

ECLIPSE

through Edward's Eyes

A Fanfiction by **P.A. Lassiter**

from

Twilight: The Missing Pieces

See more at: [//palassiter.wordpress.com](http://palassiter.wordpress.com)

Twilight Saga © Stephenie Meyer

Table of Contents

Author's Introduction

1. *Situation*
2. *Diversion* (PG-13)
3. *Freedom*
4. *Confrontations*
5. *Risk*
6. *Plan B* (PG-13)
7. *Intruder*
8. *Truce*
9. *Changes*
10. *Newborns*
11. *Campaigns* (PG-13)
12. *Graduation*
13. *Alliance*
14. *Training*
15. *Compromise* (PG-13)
16. *Competition* (PG-13)
17. *Options* (PG-13)
18. *Bargaining* (PG-13)
19. *Engaged!* (PG-13)
20. *Preparations*
21. *Storm on the Mountain*
22. *Eclipsed*
23. *Battles*
24. *Betrayal*
25. *Aftermath*

Author's Introduction

Eclipse (Edward) was the final book of the *Twilight Saga* that I rewrote from Edward Cullen's point-of-view. Though I never intended to pen the whole saga through Edward's eyes, once you've written the second half of *Midnight Sun*, all of *Breaking Dawn (Edward)*, and *New Moon (Edward)*, you can't not complete the one remaining book.

I began writing Edward's version of *Eclipse* from the same point as Bella's version, but ended it a little earlier in order to keep details of Bella and Edward's engagement within the same book. You'll find that the meadow engagement scene that appears at the end of *Eclipse* has been moved to *Breaking Dawn* in Edward's version of events. Similarly, the "Epilogue" chapter of the original *Eclipse* doesn't pertain to Edward and so the information hinted at there has also been moved to *Breaking Dawn* from Edward's point-of-view.

You will find photographs, news updates, and anything else I might be up to by visiting my "Twilight: The Missing Pieces" website at:

[//palassiter.wordpress.com](http://palassiter.wordpress.com)

P.A. Lassiter

5/26/2013

1. Situation

Isabella Marie Swan, the love of my...existence...was determined to join the ranks of the immortal damned as soon as she graduated high school. A few short weeks. My father, Dr. Carlisle Cullen, had promised that he would change her when she was ready, so my wishes were no longer a consideration. She didn't need me to get what she wanted. However, I was a rather experienced negotiator and had conceived the splendid idea of offering her a trade: If she would marry me first, then I would change her myself. Having Bella for my wife was the only thing in the world that could compel me to take that step, something that was abhorrent to me on several levels.

So far, Bella had not accepted my offer. The idea of marriage was nearly as repellent to her as stealing her mortal soul was to me. Maybe, though...just maybe...the idea that I would sanction her choice by changing her myself might tempt her to accept my proposal. Or perhaps it would compel her to postpone becoming a vampire.

With the latter hope in mind, I was researching colleges and universities for Bella to attend in the fall despite her protestations that she wasn't going. In her scheme, she would merely enroll at a distant college to provide an excuse for not visiting her parents, the real reason being, of course, that she would have a newborn vampire's blood—red eyes, cold, marble—like skin, and an insatiable appetite for human blood.

Finding a selection of colleges for Bella to choose from was not easy. She had postponed the process so long that most application deadlines were long past. Her less—than—stellar high school grades also posed a problem. However, most colleges and universities were so strapped for cash that they would consider exceptions to their stringent entry standards in exchange for a substantial donation. Fortunately, the Cullens had lots of cash to donate to worthy causes.

For more than a month, Bella and I had been submitting to her father Charlie's restrictions that were her punishment for running off to Italy to save my life. Bella was grounded and could not leave the house except to attend school and go to work. I was allowed to visit between the hours of 7:00 and 9:30 p.m., a concession she had extracted from Charlie by threatening to move out. Visiting hours recently had been decreased from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. when Bella's so—called best friend, Jacob Black, reported to her father that she'd been riding a motorcycle behind his back.

Luckily, on my return to Forks, I'd been able to arrange my class schedule to match Bella's, the only exceptions being gym and calculus. So we were together most of the day at

school and, of course, every night after Charlie went to bed. The remaining afternoon and pre-bedtime hours dragged endlessly while we were apart.

I pulled my souped-up Volvo (courtesy of Rosalie) to the curb in front of Charlie's house at 6:54 p.m. one evening, a little on the early side. From the street, I heard father and daughter conversing inside.

"...retirement, Dad. I've got my college fund."

"Some of these places are pretty pricey, Bells. I want to help. You don't have to go all the way to Alaska just because it's cheaper."

"I've got it covered. Besides, there's lots of financial aid out there. It's easy to get loans."

"So..." Charlie began, then stopped.

"So what?"

Perhaps because it was about me, I clearly heard Charlie's question in his head before he spoke it. It was time to make my appearance and save Bella from the awkwardness of answering.

"Nothing. I was just...just wondering what...Edward's plans are for next year?"

"Oh," Bella stalled.

"Well?"

I dashed to the front door and rapped on it several times. Let Charlie ask *me* if he wanted to know. Not that he was talking to me if he could help it.

"Coming!" Bella called.

"Go away," I heard Charlie mutter under his breath. I smiled. He was out of luck on that count.

Bella opened the door and I stepped inside, pushing it shut behind me. I breathed in her scent and felt a sense of calm settle over me. I was always slightly anxious when we were separated from one another, though sometimes I didn't notice it until I was with her again and the feeling disappeared. I reached for her hand as our eyes took in each other.

"Hey," Bella said softly.

I raised our entwined fingers to stroke her soft cheek with the back of my hand.

“How was your afternoon?” I inquired.

“Slow.”

“For me, as well,” I said, raising Bella’s wrist to my nose. I closed my eyes and inhaled the scent of her sweet, aromatic blood. *Mmm*. The fierce burning in my throat did not diminish the pleasure of it.

Charlie stomped into the hallway to remind us that we were not entitled to privacy as long as Bella was grounded. I let our hands drop and opened my eyes. Charlie would not appreciate my sensual enjoyment of his daughter, much less understand it.

“Good evening, Charlie,” I said. Politeness was the least I could offer Bella’s father after luring Bella away from home and endangering her life on multiple occasions.

Charlie rarely responded with more than a grunt. This time he folded his arms across his chest and waited for us to move into the public rooms of the house where he could monitor us more closely.

It was ironic that we were not allowed to be alone in Charlie’s house during the day when I spent nearly every night in Bella’s bed with her...chastely, of course. I watch her sleep and bear witness to her dreams. When they turn rough, as they sometimes do, I rub her back lightly until she calms.

Sometimes Bella talks from her dreams. I like having that direct line into her mind, especially when she calls my name and says “I love you.” On one recent occasion though, amidst a monologue of gibberish, a single word rang out clearly as a bell—“Jacob.”

Bella had become close to the werewolf Jacob Black during my time away—one of my many regrets—and since my return, he would not take her phone calls, which upset her a great deal. More than I would have preferred.

But Jacob Black was far from my mind on this evening. I had found some universities with late application deadlines and one which had responded positively to a call from my father regarding a sizeable donation to the Biological Sciences Building Fund. Geographically, it was perfect for us. Plus, I had been accepted there and I’d never attended Dartmouth before.

“I brought another set of applications,” I told Bella, showing her the thick envelope of papers in my hand. She groaned. Bella was not crazy about my enthusiasm for her attending college, especially when I brought it up in front of Charlie, who supported my efforts, even if he didn’t say so.

I smiled. "There are still a few open deadlines. And a few places willing to make exceptions." Bella rolled her eyes, guessing at why a college might make an exception for an unexceptional student. I laughed at her irritation.

"Shall we?" I inquired, cheerfully pulling Bella to the kitchen. She cleared the kitchen table and as she did so, I noticed a legal-sized envelope matching one I had just received in the mail. I smiled while I stacked the new applications in piles. Judging by its thickness, it looked like good news.

Charlie was hovering, something he often did to demonstrate how he was keeping his eye on us. In this case, he had something on his mind and was reluctant to address me directly. Eventually, he did, though.

"Speaking of college applications, Edward," Charlie began gruffly. "Bella and I were just talking about next year. Have you decided where you're going to school?"

"Not yet," I responded pleasantly. "I've received a few acceptance letters, but I'm still weighing my options."

"Where have you been accepted?"

He might as well have asked what he really wanted to know, which was, "Are you two planning to be together next year?" But I wasn't going to answer the question if he was too uncomfortable to ask it.

"Syracuse...Harvard...Dartmouth...and I just got accepted to the University of Alaska Southeast today." I turned away from Charlie just enough to wink privately at Bella. She smiled broadly.

"Harvard? Dartmouth?" Charlie was suddenly more impressed than he was bellicose. "Well that's pretty...that's something. Yeah, but the University of Alaska...you wouldn't really consider that when you could go Ivy League. I mean, your father would want you to..."

"Carlisle's always fine with whatever I choose to do," I said placidly. Because even if I went to Peninsula Community College, Carlisle would assume I could learn *something* and I could always go back to Harvard in twenty or thirty years. But Charlie couldn't know that.

"Hmph," he grunted, his typical response to me.

"Guess what, Edward?" Bella asked in an excited tone syrupy with feigned innocence.

"What, Bella?" I responded brightly.

"I just got *my* acceptance to the University of Alaska!"

"Congratulations!" I said with false surprise. "What a coincidence." That answered Charlie's unasked question and irritated him at the same time.

"Fine," he grumped after giving us his sheriff's interrogatory stare. "I'm going to go watch the game, Bella. Nine-thirty."

"Er, Dad?" Bella interrupted his exit. "Remember the very recent discussion about my freedom...?"

Hmm? I didn't know what Bella was referring to. I hadn't seen anything about that in her father's mind.

Charlie sighed in resignation. "Right. Okay, *ten*-thirty. You still have a curfew on school nights."

"Bella's no longer grounded?" I asked in surprise.

"Conditionally," Charlie growled. "What's it to you?"

I ignored his rudeness. "It's just good to know," I replied evenly. "Alice has been itching for a shopping partner, and I'm sure Bella would love to see some city lights." I smiled at Bella. She would *love* to get out of Forks and if she went on a road trip with Alice, I could go hunting without worrying about her safety.

"No!" Charlie bellowed, as if I'd suggested eloping to Vegas. His face turned the color of a beet.

"Dad! What's the problem?"

"I don't want you going to Seattle right now," he barked at Bella.

She was puzzled, as was I. "Huh?"

"I told you about that story in the paper—there's some kind of gang on a killing spree in Seattle and I want you to steer clear, okay?"

Bella was annoyed by his protectiveness and began to complain. "Dad, there's a better chance that I'll get struck by lightning than that the one day I'm in Seattle—"

"No, that's fine, Charlie," I concurred. I'd grabbed the newspaper from the table and was scanning the front page. The vampire attacks in Seattle had escalated—Bella *couldn't* go

there! "I didn't mean Seattle. I was thinking Portland, actually. I wouldn't have Bella in Seattle, either. Of course not."

"Fine," Charlie relented

It was getting worse...much worse! Jasper would be pushing for us to travel to Seattle. But how could we go to Seattle *and* keep Bella protected from the vampire Victoria when she returned to Forks?

Five more murders overnight, several people missing—

"What—" Bella began.

"Hold on," I cut in as I continued studying the article. I pushed the topmost college application toward her on the table, the one I considered most desirable. "I think you can recycle your essays for this one. Same questions."

Bella dutifully started on the form, while I considered our options. She would probably insist that the werewolves could protect her, but that was unacceptable. They were equally dangerous. Could we do the Seattle job without Alice? Or maybe the rest of the family could handle it without me.

Bella made a disgusted sound and shoved aside the application she was working on.

"Bella?"

"Be serious, Edward. *Dartmouth?*" Bella underestimated herself. I knew she could handle the coursework if she was admitted, but she didn't believe it. I placed the application in front of her again.

"I think you'd like New Hampshire," I told her. "There's a full complement of night courses for me, and the forests are very conveniently located for the avid hiker. Plentiful wildlife." I smiled crookedly at her. She exhaled heavily.

"I'll let you pay me back, if that makes you happy," I continued. "If you want, I can charge you interest."

"Like I could even get in without some enormous bribe. Or was that part of the loan? The new Cullen wing of the library?"

I smiled at how close her guess was to the truth.

"Ugh. Why are we having this discussion again?" she complained.

“Will you just fill out the application, please, Bella? It won’t hurt you to apply.”

I saw the stubborn look settle into her eyes and jawline.

“You know what?” she retorted. “I don’t think I will.”

Bella grabbed for the application, probably to tear it to shreds, but I was faster. Before her hand was halfway to the table, I folded the paper and slipped it into my pocket.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“I sign your name better than you do yourself. You’ve already written the essays,” I replied, smiling.

“You’re going way overboard with this, you know,” Bella whispered. “I really don’t need to apply anywhere else. I’ve been accepted in Alaska. I can almost afford the first semester’s tuition. It’s as good an alibi as any. There’s no need to throw away a bunch of money, no matter whose it is.”

“Bella—”

“Don’t start. I agree that I need to go through the motions for Charlie’s sake, but we both know I’m not going to be in any condition to go to school next fall. To be anywhere near people.”

“I thought the timing was still undecided,” I pointed out. “You might enjoy a semester or two of college. There are a lot of human experiences you’ve never had.”

“I’ll get to those afterward.”

“They won’t be *human* experiences afterward. You don’t get a second chance at humanity, Bella,” I reminded her. I didn’t seem to be getting through to her on this point.

“You’ve got to be reasonable about the timing, Edward. It’s just too dangerous to mess around with.” I saw fear flash across Bella’s face. No doubt she was thinking about Victoria’s attempts to kill her in revenge for the death of her mate, James. My family had destroyed him the previous spring when he decided to track and kill Bella for fun.

“There’s no danger yet,” I reassured her. Alice was watching Bella’s future for any sign of Victoria or the Volturi, though if we eliminated the threat in Seattle, we shouldn’t have to worry about the Volturi for years.

“Bella,” I whispered fervently. “There’s no hurry. I won’t let anyone hurt you. You can take all the time you need.”

"I want to hurry," she whispered back. "I want to be a monster, too." She smiled as if it were a joke.

I had to clench my teeth to keep from growling. "You have no idea what you're saying." I slapped the newspaper down on the table in front of her and pointed at the headline:

DEATH TOLL ON THE RISE, POLICE FEAR GANG ACTIVITY

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Monsters are not a joke, Bella," I answered curtly.

She looked at the paper again and then at me, shock on her face.

"A...a *vampire* is doing this?"

"You'd be surprised, Bella, at how often my kind are the source behind the horrors in your human news. It's easy to recognize, when you know what to look for. The information here indicates a newborn vampire is loose in Seattle. Bloodthirsty, wild, out of control. The way we all were."

Bella could no longer meet my eyes.

"We've been monitoring the situation for a few weeks. All the signs are there—the unlikely disappearances, always in the night, the poorly disposed—of corpses, the lack of other evidence... Yes, someone brand—new. And no one seems to be taking responsibility for the neophyte..." I sighed heavily. "Well, it's not our problem. We wouldn't even pay attention to the situation if it wasn't going on so close to home," I explained. I didn't want to frighten her, though it soon *would* be our problem if it didn't stop.

"Like I said, this happens all the time. The existence of monsters results in monstrous consequences."

Bella was gazing at the article where the names of the most recent victims were highlighted in boldface type.

"It won't be the same for me," Bella muttered. "You won't let me be like that. We'll live in Antarctica."

I snorted at the idea. "Penguins. Lovely."

"Alaska, then, as planned. Only somewhere much more remote than Juneau—somewhere with grizzlies galore."

“Better, there are polar bears, too. Very fierce,” I told her. “And the wolves get quite large.”

Bella gasped and her mouth fell open.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Then I realized what I’d suggested and how it would sound to her. I stiffened in displeasure. *Him* again. *Grrrr!* “Oh. Never mind the wolves, then, if the idea is offensive to you.” My voice sounded cold and distant.

“He was my best friend, Edward,” Bella protested. “Of course the idea offends me.”

“Please forgive my thoughtlessness,” I apologized, though I didn’t feel particularly sorry. “I shouldn’t have suggested that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bella murmured, staring down at her fists clenched on the table.

I had hurt her...again. Remorse overtook me immediately. I lifted her chin with one index finger.

“Sorry. Really,” I said softly, looking into her eyes.

“I know. I know it’s not the same thing. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. It’s just that...well, I was already thinking about Jacob before you came over.”

I fought back my instinctive anger.

“Charlie says Jake is having a hard time. He’s hurting right now, and...it’s my fault.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Bella.” I didn’t understand why she felt so overwhelmingly responsible for the dog.

Bella sighed. “I need to make it better, Edward. I owe him that. And it’s one of Charlie’s conditions, anyway—”

Charlie had said that lifting Bella’s punishment was “conditional.” *On what? Catering to the dog? Endangering her life?* I did not like it. Not one bit.

“You know it’s out of the question for you to be around a werewolf unprotected, Bella. And it would break the treaty if any of us cross over onto their land. Do you want us to start a war?”

“Of course not!”

“Then there’s really no point in discussing the matter further.” I let my hand drop from her chin and glanced around for a distraction. My eyes rested on the book Bella had been reading, probably for the fiftieth time.

“I’m glad Charlie has decided to let you out—you’re sadly in need of a visit to the bookstore. I can’t believe you’re reading *Wuthering Heights* again. Don’t you know it by heart yet?”

“Not all of us have photographic memories,” Bella retorted.

“Photographic memory or not, I don’t understand why you like it. The characters are ghastly people who ruin each others’ lives. I don’t know how Heathcliff and Cathy ended up being ranked with couples like Romeo and Juliet or Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. It isn’t a love story, it’s a hate story.”

“You have some serious issues with the classics.”

“Perhaps it’s because I’m not impressed by antiquity.” I smiled. “Honestly, though, why *do* you read it over and over?” I really wanted to know. She was such a mystery. I held her face between my hands and looked into her eyes. “What is it that appeals to you?”

“I’m not sure,” Bella said thoughtfully. “I think it’s something about the inevitability. How nothing can keep them apart—not her selfishness, or his evil, or even death, in the end....”

I thought about her explanation and found it interesting. Smiling crookedly I said, “I still think it would be a better story if either of them had one redeeming quality.”

“I think that may be the point. Their love *is* their only redeeming quality.”

“I hope you have better sense than that—to fall in love with someone so...malignant.”

“It’s a bit late for me to worry about who I fall in love with,” Bella answered, charming me. “But even without the warning, I seem to have managed fairly well.”

I chuckled. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Well, I hope you’re smart enough to stay away from someone so selfish. Catherine is really the source of all the trouble, not Heathcliff.”

“I’ll be on my guard,” I vowed, smiling.

Bella covered my hand with hers. “I need to see Jacob.”

I closed my eyes in frustration. “No.”

"It's truly not dangerous at all," Bella tried to convince me. "I used to spend all day in La Push with the whole lot of them, and nothing ever happened."

Bella shrank slightly at her own words and her heart accelerated— indicators of an untruth. She was hiding some dangerous incident from me. I nodded knowingly, eyebrows raised.

"Werewolves are unstable," I told her. "Sometimes, the people near them get hurt. Sometimes, they get killed."

She knew I spoke the truth. Her face gave her away.

"You don't know them," Bella whispered.

"I know them better than you think, Bella. I was here the last time."

"The last time?"

"We started crossing paths with the wolves about seventy years ago... We had just settled near Hoquiam. That was before Alice and Jasper were with us. We outnumbered them, but that wouldn't have stopped it from turning into a fight if not for Carlisle. He managed to convince Ephraim Black that coexisting was possible, and eventually we made the truce.

"We thought the line had died out with Ephraim," I went on. "That the genetic quirk which allowed the transmutation had been lost... Your bad luck seems to get more potent every day. Do you realize that your insatiable pull for all things deadly was strong enough to recover a pack of mutant canines from extinction? If we could bottle your luck, we'd have a weapon of mass destruction on our hands."

Bella looked at me in surprise.

"But I didn't bring them back. Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"My bad luck had nothing to do with it. The werewolves came back because the vampires did."

I froze. *What? What was she saying?*

"Jacob told me that your family being here set things in motion. I thought you would already know..."

That seemed highly suspicious to me. "Is *that* what they think?"

“Edward, look at the facts. Seventy years ago, you came here, and the werewolves showed up. You come back now, and the werewolves show up again. Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

Hmm...is that possible? Aloud, I said, “Carlisle will be interested in that theory.”

“Theory,” Bella mocked.

I looked out the window as I considered the idea. I suppose it was *possible*.

“Interesting, but not exactly relevant,” I told her. “The situation remains the same.”

Bella rose from her chair and approached me. I opened my arms to take her onto my lap where she snuggled into my chest, her head against my shoulder. *Mmm..a nice surprise*. I loved the heat of her body against mine—for as long as she could stand my chilly skin.

Then Bella started in. “Please just listen for a minute,” she pleaded. “This is so much more important than some whim to drop in on an old friend. Jacob is in *pain*.” She paused as if to absorb the word herself.

“I can’t *not* try to help him—I can’t give up on him now, when he needs me. Just because he’s not human all the time... Well, he was there for me when I was...not so human myself. You don’t know what it was like...”

My body instantly became rigid as she reminded me of the pain I had put *her* through. It had changed her in ways I was only beginning to discover. I knew she avoided bringing it up around me, which made me realize how bad it had been that she wanted to protect me from it. My fists clenched as if I could punish the culprit who had hurt her, but unfortunately, the culprit was me.

“If Jacob hadn’t helped me...,” Bella went on hesitantly, “I’m not sure what you would have come home to. I owe him better than this, Edward.”

I shut my eyes against the tidal wave of guilt and remorse that washed over me.

“I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you,” I muttered. “Not if I live a hundred thousand years.” Bella’s hand caressed my face. I waited until the pain ran its course and released its grip, then I opened my eyes.

“You were just trying to do the right thing,” Bella said, letting me off the hook for my catastrophic mistake. “And I’m sure it would have worked with anyone less mental than me. Besides, you’re here now. That’s the part that matters.”

"If I'd never left, you wouldn't feel the need to go risk your life to comfort a *dog*." Bella flinched at the insult. "I don't know how to phrase this properly," I continued unhappily, remembering the harsh reality of the last six months. "It's going to sound cruel, I suppose. But I've come too close to losing you in the past. I know what it feels like to think I have. I am not going to tolerate anything dangerous."

"You have to trust me on this. I'll be fine," Bella insisted.

Why couldn't she listen to reason? "Please, Bella," I begged in a whisper.

"Please what?"

"Please, for me. Please make a conscious effort to keep yourself safe. I'll do everything I can, but I would appreciate a little help."

"I'll work on it," she replied, though I knew she didn't intend her answer to apply to the dog.

"Do you really have any idea how important you are to me? Any concept at all of how much I love you?" I gazed into her deep chocolate eyes, so eloquent and yet so mysterious, then pulled her closer into my chest, settling my chin on her head. Bella kissed the base of my neck, a pleasure that made me wish for more.

"I know how much *I love you*," she whispered.

"You compare one small tree to the entire forest."

"Impossible."

I kissed the top of her head and sighed at her stubbornness.

"No werewolves."

"I'm not going along with that. I have to see Jacob."

"Then I'll have to stop you," I informed her. Both Alice and I would be watching.

"We'll see about that," Bella countered. "He's still my friend."

And you're still my one and only true love...my precious, fragile mortal who lends the only meaning to everything I am, was, or could ever hope to be.

2. Diversion

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to prom this weekend?” I asked Bella, half tongue-in-cheek. “Alice would love to dress you up. You could wear those sexy blue shoes with the ribbons tied around your calves—*both* of them this time.” I flashed her a crooked smile.

We were sitting in my car in the school parking lot before school. Alice had already headed to class, giving us a few minutes to ourselves, a rare commodity since we’d returned from Italy. Now that Bella was no longer grounded, we hoped to have much more unsupervised time when Bella was actually awake.

“Edward Cullen, you promise me right now that no one—not you, not Alice, *no one*—will kidnap me and force me to go to prom. I suffered through *that* human experience one time too many!”

“You didn’t enjoy dancing with me?”

“Well, that part wasn’t so bad, I guess, but I’m not doing it again!”

“You’re a graduating senior. This is your last chance,” I teased.

“No, no, no. Promise me!” She crossed her arms over her chest and waited for me to comply.

“I promise that I will not kidnap you and force you to go to prom against your will,” I stated formally.

Her eyes narrowed. “Cross your heart and hope to die?”

I cocked my head sideways and raised an eyebrow.

“No...strike that, I guess. Just promise you won’t let Alice do it either.”

“I promise that Alice will not kidnap you and force you to go to prom against your will,” I repeated. “Will that suffice?”

“I suppose so.”

“Okay, then, we better get to class,” I said as I left the driver’s side of the car and whisked around to open Bella’s door for her. She had learned to accept the courtesy, finally. I took her hand and we swung our arms between us as we walked to class.

I'd nearly finished Bella's college applications. She had lost interest in filling out new ones after receiving her acceptance from Alaska Southeast. I still thought she should have a choice, though, in case she changed her mind about going. I had nothing against Alaska, but I wasn't thrilled about the proximity to Tanya. She seemed completely incapable of leaving me alone, but perhaps that would change with Bella in the picture.

Actually, I'd perceived a growing anxiety in Bella as the school year came to a close and though I didn't know it was caused by her decision to have Carlisle change her right after graduation, I had my suspicions. As much as she downplayed the process, it probably frightened her, as it should. Becoming a vampire is worse than the worst torture imaginable. And once she was changed, she could never see her mother or father or friends again. I didn't think Bella had entirely come to terms with that.

At lunchtime, we sat at our usual table with Bella's friends. Though I liked Ben and especially Angela, I still wouldn't call them "our" friends. Normal people didn't make friends with the Cullens—that was Bella's particular dysfunction. Normal people always felt a certain amount of discomfort when in close proximity to us. I had to give Angela credit, though. For Bella's sake, she had made a great effort to befriend both Alice and me and hardly ever let her uneasiness show.

Ben was a different case. He is what modern kids would call a "nerd" or "geek." He wore thick glasses, was unfortunately short for a male, had abysmal taste in clothing, and remained mostly oblivious to anything outside of his particular areas of interest—math, computers, comic books, and martial arts movies. It baffled me why Angela had chosen him as her boyfriend; I couldn't see what she found particularly attractive about him. Still, I was proud of having helped get them together by "letting it slip" in front of Ben that I was thinking of dating Angela, but that *she* was interested in a "Ben." The threat of my potential interest in her awakened Ben's chivalry enough that he asked Angela out himself. And it had worked. I'd been able to give Angela something she really wanted in exchange for all the kind friendship she had shown Bella.

On this day, Angela's head was filled with anxiety. "Have you sent your announcements, yet?" she asked Bella when we sat down across from her, Ben, and Alice at lunch.

"No," Bella replied. "There's no point, really. Renee knows when I'm graduating. Who else is there?"

"How about you, Alice?" Angela inquired.

"All done," my sister answered, smiling. We didn't bother boring the Denali cousins with our repetitious graduation announcements.

“Lucky you,” Angela sighed. “My mother has a thousand cousins and she expects me to hand-address one to everybody. I’m going to get carpal tunnel. I can’t put it off any longer and I’m just dreading it.”

“I’ll help you,” Bella offered unexpectedly. “If you don’t mind my awful handwriting.”

I smiled at that. Charlie had given Bella a condition under which she would no longer be grounded: “balance.” By that, he meant that Bella must spend time with other friends besides me. He especially wanted her to spend time with Jacob Black—why, I wasn’t sure. He told Alice that Bella and Jacob had become close while I was away; he believed they would have become a couple if I hadn’t reappeared. It was plain to see that Charlie would prefer Jacob to be Bella’s boyfriend rather than me, but I tried not to let it bother me. As far as I was concerned, it would always be her choice, except...well...I was preventing her from seeing Jacob the werewolf. He and his wolf friends were just too dangerous.

It pleased me that Bella wanted to get together with Angela Weber—that would count as balance in Charlie’s ledger.

“That’s so nice of you,” Angela responded. “I’ll come over any time you want.”

“Actually, I’d rather go to your house if that’s okay—I’m sick of mine. Charlie ungrounded me last night,” Bella announced brightly.

“Really? I thought you said you were in for life.”

“I’m more surprised than you are. I was sure I would at least have finished high school before he set me free.”

“Well, this is great, Bella! We’ll have to go out to celebrate.”

“You have no idea how good that sounds,” Bella admitted.

“What should we do?” Alice inserted herself into the conversation. Already, she was imagining a shopping trip to London, Paris, and possibly Milan, though she was understandably reluctant to get too close to the Volturi’s home base in Italy. She might disregard that, though, for a chance to remedy what she considered to be Bella’s unfashionable wardrobe.

“Whatever you’re thinking, Alice, I doubt I’m that free,” Bella warned her.

“Free is free, right?” Alice reasoned.

“I’m sure I still have boundaries—like the continental U.S., for example.”

Angela and Ben laughed, but Bella knew Alice better than they did.

“So what are we doing tonight?” Alice pressed.

“Nothing. Look, let’s give it a couple of days to make sure he wasn’t joking. It’s a school night, anyway.”

“We’ll celebrate this weekend, then,” Alice decided.

“Sure,” Bella replied without enthusiasm. She thought she could brush Alice off when the time came. She ought to know better by now.

Everyone began making suggestions then...dinner or a movie in Port Angeles, playing pool (Angela) or video games (Ben) in Hoquiam, but Bella’s mind seemed to have wandered. What was she thinking now? Was she thinking about visiting the reservation, seeing Jacob Black?

Grrr...

My irritation was interrupted abruptly by the vision that had just appeared in Alice’s mind...*Victoria!* Victoria was coming to Forks!

“Alice? Alice!” Angela was waving a hand in front of my sister’s face, concerned about the empty stare and lifeless eyes that Alice displayed when she was watching a vision of the future play out in her head. The family was used to this habit of hers and understood what was going on, but it was alarming to others. That was one of the problems with making human friends—you couldn’t tell them anything.

Bella had noticed Alice too and appeared anxious, probably worried about what was so important in Alice’s mind that she would let her normally impeccable human façade slip. I laughed to draw attention to myself, while I kicked Alice under the table to jar her back to the present.

“Is it naptime already, Alice?” I joked.

Alice came back. “Sorry, I was daydreaming, I guess.” Awkwardness averted. Perhaps we should promote the story that Alice has epilepsy, though I could see someone calling 9–1–1 sometime and creating a whole new set of problems.

“Daydreaming’s better than facing two more hours of school,” Ben complained.

Alice picked up the thread and began chattering away, something she was very skilled at. She was making it impossible for Bella to ask her privately about the vision. At the same time, she was communicating the details of it to me. I became engrossed in playing with a lock of Bella’s hair while I read my sister’s thoughts.

She's coming this weekend, Edward, alone, Saturday or possibly Friday. Do you want Bella to know?

Alice glanced in my direction and I caught her eye, moving my own eyes to the left and right slightly, signaling “no.” Bella shouldn’t have to be afraid. Either Alice or I would take her somewhere out of harm’s way while our family dealt with Victoria. I wanted to be the one to confront Victoria, but I also wanted Bella by my side if there was a chance she might be in danger.

Lunch period ended and as we walked to class, I began chatting with Ben about our calculus assignment so Bella couldn’t press me to reveal Alice’s vision. It was easy to get Ben talking just by asking him a question about one of his favorite topics.

I managed the same trick between the rest of our classes, conversing with someone else to prevent Bella from asking the question that was in her eyes. When our last class ended, I caught up to Mike Newton and began making small talk, tagging along with him to the parking lot.

“Hope my car starts,” he commented gloomily.

“What’s wrong? Do you need a jump?”

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t start this morning, but I just replaced the battery.”

Mike was suspicious of my sudden friendliness. I’d never made any attempt to get along with him since our junior year when he had a crush on Bella. Quite the opposite.

“Perhaps it’s the cables?” I suggested. Removing battery cables was Charlie’s method for disabling Bella’s truck when he thought she planned to sneak out. I happened to know an easier way.

“Maybe. I really don’t know anything about cars,” Mike said. “I need to have someone look at it, but I can’t afford to take it to Dowling’s.”

“I know a few things,” I told him. “I could take a look, if you like. Just let me drop Alice and Bella at home.”

Mike looked both surprised and mistrustful. “Er... thanks,” he mumbled. “But I have to get to work. Maybe some other time.”

“Absolutely,” I promised.

“See ya,” Mike said as he got into his car. I waited to see if it would start. He seemed relieved when it did.

“What was that about?” Bella asked suspiciously.

“Just being helpful,” I replied.

I wasn't *only* trying to avoid her questions, I told myself. It would be easier for Bella to spend time with her other friends if she knew I had plans too and wasn't sitting around waiting for her.

I still didn't know what I was going to say when she asked me about Alice's vision, but fortunately, Alice was prepared. She was waiting for us in the Volvo nearby and when we joined her, initiated a continuous commentary on nothing. Bella couldn't hope to compete.

“You're really not that good a mechanic, Edward. Maybe you should have Rosalie take a look at it tonight, just so you look good if Mike decides to let you help, you know. Not that it wouldn't be fun to watch his face if Rosalie showed up to help. But since Rosalie is supposed to be across the country attending college, I guess that's not the best idea. Too bad. Though I suppose, for Mike's car, you'll do. It's only within the finer tunings of a good Italian sports car that you're out of your depth. And speaking of Italy and sports cars that I stole there, you still owe me a yellow Porsche. I don't know that I want to wait for Christmas....”

We'd reached the entrance to our long driveway through the forest and I stopped the car to drop Alice off. I'd avoided Bella's questions for as long as I could and now I needed something to tell her when she asked about Alice's lunchtime vision. My sister was thinking the same thing.

Tell her that I saw Jasper running off somewhere, the Southwest. I did see that, just not recently, Alice tossed out silently as she got out of the car.

“See you later,” I said, nodding slightly at her. I would take her suggestion.

Surprisingly, Bella remained quiet all the way back to her house, not asking the question I assumed had been on her mind all afternoon. Had I succeeded in distracting her?

“Light homework load tonight,” I said, making small talk.

“Mmm.”

“Do you suppose I'm allowed inside again?”

“Charlie didn’t throw a fit when you picked me up for school,” Bella replied. That *was* a good sign, but Alice had been waiting with me in the car and she’d waved at Charlie when he looked out the window. He couldn’t get mad at Alice.

Regardless, it was worth risking Charlie’s wrath to be with Bella, so I accompanied her to her room. Her father wouldn’t be home for at least an hour anyway. Bella headed for the computer on her desk and I lay down on her bed and looked out the window.

I had to think of a way to coax Bella out of town over the weekend. Luckily, the answer came to me immediately—her mom! My parents had given Bella tickets to visit Florida last year. I’d hidden them under the floorboards when my family left town, but had retrieved them since then. They were somewhere in the bedroom.

Bella seemed tense. Sitting at her computer, she drummed her fingers manically on the desktop as she waited for her ancient machine to load its outdated operating system. I slipped up behind her and placed my hand over hers to quiet it.

“Are we a little impatient today?” I said softly into her ear.

When she turned to respond, she found my face within inches of hers. Her lower jaw dropped in surprise and I covered her open mouth with my own, tasting her breath on my tongue. *Mmm...* Impulsively, I lifted her from her chair and drew her close. My right hand wound itself through her thick, soft hair and my left dropped down her back, holding her firmly to me. Our lips moved together in an intense *pas de deux*, touching and parting and touching again.

I felt Bella’s mounting excitement and for once, did not resist as she clung to my neck and pulled herself against me until each of her curves nestled perfectly into my own. My breath quickened with hers as a surge of longing rushed through my body and settled into my lower torso, powerful and urgent. *Ahhh...* I had to resist the temptation to scoop her round bottom into my hand and pull that part of her even tighter against me.

Then Bella caught me by surprise...with the tip of her tongue, she drew a delicate line across the width of my lower lip, tasting me in the most provocative way. *Ahhh...* I yearned to taste her too, but the potent cravings in my body signaled danger. It would be too, too easy to crush her bones if I allowed myself to follow through on any of the desires that were flooding through me now.

With great effort and deep regret, I took Bella’s face in my hands and gently pushed her lips away from mine, then held her still. I could smell the scent of her blood pumping frantically through her veins, the strawberry aroma of her hair, and another of her human smells that was

becoming quite familiar...sexual arousal. The musky lavender essence combined perfectly with the sweet freesia scent of her blood and drew me to her like a moth to a flame.

The lure of the physical was so perplexing. What does one do with such powerful urges when it is impossible ever to act on them? If I got my way and Bella remained human, I could never experience her in that way. It would be far too dangerous, far too easy to break her fragile body. She had never seemed to acknowledge these crucial limits, though, never held back anything when I kissed her, only pushed for more and more physical contact until I was forced to stop it. My family often marveled at my self-control and sometimes the word “gifted” was used, but I did not feel in any way gifted with self-restraint. Resisting Bella’s allure was hard work that got more difficult all the time. No longer was it just her blood that I had to resist, but also her musky, sensuous, willing body.

Cradling Bella’s face in my hands, I chuckled at her eagerness and my own weakness, mesmerized as I was by her countless charms. My luscious, lovely darling.

“Ah, Bella.” I sighed heavily, releasing some of the excitement she had stirred in me.

“I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not,” she stated impudently, looking into my eyes.

“And I should feel sorry that you’re not sorry, but I don’t. Maybe I should go sit on the bed.” My voice was low and rough.

“If you think that’s necessary...” Bella teased.

I did, indeed. I smiled crookedly as I released her grip around my neck and pushed her hips away gently. Sighing, I returned to the bed and settled back to contemplate.

Bella returned to her computer and email from her mother.

“Tell Renee I said hello.”

“Sure thing.”

Why had I done that—let myself get so carried away with that kiss? If asked, I might have said that I was softening Bella up so she’d say yes to the Florida trip. Or that I was making up for not telling her about Victoria’s return (at least until Victoria was gone for good). Perhaps when it came right down to it, I was no different than any human male and was simply gratifying my own, newly discovered desires. Whatever the reason, I knew I was offering up a taste of something she couldn’t have, making silent promises that I could not fulfill. It was very wrong of me and unfair to Bella. Unless...

If Bella agreed to marry me and held me to my part of our bargain, everything would change. If we were *both* vampires, then we *could* make love and *wouldn't that be glorious?*

Perhaps *that* thought had been hiding somewhere in the back of my mind and what I was really doing was trying to tempt her into marrying me—taking advantage of her irrepressible human hormones to convince her to be my wife. If so, perhaps that was wrong too. I could no longer see right and wrong as clearly as I used to.

I decided to put aside that troubling train of thought for the time being and returned my attention to Bella's room where an oddly shaped object on the floor of her closet caught my eye. It was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't identify it from a distance. I got up, went to the closet, and bent down to extract it from a pile of clothes and a mountain of dust balls. It was Bella's truck stereo, the one that my siblings had given her for her birthday and that Emmett had installed so Bella couldn't return it. Their gift was in sad shape. Wires had been ripped from the casing, insulation stripped off, and the backplate was bent and hanging loose. It looked like a tool, maybe a screwdriver, had been used to pry off the faceplate and gouge the sides of the box. It was beyond repair.

"What did you *do* to this?" I inquired, though I could already visualize the process of destruction.

"It didn't want to come out of the dashboard."

"So you felt the need to torture it?"

"You know how I am with tools. No pain was inflicted intentionally."

"You killed it," I moaned with high drama.

Bella remained untroubled. "Oh, well."

"It would hurt their feelings if they saw this," I told her. "I guess it's a good thing that you've been on house arrest. I'll have to get another one in place before they notice."

"Thanks, but I don't need a fancy stereo."

"It's not for your sake that I'm going to replace it."

Bella sighed.

She had never accepted gifts graciously, but I bet she had yanked out the stereo in a fit of rage after we abandoned her. I couldn't blame her. I'd promised that her life would be as if

we'd never been there, but that was an impossible promise to keep. Unfortunately, we're not like fictional vampires who can hypnotize humans and erase their memories. What a joke!

"You didn't get much good out of your birthday presents last year," I noted. I'd removed the envelope containing Bella's airplane tickets from a book on her desk, and was fanning myself with it conspicuously. She didn't seem to recognize it. Perhaps she'd erased the whole birthday episode from her own memory.

"Do you realize these are about to expire?" I asked, holding out the envelope so she could see what it was.

Bella's voice went flat. "No. I'd forgotten all about them, actually."

"Well, we still have a little time. You've been liberated...and we have no plans this weekend, as you refuse to go to the prom with me," I joked. "Why not celebrate your freedom this way?" I gave her an eager look.

Bella was startled. "By going to Florida?"

"You did say something about the continental U.S. being allowable."

She didn't trust me. I could see that she was trying to figure out my "angle."

"Well?" I pressed. "Are we going to see Renee or not?"

"Charlie will never allow it," Bella said, avoiding the question of whether *she* wanted to go.

"Charlie can't keep you from visiting your mother. She still has primary custody."

"Nobody has custody of me. I'm an adult."

I was happy either way and flashed a victorious smile. "Exactly."

Bella seemed to give the idea serious thought. I could almost see her mind waver back and forth. I knew she'd love to see her mother, but she might not be willing to argue with her father about it. He would *not* be happy to find out that one of the tickets was for me.

Finally, Bella sighed. "Not this weekend."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to fight with Charlie. Not so soon after he's forgiven me." Just as I suspected.

"I think this weekend is perfect," I grumbled.

"Another time."

How to convince her? Hmm, maybe "poor me."

"You aren't the only one who's been trapped in this house, you know," I complained, frowning.

"You can go anywhere you want," Bella rejoined.

"The outside world holds no interest for me without you."

Bella rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious," I said and I was, completely. She still didn't grasp the "vampires-bond-for-life" thing.

"Let's take the outside world slowly, all right? For example, we could start with a movie in Port Angeles..."

I groaned. "Never mind. We'll talk about it later." Or rather, I'd talk to Charlie about it later. After all, it was a matter of life and death, even if neither he nor Bella could know that.

"There's nothing left to talk about."

I gave her a "whatever" shrug.

"Okay, then, new subject," Bella announced. "What did Alice see today at lunch?"

So, my magic kiss hadn't wiped it from her mind. Too bad. I was hoping not to have to use the lie, even if it wasn't entirely a lie.

"She's been seeing Jasper in a strange place, somewhere in the Southwest, she thinks, near his former...family. But he has no conscious intentions to go back." I cringed, remembering my recent time near Jasper's "family." "It's got her worried."

"Oh. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't realize you'd noticed," I lied. "It's probably nothing important, in any case." Surprisingly, Bella seemed satisfied with my answer.

She suggested we go downstairs before Charlie came home. She didn't want him to find us hanging out in her bedroom. We all misrepresent or prevaricate sometimes, don't we?

I finished my homework at the kitchen table in no time and tried not to bother Bella while she worked on her calculus. After a short time, she rose.

“Time to fix dinner.”

I got up to help, though the chunks of beef she was defrosting in the microwave disgusted me...and the smell of the sour cream. Ugh! How could humans eat this stuff? I gathered that the dish was one of Charlie’s favorites, though. Bella was buttering him up for something—might as well be the trip to Florida.

When Charlie arrived, I excused myself to the living room to watch the TV news while Bella and her father ate dinner. There was nothing new about the Seattle killings.

“That was great, Bells,” Charlie remarked from the kitchen. He was in a good mood for some reason. He hadn’t even groused at me for being there when he got home.

“I’m glad you liked it. How was work?”

“Sort of slow. Well, dead slow really. Mark and I played cards for a good part of the afternoon. I won, nineteen hands to seven. And then I was on the phone with Billy for a while.”

“How is he?”

“Good, good. His joints are bothering him a little.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

“Yeah. He invited us down to visit this weekend. He was thinking of having the Clearwaters and the Uleys over too. Sort of a playoff party...”

“Huh,” was all Bella said. She would want to attend—all the more reason for us to go to Florida.

When Bella started running water in the sink, I hurried to the kitchen to dry the dishes and disrupt the conversation about La Push. When I came into the room, Charlie got up to leave.

“Charlie,” I said.

“Yeah?” he replied, turning around.

“Did Bella ever tell you that my parents gave her airplane tickets on her last birthday, so that she could visit Renee?”

Bella was so stunned that she dropped the soapy plate in her hands and we all watched it bounce off the floor and spray suds everywhere.

“Bella?”

“Yeah, they did,” Bella admitted without looking at her dad.

Charlie regarded me suspiciously. “No, she never mentioned it.”

“Hmm.”

“Was there a reason you brought it up?”

“They’re about to expire. I think it might hurt Esme’s feelings if Bella doesn’t use her gift. Not that she’d say anything.”

Bella was shaken and probably annoyed at my audacity, but Charlie didn’t react adversely. Nobody who met Esme could *ever* wish to hurt her feelings.

“It’s probably a good idea for you to visit your mom, Bella. She’d love that. I’m surprised you didn’t say anything about this, though.”

“I forgot.”

He was skeptical. “You forgot that someone gave you plane tickets?”

“Mmm.” Bella was so uncomfortable she looked like she wanted to disappear.

“I noticed that you said they’re about to expire, Edward. How many tickets did your parents give her?” It was hard to sneak anything past Charlie, but he’d already agreed in theory—it would be awkward for him to back out now.

“Just one for her...and one for me,” I admitted. Let the chips fall where they may. Bella dropped another plate, this time into the sink. She was shaking with anxiety. Luckily, I wasn’t.

Goddammit! I heard the curse clearly in Charlie’s mind and saw images of Bella and myself doing things with one another that we’d never actually done. How he thought we were going to have sex on an airplane or in Renee’s presence, I wasn’t sure. And if we’d wanted to take the car and park somewhere alone...well...we could have done that long ago. My guess was that Charlie, and perhaps most fathers, weren’t entirely rational about their daughters growing up.

“That’s out of the question!” Charlie roared, omitting the curse, but not the fury.

“Why?” I asked innocently. I couldn’t *possibly* be thinking what Charlie was thinking! I wanted to smile, but restrained myself. “You just said it was a good idea for her to see her mother,” I pointed out.

It was clear to Charlie that my parents trusted me much further than he trusted either me or Bella. But Carlisle and Esme were much younger, of course. *Ha ha*. Charlie ignored me, which probably was best for everyone involved.

“You’re not going anywhere with him, young lady!” he shouted, emphasizing each word with a stab of his finger.

Bella whipped around to glare at him, provoked into anger.

“I’m not a child, Dad. And I’m not grounded anymore, remember?”

“Oh yes, you are. Starting now.”

“For what?!”

“Because I said so.”

“Do I need to remind you that I’m a legal adult, Charlie?” I’d never heard Bella call her father “Charlie” to his face before.

“This is my house—you follow my rules!”

That pushed Bella over the edge. “If that’s how you want it. Do you want me to move out tonight? Or can I have a few days to pack?”

Charlie’s heart was pounding like a jackhammer and his blood pressure had shot through the roof, if the tempting scarlet color in his face and neck was any indication. It was obvious where Bella got that particularly appealing trait, though her skin was less tanned and more transparent.

Bella continued with a less hostile tone. “I’ll do my time without complaining when I’ve done something wrong, Dad, but I’m not going to put up with your prejudices.”

Charlie tried for a comeback, but was too mad to speak.

“Now, I know that you know that I have every right to see Mom for the weekend. You can’t honestly tell me you’d object to the plan if I was going with Alice or Angela.”

“Girls,” Charlie grunted.

“Would it bother you if I took Jacob?”

I snapped my teeth together to stifle the snarl.

Charlie, on the other hand became calmer.

“Yes,” he claimed after a moment’s thought. “That would bother me.”

Bella didn’t buy it and I didn’t either.

“You’re a rotten liar, Dad.”

“Bella—”

“It’s not like I’m headed off to Vegas to be a showgirl or anything. I’m going to see Mom. She’s just as much my parental authority as you are.”

Charlie’s expression was eloquent of incredulity.

“Are you implying something about Mom’s ability to look after me?”

He was. He was implying, among other things, that Renee wouldn’t require us to “sleep” in separate bedrooms at her house. And so I would lie fully clothed with Bella all night while she slept, same as always.

“You’d better hope I don’t mention this to her,” Bella warned. I wasn’t sure why that would be a threat to Charlie, but he seemed threatened.

“You’d better not,” he replied. “I’m not happy about this, Bella.”

“There’s no reason for you to be upset.”

Then Charlie *rolled his eyes*. I almost laughed again.

“So my homework is done, your dinner is done, the dishes are done, and I’m not grounded. I’m going out. I’ll be back before ten–thirty.” Bella was fearlessly taking control now.

“Where are you going?” he barked, but there was no bite in it.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I’ll keep it within a ten–mile radius, though. Okay?”

Charlie stomped out.

“We’re going out?” I was seriously impressed with Bella’s moxie. She was not happy with mine, however.

She glared. “Yes. I think I’d like to speak to you *alone*.”

Sounded good to me. I was pleased with myself for successfully orchestrating the weekend. We were going to Florida! Esme would be pleased. Actually, everybody would be pleased to get Bella out of harm's way. I was additionally glad to keep her away from the party on the reservation, though if Jacob Black had any say about it, the wolves wouldn't stand on the sidelines when Victoria showed up. It was just as well that I wouldn't be there to get in a fight with Jacob Black.

"What was *that*?" Bella shot at me as soon as we were in my car.

"I know you want to see your mother, Bella—you've been talking about her in your sleep. Worrying actually." She had been. She'd awakened herself several times in the last few nights, saying things like, "Too high, Mom," "You forgot," and "Renee!" I had no idea what she was babbling about.

"I have?"

I nodded. "But, clearly, you were too much of a coward to deal with Charlie, so I interceded on your behalf."

"Interceded? You threw me to the sharks!"

Did I just roll my eyes? What an annoying habit! "I don't think you were in any danger."

"I told you I didn't want to fight with Charlie."

"Nobody said that you had to."

"I can't help myself when he gets all bossy like that—my natural teenage instincts overpower me."

I chuckled. "Well, that's not my fault."

It was uncanny how a *teenager* could be cognizant of her own teenage inclinations. It made me wonder sometimes if Bella had ever been a teenager. Somehow, I didn't think so.

Bella burst my bubble with her next question.

"Does this sudden urge to see Florida have anything to do with the party at Billy's place?"

I clenched my teeth. "Nothing at all. It wouldn't matter if you were here or on the other side of the world, you still wouldn't be going."

I could feel Bella's instinctive reaction to *that* too. She was just so *stubborn*. I sighed and gentled my voice. "So what do you want to do tonight?"

"Can we go to your house? I haven't seen Esme in so long."

"She'll like that. Especially when she hears what we're doing this weekend."

I grinned and Bella groaned.

3. Freedom

Esme *was* happy to see Bella. She hadn't seen her since we returned from Italy.

"Oh, Bella, dear! How *are* you?" my mother inquired, meeting us at the kitchen door and wrapping her arms gently around Bella to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek. My father joined us from upstairs.

"I'm great, Esme. Charlie just un-grounded me—much sooner than expected."

"That's marvelous," my mother gushed. "He doesn't know how absolutely brave and heroic you were in going to Italy! We still thank you in our hearts every day that you've given us back our Edward!" Esme touched my cheek with her palm and I smiled at her. Bella's face had gone rose-colored from the compliment and she was looking down at her shoes.

"Guess what?" I interjected to give Bella time to recover. "Bella and I are using your plane tickets to Florida this weekend!" I could see by their smiles that they already knew. Alice, of course.

"Wonderful," my father replied. "Please say 'hello' to Renee for us."

Carlisle had met Bella's mother the spring before in a hospital in Phoenix. Both Renee and Charlie had been exceedingly grateful to my father for his emergency care of Bella after she "fell through a hotel window." I wasn't sure whether Charlie's distaste for me had colored his opinion of Carlisle since then. Probably not, though. He really was a hero.

Alice thinks Victoria might arrive on Friday. You'll want to leave before that, he told me silently.

I nodded to him while Bella was still looking at her feet.

"Hi guys!" Alice stuck her head into the kitchen. "Come play chess with us!"

"Sure, Alice," I said. "If it's okay with Bella."

"I'm pretty bad at it, but I don't mind getting beat," Bella said, looking up with a grin.

We followed Alice into the living room where Jasper had the chess board set up and ready to go under the staircase.

"You play first," Bella said to me.

“All right. Alice?”

“Let’s do it!”

Alice and my chess games rarely lasted for more than a few minutes. Since neither of us could help ourselves and—true to vampire nature—we both liked to win, we exploited all of the assets we had at our disposal. Alice predicted my moves and I read in her mind how she would respond until we’d played most of the game in our heads. Usually, we moved only a couple of pieces before the outcome was fully determined. I suppose we *could* follow through and physically play the whole game. Maybe I could change my mind on a move at the last second and trick Alice into screwing up. It hadn’t worked so far, though.

Alice tipped over her King. “You win,” she conceded. We had each moved one pawn. Bella started snickering at us.

“You find that funny, eh?” I asked her.

“It’s hilarious! Do you two always just sit there and stare at the board for three minutes until one of you surrenders?”

“Yes,” Alice trilled.

“Pretty much,” I confirmed.

“That’s the funniest thing I ever saw!” Bella cackled some more. Her amusement made me chuckle too.

She didn’t think it was quite so funny when Jasper beat her in five moves. He knew more strategies and counterstrategies than anyone I’d ever met, but he wouldn’t play with Alice or me. He found our special skills too irritating, so mostly he played with Carlisle, the only one of us who could give him a challenge. Jasper is extremely good at games of strategy, but he prefers games with an element of chance, such as poker or blackjack. He’s by far the best gambler in the family based on sheer skill. Alice and I can beat him, but not fairly.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Bella,” Jasper apologized like the Southern gentleman he is. “That was a pretty short game. Would you like to play another?” Bella tried again and Jasper beat her in seven moves. He was incapable of throwing a game.

“We should do this more often,” he told Bella. “I could turn you into a serious player. You’ve got the smarts.”

“Thanks, Jasper. I might take you up on that.” None of us mentioned the incident with Jasper on Bella’s last birthday. It was too painful. Jasper was now being careful to hunt more frequently than he used to.

We left early because Bella didn’t want to challenge Charlie any further that night. When I pulled the car to his curb at ten o’clock, I heard Charlie’s thoughts blaring from inside the house and I almost laughed out loud. The images he had conjured earlier of Bella and I with our clothes half off had stuck with him and he’d been fretting over his obligations as a modern father while we were gone. He was waiting to talk to his daughter.

“You’d better not come inside,” Bella warned. “It will only make things worse.”

“His thoughts are relatively calm,” I told her, trying not to smile. I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

“I’ll see you later,” Bella said miserably. She thought Charlie was going to yell at her some more, but I knew that he wasn’t. I laughed and kissed her forehead in farewell.

“I’ll be back when Charlie’s snoring.”

I considered hanging around to listen to the “birds & the bees” talk Charlie had planned, but since it was meant to be private, I decided to try not to listen. As I drove away, though, I realized that his thoughts were so agitated and so personal to me that they were hard to block. If I didn’t concentrate, I would probably hear his thoughts as far away as my own home. I headed that way and, in fact, could find nothing to distract my mind enough to avoid them. The conversation was too intriguing to ignore anyway.

“Okay, Bella. Here’s the thing,” Charlie began. He was trying hard to erase the pictures in his head of me molesting his daughter, but the more he tried, the more the images stuck and also the more elaborate they became. My grin turned into a laugh.

“You and Edward seem pretty serious, and there are some things that you need to be careful about. I know you’re an adult now, but you’re still young, Bella, and there are a lot of important things you need to know when you...well, when you’re physically involved with—”

Charlie wasn’t looking at Bella, so I couldn’t see her reaction, but her words spoke volumes.

“Oh, please, please no! Please tell me you are not trying to have a sex talk with me, Charlie.”

“I am your father. I have responsibilities,” he replied gruffly. “Remember, I’m just as embarrassed as you are.”

"I don't think that's humanly possible. Anyway, Mom beat you to the punch about ten years ago. You're off the hook."

"Ten years ago you didn't have a boyfriend." That last word seemed to stick in his craw. He cleared his throat uneasily.

"I don't think the essentials have changed that much," Bella muttered. I could see her red blush through Charlie's eyes. His face must be nearly as red.

"Just tell me that you two are being responsible," Charlie begged, suddenly losing his will to say the words "birth control" and "venereal disease" aloud.

I was getting beyond actual hearing range, but I didn't miss a word since I could read Charlie's mind clearly when his thoughts involved me. Which they certainly did!

"Don't worry about it, Dad, it's not like that." I could imagine Bella standing with her arms crossed defensively and staring a hole through the floor as she spoke.

"Not that I don't trust you, Bella, but I know you don't want to tell me anything about this, and you know I don't really want to hear it. I will try to be open-minded, though. I know the times have changed."

About now, Bella would be aching to put her fingers in her ears and sing "La, la, la," at the top of her lungs. Instead, she issued a short laugh, but the sound came across as ironic, possibly even a little caustic.

"Maybe the times have, but Edward is very old-fashioned. You have nothing to worry about." Charlie accepted that about as readily as he did the lies of the petty criminals he interrogated at the station.

"Sure he is," he rejoined.

"Ugh!" Bella groaned. I wished Charlie would look at her face so I could see her blazing red cheeks. *"I really wish you were not forcing me to say this out loud, Dad. Really. But...I am a...virgin, and I have no immediate plans to change that status."*

Charlie flinched inwardly at the "V-word," but then suddenly became calm. He knew Bella would not say something so embarrassing if it wasn't true. Charlie adjusted his image of me in his mind.

Have I misjudged him? The Cullen kids always have been exceptionally polite and well-mannered. Wait...what does she mean by "old-fashioned?" No sex before marriage? Surely not.

Then Charlie's thoughts turned darker when he realized there were other things Bella could be doing that *technically* wouldn't compromise her virginity. He tried to push those pictures out of his mind too, with limited success. But he was in luck. I wouldn't be splitting hairs about what did or did not constitute sex like certain American ex-Presidents. Given my potential for *killing* my lover, it was all equally dangerous and out-of-bounds.

Bella was begging Charlie to end their little chat, but he hadn't finished with her yet. His thoughts became vague to me, though, and I assumed that was either because they no longer involved me or because they carried less emotion. I caught a few key words—"balance," "Angela," "Jake"—and could fill in the gaps pretty easily. Charlie must be urging Bella to spend time with her other friends, including Jacob.

Grrr... I wished so much that I could explain to Charlie *exactly* what he was asking his very mortal and breakable daughter to do. Unfortunately, I couldn't say a word about the Quileute without breaking our treaty with them.

A few minutes later my cell phone vibrated in my pocket.

"Alice?"

"Edward, where are you?"

"Almost home."

"You have to get back to Bella's *right now!* I see her going to the reservation, but then she *disappears*. I can't see if she even makes it home, much less if she makes it home safely..."

I snapped the phone shut. *Charlie!* A mean growl ripped through my chest, shaking the car with bass-toned fury. I punched the gas pedal for the last quarter mile home. It would be faster to run back to Bella's. The rear tires of the Volvo skidded around the corner as I turned the car into my family's driveway and slammed it to a stop. Everyone would hear that from the house.

I didn't know how many minutes I had before Bella climbed into her truck and drove to her potential doom. If I got there in time, I would do as Charlie did and disable the old wreck. That would be the best way to handle the situation. She'd be furious, but that couldn't be helped. As long as she was determined to do risky things, I'd be just as determined to prevent her.

I jumped from my car and sprinted back to town, arriving at Charlie's in under four minutes. Silently, I opened the hood of Bella's truck, pulled off the distributor cap, and plucked

out the rotor inside. Without it, the truck would not start. Thank goodness for vintage engines. That trick didn't apply to modern, fuel-injected ones.

"Stay as long as you like," I heard Charlie tell Bella in the living room.

She has no curfew when it comes to Jacob Black! Charlie was not helping matters at all! Oddly enough, he didn't conjure up unsavory images of Jacob with Bella, and I wondered why not. I didn't know Jacob Black very well, but I thought he was unlikely to have my particular scruples. And unlike me, *he* was capable both of impregnating Charlie's daughter *and* giving her a venereal disease—at least I assumed so. Charlie had things all wrong, though I had to admit that Jacob Black probably would never drain Bella of her blood. I grimaced.

Bella emerged from the front door of the house, pulled it shut behind her, and rushed recklessly to her truck, nearly stumbling twice on the way. My arms twitched reflexively to catch her. She yanked open the door of her truck, hopped in, and turned the key.

Click, click, click...

Bella grasped the steering wheel with both hands and stared straight ahead, the gears in her mind turning, turning, turning...

"Gah!" she exclaimed when she suddenly realized I was sitting on the passenger side of the truck. I spun the detached rotor in my palm, watching it turn round and round, but she refused to look at me.

"Alice called," I said softly. "She got nervous when your future rather abruptly disappeared five minutes ago."

Bella turned to me with wide, questioning eyes.

"Because she can't see the wolves, you know. Had you forgotten that?" I kept my voice soft and gentle. I had no desire to upset her, but this was how it had to be. "When you decide to mingle your fate with theirs, you disappear, too. You couldn't know that part, I realize that. But can you understand why that might make me a little...anxious? Alice saw you disappear, and she couldn't even tell if you'd come home or not. Your future got lost, just like theirs."

"We're not sure why this is. Some natural defense they're born with?" I mused, watching the crucial metal object spin in my fingers. "That doesn't seem entirely likely, since I haven't had any trouble reading their thoughts. The Blacks' at least. Carlisle theorizes that it's because their lives are so ruled by their transformations. It's more an involuntary reaction than a decision. Utterly unpredictable, and it changes everything about them. In that instant when

they shift from one form to the other, they don't really even exist. The future can't hold them...."

Bella stared through the windshield, her mouth in a hard line. I could feel her fury, but she said nothing. I waited...still nothing.

"I'll put your car back together in time for school, in case you'd like to drive yourself," I promised. Without looking at me, Bella removed her keys from the ignition, opened her door, and climbed out of the truck.

"Shut your window if you want me to stay away tonight. I'll understand," I whispered before she slammed the truck door as hard as she could.

With a stab of sadness, I wondered whether she would refuse to see me. Even if she broke up with me, though, I couldn't do anything differently. I would still have to prevent her from visiting the werewolves. I would never allow any harm to come to her if I could help it. And the werewolves were harm personified!

I stayed where I was and listened to the front door slam, followed by a short exchange between Bella and Charlie. After a brief time, the light in Bella's room came on and I saw my love come to the window. Could she see me here in the darkness? Probably not—if she even looked. She grasped the aluminum window frame and slammed it closed with a clatter. The old single pane of glass shook in its frame and sorrow flooded through me. I hoped she would forgive me, but it was her *life* at stake!

I sat motionless and pondered the situation for a moment. Then much to my surprise and great delight, Bella reappeared at the window and yanked it all the way open! She *did* forgive me! How I loved her...!

It was another hour before Charlie's light went out and a few minutes more before I heard his deep, rumbling snore. I leaped to Bella's window and slipped through, overjoyed that she still wanted me there. Soundlessly, I lay down beside her and stroked her hair. Usually, even in her sleep, she would roll toward me and put her arms around my neck and her head on my chest. Not tonight, though. I could tell by her breathing that she was still awake, but she kept her back to me and did not speak. I began to sing softly. After a time, she scooted backwards and snuggled against me, her back against my front like two spoons in a drawer, and fell asleep without a word.

Charlie would have been glad to know that Bella and I made it all the way to Jacksonville without my molesting his daughter once! She did molest me a couple of times, though, once in the SeaTac parking garage and once in our first-class airplane seats. I allowed it—to a point.

Renee met us at the airport in Jacksonville on Thursday night with a certain amount of squealing and hugging directed at Bella. She was warm enough to me, but not overly familiar, and I found it easy to be with mother and daughter and just listen to them talk. It was the first time I had witnessed them together when Bella wasn't in a hospital, heavily drugged.

"You two look good together," Renee remarked as we walked with her to her car, our bags slung over my shoulder.

"My father sends his regards," I said. "My mother as well, though I know that you have not met her yet."

"It was generous of them to give Bella plane tickets for her birthday."

"They know how much Bella has missed you."

And that was pretty much the extent of my conversation with Renee for the weekend. She was completely focused on Bella, and with Phil coaching and working much of the time, the two of them were like girlfriends on a holiday. It suited me perfectly.

Contrary to Charlie's suspicions, Renee *did* put Bella and I in separate bedrooms. Bella was to sleep in the double bed in the guest room and I was assigned to a pull-out sofa in the den.

"Come to my room after they go to sleep, okay?" Bella whispered that first night.

I kissed her palm. "Wouldn't miss it."

Phil got home about ten o'clock and he and Renee retired to their bedroom shortly after that. Since we'd flown in from a time zone three hours behind Florida's, it was still early for Bella, so we stayed up to watch television. Though our hosts' bedroom was on the other side of the house from us, it became clear rather quickly why Bella's mother had chosen a husband nearly a decade younger than herself. Phil had been physically active all day, working out and then coaching his high school baseball team, but it hadn't diminished his nighttime energies. Of course, they couldn't know of my acute hearing or that I could read their thoughts, but Bella had been right—after dark at least, Renee and Phil easily could have been the same age. Their compatibility made me smile and I was glad for Bella's sake that she couldn't hear them (much). They were happy together—that was obvious.

For Bella and me, the night was just as always. We retired to Bella's room after Renee and Phil went to sleep and I returned to the den before daylight.

The "Sunshine State" was sunny indeed. "I'm not used to this much light anymore," Bella commented to her mother the next morning. Neither was I. Until recently, I'd not spent much time in the South. My family and I liked our daytime freedom too much.

"Isn't it great, though?"

"It kind of hurts my eyes," Bella admitted.

Phil was long gone by the time Bella rose. I'd been sitting at my laptop in the den after leaving Bella's room, not bothering to pretend to sleep, except for rumpling the bed sheets a bit on the pull-out sofa.

I begged off on the women's daytime outing to go shopping and to the beach, having concocted a false term paper assignment for myself to keep me indoors. That night, the three of us went to a movie. I indulged a bit by holding Bella's hand throughout. Renee grabbed Bella's other hand during the exciting and romantic bits. It was nice to have something so important in common.

Being at Renee's house had an interesting effect on Bella. The previous year, she had often tried slipping her hands beneath my shirt or sweater at night while we lay together. I wouldn't allow it, because I had no faith in my ability to resist the scent of her blood if I got too distracted—and that kind of attention was *extremely* distracting. I had limited her caresses to my hands and arms, neck, and face and she had mostly accepted those boundaries since then.

In Jacksonville, though, perhaps because she was no longer under her father's roof, or because we had been careful not to touch each other much in Renee's presence, she once again began testing my limits. On our second night in Florida, I finally gave up trying to keep her hands above my waist and on top of my clothes and retreated to a lounge chair in the corner of her room.

"Don't leave! Come back to the bed," she begged in a whisper.

"Not if you can't behave yourself," I replied. "You're much too tempting to risk it."

"Pleeease...?"

"Maybe tomorrow night if you're good," I teased.

"I'll be good, I'll be good," Bella stage-whispered.

I let her coax me back eventually. And she was *pretty good*, though she spent rather a lot of her usual sleeping hours with her hands and lips on my face, neck, hands, and forearms. Not that I minded.

Mother and daughter went to the beach again on Saturday and I was surprised that Bella hadn't come home burned red like a lobster either day.

"Oh, I wore a big hat, Mom drowned me in sunscreen, and I sat under a palm tree," Bella explained.

"Did you go swimming?"

"The water's not that warm yet, but I got my feet wet at least."

I would have been more worried about not being with Bella on these outings, but I was counting on Alice to call if she saw any problems on the horizon and so far she hadn't. Bella needed time alone with her mother. If she went ahead with her current plans, this could be the last time they saw one another. I wondered how much Bella might be thinking about that on this trip. Maybe seeing Renee would convince her to put off her transformation.

On Saturday evening, Phil came home early and took us all out to dinner. Though both Bella and I objected, he could not be deterred and I was unfortunately required to choke down a hamburger which I regurgitated in the restaurant washroom as soon as everyone finished eating. It was always a disgusting process, but sometimes necessary.

"Edward eats like a bird!" Renee whispered to Bella on the way to the car afterwards. It hadn't occurred to her that I might have an actual eating disorder, though I showed all the signs of it. (Except for bad teeth, of course. Mine are perfectly lethal.)

"He's very careful about his diet," Bella told her truthfully.

"Well, he's in great shape, I'll give him that. He's slim, but he seems strong."

"Yeah, he is pretty strong." I smiled at Bella's understatement. She didn't mention that I had once held a van in the air with one hand to keep it from crushing her legs.

After dinner, Phil chauffeured us around to look at the city lights. Jacksonville is a huge city—much larger than I expected—that straddles the meandering St. Johns River. It is rather magnificent with its numerous skyscrapers and seven artfully lighted suspension bridges spanning the river at regular intervals.

Late that night, Renee got out of bed to visit the bathroom and, acting on a sudden intuition, decided to check on Bella. I heard her coming through the house, but I decided it

would be best just to stay where I was and pretend not to hear her. When Renee looked in, Bella was sleeping on my chest with her arms wrapped around my neck as usual, with her under the covers and me fully dressed above them, also as usual. I closed my eyes so Renee would think I was sleeping too.

Bella's not telling me the whole story! Renee thought as she quietly closed the door and left us to ourselves.

All weekend I had observed mother and daughter together and found the comparison quite interesting. Bella is so different from Renee, complementary in a way. She's down-to-earth, practical, and responsible while Renee is flighty, unfocused, and impulsive. It's easy to see how Bella's personality must have developed partly in reaction to Renee, especially with the two of them living alone together for so many years.

Renee exists very much in the present, her attention pulled toward whichever of her senses is most prominent at the moment. Her thoughts flit continually from one thing to the next. If she heard a particular song on the radio, she might start telling a story related to the song. If something caught her eye in the middle of the story, she would interrupt herself to remark on that. Even when she wasn't talking, her mind operated in the same way, just silently. Experiencing everything through her six senses as she did made Renee especially observant when she was not otherwise distracted and she had a way of saying rather profound things out of the blue.

"He loves you," I heard Renee murmur to Bella in the kitchen when she thought I couldn't hear.

"Yes, I think so," Bella replied.

Think? Doesn't she know by now?

"You two are very young."

"I know, Mom. Don't worry about it. We don't have any big plans or anything." I was surprised Renee didn't see through that.

"You should come down here for college!" Renee exclaimed, hopping to a new subject.

"I don't know about that," Bella answered as she followed her mother, who was carrying a tray of iced tea, into the living room. I was in the attached den "working" when Renee stuck her head in the partially open door.

"I brought you some iced tea!"

“Umm, thank you,” I replied.

“How’s the paper going?”

“Very well, thanks.”

“He’s so polite,” Renee whispered to Bella after leaving me to my fake studies. “And even more handsome than I remembered!”

Bella didn’t reply.

“He sure could use some sun, though.” Renee laughed softly. “Like you. You’re still as pale as ever.”

“Well, we do live in *Forks*, you know,” Bella reminded her. Renee laughed again. Bella’s mother had never liked the dark, rainy days and hadn’t stayed very long in Washington State after Bella was born.

“That’s why you should come to the University of Florida for school! It’s in Gainesville, not that far from here. Just think—sunshine every day!” Renee enthused.

“I’m liking Forks better than I used to,” Bella admitted.

“Well, if not Florida, then where are you thinking of going to college?”

“I got accepted at the University of Alaska Southeast this week.”

“You’re not serious!”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“You can’t go to Alaska! Of all places! It doesn’t even get light in the winter, does it?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Juneau is pretty far south,” Bella fudged. “And it’s not like colleges are lining up to take me, you know. I was late to apply.”

“What does Charlie think about it?”

“Oh, he’s fine with it.”

“What about Edward? Is he going to Alaska Southeast too?”

“I’m...not sure,” Bella hedged.

“Hmm...” was all her mother said—aloud, that is.

Okay, so maybe they're not as serious as they seem to be. But they're so "together." Bella said they're not having sex, though. That's weird, isn't it? So if they aren't that serious, then why was he in her room last night? And if they are that serious, then why aren't they sexually involved? Could he be gay? He is awfully clean and well-groomed. He doesn't really seem gay, though...hmm... Would it be rude to ask? Maybe Phil could find out.

I chuckled to myself. Times had certainly changed since my days as a human teenager.

Alice called me on Sunday. Bella and Renee had gone for a beach walk and I was working on my computer in the den.

"Alice?"

"Just wanted to let you know what's going on. Victoria showed up yesterday. She came through the Quileute reservation and the wolves started chasing her. I knew she was coming, so we were lined up at the reservation border, but she kept jumping back and forth over the river so we couldn't follow. It was very frustrating, especially for me! But then Emmett dove for her and crossed the line. One of the wolves went for him and it was a little dicey for a while, but Jasper got everybody calmed down. Unfortunately, Victoria escaped. It was not the best day, but I don't see her coming back...right now, anyway." Alice finally paused.

"Is Em okay?"

"Yeah, I was more worried about the wolf, really. Well, I didn't *care*, really, but the wolves fight as a pack, so that's a bit of a problem. You can't pick a fight with just one of them without getting the whole gaggle on you. Anyway, everything came out okay, but we didn't get her. How's your trip going?"

"It's quite nice, actually, except I'm stuck inside, of course. But Bella seems happy to be with her mom, so it's all fine."

"Good. Okay then, Jazz and I are going hunting. See you when you get back."

"Thanks, Alice."

"Sure thing."

On the flight back, Bella was neither talkative nor amorous. When we got far enough across the country that the sun finally sank below the horizon, I raised the window shade so she could see the sunset before we dropped below Seattle's heavy cloud cover. Bella remained silent in the car driving back to Forks.

"You've been very quiet," I said. "Did the plane make you sick?"

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sad to leave?”

“More relieved than sad, I think.”

Not at all the answer I was expecting. I raised an eyebrow.

“Renee is so much more...perceptive than Charlie in some ways. It was making me jumpy.”

I laughed. “Your mother has a very interesting mind. Almost childlike, but very insightful. She sees things differently than other people.”

Hers certainly was one of the more unusual adult minds I’d read. I wondered how much of that mind had ended up in Bella. I would never know. At least Bella wasn’t unhappy about coming home, but I was left not knowing what effect seeing Renee had had on her and her decisions about the future. She seemed pensive, but obviously she wasn’t ready to talk about it.

Bella dropped off to sleep before we reached Port Angeles and remained asleep until I pulled up in front of Charlie’s house. He was waiting anxiously for Bella, happy to have her home again.

