bella out of here, I would gladly accommodate him.

“Aro will be disappointed,” Demetri sighed, unused to failure of any kind.

“I’m sure he’ll survive the letdown,” I rejoined.

Yes, but you won’t! thought Felix, as he nodded minutely to Demetri. *Let’s do this!*

My goal was to stay near the entrance to the corridor, hoping to find a way to get Bella out, perhaps attach her to the family just outside whose youngest child was looking our way and pulling at her mother’s coat. Creating a stir was my only hope at this point, while not allowing that was the goal of the two guards. Their explicit instructions were to bring me in before I caused a scene. Aro did not want to be forced to destroy me.

Felix’s intention was to herd us further into the darkness away from the public eye so that they could take us both to Aro, forcibly if necessary. The two guards were thirsty...very thirsty. I could almost taste the desire for Bella’s blood in Felix’s mind.

I had not had one second to absorb or celebrate the fact that, for the first time in my life with her, Alice had made a mistake. Bella was not dead! *Not yet*, another part of my mind noted, but if the Volturi guards had their way, she soon would be. *They would have to kill me first.*

I told you she was alive! I heard Alice’s half-taunting thought from behind me. Almost involuntarily, I spun my head in that direction and *wonder of wonders*, the second most beautiful sight I had seen today! Alice! She had come through the corridor from the rear to join me. The guards could not bully us now that our numbers were evened up. Both Alice and I were as good as two fighters with our special abilities. The gift of tracking was not worth much in a fight.

My joy was short-lived when I realized that the fight would not remain between the four of us. There were more guards—and more dangerous ones—where these two came from, and Alice was dooming herself by joining me in this alleyway. I hoped to Heaven that she could see something positive emerging from this situation. I could not. My heart grieved momentarily for Jasper. At least Bella and I would die together.

“Let’s behave ourselves, shall we?” Alice said sweetly as she skipped to my side, arms swinging like an exuberant child. “There are ladies present.”

I hadn’t had a moment to consider how Bella had appeared like a miracle in Volterra’s town square just as I was about to surrender my life. *Alice!* My beloved sister had engineered

this mission to save me. I hope I lived long enough to show her the proper gratitude. *Where was Carlisle?*

"We're not alone," she reminded the guards, glancing to the family that was now looking our way, a look of distress on the mother's face.

Does he mean to hurt her? she wondered, looking at me as I guarded Bella, preventing anyone from getting near her. The woman alerted her husband, who alerted one of the militiamen ceremonially securing the event. A group of his red-coated mates began to collect around the family. That's what I needed...enough human attention that Felix and Demetri would back down and allow Bella to leave. On the other hand, if the group saw too much, they would all die along with us.

Demetri was growing impatient, but was still trying to avoid a disaster.

"Please, Edward, let's be reasonable," he entreated.

"Let's," I agreed quickly. "And we'll leave quietly now, with no one the wiser."

I could keep up this back-and-forth all day long. They might as well give in now. Demetri did not want to earn Aro's displeasure, though.

"At least let us discuss this more privately."

"No," I snapped.

This little game has gone on long enough. I heard the thought in a silent childlike voice coming from the rear of the corridor, but it was not a child who approached us.

Felix and Demetri dropped back against the walls of the tunnel into the shadows. Felix was gloating. *Our secret weapon!*

I surrendered the fight immediately. Bella was suddenly in far more danger than she'd been before.

"Jane," I said, acknowledging her presence and letting Alice know who we were dealing with. Even I could hear the defeat in my voice.

Magic torture rays, right? Alice asked silently.

I closed my eyes momentarily and then looked up at the ceiling. An affirmative to my sister's question.

Alice crossed her arms in front of her chest defensively, though her expression remained cheerful, untroubled. There was no need to frighten Bella any more than she must be already.

“Follow me,” Jane commanded with absolute confidence in our compliance. And she would get it. No one crossed Jane.

I could see in Jane’s thoughts that a member of the guard had run to tell Aro about the events happening in the tunnel walkway. He had sent Jane to see what was taking Felix and Demetri so long to resolve the situation. No doubt he would be rubbing his hands together in delight to hear that Alice had joined me. *Two birds, one net*. He could use Bella to coerce us into doing as he wished. And because he’d read my mind, he would know that it would work. I’d do anything to keep Bella alive and unharmed. Perhaps I could trade my servitude in the guard for Bella and Alice’s freedom.

Alice followed Jane promptly. I wrapped my arm around Bella’s waist—*Glory to God! She was alive!*—and half-carried her along with me, hugging her tightly to my body. As we proceeded through the tunnel, I knew that this might be my only chance to find out what had happened.

“Well, Alice,” I began casually, not to alert Demetri and Felix to the fact that the conversation was particularly important to me. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see you here.”

“It was my mistake,” Alice replied cheerfully, like we were having a friendly brother-sister chat. “It was my job to set it right.”

“What happened?” I asked conversationally. Parlor gossip.

“It’s a long story. In summary, she did jump off a cliff, but she wasn’t trying to kill herself. Bella’s all about the extreme sports these days.”

No...it wasn’t possible for Alice to make that kind of mistake. I didn’t believe that explanation for a second. Alice didn’t either.

I was distracted by the sudden warmth radiating from Bella’s face. She was blushing! My heart warmed at the miracle of it.

Alice continued the story. *But there’s something worse and I’m so, so sorry, Edward! We lost track of Victoria after she threw away her cellphone, but Jasper and I assumed that she was still in Texas and you said you tracked her to Rio, so we didn’t investigate any further, but she went to Forks, Edward...Forks! Looking for Bella! I mean, I knew you weren’t going to catch Victoria, but...*

Alice knew? What?

...I never dreamed she'd actually go looking for Bella. If anything, she should have been going after you! Or Jasper!

If I had been human, I would have had a heart attack in that moment. *Victoria was hunting Bella? How...? Why? Did Alice send me on a wild goose chase?* But there was no time to consider that question, because Alice had more to tell me.

The Quileute werewolves are not extinct! Bella's new best friend is a werewolf! They have been "protecting" her from the woman vampire. I should say vampires. Laurent went after Bella too. The wolves killed him. I'm so sorry, Edward!

But Ephraim and Quil Ateara had died long ago! Uley had to be dead, too. I didn't understand. Alice had a lot more explaining to do if and when we got out of this mess.

"Hm," was all I could manage in response, as horror and disapproval and guilt all vied for top position in my confusing jumble of emotions. *All that work tracking Victoria to Rio and she was in Forks?! It would be laughable if it weren't so horrifying. And Laurent tried to kill my precious Bella too?! I was utterly useless. Worse than useless!*

Well, that was it! I wasn't leaving her again...*ever!* She couldn't chase me away. Even if she didn't want me anymore, I would watch over her secretly for the rest of her life. To keep her safe.

Jane led us from the main corridor into a side tunnel, which slanted slightly downward. And just like the Volturi's receiving room, the sloping cobblestones led to a large drain, this one set in front of a dead-end wall. An iron grate sat halfway off the drainage hole and Jane was nowhere to be seen. I knew what this was. Carlisle had told me about the ancient sewer system beneath Volterra. The Volturi guard used it as a means to enter and exit the castle secretly. Following Jane's lead, Alice headed directly for the open hole and dropped into it without hesitation.

Alice went down the rabbit hole, I thought, feeling again like we had entered Lewis Carroll's fantasy.

As I half-carried Bella toward the hole, she began to resist, her feet pedaling backwards. Taking her into this lion's den was the last thing I wanted to do. How I wished I could tell her to *run for it!* If there had been any hope that the guard would let her go, I would have done so. But there wasn't and the only way I could protect her now was to keep her close to me. Aro thought Bella's unreadable mind was interesting, but he wouldn't be overly distraught if Felix "slipped up."

"It's all right, Bella," I said softly. "Alice will catch you." I wanted to catch her myself, but it was vital to keep her between Alice and me.

Rosalie! Damn her! She was the one who had gotten us into this situation in the first place! I'd like to kill her!

Toss her down! Alice thought cheerfully. She had a much more positive outlook about this situation than I did. I hoped she knew something I didn't. If so, she wasn't sharing it with me. *It's twelve feet*, she added.

My emotions had never been more complex. I felt extreme joy mixed with helplessness and fear for Bella's life, mixed with a sense of invincibility now that she was beside me again. More than that, though, I felt whole. The hollowness at my center had simply disappeared.

I could see that she was frightened, but Bella bravely crouched and hung her legs into the drainage hole. Twelve feet was a long way for a human to fall. I took my love's wrists in my hands and lowered her carefully into the hole so that her delicate body would not bang against the sides. With her arms over her head and me leaning into the drain, Bella would drop about five feet, but she couldn't see in the dark, so it would feel higher. I hated to do it.

"Ready?" I asked my sister.

"Drop her," Alice said, out loud this time. *I can see perfectly fine*, she reminded me. Alice was looking up into the light, while we were looking down into the dark. I heard Bella's breath stop when I let go and wondered for a fraction of a second if *she* was having a heart attack. *Please God, no!* And then she exhaled forcefully when Alice grabbed her out of the air.

She's fine! Alice told me.

I did the minor drop and immediately wrapped my arm around Bella's waist to help her forward. She clung to me with both of her arms. I wished so badly to know what she was thinking, but it couldn't be good. Felix and Demetri were right behind us with Felix leering at her like a baboon. She must be terrified, not to mention furious with me for getting her into this situation.

Bella stumbled forward on the uneven cobble stones, her heart pounding a jackhammer's rhythm, her breath coming much too fast.

Felix sighed behind us, thinking, *Can't we move any faster than this? It's dinnertime and she smells so good!*

I bit back a snarl. If he so much as breathed on Bella, he would lose his head and a couple of arms before he knew what hit him. Suddenly, I was grateful for all those fighting

matches Emmett and Jasper had dragged me into, even though they rarely beat me with my ability to stay one step ahead of them. Felix was taller than Emmett, but built the same way and I knew how to turn his bulk against him. Bigger isn't always better.

While I planned for a fight in one part of my brain, in a wholly different part, I rejoiced.

Bella is alive! She's alive! Alive! I couldn't help myself. With one arm around her waist, I reached to touch her face with the other. I cupped her cheek with my palm and brushed my thumb across her soft lips over and over. It was as close to a kiss as I could give her in these dire circumstances. I pressed my lips to her hair. *She is real!* No hallucination could recreate the scent of her hair or her skin, or her blood.

To my great surprise, that was the first time I had thought of Bella's blood. Though my throat tightened and burned fiercely, I knew that I would never harm her with my teeth—knew it with certainty. Losing her had simply burned it out of me...not the desire to drink her blood, but the fear that I would ever act on it. I couldn't even think about it without reliving the agony of losing her. I pressed my lips to her forehead with love, relief, and pure joy. This was a sad excuse for a reunion, but I would take it.

We continued moving through the Roman-built sewers which were now used as a subterranean network into and out of the castle. The walls dripped with moisture and the air was heavy with humidity. Bella's body began to shake against me. She was petrified! No...she was cold. Why was she soaking wet? She would freeze to death! For one short second, I wished I had a Volturi cape to wrap around her. Taking just her hand in mine, I released her to move her away from the chill of my body.

"N—n—no," she protested, her teeth chattering. She must be torn between feeling safer and feeling too cold. I put my arm around her again and rubbed her skin to produce a little friction.

Fortunately, I could feel artificial heat radiating into the tunnel ahead of us. We were nearing one of the reception areas meant for humans, no doubt the only heated rooms in the castle. We came to a huge iron grate that blocked the entire tunnel. When the sewer was used for its original purpose, the grate would have trapped large items—like bodies—to be collected periodically. A door made with metal straps opened in the center of the grate, originally to let through sewer gleaners and slaves. After all of us had moved to the other side, Felix closed and latched it behind us.

The massive oak-plank door ahead of us looked familiar and so did the gray carpet I saw as we approached. Waiting for us at the other end of the room was Jane—little, lethal Jane. Though merely an excruciating torture to a vampire, her gift could be lethal to humans, causing

enough stress to bring on a heart attack or stroke. I scowled. Jane waited beside an open elevator. I wished with all my heart that I could keep Bella away from her.

Suddenly, I realized where we were headed...to the Volturi reception room, which doubled as the dining room. That's why the room had smelled so clearly of death and why the high-pressure water system was installed there. They washed any unpleasant remains from their mass feedings down the drain—perhaps even bodies.

And I was dragging my beloved into that ghastly death chamber!

22. In Harm's Way

The elevator ride was thankfully short. I put my body between the guards and Bella, whom I discreetly blocked into a corner. Demetri was ogling me and Felix was eyeing Bella.

Just try it, Felix, I dared him silently. I was keeping an eye on him as I held Bella around the waist and rubbed her skin to try to warm her. The chill concerned me. The elevator was heated, but I knew that where we were going was not.

It's ridiculous, Jane complained to herself. *A human? Disgusting.*

You're a fine one to judge! I thought. *Talk about arrested development!*

Alice caught my eye and began to tell me how Bella had appeared in the Volterra town square at the moment she did.

When I saw her jump off the cliff, I got on a plane for Forks immediately. You probably didn't know that we were all in Denali for Cornell spring break?

I shook my head infinitesimally without looking her way.

Carlisle and Esme were on a hunting trip when Bella and I left Forks. They're probably back by now. I told everyone else to stay home because I figured if you heard us coming, you would act rashly. Bella was the only one who could—

I nodded my understanding as the elevator door opened and interrupted her train of thought. The three Volturi guards looked moderately less threatening with their hoods down and their capes pushed back. They were wearing nondescript, beige clothing that would blend into any crowd.

I was glad to exit that elevator, though I was not glad to be headed to the banquet room. I didn't know what Aro would decide, but the Volturi had a precedent for doing away with all of us, if for no other reason than that Bella knew about us. I felt sure Aro would hold that over my head, possibly offering to let Bella and Alice go if I agreed to join the guard. If I refused to join...well...we all might die. I didn't know how much wiggling room there would be. Maybe Alice would have to join too, but I would do my best to get them both out of Volterra alive.

How I wished Carlisle were here! Perhaps Aro would be less likely to make demands, though from a distance his purported friendship with Carlisle still might work to our advantage.

Bella was by far the one most in danger, though, and she wasn't directly tied to Carlisle except through me.

The elevator opened into the second, more elaborate, human waiting room with thick green carpet, the beige leather couches and high mahogany reception desk. This time, someone was working there and to my surprise, she was human! She welcomed us with a professional greeter's smile.

"Good afternoon, Jane," she offered. Clearly, she knew the order of precedence in our little company.

Jane nodded without looking at the receptionist. "Gianna."

Felix was leering at the woman, ostensibly attracted to her. He winked and she responded with a girlish laugh.

Gianna's thoughts focused primarily on maintaining perfect composure as we walked by—pretending that her life was not in danger every second we remained in that windowless room with her. "Composure" also meant appearing to be jaded that the two escorted strangers were protecting a human girl and that the male obviously was involved with her somehow.

If the human is his sister or girlfriend, then I bet he could change me without losing control. I wonder if he will stick around long enough for me to work him around. I only have three years until I turn thirty and nobody will want to change me after that, she thought with dismay, though her expression remained pleasant and placid. It was too bad for her, but with my peculiar scruples, she would have better luck pursuing Felix or Santiago—or even Alice—than me.

Jane's twin brother, Alec, stood just inside the double doors that were open to the hallway beyond the waiting room and we walked across the room to meet him. The little manchild in his light gray suit at first saw only his sister. Though they couldn't have been apart for more than five or ten minutes, he greeted her as if she'd been gone for hours. I was guessing that the two rarely separated.

"Jane," he said warmly, kissing her on both cheeks. "They send you out for one and you come back with two...and a half," he commented, the "half" being Bella. "Nice work."

Jane responded with an animated laugh so different from the profound apathy she had shown us that it was jarring. It was a mixture of childish delight and girlish coquetry.

Alec turned to me. "Welcome back, Edward. You seem in a better mood."

"Marginally," I replied, *if one considers wrath to be "better" than despair.*

Alec looked at Bella and chuckled. “And this is the cause of all the trouble?”

I smiled icily. Alec found it hard to believe that I could be attached to a human whose blood smelled so delicious. We were even then, because I found it hard to believe that he could “be involved” with his sister! Though I didn’t say it, of course.

Felix was still licking his chops over Bella’s scent and meant to get to her before Alec did. “Dibs,” he called crassly. *I can’t wait to get a taste of her! Raping and pillaging, that’s what we’re all about! Ha, ha!*

Enraged, I whipped my head around toward Felix and snarled a warning. I’d be happy to rip his throat out whether he was joking or not! The pumped-up hoodlum gestured toward himself with his fingers in the universal sign for “Bring it on!” I was more than tempted.

“Patience,” Alice whispered, catching my arm to steady me. *He’s too afraid of Aro to hurt Bella. He’s just yanking your chain to get you to make the first move. Don’t forget that we’ve got bigger problems than him.*

I decided that for a vampire, Felix must be rather stupid. Was he so sure of his position that he would poke a caged bear with a stick? He would get a rude surprise! With effort, I held my temper.

“Aro will be so pleased to see you again,” Alec commented to me.

You got that right! Demetri noted in his one-track, tracker’s mind. *Everybody loves a talented boy! Look at that naked chest. Positively gorgeous!* I ignored the ogling, which was easier to tolerate than Felix’s aggressive taunting.

“Let’s not keep him waiting,” said Jane.

Let’s get this over with, I agreed with a nod. Bella had had several minutes of heat now. She was no longer shaking, but she couldn’t be warm wearing wet clothes. If we didn’t get out of here soon....

Alec took Jane’s hand and led us into the wood-paneled hallway with the golden doors at its end. We ignored the doors again as Alec slid aside the camouflaging wall panel to reveal the simple wooden door opening into the antechamber of the Volturi’s grisly dining room. We passed through it into the turret room and I noted that everything was the same as it had been the day before, except that a lot more vampires— including the wives of Caius and Aro, but excluding Caius and Marcus—were milling about, chatting like they were at a cocktail party. *Perhaps they are!* I thought with alarm. *Bloody Bellas!* I scanned the room quickly, but read no menace, only curiosity.

“Jane, dear one, you’ve returned!” Aro spoke elatedly, as if Jane had been gone half an eternity.

I watched Bella’s reaction to Aro’s chalk–white, translucent face and his clouded red eyes, both effects of age and a millennium of limited access to the outdoors. Bella’s eyes grew wide when he glided toward Jane. Because Aro had stopped pretending to be human eons ago, everything about him was pure, unadulterated vampire. His movements were so fluid that with his long robe hiding his feet, he appeared to float on a cushion of air when he walked. Several body guards moved along with him, including Renata, who kept a hand on his back. He must be feeling more vulnerable with Alice and I together than with me alone.

When Aro reached Jane, he took her face in his hands and kissed her full on the mouth, a gesture I found slightly disturbing.

“Yes, Master. I brought him back alive, just as you wished,” Jane responded in an adoring tone that contrasted sharply to the infinite ennui she’d exhibited except when greeting Alec.

“And Alice and Bella, too! This is a happy surprise! Wonderful!” He clapped his hands together several times like a happy child. I suppose there are few things that excite Aro after several millennia of existence. His collections of the rare and valuable are some of those things.

Bella’s face registered astonishment when this unnatural creature spoke her name as if he’d known her for years. And the horrible truth was that he knew her exactly as well as I did.

All of these vampires—but especially Aro—were so different from my family who worked hard at blending into a human environment that Bella must be anxious. If I was reading her face and body language correctly, she was fascinated, but also fearful. I vowed to do everything I could to get her out of here safely.

“Felix, be a dear and tell my brothers about our company,” Aro commanded in the cloyingly sweet tone that belied his continuous scheming. “I’m sure they wouldn’t want to miss this.”

“Yes, Master,” Felix replied, hurrying to comply.

Aro turned to me with a patronizing smile. “You see, Edward? What did I tell you? Aren’t you glad that I didn’t give you what you wanted yesterday?” Aro asked, emphasizing the point like a grammar school teacher.

“Yes, Aro, I am,” I replied and truly I was. But I wasn’t too thrilled about his motives.

