The rest of Midnight Sun in Edward’s point of view!

“Balancing – EPOV”
I could still feel Bella's warmth in the car, though I'd already put miles between us. I drove quickly towards home to make my nightly appearance, knowing that soon I would leave again, to take solace in Bella's dreams. Although a part of me still felt voyeuristic, the quiet comfort I had found in watching her sleep, hearing her whisper my name, was not something I could easily give up.

As soon as I walked into the house, I heard chattering in the living room. My family was arguing, and yet again I found myself the center of their attention. Of course they all knew of my plans to spend the day with Bella on Saturday, and were currently in loud dispute over whether or not such a thing should be allowed.

Allowed. As if I were a child and needed their permission. I rolled my eyes when the conversation came to an abrupt halt as I entered the room.

“No, please, continue,” I said sarcastically. “Sounds like it was just getting interesting.”

“Edward, we're merely discussing the situation, and what it could potentially mean for our family,” Carlisle told me calmly. “Your decisions effect all of us now, and we just want to be sure you're taking all the necessary precautions. No one is accusing you of anything.”

“I've already told them they don't have anything to worry about,” Alice added, a wide grin spreading across her face. “You love her. You're not going to hurt her.”


I wished I could sound more confident, that some of Alice's faith in me would rub off, but with the memory of Bella's scent still burning my throat and blurring my sense of reason, it was difficult to see things as clearly as she did.

“See, he doesn't even trust himself,” Rosalie said sharply. “Why should the rest of us?”

“Rosalie,” Esme scolded, sounding just motherly enough to make me chuckle.

“Fine. Just let me know when I should start packing,” Rose snapped as she flew from the room. I growled after her, but stopped when I noticed Emmett's glare.

“Relax,” he warned. “She's just upset. No need for you to make it any worse. Speaking of which, are you sure this little date alone with Bella is such a good idea? Why put yourself in that position? I mean, is it really worth it, making yourself go through all that?”

I nodded, then looked meaningfully at Alice, who smiled and let her mind wander over a dozen or so images of Bella and I together. Alone. Safe. I held onto each one of them as tightly as I could, trying to convince myself I was strong enough to make them reality.

Whatever, Emmett thought, smirking slightly as he too left the room. But don't say I didn't warn you.

“Don't worry, Edward,” Alice said kindly, noticing the worried look on my face as she bounded to my side. “Everything will be perfect.”

“I only wish I could be sure.”

“Well, I'm sure,” she teased. “Shouldn't that be enough?”
Needing to refocus my racing thoughts, I decided to spend the rest of the evening at the piano, much to Esme's delight. I played all of her favorites, as well as the piece Bella had inspired. I let the music surround me, envelop me, until the last of my worries had faded away. As soon as it was late enough, I took off into the night with a renewed sense of confidence. I wondered how it was possible that each night when I ran away from my family and all that was familiar, every step closer to Bella felt more like home. I hurried to her window, climbed in noiselessly, and watched in awed silence at the beauty of my Bella sleeping.

There was something different about her tonight, though, and I once again wished futilely that I could get a glimpse into her mind. Her face remained calm, not a single worried line taking away any of the peace from her face, yet she was obviously restless. She tossed and turned, and several times she startled herself awake, though her eyes didn't ever stay open long enough to focus on anything around her. In perfect stillness, I kept a careful distance until she fell into a deeper, dream filled sleep. She didn't speak as often as usual, although I was excited to hear my name escape her lips more than once.

“Edward...” she said softly, and I instinctively leaned closer as my body fought against my common sense. It was more painful for me the closer I was, but I couldn't stop the pull I inevitably felt when she called out to me. I knew I shouldn't touch her, my icy hand would surely wake her up, but somehow with each passing second, the pull was becoming more of a gravitational force.

“Edward, stay,” she mumbled, turning from her back onto her side so she was facing me. “More...”

Her unconscious request was enough to break the last of my resolve. Like a fool with absolutely no self control whatsoever, I reached out and gently brushed a piece of hair away from her face, careful not to touch her skin. Her head tilted toward my hand like she knew I was there, and longed to be nearer. The hint of a smile played at the corner of her mouth.

“Mmmm...” she sighed, her warm breath washing over my face, which was now just inches away. I felt the familiar burn intensify, but miraculously, it was overshadowed by the electric current that once again seemed to pass between Bella and I. Desperate for the distraction, I allowed one finger to lightly trace down her cheekbone, thrilling to the feeling of her warm skin against mine.

Afraid she would stir at my cold touch, I held my breath and listened closely to her heartbeat, trying to find any indication that she'd been startled. As steady as her breathing, her heart continued it's perfect rhythm, and I let out a sigh of relief. When she further relaxed into my touch, I started to hum softly, hoping whatever dreams were filling her mind remained pleasant ones.

The night passed quickly and far too soon I could see the sun begin to streak in through the window. Once I heard Charlie stir, I knew it was time to leave her side, though thankfully I also knew it would be even less time than usual before I'd see her again. Being in the enclosed space of the car with Bella wasn't the most comfortable option for me, but I wasn't about to give up precious time with her just because it caused me some physical pain. Especially since today was my day for questions.

I ran home quickly and got into my car, driving back to Bella's without stopping in at home. I didn't particularly feel in the mood to hear any more of Rosalie's criticisms, and I definitely didn't have time to calm myself down again with music if I was going to make it back to Bella on time. I arrived just as Charlie was heading out the front door, and waited until he was out of sight, parking where he had been.
I saw Bella sneak a peak out her window, and laughed at how surprised she looked to see me already sitting there. Hadn't she figured out by now that I was unable to stay away from her? I thought about knocking on her door so I could properly escort her to the car, but also didn't want to rush her if she wasn't ready yet. After all, she'd still been in bed just a short time ago.

Before I had time to wonder what the proper etiquette for our newfound situation was, Bella was shutting the door and making her way to the car. I took one more deep breath before she opened the car door and assaulted me with her scent again. I was determined, though, to let nothing show on my face. If she was going to open up to me at all today, I needed her to be completely comfortable in my presence.

“Good morning,” I said softly, smiling at her expression as she took her seat. She was staring at me with those wonder filled eyes again, like she was still waiting for me to disappear. Then, I noticed that she looked slightly paler that normal, her eyes a little redder and watering slightly. “How are you today?” I added.

“Good, thank you,” she answered casually, though I could tell there was something bubbling just under the surface. Her expression was still bright, but the skin below her eyes looked shadowy. I knew she'd been stirring for a portion of the night, but I had hoped she'd gotten enough restful sleep to make up for it.

“You look tired,” I said, growing concerned. I quickly started trying to count the actual number of hours since she'd calmed down. The time I spent with her always flew by in such a blur, it was hard to determine. Two hours, maybe three? Not enough for her to feel awake and refreshed.

“I couldn't sleep,” she admitted.

“Neither could I,” I said, unable to resist. As strange as it was getting used to the idea that Bella wasn't bothered by the realities of my life, in truth, it was nice being able to be so honest with her.

“I guess that's right,” she laughed. “I suppose I slept just a little bit more than you did.”

“I'd wager you did.”

“So what did you do last night?” she asked. I felt a tiny flicker of guilt, and a part of me wished I could confess that I spent my nights watching her, adoring her. Still, I didn't want her to be self conscious, and somehow it seemed like a little too soon to let her in on all my secrets. She'd already learned far more than I'd ever intended on telling her, and today was my turn.

“Not a chance,” I told her with a quiet laugh. “It's my day to ask questions.”

“Oh, that's right,” she said in a tone that made me think she wished I'd forgotten. “What do you want to know?”

What didn't I want to know? So much about her was a mystery to me, and I still hadn't grown entirely used to not being able to listen and find out for myself. I was learning more about her by watching the beautiful way her expression shifted from moment to moment, but there were things about her life I wanted to know that I couldn't learn by watching.

I wanted to learn about her past as well as her present, but I knew it would take her awhile to feel comfortable answering my questions, so I decided to start with something easy.

“What's your favorite color?” I asked, genuinely interested although she rolled her eyes at the inquiry.

“It changes from day to day.”

“What's your favorite color today?”
“Probably brown,” she answered, glancing down at her sweater. I thought for a moment about the vibrant colors most humans tended to wear, likely trying to make themselves stand out. It made sense that Bella would rather blend in, choosing a more neutral palate for her wardrobe, however it struck me as odd that she would say it was her favorite color.

“Brown?” I asked, disbelieving, and wondering if she'd just said the first thing that popped into her mind.

“Sure. Brown is warm. I miss brown. Everything that's supposed to be brown – tree trunks, rocks, dirt – is all covered up with squashy green stuff here.” Her face had pulled together into an almost scowl, and I had to smile. I kept forgetting that Forks wasn't exactly her ideal environment, that she was only living here out of selfless desire to let her mother live her life.

I watched her eyes closely as they softened, and noticed the way her dark brown sweater made them look even deeper than usual. They perfectly matched the color of her hair, which I suddenly had the desire to run my fingers through once more. As she smiled up at me, I was struck by how everything about her was warm and kind, and in that instant I understood her answer.

“You're right. Brown is warm,” I said, brushing her hair back behind her shoulder. It felt like silk in my hands.

We pulled up to the school, and I instantly wished I had driven slower. I wasn't ready to let her go yet.

“What music is in your CD player right now?” I asked, figuring if her favorite color changed daily, there probably wasn't much point in asking what her favorite song was. Maybe I would find that Bella was never exactly the same person from day to day. Living such an unchanging existence, I liked the idea that I would have to pay attention each moment I was with her, to figure out exactly what mood she was in and what she would like at any given moment.

“Linkin Park,” she said, smiling in such a way that I knew there must be a story behind it. I grinned at her in return, reaching to pull my own copy out to show her. It was always nice when I learned something else we had in common.

“Debussy to this?” I asked skeptically, hoping she'd explain what the look had meant. Instead, she just stared at the CD and shrugged.

Sensing she still wasn't truly at ease talking about herself with me, I exited the car and walked around to open her door for her. I figured it would be easier for her if we were at school, around other people, where she knew I wouldn't ask her anything too personal. She beamed up at me when I took her hand and helped her out, which sparked another curiosity.

“Not used to being treated like a lady?” I asked, trying to keep my voice light. I had to admit though, I had been wondering about whether or not she'd been in any relationships back in Phoenix. I didn't want to embarrass her by asking her outright, so I hinted around the subject, hoping she'd tell me something.

“Just because you're following a different generation's set of rules for being a gentleman...” she teased. Then, her expression changed again and she looked meaningfully at me. “You never did tell me how old you are.”

“Nooo, today is my day,” I said, amazed that she was still trying to turn the conversation back to me. I was never going to get any of my questions answered at this rate. “You'll have another turn, I promise, but for now, I want to learn about you.”

She blushed, but gave my arm a little squeeze as we turned and walked toward the school.
“Okay, so today you like brown, and you're either listening to Debussy or Linkin Park. If I were to, say, take you to a movie, what type of movie might you want to watch?”

“Honestly, I'm not too big into movies, but I'll watch pretty much whatever is on. I guess if I have to choose, I prefer comedies. Action movies are okay, just none of that ridiculous horror, monster, zombie nonsense.”

“Oh, no, none of that. You prefer hanging out with the real monsters.”

She scowled at me, so I quickly continued before she could start lecturing me on the way I regarded myself.

“What I mean is, yes, the vampire will make a note not to take you to any zombie movies.” Her face relaxed as I laughed, and we continued our purposefully slow walk to her first class.

“If you don't care much for movies, what would you say is your favorite way to pass the time?” She dropped her gaze and her cheeks turned pink. “Go on,” I urged.

“Uh, aside from spending time with you,” she mumbled, almost to herself, “I really like to read.”

Her remark made my insides feel like they were going to burst, but I forced myself to keep going as if she hadn't said it. Clearly she was embarrassed, although if she had any idea how much I loved being with her, she'd know there was no reason to be ashamed.

“What type of books do you read?”

“The classics, mostly. Boring answer, right?”

“Far from it,” I assured her. “The fact that you appreciate the great literary masters of times past, just shows that you have very refined taste.”

We talked about her favorite books until we reached her English class, and in a very selfish moment I almost considered asking her to skip so we could spend the day talking. Her first two classes were right next to each other, so it would be two hours before I'd be with her again, although I would be spending every minute watching her through the medium of those around her.

“See you soon,” I forced myself to say as she grinned and ducked into the classroom. At least she seemed excited that I was so eager to spend as much of the day as possible with her.

Bella's classes were uneventful, and for the most part her friends were keeping their thoughts to themselves. Although Mike's mind was racing with questions about how serious she and I were, he kept his conversation to polite comments about their classes and the weather. I left my own class the second the bell rang and moved at slightly more than acceptable human pace so that I was waiting at the door when Bella left Spanish.

“How was class?” I asked, stifling a chuckle at her confused expression when she saw me waiting.

“Didn't you come from the other end of the building?”

“No one was watching,” I assured her. She sighed, looking at me disapprovingly as we began walking.

“If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?” I asked, not wanting to waste a moment that could be spent getting to know her better. I wasn't sure how often she would be willing to let me do all the talking.

“Honestly, back in Phoenix. I really love it there. Maybe it's just because it's familiar, but it's hard to imagine wanting to live anywhere else. Not that I've seen too many places.”
“So you haven't traveled much?”
“A little, when I was younger, but Mom never liked going too far from home. I mean, when Forks felt like I'd really gone someplace, that must say something,” she laughed.
“Would you like to travel?”
“Of course. Eventually.”
“Any place in particular?” I couldn't help but think of all the different places my family and I had lived. Moving every few years grew monotonous, but it had allowed us to experience an endless number of new things. Unfortunately, we were somewhat limited in our destinations, assuming we wanted to spend any amount of time outside during the day. The northwest had been serving us well for quite some time, and I suddenly found myself wishing Bella were happier here.
“As for the US, I'd like to see some east coast cities. I've really only been on this side of the country.”
“How about internationally?”
“Can I just say everywhere?” she asked with a laugh.
“Okay, everywhere,” I grinned. I'd never known Bella had such an interest in traveling, and my mind instantly launched into all the places I could take her. It probably wasn't the most logical path for my thoughts to be taking. “Where would you go first?”
“Europe, definitely.”
“Carlisle spent a lot of time in Europe. You two should really talk sometime. He has an incredible amount of knowledge about a seemingly endless number of subjects.”
“That sounds wonderful. You must have learned so much from him over the years.”
“Yes, he's been wonderful to me. In many ways a father, often a teacher, always a friend.”
With that thought, we reached her next class and I reluctantly let her go once more.
“I'll be counting the minutes until lunch.”
“Coming from someone who doesn't eat, I'll take that as a compliment,” she said with a wide grin as she turned to step inside.
The minutes dragged, and when lunch finally arrived, she greeted me with another huge smile. We sat at the same table we had the previous day, and again, the eyes of the school seemed to be on us.
What does he see in her? Jessica thought, rudely glaring at us.
Had to be Bella. It just had to be her that made the guy want to date, Mike thought angrily.
Yet again, Angela's kindness helped me to block out everyone else's infuriating inability to mind their own business.
They look really happy. It's nice he finally has someone, she thought, smiling and waving at Bella as she passed.
“Angela approves of us,” I told Bella once she was out of earshot.
“And the rest of them?” she asked, glancing nervously around her.
“Angela approves,” I repeated, Bella's face growing redder by the second. “But don't worry about them, okay? If you let what other's think get to you, you'll never have any peace. Trust me, I have a lot of experience.”
“Yeah, I guess you do,” she said, returning her gaze to mine. Her eyes looked sad and concerned, and the last thing I wanted was her worrying about the oddities of my life that's grown so used to. The only thing I cared about was that Bella seemed to accept me so entirely, and I was eager to get back our earlier lighthearted mood.

“So, Bella who wants to travel the world and read the classics, shall we continue?”

“If you really want to, but I still don’t know why you find me so interesting.”

“You're a mystery to me, Bella. A mystery that keeps getting more and more beautiful with each piece of the puzzle I unlock.”

She blushed deeper than I'd seen all day, her eyes darting to her hands, which she'd started to fidget with on the table.

“If you say so,” she whispered, and although she still sounded like she doubted me, along with her blush, she was now grinning ear to ear.

“Okay, I'm guessing you're not particularly into sports.”

“What tipped you off?” she asked sarcastically, meeting my eyes again.

“Oh, just a hunch. Bet that breaks Charlie's heart a little.”

“I watch baseball with him sometimes. And football if I'm really bored, though I gave up trying to understand the rules years ago.”

“What activities were you interested in when you were younger?”

“I took ballet for awhile, but I was never any good at it. I think Mom was hoping to find something that would help my coordination, but the year I twisted my ankle at the big recital, she decided it was probably a lost cause.”

“Anything else?”

“I tried ice skating once.”

“And how did that go?”

“She considered putting me back in ballet.”

I laughed loudly, and was happy to see her laughing with me. With every question I asked, she grew more and more animated. At times she seemed confused by some of the things I wanted to know, but in the end I think she was actually flattered, which only encouraged me to ask her more.

Returning to her list of favorites, I rattled off a few quick inquiries I’d been wondering about.

“What's your favorite season?”

“In Phoenix, fall. In Forks, summer.”

“Favorite type of food?”

“Italian.”

“Favorite drink?”

“Lemonade.”

“Ice cream?”

“Cookies and cream.”

“Animal?”
“Dogs.”
“Gemstone?”
“Topaz.”
I was about to ask her favorite flower when I noticed she'd started blushing again, and looked away.
“Did that embarrass you?” I asked, baffled.
“No,” she said shyly, still not meeting my eyes.
“What's wrong?”
“Nothing. Now aren't you going to ask my favorite author or TV show?”
“No. I want to know why you're blushing.”
“No reason. It just made me think of something. Forget it, it's not a big deal.”
“Please?” I asked, trying to get her to look at me again.
“My favorite author is Jane Austin.”
“But I want to know why your favorite gemstone is topaz, and why it seems to have upset you.”
“I'm not upset,” she said, feigning nonchalance and still stubbornly refusing to look up.
“Tell me,” I pleaded, wishing I knew how to use that “dazzling” skill she'd insisted allowed me to get my way.
After a few more silent moments, she sighed and whispered, “It's the color of your eyes today.”
If it were possible for me to blush in return, I would have been as red as her. Instead I sat there, grinning and staring at her, happier than I'd been all day. It was a silly thing to be so excited about, but something about the sincerity in her voice was making me positively ecstatic. She still hadn't looked up, and when I heard her heartbeat speed up again and her breathing hitch, I realized there was more.
“I suppose if you asked me in two weeks, I'd say onyx.” I almost laughed as I remembered just how well she knew me, even down to the pattern of my changing eyes. As much as I was enjoying the moment, I made myself continue, in hopes that she would look at me again. I was already missing the intensity of staring into her beautiful brown eyes.
“What kinds of flowers do you prefer?” I asked, happy when she immediately lifted her head.
“Cactus flowers,” she said, a hint of her earlier enthusiasm coming back.
“Why am I not surprised?” I teased, rolling my eyes.
I was grateful that we had the next class together, since I was nowhere near ready to let her go. I continued asking about her time in Phoenix as we walked to Biology, and didn't stop until Mr. Banner arrived. When I realized today was going to be another movie day, I instinctively moved my chair a few inches away from Bella's, not that I thought it would help much.
Just as I knew it would, the second the lights went out, the electric current that seemed to flow between us was reignited, intensified by the darkness. I remembered how wonderful it had felt to graze my fingertips along her cheek last night while she slept, recalled the silky texture of her hair against my hand. I wanted to reach out to her, to hold her hand in the dark room. When she leaned forward and placed her chin on her arms, I fought against the urge to do the same. It would have been so easy to fold my arms beside hers, letting our skin touch and giving in to the electricity. Easy, but not smart.
I stayed planted firmly in place in my seat, watching her as she stared straight ahead and at least pretended to watch what was on the TV. When the lights came back on, she glanced at me, and I hoped my internal battle didn't show too greatly on my face.

I couldn't bring myself to begin questioning her again on the way to Gym, I was still so lost in my desire to touch her. Right before she turned to leave, I gave in just slightly, brushing the back of my hand to her delicate face. I was certain no matter how many times I felt her perfect skin on my granite hand, I would never tire of the feeling of peace it brought me.

I watched through her classmates eyes as she stayed, thankfully, out of the way throughout Gym. Mike was looking particularly sour, but as long as he kept Bella from inadvertently injuring herself, I figured I couldn't fault him too much. When class was over, I made my way back to the gymnasium, and was thrilled to see her brilliant smile the moment our eyes met. If everyday could feel this wonderful, endlessly repeating high school might not be as boring as it once was.

On the drive home, I noticed the way Bella's eyes turned melancholy as she glanced up at the overcast sky. Remembering her enthusiasm when she spoke of her life in Phoenix, I asked her what she missed most about it. I listened in rapt attention as she described things I could barely imagine. Obviously, I hadn't spent much time anywhere the sun was out on a near daily basis, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't remember what it had felt like on my human skin.

I was filled with wonder as I listened to her talk about the beauty of the sun cascading across the hills and valleys of the place she loved so deeply. With each passing moment, her eyes seemed to light up more and more, and even when the rain began to pour around us, nothing dampened her spirit. It was that spark, that passion, that gave me the confidence I'd been so desperately searching for as I'd spoken to my family about taking her to my special hideaway on Saturday. There was no amount of pain too great that could stop me from seeing her face lit by the sun.

Listening to her, I started to realize that one of the things I felt guiltiest about was the fact that her wanting to be with me was, in essence, taking the sun away from her. Although I was still afraid she would be repulsed by my true appearance, she'd made it clear she wanted to spend time with me, and I was just beginning to understand how much she missed the joys of a sun drenched day. Putting all my fears aside, I was determined to give her at least this one day where she could have both.

When she'd finished describing in perfect detail the beauty of the Arizona landscape, I asked her about the house she'd grown up in. She laughed, admitting she was a bit of a pack rat, which struck me as odd, since she'd barely decorated her room here. Then I realized the probable reason why. This wasn't truly home to her. I wanted to ask her more about the decisions that had brought her here, but the setting sun reminded me the evening was getting away from us. Although I wouldn't have minded being formally introduced, I wasn't sure she was ready to explain my presence to Charlie yet.

“Are you finished?” she asked, when I didn't immediately bombard her with another series of questions.

“Not even close – but your father will be home soon.”

“Charlie!” she gasped, then looked around bewildered, like she'd forgotten everything else in the world but us. I knew exactly how she felt. “How late is it?” she asked, and I hated to admit that our day was coming to an end.

“It's twilight,” I muttered, realizing that this used to be my favorite time of day. It meant the sun no longer hindered me or my family, and with the rest of the world getting ready for sleep, we felt freer somehow. Yet now, with Bella at my side, I found I wanted the day to keep going. She was truly changing everything about the way I look at the world. When I turned and saw her
curiosity, her earnest desire to know even the darkest parts of my world, I felt as if all the love I felt for her was about to come pouring out.

“It's the safest time of day for us. The easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way...the end of another day, the return of the night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?”

“I like the night. Without the dark, we'd never see the stars. Not that you see them here much,” she added, and I laughed at the childlike way she nearly pouted. I'd never admit it to her, I didn't want her to think I was patronizing or belittling her, but I couldn't help but find her petulance endearing. The strangest things seemed to irritate her.

“Charlie will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him that you'll be with me Saturday...” I suggested, part of me still wishing she would tell him the truth.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” she said stubbornly, grabbing her books. “So is it my turn tomorrow, then?”

“Certainly not!” I said, feigning shock. “I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?”

“What more is there?” she asked, a hint of her earlier nervousness coming back.

“You'll find out tomorrow,” I teased, reaching to open her door for her. I was just beginning to enjoy the sound of her heart racing from my close proximity, when something completely unwelcome interrupted it.

*This is completely out of line*, a dark voice thought. It was one I wished I didn't recognize so easily. *He has no right to be here.*

“Not good,” I said under my breath, debating for a moment whether I should whisk Bella away to somewhere she wouldn't have to deal with what was surely coming. Of course, I knew that would only make things worse.

“What is it?” Bella asked worriedly.

I looked toward her and willed myself to remain calm.

“Another complication,” I said, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

I quickly opened Bella's door and sat back firmly in my seat, determined to hold my ground steadily with Charlie so near and Billy's son beside him. This was not the time or place for confrontation.

“Charlie's around the corner,” I said to Bella, though in all honesty, I was mostly reminding myself.

Bella jumped out of the car, and I hated that I had to leave her there. She'd understand soon enough the necessity of it, but it didn't make it any easier to drive away. With a hard pump on the accelerator, I put as much distance between Billy and I as I could, as quickly as my car would allow. Part of me wanted to stay behind, to make sure Billy didn't do or say anything to upset her, but I knew no good could come of my staying and listening in. I trusted Bella would tell me later if he said anything too far out of line.

I sped home, hoping Alice would be able to give me some reassurance about Billy. I was two steps through the door before she came bounding toward me.

“Don't worry about it, Edward,” she sang, far too cheerful in my opinion, given the subject matter. “Billy's upset, but he can't tell Bella anything she doesn't already know.”

“I guess,” I said, feeling only minimally better.
“He wants her to be careful, and he feels an obligation to look out for her because she's Charlie's daughter. As far as I can see, that's the extent of it.”
“Yeah, so far,” I muttered, not entirely convinced.
“Edward,” she scolded like she always did when I doubted her abilities, “I believe you have more important things to think about right now.”
“Such as?”
“Such as preparing for Saturday.”
“What exactly do you mean, preparing?” I asked nervously. “I thought you said I had nothing to worry about.”
“You don't. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do everything you can to make it easier on yourself.”
“I already said I'd go hunting with you tomorrow afternoon.”
“I know. That isn't the only thing you can do, though.”
“What exactly are you suggesting?”
“I know you've been spending the better part of your nights with Bella, but I've also seen how hesitant you are when you're near her. I think the best thing for you to do is turn yourself right around and spend every second you can next to her. Billy will only be there a few hours, then Bella should go right to sleep. I've already seen she's going to sleep very soundly tonight, she's so exhausted from not sleeping enough last night. It will be perfectly safe for you to be close to her, let her scent assault you so you can start to learn to block it out.”
“Alice, this is absurd. It's not like I can make myself immune.”
“Not completely, but I see you growing more desensitized the more time you spend with her, and now seems as good a time as any to start. More than that, though, I think it's important that you start to see you can be close to her, that you truly can handle it. Trust me, you'll thank me for this later.”
Then, with an aggravating smirk, she starting reciting the states and their capitols in her head so I would have no idea what exactly I would be thanking her for.
As much as my mind was telling me to argue with her, I couldn't deny that a part of me was all too willing to listen to her. She'd seen that Bella would sleep soundly, and even when she was restless, I'd been able to touch her softly without waking her. Maybe Alice was right. Maybe I did need to convince myself of my ability to be close to her.
I waited, pacing, until Alice told me it was all right to head back. In seconds, I was running at top speed toward her house. I arrived just in time to see Billy's car driving away.
I listened outside the window as Bella and Charlie went through their usual nightly smalltalk, and was relieved to hear nothing out of the ordinary. Either Billy had chosen not to give any sort of warning tonight, or at the very least he didn't say anything with Charlie around. When was I ever going to learn not to doubt Alice? When Charlie commented on asking Mike Newton to the dance, I felt the same ridiculous jealousy I always did when any other male was brought up. My tension eased as Bella's obvious frustration came out, and I reminded myself that it was me she was choosing to spend time with.
After dinner, she trudged up the stairs and to her room. She opened a book, but I could see the fatigue taking over after only a few pages. With a deep sigh, she turned off her light and scooted under the covers. It was less than ten minutes before her breathing steadied and I knew she was
in a deep sleep. I waited for the sleep talking to come, but she was unusually silent. Curious, and eager to test Alice's theory, I climbed inside the window and sat on the floor beside her bed.

Thinking of what Alice had said, I took a purposefully deep breath as Bella breathed out, letting her scent fill my every sense. It was intoxicating – thrilling, yet terrifying. Through the pain, however, I could tell Alice was onto something. Each breath I took in this close proximity to her, felt easier than the last. Wondering just how far I could push myself, I leaned in until I could feel her breath on my face. I reached out a tentative hand and brushed the hair away from her face, reveling once again in its silky texture. Then, I gently touched her cheek and was excited to find that she didn't shy away from my touch.

I moved my hand down until it was resting against her neck, right over her pulse. Feeling it beat against me was almost too much, but in the same moment I started to move away, she sighed my name. It was different than how she'd said it before, when I knew she was dreaming. This time, with no other signs that her subconscious was racing, it felt like she knew I was there. Completely enraptured, I stayed there for hours while Bella slept silently beneath my touch.

It was somewhat of a shock when I saw the beginnings of daylight break through her window. With a triumphant smile, I quietly made me exit. The entire way home, I marveled at how I'd been closer to her for longer than I'd thought possible, and as the hours passed the pain became almost unnoticeable. It made me think our day alone together might actually be possible.

See, I told you, I heard Alice gloating from inside as I got into the Volvo. I rolled my eyes, but my grin didn't fade.

I waited around the corner until I saw Charlie drive away, then quickly pulled into his parking spot. It was less than a minute before Bella was bounding down the stairs toward me. I smiled at the fact that she seemed as eager as I was to spend another day together.

“How did you sleep?” I asked, unable to resist hearing her answer.

“Fine. How was your night?”

“Pleasant,” I said nonchalantly, grinning in spite of myself. I wondered if I would ever be able to admit to her how pleasant all my nights had become since finding a new favorite way to spend them.

“Can I ask what you did?” she said curiously.

“No. Today is still mine.”

She sighed but didn't protest, and I wasted no time getting back to where we'd left off. I was endlessly fascinated by how excited she was talking about her life in Phoenix. She told me more about her mother and her friends, what she missed most about them all. By lunch, she was no longer showing any signs of embarrassment as I pressed for more details, and I felt a sudden bout of confidence, finally asking the question I'd been the most interested in.

“What about old boyfriends?” I asked as casually as I could manage. “Did you leave any broken hearts behind when you left?”

Her face turned red and I wondered if perhaps she was about to tell me something I didn't really want to hear. After all, I was still getting used to the feeling of jealousy. I tried to keep my expression relaxed as I waited for her answer.

“Not really,” she finally said, though she was still blushing. “I mean, no one showed me much attention, which was pretty much how I wanted it. I guess I had a crush or two growing up, but I never felt compelled to do anything about it.”
Though I hadn't been expecting an extensive dating history, I was stunned by the notion that I was the first person she'd ever been truly interested in. While flattering, it was also unsettling. Was it just because of what I was? Was I a fascination to her, another magnet for danger pulling her in?

“So you never met anyone you wanted?” I asked, watching her face closely.

“Not in Phoenix,” she replied firmly, her eyes staring unblinkingly into mine.

Caught between what I wanted and what I kept telling myself I should want, I held her stare and let the battle inside rage. She was perfect – so fragile, so innocent, and as much as I wanted her, I didn't know how I could allow it. Nothing about me was deserving, yet I couldn't bring myself to leave.

I wanted to keep her safe, but I still couldn't be sure that my being with her would allow that. I desperately desired to give her anything and everything she wanted, yet the only thing she seemed to want was to spend time with me. It was the world's most ironic paradox.

Don't forget about her truck. And please, stop worrying. I'm not a mind reader and even I can see you're a wreck.

Alice's not so subtle commentary, along with a quick smile in my direction, interrupted my thoughts from across the room.

“I should have let you drive yourself today,” I said, forgetting for a moment that Bella hadn't heard Alice as I had.

“Why?” she asked, surprised.

“I'm leaving with Alice after lunch.”

“Oh,” she said, frowning. Her disappointment might have been more entertaining had my mind not just been in such a dark place. “That's okay, it's not that far of a walk.”

“I'm not going to make you walk home,” I sighed. “We'll go get your truck and leave it here for you.”

“I don't have a key with me,” she said, and I almost laughed. “I really don't mind walking.”

“Your truck will be here, and the key will be in the ignition – unless you're afraid someone might steal it,” I teased.

“All right,” she said, a hint of defiance in her voice. I could almost hear her trying to figure out what I was up to.

“So where are you going?” she asked when I refused to divulge my secret.

“Hunting. If I'm going to be alone with you tomorrow, I'm going to take whatever precautions I can.”

It was true I'd gained some confidence from having spent several nights in close proximity to her, but it was different when I was there in her house with her. I felt more accountable. I was very aware of Charlie's presence in the room down the hall. Although I still felt extremely protective of Bella – and I certainly hoped that my protective side would always remain the strongest force – something about the idea of being miles away from every other human excited the monster inside. The knowledge that no one would see or hear us, made it that much more difficult to control the fiendish fire that could never be fully extinguished.

“You can always cancel, you know,” I felt compelled to add, part of me still hoping she would come to her senses. If she showed even the slightest bit of hesitation, I would not allow myself to go through with my plans.
“No,” she said quietly. “I can't.”

“Perhaps you're right.” We really were both already in too deep. And I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

“What time will I see you tomorrow?” she asked sadly, and once again her obvious desire to be with me instantly brightened my mood.

“That depends...it's a Saturday, don't you want to sleep in?”

“No,” she answered quickly, her eyes widening at the same time the blush returned to her cheek. She was still embarrassed by one of the things I adored the most.

“The same time as usual, then. Will Charlie be there?”

“No, he's fishing tomorrow,” she said, clearly elated about the fact. I felt my fists clench at the realization that I couldn't even tell myself he was at home waiting for her.

“And if you don't come home, what will he think?” I pressed. Please, give me something...

“I have no idea,” she said casually. “He knows I've been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he'll think I fell in the washer.”

She was trying to make light of what I was most fearful of, and I was suddenly infuriated. Not at her. Never at her. I knew she was only trying to act unconcerned because she didn't want me to worry. But how could I ever forgive myself for allowing this potentially fatal excursion to take place, when she showed me nothing but infinite trust?

“What are you hunting tonight?” she asked calmly after a few moments, obviously in a hurry to remind me how completely normal she found my atrocious existence. I might have thought she was putting on an act for my benefit, but her heartbeat and breathing remained perfectly steady. It was as if she'd simply asked me what I was having for lunch.

“Whatever we find in the park. We aren't going far.”

“Why are you going with Alice?”

Because she's the only one who doesn't think I've completely lost my mind.

“Alice is the most...supportive.” Not particularly in the mood to discuss the rest of my family, I hoped she wouldn't press the subject. But then, that wouldn't have been Bella.

“And the others? What are they?”

I tried to think of the nicest possible way to say it.

“Incredulous, for the most part,” I sighed, and I saw her glance nervously toward my family.

“They don't like me,” she said flatly, and I wondered suddenly why it should bother her to think that a family of vampires didn't care for her.

“That's not it,” I said, though it wasn't entirely true. Rosalie had made her opinion very clear, and the rest of them were, at best, bored with having to think about her. “They don't understand why I can't leave you alone,” I added, Emmett's mocking thoughts seeping into the back of my mind.

“Neither do I, for that matter,” she mumbled, the oddest scowl taking over her beautiful face. I shook my head in disbelief.

“I told you – you don't see yourself clearly at all. You're not like anyone I've ever known. You fascinate me.”
She glared at me, clearly doubting my words, so I tried to explain it better. “Having the advantages I do, I have a better than average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you...you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise.”

Her gaze left mine, her expression dismal, and I hoped I hadn't made her feel self conscious. It was wonderful that she was different from the rest of them, those pathetic humans all trying to behave the way they think they're supposed to, while their thoughts betray how untrue to themselves they are. Bella had taken me by surprise from the very start, but it was only by my paying close attention that I was able to understand exactly how unique and genuine she was. What may have started as pure fascination had quickly grown to admiration and affection, and before I knew what was happening, I'd fallen unwittingly in love with her.

“That part is easy enough to explain,” I continued when she still didn't look at me. I had to make her see how extraordinary she was. “But there's more...and it's not so easy to put into words – ”

That's it, I'm done. I just don't have it in me to sit here and listen to his ridiculous lunchtime love confessions...

Rosalie's sharp thoughts broke through my already disjointed speech, and I turned to see her staring directly at Bella, her eyes callous.

You're not worth it, little girl. I will not let you ruin what this family has built here.

I hissed softly in her direction, and it was enough. Without a glance at me, she turned to Emmett and motioned for them to leave. When I looked back at Bella, her eyes were wide. I could only imagine how much worse it would have been if she'd heard what I'd been forced to hear.

“I'm sorry about that. She's just worried. You see...it's dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly...” I turned away, ashamed, not wanting to finish the thought.

“If?”

“If this ends...badly.” I couldn't bare to look into her eyes any longer, the guilt and the fear I had inside momentarily too much to take. I should have left, I should have let her hate me from the start. At least then she'd be safe. Though my head was in my hands, I saw her inch her hand toward me and I longed to feel her soothing touch in my miserable moment. I couldn't blame her, though, when she pulled away at the last second. Why would she want to be near me when I had just confessed my family's fears that I would kill her? I was amazed she wasn't running for the door.

“And you have to leave now?” she asked, her voice somewhat shaking. Perhaps I was right, and she really was about to run away – finally afraid the way I'd been expecting her to be from the beginning.

“Yes,” I whispered, chancing a glance at her face. Was it the last time I would be able to look at her? I had expected to see fear, but was instead met with her normal expression of sadness when we were about to part ways. She was looking at me, disappointed, and her heart started to race as I watched her. I felt a slight glimmer of hope.

“It's probably for the best,” I added, deciding since she'd admitted the effect I had on her, I might as well leave her with one confession of my own. “We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in Biology – I don't think I could take any more.”

I smirked and raised an eyebrow, nearly laughing out loud at the expression that followed. Then, in a flash, Alice was there, ruining all my fun.
Don't give her a heart attack, Edward. I don't think it's normal for a person's pulse to change that rapidly.

It bothered me that she sounded only half joking.

“Alice,” I said flatly.

“Edward,” she said. I knew she was beaming without so much as a glance at her.

I'm here. It would be rude not to introduce us.

“Alice, Bella – Bella, Alice,” I said flatly.

There. Was that so hard?

“Hello, Bella. It's nice to finally meet you,” she said, subtly stressing the word finally. I glared at her for a split second.

“Hi, Alice,” Bella said nervously.

“Are you ready?” Alice asked.

“Nearly. I'll meet you at the car.”

Alice flitted off, hardly able to contain her excitement, as images of her and Bella laughing and smiling filled her every thought.

“Should I say 'have fun,' or is that the wrong sentiment?” Bella asked, eying me curiously.

“No, 'have fun' works as well as anything.”

“Have fun, then,” she said, still unable to conceal her obvious disappointment.

“I'll try. And you try to be safe, please,” I added. I hated to admit how worried I was leaving her alone for the evening. It would be just like her to find herself in some random catastrophe with Alice and I away.


“For you it is a challenge. Promise.”

“I promise to try to be safe,” she said, placating me. “I'll do the laundry tonight – that ought to be fraught with peril.”

“Don't fall in,” I teased.

“I'll do my best.”

It was clear that we were now simply stalling, so I reluctantly stood up. The sooner I finished hunting, the sooner I could get back to her.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” she said dismally, and the same look she'd had when I first told her I was leaving was back on her face.

“It seems like a long time to you, doesn't it?” I asked, still in disbelief that she was so eager to be with me. I smiled when she nodded, thinking about how hours and days used to pass by in a blur, but now, even minutes spent away from Bella felt like an eternity.

“I'll be there in the morning,” I said, touching her soft cheek before leaving. I wished the warmth of her touch could stay with me while I was away, I felt so empty without it.

Away from the stare of nosy students, I flew across the parking lot to meet Alice. She was already sitting in the driver's seat, listening to one of my CD's.

“I'll meet you at home after you run and get Bella's truck. That is, assuming the truck survives your driving.”
“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

I hurried to Bella's house and, though I knew where she kept her spare key, climbed in through the window out of habit. Some of her clothes were lying scattered on the ground, and I chuckled a little when I realized she wasn't kidding about needing to do laundry. I almost felt bad that I'd been keeping her so distracted. Almost.

When I didn't find the key in her room, I made my way to the laundry room and eventually found them in a pair of jeans at the bottom of the pile. The truck started up after only minor protest, and I concentrated on driving it at a respectable speed. I parked in the vacant spot my Volvo had left, and with the keys still in the ignition, started to get out. Then, I grinned and fished a piece of paper out of my pocket. I scrolled, “Be safe,” across it, and wondered as I gently folded my little reminder, if Bella would think me too pessimistic. It didn't seem likely that anything would happen to her in the few hours I was away, but I hoped that knowing I was thinking of her would make her especially cautious.

Alice was waiting for me on the porch when I arrived home, and we ran our usual route into the park.

You know, I wouldn't have minded if you wanted to go farther for a better variety, she thought as the trees thickened.

“I know, but I wanted to stay close to home.”

She's fine, I promise. I would see if anything was going to happen. I keep a pretty close watch on her, you know.

“I know. I appreciate it, really.”

And?

“Hey, I thought I was the only mind reader.”

You're rather transparent, Edward. At least, to me you are.

“Fine. I was hoping maybe you could keep a particularly close eye on her tomorrow. I know you said I have nothing to worry about, but it would make me feel better knowing you're making sure I don't do anything we'll all regret.”

She came to a halt and turned to face me. She spoke aloud, obviously wanting me to get the full impact of her words.

“Of course I'll help in any way I can, but...listen, I know you don't want to hear this, but you have to remember I can only see as far as the decisions the two of you make. Right now, she trusts you implicitly, and you have made up your mind quite definitively to be her protector. You have no conscious desire to hurt her, and if something were to happen, it would be the result of a sudden, split second decision. If that was the case, there wouldn't be much I could do about it.”

I stared at her, frightened, but knowing she was right. She smiled warmly at me, touching my shoulder with all the sisterly kindness I'd come to know throughout our decades together.

“I still don't believe you'll do anything to hurt her, but I wanted you to know that this really is in your hands. You're just going to have to trust yourself. Trust yourself as much as Bella trusts you.”

“Thanks, Alice,” I said, trying to believe in myself the way she wanted me to.

Now, there's a herd of elk about a mile away. I'll race you. Last one there gets the scrawny ones.

And with that, she was off in a blur. I counted to ten to give her a fair head start.
After gorging myself far beyond what was necessary, we took off for home. We were silent as we ran, but I couldn't help hearing her, as much as I tried to block her out. Unlike the rest of my family who were too busy worrying about the implications if tomorrow didn't go as planned, Alice was focused on a completely different looking future.

She saw tomorrow being a turning point in Bella and my relationship. She saw Bella happy and carefree, and eventually even saw her being welcomed into the family. The exact details weren't clear, but she seemed certain the day would soon come that Bella would be a part of all our lives.

She fought to stay focused on the visions of Bella that I would find acceptable. More than once, however, she faltered. I cringed every time I was forced to see Bella pale and cold, part of our family in a way I vowed never to let come to pass. The idea that Bella would want such a thing was ludicrous, and the thought of changing her against her will was unforgivable. I growled at Alice and she quickly refocused her thoughts, her silent apology genuine.

When we got home, I hurried inside to get cleaned up and changed. I was pleasantly surprised to see the sun coming up as I ran toward Bella's house, though there was still a thin layer of clouds that would need to burn off. Since she'd said Charlie would be fishing today, I figured he would be long gone by the time I arrived. Not wanting to interrupt her morning routine, I stood off to one side of the house, just out of sight. I grinned when Bella peeked out the window not once, but twice, each time with increasing excitement. Far too anxious, I found myself knocking at her door a bit before our normal meeting time, but since I knew she was up, I couldn't seem to make myself wait any longer.

As I listened to her fumble with the lock, the gravity of the day seemed to come crashing back in on me. Worried for about the millionth time that we were making a mistake, I focused my thoughts back on Alice's visions and reassurances. When Bella finally got the door open and she was once again staring adoringly up at me, all my worries disappeared. She looked lovely in her tan sweater and blue jeans, casual, comfortable, and magnificently warm. A deep contrast from what I must have looked like in beige, the neutral color highlighted the pink in her cheeks.

“Good morning,” I smiled, unable to stop myself from taking another head to toe look at her.

“What's wrong?”

“We match,” I said lightly. Well, at least our clothes did.

We walked toward the truck, and with a triumphant smile, Bella went straight to the driver's side, reminding me of our agreement.

“We made a deal,” she said, not hesitating for a moment before climbing in. I sighed, reluctantly taking my seat as she asked, “Where to?”

“Put your seat belt on – I'm nervous already.”

She glared at me, but put on her belt and icily repeated, “Where to?”

“Take the one-oh-one north,” I said, not wanting to give away our destination too soon. Not that she would have any idea my personal little sanctuary even existed.

I wasn't sure if it was because of how wary I was about the day, or if I simply wasn't used to traveling at normal, human speeds, but Bella seemed to be driving slower than necessary.

“Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?” I asked, not wanting to waste a moment of our precious day.

“This truck is old enough to be your car's grandfather – have some respect.”

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Although I was tempted to resume asking her questions, I didn't want anything to make her uncomfortable today, and she seemed perfectly content driving together in silence. I thought it odd at first – most people were so eager to break the silence – but after a few minutes, I decided to accept it with welcome relief. With my constantly having to hear everyone's internal chatter, I relished the quiet, and if Bella was happy, then I was happy.

I waited until the last possible moment to break our peaceful silence, then told her, “Turn right on the one-ten.” She turned, and I settled back into my seat. This was my favorite part of the journey. “Now we drive until the pavement ends.”

“And what's there, at the pavement's end?”

“A trail,” I said noncommittally.

“We're hiking?” she asked, a hint of fear in her voice. I knew it wasn't her first choice for Saturday afternoon activities, but I was fairly certain the beauty of where we would end up would make it worth it for her.

“Is that a problem?”

“No.” She attempted a smile, but I could hear her heart start to race.

“Don't worry, it's only five miles or so, and we're in no hurry.”