I stroked her cheek with my fingers.

“We’re home, Sleeping Beauty. Time to awake.” Bella opened her eyes and looked at me. I smiled at her, but then lost the smile when I heard what else Charlie was thinking about...Jacob Black. I looked toward the house where the porch light was on and saw the curtain at the front window move. Jacob had been calling...and calling...and calling. *What the hell? Grrr...*

I walked around the car to open Bella’s door and she noticed my expression.

“How bad?” she asked.

“Charlie’s not going to be difficult,” I told her, not mentioning that Jacob Black might be. “He missed you.”

I took Bella’s small bag from the back seat. She reached for it, but I wanted to go inside and find out what was happening. Charlie came to the front door and held it open for both of us. He was extremely glad to see Bella.

“Welcome home, kid!” Charlie greeted her boisterously. “How was Jacksonville?”

“Moist. And buggy.”

“So Renee didn’t sell you on the University of Florida?”

“She tried. But I’d rather drink water than inhale it.”

I stood behind Bella and remained silent, listening to Charlie’s thoughts. He decided he couldn’t ignore me any longer.

“Did you have a nice time?” he asked, glancing at me. That was a first.

“Yes,” I replied with a smile. “Renee was very hospitable.”

“That’s...um, good. Glad you had fun.” Charlie grabbed Bella and gave her a hug—something I had never seen him do.

“Impressive,” I heard Bella whisper in his ear.

Charlie laughed. “I really missed you, Bells. The food around here sucks when you’re gone.”

“I’ll get on it,” Bella told him.

“Would you call Jacob first? He’s been bugging me every five minutes since six o’clock this morning. I promised I’d have you call him before you even unpacked.”

I went rigid beside Bella. Not only did I not like him calling, especially so many times in one day, but I was worried about what he wanted.

“Jacob wants to talk to me?”

“Pretty bad, I’d say. He wouldn’t tell me what it was about—just said it was important.” Right on cue, the phone rang.

“That’s him again, I’d bet my next paycheck,” Charlie mumbled. He was annoyed at Jacob’s persistence.

“I got it.” Bella rushed to the phone in the kitchen and I followed. I wanted to know what he would tell Bella, especially after the news Alice had given me. We’d done a good job of protecting Bella from Victoria’s visit and I didn’t want Jacob Black to ruin all that effort.

Charlie went to watch television. Bella picked up the phone and turned toward the wall, as if seeking privacy.

Sorry, no dice. What if he says something that frightens her or makes her faint?

“Hello?”

I listened to Bella’s side of the conversation, but it seemed to amount to little until she said, “Yeah, I know. I’m so glad you called me, Jake. I...” She hesitated, but the yearning in her voice was tangible. My heart seized a little in my chest.

But then he hung up on her.

“That was short,” Bella remarked, confused.

“Is everything all right?” As far as I knew, Jacob had not called her for weeks. Why now?

Bella turned toward me and I watched her face carefully.

“I don’t know. I wonder what that was about.”

“Your guess is probably better than mine,” I replied, smiling slightly.

“Mmm.”

Bella began to poke through the refrigerator to find something for Charlie’s dinner. She was deep in thought and I watched her face for any clues. Did I perceive a little hurt written there? Certainly bewilderment. She was moving around the kitchen like a zombie when suddenly she froze and the package of meat from the freezer slipped out of her hand. I caught it before it hit the floor and tossed it to the counter, then took her in my arms. She was dazed.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered in her ear.

Bella shook her head, but remained frozen with her arms still hanging at her sides. She *always* hugged me back.

“Bella?” I asked, shaking her shoulder gently. Was she in shock? I was becoming concerned.

“I think...I think he was checking,” Bella muttered, her expression vacant. “Checking to make sure. That I’m human, I mean.”

I hissed and clenched my fists behind Bella’s back. He was checking whether we were at war! I had to clamp my jaws together to keep from growling. So, so eager he was to fight my family.

“We’ll have to leave,” Bella mumbled. “Before. So that it doesn’t break the treaty. We won’t ever be able to come back.” Her voice was bleak. I pulled her closer and she leaned her forehead on my chest.

“I know,” I murmured. Never to see her father, or Forks, or for that matter, Jacob Black, again. She was beginning to understand the consequences of her choice. I laid my cheek against her hair. Then Charlie stepped into the kitchen.

“Ahem.” His warning startled Bella, who jerked away from me. I released her and leaned against the counter, watching her face. She was distraught, but she was also blushing, embarrassed by being “caught” by her father. He was not as annoyed with me as usual, but I hadn’t yet figured out why.

“If you don’t want to make dinner, I can call for a pizza,” Charlie said, clearly hungry.

“No, that’s okay, I’m already started.”

“Okay,” he replied, leaning against the doorframe. He crossed his arms over his chest, interrogation style.

So that was as far as we got with that conversation.

4. Confrontations

At home before school, I asked Alice for more details about Victoria's visit and the dust-up with the Quileute. Things had gotten a bit more out of hand than Alice had implied on the phone the day before.

Everyone, Cullens and Quileute alike, had been chasing Victoria along the reservation boundary. When Emmett leaped for her, he was assuming at least a five-foot neutral territory, which you need or everybody gets hamstrung at the border. He tumbled across the center line and the gray wolf lunged at him, jaws open. Rosalie leaped in and rolled the wolf with a punch and the wolf pack took a V-formation to attack.

Jasper rushed in to cover Rosalie's left flank and Alice leaped in to take Emmett's right. Seeing Alice suddenly in potential danger brought Jasper to his senses and he refocused his energies toward creating emotional calm. Carlisle asked Sam for a truce and Sam ordered the pack to stand down. Though Sam hates us as much as the other wolves do, he hasn't forgotten that Carlisle saved Emily's life.

Though I felt sure that my family—even without me—could annihilate the pack, Carlisle wasn't about to start a war "accidentally," especially when we needed to work together.

"I wasn't *too* worried," Alice told me, "but without my ability to predict *anything* the wolves would do and without you there, we were completely blind. I've *never* felt so handicapped!"

I didn't know whether to be glad I'd gotten Bella out of the way or annoyed that I hadn't been there to challenge the werewolves, or irritated that Victoria had gotten away. At least Alice didn't see her coming back soon. Maybe the combined forces had scared her off for the time being.

"When I was tracking Victoria," I told Alice, "I became convinced that she has a gift for escape. She slipped through my hands several times using different tricks. Maybe running along the border of the reservation was just another one."

"I think you're right. She always 'zigged' when we 'zagged.' By the way, I'm coming to school late. I have a big designer fabric order that I have to place *today* because the company is going to have a fire and I want them to ship my stuff before that." Alice grinned.

"It's not like you could *warn* them or anything..." I said, mildly amused.

“You know, I’ve done that a lot of times, but it *never* comes out right with strangers, only with family.”

“Okay, Alice, see you in calculus class.”

“Tell Bella ‘welcome back’ and I’ll see her at lunch.”

Charlie was reversing the police cruiser out of his driveway just as I pulled up to the curb. He backed into the street and put the car in drive. Then he did something unexpected. As he passed me, he raised two fingers from the steering wheel in the Forks’ version of a wave. I was so surprised that he was gone before I thought to wave back. Something was definitely different about Charlie. His thoughts were giving nothing away, though.

My curiosity faded when Bella came tripping out of the house with a Pop-Tart in her hand. Strands of hair already had come loose from the bun at the back of her neck and fallen around her face in an appealing way. It gave her an unintentionally sexy, “just got out of bed” look. She must have overslept, which didn’t surprise me, because she had lain awake until the very early hours in spite of my attempts to lull her to sleep. Maybe the insomnia was caused by her nap on the way home from the airport, but I suspected it had more to do with Jacob Black’s disturbing phone call.

We were just a few blocks from school when I heard him.

Where’s the leech? With his brilliant mind, surely he figured out that I would be here looking for him this morning. That big leech brother is lucky he didn’t get his head taken off. Next time Paul won’t hesitate! Hey, I must look pretty scary. All the kids are giving me sneaky sideways looks. Well, at least he won’t do anything in front of them. Wouldn’t want everyone to know they’ve got parasites living in their midst.

My whole body was tense and I had to concentrate not to squeeze the steering wheel into tiny fragments. Jacob was looking for *me*, bringing a warning on behalf of his pack about our “trespassing.” He was bound to reveal to Bella that Victoria had been here. *What a cur!* And he wasn’t alone. His littermates were hanging around nearby in case I threatened him. This was the kind of danger I’d been trying to help Bella avoid!

“If I asked you to do something, would you trust me?” I asked her.

“That depends.”

“I was afraid you would say that.”

Jacob Black was standing near Building 4, his motorcycle parked on the sidewalk where it would be sure to draw attention. With his tight black t-shirt and dirty jeans, he looked like a dangerous thug. I drove into the school parking lot, hoping Bella wouldn't notice him.

"What do you want me to do, Edward?"

"I want you to stay in the car." I pulled the Volvo into my usual parking space and killed the engine. "I want you to wait here until I come back for you."

"But...why?" Bella peered at me and when I didn't return her gaze, she looked around and saw him.

"Oh."

"You jumped to the wrong conclusion last night," I explained. "He asked about school because he knew that I would be where you were. He was looking for a safe place to talk to me. A place with witnesses."

"I'm not staying in the car," Bella stated flatly.

"Of course not. Well, let's get this over with." *Argh!*

There he is in his fancy car and designer jeans. Ugh! I don't know what Bella sees in him.

I reached for Bella's hand as we walked toward the wolf. He was fuming and I did not want Bella to get close to him. The overgrown man-child wouldn't want to transform in front of witnesses, but I doubted if he had enough control to guarantee that it wouldn't happen. Why did Sam send *him* anyway? Did he volunteer so he could see Bella?

He was leaning against his black motorcycle with his arms across his chest, a mask of hate settled on his face. He towered over everyone in the vicinity, including me, even though he was not standing fully upright. I stopped my approach as soon as we were within speaking distance. Bella continued moving forward, but I blocked her advance with an arm and angled my body in front of her.

"You could have called us," I opened in a quiet, but dangerous voice.

"Sorry, I don't have any leeches on my speed dial," he sneered. *So he did want to see her.*

"You could have reached me at Bella's house, of course."

If this was a ploy to get close and flex his muscles in front of her, he needed to understand just how things were. He could no longer be part of her life physically. This public

display was risky for my family and for his tribe, not to mention hurtful to Bella. “This is hardly the place, Jacob. Could we discuss this later?”

“Sure, sure. I’ll stop by your crypt after school. What’s wrong with now?”

It wasn’t obvious enough for him? I glanced around at the students who were making their way to class, some of whom were curious or excited enough about our obvious animosity that they had paused to observe— from a safe distance, of course.

I lowered my voice to a level that the keen-eared wolf would hear, but Bella wouldn’t. “I already know what you came to say. Message delivered. Consider us warned.”

The mongrel wasn’t going to let things go that easily, I feared. Apparently, he had something to prove—this wasn’t just about delivering a message from his pack. I looked down at Bella to see how much she had caught.

“Warned?” she asked. “What are you talking about?” Her hearing was better than I thought.

“You didn’t tell her? What, were you afraid she’d take our side?”

Sure, that’s the reason, mutt! Why do you insist on hurting her? “Please drop it, Jacob,” I requested, trying to keep my voice level.

“Why?”

“What don’t I know? Edward?” Bella’s voice was a mix of stress and budding anger. “Jake?”

Of course, she would want all the details and he would insist on telling her. *I could wring that dog’s neck! Has he no sense at all?*

“He didn’t tell you that his big...brother crossed the line Saturday night?” he said with heavy sarcasm and obvious satisfaction.

Because telling on me is so much more important than protecting Bella from being terrorized... Idiot! I glared at him in fury.

“Paul was totally justified in—” Jacob began.

“It was no-man’s land!” I insisted angrily, trying to cut him off before he gave away everything.

“Was not!” Jacob began shuddering visibly. He clenched his fists and began gulping air to try to keep himself together.

Great! Now the dog’s going to morph right here!

“Emmett and Paul?” Bella muttered, bewildered. “What happened? Were they fighting? Why? Did Paul get hurt?” Bella’s voice rose higher and higher until the last word was almost a squeak.

I tightened my supporting arm and murmured gently to Bella. “No one fought. No one got hurt. Don’t be anxious.” I stroked her cheek.

“You didn’t tell her anything at all, did you?” Jacob accused, as if *that* was the most important element of this entire exchange. “Is that why you took her away? So she wouldn’t know that—?”

“Leave now,” I ordered menacingly before he could get the words out. My self-control was running very thin. It would *almost* be worth the public exposure just to wipe that nasty sneer off his face. One snap of his mongrel neck and...

Except that would hurt Bella.

“Why haven’t you told her?” Jacob demanded.

Has he no sense at all? I glared at him as if my eyes might burn a hole through his thick skull. I wished they could. More kids were collecting around us to stare. A group of boys was betting on who would win the impending fistfight. If they only knew what a punch from either of us would mean!

Then suddenly, I lost all interest in Jacob Black. Bella had begun to shake and gasp for air. She had put two and two together and come up with *Victoria*.

“She came back for me,” Bella squeaked. Her face had gone pale and her eyes were filling with tears. I pulled her against me and touched her face gently.

“It’s fine,” I murmured. “It’s fine. I’ll never let her get close to you, it’s fine.” I continued stroking her cheeks and wiping away each tear with my fingers.

I turned back toward Jacob Black, so angry I could spit. “Does that answer your question, mongrel?”

“You don’t think Bella has a right to know? It’s her life,” he argued.

“Why should she be frightened when she was never in danger?”

“Better frightened than lied to.”

I could not disagree more as tears continued to fall from Bella’s eyes.

“Do you really think hurting her is better than protecting her?”

“She’s tougher than you think,” Jacob asserted. “And she’s been through worse.”

And then, as clear as if I’d been there myself, I saw her in his mind. A black night in the woods and Bella lay curled in a fetal position on sodden ground, abandoned and alone. Rain pelted her bloodless face, but she didn’t notice even as it puddled beneath her cheek.

Pain ripped through me, stopping my breath, and my body began to curl in on itself, unable to defend against this onslaught of cruel memory. Another image—Bella standing face-to-face with a demon, his red eyes clear with intent, his figure poised to attack. Then another—Bella hunched forward, her thin arms wrapped around her upper body as if she might otherwise fly apart. It was pure torture, this graphic evidence of her suffering, knowing that *I* had caused it, had done *this* to my beloved.

In a separate part of my mind, I realized that we were standing center stage with an audience of students gathered around. Some were frightened, some amused, and one person was deeply concerned.

What’s that Indian doing here? Threatening Edward? He needs help!

I was surprised to hear any student at Forks High School willing to stand up for a Cullen. Geeky Ben Cheney took a step toward the enormous, looming native before a restraining hand gripped his shoulder, Mike Newton urging him back.

“That’s funny,” the dog said, snickering, and then I saw what I looked like through his eyes—a soul burning in hell.

“What are you doing to him?” Bella cried, her bout of hysteria suddenly halted in its tracks.

I shrank from Jacob’s picture of me and with concerted effort, relaxed my face to smooth away the expression that was frightening Bella.

“It’s nothing,” I whispered. “Jacob just has a good memory, that’s all.”

Another image—Bella, with blue lips in a marble-white face, waterlogged and lifeless, washed up on a rocky beach. I winced in pain.

“Stop it! Whatever you’re doing,” she ordered.

“Sure, if you want. It’s his own fault if he doesn’t like the things I remember, though.”

Bella glowered at the dog and the images stopped. Jacob shrugged.

Then an authoritative voice popped into my head. *What’s the ruckus? Who’s this hooligan? All these kids...must be a fight.*

“The principal’s on his way to discourage loitering on school property,” I said under my breath. “Let’s get to English, Bella, so you’re not involved.”

“Overprotective, isn’t he?” Jacob scoffed. “A little trouble makes life fun. Let me guess, you’re not allowed to have fun, are you?”

What a sarcastic, ignorant... I pulled my lips back in a snarl.

“Shut up, Jake,” Bella commanded.

The dog barked a laugh. “That sounds like a no. Hey, if you ever feel like having a life again, you could come see me. I’ve still got your motorcycle in my garage.”

Bella was startled. “You were supposed to sell that. You promised Charlie you would.”

“Yeah, right. Like I would do that. It belongs to you, not me. Anyway, I’ll hold on to it until you want it back.”

“Jake...” Bella said mournfully. That word at that moment held a palpable tenderness I had not heard in her voice before and which hurt more than all the pictures Jacob Black could summon to torture me.

Jacob’s tone changed completely then, becoming soft and apologetic as he reached out to Bella. “I think I might have been wrong before, you know, about not being able to be friends. Maybe we could manage it, on my side of the line. Come see me.”

Bella looked at me as I held her protectively in my arms. I kept my face as emotionless and smooth as glass.

“I, er, don’t know about that, Jake.”

The mongrel lost all remnants of his tough façade then and I knew instinctively that this was the hook he had in her—his raw pain.

“I miss you every day, Bella. It’s not the same without you.”

“I know and I’m sorry, Jake, I just...”

He knew his power over her too and he began to reel her in. "I know. Doesn't matter, right? I guess I'll survive or something. Who needs friends?"

It was blatant manipulation, but I felt her respond to it as if the words were real. She tried to go to him, but I held her tightly at my side. She could *not* go any closer. I would not allow it.

The school principal was making his way through the clusters of children.

"Okay, get to class," Principal Greene bellowed. "Move along, Mr. Crowley."

"Get to school, Jake," Bella whispered, immediately concerned for *him*.

I took Bella's hand and began to pull her toward the Language Arts Building so she wouldn't get in trouble. Greene was irritated that a fight had nearly broken out on school grounds.

"I mean it," he threatened. "Detention for anyone who's still standing here when I turn around again." The crowd melted like snow in the rain. Then he caught sight of me at the center of things.

"Ah, Mr. Cullen. Do we have a problem here?"

"Not at all, Mr. Greene. We were just on our way to class."

"Excellent. I don't seem to recognize your friend." The balding man turned toward Jacob with the authority of age and position. "Are you a new student here?"

"Nope," Jacob replied cavalierly.

"Then I suggest you remove yourself from school property at once, young man, before I call the police."

Jacob smirked. *Yeah, like Charlie's gonna take me down on a city street and put me in handcuffs. That'd be hilarious. I'm tempted to hang around for it. Ha!*

But he thought better of it and instead, with blatant disrespect, gave the principal a fake military salute, kick-started his motorcycle, and laid rubber on the sidewalk as he squealed away. Principal Greene watched him go with exasperation.

"Mr. Cullen, I expect you to ask your friend to refrain from trespassing again."

"He's no friend of mine, Mr. Greene, but I'll pass along the warning."

Straight A's in every subject, respectful, smarter than most of his teachers. Why is that troublemaker hanging around him? Ah, it's probably about Bella Swan. It's always a girl. I can't see her going with that gang banger, though...her father the police chief and all...

"I see. If you're worried about any trouble, I'd be happy to—" He had been about to say "alert the police," but I cut in.

"There's nothing to worry about, Mr. Greene. There won't be any trouble."

"I hope that's correct. Well, then. On to class. You, too, Miss Swan."

I nodded my assent and pulled Bella toward Building 3. "Do you feel well enough to go to class?" I said under my breath so Principal Greene following behind us wouldn't hear.

"Yes," Bella replied uncertainly.

As soon as we were seated in class, Bella began scribbling a note on a full sheet of paper. Mr. Berty was focused on his reading of Robert Frost's poem "Once by the Pacific" and ignored us.

What happened? Tell me everything. And screw the protecting me crap, please.

She pushed the note across to me and I sighed. I knew she did not like to be taken care of, but thanks to an overgrown mutt, all that effort to shield her from unnecessary fear was completely wasted.

Four seconds later, I passed the note back.

Alice saw that Victoria was coming back. I took you out of town merely as a precaution—there was never a chance that she would have gotten anywhere close to you. Emmett and Jasper very nearly had her, but Victoria seems to have some instinct for evasion. She escaped right down the Quileute boundary line as if she were reading it from a map. It didn't help that Alice's abilities were nullified by the Quileute' involvement. To be fair, the Quileute might have had her, too, if we hadn't gotten in the way. The big gray one thought Emmett was over the line, and he got defensive. Of course Rosalie reacted to that, and everyone left the chase to protect their companions. Carlisle and Jasper got things calmed down before it got out of hand. But by then, Victoria had slipped away. That's everything.

Bella read my explanation and several emotions flashed across her face, fear being the most prominent one. Then she erased my paragraph and wrote again.

What about Charlie? She could have been after him.

She had no reason to go after Charlie, I thought, holding out my hand for the paper, but Bella kept writing.

You can't know that she wasn't thinking that, because you weren't here. Florida was a bad idea.

I restrained a smile and pulled the paper away from her. She'd given me a perfect segue to a distraction.

I wasn't about to send you off alone. With your luck, not even the black box would survive.

I saw her look of confusion and then her irritation at the implied insult. *Perfect.*

So let's say my bad luck did crash the plane. What exactly were you going to do about it?

Why is the plane crashing?

I felt the corners of my mouth begin to twitch. Bella was *completely* off the topic now.

The pilots are passed out drunk.

Easy. I'd fly the plane.

Bella looked annoyed. She tried again.

Both engines have exploded and we're falling in a death spiral toward the earth.

I'd wait till we were close enough to the ground, get a good grip on you, kick out the wall, and jump. Then I'd run you back to the scene of the accident, and we'd stumble around like the two luckiest survivors in history.

She stared at me in disbelief.

"What?" I whispered.

She continued to stare like she was processing something that confused her. Then she shook her head and I saw the resolve settle into her face. “Nothing,” she mouthed, then hurriedly scribbled another message.

You will tell me next time.

I looked at her pale face, reddened eyes, and damp eyelashes. I couldn’t help but believe she would have been better off had she not known anything about this, but Bella disagreed. Apparently, she liked staring death in the face...or she didn’t trust me to take care of her. I sighed and nodded my agreement.

Thanks.

Those two are still at it? Time for an intervention. Mr. Berty’s thoughts preceded him down the aisle toward Bella and me. I snatched the paper from under her hand, erased its contents and quickly wrote notes for everything he’d covered so far in class. Sometimes supernatural speed and perfect recall could be quite handy.

“Is that something you’d like to share there, Mr. Cullen?”

“My notes?” I asked the teacher, sounding deeply confused. I handed him the sheet of paper under my hand.

He looked it over and discovered everything he would want me to know about Robert Frost written there. Then *he* looked deeply confused. I held back a smile as Bella stared at me, incredulous.

5. Risk

Now that the damn dog had spilled the beans about Victoria's visit, Bella was worked up all over again about her transformation. She didn't want to wait even one more day. I wondered if Jacob Black had considered *that* possible outcome when he'd insisted on telling Bella everything! Fortunately, Carlisle agreed with me that it would be wiser to wait at least until after graduation. He tried to discourage her from rushing things.

"There are seven of us, Bella," he told her Monday evening. "And with Alice on our side, I don't think Victoria's going to catch us off guard. I think it's important, for Charlie's sake, that we stick with the original plan."

My mother chimed in. "We'd never allow anything to happen to you, sweetheart. You know that. Please don't be anxious." Esme reached for Bella's hand and squeezed it gently.

We had taken advantage of Bella's new freedom to visit my family again. She wanted to talk about the weekend's events and my house was the only place where she could do that freely.

Emmett was gleeful that he'd gotten a chance to chase Victoria and tussle with a wolf. He could never get enough wrestling and fighting into his life to suit him and rarely was he truly challenged. He was just sorry he hadn't been allowed to fight the gray wolf. ("Paul," Bella informed us.)

"I'm really glad Edward didn't kill you. Everything's so much more fun with you around," Emmett said to Bella, chuckling.

Rosalie frowned at him from across the room, not only because she was jealous of Bella, but also because she'd been the one to come to Emmett's rescue when he was in danger.

No appreciation at all for me risking my welfare to save him! And I destroyed my manicure! she complained to herself. I could see in her memory, though, that she had enjoyed punching the wolf. I wished it could have been me.

We were gathered in the living room. Emmett was watching ESPN on the wholly inadequate replacement television I'd bought him until his fancy Korean model arrived from overseas. My sisters were huddled around Alice's customized touch-screen computer, designing a line of women's clothing with a gothic edge. It didn't sound like a winning idea to me, but Alice was remarkably talented. She'd already established herself as a well-known designer under the name **AliceRoi**. She had hired a less-successful, but eager, young designer

to serve as the face of the company so that she could avoid the public exposure, but the designs were Alice through and through.

“I’m offended,” Alice stated when Bella broached the subject of Victoria’s visit. “You’re not honestly worried about this, are you?”

On cue, Jasper activated his tranquilizing aura and Bella’s fear drained away. I was thankful for his intervention because she was ready to beg Alice to change her immediately. Bella dropped the subject until we were on our way to her house, well outside of Jasper’s influence.

“Edward, you’re *always* worried about my well-being. Don’t you agree I’d be better off if I weren’t so vulnerable? If I were one of you, Victoria would stop hunting me because it wouldn’t be fun for her anymore.”

I smiled serenely. “That’s between you and Carlisle. Of course, you know that I’m willing to make it between you and me at any time that you wish. You know my condition.”

I was so pleased to have stumbled upon the idea of establishing marriage as a prerequisite for changing Bella. It was a winning strategy in so many ways and it also left Bella with no doubt of my intentions toward her, whether she was human *or* vampire.

The next day after school, I dropped Bella at home. “I need to run a quick errand. Then I’ll come back here. All right?” I asked.

“Uh, sure,” Bella replied hesitantly. It wasn’t that I was hiding the nature of my errand, only that I wanted to avoid an argument about it.

“Bye, my darling,” I said, stretching my arm across the car to touch her cheek.

When she leaned toward me for a kiss, I held her face in my hands and touched my lips to hers softly. She responded with a hungry enthusiasm. She had liked the taste of my lips the last time we kissed and I thought she would try to taste me again. It was an exquisite feeling, her soft, wet tongue stroking my sensitive skin. I had liked it. But before either of us could get too riled up, I pushed her face away and looked into her eyes.

“I love you,” I said and gave her a last quick peck. “I’ll be back soon.”

Bella got out of the car and I zipped off to visit the Car Toys store in Port Angeles. I’d called the previous week to order the fancy Japanese car stereo Emmett had chosen for Bella. It had arrived from a Seattle store and was ready to be picked up.

I sped to Port Angeles and back, anxious to return to Bella. When I reached her house, though, I smelled an unappetizing supper in the making. Instead of going in, I commenced installing the new stereo in Bella's dashboard.

Though the first stereo had been destroyed, the truck itself was tough enough that it had not been damaged by Bella's vicious attack except for some scratches from a screwdriver. It took little time to attach and wire up the unit, but I couldn't test it without Bella's keys. I decided to assume it would work and let her discover it already installed. I could always make adjustments later. The important thing was that my siblings not see the ugly gaping hole where Bella had ripped out their gift.

When Charlie and Bella finished eating, I knocked lightly on the front door and Bella came to greet me. She took my hand and pulled me into the kitchen where she was clearing the table. Charlie already had retired to the living room to watch his sports reports and he ignored me completely.

As we washed and dried the dishes, I mentioned to Bella that Emmett and Jasper had "hiking" plans for the weekend. They were going to central Oregon to look for black bear.

With her back to me, Bella remarked, "You should go with them. You haven't had a good hunting trip since we got back."

I was overdue. I'd been stretching the time between trips to three weeks so I wouldn't have to be away from Bella so often. I'd noticed when we got back from Italy that every time I had to leave, even for just the required hours after school that Charlie had decreed, a tightness formed between her eyes and around her mouth. She never said anything beyond "I'll miss you," but I could almost feel the pain emanating from her. I wondered if she believed somewhere inside herself that I might not return.

I'd also been staying nearby to hunt. When I couldn't tolerate my thirst any longer, I would leave Bella's room after she fell asleep and run into the woods where I could always find deer or elk. Now that I was feeling vital again and no longer ready to accept my own demise, this limited diet had become distinctly unappealing. But considering that I had survived for weeks on rats' blood in Rio de Janeiro, I knew I could get by with drinking only deer and elk. If my choice was between limiting my diet to the gamey blood of ruminants or reading pain on Bella's face, I would forego the blood of carnivores forever.

Her suggestion was still tempting. I hadn't hunted bear in ages and even though my favorite prey (not counting humans) was mountain lion, the blood of any carnivore was far more appetizing than that of a ruminant. The thought of running to Oregon also excited me. I

could really stretch my legs in the five hundred-mile roundtrip. Going that far, though, usually meant staying at least one day, possibly two.

When Bella turned around, she must have read the interest on my face. Immediately, she put one hand on my chest and said, “You *have* to go. It’ll be great for you.”

I placed my hand over hers and looked into her eyes. Her face remained smooth and calm. I didn’t entirely trust her willingness to let me leave.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?” I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her fingers.

“Go have fun. Bag a few mountain lions for me,” she said smiling.

“I’ll have Alice look ahead at the weekend and make sure there aren’t any problems first.”

Friday night came with no visions of Victoria on the horizon, so I decided to join my brothers on their trip. I remained in Bella’s bed until she fell asleep, then I wrote a note and left it on her pillow to find in the morning.

I’ll be back so soon you won’t have time to miss me.

Look after my heart—I’ve left it with you.

Alice had agreed to stay close to home “in case Bella needed her.” In reality, that translated to “in case Bella tried to visit the werewolves.”

I knew she would be busy on Saturday at least. She was scheduled to work a morning shift at Newton’s sporting goods store; she had plans to visit Angela in the afternoon to help with her graduation announcements; and Alice was prepared to stay with her for the evening and even overnight if Bella got lonely or bored. I would be back by Sunday afternoon.

Jasper, Emmett, and I ran south down the Olympic Peninsula and passed Mt. Rainier, Mt. Saint Helens, and Mt. Hood on our way to the Willamette National Forest. The terrain was mountainous and treed with snow piled up at higher elevations. We were headed for the Three Sisters Mountains, three volcanic peaks lined up in a row, each rising over ten thousand feet. The area boasted abundant wildlife and, high on the mountainsides, bears were coming out of hibernation. They would be fierce, just as Emmett liked them. That area of Oregon also had a healthy mountain lion population, so I was sure to find some of my favorite prey.

Just before we entered the thick of the forest, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket and I groaned aloud. This could not be good news or Alice wouldn’t be disturbing me.

“I’m sorry, Edward,” Alice said, talking in a rush. “She tricked me. She made a run for it when I thought she was working...got in her truck and took off. I was hunting and couldn’t get back in time. I tracked her to outside of La Push, but now her future has disappeared.”

“Grrrrrrrrr...” A tremendous roar rumbled through my chest and escaped from my throat. I began to run, leaving my brothers behind to figure out what was going on for themselves. Passing an eighty-foot red cedar, I smacked it with the palm of my hand. It came down with a thunderous roar, ripping away limbs from its neighbors as it fell. It landed on an ancient pine tree, up-ending it, which started a domino effect of toppling trees. I didn’t stick around to watch, though. I sprinted west to clear the Cascade Mountain Range and then headed straight north.

“You need us?” I heard Emmett yell before I was out of hearing range.

I didn’t answer. I knew Alice would be on the phone with Jasper about now and I was too focused on what lay ahead to look back.

Never a dull moment, I heard in Jasper’s mind. He wouldn’t follow me back unless Alice told him it was necessary. He needed to hunt more than any of us.

What can I do? I thought. She had to be on the reservation already or Alice would have pursued her rather than phone me. The only choice I had was to retrieve her, to get her away from the werewolves. We’d just had that dramatic warning from Jacob about crossing the border, but that couldn’t be helped. I knew the wolves would not hesitate to attack this time and I’d just left our family’s strongest and most-gifted fighters in Oregon. It would be foolhardy to start a war either with or without my family, but neither could I stand by and allow Bella to be hurt or *killed*. I kept running.

After an hour-and-a-half at full speed, I passed Centralia and angled up the west side of the Olympic Peninsula. Carlisle was waiting for me well south of Forks and he began to run alongside me until I pulled ahead of him on my way to La Push.

Edward, son, consider carefully what you are doing, he thought, without anxiety or stress. *As soon as you cross the line onto the reservation, we will have declared war on the Quileute Nation. Alice, Esme, Rosalie, you, and I will be facing however many wolves have transitioned since the last time we saw them. There were six then. The number could be eight or more by now and while I believe we would prevail in the end, it will not be without loss on both sides. Are you ready for that? I’m only asking that you consider it before you rush ahead.*

His thoughts were a soft, low murmur, a gentle hum that went on and on as if he were using his words to soothe rather than to persuade.

I know how concerned you are for Bella and that is valid, but I do not believe any of them wishes to harm her and the possibility of an accident is low considering that she has been involved with them for months now. It is no guarantee that Bella is safe, of course, but the chances are very good that she will be fine, while the odds of injury or death to her or to others in our family are high if we proceed. I urge you to use your mind and not only your heart in making this decision.

The rhythm of Carlisle's silent words had a slightly hypnotic effect on me as we ran. I absorbed them as much as heard them. His calm intention was enough to quell my rashness, but not enough to eliminate the worry or the desire to snatch her back to safety.

Why, why, why? Why did she insist on risking her life?

I slowed down as I approached La Push and let Carlisle catch up to me. He put a hand on my shoulder and set his pace to match mine. When we reached the border that separates the Quileute Nation from Washington State, I turned away from Carlisle and began pacing back and forth along the line. I punched my left palm with my right fist over and over, trying to release some of the anxiety and desperation I felt. Helpless...again.

I'm not sure what kept me from crossing the border and going after her, whether it was Carlisle standing beside me—the voice of reason—or because I knew that she had plans to meet Angela after lunch and she wouldn't cancel on her friend. It had taken me two hours to run back from Oregon and it was now eleven o'clock. One more hour, or two at the outside, to wait and pray and hope that she would be okay.

Do you want me to go to her father's house and listen for a phone call? Charlie would be the first to know if there was a problem. He and Billy Black are good friends, I understand. As long as you don't hear bad news from me, odds are that she is just fine.

Actually, knowing *something* might be a slight relief.

"Thanks, Carlisle. That would help." He wrapped his arms around me and gave me a tight squeeze before he ran toward Forks.

I paced and paced and paced. It could have been an hour or it could have been days. Existing in fear like this distorted everything, perhaps even my reaction to the situation. But these circumstances were hard to tolerate and I did not want to be stuck like this ever again. I made a resolution.

If she survives this fiasco, then I won't give her another opportunity to run off to La Push. We will stay with her night and day if necessary until she gives up this death wish.

Carlisle did not call, meaning Charlie had received no bad news. I was rather surprised that he had left me alone in my state of mind, actually. Once he'd calmed me down and got me thinking somewhat straight, he had decided to trust me not to cross the border onto the Quileute's land. When I thought about it, I realized how much faith my father had in me. It was humbling.

When I did not hear from Carlisle I decided to dash home to get my car. When Bella came off the reservation, I wanted to follow her wherever she went without worrying about being seen running too fast. Alice was waiting for me on the porch, nearly as distressed as I was.

"She's sneaky...she knows how to get around me now," Alice observed. "I saw her decide to make a run for it. The idea was triggered by a bunch of papers flying around inside her truck with a picture of a howling wolf on them, something like... oh, right... "Save the Olympic Wolf."

"Save her *from* the Olympic wolf is more like it! Once we get her back, we need a plan to make sure this doesn't happen again!"

"I'm with you on that. This is *much* too stressful," Alice agreed.

I hopped into my car and took off toward the reservation. Almost immediately, my phone buzzed.

"She's okay," Alice said. "Her future is visible again. I can't see what happened while she was around them, you know, but she's going to be fine with Angela for the next few hours."

I sighed in relief. "Thanks, Alice."

I took a couple of dirt roads I knew that intersected with Highway 110, also known as La Push Road on that stretch. It's the one route that leads in and out of the Quileute reservation. As I turned onto it, I saw the back end of a red truck moving ahead of me at a sensible speed and I zoomed up behind it.

Bella glanced at me in the rearview mirror and then looked away. She maintained her speed as I tailgated her truck all the way to town. I suppose it was symbolic as much as anything, but I wanted no one to come between us. She drove cautiously all the way to Angela Weber's house, managing not to look in her rearview mirror. I slowed down when she reached her destination so I could watch her walk safely to Angela's door. I also wanted to reassure myself that she *could* walk and that she wasn't covered in blood and gore. I eyed her up and down for any signs of trauma and when I saw nothing alarming, I hit the gas pedal and zoomed on by. She didn't look up.

Now that I knew my beloved Bella was safe, I felt panic turn to anger. *How could she do this to me? To Alice?* She knew how I felt about the werewolves—I'd made that abundantly clear. And yet, it was so *eff*-ing important to see Jacob Black that she risked her life and my wrath to sneak off when I was out of town! What could *possibly* make Jacob Black so essential? She'd said he was in pain and that she had to help him. Really? A boy so obviously in love with her? Werewolf or not, Jacob Black was my rival. So what am I to think when she chooses to rendezvous with him behind my back?

"Bella will stay at Angela's for two hours," Alice told me when I called her to be sure. "And she'll go straight home from there."

I wasn't going to disturb her then, when she was in no danger, even though I longed to see her and touch her and satisfy myself that nothing bad had happened to her. I decided to conceal my car several blocks from Bella's house and wait for her in her room.

This day had been endless. It was little comfort to know that my Bella was off the reservation when I couldn't trust her not to go back and when I did not know the true reason for her stubbornness about the...well...*him*. She had told me many times since my return that she loved me, but she would not agree to marry me and she would not agree to stop seeing Jacob Black. I had to admit that it concerned me. And if I was being completely honest with myself...that it hurt too.

As I stood in the shadows in her bedroom and waited, I was distinctly aware of my own culpability for her behavior. I had left her to cope on her own and she did what she'd had to do—seek comfort somewhere else. I had brought this on myself and now I had to accept the consequences of my actions. She *had* found someone else, or if not that exactly, she had become inexplicably attached to a teenage boy who looked more like a man than not. I sighed. I did not know what it meant because I could not read her mind.

Time stretched and turned and curled in on itself until two hours of waiting felt like ten. Being in Bella's bedroom made my throat burn. I'd been on the verge of slaking my thirst when I was interrupted and now the burn was worse than ever. But it would have to wait.

Finally...*finally*...I heard the ancient Chevy truck chugging through the streets and felt a slight lessening of the ache in the pit of my stomach.

"Bella?" Charlie called out when the front door opened.

"Hey, Dad."

"So, how was your day?"

“Good. They didn’t need me at work, so I went down to La Push.”

“How’s Jacob?”

“Good.”

“You get over to the Webers?”

“Yep. We got all her announcements addressed.”

“That’s nice. I’m glad you spent some time with your friends today.”

“Me, too,” Bella confirmed.

What did that mean? Was she glad I’d been away? Was I suffocating her?

When she finally opened the door and entered her bedroom, I could not speak. I was overwhelmed with emotion and could only stare at her, checking whether all her appendages were still intact. When I saw that she was absolutely fine, relief left room for my anger to rise again. I stood rigidly next to the window with my fists clenched at my sides.

Bella looked at me and then down at the floor. We stood there mute, listening to the clock radio flip through one digit after another.

“Hi,” she said finally, breaking the silence. I didn’t trust my voice. I wanted to yell at her or cry or...something. In my confusion, I just glared.

“Er...so, I’m still alive,” she added after a long pause.

I growled without letting the sound escape through my teeth. The vibrations in my chest were alive with emotion. I still didn’t dare speak.

“No harm done,” Bella remarked, shrugging.

No harm done? Was she kidding? I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes in an effort to calm myself before I spoke.

“Bella,” I said in a whisper. “Do you have any idea how close I came to crossing the line today? To breaking the treaty and coming after you? Do you know what that would have meant?”

She gasped and I opened my eyes and peered at her.

“You can’t!” Bella exclaimed before lowering her voice. “Edward, they’d use any excuse for a fight. They’d love that. You can’t ever break the rules!”

Grrrr. “Maybe they aren’t the only ones who would enjoy a fight.” At that precise moment, I wouldn’t have minded slamming Jacob Black to the ground and stomping on him.

“Don’t you start.” Bella ordered. “You made the treaty—you stick to it.”

“If he’d hurt you—” I began, already compiling a list of the things I would do to him.

“Enough!” Bella exclaimed. “There’s nothing to worry about. Jacob isn’t dangerous.”

I rolled my eyes. “Bella, you aren’t exactly the best judge of what is or isn’t dangerous.”

“I know I don’t have to worry about Jake. And neither do you.”

Grrrr. I clamped my jaws shut to keep the growls in. My fists were hard, tight balls by my sides. I did not know how to resolve this impasse. There was no middle ground. I remained rigid and frozen by the wall.

Bella made the first move. She braced herself and then walked across the room to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“I’m sorry I made you anxious,” she murmured into my chest.

I exhaled the air I’d been holding in and the spell was broken. I put my arms around her.

“Anxious is a bit of an understatement,” I said, understating the understatement. “It was a very long day.”

“You weren’t supposed to know about it,” Bella explained. “I thought you’d be hunting longer.” She looked into my eyes and understood what had happened.

“When Alice saw you disappear, I came back.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Bella protested. “Now you’ll have to go away again.” She was clearly disappointed. So she *wasn’t* glad for me to leave town. She really *did* miss me. That softened my heart.

“I can wait.”

“That’s ridiculous. I mean, I know she couldn’t see me with Jacob, but you should have known—”

“But I didn’t,” I interrupted. “And you can’t expect me to let you—”

“Oh, yes, I can,” she cut in. “That’s exactly what I expect—”

"This won't happen again," I stated categorically.

"That's right! Because you're not going to overreact next time."

"Because there isn't going to *be* a next time."

"I understand when you have to leave, even if I don't like it—"

"That's not the same. I'm not risking my life."

"Neither am I."

"Werewolves constitute a risk."

"I disagree."

"I'm not negotiating this, Bella."

"Neither am I."

I was rigid with frustration. Why was she so *stubborn*? And so careless with her mortality?

Then she surprised me with a question. "Is this really just about my safety?"

"What do you mean?"

"You aren't..." She suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I mean, you know better than to be jealous, right?"

Aye, that was a good question! I raised an eyebrow. "Do I?"

"Be serious."

"Easily—there's nothing remotely humorous about this." And I wasn't at all convinced I shouldn't be jealous. He was so important to her that she would put herself in mortal danger to spend time with him, apparently. It was painfully reminiscent of something she'd said about me the first time we declared our feelings for one another in the meadow.

Bella frowned. "Or...is this something else altogether? Some 'vampires—and-werewolves—are-always-enemies' nonsense? Is this just a testosterone-fueled—"

That was distasteful. "This is only about you. All I care is that you're safe." I would never put my odium for Jacob Black and his kind ahead of what was best for her.

“Okay,” she conceded. “I believe that. But I want you to know something—when it comes to all this enemies nonsense, I’m out. I am a neutral country. I am Switzerland. I refuse to be affected by territorial disputes between mythical creatures. Jacob is family. You are...well, not exactly the love of my life, because I expect to love you for much longer than that. The love of my existence. I don’t care who’s a werewolf and who’s a vampire. If Angela turns out to be a witch, she can join the party, too. Switzerland,” she reiterated.

I knew she thought I was considering her statement of neutrality, but that wasn’t the part of her speech that interested me. Did she truly mean what she’d just said—that Jacob was *family* and I was her *true forever love*? I examined her face to see how much sincerity I could read there. Enough, I decided. Still, I wondered how aware she really was of her feelings for Jacob Black. I couldn’t know. I frowned at the uncertainty of that.

“Bella...,” I began, still thinking of the pressing issues between us.

“What now?” she asked in complaint.

And then I decided...just to drop it. I wanted to see her smile again and be happy with me now. So I turned my observation in an altogether new direction.

“Well...don’t be offended,” I told her, “but you smell like a dog.” I wrinkled my nose and flashed her favorite crooked smile.

Bella gave me a faked expression of disapproval before turning her mouth upward in a grin. Then she laid her head on my chest and I laid my cheek on her hair and we stood there holding each other, swaying slightly in rhythm. Whatever her true feelings were, at that moment I was not jealous of Jacob Black...not at all.

6. Plan B

After the disaster over the weekend and all the anxiety it caused me, I was unwilling to leave Bella alone even overnight, so by Monday I was hurting. School was difficult for the first time in ages. I was like Jasper had been the previous year when he nearly attacked a little girl who stood too close to our lunchroom table. I was monitoring myself now like I'd monitored Jasper back then. I even asked Alice to keep an eye on my future, so if I headed down a dangerous path, I could leave school and run to the Olympic Forest.

Carlisle was proposing a two-day trip to northern California for the upcoming weekend. Shasta National Forest would reopen for the season a week later, so it was the perfect time to hunt mountain lion, which were breeding beyond the capacity of the forest. The state was considering trapping and relocating the excess animals, but we could lighten their work load.

As thirsty as I was, hunting big cats around Mt. Shasta was extraordinarily tempting. My brothers were going and I wracked my brain to think of a way to join them while still keeping Bella safe. I couldn't bear to go through last weekend's fiasco again. I had to make sure that she wouldn't run off to the reservation and endanger herself hanging out with the werewolves. Ideally, she should have something fun and distracting to do while I was gone...something to keep her busy.

What if I tell her we're going on the weekend, but we leave Thursday night instead? Then she wouldn't have time to plan anything and she'd be busier too. She'd be safe at school with Alice there and she works Thursday evening at the store. That would leave only Thursday overnight and Friday after school to fill. I could be back before Saturday morning. It was a good solution. Now I just had to talk Alice into being Bella's...well, "jailer" is a harsh word...maybe "most devoted friend" would be a better choice.

Then I remembered there was something Alice wanted and as she had put it, "I don't know that I want to wait for Christmas." That was an easy solution for me. I got on the phone immediately to the Porsche dealership in Seattle and asked how quickly they could get hold of a Porsche 911 Turbo in yellow.

"Ah, the canary. I think the Bellevue store has one on the floor. Folks like to look at it, but it's not the color for everyone."

"Give it to me for 15% below list and I'll buy it today, cashier's check."

"Yes, sir! I'll check with my manager right away. What did you say your name is, sir?"

“Edward Cullen. And I need it delivered to Forks, preferably, or Port Angeles, within a few days.”

“We’d have to lower the percentage to do that. Normally, we don’t offer discounts on the 911.”

“Yes, but you said yourself that it’s been sitting on the floor. No doubt it’s got some dealer miles on it and it’s last year’s model. Fifteen percent is reasonable.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

The salesman got the deal approved at twelve percent—a fair price— and the car was delivered in two days. I parked it in the garage and put a large red bow on it. It was a bribe, of sorts, but I’d been planning to get it for her anyway.

When I came home from Bella’s house on Wednesday, the front door flew open and Alice burst through.

“Edward! It’s beee—you-tee—fulll!”

She leaped at me just as I read her intention to do so, wrapping her thighs around my waist and throwing her arms around my neck. I reflexively supported her bottom while she kissed me once on each cheek. Then she used her hands on top of my shoulders as a pivoting point to kick her legs outward and land with her feet next to her hands, doing a perfect straddle stand on my shoulders. She lifted her legs outward and upward into a handstand and pushed off of my shoulders to land on her feet behind me.

“Ten!” she chirped, raising both arms straight up in the air to perform a gymnast’s bow in all four directions to an invisible audience. I chuckled.

“I knew you were going to do it,” she said as I turned to face her. “But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t a great surprise. Carlisle already reminded me not to drive it around Forks. And yes, I’ll do it. I’ll invite Rosalie and Esme and we’ll get takeout and do our nails. A slumber party! It’ll be a blast, though she’s not going to be happy about it, you know.”

“I know,” I said with resignation, “but she gives me no choice.”

Well, I’ll do my best. You’re going early? That’s good. Then she can’t be mad around me all day, since we don’t have the same classes at school.

“She’ll probably try to get away from you, you know,” I said. “So you have to be on your guard.”

I will. I'll be able to see if she's planning anything and I won't leave her alone this time. Bella's been wanting me to change her because she's scared of Victoria. She shouldn't be too mad if we're also protecting her from Victoria."

"You realize this is a recurring favor, right?"

You mean you want me to hold Bella hostage every time you go hunting?

"Basically, yes. I'd take her with me if I could."

Well, it is a canary yellow Porsche. I suppose that's special enough to warrant a yes.

"Thanks, Alice."

You're welcome. Thanks for the 911! "Yippee!"

I didn't feel guilty for asking Alice to watch over Bella while I was gone. I'd warned her that last weekend would not happen again and I meant it. Just because she didn't agree with me didn't mean I was going to fold. *No werewolves!*

Alice would see to it that Charlie approved the arrangement—a girls' slumber party—even if Thursday was a school night. He would be pleased that I was out of town, and spending time with the women of my family would count as "balance." He liked Alice and he didn't have anything against Rosalie or Esme.

For a slumber party, Bella would need a place to sleep. I had been considering the issue of a bed for my room for months, actually. Until now, I was the only one in the family who had never had any use for one. Since meeting Bella, though, it was something I'd had in the back of my mind.

The Cullen house has two king-sized and one queen-sized bed already. The latter belongs to Alice and Jasper because Alice is so tiny that they don't need more space than that and also because Alice thinks that a "king-sized" anything is gauche. But it wasn't enough to simply put Bella up in someone else's room for two nights. Getting Bella a bed was symbolically important—I wanted her to feel that this was her home too. I wanted "our" room to be welcoming and comfortable for her. And in truth, I also hoped sincerely that one day we would have use for a marriage bed.

I'd picked out the perfect bed some time ago, bought it, and put it in storage until the right moment came to move it into the house. I'd found a similar piece in a brochure of a well-known metal artist working in Seattle and had asked him to make a version of it for me. It reminded me of Bella's and my meadow where we had lain among the wildflowers together on our first date. The bedframe has worked-iron posts with vining roses entwined around and

through them that continue over the top forming a bower of roses. Iron is the most practical material for our kind because it is slightly harder to destroy than wood, though even iron beds are no match for Emmett and Rosalie, who have gone through many of them.

I arranged to have the bed delivered and asked my mother to oversee its installation on Thursday. She was thrilled at the implications of that and broke out in smiles.

After school on Thursday, I drove Bella to the Newton's sporting goods store for her afternoon shift.

"See you later, my darling," I murmured, taking her chin in my hand and pulling her lips toward mine.

As I kissed her, she slipped her hands beneath my leather jacket and grasped my trapezius muscles, feeling the shape of me, letting her fingers move down over my ribs one by one. It felt...well...*wonderful*. Whenever she touched me in that way anywhere on my body, a chain reaction of urges and wants that were difficult to resist cascaded through me. Except for the obvious problems of my strength, density, and "natural diet"—as the Volturi say—it would have felt altogether natural to slide her onto my lap straddling me and let nature take its course. She made me feel so *human*.

Bella slid her hands down my back to my waist, flattening one palm against my lower back. Heat like smoldering embers collected there, spreading slowly through my center, back to front. A vibration began deep in my torso and I inhaled spasmodically. I closed my eyes for a moment to gather some willpower.

"Mmm, Bella...you'd better go in before Mike comes to see what's happened to you."

I gently pushed her chin away and then caught her wrists as her hands began wandering around to my stomach. Taking both wrists in my right hand, I put her hands in her lap and held them there as I brushed my fingers along her jaw line and down her neck to stroke her collar bone before I leaned across her and popped open her door. The heaviness of farewell hung in the air, almost as though she knew I was leaving her, though no one had said anything about it.

Bella climbed out of the car reluctantly, a few minutes late. She'd already told the Newtons that she wouldn't be working for them over the summer and they were in the process of training her replacement, so a certain amount of loyalty was falling away on both sides. They had canceled her shift the previous Saturday after she'd already come in to work and she had been less fastidious about showing up on time since then.

My brothers, father, and I were leaving as soon as I got home. I turned my car keys over to Alice so she could chauffeur Bella around for the next two days and gave her a list of hurried

instructions—“don’t let her go *anywhere* by herself...in fact, don’t let her go anywhere at all,” and “keep an eye on her at school, especially when you’re not in class with her,” “make sure she eats,” etc.—then the four of us loaded into Carlisle’s car. He let me drive, as was his custom when we rode together, knowing my preference for taking the wheel.

We shot down the coast, shortening a ten-hour human journey to less than four. Carlisle directed me to a little-used logging road where we abandoned the car and took off into the woods. I left my cell phone in the glove box having already called Alice to make sure everything was fine. Bella’s shift was ending and my sister was waiting in front of the store for her.

“You’re on your own now, Alice,” I told her. “We’re heading into no-cell-tower territory.”

“Don’t worry. I got this,” she replied and I heard her crank the car stereo to full blast as I hung up the phone.

We all were focused primarily on tracking mountain lion simply because they were so abundant in the Shasta National Forest, but Emmett also located two bears. The first one he wrestled to the ground before draining it and the second he wrestled and pinned down just for fun before releasing it.

Gluttony doesn’t work well for vampires. A body can hold only so much blood before the excess starts sloshing around in the belly and disrupting balance. We’ve all learned our lesson about over-drinking (except for Carlisle, who has always practiced moderation). It’s uncomfortable to have your last meal riding halfway up your throat while you wait for it to be absorbed. That’s why we stay longer when we go on distant hunting trips—to give the blood time to be taken up by our tissues before we drink again. In this way, we can become fully saturated with blood, maximizing the amount of time before the thirst becomes intolerable again.

Mountain lion aren’t always easy to find in the Olympic Forest so hunting them exclusively was a treat for me. We spent Thursday night and all of Friday hunting, taking out twenty mountain lions and one black bear between us. I drank three lions the first day and two more the second and then one last one before I began clamoring to head back north. I was feeling slightly sloshy when we returned to Carlisle’s car Friday night.

I had missed Bella intensely the entire time and was continually distracted by thoughts of her, worrying whether Alice was looking after her properly, and hoping there had been no missteps in keeping her away from the werewolves.

When we reached the car, I dug anxiously in the glove compartment for my phone to check for messages. I let Carlisle drive so I could watch for the moment when we came into range of a cell phone tower. Thirty-two miles.

I had two messages. The first was from Bella.

"You are in trouble," she said, each word an exclamation. "Enormous trouble. Angry grizzly bears are going to look tame next to what is waiting for you at home."

I sighed.

"What's wrong?" Emmett asked from the back seat.

"Oh, Bella's mad at me, of course." Then I listened to the next message, which was from Alice.

"I'm sorry, Edward," she said in a familiar refrain. "She got away from me. I know, *I know*...I did everything you told me and she still sneaked away. Well, she didn't sneak away exactly. The wolf came and picked her up at school. She didn't know he was going to do it so I couldn't see it until it happened. Now she's on the reservation again. Please don't worry. I'll get her back and call you again."

Riding a motorcycle with a werewolf! *Insane!* I growled in fury and immediately felt Jasper's soothing influence wash over me, calming me down without my consent. It really bothered Jasper to be around people who were angry or sad and I suppose that's one reason Alice is perfect for him. I checked the time on the message...9:30 a.m., twelve hours earlier. My phone beeped. The tower was still delivering messages. It was from Alice again...4:15 p.m., five hours earlier.

"Just an update. She came back, riding her own motorcycle, covered in mud and really beaten down...not physically," she hurried to clarify. "She won't tell me what happened, but I think maybe she and the wolf had a fight. I put her in a hot shower and Esme got her some dinner. You know, Edward, she's a real handful. I don't think she liked our slumber party very much. I hope you're not upset. I did everything I could!"

Disgusted, I slapped the phone shut.

"Is Bella okay?" Jasper asked in concern.

"Yes," I mumbled as his phone rang. I could hear Alice giving him the day's update...and so could Emmett and Carlisle. Now everyone knew what had happened without my having to explain things.

“Miss you,” he said when Alice was finished talking to him.

We all sat silently. They were waiting for me to speak, but I wasn’t in the mood.

She’s fine, then? Carlisle finally prodded.

I nodded.

Maybe this isn’t the best way to handle things.

I didn’t answer. Obviously, it wasn’t working as I’d hoped. Instead of going with the flow and enjoying herself, Bella was even more determined to escape. Jacob had picked her up on his motorcycle. That by itself was enough to make me crazy with worry.

I spent the rest of the ride up the coast trying to think through the dilemma logically. Bella wanted to see the werewolf. I said no. She figured out a way to do so behind my back, skirting both Alice and me. I arranged for her to be chaperoned for the time I was away. He found out and kidnapped her from school, hauling her off on his motorcycle for the day. Alice said she had come home on her own, obviously upset.

So she had left *him* then, probably in reaction to something he had said or done. He had shot himself in the foot in some way. When I thought more about that, I realized that as a werewolf, Jacob Black probably couldn’t help himself, couldn’t hold his temper, and it must make him very angry that she came home to *me* every day.

She comes home to me..., I reminded myself.

Maybe I *was* overreacting, driving her away in the process. When I tried to make Bella do one thing, she became more determined to do the opposite. She didn’t like to be taken care of and she didn’t like being told what she couldn’t do. Unlike me, Jacob Black gave Bella the freedom to take risks. Though every fiber of my being warred against it, maybe there was something to be learned from that.

Carlisle glanced at me. *What are you thinking?*

“That maybe this isn’t the best way to handle things,” I said, repeating his earlier thoughts. I smiled reluctantly and he smiled back.

You’ll do the right thing, he thought, turning back to the road.

From the back seat, I heard, *Gawd! I hate it when they do that!*

“Sorry, Emmett.” He huffed once and looked out the window.

When we got home, Alice met us in the garage. *She's fine. She's sleeping in your room. Don't be mad...*

I shook my head and hurried inside.

Alice, my Alice..., Jasper thought, taking her in his arms.

Rosalie was waiting for Emmett in the living room. *I wonder if she'll change her mind because of me. Probably not. But she could still have a husband, children, a real life! I can't stand it!* My sister started when I came into the room. *I talked to Bella*, she thought guiltily.

I nodded.

It's not because I don't think you're a good man...you know I do. And I want you to be happy too, it's just...

"Don't worry about it, Rosalie. I understand. Did it make any difference?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Rose!" Emmett roared, thundering into the house at a quick clip. "You should have seen the bears! It was great!"

Rosalie rolled her eyes in my direction and then put her arms around Emmett's neck and they greeted one another like they always did—as if they'd been on separate desert islands for six months.

"Try to keep it down, Em. Bella's sleeping."

"Oh yeah, sorry."

I greeted and thanked my mother on the stairs as I raced up them, anxious to see Bella and make sure she was okay. Rushing into my room, I saw the bed I had bought sitting exactly where it should be, but the coverlet was stripped off and there was no Bella. My granite heart leaped into my throat in panic. *WHERE IS SHE?*

But then, scanning the room, I saw a tousled pile of golden cloth half on, half hanging off the couch. Bella must be under there somewhere. *What was going on?*

I backed silently out of the room to find Alice. She and Jasper were heading to their room together.

She was annoyed about you buying her a bed. She said it was “unnecessary,” Alice answered before the question was out of my mouth. She and Jasper continued into their bedroom and shut the door.

So the bed is unnecessary, is it? In my vague, indeterminate dreams of the future, I’d been hoping secretly that it *wouldn’t* be unnecessary. I found the idea of sharing it with Bella intensely pleasing.

I raced back up to my third floor bedroom and stood gazing at her face. I could see the distress written there. Was she having nightmares? She couldn’t be comfortable where she was. The couch seat sloped down toward its backrest, Barcelona-style. As gently as possible, I burrowed my arms beneath her body, lifting her and the coverlet together and transporting them to the bed. I laid her down on the mattress with her head resting on a feather pillow. Then I straightened the coverlet and crawled beneath it with her, careful not to touch her warm, moist skin. I inhaled her breath and let the scent wash over me. She was my home—where I belonged, always.

Bella stirred and turned away from me, stretching. Then she rolled back toward me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” I whispered softly when I saw her eyes open.

Bella inhaled deeply and dug under the covers for my hands, pulling herself close to me. Suddenly, all my tension, all my worry fell away, as if it had never been. I hadn’t realized that I’d truly left my heart with her until we were reunited. I wrapped my arms around her and nestled her against my chest. Serenity washed over me like a soft wave on the beach and I let go of the madness I’d felt while separated from her. I never wanted to leave her again.

Was she angry? She didn’t seem so.

I felt Bella’s soft lips touch my throat and gradually move over my jawline as she sought my mouth in the dark. We kissed gently and I chuckled.

“I was all braced for the wrath that was going to put grizzlies to shame, and this is what I get? I should infuriate you more often.”

“Give me a minute to work up to it,” Bella whispered, pressing her lips to mine.

Ahhh...

“I’ll wait as long as you want,” I whispered back, burying my hands in her hair in a sudden rush of emotion. Bella’s accelerated breaths told me she felt it too.

“Maybe in the morning,” she murmured.

“Whatever you prefer.”

“Welcome home,” Bella said as my lips wandered down her throat, pausing to feel the pulse in her carotid artery and smelling her luscious freesia scent. “I’m glad you came back.” Her heart thumped an irregular rhythm.

“That’s a very good thing,” I replied.

“Mmm,” she murmured, scooting closer to me, her arms around my neck.

Perhaps I could alter Bella’s attitude toward my new bedroom addition. As we lay face-to-face, I kissed a line down her throat and a powerful urge came over me. What would it be like if we *could* make love on our bed, to move my body in ways I never had, touching her as I’d never wanted to do with anyone before.

I brushed my hand slowly along the back of her arm to her torso and down the side of her body. My breath quickened as I traced the shape of her, the enticing hourglass indentation of her waist. I ran my fingers across it and then back across her hips. She drew in her breath. My hand continued down the smooth line of her left thigh, the fabric of her sweatpants protecting her skin from my chill.

In a lustful impulse, I grasped her knee and hitched it over my hip, tasting the scent of her arousal as it wafted on the air. *This* is how it would feel to have my love open her legs for me. I felt a familiar ache in my groin and my breath turned to a shallow pant, while Bella stopped breathing altogether. It was reckless behavior, I knew. Taking a few liberties could easily lead to taking more, but the call of this unfulfilled desire was so painfully exquisite. I brushed my lips into the hollow place at the base of my love’s throat and smelled the change in the balance of her musky-sweet scent.

“Not to bring on the ire prematurely,” I whispered with my lips moving against her skin, “but do you mind telling me what it is about this bed that you object to?”

I rolled onto my back and pulled Bella on top of me. I could feel the weight of her hips settle onto the most sensitive part of my body and I resisted a groan. As her heart galloped and my breath became ragged, I held her face between my hands and angled her chin upward so I could touch my lips to her throat.

“The bed?” I repeated. “I think it’s nice.” I was determined to give her a reason to like the bed I’d chosen especially for us.

“It’s unnecessary,” Bella declared between gasps.

I pulled her chin down to touch her lips to mine, caressing and stroking until her body trembled. As her weight settled into me, I lay beneath her and savored that thrilling new sensation for a moment. Then carefully, I pulled her close and rolled us over until I hovered over her with every part of my body lightly touching the adjacent part of hers. Her arms around my waist, Bella strained to pull me more tightly against her, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm. It was becoming quite, quite clear what all the fuss was about.

“That’s debatable,” I said. “This would be difficult on a couch.”

I leaned in and slowly, gently, licked a circle around the perimeter of her lips with the tip of my tongue, tasting her as she had recently tasted me. Bella’s face and upper chest were flushed a delicious pink and her hips pressed toward me in a clear signal of wanting more. I had never been like this with anyone before, but I could see it was instinctive.

“Did you change your mind?” Bella gasped and, abruptly, I dropped back to earth. My experimentation had taken her where I’d wanted to go and now I recognized the folly of my ways.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Bella.” Even half a step further would be too risky. “I was just trying to illustrate the benefits of the bed you don’t seem to like. Don’t get carried away.” I rolled onto my side with a sigh.

“Too late,” she mumbled. “And I like the bed.”

“Good.” I kissed her forehead, a little too pleased with myself. “I do, too.”

“But I still think it’s unnecessary. If we’re not going to get carried away, what’s the point?”

I sighed heavily. “For the hundredth time, Bella—it’s too dangerous.” I could hear the vexation in my voice and knew that I was as frustrated by that fact as she was.

“I like danger.”

“I know,” I replied, reminded of her trip to the reservation on the back of Jacob’s motorcycle and the return ride on her own, which was now parked in our garage. She *liked* risking her life, I thought with irritation.

"I'll tell you what's dangerous," Bella declared. "I'm going to spontaneously combust one of these days—and you'll have no one but yourself to blame."

She was absolutely right. I pushed her away to give us some separation.

"What are you doing?" she complained, trying to pull herself back.

"Protecting you from combustion. If this is too much for you..."

"I can handle it," she said, retracting her complaint and squirming up against me.

"I'm sorry I gave you the wrong impression. I didn't mean to make you unhappy. That wasn't nice." I was sincerely sorry, but that didn't preclude me from wanting to do it again.

"Actually, it was very, very nice," Bella whispered into my ear, sending a shiver down my back.

I inhaled deeply to calm myself and then changed the subject. "Aren't you tired? I should let you sleep."

"No, I'm not. I don't mind if you want to give me the wrong impression again."

"That's probably a bad idea. You're not the only one who gets carried away."

"Yes, I am," she grumbled.

I chuckled at that. She did not know of the countless hours I spent during our nights together fantasizing about touching her as I wished to.

"You have no idea, Bella. It doesn't help that you are so eager to undermine my self-control, either."

"I'm not going to apologize for that."

It was *definitely* time to change the subject. And we had some outstanding issues.

"Can I apologize?" I asked.

"For what?"

"You were angry with me, remember?"

"Oh, that."

"I'm sorry. I was wrong. It's much easier to have the proper perspective when I have you safely *here*." I pulled her head against my chest and tightened my hold on her. "I go a little berserk when I try to leave you. I don't think I'll go so far again. It's not worth it."

"Didn't you find any mountain lions?"

"Yes, I did, actually. Still not worth the anxiety. I'm sorry I had Alice hold you hostage, though. That was a bad idea."

"Yes," Bella agreed.

"I won't do it again," I promised. I *had* overreacted. And I wasn't putting my faith in her the way that Carlisle always so generously did with me. She deserved my trust even if it was difficult to lend it. I hated the helplessness of not *knowing*, but that wasn't *her* fault, or her problem, either.

"Okay," she said with no hesitation. "But slumber parties do have their advantages..." Bella moved closer and touched her lips to the hollow above my collarbone. "*You* can hold me hostage any time you want."

I *did* want, actually. I was learning *all* about wanting. "Mmm, I may take you up on that."

"So is it my turn now?" Bella asked.

"Your turn?"

"To apologize."

"What do you have to apologize for?" I could think of nothing.

"Aren't you mad at me?"

"No."

Bella seemed confused. "Didn't you see Alice when you got home?"

"Yes—why?"

"Are you going to take her Porsche back?"

"Of course not. It was a gift." *Why would she even think that? Is that what Alice believed?*

"Don't you want to know what I did?" Bella inquired like a naughty child.

I shrugged. "I'm always interested in everything you do—but you don't have to tell me unless you want to."

"But I went to La Push."

"I know."

"And I ditched school."

"So did I." I smiled.

Bella's fingers moved around my face in the dark, stroking a cheekbone, an eyebrow, my lips. "Where did all this tolerance come from?"

I heaved a sigh. "I decided that you were right. My problem before was more about my...prejudice against werewolves than anything else. I'm going to try to be more reasonable and trust your judgment. If you say it's safe, then I'll believe you."

"Wow."

"And...most importantly...I'm not willing to let this drive a wedge between us."

Bella lay her head on my chest and sighed. I was going to try giving Bella the trust she deserved—and restrain my dislike for the wolves—but I was still curious.

"So," I began, trying to sound casual. "Did you make plans to go back to La Push again soon?"

Bella tensed up as if she were waiting for a second shoe to drop. I quickly backed off.

"Just so that I can make my own plans. I don't want you to feel like you have to hurry back because I'm sitting around waiting for you."

"No, I don't have plans go back." Bella's voice was high and tight.

"Oh. You don't have to do that for me," I reiterated. I didn't want her to feel like I was trying to control her. It only pushed her away from me.

"I don't think I'm welcome anymore," Bella murmured in a pained voice.

"Did you run over someone's cat?" I asked lightly. She didn't have to tell me what was private to her. I was determined to give her space to breathe—even if my curiosity killed me.

"No." She hesitated and looked away and then sighed and decided to tell me what was wrong. "I thought Jacob would have realized...I didn't think it would surprise him."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but I didn't want to press her.

"He wasn't expecting...that it was so soon."

"Ah." Now I understood. She had told him of her after-graduation plans.

"He said he'd rather see me dead." Bella's voice cracked on the last word.

Anger ripped through me and I struggled to hide my fierce reaction from Bella.

I hugged her to me. "I'm so sorry."

"I thought you'd be glad."

"Glad over something that's hurt you? I don't think so, Bella." I spoke into her hair, which muffled the violent emotion I felt.

Bella curled closer to me, as I struggled with a desire—again—to slam Jacob Black to the ground and stomp on him. Bella recognized my stress.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"It's nothing."

"You can tell me."

Just when I'd decided to practice tolerance... "It might make you angry."

"I still want to know."

I exhaled again to release some tension. "I could quite literally kill him for saying that to you. I *want* to."

Bella chuckled without humor. "I guess it's a good thing you've got so much self-control."

"I could slip." I considered that possibility for a moment and found it pleasant.

"If you're going to have a lapse in control, I can think of a better place for it," Bella said coyly as she tried to scoot upward to reach my lips.

I was still angry with Jacob and that would make self-control more difficult all around, so I held her still. *Pushing, pushing, pushing...always she was pushing me.* I so wanted to surrender.

"Must I always be the responsible one?" I complained.

“No. Let me be in charge of responsibility for a few minutes...or hours,” she offered temptingly.

“Goodnight, Bella.” At least I sounded firm.

“Wait—there was something else I wanted to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“I was talking to Rosalie last night...,” she hesitated and I tensed. Would my sister’s words sway Bella either to hurry up or to delay her transformation? I was only beginning to understand my own motivation for being with Bella differently on this night. In all honesty—and against what I believed to be right—I’d caught myself anticipating the day when Bella and I would be the same...and free to make love. It hadn’t been conscious, but it was there.

“Yes, she was thinking about that when I got in. She gave you quite a lot to consider, didn’t she?”

In her matchless fashion, Bella completely surprised me. “She told me a little bit...about the time your family lived in Denali.”

“Yes?” I had no idea what the significance of this topic might be.

“She mentioned something about a bunch of female vampires...and you.”

Oh. Maybe Rosalie was trying to scare Bella away. I didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t worry,” Bella finally said, breaking the silence. “She told me you didn’t... show any preference. But I was just wondering, you know, if any of *them* had. Shown a preference for you, I mean.”

This was not a topic I felt comfortable discussing, my troubles with Tanya. Her feelings were her business and they had no relevance to Bella and me.

But Bella pressed on. “Which one?” She tried to make the question sound off—the-cuff—unsuccessfully. She *really* cared about the answer. “Or was there more than one?”

Suddenly, I felt trapped. *Damned if I do and damned if I don’t!*

“Alice will tell me,” Bella threatened. “I’ll go ask her right now.”

Argh! I clutched her tightly in my arms, reluctant to talk about it, but also unwilling for her to ask anyone else. Nothing good could come of it.

"It's late," I said to discourage her. Tanya was my own cross to bear. It embarrassed me even to think about her. "Besides, I think Alice stepped out..." She and Jasper had no doubt retreated to one of their more private love nests in the woods.

"It's bad. It's really bad, isn't it?" Bella asked in alarm. She was getting worked up over something that never happened. I suppose I had to tell her *something*. *Dammit, Rosalie!*

"Calm down, Bella," I soothed, kissing the tip of her nose. "You're being absurd."

"Am I? Then why won't you tell me?"

"Because there's nothing to tell. You're blowing this wildly out of proportion."

"Which one?" She was relentless.

I gave in. "Tanya expressed a little interest. I let her know, in a very courteous, gentlemanly fashion, that I did not return that interest. End of story."

"Tell me something—what does Tanya look like?" Bella tried for casual again.

"Just like the rest of us—white skin, gold eyes," I said, trying to brush off the question.

"And, of course, extraordinarily beautiful," Bella added. She was feeling insecure, obviously. And *jealous!* That was new...

I shrugged indifferently. "I suppose, to human eyes. You know what, though?"

"What?" Bella asked like a disgruntled child.

I whispered directly into her ear. "I prefer brunettes." The fact was that I preferred only *one* brunette over all others.

"She's a blonde. That figures."

"Strawberry blonde—not at all my type," I told her. It appeared that I needed to jolly her out of her pout and I knew how to do that!

I could almost hear Bella's thoughts about Tanya running away with her while I brushed my lips down her cheek, over her jaw, down her throat and all the way back up. No response. I made another circuit and her petulance faltered. A third circuit and her body relaxed.

"I *guess* that's okay, then," Bella allowed.

"Hmm." My lips vibrated against her throat. "You're quite adorable when you're jealous. It's surprisingly enjoyable." I chuckled.

Bella was not entirely at ease.

“It’s late,” I crooned. “Sleep, my Bella. Dream happy dreams. You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours. Sleep, my only love.”

I began to hum Bella’s lullaby to encourage her to shut her eyes and after a while, she did.

7. Intruder

I held Bella for the rest of that short night and when she awoke, I was there—something new for us. It had been a rough night for her and that made me very angry. She hadn't mentioned any names, but I knew already what the problem was. She'd been crying in her sleep—or rather, making pitiful whining noises and gulping air, which is as close as a human gets to crying when she is unconscious and paralyzed in sleep. Watching her reminded me of watching a vampire cry...the gasping, burning eyes, a hitch in the breath.

When she blinked herself awake and looked up at me, I saw that her eyes were bloodshot. She didn't seem to remember the dreaming and so I didn't bring it up. I just held her and stroked her face. When she woke fully, she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Morning breath," she mumbled.

"Not to me," I said and moved her hand away before touching my lips to hers.

"Mmm," she breathed, and then "Ewww," and covered her mouth with her hand again. "I have to brush my teeth," she said, rolling away from me.

"If you must," I replied, rolling off the other side of the bed. I watched as Bella dug through her small bag of toiletries before grabbing the whole thing and a short pile of clothes too.

"Be right back."

When she returned from the bathroom, she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt and her hair was brushed. She walked across the room toward me and I opened my arms for her. She threw her arms around my neck and rose on her toes for a kiss.

"You two up?" Alice called through the door. "It's ten o'clock. Time to get Bella home to Charlie."

"Okay, Alice," I replied. "Are you ready, my love?"