“I love a happy ending. They are so rare,” Aro said with a sigh. I hoped the comment boded well for today’s ending too. It seemed we had a long way to go. Aro continued, “But I want the whole story. How did this happen? Alice? Your brother seemed to think you infallible, but apparently there was some mistake.”

Aro spoke to my sister as if he knew her, which again, he did, though she didn’t know him in the slightest. I hoped I wasn’t so presumptive around acquaintances because I could read their minds. It seemed rude.

“Oh, I’m far from infallible,” Alice replied, charming Aro with a brilliant smile. “As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.” My sister was wisely trying to counterbalance my confrontational attitude. I could see the strain in her hands, which were clenched into fists, though her face and attitude showed no signs of tension.

“You’re too modest,” Aro countered. “I’ve seen some of your more amazing exploits, and I must admit I’ve never observed anything like your talent. Wonderful!”

So you spilled my guts to Aro! Alice accused. She knew that Aro could read minds, but she didn’t know to what extent. His gift is much different than mine. Though he can’t grab thoughts out of the air as I can, he still missed nothing, including that surreptitious exchange.

“I’m sorry, we haven’t been introduced properly at all, have we?” he apologized while also hinting to Alice of his power over her. “It’s just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother introduced us yesterday, in a peculiar way. You see, I share some of your brother’s talent, only I am limited in a way that he is not.” That was how Aro saw our difference, which explained why he coveted my skill in addition to his own. I did not agree with his assessment.

“And also exponentially more powerful,” I pointed out for Alice’s benefit and for his. Nothing good could come of Aro’s envy. “Aro needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, but he hears much more than I do. You know I can only hear what’s passing through your head in the moment. Aro hears every thought your mind has ever had,” I explained.

Alice’s eyebrows rose as she inquired silently, *He disk-copied your brain?*

I raised my chin to signal “yes.”

Then why does he need you?

Aro, who was nothing if not observant, guessed at the question and answered it himself.

“But to be able to hear from a distance...” he mused, wagging a finger between the two of us to indicate that he knew we were communicating silently. “That would be so convenient,” he finished wistfully.

Just then, Felix returned with Caius and Marcus, who looked us over. Uncharacteristically, Marcus perked up when he saw Bella and I together. His mind was still vacant, but projected a fleeting sense of astonishment. I didn’t catch exactly what had startled him.

“Marcus, Caius, look! Bella is alive after all, and Alice is here with her! Isn’t that wonderful?”

Marcus’s brief awareness already had waned and Caius did not share his brother’s enthusiasm for collecting. His primary interest was in law and order and meting out Volturi justice, particularly the death penalty. Aro remained undaunted.

“Let us have the story,” he prompted.

Marcus suddenly took center stage when he reacted to the request by gliding toward Aro, briefly holding out his hand to touch his brother’s palm.

The boy and the human are bonded like mates, tighter even, much tighter than a man should be with his pet. When he kills her, it will destroy him.

Aro raised an eyebrow. “Thank you, Marcus. That’s quite interesting.”

I was disgusted at Marcus’s assessment and snorted dismissively. He took no notice of me as he went to sit on his carved wooden throne beside Caius. The two wives and several body guards arranged themselves nearby.

“Amazing, absolutely amazing,” Aro marveled, shaking his head.

Edward, what are they saying?! Alice asked impatiently.

I replied softly. “Marcus sees relationships. He’s surprised by the intensity of ours.”

Aro smiled. “So convenient,” he whispered to himself, referring again to my gift. *He doesn’t have to touch her or even be close to her!* Then he spoke aloud. “It takes quite a bit to surprise Marcus, I can assure you.”

In my head, I translated that to: *It takes quite a bit to rouse Marcus...* The dark-haired brother reacted to almost nothing, his emptiness and indifference were so vast. Carlisle had told me that Marcus lost his beloved mate hundreds of years ago and has never recovered. I

could understand that rather well since I had lost Bella, but I wondered why Marcus continued to exist in his state of nothingness.

Aro's overexcited mind suddenly latched on to the way I was holding Bella.

"It's just so difficult to understand, even now. How can you stand so close to her like that?"

"It's not without effort," I acknowledged.

"But still—*la tua cantante!* What a waste!"

I chuckled sardonically at the enormous difference in our outlooks. Of course a drinker of human blood would value the blood more than the soul.

"I look at it more as a price," I explained.

Aro was bewildered. *What could possibly be worth more than that sweet, sweet blood?* "A very high price," he qualified.

"Opportunity cost," I said a little flippantly. It wasn't possible for Aro to understand so I wanted to waste no more effort explaining myself.

He laughed delightedly, but his thoughts were developing an alarming undercurrent the longer we talked about Bella.

"If I hadn't smelled her through your memories, I wouldn't have believed the call of anyone's blood could be so strong. I've never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade much for such a gift, and yet you..."

"Waste it," I cut in, wanting to disrupt his prolonged obsessing that was veering into desire—for Bella's blood. It exasperated me, but I worked to keep my cool.

"Ah, how I miss my friend Carlisle! You remind me of him—only he was not so angry."

"Carlisle outshines me in many other ways as well," I pointed out. *No, Carlisle is not an angry person. He expects and usually gets the best out of everyone. I am more suspicious and impatient.* And I was getting mighty impatient with this chitchat that wasn't addressing the elephant in the room—*What are you going to do with us?*

"I certainly never thought to see Carlisle bested for self-control of all things, but you put him to shame." Translation, *You are indeed most unusual and therefore, highly desirable to acquire.*

“Hardly.” It didn’t take much thinking to recognize the miracle of Carlisle’s self-control as he worked with humans every day, often covering himself in their blood in his efforts to heal them. Loving Bella as I did was not difficult—it was a simple necessity.

Aro could not stop mulling over each and every memory of Carlisle I’d ever had. *He is much too keen for this to be a good thing*, was my foremost thought.

“I am gratified by his success,” Aro declared (meaning *I am disturbed by his success*) after his thoughts lingered over the details of the fulfilling lives Carlisle had built for us in North America.

“Your memories of him are quite a gift for me though they astonish me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it...*pleases* me, his success in this unorthodox path he’s chosen. I expected that he would waste, weaken with time. I’d scoffed at his plan to find others who would share his peculiar vision. Yet, somehow, I’m happy to be wrong.” *Happy for him, not so much for me*, Aro concluded to himself.

I had grown tired of waiting for the ax to fall and wanted to know what I would have to do to resolve our situation, but Aro would not be hurried. I couldn’t tell if it was to build tension and fear or if he had so few pleasures in his existence that he wanted to stretch this one out.

“But *your* restraint,” he went on. “I did not know such strength was possible. To inure yourself against such a siren call, not just once but again and again—if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed.”

The longer Aro talked about Bella, the more dangerous he became to her. We were in the Volturi banquet room at what I guessed was dinnertime and the longer we were there, the more the room filled with Bella’s sweet scent. His words were making everybody thirsty, Felix behind me, Alec and Jane beside him, Demetri next to them, and to my great shame, even me. My own vulnerability made me as angry as anything else.

“Just remembering how she appeals to you...” Aro doggedly continued. “It makes me thirsty.” The desire in his eyes was unmistakable.

I readied myself for a fight. It would not be with Aro—just like he got thirsty by proxy (through my memory), he would battle me by proxy if he chose to attack Bella. Aro was becoming eager to touch her too, which heightened my trepidation.

“Don’t be disturbed,” Aro purred when he saw me tense and clench my fists. “I mean her no harm. But I am so curious, about one thing in particular. May I?” he glanced at Bella, but was asking my permission to read her mind. I felt my jaw clamp down.

Chill out, Edward. He's not going to hurt her, Alice informed me.

I looked at him. "Ask her," I directed, the tone of my voice unfriendly, but not confrontational.

He was treating Bella like she was my pet dog. It was insufferable to hear him refer to her as little more than an animal, then as an aromatic appetizer, and then to test her value as a potential acquisition. It was like kicking the tires on a used car or squeezing the breasts of a candidate for house slave. The latter enraged me even more than his wanting to acquire me.

"Of course, how rude of me!" he exclaimed, chuckling.

Yes, worse than rude. Bestial. I was becoming quite tired of our being treated as exhibits in a zoo. I could understand very clearly why Carlisle had fled Italy so long ago.

"Bella," Aro said, turning ceremoniously to her. "I'm fascinated that you are the one exception to Edward's impressive talent—so very interesting that such a thing should occur! And I was wondering, since our talents are similar in many ways, if you would be so kind as to allow me to try—to see if you are an exception for me, as well?"

I could almost feel Bella's body cringe as she looked at me, her deep liquid eyes questioning if he should be allowed to touch her. She didn't really have a choice, but Alice was certain that Aro would not hurt her by reading her mind, so I nodded. I hoped she didn't faint.

Bella raised her hand and Aro floated over to her to press his palm against hers. She didn't flinch, brave as she is, but though he gave her a solicitous smile, her hand was shaking in fright. Aro pinned her in place with his cloudy crimson eyes as he began to peer inside her mind.

His eager smile quickly changed to curiosity and then faded to irritation. He was getting...*nothing*. I had to use my renowned self-control to hold back a smile at what had to be his first failure to probe a mind. *My Bella!*

Aro dropped Bella's hand, irritated but intrigued, and moved away from her. Then he quietly considered the trio in front of him, Alice, Bella, and I, each of us unique. He was struggling to take it all in.

"A first," Aro mused. "I wonder if she is immune to our other talents...Jane, dear?"

"No!" I snarled at Aro, ready to attack if Jane tried to hurt Bella. Alice grabbed my arm to warn me, but I would take the strike gladly before I would let Jane do that to her. It could *kill* her!

“Yes, Master?” Jane answered sweetly.

I snarled menacingly at Aro, visibly challenging his authority. The minds around the room were stunned into silence, or embarrassment, except for Felix who wanted to attack. Clearly, nobody here *ever* challenged Aro’s authority. But this was plain cruel, not to mention unnecessary. He could test Bella’s mind any number of ways...using Demetri, or even Alec, without hurting her. He had no cause to attack Bella!

Aro ignored me and spoke directly to Jane. “I was wondering, my dear one, if Bella is immune *to you*.”

I growled fiercely, keeping my eyes locked on Jane. When she turned toward Bella, happily prepared to inflict pain, I threw myself at her instinctively.

“Don’t!” Alice cried out to me. I didn’t get as far as Jane, reaping my punishment before I was halfway there.

The torture was far worse than I would have thought possible. The flames instantly filled every vein, artery, and blood vessel in my body. It was the fire of my change at full force in every part of me at once.

Bella can’t see me suffer. She’ll try to intervene, was my first and only thought. It took every microgram of will in me—then double that—to prevent myself from screaming in agony. Time stretched into an infinity of fire, each second becoming minutes becoming hours becoming days until I would have begged to die if I could have spoken a word. But I could only endure. I squeezed my teeth together with crushing force and felt my body thrash about on the floor.

I heard Bella shriek, “Stop!” but the burning continued, one endless moment after another.

I’ve got her. My brain vaguely registered the words Alice was speaking silently, as she tried to ease my distress in a small way by keeping Bella safe for me.

“Jane,” Aro said dispassionately. I understood then that he was testing the power of the bond Marcus told him existed between Bella and myself. And though he had just seen visible proof of it, he still couldn’t grasp it.

The instant Jane turned her head the pain faded as quickly as it had begun, leaving no residue in my body except for a heightened fear of Jane’s power. Knowing that the punishment could come at any time for any reason was nerve-wracking.

At the first moment I regained control of my muscles, I hopped to my feet as casually as possible and looked up. With sudden panic, I saw that Jane was directing her eyes at Bella. I froze in alarm before I realized that Bella hadn't noticed. She was struggling in Alice's restraining arms, still focused on me. I wanted to laugh and cheer, but instead, I sighed in immense relief.

"He's fine," Alice told Bella, though I could hear the tension in her voice. It must be horrible to watch someone go through that and be helpless to stop it.

So Aro couldn't read Bella's mind and Jane couldn't torture her! Probably Demetri couldn't find her or Alec paralyze her either. Yet another miracle in a day of miracles! Jane concentrated even harder on Bella, her confusion and fury rising every second. I took Bella from Alice's arms and pulled her close to me again, wrapping my arm around her protectively.

To my surprise, Aro began to laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! This is wonderful!" He clapped his hands in glee. Jane, violently angry now, crouched to spring at Bella and I tensed to intercept her.

Aro stopped Jane with a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be put out, dear one," he consoled her. "She confounds us all."

Bella had just made an enemy of the worst kind through no fault of her own. Of all the guard members to take up a vendetta against her, Jane was the most dangerous and destructive.

"Ha, ha, ha," Aro chuckled. "You're very brave, Edward, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do that to me once—just out of curiosity." Aro shook his head in disbelief, while I couldn't hide my revulsion at his cruel games.

"So what do we do with you now?" Aro asked himself aloud. After all his toying with us, finally he had gotten to the point.

23. Verdict

Aro began pacing with his chin in his hand. Bella was trembling beside me as both Alice and I prepared ourselves for the worst. We watched and analyzed his every gesture, his every breath, feeling the guillotine poised over our heads.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you’ve changed your mind?” Aro inquired of me. “Your talent would be an excellent addition to our little company.”

The noisy thoughts behind us distracted me for a moment.

Oh boy, the Boy! (Demetri)

He’s a mind reader, so what? You’re a mind reader! We don’t need him. Now the human, on the other hand... (Felix)

He’s broken the rules. He must die! His pet human too! (Jane)

Where the hell is Heidi? I’m thirsty. (Alec)

Answering Aro’s question was like walking a tightrope over an alligator pit. One wrong move and you wouldn’t die instantly—but you might wish to. I could not tell what Aro’s reaction would be to our refusals. I wondered if Alice could.

“I’d...rather...not,” I replied in the mildest tone I could manage under the circumstances. From his point of view, he was offering me the greatest honor a vampire could receive. Though I wholeheartedly disagreed, I felt it would be wise to decline politely.

“Alice?” Aro asked, turning to my sister. “Would you perhaps be interested in joining with us?”

She followed my lead. “No, thank you,” Alice replied, keeping her tone pleasant.

Then Aro caught me off guard.

“And you, Bella?” he inquired.

I could not suppress the hiss that issued from my lips. Aro was prepared to change her himself! *I will not allow it!*

Bella was taken aback. Or was her wide expression one of fright?

“What?” Caius interrupted before she could answer, his disapproval clear. *He wants a human? Absolutely not! The law does not allow it.*

“Caius, surely you see the potential,” Aro explained indulgently. “I haven’t seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?”

Caius was mentally dismissive. *Eh, better a human should feed us.*

Jane was instantly furious. *How dare he compare me to that...that...human?*

I hardly think so, Alec thought mildly.

I was furious at all of them and felt a growl begin to rumble in my chest. Caius wanted to kill her and Aro wanted to keep her!

Bella glanced at me furtively and then said “No, thank you” to Aro, her voice coming out a tiny squeak.

“That’s unfortunate,” Aro responded regretfully. “Such a waste.”

A “waste.” That was the word he had used when he knew I wanted to die. Was he saying it was a waste that Bella would die? That he would let Caius kill her? I was pretty sure that Aro didn’t want to kill any of us...or let Caius kill us either. Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Join or die, is that it?” I hotly accused Aro. “I suspected as much when we were brought to *this* room. So much for your laws.” My voice was angrier than necessary and I *was* angry. It was, however, a controlled, strategic anger.

“Of course not,” Aro denied, shocked by my accusation. “We were already convened here, Edward, awaiting Heidi’s return. Not for you.”

Thank God, I was right. Indeed, Aro’s thoughts told me that he *distinctly* did not want to kill us.

I didn’t think Marcus would put up any resistance to letting us go—what did he care?—but we would have to get around Caius’s propensity for meting out “justice.” I decided the best approach was to challenge him head-on. I could use his rigid view of the law in our favor...*maybe*.

“Aro,” Caius murmured. “The law claims them.”

Just as I thought!

“How so?” I challenged Caius, hoping he would trap himself.

“She knows too much. You have exposed our secrets,” Caius accused.

Got him!

Good one, Edward! Alice thought, though I hadn’t gotten to the punch line yet, which I did straight away.

“There are a few humans in on your charade here, as well,” I pointed out. There was Gianna, obviously, and I’d seen a human janitor cleaning the “cells” when I left my monk’s quarters the day before. I’d bet a sow’s ear that the Volturi also had a priest on the payroll to keep the citizens’ attention focused away from themselves. A sermon every now and then on the great Saint Marcus would ensure that.

Caius grinned evilly.

“Yes, but when *they* are no longer useful to us, they will serve to sustain us. That is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you prepared to destroy her? I think not,” he taunted, knowing my answer.

Bella tried to speak for herself. “I wouldn’t—,” she began, but Caius looked at her as he would a dog that had just urinated on the Persian carpet.

“Nor do you intend to make her one of us,” he declared to me authoritatively.

Damn! Aro had told him!

“Therefore, she is a vulnerability,” Caius continued. “Though it is true, for this, only *her* life is forfeit. You may leave if you wish.”

Bella inhaled sharply and I tightened my arm around her waist. I barely choked back a growl, but my bared teeth made my response clear.

“That’s what I thought,” Caius stated triumphantly.

Yes! Felix cheered silently behind me. I called it!

I wanted to turn around and pound his head so hard he’d have to unzip his Italian trousers to drink his dinner. *Later*, I promised myself. Suddenly, I missed Emmett—a lot.

Though Caius had angered me by threatening Bella, his declaration was not all bad news. We’d just been told in front of many witnesses that Alice and I were not subject to death.

It was one hurdle behind us. Now I had to find a loophole to pull Bella through. They would have to kill me before I'd let anyone harm her!

Bella! I had been focusing so hard on maneuvering us out of our predicament that I hadn't had a second to appreciate the miracle of her resurrection. I wanted to look into her eyes and hold her and tell her how I loved her and how I had made an unforgivable error and that I was sorry...sorrier than I could ever express...and *please* would she try to forgive me anyway...*please* would she have me back?? I had no choice but to wait, though. We had no future together if either of us had no future.

Aro's mind was churning after Caius's pronouncement. *What can I do? How can I keep her? I must keep her alive, at least.*

I had been wrong about Aro when we first arrived. Now that he knew neither he nor Jane—the most powerful of the Volturi and the guard—could get inside Bella's mind, he would not take Bella's death lightly.

If Felix were to slip up now, I did not think he would survive the mistake. From what I could read in his limited mind, he had no special gift; the Volturi kept him for his intimidation factor. However, Aro could find size and strength virtually anywhere. It was unlikely that I would get a death sentence if I chose to kill Felix.

Aro had latched onto something Caius had said—“*Nor do you intend to make her one of us...*”—and had an idea, a legal ambiguity that would solve his dilemma.

“Unless...” Aro ventured. “Unless you do intend to give her immortality?”

It was a deal that could save all of us. And *intend* can be construed a number of ways. I might *intend* to today, but change my mind tomorrow, right? *It could work.* I noticed that Alice had unclenched her fists at some point during these last exchanges. She must agree with me.

“And if I do?” I said, testing the waters.

Aro smiled brightly. “Why, then you would be free to go home and give my regards to my friend Carlisle.”

Bella's heart leaped.

Having read my mind, Aro knew that changing Bella went against every petrified bone in my body, but would he disregard that information in order to keep Bella alive? *Please let it be so...*

Caius was scowling furiously at Aro, not at all happy with his brother's implied offer that was, essentially, "*Say yes, and we'll let you go.*"

Though Aro was spokesman for the three brothers—the wives were present, but they didn't appear to get a vote—ultimately, he still had to answer to Caius. Aro would not directly contradict or undermine his brother and Marcus's quiet, frozen form implied that he was "abstaining."

With a glance at Caius, Aro amended the offer. "But I'm afraid you would have to mean it," he clarified. He lifted his palm toward me in the handshake position, demonstrating to his brother that he would verify any claim I made. Caius relaxed and lost his scowl.

So there was the deal—promise to change Bella at some time in the future or Bella dies today. She forfeits either her soul or her life. I looked into Bella's eyes and saw the most beautiful, pure soul looking back at me, trusting me.

"Mean it," Bella whispered. "Please."