We returned to our mutual silence, but now that I'd sensed her nervousness, it was not as comfortable as it had been before.

“What are you thinking?” I finally asked, unable to stop myself. I felt like I'd asked it so many times before, and I never knew if she was telling me the whole truth or filtering for my benefit.

“Just wondering where we're going,” she said lightly.

“It's a place I like to go when the weather is nice,” I said, glancing at the clouds Alice promised would be gone by later this morning.

“Charlie said it would be warm today,” Bella said, and I saw she too was watching the clouds. I knew she'd been curious about the mystery of my appearance in the sun, and I could feel her growing more anxious as the moment of truth approached.

“And did you tell Charlie what you were up to?” I asked hopefully.

“Nope.” I'd suspected as much.

“But Jessica thinks we're going to Seattle together?” I confirmed. As much as I hated to think of Jessica during our day together, reminding myself without a doubt that I would be held responsible if Bella went missing seemed like the wisest thing to do.

“No, I told her you canceled on me – which is true.”

Although we'd been in the car together without the burning in my throat feeling too torturous, in that moment it raged forth and took over my senses.

“No one knows you're with me?” the monster asked darkly.

“That depends...I assume you told Alice?”

“That's very helpful, Bella.”

My voice was far too harsh and I hated myself for snapping at her, but I couldn't contain all the things that were simultaneously running through me.

Fear.

Doubt.
Thirst.

“Are you so depressed by Forks that it's made you suicidal?” I asked, too viciously again. I had to get myself under control.

“You said it might cause trouble for you...us being together publicly,” she said calmly, as if it were the most normal thing in the world she were discussing.

“So you're worried about the trouble it might cause me – if you don't come home?” I was nearly snarling at her, though some remaining sane portion of my brain told me that she'd been acting out of the best intentions. The fact that those intentions were utterly absurd, however, was hard to ignore.

She didn't speak again, but nodded in response to my accusation. Looking for any outlet to channel my frustration, I started muttering unintelligibly under my breath.

Of all the ridiculous things...she's looking out for me, doesn't even care about herself at all...how am I supposed to keep her safe when she has no sense of self preservation...no wonder she's always getting into trouble...

I could feel the anxiety radiating from her, and I was determined to regain my composure by the time we arrived at the end of the road. She parked and got out of the car without looking at me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see her taking off her sweater. The heat didn't much matter to me, but I had liked the way we matched earlier – anything to remind me we weren't different in every possible way – I decided to do the same.

“This way,” I said, motioning in the opposite direction she had started to walk.

“The trail?” she asked, and I felt a twinge of guilt for having misled her. I heard her frenzied steps as she circled the truck and nearly stumbled to my side.

“I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it.”

“No trail?” she asked wearily. I'd been hoping for something that would put the monster back in his cage, and sure enough, her panic was enough to remind me of my role as her protector.

“I won't let you get lost,” I promised, smiling as I turned to look at her.

I had expected her to relax at my assurance, or at the very least offer a smile like she usually did when she wanted to show me she trusted me. Maybe I'd done more damage than I realized by speaking so angrily to her before.

“Do you want to go home?” I asked, part of me hoping to be granted the reprieve, but a bigger part eager to show her the place that was so special to me. We'd come this far, it seemed a shame to waste the day and the sun that was surely on its way.

“No,” she said, stepping closer to me. She looked close to tears.

“What's wrong?” I asked softly, cursing myself for having upset her.

“I'm not a good hiker. You'll have to be very patient,” she said, and even without being able to read her mind, I knew she wasn't telling me the truth. Still, I didn't want to force her to talk about anything she wasn't comfortable with.

“I can be patient,” I said, playing along. “If I make a great effort.”

I'd tried to make my voice light and teasing, hoping to urge a smile from her. Though the corner of her mouth turned up, she still looked miserable. Great. I'd ruined our whole day because of my own fears and insecurities. So what if no one knew we were together. I knew we were together, and that I was personally responsible for keeping her safe. That would be enough. It would have to be.
When she still didn't speak, I sighed deeply. “I'll take you home,” I offered, giving her one more chance to retreat if it was what she truly wanted. I felt I was back to my former, more trustworthy self, but if I'd frightened her too deeply to proceed, I would respect her wishes.

“If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way.” She nearly spat the words at me, and I was baffled that her mood seemed to be shifting as often as mine today. Usually she was much more level headed.

She stood, glaring at me, and I eventually realized she was waiting for me to decide. Although at the moment, neither of us seemed emotionally stable enough to go through with our plans, I started walking because I knew I couldn't disappoint her. I was sure that once her own anger dissipated, she would remember what this day was about.

It was about trust; answering questions, and sharing secrets. It was about us, and what we could potentially be to each other if we put our fears aside. It was Bella and I, away from the world and prying eyes, unashamed and honest.

It was about me learning how far the monster inside could be pushed, how strong the protector would have to be to silence the thirst. It was about Bella figuring out just how deeply into my world she could allow herself to be thrown, while still remaining true to her own.

It was the ultimate balancing act.

We trudged along, Bella keeping up better than I think she or I had anticipated. I helped her over a few difficult areas, the electricity between us unbelievably heightened each time I touched her skin. Occasionally, I noticed her glancing in my direction, though her expression was unreadable.

Hoping to break her from her sullen mood, I started asking questions about her childhood again. I asked anything and everything I could think of to try to make her smile. Eventually, she started to relax again, and I noticed it made her pace speed up slightly. The more animated she got talking about her life, the faster she seemed to climb over the trees and rocks. She even stumbled significantly less.

As the hours passed, the clouds began to disappear. The sun was shining, but the trees created such a dense cover above us, I knew my secret would be safe a little while longer. Bella's face was alight with joy when she noticed the sun through the trees, and she sped up her pace yet again.

“Are we there yet?” she asked, feigning a frown at me.

“Nearly,” I promised, feeling my own anticipation growing. “Do you see the brightness ahead?”

“Um, should I?” she asked, squinting.

“Maybe it's a bit soon for your eyes,” I teased.

“Time to visit the optometrist,” she mumbled, rolling her eyes.

I slowed down a bit as the sun lit meadow came into view. It was a place I'd retreated to many times, and I was thrilled to finally be sharing it with her. It had been a place of solitude, but now I felt certain it's true beauty would be even more pronounced, because I would no longer have to be there alone.

Bella was hurrying towards the stream of light, looking like an explorer about to unlock a hidden treasure. I walked a few steps behind her, basking in her excitement, and found myself holding my breath as she stepped into the sunlight. Her skin bathed in the warm light and her hair shining like spun gold, she had never looked more beautiful. From beneath the trees, I watched in awe as
she took in her surroundings. Her face was filled with pure joy, and I vowed in that moment to
do anything for her, take her anywhere, if it meant she could always look that happy.

For a moment, I simply breathed, letting the smells of the forest mingle with Bella's perfectly
torturous scent. I embraced the way it teased and tormented me, because it meant we were
together, and I was in control of my need. Taking another deep breath, I let her happiness
become my own. Her peace was my peace.

There was nothing else in that moment but us, and the knowledge that my place of refuge no
longer belonged to me alone.
I waited at the edge of the meadow, still hiding under the shade of the trees. Bella walked slowly through the grass, eyes alight with wonder, and I couldn't help but smile right along with her. I wondered how long it would take her to notice I was no longer following her. She usually seemed all too aware of my presence.

I watched her, thrilled to see the place that had brought me so much joy was making her happy as well. I wanted desperately to join her, yet I couldn't bring myself to step out into the sunlight. I wanted her to truly take in all the beauty of my personal sanctuary before I forever changed by adding the image of myself to it.

Of course she would be frightened, I didn't doubt that for a moment. Secretly I'd wondered many times if the only reason Bella still didn't fear me was because I was so practiced at acting human around her. Aside from whatever fantasies her imagination had created, which in all honesty were probably nothing near the truth, she'd never seen me actually look like a vampire. Today I was going to show her something that would make me appear far from human, and she would be afraid. The side of me that wanted to protect her told me that was a good thing, but the side that had already grown too attached to our time together was terrified.

As if sensing where my thoughts had taken me, she turned to look for me. I was surprised that her expression was concerned, and feared for a moment that I had walked too far into the sun and inadvertently revealed the truth before I was ready. Then her eyes found mine and her face instantly softened. She took a step towards me and reached her hand out like she wanted me to take it and join her. As much as I wanted to hold her hand in mine, longed to feel that spark her touch always ignited, I refused to feel the rejection that would most certainly follow when she saw my skin in the light. I couldn't bare to feel her hand ripped away from mine when the repulsion set in, so I held it up, silently urging her to wait just a little longer.

I sighed and took in a deep breath of air I didn't need, and prepared for the moment I had both anticipated and dreaded. As I stepped out into the light I kept my eyes firmly locked with hers, determined to see her initial reaction, and also not wanting to see the reflexion off my skin. Yet I was unable to avoid seeing it reflect off of her own soft, perfect face, and I closed my eyes in frustration. Taking another unnecessary breath, I prepared for the worst. When I opened my eyes, would she still be standing with me or would she have turned and run, praying I wouldn't follow her?

Reminding myself that a part of me wanted her to run, I forced my eyes open. And she was still standing in front of me, closer even than she was before though I couldn't understand how. Unable to make sense of her expression and as always wishing I could read her mind, I pleaded to her with my eyes.

Please tell me what you're thinking, they urged, and as if she had suddenly figured out how to read my mind, she reached out and took my hand and led me further into the meadow. Gently pulling me down with her, she crossed her legs and sat in the grass. Her eyes, warm and adoring and completely undeserved, never left mine.

Whatever it was that kept her from being afraid of me the way any other human would seemed to still be in tact, despite my inarguably inhuman appearance. Though all I wanted was to bask in the sun with her and revel in the awe of her acceptance of me, I reminded myself why I had brought her here. I'd vowed to myself to be completely honest, even if it meant the day ending
with her wanting nothing to do with me. If she was determined to try to be with me, she needed to know everything, the complete truth, hiding nothing. There was so very much to say.

As difficult as it was for me to accept, Bella still seemed completely at ease around me. In fact she looked fascinated, watching me like she wanted to touch my ridiculous skin. Deciding that the best way to proceed with our day of truth was to just be myself, I laid down in the grass facing up to the sky and closed my eyes. I tried to believe I was capable of acting the way I normally would if this was any other sunny day in my hideaway. I could pretend she wasn't there staring at me. I could convince myself not to notice the way the breeze was mingling her scent with the wildflowers and making my sanctuary nearly unbearable.

Abruptly I opened my eyes, terrified that I had already let my thoughts take me to the darkest of places, and focused again on her and the way she was watching me. There was no fear there, though I couldn't understand how. There was only warmth and affection. I let me eyes close once more and starting singing softly under my breath, the way I always did when I needed to find peace.

I wasn't if she could see my lips move, though I was positive she couldn't hear me, but eventually she asked what I was doing. I told her simply that I was singing, but inside I wondered if she would ever know that although my voice was too soft for human ears, my heart was singing to her.

I didn't expect her to close her eyes or lay down next to me. Even with her apparent lack of fear, she couldn't possibly want to put herself in such a vulnerable position. Every now and then, I would peak at her through barely opened eyes, just to see if anything in her expression had changed. She still watched me with curious eyes, and the slightest hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

Just as I was about to chance another glimpse at her, I felt her finger brush against the back of my hand. My eyes flew open and I gazed wide eyed at her. Unconsciously, I felt myself grin, baffled by why she would want to touch me but thoroughly enjoying the sensation of her warm skin on mine.

Though I wasn't sure I was quite ready to hear the answer, I couldn't help asking the question I'd been holding in since I first stepped into the sunlight.

“I don't scare you?” I asked, still smiling yet fighting against the pain I knew would come if her answer was yes.

“No more than usual,” she replied casually, and I smiled wider as I realized she was telling me the truth. She always told me the truth, absurd as it might be.

My smile must have encouraged her, because she scooted a fraction of an inch closer and let the rest of her fingertips run along my forearm. Her hand was shaking and I closed my eyes again, hoping the fear I'd been dreading wasn't finally starting to set in.

“Do you mind?” she asked timidly, and I had to stifle a laugh. Did I mind? Her touch was the greatest feeling I'd experienced in the whole of my existence.

“No,” I answered, debating how much I should say. Then remembering my vow of honesty I added, “You can't imagine how that feels.”

With a sigh, I let my body sink further into the grass as her hand continued to trace my arm. I could feel her moving toward the inside of my elbow so when she reached for my hand, I flipped it over, palm up. I must have moved too quickly because her fingers froze in place. I opened my eyes, desperate again to read her expression. She was startled, but there was still no trace of fear and I allowed my eyes to close once more.
“Sorry,” I mumbled, wishing she could understand just how strange all this was for me. I’d never allowed myself to be anything less than human around her before, yet already it felt right and natural. “It’s too easy to be myself with you.”

She continued inspecting my hand, then out of nowhere I could feel her breath on my skin. I looked up to see my hand inches from her face. I was so close to her and in that moment the intensity of the desire I’d been working so hard to control was almost too much. I needed a distraction. Very quickly.

“Tell me what you're thinking,” I said softly, not wanting to alarm her with the severity of my voice. “It's still so strange for me, not knowing.”

“You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time,” she said sarcastically. Internally I praised her for being able to lighten the moment when it was most crucial for her survival.

Though I was trying not to focus on it, the realization of the danger that had just passed hit me. I tried to keep my voice relaxed, though knowing Bella, she'd see right through me.

“It's a hard life,” I said, wishing with everything in me that I had some semblance of a normal life to give to her. She didn't deserve the kind of life I had to offer, yet it was all I had to give. And undoubtedly I would give her everything I had.

The original reason for my question had all but vanished, but she still hadn't told me what she was thinking and now I was curious.

“But you didn't tell me,” I reminded her gently, hoping she hadn't been trying to distract me because she didn't want to answer. I had to know.

“I was wishing I could know what you were thinking...” Her voice trailed off like she was waiting for me to tell her. Maybe it was selfish but I had already revealed so much of myself to her, and now it was my turn. I had asked first and I needed to hear the truth before anything else was said.

“And?” I said simply, unwilling to budge just this once.

“I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. And I was wishing that I wasn't afraid.”

And there it was. I felt my breath catch as I took in her words. She was afraid. Of course she was afraid. She was just very, very good at hiding it from me.

“I don't want you to be afraid,” I said hopelessly. Foolishly.

“Well, that's not exactly the fear I meant, though that's certainly something to think about.”

Quickly and without thinking, I sat myself halfway up and leaned onto my arm, my other hand unfathomably still in her hand. Why had she not let go yet? She'd just told me she was afraid, yet she was still looking at me with those kind eyes, tender and not afraid at all.

As I put her expression together with her words, they took on new meaning and sang through my mind like a beautiful symphony.

Not exactly the fear I meant.

If she wasn't afraid for her safety, what else there was for her to be afraid of? My mind raced through every possibility until I remembered her conversation with Jessica, the one she knew I was listening to. She’d been upset, concerned that she cared for me more than I did for her. And then she’d told me it bothered her that it seemed like sometimes I was trying to say goodbye. Was it possible that she was simply afraid of me leaving?

Although I knew it would only encourage the thirst that was already painfully ripping at my throat, I let my face move infinitesimally closer to hers, taking in all of her wonderful and perfect
scent. If my guess was correct, I needed to know just how close she wanted to keep me. I had to hear her say it.

“What are you afraid of, then?” I whispered, slowly letting out the full breath I had taken.

Rather than answer me with the words I longed to hear, she inched her own face closer to mine. My throat burned and ached, the venom flowed under my tongue, and I felt my fist clench inside her fragile little hands. Without another thought I did the opposite of what the monster inside was begging me to do.

I fled.

I ran with immeasurable speed back to the shadows and stared at her, wondering how many more times her life would be in danger today. As I looked at the pain on her face, I knew my earlier assumption had been correct. She was afraid I was going to leave her, and in a moment of weakness I had just confirmed that fear.

“I'm...sorry...Edward,” I heard her whisper. Her voice was so soft, but she knew I would hear. She already knew me so well.

The agony that seared through me as I watched her silenced the thirst that had only moments ago been completely overwhelming.

“Give me a moment,” I said, no longer afraid of hurting her but figuring we both needed time to collect ourselves. Knowing it would calm me as it always did, I listened to the sound of her heartbeat. When it had once again slowed to its normal pace I walked deliberately slowly toward her, willing her not to be afraid, of me or of my leaving again. I sat down in front of her, crossing my legs and mirroring her position. I smiled at her and tried to convey how much I wished I could stay beside her always.

“I am so very sorry.” I wanted her to understand that my quick retreat was only for her protection, but now more than ever I didn't want to frighten her with the reality of my deplorable desire. “Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?”

She nodded, though for the first time all day she didn't attempt a smile. She was starting to understand. I could feel her pulse speed up again, smell the adrenaline course through her veins. Though I hadn't imagined it possible, it only made her smell more desirable. I smiled sarcastically at the irony. She was finally afraid of me and it only made me want her more.

“I'm the world's best predator, aren't I?” I said with a smirk. “Everything about me invites you in – my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that!”

With a sudden rush of excitement at the knowledge that there was no reason to hide anything from her anymore, I jumped to my feet and ran with all my strength around the meadow and stood once again in the shade.

“As if you could outrun me,” I laughed, feeling some kind of sick pleasure in finally sensing her fear of losing me was greater than any fear I could incite in her. Without thinking about the ramifications, I ripped a thick branch from the tree that was sheltering me and threw it against another tree. I listened to the deafening sound as it shattered, then raced to her side again, feeling something akin to adrenaline in my own lifeless veins.

“As if you could fight me off,” I teased. It was only then as reality started coming back to me that I began to take in her expression. Everything stopped. The excitement faded and my own momentary joy dissolved as I looked into Bella's eyes and for the first time, saw real fear.

Bella was terrified. Of me. And it was my own fault.
My triumph turned to defeat, as the horror of what I had just done sank in. I'd always meant to show her what I was capable of, but what was I thinking, not giving her any warning at all? I'd let the excitement take over and cloud my judgment. And now Bella sat unmoving, paralyzed with fear, waiting for my next move.

“Don't be afraid,” I murmured pathetically, wishing there was nothing for her to fear. “I promise...” My voice trailed off as I tried to find the words to reassure her that there was no danger. I was more in control in that moment than I had been all day, watching her, feeling her hurt. Her fear filled blood more potent than it had ever been, I forced myself to take a deep breath, fill my entire being with her scent. As the burn threatened my will and urged me to act, I stared at Bella's innocent and terrified face and silenced it, determined not to let it rule me any longer.

“I swear not to hurt you,” I finished, making the vow to Bella and to myself at the same time. With all the conviction of my words filling me with hope, I took another slow step toward her.

“Don't be afraid,” I repeated, this time with the knowledge that, if she would let me, I would spend my entire existence making sure she never had any reason to be afraid. Seeing her eyes soften slightly, I sat down in front of her once again, so close our knees were almost touching. I wanted to reach out to her but wasn't sure if it was too soon.

“Please forgive me,” I said sincerely. She seemed puzzled by the formality of my tone, so I decided to lighten things up again, like she was so good at doing.

“I can control myself,” I smiled. “You caught me off guard. But I'm on my best behavior now.”

I was expecting a response and when she didn't so much as blink I grew concerned. Had I already done too much damage to be repaired? Desperate, I made one more attempt at light humor.

“I'm not thirsty today, honestly,” I winked, happy my overindulgent hunting trip yesterday made that fact true, at least as far as my actual physical need was concerned.

Finally her frozen expression broke and I reveled in the sound of her laughter, even if there was still something off about it. I wasn't yet sure if she was ready to touch me again, but I couldn't help myself. I was so worried about her and all I wanted to do was comfort her, reassure her.

“Are you all right?” I asked softly. Then I reached my hand out, careful not to take hers in mine but rather letting it rest gently in her grasp. She needed to be the one in control now. I owed her that much.

She took several quiet, shallow breaths as her eyes moved between our hands and my eyes. Finally she went back to tracing my hand with her fingertips and I sighed, relieved the worst seemed to be over. I smiled warmly at her, trying to get back the feeling we had before my irrational behavior.

“So where were we, before I behaved so rudely?” I asked, wishing things could be easier for her. “I honestly can't remember,” she answered sheepishly, and the guilt washed over me once again. “I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason.” Of course now I'd given her every reason to be afraid of me. After all that had transpired between us, I didn't deserve anything more than that fear. Yet still, I needed to hear her answer.

“Oh, right.”

“Well?” It was ridiculous to hope for it, but I wanted to believe there was still a part of her that wanted me to stay.
As the seconds ticked by silently, it seemed less and less likely that her answer would be in my favor. As painful as I knew her next sentence might be, the anxiety of not knowing was getting the best of me.

“How easily frustrated I am,” I sighed, trying not to upset her. I had to remember, I was letting her control things now. She could take as long as she needed to answer, and I would just have to channel every ounce of patience in me while I waited for her.

“I was afraid...because, for, well, obvious reasons, I can't stay with you. And I'm afraid that I'd like to stay with you, much more than I should.”

If my heart could still beat, it would have started racing. It didn't seem possible that she could still want me, but I wasn't capable of dreaming, so this had to be real. She was staring at our hands again but I wanted her to look up. I needed to look into her eyes, to make sure it wasn't just some facade to make me feel better. After all, she'd proven to me time and again how self sacrificing she could be.

It probably wasn't the best idea, but the only way I could think of to find out if what she was saying was really how she felt, was to mention the possibility of leaving. Although part of me still believed it would be for the best, the thought of being away from her caused me physical pain that rivaled any raging thirst she'd ever made me feel.

“Yes,” I answered slowly, not quite sure how to phrase it. I didn't want to upset her, or frighten her. But I had to know. “That is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That's really not in your best interest.”

She frowned at me and I felt a glimmer of hope. Carefully, I continued, saying the words that threatened to tear me apart.

“I should have left long ago. I should leave now. But I don't know if I can.”

In a strangely human moment, I held my breath as I waited for her answer.

“I don't want you to leave,” she mumbled, her eyes still refusing to meet mine.

Thrilled and uncomprehending, I offered her a quick assurance, wanting her to understand that leaving wasn't really an option for me anymore.

“What is exactly why I should. But don't worry. I'm essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should.”

There was no keeping anything from her anymore. She'd finally started to understand how much I craved her blood, and now I sat beside her, trying to make her understand that there were two kinds of desire I felt for her.

“I'm glad,” she said sweetly. As much as I'd been keeping the relentless monster at bay, I couldn't forget his existence, and in that moment my urge to protect this innocent girl overcame my desire to be with her.

“Don't be!” I said, perhaps a bit too harshly, as I pulled my hand away from her as gently as I could manage. My touch seemed to be distracting her, and I needed her to understand what I was about to say.

“It's not only your company I crave!” I said looking away, embarrassed once again by my weakness. “Never forget that. Never forget I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else.” I felt her eyes searching my face, yet in that particular moment of honesty, I couldn't bear to see what her eyes would reveal.
“I don't think I understand what you mean—by that last part anyway,” she said. As I had been all
day, I was expecting to hear fear in her voice, but all there was was curiosity. When I looked
back into her eyes, they were thoughtful, and I realized she wanted to know the truth as much as
I wanted to tell it to her. It gave me the strength to continue.

“How do I explain? And without frightening you again...hmmmm.” I sifted through several
possible explanations, most of them involving food. I wondered idly if that would upset her. My
thoughts were interrupted when I felt her squeeze my hand. I didn't remember having put it back
in hers, but I was happy to feel her touch again.

“That's amazingly pleasant, the warmth,” I sighed, wishing she could understand just how
spectacular it really was for me. Over the years, I'd only ever had physical contact with my
family and of course all of their skin felt exactly like mine. Before Bella I hadn't felt warmth in
so many decades, I'd almost forgotten what it was like.

I marveled for another brief moment over the pleasure of her touch, then forced myself to focus
again. Deciding the food analogy was really the only way to explain it to a human, I sighed and
tried to phrase my words carefully.

“You know how everyone enjoys different flavors? Some people love chocolate ice cream,
others prefer strawberry?”

She nodded, though there was a hint of concern on her face, probably seeing where I was going
with it.

“Sorry about the food analogy—I couldn't think of another way to explain.”

She smiled at me and it was obviously forced, so I smiled back at her apologetically. There was
no turning back now and we both knew it.

“You see, every person smells different, has a different essence. If you locked an alcoholic in a
room full of stale beer, he'd gladly drink it. But he could resist, if he wished to, if her were a
recovering alcoholic. Now let's say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy,
the rarest, finest cognac—and filled the room with its warm aroma—how do you think he would
fare then?”

She stared at me, trying to understand the temptation I was apparently failing miserably at
explaining. I watched her expression shift from confused, to thoughtful, to somewhat accepting,
then back to confused. Clearly she'd never been tempted beyond what she could tolerate, never
given in and eaten forbidden food. Hadn't every child stolen a cookie from the jar at some point?

“Maybe that's not the right comparison,” I said, desperate to make her understand. “Maybe it
would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin
addict instead.”

Finally it all seemed to click as I saw a brief flicker of fear in her eyes, which she quickly
replaced with amusement. Amazing me as always, she made a joke.

“So what you're saying it, I'm your brand of heroin?”

I smiled, showing her how much I appreciated her attempt to keep things light, but also wanting
her to know that she was more right than perhaps she had realized.

“Yes, you are exactly my brand of heroin.”

Without missing a beat, she asked, “Does that happen often?”
I thought for a moment, wondering how best to answer. I wanted her to know the danger and severity of the situation she'd found herself in, but I'd frightened her so much already, I struggled with the right way to say it.

Maybe if it wasn't about us directly...

“I spoke to my brothers about it. To Jasper, every one of you is much the same. He's the most recent to join our family. It's a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn't had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor.”

Though I hadn't been looking directly at her, I was fairly sure I saw her flinch from the corner of my eye.

I looked swiftly back at her, wishing there was an easier way but needing her to understand why it was so much harder to control myself around her. She was so different from the rest of them, those humans I walked around with every day, barely a burn in my throat at all compared to her. My Bella and her heavenly scent, too delicious to resist but to precious to destroy.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“I don't mind. Please don't worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whichever. That's just the way you think. I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can.”

Relieved by her determination to understand, I summoned the strength to continue.

“So Jasper wasn't sure if he'd ever come across someone who was as...” I trailed off. This was the hardest part. Explaining the intense desire without upsetting her further. Finding the right adjective.

Delectable. Luscious. Exquisite. Inviting

The venom started to flow again, and I cursed myself for letting it get that far. I quickly continued my explanation, hoping she wouldn't notice the change in my voice.

“...appealing as you are to me. Which makes me think not,” I finished conclusively, forcing back the thirst. “Emmett has been on the wagon loner, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger that the other.”

“And for you?”

“Never.”

That was it. That was what I needed her to understand. There had never in my almost one hundred years, been anyone who tempted me the way she does. The smartest thing for both of us would be for me to leave, yet neither one of us seemed able to accept that option. Still, it was only fair that she understand completely. I'd never pushed my resistance to the extreme like this. I couldn't truly be sure how long I could hold on.

Then I remembered the way she'd leaned into me earlier without a trace of fear, and the vow I'd silently made to keep her safe, to let her be close to me without giving her a reason to be afraid. I forced another deep, intoxicating breath, and let the burn strengthen my resolve. I was not going to allow the monster within to take such a precious gift from the man who so desperately wanted nothing more than to love her.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost didn't hear her when she spoke again.

“What did Emmett do?” she asked, and instantly I went rigid. My hand made a fist inside hers, and no amount of her warmth and comfort could relax it. I wasn't going to answer her, and she knew it. Nothing could make me form those words.

“I guess I know,” she said, trailing off sadly.
There was no reason for it, she wasn't accusing or condemning him, but still I felt the urge to defend my brother.

“Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?”

“What are you asking? My permission?” she said in the harshest tone I'd ever heard her take. I was so stunned, I'm not sure I even understood what she was asking. Then in a completely different tone, she added, “I mean, is there no hope, then?”

“No, no!” I yelled, frightening even myself because in that instant I knew what she'd thought, and it horrified me. Was she really sitting beside me, calm and rational, but secretly wondering when the vampire would attack? Could she really care about me so much that she was willing to give her life to be with me?

Though she was talking about what she basically assumed was her imminent death, her voice was gentle and kind like she was comforting me. It was filled with such sadness that I was completely overcome. I wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be fine. Nothing was going to make me do to her what Emmett had done to those humans. It wasn't the same. Couldn't she see it wasn't the same?

“Of course there's hope! I mean, of course I won't...” It was then I realized that she couldn't possibly know the absolute conviction of the vow I'd made to myself earlier, the vow that was getting me through this ordeal. I wanted to make her understand that although nothing could ever dilute the potency of her blood, my love for her was making every second we spent together more bearable. Her life had been in danger many times. But now the only thing raging through me was the strength of what I felt for her. My love would save her life, again and again.

“It's different for us,” I tried pitifully to explain. “Emmett...these were strangers he happened across. It was a long time ago, and he wasn't as...practiced, as careful, as he is now.”

I stared at her, hoping she could see the difference.

“So if we'd met...oh, in a dark alley or something...” she said hesitantly.

“It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class full of children and —” I stopped, wondering if that was too much truth for her. Yet I'd promised her total honesty so I continued, trying not to say anything too offensive. “When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself.”

I felt the disgust wash across my face remembering that first dark day, when I'd almost taken the life of the most innocent, the most compassionate of humans. I never would have known just how profane a sin I'd committed. I'd never have felt this impossibly strong love for the girl who now sat across from me, the unworthy vampire.

“You must have though I was possessed,” I said, finally forcing myself to see that horrific day through her eyes.

“I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me so quickly...”

“To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin...I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow...”
She looked confused, although I was certain she was at least beginning to understand how close I had actually been. She hadn't said anything in so long and I wanted to gauge her reaction, so I added something I probably should have kept to myself.

“You would have come.”

Her voice was calm, as she confirmed what I already knew. “Without a doubt.”

Though I fought it, I was bombarded by the image of what I could have done to her in my selfish, destructive desire. I saw a flash of her cold pale skin, and no longer had it in me to look into her eyes. They were so comfortable, so trusting, and I deserved none of it.

“And then,” I continued sadly, staring down at her perfect, warm hands still holding mine tightly, “as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there — in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there — so easily dealt with.”

I saw her shiver so I stopped momentarily, taking another deep breath to scorch my throat. It seemed a fitting punishment. I was admitting to the worst moment of my terrible weakness and making her relive that day, showing her how close she and all the others were to death. That was surely going to haunt her for the rest of her life. It wasn't fair that she was suffering alone. I parted my lips slightly and inhaled again, letting the burn saturate my throat before I continued.

“But I resisted. I don't know how. I forced myself not to wait for you, not to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn't smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home — I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong — and then I went straight to Carlisle, at the hospital, to tell him I was leaving.”

Of all the things I'd told her throughout the day, I didn't understand how that would be the piece of information that shocked her. But there she sat, wide eyed and clearly surprised. Had she even realized I'd left? I'd thought about her every second I was away. I wanted to ask her what she did during those days. It had been nagging at me, wondering what I'd missed during my pathetic escape attempt.

But her eyes were urging me to continue, and this day was hers. She needed me to finish my story, no matter how embarrassed I was of what I had done.

“I traded cars with him — he had a full tank of gas and I didn't want to stop. I didn't dare to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn't have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary...”

I almost stopped to clarify, after all I didn't want Bella to get the wrong impression of Esme. Despite how some of my family felt, Esme never would have encouraged me to act on my thirst in order to stay. Not to say she wouldn't have done everything else including but not limited to house arrest to keep me from leaving. Still, Bella didn't seem upset by what I'd said, so I continued, anxious to get through it and ready to move on. The next part of my story was the most humiliating.

“But by the next morning I was in Alaska. I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances...but I was homesick.”

And Tanya was as relentless as ever and it was making me insane, I thought, deciding to edit out that part. No need to burden her with the annoyance of “Desperate Vampire Seeking Mate.”
“I hated knowing I'd upset Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I'd dealt with temptation before, not of this magnitude, not even close, but I was strong.”

At least I used to think I was strong. I suppressed the smile that was building inside me as certain realizations started to sink in. Even when it was easier for me and my pathetic lack of control, I wasn't happy being away from her. She was everything. She was the reason for it all.

“Who were you, an insignificant little girl...” And finally I couldn't hide the grin any longer, because the look on her face was priceless. “...to chase me from the place I wanted to be? So I came back...”

She was still looking at me incredulously and I hoped I hadn't offended her. She didn't know it yet, couldn't understand, but in my confession I'd realized the answer I'd been searching for. She was why I came back. This girl, this fragile human girl. I didn't want to admit it, but I knew now that she controlled me then just as she was controlling me now. I was hers, long before I consciously knew it.

Yes, I missed my family. I missed this silly, rainy, overcast town and the fact that I could lead a somewhat normal life here. Of course I hated to admit that some human had driven me from my home. But none of those were the real reasons I came back.

I came back because I couldn't get her scent out of my head, couldn't stop seeing her face every time I closed my eyes. I was intoxicated by everything about her. I missed Bella. And no amount of thirst or pain could keep me away. Just like no pain I would feel would ever be worth harming her in any way.

I wanted to tell her, explain everything I was feeling, but I felt an obligation to finish what I had started. So I continued, trying to keep the words from bursting out of me.

“I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it. It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica's mind...her mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that.”

Maybe one day I would admit all the dreadful things Jessica thought about her. I hated that Bella was so trusting of her and her supposed friendship, when Jessica didn't deserve any of it. But that was for another today. Today was hers. Ours.

“And then I couldn't know if you really meant what you said. It was all extremely irritating. I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting,” I admitted, and my confession almost slipped out. How I hung on every word she said, sifted through everyone else's boring mind just to see her face, hear her voice. How I watched her sleep, entranced, listening to her dream. No, it was too soon for all that.

“I found myself caught up in your expressions...and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again...”

Then the worst moment of my existence flashed before my eyes, as I remembered the panic I felt watching that van careening towards her. Was there any way to explain what I felt in those seconds? The only possible way was to admit to her the careful lie I had composed – composed my never had the strength to use – to cover up the truth of that terrible moment. I could tell her
the truth, admit why I had risked everything to save her. It was the answer to the question that had plagued her for far too long. And it was the most important thing I could give her.

“Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes. Later I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment – because if I hadn't saved you, if you blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don't think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are.”

I took a deep breath and for once didn't even notice the searing pain, though I'm sure it was there. I was staring intently into her eyes, happy that I could finally tell her how that moment had changed everything.

“But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, 'Not her.'”

I closed my eyes, feeling truly tired for the first time in almost a century. She still hadn't spoken a word, though I could hear her heartbeat start to speed up again. When she finally spoke, her voice was strained, like she had gone a long time without swallowing and her throat was aching for something to quench the thirst. I tried not to smile at the comparison. Maybe she really could understand my pain to some extent.

“In the hospital?” she asked, and I was startled that after all I'd confessed, she was still searching for answers from my darkest moments. How much more truth could she take? Yet I forced myself to continue.

“I was appalled. I couldn't believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power – you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you.”

She flinched at the same time as I did, and I hated myself for having let the word slip out. I'd been so careful not to say it, but in all my honesty I must have let my guard down. Hastily, I tried to fix whatever hurt I'd just inadvertently caused her.

“But it had the opposite effect,” I said quickly, trying to think of anything that could make her feel more at ease. Though it was difficult for me to admit even to myself, that was essentially the moment when I first chose her over my family. It would be hard to say the words out loud, but I felt I owed her that truth.

“I fought with Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper when they suggested that now was the time...the worst fight we've ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Alice.” I tried my best not to show anything on my face, but it was impossible to think of Alice without also thinking about her two unacceptable visions for Bella's future. “Esme told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay.”

I shook my head, wondering again if I should defend Esme and her compassionate nature. She told me to do whatever was necessary, but of course I could read her thoughts. She never would have allowed me to hurt Bella. She and Carlisle already had a plan and they would have intervened long before I did anything I would regret later.

“All that next day,” I continued, lost in the memory of it all, “I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn't understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn't become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair...it hit me as hard as the very first day.”

As I thought back to the endless nights I spent agonizing over how best to keep her safe, I couldn't help but smile softly. Even then, even when everything in my nature was telling me to act, to give in...I couldn't bear to think of hurting her. The thirst burned me, tortured me, but every time it scorched me I was assaulted by images that I knew I would never let come to pass.
I thought of her cold, lifeless body, of never being able to see her smile again or guess the thoughts of her silent mind. And although I didn't yet have a name for it, I could feel the emotion that was slowly taking over everything in me, feel it changing me. It was taking me farther away from the monster, and closer to the man I wanted to be.

Knowing this was it, the moment of truth I'd been so desperate for all day, I looked into her eyes with all the love and affection that had been bubbling to the surface.

““And for that,” I said slowly, needing her to really take it all in, “I'd have fared better if I had exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here – with no witnesses and nothing to stop me – I were to hurt you.”

Her expression was still unreadable as she softly asked, “Why?”

“Isabella,” I said, using her full name to make sure I had her complete attention. And because I’d been longing to see how it sounded coming from my lips. Without thinking I gave in to something I'd been wanting to do all afternoon. I reached up and ran my fingers through her hair, relishing the way it softly caressed my fingers.

I smiled as my touch made her shiver, because I could tell she wasn't afraid. She was excited.

“Bella, I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you. You don't know how it's tortured me.” I looked down, suddenly nervous about what I was about to say. I wanted her to know, needed her to understand, but the words were catching. That same image that had haunted me for so long was now it the forefront of my mind and I needed to push it away, to bury it for good. It would never happen. Bella would never be taken from me. I forced the words out, knowing they would give me strength to tell Bella how much she truly meant to me.

“The thought of you, still, white, cold...to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses...it would be unendurable.”

With that I met her gaze and all the pain I was feeling, all the agony I'd suffered fighting the monster inside disappeared. She was finally going to know. She would finally understand.

“You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me ever.”

I heard her heart beat faster than I'd ever heard it as she dropped her eyes down and looked at our entwined hands. My eyes never left her face. I couldn't hear her thoughts. Her expression was all I had. Although I was pretty sure the racing heart was a good sign.

“You already know how I feel, of course,” she said, still not meeting my eyes and torturing me in a new way. She was making me guess how she felt when all I wanted was to hear her say the words out loud. She wasn't looking at me, but still I silently pleaded with my eyes. Tell me. Please, tell me.

“I'm here...which, roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you.”

She'd just told me quite possibly the most beautiful thing anyone in the history of the world had ever said. Yet she was frowning. And I was baffled.

“I'm an idiot,” she added.

That sent me over the edge. I grinned, like the absolute fool that I was and laughed in agreement, because her reactions really were ridiculous.

“You are an idiot,” I said, still chuckling, and relieved when she finally met my gaze. She was happy, confused but happy, and we laughed together wondering how we'd gotten to this point. My eyes never left hers as I finally gave in and said the words I'd been thinking all afternoon.

“And so the lion fell in love with the lamb...”
She blushed and looked away, and as much as I wanted to stare into her eyes forever, I understood that this was a turning point for her. Although I'd been thinking the word for quite some time, I recognized her shy reaction as I confessed my love. If she needed time to let it sink in, I'd give her as much as she needed. I'd give her anything.

“What a stupid lamb,” she finally sighed, and my grin only widened. Really, I was the much bigger idiot in this scenario. I'd brought this all upon myself, willfully putting myself in agony every day just to be near her.

“What a sick, masochistic lion,” I added, letting my eyes drift to the trees behind her. The sky was still bright, but I saw one dark cloud roll in and I wondered if it was going to rain on us, here in our perfect moment. I don't think either of us would have cared.

“Why...” she said softly, but then trailed off. I smiled because even though I was sure it wasn't what she was asking, the word made me think about all the reasons why I loved her. The sunlight bounced off my skin, casting prisms on her face, yet she smiled at me like there was nothing unusual about it at all. That was definitely one of the many reasons why.

“Yes?” I asked, really just wanting to hear her perfect voice for awhile. I felt like I had been talking all day.

“Tell me why you ran away before,” she finished and my smile disappeared.

“You know why.”

“No, I mean, exactly what did I do wrong? I'll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn't do.”

I wanted to scowl at her for managing once again to place the blame on herself when I was the one whose behavior was inexcusable. But the disapproving look I intended to give her got lost in a wave of pleasure as she once again reached out and stroked her fingers against my hand.

“This, for example, seems to be all right.”

I just smiled and let myself indulge a little in the feel of her touch. My voice was relaxed as she calmed me with her gentleness.

“You didn't do anything wrong, Bella. It was my fault.” Always my fault.

“But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you.”

“Well,” I said reluctantly, but unable to argue with her if she was set on making things easier. I wanted it not for my sake but for hers. I was more determined than ever to keep complete and perfect control when we were together, to never let her be afraid again.

“It was just how close you were,” I sighed remembering her breath on my hand, her face inches from mine. “Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness...I wasn't expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your throat,” I said urgently, the burn making itself known again. But I was in control. There was nothing for her to worry about and I checked to make sure her eyes weren't fearful.

“Okay, then,” she said as if I were talking about something completely unimportant, rather than her survival. Then in possibly the cutest gesture I'd ever seen her make, she tucked her chin, smiled and said, “No throat exposure.”

I laughed, deliriously happy that I was able to talk openly with her about everything now, even my repulsive longing to sink my teeth into her throat. It didn't seem to upset her or scare her. She was just as thrilled by my honesty as I was at finally being able to share everything with her.
Of course I didn't want her to think she needed to start wearing turtlenecks everyday, so I quickly clarified.

“No, really, it was more the surprise than anything else.”

Slowly, I reached up to touch the side of her neck. Her skin was so soft, so delicate, and I wondered what it would be like to brush against it with my nose. My lips...

I would have worried that my cold touch would bother her, but she had been initiating contact all day. She seemed to like my touch as much as I relished in hers, so I left it there, feeling her pulse under my fingertips.

“You see,” I told her calmly. “Perfectly fine.” And I really was. Even as I listened to her pulse race, took in her luxurious scent, I couldn't feel even the slightest lapse in my control. All I could think about was how I wanted to touch her more and make her heart race faster.

I'd never been more comfortable with her than in that moment, so I decided to test myself just a bit further. I knew I was incapable of hurting her now. The man was finally winning the battle with the monster. And I really did want to be closer, to feel more of her skin on mine.

Sensing what I was feeling as she always did, her cheeks turned their familiar shade of pink. I wanted to laugh because it seemed silly to blush in such a moment, sitting in our stillness, just watching each other. But I also knew what I was about to do and I didn't want her to be embarrassed of her reactions to me. I enjoyed them. They made her who she was, and they reminded me that at least some part of her longed for me as I longed for her.

“The blush on your cheeks is lovely,” I said softly, and watched the shade deepen.

Reluctantly, I took my other hand from hers and it fell lifelessly to her side. She didn't want me to let go either. It was the most amazing feeling to be so wanted. Eager to show her my intentions, I brushed my fingers lightly along her soft cheek. She sighed and I felt her relax beneath my touch. Encouraged, I brought my other hand up from her neck and cupped her face delicately between my hands, always aware of how utterly breakable she was.

It terrified me, but also filled me the deepest sense of joy that she trusted me so completely. It fueled my earlier resolve and made me believe that being with her could really be possible.

“Be very still,” I said, ready to test my limits but still afraid of my instincts taking over without warning. As much as I wanted to let her control everything today, this was definitely a moment I needed to lead. Even though it seemed impossible that I would hurt her now of all times, I wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances. I had to be in charge, just for these few precious moments.

Slowly, so slow I wasn't even sure I was moving, I leaned closer to her. I kept my eyes locked with hers, silently reminding her not to make any sudden movements. My fingers were still stinging from the sensation of warmth where I had touched her face and neck. I wanted to feel that warmth on my face, wanted to feel that much more human for her. So I gently laid my cheek against her throat, taking one shallow breath to see how much more potent her scent would be in such close proximity.

It was painful, but bearable. The thirst raked at my throat, but I was so happy to be touching her without her being afraid that it lessened the pain. Assured that I was still in complete control, I allowed my breaths to return to normal. I let my fingers trace down from her face to her neck, focusing on the texture of her skin on mine. I felt her shiver and worried for one brief moment if having so much of my icy skin on hers at once was making her too cold. Then I realized her heart was racing again and reminded myself that her shivers could mean something else.
When my hands finally rested on her shoulders, I let my nose trace along the length of her collarbone. The fiery burn was almost too much and I contemplated backing away, but I was so near to her heart and it was beating faster than I'd ever heard it. Beating that way for me.

It gave me all the encouragement I needed to take the final step in my little experiment. I pressed my cheek firmly but gently into her chest and listened to her frantic heartbeat. I forced one more deep breath of her heavenly scent and closed my eyes.

“Ah,” I breathed, letting the sanctity of this impossible moment wash over me. I don't know how long I sat there, face pressed against her wonderfully warm skin, but I eventually noticed her heartbeat return to normal. We both breathed steadily and I wondered if she could be as unwilling to let this moment end as I was. Still, I was curious what her expression would show me, so I slowly returned to my sitting position and let my hands fall to my side. I knew it wouldn't be long until I would be holding her again.

She looked content, happy even, though there was still a hint of nervousness in her eyes. I didn't want her to think that every time I touched her she would have to sit there like a statue. In fact, part of me wished she could have touched my cheek as well. I longed to feel her soft fingers trace the lines of my face.

“It won't be so hard again,” I assured her, glad I could say it with such confidence. It really had been quite manageable.

“Was that very hard for you?” she asked, concerned for me as she always was.

“Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be,” I said truthfully. “And you?”

“No, it wasn't bad...for me,” she answered, blushing the deepest shade of red I'd seen yet. A huge grin pulled at my lips. She'd enjoyed me touching her, being that close to her.

“You know what I mean,” I teased and she grinned right back at me.