"I didn't get my kiss yet," she reminded me.

I smiled and wrapped one arm around her, lifting her so that her face was level with mine. She met my lips halfway while simultaneously raising her legs and locking her bare feet behind my waist. Reflexively, I placed my free hand under her bottom to support her weight.

Whoa! This felt worlds different than when Alice had done something similar earlier in the week. I felt the throb of her pulse against the most intimate part of my body.

My craving for her intensified fast and I reached down with one hand to unwind her legs, but Bella gripped even more tightly with her arms to discourage me from pulling her loose. I gave in then and let the kiss go on for as long as I could bear it before breaking her grip around my neck and unlocking her legs from my waist. I set her on her feet, breathing hard.

“You are trouble with a capital ‘T’.”

“*Mmmm...*, that was nice,” Bella replied huskily.

“Nevertheless, you need to show your face at Charlie’s so I can return from my hiking trip.” I smiled then.

“Killjoy,” Bella accused and scrunched her face at me.

“Those red toenails are very nice,” I whispered into her ear. Then I brushed my fingers lightly down her jaw and kissed her cheek. “See you soon.”

Reluctantly, Bella let Alice take her home and I was left floating in a glow of golden light, high from our reunion. Being with Bella when she woke up in *our* bed was revelatory. I could imagine what it would feel like to be married to her with the privilege of watching her wake up every morning. I wanted it even more.

Two things had changed for me during the night. Firstly, I’d come to terms with the reality that the werewolves, and Jacob Black in particular, were in Bella’s life at least for now. I had to accept that or risk losing her altogether. I still wanted to do everything I could to keep her safe, but I also had to practice trust, no matter how hard it might be. Compromise was key. Probably, I never would feel comfortable when Bella was around the werewolves—I knew the damage they could do—but perhaps with time, they would earn my trust as they had Bella’s.

Secondly, I’d realized that though Bella and Jacob were on the outs at the moment, Bella would not be happy as long as she was fighting with her friend. The fact that he’d said something to hurt her made me exceedingly angry, but Bella was unlikely to hold it against him if he came to his senses and apologized to her. In fact, I might take it upon myself to make *sure* that he did, if necessary.

Until then, I wondered if Bella would continue to ride the red motorcycle that she had parked in our garage. I didn’t like the idea of her riding alone. If I had a motorcycle too, perhaps I could accompany her. Would she like that? It would be fun to ride a fast bike, a Ducati perhaps. No matter what, though, if she wanted to take the risk of riding, then at least she

should wear safety gear. One false move on a motorcycle and a human could die instantly. I decided to find her a helmet and jacket immediately. She probably wouldn't go for matching leather pants, though. *Too bad*. They would suit her.

I hated being separated from Bella, now more than ever. But fortunately, I didn't have to tolerate it for long on this day. Bella should be home long enough before I arrived to convince Charlie that I'd just returned from a hiking trip. He would naturally be suspicious that Bella and I had spent the night together and though we had, of course, we hadn't done much that he could disapprove of. Regardless, there was no reason for him to get worked up about me all over again.

Listening to Charlie's thoughts after returning from Florida, I'd figured out what had caused his sudden change of heart toward me. The pivotal moment had been when Bella told Charlie she was a virgin. After recovering from his initial embarrassment and surprise, he began looking at me differently than he had before.

Unfortunately, the afterglow of Bella's revelation had been diminishing steadily since then. The idea of my being "old-fashioned" didn't fly very far with him. He'd decided that past behavior did not predict future behavior, especially for a twenty-first-century teenage boy and obviously, Bella and I were closer than ever.

I laughed to myself, thinking of an episode that had occurred a few nights earlier. I had been kissing Bella goodnight before she went to sleep when I felt one of her hands moving southward down my torso. I grabbed her wrist before she got too far.

"I want to touch you," she'd complained.

"I might be old-fashioned," I said, repeating her description of me to Charlie, "but I'm not made of stone. Well, I am kind of," I amended.

"You listened!" she sputtered. "When we were talking about..."

"I couldn't very well help it. Charlie's thoughts were practically screaming at me all the way home." I could feel the heat of her blush. She buried her face between my arm and chest.

"Don't be embarrassed. He's been surprisingly nice to me since then," I told her.

"Is *that* why?" Bella asked forgetting her shyness and raising her head. "I was wondering."

"It probably won't last."

After Alice returned from Charlie's house, I waited another forty minutes and then left to go back to town. As I neared the last corner before Bella's house, suddenly I was punched in the face by a scent coming through the vent. It was a *vampire's* scent and not one I recognized. I stomped the accelerator to the floor. *Bella was in danger!* My car fishtailed around the corner and I slammed it to a stop in front of Charlie's house. I leaped out and ran to the front door. The scent led *here!*

I turned my head in every direction, looking for signs of him before I realized that the scent was not fresh. *Hadn't Alice smelled it?* I knocked on the front door and with relief, heard both Charlie's and Bella's voices behind it.

"Door."

"Don't strain yourself, Dad."

They didn't know that anything was wrong. Bella pulled open the door and looked at me first with a smile and then with surprise. I was in tracking mode, sniffing the air, ready to attack.

"Edward? What—?"

I touched her lips with a finger to shush her so I could listen. "Give me two seconds. Don't move," I warned in a whisper.

I dashed up the stairs following the scent, and as I'd feared, it led to Bella's room, but the individual had been gone for a while, probably since before Bella returned home this morning. Alice had some *explaining* to do! I dashed back downstairs and grabbed Bella around the waist, relocating her swiftly into the kitchen against the far wall away from the windows, so no one could sneak up behind us. I stationed my body in front of her defensively.

"Someone's been here," I whispered in her ear.

"I swear that no werewolves—" Bella began.

"Not one of them," I hurriedly explained. "One of us."

Bella's face paled instantly and I tightened my arm around her, still alert.

"Victoria?" she gasped.

"It's not a scent I recognize."

"One of the Volturi," she deduced.

"Probably."

“When?”

“That’s why I think it must have been them—it wasn’t long ago, early this morning while Charlie was sleeping. And whoever it was didn’t touch him, so there must have been another purpose.” Charlie himself had none of the scent on him and it didn’t lead into his room.

“Looking for me,” Bella guessed. I was sure she was right. I went silent and stiff with anxiety. If he’d stuck around, she could have been killed when Alice brought her home!

“What are you two hissing about in here?” Charlie inquired, entering the kitchen with an empty bowl. Then he saw the look on Bella’s face and made an incorrect, but convenient, assumption.

“If you two are having a fight...well, don’t let me interrupt.” He was smiling, perversely glad that we might be having problems. I couldn’t focus on him and Bella seemed unable to speak. Charlie put his bowl in the sink and returned to his Saturday sports in the living room, smirking.

“Let’s go,” I muttered. There was no time to waste.

“But Charlie!” Bella cried softly, her voice high and tight, the sound of panic. I considered that for a moment before reaching for my phone. If the visitor had wanted to kill Charlie, he’d had a perfect opportunity. I didn’t think Bella’s father was in danger, but I knew she wouldn’t see it that way.

“Yo, bro!”

“Emmett,” I began immediately, giving him no time to speak. “A vampire has been here looking for Bella—nobody I recognize. I need to get her out of here, but she’s worried about her father.”

“Wow, cool! I’ll chase him down!”

“Good. Bring Jasper. You two can track him. At least make sure that Charlie’s safe. We also need to know where he’s gone...if he’s still in the area. See you at home after.”

I hung up and pulled Bella through the kitchen toward the front door. She didn’t want to leave Charlie and began dragging her feet. I had spoken in such a rush that she hadn’t understood the conversation.

“Emmett and Jasper are on their way,” I told her in a whisper. “They’ll sweep the woods. Charlie is fine.” I didn’t give her time to say goodbye. I rushed her out to the car, watching for any unusual movement or scents.

“Where are we going?” Bella asked in the car.

“We’re going to talk to Alice.” *How could she have missed this?* I was becoming angrier by the minute as I wondered what else she had missed.

“You think maybe she saw something?”

“Maybe,” I answered carefully, trying to control my temper. *She should have!*

My sisters, mother, and father were waiting for us in the living room, each of them immobilized by anxiety. They were horrified by the near miss, but were also anticipating my reaction. When I saw them standing there, affirming the danger, my panic exploded as anger, aimed directly at Alice.

“What happened?” I fired at her, my hands curling into tight fists.

“I have no idea,” Alice answered from her perfect stillness, arms folded protectively across her chest. “I didn’t see anything.”

“How is that *possible?*” I roared.

“Edward,” Bella cautioned.

“It’s not an exact science, Edward,” my father chastised.

“He was in her *room*, Alice,” I shouted. “He could have still been there—waiting for her.”

“I would have seen that,” she disagreed coldly.

“Really? You’re sure?” My sarcastic fury was lost on nobody.

“You’ve already got me watching the Volturis’ decisions, watching for Victoria’s return, watching Bella’s every step. You want to add another? Do I just have to watch Charlie, or Bella’s room, or the house, or the whole street, too? Edward, if I try to do too much, things are going to start slipping through the cracks.”

“It looks like they already are.”

“She was never in any danger. There was nothing to see.”

“If you’re watching Italy, why didn’t you see them send—”

“I don’t think it’s them,” Alice insisted. “I would have seen that.”

“Who else would leave Charlie alive?” I demanded.

“I don’t know,” Alice answered. That was utterly *useless*. What good was her skill if it was randomly ineffective, especially in such dangerous circumstances?

“Helpful,” I said snidely.

“Stop it, Edward,” Bella demanded.

I spun around ready for a fight when I saw her expression. *I* was scaring her! That pulled me up short. I took a deep breath to try and calm myself.

“You’re right, Bella. I’m sorry.” I turned to my sister. “Forgive me, Alice. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you. That was inexcusable.”

“I understand. I’m not happy about it, either.”

“Okay, let’s look at this logically,” I suggested as evenly as I could. “What are the possibilities?”

When I calmed down, everyone but Rosalie relaxed and re–animated. They’d been almost as stressed by my reaction to the situation as by the situation itself. I shouldn’t let my temper make everyone unhappy. That was wrong and unfair. Everybody here cared about Bella too, I knew. Esme moved to the couch and I pulled Bella in that direction, remembering that it was uncomfortable for her to stand as we habitually did. I sat beside her and took her hand in both of mine, while Esme put her arm around Bella’s shoulders.

Rosalie was looking out the window, motionless as a statue, waiting for Emmett’s return. She had always resented his being put in danger for Bella, though Emmett didn’t—he loved every minute of it. It wasn’t hard to see why that might bother Rosalie. Still, I had recently noticed that she was making an effort to change, something that was difficult for us under any circumstances.

Carlisle began to pace. When he reached Alice, who was standing behind the couch, he brushed her arm with his hand as a gesture of support. He was such a good man—and I fell so far short of him. As he paced back toward me, I saw his eyes return from the distant memories of Italy he was examining to see if anything explained what was going on now. He had found nothing there.

“Victoria?” he posited.

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t know the scent. He might have been from the Volturi, someone I’ve never met....” That was my best guess at the moment.

Alice disagreed. "Aro hasn't asked anyone to look for her yet. I *will* see that. I'm waiting for it."

Oh! That was a clue. "You're watching for an official command."

"You think someone's acting on their own?" Carlisle asked. "Why?"

"Caius's idea," I concluded with dread. Aro might let things ride for a time, but Caius would keep his promise to check on Bella and to take action against us if necessary. How soon he might do that was anyone's guess.

"Or Jane's..." Alice added. "They both have the resources to send an unfamiliar face..."

She was right. Jane was a certain threat to Bella who had frustrated and embarrassed her in Italy. "And the motivation," I added.

"It doesn't make sense, though," Esme interjected. "If whoever it was meant to wait for Bella, Alice would have seen that. He—or she—had no intention of hurting Bella. Or Charlie, for that matter." That was an important point. The visitor had come and gone, clearly for some purpose, but why?

Bella flinched at Charlie's name.

"It's going to be fine, Bella," Esme reassured her, stroking her hair.

"But what was the point then?" Carlisle said.

Exactly.

"Checking to see if I'm still human?" Bella suggested.

"Possible," Carlisle agreed.

Long gone. What a disappointment! I heard Emmett's thoughts outside the house. So they had found nothing. Rosalie saw him coming and broke her stillness, visibly relieved. We both looked toward the kitchen.

"Long gone, hours ago," Emmett announced to everyone. "The trail went east, then south, and disappeared on a side road. Had a car waiting."

"That's bad luck," I realized. "If he'd gone west...well, it would be nice for those dogs to make themselves useful." They would have attacked instantly. And if he was unconnected to Victoria—who already knew about them—then he'd have been caught by surprise and probably would be dead already.

Bella cringed. She was actually *worried* about the mutts. They weren't frightened of vampires, though. They got excited about the chance to take one out.

Jasper had brought some evidence with him, a piece of broken fern. "Neither of us recognized him. But here. Maybe you know the scent." He passed it to Carlisle who took a whiff of it.

"No, not familiar. No one I've ever met." That was a *bad* sign. The Volturi would have selected someone whom Carlisle wouldn't recognize if they were doing a surreptitious check on Bella. Jane would have, at least, especially if the visit wasn't authorized by Aro. My heart quailed.

Then Esme suggested a less ominous possibility. "Perhaps we're looking at this the wrong way. Maybe it's a coincidence..." Esme began. We all looked at her in disbelief. She clarified her point. "I don't mean a coincidence that a stranger happened to pick Bella's house to visit at random. I meant that maybe someone was just curious. Our scent is all around her. Was he wondering what draws us there?"

"Why wouldn't he just come here then? If he was curious?" Emmett asked.

"You would," Esme said to him with a motherly smile, knowing Emmett as she did. "The rest of us aren't always so direct. Our family is very large—he or she might be frightened. But Charlie wasn't harmed. This doesn't have to be an enemy."

Carlisle was considering that possibility, wishing it were true. It was how he preferred to see the world, less threatening, less evil. It seemed unlikely to me, though. A nomad wouldn't have hesitated to kill Charlie unless he simply wasn't thirsty.

Bella shuddered and I stroked her hand.

"I don't think so," Alice said. "The timing of it was too perfect.... This visitor was so careful to make no contact. Almost like he or she knew that I would see...."

"He could have other reasons for not making contact," Esme pointed out.

But I saw Alice's point and it was a frightening one. Someone who knew her capabilities and how to skirt them would be a serious threat to us. This undetected visit was proof of that.

"Does it really matter who it was?" Bella asked with a touch of desperation. "Just the chance that someone *was* looking for me...isn't that reason enough? We shouldn't wait for graduation."

“No, Bella,” I hastened to disagree. I didn’t want danger to be her reason for changing. Acting in fear could be cause for regret later. “It’s not that bad. If you’re really in danger, we’ll know.”

“Think of Charlie,” Carlisle reminded her. “Think of how it would hurt him if you disappeared.”

“I *am* thinking of Charlie! He’s the one I’m worried about! What if my little guest had happened to be thirsty last night? As long as I’m around Charlie, he’s a target, too. If anything happened to him, it would be all my fault!”

“Hardly, Bella,” my mother chided. “And nothing will happen to Charlie. We’re just going to have to be more careful.”

“*More* careful?” Bella echoed doubtfully.

“It’s all going to be fine, Bella,” Alice told her and I squeezed her hand.

Bella didn’t believe it. Did we? Did we truly believe it or were we all just trying to reassure her? Certainly, we were not *frightened* as she was, but that didn’t mean there was no danger.

Driving Bella home in the late afternoon, I sought to put her mind at ease, though I suspected it was futile.

“You won’t be alone for a second,” I told her. My family had decided to keep a twenty-four-hour watch on her house, with Jasper organizing time slots. “Someone will always be there. Emmett, Alice, Jasper...”

“This is ridiculous,” Bella protested. “They’ll get so bored, they’ll have to kill me themselves, just for something to do.”

“Hilarious, Bella,” I said tonelessly. She didn’t understand that we considered her to be part of our family now, though I did think it would be easier to protect both her and Charlie if she lived with us. I would work on that.

When we got to his house, Charlie was still grinning to himself about what he presumed was a fight between Bella and me. That was handy, actually. He had a ready explanation for our stress and wouldn’t be looking for the real problems lurking in the shadows.

Bella set about making Charlie’s dinner while I went outside to traverse the area and make sure no one was hanging around. I knew Charlie had some news about Jacob he wanted me to hear when I came back. The way Charlie pushed Jacob in my face at every turn was

intended to make me angry, I suppose, but it didn't especially. If I were a father, I might have preferred Jacob as my daughter's beau over me too. I couldn't blame him for his opinion of me after what I'd put Bella through and I knew that chastity would go only so far to redeem me in his eyes.

"Jacob called again," Charlie announced as soon as I returned to the house.

"Is that a fact?" Bella replied coolly.

"Don't be petty, Bella," Charlie scolded. "He sounded really low."

"Is Jacob paying you for all the P.R., or are you a volunteer?"

If Charlie knew what Jacob Black had said to his daughter, perhaps he would not be so eager to push the young man's cause. But in spite of her retort, Bella appeared to be pondering his remark. I'd already discovered that Jacob's pain—whether real or contrived—shot an arrow right through her heart.

At ten-thirty, I officially left Bella's house to go home, but I merely dropped off my car and returned on foot to join Jasper who was taking first watch.

I don't like this, he was thinking. He wasn't referring to the duty of protecting Bella, but to the uncertain dangers of the situation. As an army major by trade, he wanted to know his enemy. So did I.

After Charlie went to bed, I rejoined Bella in her room. When she finally fell asleep, she slept more peacefully than she had the previous night. Jacob's cruel words must be troubling her less, I concluded, which was good. I didn't want her to be hurt by their quarrel, even if he had behaved like an ass.

Charlie left early in the morning for a day of fishing, so I didn't bother going home at daybreak. Two mornings in a row I'd gotten to wake up with Bella.

"I'm going to let Jacob off the hook," Bella said at breakfast, unwittingly using a fishing metaphor.

"I knew you'd forgive him," I replied, giving her a smile. "Holding grudges is not one of your many talents."

She rolled her eyes at me, most likely assuming that the compliment was a joke. A few minutes later, she went to the telephone and dialed.

"Jacob?"

I heard his exuberant voice apologizing profusely on the other end of the line. He was so glad to hear from her.

"I'm not mad. You're forgiven," she said.

"I can't believe I was such a jerk," I heard him say.

"Don't worry about that—I'm used to it." I chuckled to myself.

Bella paused while Jacob asked her a question.

"How?" she asked and waited.

"Oh, *there's* a brilliant idea," she scoffed and glanced at me.

"Not right now," she told him, reluctantly, I thought.

"That's not the problem. There's...well, there's this other problem that's slightly more worrisome than a bratty teenage werewolf..."

"What's wrong?" Jacob inquired loudly on the other end of the line.

Bella hesitated and I held out my hand for the phone. Sam needed to know about the intruder so the pack could be on their guard in case he came back. Bella looked at me dubiously. It was obvious that she didn't trust me to speak civilly to Jacob. I sighed and moved my hand closer.

"Do you mind speaking to Edward? He wants to talk to you." I heard the uncertainty in her voice. I waited with my hand out while Jacob considered it on the other end of the line and then Bella handed me the receiver.

"Hello, Jacob," I said, as evenly as possible. I had to remember that I was practicing tolerance now.

"There's a problem?" he asked abruptly. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Someone was here—not a scent I know. Has your pack come across anything new?"

"He was in Forks?" Jacob's hackles went up. "Maybe he knows we're here and he's trying to go around us! There's been no sign of him on our land."

That didn't surprise me since Jasper and Emmett had followed the scent trail east and south away from the reservation.

“Here’s the crux, Jacob. I won’t be letting Bella out of my sight till I get this taken care of. It’s nothing personal—”

“That’s totally unnecessary!” Jacob interrupted. “We can protect her as well as you can. We’ve already proven that a hundred times! Before you came back, she was here all the time and it was fine!”

“You might be right—”

“And you can’t cover that much territory anyway. There’s no reason for us to sit out here on our tails if he’s staying on your side of the line. We have to make sure he doesn’t get around you. We should share patrols in Forks. Around Bella’s house at least.”

“That’s an interesting suggestion. We’re quite willing to renegotiate. If Sam is amenable.”

“I’ll convince him,” Jacob said assuredly.

“Thank you.”

“When are you all going hunting again? Bella can come to the reservation while you’re gone. Charlie won’t mind and she’ll be safe here. We can watch over her.”

“I’d planned to go alone, actually,” I replied. “And leave her with the others.”

“There’s no need for you to do that! The pack is always here and we can easily protect one little human. And you should let her visit when she wants to. We’re her friends and she practically lived here the whole time you were gone.”

That had to be a jibe, but Jacob was right—he and his pack had saved her life more than once when I wasn’t there to do it.

He continued, “We don’t lose control as much as you think we do. We keep each other in check. I know what you think about Sam and Emily, but Sam was alone then. It was much harder for him.”

I thought about that for a moment. He had a point.

“I’ll try to consider it objectively,” I replied. “As objectively as I’m capable of.”

“I want to come over to Bella’s to get his scent so we don’t confuse him with any of you.”

“That’s not a half-bad idea. When?”

“I was thinking right now, say ten minutes. Is that a problem?”

“No, that’s fine. I’d like a chance to follow the trail personally, anyway. Ten minutes...”

“You’ll leave so I can get a cleaner sample?”

“Certainly,” I agreed, though we both knew that wasn’t the reason he preferred me out of the house. I also preferred not being in the same room with him. I held the phone out. “Bella?”

She gave me a suspicious look. I thought she seemed uncomfortable that Jacob and I were planning something together. She wanted us to get along, or so she said, but maybe in a way, she also didn’t want that.

“What was that all about?” she said into the phone, while I went to look out the windows. I heard only her part of the conversation.

“Is that what you were trying to sell him?”

“Get Billy on it. What else?”

“What do you mean by ‘keep an eye on things’?”

“Of course not. You really shouldn’t do anything...risky, though....”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’re coming up?”

“Jake, I really don’t like the idea of you tracking—”

Jacob must have laughed at this objection or said something dismissive because when I reentered the room, Bella was glaring at the handset like it had made a rude noise. She stuck her tongue out at it before hanging up.

I moved up silently and wrapped my arms around Bella from behind, setting my chin on her shoulder.

“When Jacob gets here, I’m going to follow the intruder’s trail. Emmett and Jasper already did it, but I want to check it for myself. I might notice something new.”

“Edward, I thought we were getting past this ridiculous stuff. You have to leave the house when he comes over?”

"It's not that I feel any personal antagonism toward him, Bella, it's just easier for both of us," I told her, though I was still working on the antagonism part. I wasn't quite there yet. "I won't be far away. You'll be safe," I assured her.

"I'm not worried about *that*," Bella said, predictably.

I turned to leave when I felt an overpowering urge to do something tremendously immature. I whirled Bella around and pulled her to me, burying my face in her hair. Then I forcefully exhaled all the air in my lungs.

Take that Jacob Black! I thought, terribly amused with myself.

Hope he's gone, I heard as Jacob Black approached the house.

"I'll be right back," I told Bella, chuckling.

Just as we found the wet doggy smell of werewolves repulsive, the wolves were disgusted by our vampire scent. The sweetness of it burned the insides of their sensitive noses. Jacob wouldn't enjoy coming too close to Bella after I'd saturated her hair with the scent of my breath. In crude terms, I'd just marked Bella as mine, much like a dog would raise his leg to mark a tree. It was rude and childish, but exceptionally funny, I thought. I started laughing out loud imagining Jacob's reaction.

"What's so funny?" Bella pressed, but I wasn't about to tell her.

I opened the front door and slipped out, still laughing to myself. The joke was between me and Jacob Black's nose.

8. Truce

I ran through the woods behind Charlie's house following the intruder's scent. As Jasper and Emmett had told us, the trail headed straight east then south and ended abruptly on an old logging road. There was nothing new to be learned except that the escape vehicle had been a Ford Expedition with Perelli Scorpion all-terrain tires.

The intruder probably had stolen the sport-utility vehicle, which told me a couple of things about him. First, that he had crummy taste in automobiles, and second, he was familiar with the area. He knew that he would need an off-road vehicle in the Olympic National Forest and he had knowledge of the region's remote logging roads. He must be a local, even though we had never met any vampires from the area. The knowledge was mildly alarming, but it didn't really help our cause. The Volturi might have recruited or created a vampire from the Puget Sound area. He wasn't a newborn, though, or he probably would have killed Charlie.

I retraced my steps to Bella's house and heard her and Jacob talking in the kitchen.

"When the werewolf is being nice," Bella was saying, "...it's the best."

"Thanks, Bells." A moment of silence occurred before Jacob said, "Ugh. Your hair stinks worse than your room."

Ha! Jacob must have gotten a little too close to *my* girl.

I went back to the street to check the mailbox, chuckling all the way. I'd been waiting for Bella to receive a letter and to my delight, it had arrived. I folded the legal-sized envelope in half and put it in my pocket before heading toward the house.

"He's waiting for me to go. I can hear him outside," Jacob said.

"Oh." Did I hear disappointment in Bella's voice? They must be getting along or she wouldn't be sorry to see him go. So, that was good...I suppose.

"I'll go out the back," Jacob said. "Hold up a sec—hey, do you think you can come to La Push tonight? We're having a bonfire party. Emily will be there, and you could meet Kim...And I know Quil wants to see you, too. He's pretty peeved that you found out before he did."

"Yeah, Jake," Bella answered hesitantly, "I don't know about that. See, it's a little tense right now...."

"C'mon, you think somebody's going to get past all—all six of us?"

I smiled when he stuttered over the end of his sentence. What? Did Jacob have to *count* how many wolves were in his pack? Didn't he *know*?

"I'll ask," Bella said.

"Is he your warden, now, too? You know, I saw this story on the news last week about controlling, abusive teenage relationships and—"

"Okay!" Bella cut in. "Time for the werewolf to get out!"

I chuckled at her reaction, though the word "controlling" stung a little.

"Bye, Bells. Be sure you ask *permission*," Jacob mocked like a snot-nosed brat. The kitchen door slammed, signaling his exit.

I let myself in through the front door and immediately smelled his blood. *That* was odd. Maybe Bella had stabbed him. As I entered the kitchen, I looked around for the evidence and saw a bloody knife on the counter. She *did* stab him! *Interesting...*

"Did you two get into a fight?" I asked from the doorway.

"Edward!" Bella called happily as she ran across the room and threw herself into my arms.

"Hi, there." I laughed and pulled her close. "Are you trying to distract me? It's working."

"No, I didn't fight with Jacob. Much. Why?"

"I was just wondering why you stabbed him. Not that I object." I gestured toward the bloody knife.

"Dang! I thought I got everything."

Bella pulled away and dashed to the sink. She dropped in the knife and poured bleach over it, a clean-up routine she'd learned from my family. Bleach didn't eliminate the scent of blood entirely, but it made what remained unpalatable.

"I didn't stab him," Bella explained. "He forgot he had a knife in his hand."

I laughed. "That's not nearly as fun as the way I imagined it."

"Be nice," Bella chided.

"I got your mail," I said, changing the subject. I pulled the long envelope from my pocket and tossed it on the counter near her.

“Anything good?”

“I think so.”

Bella reached for the envelope and examined the return address.

“Dartmouth? Is this a joke?”

“I’m sure it’s an acceptance. It looks exactly like mine.”

“Good grief, Edward—what did you *do*?”

“I sent in your application, that’s all,” I replied innocently. *I* hadn’t done anything else, but I couldn’t answer for what my father might have done on my behalf.

“I may not be Dartmouth material, but I’m not stupid enough to believe *that*.”

“Dartmouth seems to think that you’re Dartmouth material,” I said changing the subject.

Bella remained silent for a while before answering. “That’s very generous of them. However, accepted or not, there is still the minor matter of tuition. I can’t afford it, and I’m not letting you throw away enough money to buy yourself another sports car just so that I can pretend to go to Dartmouth next year.”

“I don’t need another sports car. And you don’t have to pretend anything,” I said. “One year of college wouldn’t kill you. Maybe you’d even like it. Just think about it, Bella. Imagine how excited Charlie and Renee would be....”

I saw Bella’s eyes light up as she considered her parents’ delight. What she wouldn’t do for herself, she would do for them, and the better part of me still wanted her to experience more of her human life before she threw it away.

“Edward,” Bella finally replied. “I’m worried about living through graduation, let alone this summer or next fall.”

I heard the fear in her voice and hurried to wrap her protectively in my arms. “No one is going to hurt you,” I promised. “You have all the time in the world.”

Bella wasn’t buying my reassurance.

“I’m mailing the contents of my bank account to Alaska tomorrow. It’s all the alibi I need. It’s far enough away that Charlie won’t expect a visit until Christmas at the earliest. And

I'm sure I'll think of some excuse by then." Bella continued after another moment. "You know, this whole secrecy and deception thing is kind of a pain."

Mildly annoyed at her willful innocence, I said, "It gets easier. After a few decades, everyone you know is dead. Problem solved."

Bella flinched like she'd been struck and I immediately regretted my words.

"Sorry, that was harsh."

"But still true," Bella admitted, avoiding my eyes.

"If I get this resolved, whatever it is we're dealing with, will you please *consider* waiting?" I pleaded.

"Nope."

"Always so stubborn."

"Yep."

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bella started at the loud noise. The ancient washing machine had become unbalanced, causing the rotating drum to crash into its metal housing.

"Stupid piece of junk," Bella grumbled, moving to the machine and reaching inside to reposition a wet towel. They needed a new one, but I knew Bella wouldn't accept such a gift.

"This reminds me," Bella mentioned. "Could you ask Alice what she did with my stuff when she cleaned my room? I can't find it anywhere."

"Alice cleaned your room?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yeah, I guess that's what she was doing. When she came to get my pajamas and pillow and stuff to hold me hostage." She paused to give me a dirty look for my part in that episode and then added, "She picked up everything that was lying around, my shirts, my socks, and I don't know where she put them."

That didn't sound like something Alice would do, get her hands dirty picking up after someone else. She was a decorator, not a cleaner. Soiled clothes? I didn't think so...

Then I froze. "When did you notice your things were missing?"

"When I got back from the fake slumber party. Why?"

"I don't think Alice took anything. Not your clothes, or your pillow. The things that were taken, these were things you'd worn...and touched...and slept on?"

"Yes. What is it, Edward?"

I hesitated before answering reluctantly, "Things with your scent."

"Oh!"

We looked at each other. The ramifications were clear.

"My visitor," Bella mumbled.

"He was gathering traces...evidence. To prove that he'd found you?"

"Why?" Bella whispered.

"I don't know. But, Bella, I swear I *will* find out. I will."

"I know you will," she said with sad resignation and leaned her head against my chest.

My cell phone vibrated in my jacket pocket and I pulled it out. "Just the person I need to talk to," I muttered to myself and flipped open the phone. "Carlisle, I—" My father was already speaking so I cut my sentence short.

"Edward, have you seen today's headlines? The murders are accelerating and the perpetrators are making no attempts to cover their tracks. Something is bound to happen soon."

"I'll check it out," I promised and then broke our bad news. "Listen, whoever was in Bella's room took clothes she had worn and the pillow from her bed. He was collecting items with her scent on them."

"As tracking material, do you think?"

"Or proof that she's still human."

"Do you think it's the Volturi then?"

"Maybe." The unidentifiable scent gave us no sure answers.

"Emmett wants to go to Seattle and do some surveillance," Carlisle said. "Perhaps it's time we did, except that Alice can't see us there, can't see what will happen if we go."

“Maybe I’ll go...,” I said, thinking how useful it would be to read the minds of the perpetrators. Then I glanced at Bella and thought twice. She needed me with her. “Maybe not. Don’t let Emmett go alone, you know how he gets. At least ask Alice to keep an eye on things. We’ll figure this out later.” Bella was my first priority.

“Okay, we’ll talk when you get home,” Carlisle agreed.

I shut the phone. “Where’s the paper?” I asked Bella.

“Um, I’m not sure. Why?”

“I need to see something. Did Charlie already throw it out?”

“Maybe...”

I popped out the back door and found the sodden paper in the recycle bin. I took it inside and spread it on the kitchen table:

Murder Epidemic Continues—Police Have No New Leads

I scanned the article. In the last three months, the death toll had risen to thirty-five bodies found in the streets or floating in Puget Sound. Some were missing limbs; most had crushed and fractured bones; all had been burned beyond recognition. Random acts of violence—overturned vehicles, broken plate glass, large fires—accompanied the deaths and no witnesses were ever found.

“Carlisle’s right...yes...very sloppy. Young and crazed? Or a death wish?” I muttered.

“It’s getting worse,” Bella commented, reading around my shoulder.

It was baffling. “Altogether out of control. This can’t be the work of just *one* newborn vampire. What’s going on? It’s as if they’ve never heard of the Volturi. Which is possible, I guess. No one has explained the rules to them...so who is creating them, then?”

“The Volturi?” Bella echoed.

“This is exactly the kind of thing they routinely wipe out—immortals who threaten to expose us. They just cleaned up a mess like this a few years ago in Atlanta, and it hadn’t gotten nearly this bad. They will intervene soon, very soon, unless we can find some way to calm the situation. I’d really rather they didn’t come to Seattle just now. As long as they’re this close...they might decide to check on you.” *If they haven’t already.*

Bella shuddered. “What can we do?”

“We need to know more before we can decide that. Perhaps if we can talk to these young ones, explain the rules, it can be resolved peacefully.” I had serious doubts, though. They were already so far out of control that there might be no reasoning with them. “We’ll wait until Alice has an idea of what’s going on,” I told Bella. “We don’t want to step in until it’s absolutely necessary. After all, it’s not our responsibility. But it’s good we have Jasper. If we are dealing with newborns, he’ll be helpful.”

“Jasper? Why?”

I smiled humorlessly. “Jasper is sort of an expert on young vampires.”

“What do you mean, an expert?”

“You’ll have to ask him—the story is involved.” I preferred that Bella find out directly from the source. It was too easy for me to share what I knew rather than what I’d been told.

“What a mess,” Bella muttered.

“It does feel that way, doesn’t it? Like it’s coming at us from all sides these days.” I sighed. “Do you ever think that your life might be easier if you weren’t in love with me?”

“Maybe. It wouldn’t be much of a life, though.”

“For me,” I noted. “And now, I suppose,” I said, changing the subject, “you have something you want to ask me?”

Bella looked confused. “I do?”

“Or maybe not.” I grinned. “I was rather under the impression that you’d promised to ask my permission to go to some kind of werewolf soiree tonight.”

“Eavesdropping again?”

I chuckled. “Just a bit, at the very end.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to ask you anyway. I figured you had enough to stress about.”

I lifted her chin to read her eyes as I asked her, “Would you like to go?”

“It’s no big thing. Don’t worry about it.”

“You don’t have to ask my permission, Bella. I’m not your father— thank heaven for *that*. Perhaps you should ask Charlie, though.”

“But you know Charlie will say yes.”

“I do have a bit more insight into his probable answer than most people would, it’s true.” I smiled and waited for her to tell me what she wanted to do. If she wanted to go, I would not object.

She just looked at me blankly.

“Bella,” I said softly. “I told you that I was going to be reasonable and trust your judgment. I meant that. If you trust the werewolves, then I’m not going to worry about them.”

“Wow,” she said, surprised.

“And Jacob’s right—about one thing, anyway—a pack of werewolves ought to be enough to protect even you for one evening.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Only...”

Bella stiffened.

“I hope you won’t mind taking a few precautions? Allowing me to drive you to the boundary line, for one. And then taking a cell phone, so that I’ll know when to pick you up?”

“That sounds...very reasonable.”

“Excellent.” I smiled at her. I suddenly realized that I *was* okay with Bella being on the reservation. The Quileute cared about her. The pack had tracked and killed Laurent when he’d been ready to feed on her. And obviously, Jacob loved her.

In the late afternoon, I went outside to check on Alice who had taken over sentry duty from Emmett, who had taken over from Jasper.

“It came!” Alice announced.

“So quickly?”

“Yes, it’s in the garage with Bella’s outfit. I picked a red helmet to match the motorcycle. It has a visor and a drop-down face shield. The leather jacket is doeskin, black with red side panels and it’s...well...let’s just say you’re going to like it—a lot!” She winked at me and grinned.

“I know you didn’t ask for it, but I also bought the matching leather pants and the leather chaps because I couldn’t decide. You might have to start Bella with the helmet and jacket and work up to the pants.” Trust Alice to be more interested in the clothing than in the remarkable machine I had purchased just that morning from Euro Motors in Olympia.

I had considered acquiring a motorcycle for a long time and I knew that the Ducati was the finest high-performance motorcycle money could buy. An 848—light, maneuverable, fast—was the perfect choice and silver was my color. I bought it over the phone and wired the agreed-upon amount to the dealer. They would deliver it at their earliest opportunity. Done. I’d also talked to Alice about buying Bella’s riding gear and she’d decided that it was close enough to fashion that she should drive her Porsche to Olympia and shop for the helmet and leathers herself.

“Jazz is impressed.”

“Has he ever ridden a motorcycle?”

“No, you know he’s always been more comfortable on horses.” Alice smiled.

Jasper was an officer in the US Cavalry during the American Civil War (or the War of Northern Aggression, as the Southerners prefer to call it) and is the second oldest vampire in our family. He’d never taken to driving quite the way the rest of us had.

“Thank you, Alice. That was fast, even for you.”

“It gave me a chance to drive my new car, which would give the Ducati a run for its money, by the way.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” She was begging for a road race, which *would* be fun. “Don’t tell Bella. I want to surprise her.”

“Of course.”

Charlie drove his police cruiser up the street a short while later, back from fishing. Alice went to greet him and say hi to Bella, while I ran some lines through the woods, searching for new scent trails.

On my return I heard Alice say from inside the house, “No, I can’t stay, but thank you, Charlie. I’m just running some errands. Bye, Bella! See you later!”

Alice came back to the woods to resume her watch and I went to help Bella make dinner. As I entered the house, Bella was asking Charlie about attending the Quileute bonfire.

“Sure, go on! Billy would love to see you,” Charlie said before retiring to the living room couch to watch television. With the TV blaring in the background, Bella called Jacob to tell him she would be coming to the reservation for the bonfire.

“Edward suggested escorting me to the boundary for safety’s sake. Can you pick me up there? And I’ll call for him to meet us there when I’m ready to go home... Okay... Good. I’ll see you at six o’clock on La Push Road.”

When she hung up, Bella looked over like she was waiting for me to object to something, but the arrangements sounded fine to me.

“Edward,” she said under her breath as she fried a hamburger for Charlie. “I’d like to take my motorcycle out to Jacob’s and leave it there. After I’m changed...I want him to have it to sell. He should reap the benefits from his work if it’s worth anything.”

Oh no! I wasn’t exactly ready for Bella to see the Ducati. I didn’t want her to think I was trying to intrude on her friendship with Jacob. I had more or less assumed that she had brought her motorcycle to our house because she didn’t want to ride with him anymore. Perhaps I had jumped the gun by buying my own motorcycle, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

Bella followed me home in her truck and when I opened the garage door, she immediately spied the Ducati sitting next to her rustic road bike.

“What is *that*?”

“Nothing,” I muttered.

“It doesn’t *look* like nothing.”

I was reluctant to admit to my ill-considered plan, but she kept staring at me.

“Well,” I began, “I didn’t know if you were going to forgive your friend, or he you, and I wondered if you would still want to ride your bike anyway. It sounded like it was something that you enjoyed. I thought I could go with you, if you wished.” I shrugged, brushing it off.

Bella looked at the Ducati with an indecipherable frown. She seemed troubled by it and I felt embarrassed by my presumption.

“I wouldn’t be able to keep up with you,” Bella murmured.

I didn’t want to make her unhappy. I put my hand under her chin and pushed up the corner of her mouth with my index finger. “I’d keep pace with you, Bella.”

“That wouldn’t be much fun for you.”

“Of course it would, if we were together.”

Bella considered for a moment before explaining her discomfort. “Edward, if you thought I was going too fast or losing control of the bike or something, what would you do?”

I would save her, of course. I would intervene so that she wouldn’t get hurt. And then I realized that the risk was why she liked to ride her motorcycle in the first place. It was also one of the reasons she liked to be with Jacob—he let her take risks whereas I never could.

I smiled. “This is something you do with Jacob. I see that now.” There were things Jacob Black could give Bella that I could not.

“It’s just that, well, I don’t slow him down so much, you know. I could try, I guess...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said quickly, trying to laugh it off. “Jasper was admiring it. Perhaps it’s time he discovered a new way to travel. After all, Alice has her Porsche now.”

“Edward, I—”

I interrupted her words with a kiss. “I said not to worry. But would you do something for me?”

“Whatever you need.”

I reached behind the Ducati where Alice had stashed the helmet and riding jacket.

“Please?” I requested, predicting her objection.

She took the helmet warily. “I’ll look stupid.”

“No, you’ll look smart. Smart enough not to get yourself hurt.” I tossed the jacket over my forearm and then put one hand on each of her cheeks. “There are things between my hands right now that I can’t live without. You could take care of them.”

“Okay, fine. What’s that other thing?” she asked, pulling the helmet over her head.

“It’s a riding jacket. I hear road rash is quite uncomfortable, not that I would know myself.”

I held it out and Bella reluctantly slipped it on. I engaged the angled zipper across the front—black leather on her tiny frame. It was almost shockingly...hot. I tried not to grin like a lecher as I backed up a step to take a good look at her.

“Be honest, how hideous do I look?”

I moved back a little further and surveyed her again. Still...hot...very hot. I pursed my lips to hide my uncontrollable grin.

“That bad, huh?”

“No, no, Bella. Actually...” I hesitated. She was going to think I was making fun of her. “You look...sexy.”

Bella snorted dismissively. “Right.”

“Very sexy, really.”

“You are just saying that so I’ll wear it,” Bella argued. “But that’s okay. You’re right, it’s smarter.”

I put my arms around her and pulled her to me. “You’re silly. I suppose that’s part of your charm. Though, I’ll admit it, this helmet does have its drawbacks.”

I grabbed it by the sides and angled it off her head, setting it down on the motorcycle seat so I could kiss my beautiful, leather-clad angel properly. I could imagine how the soft leather would cling to her cute, round behind. It was probably just as well that she wasn’t wearing the matching pants.

Bella wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled herself to me as her fingers tangled through my hair and her body curved into mine. I leaned forward, pausing just before my lips met hers and looked into her eyes. Her mouth gapped open and I matched my lips to hers, our tongues touching in the middle where they began a slow, sensuous dance. Her eyes closed, Bella began to moan, creating a sympathetic echo inside my mouth and a rumble in my chest. I felt my breath speed up to match hers and I pulled her even closer. *Mmmm...*

She took a small step toward me then, pushing one thigh between mine until our legs were locked together. I felt her pressing into my thigh and I gasped to understand her desire so directly. With no thoughts left in my head, I pressed back.

Ahhh... I wanted her badly. I froze and struggled with myself for a moment—desire versus danger. Then I stepped back to put a sliver of space between us. She tried to follow, but I held her still with a hand on the side of her waist.

“Bella...” I sighed as I tried to calm my breathing. I didn’t dare tell her how crazy she made me—she would take it as an open invitation. *Not possible*, I told myself sternly.

I gently unlocked her grip around my neck and touched her flushed lips with my finger, feeling the heat radiating from them.

“We better get going. Jacob will be waiting,” I whispered before moving away.

I loaded the motorcycle and helmet into the trunk of my car while Bella unzipped her jacket. Then I helped her out of it and folded it, placing it beside the helmet before shutting the trunk.

Bella remained quiet for several miles before breaking the silence. “You know what this reminds me of? It’s just like when I was a kid and Renee would pass me off to Charlie for the summer. I feel like a seven-year-old.”

I laughed.

Halfway down La Push Road we rounded a curve and saw Jacob’s car sitting on the side of the road—a red Volkswagen Rabbit. He was leaning against it with his arms crossed over his chest looking solemn. I pulled my car off the road about fifteen yards from the border line and turned off the engine then popped the trunk.

On his side of the line, Jacob’s thoughts were loud and clear. *She loves me. I know she does. If the bloodsucker hadn’t come back, she would know it by now. I have to make her see it. I HAVE to.*

Oh great! I thought, annoyed. *He’s got plans.* Would he act on them tonight? He was thinking that he didn’t have much time left to play his hand. *Well, that’s just super.*

Bella and I climbed out of the car and walked around to the open trunk.

“Call me whenever you’re ready to come home,” I said. “And I’ll be here.”

“I won’t be out late,” she promised.

I unloaded the motorcycle and handed Bella her helmet and jacket before shutting the trunk. She would push the bike across the border since I couldn’t go there and Jacob wouldn’t come to us. Bella put the helmet under her arm and the jacket over the seat.

“Do you have it all?”

“No problem,” she said, turning for a quick goodbye kiss, but that wasn’t what I had in mind. It was childish, I suppose, but I felt the sudden urge to underline the fact that Bella was *my* girl. I leaned over the motorcycle seat, took Bella’s face in my hands and planted a long, drawn-out kiss on her lips. She responded enthusiastically as always, her heart speeding up and her breaths coming short and fast. I was betting that she’d forgotten all about Jacob standing across the way and that pleased me no end. It did not please Jacob, however, and I laughed.

“Goodbye,” I murmured to Bella. “I really do like the jacket.” As she walked away, I felt a strong pull to follow. It was hard to let her walk into that den of wolves—and into his arms.

“What’s all that?” Jacob asked, referring to the motorcycle and gear.

“I thought I should put this back where it belongs,” Bella told him. Jacob smiled broadly when Bella crossed the boundary line and he hurried to her.

I’ll show him, he thought, propping the bike on its kickstand and picking Bella up in his big, animal arms.

I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction! I rushed back to my car, started the engine, and jammed the accelerator to the floor before he could look up and read the irritation on my face.

9. Changes

Racing away from the reservation, I expected to return in two or three hours. Bella said she would not be out late and after all, how long could a bonfire cookout last? I went home to talk to Carlisle about the situation in Seattle, but we had no new information to help us decide on a strategy. Alice couldn't see us in Seattle and until she did, we were reluctant to go without knowing what we were facing. So we postponed...again.

I drove back to Charlie's house to check on Esme, who was taking her turn at guard duty, and to kill some time while waiting for Bella to call.

"Edward, how is Bella holding up?"

"She's amazingly steady, though she's in more of a hurry for Carlisle to change her."

"What do you think about it?"

"I'm against it, of course. I wish she would postpone at least for a few years, if not forever."

"You're not angry with us for taking her side, are you?"

"No, it's what she wants," I said, resigned to it.

"I bet she would rather have *you* change her than Carlisle. Would you consider that, do you think, if she's going ahead with it anyway?"

I thought for a moment before deciding to tell her about my condition, not sure whether it was wise. What if Bella declined? But trying to keep secrets in my family was a pointless endeavor.

"I have, actually. I have agreed to it if Bella will be my wife."

"Oh, Edward, that's wonderful!" Esme enthused. "Has she accepted you?"

I looked down at my feet. "No, not yet. I'm hopeful, though."

"What is her reason?"

"She says that her mother would disapprove—that Renee's always told Bella she made a mistake marrying Charlie so young. Bella doesn't want to let her down, I guess, but I can't help but believe there's some other reason."

"I can't imagine what it would be."

"Well..." I began, reluctant to put words to my biggest fear. "The most obvious possibility is that she might not want to be stuck with me forever..."

"Oh!" Esme exclaimed. "You don't believe that, do you? That can't be it! She loves you."

"Thanks, Mom. I think she does, but maybe not enough. I don't know."

My mother put her arm around my waist. "Keep after her. She'll come to her senses."

Hour after hour passed...three...four...five... and with each one, my anxiety level rose. What if something had happened to her? How would I know? Alice couldn't tell! I calmed down slightly when I realized that Billy Black would call Charlie if there was any trouble, even if he had to lie about the reason. We hadn't heard the phone ring inside the house, so probably everything was all right, but I was surprised Bella hadn't called me to come get her yet.

It was only a minute or two later when Charlie's phone began to ring. I jerked my head up and braced myself for the worst. Unfortunately, I could only hear Charlie's side of the conversation.

"Hello, Bella?" He sounded as concerned as I was.

"Oh! Hi, Jake. What's going on?"

"Is that right?" Charlie chuckled and I exhaled in a whoosh. She must be okay. "Are you bringing her home, then?"

"Oh. Well, all right. Say hi to your father."

So is he or isn't he? I wanted to shout. But the conversation ended there.

"Okay, 'bye then."

Charlie hung up the phone and I watched his shadow pass the living room window as he returned to his chair and the late-night sports report. Before I had time to get too worked up about not knowing what was happening, my cell phone vibrated. I yanked it out of my pocket and flipped it open.

"Bella?" I asked. I could hear the apprehension in my voice.

"No, it's Jacob. Surprise!"

"Jacob? What's going on?" I'd asked the exact question Charlie had.

“Bella’s ready to come home. She passed out at the bonfire and I had to haul her back to my house. She’s in my car now if you want to meet us at the border. I could carry her all the way home, though, since I’m coming to watch Charlie’s place, anyway.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll meet you in five minutes, as planned. And...thank you, Jacob.”

“Sure, sure,” he said and hung up.

“Bye, Mom. I’m going to pick up Bella. See you in a bit.”

I made the border in only three minutes and parked fifteen yards behind it to wait. Shortly thereafter, I heard Jacob’s poorly muffled engine chugging up La Push Road and I hopped out of my car to pace impatiently.

“C’mon, Bells. We’re here,” Jacob said, stopping his car well behind the line.

“Oh, crap!” Bella cried, waking up in a confused state. “How late is it? Dang it, where’s that stupid phone?”

“Easy,” Jacob said to calm her. “It’s not even midnight yet. And I already called him for you. Look—he’s waiting there.”

“You called Edward for me?” Bella sounded very surprised.

“I figured if I played nice, I’d get more time with you,” Jacob replied. I could almost see his teenager’s grin in my mind.

“Thanks, Jake,” Bella said. “Really, thank you. And thanks for inviting me tonight. That was.... Wow. That was something else.”

“And you didn’t even stay up to watch me swallow a cow.” Jacob laughed at some private joke. “No, I’m glad you liked it. It was...nice for me. Having you there.”

I picked up the pace of my strides. I wasn’t enjoying Jacob’s heartfelt goodbyes or his wistful thoughts.

“Yeah, he’s not so patient, is he? Go ahead. But come back soon, okay?”

“Sure, Jake.”

“Sleep tight, Bells. Don’t worry about anything—I’ll be watching out for you tonight.” Like she would need *him* in the yard when she had *me* in her bed! I grunted in annoyance, even though I was grateful for his help.

Bella climbed out of Jacob's car and hobbled toward me. When she finally reached the reservation boundary, I hurried to pull her into my arms. I'd been so anxious and suddenly, here she was in the flesh. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Bella," I murmured, holding her close.

"Hi. Sorry I'm so late. I fell asleep and—"

"I know. Jacob explained." With one arm around Bella's waist, I began walking her to the car, but she was having trouble with her feet.

"Are you tired? I could carry you."

"I'm fine."

"Let's get you home and in bed. Did you have a nice time?"

"Yeah—it was amazing, Edward. I wish you could have come. I can't even explain it. Jake's dad told us the old legends and it was like...like magic."

"You'll have to tell me about it. After you've slept."

"I won't get it right," Bella mumbled through a big yawn.

I opened the passenger side door, lifted Bella inside, and buckled her seatbelt. Jacob shined his bright lights on us as he turned his car around. Bella waved. I ignored him.

When we reached Charlie's house, I carried Bella to the front door in spite of her protests. "I'll see you in a little while," I whispered into her ear. Then I gave her a quick kiss and sent her inside to face Charlie. I wondered if he would be upset at Bella's late return, though I didn't particularly care if he was since it was Jacob's fault, not mine.

I drove my car around the corner out of sight and walked back to locate Esme in the woods. She'd not seen anything unusual in the area and so I suggested that she drive my car home. I'd keep an eye on things until Jacob showed up, as he'd promised to do. She agreed and I handed her the car keys.

I was still waiting for Charlie to go to bed so I could join Bella, when Jacob arrived in his wolf form. I didn't see him, but he was nearby. I could smell his scent and he could smell mine.

"I'm here, mind reader," he called to me silently. "You don't need to hang around. I got this."

Fine by me. I approached Charlie's yard and saw Bella leaning out of her window staring into the dark as the icy rain pelted her in the face. I had expected her to be asleep already. Curious, I leaped to the eaves and slipped through the open window to stand beside her. I put my arm around her waist and took her hand.

"Is Jacob out there?" Bella asked.

"Yes...somewhere. And Esme's on her way home."

"It's so cold and wet. This is silly." She shivered.

"It's only cold to *you*, Bella," I pointed out, chuckling.

When Bella finally climbed into bed, I lay down beside her. She snuggled into the crook of my arm and quickly dropped off to sleep. A bit later, I noticed she was shivering and got up to shut the window. On my way back to the bed, I noticed that Bella's copy of *Wuthering Heights* was lying on the floor, so I picked it up and took it with me. I'd read it before and knew every word in it, of course, but I'd never really understood the characters—or liked them either.

Heathcliff, in particular, was vicious, spiteful, and cruel, especially to the woman he had married. His beloved Catherine had chosen to marry a man of means over him and so Heathcliff married the man's sister. Then he set about degrading and tormenting her until she ran away.

I remembered a particular paragraph that had always stuck with me and which seemed especially relevant now. With Bella curled against me sleeping, I located the passage:

And there you see the distinction between our feelings: had he been in my place and I in his, though I hated him with a hatred that turned my life to gall, I never would have raised a hand against him. You may look incredulous, if you please! I never would have banished him from her society as long as she desired his. The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drunk his blood! But, till then—if you don't believe me, you don't know me—till then, I would have died by inches before I touched a single hair of his head!

Since returning home to Forks and my beloved, I'd found myself in a strikingly similar position. Jacob Black and his kind were my sworn enemies, having evolved for the distinct purpose of eliminating my kind. If not for Bella, I easily could have, and might have, torn his heart out, and drunk his blood! But because I could not hurt her, I would not touch a single hair of *his* head. I loved her so much that no longer could I even banish him from her society. Though I could not understand Heathcliff's cruelty to those in his life, I *could* understand his all-consuming love for Catherine.

Bella groaned in her sleep and turned to bury her face in my chest.

“Did I wake you?” I whispered as I dropped the book onto the floor, its loose spine saving my place.

“No,” she muttered. “I had a bad dream.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Bella shook her head. “Too tired. Maybe in the morning, if I remember.” Her voice dropped away, making the final words nearly imperceptible.

“In the morning,” I repeated, chuckling. I would be *here* in the morning. It was a great privilege and one of the joys of my existence.

“What were you reading?” Bella mumbled, still half asleep.

“*Wuthering Heights*.”

She frowned. “I thought you didn’t like that book.”

“You left it out,” I said softly. “Besides...the more time I spend with you, the more human emotions seem comprehensible to me. I’m discovering that I can sympathize with Heathcliff in ways I didn’t think possible before.”

“Mmm.”

“He despises the part of Catherine’s life that does not include him and he wants to destroy it, but he can’t because that would destroy a vital part of her. It’s the paradox of his life,” I explained softly, half hoping that she wouldn’t see me too clearly in him, but Bella was already asleep.

The next morning, I asked about her bad dream.

“Umm...I was cold...and something bad was going to happen...but I can’t remember what. I was just glad that you were here when I woke up.”

“Well, I’m glad too,” I said, rolling toward her and pushing her onto her back. Holding my weight on my left arm, I brushed my fingers down her cheek and across her lips and watched the color rise in her face.

I leaned in slowly, and she wrapped her arms around my neck and raised her head to touch her lips to mine. We kissed gently for several moments before I started to pull away. Bella clung to me and groaned her displeasure until I relented and leaned forward again. She

opened her mouth hungrily and our lips moved together, touching, pressing, tasting. As we kissed, I let my fingers wander down her jaw onto her neck, absorbing the heat of the blood swirling beneath her skin. I wrapped my palm across her throat and felt both carotid arteries pulsing excitedly to the rhythm of her racing heart. *Mmm...* I brushed my fingers downward to her delicate collarbones. Time to stop. She clung to me again in protest. This time, though, I unclasped her hands and kissed each palm before tucking her arms under the covers.

“Goodbye, love.”

I found Emmett in the woods keeping watch. “Hey, Em,” I called quietly, running to greet him. “I thought Jasper would still be here.”

“Yeah, we traded so he could spend time with Alice before she goes to school. Only one more week before you graduate again, eh?”

“Yes, thankfully. I’m hoping that Bella and I will be joining you and Rose at Dartmouth in the fall,” I said, grinning.

“Well, sure. We can all study together, and play foosball at the student union, and drink beer at the football games. It’ll be great!” We both laughed.

Though Emmett and Rosalie supposedly had been attending Dartmouth the entire school year, in fact they’d been traveling on several continents and periodically visiting the family in Ithaca, New York, and in Forks. It *would* be fun for us all to go to New Hampshire and attend Dartmouth together—if I could convince Bella to postpone her transformation, that is.

“No, Alice, that is unacceptable,” I told my sister later. “If you decide to go ahead with it, then you have to tell her beforehand. I won’t have her surprised like she was at prom last year. She still hasn’t forgiven me for that.”

“Oh, Edward, you’re ruining all my fun!” Alice complained.

“It’s her only real graduation. It should be about *her*.”

“But that’s what I want too!”

“Well, being *about her* means taking her feelings into account, don’t you think?”

"I *suppose*," Alice responded irritably.

"It can still be fun..."

Walking to my car after school, I gave Alice a "get on with it" look behind Bella's back and she made a face at me. Then she sighed.

"I have foreseen..." Alice began in a phony fortuneteller's voice. I attempted to elbow her in the ribs, but she dodged me. "Fine," she complained. "Edward is making me do this. But I *did* foresee that you would be more difficult if I surprised you."

"In English?" Bella requested.

"Don't be a baby about this. No tantrums."

"Now I'm scared."

"So you're—I mean *we're*—having a graduation party. It's no big thing. Nothing to freak out over. But I saw that you *would* freak out if I tried to make it a surprise party—" I reached over to ruffle Alice's hair for the white lie, but she dodged me again— "and Edward said I had to tell you. But it's nothing. Promise."

Bella sighed heavily. "Is there any point in arguing?"

"None at all."

"Okay, Alice. I'll be there. And I'll hate every minute of it. Promise."

"That's the spirit! By the way, I love my gift. You shouldn't have."

"Alice, I didn't!"

"Oh, I know that. But you will." Alice gave her an impish grin.

Bella suddenly looked confused.

"Amazing," I said. "How can someone so tiny be so annoying?"

Alice laughed. "It's a talent."

"Couldn't you have waited a few weeks to tell me about this?" Bella grouched. "Now I'll just be stressed that much longer."

Alice gave Bella an odd look.

"Bella," she said slowly. "Do you know what day it is?"

“Monday?”

“Yes,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “It is Monday...the fourth.” She rotated Bella toward the gym door where a graduation poster hung.

JUNE 11th, 2006 was written in big black letters on a yellow background.

“It’s the fourth? *Of June?* Are you sure?” Bella asked.

Alice and I looked at her in surprise.

“It can’t be! How did that happen?” Bella’s eyes rolled upward and to the right as she mouthed numbers and counted on her fingers. Then her face paled and she went silent, staring straight ahead as we continued to the car.

I opened the car door for her and as she slowly climbed in, Alice flashed me a knowing look. Bella was no longer with us. I didn’t attempt to break her silence as I drove her home and Alice filled the quiet by chattering away in the back seat. When we arrived at Charlie’s house, I left the engine running and helped Bella out of the car. Alice jumped from the backseat into the front to drive herself home.

Inside the house, I pulled Bella to the living room and sat her down on the couch next to me. She remained distracted and disconnected, staring out the living room window at the rain. Clearly, she was upset about something and though I didn’t want to pry, I was becoming increasingly distraught, wondering what was going on. For much of an hour, we sat together silently and watched the day fade to dusk through the window.

Suddenly, I could stand it no longer. I took Bella’s face in my hands and turned her head in my direction. Was she mad at Alice? At me? Upset about the party? I looked into her eyes.

“Would you please tell me what you are thinking? *Before* I go mad?” I pleaded.

Bella looked around nervously, but found no words.

“Your lips are white. Talk, Bella.”

She exhaled heavily and dropped her chin to her chest. “The date took me off guard,” she whispered. “That’s all.”

I didn’t understand, but I waited for her to continue.

She began hesitantly. “I’m not sure what to do...what to tell Charlie...what to say...how to...” Her voice trailed off.

"This isn't about the party?" I asked in surprise.

She frowned. "No. But thanks for reminding me."

I gazed at her face searching for clues to her distress. If it wasn't the party, then the date was significant for some other reason.

Then I knew. "You're not ready," I declared.

"I am," Bella argued, raising her head to look at me. Even she didn't appear to be convinced as she added, "I have to be."

"You don't have to be anything," I contradicted her.

Her eyes were wide. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. "Victoria, Jane, Caius, whoever was in my room...!"

"All the more reason to wait," I insisted.

"That doesn't make any sense, Edward!"

I held her face securely and spoke slowly, carefully. She needed to understand.

"Bella. Not one of us had a choice. You've seen what it's done...to Rosalie especially. We've all struggled, trying to reconcile ourselves with something we had no control over. I won't let it be that way for you. You *will* have a choice," I vowed.

"I've already made my choice."

"You aren't going through with this because a sword is hanging over your head. We will take care of the problems, and I will take care of you," I promised. "When we're through it, and there is nothing forcing your hand, then you can decide to join me, if you still want to. But not because you're afraid. You won't be forced into this."

"Carlisle promised, after graduation."

"Not until you're ready," I reiterated. "And definitely not while you feel threatened."

Bella didn't respond and I took that as agreement.

"There," I said, kissing her forehead. "Nothing to worry about."

"Nothing but impending doom," Bella joked weakly.

"Trust me."

“I do,” she replied, but she still looked tense. I waited.

“Can I ask you something?” she said after a pause.

“Anything.”

“What am I getting Alice for graduation?”

I snickered. She was asking her boyfriend, the mind reader, to tell her what he’d seen while rifling through the thoughts of his precognitive sister, just to remind her of a gift idea she’d forgotten. It was a convoluted way to go about things.

“It looked like you were getting us both concert tickets—”

“That’s right!” Bella exclaimed. “The concert in Tacoma. I saw an ad in the paper last week, and I thought it would be something you’d like, since you said it was a good CD.”

“It’s a great idea,” I said. “Thank you.” The combination of my own abilities and Alice’s in the same household meant that I rarely got a surprise gift or surprise party or surprise anything—and that’s the way I preferred it. I could sympathize with Bella on that score.

“I hope it’s not sold out.”

“It’s the thought that counts. I ought to know,” I joked.

Bella sighed.

“There’s something else you meant to ask,” I probed.

Bella frowned. “You’re good.”

“I have lots of practice reading your face. Ask me.”

She’d avoided the question she really wanted to ask, meaning it was a hard one for her. Was she afraid of my answer? Bella closed her eyes and hid her face in my chest.

“You don’t want me to be a vampire,” she stated.

“No, I don’t,” I replied softly and then waited for her to continue. When she didn’t, I prompted her. “That’s not a question.”

“Well...,” she began uncertainly, “I was worrying about...why you feel that way.”

“Worrying?” Bella was worrying? That wasn’t anything I’d intended!

“Would you tell me why?” she requested. “The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?”

I was puzzled. “If I answer your question, will you then *explain* your question?”

Bella nodded by moving her face slightly against my chest, avoiding my eyes. Something about her question made her feel shy and vulnerable.

I felt a little uncomfortable too because the answer highlighted my great weakness, one of the faults in my character. I took a deep breath and braced myself for the painful truth.

“You could do so much better, Bella. I know that *you* believe I have a soul, but I’m not entirely convinced on that point, and to risk yours...” I shook my head, disgusted with myself. “For me to allow this—to let you become what I am just so that I’ll never have to lose you—is the most selfish act I can imagine. I want it more than anything, for *myself*. But for you, I want so much more. Giving in—it feels criminal. It’s the most selfish thing I’ll ever do, even if I live forever. If there were any way for me to become human for you—no matter what the price was—I would pay it.”

Bella did not respond and I stopped breathing. What was she thinking? Did she revile me as much as I did? That would be understandable.

“So...it’s not that you’re afraid you won’t...like me as much when I’m different— when I’m not soft and warm and I don’t smell the same? You really do want to keep me, no matter how I turn out?”

The breath I’d been holding came out in a rush. “You were worried I wouldn’t *like* you?” I was astounded. It was *ridiculous*! I started laughing. “Bella, for a fairly intuitive person, you can be so obtuse! I don’t think you realize how much easier it will be for me, when I don’t have to concentrate all the time on not killing you. Certainly, there are things I’ll miss. This for one...” I looked into her eyes and stroked her cheek with my fingers. The red flush moved upward through her neck into her cheeks. I chuckled at Bella’s predictable response to my touch.

“And the sound of your heart,” I went on softly. “It’s the most significant sound in my world. I’m so attuned to it now, I swear I could pick it out from miles away. But neither of these things matter. *This—*,” I said, taking her face in my hands. “*You*. That’s what I’m keeping. You’ll always be my Bella, you’ll just be a little more durable.” It secretly thrilled me to think of it.

Bella sighed and finally—finally—relaxed, closing her eyes and resting her face in my hands.

After a moment, I asked, “Now will you answer a question for me? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?”

“Of course,” Bella answered, her eyes opening wide.

“You don’t want to be my wife,” I said slowly.

Bella’s heart stuttered and then began to gallop. The blood drained from her face.

“That’s not a question,” she muttered.

I released her face and took one of her hands in mine. It was cold and sweaty.

“I was worrying about why you felt that way,” I said tentatively.

Bella gulped and then whispered. “That’s not a question, either.”

“Please, Bella?”

“The truth?” I had to read her lips as she made no sound.

“Of course. I can take it, whatever it is.” I felt tense and slightly afraid, but I would not let her see that.

“You’re going to laugh at me.”

I stared at her face to see whether I had heard her right. “Laugh? I cannot imagine that.”

“You’ll see,” she mumbled and sighed. Then her pale face suddenly blazed red in mortification. “Okay, fine! I’m sure this will sound like some big joke to you, but really!”

I could not imagine what the problem was.

“It’s just so...so...so *embarrassing!*” Bella sputtered, hiding her face in my chest again.

“I’m not following you,” I finally replied when she didn’t continue.

Bella opened her eyes and glared at me. “I’m not *that girl*, Edward,” she exploded. “The one who gets married right out of high school like some small-town hick who got knocked up by her boyfriend! Do you know what people would think? Do you realize what century this is? People don’t just get married at eighteen! Not smart people, not responsible, mature people! I wasn’t going to be that girl! That’s not who I am....”

She was worried about “what the neighbors would think”? I couldn’t believe it. I waited for her to drop the other shoe, but she said nothing more.

“That’s all?” I queried.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s not that you were...more eager for immortality itself than for just me?”

And suddenly, out of nowhere, Bella was laughing at me! I had asked her a serious question and she was laughing at me! It had been my biggest concern since I first uttered the words “marry me.”

“Edward!” Bella gasped, giggling uncontrollably. “And here...I always...thought that...you were...so much...smarter than me!”

She thought I was being silly! Was that possible? A huge smile stretched across my face and I began laughing too, possibly a little hysterically. I wrapped my arms around her in joy.

“Edward,” Bella explained, “there’s no point to forever without you. I wouldn’t want one day without you.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I replied, relaxing finally. I did not doubt her words because her laughter was so obviously genuine.

“Still...,” Bella reminded me, “it doesn’t change anything.”

“It’s nice to understand, though. And I do understand your perspective, Bella, truly I do. But I’d like it very much if you’d try to consider mine.” I knew she thought I was being unreasonable, odd, perhaps a little pushy, even. But there was no way for her to understand where I was coming from unless I told her. I gazed into her eyes.

“You see, Bella, I was always *that boy*. In my world, I was already a man. I wasn’t looking for love—no, I was far too eager to be a soldier for that; I thought of nothing but the idealized glory of the war that they were selling prospective draftees then—but if I had found...” I stopped to consider. “I was going to say if I had found *someone*, but that won’t do. If I had found *you*, there isn’t a doubt in my mind how I would have proceeded. I was *that boy*, who would have—as soon as I discovered that you were what I was looking for—gotten down on one knee and endeavored to secure your hand. I would have wanted you for eternity, even when the word didn’t have quite the same connotations.”

I gave her a crooked smile.

Bella was frozen still, her eyes wide.

“Breathe, Bella,” I said, smiling.

She exhaled the air she’d been holding in.

“Can you see my side, Bella, even a little bit?”

She looked into the distance like she was trying to imagine it. I didn't know if she could. It was such a different time—but it's who I was. Even though I passed for a modern teenager...man—as best I could—I wasn't. Not at all.

“The thing is, Edward,” Bella said, dodging my question, “in my mind, *marriage* and *eternity* are not mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive concepts. And since we're living in my world for the moment, maybe we should go with the times, if you know what I mean.”

“But on the other hand,” I pointed out, “you will soon be leaving time behind you altogether. So why should the transitory customs of one local culture affect the decision so much?”

Bella cast about for an answer. “When in Rome?”

I laughed. “You don't have to say yes or no today, Bella. It's good to understand both sides, though, don't you think?”

“So your condition...?”

“Is still in effect. I do see your point, Bella, but if you want me to change you myself...”

“Dum, dum, dah—dum,” Bella intoned solemnly, finishing my sentence for me with four notes of a tune everyone recognized.

10. Newborns

“Something hideous is stalking Seattle.”

So read the last line of the day’s newspaper article on the mass murders in the city. I read it over Bella’s shoulder when I returned before school. I’d left her at dawn to go home and change my clothes and while I was there, my family and I had talked about the topic foremost in our minds—that hideous something.

Bella jumped when I entered her kitchen after receiving no response to my knocks on the front door. Charlie’s car was gone, so I had let myself in. Bella was reading about the murders.

“Have you seen this?” she asked.

“I hadn’t seen today’s news yet,” I told her. “But I knew it was getting worse. We’re going to have to do something...quickly.”

“What does Alice say?”

“That’s the problem.” I scowled as I considered the conversation we’d recently had about it. “She can’t see anything...though we’ve made up our minds half a dozen times to check it out. She’s starting to lose confidence. She feels like she’s missing too much these days, that something’s wrong. That maybe her vision is slipping away.”

“Can that happen?” Bella asked in surprise.

“Who knows? No one’s ever done a study...but I really doubt it. These things tend to intensify over time. Look at Aro and Jane.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Self-fulfilling prophecy, I think. We keep waiting for Alice to see something so we can go...and she doesn’t see anything because we won’t really go until she does. So she can’t see us there. Maybe we’ll have to do it blind.”

“No!” Bella protested with a shiver.

“Did you have a strong desire to attend class today? We’re only a couple of days from finals; they won’t be giving us anything new.”

“I think I can live without school for a day. What are we doing?”

“I want to talk to Jasper.”

The family was in agreement that the Seattle killers were young vampires—bloodthirsty, wild, and untrained—and that whoever had created them had then abandoned them to their own devices. Either their maker didn’t know the rules of our world or didn’t care to follow them. If the latter, then he must not value his charges enough to prevent them from being discovered and destroyed by the Volturi. As our resident expert on newborn vampires, Jasper had been studying the situation from every possible angle.

I’d never spoken to Bella about Jasper’s history. For one thing, he once had tried to kill her and I thought it might cause her unnecessary anxiety to know exactly how good a killer he was. For another thing, she intended to become a newborn and it might disturb her to learn how newborns had been used and abused for so long by warring vampires in the South. Though that wouldn’t happen to Bella, she hadn’t needed to know that Jasper was an expert both in training newborns to fight and in destroying them when they had served their purpose. It was a grim reality.

Carlisle, Esme, and Jasper were watching the television news when Bella and I entered the house. Alice was sitting on the staircase fretting about losing her vision, though I wasn’t convinced that that was the problem. Rosalie was in her bedroom brushing her hair in front of a mirror and Emmett came wandering in from outside. We were gathering for a family meeting and I wanted Bella to be included in it since the events taking place in our world affected her now as much as they did the rest of us.

“Hey, Edward. Ditching, Bella?” Emmett grinned.

“We both are,” I corrected him.

He laughed. “Yes, but it’s *her* first time through high school. She might miss something.”

Yeah, right, I thought.

I tossed Charlie’s *Seattle Times* onto the couch where Carlisle and Esme sat. “Did you see that they’re considering a serial killer now?”

My father sighed and wrapped his arm protectively around my mother’s shoulders. “They’ve had two specialists debating that possibility on CNN all morning.”

“We can’t let this go on,” I declared.

“Let’s go now,” Emmett suggested. “I’m dead bored.”

Rosalie hissed at him from the bedroom.

“She’s such a pessimist,” Emmett mumbled just as she appeared at the top of the stairs and began to descend.

“We’ll have to go sometime,” I agreed.

Carlisle shook his head uncertainly. “I’m concerned. We’ve never involved ourselves in this kind of thing before. It’s not our business. We aren’t the Volturi.”

“I don’t want the Volturi to have to come here,” I explained. “It gives us so much less reaction time.”

“And all those innocent humans in Seattle,” Esme murmured. “It’s not right to let them die this way.”

“I know,” Carlisle sighed.

There’s only one reason to create a group of newborns all at once, Jasper thought, catching my attention. To fight.

“Oh,” I said in surprise, turning to look at him. “I didn’t think of that.” The rest of the family regarded me with mixed curiosity and annoyance, alerting me to the fact that Jasper hadn’t spoken out loud. I continued to listen as he thought it through.

Armies didn’t used to be trained in any serious way. Coven leaders just tried to keep the newborns from killing each other until they could create a group big enough to attack the chosen target. This has all the characteristics of those early armies of the Southern Wars—the size of the group, the lack of training, the rampant destruction, their disappearance during daylight hours.

“I see. You’re right, that has to be it,” I responded after considering it for a moment. “Well, that changes everything.” I began to pace and ponder the implications until I realized that everybody was still staring at me. “I think you’d better explain to the others,” I told Jasper, resuming my pacing. “What could be the purpose of this?” I asked myself.

“What is he rambling about?” Alice wanted to know, darting to Jasper’s side. “What are you thinking?”

As everyone’s eyes moved to him, Jasper began taking an emotional inventory of the room. His attention settled on Bella.

“You’re confused.”

“We’re all confused,” Emmett complained.

