

1. Excuses

I knew right away that 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.