“Here,” I said, pleased to have just thought of an excuse to hold her hand again. I brought it softly up to my cheek and sighed as I felt her caress my skin. I could tell my face wasn't as icy as usual, still radiating some of her delightful warmth, and I hoped she could feel it too.

“Do you feel how warm it is?” I asked hopefully.

She looked like she wanted to answer me, but the strangest expression had just crossed her face. It was almost...longing? How I wished I could know what she was thinking.

“Don't move,” she whispered, and I froze beneath her. Sensing what she was about to do, I let my eyes close and focused on making sure I was still in control of myself. I knew it was coming, but I still felt myself tense as her fingers touched my cheek. I wanted to lean into her touch, encourage her, let her know how much I was enjoying it. But she had stayed still for me, and it was her turn to explore me now.

I was surprised when I felt her touch my closed eyes, and again wondered what she was thinking. Then her fingers moved to my nose and eventually my lips. Without meaning to, I opened my mouth and let out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Yet somehow I knew I hadn't been holding it to keep her scent away. Recognizing yet another long buried human reaction, I realized I'd been holding it in anticipation.

Far too soon, I felt her hand pull away from me. I opened my eyes and could feel them shamefully begging her for more. Did she have any idea what she was doing to me? I wanted to wrap my arms around her, pull her close, inhale her luscious scent until it drove me mad. It was a new kind of desire, one I hadn't believed myself capable of, and it was harder to contain even
than the beast whose need I thought would always come first. This was new, and wonderful, and completely unexpected.

“I wish,” I said, struggling for the right words, “I wish you could feel the...complexity...the confusion...I feel. That you could understand.”

Unable to control this new longing, I reached up and ran my fingers through her hair once more.

“Tell me,” she whispered, and I could feel how badly she wanted to understand.

“I don't think I can. I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger – the thirst – that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely,” I teased, determined to keep the mood light.

She'd ended up understanding better than I could have expected. Regretfully, my foolish actions during the day had finally made her see the danger of being with me. Yet now those desires were overshadowed by new and powerful sensations, and I needed her to understand just what that meant. There was hope for us now. I finally felt like I had something to offer her.

“But...” I said quietly, letting my fingers gently caress her lips and loving the shudder that ran through her as I did, “There are other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand, that are foreign to me.”

“I may understand that better than you think.” Her breath was shaky when she spoke and it filled me with delight.

“I'm not used to feeling so human,” I admitted. “Is it always like this?”

“For me?” she asked. I held another expectant breath as I waited for her answer. “No, never. Never before this.”

At that I reached out both of my hands and scooped hers into mine, holding them tighter than I probably should have. If my strength made her uncomfortable, she didn't complain. After a moment I forced myself to loosen my grip, just in case I was hurting her. It was unfathomable that this new desire was almost as difficult to control as the one I'd been fearing for so long. I wanted to hold her tight, squeeze her hands in mine and never let go. It was harder than I would have imagined, holding back and minding every touch for fear of crushing her fragile body.

“I don't know how to be close to you,” I said with a sudden twinge of sadness. “I don't know if I can.”

This wasn't something I'd factored into the equation. My longing to be close to her could put her in as much danger as the thirst I'd finally manged to tame. It felt like the universe was against us, giving us more and more reasons not to be together.

Something of my inner turmoil must have shown on my face, and being the compassionate soul that she was, her next gesture was one of pure comfort. She leaned into me, slowly as was our understood standard, and rested her cheek on my chest. I wished I could make my heart beat for her.

“This is enough,” she said sweetly, letting her eyes flutter closed.

Completely overcome with my love for her and the trust and faith she had in me, I didn't know how to respond. I wanted to ask how she could possibly think I was enough for her. What chance at a normal life could I offer her? Yet as the wind ruffled her hair again and blew her scent toward me once more, I smiled and reminded myself we had already won the hardest battle.
Acting on what I could only assume was some part of my human nature, I wrapped my arms gently around her and took a deep breath of her hair. It was the most marvelous scent, and my joy once again silenced the burn.

“You're better at this than you give yourself credit for,” she said with a giggle. It was such a relief that my gesture appeared to have been the appropriate one.

“I have human instincts – they may be buried deep, but they're there.”

I closed my eyes, and let the events of the day replay through my mind. We'd accomplished so much, both of us, and although it seemed the world was against us, I wasn't going to let anything touch us in our fleeting moment of perfect bliss.

With a sigh, I noticed the setting sun and felt our day coming to an end. If it weren't for the fact that I knew I would be watching her sleep in a few short hours, I don't think I would have been able to let her go.

“You have to go,” I muttered, half hoping she wouldn't hear me. Or wouldn't care.

“I thought you couldn't read my mind,” she sighed.

“It's getting clearer,” I said, smiling at how well I seemed to understand her now. As I thought about how long it had taken to walk there this morning, I grew concerned that it would be dark long before we could reach the car. And while the dark didn't matter to me, I knew it would make the hike that much more difficult for her. With a rush of excitement I thought of a solution, though I wasn't sure how she would react to it. Still, it seemed like a fitting way to end our day of truth and revelations.

“Can I show you something?” I asked, looking deep into her eyes to gauge her reaction.

“Show me what?” she asked nervously.

“I'll show you how I travel in the forest.” I saw the glint of fear in her eyes, and I suppressed my laughter as I thought about all the possibilities her imagination was likely creating. “Don't worry, you'll be very safe, and we'll get to your truck much faster.” I smiled, trying to assure her I'd protect her as I let her take a small step into my vampire world.

“Will you turn into a bat?” she asked, and the laughter I'd been holding in finally escaped in a loud burst. Hollywood really had fun coming up with ways to make our world even stranger than it already was.

“Like I haven't heard that one before!”

“Right, I'm sure you get that all the time,” she muttered sarcastically, probably trying to mask her embarrassment.

“Come on, little coward,” I teased, having a bit more fun with it than I should have. “Climb on my back.”

She looked at me like I was joking, so I smiled and went to pull her up. Her heart was racing again but it didn't sound the same as before when I was touching her. I was startled realize I could tell the difference, and thrilled that I'd inadvertently discovered another way of reading her.

As I pulled her up, I felt her tiny arms and legs lock around me, and tried my best not to think about how good it felt to have her pressed into me.

“I'm a bit heavier than your average backpack,” she said shyly.

“Hah!” I laughed again, rolling my eyes. She felt as light as a feather to me.
I casually reached up and brought her palm to my cheek, partly because I wanted her to feel comfortable again and partly because I missed the feeling of her hand against my face. I inhaled her beautiful scent, barely noticing the ache it incited in my throat.

“Easier all the time,” I whispered, more to myself than to her.

Then with one final breath I took off. I immediately felt her hand leave my face and resume its firm grip around my neck. I wished I could see her. I really had no way of knowing how she would react to the speed. Since I couldn't read her and I really didn't want to stop until we reached the truck, I simply let myself thrill to the excitement of running. It wasn't just the running though, it was feeling Bella there with me, finally sharing with her the one part of this miserable existence I actually enjoyed.

I thought about slowing down, to prolong the moment, but I was anxious to hear her thoughts on the experience. I hoped it was as invigorating for her as it always was for me.

After just a few minutes, I spotted her truck in the distance. Slowing down to a gentle stop, I took in another deep breath, letting her scent mingle with all the life of the forest around us. It was divine.

“Exhilarating, isn't it?” I asked excitedly. I waited for a few seconds, eager for her response, when it occurred to me she was still gripping me so tightly her knuckles had turned white.

“Bella?” I asked, growing concerned.

“I think I need to lie down,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, feeling a sharp pain of regret. I didn't think it would have bothered her that much.

“I think I need help,” she added, arms and legs still clenched around me.

Despite my best efforts, a small laugh escaped my lips. Of all the things about me she couldn't handle, of course it would end up being the one thing I was so sure she would like. I unlocked her grip and pulled her into my arms, wrapping her up the way I had in our meadow. The human gestures were coming to me more readily every second.

I was enjoying holding her, but then I remembered she had asked to lie down. I lowered her carefully onto the ferns and quickly inspected her to make sure there was no outward damage. Had I underestimated the effect of the sharp wind against her face, or the amount of strain the speed would put on her body?

“How do you feel?” I asked, genuinely concerned though I couldn't see anything wrong with her.

“Dizzy, I think.”

Oh, well I guess that was a reasonable response. “Put your head between your knees.” I'd never understood it, but I'd heard people say it helped.

I continued watching her, and listening as her breathing steadied. Eventually she lifted her head, though she kept her eyes closed.

“I guess that wasn't the best idea,” I murmured apologetically.

“No, it was very interesting,” she said, eyes still squeezed shut. I laughed at her feeble attempt to make me feel better.

“Hah! You're at white as a ghost – no, you're as white as me!” I laughed.

“I think I should have closed my eyes,” she said, shaking her head at herself.

“Remember that next time.”
“Next time!” she yelled, and I had to laugh again. Then quietly I heard her mutter, “Show-off.”

I sat there listening to her as her breathing steadied and watched her, wondering how on earth this could be her most difficult moment of the day. She’d been alone with me all day as I relentlessly shared with her my darkest secrets. She didn’t fear my unnatural skin or my unyielding strength. She reveled in my cold touch and graced me with her warm fingertips in return. I’d accomplished everything I set out to do and so much more. There was only one way this day could be more perfect and in that quiet moment, with only the sound of her heart and our breathing, I let myself believe it was possible.

“Open your eyes, Bella,” I said in my gentlest voice.

As her beautiful eyes fluttered open, I heard her breath catch. She was surprised by how close I was, but it didn’t seem to bother her. In fact I could swear she moved just a fraction of an inch nearer to me by instinct.

“I was thinking, while I was running...” I began, wondering how I would bring up what I so desperately wanted to try.

“About not hitting trees, I hope,” she interjected.

“Silly Bella,” I laughed. Always afraid of me for all the wrong reasons. “Running is second nature to me, it’s not something I have to think about.”

“Show-off,” she said again, this time obviously meaning for me to hear it.

I smiled at her and prepared myself for what was next. The last hurdle to jump over. My final test of the day. Just how close could I be to her and still keep the monster at bay?

“No. I was thinking there was something I wanted to try.”

Of course all of this was entirely new to me, so I hadn’t the faintest idea of how to start. So I decided to begin with the gesture that had left us both feeling so at peace earlier. I took her soft face into my hands and gazed into her eyes.

For a moment, she stopped breathing altogether. It wasn’t until then that I realized I hadn’t taken a breath in awhile either. Perhaps that was smart. But being stupid had gotten me pretty far today, so I decided to take a careful breath.

Even with her face inches from mine and her moist lips parted as she realized what I wanted to do, I was in control. I moved very slowly toward her until I could feel her breath on my face. It was warm, just like her touch, and I paused to marvel at how wonderful it felt. Taking another deep and cautious breath, I watched her eyes close softly. A quiet sigh escaped her lips and it was all the reassurance I needed. There was no need great enough to make me harm her, now or ever. So I let my own eyes close as hers had, and pressed my lips to hers.

It was the most magnificent feeling, soft and loving. I could taste her on my lips but it didn't ignite the painful thirst as I had expected. It made me long for more of her embrace.

Unfortunately, Bella seemed as in tune to my desires as always, and was all too willing to give me what I wanted. Every caution, every warning, every plea I had made to her to stay still disappeared. Her fingers reached up and grabbed at my hair and secured my face to hers. Her lips were parted beneath mine and I could feel her breathing me in just as I had breathed her in.

And without warning it was too much. The tender, affectionate man was gone and the monster could once again taste what it desired most. And this time my prey was clutching me to her. I froze, holding my breath and forcing the beast to retreat. I quickly played back our day in the grass, remembering the way her eyes watched me with curiosity and above all her graceful innocence.
Without opening my eyes, I pushed her face away but couldn't bring myself to release her entirely. Feeling her perfect warmth in my hands was the only thing allowing me to hold onto my last bit of restraint. Still refusing to breathe, I opened my eyes. Hers were still closed, and even in the midst of the terrible moment, I found myself wondering what she was thinking.

Eventually her eyes opened, and after taking in my expression, she whispered, “Oops.”

“That's an understatement,” I mumbled sarcastically.

“Should I...” she started to move, but that only seemed to make it worse. I couldn't have her stirring her scent around me.

“No, it's tolerable. Wait for a moment, please,” I said as calmly as I could manage. Even then I refused to let her know just how close I had been to letting the monster out.

It helped that she never took her eyes off of mine. There was no way I would have been able to hurt her while staring into them. She watched me with such adoration, it made the wild thirst die down more quickly.

“There,” I finally said, feeling a touch of my earlier peace return to me.

“Tolerable?” she asked, smirking ever so slightly. Casual and relaxed again so quickly. I had to laugh.

“I'm stronger than I thought. It's nice to know.” Yes. I needed to focus on the strength I had found rather than the weakness that had almost overtaken me. After all, I had still won the battle. And I learned another piece of information that would help me next time. Hmm. I wondered how she would react if I asked her to keep her eyes open while kissing me.

“I wish I could say the same. I'm sorry,” she said, frowning. I couldn't bear to see her place the blame on herself again. So I teased her. She seemed to like it when I made jokes.

“You are only human, after all.”

“Thanks so much,” she said bitterly, and I wished I had just left it alone.

Ready for this dismal moment to be over, I jumped to my feet and reached for her hand. I was surprised when she didn't immediately take it and worried I'd frightened her more than I'd thought, but then I felt her hand in mine and everything felt normal again. Well, normal for us.

She wobbled unsteadily as I tried to get a better grip on her. Of course I was used to her lack of coordination, but I couldn't resist the urge to make just one more joke.

“Are you still faint from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise?” I laughed.

She watched me for a moment, like she was trying to work out some equation in her head. If she had any idea how frustrating it was for me not knowing...

“I can't be sure, I'm still woozy,” she finally answered. “I think it's some of both, though.”

“Maybe you should let me drive,” I offered, wondering how in the world she would be able to drive when she could barely walk.

“Are you insane?”

“I can drive better than you on your best day,” I reminded her. “You have much slower reflexes.” I didn't mean it as an insult. It was just one of the differences between our two kinds.

“I'm sure that's true, but I don't think my nerves, or my truck, could take it.”

“Some trust, please, Bella.” I almost laughed at the irony of my asking for her trust now, when she'd done nothing but give it to me wholeheartedly all day.
I watched as her hand clenched in her pocket, probably holding onto the key with all her might. She seemed to think about it momentarily, but shook her head, unwilling to budge.

“Nope. Not a chance.”

I lifted an eyebrow, silently asking if she was really putting her foot down on this one. I don't know why, but as she began walking around me toward the driver's side, it started to feel like a challenge.

As I watched her stumble once again, I reached my arm out and encircled her waist.

“Bella, I've already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive,” I reminded her, still trying to keep things light. “I'm not about to let you behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can't even walk straight. Besides, friends don't let friends drive drunk.”

I laughed as I watched my joke sink in. She understood, but still she had to ask. And of course I couldn't resist.

“Drunk?”

“You're intoxicated by my very presence.” I grinned my most mischievous grin at her.

“I can't argue with that,” she conceded, and I had to admit it made me happy to know she really did feel that way.

With a knowing look, she lifted the key in the air and let it drop. Of course I caught it instantly and she just smiled.

“Take it easy – my truck is a senior citizen,” she said, a real hint of worry in her voice. Once again, always afraid of the wrong things.

“Very sensible,” I said seriously, letting her know I wouldn't push her ancient truck past its limit. No, apparently it was only myself I was willing to push to the extreme.

Then I noticed she was looking at me somewhat sadly, and I wondered if it really bothered her that much, the idea of me driving too fast in her beloved truck.

When she spoke however, her voice was as miserable as her expression, though she tried to mask it with irritation.

“Are you not affected at all? By my presence?”

I smiled at her again, baffled that she couldn't see it, feel in emanating from me every second we were together. I was affected by everything she did, every way she looked, every sound she made. Her presence made my existence worthwhile.

Determined to make her see just what she did to me, I lowered my face slowly to hers and let my lips trace her jawline. Gently my mouth caressed her from her ear to her chin, over and over until both of our breathing had sped up and I trusted she was starting to understand. When I looked at her again, her eyes were wide and excited.

“Regardless,” I said softly, “I have better reflexes.”
“Mind Over Matter”

My mind was still reeling from the events of the day as I watched Bella buckle her seatbelt nervously. Really, I had just run her at my full speed through the forest without so much as brushing against a tree branch. What did she think I was going to do, drive us off a cliff into the ocean?

She looked up at me with wide eyes, and I just rolled my own at her as I started the engine and began our drive. Wishing I could make her as comfortable as she had been sitting with me in our meadow, I reached across and took her hand in mine. She relaxed slightly and smiled at my casual touch. A huge grin spread across my face as I realized all the barriers were gone now. I'd been afraid to touch her for so long, worried the chill of my fingers would bother her. Now I knew it excited her. Amazing as it was to think about the possibility, this could be our new normal. I could hold Bella's hand, hug her, ruffle her hair.

Kiss her...

That part of the afternoon was still a bit of a blur. If it weren't for the lingering burn in my throat that had been reignited after tasting her on my lips, I almost wouldn't have believed it really happened. Of course there was one other admittedly more enjoyable reminder. Bella still had the most adorably goofy grin on her face, a slight blush still coloring her cheeks.

I had to remind myself not to speed in old truck down. I could feel the engine screaming at me as I tried to push it even to sixty, so I relaxed my foot and tried to concentrate on other things. The sunset over the horizon. The trees on the side of the road that may as well have been standing still. Bella's fingers locked with mine between us. Her beautiful eyes when she chanced a glance at me from under her lashes.

I wondered if she knew how much I loved it when she looked at me that way. It was so shy like she didn't want me to know she was staring, which is ridiculous because having her look at me, still completely unafraid was the most thrilling feeling. I was still trying to convince myself all of this was real when I caught her gaze and saw the blood rush to her cheeks again. It gave me some ray of hope that perhaps she really did care for me like I so desperately loved her.

Of course I knew it couldn't be exactly the same for her. She hadn't been waiting nearly a century to find the reason for her existence. In fact, I got the feeling she wasn't very big on the whole idea of dating. I chuckled under my breath as I remembered her irritation at being repeatedly asked to the dance. They'd all shown her interest, yet she turned each one of them down.

But she hadn't turned me down. So there I sat with the most remarkable human I'd ever met holding my hand and looking at me like I was the prize rather than the unmistakable winner.

Although I was perfectly content to sit in silence and marvel at how far we'd come in such a short time, I thought the quiet might be bothering her. I reached to turn on the radio, tuning the knob until I found one of my favorite stations. She seemed surprised when I started singing along with one of the songs.

“You like fifties music?” she asked, peeking up at me again, driving me crazy. In the most fantastic way.
“Music in the fifties was good,” I said, then paused realizing I'd never actually told her how old I was. I wasn't sure if she was ready for that piece of information, so I cracked a quick joke, trying to distract her. “Much better than the sixties, or the seventies, ugh! The eighties were bearable.”

I smiled warmly at her but like always her curiosity was already piqued.

“Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?” she asked, meeting my eyes with a pleading look.

“Does it matter much?” I said, still trying to keep the atmosphere light.

“No, but I still wonder.” She looked strangely dejected, as if not knowing had really been troubling her. “There's nothing like an unsolved mystery to keep you up at night.”

Had she actually lost sleep wondering about my past? It seemed a fairly insignificant detail to be bothering her so much, but who was I to question human worries.

“I wonder if it will upset you,” I said softly.

Time had lost all meaning to myself and my family. As the years pass and we remain unchanged, we eventually just stopped counting. If it weren't a necessary part of our facade, keeping up with world events and trends, I honestly think we wouldn't even know what year it was. Still, it was something Bella wanted to know, and if I'd learned anything today it was that I would do anything in my power to make her happy.

After yet another song ended, she finally spoke and her voice was calm, but with just a hint of frustration.

“Try me,” she said, and I allowed myself to meet her stare once more. Her eyes were just as adoring as when she'd watched the sun bounce off my skin, or listened to my worst confessions. She was urging me on, trying to tell me that whatever the answer was it wouldn't change anything. With a sigh I gave in and told her what she'd been wanting to know.

“I was born in Chicago in 1901,” I said slowly, watching her reaction carefully. Maybe she was expecting worse, or maybe she was just really good at keeping her shock hidden. Either way, nothing about her expression changed so I smiled and continued. “Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and dying of the Spanish Influenza.”

That did it. That knowledge of my last dark human moments made her gasp. When I looked at her there was an agony in her eyes I didn't fully understand. She seemed to be hurting for my former pain, though it was just a distant memory to me. Her empathy would never cease to astound me.

“I don't remember it well,” I assured her, determined to help the soft peace return to her eyes. “It was a very long time ago, and human memories fade.”

I sifted quickly through the few foggy human memories I'd manged to cling to. I could still see my mother's face, though I'd managed to block out how sick and pale she'd become at the end. I didn't remember much of my childhood but there were bits and pieces that had stuck with me. Often it felt more like watching a movie of someone else's life rather than recalling my own, but at least they were there. There were some, like Alice, who didn't have any memories of being human. Although I'd never trade the few memories I had, I sometimes wondered if not remembering made this life easier. If you couldn't remember the joys of being human, would it make you miss it less?

The sound of Bella's steady breathing brought me back and reminded me I was in the middle of telling her something she'd been eager to hear about for a long time. I quickly picked up where I had left off, sharing a piece of information that was always very painful to recall.
“I do remember how it felt, when Carlisle saved me. It's not an easy thing, not something you could forget.” I worried she was going to ask about my transformation, and was relieved she seemed to be letting it go. At least for the moment.

“Your parents?” she asked, probably wondering why Carlisle hadn’t saved us all. Of course she couldn't understand how difficult the decision had been for him deciding to save even me.

“They had already died from the disease. I was alone. That was why he chose me. In all the chaos of the epidemic, no one would ever realize I was gone.”

“How did he...save you?” she asked, and there was a glimmer of something slightly more that just idle curiosity behind her words. I didn't know what it was, but it made me nervous just the same.

I should have quit while I was ahead. This really wasn't something I was ready to discuss with her. I looked at her again and she was silently begging me to keep going. I really was under her complete control.

“It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane, the most compassionate of us...I don't think you could find his equal throughout all of history.” I had to take a moment to form my next words. I still wasn't entirely sure why, but I felt the need to emphasize one particular point.

“For me, it was merely very, very painful.” I felt my jaw clench as I spoke. I didn't want to upset her, but something told me she had already started to glorify to some extent our way of life. I needed her to understand that it isn't something any of us would have chosen. The transformation itself is enough to make anyone pray for death. Then the irony is that when death doesn't come, you wake to a life where death will never be an option again. At least not without taking very extreme measures.

Although I wished the subject could be closed entirely, there was one more thing I wanted her to understand. I needed her to know that our family was created more or less for companionship. Carlisle had hung onto enough of his humanity that he recognized he didn't want to be alone. Most vampires are perfectly content by themselves, or with just their mate once they find them. Somehow, all of us needed each other. We needed to belong, not just to ourselves or to one other, but to a group. We needed a family. It was the closest we could come to feeling human again.

“He acted from loneliness,” I explained. “That's usually the reason behind the choice. I was the first in Carlisle's family, though he found Esme soon after. She fell from a cliff,” I said, editing a few details of her story out of respect. “They brought her straight to the hospital morgue, though, somehow, her heart was still beating.”

It was difficult for me to think about how close Esme had been to not making it through the change. Vampire venom can work miracles, but she'd been so close to death she was almost beyond repair. I didn't like to think of what it would be like without her around, and it was impossible to think of what Carlisle would be without her. It was like she was perfectly designed for him. Their innate compatibility was enough to make me wonder if some higher power hadn't led Carlisle into this life for the sole purpose of finding her. Centuries apart, immortality was the only way for them to be together.

Lost in my reverie, Bella's next question caught me rather off guard.

“So you must be dying, then, to become...” her voice trailed off. I knew she wasn't comfortable using the word vampire. I'd only heard her say it once, that first day when she admitted to me she
knew what I was. Even then it'd been barely more than a whisper. I wondered how she would feel if I started using it casually in our conversation.

“No, that's just Carlisle. He would never do that to someone who had another choice.” Carlisle possessed more respect for human life than most humans do. His utter determination to protect rather than to harm was ultimately what gave us all hope. The monster can still be tamed, the man can win out over the beast. It was Carlisle who had assured me I would be strong enough to get through my day alone with Bella, and I was grateful beyond measure that I had proven him right.

“It's easier he says, though, if the blood is weak,” I finally finished, trying once again to put an end to the topic. As thrilled as I was to finally be sharing my secrets with her, there were still things I wasn't ready for her to know, to be thinking about.

“And Emmett and Rosalie?” she asked, eager to learn more.

“Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next.” I paused for a split second, wondering if I should divulge the next bit of information. Although I found it completely unimportant and irrelevant, I had a snaking suspicion it would bother Bella. Her ridiculous insecurities always got the best of her.

“I didn't realize till much later that he was hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him – he was careful with his thoughts around me,” I said flippantly, rolling my eyes and trying to make light of it. It really was absurd, like vampire match making. He had good intentions though and I never faulted him for it. Bella's expression didn't indicate she was upset, but I heard her breathing change so I quickly continued.

“But she was never more than a sister. It was only two years later that she found Emmett. She was hunting – we were in Appalachia at the time – and found a bear about to finish him off. She carried him back to Carlisle, more that a hundred miles, afraid she wouldn't be able to do it herself. I'm only beginning to guess how difficult that journey was for her.”

I glanced at Bella to make sure she was okay, and also that she realized the depth of what I was saying. Every day with her was a struggle, though I was pleased to find it was getting easier with time. But no amount of physical pain I was feeling could compare to the absolute elation I felt to having found someone so remarkable. Though admittedly it wasn't the most logical pairing, I finally felt I had found what the rest of my family had – someone to make our endless existence worthwhile.

Unable to resist the urge to feel her blushing cheek again, I brought our hands up together and let the back of my hand lightly brush her skin. The delicate warmth was a sweet reminder that we would find a way to make this work.

My eyes must have still been agonized though, because she looked at me reassuringly and whispered, “But she made it.”

I couldn't understand why, but she looked away from me with a sadness I wished I could take away.

“Yes,” I mumbled. Wondering if the conversation had gotten too serious for her. Unwilling to let Bella worry over the troubles of our past, I forced my tone to soften.

“She saw something in his face that made her strong enough. And they've been together ever since. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple.”

*And things are so much more peaceful then,* I thought wryly.
But the younger we pretend to be, the longer we can stay in any given place. Forks seemed perfect, so we all enrolled in high school. I suppose we'll have to go to their wedding in a few years, again,” I laughed. And every time, Alice would insist on putting her in a new dress. Just exactly how many wedding gowns does one girl need?

“Alice and Jasper?” she continued, apparently determined to learn my entire family's history. If she kept this up, maybe eventually she would feel courageous enough to meet them officially. With a smirk, I wondered how awkward that moment would be.

Bella, let me introduce you to my family. Oh, don't worry, I've threatened to rip apart anyone who doesn't stay at least ten feet away from you.

“Alice and Jasper are two very rare creatures. They both developed a conscience, as we refer to it, with no outside guidance. Jasper belonged to another...family, a very different kind of family,” I said, trying my best to emphasize the point while discouraging her from asking details. That was one subject I was determined not to burden her with. “He became depressed, and he wandered on his own. Alice found him. Like me, she has certain gifts above and beyond the norm for our kind.”

“Really?” she said excitedly. “But you said you were the only one who could hear people's thoughts.”

“That's true. She knows other things. She sees things – things that might happen, things that are coming. But it's very subjective. The future isn't set in stone. Things change.”

I felt my voice catch and I glanced quickly at Bella, once again hoping she could just let it go. As much as I tried to fight it, Alice's two differing yet equally disturbing images took hold of my mind. It was worse than just having heard her talk about it, I had seen them, repeatedly in fact. Somehow that gave them merit, made them more concrete. I had already proven I was strong enough not to let the first come to pass. Bella sitting comfortably beside me, holding my hand was proof of that.

But the image of Bella pale and cold, part of my world in a way I would never allow her to be, felt so uncertain. I wondered how it could ever come to that. I'd spent a great deal of time thinking about it, more than I wanted to, but in the end I'd decided there were only two possible explanations. First, if I were selfish enough to ask it of her to ease my own suffering. It likely would continue to be a constant battle, the closer she wanted to get to me. Still, I couldn't imagine ever succumbing to that, so I thought of the second possibility.

If she were on the brink of death and changing her was the only way to keep her with me. That desperate option seemed far more likely. My love for her was already so powerful a force, as much as I hated myself for thinking it, I knew I would act in any way needed not to lose her.

So I would have to work very hard to keep her safe, to never let any harm come to her. I smiled at the thought of continuing to be her own personal guardian – well, not exactly angel, so guardian vampire would just have to do.

Bella brought me back to the present with yet another question. Frustrated in my struggle to keep just a few things from her, I wished we were driving my car so we could get back faster. I didn't know how much more of this either one of us could take.

“What kinds of things does she see?”

“She saw Jasper and knew that he was looking for her before he knew it himself. She saw Carlisle and our family, and they came together to find us. She's most sensitive to non-humans. She always sees, for example, when another group of our kind is coming near. And any threat they may pose.”
And for that I was eternally grateful. Without Alice's gift, I probably wouldn't ever be able to let Bella out of my sight.

“Are there a lot of... your kind?” she asked, obviously surprised. I wondered what her definition of “a lot” was. It didn't feel like that many to us, but to a human, one rogue vampire was probably “a lot.”

“No, not many,” I said, hoping she wasn't too frightened by the idea of having us walk among her kind unnoticed. “But most won't settle in any one place. Only those like us, who've given up hunting you people,” I teased, “can live together with humans for any length of time. We've only found one other family like ours, in a small village in Alaska. We lived together for a time, but there were so many of us that we became too noticeable. Those of us who live differently tend to band together.”

“And the others?” she asked. She was trying to mask it, but I knew it was scaring her to think about it. I was thankful to finally be pulling into her driveway, hoping that once inside we could talk about more pleasant things. Like our day together. And hopefully our endless days to come.

“Nomads, for the most part. We've all lived that way at times. It gets tedious, like anything else.” That was putting it mildly. It was enough to drive you mad, never having a home, never feeling settled. “But we run cross the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North.”

“Why is that?”

“Did you have your eyes open this afternoon?” I smirked at her. “Do you think I could walk down the street in the sunlight without causing traffic accidents? There's a reason why we chose the Olympic Peninsula, one of the most sunless places in the world. It's nice to be able to go outside in the day. You wouldn't believe how tired you can get of nighttime in eighty-odd years.”

It was nice to finally be honest about just how long I had been wandering around in this miserable existence. Maybe it would help her understand how special she truly was, why she had so drastically changed everything.

“So that's where the legends came from?”

“Probably.” Yeah, that and bored Hollywood writers who got paid way too much to think up absurdities about the supernatural. Even if they knew the truth about us, it probably wouldn't stop them from inventing even more myths and legends to try to entertain the people.

“And Alice came from another family, like Jasper?”

“No, and that is a mystery. Alice doesn't remember her human life at all.” I sighed and wondered why Alice's nonexistent memory seemed more troubling to the rest of us than it did to her. Maybe because we were all clinging to whatever part of our humanity we could remember, and we couldn't understand how she was so content, only knowing this way of life.

“And she doesn't know who created her,” I continued. “She awoke alone. Whoever made her walked away, and none of us understand why, or how, he could. If she hadn't had that other sense, if she hadn't seen Jasper and Carlisle and known that she would someday become one of us, she probably would have turned into a total savage.”

Thankfully, at that Bella's stomach growled loudly. I had to laugh because here we were talking about vampires and our history, and Bella's body seemed to be trying to remind her she was human.

“I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from dinner,” I sighed, reluctant to let her go. I reminded myself the sooner I let her have dinner and get to bed, the sooner I could be with her again. I wondered what
dreams would have after a day like today. I hoped the beauty overshadowed the nightmarish things she'd had to learn about. I wanted only peaceful dreams for her, always.

“I'm fine, really,” she said. She seemed as unwilling to leave as I was. A part of me wished she knew I was never far away.

“I've never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget.”

“I want to stay with you,” she said firmly, shocking me by being so straightforward. Usually I had to guess at her feelings toward me. It was wonderfully enjoyable to hear her speak so honestly.

“Can't I come in?” I asked, suddenly excited by the idea of actually being invited in. Sneaking around did make me feel somewhat guilty. Not guilty enough to stop of course, but still...

“Would you like to?”

Would I like to? What kind of question was that? Although, she seemed to be trying to remain nonchalant, so I would attempt the same.

“Yes, if it's all right,” I said casually, and in the same second I was already out of the car opening her door for her. Right. Nonchalant.

“Very human,” she said with a grin.

“It's definitely resurfacing.” Along with a tidal wave of emotions I'd never had the pleasure of feeling even in my human life.

I loved the way she kept glancing up at me as we walked together. Not only was it adorable, but it also made me feel a strange kind of warmth from deep inside me, almost like when I touched her. It made me want to tell her everything, all the times I'd watched her, how amazing she was even when she was asleep. It probably wasn't the best idea, but I couldn't help myself.

I took a couple of quick steps, beating her to the door and opened it for her. I took a deep breath, because of course she would put the pieces together.

“The door was unlocked?” she asked skeptically.

“No, I used the key from under the eave.”

She walked through the door and turned the light on, looking at me warily. This may have been a mistake.

“I was curious about you,” I said, trying to sound like it was no big deal.

“You spied on me?” she asked, attempting to sound furious. Yet there was a little flicker of a smile playing at her lips, and it encouraged me to continue with my confession.

“What else is there to do at night?”

For the first time all day, she didn't push for any more information. Instead she turned and headed toward the kitchen. Still invigorated by the knowledge that I could really be myself around her, I flew past her and sat down before she was even halfway down the hall.

I watched her curiously as she heated up a plate of leftovers. The smell was revolting, so for the first time I actually willed myself to focus on her sweet aroma, trying to get past the burn and really take it all in. I was happy to find it didn't pain me nearly as much as it had even a few hours ago. Perhaps I was growing desensitized. That was an encouraging thought. So encouraging that I almost didn't hear her when she spoke again.

“How often?” she said softly. Ah. Of course she wasn't letting it go. She'd just been looking for something to distract her so she could again act completely uninterested.
“Hmmm?” I muttered, buying a few seconds to figure out how best to phrase my answer. “How often did you come here?” She asked it like it was past tense. I almost felt bad for correcting her. Almost.

“I come here almost every night.” The only exception being when I was away hunting, and even those trips I'd been cutting short as of late.

She turned and looked at me incredulously. “Why?” she asked, her voice a full octave higher than normal. I tried not to smile too widely.

“You're interesting when you sleep. You talk,” I sighed. About me.

“No!” she shrieked, and instantly I wished I'd never brought it up. Her face was the darkest shade of red I'd ever seen and she was clearly mortified. I didn't understand what she was so embarrassed about. Whether dreaming or awake, she was divine.

“Are you very angry with me?” I asked, hoping she'd forgive me for this as easily as she'd forgiven what I considered far more horrendous sins.

“That depends!” she gasped, her voice still nowhere near normal.

“On?”

“What you heard!”

Understanding what she must mean, I rushed to her side. After admitting shamelessly just how deeply I cared for her, I couldn't fathom why she was so humiliated by the thought of me hearing a few of her unconscious thoughts about me. Besides, there were never any confessions of love, as much as I wished I could be so lucky, only occasional mentions of my name. And asking me not to leave.

“Don't be upset!” I pleaded, lowering my face so I could look her in the eye. More so than usual, she looked very small as she watched me shyly.

“You miss your mother,” I told her gently. “You worry about her. And when it rains, the sound makes you restless. You used to talk about home a lot, but it's less often now.” I wanted to tell her how happy it made me that the closer she and I became, the less she mentioned Phoenix. “Once you said, 'It's too green,'” I remembered with a low chuckle.

“Anything else?” she asked. She was going to make me say it.

“You did say my name,” I replied calmly, though inside I felt like I was going to burst at the memory.

“A lot?” she sighed.

“How much do you mean by 'a lot,' exactly?” I asked, trying to avoid the question. Not so much for her sake but because I was suddenly a little embarrassed by the fact that I knew the exact number.

“Oh no!” she moaned, dropping her gaze to the floor.

I felt terrible for having upset her so much, so I pulled her into me and held her gently. I let my hands tangle in her hair as I breathed in her luscious scent. In keeping with my desensitization theory, I noticed there was almost no pain at all. I was caught up in how floral it was, pleasant and warm, just like everything else about her.

I brushed her hair back from her face and lowered my lips to her ear, letting them barely touch her as I whispered, “Don't be self-conscious. If I could dream at all, it would be about you. And I'm not ashamed of it.”
I felt her relax into my embrace, finally reaching her arms around me and squeezing back. I heard Charlie's thoughts a few seconds before she heard him pull into the driveway, and she tightened her grip on me.

"Should your father know I'm here?" I asked, already sure I knew the answer.

"I'm not sure..." she said uncertainly. I smiled at the thought that she still wasn't ready to let me go.

"Another time then..." I said, disappearing up the stairs to wait for her.

"Edward!" she whispered loudly, and I just laughed. When would she learn? I was never far away.

I stood in the hallway outside her bedroom, oddly reluctant to go in without her permission even though I'd been doing so for weeks. It was different though, now that she knew. I felt a pang of worry that maybe she would ask me to stop coming. As much as I hated the thought of missing that time with her, if she really felt strongly about it, I would respect her wishes.

I listened to her and Charlie talk idly about the day, wondering how it was possible he didn't notice the obvious excitement in her voice as she spoke. Finally I head him say, "You look kinda keyed up." I laughed under my breath as I imagined the blush that must have rushed to her cheeks. A few moments later he started asking her about boys. I snickered again as I heard her insist that none of the boys had caught her eye.

Charlie was a bit too much like his daughter in that he couldn't just let things go. He insisted on asking about that horrid Mike Newton and I felt the familiar twinge of jealousy. Logically, I knew there was no reason for it, after all Bella had spent the day with me. Holding my hand. Staring into my eyes. Learning all there was to know about me. Yet the feeling still crept in, irrational as it was. It was one aspect of feeling human again that I was not particularly enjoying.

Eventually they said their good-nights, and not wanting to startle her when she reached the top of the stairs, I decided meeting her in her room was best. It was wrong, I know, but when I saw her bed I couldn't resist laying down on it. I stretched out with my feet hanging off the edge and waited for Bella.

She shut the door louder than I thought was necessary and went straight to the window, not even noticing me on her bed. She called my name frantically into the darkness and I laughed quietly at her. Did she think I was hanging out in the trees? Not that I hadn't done that before.

"Yes?" I said slyly, and she turned around startled.

"Oh!" she cried, lowering herself to the floor. She wasn't usually this jumpy. Maybe the stress of the day was finally starting to sink in.

"I'm sorry." I tried to sound sincere, but she just looked so cute sitting there, nearly hyperventilating on the floor.

"Just give me a minute to restart my heart." She was so beautiful I couldn't wait any longer. I wanted her beside me again, so I sat up and reached over to help her up. She felt so fragile as I lifted her onto the bed next to me.

"Why don't you sit with me," I said, taking her hand. "How's the heart?"

"You tell me – I'm sure you hear it better than I do."

I laughed because she was right. I knew the sound of her heart better than any other sound in the world. I'd follow it anywhere.

"Can I have a minute to be human?" she asked when her heart had returned to normal.
“Certainly,” I said, just happy she didn't seem at all uncomfortable with my being in her room. On her bed. With her father downstairs.

“Stay,” she ordered, and looked at me with stern eyes. I fought the laughter that was threatening to escape, not wanting to embarrass her again.

“Yes, ma'am,” I answered, freezing where I sat.

She hurried off to the bathroom and I allowed my mind once again to run through all that had happened that day. I'd been so worried that things would go badly, it didn't seem possible that it was really all behind us, the most difficult test passed. It wasn't so much that I truly believed I would hurt her. I'd like to think I never really thought that possible, though certain nagging thoughts told me otherwise. But there had most definitely been the possibility of me running away if it became too much to handle. She probably never would have forgiven me if I'd left her stranded out there and had to send Carlisle to go get her. Although knowing Bella, even that might not have been beyond her ability to forgive.

I was impatient for her to return and I questioned how long a humans nightly routine could take. Eventually I heard the shower start and I tried very hard not to think about the warm water cascading over her soft skin. Instead I made myself focus on Charlie's muffled thoughts. Though they weren't clear, they were obviously about Bella. Naturally he was worried about her. He shifted back and forth between vague concern that she didn't seem interested in dating, and wondering if she was actually very interested but hiding it from him. After several blurry minutes of sifting through his mind, I heard him go outside, followed by the distinct sound of battery cables being detached. I laughed and rolled my eyes.

Finally I heard the water shut off, and a few minutes later Bella told Charlie good-night again, likely attempting to emphasize the fact that she was going to bed. She raced up the stairs and bounded back into the room, looking over at me expectantly like she thought I would have changed my mind and run off. I wish she could understand that nothing short of her kicking me out herself could make me leave. I was hopelessly addicted to her.

When she squinted through the darkness and saw that I hadn't moved, her eyes lit up and she flashed my favorite adoring smile at me. I returned the expression warmly, as I started to take in her appearance. I don't know what I had been expecting, but her old t-shirt and worn out sweatpants most certainly weren't it.

“Nice,” I said with a grin.

She cringed, so I quickly added, “No, it looks good on you.”

“Thanks,” she said quietly, shuffling over to sit beside me again. I was actually glad she hadn't troubled herself with trying to impress me. I loved every inch of her, just the way she was. There was no need to change anything about her normal pattern just because I was now allowed to be a part of it.

I was curious though, when she seemed so anxious to spend more time with me, why she had bothered with such an in depth process.

“What was all that for?”

“Charlie thinks I'm sneaking out,” she said knowingly.

“Oh,” I said, thinking about her currently non-working truck. “Why?”

“Apparently, I look a little overexcited.”

She rolled her eyes, but her blush always gave her away. Overexcited was exactly what she was. I loved that our day together had had that effect on her, though I hoped she'd be able to relax
enough to get a good night's sleep. I was anxious to see where her dreams would take her tonight.

I cupped my hand under her chin and lifted her eyes to meet mine.

“You look very warm, actually,” I sighed, leaning in to touch my cheek to hers. Now that I knew how nice it felt, I missed her warmth on my skin when it wasn't there. Unconsciously I let a low “Mmmmm...” escape as I breathed her in.

As she sat silently letting me caress her face and take in her heavenly scent, I wished more than ever that I could know what she was thinking. Did she still think I needed her to be still? Would she ever be able to reach up and touch my face in return, pull me closer to her and make the moment even more perfect?

“It seems to be...much easier for you, now, to be close to me,” she whispered, still not moving an inch.

“Does it seem that way to you?” I asked, grinning as I slid my nose to her jaw. I brushed her hair back and lightly kissed her below her ear. It was the softest little patch of skin and I wished for a second I could taste it on my tongue.

“Much, much easier,” she sighed, letting her eyes flutter closed.

“Hmm.” It had been getting easier every second we were together, either because I was getting used to her, or because every moment I loved her more seemed to strengthen my resolve. I let my fingers trace down the side of her neck and across her collarbone.

“So I was wondering...”

“Yes?” I asked, pleased that I seemed to be distracting her so thoroughly. I really had no idea what I was doing. I was just acting on what felt right, and at that moment touching every inch of her skin seemed right.

“Why is that...do you think?”

I laughed, because it had been such a surprise to me that I really didn't think I could explain it right. Everything had been so much simpler when it came down to just Bella and I. Between the force of my initial reaction to her and the endless mocking of my brothers, I think I'd convinced myself it was impossible for us to be together. At least not without a constant, unrelenting pain assaulting me. The fact that I was now able to relax around Bella, to enjoy being close to her, to feel pleasure rather than agony from her nearness, was a gift I didn't feel I could possibly deserve.

Finally I answered her with the simplest of all possible explanations.

“Mind over matter,” I said with a small laugh, my lips just barely touching her. I let my breath tickle her neck and she shivered.

Without warning she pulled away from me and my breath caught, fearing I'd done something to upset her though I couldn't think of what. As she backed away, her wet hair fell down around her face and her pulse started to race. Against my will my I felt my jaw tighten as adrenaline once again made her blood altogether too delicious. Still, I couldn't feel any lapse in my control. Just a return of the scorching pain from earlier. It was a very small price to pay for being this close to her.

“Did I do something wrong?” I finally had to ask.

“No – the opposite. You're driving me crazy,” she said, her breath almost gasping. I put her words together with her body's reaction and suddenly felt very pleased with myself.
“Really?” I smiled, wondering how I'd managed to figure out this whole closeness thing so quickly.

“Would you like a round of applause?” she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

It just made my grin widen.

“I'm just pleasantly surprised,” I explained. “In the last hundred years or so, I never imagined anything like this. I didn't believe I would ever find someone I wanted to be with...in another way than my brothers and sisters. And then to find, even though it's all new to me, that I'm good at it...at being with you...” My voice and my mind trailed off at the same time while I thought of more ways I'd like to try to drive her crazy.

“You're good at everything,” she said, still looking slightly irritated, though amusement was definitely starting to win out. I just shrugged and she laughed. It felt so good to laugh with her, to feel so...normal for once.

“But how can it be so easy now? This afternoon...”

“It's not easy,” I said, remembering how quickly and unexpectedly the fire had returned. I knew better than to let my guard down and I certainly didn't want her to forget for one second that she was sitting inches away from a vampire. She had to maintain some level of control over herself. I'd learned the necessity of that by her response to my kiss and the nearly unmanageable thirst it had ignited.

I decided the best way to make her understand, would again be total honesty. It was difficult to admit how much things had changed, how different I'd felt this morning compared to how I felt now. Still, she had a right to hear the truth.

“But this afternoon, I was still...undecided. I am sorry about that, it was unforgivable for me to behave so.”