“You can afford the time to be patient,” Jasper replied. “Bella should understand this, too. She’s one of us now.” He turned to her. “How much do you know about me, Bella?”

Emmett huffed in impatience.

“Not much,” Bella admitted.

Does she not know of Maria?

I paused in my pacing and met Jasper’s eyes. “No. I’m sure you can understand why I haven’t told her that story. But I suppose she needs to hear it now.”

My brother nodded in agreement. He didn’t like reliving his painful past. He would have preferred that I’d told Bella his story myself, but it wasn’t my place, even if I’d been prepared to do so.

Jasper began by rolling up his sleeve to show Bella something that had been in front of her eyes for as long as she’d known him, but which she had never noticed. Whiter scars on our white skin are nearly invisible to humans without a little help. Jasper held his arm at an oblique angle under a nearby lampshade to create shadows and then pointed to one of the more severe scars on his forearm.

“Oh,” Bella exclaimed softly when she saw it. “Jasper, you have a scar exactly like mine.” She lifted her arm to show him James’ bite marks in pure white on the light beige skin of her hand.

Jasper smiled poignantly. “I have a lot of scars like yours, Bella.” He pushed up his sleeve further, revealing the brocade texture of his disfigured skin. Most of his body, including his face, is almost uniformly covered with a pattern of overlapping, horseshoe-shaped scars.

Finally recognizing what she was looking at, Bella gasped, “Jasper, what *happened* to you?”

“The same thing that happened to your hand,” he said, “repeated a thousand times. Our venom is the only thing that leaves a scar.”

“*Why?*” Bella wanted to know. She couldn’t take her eyes off him now that she could see what he *really* looked like.

He hesitated, not sure how to begin. “I didn’t have quite the same...upbringing as my adopted siblings here. My beginning was something else entirely.”

Through his mind flashed the memory of one day in his atrocious life—a culling day. I saw the collected group of unwitting newborns whose time had come and I felt the hardening of his remembered resolve as he prepared to snap their necks one by one. Every time he recalled such events in my presence, I felt anew the horror of Jasper’s earlier life as a vampire.

Bella was still staring at him, dumbfounded, as he continued. “Before I tell you my story, you must understand that there are places in *our* world, Bella, where the life span of the never-aging is measured in weeks, and not centuries.”

The rest of the family turned their attention to the news while Jasper began relating the story that all of us except Bella had heard before. In an odd way, this gathering in the Cullen living room was analogous to a council meeting around a bonfire where the Quileute retold their legends, minus the aura of magic Bella had described (and the hot dogs).

Jasper began by describing the territoriality of the southern vampires who coveted the most populous regions. The greater the number of humans in a given area, the more freely a coven could feed. The assurance of a rich food supply was something worth warring over.

The wars had been raging in Mexico long before a vampire named Benito developed the idea of creating disposable armies from newborn vampires. Powerful, aggressive, and rapacious, newborns make frightful soldiers. For decades, Benito and other coven leaders who adopted his methods fought with swiftly created, poorly controlled newborns. The massive carnage and mayhem that ensued among both the vampire and human populations drew the attention of the Volturi who came to Mexico and conducted the greatest purge of vampires in history. Beginning with Benito and his army south of Mexico City, the Volturi moved northward for almost a year, wiping out all newborns and the covens that harbored them. When they were finished, Mexico was virtually cleared of vampires.

These events occurred before Jasper’s time, but his creator, Maria, was one of the rare survivors of the genocide. He carries perfect memories of her accounts of those days and is more cognizant than most of us of the painful scar that the purge cut through vampire history, but also of the relative peace that reigned afterwards. As a result, Jasper respects the Volturi, but also fears them.

“The Volturi’s action was enough that the fever for conquest did not spread from the South. The rest of the world stayed sane. We owe the Volturi for our present way of life,” he told Bella.

(He is right, of course, but I have seen inside their heads and I suspect there is more to the Volturi than just a desire for law and order.)

After the Volturi returned to Italy, warring resumed among what remained of the southern covens, but on a much smaller scale. As long as the leaders kept their activities discreet, the Volturi ignored them. And so leaders like Maria began building smaller newborn armies, training them to fight while remaining hidden from the human populations they fought over.

Jasper described to Bella how Maria found him, a Confederate army officer on his way to a Texas war zone after escorting a convoy of civilians to safety. Maria's small coven of herself and two other females lured Jasper from his horse and then Maria, sensing his potential as a leader, changed him. She charged him with managing and training her newborn recruits to create a fighting force. He also was required to destroy those who outlived their newborn strength and thus their usefulness after about one year.

During those long decades, Jasper killed thousands of vampires and as proof, carries more scars—both internal *and* external—than perhaps any other vampire of his era. The fact that he still exists is a testament to his extraordinary skill.

Late in his career with Maria, Jasper allowed his vampire brother, Peter, to escape the coven with a female newborn, Charlotte, whom he loved and who was due to be destroyed. Five years later, Peter came back for Jasper, having discovered a better life in the North. Jasper had become disillusioned and, with his ability to sense the emotions of others, nearly incapacitated by depression. He jumped at the chance to escape from Maria.

Jasper ended his story by telling Bella how he left Peter and Charlotte and wandered on his own, trying to find a way to live with himself as he continued to feed on humans. Then one day, he walked into a café in Philadelphia and Alice took his hand, complaining that he had kept her waiting a long time.

"And you ducked your head, like a good Southern gentleman, and said, 'I'm sorry, ma'am,'" Alice remembered, joining our circle. She and Jasper laughed together while they looked into each other's eyes with obvious adoration.

"Alice told me what she'd seen of Carlisle and his family. I could hardly believe that such an existence was possible. But Alice made me optimistic. So we went to find them," Jasper said, finishing his tale.

"Scared the hell out of them, too," I interjected. "Emmett and I were away hunting. Jasper shows up, covered in battle scars, towing this little freak,"— I nudged Alice with my elbow—"who greets them all by name, knows everything about them, and wants to know which room she can move into. When I got home, all my things were in the garage."

Alice shrugged. "Your room had the best view."

We all joined in a laugh before the room again turned somber as we remembered what the point of the storytelling was. Everyone turned their attention to Jasper.

"An army," Alice whispered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Jasper replied carefully. "I thought I must be interpreting the signs incorrectly. Because where is the motive? Why would someone create an army in Seattle? There is no history there, no vendetta. It makes no sense from a conquest standpoint, either; no one claims it. Nomads pass through, but there's no one to *fight* for it. No one to defend it from."

He went on, "But I've seen this before, and there's no other explanation. There is an army of newborn vampires in Seattle. Fewer than twenty, I'd guess. The difficult part is that they are totally untrained. Whoever made them just set them loose. It will only get worse, and it won't be much longer till the Volturi step in. Actually, I'm surprised they've let this go on so long."

"What can we do?" Carlisle asked.

"If we want to avoid the Volturi's involvement, we will have to destroy the newborns, and we will have to do it very soon." Jasper's voice was hard and determined. He had denied the reality of the situation for as long as he reasonably could. Reenacting his history was not something he'd been anxious to do. "I can teach you how," he said. "It won't be easy in the city. The young ones aren't concerned about secrecy, but we will have to be. It will limit us in ways that they are not. Maybe we can lure them out."

I cringed at my next thought. "Maybe we won't have to," I said. "Does it occur to anyone else that the only possible threat in the area that would call for the creation of an army is...us?"

Carlisle and Jasper both started. Neither had considered that possibility, but Jasper quickly recognized the truth of it. Carlisle was more reluctant, as was Esme.

"Tanya's family is also near," she suggested, more hopeful than convinced.

"The newborns aren't ravaging Anchorage, Esme," I said gently. "I think we have to consider the idea that *we* are the targets."

"They're not coming after us," Alice insisted, and then paused. "Or...they don't *know* that they are. Not yet."

An image of a young man leading a group of vampires flashed into Alice's mind and then disappeared.

"What is that?" I demanded. "What are you remembering?"

"Flickers," Alice replied. "I can't see a clear picture when I try to see what's going on, nothing concrete. But I've been getting these strange flashes. Not enough to make sense of. It's as if someone's changing their mind, moving from one course of action to another so quickly that I can't get a good view...."

"Indecision?" Jasper asked.

"I don't know...."

But suddenly, I *did*. "Not indecision," I hissed. "Knowledge. Someone who knows you can't see anything until the decision is made. Someone who is hiding from us. Playing with the holes in your vision."

"Who would know that?" Alice whispered in alarm.

I felt icy with the realization. "Aro knows you as well as you know yourself."

"But I would see if they'd decided to come...."

"Unless they didn't want to get their hands dirty."

"A favor," Rosalie abruptly appended. "Someone in the South...someone who already had trouble with the rules. Someone who should have been destroyed is offered a second chance—if they take care of this one small problem.... That would explain the Volturi's sluggish response." Rosalie's view of the world was dark enough that—like me—she could perceive deceit and corruption where the more optimistic members of our family couldn't.

"Why?" Carlisle asked. "There's no reason for the Volturi—"

"It was there," I interrupted, remembering the thoughts of conquest that Aro had tried to hide from me in Italy. "I'm surprised it's come to this so soon, because the other thoughts were stronger. In Aro's head he saw me at his one side and Alice at his other. The present and the future, virtual omniscience. The power of the idea intoxicated him.

"I would have thought it would take him much longer to give up on that plan—he wanted it too much. But there was also the thought of you, Carlisle, of our family, growing stronger and larger. The jealousy and the fear: you having...not *more* than he had, but still, things that he wanted. He tried not to think about it, but he couldn't hide it completely. The

idea of rooting out the competition was there; besides their own, ours is the largest coven they've ever found...."

The memory of the Romanians' challenge never faded from Aro and Caius' minds. Never again would they allow any group to acquire enough power to threaten them, though I hardly thought that we were any kind of threat.

"They're too committed to their mission," Carlisle argued. "They would never break the rules themselves. It goes against everything they've worked for."

"They'll clean up afterward. A double betrayal," I predicted. "No harm done."

Jasper disagreed. "No, Carlisle is right. The Volturi do not break rules. Besides, it's much too sloppy. This...person, this threat—they have no idea what they're doing. A first-timer, I'd swear to it. I cannot believe the Volturi are involved. But they will be."

Jasper's experience with newborns took precedence over my intuition. Probably he was right. If the Volturi were behind this, then they were showing a degree of incompetence that none of us would expect and surely, they wouldn't allow so much blatant human destruction. So somebody else was creating an army to fight us. Who? Could it be Maria after all this time? Why would she come to the North for that purpose? Surely she'd already exacted a measure of revenge in Calgary for our "stealing" Jasper? And I never heard any thoughts about our family when I'd seen her earlier in the year.

Everyone was becoming motionless with stress.

"Then, let's go," Emmett exploded. "What are we waiting for?"

Do you agree it's time? And that Jasper should lead us? Carlisle asked silently.

I nodded once.

We had never been dependent upon Jasper for our family's security before. He remained, by choice, on the periphery of all decisions except where Alice's welfare was concerned, and if the family disagreed with him in such cases, he would act on his own. I remembered clearly how he decided to kill Bella after I had saved her from a van accident and exposed my supernormal strength. Only Alice had been able to convince him to stand down on that occasion.

Over the years, I'd decided that Jasper's detachment from our family was due to a long habit of self-reliance and a deep-seated distrust of vampires, both characteristics that had allowed him to survive his life with Maria. None of us held it against him. We knew that he

would stay with Alice forever and we all believed that Alice would stay with us forever, so Jasper was one of us, whether he liked it not.

Carlisle turned deliberately toward our least-bonded family member. "We'll need you to teach us, Jasper. How to destroy them." My father said the words with great reluctance, hating violence as he did.

"We're going to need help," Jasper told him. "Do you think Tanya's family would be willing...? Another five mature vampires would make an enormous difference. And then Kate and Eleazar would be especially advantageous on our side. It would be almost easy, with their aid."

He was referring to Kate's reported ability to electrocute anyone who touched her and Eleazar's gift of detecting the talents of other vampires. Eleazar could pick out the most dangerous of our foes before the fight started.

"We'll ask," Carlisle said.

Jasper handed him a cell phone and added, "We need to hurry."

My brother began analyzing the best way to hunt newborn vampires among the human population of Seattle. He was considering battle tactics such as divide and conquer, diversion and decoys, ambushes and raids, selecting some as possibilities and discarding others.

So it would happen very soon. I wasn't especially worried about the battle. With Jasper's strategic abilities and expertise with newborns, plus our extra talents and long experience, I thought we had a good chance of surviving the battle with no casualties, especially if Tanya came through with assistance.

I led Bella to the couch and sat with her while we listened to Carlisle phone Tanya. He got to the point immediately. Tanya had been following the situation in Seattle, so he didn't have to explain that to her. He did add the extra information we had gleaned from Jasper...that it was a newborn army being created for some purpose, possibly to attack *us*, and that the Volturi would be coming sooner than later. Carlisle pitched the idea that it was better to take care of it ourselves beforehand and asked if Tanya would be willing to help.

"We have a much better chance of success with twelve mature vampires than with our seven only," Carlisle said, reiterating Jasper's thought.

"I don't know that that will be possible, Carlisle. Irina is deeply grieved over Laurent's death. Between you, me, and the wall," she said, not realizing that I was reading her words in

Carlisle's mind, "she had intended him for her mate and has not recovered at all from his death. She feels that you are partly to blame for it."

"Oh," Carlisle exclaimed. "We didn't realize...that Irina felt that way."

I groaned. Tanya was going to refuse us because of Laurent! "Damn it. Damn Laurent to the deepest pit of hell where he belongs," I muttered.

"Laurent?" Bella intoned fearfully.

She had every right to be frightened at the mention of his name. He had nearly killed Bella while my family and I were away. If not for the wolves, I remembered with chagrin, he certainly would have drained her. Fortunately, they had appeared in time and destroyed him, but in doing so, had won the ire of our cousins who were suffering along with Irina at her loss.

Carlisle tried to explain that Laurent was threatening Bella and that the killing was justified.

"We would reconsider our participation if you will allow us to destroy the wolves that destroyed Laurent," Tanya responded.

"There's no question of that," Carlisle replied firmly. "We have a truce. They haven't broken it, and neither will we."

"Then we cannot help you with the Seattle problem. We would not betray Irina in that way."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Carlisle replied coolly.

"Please accept my regrets."

"Of course. We'll just have to do our best alone." Carlisle hung up abruptly and stared out the window at the river. He was distraught by Tanya's refusal, but I knew he would not hold it against the Denalis.

"What's the problem?" Emmett asked me.

"Irina was more involved with our friend Laurent than we knew. She's holding a grudge against the wolves for destroying him to save Bella. She wants—" I stopped in mid-sentence, realizing that the news would upset Bella.

"Go on," she prodded.

I suddenly felt angry. “She wants revenge. To take down the pack. They would trade their help for our permission.”

“No!”

“Don’t worry,” I told Bella. “Carlisle would never agree to it.” I thought for a moment and then sighed. “Nor would I. Laurent had it coming,” I growled, “and I still owe the wolves for that.”

“This isn’t good,” Jasper said. “It’s too even a fight. We’d have the upper hand in skill, but not numbers. We’d win, but at what price?”

Jasper’s thoughts immediately turned toward Alice. He didn’t want to expose her to any danger, though he knew she was capable of taking care of herself. I was more confident than he was. I didn’t see how fighting a newborn could be much worse than fighting Emmett, who was extraordinarily powerful. With his strength, Jasper’s expertise, Carlisle’s centuries of experience, Alice’s special talents, Rosalie’s fierceness, and my confidence, I didn’t see how we could lose.

But for better or worse—win or lose—we would be facing battle soon.

11. Campaigns

The next two days proceeded quietly with Carlisle writing letters and making more phone calls, trying to locate friends who would be willing to fight alongside us. Finding his friends quickly was not an easy endeavor. Most were nomads and did not utilize the modern conveniences that our family took for granted, such as cell phones. Even those with relatively stable living arrangements didn't always use telephones, much less the Internet. The majority of vampires Carlisle knew were centuries older than us and were either baffled by modern technology or eschewed it altogether.

The family had debated whether we should go in search of a few critical friends, such as Peter and Charlotte, though we didn't know where to start looking for them. They could be contacted by sending letters to post offices in several cities they frequented, but it might be weeks before they received them. We knew other American nomads—Garrett, Mary, and Randall—but we had even less idea of where they might be. Carlisle's next closest friends lived in the Amazon jungle, a vast area that would take weeks to search. His remaining friends lived in Ireland, England, and Egypt or wandered around Europe. Those were long distances to travel and time was short.

I discussed the situation with Bella that night. We were lying side-by-side in her bed and Charlie was snoring loudly down the hall.

"What's causing the delay?" she asked. "Not that I want to see you leave sooner...I wish you didn't have to go at all, actually."

"But you don't want the Volturi to come here either."

"No," she replied glumly. "I'm causing so much trouble. I should leave myself and then everybody could get on with their lives safely."

"Bella!" I said, taking her face in my hands. "Don't even think that way. None of this is your fault."

"But the intruder in my room, the Volturi, Victoria wanting to kill me...it *is* my fault, Edward! I'm putting all my family and friends in danger! I hate it!"

"Oh, Bella," I said, pulling her head to my chest and rocking her gently. "Shh... shh... None of these things is insurmountable. It only seems that way because it's all happening at once. I promise you, it's going to be fine."

I smoothed her hair with my fingers and then stroked her cheek, only to discover that my fingers were wet.

“Bella! You’re crying...”

“No, I’m not,” she sniffed, all evidence to the contrary.

Her pain and fear tore at my heart. I wanted to *do* something—anything—to ease her distress. I gazed at her face and wiped the tears from her cheeks with my thumbs. Just as I caught one trailing along the side of her mouth, she looked up at me through her wet lashes and suddenly I felt exceedingly human. I touched the soft, pliant flesh of her lips with my damp thumb, sliding it gently back and forth. I noticed for the thousandth time how the extra fullness of her lower lip made it protrude slightly in a pout.

She stretched toward me then, her lips seeking mine, and when we connected, desire hot and sharp whooshed through my body like a backdraft. Her tears had raised the emotional tension between us and everywhere we touched became electric with sensation.

With a new hunger, I held her face in my palms and kissed her feverishly...our lips moving together...feeling...tasting. Her hands stroked my neck, then my chest, then slid around to my side ribs and I heard myself groan. At that moment, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to roll onto her and feel the shape of her beneath me.

Bella’s heart stuttered and raced in excitement and like a beacon, drew me closer. With her breasts pressing into my ribs, I felt the reverberations in my chest cavity—the two of us sharing one heart. She panted her breath sweetly into my mouth and I was far enough gone that I allowed some of my weight to sink strategically until I felt the concave area between her thighs cradle the convex shape of mine. The sensation was shocking in its intensity, but even as I growled with pleasure, I had no difficulty remembering to hold my weight on my arms while I rocked gently against her.

She felt sooo...sooo...good. Unutterably good.

I felt the tip of Bella’s tongue exploring the inside edge of my upper lip and I stroked the bottom of her tongue with mine. She moaned, the sound vibrating through her chest and echoing in mine. She was panting wildly and my breath too was coming fast and hard. Nearly out of my head with desire, I pressed my hips against her and she met me with equal force.

Ahhhh...ahhh...ahhh...

Caught up in the passion of the moment, our bodies moved in synchronization like human lovers, though our clothing and Bella’s quilt still formed a barrier between us. It was

only when Bella wiggled her cotton-covered leg free from the covers and wrapped it around the back of my thighs that I stopped short and froze in place above her. I closed my eyes and separated my lips from hers to try to regain control of myself, though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

“No, Edward, *pleeease*...don’t stop...,” Bella moaned and another wave of desire rolled through me and settled between my legs. I held my breath and remained still until the sensation began to dissipate, then I started breathing again, slowly, to try to calm myself.

“*Pleeease*,” Bella whispered. “I *want* to.” I felt her hand on my lower back glide downward to my buttocks and I resisted the overwhelming urge to press into her again.

“No, Bella. I’ll hurt you. We can’t,” I murmured, opening my eyes.

“I trust you.”

“I don’t,” I replied, removing her hand from my backside and rolling off of her. She immediately slid her body as close to mine as the quilt would allow.

“Bella, my love...”

I pulled her head onto my chest and stroked her hair, breathing in the scent of her. She was luscious and ripe and infinitely alluring and I wanted her *badly*. It occurred to me then that if I got “my way” and she remained human, I could never make love to her. I was starting to comprehend exactly what that meant and I suddenly realized just how difficult it would be to contain these newly awakened cravings for the rest of her natural life.

Perhaps I was undermining my own stated preference by tempting both of us toward a physical relationship. It was selfish to want her to become one of us so I could keep her forever, but it seemed even worse to change her so that we could share unfettered physical passion. Guilt dislodged desire in me as I wondered to what lengths I might go to possess her in every way. I would sacrifice her human life, it seemed.

“I can’t stand it,” Bella whined. “I want you.”

“I know, Bella. I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry. That was my fault. I didn’t mean to...to make you unhappy.”

“You’d make me *very* happy if you’d give in,” she said as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I wish I could, my darling, but it’s just not possible. I’m sorry I did that.”

"I'm not," she whispered. "Do it again, please."

"Try to sleep, Bella. Finals are coming up. You need your rest."

"*Ugh!* You sure know how to bring a girl down," she complained.

I chuckled. "Goodnight, my love."

"You can't be serious," Bella said to Alice. "You've completely lost your mind!"

"Say whatever you like about me," Alice retorted. "The party is still on."

We were fake-eating lunch in the school cafeteria with Bella the day before our first finals. Bella's eyes and mouth were gaping in astonishment that Alice would consider throwing a party in the face of our upcoming battle.

"Oh, calm down, Bella! There's no reason not to go through with it. Besides, the invitations are already sent."

"But...the...you...I...insane!" Bella sputtered, too upset to form a sentence.

"You've already bought my present," Alice told her. "You don't have to do anything but show up."

Bella inhaled and exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm down. "With everything that is going on right now, a party is hardly appropriate," she countered primly. Why she bothered to argue with Alice is a mystery to me. She should know by now that it's a waste of energy.

"Graduation is what's going on right now, and a party is so appropriate it's almost passé."

"Alice!" Bella wailed.

My sister explained. "There are a few things we need to get in order now, and that's going to take a little time. As long as we're sitting here waiting, we might as well commemorate the good stuff. You're only going to graduate from high school—for the first time—once. You don't get to be human again, Bella. This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot."

I didn't appreciate how Alice was reinforcing the idea that Bella would be changed soon. I wasn't ready to concede that. She still might decide to wait. I gave my sister a sharp look of disapproval.

Alice stuck out her tongue.

Fine—point made, on both sides.

Bella wouldn't be distracted. "What few things do we need to get in order?"

I answered quietly. "Jasper thinks we could use some help. Tanya's family isn't the only choice we have. Carlisle's trying to track down a few old friends, and Jasper is looking up Peter and Charlotte. He's considering talking to Maria...but no one really wants to involve the Southerners."

Alice shuddered and I shared her sentiment. Maria was dangerous and utterly unpredictable. We didn't need another Maria-induced tragedy like we'd had in Calgary the last time she visited us. It would be like her to start a battle with the werewolves to amuse herself, or try to recruit the newborns for her own army, or something equally cracked. I certainly wouldn't trust her anywhere near Bella. And she hated Alice.

"If we can find them, it shouldn't be too hard to convince them to help," I continued. "Nobody wants a visit from Italy."

An expression of alarm crossed Bella's face. "But these friends—they're not going to be...vegetarians, right?"

"No."

"Here? In Forks?"

"They're friends," Alice pointed out, which didn't alter the fact of their diet. She only meant that they were all mature vampires who wouldn't hunt in our "backyard" if we asked them not to.

"Everything's going to be fine. Don't worry," Alice said. "And then, Jasper has to teach us a few courses on newborn elimination...."

That was going to be fun. I couldn't wait.

"When are you going?" Bella asked in a strained voice.

"A week," I told her. "That ought to give us enough time."

Bella went still and silent.

Looking at her from across the table, Alice observed, "You look kind of green, Bella."

I leaned over to look at Bella's face and I saw that Alice was right! Could Bella be so frightened that it would make her ill? I put my arm around her in reassurance and pulled her against me. "It's going to be fine, Bella. Trust me."

She remained quiet...too quiet. Eventually, she murmured, "You're looking for help."

"Yes." Alice turned toward her, curious.

"I could help," she said.

All my muscles contracted simultaneously and I had to smother a hiss.

Let me handle this, Alice thought. I was glad to. I didn't trust my voice.

"That really wouldn't be *helpful*," she told Bella matter-of-factly.

"Why not?" Bella challenged. "Eight is better than seven. There's more than enough time."

"There's not enough time to make you helpful, Bella. Do you remember how Jasper described the young ones? You'd be no good in a fight. You wouldn't be able to control your instincts, and that would make you an easy target. And then Edward would get hurt trying to protect you."

Well done, Alice! Even Bella couldn't deny the truth in that.

She didn't and immediately conceded the argument.

"Not because you're afraid," I whispered into her ear.

"Oh," Alice exclaimed suddenly, her eyes losing focus as she directed them toward the future. "I hate last-minute cancellations. So that puts the party attendance list down to sixty-five...."

"*Sixty-five!*" Bella cried out in shock.

"Who canceled?" I asked as a distraction.

"Renee."

"What?" Bella interjected.

“She was going to surprise you for your graduation, but something went wrong. You’ll have a message when you get home,” Alice explained.

After school, Bella headed straight for the answering machine to hear the news from her mother. Phil had had a baseball injury—a broken femur—and was incapacitated. Renee couldn’t leave him.

“Well, that’s one,” Bella sighed.

“One what?”

“One person I don’t have to worry about getting killed this week.”

Such *drama*! I rolled my eyes.

“Why won’t you and Alice take this seriously?” Bella demanded. “This is *serious*.”

“Confidence,” I said confidently—and grinned.

“Wonderful,” Bella groused.

I stood beside her and fiddled with her hair as she called her mother, who did all the talking. Bella listened patiently to the details of Phil’s bad slide into home plate, his injury, all the personal tasks he couldn’t manage alone—fixing food, washing himself, going to the toilet—and then profuse apologies and regrets for having to miss Bella’s graduation.

From time to time, Bella glanced up at me and I smiled contentedly as I twined her hair through my fingers, forming big and small ringlets, and braiding and unbraiding individual locks of hair. Eventually, Bella announced that she needed to study for her finals and her mother said goodbye.

After hanging up the phone, Bella turned to me and rose onto her toes for a kiss. To make it easier for her, I lifted her by the waist and set her on the countertop so that our heights were more equal. Immediately, she spread her thighs wide and wrapped her arms around my neck to pull me in close. She seemed oblivious to her own sexiness and to how provocative the invitation was.

After our last physical encounter, I should have known better, but I *wanted* to feel her thighs around me and so I indulged myself and stepped between them to kiss her. She locked her ankles behind my legs and pulled herself tightly against me—a perpetual temptation. I couldn’t stay there long. It was much too difficult to keep myself in check as my mind instantly spun fantasies of us together, her soft human flesh yielding to my dense marble skin. *Mmmm....*

Our lips touched and moved together for a few short moments before I backed away and disengaged myself from Bella's legs and arms. Her face went pouty and I chuckled. Then with a sigh, I leaned against the counter next to her and put my arm around her shoulders. I noticed that she did not close her legs.

"I know you think that I have some kind of perfect, unyielding self-control, but that's not actually the case," I confessed.

"I wish."

I sighed again heavily. I knew what she wanted...I wanted it too, which made restraint all the more difficult. But when I remembered how fragile she was, how easily broken, my yearnings ebbed a little. Not hers though, apparently.

I changed the subject. "After school tomorrow, I'm going hunting with Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie. Just for a few hours—we'll stay close. Alice, Jasper, and Emmett should be able to keep you safe."

"Ugh," Bella complained. "I hate being babysat."

"It's temporary."

"Jasper will be bored. Emmett will make fun of me."

"They'll be on their best behavior," I promised, though Emmett could be rather impulsive and unruly.

"Right," Bella sulked, looking down at her hands. Then her expression changed. "You know...I haven't been to La Push since the bonfire."

My whole body went taut. I concentrated on keeping my expression smooth.

"I'd be safe enough there," Bella pointed out.

Inwardly, I balked at the idea of her going to the reservation, which no doubt was the reaction she was expecting from me. She even might have acceded to my preferences if I'd pushed the issue. However, I had promised that I would try to be objective and, really, there was no legitimate reason for her not to spend the time with Jacob.

"You're probably right," I acknowledged.

She looked startled, but then quickly changed the subject.

“Are you thirsty already?” she asked. She brushed her fingers over the slightly darkened area beneath my eyes.

“Not really.”

I didn’t especially want to discuss how we would be preparing for the fight, but Bella kept looking at me, waiting for me to explain why I would go hunting when my eyes were still gold in color. I relented.

“We want to be as strong as possible. We’ll probably hunt again on the way, looking for big game.”

“That makes you stronger?”

At any moment, I expected her to see where this conversation was leading, but she didn’t.

“Yes,” I finally replied. “Human blood makes us the strongest, though only fractionally. Jasper’s been thinking about cheating—adverse as he is to the idea, he’s nothing if not practical—but he won’t suggest it. He knows what Carlisle will say.”

“Would that help?” Bella inquired hesitantly.

As frightened as she was that one of us would be destroyed in the battle, she had to be weighing the relative advantages of sacrificing our principles versus being killed by vampires who had no scruples about drinking human blood. But I knew she would then remember that all of Forks was human, that *Charlie* was human, and that *she* was human. The Catch-22 had to be troubling. I put her mind at ease.

“It doesn’t matter. We aren’t going to change who we are,” I said, then moved away from the uncomfortable topic. “That’s why they’re so strong, of course. The newborns are full of human blood—their own blood, reacting to the change. It lingers in the tissues and strengthens them. Their bodies use it up slowly, like Jasper said, the strength starting to wane after about a year.”

“How strong will I be?”

I grinned. “Stronger than I am.”

“Stronger than Emmett?”

Thinking of that *really* made me smile. “Yes. Do me a favor and challenge him to an arm-wrestling match. It would be a good experience for him.”

After our morning finals the next day, Bella allowed me to drive her to the reservation border before I left on my hunting trip, even though she said being escorted made her feel like a kid. I reminded her that when your foe is supernatural, you need supernatural protection. I don't know why she found that so difficult to accept. We couldn't allow any gaps in her security and I was sure that Jacob would agree with me.

I tried to distract her. "So how do you feel you did on your exams?"

"History was easy, but I don't know about the calculus. It seemed like it was making sense, so that probably means I failed."

I laughed at her lack of confidence. "I'm sure you did fine. Or, if you're really worried, I could bribe Mr. Varner to give you an A."

"Er, thanks, but no thanks."

I chuckled as we rounded the last bend to the reservation, but stopped abruptly when I saw Jacob standing by his red Volkswagen Rabbit, tapping his foot impatiently. He had a lot on his mind and the content did not at all please me.

She loves me. I know she does. If the bloodsucker hadn't come back, she would know it by now. I have to make her see it. I HAVE to. If she lets him turn her into a filthy, stinking leech like him, I'll never forgive myself. She has to know that she has options.

I heaved a sigh. So he was going to push the issue today. I wished Bella hadn't insisted on coming to La Push.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, trying to shake it off, but Jacob was working himself up to a declaration.

The parasite is gonna hate me for this, especially when she finally comes to her senses and chooses me, but tough titties! I'm SO much better for her. She has to see that. I have to MAKE her see it.

Jacob was observing us with a defiant stance, his arms crossed over his chest.

If looks could kill, I thought, trying to vaporize him with my laser-beam eyes through the windshield.

"You're not listening to Jacob, are you?" Bella scolded.

"It's not easy to ignore someone when he's shouting."

“Oh. What’s he shouting?”

“I’m absolutely certain he’ll mention it himself,” I told her irritably.

Jacob reached through his car window and honked the horn twice in quick succession.

“That’s impolite,” I growled.

“That’s Jacob,” Bella replied, letting him off the hook as she always did.

Sometimes the boy could be so *childish*. I gritted my teeth and cursed him silently. Just because he was immature, though, didn’t mean Bella wasn’t attracted to him. He was *obviously* attracted to her, as I knew by the inner dialogue he was conducting with his erect penis. Apparently, when he saw *my girl*, he had a tough time keeping it in his pants. And he never wore a shirt, much less *underclothes!*

Great, just great... Well, he was right about one thing—Bella would have to make a choice because Jacob was going to force the issue. I gave Bella a quick kiss and touched her cheek with my fingers.

“Be safe.”

She nodded. I watched her walk toward him and, as soon as I saw that she was safely across the border, hurriedly drove away. I had to escape the contents of Jacob’s head—*immediately!*

Unfortunately, I was all the way home before I discovered that the cell phone I’d given Bella had fallen from her pocket and wedged in the back of the car’s seat cushion. *Darn it!* Now I wouldn’t know when to pick her up.

We didn’t go far to hunt—only a few miles into the Olympic National Forest—but the trip felt more like purgatory than an enjoyable romp in the woods. I couldn’t get Jacob’s thoughts and plans for the afternoon out of my head.

As usual, I drove my family crazy—well, Rosalie anyway; Carlisle and Esme were more tolerant—because I was so impatient to find some prey, *any* prey, and get home. I just hoped that I heard from Bella soon afterwards. If she hadn’t called me by Charlie’s dinnertime, then I would hang out at his house until she returned. Charlie would *love* that!

At least I knew that I’d be with her overnight, unless...PERISH THE THOUGHT! ...Jacob somehow succeeded in stealing her away from me. It troubled me more than a little to know that if she wanted to make love with him, he would *leap* at the chance. And why wouldn’t she want to? Even *I* could see that he was astonishingly attractive for a human, plus he ran around

half naked all the time. *And* he was warm and had a heartbeat. *And* if she wanted children, he could give her that one day. *And* her father liked him!

Arghh! If I were honest about it, I would admit that Jacob was a much better choice of mate for Bella than myself in every way I could think of. Even though his physical strength and volatility made him nearly as dangerous to her as me, he wouldn't have my scruples about getting physical with her. And she obviously had physical desires that were difficult for her to contain.

My heart sank lower the longer my mind followed this line of thought. In a short time, I practically had convinced myself that Bella should be with Jacob and that I should exit stage left. I couldn't give her what she needed.

It only raised my spirits slightly to recall that Bella once said she'd never felt physical desire for a man until she fell in love with me—that love and desire are intertwined for her. Was that still true? I could only hope. But what if she *does* love the dog? He certainly believes she does! Maybe if he pushes her in the direction of a physical relationship, she will find that she *does* love him.

Ack!! I HAVE to get control of my thoughts this INSTANT or I will go MAD!

With great effort, I returned my mind to the task at hand. Rosalie and I found the first small herd of deer—she caught two; I caught one. Carlisle and Esme then located a family of elk and each took one. After four hours total, we all had reached our hunting limits for the day. We'd found more elk and I was lucky enough to track a mountain lion, which my family left for me since it's my favorite. It would be best for all of us to drink lion or bear blood before the battle, so we planned to hunt them on our way to Seattle.

One of the problems with drinking only animal blood is that we get full before our bodies are completely fortified. Since we were once human, our vampire bodies recognize the antigens present in human blood and our tissues thus absorb its components easily. The further removed an animal's blood is from the human species, the less able we are to absorb its nutrients. Therefore, we have to drink more of it to get the same effect and unfortunately, our stomachs can only hold so much blood at once.

The only way around the problem is to overfill ourselves repeatedly over a period of time and that's what we were doing to prepare for our battle with the newborns. We would continue hunting the local fauna until we were ready to leave, and then supplement that with bear and mountain lion blood on the journey, assuming we could find some. The blood of the *Ursus* and *Feline* species have antigens that are similar to human antigens, which is one reason bear and mountain lion blood appeal to us. Though housecats are also appealing, they have

only half a pint of blood in them and are hardly worth the effort. Interestingly, the blood of the *Canine* species has many more antigens than human blood and is effectively inedible. We assume that's why the Quileute wolves smell so bad to our noses (one reason, anyway).

A week of over-drinking elk and deer plus a little lion or bear is nearly equivalent to drinking the blood of two humans. When one considers that the newborns not only have their own blood still in them, but also are drinking human blood—perhaps as often as every day—one must concede that the Seattle newborns will have a distinct advantage over us. That's not something I wanted Bella to know—she was anxious enough. Our training and expertise *should* override their advantage, though their much greater numbers were still a bit disquieting.

The afternoon had dragged unrelentingly, though in truth, all four of us had found sufficient prey rather quickly, considering how hunts often go. We had returned from the forest forty-one minutes earlier, but it felt like I'd been driving around Clallam County for hours waiting for Bella to phone. Twice already I'd had to stop myself from dialing Charlie to find out if she was home yet. I was driving around in my car so that I would reach her more quickly when she called, and also because I couldn't tolerate waiting at home doing nothing.

Damn! I wish she hadn't dropped that cell phone!

The delay might mean nothing, but what it *could* mean troubled me—a lot. What if Jacob's impassioned pleading had worked? What if he'd convinced her that she loved him? What if she *did* love him? What if they were loving each other? *Right now?! Aaaaaah!* I wanted to scream.

Then suddenly, *miraculously*, my phone rang. I couldn't pluck it out of my pocket fast enough.

"Bella?" I asked eagerly. "You left the phone...I'm sorry, did Jacob drive you home?"

"Yes. Will you come and get me, please?" she asked in a shaky voice. Alarm bells clanged loudly in my head.

"I'm on my way. What's wrong?"

"I want Carlisle to look at my hand. I think it's broken."

I inhaled convulsively and clenched my fists before deliberately releasing the steering wheel so it wouldn't crumble in my hands.

"What happened?"

"I punched Jacob."

The air rushed out of my lungs and I started to smile, but there was no joy in it. He had done something to Bella and he was going to pay for it!

“Good,” I said evenly. “Though I’m sorry you’re hurt.”

Bella chuckled, then sighed. “I wish I’d hurt *him*. I didn’t do any damage at all.”

“I can fix that,” I said grimly.

“I was hoping you would say that.”

Really? “That doesn’t sound like you. What did he *do*?”

“He kissed me.”

I heard the anger in her voice and my foot slammed the gas pedal to the floor. I was shaking with rage. She’d had to fight him off! I would kill him. *Kill him!!*

I heard Charlie’s voice through the telephone.

“Maybe you ought to take off, Jake.”

“I think I’ll hang out here, if you don’t mind,” he replied nonchalantly.

I kept the anger out of my voice as I verified what I’d heard.

“Is the dog still there?”

“Yes.”

Good! Easier for me...

“I’m around the corner,” I said with a forced calm before snapping the phone shut.

My car strained against gravity as I wrenched the steering wheel clockwise at Charlie’s corner. When I reached his house, I stomped on the brakes and the tires squealed to a stop at the curb. I was out of the car and at the front door in less than a second.

“It’s swelling,” I heard Bella say from inside.

“Maybe you should pick on people your own size,” Charlie suggested. Then having heard my squealing tires thought, *Whew! He’s pissed off! What’s he gonna do?*

When the door *finally* opened, there she was and she looked glad to see me.

Bella first, Bella first, I repeated to myself, trying to get my anger under control. It didn't help that her injury was so obviously painful. I could tell by the unusual delicacy with which she held her immobilized hand against her chest as she stepped outside.

"Let me see," I uttered softly, peeling the icepack from her knuckles. Then I saw the points of contact. She had belted him solidly with the knuckles of her first two fingers and slightly less solidly with the knuckle of her ring finger. I was glad that that one, in particular, was not broken. The already blackened, swollen skin indicated that the other two probably were. "I think you're right about the break," I said catching her eyes. "I'm proud of you. You must have put some force behind this."

"As much as I have," Bella sighed. "Not enough, apparently."

I kissed the back of her hand as gently as possible. "I'll take care of it," I assured her. "Jacob," I called quietly.

"Now, now," Charlie warned from the living room. *Jacob could probably take him with his size 'n' all, but there's something...what?...dangerous, yes...dangerous about Edward. Could he have a gun? Yes...possibly...*

Little did Charlie know just *how* dangerous I could be, no gun required.

Jacob rose from the couch and strolled casually to the front door, followed by Bella's father.

The Chief of Police, I reminded myself.

"I don't want any fighting, do you understand?" he said to me. "I can go put my badge on if that makes my request more official."

"That won't be necessary," I said evenly, the violence of my emotions carefully concealed.

"Why don't you arrest me, Dad?" Bella offered. "I'm the one throwing punches."

"Do you want to press charges, Jake?" the police chief asked.

Jacob grinned. "No. I'll take the trade any day."

Grrrrrrrr.

The comment made Bella angry too. "Dad, don't you have a baseball bat somewhere in your room? I want to borrow it for a minute."

The lawman replied, "Enough, Bella."

"Let's go have Carlisle look at your hand before you wind up in a jail cell," I suggested. I wrapped my arm around her waist and directed her toward my car.

"Fine," she said, leaning against me.

Jacob came outside behind us.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" Charlie whispered, considering the possibility of a gun in my glove compartment. *Smith & Wesson classic revolver*, he thought, then, *No, more high-tech...Glock "safe-action" pistol*.

I smiled to myself at Charlie's assessment of my weapon preferences. Not that I was legally of age to own a gun. That he thought I might have one anyway said something about me, but I wasn't sure what. Possibly he recognized "man," despite my youthful exterior. Good cops were sharp and could be hard to fool.

"Give me a minute, Charlie," Jacob muttered. "Don't worry, I'll be right back." I heard the front door close and caught Charlie's nervous thoughts behind it.

...let them work it out?...keep an eye on 'em...

Charlie's concerns weren't too far from the truth. Jacob was ready for a prizefight with Bella as the prize and I was more than willing to take him on...*except* for Bella. I ignored him while I walked my love to the car and helped her inside. Once the door was shut, I turned around to face the arrogant mutt.

His legs were planted slightly apart and his arms crossed over his chest, the "puffed-up" stance of challenge. Despite his towering height and ridiculously muscled torso, I knew I could snap his neck before he even realized I'd moved. Perhaps that knowledge is what allowed me to remain calm.

"I'm not going to kill you now, because it would upset Bella."

"Hmph," Bella complained behind me.

I flashed her a grin. "It would bother you in the morning," I averred, touching her cheek through the open window. Then I addressed Jacob again, low enough that Charlie, who was looking through the front window, couldn't hear.

"But if you ever bring her back damaged again—and I don't care whose fault it is; I don't care if she merely trips, or if a meteor falls out of the sky and hits her in the head—if you return

her to me in less than the perfect condition that I left her in, you will be running with three legs. Do you understand that, mongrel?"

Jacob rolled his eyes, which did not disturb me in the slightest. I knew that he knew I could do it, even though he was bragging to himself about how he had touched her face and kissed her too. *Even if she did punch me*, he thought.

"Who's going back?" Bella muttered.

"And if you ever kiss her again, I *will* break your jaw for her," I promised, my face expressionless.

"What if she wants me to?" Jacob replied defiantly.

Just like a stinking puppy urinating on the furniture....

"Hah!" Bella countered.

"If that's what she wants, then I won't object," I said, shrugging. "You might want to wait for her to *say* it, rather than trust your interpretation of body language—but it's your face."

Jacob grinned wickedly, thinking, *Oh, she's gonna want it, all right! As much as I do! Soon!*

"You wish," Bella taunted, answering the look in his eyes.

"Yes, he does," I confirmed.

Annoyed, Jacob said, "Well, if you're done rummaging through my head, why don't you go take care of her hand?"

"One more thing," I added, responding to what he'd said to her on the reservation—his declaration of love. "I'll be fighting for her, too. You should know that. I'm not taking anything for granted, and I'll be fighting twice as hard as you will."

"Good," the dog replied. "It's no fun beating someone who forfeits." *She will be mine, bloodsucker!*

"She *is* mine," I responded, my anger rising to the surface. "I didn't say I would fight fair." Not with my new weapon that—to my *great* relief—Jacob *hadn't* discovered today. I was ready to use everything I had.

"Neither did I."

“Best of luck.”

“Yes, may the best *man* win.”

“That sounds about right...pup.”

That angered him, but he had no further comeback. Instead, he leaned around me to catch Bella’s eye.

“I hope your hand feels better soon. I’m really sorry you’re hurt.”

“How do you feel?” I asked, as we pulled away from the curb.

“Irritated.”

I chuckled. “I meant your hand.

Bella shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

“True.”

Emmett and Rosalie were working in the garage when we arrived home. Rose was lying beneath the Jeep, changing the oil, while Emmett sat next to her, holding its front end in the air with one hand under the frame. Bored, he noticed Bella’s injured hand as soon as I helped her from the car.

“Fall down again, Bella?” he asked with a grin.

She replied with annoyance. “No, Emmett. I punched a werewolf in the face.”

He looked at her in surprise and then burst out laughing.

As we walked past, Rosalie said, not exactly quietly, “Jasper’s going to win the bet.”

Will he? Emmett wondered and stopped laughing. *Maybe I bet too much.*

“What bet?” Bella stopped walking and stared at Emmett.

“Let’s get you to Carlisle,” I urged, trying to push her along. I shook my head slightly at Em and gave him a warning look. Bella didn’t need to know about my brothers’ crude form of amusement.

“*What bet?*” Bella demanded, squaring off with me.

“Thanks, Rosalie,” I grumbled.

Any time, she replied in her head. She loved to cause me trouble.

“Edward...,” Bella threatened, as we headed toward the kitchen door.

“It’s infantile,” I said, shrugging it off. “Emmett and Jasper like to gamble.”

“Emmett will tell me.” Bella tried to pull away, but I tightened my grip around her waist and then gave in with a sigh.

“They’re betting on how many times you...slip up in the first year.”

“Oh.” I felt Bella cringe against my side. “They have a bet about how many people I’ll kill?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Rosalie thinks your temper will turn the odds in Jasper’s favor.”

Bella considered that for a second and concluded, “Jasper’s betting high.”

“It will make him feel better if you have a hard time adjusting. He’s tired of being the weakest link.”

“Sure. Of course it will,” she said sarcastically. “I guess I could throw in a few extra homicides, if it makes Jasper happy. Why not?”

The reality of what she wanted to do hadn’t completely sunk in, I thought. Even though Jasper had detailed the behavior of newborn vampires—their viciousness, single-mindedness, and intractability—she hadn’t truly faced the obvious conclusion yet...that she probably would at least *try* to drain some humans. I knew the idea was abhorrent to her.

I hugged her. “You don’t need to worry about it now. In fact, you don’t have to worry about it ever, if you don’t want to.” I meant it...I think.

Bella groaned. She probably needed something for the pain. I hurried her into the house.

Alice had warned Carlisle and he was waiting for us in the kitchen.

“Hi Bella. What seems to be the trouble?” he asked, though he already knew.

“I punched Jacob in the face and I think my hand is broken,” she responded wryly.

“Let’s get you up to my office then and take an X-ray,” he suggested.

It turned out that Bella’s middle knuckle was broken, though fortunately, the bone hadn’t dislocated. The other two knuckles were bruised.

"I need to immobilize your hand, Bella, so the bone doesn't move around. Plaster would be best."

"Please, please, please don't give me a cast," she begged. "Can't you just tape it or something?"

"Well, I could put it in a brace, but you'll have to keep it on or it won't do any good."

"I will, I promise!"

Carlisle dug around in his cabinets for a brace of the proper size. When he found one, he bent it into a confining shape around Bella's hand and tightened it with Velcro straps. Bella zoned out completely as he worked.

"Are you in pain?" I asked. Maybe she was blanking out her expression to hide it. That would be like her.

"No, I'm fine," she replied, though I saw her flinch once or twice during the procedure.

She wouldn't admit to pain when I asked her again a little later, but I knew *something* was bothering her. I didn't think it was Jacob's advances, though I couldn't be sure. Through his eyes I saw Bella first attempt to push him off when he started kissing her, then go completely limp and unresponsive, and then punch him in the face. It appeared to me that what he thought had happened and what had *actually* happened were wildly different. I don't think I was misreading Bella's displeasure...which was a *tremendous* relief.

Maybe she was troubled by Rosalie's reminder that she would become a vicious predator like the rest of us if she continued on her chosen course. And *soon*. It might be good that she was bothered by that. Perhaps it would disturb her enough that she would change her mind and decide to remain human.

That was something I still hoped for...and didn't.

12. Graduation

Charlie was amusing both of us with the thoughts in his head, but of course, he didn't know I could hear them. He would have spoken them aloud, except he knew that would make Bella mad and this *was* her special night.

I had planned to drive Bella to the graduation ceremony since we needed to arrive early to assemble, but according to Bella, Charlie had pitched a fit when she told him. He wanted to escort her and she'd decided it was a reasonable request.

"It's an important event for a father," I conceded. "A little like walking his only daughter down the aisle, presumably."

"Edward!" Bella gasped, her face registering shock. "I wasn't thinking anything like that!"

I turned my face away from her and chuckled to myself. No harm in pushing my agenda, and seeing her overblown reaction amused me.

"Renee's not here, and Dad doesn't have anybody else but me," Bella said defensively. "He shouldn't have to go by himself."

"You're right, of course," I agreed pleasantly, though I had no intention of letting her out of my sight, not even for the two-mile ride to the high school.

I had begun setting the kitchen table for two when Bella's father stomped in, shut the front door, and removed his gun belt, hanging it on a coat hook nearby.

"Good evening, Charlie," I offered.

He replied with his usual grunt.

"Dinner's almost ready, Dad. You have just enough time to wash up."

Charlie grunted at Bella too as he made his way upstairs. He hadn't had a good day at work and was mentally reviewing one discouraging episode. The mother of a notorious young hooligan, whose favorite activities were drinking, drag-racing, and vandalizing public fixtures, had called the police station and given Charlie a piece of her mind. He had pulled her son over for a broken taillight and found an open bottle of Johnny Walker on the floor of the kid's pickup.

“The law is the law, Mrs. Harding, and your son broke it. He’s lucky I didn’t suspend his license. This is not his first offense, you know, and I’ll do it next time.” Charlie remembered how the woman had cursed him out before she slammed down the telephone receiver.

Bad kids have bad parents, more often than not...or no parents at all, he thought. That set him wondering for the millionth time how Bella had turned out so well considering how he and Renee had raised her—in separate homes in separate states with vastly different rules and routines. He attributed their success to Bella herself.

When Charlie returned from the bathroom, I made myself scarce. He was often “crabby,” as Bella put it, when he was hungry. So I decided to withhold my suggestion until after he’d eaten dinner.

“Charlie,” I began when I came back to help with the dishes. “Bella and I were discussing graduation. How about if we all drive to the ceremony together? My parents said it was fine with them.” Putting it that way would make it harder for Charlie to say no.

He answered gruffly. “I’m driving Bella. You can tag along if you want to, I guess.”

“Sounds good,” I said cheerfully.

Bella kept her eyes carefully fixed on the dirty dishes in the sink until Charlie left the room. Then she turned to me with a red face and a scowl.

“Was that necessary?” she whispered.

I nodded, smiling. “Don’t worry. He’s fine with it.” Then I whispered into her ear, “I wouldn’t miss escorting you to your graduation. It’s an important human experience.”

She rolled her eyes, knowing that that wasn’t the real reason I had insisted. I just smiled and continued drying dishes.

A week later, the event had finally arrived. I knocked on Charlie’s front door promptly at the appointed hour so he couldn’t leave without me. When Bella appeared in the doorway, I was simply dumbstruck. She was wearing a sweater and skirt in the deep shade of blue I love on her because it accentuates the delicate tones of her ivory skin and rose-colored lips. The scoop-neck sweater exposed her collarbones and skimmed her curves below in the most appealing way. The matching cashmere skirt clung to her hips and flared out slightly at the bottom, finishing with a subtly ruffled hem. I was bowled over, stunned, by her beauty...she was *glorious*.

Bella’s troubled expression betrayed her. Did her broken hand hurt? She was clearly distressed, but before I could ask why, Charlie appeared and began herding us toward his police

cruiser. He was highly amused about something and after I helped Bella into the front seat, I caught what it was.

“Over here,” he grunted, opening the back door on the driver’s side and gesturing for me to get in.

“Sure, Charlie,” I said with a grin, reading his intention.

I climbed into the back seat and let him shut the door, leaving me sequestered from Bella and him behind the plexiglass barrier used to confine prisoners. I knew he could open a communication window in the glass, but he chose not to, enjoying his little joke.

Edward looks good back there, Charlie thought, amused by treating me like a detained criminal. Maybe I could leave him there for the ceremony! Hell, the whole evening! Ha, ha! No...I couldn't do that to Dr. Cullen and his wife. Sure would be funny to see his expression, though, when I walked away from the car! Charlie’s eyes sparkled in the rearview mirror and the corners of his mouth twitched.

I saw that the back seat of the police car had no interior door handles. If you were unlucky enough to be sitting where I was, you had to be released by the officer-in-charge. I tried not to laugh as I imagined *Charlie’s* expression when I strode into graduation like I hadn’t noticed anything amiss. It would take me roughly a sixteenth of a second to punch out the bullet-proof glass and escape. That would be easier to explain than an Edward-sized hole in the steel-plated door.

Charlie was speaking to Bella in a low voice that he assumed I couldn’t hear behind the plexiglass barrier, and every couple minutes, he’d look in the rearview mirror and chuckle to himself again. His amusement amused me, which probably wasn’t the response he had expected.

Charlie was always slightly puzzled about why he couldn’t make me angry, though he was consistently rude, dismissive, and irritable. I had never faulted him for that, because he only wanted what was best for his daughter, which is also what I wanted. Besides, I sensed that somewhere inside his hard head, Charlie concealed a certain grudging respect for me.

“Are you all right?” I whispered to Bella after Charlie released me from the back seat and I walked around to help her out of the car.

“Nervous,” she responded.

“You are so beautiful,” I marveled.

Charlie stepped between us before I could say more. Turning his back to me, he asked Bella, “Are you excited?”

“Not really,” she replied.

“Bella, this is a big deal,” Charlie insisted. “You’re graduating from high school. It’s the real world for you now. College. Living on your own.... You’re not my little girl anymore.” His voice wavered at the end.

“Dad, please don’t get all weepy on me.”

“Who’s weepy?” he rebutted gruffly. “Now, why aren’t you excited?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I guess it hasn’t hit yet or something.”

“It’s good that Alice is throwing this party. You need something to perk you up.”

“Sure. A party’s exactly what I need.”

Speaking of parties, I thought, where is Alice? I listened for her thoughts, but couldn’t detect them anywhere near.

Charlie ushered Bella to the graduates’ entrance at the rear of the gym while I “tagged along” behind. He said his “goodbyes” and “good lucks” and then left to join the other parents and spectators at the main entrance of the building. When Bella and I entered the gym, I saw Ms. Cope and Mr. Varner trying to line up the graduates in alphabetical order.

“Up front, Mr. Cullen,” the math teacher directed.

“Hey, Bella!” Jessica Stanley called and waved from the S section toward the back of the line. “Down here, Bella!”

Bella seemed distracted by the flurry of activity and all the voices shouting over the crowd noise. Instead of speaking, I touched her neck with my fingers and kissed her briefly before reluctantly moving toward the C section of the line. I located Ryan Collins, who had preceded Alice and me in every alphabetical listing of our class members for the past three years. I positioned myself between Ryan and Jody Culpepper and then looked around for my wayward sister, but she still hadn’t arrived. Maybe she’d had some last minute problems with the party arrangements or—more likely, knowing Alice—she was up to something.

I pulled on my rented graduation robe and secured the mortarboard on my head. This had become a familiar ritual, but the blazing yellow color was new and would jazz up our

family's framed display of graduation caps. Most of our former schools had proscribed shades of blue for graduation, though purple and red were also popular.

After we were lined up, the familiar "Pomp and Circumstance, March No. 1 in D" began and the senior class filed into the gym where metal folding chairs had been set up in a rectangular block. We were supposed to remain standing in front of our chairs for the first part of the ceremony.

Only about half the high school graduation ceremonies that I've attended have ended up as the beautiful formal rituals they are meant to be. The other half generally devolve, either partially or fully, into a spontaneous circus, as this one did. First, the sound system cut out as soon as Principal Greene began his welcome speech, which caused the crowd to become restless and turn in their seats to whisper to their neighbors. Three minutes later, after the sound man gave the go-ahead, the principal continued his welcome address, but his first words produced torturous feedback that screamed from the speakers and caused everyone to exclaim and cover their ears.

After that minor debacle, a local minister—being paid by the word, it seemed— offered an invocation prayer that dragged on and on until an intoxicated guest stage-whispered, "...and I'd like to thank the Academy." Tittering began and caught on, spreading through the entire assembly until the minister finally said "Amen" to cheers and hand-clapping.

Then Mr. Varner, our class sponsor, gave us the hand-lowering signal to sit down and as we did, loud popping noises that sounded like firecrackers ripped through the air and echoed in the cavernous space. Pranksters had turned each folding chair upside-down and stepped on its seat bottom, causing the metal to distend upward. When weight was applied to the seat, it returned to its former shape with a loud "POP!" As approximately one hundred graduating seniors sat down, we produced an enormous din that was increased by the stunned laughter that followed.

After that, the ceremony proceeded without incident through the award announcements and the speeches—including Eric Yorkie's trite valedictorian address— until the distribution of diplomas commenced. By the way he conducted himself, one would have thought that Principal Greene had never performed this ritual. He began to call graduates to the dais one after another without waiting for them to approach and accept their diplomas. So the names he was calling quickly became out of sync with the diplomas he was presenting, which confused him into saying the wrong names as he passed over diplomas and shook students' hands.

As I waited impatiently for Alice to arrive, the principal called "Ryan Collins" and then "Alice Cullen" and I prepared myself to cover for her by accepting her diploma as well as mine.

Then, just as Ryan finished shaking hands with Principal Greene, Alice bounded in front of me and across the stage to take her diploma.

As I walked forward to the dais, I read her thoughts, trying to ascertain what was going on. Oddly enough, I caught the phrase “...where the grapes of wrath are stored...” and recognized the military anthem that she seemed to be translating into Arabic, of all things.

It was my sister’s habit to engage in mental gymnastics to direct her mind away from thoughts she didn’t want me to read. After finishing the translation, she began matching Hanja characters to the Korean manual alphabet in her head. As vitally interesting as that was—*ha ha*—it was just another diversion. She was trying to conceal something from me.

As soon as Alice had her diploma in hand, she danced out the nearest exit, probably heading home to prepare for the party. Maybe she was setting up some kind of surprise she didn’t want me to know about. *Oh well*. I had more important things on my mind.

Exiting the stage, I returned to my seat to wait for Principal Greene to reach the S’s. When Bella’s name finally was called, I heard whistles and catcalls erupt from the back of the gym and I turned around to see that Jacob and Billy had come in. Bella turned toward the noise too and smiled tightly at them.

Is she still angry with Jacob? I wondered.

After the ceremony was over and the graduates had thrown their hats into the air, I made my way out of the C row and headed straight back to Bella. Reaching her, I wrapped my arms around her waist and whispered, “Congratulations.”

“Um, thanks,” she replied halfheartedly.

“You don’t look like you’re over the nerves yet,” I said, recognizing the stress on her face and in her eyes.

“Not quite yet.”

“What’s left to worry about? The party? It won’t be that horrible.”

“You’re probably right,” she replied while her eyes darted surreptitiously around the gym.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Alice—where is she?”

“She ran out as soon as she had her diploma.” My words made me puzzle again over Alice’s behavior. What *was* she trying to hide?

“Worrying about Alice?” Bella inquired.

“Er...,” I didn’t want to bring up Alice’s mystery. Bella would assume that Alice had some devious plan to embarrass her at the party (which she might).

Then Bella interrupted with an odd question.

“What was she thinking about, anyway? To keep you out, I mean.”

I stared at her in confusion before I suddenly realized that it wasn’t just Alice, but *Bella* and Alice, who were hiding something from me.

“She was translating the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ into Arabic, actually. When she finished that, she moved on to Korean sign language.”

Bella tried to laugh, but there was no humor in it. “I suppose that *would* keep her head busy enough,” she commented.

“You know what she’s hiding from me.”

“Sure,” Bella said. “I’m the one who came up with it.”

I could think of nothing to which this might pertain and so I merely remained silent and waited for her to tell me. Bella looked around to make sure no one was listening.

“Knowing Alice,” she murmured, “she’ll probably try to keep this from you until after the party. But since I’m all for the party being canceled—well, don’t go berserk, regardless, okay? It’s always better to know as much as possible. It has to help somehow.”

“What are you talking about?” She was beginning to worry me with her cautions.

Bella scanned the crowd again, her eyes falling on Charlie who was maneuvering his way toward us.

“Just stay calm, okay?”

I nodded mechanically, steeling myself.

She hurriedly whispered through her explanation. “I think you’re wrong about things coming at us from all sides. I think it’s mostly coming at us from one side...and I think it’s coming at me, really.”

At her?? I clenched my jaw and fists.

Bella continued. "It's all connected, it has to be. It's just one person who's messing with Alice's visions. The stranger in my room was a test, to see if someone could get around her. It's got to be the same one who keeps changing his mind, and the newborns, and stealing my clothes—all of it goes together. My scent is for them."

Her scent? For them? Frozen with stress, I barely heard Bella's next words.

"But no one's coming for you, don't you see? This is good—Esme and Alice and Carlisle, no one wants to hurt them!"

Good? That was ridiculous, but her insight wasn't. Bella was *absolutely* right! *The newborns were tracking her scent! They were created to kill Bella! Oh gawd!* We had to leave for Seattle now... tonight! They must be destroyed immediately! My thoughts and emotions flew in every direction...fear, strategy, disgust, tactics, worry, proximity. I couldn't get hold of myself. I was utterly panicked.

Then I felt the warmth of Bella's palm against my cheek.

"Calm," she urged.

"Bella!" Charlie yelled. He pushed through the last of the bodies in his way and moved between us, turning his back to me. "Congratulations, baby!" he cried excitedly.

I couldn't focus. I couldn't think. I couldn't move. My overwhelming impulse was to snatch Bella away and run as fast as I could to a safe place...somewhere.

Charlie continued speaking to Bella as I stood helplessly behind him. I heard him say "Jacob and Billy," but I didn't care what Charlie was talking about. Bella was standing alone on the other side of him. I wanted to get her inside my arms, next to my body, where I could protect her.

And then, my fear gave way to anger...rage...fury. Who was responsible for this? Someone was going die! *Soon!*

I noticed that Charlie was facing halfway toward me and there was an awkward silence in the air. He was waiting for an answer. *What had he asked? Oh...right. Whether I was coming to dinner.*

"No, thank you," I replied. *At least not that you will know.* Bella would not be going anywhere without my constant protection.

“Do you have plans with your parents?” Charlie asked, giving me an excuse to get away from him. He was looking at me strangely...puzzled or...something. It didn’t matter.

“Yes. If you’ll excuse me...,” I managed before escaping into the crowd. *Where were my parents? Where was Alice?* I needed everyone to be on the lookout.

“What did I say?” I heard Charlie ask Bella defensively.

I charged out of the school, but my exit had nothing to do with Charlie. I had to get myself away from human eyes before I did something publicly inappropriate. Immediately, I got on my cell phone.

“Alice! The newborns are after Bella! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you would overreact and you had to get through the ceremony, right? Nothing’s going to happen today.”

“How do you know?” I fairly shouted. “You haven’t seen any of this!”

“I would know if anyone was coming to Forks or to Charlie’s, because I’m looking for them now.”

“Have you told everyone?”

“No, I’ll leave that to you. I’ve got a party to put on!”

“Charlie’s taking Bella to dinner at the Lodge. I’m following them over there.”

I patrolled the shadows around the restaurant nervously as Charlie and Bella ate dinner. It took forever. The place was filled with celebrating classmates and parents, but I kept my distance from everyone. I had no interest in anyone else when Bella was in danger. Finally...*finally*...Bella rose from the booth she shared with her father.

“In a hurry?” Charlie asked.

“I want to help Alice set things up,” she answered.

Bella hastened outside and stood next to Charlie’s car while he continued chatting with various townspeople in the restaurant. She flinched when I approached her from the shadows. I pulled her tightly to my chest, took her chin in my hand and pressed my lips to hers with high, reckless emotion, fear and intense relief intermingled. When I pulled back, she gasped to regain her breath and speak.

“How are you?”

“Not so great,” I said, “But I’ve got a handle on myself. I’m sorry that I lost it back there.”

“My fault. I should have waited to tell you.”

“No. This is something I needed to know. I can’t believe I didn’t see it!”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind,” she said.

“And you don’t?” I kissed her again fiercely, stopping when I heard Charlie’s boots on the gravel. “Charlie’s on his way.”

“I’ll have him drop me at your house.”

“I’ll follow you there,” I replied and took off into the shadows.

“That’s not really...,” Bella began, but I was gone.

“Bella?” Charlie called.

“I’m out here.”

I resumed scanning for “foreign” thoughts as I ran after Charlie’s cruiser. I heard him express his regrets that he hadn’t taught Bella how to throw a punch. I would have smiled if I’d been in any mood for humor. I perked up my ears when the conversation turned another way.

“Aw, don’t be too hard on the kid,” Charlie said. “He’s young.”

Yes, Jacob is young, I agreed.

“He’s obnoxious,” Bella complained.

And obnoxious, I concurred.

“He’s still your friend,” Charlie pointed out.

“I know,” Bella sighed. “I don’t really know what the right thing to do here is, Dad.”

“Yeah. The right thing isn’t always real obvious. Sometimes the right thing for one person is the wrong thing for someone else. So...good luck figuring that out.” Charlie intended for his “I–wash–my–hands–of–it” statement to be funny.

“Thanks,” Bella muttered, not laughing.

I ascertained that she was referring to Jacob’s clumsy bid for her affections. I couldn’t know, but I hoped with all my heart that her comment didn’t mean she was wavering. Surely,

she meant that she didn't know how to let him down easy. At least Charlie wasn't pushing his own preferences, for once.

Charlie drove down our long driveway and I raced him to the house. After he pulled away, I followed Bella onto the porch.

"Bella?"

She turned and I pulled her to me with great relief, holding her beating heart against my chest, reassurance of her continued existence. Since her revelation about the newborns, I had felt a great pain in my heart—the possibility of losing her again. The talk about Jacob only made the feeling worse. I pressed my lips to hers fervently. Could this kiss be our last? *Please God, let me keep her!*

When I leaned away, I saw that her face was tight with anxiety. She wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Let's get this stupid party over with," Bella muttered.

I cradled her face in my hands and waited for her to raise her eyes and look at me. I needed to see that she heard what I was going to say.

"I won't let anything happen to you," I promised, emphasizing each word.

Bella looked at me with raw emotion in her eyes and touched her fingers to my lips.

"I'm not worried about myself so much," she said.

"Why am I not surprised by that?" I murmured. Then, bracing myself for what lay ahead, I forced a smile onto my face. "Ready to celebrate?"

Bella groaned her displeasure, but I walked her to the house anyway and guided her through the front door where she froze.

"Unbelievable."

I shrugged. It was no surprise to me, though I hadn't seen it either. Alice had begun most of the decorating just that afternoon.

"Alice will be Alice," I said.

She had gone overboard, of course. I could see tens of thousands of dollars in the lighting, decorations, and food, not to mention her new party outfit. The room was comfortably dark, like a nightclub, with red and purple lights flashing in sync to the music. The oversized

concert speakers set up throughout the downstairs would make hearing a challenge for the humans, but not for us. That was good.

“Edward!” Alice called. “I need your advice.” She’d created two stacks of CDs two feet high.

“Should we give them familiar and comforting?” She pointed to the first stack. “Or...” she continued, pointing to the second stack, “educate their taste in music?”

“Keep it comforting,” I advised. “You can only lead the horse to water.”

Like everyone in the family, Alice trusts my musical taste. Over time, we all lose track of cultural trends, but as Alice does with fashion, I stay current with music. Rosalie keeps up with mechanics and automotive advancements, while Emmett makes sure we have the latest and greatest electronic toys and sports equipment. Carlisle’s “beat” is medical trends and scientific discoveries, and Jasper stays up-to-date with investing and the gaming industry. Esme keeps us all aware of current social and community issues. Pursuing our individual interests helps the family change with the times and also gives us something to do at night.

Alice, standing behind my stereo system with headphones on, reorganized the CDs, discarding the cutting edge in favor of the familiar favorites. She was startlingly chic in her New York-style club clothing—black sequined tank and tight, red leather trousers.

“I think I’m underdressed,” Bella commented.

“You’re *perfect*,” I countered. She was stunning in her graduation outfit. I guessed that Alice had given it to her as a gift. She knew I would like it.

“You’ll do,” Alice corrected.

“Thanks. Do you really think people will come?” Bella asked, obviously hoping they didn’t.

Alice made a face at her.

“Everyone will come,” I predicted. “They’re all dying to see the inside of the reclusive Cullens’ mystery house.”

“Fabulous,” she grumbled.

I kept an arm around Bella’s waist as I went in search of Carlisle and Jasper. I found them together in the kitchen talking about our trip to Seattle.

“It’s risky, Carlisle,” Jasper said.

“I’ll keep making calls, but I’m not holding out much hope for assistance.”

“I could still locate Maria, I think, based on Edward’s reports from Texas, but—”

“No, Jasper. We can’t trust her.”

“I agree, but for numbers...?”

“Carlisle’s right,” I interjected when Bella and I entered the room. “Maria isn’t worth it. But listen to this. Bella has figured out that the break-in at her house is connected to the newborn army, probably a test of Alice’s vision. The intruder was collecting Bella’s scent *for* the army.”

Both Carlisle and Jasper went silent and still, considering what I had said. I listened to their thoughts as the truth of it sank in.

“The army was created to attack Bella?” Carlisle repeated warily. “But why?”

“Maybe the spy was sent to find out if she is still human and since she is, the newborns are...” Jasper left the rest of his sentence unspoken when I shook my head slightly.

“The connection doesn’t matter really,” I said, “except that we can now disregard the ‘scouting’ incident. If the scout came on behalf of the newborns, then he’s part of the same threat. We can protect Bella by taking care of the army.”

“There’s no more reason to wait,” Carlisle asserted. “It’s time for us to make our move.”

“Do you have any ideas about how to approach the city?” I asked Jasper.

“Yes, but there are no good choices. We simply don’t have the numbers to ensure victory, even in an open plain. It would be impossible on the streets of Seattle, where the newborns will attack us wherever and however they want while we’ll have to maintain secrecy.”

“What if we track them to their daytime lair?” I suggested. “They’re only out at night. We could surprise them during the day.”

“That’s a good idea,” Carlisle agreed. “Surely they’re not hiding in the city itself—*twenty-odd* newborns. They must be staying somewhere more remote.”

“No way to know without tracking them,” Jasper said, “but that’s one option. Another is to lure them out of the city. If they’re looking for Bella, then Bella—”

“Yes,” I interrupted before he could complete the sentence. “Bella’s *clothes* would be a perfect lure.” I stared Jasper down until he got the message. We would *not* give Bella the idea of helping by acting as bait for newborns. Knowing her, she would insist on it.

“Since we don’t have enough fighters, the best strategy would be to draw them out of the city or out of their hiding place in smaller groups. Alice says the group is twenty–two strong and we are seven...or six,” he added, looking at me carefully.

Edward, I don’t want Alice in this, he said silently. If you’re thinking of sitting out, then we’re down to five. Could Alice look after Bella?

I nodded my assent. Bella would assume I was answering the spoken thought. She wouldn’t want me to fight, I knew, and I was torn. But considered logically, Alice *could* protect Bella as well as me, especially if the two of them hid far from the battle. It would be torture to be apart from her, but Jasper wasn’t going to let Alice fight, I could see that. He couldn’t abide her taking any risk.

My horror at Bella’s revelation that the scout and the newborns were connected had eased. No longer was I trying to control my distress in front of Bella. Now that we were moving forward with our plans, I was eager to fight. I had enough faith in my fighting abilities and in those of my family that I felt sure we would prevail.

Jasper didn’t, though. He disliked the odds and didn’t wish to gamble with such uneven numbers. We had skill and experience on our side, and as he’d said before, probably we would win, but we would take casualties. Though we feel the pain of injury, unless we are burned to ashes, we cannot die. In the worst case scenario then, we have to protect ourselves from fire—eventually, we will heal from everything else.

Jasper, Carlisle, and I heard the vehicles turn from the highway into the drive. The guests were coming. Perhaps the evening would take our minds off the approaching drama for a few hours.

“When do you want to begin training, Jasper?” Carlisle asked.

“Today...tonight...right away,” he replied.

Carlisle nodded. “Okay, let’s resume this discussion later.” He placed his hand on my brother’s shoulder. “Thank you, Jasper. With your help, we *will* make this work.”

And the doorbell rang.

13. Alliance

The party decorations were downtown New York warehouse, circa 1989, the era of Club Kids, Ecstasy, and the early raves, or so Alice told me. New York City nightlife is something Alice knows about. She has a long history with it dating back to the 1930s.

Alice had removed all our living room furniture and replaced it with transparent acrylic shapes, weighted so they could be leaned against or sat on in various ways. In addition to the banks of concert lights that moved and flashed in time to the music, neon light sculptures decorated the walls.

The food table didn't interest me much, except that it was beautiful to look at. The centerpiece was a champagne fountain filled with sparkling cider. The beverage flowed from the top of the fountain into a pool that filled up and spilled over into a lower pool. Alice had hung red lights over it to make it glitter with movement.

The catered food was artfully arranged on platters that sat atop cloth-covered pedestals of different heights. Esme made it her job to replace empty platters with new ones from the backup supply in the kitchen. The dessert table across the room mirrored the food table with a smaller fountain centerpiece that spilled melted chocolate instead of cider over its sides. Nearby platters of skewered strawberries, grapes, banana slices, cake squares, and marshmallows stood ready to be drowned in chocolate.

Outside the glass doors in the dining room, Alice had erected a large, square awning and illuminated its underside with hundreds of sparkling fairy lights. Bistro tables covered with white tablecloths and decorated with flowers and votive candles sat scattered beneath it, creating a peaceful place for guests to sit and talk, eat, or just escape the music and lights inside.

The party crowd consisted of graduating seniors and their dates, plus a large portion of the junior class and a handful of adults. Most of the guests arrived in groups of four or more, taking advantage of the comfort (and presumed safety) in numbers. Their instincts were on target, actually. In earlier times in a number of cities, Alice was known to have thrown elaborate and elegant balls and parties after which certain guests were never heard from again.