So she was still willing to join the ranks of the damned. How could I *ever* agree to that? Naturally, I wanted to guarantee Bella's life, but at the expense of her soul? It was selfish. *It was wrong!* And I knew in my heart that I couldn't do it.

Ahhh! I wanted to hit something, to cry, to scream, but again, I was helpless. Even running was impossible. If I wouldn't change Bella, Aro would let Caius kill her. This was tacitly agreed between them. Though I cared nothing for my life without her, I couldn't let *her* die! *This was all my fault!*

From the corner of my eye, I saw Alice step forward and silently offer her hand to Aro. What was she doing? Why would letting him read her mind make any difference to this situation, unless she had decided to trade herself for Bella's release?

I can't let her do that! I thought desperately. Aro wanted Alice more than anything—more than me. He might even defy his brother and let Bella go without restrictions if he won the biggest prize of all. *No, Alice, no!*

Aro's body guards leaped to protect him, but he gestured for them to stand down. Renata continued to touch his cloak, but I could feel the field of confusion she generated shrink in size. Aro's eyes glittered with excitement as *precious Alice* offered herself to him.

Aro took her hand and began to concentrate, as did I, trying to follow the information he was speedily absorbing. Alice showed no expression as Aro rifled through the "exploits" he'd read from my memory to check if they were true. He was thrilled to find that they were. After

noting the love Alice had for Bella and me, love that had drawn her into this dangerous situation to help us, Aro began watching Alice and Bella's race to my side in Volterra.

Then I saw it and I had to struggle to maintain my composure. I clenched my jaws and fists against the impulse to snatch my sister away from Aro.

Alice, what have you done? No!

After what seemed like an eternity, Aro released Alice's hand and began to laugh in delight.

"Ha, ha, ha. That was *fascinating!*" he exclaimed.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Alice replied with a stoic smile.

"To see the things you've seen—especially the ones that haven't happened yet!" Aro went on excitedly.

"But that will," Alice emphasized in an oddly purposeful way.

Then I realized what was happening. First, Aro saw Alice's fateful vision from last spring when she said that either I would kill Bella or she would become one of us. It was an old vision that easily could have changed by now, but Aro didn't know that. He only saw the certainty of that vision when it happened...and Alice had felt very certain about it back then. As Aro watched Alice's memories move forward in time to the present, he saw Alice talking to Bella on the airplane to Volterra. (And now I did too.)

"Honestly, I think it's all gotten beyond ridiculous. I'm debating whether to just change you myself.... He'll be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?"

Alice! I chided inwardly, the "he" being me, of course. But it was *brilliant!* Aro knew from reading my mind that I was dead set against changing Bella, but now he believed that *Alice* would be the one to do it.

Aro was still going on about it. "Yes, yes, it's quite determined," he said confidently. "Certainly there's no problem."

Yes! Aro had interpreted Alice's memories in the way she'd known he would. By seeing all of the times her visions had been exactly right, he was convinced that Alice was omniscient. She wasn't—I would never allow her to change Bella and she knew it! But as long as Aro believed it, the world had turned right again.

"Aro," Caius grumbled his disapproval, which was echoed in Jane's thoughts behind me.

Aro jollied his brother along. “Dear Caius, do not fret. Think of the possibilities! They do not join us today, but we can always hope for the future. Imagine the joy young Alice alone would bring to our little household... Besides, I’m so terribly curious to see how Bella turns out!”

I heard the mental groans from Felix and Jane, but nobody else in the room cared one way or the other (except for Demetri, but I was positive he would recover almost instantly the moment I left Volterra).

Bella’s body began to slump against me and I grew concerned about her welfare. Was she going into shock? Would she faint? Was she hypothermic? We had to get out of there immediately!

“Then we are free to go now?” I asked calmly, as if I didn’t have a care in the world.

“Yes, yes,” Aro granted. “But please visit again. It’s been absolutely enthralling!” He was the excited child again. As far as Aro was concerned, the dream was still alive! He had averted the destruction of all his potential new toys.

“And we will visit you as well,” Caius added ominously. “To be sure that you follow through on your side. Were I you, I would not delay too long. We do not offer second chances.”

Right. Warning noted. The whole idea of changing Bella set my teeth on edge, but I managed to keep my mouth shut and just nod my agreement. There must be a way around this. I would find one. At the moment, though, Bella’s immediate well-being was my greatest concern.

Pleased with his victory, as he saw it, Caius wandered back to join his brother, Marcus, who had not moved a millimeter during the entire drama. I was right—this little matter of life and death (ours) hadn’t roused his interest in the least. Fortunately, that had been to our advantage in this case.

I heard Felix groan audibly. *I don’t get my prize?* He’d had his heart set on drinking Bella’s blood, which had set my heart on setting him alight. I promised myself a reckoning one day soon.

“Ah, Felix,” Aro smiled indulgently. “Heidi will be here at any moment. Patience.”

I didn’t think Bella knew about Heidi’s role...yet. I very much preferred she never know. Alice caught on right away.

“In that case, perhaps we’d better leave sooner rather than later,” I suggested politely, wishing to depart expeditiously, but with as much goodwill as possible. It was likely that we would need it in the future. Otherwise, I’d have picked up Bella and made a run for it.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Accidents do happen. Please wait below until after dark, though, if you don’t mind,” Aro responded courteously.

Isn’t this nice? I thought, heavy sarcasm implied, but I squelched the impulse.

“Of course,” I said agreeably.

Aro looked at me with his head tilted sideways as if he were evaluating me somehow. Then he flicked a finger at Felix to approach, which the obedient guard did without hesitation. I smiled to myself at the unspoken insult to come.

Reaching forward, Aro undid the fastenings of Felix’s hooded cloak and unceremoniously stripped it off him. Then he pitched it to me.

“And here. Take this. You’re a little conspicuous.”

Yes, he is! came the predictable thought from behind me.

Does he never quit? I wondered.

Felix was seething, which amused me. Aro had literally given me the robe off of the goon’s back. There was no time to gloat, however. I accepted the too-big cloak and slung it around my shoulders. The wool would warm Bella.

“It suits you,” Aro said with regret. He truly hated to let us go, but he enjoyed seeing me wear that cloak.

I chuckled at the joke. “Thank you, Aro,” I responded, feeling oddly grateful. “We’ll wait below.”

Just then I heard a group of voices approaching from the hallway. The strangers’ thoughts were mixed—some excited, others confused, but most fawning.

“Goodbye, young friends.” Aro dismissed us and then focused his attention on the sound of Heidi’s approach.

“Let’s go,” I said urgently. It was vital that we get the hell out of there *now!*

Demetri assigned himself to be our escort to the waiting room, though it wasn't far. Pulling Bella between us, Alice and I rushed for the one door to the turret room that served as both entrance and exit.

"Not fast enough," Alice warned. Bella looked at her fearfully.

The voices were coming through the waiting room and into the outer hall. We darted through the antechamber but met the crowd already squeezing through the small wooden door. It wasn't wide enough to pass through against the stream. Probably, that was by design. Demetri motioned for us to flatten ourselves against the stone wall to make room for the crowd coming in.

We have to get out of here! I thought, near panic. Bella was bound to figure out what was going on any second. I watched for a break in the crowd that would allow me to get her out the door and away from this flock of sheep heading for slaughter.

"Well this is unusual," spoke a loud, fat man, obviously American.

Alice was on the other side of Bella trying to relieve her stress through fashion analysis.

Dangerously strained Bermuda shorts, too-short white t-shirt, black dress socks with ginormous white running shoes, humungous camera around the neck, cheap flip-up sunglasses. Should people get the death penalty for crimes of fashion? Alice wondered.

"So medieval," screeched a large woman, the female counterpart to her husband.

White knit leggings, four inches too short, slightly see-through, big, bunchy granny panties, cheap t-shirt with kittens riding up the belly...

The forty-two tourists pressed through the undersized door one after another after another, bunching up in the antechamber until the people in the front were nudged into the turret room.

"Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra!" Aro called out to his dinner guests.

A tiny nun was clutching her rosary and looking frightened. She was very close to guessing the truth, that something was terribly amiss. She had signed up for a tour of Catholic churches in Tuscany and she knew something was not right. She repeatedly tugged at the sleeves of the other tourists, asking urgent questions they could not understand in Czech. Everyone else spoke Italian, French, and English.

I held Bella's face to my chest and blocked her view of the crowd, which would soon catch on to the ruse and begin panicking. Already she had observed the nun's obvious distress.

Suddenly, Bella's body began to quake against me and I knew that she'd just put two and two together. Alarmed for her, I lurched toward the small door the instant the last tourist cleared it and pushed Bella through in front of me. Horror, shock, or pain ...I didn't know which emotion was taking precedence, but she wore a stricken expression and water was beginning to pool in her eyes.

Heidi remained in the hallway after herding her charges through the door and I felt her magnetism immediately. She was tall and as beautiful as any vampire woman, with hair a similar color to Bella's and falsely blue eyes, but she had something extra. With her gift, I could see that she was well-suited to her ghastly job.

"Welcome home, Heidi," called Demetri as he followed us through the doorway.

"Demetri," she replied smoothly, but she was looking at me in Felix's too-long cloak with my arm around a human, running *away* from the dining hall. It confounded her.

"Nice fishing," Demetri praised.

"Thanks," Heidi replied with a wide smile. "Aren't you coming?"

"In a minute. Save a few for me," he said with a smirk.

So...Demetri likes to sample the grass on both sides of the fence. It was more than I needed to know.

I began to jog toward the double doors into the waiting room to get Bella behind their sound proofing, but it was too late—the feast had already begun. Screams of terror tore through the air, chasing us all the way to our questionable refuge.

24. Flight

“Do not leave until dark,” Demetri told us, echoing Aro’s command. *Or not at all*, he added silently, winking at me. I was in no mood. Fortunately, he was very thirsty and did not want to miss out on the hot, pulsing elixir that was flowing abundantly in the turret room. The thought wiped his face clean of its amusement and he turned to rush back down the hall, pulling the double doors closed as he went.

Behind the reception desk, Gianna was shrewdly eyeing Felix’s gray cloak draped around my shoulders.

Is he one of us now? she wondered. *He can’t be too important or he’d be wearing a darker color. But why is he still holding the human? Shouldn’t she be down the hall with the rest of them? How can she leave? Could I leave too if I wanted?* She looked thoughtful for a moment. *No, someone will change me. I just have to play my cards right.*

Gianna wanted to ask me if I would be staying, but she was too well trained to pry.

Maybe even the little one, she thought, looking at Alice. *She looks well-controlled too so close to that girl. And their eyes are so black! They must be taking her somewhere else to feed and that’s why she’s shaking like that. Oh well.* She hoped Alice and I would be back.

“Are you all right?” I whispered to Bella, though anyone could see that she was anything but. Her entire body was quaking like a cartoon character with his finger in an electrical outlet; her teeth bounced together like the plastic ones Emmett kept on the coffee table, winding them up to chatter and hop when the Washington Huskies scored a touchdown.

What should I do? I fretted, glancing around the room as if the answer were written on the walls. I was starting to panic myself as tears began streaming down Bella’s face. I had never seen her lose it like this before. She was always so brave.

“You’d better make her sit before she falls,” Alice told me. “She’s going to pieces.”

She certainly was. A high, keening sound was vibrating through her vocal chords and her watery eyes looked wild, like an elk’s right before I sank my teeth into its neck.

“Shh, Bella, shh,” I said softly as I tugged her to the leather couch farthest away from Gianna so she couldn’t stare as she clearly wanted to do.

“I think she’s having hysterics. Maybe you should slap her,” Alice advised.

She was joking, wasn't she? I wondered, looking at Alice, a question in my eye. She wasn't. I was beginning to panic myself. Was my darling harmed for life? Would she ever recover from the horrendous trauma I'd put her through? I sat down and pulled Bella onto my lap, wrapping the huge cloak around her for warmth. Her blue jeans were still wet, though at least this room was heated.

"It's all right, you're safe, it's all right," I soothed over and over, holding her close and wishing I had a heartbeat to calm her. I remember from medical school that nurses often put ticking clocks into the cribs of newborn babies to simulate the sound of their mother's heartbeat and lull them to sleep.

"All...those...people," Bella stuttered, gulping air after each word. Sobs were shaking her delicate frame.

"I know," I murmured gently.

"It's...so...horrible," she managed to get out on jagged exhalations.

"Yes, it is. I wish you hadn't had to see that."

Bella laid her head against my chest in the old, familiar way, and I wanted to cry too...cry away the months of pain, the horror of losing her, the shock and joy of getting her back. It was all so much...too much. I stroked her thick, soft hair, reveling in the smell of her, the feel of her body, the sound of her heartbeat. I had missed her so *dreadfully!*

Gianna, registering a problem, moved quietly to us and leaned over my shoulder from behind, speaking softly next to my ear.

"Is there anything I can get you?" she asked me conspiratorially, as if wanting to assist with the intransigent human.

"No," I said firmly, wishing her to go away. She was already more vampire than human in her professional lack of compassion for the species of which she was still a part. She nodded her understanding and flashed Bella a smile, though she wasn't thinking particularly kind thoughts about her.

What is her problem? He's gorgeous and he obviously wants her for...something, she thought as she turned on her heels and went back to her desk. Perhaps Bella *could* use something hot with sugar. I wondered if they kept such things in this unnatural place.

Bella pulled herself together a bit and asked, "Does she know what's going on here?"

"Yes. She knows everything," I said.

“Does she know they’re going to kill her someday?”

“She knows it’s a possibility,” I told her truthfully, finding it difficult to empathize with this cold human. “She’s hoping they’ll decide to keep her.”

The color in Bella’s face drained away and her body felt suddenly heavier in my arms.

“How can she want that?” Bella moaned. “How can she watch those people file through to that hideous room and want to be a part of *that*?”

I felt my dead heart twist at her words. *Exactly*, I thought. *And how could you ever want me knowing that I’m a part of that?*

“Oh, Edward,” Bella cried desperately, sobs erupting from her chest again.

“What’s wrong?” I worried, rubbing her back in an attempt at comfort, which I felt incapable of giving. I was no better than the rest of them under the surface. I was not meant for this beautiful, brave, heroic mortal. Nevertheless, she wrapped both her arms around my neck and I was overwhelmed with the miracle of that.

“Is it really sick for me to be happy right now?” she asked in a broken voice full of emotion.

I pulled her closer, trying to absorb the reality of her presence. I had never felt such joy, despite the disaster we had just experienced and which was not over yet.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I murmured into her ear, thrilled to get this second chance. “But we have lots of reasons to be happy. For one, we’re alive.” That was another miracle. We’d both come within a razor’s width of destruction.

“Yes,” Bella agreed. “That’s a good one.”

“And together,” I sighed into Bella’s hair, luxuriating in the scent I had missed so much for so long. “And, with any luck, we’ll still be alive tomorrow.”

“Hopefully,” Bella said with a moment’s hesitation. She still must be frightened—of course she was! She was the human one here, the one whose life had been most in danger for the last few hours.

“The outlook is quite good,” Alice piped up assuredly. “I’ll see Jasper in less than twenty-four hours.”

I was happy for that. Alice had risked her life to save mine so that Bella and I could be together again. I would owe her until the end of our days. And I was happy for Jasper too,

though he would never learn just how close he'd come to losing his beloved Alice forever. I apologized and thanked him in one breath.

Bella was looking at my face and I couldn't stop gazing at hers...her pale skin, her deep chocolate eyes, and the crease between her eyebrows that seemed a little more set in than it had been when I left. What had happened to her all these long months? I knew only a little—that she had been hounded by two of my kind while I was dashing around, unaware of one of them and convinced I had the other one in my sights. And she'd had to rely on a pack of werewolves—almost as dangerous themselves—to protect her! I was mortified by my ineptitude, stupidity, and lack of foresight. I could never make it up to her.

I was grateful that the wolves had killed Laurent. *Victoria was one dead vampire too*, I vowed. But I didn't want to think about that now. I only wanted to appreciate the beautiful face in front of me.

I touched the darkened skin beneath Bella's eyes in concern. "You look so tired," I whispered.

"And you look thirsty," Bella whispered back, looking into my ebony eyes and reminding me that my throat should be in flames. The pain was there, of course, it could not be avoided, but it was surprisingly easy to disregard.

"It's nothing," I told her and it wasn't. Not with Bella here, alive.

"Are you sure? I could sit with Alice," Bella offered, but she couldn't because I would never let her go again.

"Don't be ridiculous," I countered. "I've never been in better control of *that* side of my nature than right now."

I took a deep breath to prove it. Perhaps the ugly scene I'd just witnessed through Bella's eyes was the cause, but I didn't think so. It felt more like losing Bella had altered my makeup somehow. I could no more consider drinking Bella's blood than eating my own flesh. Marcus had been right—hurting her would destroy me.

Bella relaxed into my arms and, amazingly, was able to rest a little despite our environment and my cold, hard body. Again, I was grateful to Aro for the heavy cloak.

"Quite the day," Alice commented.

"Thank you Alice. I can never repay you for this."

"Oh, you'll repay me," she joked and I saw an image of a yellow Porsche in her mind.

“Really?” I inquired. I never would have guessed.

“Yes, well, I borrowed one down in Florence for a test drive and it was perfect for me, though I almost had to sit on a phone book to see over the steering wheel. The seats sit so low, you know.”

“I imagine we could find a remedy for that,” I said, smiling. She grinned back.

“So you stole a car to get here?”

“I *was* in a slight hurry, you know!”

“Yes, I know. Sorry about that.” I wanted to say I was sorry for so many things, but it seemed better at this juncture to keep things somewhat light. We were not out of the woods yet. “So where is the amazing banana rocket?”

“I left it outside the walls with the keys in it. No doubt someone has reported it stolen, or has re-stolen it. Either way, it will get back to its owner eventually. It’s hard to hide in a banana-colored Porsche,” she said smiling. “I’ll find us something else. We won’t need quite that much power going *down* the hill.

“You’re a marvel, Alice.”

“I know, but thank you.” After a pause, Alice cut the silence with an interesting question. “What was all that talk about *singers*?”

“*La tua cantante*,” I repeated the flowing Italian phrase.

“Yes, that.”

It was a lovely idiom for an ugly phenomenon.

“They have a name for someone who smells the way Bella does to me. They call her my *singer*—because her blood sings for me.”

Alice laughed at me.

Bella was so beautiful there in my arms. Every now and then, I couldn’t help pressing my lips to her hair, her forehead, and even her lovely, pert nose and listening to her heart turn somersaults. It was the sweetest pleasure, though my beloved did not return my affections.

Bella seemed glad to be with me and she let me hold her, but something had changed. She felt guarded, careful. Perhaps I had hurt her too badly and destroyed the love she once had for me. It wrenched my heart to think of it, but I would have only myself to blame. I had told

her I didn't want her, a lie I'd made her believe. Maybe she had moved on, found someone else. These uncertainties chased each other around in my head, but remained unresolved.

When I couldn't bear to think about it anymore, I chatted with Alice. Bella had dozed off and I took advantage of that to ask Alice some pointed questions. We spoke fast and low.

"Alice," I said, interrupting her reverie about her homecoming with Jasper, "you said earlier that you knew I wouldn't catch Victoria. What did you mean by that?"

If Alice could have blushed, I think she would have done so.

"Well, Edward, I'm not going to lie because that would be useless."

"Yes it would. And...?"

"Oh, all right," she answered begrudgingly. "I sent you after Victoria on purpose because you needed something to do. I was worried about you."

"But you saw that I wouldn't catch her?"

"Yes."

"From the very beginning, you knew I would not catch Victoria?" I asked again just to make sure I understood.

"Yes."

"So all that time, you were just pulling strings to keep me running around after a ghost, is that it?"

"No, no! I swear all that cell phone tracing and stuff was legitimate—illegitimately legitimate, I mean. The tracking part was all real—you saw her yourself—I just knew that she would get away eventually, but I couldn't see where she would go. So, I thought maybe I was wrong and you chased her into the ocean or whatever. It wasn't just a useless exercise!"

Perhaps I should have been angry with Alice, letting me hop around on two continents when she knew it would come to nothing, but I didn't feel angry.

"Why did you really do that, Alice?"

"Well..."

"You might as well just tell me, because you know I'll see it anyway."