Bella, in all her compassion, didn't let me agonize for even one second over my confession.

“Not unforgivable,” she said, looking deeply into my eyes to assure me. I'd done nothing to deserve that kind of affection.

“Thank you,” I smiled, though it felt insufficient. “You see, I wasn't sure if I was strong enough...” I said miserably. My fingers twitched and I knew I needed to feel her again to get through what I was about to say. I brought her hand up to my face, relishing in her smile and gentle touch. “And while there was still that possibility I might be...overcome,” I sighed, taking a meaningful breath of the sweet scent coming from her wrist, “I was...susceptible. Until I made up my mind that I was strong enough, that there was no possibility at all that I would...that I ever could...”

I couldn't even think the word anymore. While she sat there in all her beauty and innocence, it was physically painful to think about any harm ever coming to her. I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and tell her how much I needed her...her soft, warm, perfect body and her adoring eyes. It was beyond any need I'd ever felt. It was confusing and terrifying and wonderful.

“So there's no possibility now?” she asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Mind over matter,” I assured her, trying to convey everything I was feeling through my smile.

“Wow, that was easy,” she teased and a huge laugh escaped my mouth.

“Easy for you!” I said, touching her nose to emphasize the word. She giggled at the gesture and I rolled my eyes at her.
Uninvited, Alice's visions of Bella's future returned to my mind. I quickly ran over the two possibilities again. I'd basically decided never to leave Bella's side long enough for anything to hurt her, and I knew no amount of suffering on my part was worth Bella giving up her life, her soul.

As confident as I felt from today's success, I couldn't pretend I wasn't worried that I might someday still be overcome in a moment of weakness. It seemed absurd to imagine I could let my control waver like that, but then I remembered the intensity of my need as she clutched me to her, when I could still taste her on my lips.

“I'm trying,” I said, my face and voice abruptly melancholy. “If it gets to be...too much, I'm fairly sure I'll be able to leave.”

She glared at me. I should have known better than to talk about leaving with her.

“And it will be harder tomorrow,” I said, thinking about my theory as to why it was so much easier now than this afternoon. “I've had the scent of you in my head all day, and I've grown amazingly desensitized. If I'm away from you for any length of time, I'll have to start over again. Not quite from scratch, though, I think.”

I hoped. Though I didn't plan on being gone for long enough to find out.

“How don't you go away, then,” she pleaded, sounding a little bit childish but also undeniably sweet. I wanted her to want me, to need me there with her.

“That suits me,” I grinned. “Bring on the shackles – I'm your prisoner.”

And I couldn't resist. I reached over and locked my fingers around her wrists, gently but firmly. I wouldn't say it out loud for fear of scaring her away, but I wanted her to belong to me like I had so completely given myself to her.

We laughed quietly together, the hopeful atmosphere returning to us again.

“You seem more...optimistic that usual. I haven't seen you like this before.”

Didn't she understand yet? This day had changed everything. And every second I spent loving her more and more made it all seem that much easier.

“Isn't it supposed to be like this? The glory of first love, and all that. It's incredible, isn't it, the difference between reading about something, seeing it in the pictures, and experiencing it?”

I thought of Carlisle before Esme, Rosalie before Emmett. I'd seen the way finding their perfect partner had changed them, but still I'd never really been able to imagine what it would feel like. I'd counted myself as the outcast, the unlovable, destined for whatever reason to walk alone forever. I was still having trouble understanding the power of everything I was feeling, the way it had completely taken over everything else.

I smiled at her as she agreed, “Very different. More forceful than I'd imagined.” Although she'd made it fairly clear she'd never really been in a relationship before, it was nice just the same, hearing her say it. As least we were both figuring this all out together.

“For example,” I continued, deciding it was time to admit my irrational jealousy. With all her insecurities, it seemed only fair to let her know she definitely wasn't alone in that either. “The emotion of jealousy. I've read about it a hundred thousand times, seen actors portray it in a thousand different plays and movies. I believed I understood that one pretty clearly. But it shocked me...”

For a split second I almost lost my nerve, thinking about how humiliating it was going to be to admit everything out loud. Still, I knew it would make her happy.
“Do you remember the day that Mike asked you to the dance?”

She nodded and a rather adorable smile tugged at her cheek. “The day you started talking to me again.”

I sighed. At least her smile had just given me something to replace the bad feelings surrounding that day.

“I was surprised by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt – I didn't recognize what it was at first. I was even more aggravated than usual that I couldn't know what you were thinking, why you refused him. Was it simply for your friend's sake?” I hated using the word “friend” in reference to Jessica and her cruel mind. “Was there someone else? I knew I had no right to care either way. I tried not to care.”

Her expression was shocked, like she truly had no idea what I was talking about, why it had bothered me so much. So I laughed and added, “And then the line started forming.”

She did not look amused. Even now, so long after the fact, all the attention still bothered her. I should count myself grateful that my relentless pursuit seemed to be the one she didn't mind.

“I waited, unreasonably anxious to hear what you would say to them, to watch your expressions. I couldn't deny the relief I felt, watching the annoyance on your face. But I couldn't be sure.”

I took a deep breath and prepared to admit just how long I'd been watching her sleep. I had no way of knowing whether it would upset her more, knowing it had been for such a long time. I hoped we'd come far enough, and she would appreciate my honesty enough that she would let it go.

“That was the first night I came here. I wrestled all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was right, moral, ethical, and what I wanted. I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, till you were gone, that someday you would say yes to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry.”

She was watching me with unfathomable eyes, disbelief apparent on her face, like she couldn't understand my strong reaction. I wondered what she would think if she knew how many times I'd fantasized about shoving Mike into a wall, or even simply threatening him, demanding that he stay away from Bella.

Irrational, yes. Tempting, absolutely.

“And then,” I said, hoping my disclosing the details of her sleep talking wouldn't incite the same reaction as earlier, “as you were sleeping, you said my name.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering how that was the moment I'd first realized I loved her. It had awoken the man in me, the part of me that wanted to be everything for her.

“You spoke so clearly, at first I thought you'd woken. But you rolled over restlessly and mumbled my name once more, and sighed. The feeling that coursed through me then was unnerving, staggering. And I knew I couldn't ignore you any longer.”

Her face was still frozen in shock, but I heard her heart start beating erratically. I hoped she was finally starting to understand why I watched her every night, why I became addicted to it. Still so cautious around me in her everyday life, it was the only way for me to know how she really felt. It gave me hope. It gave me strength to keep fighting the battle everyone was so convinced I was going to lose.

I wished she would say something, anything to let me into her mind for just a moment. I was kind of pouring my heart out and she was sitting there like a statue before me. Then I thought of something I was fairly sure would get a reaction from her.
“But jealousy...it's a strange thing. So much more powerful than I would have thought. And irrational! Just now, when Charlie asked you about that vile Mike Newton...” I said, shaking my head and waiting for her response.

“I should have known you'd be listening,” she said, more defeated than I thought necessary. Of course I listened. I thought she knew that by now.

“Of course,” I said simply.

“That made you feel jealous, though, really?”

I smiled. There it was. Of all her admirers, she seemed the most irritated by Mike, much to my great amusement.

“I'm new at this; you're resurrecting the human in me, and everything feels stronger because it's fresh. “But honestly, for that to bother you, after I have to hear that Rosalie – Rosalie, the incarnation of pure beauty, Rosalie – was meant for you. Emmett or no Emmett, how can I compete with that?”

Of all the ridiculous, absolutely pointless things for her to worry about, she was really jealous of Rosalie? I might have said something, but it occurred to me that my jealously of that pathetic, childish Mike probably looked just as absurd to her.

“There's no competition,” I assured her, smiling my biggest, brightest smile. When even that seemed to do nothing to make her feel better, I took both her hands stilled locked firmly in my grasp, and brought them around behind me. It felt spectacular having her whole body pressed against mine and I allowed myself another deep breath of her hair.

“I know there's no competition. That's the problem,” she said sadly. I hated hearing her sound that way, so broken, so insignificant. How did she not yet know she was everything to me?

“Of course Rosalie is beautiful in her way, but even if she wasn't like a sister to me, even if Emmett didn't belong with her, she could never have one tenth, no, one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me.”

I paused to make sure she was really listening to me. I needed her to understand, to believe me when I told her she was the only person in all my years who'd made me glad I existed. I'd spent so long feeling like everything was pointless, not even trying to find a partner because what good could it possibly do? All those years of loneliness, of trying to make peace with my solitude, were worth it because they had led me to her.

“For almost ninety years I've walked among my kind, and yours...all the time thinking I was complete in myself, not realizing what I was seeking. And not finding anything, because you weren't alive yet.”

I finally felt her smile into my chest as she pressed her cheek closer to me.

“It hardly seems fair,” she said softly, “I haven't had to wait at all. Why should I get off so easily?”

I rolled my eyes at her. Only Bella could classify spending so much time alone with a vampire as “easy.”

“You're right,” I teased, trying to make her see her inane logic. “I should make this harder for you, definitely.”

Then I scooped both of her hands up into one of mine, so that I could run my fingers through her silky hair.
“You only have to risk your life every second you spend with me, that's surely not much. You only have to turn your back on nature, on humanity...what's that worth?”

“Very little – I don't feel deprived of anything.”

She spoke with such sincerity it made my chest tighten, like I was gasping for air I didn't need. She really didn't feel like she was giving anything up to be with me. But what about when she wanted more? We could never be together the way a man and a woman should be. We could never have a family together, or even grow old together. How long could she stay happy, growing older while watching me stay frozen in time.

“Not yet,” I finally sighed, willing myself not to think about all the things I was taking away from her by staying. I wasn't ready for that yet. For now I just wanted to stay in our perfect moment, her arms around me, my face buried in her hair.

Breaking my from my thoughts, I heard footsteps outside her door. Charlie was checking up on her, just like she'd anticipated. My grip instinctively tightened around her.

“What...” she asked, but he was already slowly turning the doorknob. It was rather inconvenient not being able to hear his thoughts clearly. Still, I felt like I should have heard him coming sooner. I let go of her hands and slipped out of her arms quickly, stifling a chuckle when she almost fell face first onto the bed where I had just been.

“Lie down!” I whispered, and watcher her curl quickly into a ball under the blanket. Her forced breathing was laughable, and I was glad the room was too dark for Charlie to really notice anything strange. He watched her for a moment and I heard his staggered thoughts berate himself for having been suspicious. I almost felt bad for him, because he'd actually been pretty spot on.

After about a minute, he softly closed the door again. When I heard him close his own bedroom door, I silently slipped under the covers and wrapped my arm around Bella. It was warm under her thick quilt, which made me feel less guilty about pressing my cold body so close to hers. I leaned over her and whispered into her ear, “You are a terrible actress – I'd say that career path is out for you.”

“Darn it,” she said, feigning nonchalance again. But I could hear her wildly beating heart. Hear it, and revel in it.

As much as I wished she could stay awake all night with me, I didn't want sleep deprivation to add to her usual lack of balance. Someone would probably notice if I flew out in front of her to catch her if she started to fall. Reluctantly, I started humming to her, trying to slow her frantic heart. It was nice to finally be able to sing Bella her lullaby, even if I wasn't quite ready to tell her I'd written it for her.

“Should I sing you to sleep?” I asked softly, listening as her heartbeat and breathing steadied.

“Right,” she said with a laugh. “Like I could sleep with you here!”

Still self conscious. I wished she could see there was nothing for her to be embarrassed of.

“You do it all the time,” I said softly.

“But I didn't know you were here,” she replied, the earlier irritation starting to creep back into her voice. I knew it was selfish, but I was afraid she was going to ask me to leave so I hastily changed the subject.

“So if you don't want to sleep...” I trailed off. I think she read more into my tone than I was intending because I heard her inhale sharply.

“If I don't want to sleep...?” she repeated.
“What do you want to do then?” I asked with a laugh, hoping I hadn't just put an idea into her head that really shouldn't be there. I listened while she returned her breathing to normal.

“I'm not sure,” she muttered after almost a minute.

“Tell me when you decide,” I said, more than happy to fill my time enjoying her skin and her scent. I traced my nose along the length of her jaw, breathing in and letting my breath wash over her. I felt goosebumps rise on her neck. It was really quite amazing. Now that I'd gotten past the worst of the pain, I found that I could really take all of her in, enjoy the aroma that was unique to her. It reminded me just how precious a gift I'd been given.

“I thought you were desensitized.”

“Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet,” I told her gently, hoping it wouldn't upset her. It was a compliment, really, though I wasn't entirely sure she could see it that way. “You have a very floral smell, like lavender...or freesia. It's mouthwatering.”

“Yeah, it's an off day when I don't get somebody telling me how edible I smell,” she said sarcastically.

I laughed at her flippant reaction. Okay, so maybe she hadn't accepted the compliment but at least I hadn't offended her.

“I've decided what I want to do,” she finally said. “I want to hear more about you.”

I wondered how much more she really wanted to know. I felt like I'd already told her most of my deepest darkest secrets. And now she knew all about my family, and how I'd been created. What else was there?

“Ask me anything,” I replied, curious.

“Why do you do it?” she asked after a moment. “I still don't understand how you can work so hard to resist what you...are. Please don't misunderstand, of course I'm glad that you do. I just don't see why you would bother in the first place.”

I'll admit, it wasn't a question I'd expected her to ask. Mostly because it meant she was actually thinking about what it traditionally meant to be a vampire. I'd been assuming she avoided thinking about the logistics of it all, and here she was blatantly asking why I wasn't off killing people like the rest of them.

“That's a good question,” I finally said, not wanting her to think I was avoiding answering, “and you are not the first one to ask it. The others – the majority of our kind who are quite content with our lot – they, too, wonder at how we live. But you see, just because we've been...dealt a certain hand...it doesn't mean that we can't choose to rise above – to conquer the boundaries of a destiny that none of us wanted. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can.”

She didn't say anything for awhile, and her breathing didn't change. I hoped I was explaining it well enough for her, because it was a very important part of our lives. Clinging to whatever shreds of humanity we could was what kept us going, gave us the courage to fight against our nature. It was essentially the reason I was able to lay here, tangled up with a human whose blood called to me, begged me to give in, yet all I wanted was to hold and protect her.

After several more moments of silence I had to ask. “Did you fall asleep?” It had been a very long, emotionally draining day.

“No,” she said, though her voice betrayed her obvious exhaustion.

“Is that all you were curious about?”
“Not quite.” Of course not. Not the always inquisitive Bella.

“What else do you want to know?”

“Why can you read minds – why only you? And Alice, seeing the future...why does that happen?”

I shrugged, having often wondered that myself.

“We don't really know,” I told her truthfully. “Carlisle has a theory...he believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified – like our minds, and our senses. He thinks that I must have already been very sensitive to the thoughts of those around me. And that Alice had some precognition, wherever she was.”

“What did he bring into the next life, and the others?” she asked, excitedly. Again I found myself slightly concerned by her obvious fascination with us. It was just so far from the normal human reaction to the supernatural.

“Carlisle brought his compassion. Esme brought her ability to love passionately. Emmett brought his strength, Rosalie her...tenacity,” I said through clenched teeth. There were a lot of other words for it, but I was in the presence of a lady. “Or you could call it pigheadedness,” I laughed, unable to resist.

“Jasper is very interesting,” I continued, not quite sure how to explain it. It was more something you needed to experience. “He was quite charismatic in his first life, able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he is able to manipulate the emotions of those around him – calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd, conversely. It's a very subtle gift.” Subtle, and very useful.

It was a lot of information to take in, so I calmly stroked her hair, her cheek, her arm, while I waited for another question. Part of me hoped she would fall asleep in the process. I was so anxious to hear her dream.

“So where did it all start?” she finally said groggily. “I mean, Carlisle changed you, and then someone must have changed him, and so on...”

It was like our own twisted version of the chicken and the egg. Where did it all start? There had to be a beginning for us, just like there was a beginning for mankind. Although I'd never really been able to make sense of it myself, I tried to explain my take on it as best I could.

“Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn't we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe that all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?”

“Let me get this straight – I'm the baby seal, right?” she said slyly, peaking for one brief second over her shoulder at me. I grinned. Glad she made the connection.

“Right,” I laughed, burying my face further into her glorious hair. There was another moment of peaceful quiet, so I softly asked, “Are you ready to sleep? Or do you have any more questions?”

“Only a million or two.”

I sighed. “We have tomorrow,” I reminded her, “and the next day, and the next...”

I could feel her smile in the darkness. “Are you sure you won't vanish in the morning? You are mythical, after all.”
Her voice was teasing, but I knew it was something she was genuinely worried about. I wanted to make the point very clear. I was hers, absolutely and unconditionally. I wasn't going anywhere unless she ordered me away.

“I won't leave you,” I said solemnly.

She seemed to take that in for a moment then added, “One more, then, tonight....”

I waited for her question but it didn't come. Instead I felt her skin grow hot under mine. It was like her whole body was blushing, and I wondered what question could have created such a strong reaction.

“What is it?” I asked, the curiosity almost unbearable.

“No, forget it. I changed my mind.”

“Bella, you can ask me anything,” I urged. I knew I wouldn't be able to relax and enjoy our night together if I was left wondering what she was too afraid to know. I thought I'd already told her the worst, but who knows. Her reactions were never what I expected. My fingers started playing aimlessly with her hair until finally I let out a frustrated moan.

“I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse and worse.”

It didn't seem right. She was going to get a peaceful night's rest and I was going to lay there agonizing all night over what piece of information she was too afraid to know.

“I'm glad you can't read my thoughts. It's bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep-talking,” she said, trying to change the subject.

“Please?” I begged, but she shook her head. “If you don't tell me, I'll just assume it's something much worse than it is.” I was already imaging the worst. Maybe she'd ask me what human blood tastes like. That was the last thing I wanted to think about with her lying in my arms, all trusting and delectable.

“Please?” I pleaded one last time.

“Well,” she said, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yes?” I didn't think it was possible, but her skin suddenly seemed to radiate even more heat.

“You said that Rosalie and Emmett will get married soon...” she whispered. “Is that...marriage...the same as it is for humans?”

“Is that what you're getting at?” I laughed, relieved that was all it was. She wanted to know if vampires had the same physical desires as humans. It wasn't something I would have expected her to think of, but all things considered, it didn't seem too difficult a topic. It had a pretty straightforward answer.

“Yes, I suppose it is much the same. I told you most of those human desires are there, just hidden behind more powerful desires.”

“Oh,” she mumbled. Only I got the feeling there was more. And with a sudden twinge of anxiety, it occurred to me the next part of her question might not be as easily answered.

Glutton for punishment that I was, I had to ask. “Was there a purpose behind your curiosity?”

“Well, I did wonder...about you and me...someday...”

Great. Why hadn't I just sung her to sleep earlier like I'd wanted to. I'm sure it would have worked. She was so exhausted, and she seemed to relax so easily when I ran my fingers along
her skin. But I wanted to hear her voice more, to know what she was thinking. Stupid curious vampire. I supposed it wasn't an option to just jump out the window.

I realized after a moment that her body had gone as still as mine. It was too much to hope for that she had fallen asleep. I assumed she was holding her breath, anxiously waiting for me to answer the question I really, *really* wanted to avoid.

“I don't think that...that...would be possible for us,” I finally said, utterly defeated.

“Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that...close?”

*Oh, Bella, you had to say it, didn't you?*

I'd been trying to answer her very pragmatically, speaking from a purely logistical, theoretical standpoint. Now I was thinking about her, wondering what it would be like, wishing it were possible. Didn't she know she was driving me crazy, too?

“That's certainly a problem,” I admitted, trying to force my mind away from the image that had instantly filled my every thought. “But that's not what I was thinking of.” At least it hadn't been.

“It's just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we're together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident.”

I was whispering, feeling somewhat ashamed to admit yet another weakness. I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to control my actions if I let myself lose focus with her. Every touch, every caress was so carefully calculated.

I very lightly touched my palm to her cheek and felt her press just slightly into it. That also complicated things. She didn't seem to be minding her own actions very closely, and there was just no way for me to know how she was going to respond in any given situation.

“If I was too hasty...if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you.”

I wanted her to say something, anything, to assure me that this wasn't a deal breaker. I'd assumed she'd realized my strength after what happened in the meadow today, but maybe she hadn't really thought it through. Maybe she had been lying there, wondering why I didn't hold her more tightly. Maybe my soft caresses wouldn't be enough for her.

“Are you scared?” I finally asked, bracing myself for whatever her response would be. She seemed to think about it for a few moments, but when she spoke, her voice was steady.

“No. I'm fine.”

I listened to her heart, her breathing, and deliberated for a minute or two. She seemed content, but she had stopped trying to pull me in closer. In an attempt to reassure her, I squeezed her just a little bit tighter and felt her sigh.

Relieved that we'd made it through yet another difficult conversation, something else popped into my head. I didn't really have a right to ask, but with all we'd already been through, I figured she could handle it. I tried to make my voice as light and unconcerned as possible.

“I'm curious now, though. Have *you* ever...?” Oddly enough, I realized I was just as embarrassed speaking bluntly about it as she had been.

“Oh course not,” she answered quickly, the heat returning to her skin. “I told you I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close.”

“I know. It's just that I know other people's thoughts. I know love and lust don't always keep the same company.”
“They do for me. Now, anyway, that they exist for me at all.”

I smiled at her in the darkness and nuzzled further into her hair. I thought about how I’d watched the rest of my family find their mates, the bonds they had formed perfect and unbreakable. It made it that much stranger to watch so many humans change partners as often as they changed clothes. I didn't think Bella fell into that category, thinking of how irritated she'd been when males showed her attention, but I didn't know what her life had been back in Phoenix. It was a relief to hear her say it. That obnoxious feeling of jealousy had already started to gnaw at me again, just thinking about her with someone else, even if it was before I knew her.

“That's nice,” I sighed. “We have one thing in common, at least.”

“Our human instincts...” she said, her voice low and shaky again. “Well, do you find me attractive, in that way, at all?”

I laughed and resumed playing with her hair. Silly, insecure, beautiful girl. Couldn't she feel it, couldn't she tell all the ways I wanted her?

“I may not be human, but I am a man,” I told her, hoping she would just leave it at that. Thankfully, she finally gave in to a huge yawn.

“I've answered your questions, now you should sleep,” I said, really needing us to be finished for the night. I couldn't remember what it felt like to be tired, but I'm pretty sure this was the closest I'd ever come to it.

“I'm not sure if I can.”

She was still nervous having me there, and I knew she needed sleep. Reluctantly I asked, “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” she yelled and I laughed. She was going to wake up Charlie and then where would we be? I lowered my lips once again to her ear and began humming her lullaby. It was only a few moments before I felt her go limp in my arms, her breathing relaxed and steady.

Finally able to relax myself, I let my thoughts drift while idly tracing my fingers across her shoulders, her back. Occasionally she let out a soft sigh, so I knew she was enjoying my touch, even in her sleep. It was a miraculous feeling.

I had no way of knowing if she'd even be able to dream with me there. Bella was so strong willed, maybe she'd talk her subconscious out of it for fear of what I might hear her say. Still, even if she was silent all night, none of my nights listening to her could compare to the feeling of her sleeping in my arms. Knowing she trusted me so completely filled me with an entirely new kind of joy. I may not be able to be everything for her, but I could always be her protector, her shelter.

After awhile, she started to stir. I hoped she wasn't getting cold so I wrapped the quilt more tightly around her, trying to block out the chill of my body. She made a low murmur, then startled me by flipping completely over and turning into me. She wrapped her arm around my waist and buried her face into my chest. I was frozen, shocked at how tightly she was holding me. Then, it happened. She said my name.

Without thinking, I reached up to run my fingers through her hair and she sighed, nuzzling further into my chest. When she said my name again I responded, hoping that somewhere in her subconscious she could hear me.

“I'm here, Bella. I'm here, I've got you,” I said softly.
My fingers continued their slow rhythm in her hair as I started softly singing to her again. She was so warm, so beautiful, I felt like my silent heart was going to suddenly start beating again.

Then, just when I thought the night couldn't get any more perfect, I heard her speak the words I'd been longing to hear.

“I love you,” she breathed, and I felt my own breath catch.

I marveled at her words, then whispered, “I love you, too, Bella. I'm always going to love you.”

“Mmmm...”

It was the greatest moment of my entire existence.

After a few minutes of silence, her breathing changed and I knew the dream was over. She was very still and her grip on me had loosened. Hoping I wouldn't wake her, I brushed the hair away from her face and kissed her lightly on her forehead. I let my lips linger for a few seconds while breathing in all of her exquisite scent. Then I kissed her beautiful closed eyes and told her again how much I loved her.

I hoped it would soothe her long enough for me to make a quick run home. I hadn't anticipated her wanting me to stay. As much as it hurt to think about leaving her, even for a few minutes, I thought it would be a good idea to check in with my family. Although I was confident Alice would have assured them things had gone well, I figured I owed it to them to tell them in person. Well, really I was only concerned with telling Carlisle and Esme. The rest of them could think whatever they wanted to think.

Either way, changing clothes seemed like a good idea as well. It felt like the respectful thing to do, even though I was pretty sure none of Bella's neighbor's had seen me go in with her last night. Still, Bella hated attention, and the last thing she needed was people speculating about me having stayed the night.

I smiled to myself, wondering if now I would be spending every night. She seemed rather reluctant to let me go.

Certain she'd drifted into the dreamless portion of her sleep, I kissed her hair one more time and climbed carefully out of bed. Surprisingly, I felt just a bit colder as soon as our bodies weren't pressed together anymore. Eager to get back to her before she noticed I was gone, I decided to make it a very quick run.

I flew soundlessly through the trees, hurrying even for me. When I got home, they were waiting for me, like I knew they'd be.

*Where've you been all night?* Emmett thought the second I walked through the door.

I eyed him with a look that clearly said, *Everything is fine but please don't make me go into details.*

Refusing to let it go, he spoke aloud. “Seriously, man. We've all been worried. What happened today?”

“Yeah, how did your big day with the human go?” Rosalie chimed in sarcastically. “Did you actually manage *not* to kill her?”

“What's it to you?” I snapped, really wishing I could have just talked to Carlisle and everyone else had stayed out of it. “I thought you all wanted me to just get it over with.”

“I don't want to move again, Edward!” she yelled.

I smirked at her, perfectly content to just let her stew for awhile. However, Alice was already flitting down the stairs to join us.
“Of course he didn't kill her, Rose. I told you, he loves her.”

Rosalie rolled her eyes as her mind launched into a steady stream of insulting thoughts about me. And Bella. Then me and Bella together.

“Oh, that's right,” said Jasper, who walked in and completed my little circle of torment. “You're in love with her now. And I thought I had problems controlling myself.”

I glared at him and Emmett doubled over in laughter.

“So how's that going anyway?” he continued, trying to contain his own laughter.

“Alice, I assume you'll fill them all in,” I said sourly, racing out of the room just in time to hear Emmett start to make a very inappropriate joke at my expense. Any other day I might have gone back down, taken him outside and thrown him into a tree or something. But all I could think about was getting back to Bella.

After a quick stop to my room to change clothes, I went straight to Carlisle's office, anxious to tell him of my success.

*Come in,* he thought before I reached the door. I smiled, pleased with myself for having such good news to tell him.

“Good evening,” I said, taking a seat next to his desk. It was amazing how the behaviors we'd gotten used to performing strictly for appearance's sake were now part of our lives even when we were alone.

“Alice told me the news,” he said warmly. “I knew everything would go well.” “Thank you,” I said. There was something slightly off about his tone and I wondered exactly what Alice had seen.

“So you two are very close now?” he asked, looking down at his desk rather than at me.

“What exactly do you mean by close?” I asked cautiously.

“Alice saw you...embracing the girl. She said you were quite in control.”

He finally looked up at me and I noticed the worry on his face.

“Yes, I held her,” I said, wishing I wasn't being forced to provide so many details. “I showed her what we look like in the sun and she wasn't afraid. She was...fascinated. She touched my skin.”

“That's wonderful.” So why didn't it sound like he thought it was wonderful.

“What's wrong, Carlisle?” I asked, hoping he wouldn't ruin my blissful mood.

“I just think you should be...careful.”

“I am being careful. All I'm being is careful. I mind every second I'm with her.” I could feel the sharpness of my tone and I hated using it with Carlisle of all people, but it sounded like he was doubting me. I couldn't understand why when he'd given me nothing but encouragement, and assurance that I was strong enough not to hurt her.

“You love her.” It wasn't a question.

“Yes, I love her. More than anything. And I'm not going to do anything to harm her.”

“I didn't say you were.”

“Then what's the problem?” I growled, wishing I had just stayed wrapped up in her arms where everything made sense.

Carlisle had been guarding his thoughts closely since I'd walked in. Still, in the midst of hospital news and paperwork, I distinctly heard, *He won't survive it if he looses her.* In that instant I
started to understand where his mind had taken him. As I stared at him in disbelief, he spoke again softly.

“She's changed you, hasn't she? Irreversibly?”

I paused to think about what he was saying. He was asking if I'd found my mate, the one I wanted to spend forever with. Logically it made no sense at all, the two of us were so different, so physically incompatible.

Yet all I could think was, Yes. I've found her. And I'm never letting her go.

“Yes, everything is different now,” I finally said, answering his question.

He seemed to ponder that for a moment, and my eyes begged him not to ask questions I didn't have the answer to. Eventually he smiled at me.

“Emse is thrilled, you know.”

I allowed myself to give him the smile I'd been wanting to give since I walked in the room.

“I know she is. She's wanted this for a long time.”

“You two will find a way,” he said firmly. I just nodded.

After a few minutes of silence, I stood up and he understood what it meant.

“You're going back to her,” he said.

“Yes. I just wanted to let everyone know that things are fine. I mean, I've got it all under control,” I added with a smirk.

“Should I assume we're going to see a lot less of you around here?” he asked as I walked toward the door.

I thought about that, then felt a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth.

That's all the answer I need, he thought. Be well.

I nodded again and closed the door behind me. I could still hear the rest of my family arguing downstairs and it was enough to make me want to just jump out of my window and make a run for it. Alice would probably never forgive me though, if I didn't at least briefly talk to her about our day.

I rolled my eyes and ran down the stairs, anxious to get it over with.

“So what? Are you spending nights at the humans house now?” Rosalie asked through gritted teeth.

“Didn't you know, he's been spending nights there for awhile. Just...now she knows he's there,” Emmett laughed loudly. And I snapped.

I lunged at him and knocked him to the floor. Of course it wasn't a very smart move on my part because after that initial hit, the one I only got in because he wasn't expecting it, I found myself pinned to the ground.

“Why so touchy?” he smirked and Alice giggled.

Oh, this was a new low. Weren't we allowed to have any secrets? It was bad enough that Alice had probably seen the vast majority of our day together, but did she really have to talk to Emmett about it? I was never going to live this down.

“Alice, a word please,” I said sourly as Emmett let me up.
“Of course,” she smiled, streaking out of the room. I followed her, glaring at the others to let them know they were not welcome to join us.

*Don't be mad at me,* she pleaded as soon as we were alone. Well, as alone as anyone could be in a house full of vampires who could hear everything you said.

“I'm not mad,” I lied. “I just would have thought you'd have shown a little more respect for Bella. You are still planning on being friends with her, aren't you?”

She pouted and instantly her thoughts turned to a stream of apologies. I knew it was cruel, but I was tired of everyone treating Bella and I like we were the greatest piece of gossip they'd ever heard.

“Alice, I just wish you would keep your thoughts to yourself. Don't you think it's embarrassing enough, my knowing you can see everything that happens between us? Aren't we allowed a little privacy?”

“I was just looking out for her, Edward,” she said sulkily. “I thought you wanted me to keep an eye on Bella's future.”

“I do. Just maybe don't keep quite so close an eye when I'm with her.”

“But I thought...”

“I know. We both thought I was the greatest danger in her life. And maybe I still am. But, after today...I don't know, it doesn't really feel like it anymore. Now I'm more,” I paused, thinking of exactly what I was so worried about. “I guess now I'm more worried about something happening to her when I'm not there to protect her. She's so fragile. I can hardly stand to let her out of my sight.”

She smiled tenderly at me, and walked over to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“Then what are you still doing here?” she asked wryly. “Go back to her. And I promise to try my very hardest to keep my head out of it.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

She turned to leave but then added, “Oh, and Edward?”

“Yes?”

“Go out the back. They're still not done making jokes you probably don't want to hear.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I sighed.

But I really couldn't make myself care. My mind was already focused on getting back to the girl I loved. She was sleeping, quietly waiting for me, and I couldn't wait to hold her in my arms again and bury my face in her soft hair.
I was thrilled to see that Bella was in exactly the same position as when I left. I couldn't stand the thought of her waking up and wondering where I had gone, if I had broken my promise so soon and left her. She was still and quiet, her arm stretched lazily over the place I had been, so I climbed back under the blanket and scooted close to her.

She sighed and snuggled in toward me until her head once again found my chest. She seemed to take a deep breath then her fingers tightened, gripping my shirt and I smiled in the darkness at her. A part of me wished she would wake up so I could hear her voice again, or that she would find me in another one of her dreams. Still, I was content to just...be with her, and that was the strangest and most wonderful feeling.

With endless time stretched out before us, my family and I usually tried to find ways of passing the time. Reading, music, art, we all had our hobbies. Yet beyond all that, each of them had something I'd never had before – someone to love, to spend time with just for the pure enjoyment of it. All the times I'd watched Alice and Jasper just stare at each other, Carlisle and Esme giggle like they were teenagers in love, I couldn't understand how they were so happy doing nothing at all. As the hours passed and I listened to Bella's heart and the steady rhythm of her breath, it all made sense. When they were together they were doing something. They were loving each other, perfectly.

As night slowly came to an end and I saw the beginnings of the sunrise through her window, I felt Bella start to shiver slightly. I pulled the blanket tighter around her but she still looked cold. As much as I hated leaving her loving embrace, I didn't want her to wake up chilled. Carefully, I climbed out of bed and sat down in her rocking chair. Unthinkingly I started rocking back and forth, watching her and completely content to just be near her.

It was cloudy of course, Alice had only predicted one day of sun for our lovely little town, yet the light was bright enough to make Bella stir. She turned over onto her back and threw her arms across her eyes like she was trying to hang onto the last bit of night. After a few minutes she let out a groan and flipped onto her side, away from me and into the wall. I laughed under my breath as she fought off the morning, half conscious and completely unaware of my presence.

“Oh!” she finally gasped, sitting straight up, eyes wide and confused. One side of her hair was sticking up rather amusingly, but the knowledge that it had gotten that way because she'd pressed herself tightly into me for most of the night made it positively endearing.

“Your hair looks like a haystack...but I like it,” I smiled

“Edward! You stayed!” she cried ecstatically. Then more quickly that I'd ever seen her move, she was flying across the room and into my lap. She threw her arms around my neck and squeezed me, her head burrowed into my shoulder. Then with a horrified look, her eyes darted up to me, obviously wondering if our “no sudden movements” rule was still in effect. I laughed because as surprising as it was, her enthusiasm was nothing but enjoyable. Even if it did wake up the gnawing pain in my throat, it was worth it.

“Of course,” I grinned, letting my hands trace across her back and she nuzzled further into my chest and took several deep breaths. I'd never considered what I would smell like to her, but apparently there were no complaints.

“I was sure it was a dream,” she whispered.
“You're not that creative,” I assured her.

Then, as swiftly as she had thrown herself onto me, she was leaping out of my grasp leaving my stunned and wondering what I'd done wrong.

“Charlie,” she said, hurrying to the door.

“He left an hour ago – after reattaching your battery cables, I might add,” I informed her, already wishing she was back in my arms. “I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?”

She looked confused by my question and stood frozen in place as if her mind was debating something very important. I figured she could debate just as well with me holding her, so I reached out my arms, eyes begging her to come back. I wasn't ready for her to go back to reality yet. She seemed so much happier with me, wrapped up in my world, crazy and confusing as it was.

She deliberated a few more seconds before finally saying, “I need another human minute.”

“I'll wait,” I said calmly, purposely not moving my arms one inch. I would wait, arms open, for as long as she needed me to.

She wasn't gone nearly as long as she had been the night before, having performed most of her nightly routine simply for Charlie's benefit. I heard the sound of water running, on and off several times. I tried to think back to what exactly it took for humans to get ready in the morning, but things had been simpler in my time. Women nowadays made preparing for the day into an even in and of itself.

Bella came back after only a few minutes, hair straighter and face washed, but as usual without makeup or jewelry. I was glad to see she still didn't find it necessary to go out of her way trying to impress me. Maybe she really did understand how perfect she already was to me. I reached my still outstretched arms out even further to her, inviting her in, missing her warmth against my body.

After a few staggered beats of her heart she climbed back into my lap and I wrapped my arms completely around her. It was amazing how well she fit into my embrace, like she was made to be there, safe and protected.

“Welcome back,” I sighed. Welcome home.

I rocked us back and forth as we sat in silence, once again content to just be. She felt so relaxed with me I almost wondered if she might have drifted off again. Then I felt her fingers tracing the collar of my shirt and when she spoke, her voice was disapproving.

“You left?”

“I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in – what would the neighbors think?”

I decided to leave out the part about checking in, not sure she would want to think about how some of them thought I wouldn't bring her back alive. She frowned, apparently not liking the idea of me having left at all. If she only knew just how fast I ran through those trees. I may have actually broken my own record.

“You were very deeply asleep,” I promised her, then unable to resist added, “I didn't miss anything. The talking came earlier.”

“What did you hear?” she said miserably. She was mortified again, but this time I wanted her to really understand. I needed her to know why it was so important to me, why hearing her dream was such a precious gift to me.
“You said you loved me,” I told her gently.

“You knew that already,” she said shyly, lowering her gaze.

“It was nice to hear, just the same.” Nice didn't even begin to describe it. I longed to hear it again but didn't want to push her if she wasn't ready.

Once again giving me everything I needed but didn't deserve, she pressed her face more closely to my shoulder and breathed, “I love you.”

It was even more beautiful than hearing it while she dreamed, because this time I knew she wanted me to hear it, feel it, cherish it.

“You are my life now,” I told her, hoping she was starting to feel the depth of what that meant. She was everything to me and I'd devote my existence to keeping her safe, and making sure she always knows how much she's loved.

The minutes passed, or it could have been hours. We were together and time meant nothing. Eventually though, my thoughts drifted to her human needs and I assumed she must be getting hungry.

“Breakfast time,” I sighed, wishing we could just stay where we were.

Then she shocked me by staring at me in horror and clutching her throat. I knew she was kidding, but I honestly hadn't thought her capable of such a tasteless joke. I felt my eyes widen as I took in her feigned terror and tried to talk myself out of feeling awful for even having made her think about such things.

“Kidding!” she laughed. “And you said I couldn't act!” Her face immediately returned to the kind, adoring Bella. However her casual attitude toward the whole situation did not sit well with me.

“That wasn't funny,” I said, a little frustrated with myself for not being able to look past the awkwardness and joke about it the way she so obviously did.

“It was very funny, and you know it.”

She stared at me, waiting for the forgiveness she'd been giving me freely and without merit so I forced the gentle calm back into my eyes. If she could make fun of the vampires, I guess I'd have to learn how to as well.

“Shall I rephrase? Breakfast time for the human.”

“Oh, okay,” and she rolled her eyes at me.

She'd had her moment, and now it was my turn. I picked her up and slung her over my shoulder like a backpack, careful not to jostle her around too much. I flew her down the stairs, grinning while she attempted to argue with me. She must not have been too irked by it because by the time she was sitting up in her chair, and after her breath had returned to normal, she smiled and asked me, “What's for breakfast?”

“Er,” I sifted quickly through the list of things I was sure she had in the house. Leftovers. I could heat up leftovers. Although if they smelled anything like last night's abomination, I'd have to hold my breath the whole time. Then again that was dinner, and we were talking about breakfast. I was pretty sure I'd seen eggs in the fridge. I could probably figure out what to do with those. This was ridiculous. I didn't know what she wanted. Couldn't I just catch a grizzly?

“I'm not sure. What would you like?” I finally asked, wishing I'd been paying better attention to her eating habits, or maybe had turned on the Food Network every once in a while.
She smiled widely at me, amused by my confusion. Jumping up from her seat, she cheerfully said, “That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. Watch me hunt.”

Still somewhat disconcerted by her carefree attitude toward everything vampire, I sat down and watched her carefully as she poured herself a bowl of cereal. It looked disgusting.

“Can I get you something?” she asked politely before taking her first bite.

*Not unless you happen to be hiding a mountain lion in your pantry.*

“Just eat,” I said dryly.

As much as I tried to avoid watching humans eat, I couldn't help look at her as she daintily chewed her cereal. It was basically as opposite as one could possibly get from a hunting trip with, say...Emmett. I don't think she'd make light of it all, if she ever saw what we were really like when we hunted.

It was strangely beautiful, watching how her eyes never left mine as she ate. It seemed almost like she was saying, “See? You let me glimpse into your world, now I'm showing you mine.”

When she was nearly done, she asked, “What's on the agenda for today?”

I thought about all she had learned yesterday, so much of my family's history, why we live the way we do. She'd taken everything in stride in such a way that the next logical step would be meeting them, officially. She'd seen my siblings around school, but none of them had ever spoken to her, with the exception of Alice of course. I'd worked hard to keep their words few and far between, though goodness knows Alice had been trying to corner her for weeks. It would make me nervous except for the fact that Alice was almost as excited at the thought of Bella being around as I was. In her own strange little way, she loved her too.

“Hmmm...” I murmured, stalling as I tried to figure out how to ask whether or not she would feel comfortable walking into a houseful of vampires. There was really no good way to say it.

“What would you say to meeting my family?”

She swallowed audibly, nervousness painted all over her face. I smiled. It was about time! I'd started to think she was underestimating just what we were capable of. Not that I wanted her to be afraid. Still, it was nice to know she valued her life at least minutely.

“Are you afraid?” I asked, seeing it and just wishing she would admit it already.

“Yes,” she said timidly and I wanted to scoop her up and kiss her right then.

“Don't worry,” I said slyly, liking the idea of once again being her guardian. “I'll protect you.”

“I'm not afraid of them,” she said and I stared at her baffled. What else was there to be afraid of? “I'm afraid they won't...like me. Won't they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone...like me...home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?”

Okay, not exactly the fear I was expecting, but it did make sense. We valued our privacy very much. It was a matter of necessity. It made sense for her to worry that they would be upset about a human knowing all their secrets. And truth be told, some of them were. Well, one really. Maybe Emmett could take Rose hunting for the day. *Bond* with her, or whatever.

As much as I wished it wasn't the case I had to admit it. “Oh, they know everything.” Yeah, everything. Thanks Alice. Then I forced a smile, deciding it was best that she know everything as well, if I really expected her to just walk right in and meet everyone face to face.

“They'd taken bets yesterday, you know, on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alice, I can't imagine,” I sighed, trying out the whole vampire nonchalance thing...
thing. “At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my
mind reading and Alice seeing the future and all that.”

“And Jasper making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that,” she
added with a smile.

“You paid attention,” I complimented, trying to hide my surprise.

“I've been known to do that every now and then,” she said with a frown. The strangest things
offended her.

I couldn't stop smiling my befuddled smile. I probably shouldn't have been shocked anymore by
how comfortable she was with the bizarre goings on of my life, but instead I kept waiting for that
little something that would send her over the edge. I'd just bluntly told her that part of my family
assumed she wouldn't still be alive today, and she was cracking jokes about Jasper's powers.
Extraordinary. And very unsettling.

“So did Alice see me coming?” she asked, bringing my thoughts quickly back into focus. Again,
Alice's images washed over me, though the stronger of the two definitely now was Bella white
and hard as stone, her eyes red and thirsty.

“Something like that,” I muttered, turning away. I didn't want to look at her until I could force
that picture from my mind. I didn't want anything tainting her beauty, her warm, soft blush.

After a few moments my mind was clearly back on the Bella that sat before me, human and
wonderful. She was watching me like she was trying to read my mind. Just like she always was, I
was grateful my thoughts were my own. I felt a sudden twinge of sympathy for the rest of my
family. How could they stand it?

Ready to change the subject I glanced down at the remains of her now soggy cereal. “Is that any
good? Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing.”

“Well, it's no irritable grizzly...” she said under her breath, purposely not looking at me. She
could tell I was keeping something from her and she didn't like it. I stood up and gazed out the
window, still watching her from the corner of my eye. She'd seen too much in my face when
she'd mentioned Alice and I was worried that, like everything else, it would be impossible for her
to let go. I was determined to say anything that would take her mind off of it.

“And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think.”

“He already knows you,” she said, blushing adorably.

“As your boyfriend, I mean.”

Then she just stared at me, likely dumbfounded by my use of the word “boyfriend.” Granted, it
seemed an absurd term for someone who had basically pledged eternity to her. It wasn't like we
could go into details though, so it was a good idea to keep it as simple as possible for the
humans.

“Why?” she finally asked, eying me skeptically.

“Isn't that customary?”

“I don't know,” she said, looking a little perturbed by the whole issue. “That's not necessary, you
know. I don't expect you to...I mean, you don't have to pretend for me.”

“I'm not pretending,” I assured her. Downplaying, yes. And attempting not to give Charlie a
heart attack. Best to keep things casual, at least as far as appearances were concerned. All that
really mattered was that Bella and I knew how we felt. Let the rest of the world think we were
just two kids in love.
Amazingly, she was still fidgeting with the last crumbs of her cereal. How long did it take to eat breakfast? I could have finished off a whole herd of elk by now. Impatient as ever to know what she was thinking, I had to ask.

“Are you going to tell Charlie I'm your boyfriend or not?”

“Is that what you are?” she asked looking embarrassed.

“It's a loose interpretation of the word 'boy,' I'll admit,” I teased, hoping she wasn't ashamed of me or something. Not that I could really blame her. I wasn't exactly what a father would wish for his daughter.

“I was under the impression that you were something more, actually,” she whispered, looking down shyly.