In the last eighty-eight years, I've often wished that I could return to what I once was, but even more so, I've wished it for Alice. Though barely resembling a human now and unable to remember being one, she remains nostalgic for all the experiences of human life she's learned about through newspapers, books, and television over the course of decades. With

Bella as an excuse, she's recently stepped up her fantasy life in which she acts out the highlights of human existence over and over as if trying to satisfy some endless, nameless need. Though Alice likes what she is now, she still senses that something is lacking and unfortunately, nothing she does now can ever make it right. I've tried to explain this to Bella, but she can't imagine missing what she hasn't yet lost.

Bella's lunchroom friends, who rode together in some parent's Chevy Suburban, were our first party guests to arrive. When Jessica entered and took in the hip club atmosphere Alice had created, she was immediately impressed, then suddenly uneasy. My family had taken up party positions and put on party faces, but most of the early guests looked around nervously as if they'd come to a Halloween haunted house and were half expecting a skeleton to drop from the ceiling. But as their numbers grew, the visitors paid less attention to our family and more to the incredible lights, music, food, and glowing acrylic sculptures. Jaws dropped, eyes grew large, and surprised laughter bubbled up around the room.

Guests were free to wander upstairs and look around, though all of us except Alice had locked our bedroom and office doors, so there wasn't much for them to see. We could have "sanitized" our private spaces to meet human expectations, but we resist that, since home is the one place we can truly relax and be ourselves. Anyway, we're so accustomed to our own environment that it's sometimes hard to recognize what humans might find odd—the fact that my bedroom has glass doors that open into empty air three stories off the ground, for example, or that Jasper keeps a tattered Confederate army uniform hanging on a peg in his office. Most of our incongruous personal items can be passed off as antique collectibles, but others are hard to explain away—such as Carlisle and Esme's wedding album from the 1920s. It's better not to take chances.

I didn't notice until Bella pointed it out that the colored lights bounce off our smooth, marble-like skin a little differently than they do human skin, giving the vampires a faint, other-worldly glow. The neon sculptures heightened the effect when we stood within their gaseous light. Later, when I escorted Bella to the bathroom, we discovered that the black lights Alice had hung there actually made my skin fluoresce. *Ack! What had she been thinking?* Perhaps she reasoned that since we never use the bathrooms, nobody would notice the bizarre effect. I scurried away to wait for Bella down the hall.

Alice had ostensibly thrown this graduation party for the three of us, but none of the guests felt comfortable enough with Alice or me to swarm around us and laugh about the crazy graduation ceremony, or ask how we had put together this amazing party, or wanted to know whether the house always looked like this. Bella was the center of attention.

“It was all Alice’s doing,” and “You’ll have to ask Alice,” and “No, the house usually has regular furniture and normal lighting,” she responded over and over.

Considering how stressed she was, Bella remained remarkably poised as more friends and acquaintances funneled through the front door. She followed Alice’s lead, engaging easily with this person and that group, moving through the crowd like she was actually comfortable in her role, though I knew that she wasn’t.

I took my cue from Carlisle, who was always the perfect host. The stress we all were feeling instantly disappeared from his face when the first guests arrived. I composed my face too, but I wasn’t as successful at being warm and friendly to everyone as he. Of course, I had an unusual challenge to overcome that he didn’t share.

Over the course of the evening, Esme sidled around the edges of the party where the wallflowers lingered, and chatted with them, encouraging them to eat and dance, and making sure that everyone felt included. Even Rosalie mingled and conversed, looking more approachable than usual. Emmett was friendly and boisterous, though his hulking size, combined with his gleaming skin and teeth, seemed to be universally alarming. He enjoyed his notoriety, though. Jasper was the only Cullen not in evidence, having retreated upstairs to plan for our night ahead.

I stuck close to Bella while she played hostess. I didn’t trust Alice’s assessment that “nothing’s going to happen tonight.” She’d already missed too much—someone had figured out how to get around her vision.

But I had another reason for keeping one arm around Bella’s waist at all times. It was the flood of disturbing thoughts that rose everywhere Bella went. At the moment, they felt more threatening to me than the newborns.

Wow! She’s a knockout!

Eric was harmless. I ignored him.

Look at those boobs! Small, but perfect. They’d fit right in your hand...

I had to suppress a growl and the urge to pound that supreme waste of space, Mike Newton, into a little pile of mush. I tightened my arm around Bella and directed her away from him, only to meet Jessica’s gaze. Her thoughts made me equally angry.

Whoa! Edward is extra-hot tonight. I’d sure like to get my hands inside that suit jacket! Even Bella doesn’t look as bad as she usually does next to him.

I turned Bella away from Jessica.

Bella seems to be enjoying herself. Edward's holding her so close. I think he really loves her. I'm so happy for her.

I smiled at that. Angela was always kind. And perceptive.

I wonder if Bella's ever gonna break up with Cullen. I didn't really get my chance with her and now she's probably going off with him somewhere. Where?

Tyler still hadn't figured out that he'd *never* had a chance with Bella. He drove her crazy...I'm pretty sure, anyway.

...never seen her legs before. Damn!

I've heard *him* referred to as "randy Randy" in gym class. He's only a junior!

That Bella Swan is such a showoff. She thinks she's so important hanging out with the Cullens. I'd be a much better match for Edward. At least I'm pretty.

I turned Bella away from Lauren, but there was no direction where someone wasn't thinking about her. I reversed our direction to head back toward the safe zone near Ben and Angela, but was further accosted on the way.

If I were just a few years younger...

Whew! She's cream of the crop this year!

What a stuck-up bitch...

Look at that ass!

It went on and on. I was proud that Bella was with me and that everyone agreed how beautiful she looked, but most of their thoughts were irritating and offensive. She wouldn't believe me if I told her what our classmates thought of her. The boys wanted her and the girls were jealous of her. Well, soon enough, all of this would be over and I could have her to myself...I hoped. There was still the werewolf problem.

I had picked out a special graduation present for Bella and I really wanted to give it to her before the newborns came. We would all be fine, certainly, but *just in case*.... I would have to work her up to accepting it, since she still refused my gifts. It was deeply frustrating—there was so much I wanted to give her.

The house was filling up with people and quite a few had started dancing in the middle of the room. It was getting harder to move around as a couple, partly because I didn't want to

touch any humans with my cold skin, and partly because I was avoiding those who were thinking lurid or mean thoughts about *my* Bella.

Then I saw it, heard it...desperate distress...I listened for a brief second before I realized what it was. *Where is she?*

"Stay here," I said in Bella's ear. "I'll be right back." I released her and hurried toward Alice who was seeing something serious, something clear and unequivocal. I found her in the corner beside the kitchen door, backed into the shadows. A red beam crossed her face every few seconds as the lights rotated, but I didn't need to see her face to see her vision.

I stepped in front of my sister to block curious eyes and then I watched the scene playing out in her mind. They were *coming*...the newborns were coming! To us! *To Forks!* I saw them swim across Puget Sound to the peninsula and trek through the forest. The leader was carrying Bella's red blouse in a plastic bag. He had passed it around the group to excite their lust for her sweet blood. Clenching my fists in fury and stress, I waited for a moment longer to be sure I'd gotten the full picture, before dashing off too quickly to notify Carlisle. Where was he? I heard Bella catch up to Alice behind me.

"What, Alice, what? What did you see?" she demanded.

Edward, should I tell Bella? What do I do? What do we do?

I caught Alice's eye across the room and shook my head slightly. There was no reason to set Bella panicking until we had something to tell her...a plan. I didn't know what she might do when she heard the news. I gave Alice a meaningful stare, putting her in charge of Bella as I ducked under the staircase. Carlisle was down the hallway faking a bathroom break. I caught him at the doorway, where the black light caused both of us to fluoresce. He hurriedly pulled me away.

"Carlisle, Alice just saw...the newborns are coming *here*."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Tracking us? To our home?"

I nodded. "More like tracking Bella to Forks. They're following her scent, not ours. They've been instructed to kill her!"

Carlisle, with his centuries of experience as an emergency physician, did not panic. Instead, he began gathering facts and taking charge. "How soon? Are they on their way?"

His composure calmed me. "Alice isn't sure yet, but it's not tonight, not immediate. We still have time."

“Find Jasper and warn him if Alice hasn’t. I’ll get Esme. Leave Rosalie and Emmett for the moment. What time is it?”

“Almost eleven–thirty.”

“Jasper wants to start training us tonight. We’ll carry on with that plan.” We exchanged heavy glances before I headed upstairs.

I found Jasper at his desk studying Seattle street maps he’d marked with red X’s at the locations of known murders. There were clusters of killings all over the city, from the industrial south end to the financial district to the tourist areas around Seattle Center. Even the high–end shopping area at Westlake Center and the hip Capitol Hill district were not exempt.

“Jasper,” I said, stepping into the room and shutting the door.

“Edward,” he replied. “This is a nightmare. There’s no pattern to the incidents. They’re scattered all over the city. How can we lure them out if we can’t predict their location? We’re looking at guerrilla warfare here.” He pressed his fingers to his temples and stared at the maps on his desk.

“I have some good news for you, which is also bad news,” I warned. “You can put your Seattle maps away; Alice has seen them.”

“So not Seattle? That’s the good news, I presume.”

“Yes. The bad news is that they’re coming here.”

“To Forks?”

I nodded.

“How soon?” Jasper asked intently.

“Unknown so far, but not tonight, not tomorrow.”

“We have to make plans tonight then.”

“Yes, Carlisle agrees,” I said.

“Did she get any details? Did she see where they’re heading?”

“They’ll be tracking Bella, which means the town itself. The leader is carrying her scent.”

We both turned our heads as the doorbell rang downstairs. It was late for new arrivals. I listened for a second.

“We’ve got company. Smell them?” I asked.

Jasper nodded. “What are *they* doing here?”

“Bella must have invited them. I’m surprised, actually.”

“We can’t protect Forks. There aren’t enough of us,” Jasper murmured to himself. “We have to direct them away from the town.” Jasper was digging in a drawer for a map of the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsulas.

“Jazz, you got the news...” Alice said, stepping into the room.

“Yes. You didn’t see how soon?”

“A few days at most,” Alice replied.

“So we won’t have to fight in the city, but they’ll charge through Forks doing just what they did in Seattle,” Jasper observed.

“Whoops!” Alice exclaimed, perking up her ears. “I better go rescue Bella.”

As Alice left, Carlisle and Esme came in.

“So you’ve heard,” Jasper said.

“Yes. We’ll train tonight at the baseball field. Agreed?” Carlisle asked.

“Yes.” Then without warning, Jasper bolted out of his chair and disappeared. I caught one word in his head—*Alice!*

Carlisle and Esme looked at me in surprise.

What was that about?

Is he okay?

I raised my index finger in their direction, a signal to pause, as I listened for Jasper’s thoughts.

Move your fucking arm before I tear it off!

Jasper was staring into Jacob Black’s face, absolutely livid, silent, and extremely dangerous. Jacob read Jasper’s expression, swallowed a twinge of fear and dropped the arm that had trapped Alice and Bella into a corner.

I grinned.

“What is it?” Esme asked with concern.

“Jacob got a little too pushy with Alice,” I said, chuckling. “He just about lost an arm.”

“Jasper?” Esme asked. “Carlisle, maybe you better—”

“It’s okay. Alice has got this,” I told them, smiling at the idea in her head. It might be uncomfortable, but it made good sense.

“What’s going on down there?” Carlisle inquired.

“Alice is letting the werewolves in on our little problem. And they want to fight with us.” I grinned. “With the pack’s help, we’ll have no trouble. There are six of them right?”

Carlisle nodded.

“With their six and our seven, the odds change considerably.”

“They want to fight *with* us? Against the newborns?” Esme asked, incredulous.

“That’s what they exist to do,” I answered. “Kill vampires. I think our peace treaty frustrates the younger ones sometimes.” I laughed.

“What’s funny?” Carlisle asked.

“Jasper’s suspicious, but the werewolves are *thrilled*. Jasper’s inviting them to our meeting tonight.”

“Wow, isn’t that something?” Esme remarked. “Our adversaries want to fight on our side!”

“We’ve got a common enemy now,” I replied. “It should be interesting. Though with Emmett and the big silver one...Paul...going at each other the way they did last time, this could get tense. I hope we can work together without killing each other!”

“Of course we can,” Carlisle said quietly. “It’s a good solution. How many newborns did Alice see?”

“One less than yesterday...twenty-one. They’re killing each other off.” I listened again.

All right!

Awesome!

Gotta tell Sam!

The werewolves' thoughts came floating through the other mental voices downstairs. And then they were gone.

I turned to my parents with a wide smile. "The wolves have left. They're planning to meet us in the forest at three o'clock for training."

"That had to be the longest party in the history of the world," Bella complained as I drove her home.

"It's over now," I replied softly. It *had* been difficult to listen to all those minds lusting after her for hours...Mike, Tyler, Josh, Eric, Kyle, Zach, Austin, *randy* Randy, and quite a few other Juniors whose names I didn't know...even one or two girls if I wasn't mistaken. Alice had invited several of her favorite teachers as well and at least one of the women's male companions had ogled Bella too. That had been especially irritating, though of course, even a man in his thirties was still a youth compared to me.

The stress of the uneven battle we'd been preparing to fight in the city also had been weighing me down—more so than I'd realized. After Alice engaged the werewolves to help us, I felt a exhilarating sense of relief. The whole family was relieved. We would have no trouble winning the battle now.

As Bella had explained when I rejoined her in the living room, Jacob, Embry, and Quil had crashed the party. Or rather, she had invited Jacob before he lip-mauled her, and she'd assumed he knew that the invitation was rescinded with her punch to his jaw. But Jacob being Jacob, he wouldn't have understood that even if he'd understood. He wouldn't have missed an opportunity to see Bella, whether he was welcome or not.

As it happened, we were all glad that he'd come. Otherwise, he wouldn't have seen that Bella was hiding something from him and he wouldn't have wheedled it out of her. Probably, Carlisle would have told the Quileute about the newborns anyway, since they'd decided to come to Forks, and possibly, the wolves would have volunteered to help us fight, but things had worked out neatly with Jacob as a go-between. Now we had time to practice together so we wouldn't end up killing each other on the battlefield.

So all in all, everything had turned out for the best and everyone was pleased— except for Bella. I had utterly misjudged how much it would distress her that the wolves were joining

the battle. We all had tried to reassure her and Jasper had created a calming environment around her, but she wouldn't be comforted.

"Why should you be the only one who gets to beat up werewolves?" Emmett had asked Bella, laughing exuberantly and making all of us smile.

Esme had kissed her on the forehead. "Everything is going to be all right, Bella."

"Try not to worry, Bella," Alice had said, patting Bella's head. "Nobody's going to get hurt." Bella didn't look convinced.

"You're taking me with you tonight," Bella whispered in the car on the way home.

"Bella, you're worn out," I objected.

"You think I could sleep?"

I scowled. I did not want Bella anywhere near the training ground. What if Emmett and Paul got into another fight and everybody piled on?

"This is an experiment," I explained. "I'm not sure if it will be possible for us all to...cooperate. I don't want you in the middle of that."

"If you won't take me, then I'll call Jacob," Bella said flatly.

Owww! Would she? I tensed up. *Yes, she would.* And Jacob would be *delighted* to take Bella to the ball field...*thrilled*. I did not reply. She wasn't going with him. Certainly not.

"See you upstairs," Bella muttered unhappily, getting out of the car at Charlie's house. I remained behind the wheel a moment longer, disturbed in more ways than one.

I could hear Charlie snoring loudly inside the house. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning, well past his bedtime. I listened to Bella urge her father off the couch, up the stairs, and into his bed. The snoring resumed almost immediately.

Checking first for observers, I loped to the house and leaped through Bella's window, then sat down in her rocking chair. She was obviously exhausted. I hoped she would collapse on the bed and drop into a deep sleep. If she did, I would stay until the last possible moment before leaving for the gathering, and hope that Jacob was already on his way.

Aside from the danger of the night's training, I didn't want Bella around Jacob. I was still plenty irate about how he'd taken advantage of her and caused her to break her hand. I wasn't even certain I could control my temper with him, not to mention Paul, the angry one.

Bella entered her room while I was considering the situation, then grabbed some items and disappeared to the bathroom. When she returned, she was dressed for an outing in the woods. I watched as she hung up her new outfit in the closet.

“Come here,” she said, walking toward me with an unconsciously stirring motion in her hips. She reached for my hand and I let her tug me toward the bed and push me onto my back. I would have enjoyed the gesture more if I hadn’t recognized her true intention. She lay with her head on my chest and her arms around my neck. She was making sure that she would awaken if I tried to leave. I sighed and wrapped her quilt around her before pulling her closer.

“Please relax,” I said, feeling the tension in her body.

“Sure,” she replied sarcastically.

“This is going to work, Bella. I can feel it.”

She tensed more and I wondered if she might start to cry. She hadn’t been nearly this worried before the wolves agreed to join us. She was even more concerned about their welfare than that of my family. And *they* were happy about the upcoming standoff, *excited* about it.

“Listen to me, Bella. This is going to be *easy*. The newborns will be completely taken by surprise. They’ll have no more idea that werewolves even exist than you did. I’ve seen how they act in a group, the way Jasper remembers. I truly believe that the wolves’ hunting techniques will work flawlessly against them. And with them divided and confused, there won’t be enough for the rest of us to do. Someone may have to sit out,” I joked.

“Piece of cake,” she mumbled into my chest.

“*Shhh*. You’ll see. Don’t worry now.” I began humming Bella’s lullaby. It usually relaxed her and often she fell asleep. I didn’t think it was working this time, though. I could almost hear the gears of her mind grinding away. Oh well, perhaps if she saw us in action, she would realize that the newborns didn’t stand a chance against our combined skills.

At two–forty–five a.m., I pulled my still–alert Bella into a sitting position.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay and sleep?” I asked extraneously.

Her irritated gaze gave me my answer, so I scooped her into my arms and leaped out the window.

14. Training

I felt so free carrying Bella on my back through the dark forest. The heavy cloud of doubt had lifted and I was looking forward to learning some new combat tricks from Jasper and to matching skills with the wolves. I secretly hoped to get a chance at Jacob. The thought made me jubilant and lightened my steps.

By the time Bella and I arrived at the baseball field, the rest of the family was there already. It was obvious that the pressure we'd all been feeling over the upcoming battle was gone. Everyone was gathered around chatting and Emmett was inserting bad jokes and puns here and there into the hum of conversation. He was happier than the rest of us put together over the prospect of an actual battle. Emmett never got the chance to *really* fight, not to the extent of his abilities, and especially not with anyone who was stronger than himself.

All the enemy combatants in this battle would be stronger than Emmett, which made him the one most in danger of getting hurt. He was the least experienced fighter among us by virtue of his youth, but more importantly, he was so strong that he'd never had to fight with his head. He could overpower anyone or anything (grizzlies, for example) using sheer strength. For this battle, he needed to raise the level of sophistication of his skills—the only way we could beat this army was with intelligent tactics.

I was considering all this as Bella and I walked hand-in-hand into the clearing.

"You know what I think?" she asked, cutting into my thoughts.

I laughed at the question, because the single most frustrating thing in my existence was *not* knowing what she was thinking...ever.

"No. What do you think?"

"I think it's *all* connected. Not just the two, but all three."

"You've lost me."

"Three bad things have happened since you came back." Bella tapped her index finger. "The newborns in Seattle." Her middle finger. "The stranger in my room." Her thumb. "And first of all—Victoria came to look for me."

I considered that. "Why do you think so?"

“Because I agree with Jasper,” she said. “The Volturi love their rules. They would probably do a better job anyway. Remember when you were tracking Victoria last year?”

“Yes,” I replied unhappily. “I wasn’t very good at it.”

“Alice said you were in Texas. Did you follow her there?”

“Yes. Hmm...” *Jasper’s country*, where creating newborn armies used to be commonplace.

“See—she could have gotten the idea there. But she doesn’t know what she’s doing, so the newborns are all out of control.”

There was a flaw in that theory and I shook my head. “Only Aro knows exactly how Alice’s visions work.”

“Aro would know *best*, but wouldn’t Tanya and Irina and the rest of your friends in Denali know *enough*? Laurent lived with them for so long. And if he was still friendly enough with Victoria to be doing favors for her, why wouldn’t he also tell her everything he knew?”

“It wasn’t Victoria in your room.”

“She can’t make new friends? Think about it, Edward. If it *is* Victoria doing this in Seattle, she’s *made* a lot of new friends. She’s created them.”

Created a newborn for reconnaissance? Seemed unlikely, but...

“Hmm, it’s possible,” I conceded. “I still think the Volturi are most likely... But your theory—there’s something there. Victoria’s personality. Your theory suits her personality perfectly. She’s shown a remarkable gift for self-preservation from the start— maybe it’s a talent of hers. In any case, this plot would put her in no danger at all from us if she sits safely behind and lets the newborns wreak their havoc here. And maybe little danger from the Volturi, either. Perhaps she’s counting on us to win, in the end, though certainly not without heavy casualties of our own. But no survivors from her little army to bear witness against her. In fact,”—*and this was just like her, truly evil*—“if there were survivors, I’d bet she’d be planning to destroy them herself.... Hmm. Still, she’d have to have at least one friend who was a bit more mature. No fresh-made newborn left your father alive....” That was the weak point in Bella’s theory. Could Maria have sent someone back here with Victoria? That would be a *serious* problem.

I looked at Bella’s resolute face. “Definitely possible. Regardless, we’ve got to be prepared for anything until we know for sure.” Then I remarked, “You’re very perceptive today. It’s impressive.”

Bella sighed. "Maybe I'm just reacting to this place. It makes me feel like she's close by...like she sees me now."

I bristled at the thought. "She'll never touch you, Bella." Still, my eyes scanned the clearing. What if she *were* here? I felt the predator in me rise to the surface as I considered the thought.

"Yet, what I wouldn't give to have her that close," I muttered. "Victoria, and anyone else who's ever thought of hurting you. To have the chance to end this myself. To finish it with my own hands this time." I could almost feel the crunch of her neck between my teeth and hear the metallic squeal of her head coming off.

Not like *James*...Jasper and Emmett had dashed him into the flames...or *Laurent*... the wolves had torn him apart. A killing lust rose in me so strongly I could taste it...*Victoria, the intruder, the newborns, Felix, Caius, Jane*...

I hate this, I hate this, I hate this...! The thought came crashing into my head, suddenly driving away the savagery that was overtaking me. I looked up and saw my sister struggling with her misery.

"Is something wrong with Alice?" Bella had noticed too.

I chuckled. "The werewolves are on their way, so she can't see anything that will happen now. It makes her uncomfortable to be blind."

I grinned at Alice's hyperbolic pout. She stuck out her tongue at me.

"Hey, Edward, hey, Bella," Emmett greeted us. "Is he going to let you practice, too?"

"Please, Emmett," I complained. "Don't give her any ideas."

Carlisle wandered over. "When will our guests arrive?"

I paused to listen for Jacob who was always easy to hear. What I caught instead was something very different.

I don't like this.

We get to kill vampires!

Whoo hoo!

Yippee!

We wanna come too!

I'm coming. I don't care what Jacob says.

Seth! You're not coming!

I can if Sam says so! You're only second in command. He's first!

You're not coming, Seth.

But Sam! Please?!

No. You're staying with Collin and Brady at the reservation. You're too young. That's final!

It's okay, Seth. We can still see what's happening. One of the vampires might come to the rez! Then the tribe will need us! We'd be heroes!

Yeah!

That won't happen.

It might!

Shut up, Brady.

You shut up.

All of you, pipe down. We're getting close.

Hey, bloodsucker! If you can hear me, we're coming—as wolves. You can talk for us, right? We don't want you all at an advantage.

I sighed and answered Carlisle's inquiry. "A minute and a half. But I'm going to have to translate. They don't trust us enough to use their human forms."

My father nodded. "This is hard for them. I'm grateful they're coming at all."

Bella was shocked. "They're coming as wolves?" Her voice rose perilously.

I saw trepidation in her eyes as I nodded my reply. Had she not seen Jacob as a wolf before?

The wolves' cacophony broke into my awareness. I unconsciously ticked off the minds I'd just heard: *Brady, Collin, Seth, Jacob, Sam*. I ticked off the other wolves' names I knew: *Paul, Jared, Quil, Embry*. That's nine wolves, not six! Were there more?

"Prepare yourselves," I warned my family. "They've been holding out on us."

“What do you mean?” Alice asked crossly.

“Shh.”

I looked in the direction the pack was coming from and my family formed a defensive line in front of Bella and myself, with Jasper and Emmett in the forefront.

I listened to hear if I could make out the differences in the wolves’ mental voices and found that I could. They all thought independently, yet collectively too.

There was a definite hierarchy to the pack and I gathered that the lower-level wolves had to obey those above them. Seth had indicated that Jacob was second in command, which was interesting, because he wasn’t the second oldest wolf. Jared and Paul were older and had turned first, so the hierarchy must be determined by something other than age...bloodlines, maybe. Sam and Jacob were direct descendants of two of the three wolves we had met in the 1930s. But Jacob was the great-grandson of Ephraim Black, the former chief of the tribe. Wouldn’t the chief’s descendant be highest in the hierarchy? I had no answer for that question.

Being privy to the pack mind was utterly absorbing...mesmerizing! There was so much going on that I could barely keep up with it, even given all the advantages of my vampire brain.

Three of the wolf minds felt different from the others...Sam, understandably, but also...*hmm*...Jared, and...Quil. Each of them exuded an “aura,” for lack of a better word, that seemed bigger than himself, as if another soul rode on his back, perhaps. It was hard to put into words, but I could feel the power of it. It was unmistakable and—I suspected—irreversible, like two chemical compounds had reacted to create a third. The “appendages” had names—Emily, Kim, Claire—that read like permanent tattoos in the wolves’ minds, always present. These had to be the results of imprinting, the phenomenon of pair bonding among werewolves that Bella had told me about. Of course, I knew that Emily was with Sam. My father had had reason to get to know Emily when she’d been injured a few years earlier.

Ohhhh.... I felt the stab of pain that flashed through one of the wolves and observed it spread relentlessly through the pack mind. They *all* felt the pain after Sam had entertained a wistful thought about his Emily. The pain had a voice...a female voice!

We don’t really know who’s first Alpha, second Alpha, and third, do we boys? Doesn’t that depend on a certain wolf’s personal heritage? Which we don’t know, by the way...

Shut up, Leah. It’s bad enough that you won’t get over him! Leave me out of it!

Embry’s right! We all have to live with it... “Love you, Sam... Come back to me, Sam... Why did she have to come here, Sa—”

Knock it off, all of you! We're here. Get your minds in the game!

Ewww! I can smell them!

They stink so bad!

My nose hurts!

Do we have to be so close to them?

There's that big one. I still owe him a snap!

Everyone, hush. You're not fighting Emmett, Paul. That's over. The Cullens are our allies. Line up here behind the trees. We'll keep our distance.

They're surprised, aren't they? Heh, heh.

"Damn," Emmett exclaimed as the wolves appeared and formed an arrowhead line, ten feet behind the forest's edge. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

Oh my! They are fearsome! Esme turned to Rosalie, her eyes wide.

Jasper was counting heads silently. *How many? ...six, seven...ten!*

He was right—ten with the female, Leah.

"What is it?" Bella whispered. "I can't see."

"The pack has grown," I murmured into her ear. From what I could gather amidst the general din of their collective minds, Victoria's presence—and now the intruder at Bella's house—had stimulated the wolf gene within the Quileute bloodline and caused more young people to transform into werewolves...even one female!

"Fascinating," I muttered to myself.

Carlisle stepped forward with slow deliberation, careful not to startle the pack. He was right. This *was* hard for them...hard to tolerate our scent, hard to suppress their instinct to attack, and hard to stay calm.

The wolves were massive, tall as sixteen-hand horses, but with broader bodies. Seeing six of them through Jasper's eyes had not done them justice. We would be well-matched if we had to fight them. Their surprise presence would absolutely *horrify* the newborns.

"Welcome," Carlisle said formally.

The wolves remained under cover of the trees. They did not want to make themselves vulnerable by moving into the clearing. Plus, we were burning their noses rather painfully. Their stench was offensive to us too, but didn't cause us physical pain.

"Thank you," I translated for Sam. He was the tallest wolf, solid black, and stood at the point of the arrow, flanked by a huge russet-brown wolf—Jacob—and a large dark-brown one—Jared—who was third in command, apparently.

"We will watch and listen, but no more. That is the most we can ask of our self-control."

"That is more than enough," Carlisle responded to Sam's words. "My son Jasper has experience in this area. He will teach us how they fight, how they are to be defeated. I'm sure you can apply this to your own hunting style."

"They are different from you?" I spoke Sam's question.

Carlisle nodded. "They are all very new—only months old to this life. Children, in a way. They will have no skill or strategy, only brute strength. Tonight their numbers stand at twenty. Ten for us, ten for you—it shouldn't be difficult. The numbers may go down. The new ones fight amongst themselves."

The wolves made an excited rumbling noise. They were anxious to fight. Laurent was the only vampire they'd been allowed to attack and the four youngest hadn't been around for that.

It was Jasper's idea for us to fight independently from the wolves. As a strategist, he believed the newborn army would divide itself in half to come at us from two sides, front and back, making the split easy. Remaining separate as we fought meant the battle would be much safer for both our family and for the pack.

I could hear that Sam liked that plan. He did not trust that all of his pack members could control themselves if they had to fight alongside us. He didn't really trust us, either.

"We are willing to take more than our share, if necessary," Sam offered.

I didn't appreciate the implication and neither did my brothers. Emmett and Jasper exchanged disparaging looks. Emmett grunted.

Carlisle remained calm. "We'll see how it plays out."

Our seven vampires against ten newborns would be no problem for my family. We had many advantages over them.

"Do you know when and how they'll arrive?" Sam wanted to know.

“They’ll come across the mountains in four days, in the late morning. As they approach, Alice will help us intercept their path,” Carlisle responded.

So Alice got that cleared up, I thought. Good.

“Thank you for the information. We will watch,” I said, voicing Sam’s reply.

The wolves exhaled heavily one by one, then lowered themselves into a crouching, Sphinx–like position meant to imply calm relaxation, though they were far from calm or relaxed.

Jasper stepped nervously into the clearing between the family and the pack of wolves hidden in the trees. It went against his every instinct to train these creatures whose entire reason for existing was to destroy our kind.

Is it safe to turn my back to them? You will warn me if they think to attack?

I nodded yes to both of Jasper’s questions.

He was right to be concerned. The wolves were itching to fight and that could get worse when we started moving at speeds faster than they could perceive, but Sam was determined to keep the pack calm. This was an unprecedented opportunity for them—to be trained by an expert in killing vampires. They would learn how to defeat newborns, but in doing so they would also learn how to defeat us, should they ever want to. Taking them as allies was risky for our family, but not taking them for this battle was an even bigger risk.

This is so wrong, Jasper thought as he turned his back to the wolves and faced us.

“Carlisle’s right,” he began, doing his best to ignore their presence. “They’ll fight like children. The two most important things you’ll need to remember are, first, don’t let them get their arms around you and, second, don’t go for the obvious kill. That’s all they’ll be prepared for. As long as you come at them from the side and keep moving, they’ll be too confused to respond effectively. Emmett?”

Em stepped forward, grinning, ready to do his worst. Jasper moved a few paces northward in the clearing and motioned for our brother to move south. Then they faced off.

“Okay, Emmett first. He’s the best example of a newborn attack.”

Emmett thought Jasper was mocking him. “I’ll *try* not to break anything,” he grumbled.

Jasper grinned at Emmett’s irritation before explaining himself.

“What I meant is that Emmett relies on his strength. He’s very straightforward about the attack. The newborns won’t be trying anything subtle, either. Just go for the easy kill, Emmett.” Jasper backed up a few more steps and tensed into a crouch. “Okay, Emmett—try to catch me.”

Emmett charged forward just as he would if he were attacking a bear. Jasper wasn’t a bear, though—he was much, much quicker. When Emmett came at Jasper straight on and grabbed for his neck, his hands clapped together noisily. Jasper was already somewhere else. Emmett tried again and again and each time, Jasper dodged him in a different direction—to the left, right, down, around to the side. Then suddenly, Jazz was behind Emmett with his teeth at the back of his neck. Emmett froze—he was dead. (Or rather, in a real battle, he would now be without his head and completely vulnerable to flames.)

“Dammit! You mother—effer!” Emmett cursed in frustration.

I smiled. This was *excellent* fun!

The wolves began making low growling noises that rumbled up and down the line. They were impressed.

“Again,” Emmett demanded, a little angry.

“It’s my turn,” I cut in.

“In a minute,” Jasper replied. He smiled in Emmett’s direction, dismissing him.

Bella’s fingers squeezed my arm and I realized with chagrin that I’d been so caught up in the action that I’d forgotten she was standing next to me. I turned my head to look at her and saw fear in her eyes. I took her hand and squeezed it while Emmett stalked back to his position between Carlisle and Rosalie.

Jasper was sensing some negative emotion in the air around him and I realized that Bella was the only one present who seemed unhappy. He confirmed it.

“I want to show Bella something first,” Jasper said, motioning Alice forward. “I know you worry about her,” he told Bella as Alice danced into the clearing. “I want to show you why that’s not necessary.”

Bella had been worrying about Alice? Granted, my sister did look tiny and defenseless, but that was just her sheep’s clothing.

Alice and Jasper faced each other, six feet apart, and Jasper crouched to attack. Alice just stood there and smiled, her hands clasped behind her back. She couldn’t have looked more vulnerable if she’d had a lollipop in her hand. As Jasper crept forward and started to circle Alice,

she simply shut her eyes. Then suddenly, he leaped at her from her left side, swept past her, and ended up at her right side, having made no contact.

Bella gasped.

Jasper circled around and leaped at Alice again. With her eyes still shut, she took a small step backward at the very second Jasper moved and then stepped forward to her starting point. Again Jasper had flown right through the space where she'd been. Alice grinned. I looked at Bella and saw her puzzlement. Alice's movements were so swift and minute that Bella probably couldn't see her step out of the way.

Then Jasper demonstrated a full-on assault for Bella's benefit. Alice stood with her eyes closed, grinning, as Jasper crouched, circled, and then attacked. Just before his arms circled her waist, she bent forward and spun on her toes and his arms closed above her. He grabbed for her legs. She made the smallest bunny hop and he missed her by a hair's breadth. He spun in a circle and grabbed for her neck, but she ducked under his hands and spiraled away. They began moving faster...attack, escape, attack, escape...looking for all the world like dancers in a highly choreographed ballet. Still, Jasper could not put his hands on Alice. Finally, he attempted to tackle her, charging with his head down and his arms aiming for her hips. He missed, of course, and the second he straightened up, he found Alice on his back with her mouth poised over his neck.

"Gotcha," she gloated before kissing his throat.

Jasper turned and gazed into Alice's eyes and in that brief moment, something extremely personal and intimate passed between them. I looked away, though I couldn't block their private thoughts from entering my mind. The power of their love always caught me off guard when I happened to witness it.

Then Jasper laughed. "You truly are one frightening little monster."

The wolves agreed. Grunts and growls rippled down the line as a flurry of thoughts floated to me through the air.

She's like a flea...so fast!

More like a ghost!

She can fly!

They had been greatly disturbed by that demonstration. Not one of them ever wanted to get in a scrap with Alice.

I smiled and noticed that Bella was looking curiously at me. "It's good for them to learn some respect," I whispered to her.

"My turn," I called out and squeezed Bella's hand in farewell.

Alice took my position as Bella's bodyguard and I took hers in the clearing. Jasper and I didn't waste any time. We both crouched for attack and began to circle one another. He feinted at me, testing my readiness. I'd read his intention and didn't bother to react. I feinted at him and he countered, but recovered quickly.

Jasper couldn't read my thoughts as I did his, but with nearly a century of intense fighting experience, he had devised many tricky moves I'd never seen. When I attacked, he became like a martial artist, rolling across my back, flipping over top of me, defending with his legs or shoulders or even head. When he attacked me, he tried to do so instinctively with no forethought, which was never entirely successful. Always, I heard his mind the tiniest fraction of a second before he acted and either dodged him, defended myself, or counterattacked. We circled and attacked and dodged, but neither of us could gain an advantage.

Eventually, Carlisle cleared his throat. *Let's move on...*

Jasper laughed and I laughed in return. Excellent fun!

"Back to work," he announced. "We'll call it a draw."

Carlisle challenged Jasper next and my brother sparred with him, showing him how to alter his offensive moves slightly to make them more effective. Carlisle adjusted in action and quickly adapted to the new techniques. The trick was never to face off with a newborn and never to stop moving.

Jasper repeated the exercise with Rosalie, showing her some variations on her habitual movements. She'd had decades of practice fighting Emmett and so already had learned to counter his strength moves with her own quickness and agility.

My mother was not a fighter and against Jasper, it showed. She hadn't needed to learn fighting techniques because our family had never battled another coven, and because the odd nomad we'd run into over the years was never allowed to get close to Esme. Carlisle or I had always been there to protect her. She was committed to this battle, though, and charged Jasper with intensity. Each time, he was able to counter and get to her neck within a few seconds. He took things back a step then, slowing down and pausing periodically to illustrate the right approach and identify my mother's vulnerabilities.

“You see what I’m doing here?” he asked, coming at her sideways. “Yes, just like that,” he said when she mimicked the action. “Concentrate on the sides. Don’t forget where their target will be. Keep moving.”

After six or seven trials, Esme had improved enormously. She would be no great fighter with only two training sessions, but she would be better at least, and far safer from the newborns than before. I heard Carlisle promise himself to practice with her before the battle came.

Emmett took another crack at Jasper and did better until he got frustrated and began making mistakes.

The wolves watched alertly, the pack mind continually purring as one or another wolf saw something to be noted. After this training, they would be well-equipped to take out any of us and I sincerely hoped there was no fighting with them in our future—they knew too much.

I felt Bella’s head bump heavily against my shoulder and looked at her face. She was struggling to keep her eyes open.

“We’re about finished,” I whispered.

For the first time, Jasper turned toward the line of wolves and spoke. “We’ll be doing this tomorrow. Please feel welcome to observe again.”

“Yes,” I answered for Sam. “We’ll be here.” Then Sam made a request. I patted Bella’s arm and moved toward Carlisle.

“The pack thinks it would be helpful to be familiar with each of our scents—so they don’t make mistakes later. If we could hold very still, it will make it easier for them.”

Easier not to take a snap at one of us, I finished to myself.

“Certainly,” Carlisle answered Sam. “Whatever you need.”

The line of wolves in the woods grumbled at the prospect of scenting us, but knew it was wise to do so.

Sam led the pack single file into the clearing. I heard Bella gasp and observed her face as the line came toward us. She looked stunned by the massive creatures, which surprised me a little, because I felt sure she’d seen them before—just not all ten, I guess. Her expression boded well for the future of my family, though. The newborns would be utterly confounded. Maybe they’d even retreat!

Sam approached Carlisle and winced slightly at the burn in his nose. He kept moving toward Jasper, who tensed in readiness to defend himself and Alice. Emmett, in contrast, grinned as the wolves ambled by, happy at the prospect of having excellent new sparring companions in future. The wolves were highly stressed as they filed past us and I read Jasper's concern for their self-control. He remained on his guard.

I recognized the six wolves who had chased Victoria with my family while Bella and I were in Florida. I'd seen images of all of them in Jasper's memory and some of them in Carlisle's and Emmett's. The new female was smaller than the others and light gray in color. Her hackles went up as she approached us. It was clear that Leah Clearwater did not like us one bit.

There's Bella with her boyfriend, she thought in a taunting tone.

Shut up, Leah, Jacob returned.

Actually, I don't know what you see in her. She's so pale and scrawny and—

SHUT UP, LEAH!

Seth was sandy colored and gawky looking, with feet that seemed too big for his body. Leah became defensive of Seth when he whined in fear at one point. He was her younger brother, I saw, and appeared to be quite young. Brady and Collin were gray-brown and burnt umber, respectively, and were even younger than Seth.

Jacob grew his hair out for Bella...aaah, Leah taunted mentally in a sing-song tone.

Jacob successfully ignored her this time. He was gazing at Bella, anxious to make himself known to her. Bella was looking at him too, had already picked him out, it seemed. When their eyes met, he pulled his lips back from his teeth, which might have seemed aggressive, except that he let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth as he panted breathlessly.

Bella giggled.

Jacob pulled his lips back even more—a smile—and trotted forward toward her, passing by Alice and me, seemingly without concern. I watched Jacob with eagle eyes, looking for any sign that Bella was frightened or that he might lose control near her. His closest friends, Embry and Quil, were following him defensively.

Jacob glanced at me.

I'm not gonna hurt her, so don't get all bent outta shape, okay?

I didn't move, just kept watching to see how Bella would respond. Now directly in front of her, Jacob bent his elbows in a dog's forward bow, which lowered his head to Bella's eye level.

"Jacob?" she murmured, barely audible. Her voice was all wonder and fascination.

Jacob purred deeply in his chest. Not even I could have mistaken it for a growl. Bella's hand trembled slightly as she reached out and stroked the side of his muzzle. Like a cat, he shut his eyes and pushed his face against her hand, purring loudly. Bella continued stroking down the side of his neck as I watched helplessly. She was giving him exactly what he'd longed for—she was voluntarily touching him with a tender hand.

I was galled...mortified! This wasn't at all what I'd expected. I thought she would be frightened of him and perhaps a little disgusted as well. I just managed to keep my expression neutral.

Then Jacob did something extremely foul. I saw his intention just before he acted, but I didn't try to stop him or push him away from her. If she wasn't disgusted by him yet, she would be momentarily. With his wet, lolling tongue, Jacob licked Bella's face in one long stroke from chin to forehead. I could hear the slurp.

"Ew! Gross, Jake!" Bella cried, jumping back and slapping at his face.

He dodged her hand and started croaking—obviously a laugh. The rascal had stolen another kiss!

Bella wiped her face on her sleeve and, much to my surprise, started chuckling.

Vampires and wolves alike were watching the scene with suppressed revulsion. The wolves thought Bella stank like a vampire and the vampires thought Jacob stank, period.

Jacob laughed again and on Sam's command, the rest of the pack began stepping backwards toward the forest. Sam was highly annoyed at Jacob's antics and thought it best that the pack retreat from his bad conduct. Of all his wolves, Sam expected his second in command to set a good example for the younger pups, and stepping out of formation and making a fool of himself was not exemplary behavior.

When the retreating wolves reached the forest's edge, seven of them pivoted at the last moment and cantered into the trees. Two wolves—Quil and Embry—remained behind, standing at the edge of the woods, whining.

Jacob had questions on his mind. I saw that he was going to butt into my plans and I didn't particularly want to deal with him. Sighing, I returned to Bella's side and took her hand.

“Ready to go?”

How are you gonna protect her during the fight? the wolf demanded silently.

I looked over Bella’s head at the overgrown, reddish–brown dog.

“I’ve not quite figured out all the details yet,” I replied grudgingly.

She can hide in the woods and I’ll guard her.

Wouldn’t he like that?!

“It’s more complicated than that,” I said. “Don’t concern yourself; I’ll make sure it’s safe.”

“What are you talking about?” Bella wanted to know.

Great! He’s going to scare her and make her more upset about this battle than she already is.

“Just discussing strategy,” I replied, trying to brush off her question. We had to hide her somewhere, that was obvious, but I hadn’t considered all the eventualities yet. Jacob looked at Bella, then at me, and realized I hadn’t told her our strategy for the fight or for how we would keep her safe. He decided that we must hash it out...*right now*. How *annoying!*

Jacob took off for the woods and Bella reached out after him.

“Wait!” she cried, but he continued trotting away. “Why did he leave?” Bella asked me, obviously disappointed.

“He’s coming back. He wants to be able to talk for himself.”

Jacob reappeared quickly, running toward us in human form—and wearing the briefest of cutoff sweatpants in black. He kept his distance from my family as he ran by them.

“Okay, bloodsucker,” Jacob said rudely. “What’s so complicated about it?”

“I have to consider every possibility,” I explained. “What if someone gets by you?”

Jacob grunted dismissively. “Okay, so leave her on the reservation. We’re making Collin and Brady stay behind anyway. She’ll be safe there.”

Bella frowned. “Are you talking about me?”

“I just want to know what he plans to do with you during the fight,” the mutt told her.

“Do with me?”

“You can’t stay in Forks, Bella.” I explained. “They know where to look for you there. What if someone slipped by us?”

“Charlie?” she gasped. Her face went gray.

“He’ll be with Billy,” Jacob promised. “If my dad has to commit a murder to get him there, he’ll do it. Probably it won’t take that much. It’s this Saturday, right? There’s a game.”

“This Saturday?” Bella squeaked. “Well, crap! There goes your graduation present.”

I laughed. Bella’s priorities (or perhaps her mental faculties, due to sleep deprivation) were all scrambled.

“It’s the thought that counts. You can give the tickets to someone else.”

“Angela and Ben,” Bella decided. “At least that will get them out of town.”

My poor darling was so worried, just what I had wanted to avoid. *Jacob!*

I touched her cheek and spoke gently. “You can’t evacuate everyone. Hiding you is just a precaution. I told you—we’ll have no problem now. There won’t be enough of them to keep us entertained.” I smiled.

“But what about keeping her in La Push?” Jacob pressed.

Wasn’t it obvious? “She’s been back and forth too much. She’s left trails all over the place. Alice only sees very young vampires coming on the hunt, but obviously someone created them. There is someone more experienced behind this. Whoever he”—I glanced at Bella, remembering her theory about Victoria—“or she is, this *could* all be a distraction. Alice will see if he decides to look himself, but we could be very busy at the time that decision is made. Maybe someone is counting on that. I can’t leave her somewhere she’s been frequently. She *has* to be hard to find, just in case. It’s a very long shot, but I’m not taking chances.”

Bella stared at me with her eyebrows knitted together. I smoothed my thumb over the space between them. “Just being overcautious.”

“So hide her here,” Jacob said, pointing to the Olympics. “There’s a million possibilities—places either one of us could be in just a few minutes if there’s a need.”

I shook my head. “Her scent is too strong and, combined with mine, especially distinct. Even if I carried her, it would leave a trail. Our trace is all over the range, but in conjunction with Bella’s scent, it would catch their attention. We’re not sure exactly which path they’ll take,

because *they* don't know yet. If they crossed her scent before they found us..." Jacob frowned as I looked at him. "You see the difficulties."

"There has to be a way to make it work." Jacob scowled, concentrating, and then looked away into the forest.

Bella swayed on her feet. She couldn't hold herself up anymore. I gripped her waist and pulled her close so she wouldn't fall.

"I need to get you home—you're exhausted. And Charlie will be waking up soon..."

"Wait a sec," Jacob cut in. "My scent disgusts you, right?" *What if I carry her to a hiding place; the infants will be repelled and...*

"Hmm, not bad." I said. "It's possible."

I want to try it now.

I nodded my agreement. It was a good idea despite the opportunism present in it. It was certainly worth a trial run and if it worked, we'd have one less thing to worry about.

"Jasper?" I called, motioning to him.

The family was thirty yards away discussing strategies for keeping the newborns away from Forks. Jasper broke away from the huddle and walked toward us with Alice on his heels. I could see Jacob's stress mount as two more vampires approached, but he was working hard to remain calm. His cohorts near the trees whined in consternation.

"Okay, Jacob."

I nodded at him to proceed and he held his arms out to Bella. I exhaled heavily to discharge some of my tension. It was better than releasing it as my instincts were telling me to do.

The wolves are our allies. He just wants to help, I reminded myself.

Bella was glaring at Jacob with her arms crossed over her chest.

"We're going to see if I can confuse the scent enough to hide your trail," Jacob explained, but she didn't respond.

"You're going to have to let him carry you, Bella," I said with what sounded like remarkable calm.

Bella was making it obvious that she didn't want to and that made me glad in a certain disingenuous way.

Jacob rolled his eyes and snatched her up into his arms. She flinched and then leaned away from his chest, but he wrapped his arms tighter. I remained composed with some effort.

"Don't be such a baby," Jacob groused.

Both he and Bella glanced at me, perhaps to determine my reaction to their little spat. They were certainly comfortable enough with each other to quarrel like children. I kept my face placid.

"Bella's scent is so much more potent to me," I explained to Jasper. "I thought it would be a fairer test if someone else tried."

Jacob turned and moved swiftly into the woods carrying the most precious cargo imaginable. Jasper and Alice gave him three minutes' head start and then began tracking.

It felt like Bella was gone for ages, but it couldn't have been more than five minutes before Jacob reappeared with her about fifty yards away.

"You can put me down now," I heard Bella grump.

"I don't want to take a chance of messing up the experiment," he replied, slowing his pace dramatically.

"You are so annoying."

"Thanks."

Jasper and Alice dashed out of the woods and joined me, surprising Jacob. He stopped ten feet away and set Bella on her feet, maintaining his distance from the three of us. Bella walked to me and took my hand. She smelled horrible, but I was glad to have her back.

"Well?" Bella asked my siblings.

"As long as you don't touch anything, Bella, I can't *imagine* someone sticking their nose close enough to that trail to catch your scent," Jasper said with a grimace. "It was almost completely obscured."

"A definite success," Alice chimed in, wrinkling her nose.

"And it gave me an idea," Jasper said. *To make a trail with Bella's scent...lead them here...*

“Which will work,” Alice confirmed and in her mind I saw the newborns following the trail like cattle to the slaughter.

“Clever,” I commented. We could make the newborns come right to us. I read more details in Jasper’s mind as he considered them.

“How do you *stand* that?” Jacob complained to Bella, reminding me that the meat of our discourse had been silent to the humans.

I repeated it aloud. “We’re—well, *you’re*—going to leave a false trail to the clearing, Bella. The newborns are hunting, your scent will excite them, and they’ll come exactly the way we want them to without being careful about it. Alice can already see that this will work. When they catch *our* scent, they’ll split up and try to come at us from two sides. Half will go through the forest, where her vision suddenly disappears...”

“Yes!” Jacob punched the air, realizing that the wolves would be waiting there. The newborns would be toast.

I smiled. Even Jacob could appreciate Jasper’s skill at this kind of war. My brother *was* an expert, to be sure, and as such, he couldn’t help himself from following his idea to its logical conclusion.

It would work even better if Bella herself was here. They’d go craz...

“Not a chance,” I cut him off.

“I know, I know,” Jasper retreated. “I didn’t even consider it, not really.”

That was blatantly untrue. Otherwise, Alice couldn’t have seen the outcome of his decision to try it—which she did. She stomped on Jasper’s foot in response. He tried to explain himself.

“If Bella was actually there in the clearing,” he told Alice, “it would drive them insane. They wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything but her. It would make picking them off truly easy....”

I tried to stare a hole through his head to get him to *shut up!* When he finally noticed me, he began backpedaling.

“Of course it’s too dangerous for her. It was just an errant thought,” he said swiftly, though he still couldn’t contain his thoughts. *But an excellent one. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel...*

“No,” I asserted forcefully. *Not on your life!*

“You’re right,” he conceded aloud. His thoughts said something different, but I knew he wouldn’t dare bring it up again. He took another tack. “Best two out of three?” he asked Alice, looking to redeem his losing performance from earlier. They danced off into the clearing together to practice fighting.

Real nice, Jacob was thinking. He’s willing to put Bella’s life on the line!

“Jasper looks at things from a military perspective,” I explained quietly. “He looks at all the options—it’s thoroughness, not callousness.”

Jacob snorted in disgust, but moved in closer. *How do we work this?*

“I’ll bring her here Friday afternoon to lay the false trail. You can meet us afterward, and carry her to a place I know. Completely out of the way, and easily defensible, not that it will come to that. I’ll take another route there.”

“And then what? Leave her with a cell phone?” Jacob sneered.

“You have a better idea?”

“Actually, I do,” he boasted. *Leave Seth with her to follow the fight...*

“Oh...Again, dog, not bad at all.”

Jacob hurriedly explained his idea to Bella, trying to get back in her good graces.

“We tried to talk Seth into staying behind with the younger two. He’s still too young, but he’s stubborn and he’s resisting. So I thought of a new assignment for him—cell phone.”

Confusion was plain on Bella’s face.

“As long as Seth Clearwater is in his wolf form, he’ll be connected to the pack,” I told her. “Distance isn’t a problem?” I checked.

“Nope.” *Three hundred miles is....*

“Three hundred miles? That’s impressive.”

“That’s the farthest we’ve ever gone to experiment. Still clear as a bell,” he bragged.

“It’s a good idea.” I said. “I’ll feel better with Seth there, even without the instantaneous communication. I don’t know if I’d be able to leave Bella there alone. To think it’s come to this, though! Trusting werewolves!”

“Fighting *with* vampires instead of against them!” Jacob was as disoriented by working together as I was.

“Well, you still get to fight against some of them.”

Jacob smiled. “That’s the reason we’re here.”

Bella seemed a little disturbed and I had no idea why.

15. Compromise

It was late afternoon before Bella awoke. She'd had a bad "night"—one of the worst I'd witnessed. She tossed and rolled, getting hopelessly tangled in the covers before shoving them off altogether; she kicked the wall; her arms jerked; she chattered ceaselessly.

We'd made it back to Charlie's house less than an hour before Bella's father usually got up to go to work. Bella had begun nodding off as we walked from the clearing so, rather than carry her on my back, I picked her up and held her to my chest as I ran through the forest. She was less protected from the cool air racing by us when she was in front of my body, but Bella rarely complained of feeling cold.

After vaulting through her window, I'd laid Bella on the bed and removed her shoes, then tucked her quilt around her. She rolled onto her side, but didn't seem to awaken. I assumed that Charlie, still snoring down the hall, would check on her when he got up, since he'd fallen asleep before she returned from the party and she'd had to herd him upstairs into his bed. He probably wouldn't even remember that or know for certain whether she'd made it home.

Rather than hide in Bella's closet to avoid Charlie's bed-check, I decided to go outside and make a phone call. I needed to talk to Alice and I could keep an eye on the house from the nearby woods until Bella's father left for work.

Alice fired questions at me as soon as I dialed her number.

"Edward, what are we going to do about Charlie? Have you thought about that?"

"Do you mean on Saturday? Jacob said Billy would invite him to the reservation."

"No, I mean, how are we getting Bella out of the house on Friday and Saturday?"

"Oh. Well, Bella and I often spend Saturdays out somewhere, but Friday night might be a problem. I'll think of something."

"Don't bother. I've already figured out everything."

"What have you figured out, Alice?"

"That you two need some time together before the battle."

"And why would that be?"

“Because you want to give her a special graduation present.”

“Well...” Even if Alice knew my plan, I didn’t want to talk about it. It was meant to be private.

“And she wants to give you one too, so here’s my proposal...”

That couldn’t be right. Bella had already bought Alice and I concert tickets, but since they were for Saturday and we couldn’t go that day, she said she would give them away. I didn’t have a chance to consider it further, since Alice was still talking.

“The family is taking our annual ‘backpacking’ trip to celebrate the end of the school year. I want to go shopping instead and I’m very upset that I have to be home alone, so Bella’s going to stay with me while you’re all away—Thursday night through Saturday.”

“But you’re going hunting to get ready for the battle, aren’t you?”

“Yes, you and I both are. I’ll leave with the family on Thursday while you stay with Bella at our house, and you’ll hunt Friday while I stay with Bella. You can give her your graduation present. Or do whatever else you want to do with her on Thursday night,” Alice added. I could almost hear her wink.

I ignored the insinuation, but I liked the plan.

“None of my business, but it’s a good idea, right?”

“Yes, Alice, it’s a good idea.” I changed the subject. “How did Jasper feel about the training session?”

“Good, actually. Even Esme will do fine with the newborns, he thinks. They’re predictable, according to him, so you only need a couple of techniques to out-manuever them.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Thanks, Alice,” I said, shutting my cell phone.

I was...immensely. To destroy the creatures with *my own hands*! The anger and frustration I felt toward Bella’s tormenters had been building for too long. Victoria’s “feint and run” tactics; the intrusion into Bella’s bedroom by someone unknown; the amassing of an army...these threats had been intangible and elusive, nothing that I could challenge directly. It was too much for a killer to bear for long.

With Bella safely hidden away and Seth there to guard her, I would be free to let loose the demon without Bella’s having to witness the least human part of me. I did not want my love

to see her would-be mate tearing the heads off his enemies or ripping them limb-from-limb with his bare hands.

Upon returning to Bella's room, I settled into her rocking chair and watched her agitated slumber as the sun made its way across a cloudless sky. Bella was so exhausted that neither her nightmares nor her talking nudged her into consciousness. I listened to her mumblings and tried to decipher the words she spoke.

"...toria come too...*aahh*...don't hurt him, no...can't stand...no..."

Bella's voice rose in pitch to a squeak, the words filled with emotion and distress. I began humming in hopes that the sound would divert her mind from its disturbing rut. I didn't wish to wake her, just to raise her sentience above the level where the frightening dream resided.

As I hummed her lullaby, Bella smiled vaguely and quieted as I'd hoped she would. The effect lasted for about fifteen minutes before her right arm began to twitch, rising off the mattress. I could almost see in its movement the intention to hit, or punch, or perhaps just to defend from such. She rolled over restlessly and whacked her foot against the wall, but it didn't wake her.

"...be there too...help...find me...this way...where is he? Where are you? Edward! Edward!"

It was easy to see that Bella was anxious about the battle and I wished I could ease her mind somehow. She didn't understand how elementary it was going to be for us. With the wolves taking on half the newborns, well...there would barely be a fight.

"...no Jacob...don't...no! Stay...you can't...not you too... Alice!"

Would it ease her mind if I held her instead? I wondered. I approached the bed and lay on my side behind her, wrapping an arm around her lower ribs, cradling her against my body.

"Edward..." she said softly and began whispering unintelligibly. She knew I was there. I hoped my presence would comfort her. I kissed her hair and breathed in her delicious scent.

I felt such a yearning for her, an indefinable craving for something I didn't have. She loved me, though she could never return my love to the degree I offered it. I knew that. It made me long for some sort of reassurance that she was truly mine. I hadn't talked to her about it recently, but it still troubled me that the idea of marriage set her teeth on edge. Though she claimed it was about the institution itself, how could I not suspect that it was actually about *me*—that she didn't want to marry *me*? Did she have doubts about me? Was she holding out

for other possibilities? One possibility in particular? The thought made me want to secure her, to make her mine. If she would agree to marry me, I would give her anything she desired...anything at all. But then again, she wouldn't *take* anything I offered. It was a constant thorn in my side.

Bella had begun talking again, interrupting my obsessive thoughts.

"...third wife saved... *she* was human...brave human...to give her life...Esme... Carlisle...*Edward!*"

"Shh, darling, I'm here," I whispered, rocking slowly forward and back, trying to calm her troubled mind.

As I moved with her, gently swaying, the rhythmic motion pacified and quieted her. It had an altogether different effect on me, however. In spite of her clothing and mine between us—the quilt having been kicked into a lump at the foot of the bed—I could feel my love's shoulders and back rounded into my chest, her slim waist nestled against my stomach, the backs of her thighs pressed against the fronts of mine, and her firm, round bottom snuggled into my lower torso. The gentle rocking I'd intended as comfort for her begat a craving in me.

I'd become hyper-aware of every square inch of my skin where her warmth pressed against me, a tingling electricity. How would it feel to touch her bare, hot skin with my cold from shoulders to knees? A pleasurable, pulsing ache began deep in my center and grew stronger. My hips began to move without thought or decision, acting from a base instinct I didn't wish to quell. Pressing into her, I gasped at the molten liquid heat flowing through my groin—most intense there—spreading up through my abdomen and down into my legs.

"*Ahh,*" I groaned, and my arm gripped her tighter around the ribs. I pressed into her again, feeling a surge of pleasure between my legs so powerful that it caught my breath and held it hostage. Ignoble and dishonorable though my actions were, I found myself unwilling to stop. Barely aware of what I was doing, I swept her hair from her neck and bent my lips to her carotid artery. I pushed my hips against her soft behind. This time I thrilled to the pressure of her pushing back. Her heartbeat stuttered.

"*Mmm...*," Bella moaned in her sleep. If I'd had a beating heart, I swear it would have stopped at that moment. A potent wave of desire rolled through me and I knew I must leave her bed now or be rendered incapable. I fought with myself to go when what I wanted to do was rip away the obstructing fabric and crush myself against her heated skin.

By sheer force of will, I rolled off Bella's bed and landed in the rocking chair across the room in one quick motion. Groaning, I pressed the palm of my hand between my legs to ease

the pressure that had built there. I flopped my head back over the top of the chair and closed my eyes, still feeling her body flush to mine, my front side perfectly dovetailed to her back side. I sighed heavily. Physical desire could be so powerful! It caught me by surprise. Slowly, my panting breaths elongated and the aching in my groin eased. I would have chastised myself for getting so carried away, but I had enjoyed it too much.

Out of nowhere, Bella began to speak.

“...where are you...ow...slow down...wait...Edward...”

She just couldn't settle and take her ease. She had calmed most effectively when I lay with her, but I didn't dare return in my present state.

“...to the clearing...have to get there...help Carlisle...*They see me! They're coming!* Where is Edward...Edward...?!”

Had she awakened? Did she need me? I leaped to her bedside and touched her shoulder. No, still asleep. After making sure, I returned to the rocking chair only to be summoned again to find her still asleep. It was a long day for her with her agitated mind and for me, too, with my indecent desire.

How I wish... But no. It was impossible.

Back in the rocking chair, I decided to focus on something else—my graduation gift for Bella, though I couldn't call it that or (more than likely) she wouldn't accept it. In my mind, I reviewed the contents of the fire safe built into my closet at home. I perused the items one by one and considered this piece and that, and imagined how it would be to give Bella what I *really* wanted to give her. I smiled to myself.

“Edward?”

This time my name came as a solitary word from across the room. I rushed to Bella's bedside where she yawned and stretched. I sat carefully on the edge of the bed and twined my fingers through hers. Her eyes remained closed.

“Are you really awake this time?” I murmured.

“Mmm,” Bella nodded sleepily. “Have there been a lot of false alarms?”

“You've been very restless—talking all day.”

“All *day*?” Bella repeated in surprise, her eyes popping open. She looked toward the window.

“You had a long night,” I reminded her. “You’d earned a day in bed.”

Bella sat up and stared outside. The sun was slipping toward the western horizon.

“Wow.”

“Hungry?” I asked, standing up. “Do you want breakfast in bed?”

“I’ll get it,” Bella responded. “I need to get up and move around.”

No, of course she wouldn’t want me to wait on her, though I was anxious to show off my fledgling cooking skills. I’d been watching the Food Network so I could learn how to feed her. It was very much like chemistry class. Less exacting, actually.

Bella swiveled and stretched her legs over the side of the bed, then stood up and I reached out to catch her when she swooned. She looked down at herself, still wearing her flannel shirt and blue jeans from the night before.

I escorted her to the kitchen and watched as she put some foul-looking packaged tarts into the toaster.

“Ugh, I’m a mess,” she groaned, bending down for a glimpse of herself in the shiny toaster.

“It was a long night,” I said. “You should have stayed here and slept.” Especially considering how restless she’d been and how insensible she looked even now.

“Right! And missed *everything*. You know, you need to start accepting the fact that I’m part of the family now.”

I smiled, reminded of the conversations I’d had with myself while she slept. Perhaps *she* had read *my* mind.

“I could probably get used to that idea.”

Bella sat at the table with her breakfast and as she raised one of the offensive, toasted rectangles to her mouth, I saw something that must have been hidden under her cuff before—a silver charm bracelet with a single charm on it. I felt iron stays tighten around my heart, but I kept my face smooth.

“May I?” I asked, reaching for the miniscule object.

“Um, sure.”

I placed my palm beneath the tiny carved wolf where it balanced on four legs, an exquisite replication of the thing itself—Jacob Black in his alternate form. The workmanship was superb and I marveled that a shovel-handed non-vampire could have produced this miniature work of art.

It was a lovely graduation gift—romantic—and because I knew how Jacob thought, I also interpreted it as a challenge to me. He was putting his mark on Bella, something that irked me, particularly because Bella had never allowed me to give her jewelry.

This doesn't have to be a bad thing, I told myself. Maybe I could use it to counter her resistance. It definitely made me want to push forward with my plan.

"Jacob Black can give you presents," I said carefully.

"You've given me presents," Bella said after a brief pause. "You know I like the homemade kind." She once *did* accept a compact disk of my piano compositions, something that did not require me to spend a dime. It wasn't an ideal criterion, but I could work with it.

"How about hand-me-downs? Are those acceptable?" I ventured.

"What do you mean?"

"This bracelet," I said, drawing a line around her wrist with my finger. "You'll be wearing this a lot?"

Bella shrugged noncommittally. She probably didn't want to say so to me.

"Because you wouldn't want to hurt his feelings," I suggested, giving her an out.

"Sure, I guess so."

"Don't you think it's fair, then," I said, rotating her wrist and tracing her lovely pulsing veins with my fingertip, "...if I have a little representation?"

"Representation?"

"A charm—something to keep *me* on your mind."

"You're in every thought I have. I don't need reminders."

"If I gave you something, would you wear it?" I pushed. It was clear she intended to wear *Jacob's* gift.

"A hand-me-down?" Bella clarified.

“Yes, something I’ve had for a while.” I smiled, waiting for her concession.

“Whatever makes you happy.”

It *did* make me happy...very. Might as well take advantage of the moment.

“Have you noticed the inequality?” I asked, feigning great offense. “Because I certainly have.”

“What inequality?”

“Everyone else is able to get away with giving you things. Everyone but me. I would have loved to get you a graduation present, but I didn’t. I knew it would have upset you more than if anyone else did. That’s utterly unfair. How do you explain yourself?” I demanded.

“Easy.” Bella shrugged blithely. “You’re more important than everyone else. And you’ve given me *you*. That’s already more than I deserve, and anything else you give me just throws us more out of balance.”

Huh? Me—a *vampire*, no less. I’d altered her human existence beyond recognition, stolen her future, and endangered her life, and *that’s* what she thinks about it? I rolled my eyes.

“The way you regard me is ludicrous.”

Bella did not respond, just kept chewing that awful *thing*.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out to check the number.

“What is it, Alice?”

“Hi Edward. Guess what? The newborns are down to nineteen, nine for them, ten for us, or ten for them, nine for us, whatever...easy.”

That was good news, but not why she had called. I waited for my sister to get to the point.

“You have to do something about Bella. She’s making plans to come to the clearing in the middle of the battle. You might have to tie her to a tree or something. She’s not really in danger, because she can’t find her way out of the woods.” Alice laughed. “Actually I take that back. She *is* in danger—of falling down and hurting herself.”

I sighed. “I sort of guessed as much.” I gave Bella an accusatory stare. “She was talking in her sleep.”

Bella’s face went red.

"I'll take care of it," I told Alice, returning the phone to my pocket.

Looking reproachfully at Bella, I asked, "Is there something you'd like to talk to me about?"

I didn't bother to repeat what Alice had said. Bella already knew. She studied her hands guiltily before speaking.

"I like Jasper's idea."

"Ah, Bella," I groaned.

"I want to help. I have to do *something*," Bella protested.

"It wouldn't help to have you in danger."

"Jasper thinks it would. This is *his* area of expertise."

I gave her a dark look of disapproval.

"You can't keep me away. I'm not going to hide out in the forest while you all take risks for me."

She might, actually, even if I didn't tie her to a tree. I tried to keep the corners of my mouth from twitching.

"Alice doesn't see you *in* the clearing, Bella. She sees you stumbling around lost in the woods. You won't be able to find us; you'll just make it more time consuming for me to find you afterward."

I had her. Or so I thought...

"That's because Alice didn't factor in Seth Clearwater. If she had, of course, she wouldn't have been able to see anything at all. But it sounds like Seth wants to be there as much as I do. It shouldn't be too hard to persuade him to show me the way."

Arrgh! She was impossible! Okay then, two could play that game.

"That might have worked...if you hadn't told me. Now I'll just ask Sam to give Seth certain orders. Much as he might want to, Seth won't be able to ignore that kind of injunction."

Bella was undaunted. "But why would Sam give those orders? If I tell him how it would help for me to be there? I'll bet Sam would rather do me a favor than you."

She was so stubborn! I still had a trick up my sleeve, though.

“Maybe you’re right. But I’m sure Jacob would be only too eager to give those same orders.”

Bella scowled. “Jacob?”

“Jacob is second in command. Did he never tell you that? His orders have to be followed, too.” And I was sure Jacob would agree with me, so she could be mad at both of us.

Bella was surprised by the news. I tried to cement my victory by changing the subject before she found some new argument.

“I got a fascinating look into the pack’s mind last night. It was better than a soap opera. I had no idea how complex the dynamic is with such a large pack. The pull of the individual against the plural psyche... Absolutely fascinating.”

Bella glowered.

“Jacob’s been keeping a lot of secrets,” I said, smiling. “For instance, did you note the smaller gray wolf there last night?”

Bella nodded unhappily.

I laughed, thinking of how shocked the pack had been at her arrival.

“They take all of their legends so seriously. It turns out there are things that none of their stories prepared them for.”

Bella gave in. It *was* good gossip. “Okay, I’ll bite. What are you talking about?”

“They always accepted without question that it was only the direct grandsons of the original wolf who had the power to transform.”

“So someone changed who wasn’t a direct descendant?”

“No. She’s a direct descendant, all right.”

Bella’s face opened in surprise. “She?”

I nodded. “She knows you. Her name is Leah Clearwater.”

“Leah’s a werewolf!” Bella squealed. “What? For how long? Why didn’t Jacob tell me?”

“There are things he wasn’t allowed to share—their numbers, for instance. Like I said before, when Sam gives an order, the pack simply isn’t able to ignore it. Jacob was very careful

to think of other things when he was near me. Of course, after last night that's all out the window."

"I can't believe it. Leah Clearwater!" Bella's eyes stared into the distance as her mind processed the bombshell.

I'd gotten to her!

"Poor Leah," Bella whispered.

"She's making life exceedingly unpleasant for the rest of them. I'm not sure she deserves your sympathy."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard enough for them, having to share all their thoughts. Most of them try to cooperate, make it easier. When even one member is deliberately malicious, it's painful for everyone."

"She has reason enough," Bella muttered.

"Oh, I know," I agreed, going on. "The imprinting compulsion is one of the strangest things I've ever witnessed in my life, and I've seen some strange things. The way Sam is tied to his Emily is impossible to describe—or I should say *her Sam*. Sam really had no choice. It reminds me of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with all the chaos caused by the fairies' love spells...like magic." I smiled. "It's very nearly as strong as the way I feel about you."

Bella ignored my declaration of love.

"Poor Leah," she repeated. "Jake said she's still in love with Sam. But what do you mean, malicious?"

"She's constantly bringing up things they'd rather not think of. For example, Embry."

"What's with Embry?" Bella asked, getting as caught up in the drama as I had listening to them.

"His mother moved down from the Makah reservation seventeen years ago, when she was pregnant with him. She's not Quileute. Everyone assumed she'd left his father behind with the Makahs. But then he joined the pack." I was reminded of an old Makah fisherman Carlisle and I had met the previous year. He'd had a tale to tell.

"So?"

“So the prime candidates for his father are Quil Ateara Sr., Joshua Uley, or Billy Black, all of them married at that point, of course.”

“No!” Bella gasped.

“Now Sam, Jacob, and Quil all wonder which of them has a half-brother. They’d all like to think it’s Sam, since his father was never much of a father. But the doubt is always there. Jacob’s never been able to ask Billy about that.” I’d seen that in Jacob’s mind before, wondering about Embry’s origins, but I hadn’t realized the significance of it—and maybe Jacob hadn’t either—until Embry joined the pack.

“Wow. How did you get so much in one night?”

“The pack mind is mesmerizing. All thinking together and then separately at the same time. There’s so much to read!” I hoped to get another chance at it.

“The pack is fascinating,” Bella concurred. “Almost as fascinating as you are when you’re trying to distract me.”

Darn! I pretended not to know what she meant, keeping my expression neutral.

Bella wasn’t giving up, though. “I have to be in that clearing, Edward.”

“No.” That was my last word on the subject. I *would* tie her to a tree if I had to. She would forgive me eventually.

Bella stared at the table, no longer meeting my eyes. Was she scheming?

“Okay, look, Edward,” Bella said quietly. “Here’s the thing... I’ve already gone crazy once. I know what my limits are. *And I can’t stand it if you leave me again.*”

Leave her? I inhaled sharply as the memory of Bella curled up in a puddle in the forest stabbed my heart. I *never* wanted to cause her that kind of pain again. I was horrified.

I pulled her into my arms desperately and caressed her face, her arms, rubbed her back, and held her to my chest. Her heart was beating erratically in her distress.

“You know it’s not like that, Bella,” I tried to reassure her. “I won’t be far, and it will be over quickly.”

“I can’t stand it,” she declared. “Not knowing whether or not you’ll come back. How do I live through that, no matter how quickly it’s over?”

I sighed. “It’s going to be easy, Bella. There’s no reason for your fears.”

“None at all?”

“None.”

“And everybody will be fine?”

“Everyone.” There was no question.

“So there’s no way at all that I need to be in the clearing?”

“Of course not. Alice just told me that they’re down to nineteen. We’ll be able to handle it easily.”

“That’s right—you said it was so easy that someone could sit out. Did you really mean that?”

“Yes.”

“So easy that *you* could sit out?”

I was stunned into silence. Was she asking me *not to fight* for her?! It seemed so unlike Bella. She never asked for *anything*—how could she ask for something like this? I kept my face a smooth mask as Bella tried to read my reaction. It’s not that she didn’t have a right to ask; it’s just that I didn’t want to do it...not at all.

Bella inhaled deeply and continued. “So it’s one way or the other. Either there is more danger than you want me to know about, in which case it would be right for me to be there, to do what I can to help. Or...it’s going to be so easy that they’ll get by without you. Which way is it?”

Had I misled her? Was it true that my family would be fine without me? I would *never* allow her in the midst of the battle, so there was no question which way I would go—consequently, I realized, the cost didn’t matter. I would keep her safe at *any* cost, my family included. I couldn’t believe she would ask me for this, but I had hurt her before...hurt her *badly*. There had to be scars.

“You ask me to let them fight without my help?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she replied. “Or to let me be there. Either way, so long as we’re together.”

I’d been focused on protecting her from those who would hurt her, but she was asking me to protect her in another way—from her terror. Taking her face between my hands, I looked carefully into her eyes. What I saw there *was* fear...and guilt. Asking had been hard for her. I reached for my cell phone.

"Alice," I said, hearing resignation in my voice. "Could you come babysit Bella for a bit?" I looked for her objection to my choice of words. She made none. "I need to speak with Jasper."