“You’re right. Don’t be upset, okay, but I saw what would happen to you unless you had something to distract you and take your mind off of...” Alice pointed a finger at Bella dozing on my lap. “You’ve heard of vampires going insane, right? And doing crazy things like walking in the sun, or drinking openly, or going on rampages? I saw that happening to you, Edward, and I was afraid for you.”

“You think I would have called the Volturi down on myself accidentally?”

“Yes...or maybe subconsciously, but either way you’d be dead. Maybe I was wrong, but it seemed like tracking was helping you. One reason I went to Biloxi when I did was to check up on you—”

I scowled at her.

“I know, I know...I still wanted to go, though. It was just a question of when. I might have waited until Jasper could come too, but you were already down there, so... Please tell me I wasn’t wrong to do it!”

I thought about it for only a second before replying.

“You weren’t wrong, Alice.”

She nodded at me knowingly.

“Did you see me in Rio?”

Alice nodded again.

“You saw what kind of shape I was in then. It probably would have happened much sooner if I hadn’t been chasing Victoria. As it was, I lay in the ground in Texas for weeks.”

“I know. It was bad.”

I nodded at her then. “I was glad to see you in New Orleans. All that stuff you told me about your family, that wasn’t fiction, was it?”

“Oh, no! That was all true.”

“What did you find in Biloxi?”

“I do have a niece and you’d be amazed—she looks a little bit like me, small, dark hair, but her wardrobe is hideous!” Alice grinned.

“You didn’t step in and fix that for her then?” I asked, only half joking.

“No, I resisted the urge. I still might meet her someday. I don’t think I’m ready yet, though.”

I nodded again and we fell into silence until something else occurred to me.

“Did you tell Carlisle?”

Alice suddenly looked guilty.

“You did! That’s why he didn’t try to keep me in New York! He agreed with you, didn’t he? And he wasn’t worried about me going after Victoria by myself because he knew I wouldn’t catch her. Am I right?”

Alice just crinkled her nose at me.

That explained something I’d found slightly puzzling at the time...why my father hadn’t insisted that he or Emmett come with me on such a dangerous mission. Or why Esme hadn’t objected more than she did. So my family had ganged up on me in my own best interest. I sighed and shrugged my shoulders at my sister.

“At least I got to see the Alamo,” I said. “And the drag queens in Ipanema.”

She smiled widely. “They were marvelous, weren’t they?”

So she’d seen that too. Oh well.

After a while, Bella’s eyes opened and she smiled at me, making my silent heart leap. I kissed the top of her lovely head. She wasn’t shivering anymore.

I was surprised by how well the soundproofed doors had blocked the noises of the massacre after Demetri retreated. I was sure that neither Gianna nor Bella had heard the death throes of the hapless tourists. Alice and I did and it wasn’t pleasant, but both of us had lived through as much a thousand times before. Had caused as much, though not all at once, perhaps.

The afternoon wore on. One part of me was vigilant and guarded inside the Volturi’s lair, while another part of me was living in pure bliss. After Bella “died,” I never dreamed of recovering any part of this happiness again. It was a second chance I didn’t deserve.

Alice and I heard the footsteps in the hallway at the same time—two sets—and I focused on reading the approaching minds. “Alec and Jane,” I mouthed to Alice over Bella’s head.

“Don’t trouble yourself, dear sister. I will dispose of the miscreants and that wretched human will never disturb your serenity again. Of course she’s no match to you, dearest. No one will ever match your power or your beauty. Let me do this alone. Wait here,” Alec suggested to Jane as he continued toward the waiting room.

All of us turned to look as he opened the doors and entered with a pacific smile on his face. I saw that he meant us no harm—only that he was sending us on our way according to Aro’s orders. Jane remained out of sight down the hallway, fuming, with vengeance firmly rooted in her heart. She would always be a danger to Bella, I feared.

“You’re free to leave now,” Alec said in a gracious tone of voice that belied the unpleasant thoughts beneath. “We ask that you don’t linger in the city.”

“That won’t be a problem,” I rudely rejoined. Alec merely smiled and left the room. Good riddance.

Alec had been a child trained in the social graces and his true feelings would have been difficult to decipher without the benefit of reading his mind. He would always be most loyal to Jane, even before his masters—her wants were his wants, her needs his needs. Jane wished Bella dead, so Alec did too, though he would not act on that alone.

I hoped never to darken the doors of this castle again. I’d had more than my fill of these ruthless and conniving beings. Improbably, Demetri was the only one of them I liked in the slightest. He was not duplicitous. Though a flirt and perhaps a scoundrel, he had the spirit of a scalawag rather than a villain. I sensed that he’d lived his early years as a vampire somewhere other than in this putrid nest. Aro must have found him already changed, unlike Alec and Jane.

Gianna rose to her feet behind her desk. *Ah, so they are leaving after all. I had hoped... Oh well, perhaps Felix will come around. I know he likes me.*

Aloud, she said, “Follow the right hallway around the corner to the first set of elevators. The lobby is two floors down, and exits to the street. Goodbye, now.”

I ignored her look of longing in my direction as I settled Bella on her feet and then stood. Alice, however, saw something dark in Gianna’s future and an ominous look crossed her face. I didn’t catch what she saw and I didn’t care.

In the streets, the crowd was still thick, but music and dancing had replaced ceremony. In honor of Saint Marcus Day, children and adults were dressed as mythical vampires, complete with black-satin capes with red linings and plastic fangs in their mouths. The children enjoyed baring their false fangs at us as we walked by. Some held large wooden crosses or wore garlic braids around their necks.

“Ridiculous,” I mumbled to myself. *Fangs, indeed.* Perversely, such caricaturing made me want to reveal myself in all my dubious, blood-sucking glory. It was childish, but a satisfying fantasy, nevertheless.

Twilight had fallen and inside the high city walls with only a sliver of moon, the old-fashioned streetlamps made little headway against the darkness. My heavy cloak drew no special attention among the crowd of vampire wannabes.

“I’m going over the wall to retrieve our bags and find a car. I’ll meet you outside the gate,” Alice whispered before peeling off.

Bella was exhausted, so I supported her weight as she shuffled alongside me through the narrow, cobblestoned streets toward the city gates. She whipped her head around in a sudden panic.

“Where’s Alice?” she whispered in a strained tone.

“She went to retrieve your bags from where she stashed them this morning,” I told her and she calmed down. I suppose she thought someone had snatched Alice from under our noses.

“She’s stealing a car, too, isn’t she?” Bella asked.

“Not till we’re outside,” I responded with a grin. Alice was good at grand theft auto. She was so small and sweet-looking that nobody ever suspected her of criminal activities.

As promised, Alice was in a nondescript black sedan just to the side of the city gates, hidden in the shadows. The idling car would be warm for Bella, whose jeans were still slightly damp. I opened the rear door for her, helped her in, and slid in beside her. Then I pulled her into my arms and rewrapped her in the gray wool.

“I’m sorry,” Alice apologized. “There wasn’t much to choose from.”

“It’s fine, Alice,” I assured her, grinning. “They can’t all be 911 Turbos.”

“I may have to acquire one of those legally. It was fabulous,” Alice said wistfully.

“I’ll get you one for Christmas,” I said. It was the least I could do. And maybe she would let me drive it sometimes too. I’d never gotten around to driving a Porsche, though I had enjoyed the Jaguar she “borrowed” for us once when we were in a hurry to get out of some town, somewhere.

Alice was thrilled with the promise, but felt it necessary to reiterate one vital detail. She turned around to make sure I was paying attention.

“Yellow,” she said. Color mattered to Alice.

I grinned again. It was going to be a good year. I could feel it.

Bella felt incredibly fragile in my arms. She seemed thin and drawn and the circles under her eyes and the crease between them were troubling. She’d been horribly traumatized and I blamed myself for that. I shouldn’t have acted without talking to Alice, but after Rosalie called with the news and I called Bella’s house to confirm, I’d seen no reason to go through it again.

It was only then that a thought I’d pushed aside on that horrible day came floating to the surface. Charlie hadn’t answered his own telephone. It had been a young man with a low, unfriendly voice, as if he knew my father and didn’t like him. Everybody liked Carlisle. Who could that have been? Obviously, Bella *wasn’t* dead and so the young man must have been visiting her at Charlie’s house. He was unlikely to be Charlie’s friend, because police chiefs don’t befriend teenage boys who might be interested in their daughters.

Please God, let me not be replaced in her heart, I prayed, though I knew it would be better for her if I was. Once again, I found myself in that terrible dilemma that had forced me to leave in the first place. The issue had not changed, only me, and maybe...now...her. Doing the “right” thing had had such a horrific outcome, how could the wrong thing be any worse? I rationalized. It didn’t matter, though, because I could never leave her again, even if she had found someone else to love.

On the drive from Volterra to Florence, Bella watched my face and I gazed at hers. The dozing hadn’t helped much. She was worse than exhausted and yet she didn’t close her eyes.

“You can sleep now, Bella,” I said gently. “It’s over.”

“I don’t want to sleep. I’m not tired.”

That was a blatant falsehood. I could *see* that she was tired. It was obvious. I leaned over and kissed the hollow beneath her ear, wanting to do more, but it didn't seem to be the time.

"Try," I whispered, but Bella shook her head. "You're still just as stubborn," I told her, more in love with her than ever.

I was glad when we reached Florence. Bella would have a chance to change from her damp jeans into something from her bag. Alice parked our stolen automobile in an inconspicuous place in the business district and trotted off in search of something appropriate for me to wear in public. It took no time at all before she returned with the requisite designer clothes.

I pulled on the V-neck cashmere sweater and then escorted Bella and her bag to a café, dropping the useful, but now horrid reminder of our nightmare onto a pile of trash behind the building. Perhaps some needy person would find the warm cloak. Inside, Bella disappeared into the washroom to change and "freshen up," as she put it.

"I don't want her alone," I whispered to Alice. I'd just gotten her back! My sister took a quick look into Bella's immediate future to alleviate my fear.

"She'll be fine," she confirmed.

Alice and I sat down and ordered some food for Bella who hadn't eaten in who knows how long. When she returned in fresh, dry clothes, her hair and teeth brushed, she protested at the dishes waiting for her, but we insisted that she had to try the pasta in Italy. I excused myself to change my trousers and I borrowed Bella's brush for my hair as well.

When I returned, Bella had eaten half the pasta and half a salad despite her protests of wanting nothing. I hadn't forgotten the promise I'd made to myself on a previous occasion that I would never again forget to feed her.

She finished what she wanted of the food while Alice stepped outside to call for plane tickets and to phone Jasper and tell him that we were all fine and on our way home. I could almost feel my family's sighs of relief from across the ocean.

I wondered what Bella had told her father. I suspected that she would be arriving to an angrier, though no more emotional, environment than I would be. Poor Charlie. What he must have been going through...again. He'd probably ban me from her life forever. Fortunately, though, Bella was almost ready to graduate high school. Old enough legally to be on her own.

I revisited these thoughts on the short flight to Rome and then on the longer one to Atlanta. To my surprise, Bella refused to sleep, ordering Coke to keep herself awake. I chided her again for her stubbornness until she explained her reason.

“I don’t want to sleep,” she told me solemnly. “If I close my eyes now, I’ll see things I don’t want to see. I’ll have nightmares.”

Poor Bella. What had I done to her?

I pulled up the armrests between us on our flights so that Bella could lounge in my arms. I couldn’t stop marveling at the way the light from nearby reading lamps highlighted the bone structure of her face. I brushed my fingers across her cheekbones, along her eyebrows, and down her jawline. I stroked her hair and traced the edges of her ears. I couldn’t stop touching her. It was heaven. She touched my face now and then, but hesitantly, as if she couldn’t believe I was real. It was peaceful to be there together in intercontinental limbo with no threats hanging over our heads. I didn’t ask her about the young man who had answered Charlie’s telephone and she didn’t ask me the many questions I could see in her eyes.

No longer was I the hollow man of the last six months. No longer did I feel the urge to bury myself in the earth until my end caught up with me. I was whole again and for this period of time between worlds, I just wanted to enjoy the moment with my beloved.

25. Reunions

Bella's fingers were stroking my cheek, her eyes soft, but guarded. I raised her wrist to my lips and kissed the pulsing artery just beneath her skin, inhaling the scent of her blood. It was shockingly sweet with a musky undertone, just as I remembered.

With the tip of my finger, I traced the outer ridges of her lips and pressed against the pliant flesh. She parted her lips and a single tear spilled from her left eye. Brushing it away with my finger, I pulled her face to my chest and kissed her hair. My poor darling...so exhausted, but too stubborn to sleep.

Our plane landed midmorning at a cloud-covered SeaTac airport. Alice and I supported Bella as she stumbled blindly down the jetway into the terminal and past the security checkpoint. She looked surprised to see Jasper striding toward Alice and even more surprised to see my parents standing in the shadows a little farther along.

Alice and Jasper clasped hands and gazed adoringly into one another's eyes, oblivious to everyone around them. As always, he was assessing her emotional state and she was envisioning everything she and Jasper would say and do in the ensuing hours. They were two of a kind and deeply in love.

When we reached my parents, Esme threw her arms around Bella as best she could with me still clinging to her. I didn't plan to let go of her at all if I could help it.

"Thank you so much," my mother whispered in Bella's ear, the words vibrating with emotion. Then she wrapped me roughly in her arms—the part of me not attached to Bella—and reprimanded me in her gentle way.

"You will *never* put me through that again." In her mind, I caught a brief image of her putting me over her knee and I smiled.

"Sorry, Mom." I truly was sorry for causing her so much anxiety in the past few days.

"Thank you, Bella," my father said. "We owe you."

"Hardly," Bella replied, but the word came out unrecognizable as English.

"She's dead on her feet," my mother said in reproach. "Let's get her home."

Esme and I each took a side, supporting Bella's weight between us as we trekked to the parking garage. She was falling asleep on her feet.

When we came within sight of Carlisle's Mercedes, I saw Emmett and Rosalie waiting there and my hackles rose instantly.

"Don't," my mother whispered. "She feels awful."

"She should," I said at full volume, rage toward my sister rising fast. *Damn you, Rosalie!* I wanted to shout. My cruel eyes or stiffening spine must have given me away.

"Snot her fahl," Bella mumbled, but it *was* her fault. It really and truly was Rosalie's fault entirely. And she knew it.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Rosalie's thoughts were tumbling rapidly over one another. *It was a mistake, I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I didn't know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

I could see that my sister's apologies were sincere. She hadn't meant to be malicious—she'd just wanted me home. But she had badly misjudged the situation with dire, almost deadly, results.

"Let her make amends," my mother implored me, gesturing toward my Volvo, which was parked nearby. "We'll ride with Alice and Jasper."

I did not want to. I felt more like throwing a punch and I might have done so if Bella hadn't needed my support just then. Emmett would have intercepted it, of course.

Bella saw my fury. "Please, Edward," she begged.

I sighed heavily. I could refuse her nothing. As Emmett and Rosalie climbed silently into the front seat of the Mercedes I settled Bella into the back seat and pulled her into my arms. Her eyelids drooped closed immediately.

"Edward—," Rosalie began as Emmett started the car.

"I know," I snapped, cutting her off. What I knew was that in spite of her jealousy and self-centeredness, Rosalie was dismayed by the events she had set in motion. I also knew that she had not wished for, or gloated over, Bella's "death."

"Bella?" my sister queried, for the first time in their acquaintance addressing Bella directly. Bella's head jerked up in surprise.

"Yes, Rosalie?" she responded, her words slurred and soft.

"I'm so very sorry, Bella. I feel wretched about every part of this, and so grateful that you were brave enough to go save my brother after what I did. Please say you'll forgive me."

This demonstration of humility by my sister was unprecedented in my decades of living with her. Probably Emmett had coached her on what to say, but still, I was somewhat placated by it.

Bella wasn't angry, as I'd already observed. She even tried to take the blame on herself to make Rosalie feel better. It was just like her—she was as selfless as my sister was selfish.

"Of course, Rosalie. It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who jumped off the damn cliff. Of course I forgive you."

Bella's words were so slurred that she sounded drunk. Emmett found that amusing and chortled, "It doesn't count until she's conscious, Rose."

"Ahcasha," Bella mumbled in protest. We deciphered that as "I'm conscious," which she no longer was.

"Let her sleep," I whispered. To my relief, Bella remained sacked out all the way to Forks and showed no sign of having nightmares. I asked Emmett to turn the heat up high. She seemed so thin and fragile.

As we entered Forks, I could feel Charlie's rage long before we reached his house. I assumed that Alice, or perhaps my father, had called him with news of our homecoming. I knew that he would not be happy with me and that was regrettable. There was no way Charlie could understand what had gone on between his daughter and myself without assuming I was at best a cad and at worst a demonic influence. Perhaps he was right on both counts.

Emmett pulled up to Charlie's curb and I saw Bella's father look out the window. The front door flew open and he stomped out of the house as I lifted Bella from the car and carried her toward him in my arms.

"Bella!" he roared.

Charlie met us halfway up the sidewalk with his emotions spilling out ahead of him. His thoughts were indecipherable except for one: *That sonofabitch! What has he done to my daughter?*

"Charlie," Bella muttered, but the word was unrecognizable.

"Shh. It's okay; you're home and safe. Just sleep," I murmured in Bella's ear. She seemed prepared to do that until Charlie began shouting at me, full volume.

"I can't believe you have the nerve to show your face here," he thundered. He had a lot to learn about my "nerve."

Of course, I wished that we could have an easygoing relationship because he *was* Bella's father, but that ship had sailed the previous year. This incident was not going to improve his opinion of me.

Bella tried to protest on my behalf. "Stop it, Dad," she mumbled, but I was the only one who could hear her.

"What's wrong with her?" Charlie boomed.

I replied softly, trying not to disturb her any more than necessary. "She's just very tired, Charlie. Please let her rest."

"Don't tell me what to do! Give her to me. Get your hands off her!"

I had no intention of disobeying orders from the Chief of Police, so I attempted to pass Bella's dead weight to Charlie. She woke up enough to cling fiercely to me as her father tried to pull her away.

"Cut it out, Dad. Be mad at me," Bella said, trying to deflect Charlie's anger.

It worked. "You bet I will be," he fumed. "Get inside."

"Kay. Let me down," Bella sighed. I placed her carefully on her unsteady feet.

As soon as she lifted her foot and tried to put it down again, Bella collapsed. I had to move a bit too fast to catch her before she hit the sidewalk, but Charlie didn't remark on it.

"Just let me get her upstairs," I said, "then I'll leave."

"No!" Bella objected.

I took Charlie's silence as concession and carried Bella toward the front door. He followed us, scrutinizing my every movement.

"I won't be far," I whispered into Bella's ear below the range of Charlie's hearing.

I carried Bella into the house as smoothly as possible and by the time I reached the stairs, she was asleep again.

"Put her on the bed and come back down here immediately!" Charlie ordered at a lower volume. I nodded my assent.

He's surprisingly strong for a kid. I caught the thought amidst the fog that was Charlie's mind.

Yes I am, I answered him silently and my will was at least as strong as my body. He could not keep me away from Bella no matter how determined he might be to do so.

After I laid her on the bed, Bella clung to my sweater with a death grip. I had to peel her fingers from the fabric one by one. Then I pulled off her shoes and placed them beneath the bed. I tucked the blanket around her and smoothed her hair away from her face. Then I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Sleep well, my darling,” I whispered.

I stood and left the room, then approached the staircase to face Bella’s father who was waiting for me at the bottom. His anger had not subsided.

“I’m not even going to ask you what you were doing with my daughter for three days,” Charlie began in a heated whisper that wasn’t particularly quiet. I descended the stairs until I was standing across from him as he continued to rant. “I don’t want to know. But I forbid you to walk through this door again. Do you understand?”

I nodded silently.

“I respect your father and all, but you have been nothing but trouble for my daughter and I don’t want you seeing her anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie. Truly I am,” I apologized quietly. There was nothing more to say.

He stared at me without blinking for seven full seconds, his arms crossed over his chest, his legs slightly apart in an aggressive stance. Then he grunted and stepped aside to let me pass. I walked by him to the front door, opened it, and stepped outside.

“Goodbye, Charlie,” I said, turning halfway around to look at him. He slammed the door behind me.