Seeing the return of the sadness in her eyes, I felt terrible. Here she was, finally starting to understand that she was my entire world, and I'd managed to make her feel insecure again. I didn't want her to think I was trivializing what she meant to me, what we were becoming to each other. It was a necessary charade, just like what my family and I did everyday. It was another way to blend in. What would Charlie think if I were to come out and confess my love for his daughter when the last he'd heard was that she wasn't interested in anyone?

It wasn't like with my family, everything out in the open for all to see and hear whether we like it or not. We dealt with things because we had to. Charlie, we would need to ease in. The best way to start would be a simple introduction, let him know we were involved, and prepare him for the fact that he'd be seeing a lot more of me.

“Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details,” I said, wishing I could take away all her fears. Gently, I touched my finger to her chin and felt that wonderful warmth grace me once more. I lifted her face to mine, trying to reassure her with my stare that if I could, I would shout it to the world. She looked at me, still confused, so I added something I hoped would cheer her up. She liked the idea of me staying close by.

“But he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much. I don't want Chief Swan getting a restraining order put on me.”

“Will you be?” she asked excitedly, her eyes lighting up again. “Will you really be here?”

She was so beautiful, so utterly lovable, I wished I never had to leave. The day I could make her see that once and for all, I'd consider my life a success. Words didn't feel like enough to explain how everything about her drew me in, and my touch could never fully convey the depths to which I desired her. Yet I would spend forever holding her, caressing her, telling her again and again how precious she is. I sighed and watched her expression closely.

“As long as you want me,” I said simply, wishing there was some way to keep her from ever doubting me.

“I'll always want you,” she said softly. “Forever.”

*Forever.* One word and everything stopped.

She couldn't yet understand the true capacity of forever. She'd lived so few years, and yet even if she lived a long life, her years were numbered. I knew forever. It was exactly how long I would love her, even when time stole her away from me and left me stranded in eternity without her.

Then I remembered Carlisle's hidden thought, the one he hadn't wanted me to hear, the one I hadn't understood or wanted to think about.

*He won't survive it if he loses her.*
Maybe the reality was that he knows I won't survive it when I lose her.

Even if I protect her from every danger and Carlisle helps me keep her healthy, cures her if she gets sick, there's nothing that will prevent time from taking her away from me. Seventy, eighty years, maybe, if we're very lucky. And then nothing. No more reason to exist.

I walked slowly towards her, taking in everything about her. Her eyes, her hair, her glorious scent, the soft blush that always seemed to color her cheeks when I was near. The way she loved me, unafraid and unrelentingly. Was Carlisle right? Would I simply give up after she was gone? Before Bella I didn't know what I was missing, didn't believe there was more than just existing. She truly had changed everything, just like Carlisle had already figured out.

With a sudden wave of horror I wondered if this was the cause of Alice's vision. Knowing I couldn't survive without her, would I ask her to sacrifice her life, her soul, to save us both? Could I really take away her humanity to preserve my eternity?

I didn't know what my expression was telling her, and I certainly had no intention of explaining it. At least not yet. She was staring up at me with bewildered eyes as I reached down to touch her face, needing her more than ever to help make sense of everything.

“Does that make you sad?” she asked, her voice full of sorrow. I wished I could reassure her, but I was speechless. The answer was such a confusing mix of yes and no. Yes, I wanted her to want me, and to think of her wanting me forever was an unimaginably powerful force. Yet I couldn't bear to think of what it would mean for her, if someday she did start to understand the depths of forever and decided she still wanted me. I wasn't sure I could ever ask it of her for myself, but what if she wanted the one thing I was afraid to give her? If the only way to give her forever was to make her like me, how could I deny my love what her heart wanted?

Unable to give her any semblance of an answer I simply asked, “Are you finished?”

“Yes,” she said, jumping up. Unbelievably, she was happy. And really far too excited that she was about to meet a family of vampires.

“Get dressed – I'll wait here,” I said, walking with her to the bottom of the stairs.

She bounded away looking positively luminous. She was in good spirits, but I could also hear the way her pulse had started racing. It was probably the most nervous I'd ever seen her, and while I'd like to think her nerves were for the right reasons, I was sure I knew her better than that.

She took her time getting dressed and I wondered if she was finally succumbing to the foolish notion that she needed to wear something special or waste time primping her hair to ensure everyone's approval. It really wouldn't matter to any of them what she was wearing, though I couldn't help thinking the more clothes the better. Anything to cover up a few more inches of her skin and dilute her scent, even if only helped fractionally.

After what seemed like an unnecessarily long time, she appeared at the top of the stairs with a strained smile on her face.

“Okay,” she said, hurrying back down to me. “I'm decent.”

She was in such a rush that she fell right into me. I reached out to help her regain her balance, and in the process really stopped to look at her outfit. I'd never seen her wear a skirt before. It was unlike her, though I had to smile at the fact that she'd put on my favorite blue sweater. She really had been paying close attention. Her hair was pulled back casually. I didn't want to insult her or make her feel more awkward as she walked into this already uncomfortable situation, but I wished she would have kept her hair down. With her neck and throat exposed like that, I'd probably have to introduce Jasper from the next room.
Although I had my concerns, she did look lovely. More feminine than I was used to seeing her, and it just accented the color in her cheeks. I pulled her into me and let my fingers trace down her back. She relaxed into my arms and hugged me back. It was enough to almost make me forget about the whole meeting the family thing. I was tempted to scoop her up and take her back to her room so we could lie together blissfully again, wrapped up in each other and forgetting the world.

“Wrong again,” I whispered, breathing in the smell of her hair. “You are utterly indecent – no one should look so tempting, it's not fair.”

“Tempting how?” she asked. “I can change...” There was a slight hint of panic in her voice as it finally started to occur to her what she was about to walk into. I might have been happier at her sudden flash of self preservation, but I was overcome with the desire to feel her lips on mine again.

“You are so absurd,” I laughed, kissing her forehead. She was beautiful, warm, and wonderful, and she was in love with me.

“Shall I explain how you are tempting me?” I teased.

I ran my fingers up and down her back, enjoying the way it played with her erratic heartbeat. I felt myself instinctively start breathing harder as she brought her hands to my chest, touching me lightly and looking at me with such longing. Slowly I leaned into her and my lips met hers. It was completely different than the last time when I was so preoccupied with controlling my other desire. I wasn't worried at all about the burn in my throat this time. I was too absorbed in the way her soft, perfect lips caressed mine. So confident in my control, I allowed my mouth to open just slightly and took one slow, beautiful breath of her.

One second I was lost in her touch, the next I was catching her limp body.

“Bella?” I said, frightened I had somehow managed to hurt her.

“You...made...me...faint,” she panted, and I sighed in both relief and confusion.

“What am I going to do with you?” I said, wondering if we were ever going to be able to kiss each other without her having some bizarre reaction. “Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!”

She laughed, the color rushing back to her cheeks. It made me nervous the way it still felt as if she were about to fall over. I held her tightly to me, afraid to let go. I didn't know much about the fundamentals of human relationships, but being able to kiss without her needing resuscitation was probably on the list.

“So much for being good at everything,” I mumbled.

“That's the problem,” she gasped. “You're too good. Far, far too good.”

Remembering the only other time I'd seen her collapse, I asked, “Do you feel sick?”

“No – that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all,” she said, looking a little embarrassed. “I don't know what happened. I think I forgot to breathe.”

“I can't take you anywhere like this,” I said smiling. Good. I didn't really want to leave anyway. The day would be much better spent trying to figure out the mechanics of kissing without fainting. Perhaps if she was already lying down...

“I'm fine,” she said, interrupting my thoughts. Which probably was for the better. “Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, what's the difference?”
Actually they thought I was insane, but I'd already learned to deal with that. I stepped back to look at her, making sure everything was back to normal. Well, normal for Bella. She seemed confident enough, which was ludicrous really, but I couldn't help but be proud of her bravery. Even if she was afraid for all the wrong reasons, she was still willing to face her fears for me.

“I'm very partial to that color with your skin,” I complimented, trying to ease her silly insecurities. She blushed again and looked away, but I could see the grin on her face.

“Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?”

“And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won't approve of you, correct?” I asked, just to make sure that really was all she was afraid of.

“That's right,” she said too quickly.

“You're incredible,” I smiled, shaking my head. It was crazy, yet I loved her even more because of it. She cared about me enough to want my family to like her. Although it was difficult to think of us by conventional standards, I knew that her desire for their approval was something any boyfriend would be glad to have his girlfriend to feel.

I walked her to her truck and opened the passenger door for her, clearly indicating I still didn't think she was in any condition to drive. Besides, it would be far too difficult trying to explain the way to my house. It was something you more or less had to just feel. Bend in the road, odd formation of trees, hidden pathway to the dirt road that led the way to our secret sanctuary.

It wasn't exactly the type of house one would expect to find anywhere near a town like Forks. Esme had designed it decades ago, but Carlisle wanted us to find a place we felt like we could really get settled before building it for her. The pacific northwest was everything we could ask for, so he gave her her dream home. The design was actually a tribute to both Esme and my time as humans, perfectly crafted to fit the early 1900's.

The fact that it was so near the forest was convenient for hunting, though of course we preferred to go farther away when possible. It was beautiful too, and I loved that I could hear the river from my room. Something about the sound had soothed me during my endless nights. The nights before I had Bella. The nights that no longer mattered or existed.

I glance over at her as I parked the truck in front of my home. It was nice to finally be able to share this with her. Her eyes were wide, taking it all in.

“Wow,” she breathed, and I was thrilled to see how mesmerized she was.

“You like it?” I asked with a grin.

“It...has a certain charm,” she said, trying to sound indifferent. I laughed and ran my fingers through her ponytail, still wishing I could ask her to take it out. Oh well, they'd need to to get used to having her in close proximity. And I would hear if it was getting to be too much for any of them.

“Ready?” I asked, as I flew around to open her door.

“Not even a little bit – let's go,” she answered, choking out a laugh for my benefit. She reached up to touch her hair. Let it down, please just let it down. Then her arm fell to her side and I snatched her hand up in mine, determined to keep her attached to me the whole time.

“You look lovely,” I assured her.

I heard her heart start racing as we neared the door. I tried to to comfort her by tracing the back of her hand, gently squeezing it to let her know I was staying very close. I wasn't certain but I
had a feeling being surrounded by so many of us at once might trigger the reaction I'd been expecting her to have all along.

I opened the door and led her inside, keeping her hand firmly in mine. Her eyes widened as she saw our large front room. Esme and Carlisle were waiting for us near the piano, keeping their distance until I officially invited them over to meet her. Of course I should have figured Alice would have told them to expect us. I might have been irritated at her for not being able to stay out of it, especially after our conversation last night, but in truth I was glad they had all been forewarned. I also hoped she would have pleaded with Rosalie on my behalf to be on her best behavior, and reminded Jasper of my previous request that he keep his distance until he was absolutely positive he was in control.

Overwhelmed by the house, it took Bella a few moments to even see them standing there, but when she did they all exchanged warm smiles.

She really isn't afraid at all, is she? Esme thought, and unconsciously I squeezed Bella's hand again. No. Never afraid of the vampires. Only their approval as my adopted parental figures.
She's so relaxed, so at ease with him. Truly remarkable. Carlisle's thoughts mirrored Esme's perfectly, in sync even in their minds.

Figuring they were right and she really was comfortable enough, I decided to start the introductions.

“Carlisle, Esme, this is Bella,” I said formally, not quite sure how to go about introducing someone they already knew so much about.

“You're very welcome, Bella,” Carlisle said, taking a few hesitant steps towards her. He reached his hand out and she quickly shook it.

“It's nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen,” she smiled, clearly pleased with herself at being able to shake off her nervousness so well.

“Please, call me Carlisle.”

“Carlisle,” she repeated, her smile widening. Amazed at how well she was handling it, I relaxed my grip on her slightly, though there was no way I was letting go of her hand.

Esme walked towards her and reached out to her lovingly. She was absolutely beaming. Such a lovely girl, she thought.

“It's very nice to know you,” she said kindly. You've made him so happy.

“Thank you. I'm glad to meet you, too.” I could tell she was genuinely excited to be there, happy to be welcomed into my life so completely. I didn't know how she was doing it, but she was acting as if we were just a normal family. Maybe that was really how she saw us.

“Where are Alice and Jasper?” I asked. I assumed the rest of them were close by, trying to space out their entrances so as not to overwhelm her. Confirming my suspicions, the second Alice heard her name she was at the top of the stairs, one arm around Jasper's waist and the other enthusiastically waving at Bella.

“Hi, Bella!” she called enthusiastically.

Finally! What took you two so long? I rolled my eyes. This was going to be interesting. She glided down the stairs in one quick motion, obviously not concerned at all about easing Bella in. She was determined to just be herself. Then, to all of our astonishment, she leaned over and kissed Bella on the cheek. Bella was clearly surprised but didn't appear to be bothered by it.
Welcome to the family, Alice thought cheerfully and I instinctively tightened my grip on Bella's hand again. She looked up at me and I forced myself to calm down. It was just Alice being Alice. “You do smell nice, I never noticed before,” she added casually and Bella's face turned a deep shade of red. I wanted to be mad at her for making such an inappropriate comment but other than Bella's obvious embarrassment, no one seemed to think anything of it. Carlisle and Esme just glanced at each other, amused by the whole thing.

After a few moments of silence – well silence for Bella, I was stuck listening to my family dissect every minute change in her expression, every uneven beat of her heart – Jasper slowly and carefully came down to join us. I could tell he was taking in the atmosphere, surprised by how relaxed it felt given the events he'd just witnessed.

Wow, you might not even need me, he teased. I shot a quick glare at him.

Oh, sorry, that's right.
You'd prefer I waited outside.

I wanted to be irritated at his attitude, but honestly I was just glad his thoughts were focused on giving me a hard time and not on Bella herself.

I'm fine, Edward. Really, he thought, watching my expression.
Trust me, Alice would never forgive me if I did anything to mess this up.

That at least I could believe. She'd probably been lecturing him all day. Besides, if there was any chance of him slipping up, she would have seen it and made him stay away. She was almost as protective of Bella as I was. As much as I was trying to hide it, I could tell Bella had caught onto my unease and I felt her tense slightly at my side. Feeling the change, Jasper let a wave of calm wash over the room. I looked at him skeptically.

What? Can't hurt, right?

“Hello, Bella,” he said calmly, opting out of the handshake most likely for my own sanity.

“Hello, Jasper,” she replied politely, then smiled warmly at all of them. “It's nice to meet you all – you have a very beautiful home.”

So calm...
Completely at home here.
Where is she getting the courage to just stand there like that?
Why isn't she panicking?
Just wonderful.
A truly rare creature indeed.

Their thoughts all jumbled together as I watched her in awed silence. My beautiful Bella, making friends with the vampires.

“Thank you,” Esme said, then added to me, And thank you for bringing her. I've been so anxious to meet the girl who's stolen your heart. “We're so glad that you came.”

I couldn't have been happier as I looked around the room. The ones I loved, together and smiling. Then I noticed Carlisle glance at me, his eyes narrowed just slightly.

I assume you've seen Alice's vision?

I nodded small enough I knew Bella wouldn't see.

She thinks they'll be here soon. It's getting clearer. I wasn't sure if you would want to burden Bella with this. She's doing so well, but knowing they're coming would surely frighten her.
You would think, I thought to myself, shrugging almost invisibly at him.

So you're planning on telling her?

I looked over at Bella whose attention had been drawn elsewhere, still taking in her surroundings. I would be keeping close by, and although I happily reminded myself she would probably like that, I was certain she would notice the change in my mood. Until they were gone I couldn't let my guard down around her. I wouldn't be able to simply relax and lose myself in her the way I'd already started to grow used to. Alice and I would be on high alert, both using our powers to their fullest to keep the girl we loved safe.

I nodded again at Carlisle and he smiled.

I guess she has a right to know, she's sort of family now. It's lovely watching the two of you. I can tell she trusts you completely.

Joyfully I smiled back at him and began tracing the back of Bella's hand again. The fact that she was standing so confidently beside me was proof of her trust. She'd put her life in my hands, and I'd spend eternity making sure no harm ever came to her.

I looked over at Bella again, and she was eying the grand piano that had occupied my time for so many otherwise dull and boring nights.

“Do you play?” Esme asked.

Bella frowned and shook her head. “Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?”

“No,” she said with a laugh then glanced at me. I thought you'd told her all your secrets? she teased. Oh well, I'm happy to take care of this one for you. “Edward didn't tell you he was musical?” I rolled my eyes at her. Always the proud mother.

“No,” she said, looking at me indignantly. “I should have known, I guess.”

Esme seemed confused by the comment, so she added, “Edward can do everything, right?”

Yeah, kid's got nothing better to do at night, Jasper thought, a small laugh escaping his mouth. How ever are you going to keep up with all your hobbies now that your time is spent entertaining the human with vampire tricks?

I growled at him, too low for Bella to hear. I could hear Emmett laughing from upstairs as Rosalie let out a sigh of disgust. Though I'd wanted Bella to meet everyone, if they were going to act like children it was better they keep to themselves.

“I hope you haven't been showing off – it's rude,” Esme said firmly, bringing me back to the present. It was always amusing when she switched into “mom mode.”

“Just a bit,” I laughed, grinning from ear to ear and beaming at Bella. I never needed to hide anything anymore. She liked it when I was myself.

Told you love makes you giggle like an idiot. Welcome to the club. Esme was smirking at me and I just laughed again. I was all right with looking like an idiot if I got to feel like this.

“He's been too modest, actually,” said Bella, defending me.

“Well, play for her,” Esme added cheerfully, looking at me with excited eyes.

“You just said showing off was rude,” I reminded her.

“There are exceptions to every rule.” Of all the things you should be proud of, Edward...

I knew there was no way I was getting out of it, and truthfully I was excited to finally play for Bella. Not because I wanted her to be impressed, but because the most beautiful music I'd ever written was all because of her.
“It's settled then,” Esme said, taking my free hand and dragging me toward the piano. Bella's hand was still clutched tightly in mine and I didn't let go until she was sitting beside me. With one last quick squeeze I let go, looking longingly at her and she scooted closer to me.

I began with Esme's song since I knew she'd been hoping to hear it. She loved when I played. Bella watched me, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. My family laughed and I listened to their mixed reactions.

*I knew she'd like it.*

*He's just showing off again.*

*Look how happy he is, playing for her.*

*We should really let them be alone. This is a special moment.*

Their thoughts blurred together again as I heard Carlisle lead their quiet exit. I looked over at Bella and she was still gaping as my fingers moved across the keys. When her eyes met mine I winked at her playfully.

“Do you like it?”

“You wrote this?” she asked, astonished, and I nodded.

“It's Esme's favorite,” I told her. *It was my favorite too, before your song.*

She closed her eyes and hung her head, looking strangely forlorn. I couldn't understand what had upset her.

“What's wrong?”

“I'm feeling extremely insignificant,” she whispered.

Immediately I slowed my fingers and carefully blended the end of Esme's song into the beginnings of her lullaby. It was softer, gentler, and not as ornate. I had tried to capture her pureness, her innocence in every note, though I knew no sounds in this world could ever do her justice.

“You inspired this one,” I breathed, looking at her with all the love I was feeling. Surely she could see it, hear it in her song. Without her they were just notes, but she gave them life. She gave everything in my life meaning.

As I continued to play softly, her expression smoothed and she looked content. It was bringing her happiness just like when I had sung her the simple melody as she was drifting off to sleep.

“They like you, you know,” I told her, hoping she realized just how completely she had already been accepted. “Esme especially.”

She looked behind her and noticed for the first time that we were alone.

“Where did they go?” she asked, slightly concerned.

“Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.” *And gossiping upstairs about things that really should be none of their business.*

Her face once again looked defeated though I couldn't imagine how the day could have been any more successful.

“They like me. But Rosalie and Emmett...” she trailed off.

I refused to let her spend one second agonizing over what Rosalie thought. I'd given up wasting my energy trying to figure out her mind decades ago, and I had the advantage of a first hand look into it. Complete nonsense.
“Don't worry about Rosalie,” I said, trying to convince her there was no point. “She'll come around.” Or she will do a very good job of pretending to accept Bella. As much as I didn't want to abuse my powers, my insight into her thoughts had let me in on a few things she probably wouldn't want made into public knowledge. I was sure I could persuade her to put on a big smile and welcome Bella with open arms. Not that I was going to let her touch her.

“Emmett?” she asked, watching me closely.

“Well, he thinks I'm a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Rosalie.”

“What is it that upsets her?”

*What doesn't?* I thought, sighing.

“Rosalie struggles the most with...with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth.” I paused for a second, wondering if I should continue. It didn't seem fair to Rosalie, but I knew it would help Bella with at least one of her insecurities. And really, Rose hadn't even bothered to come down today. It served her right, having one of her secrets out.

“And she's a little jealous,” I continued, feeling only a slight twinge of guilt.

“Rosalie is jealous of me?” she asked shocked. She looked as if she were trying to figure out a complex math problem in her head. Did she really think Rosalie was all that special? I couldn't understand it, but maybe I'd just spent too many years listening to her whine. Emmett was the only thing that made her tolerable at all.

“You're human,” I said, shrugging indifferently. “She wishes that she were, too.” It was the least embarrassing and the most easily explained reason. Everything else was basically laughable. I may not care much for her, but I wasn't going to divulge anything that would humiliate her.

“Oh,” she said, and I was relieved she finally let one thing go without the whole inquisition bit. “Even Jasper, though...”

“That's really my fault,” I told her, wishing I had just let Jasper be himself. As it turned out he was too busy making fun of me to pay much attention to her smell. “I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.”

Her eyes were frozen on me as she processed that. I hoped it wouldn't upset her, but obviously everyone had been on their best behavior so she really shouldn't worry. She shivered slightly but seemed to talk herself out of any further reaction.

“Esme and Carlisle...” she asked.

“Are happy to see me happy,” I assured her. I wished for a moment she could step inside Esme's mind the way I could, so she could see her utter elation watching Bella and I together. “Actually, Esme wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Carlisle changed me...She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.”

She smiled, obviously pleased by Esme's approval. If only she knew how much they already cared about her, how Carlisle had already started thinking of her as family. I wanted to try to explain it, but thought she'd be better off learning it on her own over time. She probably wouldn't believe me anyway.

“Alice seems very...enthusiastic,” she said with a wide smile. In that second I knew Alice was going to be right again, although I'd never truly doubted it. It was one of her most confident visions, and now it was absolute. They were going to be wonderful friends.
“Alice has her own way of looking at things,” I said, attempting to hide the sea of images that took over my every thought. It was no use. She knew me too well.

“And you're not going to explain that, are you?” she asked, not missing a beat.

All I could do was stare at her, because of course I couldn't explain. What was I going to say? *I know you two just met, but Alice already loves you so much she's picking out your wedding dress.*

She stared at me, waiting for a response I wasn't prepared to give. Finally she sighed and asked, “So what was Carlisle telling you before?” She really didn't miss anything.

“You noticed that, did you?”

“Of course,” she said in that nonchalant tone I was starting to get used to. I had hoped to have her safely back in her house, curled up in my arms again before telling her about the danger that was coming. But, I figured everything else had been so easy, she could probably handle one more of my realities.

“He wanted to tell me some news – he didn't know if it was something I would share with you.”

“Will you?” she asked, already pleading with her eyes. She couldn't stand to be left out of anything. It was like a strange, sick fascination with all things vampire.

“I have to,” I sighed, “because I'm going to be a little...overbearingly protective over the next few days – or weeks...” *Or the rest of your life, but who's counting? “...and I wouldn't want you to think I'm naturally a tyrant.”*

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong, exactly. Alice just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we're here, and they're curious.”

“Visitors?” Her voice was starting to crack just a little and I wished yet again that I could shield her from the truth of what's really out there.

As unsettling as her unrelenting acceptance of us was, I was glad it was strong enough to keep her fears away. It was allowing her to sit with me in my house, with my family, and be a part of my life in a way I'd never expected possible. It made me feel almost...normal. If she started to comprehend what the rest of them were really like, if they confirmed all her preconceived notions as to what vampires were really capable of, I was afraid she might rethink the situation she was letting herself walk into.

“Yes...” I paused, trying to phrase my words carefully. “Well, they aren't like us, of course – in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably won't come into town at all, but I'm certainly not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone.”

Her nerves finally got the best of her and her whole body shook. It looked like she was trying to forget a nightmare she'd just woken up from. I didn't like seeing her scared, but in a way it was good to see her react reasonably for once.

“Finally, a rational response!” I said under my breath. “I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.”

As much as I hated knowing she was frightened, it was nice to see she at least recognized real danger when it was there. I'd like to think she was never afraid of me because deep down, even before I knew, she must have felt certain that I would never be capable of hurting her.

She recovered from the scare easily, and resumed her examination of the house. Her eyes were still wide and unbelieving as she took it all in. Still, she seemed happy here, and I was reminded
again of how lucky I was to have her. Different as our worlds were, she fit in so perfectly already it gave me hope for our future. The impossible was feeling more and more possible every second.

“Not what you expected, is it?” I said, noting the way she was scrutinizing every inch of the space. It was probably the exact opposite of Hollywood's idea of the vampire mansion.

“No,” she smiled, her gaze stopping to linger on the staircase leading to the unknown parts of our home, undoubtedly curious.

“No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs...what a disappointment this must be for you,” I teased.

“It's so light...so open.”

We loved the openness of it, thrived on being able to let the sunlight in when we could so rarely enjoy it any other way. The glass walls facing the forest allowed us to be a part of the world, while still enjoying the sanctity of privacy.

“It's the one place we never have to hide,” I told her, looking deeply into her eyes as I finished her lullaby. I almost hadn't realized I was still playing, but feeling it come to an end added an emptiness to the air. I wished I could fill her life with music and beauty every moment of every day. She deserved to be surrounded by it, wrapped up in its grace the way her beauty always held me.

“Thank you,” she said softly as the final chord lingered around us. I could hear it for longer than her, the way it blended perfectly into the stillness of the room. As I gazed into her adoring eyes, I noticed she was nearly crying. It was the first time I'd seen her moved to tears and it was so beautiful I reached out to her without thinking.

She quickly wiped most of them away, embarrassed for reasons I would never understand, but when I touched her cheek lightly right below her eye I felt a single moist drop on my finger. She'd just shown me yet another side of herself and I was deeply grateful. The small tear felt like such an important part of her that I was overcome with the desire to taste her on my lips again.

Rather than kissing her – because honestly I wasn't yet ready for another one of her unexpected responses – I put the tear in my mouth, tasting her sweet saltiness.

She looked at me confused, but it wasn't something I thought I could explain properly so I hastily changed the subject to something I knew would get her mind off of it.

“Do you want to see the rest of the house?” I said cheerfully.

“No coffins?” she asked with a smile, though I could hear a hint of real curiosity in her voice.

I took her hand, laughing at what she had probably prepared herself for coming here. I led her towards the stairs and repeated, “No coffins.”

We walked slowly, her fingers tracing the banister on the way up. She still looked completely dumbfounded by it all as I gestured towards the various rooms.

“Rosalie and Emmett's room...” and yes I can hear you pacing in there. I can't believe you wouldn't even say hello, I thought icily. “Carlisle's office...Alice's room...”

I hadn't particularly been watching her, trying to let her take in the house without my stare making her uncomfortable. Abruptly, I felt her pull on my hand as we reached the end of the hallway. I turned to see her stopped in her tracks, staring at Carlisle's huge cross and looking more confused than I'd seen her all day. I couldn't understand her reaction at first, then I remembered the stories. Right, that one almost made a little bit of sense.
“You can laugh,” I told her kindly. I didn't want her to worry about offending me. “It is sort of ironic.”

She reached up to touch it, curiosity written all over her face.

“It must be very old,” she said, her voice full of wonder.

“Early sixteen-thirties, more or less.” Humans were so used to everything having to be new and modern, if something was more than a hundred years old, it was considered an antique. Huh, I thought, suddenly amused by the idea. To them, even I'm an antique.

She looked at me, still bewildered. “Why do you keep this here?”

“Nostalgia. It belonged to Carlisle's father.”

“He collected antiques?”

It was the first time it had occurred to me that Bella had no idea how old Carlisle was. To all of our family, even with our own immortality stretched before us, his years seemed like a long time. We really were children in comparison.

“No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.”

I watched her closely as she processed this new piece of information. Now she really was doing a math problem in her head, and I waited for her to speak. She stared at me for a long time, then let her gaze drift back to the cross. Her eyes had taken on a new expression, one I wasn't expecting and didn't fully understand. It was sorrowful almost, sympathetic.

“How old is Carlisle?” I asked her, worried by how sad she seemed.

“Are you all right?” I asked her, worried by how sad she seemed.

“How old is Carlisle?” she asked without looking at me.

“He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday,” I told her, trying to make my voice upbeat. It was sweet that she seemed worried for him, but of all of us, he was the most content with the idea of eternity by far.

Although it took many countless years of suffering, over time he'd been able to see this existence as a gift. He had all the time he would ever need to study, learn, to be an artist, to help people and be a kind of perpetual savior. There was no reason to feel sorry for him. He had made peace with what this world had given him long ago.

“Carlisle was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though.”

Carlisle had always been grateful that he had held on so tightly to his human memories. In the beginning it was despair and denial that had made him cling so desperately, but over time he thought back to them merely for educational purposes. He knew a lot about the life and times, the way things were, and that knowledge helped him as he started learning how to blend into the world around him.

I looked closely at Bella's expression before going any further. I assumed she would want to know, since she'd been so curious about us all and how we had entered into this life. And Carlisle was, of course, the one who started it all for our family. Yet she seemed more troubled by his story than any other I'd told, and I wanted to make sure she was really ready to hear it. She looked calm enough, though again I found myself wishing I could hear how she was actually feeling. I was worried she was putting on a brave face so that I would continue.
“He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil.”

It was what made his story so disturbing, what he went through so terrifying. Nowadays no one ever really got close to figuring out what we were, because everything they couldn't understand was passed off as myths and stories. Carlisle lived in a time when people believed in monsters, and were determined to destroy them.

“She led hunts for witches, werewolves...and vampires.” She shuddered slightly at the word, but didn't ask me to stop. “They burned a lot of innocent people – of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

“When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Carlisle was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived. The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course,” I laughed dryly. What did people think that was going to solve exactly? “...and waited where Carlisle had seen the monsters exit into the street. Finally one emerged.”

I paused again to make sure she was okay. Her face was horrified, but not frightened. I didn't want to tell her the next part, because if she was already appalled, hearing about the way Carlisle was changed might send her over the edge. I tried to keep my voice relaxed, though I myself found it difficult to think about. I had a better understanding of what he went through than the rest of my family, having heard the way his mind remembered it in such detail. He'd edited parts of his story when telling it to us, even to Esme. I was the only one who understood exactly how much he had suffered.

I thought of the old vampire who'd ultimately been the reason for all of our existences, and felt myself cringe.

“He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Carlisle heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught sight of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Carlisle – he was twenty-three and very fast – was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Carlisle thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Carlisle first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Carlisle bleeding in the street.”

Bleeding and writhing in pain...pain that he couldn't comprehend. He thought he'd died and was feeling the fires of hell, though he couldn't fathom how that could be considering he'd done everything he and his father believed necessary to ensure salvation. The creature had been so weak and desperate to quench his thirst, he'd bitten Carlisle repeatedly, trying to find the fastest way to drain him. Only I knew exactly how many times he'd been bitten, though obviously Esme would have seen his multiple scars. It was unfortunate, not only for Carlisle but for myself, since he'd used the details of his change as a model for how to change me. He'd tortured himself for years, believing he'd caused me unnecessary pain, though I assured him the decisions he'd made were completely logical and I would never fault him for it.

Bella still looked concerned, though her fascination seemed to be winning whatever battle was raging on inside her head. Reluctantly, I finished Carlisle's tragic story, wishing we were back downstairs and I was filling her thoughts with music rather than things that would surely give her nightmares.
“Carlisle knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned – anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Carlisle acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in the cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered. It was over then, and he realized what he had become.”

The raging thirst that was the first thing you felt made that fact clear. There are other things too, like the feeling of power and strength that course through your veins. It's startling, since the last thing you can clearly remember feeling is helplessness and agony. While most of us were reassured by the strength, Carlisle recalled being frightened of it, worried from the very beginning that he would inadvertently cause someone else harm. It was that mindset, the overwhelming desire to protect rather than to hurt, that made him what he is today. Everything we are was ultimately because he possessed a different kind of strength than the rest of us from the start.

I'd lost myself momentarily in my own reveries, but the look on Bella's face quickly brought me back. She looked like she might cry again, only these were the kind of tears I refused to let escape from her. I didn't want her mind troubled over the horrors of any of our pasts. We were all relatively content now – with one obnoxious exception – and I didn't want her worrying about his or any of our happiness.

Carlisle had found Esme, and I was fairly certain that he would have done anything, even let himself burn for an entire lifetime, in order to be with her. Now, though I still couldn't fathom how I deserved her, I had Bella. Whatever torments I'd had to suffer, and whatever agony I was still putting myself through, everything was completely and without a doubt worth it if it meant we were together.

“How are you feeling?” I finally asked, hoping I could ease any worries that were causing her pain.

“I'm fine,” she replied in a steadier voice than I'd anticipated. Adorably, she bit her lip and I could see a smile twitching at her cheek. She wanted to learn more. Knowing she was anxious to learn more about my family gave me the determination I needed to keep going.

“I expect you have few more questions for me,” I said, smiling warmly at her.

“A few,” she admitted, at last letting her smile shine through and brightening the darkness that had crept over us. We were creatures of legends, but Bella possessed a magic all her own. She'd entranced me, captured my silent heart, and changed my unchangeable world. If that wasn't magic, I don't know what is.

Returning her glorious smile, I squeezed her hand and led her towards Carlisle's office.

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Returning her glorious smile, I squeezed her hand and led her towards Carlisle's office.

“Come on, then, I'll show you.”

“Carlisle – EPOV”

She followed me without any hesitation, eager to learn more about Carlisle's early years. I hoped he would be able to share some of his story with her himself, because as well as I understood the events it was still that much more remarkable hearing the tale in his own words. Even I found it difficult to fathom all that he had gone through trying to deal with the circumstances, things what they were in those days. And to think he had gone through all of it alone gave me that much more respect for him. Without his constant model of courage and inspiration I don't know what I would have become, but I was sure I wouldn't have Bella standing at my side.
I waited for just a moment outside the door, knowing Carlisle would have heard us coming. As Bella watched me expectantly, we heard him say, “Come in.” We stepped inside and Bella's eyes widened again as she took in the office, lined almost entirely with Carlisle's massive library. Unlike most with such an extensive collection, he had actually read them all. Read them, and memorized most of them. His vast amount of knowledge would put every professor, every PhD, every scientist or doctor in the world to shame. He'd taken the never ending time and used it to better himself, to learn enough that he could give back to the race he was no longer a part of but loved dearly.

When Bella's eyes finally settled on Carlisle, sitting at his desk and waiting patiently for her to examine every inch of the room, they exchanged warm smiles.

*She has her own thirst for knowledge, I can see it in her eyes,* he thought, glancing briefly at me before looking back at Bella.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, though I was sure he'd been listening to our conversation in the hall. He stood then, always the gentleman.

“I wanted to show Bella some of our history. Well, your history, actually.”

“We didn't mean to disturb you,” Bella said, her face shifting into something that resembled regret. I wished I could make her understand how welcome she was in our home, how happy Carlisle was to share his knowledge with her. I guessed it was something she'd have to come to see on her own in time, like their whole hearted acceptance of her.

“Not at all,” Carlisle assured her. “Where are you going to start?” He was already eying the picture on his wall that depicted the town he was born in. He would never say it out loud, but I could feel the way it made him a little homesick for the place he would always miss though he barely remembered it.

“The Waggoner,” I told him, watching his gaze and glancing at the picture behind us. I put my hand on Bella's shoulder, turning her around so she could see the various pieces of art Carlisle had collected over the years, chronicling his life. I smiled as I heard her heart start racing again and pulled her a little closer.

*Wow, you really have quite an effect on her,* Carlisle smirked.

I walked Bella over to the densely covered wall so she could see every detail close up. Her eyes traveled quickly between the frames, not sure where to start. After she was finished with her initial scan, I led her to the picture that still had Carlisle's full attention. Looking at it was the only time he ever really looked sad or nostalgic. As he walked up behind us I could feel him trying to focus his thoughts on work and the hospital, but it wasn't enough to keep the occasional longing memory from creeping in.

Bella looked confused as to what exactly she was looking at.

“London in the sixteen-fifties,” I explained.

“The London of my youth,” Carlisle added. Bella jumped slightly and I could hear her heartbeat change. Once again I was thrilled that I could tell the difference between the way it sounded when she was nervous or startled, and the erratic way it beat when she was excited by something I did. With a grin I squeezed her hand and it shifted back into my favorite accelerated cadence.

“Will you tell the story?” I asked Carlisle, and Bella turned expectantly toward him.

“I would,” he told her, “but I'm actually running a bit late. The hospital called this morning – Dr. Snow is taking a sick day. Besides,” he said turning back to me, “you know the stories as well as I do.”
Besides Edward, you know she wants to hear your voice, not mine, he thought with a grin. I'll see you two later.

Carlisle had barely left the room when Bella turned back to me, eyes eager and curious. “What happened then? When he realized what had happened to him?”

I turned my stare to the picture which held in the background the massive cliff Carlisle had thrown himself from, trying to undo what fate had done to him. Unthinkingly, I tightened my grip on Bella. The way the grass lay peacefully in the forefront reminded me of our own meadow. Calm and beautiful, but with something dangerous lurking ominously behind the surface. Yet somehow, as it had with Carlisle's attempts, life had won out over death.

“When he knew what he had become he rebelled against it,” I whispered. “He tried to destroy himself. But that's not easily done.”

“How?” she said, her voice sympathetic again for Carlisle's suffering.

“He jumped from great heights. He tried to drown himself in the ocean...” That was actually how he had figured out that air was no longer a necessity, simply a human habit that had remained after his transformation. I considered mentioning this to Bella, but she was already taking a lot of information in and I didn't want to burden her with another one of our anomalies.

“But he was young to the new life, and very strong,” I continued. “It is amazing that he was able to resist...feeding...” I paused, but Bella's face showed no hint of disgust. She'd already grown used to our ways and the words I purposely avoided didn't seem to trouble her at all. “...while he was still so new. The instinct is more powerful then, it takes over everything. But he was so repelled by himself that he had the strength to try to kill himself with starvation.”

I heard her inhale sharply. “Is that possible?” she whispered. I heard a hint of concern in her voice that went beyond her empathy for Carlisle.

“No, there are very few ways we can be killed.” I didn't feel up to going into the details, partly for fear of frightening her, and partly because it even got to me a bit. I'd heard the description of such an event over and over through the medium of Jasper's mind, and it was horrific. I continued quickly, not giving her the chance to ask the question I knew was on the tip of her tongue.

“So he grew very hungry, and eventually weak. He strayed as far as he could from the human populace, recognizing that his willpower was weakening, too. For months he wandered by night, seeking the loneliest places, loathing himself.”

I felt her hand tighten around mine and when I looked at her eyes, they looked glassy and far away. I decided that she'd had enough of hearing about Carlisle's first miserable months. She understood more completely than I would have expected, and I knew it would make his triumph that much more amazing to her.

I could already feel that she was starting to understand the deep respect we all had for him, why he was ultimately the reason we were all able to live the life he'd set out for us. We followed his example as if we were his true children. I let a smile wash over my face as I continued his story, hoping it would bring the peace back to her agonized eyes.

“One night, a herd of deer passed his hiding place. He was so wild with thirst that he attacked without a thought. His strength returned and he realized there was an alternative to being the vile monster he feared. Had he not eaten venison in his former life? Over the next months his new philosophy was born. He could exist without being a demon. He found himself again.”
I could feel Bella relax at my side as her gaze wandered again across the pictures. She even started to smile a little and I luxuriated in her steady breathing, the quiet rhythm of her heart. I could have stood listening to the sound of her heart all day, but I was excited to tell her about Carlisle's early years of studying, the way he'd learned to see immortality as a gift rather than a curse.

“He began to make better use of his time. He's always been intelligent, eager to learn. Now he had unlimited time before him. He studied by night, planned by day. He swam to France and…”

“He swam to France?” she interrupted, her voice higher than usual. Oops. So much for avoiding the not breathing issue.

“People swim the Channel all the time, Bella,” I said calmly. One last attempt at avoidance.

“That's true, I guess. It just sounded funny in that context. Go on.” She was biting her lip adorably, trying her best to let me finish without asking questions every second. It made me want to tell her just to see her reaction.

“Swimming is easy for us…”

“Everything is easy for you,” she said, rolling her eyes. Good job with the not interrupting. Maybe next time I'd get a whole sentence out. It was easier when she was in shock.

“I won't interrupt again, I promise,” she said solemnly. I laughed quietly. It sounded like a challenge, so I finished my sentence.

“Because technically, we don't need to breathe.”

“You…” she started to say, but I just smirked at her.

“No, no, you promised,” I reminded her with a laugh, touching her lips with my finger. I would have rather silenced her with a kiss. “Do you want to hear the story or not?”

“You can't spring something like that on me, and then expect me not to say anything.” Her words were muffled against my fingertip and I could feel her warm breath on my skin. Needing to feel her soft skin again, I moved my finger from her lips and cradled her neck in my hand. I could feel her pulse racing beneath me and her breath caught, but she persisted, determined to keep me talking.

“You don't need to breathe?” she asked, exasperated.

“No, it's not necessary.” And during that first day of being assaulted by Bella's appetizing scent, not a possibility. Holding my breath was the only thing that got both of us through the day. “Just a habit,” I added indifferently, determined to keep the dark memories away. They didn't matter anymore. Bella was safe and I was going to make sure it always stayed that way.

“How long can you go... without breathing?” she asked, still unable to comprehend.

“Indefinitely, I suppose; I don't know. It gets a bit uncomfortable – being without a sense of smell.”

Her eyes were incredulous. “A bit uncomfortable,” she repeated.

It seemed a relatively insignificant detail to be bothering her so much, but her face was still tense and disbeliefing. As if my not needing oxygen was what had finally made her see how unalike, how incompatible we were. Was it always going to be this way between us? Her casually accepting the most atrocious parts of our nature, then just when I start to let my guard down I stun her with the most trivial of facts? If one day it's all too much for her to take, would I even be able to let her go anymore, if that was what she truly wanted? I had to believe I could.
As Bella took in my expression, her own softened and she reached up to smooth the worried lines that had spread across my face. Her gentle touch soothed and calmed me and I felt the breath I had been unintentionally holding escape from me. I let my face rest in her remarkable touch, wondering how she always made me feel so much better so quickly.

“I keep waiting for it to happen,” I admitted, hoping somehow she would assure me she wasn't secretly waiting for her chance to escape.

“For what to happen?” she asked, eyes still tender, fingers still caressing my cheek.

“I know that at some point, something I tell you or something you see is going to be too much. And then you'll run away from me, screaming as you go.” I tried to force a smile, but the thought of no longer having her beside me was tearing me apart. I could feel how closely our existences were tied, and although I assured myself I could let her go a part of me knew, as was true now, I would never be far away. I would find a way to be content again, watching her from afar, loving her hopelessly.

“I won't stop you,” I said quietly, almost unable to form the words. “I want this to happen, because I want you to be safe. And yet, I want to be with you. The two desires are impossible to reconcile...”

Though it was getting easier everyday, I thought, convincing myself that I had been her biggest threat. Now my thirst was under the control of my love for her. As prone to danger as Bella obviously was, it had started to feel like having me around to protect her was actually the best way to ensure her safety. As long as I wasn't the one bringing trouble her way, it couldn't be wrong to love her and keep watch over her.

I watched her face as she took in what I was saying, heard how afraid I was of losing her. She leaned in closer, staring at me intently.

“I'm not running anywhere,” she said firmly. As I listened to the steady beat of her heart it was hard not to believe her, impossible as her words were. I grinned then, feeling the light atmosphere of earlier in the day start to return.

“We'll see,” I teased.

She scowled at my disbelief which of course made me ecstatic. It seemed she'd made up her mind to stay, to not let anything I said scare her away. She was stubborn, which might end up working in my favor.

“So, go on,” she said, obviously trying to prove her determination. “Carlisle was swimming to France.”

Her lips had formed a tight line as she waited for me to continue, though I could see the curiosity returning to her eyes. I had to fight back a laugh. She was adorable when she was trying to make a point.

I thought for a moment, remembering exactly where we had left off. My eyes wandered until I found the picture depicting Carlisle's early days with the Volturi. The ruling family that kept residence in Italy was more of a theoretical concept at the time. In those days, most vampires didn't have a problem with anonymity, seeing as it was more or less necessary for their survival. Still, as the years passed it became clear that certain rules would need to go into effect, to keep the world from finding out our secrets. And of course with rules, there had to be consequences. And enforcers.
“Carlisle swam to France,” I finally said, not quite ready to explain the rules governing the way we existed, “and continued on through Europe, to the universities there. By night he studied music, science, medicine – and found his calling, his penance, in that, in saving human lives.”

He'd always told us his years studying in Europe, learning how to become something greater than what he had been, were the happiest he had known. That is, until he created us. He'd explained that as thrilled as he was by the knowledge he was gaining, all the libraries in the world had never offered him any of the joys he'd later found with companionship, with finally having a family again. He'd learned how to make peace with his existence, but we'd given him a reason to want to live.

Those first years with him, when it was just the two of us were enlightening. Carlisle was careful with his thoughts, once he realized I could hear them. During his years in medicine he'd dealt with so much blood, so much temptation. Still a newborn, he didn't want to make resisting any harder than it already was for me. Yet when I asked about the decades he spent perfecting his medical skills, I could always hear the difficulties, the battle that had raged inside him as his patients bled in his hands. But he never gave in, not once in all his countless years, and it gave me the strength I needed to persevere.