"I'll be there in a second," Alice answered. I shut the phone.

"What are you going to say to Jasper?" Bella whispered, looking away from me.

"I'm going to discuss...me sitting out." Yes, I would follow through. Bella never asked for anything, which indicated how important this was to her.

"I'm sorry," she said dully.

"Don't apologize. Never be afraid to tell me how you feel, Bella. If this is what you need..." I shrugged. "You are my first priority."

"I didn't mean it that way—like you have to choose me over your family."

"I know that. Besides, that's not what you asked. You gave me two alternatives that you could live with, and I chose the one that *I* could live with. That's how compromise is supposed to work."

Bella leaned her forehead into my chest and I felt her relief in the softening of her body, a lessening of her rigidity.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Anytime," I murmured and kissed the top of her head. "Anything." *Anything at all.* I held Bella against me for a time before I remembered something I'd wanted to ask her.

"Who's the third wife?"

"Huh?"

"You were mumbling something about 'the third wife' last night. The rest made a little sense, but you lost me there."

"Oh. Um, yeah. That was just one of the stories that I heard at the bonfire the other night. I guess it stuck with me."

Bella shrugged it off as if it meant nothing, a gesture that was also a habit of mine. I did it when I was trying to minimize something. I deduced that "the third wife" was more significant to her than she was letting on. What was she hiding? I leaned away to peer at her face, but she gave me no clues.

Just then, I glanced up and saw Alice standing in Charlie's kitchen doorway. Apparently, knocking didn't suit her.

"You're going to miss all the fun," she complained. That was true, but it was what Bella needed.

"Hello, Alice," I greeted my sister.

I lifted Bella's chin with one finger and leaned in to kiss her goodbye. She responded warmly, which I took as a good sign.

"I'll be back later tonight. I'll go work this out with the others, rearrange things."

"Okay."

"There's not much to arrange," Alice said. "I already told them. Emmett is pleased."

I sighed. "Of course he is." More newborns for him to rip apart.

"You're gonna miss out, little bro!" Emmett shouted at me from upstairs when I entered the house.

I made my way to Jasper's office and found Emmett, Jasper, and Rosalie gathered around Jasper's desk.

"You're letting her keep you away from the fight?" Rosalie asked in sharp-edged disbelief. I didn't bother to dignify that.

"Jasper, what happens if I sit out with Bella?"

"Nothing, really. We were going to attempt this with half as many fighters. We should be okay. You can still help by listening for anything unexpected. It's imprudent to underestimate any threat, but I don't foresee any problems."

"I wasn't troubled by the numbers before," I told Jasper. "I'm more concerned about them now, with everyone but me facing the army. I still think there's likely to be at least one more fighter than Alice is counting. She's seeing only newborns, right? But we know their creator isn't a newborn."

“Right. I’ll take that into consideration. Still, nine or ten unskilled newborns, plus one skilled fighter shouldn’t be much to worry about with the six of us.”

I knew that if Jasper believed there was any real danger, he would not let Alice fight, so clearly, I had no cause for alarm.

“Are you coming tonight?” he asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. We need to do some two–on–one, three–on–one drills. I could use your help.”

“It’s gonna be awesome!” Emmett interjected. “Right Rose?”

Rosalie didn’t respond.

I nodded at Jasper. “What time tonight?”

“Earlier...midnight. Is that okay?”

“Should be. See you all then.”

I left to find Carlisle and Esme, whom I found downstairs in the kitchen...canoodling—before I entered anyway. I ignored the knowledge and they ignored that I was ignoring it. Business as usual at the Cullens.

“I’m glad you’re staying with Bella for the fight,” Esme said, straightening her skirt as she approached me to take my hand. “It’s noble of you to give up what you want to do.”

“She can’t bear to be separated,” I told my mother. “So I sit out or she sits in, which is not an option.”

“It’s fine, son,” Carlisle told me. “We’ll manage. Where will you and Bella be during the fight?”

“I’m planning to have Jacob carry Bella to the north ridge of Little Tahoma where we can’t be approached from behind, should we be approached at all, which I don’t expect. Jacob’s stench will mask Bella’s scent. I’ll go up a different route to meet them. Sam is assigning Seth to be our two–way radio so we can follow the battle.”

“It’s good of Jacob to help us in this way—Seth too.”

“Oh, believe me, it’s no sacrifice,” I grunted in irritation.

Esme looked at me curiously. “Jacob has an ulterior motive?”

“Does he ever!” I replied sarcastically, before softening my tone. “He wants Bella to be safe, though, as I do.”

Carlisle and Esme passed a look between them which contained the words “competition” and “jealousy.” I ignored it.

“We’ll see you tonight then?” Carlisle asked.

“Yes, midnight.”

16. Competition

After the discussions with my family, I ran back to Charlie's house.

"Edward!" Bella cried when she opened the front door. I stepped inside and took her in my arms. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," I said, kissing her forehead.

She tilted her head back and I touched her cheek with my fingers. As she looked at me, I saw the relief clearly in her eyes. I was glad that I could do that for her.

"What are you two doing out there?" Charlie intruded with a question from the kitchen.

We didn't bother to answer. I took Bella's hand and we walked into the kitchen together.

"Good evening, Charlie," I greeted him. Charlie was more animated than usual, visiting with my sister. He enjoyed Alice's company.

"I was telling Alice that folks were talking about the graduation party all over town today," Charlie said.

"Alice wouldn't be happy if they weren't," I replied, smiling at my sister.

"Bella, did you take any pictures?" Charlie asked.

"No, Dad, but I saw Jessica taking pictures with her new Blackberry. Maybe she'll print some for us."

"Jessica got the Blackberry Pearl?" Alice asked.

"Yes, that sounds right. She asked her parents for it for graduation."

"Maybe she thinks it will help her schedule her Hollywood meetings," Alice said with a giggle.

"Did she tell you that? Is she going to California?" Bella asked in surprise.

"Lauren was bragging at the party that they're going to be models or actresses in Los Angeles. She's got a meeting lined up with a producer, apparently, the son of somebody her dad knows from his college days. It was Lauren's idea, but Jessica's going to get a job and share an apartment with her."

“My,” Charlie said, “that sounds like a big opportunity.”

Bella nodded.

“I just hope they both like waiting tables,” Alice commented under her breath.

I smiled at Alice’s thoughts. The producer had inflated his credentials by omission, a common practice in L.A. He *was* a producer...of children’s birthday parties. He hired the clowns, the ponies, the caterers, and the wait staff and billed the clients, adding twenty–five percent for himself.

Alice didn’t see such a bright future for either of the girls from Forks. Lauren and Jessica had both been unkind to Bella in high school and I didn’t particularly care if they fell flat on their faces in California.

“Alice, are you ready to go home?” I asked. “We’re leaving early in the morning.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Alice says you’re going backpacking? Where to?” Charlie inquired, showing uncharacteristic interest in my activities. Then I realized he was double–checking Alice’s story that I was leaving town while Bella stayed with her at our house. *Policeman...right.*

“We’re still debating between Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Hood,” I improvised. “I want to hike the St. Helens’ crater and see how the lava dome has grown, but Emmett wants to cross–country ski and Mt. Hood still has snow.” I shrugged.

“Well, have a nice trip.”

“Thank you, Charlie. Come on, Alice.”

The three of us walked outside, leaving Bella’s father to his newspaper.

Alice verified the altered arrangements silently.

So, I’ll be hunting with the family and you will stay with Bella the whole time, starting Thursday after dinner. That actually works better, considering her plans.

I gave Alice a sharp look, obviously wanting an answer to “What plans?” She just gave me a sly smile and skipped to the car.

“Bye, Bella!” she added.

“I’ll be upstairs. See you in a little while,” I murmured into Bella’s ear before kissing her softly on the lips. She turned to go inside.

I headed toward my car, but before I had a chance to ask Alice about her silent comment, she had started the engine and raced off. I briefly considered chasing her down, but decided not to. Maybe Bella wanted to surprise me with something, as I did her.

Sighing at my sister's annoying ways, I leaped through Bella's window and stretched across her bed with my hands under my head, thinking about the night of training ahead. I was sorry to be missing the battle. It would do me no end of good to tear the heads off a few newborns.

Bella eventually made an excuse to Charlie about being tired and I heard her trudge up the stairs. When she entered the bedroom, she walked over and lay on her side next to me, her head propped in her hand. I removed a hand from under my head and touched her cheek with my fingers. She did look tired, even though she'd been in bed most of the day. Bella spoke before I could bring it up.

"What time are we meeting with the wolves?" she asked quietly.

"In an hour."

"That's good. Jake and his friends need to get some sleep."

"They don't need as much as you do," I said, looking into her eyes.

Bella changed the subject. "Did Alice tell you that she's kidnapping me again?"

I grinned. "Actually, she's not."

Bella stared at me in confusion.

"I'm the only one who has permission to hold you hostage, remember? Alice is going hunting with the rest of them." I sighed. "I guess I don't need to do that now."

"You're kidnapping me?"

I nodded.

Bella's face registered surprised and then turned thoughtful. I waited for her response to the news, but it did not come. I began to get anxious. I had to know.

"Is that all right?"

"Well," Bella began hesitantly, "...sure, except for one thing."

"What thing?" Had I *completely* overstepped? Did Bella not *want* to spend a night with me? Was she having doubts about us? I held my breath.

“Why didn’t Alice tell Charlie you were leaving *tonight?*” she inquired.

I laughed in relief. *Whew!*

Everybody was already at the baseball field when Bella and I arrived. Jasper and Emmett were practicing in the clearing and Alice and Rosalie were lounging on the ground, watching. I could see that Emmett was improving, even though he preferred using brute force over cunning. Perhaps he could learn to combine Jasper’s intelligent techniques with his extraordinary strength to become an unbeatable foe.

Carlisle and Esme were having a close conversation with one another, their heads bent together and their fingers intertwined. Without trying to listen, I knew that they were praying...for our family, for the wolves, for the community, and for the newborns too, because the creatures didn’t know any better and were being misused. My parents are righteous people, good people, and ironically, more humane than most humans.

Only three of the werewolves were present on this night, sitting at different vantage points around the clearing. Jacob greeted me in an oblique manner.

The mind reader’s here! I would’ve said “bloodsucker,” but hey...

You mean they’re all bloodsuckers, right?

Duh, Quil.

I never said I wanted to come. I’d rather be at Claire’s house.

She’s a baby, for crissakes! She’s sleeping!

She wakes up sometimes and I like to make sure she’s okay.

What if she isn’t? What can you do about it?

I look in the window. Sometimes I howl until her mom wakes up.

Geez, Quil, you need to get a life.

I need both of you here. Sam didn’t want me to come alone. By the way, are you ready out there?

We're here. Paul, Leah, and Brady are running patrols in case the redhead or some other rogue vampire comes around. We don't want to be caught off guard. The rest of us are watching the practice.

We've separated ourselves around the field to get different perspectives on the moves they're doing.

Good. Just pay attention.

Bella and I approached the clearing, but stopped well back from it.

"Where are the rest of the wolves?" Bella asked.

"They don't all need to be here. One would do the job, but Sam didn't trust us enough to just send Jacob, though Jacob was willing. Quil and Embry are his usual...I guess you could call them his wingmen."

"Jacob trusts you."

I nodded. "He trusts us not to try to kill him. That's about it, though."

"Are you participating tonight?" Bella asked with what seemed like trepidation. I didn't know why she was still nervous. I wouldn't renege on my promise to her.

"I'll help Jasper when he needs it. He wants to try some unequal groupings, teach them how to deal with multiple attackers." I shrugged. It was the closest I'd get to the battle, unfortunately.

Bella looked toward the field without speaking. Why did I get the feeling that something was wrong here?

Hey, Bella!

I turned to where Jacob was resting on his haunches at the south end of the clearing. When I looked toward him, so did Bella. His large, pink tongue was hanging out the side of his mouth in a Goofy-the-cartoon-dog grin.

Bella had grown quiet, but attempted to return Jacob's grin. I could see her lips trembling, unable to maintain an upward lift. I wished that she had skipped this second training session. There was no reason for her to be present.

Jacob had risen and was trotting across the field.

"Jacob," I acknowledged when he reached us.

The wolf was focused on Bella. He lowered his eyes to her level and whined, his huge head cocked sideways. He wanted to know what was wrong.

"I'm fine," she said, not needing me to translate his question. "Just worried, you know."

That's really stupid. What is there to be worried about? Jacob asked as he stared at Bella.

"He wants to know why," I translated.

Jacob growled in annoyance. *That's not what I said mind reader! Or are you losing your touch?*

I was amused, but trying not to smile.

"What?" Bella wanted to know.

"He thinks my translations leave something to be desired," I explained. "What he actually thought was, 'That's really stupid. What is there to be worried about?'" I edited, because I thought it was rude."

Bella tried to smile again, but her lips twitched downward instead.

"There's plenty to be worried about," she said. "Like a bunch of really stupid wolves getting themselves hurt."

So *that* was what was distressing her. She'd removed me from danger and now she was worried about *him*. I should have realized that Jacob would be high on her list of those she wanted to protect. Not that she *could* protect him—especially from himself.

Jacob barked at Bella in derision. The wolves considered fighting vampires to be good fun.

Edward, we're starting. You and I against Emmett. Ready?

I sighed at my assigned role of blunt force attacker—no need to be quick, smart, or crafty, or to use my mind-reading capability. How boring! I also didn't like separating myself from Bella or leaving her with Jacob, though I had no justifiable reason for that. It was probably as Carlisle and Esme thought...I was feeling competitive and jealous. The latter emotion had no basis in fact that I knew of, but I'd discovered early on with Bella just how irrational a feeling jealousy could be.

"Jasper wants help," I told her. "You'll be okay without a translator?"

“I’ll manage.”

Contrary to my inclinations, I turned away from them and strode toward my brothers in the clearing. When I looked at Bella a short while later, she and Jacob were on the ground where I had left them, he with his head on his paws and Bella leaning against his huge, furry body.

How cozy! I thought irritably.

Alice, Rosalie, Carlisle and Esme were gathering around where Jasper and I began our first mock attack on Emmett when I heard Alice whisper to Rose.

“Edward is not happy about sitting out this battle. He’s going to be Mr. Grumpy-pants for weeks.”

“Hell, we never see him anyway. Let Bella deal with him,” Rosalie responded.

I suppose Alice was right. I *did* feel rather ill-tempered. I had to be sure not to let my bad mood make Bella feel guilty about asking me not to fight. I looked over at her again. It appeared that Jacob had abandoned his assigned task in order to keep Bella company at a distance from the clearing. She had told him she didn’t want to watch us fight. It must be making her nervous.

For his part, Jacob was looking forward to Friday and Saturday. On Friday, he would be alone with Bella while he carried her up Little Tahoma. On Saturday, he’d be killing vampires. All in all, he was feeling quite pleased with himself. I knew he was plotting to steal Bella away from me—he had openly admitted it. So far, we’d kept things civil, but I wasn’t sure how long that would last.

At the moment, I thought the advantage was mine, but I wasn’t assuming anything. The tide could turn. I was just glad that I would have all of Thursday night alone with Bella...for the first time. It was a chance for us to focus on each other and for me to play my trump card before Jacob had an opportunity to usurp me.

Yikes! While enacting my role as attacker, I had let Emmett sidestep me and (pretend to) cut me off at the knees. He *was* getting better. Jasper and I let him get his teeth to our necks when he performed cleverly and we put our teeth to his neck when he didn’t. There would be no scars on this night, but there was no such guarantee for Saturday.

After Emmett could reliably overcome Jasper and I playing newborns, Carlisle took us on. He easily maneuvered his way around the two of us and had us both under his teeth in no

time, one after the other. After Jasper, Carlisle was our best natural fighter, though he was always reluctant to use his skills.

“Good work, Carlisle. You’re well-prepared. Just remember to keep your arms close to your body. You could be in trouble if a newborn gets hold of one and rips it off.”

I saw Esme cringe, but Jasper was right. If any of us—any of my family, that is—lost a limb, he would be at an immediate disadvantage.

“You might want to emphasize that to everyone, Jaz,” I said. “What to do if one of us—you—loses a limb. The tendency would be to get distracted or become distraught and lose focus. We...everyone...should know the options.”

“Good point. How one reacts to injuries sustained by oneself or by comrades in battle can mean the difference between life and death. The first incident is the most dangerous. Eventually, you get used to casualties and no longer overreact.”

I was inordinately glad that Bella was not listening to this conversation. I had no doubt it would send her into an extreme panic. That was another good reason for keeping her away from the battle. She had never seen any of us take injuries, not even when James and Laurent were killed. It would surely be terrifying. Though we healed quickly—as did the wolves—we did not heal *instantly*. And if hurt badly enough, the wolves would not heal at all. Like humans, they could die in an infinite number of ways.

Jasper’s advice in case of injury was to back away and call for help. There weren’t so many enemy combatants that any one of us should need to fight without a limb (the most common vampire injury, after bites). Again, I corrected myself, “any one of *them*.” I would not be involved.

Rosalie was up next and she also needed little extra instruction. Jasper showed her how to center herself between two attackers and duck away at the last microsecond, using her hands to smash their heads together. The maneuver created enough time for severing one or both of their necks. Rosalie had a particular knack for aggression and cruelty, so I rarely worried about her in a confrontation.

There wasn’t much training to be done with Alice either. Even when Emmett joined us in the attack, she simply flitted around like Tinkerbell, dodging us all, and then took us out one by one. I lasted the longest because I found it difficult not to read her moves, but she got me soon enough. It was great fun for her and highly annoying for the rest of us.

We spent some extra time with Esme, practicing the previous night’s techniques and adding a couple new ones to her repertoire. Then Jasper signaled Carlisle to join us. He knew

that our father would keep half-an-eye on Esme the whole time, so we practiced a three-on-two combination with them. Esme was especially good at distracting an attacker, which allowed Carlisle to slip in for the kill. They made a good team.

Quil and Embry kept their eyes glued to our practice and now and then, one or the other would issue a sharp bark of surprise or approval. Observing through the pack mind from afar, Seth and Collin were beside themselves with excitement. Neither of them could control their mental chatter, though Sam cautioned them more than once.

Sam chastised Jacob for not performing his assigned task, but Jacob remained unmoved. He had decided that Quil and Embry could follow the training just fine by themselves while he pursued his own interests. When I glanced over at Bella a second time, she was running her hands through his long, red-brown coat starting from his neck and stroking his body as far down as she could reach, over and over. He was purring like an ecstatic feline and at any moment I half expected him to roll over for a tummy-rub. She seemed to have forgotten that a human male—one who was very much in love with her—lived inside that stuffed carpet. She was completely oblivious to the effect she was having on him. They don't call it "petting" for nothing!

I suppressed the urge to go over there and put an end to it, and just tried to ignore Jacob's thoughts. However, the next time I observed the two of them, he had his muzzle pressed to her thigh and she was nestled against his neck. Jacob's thoughts had descended into the realm of lewdness and vulgarity on their way down to pornography.

I had had enough...both of the fighting practice and of that *mutt* making moves on *my Bella!* He had duped her into giving him more physical contact than she ever would have allowed in his human form and he was lapping it up like the mongrel that he is! If I had hackles, they most certainly would have been raised.

With a terse, "That's it for me," I left the field and marched across the clearing to reclaim what was mine. The battle was ON! And I had no intention of losing to a dirty dog!

Perhaps Jacob had read *my* mind, or maybe he'd only had to read my face. I was *livid* and didn't bother to hide it. I know he heard my low-pitched growl—everyone except Bella had heard it. Even the wolves down in La Push and those out on patrol caught the gist of it. Sam ordered Jacob to return with Quil and Embry to the reservation, *immediately!*

Before he tears your head off... was the implication.

I felt all eyes on my back as I stomped to the edge of the clearing, seething with rage. Had Jacob forgotten that I could read his every thought? Actually, perhaps he had learned to

cloak some of them, because the one that set me off had come through the pack mind, not directly from Jacob's head. It had shocked them all.

Jacob had seen an opening and decided to take advantage of it. At first, he had settled down next to Bella partly as protection, but mostly to keep her company because she didn't want to get close to the practice. When she nudged him toward the clearing, he lay down beside her and refused to leave.

Fine, I'd thought. It was good of him to watch over her while I was otherwise engaged. But once Jacob realized that Bella had become comfortable with his wolf form, he'd had a loathsome idea (which he thought was clever, of course). Like any pet lover, Bella had begun to stroke the hairy beast beside her, which no doubt calmed and soothed her nerves. Jacob, though, had to milk it for all it was worth and he wasn't accepting it in the manner in which I was sure she intended it. His fantasy machine started churning, getting viler as our practice session wore on ...

Ooooh, she's touching my head, my neck... Rub my ears...yeah...like that... Ahhh...down my back, baby...more, more...reach a little further...haunches! Ahhh... If I roll on my side would she scratch my belly? Oh, yeah. Here, over here! Crawl on over and lie down on me. That's the way! Come to Jake, baby. I'm very warm and comfortable... hot, actually, if I do say so myself. Yeah, stroke me there! Yeahhhh...fingernails! Bella's got to stop chewing them so short. Ahhh...I hope the bloodsuckers practice all night. Mmm hmm. What if I scooch over this way and put my head right there, against her leg...will she mind that? No, guess not! Smells pretty good down here! Heh, heh, heh...maybe I can sneak my snout up her shirt! I bet she'd just laugh. Too bad she never wears a SKIRT! I'd poke my nose right UP that baby! Bet she'd like that! A little tongue action...

That's when I growled. Jacob turned his head and saw me coming, nudged Bella off, got up and trotted away, trying to pretend that he wasn't in a hurry to get the *hell out of there!* DAMN STRAIGHT!

I'm not sure what I would have done if he'd stood up and challenged me. Most of the time my self-control is pretty sound. Normally, I can make a choice whether or not to act on my impulses. I'm not so sure I could have this time. At the very least, I would have taken a swing at him. He'd have been out of commission for days...if he was lucky. Actually, I'm glad he ran off and took his buddies with him, so Bella didn't have to see me lose my temper. I couldn't have explained it, because I would *never* stoop to repeating his vile thoughts. *Grrrrr...*

Bella had been facing away from the clearing and from my approach. If she noticed my anger, she didn't say so. If anything, she probably thought I was upset about missing the battle and she was busy blaming herself for that. I couldn't speak. I just took her hand, lifted her from

the ground, and shuffled her onto my back. Then I ran to Charlie's house as fast as I could go. Fortunately, my sister—the psychic—foresaw my need to escape and met us there.

Going for a run?

I looked out Bella's window and saw Alice standing across the street among some trees. I nodded at her.

"Bella, Alice is outside," I said. "She's going to watch over you and Charlie while I go for a quick hunt."

"You're leaving?" she asked in alarm.

"Just for a few hours. Try to sleep and I'll be here when you wake up."

She stared at me. "Is something wrong?"

I sat down next to her on the bed and tried to soften my expression.

"No nothing, darling. I just need to hunt." I cradled her face in my hands and pulled her lips to meet mine. As a distraction technique, it worked well most of the time—for both of us.

"Are you awake enough to change into your nightclothes or do you want to sleep in your jeans again?"

"Will you wait?"

"I'll stay until you're asleep if you prefer."

Bella touched my hand and then got up and headed to the bathroom with her sweats and toiletry kit. She wasn't gone long.

"Alice is here?"

"Yes, outside."

"Go on then." She looked at the clock and saw that it was 3:00 a.m. "You don't have that much time before dawn."

I pulled her into my arms and held her. I might have felt a little cold to her in the emotional sense, but she didn't ask about it. She hadn't heard Jacob's thoughts or seen his intentions, so she couldn't have known what was really troubling me. I preferred to keep it that way.

"Goodbye, my love. See you soon."

I gave her another quick kiss and then dove through the window. I hit the ground running.

“Thanks, Alice,” I whispered into the night.

Sure thing, she replied.

I ran east into the Olympic National Forest. I didn’t really need to hunt, as Bella well knew, and I was glad she hadn’t questioned me about it. I especially didn’t need to hunt if I wasn’t going to fight, but I *did* need to run. I sprinted through the trees and then up into the Olympic Mountains. When I happened upon some mule deer, I took the opportunity to drink one. Couldn’t hurt.

As I ran, I forced Jacob Black to the back of my mind and focused on my plan for Thursday. I was quite excited for Bella and myself to have a night alone to celebrate each other. I planned to give her a charm for her bracelet, which she’d already agreed to accept. Of course, I wouldn’t reveal *everything* about it. To her, it would be a pretty bauble to stand in for me, something to balance against... Well, I wasn’t going to think about *that* at the moment. I would be happy if Bella just wore the glittering heart on her wrist as a symbol of my love...a promise charm, if you will.

If things went well, I hoped I might give Bella my second gift too. It would be especially gratifying if she had it to show off on Friday before the battle, but that wasn’t really the point. I just wanted her to say “yes.” I wanted a “yes.” Nothing else mattered in comparison to that. As far as the gift itself, Bella had agreed, in theory, to accept recycled presents. Whether one called them hand-me-downs or family heirlooms was just a question of semantics.

The faster and further I ran, the more my anger dropped away. Whipping through the trees like an Ewok felt good...restorative. After crossing Hurricane Ridge with its June snowcap, I descended the Olympic Mountain range and saw the waters of Puget Sound sparkling under a gibbous moon. In the distance, city lights gleamed against the night...Bellingham, Everett, Seattle. We were fortunate to live in such beautiful country. It would be pleasant to remain here, to settle down, plant some roots. Planting roots was a luxury for the likes of us, though.

As I turned around to cut back across the peninsula toward home, I considered the fact that Jacob was ready to pull out all the stops in his fight for Bella’s heart. He had recognized tonight—as had I—that we were already into the end game. It was time to take stock of our separate arsenals and choose our final gambits.

Jacob had certain advantages that he was now fully prepared to exploit. Perhaps it was his boldness in that decision that had made me so irate. His physical presence— whether as a

wolf or a man—was overwhelming. He was a beautiful human, even I could see that, and he had all his God-given gifts that make a human male the right match for a human female—his beating heart, his warm-blooded body, his future with its natural arc, and last, but not least, his ability to procreate, to be bound to a partner by a shared legacy. It was a lot to overcome.

Perhaps wisely, as the underdog (pun intended), Jacob had decided to approach Bella through her weakest point of resistance...her hormones. He believed that she loved him and that if he could induce her to give herself to him physically, she would discover that truth for herself. For all I knew, he could be right. If so, then their physical closeness, like that of earlier in the evening, was a threat to me.

Of course, Jacob's thoughts were repugnant enough to justify my wrath and—even though Carlisle reminds me periodically that a man can't help his thoughts—I'll be damned if I stand by and listen to him disrespect my one and only love. If she would declare herself as mine definitively, then I'd have every right, an obligation even, to pound his face in. That would be satisfying.

But back to the end game...I have a couple advantages on my side too. Bella knows that she loves me and I know that she desires me. No convincing or coercion necessary. Perhaps I would be wise to borrow a page from Jacob's game book and entice her into matrimony with the oldest lure known to man. Granted, the whole idea is *backwards*, but that is the situation in which I find myself in the twenty-first century.

Not that seducing Bella into marriage would require any kind of sacrifice on my part. I'd just have to watch myself. Containing my desires within the bounds of what is safe for Bella, or *right*, for that matter, had become increasingly difficult. I don't have human hormones, but *something* was pushing me quite forcefully to act on the instinct of procreation, whether or not it could ever be fruitful.

The previous night had proved to me that I was wading into dangerous waters. If Bella had awakened and responded to me in kind—not to put too fine a point on it—she could be dead now. Given that, surely it is wrong to tempt her with what I can never fully give, at least while she is human. Could I satisfy her with a touch, as Jacob imagines himself doing? Would that be enough for her? Somehow I doubted it. I also doubted whether I was strong enough to restrain my own passion if we ever became that intimate.

Even if I were able, though, that wasn't precisely the point. Though comically reversed for Bella and me, as usual, the old saw asks, "Why would she buy the cow if she can get the milk for free?" Such values are deeply ingrained. I don't want to draw an arbitrary line in the hierarchy of sex acts that proclaims those below it to be morally wrong for unmarried people

and those above it not. I posit that two people *know* when lovemaking occurs, whether they admit it to themselves or not.

At that moment, a very disturbing thought came to me. A virginal woman normally undergoes a tearing of her interior flesh upon consummation of her marital bond. But vampire flesh wounds don't heal, they *mend*. A vampire's detached limb will reconnect itself to its stump *exactly* as it was before, and quickly. So what happens to a human virgin when she becomes a vampire? Must she suffer the tearing of her inner flesh every time she engages in sexual congress...forever? It stands to reason. Our torn flesh *mends*.

I shuddered to imagine the force required to break through the hymen of a vampire. It must be torture! And for that to be required every time she made love...well...it was unthinkable. Of the vampire women I knew...Esme had borne a child; Rosalie had been assaulted; Tanya seemed to have no problems—had she been part of a harem in her day? What about Alice? I had never heard any thoughts from her or Jasper indicating that they had to cope with such a difficulty. If not, though, then...

With deep sadness, I realized that Alice—dear, beloved Alice—must have been sexually assaulted as a child. Just the thought of it was ghastly, even if she never remembered the act. But I could be completely wrong. I mustn't jump to conclusions.

I wonder if any of this had occurred to Bella. I thought not. Of course, she had made it clear on any number of occasions that she was ready to lose her virginity to me. I daren't bring my revelation to her attention until I'd thought it through completely. It would only give her more reason to risk her safety. I would ask Carlisle about it at the first opportunity. If Bella and I were destined to be together, and if my suppositions were correct, then it is imperative that Bella should lose her virginity *while she is human!*

My breath quickened instantly, imagining the prospect of making love to Bella as she is now, then left me altogether when I remembered how impossibly dangerous that would be. What alternatives were there then?

The obvious one was for Bella to make love with a *human*. I had no doubt how that scenario would play out. Bella had once told me that she'd never desired a man until she loved me, so I thought it was safe to assume that should she ever make love, she would be *in love*. I only knew one human who might fulfill that requirement.

Surgery or its equivalent was a possibility, though I didn't know how Bella would feel about that. If I were a woman—a *human* woman, a huge stretch, of course—I imagine I would want the first person who touched me there to be someone I truly wanted. Not a clinician. Carlisle could do it, but well...*hmm*.

I didn't know the answer, but one thing I knew for certain...I wanted Bella to marry me before she was changed. It's what, for other reasons, I'd bargained for when I offered to change her myself. The truth was that she simply *mustn't* be changed before relinquishing her virginity. Carlisle had thought of this, surely! But if so, he'd never considered it in my presence.

Regardless, it would seem that in order to get what my heart truly desired I must accomplish two things: I must secure Bella's hand in marriage while she is human, and following that, I must exercise enough self-control to make love with my human wife without killing her. The revelation filled me with great joy—and terrible dread.

17. Options

“Can we take a walk?” I asked my father.

“Certainly, son.” *You have something on your mind?*

I nodded. He knew me well.

I’d returned from my run across the Olympic Peninsula just before dawn and headed in the direction of Charlie’s house until I heard Alice thinking, *Go on then, but hurry back, please. I have a date.*

She was kidding, more or less. The family would leave on their hunting trip soon, but they would wait until Carlisle got back, so Alice wasn’t really in a hurry. She would continue watching Bella’s house while I went home to talk to my father.

So what’s going on? Carlisle asked as we jumped the river and ran into the forest behind our house. I wanted to get a few miles away from sensitive ears before I brought up the subject.

“It’s a little awkward,” I began, speaking too softly for the sound to reach home.

Carlisle didn’t answer, just kept on my heels and waited for me to explain. When I deemed we were far enough from our house, I slowed down to a walk and he followed suit.

“Mom’s probably told you that Bella and I made a bargain about her change. After we returned from Italy, you know.” I looked at him.

You agreed to change Bella yourself if she would marry you first, right?

“Right.”

“So, she’s accepted you then?” Carlisle asked aloud, a note of excitement in his voice.

“No, not exactly. I’m rather hoping that she will soon, but marriage is not high on Bella’s list of things to do before she turns twenty,” I said ruefully.

Carlisle chuckled. *No, I suppose not. Times have changed.*

“Here’s the thing, Dad. While I’m hoping that Bella will let me change her under our agreed-upon terms, I don’t know that she will. She might come to you to avoid the disrepute of

marrying at age eighteen.” I grimaced, knowing it was too true. “I have reason to be concerned about your changing her, though, in case she decides to ask you.”

I’ve given her my word, Edward.

“Yes, I know, but if I’m right about this, I don’t think she will go ahead with it if she receives what one might call ‘full disclosure.’ Anyway, she *can’t* do it. She just...well... she cannot.”

You realize, of course, that I will not go back on my word without an extremely good reason to do so. And by ‘extremely,’ I mean life–threatening.

“What about *happiness*–threatening? Would that qualify?”

Why don’t you just tell me what’s troubling you and we’ll go from there?

“Well...” I began. My hesitancy was not due to shyness—my father and I had discussed all manner of difficult topics in the past, though this one was more delicate than most. Mostly, I was reluctant to disclose personal information about my beloved without her explicit permission, but I needed some answers first and Carlisle was much too smart not to put two and two together. Also, frankly, I was afraid that Carlisle would confirm my conclusions.

Yes?

“You might not be aware that Bella is...” I hesitated again, but I knew that pretending this was a hypothetical discussion would be ridiculous.

“Expecting?” Carlisle inquired pointedly.

I whipped my head around and stared at him in shock. The expression on my face must have been amusing, because he chuckled softly.

“No! What are you talking about? Why would you *say* that?” Wild, irrational thoughts of Bella and Jacob raced through my head.

It’s an old doctor’s trick. Whatever is troubling you pales in comparison, am I right?

I smiled in spite of myself. “Yes, I suppose it does. Bella is a virgin, Dad.” I listened for his thoughts, trying to catch his first reaction before he could block it from me. Apparently, he didn’t think the news was ominous, because he didn’t bother to block his thoughts. He merely began reflecting on the topic in general.

To be honest, I can’t say it didn’t occur to me that such might be the case, though it’s not as common as it used to be. His thoughts wandered off from there.

I grew impatient when he didn't address the question until I realized that I had failed to ask it. I took a deep breath and tried again.

"What happens if we marry *after* she is changed?"

Ah, yes. With regard to marital relations, you mean?

"Exactly."

Well, it is much as you might expect. It is less than ideal.

"You see the problem, then."

Of course.

"And?"

And what?

"What can I *do* about it?" I demanded, impatience getting the better of me.

First of all, don't panic, son. Remember, I can't read your mind.

"I know. I'm sorry. But you can't change her, don't you see?"

Carlisle raised his hand to his chin and became thoughtful again.

You're right...not without advising her of the difficulties it might present and discussing her options, no.

"But there AREN'T any options!" I shouted, surprising even myself with the emotional outburst. I dropped my head and gripped my skull with my hands.

Carlisle waited patiently for me to calm down.

Edward, can you tell me what's wrong?

I looked up and glared for a moment before my face collapsed, my eyes began to burn, and my breath caught in my throat. I stared at my feet as I cast about for words.

"I want to be her first—her only, really—but it's impossible! She would have to be human and I don't...I *can't*...risk her life. And Jacob's just waiting in the wings...and..." Even to me, the explanation sounded ludicrous.

Carlisle wrapped his arms around me and hugged me to his chest.

"I'm sorry...I don't know what to do," I moaned. "I wish I could be human for her."

My father remained silent and waited for me to pull myself together. Eventually, I raised my face to his. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes, which still burned.

Well, son, as a physician, I can't recommend that you take any action that would endanger Bella's life, but she has other choices. She needs to be informed so that she can make up her own mind.

"Do you mean like surgery?"

That's one option, yes, but there's also the possibility that Bella wouldn't require it. Human women are all different and some never experience tearing of any kind.

"No?"

A small percentage of women are open from birth. Even if they aren't, many effect the alteration on their own, sometimes without even knowing it.

"What do you mean?"

By accident during unusual physical exercise, by the use of internal feminine products, or by internal masturbation. You're aware of the human practice of masturbation, I assume?

"Vaguely."

Odds are that you've experienced it yourself, but have no memory of it. The doctors' joke is that 99% of human males masturbate and 1% lie. Most physicians believe the percentage for human females is less than that, but still high.

"So you're saying that she might already have torn herself?"

Or stretched. Not all women tear. A pelvic exam will tell her what she needs to know. If she's still intact, she can have a simple procedure done or she can alter herself, depending on her anatomy.

"Oh, I didn't realize."

Carlisle chuckled. *Men rarely do. Women are rather mysterious to us, by and large.*

"I guess you're right." I found myself smiling faintly. "She doesn't have to make love with a human, then."

No, and why would she? She loves you. So, there's nothing to worry about. Once Bella is made aware, she can decide for herself what she wants to do.

I exhaled heavily. "I guess I overreacted."

It's understandable. Being in love can turn us upside-down sometimes. But Bella loves you too. Don't forget that and you'll be fine.

"That means that Alice wasn't necessarily raped as a child," I said, more to myself than anything.

He looked shocked. "What made you think of that?"

"Well, being locked up in that place like she was and then being changed immediately upon her release, and then meeting Jasper a few decades later. I've never heard either of them think about this problem."

I see what you mean. The old asylums could be brutal places with patients having no recourse at all. If that did happen, I'm glad she can't remember it. Possibly, the thought has never occurred to her.

"I hope she didn't see us having this conversation."

Me too. He paused for a moment, thinking, *poor Alice*, just as I had done. She would hate our pity, though.

I should probably get back, not to keep everyone waiting, Carlisle thought.

"I'll go to Bella's and send Alice home."

"I love you, son. I'm always here."

"I know. I love you too, Dad. You save my life constantly."

As you have mine from the beginning.

18. Bargaining

“Darling, let me take that out for you...if you’re finished with it, that is.” Bella was zipping shut the duffle bag containing the things she needed for her two–day, two–night sojourn from her father’s house.

I was excited or nervous or both, though no longer about the issue that had panicked me earlier in the day. After my frank conversation with my father, the pressure I’d been feeling to be superhuman in ways that went beyond the natural abilities of my species had lessened, and with it, much of the animus I’d been harboring toward Jacob Black since our meeting at the clearing.

In truth, the dog’s amorous scheming with regard to *my* Bella was little more than hubris. His actions had not been offensive to anyone else who witnessed them, least of all Bella. I’d been responding to the testosterone–fueled fantasies of a teenage boy, which weren’t so far removed from thoughts I’d heard about Bella at the graduation party or, indeed, things I might have thought myself once or twice.

What troubled me most was that Jacob is bolder than everybody else in going after what he wants, and he’s much closer to Bella’s heart than her other admirers, in spite of the ill–considered kiss he recently had forced on her. And tomorrow he would be carrying Bella for several hours next to his nearly naked, *human* body. Emotions would be running high and with her raging hormones and my continued resistance to dangerous physical contact, who knew what Jacob Black might lead her to feel?

Tonight was my chance to supplant whatever tricks Jacob was planning for the morrow. We both knew how vulnerable Bella felt with the newborn army on its way, but the difference between Jacob and myself is that he’d have no qualms about taking advantage of Bella’s distress. If she gave him any kind of a “yes,” he would gladly pressure her for another and another. I didn’t want to allow him even the slimmest opportunity to push himself forward in our personal battle for Bella’s heart. If I succeeded with *my* night’s plans, I felt confident that Jacob’s schemes would be rendered ineffective. I wanted him out of the picture. I knew Bella loved me, but at the moment I didn’t feel entirely secure that she loved *only* me.

With my family gone hunting and Charlie at work, Bella and I had spent the day together. We delivered Saturday concert tickets that Bella had intended for Alice and me to Angela Weber and Mike Newton, who were taking their dates Ben Cheney and Jessica Stanley.

It eased Bella's mind to know that her closest friends would be out of town when the newborns arrived.

I listened to Bella's side of a phone conversation with Jacob when she called to verify Billy's plans for Charlie on Saturday. Billy said he'd take Charlie ocean-fishing first, and then they'd watch the NBA finals at Billy's house, even though the Seattle Sonics weren't playing. After Bella had completed these arrangements for the people she most wanted to protect from the newborns, I made her a sandwich and asked her for a favor.

"For this one night, could we try to forget everything besides just you and me?" I asked, gazing into her eyes. "It seems like I can never get enough time like that. I need to be with you. Just you."

Bella had promised readily enough, though I knew that putting aside her worries about the upcoming battle would be difficult. The last thing I wanted on our night together, though, was for her to fret about what promised to be little more than a skirmish, and a brief one at that. If I was to succeed with my plans, I needed Bella to be thinking of our future together.

I hung out in the woods when Charlie came home from work, since he'd been told I was on a backpacking trip. I kept watch over his house from a distance while Bella fixed dinner for her father and cleaned up afterwards.

"I guess I'll go now, Dad," I heard her say. "Alice said 'after dinner.'"

"You want to call her first to tell her you're on your way?"

"I could, but it won't be a surprise or anything."

I smiled at that. It was an ironic thing to say, since if Alice were home, she would know exactly when Bella was coming. Actually, the caveat was unnecessary— Alice would know anyway, even from Oregon where the family had gone to hunt.

The phone in my pocket vibrated and I answered, still smiling.

"Hi Alice," Bella said. She must have turned toward the kitchen wall so that Charlie couldn't see her face. She was such a bad liar that, otherwise, he'd surely know she was faking the phone call. As a vampire, it was something she would have to improve on.

"I'm getting ready to leave. I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"I'll meet you around the corner," I replied softly. "See you soon."

“See you,” Bella replied a bit too cheerily. Probably, she was worried that Charlie would guess Alice wasn’t home, which made her overcompensate. Her face was undoubtedly bright red. She’d be at the kitchen sink about now, pretending to wash her hands or drink some water until the color faded.

I chuckled, remembering what a mystery Bella had been to me in those first days at Forks High School, especially after I threw myself in the path of Tyler’s van just before it would have crushed her to death. What Jasper, Rosalie, and Emmett believed had been a murder-worthy mistake on my part, had turned into love, previously unimaginable physical desire, and soon, I hoped, a legal bond.

I heard Bella start her decrepit Chevrolet pickup (as did everyone within a five-mile radius) and pull away from her house. Half a block after she turned the corner, I opened the passenger-side door and hopped in with her.

“Would you like me to drive us?” I inquired.

“No, I’ll drive,” Bella replied. She glanced at me from the corners of her eyes and then focused them back on the road. She was a careful driver, but I also sensed that she wasn’t yet ready to begin our evening. She’d promised to let go of everything else but the two of us for the night. Perhaps she needed a bit of transition time. For once, I wasn’t impatient with Bella’s inordinately slow pace. I was with my love and there was nowhere else I’d rather be.

When Bella turned onto Cullen property and maneuvered her truck through the twists and curves of our driveway, I saw that Alice had turned on all the lights in the house to welcome us home. It was a nice touch to see the house gleaming in the dark meadow. There had still been some light in the sky when we drove down the highway, but in the forest, we were in darkness.

Pulling up to the house, Bella stopped the truck and I dashed out to open her door. Joyfully, I hooked my arm around her waist and lifted her to my chest, slinging her duffle bag over my shoulder and kicking the driver’s door shut at the same time. I kissed her eagerly as I carried her toward the front door, flicked the door latch, nudged the door open, and crossed the threshold. The symbolism was intentional.

The longer our lips remained locked together, the less I wanted to stop kissing her—out of love, joy, and passion equally. Bella responded unreservedly and we carried on like that for a while. We were the only two creatures in the world at that moment—mortal and immortal together— in love and alone. This was the woman I hoped to take as my bride. How I adored her!

When I separated her lips from mine—the memory of her once fainting during a kiss never far from my mind—my breath was rapid and uneven and Bella was gasping for air.

“Welcome home,” I said, chuckling.

“That sounds nice,” she stuttered between breaths.

I set her on her feet and she hugged herself tightly to me. Now seemed like a good time for my opening gift-giving salvo.

“I have something for you,” I said casually.

“Oh?”

“Your hand-me-down, remember? You said that was allowable.”

“Oh, that’s right. I guess I did say that.” It was a slightly less-than-euphoric response.

I chuckled. “It’s up in my room. Shall I go get it?”

“Sure,” Bella agreed, seizing my hand. “Let’s go.”

Even better! Now *there* was some of the enthusiasm I’d been hoping for. I couldn’t help myself in my excitement...I gathered her into my arms and raced up the first flight of stairs, down the hallway, and up the second flight of stairs to my third-floor bedroom. I set her down outside the door and dashed to the already-open fire safe in my closet, snatching up the precious charm.

As I returned to Bella, she stepped past me toward the bed to sit down and I wondered momentarily if *she* was worried about fainting. She positioned herself in the center of the mattress in what one might consider a defensive position with her knees pulled to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. If she did pass out, she would roll to a soft landing.

“Okay,” Bella said grudgingly. “Let me have it.”

Laughing at her reluctant assent, I joined her on the bed and noticed that her heart stuttered and sped up. How could someone be so anxious about a simple gift?

“A hand-me-down,” I reiterated, highlighting the lowly nature of the trinket.

I pulled her hand from her leg and linked the 12-caret, heart-shaped diamond to her new silver bracelet. It sparkled and gleamed in the light of the bedside lamp. Bella gulped.

“It was my mother’s.” I shrugged at its inconsequence. “I inherited quite a few baubles like this. I’ve given some to Esme and Alice both. So, clearly, this is not a big deal in any way.”

Bella smiled sympathetically at the mention of my long-dead mother, Elizabeth Masen.

“But I thought it was a good representation. It’s hard and cold.” I laughed. “And it throws rainbows in the sunlight.”

“You forgot the most important similarity,” Bella said softly as she rotated her wrist under the light. “It’s beautiful.”

“My heart is just as silent,” I murmured. “And it, too, is yours.”

“Thank you. For both.” Bella looked up.

“No, thank you. It’s a relief to have you accept a gift so easily. Good practice for you, too.” I grinned, hinting at future gifts.

Rather than object as I would have expected, Bella burrowed under my arm and snuggled against my side, showing no signs of complaining about being given a present. That was unprecedented. I was thrilled!

Looking down at her hands, Bella spoke.

“Can we discuss something? I’d appreciate it if you could begin by being open-minded.”

So...she was assuming that I would disagree with whatever it was she wished to talk about. But I wanted Bella to feel free to tell me what she thought and how she felt about everything.

“I’ll give it my best effort,” I promised.

“I’m not breaking any rules here. This is strictly about you and me.” That was good. I’d been hoping to ignore the following day’s events for one night.

Bella cleared her throat nervously.

“So...I was impressed by how well we were able to compromise the other night. I was thinking I would like to apply the same principle to a different situation.”

Bella’s awkwardness began to amuse me, in spite of my mild tension over whatever this obviously difficult topic was. She was behaving just as I had when I’d spoken to Carlisle about *her*.

“What would you like to negotiate?” I asked solicitously.

Bella went quiet and my tension began to mount. Damn! How much easier everything would be if I could just read her mind! A loud, fast thumping sound filled the room.

“Listen to your heart fly. It’s fluttering like a hummingbird’s wings. Are you all right?”

“I’m great.”

“Please go on then.”

“Well, I guess, first, I wanted to talk to you about that whole ridiculous marriage condition thing.”

So much for being open-minded. “It’s only ridiculous to you,” I pointed out. “What about it?”

“I was wondering...is that open to negotiation?”

My heart sank. If she was trying to dodge my one condition for changing her, then I saw little chance of getting the yes I’d hoped for tonight. I frowned in disappointment.

“I’ve already made the largest concession by far and away—I’ve agreed to take your life away against my better judgment. And that ought to entitle me to a few compromises on your part.”

“No,” Bella replied. I tensed before she hurried to explain. “That part’s a done deal. We’re not discussing my...renovations right now. I want to hammer out some other details.” My interest was piqued, but anything that required this much buildup couldn’t be good.

“Which details do you mean exactly?” I began martialing counter-conditions in my head just on principle.

Bella avoided the question. “Let’s clarify your prerequisites first.”

“You know what I want.”

“Matrimony,” Bella said with a sneer.

“Yes,” I agreed, then proceeded to load my side of the scales to gain some negotiating room. “To start with.” The comment unsettled her, putting her at an immediate disadvantage in the as-yet-unspecified negotiation.

“There’s more?” she asked in alarm.

“Well,” I said, thinking fast. Obviously, she was going to ask for something she *really* wanted. It was only smart that I try to get as much as possible in trade. What *I* really wanted, after marriage, was for her to share my material abundance, so I made my case for it. “If you’re

my wife, then what's mine is yours...like tuition money. So there would be no problem with Dartmouth."

"Anything else? While you're already being absurd?"

"I wouldn't mind some time," I told her, revisiting the condition I'd mostly given up on. I still thought it would be best for her to remain human as long as possible, though.

"No. No time. That's a deal breaker right there."

I sighed at her intransigence, though I'd expected it.

"Just a year or two?"

Bella declined with a vehement shake of her head.

"Move along to the next one."

"That's it. Unless you'd like to talk cars..." I smiled at Bella's discomfiture, but I knew she was deeply serious about whatever it was she was so nervous to talk about. I took her left hand, touching her ring finger with longing.

"I didn't realize there was anything else you wanted besides being transformed into a monster yourself. I'm extremely curious." My voice was soft and gentle, though I was anything but calm. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking.

Bella kept her head down and avoided my eyes, but I saw the blood rush into her face. I touched a flushed cheek in surprise.

"You're blushing?" She still didn't look up. "Please, Bella, the suspense is painful."

Bella bit her lip. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Bella," I pressed.

"Well, I'm a little worried...about after," she finally admitted, though that told me nothing in particular. Still, it was a hint—one that made me uneasy.

I kept my voice gentle. "What has you worried?"

"All of you just seem so convinced that the only thing I'm going to be interested in, afterward, is slaughtering everyone in town," Bella declared, a harsh reminder of our true nature. "And I'm afraid I'll be so preoccupied with the mayhem that I won't be me anymore...and that I won't...I won't want you the same way I do now."

“Bella, that part doesn’t last forever,” I promised.

“Edward,” Bella said with her eyes downcast, “There’s something that I want to do before I’m not human anymore.”

Good. *Great!* I was pleased that Bella had been thinking more about her humanity. I waited for her to reveal the “something,” but she didn’t.

“Whatever you want,” I prompted.

“Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

I had no idea what could be so difficult to say out loud. It’s not like she was asking for a kidney or Rosalie’s first-born son or something. “Tell me what you want, and you can have it.”

Bella’s face remained a beautiful pink color as she spoke a single word under her breath—“You.”

Had she changed her mind about matrimony?

“I’m yours,” I replied happily.

Bella averted her eyes when I tried to read them, but then she kneeled beside me and wrapped her arms around my neck. She kissed me hesitantly and I was more than willing to return the affection, though I still didn’t understand.

Should I propose to her now? But no, she’d said she wanted to negotiate the “marriage” condition, and then she’d said she wanted to do something before she was changed. None of it made any sense. Then I felt Bella’s hands slide down my neck toward my chest. Her fingers clumsily began to unfasten the buttons on my shirt. She’d released two of them before the truth hit me.

Oh! Oh my gawd...she wanted ME! Today! Now! I froze as a sudden, cold terror gripped my loins and stoppered my breath. I felt a sickening sensation in my stomach.

With our physical desire for one another increasing daily, I don’t know why I had been so *thick*. I suppose I rely on my mind-reading ability so much that my powers of perception without it are a bit weak, especially where my unpredictable Bella is concerned. In my variation of innocence, I’d been focused on procuring the promise of a wedding, while my true love wanted to skip right to the wedding night. In fact, she had no interest in the wedding at all.

“Be reasonable, Bella.” I pushed her away somewhat harshly, fear causing me to overreact.

“You promised—whatever I wanted,” Bella objected.

I couldn’t admit the truth—that I wanted her too, that I’d been thinking about it and all the ramifications of it almost non-stop for the past twenty-four hours. But now my father’s words were ringing in my ears: *...I can’t recommend that you take any action that would endanger Bella’s life....*

His warning had been a relief in a way, a comfortable solution. Since Bella didn’t *need* to lose her virginity with me before she was changed, there was simply no reason to risk hurting her. Waiting until she was absolutely safe eliminated my fear of making a fatal mistake. Conveniently enough, it also abolished the gray area between right and wrong, and the danger zone between possible and not possible.

“We’re not having this discussion,” I said with the strength of my new conviction.

Bella’s face became hard. “I say we are.”

She knew she couldn’t undress me against my will, so her fingers moved instead to the buttons on her own shirt, successfully disengaging the top two before I could react. I grabbed her wrists and pulled them away from the buttons and pinned them to her sides. In spite of myself, I couldn’t keep my eyes from surveying the smooth ivory skin she’d exposed above her breasts.

“I say we’re not,” I repeated with no inflection at all.

Bella scowled at me and I scowled back. Her heartbeat was pounding out an agitated rhythm that I felt in my body too. She was angry; I was aroused.

“You wanted to know,” Bella grumbled.

“I thought it would be something faintly realistic.”

“So you can ask for any stupid, ridiculous thing you want—like getting married—but I’m not allowed to even discuss what I—”

“No.” Somebody in this room had to keep her safe. I took Bella’s wrists in one hand and covered her mouth with the other—mostly a symbolic gesture. I did not trust myself to argue with her. It wasn’t an unreasonable request—to make love with the one you loved. It was just too much responsibility, too much risk.

Bella went silent, but the pink color rose up her neck into her cheeks and she refused to look at me. I lifted her chin with my hand so I could see her eyes. She resisted and I exhaled irritably.

“What now?”

“Nothing.” Bella tried to turn away. Then I saw the dampness beginning to collect in her eyes.

“Did I hurt your feelings?” I asked in astonishment.

“No,” Bella mumbled, but I could see otherwise.

I was mortified! I hurriedly scooped her into my arms and held her against my chest, cradling her face. I stroked her cheek with my thumb in an attempt to soften the affront. That wasn't what I'd meant at all!

“You know why I have to say no. You know that I want you, too.”

“Do you?” Bella whispered and I recognized insecurity in her tone. How had I managed to make her feel undesirable? That was crazy!

“Of course I do, you silly, beautiful, oversensitive girl.” I chuckled without mirth, remembering graduation night. “Doesn't everyone? I feel like there's a line behind me, jockeying for position, waiting for me to make a big enough mistake.... You're too desirable for your own good.” And I felt certain that she could have what she desired with any one of them. It was only me who couldn't give that to her. Sadness swept through me.

“Who's being silly now?” Bella asked.

“Do I have to send a petition around to get you to believe? Shall I tell you whose names would be on the top of the list? You know a few of them, but some might surprise you.” She was completely blind to the effect she had on young men...and on older ones too, and yet it was so obvious to me.

“You're just trying to distract me,” Bella accused. “Let's get back to the subject.”

I sighed.

“Tell me if I have anything wrong. Your demands are marriage,”—Bella grimaced—“paying my tuition, more time, and you wouldn't mind if my vehicle went a little faster. Did I get everything? That's a hefty list.”

She really was going to bargain against her own welfare. It might be amusing if it weren't deadly serious. Still, she was adorable when she got so determined—and she was persuasive too. I mustn't forget that.

"Only the first is a demand," I clarified, that being the one thing precious enough to overcome my aversion to stealing her humanity. "The others are merely requests."

"And my lone, solitary little demand is—"

"Demand?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, demand. Getting married is a stretch for me. I'm not giving in unless I get something in return."

Could she be saying that making love with me now was the one thing valuable enough to overcome *her* aversion to marriage? She couldn't wait a few more months in order to keep herself safe and whole? It couldn't be.

I leaned over and whispered softly into her ear. "No. It's not possible now. Later, when you're less breakable. Be patient, Bella," I implored.

"But that's the problem. It won't be the same when I'm less breakable. I won't be the same! I don't know who I'll be then."

"You'll still be Bella," I said, attempting to reassure. The truth was that I had no memory of who I was before my change and, except for Rosalie, I'd not known my parents or siblings before they were changed. It's just what we all believed. If we had been vastly different before, then we couldn't know it anyway, since our memories didn't survive the change well.

Bella frowned. "If I'm so far gone that I'd want to kill Charlie—that I'd drink Jacob's blood or Angela's if I got the chance—how can that be true?"

"It will pass. And I doubt you'll want to drink the dog's blood," I teased. "Even as a newborn, you'll have better taste than that." I grinned, trying to derail her from this unproductive conversation.

She ignored the attempt. "But that will always be what I want most, won't it? Blood, blood, and more blood!"

"The fact that you are still alive is proof that that is not true," I said righteously.

“Over eighty years later,” she countered. “What I meant was physically, though. Intellectually, I know I’ll be able to be myself...after a while. But just purely physically—I will always be thirsty, more than anything else.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t be sure that my words would ring with conviction. It wasn’t true for me anymore. My desire for Bella easily rivaled my thirst now. But I hadn’t known her when I was a newborn. Emmett or Esme could answer that question better than me. It was difficult to argue with less than full information.

“So I *will* be different,” she continued at my silence. “Because right now, physically, there’s nothing I want more than you. More than food or water or oxygen. Intellectually, I have my priorities in a slightly more sensible order. But physically...”

Bella turned her head and kissed the inside of my hand.

Ahhh... I inhaled deeply trying to calm myself. I couldn’t refute the power of her desire. I could feel it—had always felt it—and it moved me deeply. I loved her and I wanted to make love with her too. Probably as much as she did.

“Bella, I could kill you,” I anguished.

“I don’t think you could.”

No? I reached behind me and grasped one of the iron roses from the corner post of the bed and snapped it off its iron vine. I held it out for Bella’s inspection before I closed my hand around it and applied mild pressure. When I opened my hand, the iron rose had become an amorphous iron lump, which shattered instantly into thousands of iron filings in my palm.

“That’s not what I meant,” she protested with a scowl. “I already know how strong you are. You didn’t have to break the furniture.”

“What did you mean then?” I tossed the black sand into a corner and tried to decode the look in her eyes. I didn’t understand.

“Obviously not that you aren’t physically able to hurt me, if you wanted to... More that, you don’t want to hurt me...so much so that I don’t think that you ever could.”

No, no, no..., I thought, shaking my head slowly.

“It might not work like that, Bella.” What if I was more like a mountain lion, biting the neck of his mate during copulation? Or worse, like a praying mantis that rips off the head of her partner when she’s finished with him? Or even more likely, what if my hands clenched uncontrollably, or I accidentally kicked her, or...it could be *anything*!

"Might," she accused derisively. "You have no more idea what you're talking about than I do."

"Exactly. Do you imagine I would ever take that kind of risk with you?"

Bella gazed into my eyes, all the hardness in her expression suddenly melting away.

"Please," she whispered plaintively. "It's all I want. Please." She closed her eyes in expectation of defeat.

I was losing my footing as the earth beneath us began to sway. A powerful ache throbbed in my chest and started working its way through my body.

"Please?" Bella begged, opening her eyes.

What did she see in my face, in my body language, in my heart? Could she see my resolve wavering? Could she see how much I loved her? How much I wanted to give her *everything* she wanted? It was agonizing.

Bella saw me falter. Her heart picked up speed and she plowed on with renewed energy, her words rushing breathlessly from her.

"You don't have to make me any guarantees. If it doesn't work out right, well, then that's that. Just let us try—only try. And I'll give you what you want," she babbled on. "I'll marry you. I'll let you pay for Dartmouth, and I won't complain about the bribe to get me in. You can even buy me a fast car if that makes you happy! Just...please."

She would *marry* me! It was my heart's desire! But...she would marry me to *death*! How could I? I felt my arms tighten around her as if I could hold her promise to me and never let it go. I put my lips to her ear and inhaled the scent of her...a combination of her blood, her skin, her hair...her desire. That alone was coercion enough. I wanted to give her what she wanted. Of course I did!

"This is unbearable," I murmured. "So many things I've wanted to give you—and this is what you decide to demand. Do you have any idea how painful it is, trying to refuse you when you plead with me this way?"

"Then don't refuse."

I brushed my lips across her neck, back and forth, searching for my resolve. It would be so easy to surrender...here, now...on *our* bed.

"Please."

“Bella...”

I knew better. I shook my head, but her hair felt soft against my face; my lips were absorbing her heat; and I could feel the gush of blood that her frantic heart pumped just beneath her skin.

Bella turned her face toward mine and found my lips. Love and desire quickly welled up and overflowed. I clutched her face in my hands and kissed her urgently, desperately...the lion thrusting his head through the bars of his cage. She trembled against me and fire coursed through my veins, desire like hot blood.

When Bella pulled away to breathe, I moved my lips to her throat, smoothing them down her jugular vein and across her collarbone. At what point would the beast break through the bars and spring?

I felt Bella unfastening the buttons of my shirt, but this time, I had no wish to stop her. Her fingers trailed down my skin as she laid my chest bare, button-by-button. When finally she moved the fabric aside and placed her fiery hands on me, I was paralyzed with sensation. I'd never allowed her to touch me beneath my clothing, though she'd tried many times. I closed my eyes and simply breathed her in, my mouth at her neck.

Her fingers stroked the shallow swells and dips of my pectoral muscles, around the sides, across the bottom, over my nipples. As my breath grew ragged, she traced the depressions between each of my ribs, then stroked my breastbone where they joined in the center. Then her hands slid up my neck to my face and pulled my lips back to hers. Her kisses telegraphed her desire and I returned hers with mine. It would be only a small step further to set the beast free. I *wanted* to.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her torso tightly against me. Maybe I *could* give her what she wanted. Maybe... Bella's hands moved back to my chest and wandered around in every direction beneath my gaping shirt front. I held my breath, wondering what I would do if her fingers roamed downward onto my stomach and lower, behind the waistband of my trousers. Well...I doubt I could have resisted giving her *anything* she wanted.

To be touched in this way was so penetrating and intense that it almost hurt. And when Bella removed her hands from my skin, the weight of heavy loss dropped like lead into my stomach. I pulled her even closer and her hands began moving again, but this time they were releasing more buttons on her blouse. The realization jerked me backward as if I'd just hit the end of my chain, which in truth, I had. If Bella succeeded in removing any of her clothing, I knew I could not turn back.

Almost as a reflex, I grabbed Bella's wrists and stretched her arms over her head, pushing her onto her back and imprisoning her with my body. Strangely, she'd given me an inspiration and also a salve for something that had been niggling at the back of my mind.

My lips were at her ear. "Bella," I whispered roughly. "Would you please stop trying to take your clothes off?"

"Do you want to do that part?" she asked breathlessly.

Yes! my body fairly shouted. *Do it now!* Through the cacophony of opposing voices in my head, I forced out the words, "Not tonight."

I moved my lips slowly down her cheek and across her jawline to soften the blow—for both of us. I was wary of my willingness to concede to her demand, even though it would require more self-control than I'd ever imagined myself capable of. Quite possibly, I wasn't. But judging by my faltering will, she would get what she wanted sooner or later, probably sooner. She obviously possessed the power to silence my better judgment. But I wanted Bella in other ways too, and just as badly—I wanted her spiritually, emotionally, and legally. She'd been avoiding the latter issue altogether.

"Edward, don't—" Bella gasped.

Still against my better judgment, which seemed to be taking the night off, I told her, "I'm not saying no. I'm just saying *not tonight*."

Bella looked at me, still breathless, and I saw in her eyes frustration and disappointment, but I also thought I glimpsed a measure of triumph. Frustration took the reins, though.

"Give me one good reason why tonight is not as good as any other night."

"I wasn't born yesterday." I chuckled at the vast truth in that. "Out of the two of us, which do you think is more unwilling to give the other what they want? You just promised to marry me before you do any changing, but if I give in tonight, what guarantee do I have that you won't go running off to Carlisle in the morning? I am—clearly—much less reluctant to give you what you want. Therefore...you first." That was the inspiration *and* the salve to my conscience.

Bella was aghast. "I have to marry you first?"

You'd have thought I'd asked her to eat banana slugs, or stop brushing her teeth for a year, or something humans would deem equally repulsive. It would seem that I *was* prepared to use the oldest lure in the history of mankind to place a wedding ring on my beloved's finger.

19. Engaged!

“That’s the deal—take it or leave it. Compromise, remember?” I *loved* this bargain. It solved all the problems and gave me everything I wanted—for myself *and* for Bella. It also postponed the inevitable moment when I’d have to accomplish the extra–superhuman and pay up. Maybe by then I could acquire a little tolerance for the overwhelming physical impact of her hands on me. Now that *that* cat was out of the bag, I had no doubt Bella would take full advantage. So she *had* gotten something immediate out of our negotiation.

I began “encouraging” Bella to accept the deal. I moved my lips to hers and kissed her with all the pent–up passion I felt. It had always been easy to get Bella worked up and it seemed even easier now that she knew she *could* have all of me. It was her decision.

With Bella’s arms still trapped above her head, I stretched alongside her and lay one of my legs across both of hers, pulling her in close. She struggled to release her hands as I continued focusing my attention on her lips. No...I didn’t think I *would* let her touch me again until I got her yes. I smiled inwardly, feeling the power of my own sexuality—the effect it had on her.

“I think that’s a really bad idea,” she whispered between panting breaths.

“I’m not surprised you feel that way,” I replied, smiling at my newfound weapon. “You have a one–track mind.”

I stopped kissing her and blew my breath across her face. She groaned and lifted her head from the mattress, searching for my mouth. I pulled away and watched her eyes drop to where my shirt lay open—they didn’t return to my face for several moments. I was quickly learning how to employ the oldest inducement in the book and was finding it extremely pleasurable. Bella’s breath caught as I dragged my fingers across the newly bared skin above her breasts. I drew shapes on her breastbone and followed it down to where her next button prevented further exploration.

I kissed her again and pressed myself against the side of her body.

“How did this happen?” Bella complained. “I thought I was holding my own tonight—for once—and now, all of a sudden—”

I couldn’t contain myself. “You’re engaged!” I exclaimed, accepting the bargain on her behalf.

“Ew! *Please* don’t say that out loud.” I found her squeamishness amusing.

“Are you going back on your word?” I asked sternly, halting the touching and the kissing as if she might forfeit them forever.

Bella glared at me and refused to answer.

“Are you?” I demanded, giving her an angry schoolmaster’s scowl and waiting for her surrender. Over the years, I had learned a lot from my sister Alice in the art of coercion.

“Ugh!” Bella moaned. “No. I’m not. Are you happy now?”

“Exceptionally.” I beamed at her unreservedly. I *was*...truly, madly, deeply.

Bella groaned.

“Aren’t you happy at all?” I queried, my lips hovering just over hers but not touching. *Persuasion*.

“A little bit,” she said grudgingly. “But not about getting married.”

I kissed her and then laughed. No, Bella was far happier about the promise of sex. With that to look forward to, she might even be nudged to the altar a little sooner. That part made me very happy indeed.

“Do you get the feeling that everything is backward?” I asked. “Traditionally, shouldn’t you be arguing my side, and I yours?”

“There isn’t much that’s traditional about you and me.”

“True,” I agreed.

Though Bella showed no compunction about losing her virginity before marriage, I didn’t feel quite right about it. In my day, that was not the gentlemanly way to go about things. First came the courtship; then one sought the father’s approval; then came the proposal and the engagement. Ideally, it was only after the wedding that lovers took that final step.

I knew that times had changed, of course, and I wasn’t completely averse to the new ways, I just didn’t want to pile bad on top of worse. If I was going to steal my beloved’s soul, which is terribly unworthy, I didn’t want to tarnish her virtue too.

Releasing Bella’s wrists and holding her face in my hands, I tasted her upper lip with the tip of my tongue. She opened her mouth slightly and I stroked the inside of her full lower lip

before her tongue met mine. They touched and tangled until Bella gasped for air and I moved my lips to the palm of her hand.

“Look, Edward,” Bella said when she finally caught her breath, “I said I would marry you, and I will. I promise. I swear. If you want, I’ll sign a contract in my own blood.”

“Not funny,” I murmured as I kissed along the shallow blue veins in her wrist.

“What I’m saying is this—I’m not going to trick you or anything. You know me better than that. So there’s really no reason to wait. We’re completely alone—how often does that happen?—and you’ve provided this very large and comfortable bed....”

“Not tonight,” I repeated. I had my reasons for insisting.

“Don’t you trust me?” Bella asked.

“Of course I do.” She lifted my chin so she could scrutinize my face. I kept my eyes lowered.

“Then what’s the problem? Bella complained. “It’s not like you didn’t know you were going to win in the end. You always win.”

“Just hedging my bets,” I replied lightly.

“There’s something else,” she said, watching my expression more closely than I preferred. “Are *you* planning to go back on your word?”

“No. I swear to you, we *will* try. After you marry me.”

Bella ventured a laugh, but I knew she was disappointed. Frankly, I was too...a little, but I wanted to do right by her. I truly did.

“You make me feel like a villain in a melodrama—twirling my mustache while I try to steal some poor girl’s virtue.”

I glanced up at her and then dropped my eyes quickly to focus on her collarbone with my lips.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Bella barked out a laugh. “You’re trying to protect your virtue!” She started giggling and clapped her hand over her mouth.

“No, silly girl,” I said, giving in with a sigh. “I’m trying to protect *yours*. And you’re making it shockingly difficult.”

“Of all the ridiculous—”

“Let me ask you something,” I cut in. “We’ve had this discussion before, but humor me. How many people in this room have a soul? A shot at heaven, or whatever there is after this life?”

“Two,” Bella asserted.

“All right. Maybe that’s true. Now, there’s a world full of dissension about this, but the vast majority seem to think that there are some rules that have to be followed.”

“Vampire rules aren’t enough for you? You want to worry about the human ones too?”

“It couldn’t hurt.” I shrugged. “Just in case.”

Bella scowled.

“Now, of course, it might be too late for me, even if you are right about my soul.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said, defending me fiercely.

“‘Thou shalt not kill’ is commonly accepted by most major belief systems. And I’ve killed a lot of people, Bella.”

“Only the bad ones.”

I shrugged again. “Maybe that counts, maybe it doesn’t. But you haven’t killed anyone—”

“That *you* know about,” Bella interjected.

I smiled. “And I’m going to do my best to keep you out of temptation’s way.”

“Okay. But we weren’t fighting over committing murder.”

“The same principle applies—the only difference is that this is the one area in which I’m just as spotless as you are. Can’t I leave one rule unbroken?” I looked into her eyes, pleading with my own.

“One?”

“You know that I’ve stolen, I’ve lied, I’ve coveted...my virtue is all I have left.” I gave her a crooked smile.

“I lie all the time.”

“Yes, but you’re such a bad liar that it doesn’t really count. Nobody believes you.” I laughed. She was hopelessly inept at prevarication. If nothing else, the color in her face gave her away every time.

“I really hope you’re wrong about that—because otherwise Charlie is about to burst through the door with a loaded gun.”

“Charlie is happier when he pretends to swallow your stories. He’d rather lie to himself than look too closely.” I grinned.

“But what did you ever covet? You have everything.”

“I coveted you,” I admitted with a pang of guilt. “I had no right to want you—but I reached out and took you anyway. And now look what’s become of you! Trying to seduce a vampire,” I teased.

“You *can* covet what’s already yours,” Bella said. “Besides, I thought it was *my* virtue you were worried about.”

“It is. If it’s too late for me... Well, I’ll be damned—no pun intended—if I’ll let them keep you out, too.”

“You can’t make me go somewhere you won’t be,” Bella asserted. “That’s my definition of hell. Anyway, I have an easy solution to all this: let’s never die, all right?”

“Sounds simple enough. Why didn’t I think of that?” I smiled again.

“So that’s it. You won’t sleep with me until we’re *married*.”

“Technically, I can’t ever *sleep* with you.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Very mature, Edward.”

“But, other than that detail, yes, you’ve got it right.”

“I think you have an ulterior motive.”

“Another one?” I gave her my “big eyes.”

“You know this will speed things up.”

“There is only one thing I want to speed up, and the rest can wait forever...but for that, it’s true, your impatient human hormones are my most powerful ally at this point.”

"I can't believe I'm going along with this. When I think of Charlie...and Renee! Can you imagine what Angela will think? Or Jessica? Ugh. I can hear the gossip now."

I raised an eyebrow. She was looking at this in such a human way. Bella was much less worried about her virtue (or mine!) than about who would look askance at her on the street, how much the townsfolk would gossip, and what her parents would say. Those thoughts made her so uncomfortable that I took pity on her. I wanted our nuptials to be as easy and painless as possible. After all, I couldn't go through with it if the prospect made her unhappy.

"It doesn't have to be a big production," I promised. "I don't need any fanfare. You won't have to tell anyone or make any changes. We'll go to Vegas—you can wear old jeans and we'll go to the chapel with the drive-through window. I just want it to be official—that you belong to me and *no one else*." That was the bottom line for me. I wanted Bella to be mine and I didn't care how we got there. She softened a little.

"It couldn't be any more official than it already is," she claimed.

"We'll see about that."

It would not be official to Bella's other suitors until the law made it so. Not being married was telling the world, "I haven't made up my mind yet." Challengers would continue to line up at the door. *My wife*. That was the point—*forsaking all others*, or perhaps more correctly, all others forsaking her. If I am her husband, I have a *duty* to break the jaws of those who kiss her without her permission. I smiled to myself at the thought.

So, that's where the second gift came in, the other one I'd been hoping to give her tonight. Wearing a man's engagement ring told the world, "I *have* made up my mind. I'm taken." Particularly aggressive suitors—*Jacob*—might make a play for one's fiancée, but a broken jaw would almost be expected.

"I suppose you don't want your ring now?" I asked, feigning indifference.

She gulped and her face took on a greenish cast. "You suppose correctly."

I laughed, feeling jaunty. "That's fine. I'll get it on your finger soon enough."

Bella scowled. "You talk like you already have one."

"I do," I admitted proudly. "Ready to force upon you at the first sign of weakness."

"You're unbelievable," Bella complained. I assume she meant "pushy," but I didn't mind that.

“Do you want to see it?” I asked, unable to hide my excitement.

“No!” she snapped, but after a hesitation, said, “Unless you really want to show it to me.”

“That’s all right. It can wait.” I shrugged.

Bella sighed. “Show me the damn ring, Edward.”

I shook my head. “No.”

Bella stared at me for a long time, the gears in her head turning. Then the cogs clicked into place.

“Please?” she begged softly, reaching to touch my face with her fingers. “Please can I see it?”

I recognized what was happening. I’d been taking advantage of Bella’s particular weakness tonight and she had just discovered mine.

“You are the most dangerous creature I’ve ever met,” I grumbled. But I *wanted* to show it to her, so I snatched the black satin box out of my nightstand and rejoined Bella on the bed. “Go ahead and look, then,” I said, balancing the box on her knee.