I walked to the driver’s side of the Mercedes to tell Emmett to head on home, that I was staying, until I saw Charlie staring at us through the front room window. I decided it would be best to ride off with Emmett and walk back. Charlie wanted to see me leave his property, I guessed.

I slid into the back seat and Emmett drove around the corner out of sight.

“Let me out here, Em.”

“He didn’t sound too happy with you. Are you sure you want to push it?”

I didn’t bother replying to that ridiculous question.

“Tell Mom I’m with Bella, please.”

“You might wanna go hunting, kid. Your eyes are blacker than an 8-ball.” He smiled, trying to lighten my mood.

“I’m not leaving her now.”

“Okey dokey, then, it’s your throat. See you at home sometime.”

“Bye, Edward. I’m glad you’re home,” Rosalie said meekly.

I nodded, but did not reply. I wasn’t ready to forgive her just yet.

The Cullen family was reunited in Forks. I didn’t know whether Carlisle and Esme would stay or return to New York. I thought Alice might want to remain in Forks and finish high school with Bella, but it didn’t matter to me particularly. I wasn’t going anywhere.

It was a typical, early spring day in Forks with heavy cloud cover that kept the morning light dim. It would remain dim until the sky began to darken around 5:00. I had missed the clouds a great deal. By blocking the sun, they simplified our lives and allowed us so much more freedom. No more hiding in rat-infested attics in the daytime!

I trotted back to Charlie’s house and listened for human thoughts nearby. What I heard instead was Charlie’s side of a telephone conversation.

“Yes, she’s home.”

“I don’t know yet, she was too tired to talk.”

“The Cullens brought her back, so I assume she ran off to find him.”

“Yeah, she seems fine.”

“Thanks, me too. Do you need some help today? Bella will probably sleep all day.”

“Okay, give me an hour.”

I didn’t know who had been on the phone with Charlie, but it sounded like he planned to leave the house soon. All the better that I was there to watch over Bella in case she woke up frightened. I took a quick look around and then leaped to grab the eaves above her window, which I slid open before slipping inside. Bella hadn’t moved an inch since I’d laid her in her bed. She was sleeping like the dead. I heard Charlie tromp heavily up the stairs, probably coming to check on her. I slipped into her closet quickly and silently.

Charlie opened the bedroom door and looked in at his slumbering daughter, love and relief both recorded on his face. He stood and watched her sleep for a minute or two then glanced around the room before retreating into the hallway.

I crept out of the closet, hid my shoes under the bed, and stretched out next to Bella. Lying there after so many months away...smelling her scent, listening to her heartbeat...it was wondrous. I could barely believe she was real. At some point, she rolled over and wrapped her arms around my neck and rested her head on my chest and I knew I was back where I belonged.

Bella slept for the rest of the day and into the night, giving me time to consider many things, particularly those pertaining to the future. During those hours, I drew several conclusions: 1) I would never leave Bella; 2) I could not change Bella (or let Alice change her); 3) When Bella's life ended, I would go to the Volturi and force them to destroy me.

In the meantime, my plan would require Bella and I to dodge the Volturi if they decided to come to our side of the world and check on Bella's status. I anticipate that they will follow through, partly because they don't make idle threats, but mostly because Aro is so curious about how Bella would turn out as a vampire.

That is where Alice can help. She would warn us when the Volturi are preparing to visit so that I can hide Bella beforehand. Demetri won't find her—I'm almost certain of it. The way he located me on top of the wall outside the castle was nearly identical to how I find someone's mental voice and my gift doesn't work with Bella. Aro and Jane's gifts, which also operate on the mind, don't work either, evidence that further confirms my theory. There were a few details to be worked out with the plan, but we had plenty of time.

Charlie returned home in the late afternoon—someone named "Sue" on his mind—and stepped into Bella's room to check on her. Predictably, he found her alone in bed, still soundly asleep, with no evidence that anyone might have been lying next to her all day. He came in again before he went to bed, mildly concerned that she was sleeping so many hours, but he'd seen how exhausted she was when she got home and so he didn't try to awaken her. I thought he would look in on her again during the night if he woke up (which he rarely did). I was getting good at leaping for the closet in the nick of time and it smelled like Bella in there, so it was a pleasant place to be.

Around ten o'clock, Bella called out something unintelligible in her sleep. She was clearly agitated. Lying behind her spoon-fashion, I rubbed her back with my hand and she spoke again.

"Edward...stay," she said.

"I will, my darling...forever," I whispered and she mumbled something more before returning to a deep slumber.

26. Conversation

It was after midnight when Bella began to stir. For an hour, she mumbled a lot, sometimes sighing contentedly and other times becoming agitated, her feet kicking and her arms flailing like she was trying to fight off something. I hoped to heaven that it wasn't me. Perhaps she had a fever. I placed my hand across her forehead as gently as possible.

Her eyelids scrunched closed and then suddenly flipped open.

"Oh!" she cried and immediately hid her eyes behind her fists, rubbing them like she could make my image disappear.

"Did I frighten you?" I asked softly, concerned that she didn't expect, or maybe even want, me there with her.

Bella's eyes popped open again, then slammed shut, and she gasped in surprise. Her eyes opened once more. She blinked and looked at me and blinked again, and then her face melted into a portrait of disappointment.

What in the world is she thinking? Does she not want me? Is she afraid of me?

"Oh, *crap*," was what she said. She was *impossible* to understand!

"What's wrong, Bella?"

She was deeply distressed now, a mixture of sadness and anger marring her beautiful face. *What have I done?*

Then she spoke, but the words that came out of her mouth made no sense at all.

"I'm dead, right? I *did* drown. *Crap, crap, crap!* This is gonna kill Charlie."

What is she saying? "You're not dead."

"Then why am I not waking up?" she countered, raising her eyebrows in challenge.

"You *are* awake, Bella."

"Sure, sure. That's what you want me to think. And then it will be worse when I do wake up. *If* I wake up, which I won't, because I'm dead. This is awful. Poor Charlie. And Renee and Jake..." She absolutely had run off the rails.

"I can see where you might confuse me with a nightmare," I said, propping my head on one hand. "But I can't imagine what you could have done to wind up in hell. Did you commit many murders while I was away?"

She frowned. "Obviously not. If I was in hell, you wouldn't be with me."

She was utterly irrational. *Perhaps this is a new, more vivid version of Bella's sleep-talking*, I thought.

Then slowly, the blood began to flood up her neck and into her face, hot and tantalizing.

"Did all of that really happen, then?" she asked hesitantly.

"That depends. If you're referring to us nearly being massacred in Italy, then, yes."

"How strange." She pondered for a moment. "I really went to Italy. Did you know I'd never been farther east than Albuquerque?"

"Maybe you should go back to sleep," I told her. "You're not coherent."

"I'm not tired anymore," she insisted. "What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?"

"It's just after one in the morning. So, about fourteen hours."

"Charlie?" she asked.

I sighed. "Sleeping. You should probably know that I'm breaking the rules right now. Well, not technically, since he said I was never to walk through his door again, and I came in the window... But, still, the intent was clear."

"Charlie banned you from the house?" Bella burst out angrily.

"Did you expect anything else?"

A flash of fire crossed her face before she abruptly changed the subject.

"What's the story?" she asked, like she didn't know why I was there.

My heart sank. This was not going well at all. Perhaps she'd found someone new and I was making a fool of myself. If so, I didn't care. If this was the last time I was ever to lie beside her, then I would revel in it and memorize every sight, sound, and smell to relive throughout eternity.

"What do you mean?" I pressed warily.

“What am I telling Charlie? What’s my excuse for disappearing for...how long was I gone, anyway?”

Oh. It’s not that then.

“Just three days. Actually, I was hoping you might have a good explanation. I’ve got nothing.”

“Fabulous,” Bella said sarcastically.

“Well, maybe Alice will come up with something.”

Bella hesitated and then asked casually, “So, what have you been doing, up until three days ago?”

She was stalling...spinning out the time until she had built up her courage. Soon she would get to the part where it was over between us, that I had nearly cost her her life, that she didn’t love me anymore, and that she no longer wanted me in her house or in her life. I tensed, waiting for the blow.

“Nothing terribly exciting,” I replied. That was the kind of question one asks when making obligatory small talk. I didn’t want to discuss it anyway. It might frighten her to be reminded of Victoria.

“Of course not,” she muttered and then puckered her face in disgust, maybe, or irritation. Maybe she wanted me to leave. I felt the old knife stab through my heart at the thought.

“Why are you making that face?” I asked, though I already knew.

“Well...,” she began. “If you were, after all, just a dream, that’s exactly the kind of thing you would say. My imagination must be used up.”

I sighed. She confounded me, but I would let the game go on as long as she wished. I would not be the one to usher myself out of her life one moment sooner than necessary.

“If I tell you, will you finally believe that you’re not having a nightmare?”

“Nightmare!” she scoffed. “Maybe. If you tell me.”

I didn’t really want to. I was not proud of my performance. I’d hoped that I wouldn’t have to talk about it so soon, if at all, but it appeared that I did.

“I was...hunting.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Bella complained. “That definitely doesn’t prove I’m awake.” She was going to make me spit out the whole sordid story.

“I wasn’t hunting for food...I was actually trying my hand at... tracking. I’m not very good at it.”

“What were you tracking?”

“Nothing of consequence,” I said, trying to brush off the question.

“I don’t understand.”

My heart quailed. This was the worst of my many failures. It made me ill to think about the evil creature who had outsmarted me at every turn and now was stalking my precious Bella. My words tumbled out in a rush.

“I—I owe you an apology. No, of course I owe you much, much more than that. But you have to know...I had no idea. I didn’t realize the mess I was leaving behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So safe. I had no idea that...*Victoria*...would come back.” The name came out as a growl.

“I’ll admit, when I saw her that one time, I was paying much more attention to James’s thoughts. But I just didn’t see that she had this kind of response in her. That she even had such a tie to him. I think I realize why now—she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never occurred to her. It was her overconfidence that clouded her feelings about him—kept me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

“Not that there’s any excuse for what I left you to face. When I heard what you told Alice—what she saw herself—when I realized that you had to put your life in the hands of *werewolves*, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there besides Victoria herself—” I shuddered in disgust.

“Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my core, even now, when I can see and feel you safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for—”

“Stop!” Bella interrupted forcefully. I glanced at her in surprise.

“Edward—” she began gravely and then paused.

This was it then, and I deserved whatever I got. She should kick me to the gutter after what I’d allowed to happen. I should have watched to make sure she was okay. I should have checked on her welfare. I should have—

Bella's words cut into my self-recrimination.

"This has to stop now. You can't think about things that way. You can't let this...this *guilt*...rule your life. You can't take responsibility for the things that happen to me here. None of it is your fault, it's just part of how life is for me. So, if I trip in front of a bus or whatever it is next time, you have to realize that it's not your job to take the blame. You can't just go running off to Italy because you feel bad that you didn't save me. Even if I had jumped off that cliff to die, that would have been my choice, and *not your fault*. I know it's your...your nature to shoulder the blame for everything, but you really can't let that make you go to such extremes! It's very irresponsible—think of Esme and Carlisle and—"

I could not believe my ears. She had completely and utterly misunderstood everything! Or more correctly, she had bought my lie. Even now, with all the evidence to the contrary, she still did.

"Isabella Marie Swan," I began, hearing the deep frustration and pain in my voice. "Do you believe that I asked the Volturi to kill me *because I felt guilty*?"

"Didn't you?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Feel guilty? Intensely so. More than you can comprehend."

"Then...what are you saying? I don't understand."

No...she didn't. She couldn't possibly love me to the degree that I loved her. It made my heart ache.

"Bella, I went to the Volturi because I thought you were dead," I whispered, looking intently into her eyes. "Even if I'd had no hand in your death—even if it *wasn't* my fault—I would have gone to Italy. Obviously, I should have been more careful—should have spoken to Alice directly, rather than accepting it secondhand from Rosalie. But, really, what was I supposed to think when the boy said Charlie was at the funeral? What are the odds?"

It sounded familiar...young lovers battling cruel Fate, which throws them curve ball after curve ball.

"The odds..." my sentence petered out as I considered it, then I started again. "The odds are always stacked against us. Mistake after mistake. I'll never criticize Romeo again."

"But I still don't understand," Bella said in confusion. "That's my whole point. So what?"

"Excuse me?"

“So what if I *was* dead?”

Ack! She didn’t get it at all. How could that be?

“Don’t you remember anything I told you before?” I queried.

“I remember *everything* that you told me.”

And believed it too...even the lie...*especially* the lie. Of course she did. If I told her the truth about the lie now, would she believe that? I could only hope.

In spite of the turmoil this conversation stirred up, I became distracted suddenly by Bella’s full lower lip which she’d pushed forward in the hint of a pout. I examined its delicate softness and felt a now familiar longing rise in me. I wanted to press my mouth to it, feel it, taste it, and breathe in the scent of her. I wanted other things too...so much...but the wary expression on Bella’s face constrained me. She did not feel the same way.

Even so, I allowed myself to press the tip of my finger against her vulnerable, pouting lip. It sent a shiver up my spine. Bella’s heart stuttered and began to quicken. Perhaps she didn’t want all of me, but some part of her still wanted some part of me, it seemed. I shut my eyes to block the distraction.

“Bella, you seem to be under a misapprehension. I thought I’d explained it clearly before.” I took a deep breath to calm myself and then opened my eyes to look into hers. “Bella, I can’t live in a world where you don’t exist.”

She stared at me as if I had spoken in an alien tongue.

“I am...confused,” was all she could say.

She had taken my every word at face value, even the calculated lies. How could I convey to her now what was in my heart? The truth was all that I had.

“I’m a good liar, Bella, I have to be,” I began.

Bella’s body stiffened and her hands clenched into fists. I shook her shoulder gently to try and loosen the tension out of her. What was she expecting?

“Let me finish! I’m a good liar, but still, for you to believe me so quickly.” I flinched, remembering the look she’d had on her face that day. “That was...excruciating.”

Bella remained rigid as a statue. She seemed braced for a blow.

“When we were in the forest, when I was telling you goodbye—,” I began. “You weren’t going to let go. I could see that.” My voice was a whisper, soft and intense. “I didn’t want to do it—it felt like it would kill me to do it—but I knew that if I couldn’t convince you that I didn’t love you anymore, it would just take you that much longer to get on with your life. I hoped that, if you thought *I’d moved on*, so would you.”

“A clean break,” Bella replied robotically.

“Exactly. But I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be next to impossible—that you would be so sure of the truth that I would have to lie through my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head. I lied, and I’m so sorry—sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. Sorry that I couldn’t protect you from what I am. I lied to save you, and it didn’t work. I’m sorry.

“But how could you believe me? After all the thousand times I’ve told you I love you, how could you let one word break your faith in me? I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly *believed* that I didn’t want you anymore. The most absurd, ridiculous concept—as if there were any way that *I* could exist without needing *you!*”

She was still locked in her robotic state. I shook her by the shoulder again to wake her up to the truth.

“Bella, really, what were you thinking!”

Suddenly, tears welled up in her eyes and she began to cry. I didn’t understand why, but it was better than the blank rigidity.

“I knew it,” she spluttered. “I *knew* I was dreaming.”

“You’re impossible,” I complained. “How can I put this so that you’ll believe me? You’re not asleep, and you’re not dead. I’m here, and I love you. I *have* always loved you, and I *will* always love you. I was thinking of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second that I was away. When I told you that I didn’t want you, it was the very blackest kind of blasphemy.”

She shook her head in disbelief, tears flowing like raindrops down her cheeks.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” I whispered, desperate to get through to her. “Why can you believe the lie, but not the truth?”

“It never made sense for you to love me,” Bella declared, her voice breaking in a sob. “I always knew that.”

Ahhh! She is so frustrating! She can accept that I don't love her in the blink of an eye, but she resists the truth with every fiber of her being.

"I'll prove you're awake," I vowed, taking her face between my hands. She tried to shake me off, but I wouldn't let go. I moved my face closer to hers, so close that I could feel the warmth radiating from her lips.

"Please don't," she whispered at the last second, the pain in her words a lance through my heart.

"Why not?" I objected. I wanted to kiss her...so badly.

"When I wake up," she began. I opened my mouth to argue and Bella quickly rephrased. "Okay, forget that one—when you leave again, it's going to be hard enough without this, too."

Finally, I began to understand. She was pretending this was all a dream so that when it ended, she wouldn't be devastated. She didn't want to love me because she didn't believe I loved her! My heart sank to the depths of the ocean. Now I had to face the hardest question of all.

Steeling myself, I began. "Yesterday, when I would touch you, you were so...hesitant, so careful, and yet still the same. I need to know why. Is it because I'm too late? Because I've hurt you too much? Because you *have* moved on, as I meant for you to? That would be...quite fair. I won't contest your decision. So don't try to spare my feelings, please—just tell me now whether or not you can still love me, after everything I've done to you. Can you?" I whispered, not daring to hope.

Of course she tried to dodge the inquiry.

"What kind of an idiotic question is that?"

"Just answer it. Please."

She stared at me like I was thick as mud before relenting.

"The way I feel about you will never change," she declared. "Of course I love you—and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Her words surged through me like a bolt of lightning, setting every cell in my body aflame.

"That's all I needed to hear," I whispered before taking her face in my hands and pressing my lips to hers, gently at first, then with increasing passion as I felt her respond. A wall

inside her collapsed and she surrendered herself to me, body and soul, as her lips joined hungrily with mine.

Our time apart had sharpened and intensified the physical longings I felt for Bella. With my newly enhanced control over the bloodlust, I was freer with her than ever before. I pressed my body against hers from tip to toe, our lips devouring each other, our torsos connecting, our legs and feet intermingled. My fingers followed every line of her face, felt every softness, and explored every delicate curve, remembering all the details and discovering new ones I hadn't had the self-control to linger over before.

"Bella, my love..." I whispered, my lips moving on hers. She was kissing me back with all the ardor she'd ever expressed, but this time, I didn't try to stop her or pull away. I longed for more, like nothing would satisfy me until every part of us was joined.

I was overcome by the sweet smell of her skin, her blood, her hair, and I ached to pull her even more tightly against me, to let my hands wander over her body following the curves of her waist and hips, her lower back, her soft, round buttocks below... *Ahh...* I groaned with desire.

Bella's heart pounded so violently that I could feel it pulsing throughout my own body, as if my stone heart had come alive. She was panting so hard and fast that I feared she would faint.

Please God, let this not be the last time...

With great reluctance, I separated my lips from hers and laid my ear against her wonderfully human heart. My own heart sang to its jagged rhythm and I marveled at the miracle that allowed me to be so close to her. To me, her blood was like sweet, sweet wine flowing beneath her skin, enhancing my attraction to her, but no longer tempting me to imbibe. I could not endanger her life.

I kept my head to her heart while it gradually calmed and my own excitement eased. In case she still hadn't understood—a real possibility given her deep resistance—I said, "By the way, I'm not leaving you."

Bella didn't respond and I couldn't be sure even now that she believed me. I raised my head to look into her eyes, needing to see her response when I repeated the words.

"I'm not going anywhere. Not without you." When she didn't reply, I continued, "I only left you in the first place because I wanted you to have a chance at a normal, happy human life. I could see what I was doing to you—keeping you constantly on the edge of danger, taking you away from the world you belonged in, risking your life every moment I was with you. So I had to try. I had to do *something*, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn't thought you

would be better off, I could have never made myself leave. I'm much too selfish. Only *you* could be more important than what I wanted...what I needed. What I want and need is to be with you, and I know I'll never be strong enough to leave again. I have too many excuses to stay—thank heaven for that! It seems you *can't* be safe, no matter how many miles I put between us."

"Don't promise me anything," Bella murmured, with pain written on her face.

"You think I'm lying to you now?" I demanded in frustration.

"No—not lying," she hesitated. "You could mean it...now. But what about tomorrow, when you think about all the reasons you left in the first place? Or next month, when Jasper takes a snap at me?"

That Bella could doubt me so thoroughly was distressing, but I felt the truth in her words. There would be times, possibly, when her vulnerability would haunt me again, but leaving was not the solution. I knew that now.