“I can't adequately describe the struggle,” I said softly, again watching Bella's expression closely. “It took Carlisle two centuries of torturous effort to perfect his self-control. Now he is all but immune to the scent of human blood, and he is able to do the work he loves without agony. He finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital...”

My voice trailed off again as I thought of how I used to long for the peace he'd found, not only in his work but in Esme as well. Always having Carlisle, I'd never felt lonely the way he had before he created me. I was never truly alone as he had been. However it wasn't until he found Esme that I even considered the possibility there could be something more than simple companionship for our kind.

Suddenly his every thought was consumed with her. They were so compatible, so perfectly designed for one another, his mind had found a new type of peace, one even saving lives had never been able to give him. He was complete, whole for the first time. Though at the time I thought it impossible to find someone so precisely matched for me, something in me longed for the quiet way his thoughts always seemed to settle on her, no matter how chaotic they had been.

Now my every thought was of Bella, and every second we were together I felt all the love I didn't believe possible. Though it seemed an insurmountable problem, being different from her in almost every conceivable way, when I looked her her I knew I had found the one I was meant for.

I glanced at Bella and her eyes were anxious for me to continue, so I quickly pulled my thoughts back into the present. Touching the painting in front of us, I forced myself to continue. There was plenty of time to daydream about Bella later. And really it was so much better when she was in my arms.

“He was studying in Italy when he discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers.”

I pointed to Carlisle and the others, wondering if she'd made the connection yet. She took in the pictures, her brow pulling together like she was trying to sort out everything I'd just told her. Then her eyes widened and she laughed one quick, sharp laugh. She squinted and took another step closer toward the figure she'd just recognized as Carlisle.

“Solimena was greatly inspired by Carlisle's friends. He often painted them as gods,” I said with a laugh. If he'd understood what they really were, I was sure they would have been depicted as...
devils. “Aro, Marcus, Caius,” I added, pointing at each one respectively. “Nighttime patrons of
the arts.” At least that's more or less what they were when they had been painted. It was all Bella
really needed to know. There was no point in frightening her over things she would never have to
worry about.

“What happened to them?” she whispered, her finger instinctively moving toward the group. Her
tone sounded almost reverent.

“They're still there,” I shrugged, attempting to sound casual. “As they have been for who knows
how many millennia. Carlisle stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades.” Bella
almost scoffed, probably not thinking about the fact that for Carlisle, that was a small fraction of
his years. “He greatly admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to sure
his aversion to 'his natural food sound,' as they called it. They tried to persuade him, and he tried
to persuade them, to no avail. At that point, Carlisle decided to try the New World. He dreamed
of finding others like himself. He was very lonely, you see.”

Having watched Bella's empathy all day, I knew her expression was about to shift back into
concern for him. I smiled lovingly at her, trying to remind her the story has a happy ending.

“He didn't find anyone for a long time. But, as monsters became the stuff of fairy tales, he found
he could interact with unsuspecting humans as if he were one of them.” Bella had shared a few
of her silliest theories with me, maybe someday I would let her in on all the wrong assumptions
made about Carlisle throughout his years. Humans really do have highly overactive
imagination.

“He began practicing medicine. But the companionship he craved evaded him; he couldn't risk
familiarity. When the influenza epidemic hit, he was working nights in a hospital in Chicago.
He'd been turning over an idea in his mind for several years, and he had almost decided to act –
since he couldn't find a companion, he would create one.”

I heard Bella inhale sharply and she moved a step closer to me. It was strange, being so honest
with her about what had led Carlisle to create me. Strange, yet wonderful. It was nice having her
know, comforting that she accepted it all so gracefully.

I had always understood his motives, even when he berate himself, considering the decision
selfish. I even vaguely remember him trying to explain what he was about to do to me while I
was still human, though the exact words have long since faded. The sentiment, however, was
unmistakably one of heartfelt apology.

“He wasn't absolutely sure how his own transformation had occurred, so he was hesitant. And he
was loath to steal anyone's life the way his had been stolen. It was in that frame of mind that he
found me. There was no hope for me; I was left in a ward with the dying. He had nursed my
parents, and knew I was alone. He decided to try...”

It was in that moment I found myself grateful Carlisle had not stayed to tell his story. Although I
had never faulted him for any part of his choice or the way he'd gone about it, I was certain she
would have been able to hear the guilt he still felt, though buried deeply beneath the joy we all
brought to him.

I tried to focus my thoughts on Carlisle and the rest of my family I loved so completely, rather
than the agony of my transformation. Even after nearly a hundred years, it was painful to
remember the three days of torture that had saved me from death. Yet as hard as I tried, the
familiar memory of searing pain crept back into my thoughts. The only difference was that this
time, with Bella beside me, it felt like a reasonable price to have paid. Left to die, I never would
have found my reason for living.

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I'd let my gaze drift to the woods outside my window that had once given me so much joy. Alone for so many decades, I thought I'd found my own version of happiness. I had interests, hobbies, a love of the nature that surrounded me. Now I wondered how any of it had mattered at all without someone to share it with. Everything seemed more alive now, more vibrant with Bella at my side. I turned to look at her and all the love I felt burst through as I smiled at her.

“And so we've come full circle,” I said simply, though I knew she wouldn't understand the full depth of the words. As I had always felt was true for Carlisle and Esme, everything I'd been through suddenly felt like a journey to bring me to Bella.

“Have you always stayed with Carlisle, then?” she asked and I nearly shuddered. I didn't want to think about the dark and miserable time when I'd left the sanctuary Carlisle had created for us. Still, it was something I felt Bella had a right to know.

“Almost always,” I sighed, putting my arm around her for strength. I started walking us towards the door. It didn't feel right to talk about my years of defiance in Carlisle's office. Everything there radiated his purity and I didn't want to taint it with stories of my transgressions. Bella looked over her shoulder as we left, taking in all she had seen and learned with one final glance.

Once we were walking slowly down the hallway, she peered up at me and asked, “Almost?”

I was prepared to answer her question, but I was still having trouble phrasing it, wishing there was anything I could say that would make me seem less of a monster. Of course, I didn't really deserve to be sugarcoated like that. She needed to hear the truth, no matter how appalling my actions had been.

“Well, I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence – about ten years after I was...born...created, whatever you want to call it. I wasn't sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite. So I went off on my own for a time.” I took a deep breath and waited for her reaction.

“Really?” she asked, her voice betraying nothing but her normal amount of curiosity.

Amazing. Once again I found myself baffled as to what would upset her. I'd always thought she must have assumed I'd faltered now and again, with my references to addiction and falling off the wagon. But somehow she wasn't bothered learning that for awhile, typical vampire behavior had been my way of life. Sure, my not requiring oxygen left her speechless, but this particular piece of information was taken in stride. Ridiculous, unpredictable human.

“That doesn't repulse you?” I had to ask, still confused.

“No,” she answered calmly as if it were the most normal thing she'd ever heard.

“Why not?”

“I guess...it sounds reasonable.”

I finally gave in and laughed out loud as we reached the top of the stairs. That was it. I'd had enough of trying to figure Bella out for one day. I'd tell the rest of my story and she could take it however she wanted.

“From the time of my new birth, I had the advantage of knowing what everyone around me was thinking, both human and non-human alike. That's why it took me ten years to defy Carlisle – I could read his perfect sincerity, understand exactly why he lived the way he did.” With his every thought focused on the sanctity of human life, his constant battle fighting death, how could I be responsible for causing it?

“It took me only a few years to return to Carlisle and recommitt to his vision. I thought I would be exempt from the...depression...that accompanies a conscience. Because I knew the thoughts of
my prey, I could pass over the innocent and pursue only the evil. If I followed a murderer down a
dark alley where he stalked a young girl – if I saved her, then surely I wasn't so terrible.”

A shiver ran through Bella as we both unthinkingly remembered the night I'd found her in Port
Angeles. Hearing the disgusting things those men were planning to do to her was the closest I'd
been to reverting to my old ways. Though for the first time my desire to kill had not been a
product of unrelenting thirst. I'd wanted to destroy them for their wanting to defile someone as
pure and innocent as Bella. Fearing what seeing such an act would have done to Bella, I was
grateful I'd had the restraint to drive away, and even more grateful Carlisle had later helped me
get the lowlifes behind bars.

In our silence, I heard her pulse return to normal so I hastily finished.

“But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes.” The way my eyes had burned that
depth shade of crimson still haunt me to this day. “I couldn't escape the debt of so much human
life taken, no matter how justified. And I went back to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me
back like the prodigal. It was more than I deserved.”

We'd reached my room and I stopped to look deeply into her eyes, afraid that hearing just how
far gone I'd been might have finally made her afraid. Once again, there was only sympathy and
compassion for my suffering. She was so kind and forgiving, it sent a fresh surge of guilt through
me.

Determined not to taint the last of the tour, I pushed the thoughts away and opened the door.

“My room,” I muttered, guiding her in.

I waited while she did her usual survey of her surroundings. I wished the sun could make a brief
appearance so she could see how beautifully it lit up the forest my room overlooked. She glanced
at my music collection and I thought about putting something soft and comforting on to help get
back the relaxed feeling from earlier. Before all my secrets had come out. She eyed the fabric
that lined my walls and smiled at me.

“Good acoustics?”

I returned her warm smile with one of my own and a quick nod, laughing joyously at how at
home she looked standing in my room. I turned on the music quietly, not wanting to distract her
too much. She smiled as the notes filled the air. So thoughtful and beautiful, and completely
relaxed again, I wished I could scoop her up into my arms. I wanted to dance with her, hold her
close, and fill the room with her presence so I'd never feel lonely here again.

Finally back in the part of my home I felt the most comfortable, the most at peace, I really let
myself think about all she’d seen and learned throughout the day. She knew the reasons for my
creation and why we all lived the way we do. I'd let her into the darkest parts of my past and
she'd listened with gracious understanding. There was nothing I needed to fear, nothing left to
hide from her. She knew me inside and out and was somehow still at my side, adoration filling
her every stare.

“How do you have these organized?” she asked. So deep in thought, her voice caught me off

“Ummm, by year, and then by personal preference within that frame,” I said quietly. I hoped she
didn't think I was ignoring her, but I was having a hard time focusing on much of anything. I
stared at her, entranced by the way she fit so perfectly into my mixed up world. I couldn't think
of anything else but how lucky I was to have found her.

“What?” she asked cautiously, obviously wondering about my sudden change in expression.
“I was prepared to feel...relieved. Having you know about everything, not needing to keep
secrets from you. But I didn't expect to feel more than that. I like it. It makes me...happy.”
I hoped I didn't sound totally ridiculous, so I shrugged indifferently and smiled at her. I was
happy. More than happy, I was elated. I couldn't explain it any better than that. There was just
something about the knowledge that she knew me, really knew me, and still wanted to be with
me. Maybe I'd been afraid I was mistaking her affection with simply curiosity.
“I'm glad,” she said with a grin.
Still in disbelief that everything had gone so smoothly, I found myself scrutinizing her
expression. It was gentle and at ease. So much so that it almost made me nervous. Maybe she
was just in shock. Maybe I'd had her so wrapped up in my own world, when she went back to
hers she would realize she didn't really belong here. Now that I thought about it, we had more or
less been consumed with each other the past two days, no contact with normal human life aside
from her brief exchange with Charlie. Would going back to school, seeing her friends and
returning to daily life make her see exactly how insane all of this really was?
I wasn't sure what my expression was telling her, but she suddenly smirked at me. Thankfully, it
brought me back to her.
“You're still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren't you?” she asked, guessing my
thoughts more perfectly than I was ever able to guess hers. I nodded and gave her a half-hearted
smile, wishing I could believe in her love the way she seemed to believe in me.
“I hate to burst your bubble, but you're really not as scary as you think you are. I don't find you
scary at all, actually,” she said flippantly. I looked at her skeptically then taking in her obviously
forced expression of nonchalance, smiled widely at her, all my teeth showing.
“You really shouldn't have said that,” I said, laughing mischievously. Overcome with a rush of
excitement from our day of truth, I let myself sink into a crouch, a growl I never thought she'd be
alright with hearing building up in me. She took a step back and I almost stopped, but her
taunting voice egged me on. Her voice, and my desire to wrap my arms around her again.
“You wouldn't.”
Careful not to jar her, I leaped from my crouch and locked my arms around her. As we fell into
the sofa I let my body absorb the shock, then tightened my grasp on her as she breathed in
deeply. She was trying to wiggle out of my hold but it felt too nice, too warm. I wasn't ready to
let go yet.
I curled her up into to me so she was pressed tightly against my chest. She watched me
cautiously for a moment, but must have decided it was all in fun. She made one more feeble
attempt to get free before relaxing and sinking into me. I listened as her heart slowed.
“You were saying?” I teased.
“That you are a very, very terrifying monster,” she said sarcastically.
“Much better.”
“Um. Can I get up now?” she asked, trying once again to work her way out of my arms. I
laughed lightly at how little effort she was actually putting into her escape attempt. I was
debating letting her up, when I heard Alice and Jasper's familiar thoughts coming from the
hallway.

What are they doing up there? Or maybe I don't want to know.
Edward, you'd better not break her. I don't think Charlie would be too happy if she came home in a full body cast.

“Can we come in?” Alice asked sweetly, a completely different tone than that of her not so subtle warning to me.

I felt Bella's skin grow hotter and she started wiggling again, this time actually putting forth some effort. If she knew what I had to put up with hearing, I don't think she'd be embarrassed about me holding her in front of my family. I swung her around so she was sitting in my lap. I wasn't sure how much less awkward that was for her, but at least we were no longer horizontal.

“Go ahead,” I said, laughing under my breath at the color on Bella's cheeks.

Alice practically skipped in, grinning from ear to ear.

You two are so cute. I love how much you make her blush, she thought, sitting down on the floor.

Wow, am I interrupting something? Jasper added, probably sensing the excitement in the air mixed with Bella's racing heart and pumping adrenaline. He sounded like he was somewhere in between mocking me and sincerely asking if I wanted them to leave. I rolled my eyes at him then looked down at Alice.

“It sounded like you were having Bella for lunch, and we came to see if you would share,” she said lightly. I felt Bella's whole body go rigid and I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face. Now that I was relatively certain she wasn't going to make a run for it, it was actually rather enjoyable to be able to tease her a little.

“Sorry, I don't believe I have enough to spare,” I said, pulling Bella closer until I could feel her raised body temperature pressed against every inch of me. She resisted for a fraction of a second before giving in and sinking back into me. It was delightful.

I suppose you don't want me to mention the fact that getting her blood pumping like that is wretchedly insensitive to those of us not conveniently in love with her?

I could hear that Jasper was in complete control but I still glared at him as he smiled wryly at me.

“Actually,” he said finally stepping inside the room, probably to drive me insane, “Alice says there's going to be a real storm tonight, and Emmett wants to play ball. Are you game?” Or are you too busy playing pouncing games with your girlfriend?

I wanted to glare at him but it had been a long time since there had been a storm big enough to let us really play, not holding back. I felt the excitement start to overtake me. Then reflexively I hugged Bella, unwilling to let her go. Alice saw the gesture and grinned.

“Of course you should bring Bella.”

Oh thanks, Alice, Jasper thought, throwing her a quick glare. Then he looked back at me, defeated. Whatever gets you out there, I guess. Although I'm pretty sure Emmett was planning on dragging you there himself if you'd said no.

Ignoring him, I turned to Bella. “Do you want to go?” I asked expectantly.

“Sure,” she said, feigning enthusiasm. I knew sports were probably on the bottom rung of her list of priorities. Still, I was certain our game would be more interesting than anything Charlie had ever forced her to sit through. “Um, where are we going?”

“We have to wait for thunder to play ball – you'll see why,” I grinned.

“Will I need an umbrella?” she asked reluctantly, and we all laughed. For someone who hated the rain so much, she sure had picked the wrong town to live in.
“Will she?” asked Jasper, humoring her.

*Clouds rolling in, at least an hour of good strong thunder...but it will be dry. Besides Edward, if it rains you can just wrap her up in your arms. You seem to have gotten very good at that.* She grinned widely.

“No,” she said, mostly to Bella. “The storm will hit over town. It should be dry enough in the clearing.”

“Good, then,” Jasper said, his excitement finally starting to come out.

“Let's go see if Carlisle will come,” Alice added, hurrying to the door.

“Like you don't know.” *Okay, you kids have fun.* Jasper teased. *Don't be late to the game.*

I smiled as he closed the door behind them.

“What will we be playing?” Bella asked, eyes wide.

“You will be watching,” I explained. “We will be playing baseball.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes as if baseball sounded too mundane for a group of vampires.

“Vampires like baseball?”

“It's the American pastime,” I told her seriously. Then I nuzzled at her neck so I could hear her heart race once more before taking her to see yet another one of my family's secrets.
Bella had been eying me cautiously the whole way back to her house, like she was waiting for me to spring some surprise on her. I'd tried to explain, it really was just baseball. Well, vampire baseball, but in essence it was the same. We just happened to run a bit faster and hit a bit harder than human players. Still, I didn't know what she was so nervous about.

I had planned on coming in with her, still hesitant to leave her side for even a moment after what Alice had seen, but when I saw the familiar black Ford parked in her driveway a low hiss rose in my throat. I could hear nothing but disgust in Billy's string of insulting thoughts aimed directly at me. The way they were coming across as a warning, a threat, made me cringe. It was almost as if Billy somehow understood my ability, like he knew I could hear him. Like he wanted me to hear him.

My family has been nothing but respectful, honoring the treaty in a way you don't seem capable of. Why couldn't you just stay on your own land, leave Bella and I alone and stay out of it, I muttered quickly, too low for Bella to hear. I couldn't really blame Jacob in all this, he looked as unwilling to be part of the situation as I felt. His thoughts were irritated and mortified and I might have even felt a little sorry for him, being dragged into a battle he didn't belong in. Except for the fact that mixed in with thoughts of Please Dad, don't embarrass me and Can we just get this over with, I distinctly heard, What's Cullen got that I don't? I've known her since we were kids, we have fun. Don't understand what the fascination is...

I shook off the twinge of jealousy that welled up in me – after all, he was just a kid – and focused in again on Billy. He was determined to talk to Charlie, convince him to make Bella stay away from me, although it was definitely going to work in my favor that he was still bound by the treaty not to reveal anything specific. It was also helpful that Jacob still thought of his father as a somewhat eccentric, superstitious man who put too much stock in legends. His disbelieving attitude would likely keep Charlie relaxed throughout the exchange. Still, the fact that Billy was interfering at all was infuriating.

“This is crossing the line,” I growled, and Bella's eyes shot up to mine. “He came to warn Charlie?” she gasped.
I nodded as I thought about the best way to handle things. Thankfully Charlie wasn't home yet, so the easiest way would be if I could convince them to leave before he arrived. I thought about how difficult it would be, attempting to remain calm and rational when Billy was so determined to destroy my once chance at happiness. What right did he have to interfere? As unorthodox as my relationship with Bella might seem, I wasn't breaking any rules.

Aware of the intensity of our glares, Bella once again took things upon herself.

“Let me deal with this,” she offered and I couldn't help the relief that washed through me. I looked down at her, kind and innocent, and tried to wipe the ire from my expression.

“That's probably best,” I conceded, though I hated the thought of what Billy would say to her without Charlie there. Especially if he found a way to get Jacob out of the room so he could talk openly. I was suddenly very thankful I had shared so much with Bella. At least it had come from me first. I couldn't imagine Billy saying anything that would shock her after all she'd learned over the past two days. In fact, it would probably irk him that she was able to accept everything so coolly.

“Be careful, though. The child has no idea,” I added, making sure Bella didn't inadvertently reveal something to Jacob. Not that I thought he'd believe any of it. He'd long given up taking the stories of his tribe seriously. It was all just fun and games to him.

Bella looked at me with mild irritation. “Jacob is not that much younger than I am,” she said in what was, ironically, a very childish tone. She had again managed to find a way to take my frustration away and I grinned at her, all but forgetting the black stare Billy was still giving me.

“Oh, I know,” I teased.

She sighed and moved to leave the car. Abruptly I felt the tug of her absence and I considered waiting for her upstairs while she dealt with Billy. Then, reason slowly set in and I knew I would need to consult Alice on how this particular complication would play out. Regretfully, I would have to leave her, though I'd be sure to make our time apart as brief as possible.

“Get them inside so I can leave,” I said gently. “I'll be back around dusk.”

“Do you want my truck?” she offered kindly and again I had to chuckle at how she could know so much about me, yet sometimes understand so little.

“I could walk home faster than this truck moves,” I laughed. Running at full speed I could probably make it there and back before her truck had turned onto the main road.

“You don't have to leave,” she said sadly, and as her eyes pleaded with mine I started to forget exactly why I needed to go. I smiled warmly at her, hoping she knew just how unwilling I was to leave, even for a short time.

“Actually I do,” I sighed, then added with a smile, “After you get rid of them, you still have to prepare Charlie to meet your new boyfriend.”

She stared at me, exasperated. I knew she'd love that. “Thanks a lot.”

“I'll be back soon,” I promised with a tender smile. I glanced quickly at Billy who was still staring daggers at me. It was foolish, but I couldn't help myself as I leaned in to kiss Bella on the neck. Billy's thoughts shifted quickly into raging, pointed accusations as he watched me. Bella's heart sped up, though I could tell it was more from nervousness than the usual way she thrilled to my kiss.

As she too met Billy's enraged stare she mumbled, “Soon,” and darted from the truck toward them. I watched her as she tried to greet them casually. It pained me, thinking of leaving her alone with them. I hoped Jacob's obvious crush would keep him in the room with her. At least
that way Billy wouldn't be able to say anything too hurtful or upsetting. I couldn't stand the thought of him lecturing her. She had enough to worry about, trying to think of a way to ease Charlie into the idea of our being together.

As soon as they were inside, I flew out of the truck and made my way home. It was one of the rare times I found no joy in running. I was on a mission, and the sooner I could establish just how big a threat Billy was going to be to our relationship, the sooner I could back with Bella. I'd barely opened the door when Alice came sprinting toward me.

*What are you doing here? I thought you two were going to meet us there. What's wrong?*

“Nothing's wrong, Alice,” I lied. “I mean, I don't think it is. I just need you to try to look for something.”

“Is Bella all right?” she asked worriedly.

“She's fine. She's just being...interrogated a bit right now.” I paused. “By the Blacks.”

I watched as her expression changed from concern to irritation, and eventually to rage that almost rivaled mine.

*It's not his place to get involved in this, you haven't done anything wrong!* She thought, unable to form the words aloud.

“I know.” I said evenly, trying to calm her down. “I don't know exactly what he's planning, only that he clearly doesn't want me anywhere near Bella, and he seems to have taken it upon himself to try to make that happen.”

I waited while her thoughts slowed and rationalized, and finally she asked, “How can I help?”

“I just need you to make sure he's not planning anything big. You know, no storming the house or plans to reveal us or anything like that.”

“You really think he'd break the treaty over this?”

“I don't know. He didn't sound like he wanted to. He was thinking up ways to defame me without breaking any rules, but if Charlie can't be convinced to step in, I'm not sure how far he'll go trying to protect Bella.”

Alice closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, trying to focus in on any shift in Bella's or our future. She was silent for a few moments and I listened intently as her thoughts bounced and jumped. I smiled as she focused in on Bella and I together, laughing, smiling, and completely at ease. She tried to see beyond that, to see if there was anything struggling to pull us apart, but nothing came close to even minutely skewing the vision. She smiled as she opened her eyes.

“You two are so happy,” she said dreamily. “It's hard to see past that when both of your minds are so completely made up.”


She wrinkled her nose at me, rolled her eyes, and closed them once more. This time her breathing stopped entirely. I tried to follow her frenzied thoughts as she attempted to focus in on Charlie. He was as blurry to her as his thoughts were to me, and I wondered if maybe I should introduce the two of them so she could get a better vision of his future. It would come in very handy if she could see his reactions and help me better prepare for them. If I could win Charlie over, Billy wouldn't feel like as big of a threat.

“I'm sorry,” she finally said, looking at me again. “I can't really get a handle on Charlie, though I don't see anything that indicates he'll have a problem with you. Other than the fact that you're dating his only daughter, of course,” she smirked. “As for the Blacks, I just can't seem to find
anything. Maybe because I don't really know much about them. Or maybe because Billy hasn't entirely made up his mind on how he wants to handle things. Or maybe...”

“Your maybes aren't really helping me, Alice,” I snapped much harsher than I had intended. The look that shot across her face made me instantly apologetic, though she didn't give me time to get the words out.

“Then get yourself a real psychic, Edward,” she spat. “I'm doing the best I can! Watch Bella, don't watch Bella, watch her but only when you're not hovering over her. I can't keep up with you and I can't concentrate when you're in my head like that!”

She turned away and dashed up the stairs, slamming her door behind her. Within seconds I could hear my family's thoughts cascading down on me. Of course I figured they were listening, but it was frustrating nevertheless.

*What does he expect, constant 24 hour supervision?*

*The Blacks are just worried about Bella, he's being overprotective again.*

*I want to see the look on Charlie's face when Edward picks her up tonight.*

*Ridiculous. Completely ridiculous, all of it.*

I flew up the stairs and knocked on Rosalie and Emmett's door. There was something I needed to say and at least for a few minutes, it would keep me from prying into Alice's mind. She needed time to think, and I already felt miserable enough for having upset her.

“Come in,” Rosalie said sweetly, and I heard Emmett laugh. They were sitting together on the edge of the bed, already in their baseball gear and ready for the game.

“Why didn't you come down earlier?” I asked, trying to match her calm tone.

“And?”

“And I decided that I couldn't,” she smiled innocently. I could feel the irritation welling up again.

“Fine,” I said, not sure I was composed enough to speak to her any further. I turned to Emmett.

“What about you?”

“What, and leave Rose up here all alone? She would've ended up breaking something, and I figured Bella didn't need any more drama. Getting a tour of the vampire mansion was enough excitement for one day.”

I shook my head at both of them, wishing there was a way I could make them accept Bella. I wanted her to feel welcome here, by everyone, and though I was sure Emmett was only staying away for Rose's sake, it bothered me that she seemed so determined not to change her attitude. Her thoughts gave me no hint of acquiesce, and I wondered if the two would ever be able to be in the same room together. After a few silent moments I left, not sure what else to say, and knocked lightly on Alice's door.

“Yeah, you can come in,” she mumbled. She was lying curled up on Jasper's chest as he lovingly stroked her hair. He was glaring at me and I attempted a smile.

“I apologize, Alice. I didn't mean to put so much pressure on you. I know you love her too.”

“Of course I do,” she said sitting up. “And your paranoia has me worrying about her all the time. First the other vampires I saw, now Billy who I can't seem to get a reading on. And of course you've got me on constant lookout for any natural disasters that might strike, Bella herself
included. You know, I'm not going to be able to see every time she falls down and scrapes her knee,” she added sarcastically.

“I know, and again I'm sorry. It's just that...” I paused, wishing I could say this to Alice alone, without Jasper's stare boring into me. “I just don't seem to be able to exist without her anymore. If something happened because I wasn't close enough to stop it, or because I wasn't paying attention for one moment...” My voice trailed off, unable to finish the thought. It was irrational, I knew, but I hoped Alice could understand my intense need to protect her.

I watched as her warm smile returned. Slowly – and Alice never moved slowly – she got up off the bed and walked over to me. She stopped just a few inches from my face and stood up on her tiptoes, looking deeply into my eyes.

_You and Bella will always be together. I know you don't want to think about it, but you know what I've seen. The image of her dying has completely vanished, and I only see one future for you both. So ignore it if you must, but I'm going to take comfort in knowing that Bella is part of our family. Forever._

I wanted to be mad at her. I wanted to scream at her for putting the image that horrified me back in my mind and securing it so completely. Yet the thought of Bella and I...forever...pushed all other thoughts away. I stared at her for an unimaginable stretch of time as more of Alice's visions flooded my mind. Though I still couldn't accept what would have to take place to make them true, this time I didn't fight them. I let them come, even let myself revel for the briefest of moments at the thought of not having to worry about her safety anymore. What it would feel like to know she was mine for all eternity.

_Seriously, man. It drives me nuts when you guys do that. Aren't we gonna go play ball?_ Jasper's thought brought me abruptly back to the present and I turned to glare at him.

_What?_

“Come on, let's go. Jasper's getting impatient,” I told Alice. “I'm going to take the Jeep to pick up Bella and I'll meet you guys there.” Alice started to turn away but I took her hand and pulled her back to face me. “Thanks,” I mouthed, and she grinned widely at me.

Driving back to Bella I would not allow my thoughts to drift back to where they had been with Alice. I refused to spend one more second pining away after a future I was still determined not to let come to pass. All worries seemed to disappear as soon as her house was in view and I quickly parked the Jeep. I ran in a blur to the door, not worrying as much as I probably should have whether someone might have been watching.

I rang the doorbell and listened as Charlie's jumbled thoughts grew louder and more concerned. They didn't sound out of the ordinary though, nothing to indicate that Billy had spooked him. Just the usual concerns of a father who wasn't ready to let his little girl go.

He opened the door with a forced smile and I could see Bella hovering nervously behind him, her heart racing. She was giving him the strangest look, almost like she was willing him not to humiliate her. It was oddly endearing.

“Come on in, Edward,” he said politely, though his mind was not offering me nearly the same pleasantries.

I could hear Bella exhale a slow sigh of relief, though we both knew the hardest part was still ahead of us. I hoped something in him recognized how much I cared for Bella and it would put his mind at ease.

“Thanks, Chief Swan,” I said in my most formal and appreciative voice.
“Go ahead and call me Charlie. Here, I'll take your jacket.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“Have a seat there, Edward,” he said and I could feel the tenor of his mind switch to something resembling a trial. It was overprotective, remarkably sweet, and completely amusing.

I sank down into the chair beside the couch and braced myself for the onset of questions. Inexplicably Bella glared at me, though I couldn't imagine it being less awkward if she and I had sat next to each other, Charlie staring daggers at me from the chair. I winked at her, as if to say, *Please just trust me. I've got more insight into this one than you do.*

“So I hear you're getting my girl to watch baseball,” he said skeptically. He obviously thought it was a cover for something much more mischievous.

“Yes, sir, that's the plan,” I answered sincerely, and amazingly he seemed to believe me.

“Well, more power to you, I guess,” he chuckled, both his voice and mind relaxing. At least Charlie had found one silver lining in the whole boyfriend situation. Bella had always been very forthcoming about her aversion to sports. Charlie was hoping I'd finally bring out the sports lover in her.

We sat in silence for a minute or two until Bella took a deep breath.

“Okay,” she said, standing up and clearly ready for the awkward moment to be over. “Enough humor at my expense. Let's go.” She darted past us to get her coat and I could feel Charlie's anxiety return.

“Not too late, Bell,” he warned, though he was looking directly at me. I stifled a laugh at Bella's exasperated sigh.

“She'll be safe with me, I promise, sir.” I tried to infuse my voice with the same sincerity as when I made the vow to myself. He eyed me cautiously but I could tell he believed me, and it made me ecstatic to feel I'd earned at least his partial approval.

We both watched as Bella stomped out of the room, hiding her humiliation with frustration. It was adorable, and Charlie and I laughed in unison. What was even more entertaining was her expression when she saw the Jeep I'd brought. Had she really thought I'd planned on taking the Volvo trudging through the mud to the middle of nowhere? Not that I'd told her exactly how far out we'd need to go.

Charlie whistled behind us, partly in awe and partly to mask the concern that was creeping back over him.

“Wear your seat belts,” he added in a strained whisper.

Bella looked a bit queasy as she approached the daunting vehicle. She looked like a cat preparing to pounce as she readied herself to jump into the high seat. *Would it really be that difficult to ask for my help?* I thought with a sigh, lifting her quickly inside.

I walked slowly to the driver's side and held in another laugh as I watched Bella fumble helplessly with the harness. Her contorted expression looked like she was trying to solve a Rubik's Cube.

“What's all this?” she asked, clearly frustrated.

“It's an off-roading harness,” I answered calmly.

“Uh-oh.” Her pulse quickened and her eyes widened in horror. I smiled, thinking of how I could calm her down and get her buckled safely in all at the same time. From where Charlie stood, I
was confident all he would see was me securing his girl into place, an act he would surely approve of.

I leaned across and began fastening the harness with one hand and lightly tracing Bella's neck with the other. My cool fingertips grazed across her collarbone, and she shivered as goosebumps rose on her delicate skin. This time I didn't even pause to worry I was making her too cold. Her soft sigh assured me it was the good kind of shiver.

Reluctantly I returned to my seat, though the pounding of her heart was still making me grin widely. I started the engine and Bella jumped at the sound.

“This is a...um...big Jeep you have,” she said, still trying to mask her anxiety.

“It's Emmett's. I didn't think you'd want to run the whole way.” I held my breath, waiting for her reaction to the knowledge that she'd be running with me again, but she was still too distracted by the vehicle to notice what I'd said.

“Where do you keep this thing?”

“We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage.” It was meant to be Emmett and Rose's place, during the periods when they decided to spend some time on their own. Of course, it didn't take long to realize that when they hit that point, the backyard simply wasn't far enough away. For any of us.

“Aren't you going to put on your seat belt?” she asked in a slightly disapproving voice. I turned and raised one eyebrow at her. Hadn't she caught on yet?

As she watched me, something in her expression changed. The queasy look from earlier returned and I was worried she was being jostled around too much. I almost slowed down when she choked out her next words.

“Run the whole way?” Ah. There it was. “As in, we're still going to run part of the way?” Her voice was panicked and again I wondered how the experience could have been so frightening for her. She trusted me in every other way, but being whisked through the woods was too much for her. I tried to smile, though I was genuinely concerned that it bothered her so much. We had a long way to go, and if I couldn't run we'd end up missing the whole game. And Emmett and Jasper would never let me hear the end of it.

“You're not going to run,” I teased lightly.

“I'm going to be sick.”

“Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine.” Honestly, if she didn't see how fast we were going, I was sure I could run carefully enough that she'd barely even notice the movement. She bit her lip and I was once again overtaken by the urge to press my own lips against her. Without even a moment of doubt over my control – it was such a relief, knowing I could be close to her – I gently kissed the top of her head, her scent overwhelming my senses. A low moan escaped my throat, though I couldn't bring myself to be sorry I'd done it. The pain was worth it to be filled with her luscious scent, impossibly sweeter in the damp, cool air. She glanced up at me questioningly, and I was happy to be able to say the words honestly without fear of frightening her.

“You smell so good in the rain.”

“In a good way, or in a bad way?” she asked, blushing and looking guilty for reasons I couldn't fathom.

“Both,” I sighed. “Always both.”
As we turned onto the hidden pathway and the road grew rougher, Bella started to bounce up and down in her seat. She didn't protest, though I could hear her sharp intakes of breath as she tried to calm herself down. I wondered if she realized just how much easier it would have been if we had run the whole way. If only I could find a way to cure her of her fear of running. Maybe if I relaxed her first, gave her a happy thought, so to speak, before we took off. I grinned to myself, realizing I was coming up with excuses to kiss her again.

By the time we'd reached the point where the Jeep could no longer fit down the path, I'd all but perfected my plan. Just as Alice had predicted, the rain was slowing and the sky was letting a few rays of sun shine through the storm. It created an ethereal effect through the trees, and I found myself anticipating the moment more and more.

“Sorry, Bella, we have to go on foot from here,” I said, already anxious for her reaction.

“You know what? I'll just wait here.”

“What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning,” I said, smiling again at the thought of Bella surrounded by my family, comfortable and perfectly at home.

“I haven't forgotten the last time yet,” she said, giving me the cue I'd been waiting for. I raced around to her door and started releasing the clasps on her harness, taking in another luxurious breath of her rain soaked hair.

“I'll get those, you go on ahead,” she said frantically. As if I was going to leave her side, even for a moment.

“Hmmm...” I trailed off, wondering how best to phrase it. I wanted her to be prepared so we had some chance of her reacting rationally. I was perfectly in control, but I still didn't relish the thought of having to pry her off of me. “It seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory.”

Hoping she could feel the electricity, that she had some idea of what was coming, I pulled her swiftly from her seat and placed her carefully in front of me.

“Tamper with my memory?” Her voice was shaking and it made me wonder just how distracted I could make her. I wanted her to forget everything except us.

“Something like that,” I mumbled, looking at her with all the longing I'd been feeling ever since that moment in the car. My need to be close to her, to taste her again was taking over all my other senses.

She still looked like she had no idea what I was about to do, and I fought to hide the amusement her naivety triggered in me. Willing her to understand, I rested my hands on the Jeep, one on either side of her. As I inched my way closer, I could feel her rest into the door. She was still baffled as I tilted my face toward her and filled myself with her scent.

“Now,” I said, taking one more perfectly agonizing breath, “what exactly are you worrying about?”

“Well, um, hitting a tree,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. I could hear her heart racing and it just excited me more. “…and dying. And then getting sick.”

Suppressing the smile that threatened to break the intensity of the moment, I let my lips slowly find the softest little patch of skin on her throat. I could taste her adrenaline, feel her pulse under my lips. It was fantastic and torturous all at once. Yet I couldn't stop, I needed more of her.

“Are you still worried now?” I muttered, lips still resting against her increasingly warm skin.

“Yes,” she said in a strained voice. “About hitting trees and getting sick.”
I let my lips and my nose trace a cool line up to her chin as I inhaled deeply, completely intoxicated.

“And now?” I continued, thrilling to every ragged breath she took in. Feeling her body react to my touch was more enjoyable, more exhilarating than anything I'd ever experienced.

“Trees. Motion sickness,” she whispered, though I could tell all coherent thoughts were long vanished.

I pressed my lips to each of her soft eyelids, marveling at how even they had a scent all their own, each place on her body holding its own mystery.

“Bella, you don’t really think I would hit a tree, do you?” I whispered.

“No, but I might.” All the determination had left her voice and I felt her chin lift, eyes still closed but searching for my lips. I trailed my lips in soft kisses down her cheek, stopping just before my lips met hers, prolonging the moment just a bit longer. Her shallow breaths were urging me on, her anticipation breaking down my last ounce of willpower.

“Would I let a tree hurt you?” I murmured, allowing my lips to gently trace her bottom lip. Already I could taste her sweetness and I wanted to let all my defenses drop, though somewhere in the back of my very clouded mind I remembered that for her safety that was an impossibility.

“No,” she sighed.

“You see,” I smiled, speaking the words against her mouth. “There's nothing to be afraid of, is there?”

“No,” she whispered, all her earlier fears forgotten, just as I had intended. With that knowledge, I finally gave in and kissed her with all the love and passion that had been building up inside me. I caressed her face, enraptured by the way she trembled in my embrace. I couldn't make myself care or try to stop her when her arms locked around my neck and pulled me in closer. I could feel every inch of her fragile body pressed against mine, and I was grateful for the little voice in the back of my head that shouted beyond all the desire I was feeling, telling me to hold her gently.

With the tiny bit of rational thinking I had left in me focused entirely on not breaking her, I was caught completely off guard when she let out a deep sigh into my mouth. Inhaling unthinkingly, I was assaulted by her warm breath and the monster was resurfaced, enraged at having been kept at bay for so long.

“Damn it, Bella!” I nearly shouted, though the anger was solely directed at my own despicable weakness. “You'll be the death of me, I swear you will.”

When I could once again focus my gaze to where Bella stood, I saw her hunched over as if she didn't have the power to hold herself up. I might have been somewhat pleased with myself if it hadn't ended the way it did.

“You're indestructible,” she gasped, still staring at the ground.

“I might have believed that before I met you. Now let's get out of here before I do something really stupid.”

The vile monster had still not been completely silenced, and I was growing more and more frustrated with myself with each burning breath I took. I pulled Bella onto my back, wishing I could have just left her in her relaxed state instead of pushing the limits, selfish creature that I was. All I'd really wanted was for her to be comfortable running with me.

I could faintly see the rest of my family's footprints in the mud. I counted the tracks and determined they were all there waiting for us. They were probably wondering what was keeping
us. Or hearing about it in excruciating detail from Alice. Either way, there was not stopping now. I desperately needed the wind and the speed of running to clear my head. I couldn't believe I had been so overconfident. I could never let my guard down with Bella, not for one second. Though the thrill of concentrating on her and her alone had been mesmerizing and wonderful.

I felt her grip me tightly and I knew she was as ready and she was going to be.

“Don't forget to close your eyes,” I warned her, wishing I could get the ferocity out of my voice. I wanted only to speak kindly to Bella, always. No matter how inexcusable I'd behaved.

Her head burrowed into my shoulder and I could tell she was following my instructions. I ran at just slightly under my normal speed, being especially cautious and hoping the motion wouldn't bother her this time. The rush of air against my face definitely helped and I purposely took slow, steady breaths, focusing on the forest around me. By the time we stopped I felt like myself again, though I couldn't entirely shut out the feeling of self loathing. My only comfort was knowing that Bella, kind soul that she was, had probably already forgiven me.

I reached up and gently stroked her hair, hoping she could feel that I was back in control. That I loved her, and I was sorry.

“It's over, Bella,” I told her gently. After one brief moment I felt her release me from her grasp, though if I'd known how unstable she was I would have made her hold on a little longer. Stubborn as ever, she tried to get down on her own and ended up in a heap on the ground.

“Oh!” she muttered, irritated at her usual lack of balance.

I watched her carefully, wondering why she hadn't asked for help like the last time. She looked confused, maybe even a little disoriented, then utterly perturbed by the whole thing. Yet the whole time she made no attempt to pick herself up. I shouldn't have laughed, but her expression was such a conglomeration of emotions I couldn't hold it in.

With a low grumble she stood up and started brushing herself off, missing about half of the debris that had accumulated on her coat. I couldn't stop the laughter, though I felt bad. It was obviously making her more upset. As she started to storm off into the woods, in the completely wrong direction, I pulled myself together and wrapped my arm around her waist.

“Where are you going, Bella?” I asked, making sure my voice was kind. She looked so mad and I was feeling rather guilty for making things worse instead of better.

“To watch a baseball game. You don't seem to be interested in playing anymore, but I'm sure the others will have fun without you.” The furious tone coming out of her soft lips was baffling. Again, I couldn't understand why the little things bothered her so much more than the things that should be truly troubling. She had fallen and I had laughed. Okay, it was completely insensitive, but in my defense I was laughing more out of relief than anything. The incident before our run had been very unsettling.

“You're going the wrong way,” I said softly, not wanting to upset her further. Without a word she trudged off toward the field. I reached out to her again, holding her closely but gently.

“Don't be mad,” I pleaded, “I couldn't help myself. You should have seen your face.” I laughed softly once more, this time purely out of joy at having her back in my arms.

“Oh, you're the only one who's allowed to get mad?” she asked, eyebrows raised and voice accusing.

“I wasn't mad at you,” I clarified, wondering how she could think I'd ever be mad at her for my own horrid faults.
“Bella, you'll be the death of me?” There was a sadness I couldn't quite explain as she repeated my foolish words back to me.

“That was simply a statement of fact,” I said, hating myself more for having said something inadvertently offensive.

“You were mad.”

“Yes,” I admitted. I was still mad, but at myself. Always at myself.

“But you just said – ”

“That I wasn't mad at you. Can't you see that, Bella?” Hadn't she figured it out yet? I cherished her, was captivated by her every breath, yet I was constantly aware of the fact that I deserved none of it. “Don't you understand?” I asked, though it sounded like I was begging. Maybe I was begging. I needed her to know I would never blame her for eliciting my most loathsome responses.

“See what?” asked angrily and her eyes searched mine for the answer she couldn't seem to comprehend.

“I'm never angry with you – how could I be? Brave, trusting...warm as you are.”

“Then why?” she breathed, clearly determined to understand the way I so desperately wanted her to. I reached out and held her perfect, soft, glorious face in my hands, again overwhelmed by how much I loved her.

“I infuriate myself,” I whispered, and instantly her expression softened, like she was shocked to hear the words. “The way I can't seem to keep from putting you in danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to – ”

Miraculously, her desire to stop me from even mentioning leaving was still there despite my behavior. I felt her soft fingertips touch my lips, silencing me.

“Don't,” she said simply, and how could I refuse? There was nothing I wanted more than to stay with her, forever. I reached up to take her hand in mine and brought it to my cheek, unwilling to let go of her warm touch. I pressed it against my face, marveling at how amazing her skin felt on mine and the strength of what it made me feel.

“I love you,” I told her, looking deeply into her eyes to make sure she understood just how much. “It's a poor excuse for what I'm doing, but it's still true.”

Just when I thought I couldn't love her any more, the goofiest grin spread across her face and she blushed a lovely shade of pink. I didn't question it, just happy that she still seemed excited by my confessions of love. I hoped my words would never stop eliciting that response because I would never stop telling her, and her blushing smile was all the reminder I needed that hearing it made her happy.

“Now, please try to behave yourself,” I said, half teasing and half begging her to just stay still this time. I needed to know I could kiss her without it turning into such an ordeal.

I kissed her very softly, silently pleading that she maintain her own control as I desperately clung to mine. Even the brief seconds my lips were against hers were divine, and I was disappointed when I felt her sigh and pull away. I stared at her, perplexed.

“You promised Chief Swan that you would have me home early, remember? We'd better get going.”
“Yes, ma'am,” I said with a smile, though I wished it hadn't ended quite so soon. It was the most reasonably she'd responded to my kiss and I was hoping to be able to stay in the moment just a little longer.

I held her hand as we walked through the last of the mossy trees until we reached the field. It had been a favorite hideout of ours and far enough away from the town that the loud cracks of our bats would blend in perfectly with the thunder. I watched Bella's eyes widen as she took in the scene that had become commonplace to us. Alice was practicing her lightning fast pitches, Carlisle speeding from base to base, getting the field ready for the game.