Bella stroked the smooth satin with her finger.

“You didn’t spend a *lot* of money, did you?” she asked. “Lie to me, if you did.”

“I didn’t spend anything. It’s just another hand-me-down,” I explained, downplaying it. “This is the ring my father gave to my mother.”

“Oh,” Bella exclaimed. She grasped the box’s hinged lid, but then hesitated.

“I suppose it’s a little outdated,” I apologized, smiling. “Old-fashioned, just like me. I can get you something more modern. Something from Tiffany’s?” *Something she wouldn’t accept in a million years?*

Actually, my mother’s ring *was* a Tiffany’s—Louis Comfort Tiffany—designed especially for her in 1898. A long oval of gold lace in Louis Comfort’s trademark style had sixteen diamonds embedded in it, set along diagonal lines. The last time I’d had it appraised for Lloyd’s of London, Christie’s auction house set its value between thirty-eight and forty-two thousand dollars—but that was nothing Bella needed to know.

“I like old-fashioned things,” she muttered before opening the box.

I watched her expression to see if I could read her thoughts. She seemed attracted to it in spite of herself. Though she made no sound, she ran her finger along the lines of diamonds.

"It's so *pretty*," she mumbled as if in a trance.

"Do you like it?" I asked eagerly.

After another moment of staring at the piece, Bella looked up and shrugged.

"It's beautiful," she said in a "ho-hum" voice. "What's not to like?"

Nice try, I thought and chuckled. "See if it fits." She immediately clenched her left hand—the unbroken one—into a fist.

"Bella," I protested, sighing, "I'm not going to solder it to your finger. Just try it on so I can see if it needs to be sized. Then you can take it right off."

"Fine."

I lifted the ring from the box, took Bella's left hand in mine and slipped the ring onto her third finger. It looked *glorious* on her slim hand...the gold, the diamonds, the *symbolism*...I was absolutely exhilarated, though I took pains to hide it.

"A perfect fit," I said, matching her apathetic tone. Despite my carefully controlled expression, my joy must have been evident.

"You like that, don't you?" Bella accused, teasing me by dancing her fingers under the light, causing the clear diamonds to sparkle and glitter. I couldn't turn my eyes away.

"Sure. It looks very nice on you." I managed to shrug disinterestedly.

Bella stared at my face until her gaze shattered the façade and I beamed at her, ecstatic and triumphant. She *would* be mine! She *was* mine! Whatever happened, Bella and I would be together.

As she continued to scrutinize me, Bella's eyes glazed over. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded out the rhythms of a heavy metal band. I wrapped her in my arms and kissed her with joyful abandon. She had promised me what I wanted most in the world.

When I finally pulled away and whispered my answer into Bella's ear, both of us were panting raggedly.

"Yes, I like it. You have *no* idea."

Bella laughed. "I believe you."

Just one thing would make the moment absolutely perfect. "Do you mind if I do something?" I asked softly, pulling her tightly to me.

"Anything you want," Bella murmured, misreading my intent. I slid off the bed and pulled Bella with me.

"Anything but that," she protested.

With my hands on her shoulders, I looked carefully into her eyes. "Now, I want to do this right. Please, *please*, keep in mind that you've already agreed to this, and don't ruin it for me."

This was the moment I'd waited for my whole life, though I never knew it. I dropped down on one knee to ask for my beloved's hand in marriage.

"Oh, no," Bella groaned.

"Be nice," I insisted as I took her left hand in mine.

"Isabella Swan?" I gazed at her beautiful face and looked into her deep chocolate eyes. "I promise to love you forever—every single day of forever. Will you marry me?"

Bella paused a moment before simply whispering, "Yes."

YES!

"Thank you," I replied. I kissed the tip of each of her precious fingers and then the ring on her hand that symbolized her promise. It was everything I'd ever wanted.

I rose to my feet, wrapped my arms around her, and kissed her—my precious fiancée—with a heart full to overflowing. Without breaking off the kiss, Bella reached behind her and unclasped my wrists, and then pulled me to the bed. She lay down and I stretched out beside her.

I touched her face with my fingers and tried to read her eyes. Accepting my proposal hadn't dampened her ardor, but rather seemed to have increased it. My shirt still gaped open and she reached out to touch my chest, checking for my reaction first. I smiled softly and propped my head in my hand while she explored my upper body with her eyes and fingers.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered as she traced the hard lines of my solidified muscle and bone.

Now was as good a time as any to start becoming accustomed to her hands on my skin. It was an exquisite feeling and I shut my eyes to take it in. When I opened them again, I cupped her cheek in my hand and she lifted her eyes to my face.

“I love you, my darling,” I murmured, smoothing her hair behind her ear and leaning forward to kiss her.

Moving her hand to my face, Bella whispered, “I love you, Edward.”

I leaned over her then and we enjoyed one another...kissing, touching, stroking.

“Will you take off your shirt?” Bella asked softly.

“Aren’t you tired?” I hedged.

“No.”

“How about if you get ready for bed first? You’ll need some sleep for tomorrow.”

“Kiss me again—first.”

I chuckled and obliged her before rising from the bed and lifting her off with me. I kept one hand on her waist until she caught her balance.

“Go on. I’ll wait,” I said smiling.

Bella’s heart was still pounding erratically as she grabbed her duffle bag and headed toward the bathroom. When she returned, she was wearing a deep blue, button-front top and sleep shorts—silk.

“New pajamas?”

“Alice must have sneaked them into my bag. What do you think?” Bella raised her arms away from her body and looked down at herself.

“Lovely, but not nearly so much as the one wearing them,” I replied with a grin. I pulled the sheet and coverlet back for her to climb under.

“You too,” she demanded.

“You first,” I replied, smiling. Bella scowled.

She took my hand and climbed under the covers, pulling me with her.

“This is coming off,” Bella said, slipping her hands inside the shoulders of my Oxford button-down.

“You’ll get cold,” I warned.

“Don’t care.”

Bella pushed my shirt off my shoulders. I unfastened the remaining buttons, slid it off my arms, and tossed it on the nightstand. Again I propped my head on my hand and watched her scrutinize my half-bare body. She touched my neck with her fingers, then dragged them across my shoulder and down my arm. Her lower lip dropped and her heart-rate sped up.

When she placed her hand flat against my ribs, it didn’t feel so much like burning this time, but the tactile stimulation was still shockingly intense. I scooted away from her slightly and lay face down, my breathing uneven.

“Edward!” she whispered in exclamation and smoothed her left hand down the center of my spine. I closed my eyes and began to hum to myself, a slight distraction from the newness of her soft, hot skin against mine.

I don’t know how long we lay like that with Bella caressing my back, my waist, and along the sides of my torso, but after a time she lay down beside me and wrapped her arm around my waist. I opened my eyes to find her face close to mine.

“I want you,” she murmured.

“I want you too,” I replied. “After.” I kissed her lightly and then rolled away, tucking the covers around her. She was shivering.

“I don’t think I should wear this to bed,” Bella said, pulling off her engagement ring and holding it out to me.

“Are you sure? You won’t hurt it. It’s already survived over a hundred years.”

“You better put it in the box for safekeeping. I don’t want to take any chances,” Bella said with a flushed face.

Not a good liar. I took the ring and settled it in the satin, hoping she would put it on again in the morning. It made me so happy to see it on her finger.

“Are you tired yet?” I asked.

“No, come back over here.” She lifted up the covers and I came over, but lay down on top of them.

“You’re cold. That won’t help you sleep.”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“You should try anyway.”

Bella ducked under my arm and nestled against me, then laid her right hand in the center of my chest, playing with the short, bronze hair that swept lightly across my pectorals in a V-shape. I shut my eyes and hummed Bella’s lullaby while she stroked my chest, neck, and upper arms.

“I’ve wanted to do this since our first day in the meadow,” Bella said.

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. I almost turned around and went home when I saw you with your sweater off that day. You had on a sleeveless white shirt that was open in the front.”

“I remember that. We matched,” I smiled. “I thought you were afraid.”

“No, I was dazzled. You were too beautiful.”

“Not too beautiful for you, love.”

“Yes...”

I lifted Bella’s chin with my finger and kissed her gently, then looked into her eyes. They were hard to read. She broke eye contact and touched her lips to my upper chest and then stroked the same place with her fingertips. I let it go.

Inevitably, I suppose, Bella slid her hand down to my belly and I drew in my breath sharply. When she stretched her fingers downward, I put my hand over hers and stopped its progress. Just feeling her still, hot hand there on my skin was as much stimulation as I could tolerate. I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles, then held it in mine.

20. Preparations

It was the happiest night of my long existence. Lying with Bella and watching her sleep, though I had done it many times before, had a new significance. For the first time, I felt confident that we would be together forever. Bella couldn't possibly love me as I loved her, beyond all reason, beyond all restraint, but to have her promise to be mine and only mine...it was enough.

I wondered how long it would be before Bella agreed to the actual marriage. I assumed that we would exchange our vows at the drive-through chapel in Las Vegas and that she would insist on keeping it secret. Esme would be disappointed when the truth eventually became known, but perhaps by then Bella would be amenable to holding a simple wedding ceremony with our families present. Whatever Bella decided to do was fine with me. With the promise she'd extracted from me in our new agreement, I thought she might choose to marry right away, but if not, surely we'd marry before moving to New Hampshire in the fall. I was excited to see how things would play out.

Bella had fallen asleep so late that she slept in late too. After welcoming her into the new day—the first day of our engagement!—I left her alone while I went to the kitchen to practice my breakfast-making skills. Bella wandered downstairs when she smelled the eggs and toast.

My family returned from their hunting trip around noon and set about preparing for the upcoming battle—everyone except Alice, that is. She hung around Bella and me, displaying signs of extreme annoyance. I knew why and I didn't plan to give her an opening to vent. I was too blissful to let her ruin my good mood.

"I *think* that you're going to want to pack for cold weather, Edward," Alice said sourly. "I can't see where you are exactly, because you're taking off with that *dog* this afternoon. But the storm that's coming seems particularly bad in that general area."

I nodded at her, trying not to smile. She was annoyed about losing her vision whenever the werewolves were involved with us, but she was even more annoyed at me.

"It's going to snow on the mountains," she added.

"Ew, snow," Bella complained. She'd always disliked the cold and I still found it miraculous that she wanted *me*.

"Wear a jacket," Alice directed Bella. I was sure Bella sensed my sister's irritation, but I didn't think she had figured out what the problem was—yet.

Alice followed us to the garage where I began filling a backpack with the camping gear we would need for Bella on Little Tahoma overnight—tent, four-season sleeping bag, a canteen, first aid kit, and some dried food in sealed packages. Bella made an “icky” face at those, but we would be on the mountain long enough for Bella to need sustenance.

As I picked and sorted through cabinets, Alice was silently giving me hell.

Edward, how could you promise Bella a Las Vegas wedding? You know I've been waiting for this event since you met her. It's the last real wedding our family will ever have.

I handed Bella my cell phone. “Why don’t you call Jacob and tell him we’ll be ready for him in an hour or so. He knows where to meet us.”

Alice would not be ignored.

You cannot run off to Las Vegas and get married in a car, for heaven's sake! Please let me plan your wedding!

I just smiled. For once, Alice was not going to get her way. Bella would never agree to it.

If you don't talk to Bella, I will. You know I can convince her.

I shook my head definitively. I did not want her pressuring Bella after everything it had taken to get my yes—and knowing that Bella wasn’t yet at ease with her decision. I’d promised her that we didn’t have to tell anyone, but it would be hard to keep Alice quiet.

Bella hung up the cell phone and looked at us curiously.

“Billy said to tell you ‘good luck.’”

“That was generous of him,” I replied, turning away from my interfering sister.

“Bella, could I please speak to you alone?” Alice broke in.

“You’re about to make my life harder than it needs to be, Alice,” I hissed at her quietly. “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“This isn’t about you, Edward,” Alice countered.

I laughed. It wasn’t about *me*?

“It’s not. This is a female thing,” she insisted and I growled softly at her.

Alice knew full well that while I would like a traditional wedding, Bella certainly would not. I’d have been thrilled to stand at the altar in a tuxedo and watch my love walk down the

aisle to the familiar wedding march. I'd have been fine with letting Alice plan everything, even if she did go overboard, but ironically, I was arguing against it for Bella's sake. She was reluctant to have a marriage, let alone an elaborate wedding.

"Let her talk to me," Bella said.

I flashed her a look of warning, then gave in with a shrug. "You asked for it." My getting obstreperous wouldn't stop Alice anyway. As I left the garage, my sister began marshaling her formidable powers of persuasion to unleash on my unsuspecting fiancée.

"Bella?" Alice asked in a sad voice meant to induce maximum guilt.

"What's wrong, Alice?" Bella asked in concern. I was surprised she couldn't see what was coming a mile off.

"Don't you love me?"

Cruel! Opening with the kicker!

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Then why do I see you sneaking off to Vegas to get married without inviting me?"

"Oh." Bella paused, anxious not to hurt Alice's feelings and worried that she already had done so. "You know how I hate to make a big deal out of things. It was Edward's idea, anyway." In two seconds, Alice had Bella on the defensive, practically apologizing.

"I don't care whose idea it was. How could *you* do this to me? I expect that kind of thing from *Edward*, but not from you. I love you like you were my own sister."

"To me, Alice, you *are* my sister."

"Words!" Alice barked. She was in excellent form today.

"Fine, you can come," Bella capitulated. "There won't be much to see."

Did Bella really think Alice would let her off that easily?

"What?" Bella asked, probably in response to the Alice-patented, pained expression.

"How *much* do you love me, Bella?"

"Why?"

“Please, please, please,” Alice wheedled. “Please, Bella, please—if you really love me... Please let me do your wedding.”

“Aw, Alice!” Bella groaned, finally catching on to my devious sister’s true intentions. “No! Don’t do this to me.”

“If you really, truly love me, Bella,” Alice pushed.

“That is so unfair. And Edward kind of already used that one on me.”

“I’ll bet Edward would like it better if you did this traditionally, though he’d never tell you that.”

I cringed from a distance. Alice was using me to lay even *more* guilt on Bella. I wouldn’t be surprised if she backed out of the whole deal! And *still* Alice went on.

“And Esme—think what it would mean to her!”

Ooh... low blow.

“I’d rather face the newborns alone,” Bella moaned.

“I’ll owe you for a decade.” The pitch of Alice’s voice rose, the sound of imminent victory.

“You’d owe me for a century!” Bella yelled.

“Is that a yes?”

“No! I don’t want to *do* this!”

“You won’t have to do anything but walk a few yards and then repeat after the minister.”

“Ugh! Ugh, ugh!”

“Please?” Alice begged shamelessly. “Please, please, please, please, please?”

I grinned in spite of myself. Bella was getting a taste of her own medicine. The way she’d pleaded with me to make love with her last night... If Bella knew how close she’d come to succeeding....

“I’ll never, never ever forgive you for this, Alice.” There it was—complete surrender.

“Yea!” Alice cheered and began clapping.

"That's *not* a yes!" Bella balked.

"But it will be," Alice replied, undiscouraged.

"Edward!" Bella hollered. "I know you're listening. Get over here."

Uh oh. My turn.

"Thanks so much, Alice," I growled to the sound of Alice's continued clapping. Bella was upset, but rather than yell at me, she threw her arms around my neck and laid her battered, defeated head against my shoulder.

"Vegas," I whispered in reassurance, ignoring Alice. But I couldn't save Bella from the guilt trip.

"Not a chance," Alice retorted. "Bella would never do that to me. You know, Edward, as a brother, you are sometimes a disappointment."

"Don't be mean," Bella objected. "He's trying to make me happy, unlike you." There was a tremor in her voice.

"I'm trying to make you happy, too, Bella," Alice explained. "It's just that I know better what will make you happy...in the long run. You'll thank me for this. Maybe not for fifty years, but definitely someday."

"I never thought I'd see the day where I'd be willing to take a bet against you, Alice, but it has arrived." Bella had given in. Like it or not, my little sister was putting on a wedding.

"So, are you going to show me the ring?" Alice looked at Bella's left hand. "Huh. I saw him put it on you...Did I miss something?" After going blank-faced for a moment, the psychic answered her own question. "No, wedding's still on," she chirped.

"Bella has issues with jewelry," I explained.

"What's one more diamond? Well, I guess the ring has lots of diamonds, but my point is that he's already got one on—"

"Enough, Alice!" I glared angrily at her. Would she *never* shut up? So far, Bella hadn't guessed that the sparkling heart I'd attached to her bracelet was neither glass nor crystal. If she knew what it was, she never would have accepted it. Alice was going to ruin it for both of us!

"We're in a hurry," I snarled.

Alice quickly put two and two together.

Oops! Sorry, Edward!

"I don't understand. What's that about diamonds?" Bella asked in confusion.

"We'll talk about it later," Alice rushed to reply. "Edward is right—you'd better get going. You've got to set a trap and make camp before the storm comes."

Bella let it drop—I was extraordinarily relieved.

As I carried Bella in my arms to the clearing with the backpack occupying her usual position, I considered the second part of our bargain—making love to Bella while she was still human. After the conversation I'd had recently with my father, I had stopped worrying about undertaking this dangerous and seemingly impossible feat. But now, I was back on the hook and somehow I would have to come through for her—after marriage, yes, but that day would come soon enough. I didn't know how I could ever be what she needed me to be. For now, though, I was content to focus on the wedding and put aside thoughts of the wedding night.

We were taking a circuitous route to the clearing far away from the path Jacob would follow later to convey Bella to the ridge on Little Tahoma. The newborns would approach from Puget Sound over the Olympic Mountains from the east. Jasper's plan called for them to cross Bella's scent, which would lead them to the clearing where we—my family, I mean—would be waiting to destroy them. Alice had shown me the path the newborns would take and so I sent Bella on a short walk from the clearing along a line that would transect it.

The weather was disturbing. A low pressure system was moving rapidly into the area, bringing unusually strong Arctic winds from the north. Just before we left the house, Alice had called out, "Don't forget your coat, Bella. It seems...unseasonably cold." Unfortunately, with the werewolves in the picture, Alice couldn't tell us anything specific about what would happen on the mountain. The wolves acted like a lead curtain in an X-ray, creating a big blank spot in her vision.

I followed along with Bella as she created her scent trail, but remained a constant distance from her. She had been adamant about our letting her *do something* to help with the battle. I refused to let her sit in the clearing and act as newborn bait like she'd wanted to do and this was part of our compromise.

“Am I doing this right?” she called out as she dragged her fingers over tree trunks and pulled her hands through tall ferns.

“Perfectly.”

“Will this help?” she wanted to know. I looked over from my parallel path and saw that she was pulling hairs from her head and draping them over plants here and there.

“Yes, that does make the trail stronger. But you don’t need to pull your hair out, Bella. It will be fine.”

“I’ve got a few extras I can spare,” she replied.

As we walked, I thought about how Alice had twisted Bella’s arm to agree to an elaborate wedding. Bella had been completely unprepared for the frontal attack.

“You don’t need to let Alice have her way, you know,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it, Edward. I’m not going to leave you at the altar, regardless.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” I said, though in truth, it *had* crossed my mind. “I want this to be what you want it to be.” Most women planned their weddings to express their own personality and taste, didn’t they? Bella certainly had a distinctive style—one might call it neo-Grunge—which was a far cry from what I knew Alice had in mind.

“Well, even if she does get her way,” I told Bella, “we can keep it small. Just us. Emmett can get a clerical license off the Internet.”

Bella laughed. “That does sound better.”

“See, there’s always a compromise.” I chuckled. *Words to live by.*

Bella trudged along, conscientiously touching everything in her path. I kept a close eye on her, hoping that she wouldn’t trip over a root or something and fall.

After she crossed the path the newborns would follow, I had her turn around and retrace the same path back to the clearing. We’d almost made it when Bella’s good luck ran out and she lost her balance. She grabbed for a tree branch which broke off in her hand on her way down.

“Ouch!” Bella cried. “Oh, fabulous.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Stay where you are. I’m bleeding. It will stop in a minute.”

Silly girl. I dodged the twenty yards through the trees to her and slipped off the backpack.

"I've got a first aid kit. I had a feeling I might need it."

"It's not bad. I can take care of it—you don't have to make yourself uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," I told her. "Here—let me clean it."

"Wait a second, I just got another idea." Bella pressed her bloodied hand against a rock, leaving a red splotch.

"What are you doing?"

"Jasper will *love* this," Bella muttered, walking toward the clearing and touching trees and rocks she passed. "I'll bet this really gets them going."

I sighed.

"Hold your breath," Bella said.

"I'm fine. I just think you're going overboard."

"This is all I get to do. I want to do a good job," Bella countered as we entered the clearing.

"Well, you have," I told her. "The newborns will be frantic, and Jasper will be very impressed with your dedication. Now let me treat your hand—you've gotten the cut dirty."

"Let me do it, please," she argued.

I took her hand. "This doesn't bother me anymore." I cleaned the wound with antiseptic and pressed a bandage over it.

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "I got over it."

"You...*got over it*? When? How?"

I smiled. "I lived through an entire twenty-four hours thinking that you were dead, Bella. That changed the way I look at a lot of things."

"Did it change the way I smell to you?"

“Not at all. But...having experienced the way it feels to think I’ve lost you...my reactions have changed. My entire being shies away from any course that could inspire that kind of pain again.”

Bella just stared at me.

I smiled. “I guess that you could call it a very educational experience.” Educational in the worst possible way, of course. It was good in the end that I had learned to control my blood craving for Bella, because very soon I would have to bite through her skin numerous times and poison her blood with my venom—another bargain I’d made in the quest for her hand. That made *two* feats I’d promised my beloved in exchange for marriage. In fairy tales, such endeavors always seemed to come in groups of three, though. It made me wonder what other impossible acts would be required of me.

Bella shivered in the cold wind that howled through the clearing.

“All right. You’ve done your part,” I said, unzipping the backpack and pulling out a winter coat for Bella. “Now it’s out of our hands. Let’s go camping!” I grinned broadly and then took Bella’s newly bandaged hand and started pulling her toward the opposite side of the clearing.

I’m here, bloodsucker.

“Where are we meeting Jacob?” Bella asked.

“Right here.” And speaking of the *dev...werewolf...there he was.*

I cringed momentarily when Jacob stepped into the clearing wearing the flimsiest pair of cutoff sweatpants you’ve ever seen—and nothing else. At nearly seven feet tall, his brown, muscled body was both beautiful and intimidating. Though I was once again grateful to him for helping Bella in a way I could not, I was also displeased that he had to be so strikingly bare while doing it. I clamped my jaw shut to keep my less-than-civilized thoughts to myself.

Jacob’s mind was loud and obnoxious, as usual. He was not pleased to see me, particularly, but *was* happy to see Bella. He was anticipating holding her against his naked chest for several hours with his rival nowhere in the vicinity. He had a plan to push his case with her as far as he could during the jaunt up the mountain. He was prepared to cajole, harass, or possibly even coerce Bella into kissing him, or even more annoyingly, into admitting that she loved him. He believed that if he could break down her defenses with physical contact, she would magically recognize that he was the one for her, rather than me. This was one reason why my night with Bella had been so important. I meant to supersede his efforts.

“There had to have been a better way to do this,” I said under my breath, frowning at Jacob’s thoughts.

“Too late now,” Bella said. Her tone made her words sound like a complaint. She still must be annoyed at Jacob for his oral assault on her.

I sighed.

“Hey, Jake,” Bella called when we approached his side of the clearing.

“Hi, Bella.”

“Hello, Jacob,” I said civilly. He ignored me. I wondered if he could feel the aura of victory around me.

“Where do I take her?” he demanded.

I retrieved a topographical map of the relevant part of Mt. Rainier and handed it to Jacob.

“We’re here now,” I pointed. Jacob started to flinch from my reach before catching himself. He was deeply uncomfortable being near any of my family, but he had the added discomfort of his personal aversion toward me as his rival for Bella’s heart. Jacob didn’t know that she had already given me her yes, but the fact that she’d removed her engagement ring so quickly gave me pause.

“And you’re taking her up here.” I traced the route on the map. “Roughly nine miles. When you’re about a mile away, you should cross my path. That will lead you in. Do you need the map?”

“No, thanks. I know this area pretty well. I think I know where I’m going.”

“I’ll take a longer route,” I told him. “And I’ll see you in a few hours.”

It was time to leave Bella with him. I *hated* this part.

“See you,” Bella murmured.

With a sinking heart, I turned and dashed across the clearing into the forest. I would start out in the opposite direction from them and take a roundabout way up the mountain, arriving well before they did.

When I was halfway up the mountain, the low pressure system that had been threatening arrived. A huge, black, storm cloud blanketed the mountain as far as the horizon. It

was much too cold for June and the altitude was too high for rain. I raced up the mountain as snow began to fall, performing a number of backtracking maneuvers that I'd learned from Victoria while pursuing her in Texas. Not that I expected anyone to follow my trail, but extra caution couldn't hurt.

By the time I arrived at the location I'd chosen to hide Bella, the snow flurries had thickened. The camping spot was a cut-out in the ridge, which created a flat floor for the tent and a sheer rock wall to protect us from the cold north wind. It also prevented anyone approaching from behind.

It took a few seconds to set up the REI igloo-style tent and a few more seconds to secure it with a heavy boulder in each corner. In this kind of wind, regular tent stakes would pull right out of the rocky ground.

Once that task was finished, I had nothing to do for the several hours Jacob would require to traverse the mountain and bring Bella to me. Being separated from her now was a new kind of torture. I still was disappointed that I wouldn't be at the battle to destroy those who would destroy Bella, but I was even more grateful that we would be together.

I was determined not to listen to Bella and Jacob's conversation or to Jacob's thoughts while I waited, so I began to pace, worrying and fretting instead. Frankly, I was less troubled by the dangers of the upcoming battle than I was by what Jacob might be saying to Bella as he held her against his bare, chiseled chest. Though I hadn't considered it earlier, I was rather glad that Bella had coaxed me to remove my shirt the night before. She had obviously enjoyed touching me, despite my chilly temperature. Maybe experiencing me in that way with a promise of more would inoculate her against Jacob's particularly human kind of appeal.

As time passed, the weather, which was deteriorating minute by minute, began troubling me anew. Bella hated the cold and snow, but worse than the discomfort of it was its inherent danger. I'd begun to wish that I'd picked a hiding place at a lower elevation where her freezing to death was less likely.

They were getting close...finally. I heard their voices and caught a whiff of Jacob's werewolf odor on the wind. I paced faster as Bella came nearer and then...they were there.

"Bella!" I cried with immense relief. She was whole and unharmed, though I don't know what else I might have expected. Jacob wouldn't do anything that might start a fight with me and risk missing the upcoming battle. Not for any reason.

I darted to Bella...my *fiancée*...and saw Jacob recoil from my approach. He recovered quickly, though, and set Bella on her feet. I grabbed her in a full-body hug, joy and relief spreading through me like a narcotic.

"Thank you," I said over Bella's head. "That was quicker than I expected, and I truly appreciate it." In spite of our rivalry, I was extremely grateful for his help in ensuring Bella's safety. Covering her scent with his had been his idea.

I didn't do it for you, Jacob thought, then said, "Get her inside. This is going to be bad—my hair's standing up on my scalp." He sniffed into the wind. "Is that tent secure?"

"I all but welded it to the rock."

"Good."

As a native creature of this forest and these mountains, Jacob was attuned to subtle variances in the weather and to the signals given off by the resident birds and beasts. He was thinking about how quiet the wildlife had become in anticipation of the storm. The animals were hunkered down in their dens or nests preparing to wait it out. We both looked up at the huge, black cloud roiling above our heads, becoming more ominous every minute.

"I'm going to change," Jacob said, mostly to himself. "I want to know what's going on back home." He hung his parka on a tree branch and disappeared into the forest.

I saw in Jacob's mind that Sam had ordered him to stay with us in case of any sudden change of plans. Sam would send Seth to replace him in the morning. Though neither wolf's presence was necessary, I was obliged to Sam. Jacob's being available overnight was neither here nor there, but having access to the pack mind through Seth would be the next best thing to being at the battle myself.

21. Storm on the Mountain

The late spring storm was much worse than anyone had anticipated and I had brought no source of heat for Bella. Inside the down sleeping bag still wearing her clothes, coat, and boots, she began suffering hypothermia as the temperature dropped and the wind howled around us. Bella was far too cold to sleep. Her fingers and toes had gone numb and she could barely speak, her teeth were chattering so violently.

Amidst all that, Bella was worried most about the scent trail she had laid down so meticulously in the forest.

“W-w-w-will the s-s-s-s-now r-r-ruin m-m-my t-t-t-t-trail?” she asked. Despite the cold stutter, I understood her words.

“No, your scent is more robust than that. The newborns won’t have any trouble finding it.”

I was beside myself with worry. I had tried repeatedly to convince her to let me carry her off the mountain. I could cover the nine miles at full speed and get her somewhere warm in no time. Bella refused. She was so cold already that she couldn’t bear the thought of being out in the wind. She was also worried that we wouldn’t have time to get ourselves back up the mountain before the newborns arrived in the morning.

“W-w-w-w-w-what t-t-t-t-time is it?” Bella chattered.

“Two.”

I sat as far from Bella as I could in the small four-man tent. If only I were warm-blooded, my exhalations would help her, but I wasn’t and my presence only made the space colder. I stopped breathing except to speak.

“Maybe...” I began, thinking of another argument for leaving the mountainside.

“No, I’m f-f-f-f-fine, r-r-r-really. I don’t w-w-w-want to g-go outside.” Bella didn’t want to disrupt our plan—as if that would matter when she died in the snowstorm!

Every time her teeth knocked together, I cursed myself that I hadn’t thought to bring a propane heater, or even to research the location of hot springs in the area. They were scattered all over the Olympic Mountains, many of which were still active volcanoes. Hot lava beneath the surface of the earth heated underground pools of water which found their way to the

surface, forming natural hot tubs. Temperatures varied anywhere from 90 to 110 degrees. Bella could have been soaking away the chill.

“What can I do?” I entreated her.

She shook her head—nothing.

Outside the tent, Jacob, in his wolf form, whined and howled. *She’ll freeze! Be a block of ice like you! You have to do something!*

“G-g-g-get out of h-h-h-ere,” Bella stuttered, alarmed at his cries.

“He’s just worried about you,” I explained. “He’s fine. *His* body is equipped to deal with this.”

“H-h-h-h-h,” Bella huffed, but no perceptible words emerged.

Bella thought Jacob was suffering in the storm, but that wasn’t the problem. Through the walls of the tent, he was badgering me to take Bella off the mountain.

“What do you want me to do?” I finally snapped at him. “Carry her through *that*? I don’t see you making yourself useful. Why don’t you go fetch a space heater or something?”

I am a space heater, he retorted silently.

“I’m ok-k-k-k-k-kay,” Bella insisted.

I groaned and Jacob growled. Bella would keep saying that until her tongue froze to the roof of her mouth. A sudden gust of wind tried to rip the tent from the mountain.

Suddenly, Jacob’s ear-piercing howl cut through the air. Bella covered her ears in pain. I wanted to growl.

Send Seth. I’m going human to warm up Bella in the tent, Jacob informed Sam.

“That was hardly necessary,” I complained, referring to the noise. Sam could hear his thoughts just fine. “And that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” I called to him.

“Better than anything you’ve come up with,” Jacob replied in his human voice. He had phased already. “*Go fetch a space heater*,” he mimicked. “I’m not a St. Bernard.”

Close enough, I thought, though a St. Bernard would be more pleasant.

In truth, using Jacob’s body heat was an obvious solution to our problem—and it was quickly becoming our only option. But the thought of him snuggling with Bella in *my* place was

deeply disturbing, especially since his thoughts about her the night before had been so transparent and offensive.

A man can't help what he thinks, I heard my father say in my head. In this case, I might have disagreed with him. Jacob had better, anyway, or he was unlikely to make it through the night in one piece.

Jacob unzipped the tent door partway and squeezed his gigantic body through the gap, re-zipping quickly as snow blew in behind him. He held a parka in his hand.

"I don't like this," I snarled. "Just give her the coat and get out." I *definitely* didn't like the direction Jacob's thoughts had taken. He was anticipating squeezing into the sleeping bag with Bella in his usual state of undress.

My objection wasn't entirely self-serving. It had been only a short time since Jacob had kissed Bella against her will. I didn't want her to worry that he would try something like that—or worse—again. I didn't like his idea in principle, either. Bella was now my *fiancée*, soon to be my wife, after all.

Then something even more disturbing occurred to me. *What if she liked it?* He was warm and soft like her, with a beating heart and heated breath. And teenage hormones too! Surely, all that was more appealing than cold, hard me.

"The parka's for tomorrow," Jacob said, dropping it on the floor. "She's too cold to warm it up by herself. It's frozen. You said she needed a space heater, and here I am." Jacob held his arms out. His wingspan was wider than the tent.

With Jacob inside, space was tight. I pulled my legs to my chest in the farthest corner to avoid contact with his gargantuan body. I didn't dare touch Bella because my body temperature was exactly that of the air around us—seventeen degrees Fahrenheit. What I wouldn't have given to be warm-blooded! I shook with anger and frustration as Jacob crawled toward Bella's shivering form, but there was nothing I could do. She needed his body heat.

Bella looked at Jacob's near-naked body in surprise. "J-J-J-Jake, you'll f-f-f-freez-z-z-ze."

"Not me," he replied in what felt like a taunt aimed at me. "I run at a toasty one—oh—eight point nine these days. I'll have you sweating in no time."

That final remark *was* meant to provoke me and it did. I snarled as he unzipped the sleeping bag and prepared to climb in next to *my* Bella. I grabbed his bare shoulder as a

warning. His body stiffened and I sensed his barely controlled werewolf anger rocket to the surface.

“Get your hand off of me,” he snarled with flared nostrils.

“Keep your hands off of her,” I responded menacingly.

“D–d–don’t f–f–f–fight,” Bella begged.

“I’m sure she’ll thank you for this when her toes turn black and drop off,” Jacob sneered.

I fought to regain some semblance of self–control. If Jacob phased inside the tent, Bella would be hurt. *Dammit!* I fairly screamed inside my head. Why couldn’t I give Bella what she needed? Why hadn’t I planned for this? If I’d just brought a heater, Jacob’s “services” would not be required! But he was right. Bella could lose fingers or toes overnight. I could barely restrain my fury and frustration as I let go of him and moved back into my corner.

“Watch yourself,” I warned. If Jacob made one wrong move, if he so much as breathed on Bella inappropriately, I’d have him out of that tent and flying down the mountain so fast his head would spin.

He snickered knowing that I had no choice but to let him sleep with her. It was the only way.

“Scoot over, Bella,” Jacob ordered.

Bella stared at him in surprise. “N–n–n–n–n,” she tried to object.

“Don’t be stupid. Don’t you *like* having ten toes?”

Jacob unzipped the sleeping bag, shoved in beside Bella, and forced the zipper closed behind him. He was delighted by the tight quarters and by the fact that Bella clung to his chest in her desperation to be warm. He jerked away when her fingers touched his bare ribs.

“Jeez, you’re freezing, Bella.”

“S–s–s–s–sorry.”

“Try to relax,” Jacob coaxed. “You’ll be warm in a minute. Of course, you’d warm up faster if you took your clothes off.”

How dare he? I knew he was taunting me, but it still made me angry. I growled a threat.

“That’s just a simple fact. Survival one–oh–one.”

“C–c–cut it out, Jake,” Bella said as she continued to shiver. “N–n–n–nobody really n–n–n–needs all ten t–t–t–toes.”

“Don’t worry about the bloodsucker. He’s just jealous,” Jacob announced with satisfaction.

I knew that the angrier I got, the better Jacob liked it, so I struggled to make my voice calm. “Of course I am,” I replied quietly. “You don’t have the faintest idea how much I wish I could do what you’re doing for her, mongrel.”

“Those are the breaks,” Jacob retorted, before his cockiness gave way abruptly to discouragement. He added softly, “At least you know she wishes it was you.”

“True.” I smiled to myself. If Bella was enjoying this fiasco, she wasn’t letting on. Mostly, she seemed ill–at–ease, but I noticed that her teeth had stopped chattering. I would keep myself calm by focusing on that. Bella was warming up and that was a good thing.

“There,” Jacob soothed. “Feeling better?”

“Yes,” Bella said without a stutter.

“Your lips are still blue,” Jacob goaded. “Want me to warm those up for you, too? You only have to ask.”

I heaved a sigh.

“Behave yourself,” Bella ordered and then went quiet. The blue color in her lips had faded to white with pink in the center. Bella kicked her feet, removing her boots, and then Jacob jerked again. Bella was torturing him by pressing her frozen toes against his bare legs.

At that moment, Bella was as close to Jacob physically as she had ever been to me, pressed against his hot skin. She was, in fact, going to sleep with him, something I would never be able to do. Just thinking the words “sleep with him” made me sick with jealousy.

“Jake?” Bella muttered into the silence. I thought she had dropped off. “Can I ask you something? I’m not trying to be a jerk or anything, I’m honestly curious.”

“Sure,” he chuckled.

“Why are you so much furrer than your friends? You don’t have to answer if I’m being rude.” I didn’t know why Bella was being so polite. Jacob never was.

“Because my hair is longer,” he said, avoiding the whole truth.

“Oh. Then why don’t you cut it? Do you like to be shaggy?” Bella asked innocently.

I chuckled at Jacob’s embarrassment.

“Sorry,” Bella said. “I didn’t mean to pry. You don’t have to tell me.”

Jacob grunted. “Oh, he’ll tell you anyway, so I might as well.... I was growing my hair out because...it seemed like you liked it better long.”

“Oh. I, er, like it both ways, Jake. You don’t need to be...inconvenienced.”

“Turns out it was very convenient tonight, so don’t worry about it,” he replied.

Bella’s heart rate gradually slowed and her breath slowed and evened out. I was surprised she could sleep with the howling of the wind and the flapping of the nylon tent fabric.

“That’s right, honey, go to sleep,” Jacob whispered.

Bella sighed and we all went quiet.

“Seth is here,” I muttered under my breath some time later. He had just reached the ridge and was coming around the side of the little campground. He settled himself under a tree out of the falling snow.

“Perfect. Now you can keep an eye on everything else, while I take care of your girlfriend for you.”

Jacob was asking for it...but I could wait. I still had my yes.

Bella became conscious enough to groan, “Stop it,” and then she dropped off again.

Jacob hadn’t, though. He was in a heightened state of arousal with the object of his affection lying stretched out against him. His mind slid into a fantasy in which Bella nuzzled his chest, then stretched her lips toward his in a rush of desire, stroking his chest with her fingers, pressing herself against...

“Please!” Do you *mind?* I hissed between clenched teeth.

“What?” Jacob whispered as if he’d forgotten that his head was an open book—or more like a bullhorn, actually.

“Do you think you could *attempt* to control your thoughts?”

“No one said you had to listen. Get out of my head,” he shot back.

"I wish I *could*. You have no idea how loud your little fantasies are. It's like you're shouting them at me."

"I'll try to keep it down," he replied sarcastically. Now that he'd been reminded I could hear his thoughts, he directed a comment my way.

You can't make love to her, I bet. It would be too easy for you to kill her, am I right?

I don't know why I answered him. Perhaps it was because I had trespassed on a private moment in his head and I felt I owed him one, or maybe it was because Bella's teeth had stopped chattering and she had drifted off to sleep, safe.

"Yes," I said softly, "I'm jealous of that, too." Jacob was gleeful at my admission. Though he'd turned his back to me, I could feel him smiling. I wasn't going to divulge the promise I had given Bella to "try."

"I figured it was like that. Sort of evens the playing field up a little, doesn't it?"

Ah, yes. Give him an inch and he'll take a mile. I had to chuckle at his never-ending optimism. "In your dreams," I replied.

Then he took another half mile. "You know, she could still change her mind, considering *all* the things I could do with her that you can't. At least, not without killing her, that is." He Rolodex'd through several offensive images of himself with Bella.

"Go to sleep, Jacob," I warned him. "You're starting to get on my nerves."

"I think I will. I'm really very comfortable." Jacob paused for a few moments and then asked silently, *Would you answer a personal question?*

"Maybe I would," I replied softly. I was willing if it would keep Jacob's mind from wandering in the unpleasant direction it had before.

"But would you be honest?"

"You can always ask and see." I rather hoped he would ask whether I had proposed to Bella. The thought made me smile.

"Well, you see inside my head—let me see inside yours tonight, it's only fair."

"Your head is full of questions. Which one do you want me to answer?"

"The jealousy...it *has* to be eating at you. You can't be as sure of yourself as you seem. Unless you have no emotions at all."

“Of course it is,” I sighed. Admitting that painful truth made it easier to admit the next. “Right now it’s so bad that I can barely control my voice. Of course, it’s even worse when she’s away from me, with you, and I can’t see her.” That’s why I could tolerate this intolerable situation—because Bella was still within my sight and within reach of my arms should she need me.

“Do you think about it all the time? Does it make it hard to concentrate when she’s not with you?” In asking his questions, Jacob was telling me more about himself than he would learn about me. At moments such as these, I could feel the vast age difference between us. Funny, that I could be so old and he so young and yet both of us suffer from the same heartache.

“Yes and no,” I answered him truthfully. “My mind doesn’t work quite the same as yours. I can think of many more things at one time. Of course, that means that I’m *always* able to think of you, always able to wonder if that’s where her mind is, when she’s quiet and thoughtful.” That’s one of the reasons it was so hard to tolerate not hearing Bella’s thoughts. If she were anyone else, I wouldn’t *have* to wonder all the time.

Does that happen a lot...I mean, that she thinks about me when she’s with you?

“Yes, I would guess that she thinks about you often,” I answered. “More often than I like. She worries that you’re unhappy. Not that you don’t know that. Not that you don’t *use* that.” I smiled wryly. Jacob was good at making Bella feel sorry for him...not that I considered that a sound technique for winning a woman.

“I have to use whatever I can. I’m not working with your advantages—advantages like her knowing she’s in love with you.”

“That helps,” I said, thinking of Bella’s yes to me the night before. It was a little unfair to Jacob that he didn’t know. He would be furious when he found out and less likely to want to keep Bella warm, perhaps. I kept it to myself.

“She’s in love with me, too, you know,” Jacob asserted.

I didn’t have a response to that. It was my biggest fear...and Jacob seemed so sure.

He sighed. “But she *doesn’t* know it.”

“I can’t tell you if you’re right,” I admitted.

“Does that bother you? Do you wish you could see what she’s thinking, too?”

“Yes...and no, again. She likes it better this way, and, though it sometimes drives me insane, I’d rather she was happy.”

The tent shook violently in the wind. Jacob’s thoughts immediately diverted to protecting Bella from the storm.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Odd as this might sound, I suppose I’m glad you’re here, Jacob.”

“You mean, ‘as much as I’d love to kill you, I’m glad she’s warm,’ right?”

I smiled. That was it exactly. It was impossible to dislike someone who loved Bella, even if I hated him a little too.

“It’s an uncomfortable truce, isn’t it?” I remarked.

“I knew you were just as crazy jealous as I am,” Jacob said, triumphantly.

“I’m not such a fool as to wear it on my sleeve like you do. It doesn’t help your case, you know.”

“You have more patience than I do.”

“I should. I’ve had a hundred years to gain it. A hundred years of waiting for *her*.” That should give Jacob some perspective on the relative gravity of our positions.

“So...at what point did you decide to play the very patient good guy?”

“When I saw how much it was hurting her to make her choose. It’s not usually this difficult to control. I can smother the...less civilized feelings I may have for you fairly easily most of the time. Sometimes I think she sees through me, but I can’t be sure.”

“I think you were just worried that if you really forced her to choose, she might not choose you.”

I thought about that for a moment. There were times when Bella needed Jacob and I wouldn’t do, times when she wanted to feel young and carefree. For example, riding her motorcycle was something she only wanted to do with Jacob. My tendency to be overprotective got in the way. But that was just one side of Bella. Her past might have been more Jacob’s than mine, but I thought her future was with me.

“That was a part of it,” I admitted. “But only a small part. We all have our moments of doubt. Mostly I was worried that she’d hurt herself trying to sneak away to see you. After I’d

accepted that she was more or less safe with you—as safe as Bella ever is— it seemed best to stop driving her to extremes.”

Jacob sighed. “I’d tell her all of this, but she’d never believe me.”

“I know.” I was smiling at Jacob’s dilemma. Even if he knew about my personal failings and misgivings, it wouldn’t help in his competition for Bella’s affection. She had an altogether higher opinion of me than I deserved. Jacob sure didn’t!

“You think you know everything,” he complained.

“I don’t know the future,” I said. Until Bella married me, I would not lose this uncomfortable shadow of doubt. And if I couldn’t have her, I *had* no future. That was a certainty.

Jacob finally grew quiet, pondering his own future, both with and without her.

“What would you do if she changed her mind?” he finally asked.

“I don’t know that either.” I wondered why he even cared about what I did if he won and I lost. I didn’t have to wait for the answer—he didn’t care.

“Would you try to kill me?” Jacob’s voice sounded like a smirk, implying that I might find that a challenge. I wasn’t sure where Jacob had gotten the false impression that I couldn’t tear him apart in an instant if I chose to. I would never choose to, though, so I guess he wouldn’t find that out.

“No.”

“Why not?” Jacob asked, his tone implying that I’d be scared to try.

“Do you really think I would hurt her that way?” He understood so little about me. I would hurt myself a thousand times before I would hurt Bella merely to indulge my anger. That would be true forever. And that said something else about the difference between him and me. His attitudes were those of a young, testosterone-driven human.

He sighed, seeming to consider the point. “Yeah, you’re right. I know that’s right. But sometimes...”

“Sometimes it’s an intriguing idea.” I smiled. One never got so old that a good bone-rattling, no-holds-barred brawl lost its appeal. Jacob let loose an abrupt laugh and then covered his mouth to quiet the sound. In some ways, we were very much alike.

“Exactly,” he agreed when he had stopped laughing.

Then suddenly, Jacob turned serious.

“What is it like? Losing her?” His voice sounded raspy. “When you thought that you’d lost her forever? How did you...cope?”

“That’s very difficult for me to talk about.”

Jacob was silent, assuming that I would anyway. *In for a dime, in for a dollar...*

“There were two different times that I thought that,” I mused, each word a tiny prick of pain. “The first time, when I thought I could leave her...that was...almost bearable. Because I thought she would forget me and it would be like I hadn’t touched her life. For over six months I was able to stay away, to keep my promise that I wouldn’t interfere again. It was getting close—I was fighting but I knew I wasn’t going to win; I would have come back...just to check on her. That’s what I would have told myself, anyway. And if I’d found her reasonably happy...I like to think that I could have gone away again.

“But she wasn’t happy. And I would have stayed. That’s how she convinced me to stay with her tomorrow, of course. You were wondering about that before, what could possibly motivate me...what she was feeling so needlessly guilty about. She reminded me of what it did to her when I left—what it still does to her when I leave. She feels horrible about bringing that up, but she’s right. I’ll never be able to make up for that, but I’ll never stop trying anyway.”

Jacob stopped to think about whether he would be able to leave her and stay away if she decided in my favor rather than his. And he wondered how long it would take him to get over it. He didn’t think that he ever would.

“And the other time—when you thought she was dead?” Jacob whispered to keep his voice from cracking. *Like she will be to me if you make her one of you*, he added silently. *You’re going to, aren’t you?*

I responded to the silent part of his question.

“Yes. It will probably feel like that to you, won’t it? The way you perceive us, you might not be able to see her as Bella anymore. But that’s who she’ll be.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I can’t tell you how it felt. There aren’t words,” I snapped.

“But you left because you didn’t want to make her a bloodsucker. You *want* her to be human.” His voice took on a desperate edge.

“Jacob, from the second that I realized that I loved her, I knew there were only four possibilities. The first alternative, the best one for Bella, would be if she didn’t feel as strongly for me—if she got over me and moved on. I would accept that, though it would never change the way I felt. You think of me as a...living stone —hard and cold. That’s true. We are set the way we are, and it is very rare for us to experience a real change. When that happens, as when Bella entered my life, it is a permanent change. There’s no going back....

“The second alternative, the one I’d originally chosen, was to stay with her throughout her human life. It wasn’t a good option for her, to waste her life with someone who couldn’t be human with her, but it was the alternative I could most easily face. Knowing all along that, when she died, I would find a way to die, too. Sixty years, seventy years—it would seem like a very, very short time to me....But then it proved much too dangerous for her to live in such close proximity with my world. It seemed like everything that could go wrong did. Or hung over us...waiting to go wrong. I was terrified that I wouldn’t get those sixty years if I stayed near her while she was human.

“So I chose option three. Which turned out to be the worst mistake of my very long life, as you know. I chose to take myself out of her world, hoping to force her into the first alternative. It didn’t work, and it very nearly killed us both.

“What do I have left but the fourth option? It’s what she wants—at least, she thinks she does. I’ve been trying to delay her, to give her time to find a reason to change her mind, but she’s very...stubborn. You know *that*. I’ll be lucky to stretch this out a few more months. She has a horror of getting older, and her birthday is in September....”

“I like option one,” Jacob muttered.

I had no answer for him.

“You know *exactly* how much I hate to accept this,” Jacob finally said grudgingly, “but I can see that you do love her...in your way. I can’t argue with that anymore. Given that, I don’t think you should give up on the first alternative, not yet. I think there’s a very good chance that she would be okay. After time. You know, if she hadn’t jumped off a cliff in March...and if you’d waited another six months to check on her... Well, you might have found her reasonably happy. I had a game plan.”

I chuckled. Jacob’s plan, which he’d already begun to execute when Bella jumped from the cliff, had been a month-by-month escalation of their relationship. First, he’d play the buddy role while he got rid of Mike Newton, whom he thought Bella also liked. Then he would take her hand, hug her and put his arm around her every chance he got until she was comfortable with that. Then, he would wait for the right moment when Bella was feeling

vulnerable to entice her into that first kiss. All the while, he would suck up to Charlie and integrate himself into her family and she into his, and include her in tribal functions, all of which would make it easy for Bella to slide right into a long-term relationship with him, almost without noticing. It reminded me of how the Venus flytrap acquired its dinner.

I chuckled again as I spoke. “Maybe it would have worked. It was a well thought-out plan.” As was the one he was executing now.

“Yeah.” Jacob sighed. “But...” *you screwed it all up by coming back*, he finished silently. Then he showed his hand.

“Give me a year, bl — Edward. I really think I could make her happy. She’s stubborn, no one knows that better than I do, but she’s capable of healing. She would have healed before. And she could be human, with Charlie and Renee, and she could grow up, and have kids and...be Bella. You love her enough that you have to see the advantages of that plan. She thinks you’re very unselfish...are you really? Can you consider the idea that I might be better for her than you are?”

“I *have* considered it,” I told him honestly. “In some ways, you would be better suited for her than another human. Bella takes some looking after, and you’re strong enough that you could protect her from herself, and from everything that conspires against her. You *have* done that already, and I’ll owe you for that for as long as I live—forever— whichever comes first....

“I even asked Alice if she could see that—see if Bella would be better off with you. She couldn’t, of course. She can’t see you, and then Bella’s sure of her course, for now. But I’m not stupid enough to make the same mistake I made before, Jacob. I won’t try to force her into that first option again. As long as she wants me, I’m here.”

“And if she were to decide that she wanted me?” Jacob demanded arrogantly before his tone changed to one of concession. “Okay, it’s a long shot, I’ll give you that.”

As of last night, I thought his shot had become a full-court “Hail Mary,” but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t take the possibility of his sinking it seriously. My answer sounded much easier than it ever would be.

“I would let her go.”

“Just like that?”

“In the sense that I’d never show her how hard it was for me, yes. But I would keep watch. You see, Jacob, *you* might leave *her* someday. Like Sam and Emily, you wouldn’t have a choice. I would always be waiting in the wings, hoping for that to happen.”

Jacob grunted at the unlikelihood that he would ever love someone else.

“Well, you’ve been much more honest than I had any right to expect...Edward. Thanks for letting me in your head.”

“As I said, I’m feeling oddly grateful for your presence in her life tonight. It was the least I could do.... You know, Jacob, if it weren’t for the fact that we’re natural enemies and that you’re also trying to steal away the reason for my existence, I might actually like you.”

It was easier to imagine liking Jacob now that Bella had accepted my proposal of marriage. I didn’t mind Jacob being in Bella’s life; in fact, I was grateful for his friendship with her, as long as he kept things within those boundaries, and stopped trying to be her lover and my rival. I was anxious for the subterfuge to end. He *should* know of our commitment.

“Maybe...if you weren’t a disgusting vampire who was planning to suck out the life of the girl I love...well, no, not even then.”

I chuckled. Jacob was nothing if not honest (at least when he wasn’t working on his game plan). Then I remembered something disturbing Bella had talked about in her dreams again.

“Can I ask you something?” I inquired.

“Why would you have to ask?”

“I can only hear if you think of it. It’s just a story that Bella seemed reluctant to tell me about the other day. Something about a third wife...?”

“What about it?”

...the entire tribe was lost, the last wolf would die, the third wife thrust a knife into her stomach to distract the vampire and the wolves tore it apart...”

Suddenly, I understood and hissed at the thought.

“What?”

“Of course,” I fumed. “Of course! I rather wish your elders had kept *that* story to themselves, Jacob.”

“You don’t like the leeches being painted as the bad guys? You know, they *are*. Then *and* now.”

“I really couldn’t care less about that part. Can’t you guess which character Bella would identify with?”

Jacob thought for a minute. “Oh. Ugh. The third wife. Okay, I see your point.”

“She wants to be there in the clearing. To do what little she can, as she puts it.” I sighed. “That was the secondary reason for my staying with her tomorrow. She’s quite inventive when she wants something.”

“You know, your military brother gave her the idea just as much as the story did.”

He was right. “Neither side meant any harm,” I whispered.

We thought our separate thoughts until Jacob asked, “And when does *this* little truce end? First light? Or do we wait until after the fight?”

We both took a moment to consider that. We wouldn’t be fighting together, so there was no need to be friendly tomorrow.

“First light,” we whispered simultaneously, and then chuckled together.

“Sleep well, Jacob. Enjoy the moment,” I said, feeling generous in victory. He would be happy this one last night. I intended to break the news to him in the morning, whether Bella liked it or not. It was unfair to deceive him when he had such a high stake in Bella’s decision.

The storm had begun to let up and blew less fiercely than it had earlier. The temperature seemed slightly warmer as well. In the quiet, I heard Jacob’s mind as he relaxed and became drowsy.

Mmm, I’m so horny, I don’t know if I can sleep. I’m not even sure I want to, he thought as he sniffed Bella’s hair and stroked her lower back.

“Argh!” I growled. “I didn’t mean that quite so literally.”

“Sorry,” Jacob whispered. “You could leave, you know—give us a little privacy.” Again, with the taunting.

“Would you like me to *help* you sleep, Jacob?” I offered. It would be satisfying to knock him out with a gentle blow to the head.

“You could try,” he retorted. “It would be interesting to see who walked away, wouldn’t it?” What a cocky little S.O.B. Jacob was. He would never give it a rest.

“Don’t tempt me too far, wolf,” I responded. “My patience isn’t that perfect.”

Jacob backed down with a laugh. "I'd rather not move just now, if you don't mind."

Ah, let him have his fun, I thought magnanimously. Morning would come soon enough.

I began to hum Bella's lullaby to remind myself of what she and I had between us and what lay ahead. As Jacob's thoughts once again drifted in an unsavory direction, I hummed louder. Ignoring him for a few hours would be my final gift to him before he had good reason to hate me forever.

22. Eclipsed

The night had been difficult, painful in the extreme. Something good had come of it, I suppose...Jacob and I had faced one another in a couple hours of honest exchange. We both knew more about each other than we had before. Strangely, I no longer felt compelled to use Jacob's vulnerabilities against him in our battle for Bella's heart. He did not feel the same way, however.

Jacob had a moment of triumph about 3:30 a.m. when Bella began talking in her sleep. He was disgusted and annoyed by what she said...at first. She spoke of me and called my name. She seemed to be dreaming that I was there in the sleeping bag with her. I wish I had been. Her dream changed, however, much to my dismay.

"Jacob, *my* Jacob," Bella stated clearly with apparent pleasure.

Once he got over his initial surprise and delight, the object of her affection was overcome with glee. *That's gotta be frostin' his buns!* Jacob gloated. *I guess the competition isn't as over as he'd like to think it is!*

Fortunately for his health, Jacob decided to keep his comments nonverbal. If he'd spoken them aloud, I would have felt compelled to rearrange his face for him. After considering it further, though, I realized that Bella might not survive the night intact without his body heat, so I had to put up with him until morning no matter what he did.

Did calling *his* name in her sleep along with mine mean she had conflicted feelings? *Dammit!* It had to, didn't it? If so, then getting Bella to agree to marry me didn't mean very much in the end—it didn't mean that she was *sure*, for instance. I was relieved when Jacob dozed off and his soft snoring rather than his conscious thoughts filled the silence, leaving me alone to ponder my dilemma until dawn.

The sun reflected off the remnants of the night's snowstorm and made the light very bright outside. Unused to morning sunshine, Bella woke early. I heard her scuffling inside the sleeping bag, but she seemed unable to move. With difficulty, she stretched her neck enough to peer at me around Jacob's inert mass.

"Is it any warmer out there?" she whispered, not to awaken the hound.

"Yes. I don't think the space heater will be necessary today," I said, consciously erasing all emotion from my voice.

Bella's wiggling grew more frenzied, but to no greater effect.

"Some help?" she requested softly. If she wanted out, I was more than happy to assist her. The thought made me smile.

"Did you want me to take his arms all the way off?"

"No, thank you. Just get me free. I'm going to get heat stroke."

With rapid movement, I reached forward and unzipped the sleeping bag in a single long stroke. Jacob was jammed so tightly inside that the sudden release dropped his naked back squarely onto the frigid tent floor. Now *I* was amused at *his* expense.

Jacob's eyes flew open and his body jerked reflexively from the cold surface. In one swift movement, he had launched himself from the floor and landed on top of Bella. A whoosh of air was forced from her lungs when Jacob's weight compressed her soft form. *That* had not been my intention at all! I grabbed his left leg and flung him off of her in a carefully controlled movement to avoid collapsing the tent.

Jacob had barely hit the cold floor again before he was on his feet and crouched to attack, fierce growls erupting from his chest. His body shook uncontrollably and his hands clenched into fists. I jumped to my feet between he and Bella and snarled. Outside the tent, Seth joined in with noisy growls of distress.

It's a fight! It's a fight! he relayed to the pack, some of whom cheered Jacob on.

"Stop it, stop it!" Bella shouted, crawling around me to get between Jacob and myself. She stretched out her arms and pressed a palm into each of our chests in the small space. Though the touch seemed to calm him, I didn't trust Jacob's control. I grabbed Bella around the waist to shift her out of harm's way at the first sign of danger from the werewolf.

"Stop it, now," Bella ordered me.

I was merely defending. *Jacob* was the aggressor, I grumbled to myself, though he seemed to be regaining some control. Seth was growling furiously, caught up in the excitement of having a pack member stand off against a vampire. It was hard for him not to come crashing into the tent to help. I admired his control, actually, for such a young werewolf.

"Jacob?" Bella inquired. "Are you hurt?" He broke his stare to look at her.

"Of course not!" he returned, offended by the question.

Why was she so worried about *him*? It was *his* fault!

Bella turned to me and said. "That wasn't nice. You should say sorry."

"You must be joking—he was crushing you!" I was astonished...and annoyed.

"Because you dumped him on the floor! He didn't do it on purpose, and he didn't hurt me."

"Arrrgh!" But I couldn't refuse Bella. "My apologies, dog," I said in a hostile tone.

"No harm done," he replied magnanimously, as if he really *were* the injured party.

Stupid mutt!

Bella was annoyed at me for treating Jacob roughly, but she didn't have all the information I had. I was almost sure that he had been in full control of himself when he landed prone on top of her, and that he was just taking advantage of the situation. In his plan to steal Bella, he had been looking for excuses to touch her in more and more intimate ways, believing that he could provoke her into realizing she loved him. After my midnight admission that I "couldn't" make love to Bella, he'd also wanted to show her just how ready, willing, and able he was to "take care of her needs." And I think he wanted to rub my nose in it too. Bella didn't have a clue and I wouldn't tell her, of course.

I noticed that Bella had started to shiver in the icy morning air, so I picked up Jacob's parka and wrapped it around her.

"That's Jacob's," she protested.

"Jacob has a fur coat," I said evenly. It was time for the wolf to get out of my tent.

"I'll just use the sleeping bag again, if you don't mind. I wasn't quite ready to wake up. That wasn't the best night's sleep I ever had."

"It was your idea," I reminded him.

Jacob settled himself back into the sleeping bag. "I didn't say it wasn't the best night I've ever spent. Just that I didn't get a lot of sleep. I thought Bella was never going to shut up." Of course he would bring that up in front of her.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," I said, concealing my annoyance.

"Didn't you have a nice night, then?" he continued in a mocking tone. This was not a wise tactic on his part.

“It wasn’t the worst night of my life.” The worst, by far, was when I thought Bella had died jumping from a cliff. Perhaps it was good to be reminded of that just then. It put things in perspective.

“Did it make the top ten?” Jacob pressed. All right. He was begging for it.

“Possibly,” I admitted. “But if I had been able to take your place last night, it would not have made the top ten of the best nights of my life. Dream about that.”

Jacob sat up abruptly. I had put the thought into his head and it would torment him for a long time to come. Now he couldn’t help but think about Bella and I lying together night after night, doing whatever his active imagination conjured up. Served him right for being so smug.

“You know what? I think it’s too crowded in here,” he said, suddenly uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t agree more.”s Bella gave me a poke in the ribs for my rudeness, which no doubt gave *her* a bruised elbow.

“Guess I’ll catch up on my sleep later, then,” Jacob decided. He unpacked his enormous frame from the sleeping bag, which would have to be destroyed. The combination of his sweaty human and wet dog scents mixed with Bella’s flowery essence was too much to take. “I need to talk to Sam, anyway,” he said, excusing himself.

Good riddance, I thought with relief, but the feeling dissolved quickly when Bella grabbed Jacob’s arm to prevent his departure.

“Jake, wait—” she protested. He shrugged her off. “Please, Jake? Won’t you stay?”

Begging *him* to stay? Whatever was she *thinking*?

“No,” he answered sharply, before adding in a gentler tone, “Don’t worry about me, Bells. I’ll be fine, just like I always am. ‘Sides, you think I’m going to let Seth go in my place—have all the fun and steal all the glory? Right,” he snorted.

“Be careful—” Bella began, but Jacob quickly exited the tent and zipped up the door behind him.

“Give it a rest, Bella,” he mumbled. Then he phased to his wolf form.

Bella wanted *both* Jacob and I to sit out the battle with her. A stab of pain pierced my chest and I inhaled sharply. She cared for him too, of course she did. I just didn’t know how much.

My mind shuffled through everything I had learned during the night, weighing things Jacob had said. Would it be more advantageous to tell Jacob the competition was over or to keep the engagement a secret from him? Bella and I sat together in the tent for a long time without speaking. It was one of those moments when I wished I knew what she was thinking.

“How much longer?” Bella asked, breaking the silence.

“Alice told Sam it should be an hour or so.”

“We stay together. No matter what,” Bella verified, clinging to my arm.

“No matter what,” I promised.

“I know,” she said. “I’m terrified for them, too.” I wondered what she had seen in my expression to make her say that. I *was* more worried about my family than I would be if I were fighting with them. Then I realized that Bella had been referring to the wolf pack.

“They know how to handle themselves,” I said, with forced confidence. “I just hate missing the fun.”

Bella grimaced and I wrapped an arm around her.

“Don’t worry.” I kissed her on the forehead.

“Sure, sure,” she said noncommittally.

“Do you want me to distract you?” I offered, stroking her cheekbone with my fingertips. Bella shivered violently. “Maybe not right now.” *So much I cannot give you that he can.* The thought rolled around in my mind, battering me anew every few seconds.

“There are other ways to distract me,” Bella said, interrupting my bout of self-pity.

“What would you like?” I asked.

“You could tell me about your ten best nights. I’m curious.”

So she had caught that. I chuckled, my mood suddenly lighter.

“Try to guess,” I suggested.

She declined with a shake of her head. “There’re too many nights I don’t know about. A century of them.”

“I’ll narrow it down for you. All of my best nights have happened since I met you.”

“Really?”

I replied with the confidence of perfect recall. “Yes, really—and by quite a wide margin, too.”

“I can only think of mine,” Bella said after a pause.

“They might be the same,” I pressed. I very much wanted to know what memories were precious to her.

“Well, there was the first night. The night you stayed.”

“Yes, that’s one of mine, too. Of course, you were unconscious for my favorite part,” I said, remembering her words, *Edward...I love you.*

“That’s right. I was talking that night, too.”

“Yes.” So she remembered. That was heartening. Caught up in the memory, I didn’t foresee her next question.

“What did I say last night?” she whispered, a slight agitation in her voice.

I shrugged, downplaying it.

“That bad?” Bella groaned.

I sighed. I had to tell her. It made it worse knowing that Jacob was within hearing range. Though he was silent, his thoughts were loud in the stillness of the snow-blanketed forest. He was listening intently to our conversation.

“Nothing too horrible,” I murmured under my breath, beneath what I thought was his hearing range.

“Please tell me.”

“Mostly you said my name, the same as usual,” I said, raising my voice a little. *Got that, mongrel? She said your name once in all the months I’ve lain with her, and mine nearly every night.*

“That’s not bad,” Bella stated tentatively.

Whispering just loud enough for Bella to hear, I told her, “Near the end, though, you started mumbling some nonsense about ‘Jacob, my Jacob.’” I paused to collect myself. “Your Jacob enjoyed *that* quite a lot.” I trained my eyes on the ceiling so Bella couldn’t see what I couldn’t hide.

“Sorry. That’s just the way I differentiate.”

“Differentiate?”

“Between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Between the Jacob I like and the one who annoys the hell out of me,” she clarified.

I thought about that for a moment. So, a *part* of Bella loves a *part* of Jacob. It wasn’t the same as what she felt for me, I realized with relief.

“That makes sense. Tell me another favorite night.”

“Flying home from Italy.”

I crinkled my forehead in confusion. *That couldn’t be right.* Bella registered my doubt.

“Is that not one of yours?” she asked.

“No, it *is* one of mine, actually, but I’m surprised it’s on your list. Weren’t you under the ludicrous impression I was just acting from a guilty conscience, and I was going to bolt as soon as the plane doors opened?”

“Yes. But, still, you were there.” Bella smiled warmly at me, her eyes shining. With tears?

I leaned over to kiss her tangled mass of hair. That she could have been happy flying home with me after what I’d done to her, especially since she believed I was about to do it again, was beyond my comprehension.

“You love me more than I deserve,” I told her, reconsidering my fears and misgivings.

Bella laughed dismissively.

“Next would be the night after Italy,” she went on.

“Yes, that’s on the list. You were so funny.” I didn’t bother to lower my voice. Jacob was still within hearing range, but feeling reassured of Bella’s love, I didn’t mind his hearing our conversation.

“Funny?” Bella queried.

“I had no idea your dreams were so vivid. It took me forever to convince you that you were awake.” I grinned, remembering her surprise and prolonged confusion that I was still in her room in the morning.

"I'm still not sure," Bella added. "You've always seemed more like a dream than reality. Tell me one of yours, now. Did I guess your first place?"

"No—," I began, surprised that it wasn't obvious. Well...now *everybody* would know and maybe that was for the best. "That would be two nights ago, when you finally agreed to marry me." I heard the flurry of Jacob's thoughts while he processed what I had just said. He froze in disbelief.

Bella screwed up her face to indicate her disagreement.

"That doesn't make your list?" I looked at her sideways, a challenge.

She paused, contemplating. I didn't have to read her mind to know what she was thinking. She squirmed a little before answering.

"Yes...it does. But with reservations. I don't understand why it's so important to you. You already had me forever." I felt Jacob's shock at hearing Bella verify my words.

"A hundred years from now, when you've gained enough perspective to really appreciate the answer, I will explain it to you," I said, smiling. By then, all of this turmoil and doubt will have passed away along with all the humans we knew. But there would still be "us," the one thing in our future that we could hold onto forever.

"I'll remind you to explain—in a hundred years." I hoped that she would.

Jacob's paralysis of shock and denial wore off as the werewolf absorbed what he'd heard from both Bella's lips and mine.

"Are you warm enough?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said, as usual. "Why?"

I didn't have to reply. Jacob's howl of rage and pain exploded into the quiet morning air. It went on and on and I felt the rage gradually lessen and the pain increase until, finally, the sound spent itself in a muffled stutter. The only recognizable word in his mind was "escape." He began to run.

I answered gently. "Because your space heater has reached his limit." Then to myself, I muttered "Truce over."

Jacob had had one memorable night to entertain his fantasies and to hold onto his misapprehensions before dawn came and tore them away.

"Jacob was listening," Bella stated flatly.

“Yes.”

“You knew.”

“Yes.”

“I never promised to fight fair,” I told her. “And he deserves to know.”

Bella slumped over, hiding her face in her hands.

“Are you angry with me?” I asked quietly.

“Not you. I’m horrified at *me!*” Her voice came out a tortured wail.

“Don’t torment yourself,” I implored, stunned that she would feel responsible for Jacob’s pain, as if she had caused it or could ever heal it. On second thought, though, maybe she did have that power over him.

“Yes, I should save my energy to torment Jacob some more,” Bella cried. “I wouldn’t want to leave any part of him unharmed.”

“He knew what he was doing.”

“Do you think that matters?” Tears welled in Bella’s eyes. “Do you think I care whether it’s fair or whether he was adequately warned? I’m *hurting* him. Every time I turn around, I’m hurting him again. I’m a hideous person.” The antipathy in Bella’s voice was agonizing, directed at herself as it was. What had I done?

“No, you’re not,” I countered in an effort to reassure. I pulled her to my chest, trying to interrupt the escalation of emotion I could feel building in her, taking over.

“I am! What’s wrong with me? I have to go find him.” Bella tried to shake off my embrace and I released her, letting my arms fall limply to my sides.

“Bella, he’s already miles away, and it’s cold,” I said, trying to reason with her.

“I don’t care. I can’t just *sit* here. I have to—I have to...” Bella was thrashing wildly, flinging off Jacob’s parka and jamming her feet into her boots. I sat, helplessly watching as she scuttled through the tent flap into the bright sunshine outside.

I shook myself into action when I heard snow crunching beneath Bella’s feet. At first, I trailed her through the clearing, uncertain what to do. Then she staggered into the dense forest, frozen evergreen limbs creaking as she pushed them out of her way, and spraying snow

into the air when they snapped back. In one version of the future, Alice had seen Bella stumbling about in the woods with me searching for her.

“Seth,” I spoke softly, directing my question to where he lay beneath a spruce tree at the edge of the clearing. “How much time before the battle? Ask Sam to ask Alice.” Then I took several quick steps to catch up with Bella, and reached for her wrist to stop her progress.

Seventeen minutes, Seth thought in answer to my request.

“You can’t go after him. Not today,” I told Bella. “It’s almost time. And getting yourself lost wouldn’t help anyone, regardless.”

Bella tried to break my grip.

“I’m sorry, Bella. I’m sorry I did that.” Remorse colored my words. I’d hurt her again, this time in my selfish effort to stake my claim and fend off Jacob’s challenge.

“You didn’t do anything. It’s my fault. I did this. I did everything wrong. I could have...When he...I shouldn’t have...I...I...” Bella’s voice disintegrated into a sobbing stutter.

“Bella, Bella,” I crooned, trying to soothe her as I held her shaking body to my chest. Tears ran down her face.

“I should have—told him—I should—have said—” She paused. “He shouldn’t have—found out like this.” Her wracking sobs tore at my heart. I had to do something.

“Do you want me to see if I can bring him back, so that you can talk to him?” I spoke quietly, working hard to control my voice. “There’s still a little time.”

I felt Bella’s head bob twice, but she kept her eyes cast down. It was just as well. I wasn’t sure my expression was fully under my control.

“Stay by the tent. I’ll be back soon.”

I turned, sniffing the air to locate Jacob’s scent, then taking off at full speed. As I ran, my mind flailed around, trying to come to terms with Bella’s reality. It wasn’t just that Jacob loved my Bella and wouldn’t let her go, though that was true. Bella couldn’t let *him* go either. A part of her needed him badly enough that it tore her up when our natural animosity rose to the surface.

Jacob and I could not coexist in any proximity to one another. Bella had to choose between us and she had just made it clear that she was unsure. It was an opening for Jacob and I knew he would take his best shot.

Jacob heard me running behind him and whipped around to protect himself. I stopped a good distance away and held up my hands, palms raised, to show that I had no aggressive intentions. He flicked his tail and snarled. I didn't blame him.

"Jacob," I said, "Bella cannot bear for you to leave in this way. It's tearing her apart. I'm begging you, please, for her, to come back and talk to her before you go. I'm afraid she'll endanger herself trying to follow you down the mountain." I stopped speaking abruptly when my voice quavered.

Jacob's black eyes peered into my mine, considering, assessing. I turned my back to him—the wolf equivalent of laying down my sword—and began to retrace my steps, slowly at first, until I heard him grunt his begrudging consent, then I started running. He kept some distance between us, but I knew he was following. Seth growled when he heard us coming.

"It's just us, Seth," Jacob called from the woods as he pulled on his clothing (such as it was).

I entered the clearing where Bella was pacing back and forth along a short line like a tiger in too small a cage. Her body was rigid, but her tears seemed to have stopped. How I longed to know what she was thinking!

Seth approached me. *Sam says that Alice says that the Volturi are coming. She thinks they are following the newborn vampires, but their intentions are fuzzy. That's a big problem isn't it?*

The *Volturi!*? "Yes, that's all we need," I muttered. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. But the timing is going to be very close. Please have Sam ask Alice to try to nail the schedule down better." I carefully chose my words, so as not to alarm Bella. She didn't need to hear that the second group who wanted to assassinate her was following in the footsteps of the first. We'd have to deal with each problem as it came at us.

I hurried to Bella's side. Jacob was waiting on the edge of the woods for Bella to approach and speak to him.

"Bella," I said gently, filtering my concern about the Volturi and all the pain I was feeling from my voice. "There's a bit of a complication," I said as lightly as I could manage. "I'm going to take Seth a little ways away and try to straighten it out. I won't go far, but I won't listen, either. I know you don't want an audience, no matter which way you decide to go." My voice faltered on the last words. I would try to accept whatever she decided, but my emotions had not yet caught up to my resolve.