"It isn't as if you hadn't thought the first decision through, is it?" Bella asked, watching for my reaction to her question. "You'll end up doing what you think is right."

I paused to consider that for a moment.

"I'm not as strong as you give me credit for," I admitted. "Right and wrong have ceased to mean much to me; I was coming back anyway."

At that moment, the reality of the statement hit me full force for the first time. By the time I reached Rio, I was holding onto my threadbare resolve by my fingernails. Apart from death, I'd had only one choice of action.

"Before Rosalie told me the news, I was already past trying to live through one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to make it through a single hour. It was only a matter of time—and not much of it—before I showed up at your window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now, if you'd like that."

Bella made a face. "Be serious, please."

"Oh, I am," I replied forcefully, frustrated by her inability to trust me, though she had every reason not to. "Will you please try to hear what I'm telling you? Will you let me attempt to explain what you mean to me?"

I looked at her to be sure she was giving me her permission and her full attention.

“Before you, Bella, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, but there were stars—points of light and reason... And then you shot across my sky like a meteor. Suddenly everything was on fire; there was brilliancy, there was beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen over the horizon, everything went black. Nothing had changed, but my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn’t see the stars anymore. And there was no more reason for anything.”

I could see the doubt in her eyes.

“Your eyes will adjust,” she muttered, granting me nothing.

“That’s just the problem—they can’t.”

“What about your distractions?” she countered. I *had* told her that my kind are easily distracted and that is true...in general...but not always in the particular.

“Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from the...the *agony*. My heart hasn’t beat in almost ninety years, but this was different. It was like my heart was gone—like I was hollow. Like I’d left everything that was inside me here with you.”

“That’s funny,” Bella said, though I failed to see the humor.

I raised an eyebrow. “Funny?”

“I meant strange—I thought it was just me. Lots of pieces of me went missing, too. I haven’t been able to really breathe in so long.” Bella took a deep breath and exhaled, which seemed to relax her a little. She lost some of her rigidity, though I could feel the pain in her words. “And my heart. That was definitely lost.”

I put my ear to her heart again, closing my eyes to focus on the beating that broadcast her humanity, the most valuable thing of all. She laid her cheek against my hair. Aside from our kiss, it was the first sign she had given me that she might be able to return my affection; that I hadn’t damaged her love so completely that I could never recover it. I was willing to work for it—happy to do so—if only she would give me another chance, but she was still hesitant. My ill-advised desertion had hurt her terribly, nearly as much as it had hurt me, perhaps.

“Tracking wasn’t a distraction then?” she probed, testing me. I was patient. I could wait for her.

“No.” I sighed remembering how difficult it had been to care about tracking Victoria with so much pain inside me, so much loss.

“That was never a distraction. It was an obligation.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that, even though I never expected any danger from Victoria, I wasn’t going to let her get away with...” I’d been ready to say “hurting you,” but I didn’t want to remind Bella of how close she had come to death then too.

“Well, like I said, I was horrible at it. I traced her as far as Texas, but then I followed a false lead down to Brazil—and really she came here.” I was reminded of my hopeless ineptitude. “I wasn’t even on the right continent! And all the while, worse than my worst fears—”

“You were hunting *Victoria*?” Bella screeched. Her cry was so loud that we both froze to listen for Charlie’s snoring, which halted briefly, but then resumed.

“Not well,” I explained feebly. She was right to be upset—I had failed her completely. It was disgraceful. “But I’ll do better this time,” I promised. With Bella back in my life, with the emptiness filled, I knew I could dispatch Victoria easily enough. “She won’t be tainting perfectly good air by breathing in and out for much longer.”

“That is...out of the question,” Bella replied, confusing me. Wasn’t she angry at my failure?

“It’s too late for her,” I pledged. “I might have let the other time slide, but not now, not after—”

She cut me off again, this time more calmly. “Didn’t you just promise that you weren’t going to leave? That isn’t exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?”

Well...perhaps not. Did that mean she wanted me to stay?

“I will keep my promise, Bella. But Victoria...”—a snarl was building in my chest—“is going to die. Soon.”

“Let’s not be hasty,” Bella admonished.

That didn’t make any sense. Surely she wanted me to remove the threat that had been hanging over her head.

“Maybe she’s not coming back. Jake’s pack probably scared her off. There’s really no reason to go looking for her. Besides, I’ve got bigger problems than Victoria.”

Jake? Who’s Jake? “It’s true. The werewolves are a problem,” I said. In more ways than one, perhaps. I stifled a growl.

Bella was dismissive. "I wasn't talking about *Jacob*. My problems are a lot worse than a handful of adolescent wolves getting themselves into trouble."

Jacob Black? Bella's beau-hopeful from the prom? He's the one with a pack? I put that disconcerting thought aside for the moment. "Really? Then what would be your greatest problem? That would make Victoria's returning for you seem like such an inconsequential matter in comparison?"

"How about the second greatest?" Bella backpedaled.

"All right," I agreed, certain that besides Victoria, nothing could be more dangerous than werewolves. That was even more true now that I knew that Bella's new *best friend*, as Alice had put it, was *Jacob Black*, the werewolf. I waited.

"There are others who are coming to look for me," Bella finally whispered.

"The Volturi are only the *second* greatest?" I teased, now that I knew what she was referring to.

"You don't seem that upset about it."

"Well, we have plenty of time to think it through. Time means something very different to them than it does to you, or even me. They count years the way you count days. I wouldn't be surprised if you were thirty before you crossed their minds again."

I was not prepared for the look of horror that crossed Bella's face. "You don't have to be afraid," I cut in quickly, abashed at frightening her. "I won't let them hurt you."

"While you're here," she said resentfully.

Not this again! I took her face in my hands to be sure she would hear me. "I will never leave you again," I said slowly, emphasizing each word.

"But you said *thirty*," Bella muttered and tears began to roll down her cheeks.

I was mortified. I didn't understand how I had hurt her *again*.

She continued, "What? You're going to stay, but let me get all old anyway? Right."

She thought I wouldn't love her anymore when she got older? Ridiculous. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. What choice have I? I cannot be without you, but I will not destroy your soul."

"Is this really..." she began, but didn't continue.

“Yes?” I prodded.

“But what about when I get so old that people think I’m your mother? Your *grandmother*?”

Bella’s voice had taken on a tone of disgust. I did not share that feeling. Not at all. I kissed each tear that made its way down her face, letting them roll onto my lips.

“That doesn’t mean anything to me,” I whispered, my lips moving against her soft skin. “You will always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course...” I cringed at this new thought. “If you outgrew *me*—if you wanted something more—I would understand that, Bella. I promise I wouldn’t stand in your way if you wanted to leave me.”

That could happen so easily. Just thinking of the possibility hurt.

“You do realize that I’ll die eventually, right?” she blurted, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

I was undaunted. “I’ll follow after as soon as I can.”

“That is seriously...sick.”

“Bella, it’s the only right way left—”

“Let’s just back up for a minute,” Bella said. “You do remember the Volturi, right? I can’t stay human forever. They’ll kill me. Even if they don’t think of me till I’m *thirty*”—Bella said the word like it was poison—“do you really think they’ll forget?”

“No... They won’t forget. But...”

“But?”

I grinned remembering the idea that had come to me while Bella slept. “I have a few plans,” I said mysteriously.

“And these plans,” Bella replied, her tone becoming aggressive. “These plans all center around me staying human.”

“Naturally.” I was as sure of my answer as I was of my name.

She glared at me and I glared back. We lay there, side-by-side, caught in the familiar impasse for quite some time.

Then Bella pushed my arms away and sat up, a stubborn look cemented on her face.

“Do you want me to leave?” I asked, pain stabbing me at the thought. I had promised never to leave her and I intended to keep my promise, even if she didn’t want me anymore, even if she never knew I was there.

“No,” Bella retorted. “*I’m* leaving.” She got out of bed and started thrashing about in the dark. It was bewildering. She was impossible to understand.

“May I ask where you are going?” I asked warily, at my wit’s end.

“I’m going to your house,” Bella announced, still knocking about looking for her shoes. No doubt she was bruising herself in the process. I rose and pulled her shoes and mine from beneath the bed. I didn’t want her to hurt herself.

“Here are your shoes. How did you plan to get there?” *And why?*

“My truck.”

“That will probably wake Charlie.”

She’d already thought of that. “I know. But honestly, I’ll be grounded for weeks as it is. How much more trouble can I really get in?”

“None. He’ll blame me, not you,” I said sadly.

“If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“Stay here,” I proposed, but she was riled up and I didn’t think she would listen. *What should I do?*

“No dice. But you go ahead and make yourself at home,” she suggested as she headed for the door.

I blocked her exit. I couldn’t let her go without piecing things together. Would she ask my parents to keep me away from her? Would she demand that Alice change her? Or *what?*

She reversed direction and strode toward the window, glowering. I did not doubt for a second that she would jump the two stories just to prove her point, so I folded.

“Okay,” I said grudgingly. “I’ll give you a ride.”

“Either way,” she responded breezily. “But you probably *should* be there, too.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re extraordinarily opinionated, and I’m sure you’ll want a chance to air your views.”

“My views on which subject?” I inquired grimly.

“This isn’t just about you anymore. You’re not the center of the universe, you know. If you’re going to bring the Volturi down on us over something as stupid as leaving me human, then your family ought to have a say.”

“A say in what?” I practically barked each word.

“My mortality. I’m putting it to a vote.”

Oh noooo...!

27. Vote

It wasn't something I could have predicted and *definitely* not something I supported, but she was absolutely determined to follow through on this misguided idea. It didn't matter what my family said. Despite what she had told Bella on the airplane, Alice wouldn't dare change Bella against my wishes. So I would humor her.

With one arm behind her knees and one behind her back, I picked her up and leaped into the front yard before she could jump out the window on her own.

"All right then. Up you go."

I didn't pretend to be happy about it as I swung her onto my back, tightened her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck, and started running toward home. It had been a long time since I'd carried Bella on my back. With her chin on my shoulder and her cheek against my neck, plus the always soothing feel of the wind flying past my ears, my irritation and frustration softened a little.

Then I felt Bella's lips against my neck, a kiss. It was another gesture—the second—that I could hope meant she might forgive me and take me back.

"Thank you," I said sincerely, without slowing my pace through the forest. "Does that mean you've decided you're awake?"

Bella laughed lightly, music to my ears after the contention and turmoil of the last couple of hours.

"Not really," she replied. "More that, either way, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight."

So she wasn't ready to take me back, but apparently, she still wanted to join the ranks of the damned.

"I'll earn your trust back somehow," I promised. "If it's my final act."

"I trust *you*," Bella claimed. "It's me I don't trust."

"Explain that, please," I requested. Again, it made no sense to me. We were close to home, so I slowed down to give us more time to finish the conversation.

“Well—” Bella began hesitantly. “I don’t trust myself to be...enough. To deserve you. There’s nothing about me that could *hold* you.”

I had planted this seed of doubt in her mind—no question about it. I had *told* her that I didn’t want her anymore, which she probably read as boredom on my part. I’d stressed that we are easily distracted, which she would think meant she wasn’t interesting enough to keep my attention. I could hardly feel worse, but suddenly, I did.

I stopped walking and pulled Bella from my back, setting her on her feet. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, pulling her close to my chest.

“Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,” I whispered in her ear. “Never doubt that.” Obviously, she did, but I intended to change that. Then I remembered a loose end from our previous conversation.

“You never did tell me...” I began, slightly apprehensive.

“What?”

“What your greatest problem is.”

“I’ll give you one guess,” she said softly, looking into my eyes. Then she touched the tip of my nose with her index finger.

Damn! Just what I feared.

“I’m worse than the Volturi,” I said dejectedly. “I guess I’ve earned that.” I didn’t know how I could ever overcome it.

“The worst the Volturi can do is kill me,” Bella explained.

And I do worse...?! She was reluctant to say what she meant. Once she did, I knew it would haunt me for the rest of my days.

“You can leave me,” she told me. “The Volturi, Victoria...they’re nothing compared to that.”

Each word was like a separate bullet through my heart. I was no longer sure whether what I had put her through *was* forgivable. A sense of despair began to take hold of me, nothing like what I’d felt without her in my life, but bad enough. And *I* had brought all this on her and on myself. I turned my face away so she couldn’t see the hurt.

“Don’t,” she whispered pressing her hand to my face. “Don’t be sad.”

It wasn't possible for me not to feel sad, and guilty, and pained, but I gave her half a weak smile. It wouldn't have fooled anybody.

"If there was only some way to make you see that I can't leave you," I lamented. "Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you."

"Okay," Bella responded agreeably. Then she changed the subject. "So—since you're staying, can I have my stuff back?"

Her stuff! I chuckled. I knew right away what she was referring to.

"Your things were never gone," I admitted. "I knew it was wrong, since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, but I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the pictures, the tickets—they're all under your floorboards."

"Really?" Bella's eyes brightened. She seemed exceptionally pleased.

I nodded, glad to see her cheered in some way by my bad behavior.

"I think...I'm not sure, but I wonder...I think maybe I knew it the whole time."

"What did you know?"

Bella spoke haltingly as if she was figuring out her answer as she spoke it.

"Some part of me, my subconscious maybe, never stopped believing that you still cared whether I lived or died. That's probably why I was hearing the voices."

Hearing voices? A memory from the year before suddenly came back to me with perfect clarity. Bella's behavior after she learned what I was had been utterly illogical— backward, even—to the point of self-endangerment. I'd been concerned that she was suffering from a mental disorder. Had my behavior this year driven her completely over the edge?

"Voices?" I inquired, keeping my voice as even as possible. There was no need to distress her with my alarm.

Bella amended, "Well, just one voice. Yours. It's a long story." She looked uncomfortable at the admission.

"I've got time," I said mildly.

"It's pretty pathetic," she stalled.

I kept my expression neutral and said nothing. Already I was considering the conversation I would have with my father when Bella next slept about appropriate care for her. He could help me get Bella the best treatment available.

“Do you remember what Alice said about extreme sports?”

“You jumped off a cliff for fun,” I said without emotion or judgment.

“Er, right. And before that, with the motorcycle—”

“Motorcycle?”

She had been trying to kill herself! I kept my vampire face smooth and expressionless.

“I guess I didn’t tell Alice about that part.”

“No.”

“Well, about that... See, I found that...when I was doing something dangerous or stupid...I could remember you more clearly,” she admitted timidly. “I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it, like you were standing right there next to me. Mostly I tried not to think about you, but this didn’t hurt so much—it was like you were protecting me again. Like you didn’t want me to be hurt. And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was because, underneath it all, I always knew that you hadn’t stopped loving me.”

I was *shocked*. “You...were...risking your life...to hear—”

“Shh,” Bella cut me off. “Hold on a second. I think I’m having an epiphany here.”

I watched her face as her expression became thoughtful and then startled. After a time, her face lit up.

“Oh!”

“Bella?”

“Oh. Okay. I see.”

“Your epiphany?”

“You love me,” she stated with a bright smile and an air of self-assurance.

A sea change had taken place. Through no reason I could see, she'd abruptly accepted the truth. I gave her a crooked smile. I still felt uncertain about what was going on inside her head, but I welcomed this development with all my heart.

"Truly, I do," I confirmed, noting with unexpected pleasure the particular words that had just come out of my mouth. A seed had been planted.

The air between us crackled with electricity. It was the same phenomenon I remembered from a year ago when we were sitting in biology class in the dark. Though it was dark now too, I could see the joy in Bella's eyes. I took her face between my hands and gently pulled it toward mine, as love and desire and overwhelming happiness flooded through me. Unlike back then, I could touch her without fear now. I pressed my marble lips to her soft, heated mouth, feeling her breath on my face and her hands begin to twine through my hair.

She kissed me back like it was the first time. All the passion in me that had been thwarted, last year by fear and this year by separation, poured out and Bella met me touch for touch, breath for breath. She crushed her body against mine and I did not resist, but wrapped my arms around her and pulled her closer. If my heart still beat, it would have been racing a hundred miles an hour. As it was, I found myself breathing fast and hard, taking in the warm air Bella exhaled and exhaling cool air back to her. We kissed each other like there was no tomorrow, but there would be...and that was the true source of our joy.

When the intensity threatened to suffocate her and overwhelm me, I finally pulled away, my stone body feeling more human than ever before. It was deeply tempting to lay her down on the soft forest floor among the trees and never get up again—but not for sorrow this time.

"You were better at it than I was, you know," I said after our breathing had calmed.

"Better at what?"

"Surviving. You, at least, made an effort. You got up in the morning, tried to be normal for Charlie, followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively tracking, I was...totally useless. I couldn't be around my family—I couldn't be around anyone. I'm embarrassed to admit that I more or less curled up into a ball and let the misery have me. It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know I do that, too."

I smiled, a little self-conscious about my weakness, as Bella had been about hers. It was clear that we'd both had an extraordinarily difficult time coping with our separation. Bella became a danger to herself; I became a danger to no one—not even when I wanted to be.

"I only hear one voice," Bella reminded me, teasing.

I laughed and with one arm around her waist began escorting her toward the house.

"I'm just humoring you with this," I told her. "It doesn't matter in the slightest what they say."

"This affects them now, too," Bella insisted. I wasn't convinced or particularly worried about that. We would leave the area if the Volturi decided to visit.

I led Bella into the house and turned on the lights. Everyone was there—I could hear their thoughts—but we didn't need the lights and usually left them off unless it was an hour when we wanted the house to look "lived in." Esme, no doubt with Alice's help, had already removed the dust sheets, cleaned, and placed flowers about. It looked like we had never left, which made me wonder if the whole family had decided to stay in Forks. I would be staying there with Bella, at least, as I was sure Alice had informed everyone.

"Carlisle? Esme? Rosalie? Emmett? Jasper? Alice?" I called to my family, though I was sure Alice had warned them we were coming. Carlisle appeared immediately.

"Welcome back, Bella," my father said, greeting her warmly. "What can we do for you this morning? I imagine, due to the hour, that this is not a purely social visit?"

"I'd like to talk to everyone at once, if that's okay. About something important," she told him.

She was going through with this no matter what I thought, so I just kept my mouth shut. My father noticed that I didn't look particularly happy about it.

"Of course," he said. "Why don't we talk in the other room?"

It was a family conference that called for the use of the antique dining table Esme had selected for that purpose. We never used it for dining, of course. Carlisle pulled out his chair at the head of the table for Bella and sat on one side of her while I sat on the other. Everyone else filed in and took seats.

When we were all there, my father said, "The floor is yours."

I could see that Bella was nervous looking around the table at seven vampires, several of whom needed to hunt. I took her hand to reassure her—not that I supported this charade, but that I wouldn't let anyone hurt her—while I looked around the room to see how much everyone knew. Alice *had* warned them about the vote, but not what they'd be voting on. I took a straw poll in my head, guessing which way each of them would go.

Alice would vote *yes* and Jasper would vote with her, having no reason to oppose changing Bella. Rosalie was bold enough to vote how she wanted—*no*. With me, that made the count two to two. Esme would want Bella to have her choice, so she would be a *yes*. Emmett would *want* to vote with Rosalie, but he liked Bella enough that he might go the other way. I didn't know how my father would vote. He had never taken the life of anyone who was not certain to die anyway and Bella was one hundred percent healthy. I didn't think he'd want Alice to change her given that fact, but I couldn't be sure. It didn't matter, though, because I wouldn't allow this to move forward no matter how any of them voted. Bella's soul was *sacrosanct*. Changing her was not an option.

I stared fixedly at everyone, telegraphing my displeasure should they vote the wrong way.

Bella began. "Well, I'm hoping Alice has already told you everything that happened in Volterra?"

"Everything," my sister confirmed, smiling.

"And on the way?" Bella checked, meaning Alice's promise to change her. I couldn't read what Carlisle thought about that. He was reserving judgment.

"That, too," Alice said. I wanted to growl at her.

"Good. Then we're all on the same page." Bella exhaled heavily and looked down at the table.

"So, I have a problem," she began after collecting herself. I squeezed her hand for reassurance. Everybody was gazing at her and they weren't all remembering to blink. That must be disturbing to her.