Esme, as always, was watching our family with love and adoration. Baseball wasn't her favorite pastime, but reveling in the happiness it brought us was. She smiled warmly when she saw Bella and I across the field and hurried over to us. Rosalie in all her glory refused to even look in our direction, marching toward the others with a string of explicatives running through her mind. Emmett watched her, or rather ogled her, for a long moment before following after Esme.

You two sure took your time getting here, he thought with a smirk. And man was it loud...

I wanted to glare at him, but Esme was already staring at me with her kindest eyes. There was no need to let her know what a cretin Emmett was being.

“Was that you we heard, Edward?” she asked sweetly.

“It sounded like a bear choking,” Emmett added in what was clearly mock concern.

Bella just smiled at Esme and confirmed, “That was him.” If she was still upset with me, she was obviously going to let it go, at least in front of my family. Always the picture of politeness, trying to make the vampires happy.

“Bella was being unintentionally funny,” I added, casting the quickest of scowls at Emmett while Esme's attention was on Bella.

Yeah, I bet you two are all laughs and hilarity. Now can you manage to detach from her hip long enough to play a decent game?

Thankfully Alice was streaking toward us, excitement written all over her face.

“It's time,” she said, right as the first wave of thunder rolled across the field. I felt Bella shiver beside me and for a moment I wondered if I could leave her side long enough to play. I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and never let go.

“Eerie, isn't it?” Emmett said, winking at Bella as the thunder subsided.

“Let's go,” Alice chirped, dragging Emmett along behind her. You too, Edward, she added. Time to be a show off again.

As I watched my family take their places, the excitement of the game started to wash over me. It had been so long and it was always exhilarating, being able to let out the full force of our strength and speed without breaking anything. Aside from the occasional bat.

“Are you read for some ball?” I asked Bella.

She stared at me with just a hint of hesitation before muttering, “Go team!” I had to laugh at her fake enthusiasm. She really was trying. I was glad Esme was going to sit with her, keep her somewhat grounded in reality as the rest of us ghosted across the field. I wasn't sure how much of the game she'd actually be able to make sense of, not that I thought she really cared about the logistics of the game.

With a parting sigh and touch of her silky hair, I ran to meet the rest of them, showing off maybe just a little. It really was fun being the fastest. I fought the urge to listen in on Esme and Bella's
conversation, deciding it was good that they finally get to talk, just the two of them. Bella had been so concerned about my family's approval, and if anyone could convince her just how loved she already was, it was Esme and her unmistakable kindness and sincerity.

After everyone had taken their places, I heard Esme call, “All right. Batter up.” Emmett stepped up to home plate and I listened as Alice thought through the perfect opening pitch. It wasn't often that I got to play any type of game with them, mostly because they thought I had an unfair advantage, hearing what they were planning before the acted. Baseball was one of the few sports where they'd all decided my power couldn't really do too much damage. If anything, they thought hearing their constant inner babbling might be enough of a distraction that I'd miss things.

When Alice finally released the ball, it flew toward Emmett. It streaked past him in a blur. He didn't even flinch.

Strike one, Alice thought smugly as an impish grin flitted across her cheeks. It's going to be a good game. She prepared for the second pitch but Emmett was prepared this time. She could usually only sneak one past him, just like any of us could only ever get in one solid punch before his disarming strength and instinct took over. I was the closest he ever got to a fair fight, though he'd learned over the years that if he just stopped thinking, he could quickly regain the advantage. Right Emmett, just don't think. That's always the answer.

Alice launched her second pitch and the bat collided with the ball. Emmett took off victoriously. Go! Alice thought but I was already blazing through the trees, eyes locked on the ball. Putting every ounce of force into my run, my feet barely touching the ground, I started closing the distance. Planting my foot firmly, I hurled myself into the air and snatched the ball. I almost wished Bella could have seen that one.

I heard Esme's shout of “Out!” just as I reentered the clearing, and grinned at Emmett's look of desolation. He took the game so seriously. Rosalie was up next and she was glaring right past Alice toward me.

Can't believe he brought his human to this. And everyone's acting like it's so normal. Yeah, Bella, come to our house. Sure, come watch the game. Whatever. Just bringing the girlfriend home, no big deal.

Her thoughts never let up and I smirked as the distraction caused her to miss the first and second of Alice's pitches. Finally she silenced her insults and concentrated, hitting the third one firmly. Of course I didn't have to run as fast to catch her ball, though I did have to jump higher. She had a tendency to hit up and into the tress. Amazingly, she'd figured out how to be annoying even in her baseball technique.

Two outs and Jasper was up. He took his place, swinging the bat around and grinning slyly at Alice. They could always find a moment to flirt, even in the midst of a game.

“Love ya, babe,” he mouthed to her and she blew him a quick kiss before whirling the ball past him, resulting in his first strike. His smile never faded, too in love to care much about the fact that his girl was beating him. The second pitch came in low and Jasper hit it into the ground where it skidded straight into Carlisle. He bounced it off his foot and ran it to first base, colliding with Jasper as they both broke into laughter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bella jump to her feet, a look of concern on her face. She seemed to relax when Esme gently said, “Safe,” and she hesitantly sat back down. I thought she understood that it takes a lot more than crashing into each other to cause us any harm. I'd have to let her watch Emmett and I go at it someday to prove there really wasn't anything for her to worry about.
My team was up to bat and Emmett took over Alice's place on the pitcher's mound. He smiled at me as I stepped up to bat and I rolled my eyes. His favorite trick was running through the periodic table in his head, just to make sure I had no knowledge of how or when he was going to hurl the ball at me. The first pitch whirled by and I heard him chuckle.

*Oh yeah, I've been practicing.*

I concentrated and gripped the bat as I attempted to hit the second ball. Strike two. Another laugh from Emmett.

*Come on, you'd better hit this one. Bella's watching...*

I forced myself to focus, ignoring his mental chattering. Like a flash the ball left his hand and finally collided with my bat. I took off, watching as Rosalie raced for the ball she hadn't expected me to hit. I knew she had no chance of catching it and I smiled triumphantly as I rounded home plate, casting a quick smile in Bella's direction.

Emmett managed to strike out first Alice, then Carlisle. Determined and confident as I stepped up for my second round at bat, I hit the first of his pitches with a loud crack. A piece of the bat flew into the air and I took off running. This time Rosalie was prepared, having started running before Emmett had even released the ball. I knew she'd caught it when I heard her victorious yell come from the middle of the forest.

Rotating batting order, Emmett paced as Alice struck out Jasper. Rosalie only made it to first thanks to Carlisle's speed and dexterity. With a sly grin Emmett stepped up to the plate and hit the first pitch. I took off and jumped for it but couldn't get a grip as it bounced off my fingers, ricocheted off a tree and buried itself in a dense patch of ferns. By the time I found it, both Rosalie and Emmett were grinning at me from home plate.

Jasper manged to hit Alice's first pitch and it sailed almost too easily into my hands, making their third out. Thrilled by the excitement of the game, I ran to Bella as we changed positions and Carlisle stepped up to bat. It didn't escape my notice that Alice was smiling wildly at me as I approached Bella.

“What do you think?” I asked, ecstatic that she was there sharing it with me.

“One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again,” she said with a smile.

“And it sounds like you did so much of that before,” I said, laughing at how hard she was trying to seem enthusiastic.

*She's having a good time, Edward,* Esme assured me with a sideways glance. *She's very impressed.*

“I am a little disappointed,” she said with the funniest little smile.

“Why?”

“Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet.”

*See, I told you. She's proud of you,* Esme added. I smiled widely at Bella and listened to her accelerated heart.

“I'm up,” I sighed reluctantly, as the other team's impatient thoughts took me away from the moment.

I noticed Rosalie slowly backing up into the woods, so I decided to hit low. I slid into second just before Emmett caught up with me, and waited for Carlisle's hit that would hopefully give me the
chance to finish the run. He didn't disappoint, sending the ball soaring through the treetops. I strolled casually toward home, letting Carlisle catch up, and we both touched home together with smiles and high fives as Alice came flitting over to join the celebration.

Our team quickly took the lead as Emmett mumbled things like “lucky,” and “show-off” under his breath. We were in the middle of the fifth inning when Alice suddenly dropped the ball with a gasp. I stared at her in horror as the image that had assaulted her filled my every thought. Three crimson eyed vampires, speeding through the forest. They were heading directly for us.

I didn't bother asking her for details, only able to think of one thing. I rushed to Bella's side, locking my arms tightly around her as I continued to filter through exactly what Alice was seeing.

“Alice?” Esme asked nervously, though her stare was fixed on the protective stance I'd taken over Bella.

“I didn't see – I couldn't tell,” Alice breathed apologetically, eyes staring into mine. I'm sorry, Edward. I should have been paying closer attention. I shook my head, unwilling to let her feel any more guilt than what I'd already caused her today. It was my fault, bringing Bella so far out into the forest when we knew the nomads were nearby.

“What is it, Alice?” Carlisle asked as the rest of my family formed a circle around us.

“They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before,” she said quietly, glancing up at Jasper. The threat of danger started to sink in and he moved closer to her, as protective as I was being of Bella. Alice was significantly less breakable, though of course that didn't negate his instinct to defend her.

“What changed?” he asked her gently.

“They heard us playing, and it changed their path,” she said woefully. I'm sorry, I should have seen it, her mind kept repeating. All of us glanced at Bella who was looking paler than I'd ever seen her.

“How soon?” Carlisle asked me, likely realizing that if I could already hear them clearly the answer was, “too soon.”

I listened carefully, worried when I picked them out so quickly. Focusing in on voices I'd never heard before was usually more difficult, but their intent was crystal clear. They were curious, hoping to observe the unconventional vampires they couldn't understand. And they wanted to play.

This should be interesting.

They actually call themselves a family, how absurd.

Maybe they'll let us join in the game. Oh, a little sport would be so much fun.

“Less than five minutes,” I finally said, estimating as best I could from their surroundings and the speed they were traveling. “They're running – they want to play,” I added with disgust. We were like some little science project to them.

“Can you make it?” Carlisle asked hopefully, glancing at Bella's terrified face.

“No, not carrying – ” I stopped myself, not wanting to give Bella a way to make her feel this was in any way her fault. I'd been careless and I had to figure out how to make her safe. “Besides,” I added as a terrible thought crossed my mind, “the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting.” Bella shivered beside me and I held her closer, wishing she was back in her bed, safely curled up in my arms with me singing her to sleep.
“How many?” Emmett asked Alice, as his body instinctively shifted into a fighting stance. Of course he would assume this had to end in destruction.

“Three.”

“Three!” he said, a sickening smile spreading across his face. “Let them come.” *I could use a little exercise*, his mind added, far too excited by the idea. I tried not to think about how I was in fact, somewhat comforted by my brother's willfulness to rip to shreds anyone who threatened our tightly bonded family. I sincerely hoped it wouldn't come to that, but...whatever it takes to keep Bella safe.

All of us, except Emmett who was too busy planning the fight, turned to Carlisle. In times like this we all relied on him as our leader, to help us choose the best course of action. I was sifting through Alice's mind, trying to find anything we might have missed when Carlisle spoke again.

“Let's just continue the game,” he said calmly. “Alice said they were simply curious.” I stared at him with wide eyes, unwilling to accept the best thing to do was to stand around and wait.

*Trust me, Edward. It's for the best. You can't get her to safety without risking crossing paths with them. We'll keep her behind us until we can distract them enough to provide you the escape you need. I won't let anything happen to any of our family.*

Esme was watching the intensity of my stare with Carlisle. *We love her too, Edward. We won't let any harm come to her,* she added. Once again her thoughts were perfectly in sync with his, and I relaxed infinitesimally at the sheer conviction in her tone. If it came down to it, my family would fight for the girl I loved, and I loved them all the more for it.

“Are they thirsty?” she muttered aloud so that Carlisle could hear. I shook my head, relieved that none of them seemed to be thinking about hunting. As much as I hated to think of the human blood that must have been recently spilled, it made me less fearful for Bella. Their senses wouldn't be heightened the way they would be if they hadn't just gorged themselves.

“You catch, Esme. I'll call it now,” I finally said, firmly taking my stance as Bella's protector. My vow to her had never felt stronger as I thought about the lengths I would go to to ensure her safety. I'd fight them all if I had to, rip every last one of them apart.

Everyone took their places again on the field, Alice and Esme staying the closest. No one dared go farther than was necessary to keep up the charade of the game.

“Take your hair down,” I whispered to Bella, idly remembering how I thought that would make a difference when she met my family. It was ridiculous to think that a thin layer of hair could mask her luscious scent, but nevertheless I needed to do everything in my power to keep her hidden. As she let our her ponytail and ruffled her hair it only stirred her scent more, filling the air around us with it.

“The others are coming now,” she said quietly, trying to mask her fear.

“Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don't move from my side, please.” I was trying to hide my own terror, not wanting her to be any more afraid than she already was. Gently and lovingly, I ran my fingers through her hair and brought it around her face, covering as much skin as I could.

“That won't help,” Alice whispered, observing my actions. “I could smell her across the field.”

“I know,” I admitted, remembering how every rustle of the wind had brought her scent to me like a tidal wave. I only hoped that her blood wouldn't be as potent to our visitors, that their senses would be dull, her scent masked by all the other smells of the forest and wildlife.

As we watched the others resume the game, their eyes constantly darting through the surrounding forest, Bella gazed up at me.
“What did Esme ask you?”

There was no hiding anything from her. She was far too observant. I debated whether or not to tell her, but figured it was better she know. It was very fortunate that the answer to Esme's question had been in our favor and I hoped it would ease her mind slightly.

“Whether they were thirsty,” I said softly, trying to infuse my voice with reassurance.

I listened to my family's thoughts, all but one of which were focused on every possible outcome. Emmett was sure it would end in a fight and he'd even managed to get Jasper a little excited about the idea. Carlisle, always the voice of reason, was thinking of ways to simply talk them into leaving. Alice couldn't stop apologizing to me, which made me feel even more miserable. Esme was muttering positive thoughts and promises that things would be okay.

Rosalie was...despicable. She'd reached a new low and I tried very hard to block out her every thought.

_Ridiculous. All this anxiety to save some girl because Edward can't get over his stupid infatuation induced crush. Should have just stayed home. Not worth my energy, not worth anything..._

I stared into the forest, trying to figure out which direction they would come from. I needed to keep as much distance as possible between them and Bella. Maybe Carlisle was right. Maybe he could simply get them talking, answer all their questions about the strange vegetarian vampires they were so fascinated with. Bella and I could simply walk away from the scene while their attention wasn't on us. I tried to convince myself it was possible, but something inside me knew it wouldn't be that simple.

“I'm sorry, Bella,” I whispered, despising myself for my foolishness. “It was stupid, irresponsible, to expose you like this. I'm so sorry.”

She didn't say a word, though I hoped she knew I would die before letting any harm come to her. I felt my breath catch as I saw the first hint of movement in the trees beyond right field. I stepped in front of Bella, blocking her as best I could from their approach. The rest of my family heard the noise a second after I did. The cracking of branches, shifting of trees, and stealthy footsteps of the three vampires who threatened to destroy the person I loved most.
My jaw was clenched tightly and it was a struggle to keep from reaching out to hold onto Bella. Everything in me wanted to wrap my arms around her, protect her, shelter her from whatever was coming. But I knew better. And even if I didn't, Carlisle's racing thoughts reminded me of the necessity of acting normal as he silently repeated one thing and one thing only.

*She needs to blend in...we can't draw attention to her.*

As the three nomads stepped out of the forest and into the clearing, my family and I instinctively huddled closer together. We formed a sort of arrowhead in the grass with Carlisle at the point, our leader as always, and Emmett and Jasper who were all too ready to attack on either side of him. Rosalie and Esme were behind Emmett, Alice and I behind Jasper, both carefully trying to block Bella's scent from the approaching predators.

Mirroring our shape, one of the males walked out in front, the woman and other male on either side of him a few steps back. I listened carefully, trying to pick out any shift in their thoughts, anything that would indicate they knew they were in the presence of a human. Knowing that Emmett and Jasper were ready to fight, and that the others would join in to protect us, I planned my escape should it be necessary. As difficult as it would be to flee knowing my family was fighting for us, I wouldn't hesitate for one second to run Bella to safety if any of the nomads thought of harming her.

*There certainly are a lot of them,* the male in front thought.

*What odd creatures, standing around playing games like a happy little family,* the woman mused, obviously irritated.

*So many perfectly delicious dining options wandering around this ridiculous town and they're feeding on what...squirrels?* The second of the males was eying us sarcastically, and I fought back the growl that was building in my throat. I thought of how hard Carlisle worked to preserve human life, and it enraged me to hear it disregarded so callously. I was grateful it was only I who had to endure it. I hoped that our brief encounter would satisfy their curiosity and when it was over they would leave immediately. It made me cringe to think of them feeding in our home territory.

Carlisle took a few tentative steps toward the group, Emmett and Jasper right at his heels. I could see the effort it was taking them to keep their posture calm and relaxed. As they moved, the wind blew gently and I felt my hands ball into fists as I waited for the nomads to react. Thankfully, Bella's scent was blown in the opposite direction, and I relaxed as the first male moved toward Carlisle, no indication he sensed anything was wrong.

"We thought we heard a game," he said casually, smiling. "I'm Laurent, these are Victoria and James," he added, motioning to his companions.

"I'm Carlisle. This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Rosalie, Esme and Alice, Edward and Bella." *Everything is fine, Edward,* he added, as if sensing the panic that shot through me when he said her name. Blending in, I reminded myself. Just part of the family.

I watched as Victoria and James glanced at each of us cautiously, though their thoughts assured me they were merely confused by what they were seeing. They couldn't understand the choices we made, not only in our feeding habits but also by how many were in our family.

*How does such a large group remain unnoticed?* Victoria thought as her eyes continued to take us in. James cocked his head toward me and I again struggled to keep my frame relaxed. Had he picked up on the intensity of my stare? Jasper glanced toward us, feeling how difficult it was becoming for me to keep my composure. I felt a gentle wave of serenity flow around us, though it did little to calm me.
Keep it together, Edward. I can only do so much.

“Do you have room for a few more players?” Laurent asked.

“Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?” Carlisle asked and I felt my breath catch.

“We're headed north, in fact, but we were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time.”

I could feel the rest of my family exhale in relief and Carlisle continued in his friendly tone.

“No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves.”

“What's your hunting range?”

If you can even call it that... James and Victoria thought sarcastically in unison.

“The Olympic Range here, up and down the Coast Ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali.”

We all saw Laurent take a small step back as if he were in shock, but only I heard the rush of nearly incoherent thoughts that played through his mind. Carlisle was trying to make sense of his reaction.

He doesn't believe the stories, does he? He wonders if maybe we're really just like the rest of them, and just claiming this territory for ourselves? he asked me silently. Having heard traces of disbelief in Laurent's mind amidst his genuine curiosity, I nodded almost invisibly to Carlisle.

“Permanent?” Laurent finally asked. “How do you manage that?”

“Why don't you come back to our home with us and we can talk comfortably? It's a rather long story.”

Carlisle's intention was twofold. First and most importantly, he was providing Bella and I the escape we needed. Second, he truly wanted these vampires who were everything he wasn't to understand that there was another way to live. He needed them to see that human bloodshed was not the only option, even if he had almost no hope of changing their ways.

James and Victoria looked at each other as they each contemplated whether they actually wanted to venture into our large family's home. It all seemed so foreign to them. Laurent was clearly pleased by the invitation and smiled warmly at us.

“That sounds very interesting, and welcome. We've been on the hunt all the way down from Ontario, and we haven't had the chance to clean up in a while.” Their lifestyle does appear considerably more hygienic, he thought, taking in our cleanliness. Even after an afternoon playing baseball, we were nothing compared to the filthy, disheveled creatures who stood before us, remnants of traveling and feeding apparent on every soiled inch of them.

“Please don't take offense, but we'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand,” Carlisle added gently.

“Of course. We certainly won't encroach on your territory. We just ate outside of Seattle, anyway,” he laughed, nonchalant as the rest of us fought the wave of disgust running through us.

I could hear Bella's heart speed up and I wished with everything in me she'd never had to hear about the atrocities that were all too common among the worst of our kind. The only satisfaction I could gain from this meeting was my own knowledge that standing between the nomads and Bella, I felt more human than vampire.
“We'll show you the way if you'd like to run with us – Emmett and Alice, you can go with Edward and Bella to get the Jeep,” he said casually. I felt Bella's breathing steady as she realized the encounter was coming to a close. Soon I would have her safely in her bed, my arms around her, singing her to sleep. I might never stop singing for fear that this nightmare would take hold of her and cause her more pain.

As the group started to disperse and my fears slowly dissipated, I began to loathe myself for having allowed Bella to be exposed to such danger. It was almost as painful as when I'd been afraid I was capable of hurting her, though this time I felt at least somewhat absolved. I'd been allowed to be her protector, as I'd sworn to be for the rest of time, and I felt some relief at having been able to uphold my promise.

Just as Carlisle's final words before our departure rang through the air, the breeze picked up again. I barely had time to notice that the winds had changed and they were now blowing Bella's scent right towards the nomads, when Jame's head snapped toward us. My body tensed, ready to leap on him if he took just one step toward her.

Human! His every thought was consumed with her as he crouched and readied himself to attack. Warm, blood pulsing, so frail...

I lowered myself to meet his stance, lips curled back over my teeth, growling ferociously in an attempt to make him back down. He was not only outnumbered but outmatched. I felt stronger and more powerful than I thought possible, driven by the most intense desire I'd ever felt. It raged through me, fierce and all consuming. Protect Bella. She's all that matters, today and forever. No harm will ever come to her.

“What's this?” I faintly heard Laurent ask, though I diverted none of my attention to him. I was busy carefully matching Jame's every movement as he tried to shift to one side. I didn't even want that savage looking at my Bella.

“She's with us,” Carlisle said sternly. Edward, don't move unless he attacks.

“You brought a snack?” Laurent asked, suddenly catching Bella's scent and moving unthinkingly toward us. I let another deafening snarl escape and Laurent staggered backward.

Jame's thoughts, which had been focused solely on the kill, finally settled into something that sounded almost like amusement.

A little protective of our food, are we?

I fought the urge to respond, telling myself that the last thing we needed was for Jame to inadvertently learn of my ability to read his mind.

“I said she's with us,” Carlisle repeated firmly.

“But she's human,” Laurent said, utterly stunned. Amazing. They really are what they say they are.

“Yes,” he said simply as Emmett moved into place beside him, cautioning James with his eyes. James stood back up, but I stayed crouched and ready to lunge. Bella's ragged breathing was agonizing and I tried to block out the frantic panic of her heart. I had to stay focused. Everything in me wanted to grab her and run, but I had no way of knowing how fast or strong James was. All I could feel was his determination, and that was enough to keep me frozen in place. His eyes were locked on Bella, nostrils flared and a sadistic smile was tugging at his mouth.

Well this should be interesting. A whole family of vampires protecting one pathetic little human. One of whom seems rather attached to her.
I was faintly aware of the fact that Laurent and Carlisle were still speaking. Their voices still sounded unusually calm considering what was taking place around them.

“It appears we have a lot to learn about each other,” Laurent said smoothly.

“Yes.”

“But we'd like to accept your invitation.”

For one second, his words broke both Jame's and my focus. I saw Laurent glance toward Bella out of the corner of his eye before adding, “And, of course, we will not harm the human girl. We won't hunt in your range, as I said.”

Sorry. All bets off, James thought as he turned to glare at Laurent. His eyes flickered next to Victoria as he thought, Just you and me, babe, in what was a strangely melancholy tone. She seemed to understand what his gaze was telling her and I had no doubt she would comply. Interesting how one difference of opinion was all it took to disband their small group.

“We'll show you the way,” Carlisle said, still addressing Laurent, though I was beginning to understand that the power of the trio lied with James. “Jasper, Rosalie, Esme?”

My family quickly formed a tight circle, protecting Bella from view. Alice was beside her, watching her lovingly as she tried to comfort me. Everything's going to be fine, Edward. They know they can't fight off all of us. The worst is over. Bella is perfectly safe.

“Let's go, Bella,” I said softly. I expected her to move, to collapse into my arms from the stress of it all, but she was frozen. I reached out to grip her elbow, tugging gently until her muscles finally relaxed. I pulled her along beside me, wishing I could run but trying to appear composed in case James was still watching. Obviously he had already figured out how protective I was of Bella, but something told me it was still best to act calm, not antagonize him any more.

As soon as we were out of view from the others, I pulled Bella up and her arms latched around my shoulders. Somehow she felt even more fragile than she had mere hours ago. I whispered a silent apology as I took off at blinding speed. I knew Alice and Emmett were falling farther behind with each passing second, but I couldn't will myself to slow down. I wanted Bella as far from that place, from those monsters, as possible.

I tried to be gentle as I put Bella inside the Jeep, but fury was coursing through my veins. Whether it was fury at James for his desire to destroy everything I loved, or fury at myself for allowing him the opportunity, I wasn't sure. Emmett and Alice caught up to us, and dove into the Jeep.

“Strap her in,” I told Emmett as I revved the engine. The moment I heard the click of her harness my foot pressed firmly on the gas. I cursed myself quietly, letting the anger flow through me rather than fighting it off like I should have. It was cowardly and it wasn't fair to Bella, but anger was easier than the other emotions. If I didn't allow my fury to consume me, I would be left with guilt, frustration, despair.

Bella was not going to be happy with what was coming next. She wouldn't understand, and unfortunately I couldn't let that matter. I allowed the anger fill me again, silencing the agony of knowing how much what we were going to do would upset her. I had hoped her fear would keep the question I knew was coming away for a few more minutes. Just let me have the anger a little longer. Of course Bella was quicker than that.

“Where are we going?” she asked, not even a minute after turning onto the main highway.

I didn't answer. I didn't move.

Edward, you have to talk to her.
Fess up man, we all know what you're doing.

“Dammit, Edward! Where are you taking me?” she screamed, breaking my already dead heart. 

If you don't say it, I will, Alice threatened.

“We have to get you away from here – far away – now.” I braced myself for her reaction, tightening my grip on the steering wheel until my hand was molded around it.

“Turn around! You have to take me home!” she yelled, and I heard her start fumbling with her harness.

“Emmett,” I said, though it was nearly a whisper. I was doing what I’d sworn never to do. I was hurting Bella. I was causing her misery. Although I knew it was the only way to keep her safe, it tore me apart, one agonizing plea at a time.

“No!” Rip... “Edward!” Tear... “No, you can't do this.” The last ounce of strength in me seemed to dissolving into nothing. I knew I wouldn't be able to take it for very long and I feared I would give in, give her what she was crying for. Yet this was the only way to keep her safe...

“I have to Bella,” I said firmly, wishing she could understand the pain I was feeling. “Now please be quiet,” I softly begged, unable to bear one more anguished outcry.

“I won't!” she yelled, again nearly breaking the last of my will. “You have to take me back – Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family – Carlisle and Esme! They'll have to leave, to hide forever!”

“Calm down, Bella. We've been there before,” I said solemnly. I could understand Bella not wanting to be taken from her home. I knew she would be worried about Charlie's safety and what her sudden disappearance would do to him. But I refused to let her be this upset over what it would put my family through.

“Not over me, you don't! You're not ruining everything over me!” She thrashed around in her seat violently and I felt a new wave of guilt wash over me. In the midst of everything, she had managed to find a way of making everything her fault again.

Wow, Emmett thought, in yet another one of his completely inappropriate moments. I'm starting to see what you see in this girl. Feisty, isn't she? I would have sneered at him but Alice interrupted.

Don't you see what this is doing to her, Edward? I know you're scared, but you can't make her decisions for her. Maybe there's another way, one that doesn't involved kidnapping Bella and holding her against her will. I want her safe too, but I will not let her hate us forever for it.

I didn't look at her and I didn't slow down.

“Edward, pull over,” Alice said aloud, fire in her eyes. I glared at her and ground my foot against the peddle, pushing it nearer and nearer its maximum speed.

“Edward, let's just talk this through,” she pleaded.

“You don't understand,” I screamed, trying to ignore the way my voice made Bella flinch. “He's a tracker, Alice, did you see that? He's a tracker.”

Whoa, new rules apply, Emmett added, only just beginning to see the gravity of the situation.

Alice's mind quickly filled with rage. I never wanted to use my visions against you, but so help me I will tell her everything.

“Pull over, Edward,” she said too calmly, considering the threat she'd just made to me. I continued to increase our speed.
What do you think Bella would do then? If she knew this would end in either her dying, or her being changed? Do you think she would run? Or do you think she'd be all too eager to get on with it? She knows as well as we all do that you won't let her die.

“Do it, Edward,” she repeated.

“Listen to me, Alice. I saw his mind. Tracking is his passion, his obsession – and he wants her, Alice – her, specifically,” I roared, willing her to understand that one of her visions was not necessarily more certain than the other. If he somehow got to her and did more damage than even vampire venom could mend...

“He begins the hunt tonight,” I said, not letting myself finish the thought and not taking my foot off the gas.

“He doesn't know where – ”

“How long do you think it will take him to cross her scent in town? His plan was already set before the words were out of Laurent's mouth.”

I heard Bella's sharp intake of breath and instantly regretting having said the words aloud. She'd been so focused on what her disappearance would mean for my family she must not have had time to think about her father's own safety.

“Charlie! You can't leave him there! You can't leave him!” she screamed, finally realizing what I'd known from the moment we left the field. The tracker would go to her house. He'd find it quickly, it was possible he already had. Laurent had promised not to hunt on our land, but James clearly felt no loyalty to him anymore.

Hearing her anguish and thinking through what Alice had said, my foot backed off the gas though I kept driving, still staring straight ahead.

If we can find a way to keep Charlie safe, she'll be much more willing to cooperate, Alice thought calmly, then added aloud, “Let's just look at our options for a minute.”

I released my foot from the gas, listened for a moment while Emmett thought of every possible way to “take the weak, ridiculous excuse for a vampire down,” then slammed on the brakes.

“There are no other options,” I said through clenched teeth.

“I'm not leaving Charlie!” Bella screamed. I fought the urge to turn around and try to comfort her, though I knew there was only one thing she wanted, and I couldn't give that to her.

“We have to take her back,” Emmett said. Whatever Alice is thinking, you know she's right. She does have a bit of insight into the situation.

“No.”

“He's no match for us, Edward. He won't be able to touch her.”

“He'll wait.”

“I can wait too,” he smiled. It'll be fun. Like a vampire stakeout. I mean, why does Bella have to be the one to leave? Me and Jazz can drag James out of the country. We were just talking about how long it's been since we took a nice, long run together...

“You didn't see – you don't understand,” I groaned, hating his nonchalance. “Once he commits to a hunt, he's unshakable. We'd have to kill him.”

“That's an option,” he smiled. Just say the word and it's done. You won't even have to get your hands dirty.

“And the female. She's with him. If it turns into a fight, the leader will go with them, too.”
“There are enough of us,” he said, though his voice was now bordering on sarcastic. I was trying too hard. Emmett knew as well as I did that this wasn't about my family's safety. Of course the nomads were outnumbered and if it came down to a fight I was sure we would win. Still, the endless streams of what ifs kept playing out in my mind. One wrong move on our part, one moment of being too distracted by the fight, and he could get to her. I knew as well as any that one second is all it would take to change everything.

“There's another option,” Alice whispered, stubborn as always. *James won't touch her if she's already been bitten. It would take all the fun right out of his game...*

“There – is – no – other – option!” I screamed, her expression unchanging. She knew that was not a choice I would make willingly. Even if Bella were dying I didn't know how I could bring myself to damn her to this miserable existence, even if one wretched part of me wanted it more than anything.

Bella. Forever...

“Does anyone want to hear my plan?” Bella said, interrupting the most peaceful thought I'd had since the whole ordeal had begun.

“No,” I snapped, though the anger was only toward myself. *Don't yell at her just because you don't like what her future looks like. Or because you do like it but can't admit it to yourself.*

Okay, maybe the anger was a little bit toward Alice too.

“Listen,” Bella said, trying her best to sound relaxed. “You take me back...”

“No,” I mumbled reflexively, though I knew she wasn't finished.

“You take me back,” she repeated, anger and frustration returning to her tone. “I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix. I pack my bags. We wait till this tracker is watching, and then we run. He'll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie won't call the FBI on your family. Then you can take me any damned place you want.”

All three of us watched her, speechless at how rationally she was thinking given the circumstances. For a moment, even Alice and Emmett's minds were silent. It was the quietest moment I'd had in decades.

“It's not a bad idea, really,” Emmett finally said.

“It might work,” Alice added. *And I'll be keeping a very close watch on Bella's future, so I'll know if there's cause for concern.* “And we simply can't leave her father unprotected. You know that.”

All of them stared at me, Alice and Emmett pleading silently to pull myself together and think of the bigger picture. Bella's thoughts were as painfully silent as ever but her eyes begged me to comply.

“It's too dangerous – I don't want him within a hundred miles of her,” I said, though I could feel my resolve crumbling with every passing second of Bella's stare.

“Edward, he's not getting through us,” Emmett assured me. He punctuated the sentiment by letting me see a dozen or so different images of he and Jasper tearing James into pieces.

Alice quickly let the scenario play out through her mind, then very confidently told me, “I don't see him attacking. He'll try to wait for us to leave her alone.”

“It won't take long for him to realize that's not going to happen,” I growled, abhorring the thought of leaving Bella's side for one second with a monster like James after her.
“I demand that you take me home,” Bella said in her most confident voice. It might have worked had I not been so in tune with the changed rhythm of her breathing, so aware of the way her heart was racing. Bella was scared and she was trying to be brave. For me. For Charlie. For all of us. I shut my eyes tightly and tried to silence the voice in my head reminding me it was all my fault.

“Please,” she added quietly. And somehow that final plea, the one that might have been her final attempt before giving in and letting me take her far away, was the one that broke my resolve.

“You're leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not,” I whispered, utterly defeated. “You tell Charlie that you can't stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works. Pack the first things your hands touch, and then get in your truck. I don't care what he says to you. You have fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep.”

I didn't pause to wait for her response. I knew it was what she wanted, what she needed, and I knew I had to give it to her. Alice would watch her future, I would listen to the tracker's every thought, and Emmett would plan various ways to rip the creature to shreds if he took one step toward the house. He was right. There was no getting through us, and Bella could have the peace of mind knowing her father was safe.

“Emmett?” I heard her mutter from the back. I looked in the mirror to see him releasing her from his iron hold, and allowed myself a brief smile as she settled comfortably back into her seat.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, grinning infinitesimally at me. You're right, man. The warm is totally nice.

Okay, smile gone. If I weren't so relieved by how quickly Bella had calmed down, I might have snapped at him.

I listened carefully as Alice's mind continued playing out possible outcomes for the night. She saw nothing to indicate that there would be any problems getting Bella safely in and out of Charlie's, and back to our house. From there she thought of everything from running Bella on foot out of the country, to booking multiple flights then walking her around every gate in the airport to confuse the scent. Though she couldn't see specifically how James would react to any tricks we might try to play, there was one thing that was certain. James was relentless. He would not give up no matter where we ran. Never happy to resort to violence, I tried not to dwell too long on what that meant.

James would not be allowed to walk away from this fight.

A few more silent minutes passed and I calmed myself by counting Bella's breaths and heartbeats. I'll never let anything or anyone take those sounds away from me.

“This is how it's going to happen,” I finally said, knowing we were only minutes from her house. “When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk her to the door. Then she has fifteen minutes.” I quickly glanced back at Bella to make sure she understood what I was saying. She'd have to be fast and creative in her story. We both knew Charlie wasn't going to let her go easily.

“Emmett,” I continued, grateful for his strength and determination, “you take the outside of the house. Alice, you get the truck. I'll be inside as long as she is. After she's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carlisle.”

“No way,” Emmett said firmly. “I'm with you.” If he attacks, I'm not letting you fight him alone.

“Think it through, Emmett. I don't know how long I'll be gone.”

“Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you.” You can be a real idiot sometimes, but you're my brother and I will fight beside you until this is over.
I let out a long sigh, knowing there was no point in arguing with him. It wasn't exactly like I could force him to let us go alone, and truthfully I knew I'd feel better having him with us. He'd never let anyone touch Bella.

“If the tracker is there, we keep driving,” I added, trying to cover my bases.

“We're going to make it there before him,” Alice said, showing me the image in her mind for confirmation. “What are we going to do with the Jeep?”

Great. She wanted to go with us too. Did she and Emmett really think I was that incapable of defending myself? I'd barely talked myself into letting Emmett come along, I certainly wasn't dragging Alice into this. As much as I knew she could take care of herself, Jasper would never forgive me for allowing her into a fight while he stayed in Forks playing watch-vampire for Charlie. Even though she's virtually indestructible, he worried about Alice's safety as much as I worried about Bella's.

“You're driving it home,” I answered, hoping she could hear the finality in my voice.

“No, I'm not,” she said sweetly, again flooding me with images of her hovering protectively around Bella. I love you both, and I'm not going anywhere.

I muttered things that were definitely not appropriate for Bella to hear as Alice kept smiling her innocent and unyielding smile.

“We can't all fit in my truck,” Bella said quietly. I could tell there was more to the sentence, though I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the rest. She was looking at her feet when she spoke again. “I think you should let me go alone.”

My eyes shot up to the rear view mirror and her gaze timidly met mine.

“Bella, please just do this my way, just this once,” I begged. I knew she was worried about me and trying to be brave, but now simply wasn't the time.

“Listen,” she said, confidence slowly creeping back into her voice. “Charlie's not an imbecile. If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get suspicious.”

“That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters.”

“Then what about this tracker? He saw the way you acted tonight. He's going to think you're with me, wherever you are.”

I watched as Emmett glanced at Bella with the strangest look of pride. Being chased by an obsessed vampire killer, and all she can think about is keeping you and Charlie safe, and not messing things up for our family...amazing.

“Edward, listen to her,” he added aloud, still looking at Bella like he was in awe. “I think she's right.”

“Yes, she is,” Alice said, this time thankfully not backing her words up with another rush of visions. They were starting to feel like a constant exclamation point to every word she spoke.

“I can't do that,” I said bleakly, not able to bear the thought of leaving her side when I knew what was pursuing her. I couldn't fathom the torture of not knowing where she was, not ever being certain of her safety. She was always so afraid of my leaving her, but I was every bit as afraid of us being separated as she was.

“Emmett should stay, too. He definitely got an eyeful of Emmett,” she said, ignoring my words and my expression.

“What?” Emmett asked, as shocked as I was that she would send her strongest protector with me instead of keeping him with her.
“You'll get a better crack at him if you stay,” Alice reminded me. *Of course he'll assume you two are together. She could be halfway across the country by the time he realizes you stayed in Forks by yourself.*

“You think I should let her go alone?” I snapped, glaring at Alice in frustration and anger, though something in me knew I'd already lost the battle. It was three against one.

“Of course not,” Alice said softly, trying to calm me down as my breathing sped up and my hands clenched into fists around the steering wheel. “Jasper and I will take her.”

“I can't do that,” I muttered. Then Alice filled my mind with pictures of Bella safe and perfect, hundreds of miles away from any danger. I felt a crushing pain at the thought of being so far away from her, but we all knew that when it came down to it, my feelings of loneliness weren't really important at all. If Bella was safe, I could get through anything.

“Hang out here for a week – ” Bella said calmly. *Too long...* My mind instantly fought against the idea of not being beside her.

“– a few days,” she said, taking in my expression. “Let Charlie see you haven't kidnapped me, and lead this James on a wild-goose chase. Make sure he's completely off my trail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route, of course, and then Jasper and Alice can go home.”

Against my will, a vision of my own flashed through my mind. I could see it all too clearly. Bella and I alone, together, traveling the world. We'd lead James far away from her scent, but we could never go back to Forks. Assuming we didn't kill him, we'd always worry that he would be there waiting for our return. I wanted so much for Bella to have a normal life, to make sure that her being with me did not make her give up anything. Still, the thought of having her all to myself, being able to show her the world and forever bask in her presence...

“Meet you where?” I found myself asking, far too attached to the future that was racing through my thoughts.

“Phoenix. Of course.”

“No. He'll hear that's where you're going.” I said, quickly snapping myself back into the present. There was no time for idle fantasies about a life that probably wasn't possible for us anyway. She'd never be willing to leave everything behind for me, and it would be selfish of me to ask that she do such a thing. Bella was going to live her life, her *human* life like the rest of her friends and family. I would not take that away from her.

“And you'll make it look like that's a ruse, obviously. He'll know that we'll know that he's listening. He'll never believe I'm actually going where I say I am going.” She said it with such confidence, I actually felt a little silly for not thinking of it myself.

“She's diabolical,” Emmett laughed, still quite proud of her for thinking so clearly in the midst of everything.

“And if that doesn't work?”

“There are several million people in Phoenix,” she told me, still calmer than I thought she should be. Her heart wasn't even racing. Apparently the idea of fleeing across multiple states to evade a sadistic vampire tracker wasn't particularly upsetting to her. Not like, oh...running with me or meeting my family.

“It's not that hard to find a phone book,” I added, though I was figuring out that she had an answer for everything.

“I won't go home.”
“Oh?” Why go back to Phoenix if not to be with her mother?
“I’m quite old enough to get my own place.”
“Edward, we’ll be with her,” Alice added, hearing the low growl that was building in my chest at the idea of Bella off on her own.
“What are you going to do in Phoenix?” I spat at her.
“Stay indoors,” she smiled.
“I kind of like it,” Emmett added with a grin. *Send the girls on a nice little vacation while you and I take care of James. He won’t know what hit him...*
“Shut up, Emmett.”
“Look, if we try to take him down while she's still around, there's a much better chance that someone will get hurt – she'll get hurt, or you will, trying to protect her. Now, if we get him alone...” He was smiling again as he painted the rest of the picture for me, far too graphic for Bella to hear. The specifics of killing a vampire were not something any of us wanted her to think about in any amount of detail.

As we approached the house, I heard Bella's heart finally start to speed up. She was forcing herself to take slow, calming breaths, but I knew she was afraid.

“Bella,” I said gently, suddenly realizing my voice had probably been offering her little comfort during our drive. I hated knowing how harsh I’d sounded. I was just so terrified of losing her.

“If you let anything happen to yourself – anything at all – I'm holding you personally responsible. Do you understand that?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice strained. Of course it was unfair to use her guilt tendencies against her, but I couldn't help feeling that she would be more careful if she believed she was doing it for my sake. She had to know by now, I just wouldn't survive if I lost her.

“Can Jasper handle this?” I asked Alice. She growled, too low for Bella to hear. I'd started to feel more comfortable with his being around her, seeing as most of his energy was being spent making fun of me, but I still had to be sure.

“Give him some credit, Edward. He's been doing very, very well, all things considered.” *Relax. I'll keep an eye on the situation and make sure he hunts if there's even a chance his control is wavering.*

“How dare you insinuate...” she began, but I cut her off with a quick smile.

“But keep your opinions to yourself,” I reminded her, then watched as her expression shifted back to a demure smile.

*Oh, don't worry. She’ll figure all of that out on her own, when the time is right.*
“Goodbyes – EPOV”

We drove in silence the rest of the way to Bella's house. Even Emmett and Alice's minds were quiet, focused intently on listening for any sign of James. We all peered into the shadows or the surrounding forest, watching closely but seeing nothing unusual. I took a deep breathe as we pulled up behind Bella's truck, and I let her lovely scent momentarily block out all the fear I was feeling. For one second, there was no danger. There was only Bella and I, and the love we felt for each other.

Far too soon, Alice pulled me from my peaceful moment of delusion.

*He hasn't tracked her here yet. You two have a little time, but be careful. Stick to the plan.*

“He's not here. Let's go,” I told Bella, wishing I could have basked in her presence just a little longer. Though I refused to think the worst, something in me knew she and I would be separated longer than I was willing to think about. I didn't know exactly how or in what way, but I was certain the next few days were going to change everything.

Emmett quickly released Bella's harness, smiling at her with all the love of a brother toward his little sister. It really was amazing how quickly she had won her way into all of their hearts. All except for Rosalie of course, but I didn't let myself dwell on that. Rose basically only knew how to love herself. Even Emmett came second to her selfishness.

“Don't worry, Bella,” Emmett said kindly, “we'll take care of things here quickly.” *If that stupid tracker would just hurry up and get here, maybe we could have him taken care of before Bella even crosses the state line.*

I tried to smile to show him something at least resembling confidence, but the sight of Bella's tears stopped it before it began. She looked so small, so fragile, looking up at Emmett with her eyes filling up. When she glanced at Alice, they poured down her cheek. I knew it would only hurt her more if she caught my gaze. I couldn't even imagine what I must look like. If it were possible for me to cry my eyes would have been a perfect mirror of hers. I was certain she would be able to feel that and it would only bring her more tears, so I forced myself to turn away.
“Alice, Emmett,” I said, keeping my eyes locked on the darkness around us as they quickly left the Jeep.

_Everything is going to be fine_, Alice thought gently.

_You guys hurry up, it's time to get this thing started!_ Emmett added, though there was something tainting his usual energy and enthusiasm. If I didn't know better, I'd have wondered if he wasn't a little nervous himself about what was coming.

As they ran soundlessly away from us, I raced around to Bella's door, helping her down from the massive Jeep. Could it really have been only a few hours ago that I'd lifted her up into her seat, laughing at her dismay as she fumbled with the harness? It all seemed so trivial, and I wondered how I could have wasted one second of our time together. We should have just stayed home, wrapped up in each other's arms in our perfect little world.

With that thought I pulled her close to me, her arm entwining with mine as we walked to the door. Fearing the night in a way I never had before, I walked quickly, though I would have given anything to simply stop time. She was pressed so tightly to me I could feel her heart racing against my chest, and I wished I could have taken the time to count the beats, savor the way the damp night air changed and enhanced her scent.

“Fifteen minutes,” I said softly, though I wasn't sure if I was reminding her or myself.

“I can do this,” she said through her still flowing tears.

