

## 2. Frailty

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

“Why not? I want to touch your skin.”

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

“Not the same.”

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

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

“You shouldn’t. I don’t.”

“But—”

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

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

“Goodnight, Bella,” I said firmly.

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

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

*Thump, a-thump, a-thump, a-thump...* I had replayed the memory so many times that it no longer had the overwhelming impact it had had those first few weeks when I was trying to overcome my shocking visceral attraction to Bella. I had held my breath so much during biology class last winter and spring that it became a habit for a long time. I’d automatically stop breathing when I’d see her between classes or find her after school. The reflex seemed to be gone now.

After our pivotal day in the meadow together and then my first night in her room, I stayed as close to her as I could. I feared that the tolerance I’d built up over those hours would vanish when we separated and that when I saw her again, my impulses might get the better of me. Now, though, after all those days and nights in the hospital with Bella, being

away from her for a few hours, or even overnight if I needed to hunt, caused no serious backsliding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You know..."

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

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

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

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

I'd gotten an even bigger dose of the topic in medical school. I could, of course, name every part of the female reproductive system, including a few parts that lots of

women probably didn't know about themselves. (Bartholin's glands, anyone?) And yet, it hadn't crossed my mind that my human girlfriend bled several days each month.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

interesting to me.

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

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

Battlefield hospitals were notoriously filthy and disease-ridden places in the days before germ theory was introduced. When Carlisle related his wartime experiences, I saw images in his mind of doctors moving from one surgery to the next, gowns soaked in blood and dotted with remnants of human tissue, pus, and waste matter. Clean water for washing was often scarce and Carlisle gravitated to the areas where conditions were the worst, partly because he was immune to disease, and partly because he could do the most good there.

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

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

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

suffering, which earned him the name *Stregone Benefico*, meaning “beneficent wizard.”

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

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

*Goodness! How did I get here?*

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t go, Edward.” The words rose clear as a bell from a slumbering Bella. “Stay...”

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Cullen," he offered in greeting.

"Mike."

"Tyler's been looking for you."

"Is that right? Why would that be?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, my darling," I murmured. I pulled the swinging door wide and took Bella's arm while she walked through. Her right foot snagged on the door jamb, pitching her weight forward. I slung my arm around the front of her waist and tilted her upright almost before the stumble was noticeable. She'd been several weeks without her walking cast, but her coordination hadn't improved. I leaned forward and gave her a light kiss on the forehead. "How was work?"

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

folded across his chest.

“What’s he doing here?” she said, gesturing toward Tyler.

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

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

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

“Hey, Bella. Nothing much, I guess. How’re you doing? I see you got your cast off.”

“Yes, a few weeks ago.”

“So you’re doing good, then?”

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

“Oh no, not really,” he mumbled.

“How’s your summer going?” Bella took a stab at conversation.

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

“Bye, Tyler.”

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

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

“Not out loud,” I said, chuckling.

“Edward!” she chided, though she was smiling too.

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

“I do?”

“He seems to think so. He’d much rather ask you out when I’m not around, though.”

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

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

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

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

through my hair.

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