"Alice promised the Volturi that I would become one of you. They're going to send someone to check, and I'm sure that's a bad thing—something to avoid. And so, now, this involves you all. I'm sorry about that." Of course Bella would apologize for what *I* had caused. "But, if you don't want me, then I'm not going to force myself on you, whether Alice is willing or not."

My mother hurried to reassure Bella that we did want her, but Bella signaled for her to wait.

"Please, let me finish. You all know what I want. And I'm sure you know what Edward thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote. If you decide you don't want me, then...I guess I'll go back to Italy alone. I can't have them coming here."

I started growling at the insane thought of Bella going to the Volturi. Even though Aro would want to change her, I thought it unlikely she would survive long enough in Volterra for that to happen.

“Taking into account, then, that I won’t put any of you in danger either way, I want you to vote yes or no on the issue of me becoming a vampire.”

Bella half-smiled. I knew she was uncomfortable with that word, even though she wanted to be one of us. She gestured at Carlisle, but I didn’t want her to start with him because once he stated his opinion, the vote would tend to go in that direction and I couldn’t be sure which direction that would be. As the head of our family, his opinion carried the most weight.

I interrupted before he could speak. “Just a minute.” Bella gave me a dirty look. I squeezed her hand. “I have something to add before we vote.” She sighed in resignation.

“About the danger Bella’s referring to, I don’t think we need to be overly anxious. You see, there was more than one reason why I didn’t want to shake Aro’s hand there at the end,” I said. “There’s something they didn’t think of, and I didn’t want to clue them in.” I smiled as I looked around the table at everyone. I was rather proud of myself.

“Which was?” Alice asked doubtfully.

“The Volturi are overconfident, and with good reason. When they decide to find someone, it’s not really a problem. Do you remember Demetri?” I asked Bella.

Her face went white and she shuddered. She did.

“He finds people—that’s his talent, why they keep him,” I told her. “Now, the whole time we were with any of them, I was picking their brains for anything that might save us, getting as much information as possible. So I saw how Demetri’s talent works. He’s a tracker—a tracker a thousand times more gifted than James was. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aro does. He catches the...flavor? I don’t know how to describe it...the tenor...of someone’s mind, and then he follows that. It works over immense distances. But after Aro’s little experiments, well...” It was obvious.

“You think he won’t be able to find me,” Bella said evenly.

I grinned. “I’m sure of it. He relies totally on that other sense. When it doesn’t work with you, they’ll all be blind.”

“And how does that solve anything?” she asked, unimpressed.

“Quite obviously, Alice will be able to tell when they’re planning a visit, and I’ll hide you. They’ll be helpless. It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!”

I laughed, thinking about it—a human getting the best of the Volturi guard.

“But they can find *you*,” Bella objected.

“And I can take care of myself.”

Emmett laughed. “Excellent plan, my brother,” he said and we bumped fists.

Rosalie hissed, “No.”

“Absolutely not,” Bella agreed.

“Nice,” said Jasper approvingly.

“Idiots,” Alice grumbled.

My mom gave me a censorious look. The women just couldn’t appreciate the pleasure of a good fight. Bella was annoyed but she kept her cool.

“All right, then. Edward has offered an alternative for you to consider,” she said. “Let’s vote.” Then she looked at me. “Do you want me to join your family?”

“Not that way. You’re staying human.”

She didn’t react. Just nodded once, as if she was registering my vote, and then moved on around the table.

“Alice?”

“Yes.”

“Jasper?”

“Yes.” Of course he would vote with Alice, even though he liked my plan.

“Rosalie?”

“No,” she said after a moment. She was trying to be nice to Bella, so I could tell this moment was awkward for her. She stuck to her guns, though. “Let me explain,” she added quickly. “I don’t mean that I have any aversion to you as a sister. It’s just that...this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there had been someone there to vote no for me.”

I could see in her thoughts that she was being honest. She *would* accept Bella as her sister, which pleased me. Plus, I appreciated her vote.

Bella turned to Emmett next.

“Hell, yes!” he answered. “We can find some other way to pick a fight with this Demetri.”

I snarled. Both Jasper *and* Emmett had abandoned me. Not that it mattered, but still...

Bella looked at my mother.

“Yes, of course, Bella. I already think of you as part of my family.”

“Thank you, Esme,” she replied gratefully.

Bella must have questioned why—since everyone seemed to want her—we’d abandoned her. I didn’t know if she could understand that we all thought she would have been better off without us.

The vote was now four *yeas* and two *nays*. Bella looked at Carlisle and he looked at me.

I think you have to reconsider, son. Her life is in danger and so is yours. I can change her if you’re worried about her safety.

I refused to look at him, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

“Edward,” he pressed me out loud.

“No,” I growled.

“It’s the only way that makes sense,” my father asserted. “You’ve chosen not to live without her, and that doesn’t leave me a choice.”

He meant it literally—I had chosen suicide when I thought Bella was dead and Carlisle and Esme didn’t want me to try it again. If Bella remained human, they knew that when her life ended, I would force the hand of the Volturi, so Carlisle would not support my decision. Instead, he would allow Bella to lose her soul!

Fury gripped me. I dropped Bella’s hand and stormed out of the room, snarling all the way. Behind me, I heard my father’s words to Bella:

“I guess you know my vote.”

28. Deal

I was *stinking* mad. As I entered the living room, I scoured the area for a suitable object on which to vent my rage. The nearest breakable item was Emmett's sixty-inch, flat-screen, high-definition, plasma television that he'd had shipped by special order from Korea, as they were not yet available in the United States. The number of adjectives in front of the word "television" indicates just how much money it had cost him.

I approached the wall-sized screen and jammed my fist through the center of it, shattering the glass, which sprayed in every direction. The plastic casing behind the screen splintered and my hand smashed through it too and into a wall stud, tearing it from the ceiling joist. Still angry, I yanked what was left of the TV off the wall, twisted it fiercely into a gnarled mass, and chucked it into the gaping hole in the wall where it had hung. Despite the impressive racket of the destruction, it didn't make me feel better.

If my father supported Bella's decision to the degree that he would change her himself, then it was a done deal. The only thing I could do now was try to talk her out of it somehow.

"That's all I needed," Bella said from the other room. "Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel exactly the same way about all of you, too."

I was wracking my brain for a plan. *Somehow* to convince Bella not to go through with it or at least to postpone it as long as possible so that she could live out more of her human life. And maybe by then, she would have changed her mind.

Then Bella spoke again. "Well, Alice. Where do you want to do this?" I couldn't believe my ears!

"No! No! NO!" I bellowed, storming into the dining room. I loomed menacingly over Bella, livid. "Are you insane?" I yelled. "Have you utterly lost your mind?"

Bella put her hands over her ears and ducked her head. I put my body between her and my sister.

"Um, Bella," Alice said nervously. "I don't think I'm ready for that. I'll need to prepare..."

"You promised," Bella protested, trying to talk to Alice around me.

"I know, but... Seriously, Bella! I don't have any idea how to not kill you."

"You can do it. I trust you."

I snarled. I couldn't *believe* she wanted to go through with this...and *immediately!* It was *crazy*, not to mention risky for my family. But Alice appeared to be backing out of her offer, at least for the moment.

Bella called to my father.

"Carlisle?" she asked, stretching to see him behind me.

I grabbed her face in one hand and forced her to look straight at me. I warned my father away with my other hand raised in his direction. He *ignored me. Ignored me!*

"I'm able to do it," Carlisle said to Bella calmly. "You would be in no danger of me losing control."

"Sounds good," Bella mumbled, her jaw still trapped in my hand.

I could not believe it! *What can I do? What can I do?*

"Hold on," I growled. "It doesn't have to be now."

"There's no reason for it not to be now," Bella argued.

"I can think of a few."

"Of course you can. Now let go of me," she demanded.

I released her chin and adopted Charlie's intimidation stance with my arms crossed over my chest and my legs slightly apart.

"In about two hours, Charlie will be here looking for you. I wouldn't put it past him to involve the police."

"All three of them," Bella replied sarcastically, but I could see her think about that. She remained silent for several long moments and I knew I'd found the right argument. My body was still stiff with anger, but I had regained control of my temper.

"In the interest of remaining inconspicuous," I said to Carlisle, who would particularly care about the issue, "I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Bella finishes high school, and moves out of Charlie's house."

"That's a reasonable request, Bella," Carlisle granted.

Yes!

Bella grew quiet for a bit and then relented.

“I’ll consider it,” she said grudgingly.

Whew! I’d won the argument...for now. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“I should probably take you home,” I said hastily, wanting to end this night before anyone had second thoughts. “Just in case Charlie wakes up early,” I explained.

Bella looked at my father. “After graduation?” she asked.

“You have my word.”

I felt another snarl building in my chest.

“Okay. You can take me home,” Bella agreed.

I hurried her out the back door, avoiding the demolition zone I’d created in the living room. I couldn’t remember ever being so angry, at least not in a long while. I would owe Emmett—big time.

After I’d run the several miles through the woods with Bella on my back, I’d calmed down enough to direct my energy toward planning—or perhaps “scheming” was more accurate. When we reached Charlie’s house, I leaped through Bella’s window, pulled her from my back, and set her on the bed without a pause. I needed to think. She watched me as I paced back and forth across the room.

“Whatever you’re planning, it’s not going to work,” she warned me.

“Shh. I’m thinking,” I replied. An idea was taking shape in my mind, a way to buy more time.

“Ugh,” Bella complained, dropping onto her back and hiding her head under the blanket.

I couldn’t *stand* it! I darted to her bed and lay down beside her. Then I pulled the blanket off her face and smoothed the hair away from her eyes.

“If you don’t mind,” I said mildly. “I’d much rather you didn’t hide your face. I’ve lived without it for as long as I can stand.” I was feeling more confident and conciliatory. “Now...tell me something.”

“What?” Bella asked suspiciously.

I'd accepted that I could not prevent Bella from going to Carlisle to be changed. The only possible thing I could affect was *how soon* she acted. I'd already gotten her to postpone until after graduation. Perhaps I could extend that time.

"If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?"

"You," she responded.

"Something you don't already have," I replied impatiently.

Bella paused to think. If she was honest with her choice, I might have a bargaining chip.

"I would want...Carlisle not to have to do it. I would want you to change me."

As I'd thought. Could I do it? Could I put aside everything I believed in to give her what she wanted? Possibly, if the trade was significant enough. I *wanted* to keep her forever, of *course* I did. I just didn't want to condemn her to an eternity of night. But I had to remember that she would go ahead whether I agreed to it or not. If she was going to do it anyway, I *did* want to be the one. I wanted to inject her with poison from my own mouth. *Ugh!*

"What would you be willing to trade for that?" I asked.

Bella looked shocked. It was the first time I had given her any indication that I might go along with her decision.

"Anything," she said breathily, her eyes wide.

"Five years?" I suggested.

Bella looked absolutely mortified. She hadn't seen that coming.

"You said anything," I reminded her.

"Yes, but...you'll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it's just too dangerous to be human—for me, at least. So, anything but *that*."

Grrr. "Three years?"

"No!"

"Isn't it worth anything to you at all?" I asked, slightly offended.

"Six months?"

Patently ridiculous! I rolled my eyes. "Not good enough."

“One year, then,” Bella relented. “That’s my limit.”

This wasn’t going as well as I’d hoped.

“At least give me two.”

“No way. Nineteen I’ll do. But I’m not going anywhere near twenty. If you’re staying in your teens forever, then so am I.”

Oh, right. The numbers meant something to Bella, though it was completely illogical. That idea wasn’t going to work then. *What else? What do I really want?*

I recalled two words I’d said earlier in the day under other circumstances and suddenly I *knew*. Pleasure flowed through me when I recognized what would give me the ultimate bliss and also might convince Bella to postpone changing. If she didn’t want to wait, then I would still get my heart’s desire!

“All right. Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one—then you’ll just have to meet one condition.”

“Condition? What condition?” Bella was guarded.

As soon as the idea had entered my mind, I knew I wanted it...badly. I tried to hide from her just how much when I said the words.

“Marry me first.”

Bella looked at me without comprehension. “Okay. What’s the punch line?”

Seriously? “You’re wounding my ego, Bella. I just proposed to you, and you think it’s a joke.”

“Edward, please be serious.”

“I am one hundred percent serious.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Bella said in disbelief. “I’m only eighteen.”

“Well, I’m nearly a hundred and ten. It’s time I settled down.”

She turned to the window, unable to look me in the eyes. Her discomfort was obvious.

“Look, marriage isn’t exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Renee and Charlie,” she said with unintended irony.

“Interesting choice of words.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re afraid of the commitment,” I said, pointing out the lack of logic in that.

“That’s not it exactly,” she said slowly. “I’m...afraid of Renee. She has some really intense opinions on getting married before you’re thirty.”

“Because she’d rather you became one of the eternal damned than get married.”

“You think you’re joking.”

Though it probably wasn’t reasonable, I recognized that Bella’s resistance hurt my feelings a little. I thought she loved me, but it was always possible that she wanted immortality more than she wanted me. It was a distressing thought.

“Bella, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for an eternity as a vampire... If you’re not brave enough to marry me, then—”

“Well, what if I did?” she challenged. “What if I told you to take me to Vegas now? Would I be a vampire in three days?”

I knew she was bluffing.

“Sure,” I said agreeably. “I’ll get my car.”

Her face fell. “Dammit. I’ll give you eighteen months,” she conceded.

“No deal,” I said, smiling. “I like this condition.”

I had her! It was fair, though. We each would have to give in to something abhorrent to us. I tried not to think too hard about what I was agreeing to do or what seemed to be abhorrent to Bella.

“Fine,” Bella rejoined. “I’ll have Carlisle do it when I graduate.”

“If that’s what you really want,” I said nonchalantly, grinning for all I was worth. Like me, she’d seen the possibility of getting something she *really* wanted and I didn’t think she’d be able to give it up.

“You’re impossible,” Bella complained. “A monster.”

“Is that why you won’t marry me?” I teased.

Bella groaned.

I wasn’t above exploiting my charms to get what I wanted. I leaned in close, invoking all my powers of persuasion...the eyes, the voice, the breath.

“Please, Bella?” I whispered, looking into her eyes and exhaling across her face.

Bella’s expression went blank and her mouth hung open slightly. She seemed confused for a moment before she came back to herself and shook her head.

“Would this have gone better if I’d had time to get a ring?” I asked forlornly.

“No! No rings!” Bella cried out, a note of terror in the sound.

“Now you’ve done it,” I told her.

“Oops.”

“Charlie’s getting up; I’d better leave,” I said with a forsaken sigh.

Bella’s expression became anguished, which made me feel better. I didn’t really want to leave.

“Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?” I asked, not mentioning that I’d dodged Charlie that way repeatedly in the last twenty-four hours.

“No,” Bella assured me. “Stay. Please.”

I smiled happily and disappeared into Bella’s sweet-smelling closet.

Bella had gotten plenty to think about in the last hour. I was confident I’d found the one thing that might make her wait to be changed...marriage. Now that she knew I would be willing to change her myself, though, she was in a quandary. In truth, the act of transforming a human was intimate...not just physically, but also spiritually. If I did it, she would know without a doubt that I wanted her forever. And my venom, though no different than Carlisle’s in chemistry, was symbolically very different.

“Morning, Dad,” Bella said after her door creaked.

“Oh, hey, Bella,” Charlie replied uncomfortably. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Yeah. I’ve just been waiting for you to wake up so I could take a shower.” Clever. She was trying to scare him out of her room with hints of nakedness.

“Hold on,” Charlie said and turned on the overhead light. “Let’s talk for a minute first.” I wondered if he was suspicious and needed the light to look around. “You know you’re in trouble.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I just about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry’s funeral, and you’re gone.”

So it was someone named *Harry* who had died when I’d thought it was Bella.

“Jacob could only tell me that you’d run off with Alice Cullen, and that he thought you were in trouble. You didn’t leave me a number, and you didn’t call. I didn’t know where you were or when—or if—you were coming back. Do you have any idea how...how...” Charlie faltered.

Jacob again. Jacob with the “pack.” Things were starting to add up to something I didn’t like at all.

Charlie was still carping at Bella. “Can you give me one reason why I shouldn’t ship you off to Jacksonville this second?” he demanded.

“Because I won’t go,” Bella said stubbornly.

“Now just one minute, young lady—”

“Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I’ve learned my lesson. And I guess you’re within your rights if you want to kick me out, too—but that won’t make me go to Florida.”

I could feel Charlie’s tension building though I couldn’t see his face.

“Would you like to explain where you’ve been?”

Bella paused and I knew she was trying to think fast.

“There was...an emergency.” Bella hesitated again. I could imagine Charlie’s skeptical expression.

Bella made a funny noise that sounded something like resignation.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand.”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“See, Alice told Rosalie about me jumping off the cliff...”

Bella was digging herself in worse every second, but I couldn’t help her with Charlie. I could imagine his expression about now.

“I guess I didn’t tell you about that,” she admitted guiltily. “It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Jake. Anyway, Rosalie told Edward, and he was upset. She sort of accidentally made it sound like I was trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn’t answer his phone, so Alice dragged me to... L.A., to explain in person.”

“Were you trying to kill yourself, Bella?” Charlie probed, a cloud of fear suddenly radiating from him and filling the room.

“No, of course not. Just having fun with Jake. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing.”

Jake, Jake, Jake...again! Grrrr.

“What’s it to Edward Cullen anyway?” Charlie stormed. “All this time, he’s just left you dangling without a word—”

“Another misunderstanding,” Bella interrupted.

Bella tells her father she’s been jumping off cliffs and what he latches onto is my name as the worst thing in Bella’s explanation. I deserved it, I guess.

“So is he back then?” Charlie demanded.

“I’m not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are.”

“I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don’t trust him. He’s rotten for you. I won’t let him mess you up like that again.” I stifled a snarl.

“Fine.” I was taken aback at Bella’s easy dismissal of me. *Would she...?*

“Oh.” Charlie sounded surprised. “I thought you were going to be difficult.”

“I am. I meant, ‘Fine, I’ll move out.’”

Panic and anger and fear all poured out of Charlie, though I couldn’t catch any particular thoughts.

“Dad, I don’t want to move out,” Bella cut in before he could speak. “I love you. I know you’re worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you’re going to have to ease up on Edward if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?”

“That’s not fair, Bella. You know I want you to stay.”

“Then be nice to Edward, because he’s going to be where I am.”

I felt the air rush out of me in an abundance of relief. She *did* believe in me! She wanted me! I was thrilled.

“Not under my roof.”

Bella sighed. “Look, I’m not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight—or I guess it’s this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Edward and I are sort of a package deal.”

“Bella—”

“Think it over,” Bella insisted. “And while you’re doing that, could you give me some privacy? I really need a shower.” More threats of nakedness. I smiled.

The door slammed and Charlie stomped down the stairs. I hated that Bella was fighting with her father over *me*. I exited the closet and sat in Bella’s rocking chair.

“Sorry about that,” she whispered.

“It’s not as if I don’t deserve far worse,” I told her. “Don’t start anything with Charlie over me, please.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bella said as she gathered her things for the shower. “I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?”

She looked at me with wide, frightened eyes. I think it was meant as a joke.

“You’d move in with a house full of vampires?” I tested. It sounded like she’d be willing to *live* with me, but not *marry* me. Great.

“That’s probably the safest place for someone like me,” Bella went on. “Besides... if Charlie kicks me out, then there’s no need for a graduation deadline, is there?”

She grinned provocatively.

Grrr. “So eager for eternal damnation,” I groused.

“You know you don’t really believe that.”

“Oh, don’t I?” *Of course I did!*

“No. You don’t.”

I frowned and tried to think how to respond to that blatant challenge when Bella cut in.

“If you really believed that you’d lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn’t—you said ‘Amazing. Carlisle was right,’” she reminded me. “There’s hope in you, after all.”

I was floored by that assessment. I guess...I guess...she was *right!*

“So let’s both just be hopeful, all right?” she added. “Not that it matters. If you stay, I don’t need heaven.”

Still in shock by the truth she had pointed out to me, I rose and approached her slowly. Gazing into her eyes, I took her face in my hands.

“Forever,” I vowed.

“That’s all I’m asking for,” Bella responded. She rose onto her toes as I leaned forward to meet her lips with mine.

She *was* my heaven.