“Hurry back,” she whispered, anguish written across her face. I composed my expression into a neutral mask and gave her a light kiss. I’m not sure what I meant by it, perhaps I just wanted to remind her that I loved her too and that I was still there for her.

I kept my word, leading Seth into the woods where we could confer with our allies below. Listening to the pack mind helped me shut my ears to what was happening on the ridge above us.

As best Alice could tell, the Volturi would arrive in fifty–five minutes. It was imperative that we finish off the newborns and get the wolves out of the area before then. If they learned of the wolves’ lethal power against our kind, they would commence destroying them immediately. We would be forced into supporting our werewolf allies in a battle against the Volturi that none of us believed we could win. Timing would be critical in determining whether any of us survived the day.

While Seth and I communicated with Sam, another part of my mind remained alert for sounds of distress from Bella. I blocked Jacob’s thoughts and hummed to myself to drown out Bella and Jacob’s conversation when I wasn’t speaking to Seth. If Bella raised her voice in a cry or scream, though, I would not miss it. I was close enough to reach her side in seconds if need be.

Eight minutes after I left Bella with Jacob, I heard him dash into the woods and run at full speed down the mountainside. His joy was obvious when he rejoined the pack mind. Was that it, then? It was time to find Bella and learn my fate.

She was lying on her stomach in the tent, her face buried in the folds of the sleeping bag. Things didn’t look good.

I lowered myself beside her and stroked her disheveled hair.

“Are you all right?” I asked softly.

“No. I want to die,” she replied, her voice low and raspy.

“That will never happen. I won’t allow it.” That was the only thing I was certain of in that moment.

“You might change your mind about that,” Bella mumbled miserably.

“Where’s Jacob?”

“He went to fight,” Bella said, without raising her head.

Seth had followed me up to the ridge and was pacing back and forth outside. Jacob was trying to keep his thoughts to himself, but he couldn't hide his ecstasy over Bella's response to him. He'd finally gotten the physical reaction from her that he'd craved for so long.

The entire scenario played itself out in Seth's mind as Jacob relived it in his own. I listened and felt the collective recoiling of the nine other souls connected to Jacob's thoughts.

The pack consensus was: *Too much information.*

"Oh," I uttered when I saw the passionate kiss Bella and Jacob had shared.

The word sounded surprisingly neutral, almost free of the gut-wrenching emotion that lay behind it. I flinched when the second kiss replayed, tender and sweet. It wasn't as if I hadn't figured out that Bella loved Jacob, but it didn't make the pain any easier to take.

Then I began to process how Jacob had manipulated Bella into giving him that kiss. I saw how she had resisted his ardent embrace and how he'd manhandled her into feeling something. Not that what she felt wasn't real—I knew that it was. And Jacob had gotten his wish. Bella finally recognized what he'd known all along...that her feelings for him ran deep. From my perspective the outcome was unpleasant, but I had to admit that Jacob's maneuver was brilliantly accomplished. I chuckled at his shameless guilt-tripping of Bella into requesting his kiss.

"And I thought I fought dirty," I said, smiling. "He makes me look like the patron saint of ethics." Bella was still hiding her face from me. I brushed her hair back and stroked the side of her cheek. "I'm not mad at you, love. Jacob's more cunning than I gave him credit for. I do wish you hadn't asked him, though."

"Edward, I...I...I'm—"

"Shh," I said. "That's not what I meant. It's just that he would have kissed you anyway—even if you hadn't fallen for it—and now I don't have an excuse to break his face. I would have really enjoyed that, too."

"Fallen for it?" Bella muttered, not understanding.

"Bella, did you really believe he was that noble? That he would go out in a flame of glory just to clear the way for me?"

Bella looked up at me with wide, startled eyes, a gullible lamb that had chased a handful of clover to the abattoir.

"Yes, I did believe that," she said, lowering her eyes quickly.

I chuckled again. “You’re such a bad liar, you’ll believe anyone who has the least bit of skill.”

“Why aren’t you angry with me? Why don’t you hate me? Or haven’t you heard the whole story yet?” Bella whispered, her tortured face finally turning toward mine.

“I think I got a fairly comprehensive look,” I told her, my lips twitching in amusement. “Jacob makes vivid mental pictures. I feel almost as bad for his pack as I do for myself. Poor Seth was getting nauseated. But Sam is making Jacob focus now.”

Bella dropped her face to the floor again and groaned.

“You’re only human,” I whispered, stroking her hair and rubbing her back as she wallowed in her mortification.

“That’s the most miserable defense I’ve ever heard.”

“But you are human, Bella. And, as much as I might wish otherwise, so is he.... There are holes in your life that I can’t fill. I understand that.”

“But that’s not true. That’s what makes me so horrible. There are no holes.”

“You love him,” I said softly. I had stopped fighting the truth and it was time for Bella to stop fighting it too. Such feelings didn’t disappear by wishing them away. Acceptance was the only way through.

After a long silence Bella replied with tears in her voice. “I love you more.”

“Yes, I know that, too. But...” I paused to regain control of my voice. “...when I left you, Bella, I left you bleeding. Jacob was the one to stitch you back up again. That was bound to leave its mark—on both of you. I’m not sure those kinds of stitches dissolve on their own. I can’t blame either of you for something I made necessary. I may gain forgiveness, but that doesn’t let me escape the consequences.”

“I should have known you’d find some way to blame yourself. Please stop. I can’t stand it.”

“What would you like me to say?”

“I want you to call me every bad name you can think of, in every language you know. I want you to tell me that you’re disgusted with me and that you’re going to leave so that I can beg and grovel on my knees for you to stay.”

Because I have the mind that I do, Bella's suggestion ignited a fuse of secondary thoughts. In four seconds, I had silently rattled off a hundred insulting words in twenty languages for "unfaithful woman." None of them applied to Bella. She wanted me to punish her for her feelings.

"I'm sorry. I can't do that," I sighed.

"At least stop trying to make me feel better. Let me suffer. I deserve it."

"No." I could never allow Bella to suffer over me as she had once before.

She considered for a moment, before discovering another way to punish herself. "You're right. Keep on being too understanding. That's probably worse."

Edward, Seth called to get my attention. Alice said the newborns are almost here.

Bella noticed my distraction. "It's getting close," she guessed.

"Yes, a few more minutes now. Just enough time to say one more thing...." The intensity of my emotion made my voice come out in a whisper. "I can be noble, Bella. I'm not going to make you choose between us. Just be happy, and you can have whatever part of me you want, or none at all, if that's better. Don't let any debt you feel you owe me influence your decision."

There, I'd said the words to let her go. If she didn't feel free to do what she wanted, then convincing her to marry me was a hollow victory. I couldn't control her feelings—I wouldn't try to control her choices either.

"Dammit, stop that!" Bella hollered.

I was stunned. "No—you don't understand. I'm not just trying to make you feel better, Bella, I really mean it."

"I know you do," she said irritably. "What happened to fighting back? Don't start with the noble self-sacrifice now! Fight!"

Fight? Jacob? I had no more strength for it. Winning her by hurting someone she loved was not a triumph. Bella continued to stare at me, a spark of anger in her eyes that I couldn't comprehend.

"How?" I finally asked. Clearly, I was missing something.

Bella threw herself onto my lap and molded her body to mine.

"I don't care that it's cold here. I don't care that I stink like a dog right now. Make me forget how awful I am. Make me forget him. Make me forget my own name. Fight back!"

Oh.

As much as I wanted to give Bella everything she wanted, what she thought she wanted now was not in her best interest. I could never take advantage of her while she was in such a vulnerable state. Nor did I want to. But at that moment, Bella was wrapped around me like a second skin, all of her tumultuous emotion channeled into kissing me passionately— just as she had kissed Jacob not ten minutes before. I met her lips with mine, but gently, in full control of my faculties.

"Careful, love," I said, pulling back.

"No."

I took her face in my hands and pushed her away slightly so I could see her eyes. "You don't have to prove anything to me," I said mildly.

"I'm not trying to prove something. You said I could have any part of you I wanted. I want this part. I want *every* part."

With her arms around my neck and her legs wrapped around my waist, Bella stretched up to kiss me again and I touched my lips to hers, feeling cautious and confused. She continued her assault, pressing her breasts into my chest and rocking her pelvis rhythmically in my lap. I desired her. Of course I did. I longed to throw her onto her back and tear off her clothes.

But I couldn't. It wasn't right. With effort, I collected my wits and placed my hands on her waist, calming her provocative movements. Then I took her face in my hands and gently pushed her lips away. I exhaled a deep breath, trying to release the urgent feelings in my body.

"Perhaps this isn't the best moment for that," I observed.

"Why not?" Bella challenged belligerently.

I remained still and after a moment, she removed her arms from around my neck and went limp, dropping her head so I couldn't see her face.

"Firstly, because it is cold."

I grabbed the sleeping bag and wrapped her in it, completely separating her from the frigid temperature of my stone form. When we did make love—if we did—it should be somewhere warm, I suddenly realized. The warmer the better. I felt hope rise in me again.

Perhaps we were both making more of this episode than was necessary. It still felt like Bella's heart was mine. I hoped so.

"Wrong," Bella retorted, interrupting that train of thought. "First, because you are bizarrely moral for a vampire." I laughed at her description.

"All right, I'll give you that. The cold is second. And thirdly...well, you do actually stink, love." I wrinkled my nose. She did smell too doggy to be enticing. Jacob's scent was in no way an aphrodisiac to me.

Bella sighed.

"Fourthly," I whispered directly into her ear, "we will try, Bella. I'll make good on my promise. But I'd much rather it wasn't in reaction to Jacob Black."

I felt Bella's embarrassment as she shrank slightly and hid her face in my shoulder.

"And fifthly..."

"This is a very long list," Bella complained drolly and I laughed in response.

"Yes, but did you want to listen to the fight or not?"

With precision timing, Seth let loose a long howl, signaling that the battle had begun.

23. Battles

Inside the tent, Bella was so tense that she was digging her fingernails into her bandaged palm. If it weren't for the brace on her other hand, I'm sure it would have been doing the same. I carefully unclenched her fingers and put my hand in hers.

"It's going to be fine, Bella," I said calmly. "We've got skill, training, and surprise on our side. It will be over very soon. If I didn't truly believe that, I would be down there now—and you'd be here, chained to a tree or something along those lines."

"Alice is so small," Bella cried.

I chuckled. "That might be a problem...if it were possible for someone to catch her."

Outside the tent, Seth was complaining. *Why do I have to be here when all the good stuff is happening down there?*

We're smelling them. Oooh... They stink worse than the Cullens.

Sorry Edward, Seth appended to the pack's comment. He began to whimper then, alarming Bella.

"What's wrong?"

"He's just angry that he's stuck here with us. He knows the pack kept him out of the action to protect him. He's salivating to join them."

Watching the pack mind through Seth, I began commentating the action for Bella. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to see my family's separate battle in the clearing until the wolves joined them there.

"The newborns have reached the end of the trail—it worked like a charm, Jasper's a genius—and they've caught the scent of the ones in the meadow, so they're splitting into two groups now, as Alice said." It took some concentration to explain the action while following it through seven sets of eyes from seven different angles. It was thrilling, though, with so much to see and hear.

"Sam's taking us around to head off the ambush party," I murmured. Then I noticed Bella's heart pounding wildly, but her respiration had stopped.

“Breathe, Bella,” I reminded her and then continued. “The first group is in the clearing. We can hear the fighting.” I wished I could see them too...my family.

Bella went rigid next to me and I squeezed her hand gently.

The pack stood in formation, crouched and utterly silent in the woods, waiting. I hooted once when I heard that my brother was whooping it up in the clearing.

“We can hear Emmett—he’s enjoying himself. The second group is getting ready—they aren’t paying attention, they haven’t heard us yet.”

“I’m getting her.”

“No, she’s mine. Get out of my way!”

I growled, frightening Bella.

“What?” she gasped.

“They’re talking about you,” I explained angrily. “They’re supposed to make sure you don’t escape.”

“What’s that smell? It really stin—,” said a large newborn before getting the surprise of his life.

“Nice move, Leah! Mmm, she’s quite fast,” I exclaimed. Then to Bella, “One of the newborns caught our scent, and Leah took him down before he could even turn. Sam’s helping her finish him off. Paul and Jacob got another one, but the others are on the defensive now. They have no idea what to make of us. Both sides are feinting....”

Jared darted forward, nearly tripping Sam.

“No, let Sam lead. Stay out of the way,” I coached, despite my distance from the action. “Separate them—don’t let them protect each other’s backs.”

I wanna be... I wanna go..., Seth whined.

“That’s better, drive them toward the clearing.” I was so caught up in the fight that I was moving around, taking abortive stabs at the newborns myself as if I could affect the fight below.

Then my ears caught something much closer. Seth heard it too and froze into silence.

“It leads this way. Keep up! You didn’t see her down there, smell her?”

“No. They probably hid her somewhere. Maybe the psychic knew we were coming.”

"She couldn't have. I didn't decide."

"No, not you, but the rest of us."

"She's got to be with him. They're always together."

I *recognized* that squeaky, childlike voice! It was *Victoria!* She and her companion were following my scent trail and getting closer by the second! I jumped to my feet instantly, pulling Bella with me. With two great swipes of my hand, I shredded the tent, freeing us to move in whatever direction was required. Seth leaped toward me silently, stopping with his nose a few inches from my face.

They're here?

I nodded at him minutely.

Two?

Another nod.

Shall I hide in the trees for an ambush?

"Go, Seth!" I agreed with a whisper.

He wheeled around and darted into the woods. I grabbed Bella's waist and swung her to a safer position with her back against the sheer cliff wall. Then I crouched in front of her defensively and waited, ready for combat.

"Who?" Bella whispered.

I didn't bother to lower my voice. It was too late to run. "Victoria," I answered with seething hatred. "She's not alone. She crossed my scent, following the newborns in to watch—she never meant to fight with them. She made a spur-of-the-moment decision to find me, guessing that you would be wherever I was. She was right. You were right. It was always Victoria."

For many long months, I had wanted nothing more than a chance to destroy Victoria, but I'd never wanted Bella—or Seth, for that matter—to be anywhere near when it happened. Since nothing could be done about that now, I was grateful that Seth was hiding in the woods ready to launch a surprise attack.

They appeared on the far side of the little clearing, the newborn wrangler in the lead, a tall, blonde vampire, possibly less than a year old. I recognized his scent from Bella's bedroom.

It was *Victoria* who had sent him on that reconnaissance mission to collect Bella's scent for baiting the army. Just as Bella had guessed.

It was easy to identify nomads—the longer they lived in a wild state, the more feral they appeared. They took on the characteristics of lions or tigers, always pacing or crouched tautly ready to spring. Their eyes swept back and forth continually to catch every movement in their field of vision.

Victoria was very thirsty and her ebony eyes were glued to Bella. The fiery redhead had scented her and, though she would prefer to drink Bella's blood, she was vindictive enough to settle for crushing my love's heart. If I didn't eliminate her, Victoria wouldn't get far before she fed on someone, possibly someone in La Push or Forks.

Victoria's plan was to send Riley—her "Jasper"—across the clearing to engage me, giving her the opportunity to steal Bella. She wasn't concerned about Riley's welfare. She only needed him to last long enough for her to complete her mission. It wouldn't have been a bad plan if I hadn't had a secret weapon waiting in the wings.

Bella trembled behind me in fright, but I kept my eyes on the approaching combatants. Riley had begun stalking. He knew that I had special abilities and was clearly frightened of me, though he tried hard not to show it. Victoria was prepared to leap across the clearing, snatch Bella, and escape. She had escaped from me innumerable times when I tracked her across Texas and seemed to possess a talent for it.

The wolves had nearly finished destroying their half of the newborn army. Paul bayed into the sky, a premature victory howl. The wolves hadn't entered the clearing yet, so I still had no news of my family.

Victoria signaled at Riley to attack. Poor child. He didn't know that if he did, he was as good as dead. It seemed only fair to give him an option to escape that fate.

"Riley," I said, in a gentle, coaxing voice.

He froze.

"She's lying to you, Riley. Listen to me. She's lying to you just like she lied to the others who are dying now in the clearing. You know that she's lied to them, that she had *you* lie to them, that neither of you were ever going to help them. Is it so hard to believe that she's lied to you, too?"

Riley hesitated, suddenly unsure.

I fainted to the side and Riley matched my movement.

“She doesn’t love you, Riley,” I continued. “She never has. She loved someone named James, and you’re no more than a tool to her.”

I caught the sharp pain that Victoria acknowledged in her mind at the mention of her mate, though she remained stoic. Riley was wavering, not wanting to accept my story, but halfway believing me, nevertheless. His attention drifted back to Victoria, imploring her with his eyes. Hers were still locked on Bella.

“Riley?” I called to pull his focus back to me while Seth crept forward to the edge of the trees. Our plan was for Seth to engage the less experienced fighter, while I battled the wily escape artist. Bella would be unguarded if we had to fight at the same time.

“She knows that I will kill you, Riley. She *wants* you to die so that she doesn’t have to keep up the pretense anymore.” Riley flinched. “Yes—you’ve seen that, haven’t you? You’ve read the reluctance in her eyes, suspected a false note in her promises. You were right. She’s never wanted you. Every kiss, every touch was a lie.”

I fainted to the side to test Riley’s concentration. He matched me, but more slowly than last time. His determination and confidence were slipping. If I could not convince him to retreat, then at least he would be softened up for Seth’s attack. Victoria was tempted by the small gap I’d left between Bella and myself. She was judging the space between us and whether it was enough for her to dart in and seize Bella.

“You don’t have to die,” I assured the newborn. “There are other ways to live than the way she’s shown you. It’s not all lies and blood, Riley. You can walk away right now. You don’t have to die for her lies.”

I moved forward and a little further from Bella, luring Victoria closer. As much as she wanted to get at Bella, she also wanted to stay a safe distance from me. The tension between the two desires kept her frozen in place. I needed her to approach close enough so that I could grab her. I slid further forward, creating a one-foot gap between me and Bella. Victoria was itching to make her move.

“Last chance, Riley,” I whispered as I fainted again. His reaction was slightly off-balance. He looked toward Victoria anxiously.

“He’s the liar, Riley,” Victoria squeaked in her babyish voice. “I told you about their mind tricks. You know I love only you.” That half-hearted assurance was enough to restore Riley’s devotion and solidify his decision to attack me. He assumed—wrongly, of course—that Victoria would back him up. Riley crouched and bared his teeth.

I didn't have to tell Seth when the right moment came. He instinctively knew when Riley's attack was imminent and, one second beforehand, leaped from his hiding place, a creature of nightmares.

"No!" Victoria screamed.

Seth slammed Riley to the ground and took a chunk from his hand with a metallic screech, tossing it aside. Victoria gazed longingly at Bella.

"No," she hissed as she realized she had been tricked. She would have to get past me before she'd get a chance at Bella.

Riley got to his feet and kicked Seth hard in the shoulder, snapping a bone. Seth winced and backed off, circling. Victoria began circling me, or rather, semi-circling me, as my back was to the cliff. She quickly discovered that I always beat her to wherever she moved. With my mind-reading ability, she couldn't outmaneuver me.

Seth snapped another chunk out of Riley and tossed it away. When Victoria saw that Riley was in trouble and that getting to Bella would be more difficult than she anticipated, she began to back into the trees. She was stuck between her burning obsession to kill Bella and her desire to escape. If she escaped this time, I didn't know when I might get another opportunity to destroy her. I knew she would not stop chasing Bella as long as she existed.

"Don't go, Victoria," I crooned. "You'll never get another chance like this."

She snarled and hissed, caught in indecision.

"You can always run later. Plenty of time for that. It's what you do, isn't it? It's why James kept you around. Useful, if you like to play deadly games. A partner with an uncanny instinct for escaping. He shouldn't have left you—he could have used your skills when we caught up to him in Phoenix."

She snarled in fury.

"That's all you ever were to him, though," I said to provoke her further. "Silly to waste so much energy avenging someone who had less affection for you than a hunter for his mount. You were never more than a convenience to him. I would know." I half-smiled and tapped the side of my forehead.

Enraged, Victoria shrieked and dashed out of the trees toward me, feinting to the side, but finding me there already.

Seth barked in pain as Riley connected with his flank. He hobbled backwards toward Bella and me, letting the vampire drive him to our position. When Riley got too close, Seth snapped to move him back. Victoria was closing in too. Seth circled near me and brushed his tail across my back.

I'll guard Bella when the redhead attacks.

Victoria gasped. *It's touching him! Werewolves don't make friends. Maybe it's going to attack him.*

"No, he won't turn on me," I told her confidently, moving closer to her when her eyes slipped across to Seth. "You provided us with a common enemy. You allied us. Look more closely, Victoria," I purred, distracting her. "Is he really so much like the monster James tracked across Siberia?"

That caught her attention and her eyes darted to Seth again, then defensively to me, then to Bella with longing, around and around. "Not the same?" she hissed. "Impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible," I crooned as I moved slightly closer, preparing to attack. "Except what you want. You'll never touch her."

Here when you're ready, Seth thought.

Victoria saw the larger space I'd left between me and Bella and lunged, but I was already there to block. Then she crouched and I crouched and the battle was on!

This is what I'd been waiting for—a chance to fight the demon that would snuff out the life of my beloved. As we tangled, we must have looked to Bella like little more than dervishes, whirling through the air, but there was a rhythm to it. She attacked; I moved. She attacked again; I moved again. Her talent for escaping didn't let her avoid my strikes, and I clobbered her several times.

Seth kept on the alert, and when Riley became distracted by Victoria and me, took another bite out of him. Riley struck back with a kick and I almost felt the blow that he delivered to Seth's chest. Seth slammed into the cliff face and then fell to a heap on the ground right in front of Bella. He was all that lay between her and Riley. For a second, I panicked for both Seth and Bella.

I'm okay over here. Playing dead.

Whew! I exhaled with relief. Seth was trying to lure Riley in close so he could pounce on him.

Then suddenly, I smelled Bella's blood—rich, sweet, and fresh! I panicked for a second time. *Oh my God! What's wrong? Bella!*

Victoria and Riley smelled it too and their eyes snapped to its source. Through Victoria's eyes I saw a terrifying sight—Bella, against the face of the cliff, holding a weapon to the inside of her elbow, a shard of basalt. Was she trying to cut a vein? I clutched for one horrifying second before I realized that a few blood drops didn't constitute a serious injury. She'd merely nicked her skin. I released my interrupted breath.

The third wife... Bella simply could not be stopped when she was determined.

I smell blood. What do I do? Edward? Is she okay?

With Victoria distracted by the blood, I served up a heavy blow to her chest, which sent her spinning into a large spruce tree. In the brief moment it took her to recover, I intercepted Riley who was lunging toward Seth and Bella. Twisting around backwards, I grabbed Riley's arm and wrenched it from his body with a swift kick between his shoulder blades. Then I turned around to find Victoria launching herself at me. With a mighty heave, I shot Riley's amputated arm at her like a missile. The force of the blow sent her sailing into another tree, which snapped in half and toppled over.

Behind me, Seth raised his head and chomped cleanly through Riley's remaining arm. Victoria's sidekick was done for! Seth leaped to his feet and lunged at the retreating vampire, tearing him to pieces to the din of metallic screeching and agonized screams. Then soon enough, the screams stopped.

Victoria, realizing that she was on her own, began backing away from me, now focused on escape.

"No," I purred. "Stay just a little longer."

At my ominous words, Victoria turned and shot toward the forest. Luckily, I was close enough to her that when I followed at a full sprint, I reached her before she got to the cover of the trees. Hoping with all my heart that Bella wasn't watching, I set my teeth to the back of Victoria's neck and tore her head from her body. I grasped her wriggling form and began tearing off her limbs. She couldn't reassemble herself faster than I could destroy her.

And then it was over—everything but the flames. I heaped Victoria's writhing limbs and bits of torso into a pile and covered them with dry pine needles, all the while avoiding Bella's face. Seeing me as the killer that I am was undoubtedly terrifying to her. I only hoped that she would be able to overcome her fear and revulsion with time. At the moment, I had to finish my task. We had to burn the pieces quickly.

I darted into the woods to collect the smaller bits of Riley, while Seth closed his jaws around the torso and dragged it to the pile, flopping it down on top of Victoria's remains. I pulled out a butane lighter brought for the purpose and lit the tinder on fire.

"Get every piece," I stressed.

We moved about searching for any remaining scraps of the two vampires and tossed them one by one onto the fire. Purple, heavily perfumed smoke rose into the sky, signaling the demise of the two nomads.

Seth was elated and I was relieved at our success. I raised my fist toward him and after baring his teeth in a wolf smile, he bumped his nose against my knuckles.

"Nice teamwork," I said with half a smile.

It's over. We're all fine. The Cullens are fine.

The wolves had chased the last of the newborns into the clearing and dispatched them there. Emmett was in high spirits. Alice told Sam that he and Jasper had been so destructive they hadn't left anything for she and Esme to do except gather up the bits and pieces of deconstructed newborns and add them to the pyre.

It was time for me to face the fallout of our battle. I had never intended for Bella to see me fight and I knew she must be horribly traumatized. I turned slowly toward her and my worries were confirmed. Bella stood with her back against the cliff, a stunned expression on her face—eyes wide, pupils dilated, and her breath fast and shallow, apparently in shock. She was clenching the sharp rock in her hand, holding it up as if she would strike me or anyone else who dared approach her. I saw that she was squeezing it so tightly in her broken hand that her fingers had gone bloodless. Would she cut herself again?

I stepped toward her cautiously, palms forward in a position of surrender as she stared at me with her mouth open. She was *terrified* of me and why not? I'd just torn someone apart with my teeth and bare hands! She must have seen Victoria's detached head bounce off the ground and roll toward the trees. That red hair had haunted Bella's dreams since I'd come back from Italy and probably for a long time before that. It probably would terrorize her with renewed force.

"Bella, love," I said softly, watching her eyes. "Bella, can you drop the rock, please? Carefully. Don't hurt yourself."

She stared at me woodenly, though after a few moments, her fingers loosened and the makeshift weapon fell onto a small pile of rocks with a clack. Otherwise, she moved not at all. I noticed that a few drops of blood had dried inside her elbow.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Bella,” I murmured. “You’re safe. I won’t hurt you.”

I looked for some sign of recognition in her eyes, but they were still blank. If she was in shock, she could collapse at any moment. She could die within minutes from insufficient blood supply to her brain. I had to break through her confusion before the shock worsened. I kept speaking in a soft rhythm, hoping to diffuse her fear and bring her back to the present.

“It’s going to be all right, Bella. I know you’re frightened now, but it’s over. No one is going to hurt you. I won’t touch you. I won’t hurt you,” I repeated.

Her wide eyes continued to stare for a moment, and then she started blinking spasmodically. Gradually, her vision cleared and some awareness returned to her face. She looked at me in confusion.

“Why do you keep saying that?”

She took a tentative step toward me. The movement was robotic and her balance looked questionable. I leaned away from her with my palms still raised.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered. “What do you mean?”

“Are you...” I began. She was asking *me* what was wrong? “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Afraid of you? *Why?*” Bella’s voice quavered. She took another step toward me and then started to fall. I leaped forward, scooping her into my arms. She seemed to flinch slightly at my touch, but then dropped her head against my chest and started to weep uncontrollably. The dam had burst.

I held her against my chest while the emotion that had kept her frozen drained from her body. Bella had witnessed things that no human should ever see. I knew her mind was struggling to process everything that had occurred.

“Bella, Bella, I’m so sorry. It’s over, it’s over.”

“I’m fine,” she choked out. “I’m okay. I’m just. Freaking out. Give me. A minute.”

I hugged her to me. “I’m so sorry...so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Bella’s sobs slowed and eventually she stopped gasping for breath. Then she began kissing my body everywhere she could reach...my chest, shoulders, neck.

“Are you okay? Did she hurt you at all?” Bella voice was a mixture of panic and relief.

“I am absolutely fine,” I said as I buried my face in her hair, profoundly relieved.

“Seth?”

I chuckled. “More than fine. Very pleased with himself, in fact.”

“The others? Alice, Esme? The wolves?”

“All fine. It’s over there, too. It went just as smoothly as I promised. We got the worst of it here.”

Bella paused to consider that, but continued to look confused.

“Tell me why...why did you think I would be afraid of you?”

“I’m sorry. So sorry. I didn’t want you to see that. See *me* like that. I know I must have terrified you.”

Bella looked into space for a few seconds and then her expression changed. “Seriously?” she scoffed. “You...what? Thought you’d scared me off?” Then she snorted. *Snorted!*

I didn’t trust that reaction. It contained a bit too much bravado. I lifted her chin with one hand and looked into her eyes.

“Bella, I just...I just beheaded and dismembered a sentient creature not twenty yards from you. That doesn’t *bother* you?” I frowned.

She shrugged. “Not really. I was only afraid that you and Seth were going to get hurt. I wanted to help, but there’s only so much I can do....”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Your little stunt with the rock. You know that you nearly gave me a heart attack? Not the easiest thing to do, that.”

I stared her down, waiting for an answer.

“I wanted to help.... Seth was hurt....”

“Seth was only feigning that he was hurt, Bella. It was a trick. And then you...!” The words stuck in my throat. “Seth couldn’t see what you were doing, so I had to step in. Seth’s a bit disgruntled that he can’t claim a single-handed defeat now.”

“Seth was...faking?”

I nodded.

“Oh.”

Would have had him too. I didn't need help, Seth grumbled.

“Well, I didn't know that,” Bella said defensively. “And it's not easy being the only helpless person around. Just you wait till I'm a vampire! I'm not going to be sitting on the sidelines next time.”

So anxious to fight! To change! But still...to be my wife, I noted with relief.

I smiled. “Next time? Did you anticipate another war soon?”

“With my luck? Who knows?”

With what faced us at the bottom of the mountain, I certainly hoped not.

24. Betrayal

We had little time to enjoy our victory. What I knew and Bella didn't was that the Volturi guard was on its way. Perhaps it was merely unfortunate timing that they would arrive after the battle *they* should have fought was over, but I thought not.

I would have preferred to explain everything to Bella after we were reunited with my family, but that was not to be.

"Hold on. Didn't you say something before—?" She paused. "About a complication? And Alice, needing to nail down the schedule for Sam. You said it was going to be close. What was going to be close?"

Seth and I exchanged a glance.

"Well?" Bella pressed.

"It's nothing, really," I said. "But we do need to be on our way...." I reached over to hike Bella onto my back.

She leaned away. "Define nothing."

I gave in and took Bella's face between my palms. "We only have a minute, so don't panic, all right? I told you that you had no reason to be afraid. Trust me on that, please?"

"No reason to be afraid. Got it."

I thought about how to explain the situation without terrorizing her again.

Leah, no, wait! Seth thought anxiously.

I whirled around. "What's she doing?"

Seth whined in distress and then I saw what was happening. A dagger of fear sliced through me and I was transported to the clearing, watching the disaster, but unable to do anything about it.

"No! Don't—" I cried, reaching impotently through the ether to pull Leah back. Then I fell to my knees as he gripped us with the strength of three Emmetts, collapsing our bones like an accordion. *Ohhhhhh... I...can't... ohhh...help...noooo....*

“Edward! Edward!” I heard Bella’s panicked call, but it seemed far away. I struggled to escape the pain.

“It’s okay,” I managed to gasp. “We’re going to be fine. It’s—” *Owww!*

“What’s happening?” Bella cried. All the wolves, including Seth, were howling in chorus.

“We’re fine. We’re going to be okay. Sam—help him—” From a corner of my consciousness, I saw Bella begin to topple over. I extended my arm to catch her and the reflex brought me back to the ridge where I saw that Seth’s hair was standing on end.

Gotta go! Gotta go! Seth chanted frantically in his head, silently asking permission to leave us. He stood shuddering, ready to bolt down the mountain.

“Seth! No! You go *straight home*. Now. As fast as you can!” Seth’s dark eyes stared at me in disbelief, the urge to join the pack burning in his legs.

“Seth. Trust me,” I said quietly. It was imperative that he heed my warning. The wolves were in grave danger from the Volturi. I looked into his eyes and saw that he trusted the bond we had forged in our battle. I breathed more easily as he darted toward home.

I didn’t try to encourage Bella onto my back this time, but whisked her into my arms instead. I ran full speed down the mountain, trying to beat the Volturi guard. They could not be trusted...especially Jane.

“Edward.” The word got stuck in Bella’s throat and she tried again. “What happened, Edward? What happened to Sam? Where are we going? What’s happening?”

“We have to go back to the clearing,” I told her gently without slowing my pace. “We knew there was a good probability of this happening. Earlier this morning, Alice saw it and passed it through Sam to Seth. The Volturi decided it was time to intercede.”

Bella became very still.

“Don’t panic. They aren’t coming for us. It’s just the normal contingent of the guard that usually cleans up this kind of mess. Nothing momentous, they’re merely doing their job. Of course, they seem to have timed their arrival very carefully. Which leads me to believe that no one in Italy would mourn if these newborns *had* reduced the size of the Cullen family. I’ll know for sure what they were thinking when they get to the clearing.”

“Is that why we’re going back?” Bella whispered. Her face was more pale than usual and she felt unusually limp. I tightened my arms around her.

“It’s part of the reason. Mostly, it will be safer for us to present a united front at this point. They have no reason to harass us, but...Jane’s with them. If she thought we were alone somewhere away from the others, it might tempt her. Like Victoria, Jane will probably guess that I’m with you. Demetri, of course, is with her. He could find me, if Jane asked him to.”

If Jane found the two of us alone in the woods, I felt certain she would take advantage of the situation. She didn’t like either of us, or Alice, because Aro had taken an interest in our talents. Not to mention her propensity for inflicting pain—it was a form of amusement for Jane.

An odd whining sound began in Bella’s throat. Just what I was afraid of—panic.

“Shh, Bella, shh. It’s all going to be fine. Alice can see that.”

I was exaggerating out of necessity. Though Alice’s vision was back, Bella’s mental state was too volatile to allow her a solid reading. If the two of us were delayed, the outcome was less rosy.

My comment snapped Bella to attention. Alice couldn’t read anything while the pack was nearby and Bella knew it.

“The pack?” she asked suspiciously.

“They had to leave quickly. The Volturi do not honor truces with werewolves.”

Bella began to hyperventilate.

“I swear they will be fine,” I hastened to promise. “The Volturi won’t recognize the scent—they won’t realize the wolves are here; this isn’t a species they are familiar with. The pack will be fine.”

At any moment, Bella would process the fact that something else, something dire, had happened with the pack. I wanted to get her to safety before she did. I ran as fast as I could, but it seemed to take forever to get down that mountain. And just as I’d worried, we didn’t get there before Bella started to piece things together.

“What happened?” Bella repeated. “Before. When Seth was howling? When you were hurt?”

I hesitated.

“Edward! Tell me!”

“It was all over,” I whispered. “The wolves didn’t count their half...they thought they had them all. Of course, Alice couldn’t see....”

“What happened?!”

“One of the newborns was hiding.... Leah found him—she was being stupid, cocky, trying to prove something. She engaged him alone....” Maybe that information would satisfy her for the moment.

“Leah,” Bella repeated. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Leah wasn’t hurt,” I admitted reluctantly.

Bella stared. She knew there was more.

“We’re almost there.”

“Edward,” she finally whispered. “Edward, someone got hurt.”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

I remained silent. She’d seen too much today, been through too much; it was just too much, way too much. Her question hung in the air, and the longer I left it unanswered, the more obvious the answer became.

“Jacob.” I finally replied.

She nodded. “Of course.”

Bella’s body suddenly went limp in my arms. Her head slumped forward onto her chest.
No!

“Carlisle!” I shouted. He, Alice, and Esme were waiting for us when we broke through the trees. “She’s gone into shock!”

Carlisle pressed his fingers to Bella’s wrist.

“Her pulse is strong and regular, Edward. She’s just fainted. Lay her down by the fire.”

I snatched some boughs from the nearest cedar and ran toward the fire, avoiding the newborn that Jasper was guarding nearby.

Surrendered?

I didn’t have time to think about that at the moment. I made a nest of the cedar boughs, close enough to the fire for warmth, but not close enough for Bella to identify the fuel that was

burning. I knelt beside her and took her hand. Esme stroked Bella's forehead and spoke soothingly while Carlisle held her wrist and repeatedly checked her pulse.

"How is Jacob?" I asked my father under my breath.

He's in a tremendous amount of pain, Carlisle answered silently. Leah engaged a hidden newborn alone and Jacob dove between them at the last moment to save her from being crushed.

I'd already seen the disastrous sequence in Seth's mind, but I didn't interrupt the narrative.

It was a heroic move, but foolhardy. Jacob's bones are a disaster, but so far, his vitals are strong. Already he's started to heal with his bones out of place. There wasn't time. Sam had to get the pack out of here.

He looked at me and I nodded.

Now the Volturi are here. Do you find the timing rather odd?

I nodded again.

I need to get to Billy's. I gave Jacob morphine, but he'll need a lot more of it soon.

Carlisle was right. Not only would Jacob's body temperature burn off the morphine before it could do much good, but the longer Carlisle was delayed, the more likely he'd have to re-break Jacob's bones to set them correctly.

That kind of pain.... A human could die from it. I said a silent prayer.

Bella showed no sign of waking.

"Carlisle—it's been five minutes," I fretted.

"She'll come around when she's ready, Edward," my father said calmly. "She's had too much to deal with today. Let her mind protect itself."

"Alice, how long do we have?"

"Another five minutes. And Bella will open her eyes in thirty-seven seconds. I wouldn't doubt that she can hear us now." My sister's confidence was back.

"Bella, honey?" Esme's soft, comforting voice. "Can you hear me? You're safe now, dear."

Suddenly, I realized that as far as Bella knew, Jacob could be dead. I hadn't had a chance to explain before she fainted! I put my lips to her ear.

"He's going to live, Bella. Jacob Black is healing as I speak. He'll be fine." Bella's eyelids twitched in response.

"Oh, Bella." I kissed her pale lips, overcome with relief.

She opened her eyes, a question already on her tongue.

"Edward," she whispered.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Jacob is okay?"

"Yes," I reiterated as convincingly as I could. She might not trust me to tell her the truth. If Jacob had died, I would have hidden that fact until the Volturi crisis was over.

Carlisle saw the problem and spoke to reassure her. "I examined him myself," he said. "His life is not in any danger. He was healing at an incredible rate, though his injuries were extensive enough that it will still be a few days before he is back to normal, even if the rate of repair holds steady. As soon as we're done here, I will do what I can to help him. Sam is trying to get him to phase back to his human form. That will make treating him easier. I've never been to veterinarian school," he added with a smile to quell her fears. He had a masterful bedside manner.

"What happened to him?" Bella whispered. "How bad are his injuries?"

Carlisle repeated the vital facts. "Another wolf was in trouble—"

"Leah."

"Yes. He knocked her out of the way, but he didn't have time to defend himself. The newborn got his arms around him. Most of the bones on the right half of his body were shattered."

Bella visibly recoiled.

"Sam and Paul got there in time. He was already improving when they took him back to La Push."

"He'll be back to normal?"

"Yes, Bella. He won't have any permanent damage."

Bella exhaled and seemed to relax slightly.

“Three minutes,” Alice announced.

We all knew what she meant. Bella struggled to get to her feet and I wrapped my arm around her waist and helped her up. When she looked around, her eyes immediately fell upon the terrified newborn huddled by the fire that was consuming her compatriots. The child, at most fourteen or fifteen in human years, was the last surviving member of Victoria’s army.

I looked at Carlisle.

Esme took pity on her. She didn’t wish to fight, even apologized, so I allowed her to surrender.

I nodded, understanding. Ending any creature’s life was contrary to Carlisle’s nature. He even regretted killing the animals whose blood he required to keep himself functioning. So here was this newborn female—the next Cullen, potentially. Bella was fascinated and couldn’t stop staring at her.

“She surrendered,” I explained. “That’s one I’ve never seen before. Only Carlisle would think of offering. Jasper doesn’t approve.” My brother, who was guarding the child, kept rubbing his forearm.

“Is Jasper all right?” she whispered.

“He’s fine. The venom stings.”

“He was bitten?” Bella’s eyes grew wide.

“He was trying to be everywhere at once. Trying to make sure Alice had nothing to do, actually.” I shook my head. “Alice doesn’t need anyone’s help.”

Alice concurred. “Overprotective fool.”

The newborn writhed and screeched and scratched at the ground in her desperation to attack Bella. She was suffering mightily—the pain of scenting one’s prey, but not drinking its blood was tremendous, particularly for a newborn. She was trying to control herself but it was impossible. She was behaving like the raving monster that she was...that we all are under our civilized facade.

Jasper crouched menacingly over the agitated child, preparing to end her. He worried that the Volturi would punish our family for her mere presence. Carlisle intervened, holding him back with a touch to his arm.

“Have you changed your mind, young one?” Carlisle asked gently. “We don’t want to destroy you, but we will if you can’t control yourself.”

“How can you stand it?” cried the newborn. “I *want* her.”

“You must stand it,” my father told her. “You must exercise control. It is possible, and it is the only thing that will save you now.” The child wailed.

“Shouldn’t we move away from her?” Bella asked. I wished we could. Watching the newborn thrash and moan was one more disturbing experience for Bella in a day full of them.

“We have to stay here,” I explained. “*They* are coming to the north end of the clearing now.” Hearing them, the family gathered quickly, creating a semicircle with Bella in the protected center.

The five Volturi guards approached us through the smoke like apparitions. Though the smallest of the group by two feet, Jane was the obvious leader. She wore an off-black cloak while the others, taking up positions behind her, wore charcoal gray. We’d learned from our time in Italy that among the Volturi, the darker the cloak, the more important the wearer.

“Hmm,” Jane murmured, conveying both judgment and apathy.

As the one best-acquainted with the guard members, I took the lead. “Welcome, Jane,” I said without emotion.

Demetri was in a less amorous mood than when I’d last seen him, but Felix wasn’t. The latter pushed back his hood and winked at Bella.

Weren’t there five? I saw only four guard members—Jane, Alec, Demetri, and Felix—but when I listened, I heard five minds. I pulled Bella closer to me and listened more carefully, matching each set of thoughts to the individuals in front of us. There was one extra mind. *Interesting.* The fifth guard wasn’t hiding, though, waiting to ambush—he stood next to the others...*invisible!* What a useful talent that would be!

Jane examined us one by one. *Really, I don’t see what all the fuss is about. Except for their curious yellow eyes.* Then she spied the newborn.

“I don’t understand,” she said flatly.

“She has surrendered,” I explained.

Jane’s face registered surprise. “Surrendered?”

Felix laughed to himself. *Never heard of that before!*

I shrugged. "Carlisle gave her the option."

"There are no options for those who break the rules," Jane informed us.

My father responded quietly, "That's in your hands. As long as she was willing to halt her attack on us, I saw no need to destroy her. She was never taught."

"That is irrelevant."

"As you wish," Carlisle conceded, as he must. I knew from bitter experience the consequences of crossing the little witch.

Jane stared at Carlisle in complete bewilderment. *Not kill it? How odd he is!* Then aloud, she said, "Aro hoped that we would get far enough west to see you, Carlisle. He sends his regards."

Carlisle nodded. "I would appreciate it if you would convey mine to him."

"Of course." She smiled and gestured toward the fire still releasing lavender smoke. "It appears that you've done our work for us today...for the most part." She glanced at the newborn who was looking at me intently.

"Just out of professional curiosity, how many were there? They left quite a wake of destruction in Seattle."

"Eighteen, including this one," said my father.

Behind Jane, Felix and Demetri exchanged looks. *That many! How did they manage...?*

Alec remained remote with a pleasant, but disinterested look on his face. Next to him, a fifth cloak materialized and then disappeared abruptly. *Bastarde!* it cursed silently. The fifth guard's talent for invisibility was somewhat flawed, it would seem.

Demetri snickered. *Afton is such a loser. Why did he come, anyway?*

"Eighteen?" Jane was surprised. She stared at the fire and considered that.

"All brand-new," Carlisle hastened to clarify. "They were unskilled."

Jane pounced like she had caught him in a lie. "All? Then who was their creator?"

The newborn exclaimed inwardly. *As if they hadn't already been introduced! This Jane is a bigger liar than Riley...and so much better at it than he was.*

I almost raised my eyebrows in surprise, but managed to keep my face expressionless. “Her name was Victoria,” I told Jane, more attuned to the child’s thoughts than before. She knew something about the guard.

“Was?”

I nodded toward the lavender purple plumes of smoke rising from the mountain.

Was? Oh, goood! The young one was jubilant at the news.

“This Victoria—she was in addition to the eighteen here?”

“Yes. She had only one other with her. He was not as young as this one here, but no older than a year.”

Riley. If...okay, when...I die today, at least I won't leave that loose thread. Diego has been avenged.

It seemed that Riley had betrayed the young one’s mate to Victoria who then killed him. The newborn had wanted revenge.

“Twenty,” Jane noted, apparently impressed. “Who dealt with the creator?”

“I did,” I replied.

Jane sought to verify our story with the newborn.

“You there,” she hissed. “Your name.”

The child refused to answer—in defiance, I saw. She didn’t know about Jane’s ability to force her, apparently. Jane smiled her ghastly smile and the newborn’s scream pierced the air. I knew the sensation, a reliving of the burning. I looked away, but couldn’t escape the horrific screaming. I wished Bella didn’t have to hear it.

“Your name,” Jane ordered again. The child slumped to the ground and gasped for breath.

“Bree,” she huffed.

Jane attacked her again, setting Bree’s body on fire. I kept my face smooth when the screaming resumed, though I was screaming at Jane in my head. I wondered suddenly if she got some kind of physical pleasure from torturing, like others got pleasure from sex, or drinking blood.

Can't someone please rip my head off? Carlisle is kind enough, isn't he? Or their mind-reader. Can't he or she understand and make this stop? Bree was begging me for relief.

"She'll tell you anything you want to know," I spat at Jane. "You don't have to do that."

"Oh, I know," Jane trilled in reply. "Bree, is his story true? Were there twenty of you?"

The child lay with her face on the ground, panting, but hastened to answer. "Nineteen or twenty, maybe more, I don't know!" She flinched as if she expected to be attacked again. "Sara and the one whose name I don't know got in a fight on the way...."

"And this Victoria—did she create you?"

"I don't know. Riley never said her name. I didn't see that night...it was so dark, and it hurt...." Bree flinched, remembering. "He didn't want us to be able to think of her. He said that our thoughts weren't safe...."

Jane looked at me momentarily.

We had been right. Victoria had used Riley as a cover so that Alice couldn't see her. If she hadn't revealed herself to me at the top of the mountain, then Riley would have taken the blame. The newborns didn't know Victoria's name. *Clever.*

"Tell me about Riley," Jane said. "Why did he bring you here?"

"Riley told us that we had to destroy the strange yellow-eyes here. He said it would be easy. He said that the city was theirs, and they were coming to get us. He said once they were gone, all the blood would be ours. He gave us her scent." Bree pointed at Bella.

"He said we would know that we had the right coven, because she would be with them. He said whoever got to her first could have her."

I clenched my jaws to stifle a growl.

"It looks like Riley was wrong about the easy part," Jane observed, more kindly than before.

Bree nodded, then tried communicating with me. She thought about Jane talking to Victoria. I listened carefully.

Riley didn't tell us about the dark cloaks visiting Victoria, but I was there. I saw Jane. She doesn't want the yellow-eyes to know, to implicate her or the dark-cloaked Volturi. Hopefully, the mind reader knows now.

I did. So the Volturi guard *meant* to show up after we were destroyed, had given Victoria extra time to accomplish that! *Does Aro know about this?* I wondered. If not, he would find out the next time he read Jane's mind. *Would Aro have approved of Victoria's killing Carlisle and the rest of us?* I didn't think so. His friendship with Carlisle went too far back. Even if he did approve, though, surely he would try to acquire Alice and me and maybe Bella, rather than kill us all outright. It seemed to me that Jane was acting on her own initiative, out of envy, perhaps. I could only hope that she would be thoroughly punished when she returned to Volterra. *Could Aro punish Jane? How?* I wondered.

The newborn started babbling aloud, telling Jane what she wanted to hear so she wouldn't torture her again. "I don't know what happened. We split up, but the others never came." *Did the howler vampires get them? I will keep that secret for the yellow-eyes.*

The child was trying to protect us? I wished that Jane wouldn't kill her. But what could I do about it?

Bree went on, "And Riley left us, and he didn't come to help like he promised. And then it was so confusing, and everybody was in pieces." She shuddered, remembering part of a body she'd had to dodge. "I was afraid. I wanted to run away. That one"—she indicated Carlisle—"said they wouldn't hurt me if I stopped fighting." *I'm not betraying Carlisle in any way. He already told Jane as much.*

"Ah, but that wasn't his gift to offer, young one," Jane said in a soothing manner, completely incongruent with her decision to destroy the child—like smiling beatifically while she tortured someone. Jane was beyond twisted. "Broken rules demand a consequence."

Bree stared at her dumbly. *Be like Kevin*, she thought. I didn't know who Kevin was.

Jane looked at Carlisle. "Are you sure you got all of them? The other half that split off?"

Carlisle nodded. "We split up, too."

So it was the howlers that got Kristie, Bree thought. *I hope that, whatever else they are, the howlers are really, really terrifying. Kristie deserved that.*

I didn't know who Kristie was either, but it was easy to gather that this child didn't think much of her coven members.

"I can't deny that I'm impressed," Jane told Carlisle.

"Yes," agreed the three visible Volturi guards and the fourth one, invisible again.

That's probably the truth, thought Bree. Jane had been hopeful that we—Victoria's army, I guess—would do some damage here, and we clearly failed.

"I've never seen a coven escape this magnitude of offensive intact," Jane went on.

Good. Perhaps our success would give her second thoughts about harassing us in the future.

"Do you know what was behind it? It seems like extreme behavior, considering the way you live here. And why was the girl the key?" She glanced at Bella.

"Victoria held a grudge against Bella," I said.

Bree exclaimed silently. *So that was the strategy! It finally makes sense. Riley just wanted the girl dead and didn't care how many of us died to get it done. Or how many yellow-eyes we killed, either.*

Jane laughed. "This one"—she smiled her torturing smile at Bella and I flinched—"seems to bring out bizarrely strong reactions in our kind."

Damn her! "Would you please not do that?" I requested, trying to keep the fury out of my voice.

"Just checking. No harm done, apparently."

Smug little witch. She's another one I'd like to do away with today! I squeezed Bella more tightly to me, glad for whatever magic made her safe from Jane.

The child was wondering why we "put up" with Bella or if we were keeping her why didn't we make her a vampire. I sighed. It seemed everyone agreed about that except for Jacob and me (and Rosalie).

Jacob! What was Bella going to do about Jacob? The thought flashed through my mind before I could cut it off. Now wasn't the time for it.

"Well, it appears that there's not much left for us to do," Jane said with no emotion. "Odd. We're not used to being rendered unnecessary. It's too bad we missed the fight. It sounds like it would have been entertaining to watch."

"Yes," I shot back. "And you were so close. It's a shame you didn't arrive just a half hour earlier. Perhaps then you could have fulfilled your purpose here."

I was trying to force her to think about her motives and she was trying to keep her mind as blank as her expression and not let me into her thoughts. She was pretty good at it, but when she spoke, she lost her concentration for a second.

...colluding with the redhead...he knows.... Oh well.

I nodded once to acknowledge her thought. The newb—*Bree* was right.

“Yes. Quite a pity how things turned out, isn’t it?” Jane said aloud. I agreed that *they* should have done their job properly, but Jane was thinking that *Victoria* should have been more successful.

The child glanced at me and thought, *Thanks*. I felt a rising panic clutch at my heart. I didn’t want *Bree* to die. Jane had no reason to kill her unless she suspected the child knew too much. She must not suspect her, though, or she wouldn’t have risked asking all those questions in front of us.

“Felix?” With that one word interrogative, Jane ordered *Bree*’s execution.

“Wait,” I blurted out. I turned to *Carlisle*, rushing my words. “We could explain the rules to the young one. She doesn’t seem unwilling to learn. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“Of course,” my father agreed, hoping Jane would allow it. “We would certainly be prepared to take responsibility for *Bree*.”

Jane’s mind was again filled with disbelief. But also amusement. We could do nothing more for the child.

“We don’t make exceptions,” Jane stated, predictably. “And we don’t give second chances. It’s bad for our reputation.”

The vampire cops are dirty—really dirty—but at least the yellow-eyes know now. *Bree* seemed relieved.

I’m so sorry. Thank you for telling me everything. But I knew she couldn’t hear me.

Suddenly, Jane turned on *Bella*. “Which reminds me..., *Caius* will be so interested to hear that you’re still human, *Bella*. Perhaps he’ll decide to visit.”

Jane tried to torture *Bella* again as she spoke, but, thankfully, it didn’t work. I clenched my fists to keep from leaping forward and grabbing Jane by the throat. *Alice* saw me beginning to lose control.

I got this, my sister thought. “The date is set,” she told Jane. “Perhaps we’ll come to visit you in a few months.”

Jane caught the implicit threat—that we might tell Aro about the guard’s delay. Jane ignored Alice but she was more threatened than she let on. Alice had only been guessing, but I *knew* Jane had conspired with Victoria.

Jane decided it was time to leave. “It was nice to meet you, Carlisle—I’d thought Aro was exaggerating. Well, until we meet again....”

Carlisle nodded, but he didn’t bother to return the sentiment.

Bree didn’t seem to be afraid. She only regretted not being able to tell a “Fred” about the “*dangerous politics and dirty cops and secret covens*” in our world. *But Fred is smart and careful and talented. What can they do to him if they can’t even see him? Maybe the yellow-eyes will meet Fred someday. BE NICE TO HIM, PLEASE.* Bree yelled the last thought at me, in case I wasn’t listening.

But I was listening. Of course I was. I only wished I could have done more for her. I made her a silent promise to be kind to this Fred—an escapee from the coven?—should we ever meet him. I hoped we did. I wondered for a brief second what she meant by “*if they can’t even see him?*” Another invisible vampire?

“Take care of that, Felix.” Jane gestured at Bree, bored now. “I want to go home.”

“Don’t watch,” I whispered anxiously in Bella’s ear. She turned her face into my chest.

The child shut her eyes, knowing that her time had come. Perhaps in a way, it might be a relief. In her last moments, she thought about her short, terrible life as a vampire. Victoria had tortured Diego to death because he’d discovered that coven members *could* go outside during the day. He thought Riley didn’t know the truth...but Riley knew and chose to betray him to Victoria. Riley had watched Victoria burn Diego alive, piece by piece...fingers, lips, ears, tongue...a slow, painful death. The memory would have tortured Bree forever. I hated Victoria all the more for causing such suffering...and this child was only one of many victims she had created. I was glad I’d killed her.

Felix didn’t bother being cruel to Bree. Perhaps that wasn’t his thing. He growled and bit through her neck, the quickest way to stop the screaming. Then he and his compatriots tore her apart and lit her pieces on fire. The familiar perfume and lavender smoke rolled toward the sky. At least she would suffer no more.

I rubbed Bella’s back, more than anxious to get her out of there.

“Come,” Jane ordered and the four guards moved out of sight, followed by one nobody could see—most of the time.

25. Aftermath

Battles are exciting and include a certain element of fun—just ask Emmett—until the fighting is over and you face the destruction that has been wrought. In this case, it included two smoldering piles of body parts belonging to twenty former vampires, one crumpled wolf, and one human terrified within an inch of her life. This was, in fact, the biggest and most deadly battle I had been part of and I found the results sobering.

Victoria's debacle cost many more lives than the twenty vampires. Hundreds of humans in the Puget Sound area were murdered to feed the army. The last mass murder that we attribute to them was the sinking of the M.V. Coho, the car ferry traveling from Victoria to Port Angeles. The Coho disappeared during its last run of the night only a few hours before the newborns came looking for us. We assume that the army boarded the ferry, extinguished communications, and attacked the passengers. Four hundred fifty souls remain unaccounted for. At six hundred feet deep, the waters of the strait are unlikely ever to return the bodies.

Back on the battlefield, everyone stood together in the clearing and heaved a sigh of relief. Emmett started laughing and pumped the air with his fist, still juiced up with the excitement of the battle, and the release of the tension that had practically cracked in the air. He picked up Rosalie and swung her around, while Esme leaned her head on Carlisle's shoulder for comfort. She was pained over the death of Bree, whom she'd already taken to her heart. Jasper held Alice while she examined the fresh bite marks on his forearm.

After a few minutes, Carlisle touched my mother's face and said, "I must attend to Jacob. I'll get home as soon as I can."

"Yes, go. He needs you." He kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I'm going too," Bella declared. "I want to see him."

I simply nodded and swung her onto my back and then followed Carlisle home. Once there, Bella wanted to drive her truck to the reservation immediately, but I convinced her it would be faster to ride with Carlisle. I sat her down in the front seat of my father's sedan and said "Stay." Her eyes damp with emotion, she was too upset to smile at the reference.

While Carlisle called Billy Black to ask for permission to visit the reservation, I packed up his portable X-ray machine, an intravenous drip kit, fluids, braces, and other supplies that he would need. Jacob could not go to the local hospital to be examined since his one-hundred eight-degree temperature made him dead by human standards. So, though Carlisle was the

only doctor who could help him, we wouldn't come onto Quileute land without explicit permission from the tribal chief, who was officially Sam Uley, but unofficially, Billy Black.

When the newborn grabbed Jacob and crushed him in his powerful arms, my father had rushed to him across the clearing, but the pack immediately circled the huge, russet wolf and began growling. Carlisle pled with them to allow him to examine Jacob, but they wouldn't budge until Sam emerged from the woods in human form and ordered them to step back.

Jacob had refused to phase to his human form, instinct telling him that he was safer as a wolf, especially when injured, so Carlisle approached carefully. With Sam's permission, he managed to inject Jacob's furry shoulder with several vials of morphine, dodging his teeth when the wolf snapped at him between howls of pain. It wasn't until after the second shot that Jacob stopped snapping and only after the third could Carlisle touch him long enough to check his pulse—what was a normal pulse for a werewolf?—and feel for broken bones. Jacob began howling again in pain immediately, but with the Volturi only moments away, the wolves had to clear the area. Further medical care had had to wait.

I loaded Carlisle's supplies into the back seat of the Mercedes while Bella and I waited for Carlisle. When he joined us, he opened the car door and said, "Bella, your father is still at Billy's."

"Maybe you should stay here with Alice until Charlie goes home," I suggested, since we'd told him Bella had gone to Olympia that day. "Then I'll come and get you."

"No! I have to see him!" she insisted.

"Edward is right, Bella," Carlisle said gently. "I'm going to give Jacob a large dose of sedatives so I can reset his bones. It is likely to be unpleasant and he won't awaken for some time."

Tears welled in her eyes and she quickly wiped them away. "Edward, promise me you'll call the *instant* Charlie leaves."

"I promise, love, I promise," I said, pulling her to me as the tears began to spill over again. "I know you're worried, but Carlisle already took a look at Jacob and he's going to be fine. It'll just take a little time."

"I know," she sobbed, "but I need to see him." I stroked her hair. I understood her concern, but her desperation to be with him broke my heart just a little.

Alice appeared at the garage door. Sometimes it was handy having a psychic around. “I’ve got loads of things to keep us occupied,” she said, as she steered Bella into the house, an arm around her shoulders.

Half a mile from the reservation, we could already hear Jacob’s cursing and moaning, despite the heavy dose of morphine in his system, and the sounds continued growing louder until we pulled up to Billy’s weathered, red cottage. Sam met us at the door. Seven members of the wolf pack were jammed into the small living room along with Billy in his wheelchair and Charlie and Sue Clearwater stationed on the couch.

“I’m here to help Carlisle if that’s okay,” I said politely. Sam nodded, then turned toward the room and bobbed his head at the front door. Jared and Paul, the largest boys in the group, shuffled outside to make room.

“Thank you for coming, Dr. Cullen, Edward,” Billy greeted us. I could see by the deep lines in his forehead and the redness in his eyes how distressed he was. He gestured toward an interior door at the back of the room.

I nodded to Charlie and Sue and followed Carlisle as he maneuvered around the pack members, trying not to touch them. Having Cullens on the reservation was difficult enough for the wolves, but being in that confined space with two of us clearly jangled their nerves. Generations of Quileute had inherited the genes that made us their mortal enemies. Their attitudes wouldn’t change overnight, if ever.

Carlisle and I crowded into Jacob’s tiny bedroom. The smell of sweat and fear and half a dozen werewolves made me cringe. Not Carlisle, though. “How is your pain level?”

“Pretty bad, Doc,” Jacob groaned.

“Your body heat is burning off the morphine. I need to set up an IV drip.” Jacob nodded dully before closing his eyes.

Pathos overcame me, seeing Jacob there in his too-small bed in his too-small room, sweating and suffering, epithets breaking through the tight line of his lips. If I was reading Bella correctly—not a sure thing by any means—another kind of suffering lay ahead of him too. It was the kind of pain I knew well, of jealousy, of rage...hatred too. He would hate me forever for stealing the one he loved.

I stepped out to ask Billy’s permission to shut the bedroom door. Carlisle needed to break and reset Jacob’s already-healing bones. It would be ugly. Sam wisely ordered the pack outside and as they passed the bedroom door in single file, glancing at Jacob’s inert form, they

each glared at me with varying degrees of warning. The wolves didn't concern me—I was there only for Jacob...and Bella.

After fully sedating Jacob, Carlisle glanced at the X-ray I held in front of the bare window, then ran his fingers along his patient's limbs and torso, feeling for the dislocations. He couldn't let Jake's bones continue to heal as they were and risk crippling him for life. Carlisle found the site of the break in Jacob's right femur and with sensitive, capable fingers, grasped it through Jacob's muscle and snapped the bone cleanly. Barely muffled cursing drifted in from outside. Billy had turned on the television and was talking loudly to Charlie, trying to distract him from noises he might otherwise have heard, but with their preternatural hearing, the pack wouldn't escape so easily.

One by one, Carlisle located the misaligned bones and broke them with his bare hands strictly by feel, something an ordinary doctor never could have done. After snapping and setting the femur, Carlisle did the same for both the radius and ulna in Jacob's right forearm. The humerus was healing in its correct position, but two ribs were offset. Carlisle pressed his fingers into Jacob's torso to grab each one and force the breaks at exactly the right location. Then with vampire speed, he taped the ribs and attached braces elsewhere, plaster being unnecessary for bones that were already mending. When we were finished, Sue rolled Billy's wheelchair to the doorway of the little room so Billy could look at his son.

Seth hadn't left with the other wolves and when I entered the living room, he grinned, remembering our shared success earlier in the day. I touched my chest where Riley had bashed him.

Good as new! Seth thought.

His sister, Leah, came in to check on Jacob's prognosis. She glared at me and I ignored her. Everyone was angry at her for pulling the fool's move that compelled Jacob to intervene and get himself crushed in the process. Her thoughts were more remorseful than she let show.

Carlisle downplayed Jacob's injuries, knowing they would heal so fast as to seem minor within a few days. Charlie had witnessed the boys carrying Jacob into the house screaming and cursing, though, so Jake would have to use crutches for several weeks in public even if he didn't need them. The official story was that he had wrecked his motorcycle, so before we departed, we had to listen to Charlie lecture everyone on the dangers of motorcycles. He knew something about it to be sure. Some of the accident images I saw in his head were truly gruesome.

"I never want to see Bella on one again," he said. Though she had always ridden with Jacob, not me, Charlie's policeman's intuition had him directing the warning my way.

"It's far too dangerous," I agreed, keeping the peace.

"Have you spoken to Bella? Does she know about Jake's accident?"

"No," I replied. "I haven't been able to reach Alice on her cell phone. Either it's turned off or her battery has run down, I guess. She often forgets to charge it."

Charlie grunted.

"I'm keeping Jacob sedated for a while to get him past the worst of the pain," Carlisle announced.

"I'll call you when he wakes up," Billy told Charlie, who finally left. I took off running for home.

Bella was waiting anxiously for me on the front porch when I arrived. Despite the red-rimmed eyes and the deep ridge between them, she looked stunning. Alice had dressed her in a fashionable new outfit and done her hair and makeup. No doubt she had submitted under strident protest, but it was part of our cover story for Charlie, that Bella had been shopping in Olympia with Alice for the past two days.

"You look beautiful," I said, but Bella didn't reply. There was no need to ask how she was doing—pain and exhaustion were written clearly on her face. She reached for me and I held her briefly before swinging her onto my back.

Back at Billy's, I remained outside as Bella rushed through the doorway and stumbled over the threshold. I reached to catch her, but she grabbed the doorframe in time to steady herself.

"Go on in," Billy said and I heard Bella gasp at the sight of the unconscious Jacob lying on the bed, scaffolding supporting the right side of his body.

Within a few minutes, Alice called. I stepped to the door of the house with a questioning look at Billy and he nodded his head.

"Bella," I said softly, stepping into Jacob's room. She turned, tears streaming down her face, and I handed her the phone, letting Alice convince her to leave his side. Reluctantly, Bella agreed and hung up. Then she kneeled beside Jacob and held his large hand between hers for a few moments. When she finally let him go, she stood and melted into me, fresh tears erupting from her eyes. I supported her weight as we turned to leave.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Billy," she said.

“Okay, Bella. I’m sure Jacob will be glad to see you when he wakes up.” Bella inhaled sharply, a sob breaking from her chest as I led her outside.

“Are you okay?” I whispered, facing her and pulling her to me.

She moved her face slowly back and forth against my chest.

“Why don’t we get the necessities over with, so you can return? Maybe Jacob will be awake by then.”

When we arrived home, Alice was waiting for Bella and I turned her over to my sister. “I’ll just get some more supplies for Carlisle,” I muttered, ducking quickly into the house, then back out. “I’ll see you soon,” I said, kissing the top of Bella’s head, “whenever you want me.”

“I always want you,” Bella replied, tears rolling down her face again. I held her briefly before departing.

Her grief was agonizing in more ways than one. She wanted me, I did believe that, and yet this suffering was so great. And it was all for someone else. Someone she loved.

Twilight was falling and, back at Billy’s, the bystanders had gone home for dinner. Besides Carlisle, Sam was the lone attendant in the Black’s living room, keeping a vigil for the pack until Jacob awoke. Billy had gone to his room to lie down. His day had been nearly as difficult as that of the newborn combatants, perhaps more so in some ways.

I watched while Carlisle changed the drip bag hanging near Jacob’s head. “This one’s just fluids and pain killers. I want to check how he’s feeling.” Training was a reflex for my father. We waited a few minutes.

“Jacob,” he said. “Jacob, it’s Carlisle. You can open your eyes now. You’re home in bed.” Jacob’s eyes fluttered and opened slowly. He looked surprised to see us standing there, though his surprise was mixed with pain and confusion.

“How are you feeling?” Carlisle asked as he reached for Jacob’s wrist to check his pulse. Jacob flinched away slightly when Carlisle touched him, but then he relaxed.

“Pretty rough, Doc,” Jacob croaked.

“May I examine you?”

“Sure, sure,” Jacob whispered, his eyes closing.

“Try to stay with us. How is the pain?”

“Painful.”

“I’ve got you on a morphine drip. When the pain gets uncomfortable, just press this button. It won’t let you overdose, but with the speed you’re burning off the medicine, it might not be enough, either. I’ll leave some additional pain pills for you to take with food in about an hour.

I watched as Carlisle performed the necessary rituals...checking Jacob’s pupils with a pin light, listening to his heart through the stethoscope, taking his blood pressure, pressing his fingers into Jacob’s abdomen, checking for any sharp pain. Jacob was extremely lucky his broken ribs hadn’t punctured any organs.

When Carlisle finished, he said, “Jacob, your bones are healing fast, but if you change form, they might dislocate and cause serious damage, so don’t phase until I give you the okay.” He eyeballed his patient, waiting for him to confirm.

“Okay, Doc.”

“I’m leaving now, but I’ll come check on you in the morning. If you experience any unusual symptoms or pain that is too severe, have Billy call me and I’ll come back right away.” Jacob nodded and Carlisle left the room.

“Bella is anxious to see you,” I said. “She will come by within the hour.” I looked at Jacob’s face to see if he understood. He seemed confused to see me there and didn’t reply before he closed his eyes.

Alice met us at home. “He’s going to be fine, Edward,” she said, looking intently into my eyes. I knew she didn’t mean just in a physical sense.

I nodded, but felt a clutching tension in my chest. For Bella’s sake—and for mine, I had to admit—I hoped my sister was right.

Carlisle went to find Esme and I retreated to my room to ponder everything that had happened. I wanted to comfort Bella, but I didn’t know what to do for her, whether to be present or to go away. I turned on my stereo and sat on the couch to brood.

An hour had elapsed when Alice appeared in my the doorway. “Edward, Bella needs you.”

I looked up, instantly alert. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing, she’s okay. But in four minutes, she will pull to the side of the road, just this side of the reservation.”

I leaped up and dashed from the house, racing to get to her. Just where Alice had said she would be, Bella had collapsed inside her truck, unable to drive for the ferocity of her grief. I flung open the door and swept her into my arms. Not knowing what to say to comfort her, I simply pulled her against my chest and let her cry. Bella's body shook with sobs, one after another after another with no end in sight. She seemed unable to look at me or to speak, and so I waited, and held her, and rubbed her back, until finally she choked out a single word: "Charlie."

"Are you really ready to go home?" She nodded and tried to explain, but could say nothing coherent, so I took her at her word, holding her with one arm while I drove her slowly home.

"Wait for me upstairs," she muttered, still trying to pull herself together.

I had no idea where I stood with her, but regardless, I would not—could never—leave. I listened intently as she spoke with Charlie downstairs, trying to deduce what I could.

"Bella?" her father called when she entered the house. Then, with alarm, said "What happened? Is Jacob...?"

"He's fine, he's fine," Bella responded hoarsely.

"But what happened? What happened to you?" Of course, Charlie wouldn't fail to notice the devastation etched in Bella's face.

"Nothing, Dad. I...just had to talk to Jacob about...some things that were hard. I'm fine."

Hearing her words, I realized I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled.

"Was this really the best time?"

"Probably not, Dad, but I didn't have any alternatives—it just got to the point where I had to choose.... Sometimes, there isn't any way to compromise."

She'd made her choice. I felt an odd mixture of jubilation and sorrow, knowing she'd chosen me. The decision was hurting her badly.

"How did he handle it? I hope you didn't mess up his recovery."

"He's a quick healer," Bella muttered, then said in a rush, "I'll be in my room."

I heard her trudge up the stairs. When she came through the bedroom door, her shoulders immediately began to shake and a deep sob tore from her chest. In a flurry of motion, she began fumbling with the delicate clasp on the charm bracelet Jacob had given her.

She meant to divest herself of him symbolically. I wrapped my hands around hers and held them gently.

“No, Bella,” I murmured. “It’s part of who you are.” A fresh round of sobbing shook her. I pulled her into my arms and held her as the tears poured down her face.

The night was a torture, Bella’s every sob an arrow through my heart, every tear a reproach to my soul. Her visit with Jacob had torn her apart. More than anything, I was reminded of the horrifying images of my beloved which Jacob had inflicted on me with his memories of the previous fall and winter. The plain truth was that I had forced her into his arms by abandoning her and I was forcing her to wrench herself away to equal suffering.

What should I do now? I had no idea.

It was not for me to know what had transpired, but Bella tried to tell me through heavy tears that Jacob had accepted her plan to marry me and join my family. I can only imagine how he reacted, what he might have said, but the meeting had sent her into hysterics that seemed unlikely ever to end. I felt completely helpless and utterly useless.

She had let him go. But how could I let her marry me if this was the result of her choice? How could I live a decision that caused her so much pain? How could she?

Hours passed before Bella eventually fell into a restless sleep during which she called my name numerous times, but also Jacob’s. I spent the rest of the night pondering what was right...for her...for him...for me.

Morning came and still I held Bella in my arms. When she awoke and looked up at me, her eyes swollen and bloodshot, I waited for the tears to begin anew. Instead, she spoke in a gravelly voice. “I’m sorry that you had to see that. That wasn’t fair to you.”

I took her face in my hands and looked deep in her eyes, trying to see the truth. “Bella...are you sure? Did you make the right choice? I’ve never seen you in so much pain—”

My voice cracked. I couldn’t continue.

She pressed her finger to my lips. “Yes,” she said.

How could I believe her? Did she even know herself? “I don’t know... If it hurts you so much, how can it possibly be the right thing for you?”

Her voice was raspy, but calm. “Edward, I know who I can’t live without.”

“But—”

Bella shook her head vigorously. "You don't understand. You may be brave enough or strong enough to live without me, if that's what's best. But I could never be that self-sacrificing. I have to be with you. It's the only way I can live."

I wanted to believe this—so much—but the pain I had witnessed pouring from her over Jacob Black was something I couldn't disregard.

She registered my skepticism. "Hand me that book, will you?" She pointed at her ragged copy of *Wuthering Heights*.

"This again?" The characters in that book seemed to me so inexplicably ignorant, cruel, and selfish that I had a hard time taking her love for it seriously.

"I just wanted to find this one part I remembered...to see how she said it...."

It wasn't hard for Bella to find the passage she was looking for. The book's spine naturally opened to it and I saw that the corner of the page had been folded over many times.

"Cathy's a monster," she admitted, "but there were a few things she got right." Then she quoted: "*If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.*" She looked at me. "I know exactly what she means. And I know who I can't live without."

I looked away. *Could my love truly not live without me as I could not survive without her?* She had suffered enormously when I left her. That was fact. But was that worse than this? I tossed the book onto Bella's desk and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close. There was one thing I *did* know and, in my selfishness, perhaps I would allow the part to stand for the whole.

"Heathcliff had his moments, too," I said, then whispered. "*I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!*"

"Yes," Bella said. "That's my point."

She *couldn't* live without me. Yet, she didn't *want* to live without him. Perhaps there was another way to handle things, some way she wouldn't have to choose. Sharing her with Jacob would be the second most difficult thing I would ever attempt to do, but I'd told her once—and it was still true—that I'd rather hurt myself than her. I would do *anything* to avoid seeing her hurt again. If it made her happier to have both of us...well....

She had to know that it was okay. She had options. "Bella," I began, "I can't stand for you to be miserable. Maybe..."

“No, Edward. I’ve made a real mess of things, and I’m going to have to live with that. But I know what I want and what I need...and what I’m going to do now.”

“What are *we* going to do now?” No matter what she decided, I would be there for her, now and always.

She smiled, sighed, and then said resolutely, “We are going to go see Alice.”

The wedding was on.