

## 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.

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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 13<sup>th</sup>.”

“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."

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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 6<sup>th</sup>, 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.