Epilogue: Treaty

The first time I saw Jacob Black after returning to Forks, I learned more about him than I ever wanted to know. Now I wish I could erase it all from my head. No, that's not true—what I really want to erase is what I did to drive Bella into Jacob's arms. Whether or not she's actually been in his arms, I'm not sure. Jacob seems to have a rich fantasy life and I can't tell how much of what I saw was truth and how much fiction. One thing I know, though, is that he wishes it were all true. He wishes that he'd moved faster with Bella, pushed his romantic interest a little harder. He thinks that if I'd stayed away just a little longer, he would have won her.

I can't say I'm glad how Bella and I were reunited, but I *am* glad that we were *when* we were. Bella claims that Jacob is her best friend and I believe that is what she believes. I don't know how much deeper than that her feelings go. I'm not sure she does either.

The more pressing problem, though, is that Bella's "best friend" is a werewolf—an extremely dangerous, volatile, and violent creature by nature. Carlisle has told me about the "bear attack" on Emily Young. We thought that the werewolves had died out long ago, or we never would have come back to the region. So when a tribal elder brought Emily to the hospital with life-threatening wounds, Carlisle had no reason to believe they weren't from a bear attack. He said he smelled the familiar werewolf scent on her, but he'd assumed that it was simply in the blood of the tribe and was noticeable only because Emily was bleeding so profusely.

Now we know that when Sam hit puberty, the tribal gene kicked in after generations of lying dormant. Before Sam had learned to control his new nature, he'd critically injured the love of his life. Nobody from the tribe would have come anywhere near my father except that Emily needed the immediate attention of a skilled surgeon to avoid bleeding to death. Carlisle not only saved her life, but also the vision in her damaged right eye.

Bella doesn't believe this could happen to her. I can't *believe* she has hung around with the werewolves for weeks and remains unscathed—as far as I can tell, that is. If she *had* been endangered by the wolves, I get the feeling she wouldn't tell me—a possibility that makes me all the more vigilant. She doesn't take my concerns seriously.

I admit that I would prefer Bella didn't spend time with Jacob Black even if he *weren't* a werewolf. However, my determination to prevent her from doing so has nothing to do with that personal preference. It is all about the my love's safety.

Bella did not agree to marry me the night of the vote. I'm still hoping that my offer of changing her myself will undermine her resistance, though, and that she will accept my proposal. If I have to change her afterward, then at least she will be *my wife forever!* Just the thought of it sets my feet dancing.

The family did remain in Forks. As soon as Esme found out I was staying, she wanted the whole family to be there together. Carlisle was eagerly accepted back at the local hospital after explaining that his wife hadn't liked the big city life of "Los Angeles." Esme planned to continue working on the house restoration project she had started in Ithaca, New York, coordinating the work by telephone and periodic visits.

Jasper would have stayed regardless, because Alice wanted to be with Bella and me and he wouldn't be without her. He was considering transferring his credits to the Philosophy program at the University of Washington.

We'd told school friends that Rosalie and Emmett had gone to Dartmouth, but they'd actually been traveling a lot, to northern Europe, to somewhere in Africa—Kenya, I think, to New York, and to Denali. Now they would remain in Forks with us, keeping a low profile until they could claim they were out of college for the summer.

We hadn't seen any sign of Victoria since our return, but we weren't letting Bella out of our sight. When I had to go hunting, Alice stayed with her. Charlie liked having Alice around ever since she played nursemaid to Bella when her leg was in a cast the previous spring. Bella had been grounded upon our return from Italy and I was only allowed to visit her between the hours of 6:00 and 10:00 p.m., but Alice could come and go at will and even stay overnight.

We had another problem besides Victoria and, though it was only marginally related to Bella, it seemed to be getting worse. The *Seattle Times* was reporting a series of gruesome murders in the city, accompanied by unprecedented mayhem and destruction... overturned cars, large fires, corpses left in plain sight with disturbing marks on their bodies. We recognized the pattern and were convinced that one or more newborn vampires were on the rampage in Seattle. They were drawing undue attention to themselves, but for what reason, we didn't know. It was risky behavior—exactly the kind of activity that the Volturi guard is sent to quell.

We didn't want the Volturi anywhere near Forks and had discussed the possibility of going to Seattle to destroy the renegades ourselves. Emmett and Jasper were all for going immediately, but Carlisle wanted to wait and see whether they would leave the area on their own first.

Though Charlie compromised with Bella by letting me into his house during the designated visiting hours, he was not speaking to me. The effect of that was that his thoughts

were often directed at me, which made them easier to read—not a great benefit because they were mostly angry opinions and insults.

The one significant thing I learned, though, was how terribly worried Charlie had been about Bella after I left. I caught words like “depressed,” “nightmares,” and “zombie,” all of which were extremely distressing to me. In this one case, I was rather glad to be getting only the gist of his thoughts because the pain of just that much was difficult to handle. The truth was that I could never forgive myself for what I had done to Bella, nor could I ever make it up to her. All I could do was try to prevent anything or anyone from hurting her again—myself included.

Sadly, I was already failing at that because Jacob Black had not been speaking to Bella since I’d returned. Being grounded, she couldn’t go see him and he wouldn’t answer her phone calls. Though I personally preferred him to keep his distance, it upset me to see her feelings hurt.

One Saturday, I picked up Bella at Newton’s Olympic Outfitters to drive her home after her shift. She was distraught about Jacob Black, whom she had tried to phone again.

“It’s just plain rude!” Bella said angrily. “Downright insulting! Billy said he didn’t *want* to talk to me. That he was there, and wouldn’t walk three steps to get to the phone! Usually Billy just says he’s out or busy or sleeping or something. I mean, it’s not like I didn’t know he was lying to me, but at least it was a polite way to handle it. I guess Billy hates me now, too. It’s not fair!”

“It’s not you, Bella,” I told her quietly. “Nobody hates you.”

“Feels that way,” she complained.

“Jacob knows we’re back, and I’m sure he’s ascertained that I’m with you,” I explained. “He won’t come anywhere near me. The enmity is rooted too deeply.”

“That’s stupid. He knows you’re not...like other vampires.”

“There’s still good reason to keep a safe distance,” I said. Bella turned away to look out the window, which was dripping with spring rain.

I wished I could convince her that werewolves and vampires live in circles that do not—cannot—intersect. And I wished that that truth didn’t bother her so much. Jacob was right to stay away from her—and me.

“Bella, we are what we are. I can control myself, but I doubt he can. He’s very young. It would most likely turn into a fight, and I don’t know if I could stop it before I k—” I caught myself just in time. “...before I hurt him. You would be unhappy. I don’t want that to happen.”

Bella didn't miss my slip.

"Edward Cullen," she chided. "Were you about to say *'killed'* him? Were you?"

I looked out my window, not because I was avoiding her question, but because I could hear Charlie swearing, though we were still around the corner from his house.

"After everything I've told her about motorcycles, she does this! I could kill her myself!"

"Yeah, I thought you should know, Charlie."

"I appreciate that, Jake."

Jacob Black.

Bella was still waiting for my answer. "I would try...very hard...not to do that," I promised. Because it would hurt her.

"Well, nothing like that is ever going to happen, so there's no reason to worry about it. And you know Charlie's staring at the clock right now. You'd better get me home before I get in more trouble for being late."

She started to smile, but her expression changed when she looked at my face and realized something was wrong. I had pulled to the stop sign at the corner and waited there until I saw Jacob Black leave her house. I wasn't going to take Bella home while he was there. Bella's heart began to accelerate as she watched me nervously.

"You're already in more trouble, Bella," I murmured, still listening for Charlie and Jacob's thoughts.

"What? What is it?"

"Charlie..."

"My dad?" Bella's voice rose into the stratosphere.

"Charlie...is probably *not* going to kill you, but he's thinking about it," I told her.

Jacob Black had left Charlie's and walked into the woods just beyond the house where he now waited. I turned down Charlie's street, but drove past his house and parked the car next to the woods. The car was still visible from his front porch, but not as immediately obvious as it would be sitting in front of his house.

"What did I do?" Bella was starting to panic.

I had understood as soon as I saw the shiny red motorcycle in the driveway and heard Jacob's angry thoughts. So *this* was the infamous motorcycle with which Bella had tried to kill herself so she could summon my voice in her head. I felt the virtual whip across my shoulders. There wasn't a punishment harsh enough to make up for the harm I'd caused Bella by leaving.

Bella's eyes followed my gaze until she saw it too.

"No!" she gasped. "Why? Why would Jacob do this to me? Is he still here?"

"Yes. He's waiting for us there." I pointed toward the path into the trees.

Bella jumped out of the car and took off at a run, her face compressed in fury and her hands clenched into fists.

I caught up with her before she reached the path and wrapped my arm around her waist to slow her down. Tears had started to pool in her eyes, which she would say were the result of anger, but I believed they contained sadness too. She felt betrayed.

"Let me go! I'm going to murder him! *Traitor!*" Bella yelled toward the woods.

"Charlie will hear you," I cautioned. "And once he gets you inside, he may brick over the doorway." Charlie was still fuming in the house, his anger increasing every minute that his daughter was late getting home.

Bella glanced at the house. "Just give me one round with Jacob, and then I'll deal with Charlie," she declared, straining to break my hold around her.

"Jacob Black wants to see me. That's why he's still here," I explained. She stopped struggling in surprise.

That's right, bloodsucker! Hurry up! I don't have all day!

Jacob had been told that I could read minds—by Bella, I assume—and he was testing that out by insulting me. *Bloodsucker*. It's what I was. I couldn't deny that.

"Talk?" Bella checked.

"More or less."

Why did I volunteer for this? I knew he was seeing her and I sure as hell don't need to see them together. Damn it! Well, he can't bite her or he's fair game.

"How much more?" Bella worried. Her voice was shaky.

I tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Don't worry, he's not here to fight me. He's acting as...spokesperson for the pack."

"Oh."

Where the hell is she? What has that SOB done to her THIS time?

I pulled Bella toward the path. "We should hurry. Charlie's getting impatient."

We walked a short distance into the woods and found Jacob Black leaning against a mossy stump. He straightened and walked toward us wearing an unfriendly expression meant for me. His stature was impressive. I guessed he was in Magic Johnson territory, height-wise.

With a protective arm I cut off Bella's progress toward him. I didn't want her any closer to the werewolf than absolutely necessary. His murderous eyes locked onto mine.

Ha! He's keeping her away from me; now he won't get to see her either.

Being this close to a vampire was difficult for Jacob Black. He was shaking and shuddering, ready to transform into a wolf right there on the spot. Because of Carlisle, who long ago brokered a peace treaty with the Quileute, we never battled the wolves from the earlier generation, so I had no experience with their fighting style.

The Quileute are not werewolves, per se. They are more properly called "shape-shifters" and just happen to take the shape of wolves. Their ability to change is unrelated to the lunar cycle and, as far as I know, they don't attack humans at all. They seem to exist for the sole purpose of destroying vampires.

We don't know if they are the only wolves of their kind in the world. Caius was a werewolf hunter and Carlisle has never heard him speak of any others like the Quileute wolves. But indigenous peoples the world over harbor mysteries I associate with living so close to nature and to the land. Their genetic traits developed over millennia, often in isolation. Who knows how many such secrets have been lost through genocide or how many still exist and are known only to the tribes themselves?

"Bella," Jacob acknowledged, keeping his eyes locked on me. I had pushed her behind my body in case the boy lost control. She had to duck around me to get a look at his face.

“Why?” Bella protested. “How could you do this to me, Jacob?”

“It’s for the best,” he replied coolly.

“What is *that* supposed to mean? Do you want Charlie to *strangle* me? Or did you want him to have a heart attack, like Harry? No matter how mad you are at me, how could you do this to *him*?”

Hmm... “Like Harry”... “He’s at the funeral”...the boy on the telephone... All pieces of the puzzle.

I explained to Bella, “He didn’t want to hurt anyone—he just wanted to get you grounded, so that you wouldn’t be allowed to spend time with me.”

The mind-reading infuriated Jacob. The tendons in his arms bulged as he flexed his fists.

“Aw, Jake!” Bella complained “I’m *already* grounded! Why do you think I haven’t been down to La Push to kick your butt for avoiding my phone calls?”

“That’s why?” He glanced at me, greatly surprised. *Not the vampire leech’s fault?*

“He thought I wouldn’t let you, not Charlie,” I told Bella.

“Stop that,” the dog snapped and I braced myself. His body was trembling again.

“Bella wasn’t exaggerating about your...abilities,” he hissed, gritting his teeth. “So you must already know why I’m here.”

“Yes. But, before you begin, I need to say something.” I kept my voice soft and low in order not to excite him around Bella. His body was calm now but his arms still shook. “Thank you,” I said with the utmost sincerity. “I will never be able to tell you how grateful I am. I will owe you for the rest of my...existence.”

Jacob had expected something aggressive from me and was caught off guard. His face looked puzzled rather than angry for a moment.

“For keeping Bella alive,” I clarified, “when I...didn’t.”

Though Jacob was a danger to Bella, that didn’t negate the fact that he had done me the greatest possible service by protecting her. The pain of its necessity due to *my* misguided actions made my voice go coarse and deep.

“Edward—,” Bella started to contradict, but I held up a hand to signal “not now.” I knew very well the measure of my culpability.

"I didn't do it for your benefit," the wolf snarled, regaining his aggressive edge.

"I know. But that doesn't erase the gratitude I feel. I thought you should know. If there's ever anything in my power to do for you..."

You could leave Bella alone, he thought.

"That's not in my power," I admitted.

"Whose, then?"

"Hers," I said, looking at Bella. "I'm a quick learner, Jacob Black, and I don't make the same mistake twice. I'm here until she orders me away."

I looked into Bella's eyes when I said that last bit. She needed to hear it, a reminder of my promise to her.

"Never," Bella murmured, looking into my eyes.

Jacob Black made an offensive noise, which annoyed Bella.

"Was there something else you needed, Jacob?" Bella shot out. "You wanted me in trouble—mission accomplished. Charlie might just send me to military school. But that won't keep me away from Edward. There's nothing that can do that. What more do you want?"

"I just needed to remind your bloodsucking friends of a few key points in the treaty they agreed to," Jacob Black said. I'd already seen the words in his head.

You can't bite her to turn her into one of you. That means war.

Out loud he said, "The treaty that is the only thing stopping me from ripping his throat out right this minute."

I hardly thought that was true, but never mind.

"We haven't forgotten," I told him and I wasn't worried about it. I had no plans to let anyone bite Bella.

"What key points?" she wanted to know.

"The treaty is quite specific. If any of them bite a human, the truce is over. *Bite*, not kill," he said to Bella, while looking at me.

Is that what you're planning, bloodsucker?

If he could read minds, he'd see that it was Bella who wanted that, not me.

Bella's temper flared. "That's none of your business," she snapped, inadvertently revealing her intention to him.

"The hell it—"

The wolf interrupted himself as he started shaking violently. He pressed his fists into his head, clamped his eyes shut, and hunched inward, trying not to lose control of himself. He was *furious* and utterly stunned by Bella's words, but he didn't want to hurt her. Now me...that was another thing.

"Jake? You okay?" Bella took a step toward the shuddering boy. I grabbed her and relocated her behind my body.

"Careful! He's not under control," I warned. Not only that—the wolf wasn't just furious; *hate* radiated from him.

"Ugh. *I would never hurt her,*" he snarled at me.

As if I would!

I felt my temper rising. I knew *exactly* what he was referring to—not just changing her, but leaving her. The wolf wanted to fight and except for Bella's presence, I would have been happy to oblige him.

Just then, Charlie stomped out of his house and saw my parked car.

"BELLA!" he thundered. "YOU GET IN THIS HOUSE THIS INSTANT!"

"Crap."

"I *am* sorry about that," Jacob Black admitted regretfully. "I had to do what I could—I had to try..." *To get you away from him. To get you back.* But he didn't say those last words out loud.

"Thanks," Bella retorted, her voice wavering. Charlie's anger was unsettling to her.

"Just one more thing," I said to Bella as she turned to leave, then I looked at Jacob. "We've found no trace of Victoria on our side of the line—have you?"

"The last time was while Bella was...away. We let her think she was slipping through—we were tightening the circle, getting ready to ambush her but then she took off like a bat out

of hell. Near as we can tell, she caught your little female's scent and bailed. She hasn't come near our lands since."

I nodded to acknowledge the report. It was good news for the moment.

"When she comes back, she's not your problem anymore," I informed him. "We'll—"

"She killed on our turf. She's ours!" the wolf raged.

"No—," Bella cried out to both of us.

"BELLA! I SEE HIS CAR AND I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! IF YOU AREN'T INSIDE THIS HOUSE IN ONE MINUTE... !" Charlie couldn't think of a black enough threat to end that sentence.

He'd punished Bella about as far as he could without committing a crime, I figured, or provoking Bella to move to my house. He'd *really* hate that, so I guessed he wouldn't come down too hard on her, despite his temper.

"Let's go," I urged. I wanted Bella out of the werewolf's vicinity anyway, the sooner, the better.

Bella turned back toward her friend.

"Sorry," he whispered. "'Bye, Bells."

"You promised," Bella said.

Promised what?

"Still friends, right?" she asked. I hoped that was all he'd promised her. I would be keeping my eye on Jacob Black.

"You know how hard I've tried to keep that promise," he responded, "But...I can't see how to keep trying. Not now..." The wolf stretched a hand toward Bella. "Miss you."

"Me, too," Bella croaked. "Jake..." Bella stepped toward the wolf and I pulled her back.

No closer.

"It's okay," Bella said to me confidently.

"No, it's not," I replied with steel in my voice. She had to understand the danger.

“Let her go. She wants to!” The wolf snarled at me and began striding forward, ready to fight. Swiftly, I grabbed Bella and moved her behind me and then turned to face the aggressor, arms raised in readiness.

“No! Edward—!” Bella cried out.

“ISABELLA SWAN!” The irate voice rang through the neighborhood.

“Come on! Charlie’s mad! Hurry!” Bella urged, pulling at my shirt. He was indeed. He had just squelched an impulse to retrieve his service revolver.

I backed Bella out of the woods, keeping my eyes on the wolf. I’d gotten my irritation under control, though I couldn’t say the same for Jacob Black. When we’d cleared the trees, I spun forward and wrapped my arms around Bella’s waist. She was very upset, her body shaking as we strode toward her father’s house. Charlie was standing just inside the front door.

“I’m here,” I said, holding her close.

It wasn’t as bad as I’d expected. My recent temper tantrum was worse than Charlie’s. At least *he* didn’t stoop to destruction. He was quite a yeller, though, and anger made his rich, red blood churn and eddy beneath his skin in the most tantalizing way.

If Charlie had been speaking to me, he surely would have ordered me out of his house as soon as I stepped inside with Bella. He wasn’t, though, so I took advantage, placidly ignoring his mental expulsions and non-verbal cues to leave (such as turning his back on me and blocking me in the entry). Bella did not argue with her father or protest his excoriations because she was too worried about his blood pressure, she told me later.

The upshot of the motorcycle fiasco was that my visiting hours were shortened by an hour and a half; we would be allowed no privacy in Charlie’s house; and Bella still wasn’t allowed out except for school and work (and to buy groceries when that became necessary). She also had to promise not to ride the motorcycle. Bella thought the punishment was fair. I wasn’t particularly bothered by it either, because as long as Bella remained grounded, she couldn’t spend time with the werewolf as she’d been wanting to do. Charlie wouldn’t allow it and so I didn’t have to be the bad guy for the time being.

I've already set in motion the long process of replacing Emmett's television. To tide him over until it arrives from overseas, I had an electronics store in Port Angeles deliver a fifty-inch Panasonic flat screen to the house. Esme repaired the wall herself, with nary an admonishment in my direction. My behavior had been deplorable, but she knew how seriously I viewed taking Bella's human life. Everyone seemed to think I'd gotten over it and mostly they were relieved.

Emmett forgave me right away for destroying his prized possession. He claims he had plenty of rages himself "back in the day," though personally, I couldn't remember any.

"Besides," he informed me. "They're making sixty-four-inch plasma screens in Korea since I bought the old one."

I couldn't remember anybody ever accusing Emmett of being subtle either, but I didn't mind. It was the least I could do.