When we reached the porch she startled me by reaching both of her hands up to my face. I could feel her warmth radiating through every inch of me and for a moment I couldn't fathom how I was going to be able to let her go. As her eyes blazed into mine I wanted to forget the plan, forget how carefully orchestrated every minute of the night was. I wanted to grab hold of her and run, faster than I'd ever moved before, and take her away from all of it. Her stare only intensified when she finally spoke to me.

“I love you,” she whispered, her fingers caressing my face. “I will always love you, no matter what happens now.” My chest tightened as I put aside my selfish desire to run away with her. Whatever it takes to make her safe, I reminded myself.

“Nothing is going to happen to you, Bella.”

“Just follow the plan, okay? Keep Charlie safe for me. He's not going to like me very much after this, and I want to have the chance to apologize later.”

I barely heard her as I caught the faint sound of movement in the trees, though the air was still.

“Get inside, Bella. We have to hurry,” I pleaded. As much as I wished I could stay there and prolong our moment together, I knew every second we waited was adding to the danger threatening her.

“One more thing,” she said, the fire in her eyes burning wildly. “Don't listen to another word I say tonight!” She stood on her tiptoes and closed the small gap between us, kissing me fiercely for a split second. I wanted to respond but before I knew what was happening, she was violently throwing the door open.

“Go away, Edward!” she screamed, slamming the door in my face. It took me a moment to catch up with her plan, but as I heard the strangest mix of concern and relief float through Charlie's mind, I understood. She was making sure he wouldn't suspect I had taken her away. She was protecting me, and amidst the chaos I felt myself smile.
I flew around the side of the house and up to her window the way I had for so many nights. A wave of something near nostalgia washed through me as I stepped inside her room. What used to be my calm sanctuary now set the scene for panic and despair.

“Leave me alone!” I heard Bella scream as she scrambled up the stairs and through the door. She didn't look at me as she began fumbling around for her bag.

“Bella, are you okay? What's going on?” Charlie yelled, knocking on her locked door.

“I'm going home,” she screamed, and I looked at her just in time to see the fresh wave of tears that were streaming down her face.

“Did he hurt you?” Charlie asked.

“No!” she cried, obviously horrified that he had come to that conclusion. Finally she turned to face me and determination had started to replace the agony in her eyes. I was rummaging through her dresser, tossing her clothes to pack. I was relieved to see she still had a few warm weather items amid the sea of sweaters and long sleeved shirts that were necessary for Northwest weather. I knew Arizona would be hot and I didn't want her to be uncomfortable. Not that I doubted Alice's ability to shop, even in the most dire of circumstances.

“Did he break up with you?” Charlie asked, still trying to figure out Bella's behavior.

“No!” she yelled again while packing the items I threw to her.

“What happened, Bella?”

“I broke up with him!” she screamed while she tugged on her bag's zipper. I could hear the change in her heart and see the pain in her eyes at having uttered the words, false as they were. She was losing her resolve and I wondered if it was making it more difficult to lie to Charlie with me there listening to it all. I reached over to close the bag and placed it over her arm.

“I'll be in the truck – go!” I told her, urging her to finish what she had started. I jumped out the window, scanning every inch of darkness as I made my way to Bella's truck. Though I could still hear the argument clearly, I forced myself to block out her words. Instead, I listened intently to the sounds of the forest. I made myself hear every cracking twig, every rustle of trees in the soft breeze, constantly ascertaining whether there was something unfamiliar in the always familiar sounds of nature.

Though I was trying to give her privacy, I couldn't help tuning in again when I heard a very startled, “What?”

At the same time my head snapped in the direction of the house I heard the sound I'd been terrified of hearing. A soft, sinister laugh was coming from the trees. Before I had time to panic, I heard Alice's voice in the distance.

“We're here,” she called, alerting both James and I to her and Emmett's presence. James growled into the darkness. Relieved by the knowledge that he wouldn't attack when he knew he was outnumbered, I turned my attention back to Bella and Charlie.

“She called while you were out,” Charlie said, and I assumed he was talking about her mother. “Things aren't going so well in Florida, and if Phil doesn't get signed by the end of the week, they're going back to Arizona. The assistant coach of the Sidewinders said they might have a spot for another shortstop.”

There was another dry laugh. Arizona girl, huh? Not exactly conducive to vampire life.

I snarled into the stillness, hoping the threat would keep James at bay a little while longer. He knew Alice and Emmett were close by, and I was sure he knew I was there too. I'd made it fairly
obvious wherever Bella was, I would be. It was the basis of our entire inane plan. Still, I readied myself to attack if he took one step from his hiding place. As Alice and Emmett came into view, we all growled menacingly into the trees. 

*Wow, she really does have her own little army of vampires. I don't see what all the commotion is about, but at least it makes things interesting. It was about time for a little sport.*

“I have a key,” I heard Bella murmur as she started to open the door. I turned my attention back to her while still listening intently as the upcoming hunt consumed James's every thought. “Just let me go, Charlie. It didn't work out, okay? I really, really hate Forks!”

I took my eyes off of Bella just long enough to see the pained expression on Charlie's face. His thoughts were even more jumbled than usual. There were still pleas trying to make her stay, and confusion as to what had really caused the scene. Yet there was one overwhelming emotion that clouded everything else. Defeat.

My whole body tensed as I watched Bella run toward the truck. I listened as James growled softly from the trees, but he made no move to attack. He knew I was waiting and that he was being watched closely. Bella tossed her bag in the back and climbed in, her face stained with tears though for the moment her eyes were dry.

“I'll call you tomorrow!” she called to Charlie as she started the engine. She watched him in the rear view mirror as she drove away and I listened to her try to stifle her sobs. I took her hand in mine and felt how hard she was shaking.

“Pull over,” I told her gently.

“I can drive,” she said, trying to regain her composure.

I wouldn't argue with her, sure that would just upset her more, but I also knew she wasn't in any condition to drive. In one swift motion I reached over and pulled her across my lap, changing to the driver's seat.

“You wouldn't be able to find the house,” I explained in my most soothing voice.

I listened while her breathing returned to normal, and just as she started to relax headlights came up too fast on us. With a gasp she turned to stare out the back window, terrified.

“It's just Alice,” I told her, reaching out for her hand again. I squeezed it gently, trying to assure her we had things under control. Her heart settled, but somehow its steady beat did nothing to calm my nerves.

“The tracker?” she asked, quick as ever to figure things out.

“He heard the end of your performance,” I admitted.

“Charlie?” she gasped, a new wave of panic entering her voice.

“The tracker followed us. He's running behind us now.” I would have been listening to his thoughts, but they weren't giving me anything useful. He was so focused on the hunt – on the kill – there was little logic or planning going on. He only had one thought and I knew all too well what it was.

“Can we outrun him?” she asked, and I decided that there was no point in downplaying the situation. She needed to know the truth, as painful as it was to admit.

“No.”

Instinctively I drove faster, pushing her truck to its limit and wishing we were in one of my family's other cars. Not that it would do any good, really. James was as fast as he was stubborn. Bella watched as Alice followed us, and I hoped she could feel the strength of our numbers and
the determination of everyone involved not to let any harm come to her. After a few silent moments I felt the truck buckle slightly under Emmett's weight. Before I could explain, Bella was screaming and I cursed my brother under my breath for not having given any warning. I reached out to put my fingers against Bella's shrieking lips.

“It's Emmett!” I assured her as her chest rose and fell in panicked gasps. With a fresh wave of guilt sweeping over me, I wrapped my arm around Bella's waist and tried to think of some way to comfort her. I wished we had the luxury of time so I could pull over and press her against me, rocking her and singing to her until all her fears were gone. With a sigh, I decided I would have to settle for trying to distract her with a bit of teasing.

“I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life. It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well – especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you.” I smiled at her and tried to make my voice light and casual, give her a few moments away from the nightmare that was chasing us.

“I wasn't being nice,” she said, refusing to meet my gaze. “That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt.”

I instantly hated myself for my stupid attempt at distraction. The sadness and regret in her voice told me I'd only made things worse.

“Don't worry. He'll forgive you,” I said softly, smiling as her eyes met mine. They held a different kind of fear than what I'd been witnessing since the moment the nomads showed up. She was truly afraid she had ruined her relationship with her father. With all her endless ability to forgive, she couldn't see that he would have the same level of forgiveness for her.

“Bella, it's going to be all right,” I promised.

“But it won't be all right when I'm not with you,” she said shakily, making my heart tighten in my chest. With Bella beside me and my arm tightly locked around her waist, it was so easy to forget that in less than an hour we'd be countless miles apart. Not since my initial fleeing to Denali had I been more than a short hunting trip's distance away from Bella. And since I'd realized how deeply I love her, I'd hunted mostly in the park just outside the city, unwilling even to make the journey to our usual more distant locations. The thought of having hundreds of miles between us was nearly unbearable.

“We'll be together again in a few days,” I said, trying to comfort both Bella and myself. I pulled her closer to me, as if locking her in my embrace now would prevent the inevitable separation that was looming over us. “Don't forget that this was your idea,” I added, trying to smile through the pain.

“It was the best idea – of course it was mine,” she said, sounding almost like herself.

I knew it was an act, but I appreciated that she was making as much effort as I was to try to keep things feeling normal as best we could. I offered her one more tentative smile, though of course she saw right through me.

“Why did this happen?” she asked, and it sounded like another sob was threatening to escape her. “Why me?”

She might as well have asked “what did I do?” and the thought of Bella blaming herself yet again for my carelessness made me loath myself even more.

“It's my fault – I was a fool to expose you like that.”
“That's not what I meant,” she said, her voice hesitating just a moment before she continued. “I was there, big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did this James decide to kill me? There’re people all over the place, why me?”

I thought about what she was asking and cringed at how similar it was to when she had inquired as to why I said I was more dangerous to her than to other humans. In essence, it did boil down to the powerful lure of her scent, though obviously she had no control over that. It was Bella that drew him in, but it was myself who set him off. Everything about my stance in the field told him one thing.

*She belongs to me.*

“I got a good look at his mind tonight. I'm not sure if there's anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It is partially your fault,” I said, trying to make my voice light and teasing. “If you didn't smell so appallingly luscious, he might not have bothered. But when I defended you...well, that made it a lot worse. He's not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Suddenly we've presented him with a beautiful challenge – a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting the one vulnerable element. You wouldn't believe how euphoric he is now. It's his favorite game, and we've just made it his most exciting game ever.”

James was the absolute worst of our kind, a creature who gave merit to all the horrific stories humans created about us. He enjoyed violence, craved the fight, and above all thirsted for blood without any regard to the life attached to it. The fact that we were running from him, that Bella was still alive, was proof of the inarguable strength our family showed.

“But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then,” I added quietly, unwilling to hide the truth from Bella but unable to meet her stare.

“I thought...I didn't smell the same to the others...as I do to you,” she whispered.

Of course it wasn't the same! My hands clenched into fists around the steering wheel at the thought of what it would have meant if she had called to James the way she called to me. Though it was the last thing I wanted to think of at that precise moment, I couldn't help my mind wandering back to that first terrible day. The way Bella's blood assaulted me, strangled me and pulled me in...

“You don't,” I said quickly, not wanting to waste precious moments with Bella dwelling on the past that didn't matter. “But that doesn't mean that you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you had appealed to the tracker – or any of them – the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there.”

I watched as Bella's body shook with a wave of fear and all I could think was, *I can never let her be afraid again.* Though I knew I'd been trying to find some way around it, that shiver coursing through her veins was all it took to get me on board with Emmett's line of thinking.

“I don't think I have any choice but to kill him now,” I said sadly. “Carlisle won't like it.”

I didn't know what reaction I was expecting, but I was surprised when Bella calmly asked, “How can you kill a vampire?” She sounded inquisitive, her tone reminiscent to when she was learning about my life and my family. It was as if she were asking merely out of curiosity rather than discussing how to destroy the predator who was stalking her.

I watched her, baffled as ever, but reminded myself that this was no time to hide the truth. It was not easy to kill our kind, but I knew we would all do whatever was necessary and I tried to give her that assurance by saying it as plainly as I could.
“The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds, and then burn the pieces.”
She showed no reaction, didn't hesitate for a second before adding, “And the other two will fight with him?”

“The woman will. I'm not sure about Laurent. They don't have a very strong bond – he's only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by James in the meadow...”

“But James and the woman – they'll try to kill you?” Her voice broke at the word and I was overtaken again by how undeserving I was of her love, pure and perfect even as her life was in danger.

“Bella, don't you dare waste time worrying about me. Your only concern is keeping yourself safe and – please, please – trying not to be reckless.”

“Is he still following?”
“Yes. He won't attack the house, though. Not tonight.”

James was determined and in his mind, failure was not an option. He'd never dream of taking us on while we were on our own land. He would observe and plan, and for that I was grateful I hadn't let on to my particular ability. I hoped I would get all the insight we'd need to defeat him simply by listening.

I allowed myself one peaceful moment as we pulled up to our house. My sanctuary for so many years, it had never looked more wonderful than in that moment. I didn't let myself think about the goodbye I would have to say within those walls, but instead focused on the only thing that truly mattered. Bella was with us and at least for that moment, she was in the safest place in the world.

As the truck slowed, I heard Emmett's thoughts race full gear into the protective big brother tone I'd started to get used to – and deeply appreciated.

Keep watch, check with Alice for any changes, I'll get Bella inside. Don't worry, we've got this. He's not going to try anything on our turf.

I watched Emmett hold Bella protectively against his chest, running faster than I'd ever seen him move until they were safely inside. I looked at Alice with weary eyes, as if the pleading could make her tell me something encouraging.

He's close but I don't see him attacking until he's got her alone.

“Until?” I whispered frantically.

Quietly, she reminded me. All I'm saying is that's his plan, that's what he sees himself doing. But you and I both know Bella is not going to be left alone for an instant, so there isn't a problem. Now hurry inside, Bella's going to need you to be strong for this.

We were at their side before Emmett had set Bella down. I tore my eyes from Bella's nervous expression and saw Laurent standing among my assembled family members. Emmett was growling at him as he placed Bella back at my side. I allowed myself one brief moment to revel in the warmth and joy of having her near enough again that our skin was touching, then focused on Laurent.

“He's tracking us,” I snapped angrily.

“I was afraid of that.” What have I brought on this family because of my foolish curiosity?

My glare softened only slightly as I realized Laurent's guilt over the situation. He'd never intended to cause any trouble for us, and clearly James was an unstoppable force that even his companion could not control.
I watched as Alice closed the gap between her and Jasper, and whispered too low for Bella to hear that time was running short and they needed to pack a few things before leaving. Rosalie heard her and rushed to Emmett's side, understanding that there were only minutes left before they too would be parted. Her thoughts turned icy as she glared at Bella.

"Can't believe I have to let Emmett fight for some human just because yet another stupid vampire can't seem to leave her alone. Edward so help me, you owe me forever for this."

I snarled under my breath and she forced her thoughts to turn back to Emmett. In an uncharacteristically vulnerable moment, I felt the concern that washed through her. She'd been channeling all her energy into being angry with Bella, but underneath it all, she was worried about Emmett's safety.

“What will he do?” Carlisle asked. I turned back to Laurent and we all watched him carefully.

“I'm sorry. I was afraid, when your boy there defended her, that it would set him off.”

“Can you stop him?”

“Nothing stops James when he gets started,” he sighed, shaking his head. *It is a fight to the death now, and one I will not be a part of.*

I would have been furious at Laurent's eagerness to bow out, but in truth I knew it was not his fight and I couldn't blame him for acting out of self preservation.

“We'll stop him,” Emmett said firmly. *Edward, don't let him get to you. James doesn't stand a chance against us.*

“You can't bring him down,” Laurent persisted, and I felt the sureness of the statement echoed in his mind as he thought through James's previous conquests. “I've never seen anything like him in my three hundred years. He's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined his coven.”

I heard Bella gasp almost imperceptibly as she realized James was the true leader of their group, something I'd understood from the callous disregard he'd shown Laurent in the field.

Laurent eyed Bella wearily, shaking his head and recalling some of the more gruesome ways he'd seen James kill. *How many will die to save the girl? They do not understand what they face.*

He looked at Carlisle and coldly asked, “Are you sure it's worth it?”

The growl I let rip through my chest and throat silenced every one of Laurent's thoughts. He took a step back, fearful, as he was right to be. It took all my strength not to lunge at him, but Bella's presence reminded me it was not he who I truly wished to fight. He may not understand our love, but he was not the enemy who threatened our happiness.

“I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice,” Carlisle told Laurent solemnly. His eyes softened as he looked at each of our faces.

Marvelous creatures, this family, he thought, eyes taking in all of us and the home we'd built for ourselves. *I never thought it possible for our kind to live in a way that feels so...human.*

“I'm intrigued by the life you've created here,” he finally said. “But I won't get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won't go up against James. I think I will head north – to that clan in Denali.” *I don't know that I will be strong enough to conform to this way of life, but I have been inspired to try.* “Don't underestimate James,” he added. “He's got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. He's every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be, and he won't come at you head on...I'm sorry for what's been unleashed here. Truly sorry.”

He bowed his head to us and glanced once more at Bella.
She must be a very remarkable girl, to have elicited such strong emotions. Though I was certain Laurent hadn't figured out my ability to read him mind, somehow his final thought sounded like a direct apology to me.

I abhor the thought of having upset the life you've created. May the united front of this family keep your lives in tact.

“Go in peace,” Carlisle said calmly.

We watched as Laurent took one final look at our family, then flew out the door. There was a certain finality to the sound of the door closing behind him, the last excuse for not setting our plan in motion gone.

“How close?” Carlisle asked, his eyes locking intensely with mine. I listened for several moments while I located James's already familiar voice again. He was confident, certain of his and Victoria's success, and he was anxious to get started.

“About three miles out past the river; he's circling around to meet up with the female.”

“What's the plan?”

“We'll lead him off, and then Jasper and Alice will run her south.”

“And then?” Carlisle was trying to keep his thoughts focused, his concern solely for Bella's safety, but I knew what he was truly asking. He wanted to know if we would need to kill James.

“As soon as Bella is clear, we hunt him.” I tried to infuse my voice with a sense of command, though it pained me to force Carlisle into something I knew he hated. Still, I needed him to understand that in this case it was the only way.

“I guess there's no other choice,” he conceded. If we leave him alive, he'll just come back for her later. I was grateful for his acceptance, knowing how difficult it was for him to admit, and I silently vowed to do everything in my power to never put him in that position again.

“Get her upstairs and trade clothes,” I said to Rosalie, hoping for once she would just listen. Of course, nothing having to do with Rose was ever that simple.

You have got to be kidding me! Just because you think she smells all sweet and delicious doesn't mean I want her stench any closer to me than necessary.

I hardened my expression, trying to convey that I wasn't giving her a choice.

“Why should I?” she asked, her words sharp and biting. “What is she to me? Expect a menace – a danger you've chosen to inflict on all of us?”

“Rose...” Emmett said softly, touching her shoulder gently and trying to reason with her. She shied away from his touch, eyes still glaring into mine.

I'm letting Emmett fight by your side. You don't have any right to ask more of me than that.

And as much as I hated to admit it, she was right. I had no right to ask any of them to fight for Bella, yet there they were. My entire family was putting their lives I danger to protect the fragile human who held my heart.

“Esme?” I asked, turning to her, thankful for her reassuring smile.

“Of course,” she said without a moment's hesitation.

In an instant, Esme had lifted Bella into her arms. They were up the stairs and out of sight before Bella could react.

“How are you, son?” Carlisle asked gently, my eyes lingering on the spot Bella had been standing seconds before.
“Terrified,” I admitted, any sense of pride or attempt to hide me fears long passed.

“Everything will work out. You and Emmett are strong, capable fighters, and though I loath the thought, I will fight right along beside you until James is finished.”

“What if we're wrong and he doesn't follow us. What if he gets to her and I'm not there?” I asked, suddenly completely unsure of the supposedly brilliant plan we’d created. The thought of not having Bella with me, of not being completely sure of her safety at any given moment, felt too difficult to bear.

“James will follow us. He will believe Bella is with you, and even if he eventually realizes he's being deceived, he will have no way of knowing where Alice and Jasper have taken her. Her scent will be masked long enough for them to leave the area safely, and she'll be in another state long before he realizes he's been fooled.”

I nodded slowly, willing myself to believe. It sounded good in theory, but I couldn't shake the feeling that my being separated from Bella was a horrible mistake. She and I made each other strong. Our love somehow created reason out of chaos, and I felt like without her beside me, nothing would make sense anymore.

“Edward, Alice will see if something goes wrong and she and Jasper will get her to safety,” Emmett assured me. “Don't ever forget that Alice is always one step ahead. Bella's in good hands with her. She loves her almost as much as you do...though in a far less nauseating way,” he added, his voice once again teasing. I attempted a smile though I still couldn't feel anything but fear.

“Each of our groups will have a cell phone. Check them often, and we'll report any changes or updates. Emmett, go grab anything you might need...” Carlisle trailed off, still not willing to think about the actual act of killing James. Emmett nodded and rushed out of the room.

When Carlisle spoke again, his voice was soft but severe. “Edward, I need you to do something and I know it will be difficult. You're very afraid but I want you to fill Bella with every ounce of confidence you can muster. You'll have just a few moments with her and I want you two to part both feeling sure of our success. Stand confident and sure, Bella will be watching you closely. You know she fears for your safety, but you have the ability to calm those fears by hiding your own. Let her know in any way you can that this will all be over soon. I say this not only for her sake, but for ours as well. Emmett and I need you to be completely focused, and this is the best way I can think of to ensure that happens.”

I nodded, believing in my gut that he was right. I couldn't let Bella's last image of my face be one filled with fear. Our time apart would be as difficult for her as it was for me, and I couldn't spend my time worrying about how scared she was. I had to show her there was nothing to be afraid of, then from the moment we left the house, I needed my every thought to be focused on James.

Emmett strolled calmly back into the room just as Esme and Alice were bringing Bella downstairs. She wobbled a little as they let go of her but I suppressed the urge to rush to her side. Focus on the plan. Confidence. I knew as soon as I held her, the walls would come crashing down and she would see through me the way she always did. I had to save our goodbye for the last possible second.

Carlisle gave Esme and Alice their phones, then smiled warmly at Bella.

“Esme and Rosalie will be taking your truck, Bella.”

Don't remind me, Rosalie thought viciously, glaring at Carlisle.
“Alice, Jasper – take the Mercedes. You'll need the dark tint in the south.” They nodded and he added, “We're taking the Jeep.”

I couldn't understand why, but Bella's heart seemed to speed up at that. Was it all finally sinking in? She'd been handling everything so well and in that moment I realized her calm attitude was the only thing giving me the strength to leave. If she fell apart now, if she let me see how truly frightened she was, I wasn't sure I'd be able to leave her.

“Alice, will they take the bait?” Carlisle asked, thankfully interrupting my concern.

She closed her eyes and I felt a quick surge of comfort at her peaceful expression. I listened to her mind closely and was grateful to see there were no signs of anything veering off track. The plan seemed flawless as she saw James take every piece of bait we would set for him

“He'll track you,” she assured me, opening her eyes and looking deeply into mine. You've seen it too now. You know everything is as it should be. “The woman will follow the truck. We should be able to leave after that.”

“Let's go,” Carlisle said, and I knew the moment I'd been dreading had arrived.

I flew across the room to Bella, finally giving in to the need to be close to her. I wondered if she knew how difficult it had been for me to keep my distance, or if she could ever understand the reasons why it was necessary. I was falling apart on the inside and touching her, feeling her heartbeat against me was quickly crumbling the last of my will.

I wrapped my arms around her, filling myself with her perfect scent, memorizing every inch of her body and the way it shaped itself around mine when I held her. I brushed my fingertips across her soft, warm cheeks. I lifted her up to me until we could both feel the other's breath against each of our faces, then kissed her with more intensity than I'd ever allowed myself. I cherished the burn in my throat I'd once been afraid of, breathing her in until everything inside me ached. It was the sweetest torture I'd ever felt.

I knew if I stayed any longer I'd lose the courage to walk out the door, so I lowered her feet back to the ground, one hand still caressing her cheek. Remembering what Carlisle had told me, I attempted to fill my stare with the certainty of my return. I knew if I spoke she would hear the agony in my voice so I remained silent. Wishing for once that she could read my mind, I repeated one thing over and over and hoped at least she could read it in my eyes.

I'm coming back for you...

As she watched me, tears began filling her eyes. If they spilled over, if I saw her cry, I knew my mask would dissolve and she would see the terror I was feeling. So I forced myself not to see her anymore. I focused all my thoughts on James and the fight that was to come. Swiftly I turned to leave, refusing to look at any of my family's expressions. We were as prepared as we were going to be and without another moment's hesitation, I ran out the door with Carlisle and Emmett right behind me.

As we climbed into the Jeep I was consumed by everything that was happening. We were driving into the night to kill a monster, and I was leaving the only thing that mattered, my love, my existence, in Alice's hands.

“The Chase”

The only thing keeping me sane as we drove away from Bella was knowing Alice was with her. I figured having someone who can literally keep an eye on her future is probably even better than being watched by a mind reader, though it was increasingly hard to convince myself of that fact
as the miles between us grew. Not being able to touch her, feel her presence, count her heartbeats was excruciating. If there'd been any other way I wouldn't have left her side, but the moment I heard James behind us, I knew they'd all been right. He would follow us, assuming Bella was with me just as we had anticipated.

Our plan was to lead him North, possibly up into Canada, until we were sure we were far enough away that Victoria would not be able to help him once the fight began. With Esme and Rosalie leading her around, James would be nothing more than a pile of ashes before she realized anything was wrong. Her mind had been fairly subdued during our encounter in the field so there was no way of knowing how strong her reaction would be when she eventually realized what had happened to James. I hoped though, that her ties to hims were as weak as Laurent's had been, and she would simply go her own way. Maybe she'd grown tired of wandering as well, and would join Laurent in Denali.

We'd gone almost a hundred miles before Carlisle spoke aloud, though I'd been listening to him go over the details of our plan since we left the house. He was meticulous, thinking of every aspect of where we were going and what we were doing. Except the actual kill. Even in his mind he refused to picture it.

Emmett's mind, however, was crystal clear on that front. Once we were far enough away from Forks, we'd search for a place secluded enough that no one would hear or see the fight or its aftermath. Ideally we'd find a forest miles away from any town. We'd leave a trail leading off into the woods, letting him believe we'd continued on foot, then backtrack and wait for him to arrive. I hoped Emmett and I would be able to finish him off without having to involved Carlisle, though of course he would fight if he thought for one second either of us was in any danger.

“Can you still hear him?” Carlisle asked, breaking my train of thought.

“Yes, but it's getting fainter. He's falling behind, though I'm positive he's capable of keeping up with us,” I said, suddenly worried. “Do you think that's a bad sign?”

“Not necessarily. He's a tracker, so he knows he'll be able to find us even if he stays miles back. You said this was a game to him. Maybe he's trying to make it more interesting.”

“Maybe,” I mumbled, trailing off and trying not to let my mind wander to other more disturbing possibilities.

I focused even harder on James's mind, determined not to lose my hold on his voice. He was still thinking of nothing but Bella, her scent at the forefront of his thoughts. It was agonizing, listening to him think about Bella and how much he would enjoy killing her. I felt as if she were being defiled simply by being in his mind, and everything in me wanted to tear her from his thoughts and protect the perfection of her image.

Over the next hundred miles, James's voice came in and out of focus. I'd hear him just long enough to know he was still behind us, then as quickly as I'd caught it, it would disappear. I couldn't hear anything specific about his plan, almost like he was guarding part of this thoughts from me. It was extremely disconcerting.

After several more miles, I completely lost his voice. Oddly enough, right before he was silenced that final time, I thought I heard a faint laugh. It sounded almost...smug, like he knew it was the last thing I would hear. I thought I'd been very careful not to let on to my special talent, but with a slight panic I wondered if somehow he'd figured it out.

“Carlisle, I can't hear him anymore,” I finally admitting, feeling defeated.

“Do you want me to slow down? Let you try to pick it up again?”
“Yes. No. I don't know.” I shook my head, frustrated and worried and wishing more than anything that Bella was there to calm my fears. My hands were clenched tight and I closed my eyes, trying to decide the best course of action.

“I'm going to call Esme,” I decided. “I want to make sure everything is going according to plan on their end. Then we'll decide what to do about James.”

Carlisle handed me the phone and I tried to block out how worried his thoughts had become. He was my pillar of strength in all this. If he lost faith, I'd probably lose my mind.

“Edward?” Esme answered almost instantly. Her voice sounded as worried as Carlisle's mind and I wondered if somehow she sensed his distress.

“We're fine. For now. We just passed Vancouver about twenty minutes ago and we're still driving, but I can't hear the tracker anymore. I'm worried he's figured something out. How are things going with you are Rose? Did Victoria follow you?”

“For awhile. It didn't take her long to give up chasing us, though. I knew switching clothes would only get us so far, but at least it gave Alice and Jasper a chance to get Bella out of town. Victoria headed back to Forks after about twenty miles. She's been all over the place, the school, the airport. She's trying to figure out which way they went, but she eventually ended up back at Bella's house so I'm sure she's as confused as we intended her to be.”

“And Charlie's safe?” I added, knowing that the next phone call I would make would be to Bella and I'd need to reassure her that he was fine.

“Yes, he's been at the station. I've been keeping an eye on him there while Rose makes runs between our house and Charlie's. Don't worry about him, I don't think Victoria has any reason to attack, and if she does we'll stop her.”

“Thanks,” I sighed, relieved. Then I started thinking about something she'd said. “Airport?” I asked, my mind racing as I considered a terrible possibility.

“Edward, what's wrong?” Carlisle asked, no longer trying to hide the panic he was feeling.

“I'm an idiot,” I growled, throwing my head back against the seat. “I lost his voice somewhere around Vancouver. I knew I heard him laugh.”

“We're coming home,” I said to Esme as I hung up. I looked over at Carlisle's expression and continued with a deep sigh. “He knows Bella's not with us and he knew we were far enough away that I wouldn't figure it out until he was already heading back.”

“I'm confused,” Carlisle said.

“Yeah, Edward,” Emmett chimed in from the back. “We don't really have time for the cryptic. Where is James?”

“I really hope I'm wrong, but I believe if we go to the Vancouver airport, we'll find his scent.”

“He's flying back to Forks?” Carlisle asked, shocked.

“Well I can't be sure of where he's heading, but it's really the only thing that makes sense. He must have known I could hear him, and he let us think he was following us but really he was leading the chase.”

“He really does know what he's doing,” Emmett mumbled, sounding almost as frustrated as I felt.
“Doesn't matter,” I said firmly. “If he really is heading back to Forks, it won't take us long to find him. And when we do, he's going to have to deal with all five of us.”

“Oh, please,” Emmett scoffed. “You know Rose isn't gonna get her hands dirty.”

“If you fight, she fights,” I said, remembering how she had reacted back at the house, though of course only I had heard it. “She may be be self centered and the only one of us whose heart didn't just stop beating, it actually disappeared...but she loves you. She won't just stand by and watch you fight. She'll be at your side.”

A smile pulled at the corner of Emmett's mouth and his mind launched into a series of thoughts regarding himself and Rosalie that I really wasn't interested in hearing.

“Carlisle,” I said loudly, trying to drown Emmett out, “I want to check the airport, just to make sure my hunch is right. He knows getting on a plane would be a sure way for us to lose his trail. Assuming he's on a plane right now, I think it's best we head back to Forks.”

Carlisle nodded as he turned the car around. Fueled by anxiety and concern, and thanks to my built in radar detector, it didn't take us long to get back into the city. Carlisle circled around the airport once looking for anything indicating James had been there while I hurried inside. Sure enough, his scent was everywhere. He'd run around to every terminal, no doubt trying to confuse us and unfortunately, his trick had worked. There was no way of knowing which plane he'd left on or where he was heading.

Carlisle read the expression on my face as I jumped inside the car again. Do you want to call or should I? he asked solemnly.

“Go ahead,” I muttered, lost in thought. “Fill Alice in, see if she has seen anything that would help us figure out what he's up to, and then I want to talk to Bella. I need to hear her voice, know she's still okay.”

I understand...but please, try not to alarm her, he thought, dialing Alice's number. She answered after only one ring, though I was actually surprised it took her that long. Usually when one of us tried to call her, she'd end up calling us first while we were still in the process of dialing.

“Carlisle,” I heard her answer simply. I knew that tone. It was the tone she took when someone told her something she'd already seen. I wasn't sure whether I felt comforted by the fact that she'd already had a vision, or more nervous. What if she told me something I wasn't ready to hear?

“Bella is there with you right now, correct?”

“Yes,” she said, and I was instantly filled with relief. I was also grateful for the serenity of Alice's voice. I wasn't sure what she had seen or how much of her vision she would have told Bella, but I hoped that as far as Bella knew, things were still under control. Of course she needed to know the reality of the situation but if possible, I wanted to be the one to tell her.

“We lost James somewhere between the border and just past Vancouver,” Carlisle continued. “We caught his scent at the airport but we don't know where he went from there. It makes sense that he would go back to Forks. With no trail to follow where else would he go? Still, we were hoping you'd seen something that could give us some insight.”

“I just saw him,” she said, voice still steady as she described a vision of James in a room full of mirrors with wooden floors and a gold stripe around it. She said his plans weren't clear to her, but she knew he'd be in that room and would be waiting for something. “Whatever made him get on that plane...it was leading him to those rooms.”
“Is Bella beside you right now?” Carlisle asked, glancing at me. I held my breath, waiting for her response. How much did Bella already know?

“Yes,” she said, and I tried to force myself not to be upset. It made sense she would have told Bella something had gone wrong. I only hoped it hadn't frightened her too greatly.

Carlisle handed me the phone just in time for me to hear her nervous “Hello?”

“Bella,” I breathed, amazed by how much better I felt simply by hearing her voice. For once brief moment it felt like nothing could touch us.

“Oh, Edward! I was so worried!” she cried, and I had to smile. She was human and fragile and being hunted by a monster, yet she was worried about me.

“Bella, I told you not to worry about anything but yourself.”

“Where are you?” she asked, which forced me to think of the miles that were still between us. I would have given anything to be by her side, and I cursed myself for ever having let my family talk me into separating from her.

“We're outside of Vancouver. Bella, I'm sorry – we lost him.” I said the words even though she already knew, still somehow feeling the need to apologize to her. “He seems suspicious of us – he's careful to stay just far enough away that I can't hear what he's thinking. But he's gone now – it looks like he got on a plane. We think he's heading back to Forks to start over.”

At least that's what we'd been assuming so far. Now, given Alice's vision I didn't feel as confident. What she'd described didn't sound like anything I'd ever seen in Forks. I could only hope something had led James down a wrong path, and if we couldn't find him quickly that his futile waiting would buy Bella and I the time we'd need to disappear.

“I know. Alice saw that he got away.”

“You don't have to worry, though. He won't find anything to lead him to you. You just have to stay there and wait till we find him again.” Or until I can't take it anymore and I come to find you, I added, though I kept that carefully to myself.

“I'll be fine,” she said bravely, and I felt a surge of pride. She truly was the most amazing creature I'd ever known. “Is Esme with Charlie?”

“Yes – the female has been in town. She went to the house, but while Charlie was at work. She hasn't gone near him, so don't be afraid. He's safe with Esme and Rosalie watching.”

“What is she doing?” she asked, just a hint of nervousness creeping into her voice.

“Probably trying to pick up the trail. She's been all through the town during the night. Rosalie traced her through the airport, all the roads around town, the school...she's digging, Bella, but there's nothing to find.”

We'd been very careful to mask Bella's scent before she left town. She was riding in a car she'd never been in, wearing clothes that were not her own. Everything that smelled like Bella had been leading in the opposite direction Alice had driven. There was nothing that would lead Victoria, or James if was in fact flying back to Forks to pick up her scent again, anywhere near Phoenix.

“And you're sure Charlie's safe?” she asked again and I could almost feel the tears that were filling her eyes.

“Yes, Esme won't let him out of her sight. And we'll be there soon. If the tracker gets anywhere near Forks, we'll have him.”
“I miss you,” she said softly, once again making everything else disappear. I listened closely until I could hear her heartbeat. Although it was muffled and distorted through the cell phone, I was comforted by it nonetheless.

“I know, Bella. Believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half my self away with you.”

“Come and get it, then,” she said, her voice suddenly teasing, though there was a fierceness that colored her words and reminded me how much I wanted to do exactly that.

“Soon,” I promised, “as soon as I possibly can. I will make you safe first,” I added, more of a reminder to myself than to Bella. I was fighting everything inside of me not to drop Carlisle and Emmett back in Forks and rush to be with her. Of course I couldn't do that to my family and it wasn't at all logical – but as I'd learned during my time with Bella, love seldom is.

“I love you,” she said sweetly, and I could feel my time listening to the purity of her voice coming to an end. I took a moment to memorize the sound as she spoke the three words that would get me through the rest of this ordeal.

“Could you believe that, despite everything I've put you through, I love you, too?” I asked desperately.

“Yes, I can, actually.”

“I'll come for you soon.”

“I'll be waiting.”

With that I hung up the phone and allowed myself one moment of peace, basking in the glow of her love for me and the knowledge that she was waiting for my return.

As if soaking in and feeding off of the desperate longing I felt to be with Bella, Emmett and Carlisle's thoughts simultaneously drifted to Rosalie and Esme. We all quietly daydreamed of being back in the arms of the women we loved while Carlisle unconsciously pushed the petal to the floor. Once again outside the crowded streets of the busy city, he was driving at maximum speed toward home.

It didn't take as long to get back to Forks as it had to get to Vancouver, partly because we were no longer trying to keep James within mind reading distance, and partly because there was a new wave of urgency creeping through all of us. Everything had changed now that we weren't sure where James was. We pulled up to the house and raced up the stairs.

“Rose, baby?” Emmett called as he charged through our front door. Carlisle and I were right behind him and saw her casually saunter down the stairs. Being the only one personally unaffected if something were to happen to Bella, she seemed completely relaxed.

“I'm here,” she said calmly. “Although I'm not sure why you are. Aren't you all supposed to be out dismembering and burning up a vampire?” Her slight smirk infuriated me, but it wasn't the time to let my emotions get out of control. Obviously Esme hadn't told her what was happening, which made me feel somewhat concerned – was Charlie in trouble after all? – but the most important thing was to get her up to speed and figure out what to do next.

“We lost James somewhere near Vancouver. He's on a plane but we don't know where he's going. I'd appreciate it if you could run over to the airport and try to catch his scent. If he is here, there will be no more leading him around. It's time for us to end this. *Now.*”

“Yeah!” Emmett chimed in.

*Oh, for the love of...*

*Does he really have to be so excited about it?*
Rosalie's and Carlisle's mutual disgust over Emmett's enthusiasm actually made me smile for the first time since hearing Bella's voice.

“Rose?” I said, trying to keep the momentary smile on my face. “Airport?”

*Fine, just add it to the list,* she thought, rolling her eyes. I cocked my head and looked at her questioningly. *Oh that's right, I'm keeping a list of all the things you owe me for when this mess is over.*

I snarled loudly at her and the perfectly innocent smile that was painted across her face. *Edward, focus...please,* Carlisle thought disapprovingly. *Let it go, man. Whatever it is, just let it go,* Emmett added, looking back and forth between the two of us.

Without another word, Rosalie was out the door. I turned to Emmett and Carlisle and tried to think of what we should do considering we really had no idea where James was.

“Victoria is nearby, so I'd really rather not leave the house empty,” I said. “Besides, there's not much we can do until we have a better idea whether or not he's even here.”

“Edward, I know you don't want to think about this, but what if Rosalie finds that he didn't return to Forks?” Carlisle asked.

“I honestly have no idea,” I said quietly. *Edward...*

I looked into his eyes and felt the reality of he'd already anticipated wash over me.

“I guess in that case I would go to Bella. If we don't know where James is, I am not going to risk leaving her alone.”

“She's not alone,” he reminded me.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. And I understand.” *We would stay here, and you and Bella would run.* It wasn't really a question, but I nodded infinitesimally.

“Come on guys, you know I hate when you do that,” Emmett complained.

“I apologize,” Carlisle said, turning to him. “Edward and I were just thinking about all the various possibilities. I trust you would continue to hunt James if your brother were to go to return to Bella?”

Emmett turned to me, incredulous for a moment before his expression softened.

“Yeah, I would,” he finally said, never taking his eyes from mine. “Do what you need to do, Jasper and I can handle James.”

“Thank you,” I said softly, again seeing both brotherly love for myself and sisterly love for Bella emanating from him.

The three of us stood in silence for an endless span of time until Esme called to tell us that Charlie was home and it appeared Victoria hadn't followed him. Still, she thought it best to stay near the house since it seemed like the most likely place for either Victoria or James to go if they were trying to pick up Bella's scent again. Eventually Rosalie came home, still looking like she was in no particular hurry.

“Did I miss anything exciting?” she asked and the three of us let out a collective sigh. “Fine,” she said indignantly, looking everywhere but at me. Oh, great. I thought she was just being her usual
obnoxious self, but it turns out she was stalling. I already knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“He's not here,” she finally admitted, staring at the floor as her expression transformed into something I’d never seen from her before. “I'm really sorry, Edward. I know how hard this must be for you.”

I was so taken aback by her sudden compassion, it took a moment for the fear to fully consume me. However when Carlisle spoke, the force of what she was saying came crashing down on me. “I'll call Alice and tell her you're on your way.”

No sooner had he reached for the phone than it began ringing. Now there was the Alice I knew and loved.

“Alice,” he began but she instantly cut him off. Feeling my chest tighten I took a step toward the phone and listened to her frantic words.

“He's here...or at least he will be soon.” Carlisle's eyes widened and he handed the phone to me without a word.

“Alice, what did you see?”

“I saw him in Bella's mother's house. He'll be there very soon. I don't know how he found her, Edward. I'm so sorry.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head in frustration and confusion. “No, don't be sorry. I'm glad you saw where he was, it means we know where to go. Just keep Bella safe until I can get there. Keep watching, make sure he's staying there waiting for her. We'll get Bella somewhere safe then we'll surround the house. Even if Esme and Rosalie stay here protecting Charlie from Victoria, he'll be outnumbered five to one.”

“Four to one,” she said firmly.

“What?”

“Even if we know exactly where he is and we're sure to win the fight, you don't think for one second that any of us are willing to leave Bella alone, do you?”

I thought about what she was saying and realized that once again Alice was one step ahead.

“Thank you, Alice.”

“Of course. Besides, Bella is a nervous wreck. And she's not even worried about herself, she's worried about you,” she sighed. I could tell she was rolling her eyes. “Even Jasper is having difficulty calming her down. Honestly I love her, you know I do, but I don't think I can take much more.” Her voice had turned sarcastic and I gladly took the moment of reprieve from all of the fears and uncertainty. “Edward, you two need to be together now,” she continued kindly. “Don't worry about James, we can handle it. Now if everyone hurries, you can catch the next flight out from Seattle. Remember, Port Angeles doesn't fly directly to Phoenix. We'll meet you there soon.”

“Thank you,” I said again, and listened as the phone went dead. The entire conversation had lasted less than a minute, and I was sure if Bella had been listening she wouldn't have understood a word of it. All she needed to know was that I was on my way, and soon I'd have her safely wrapped up in my arms where she belonged.

“Let's go,” I said firmly, and within seconds we were flying out the door and toward Seattle. We raced down the highway and as Alice had promised, arrived just in time to catch the flight. I tried to force myself to calm down as the plane took off. At least for the moment, there was nothing
more that I could do. Alice, Jasper, and Bella would be waiting at the airport for us. Alice would be able to ensure James was nowhere nearby, so Bella and I would be safe to run as far away from Phoenix as we could get. I trusted the rest of my family to take care of James and they'd contact us when it was safe to come home. With a great stretch of the imagination I could pretend that Bella and I were just taking a vacation together, and when we returned everything would be normal again. Or at least as normal as things ever were for us.

“Edward, can you hear anything yet? Is there any sign of him?” Carlisle asked, and it was only then that I realized the plane was landing. Amazingly enough, I'd blocked out every voice and every thought of the people surrounding me for the entire duration of the flight.

I listened, though of course I knew it was in vain. Alice's vision was clear. He'd already be in place by now, waiting for Bella.

“No, nothing. But it doesn't matter. Bella's here and I'm going to get her somewhere safe.”

I closed my eyes and focused in on Alice's thoughts. I was so in tune with her it only took a moment, and the second I found her I gasped.

“What is it?” Carlisle asked quietly, though the panic was clear in his eyes.

“They lost Bella!” I said frantically as a few heads turned in our direction.

“Quietly, Edward. We can't make a scene. Now what do you mean, they lost her?”

“They're searching for her, all over the airport. They're both confused, they don't understand how or why she ran away from them, but Alice is crazy with worry. She knows we've landed and she's coming to meet us while Jasper keeps looking. And...there's something else. Something she's blocking from me,” I whispered, a new wave of fear welling up inside me. What was Alice hiding? And why would Bella run away from the only people who could really protect her?

It felt like it took forever to disembark the plane. Couldn't the humans move any faster? When my eyes locked with Alice's I saw it as much as I had felt it, that something she didn't want to tell me.

“Alice,” I yelled, running toward her at much too fast a pace. Carlisle and Emmett followed behind me, purposefully walking slowly as if their lagging behind would make up for the fact that I'd turned into a blurry streak across the terminal.

“Alice,” I demanded, and her expression told me she knew exactly what I was asking. She looked at the ground, a mixture of shame and terror on her face.

“The first time I saw him in the room full of mirrors, he was alone. Then when I saw him at her mother's house, he was still alone. I don't know what changed, but the next thing I saw he was back in the mirror room and...” She stopped as if unable to finish the sentence. I knew what she was going to say and although I didn't want to hear it, couldn't make myself believe it, I needed her to say the words aloud.

“Alice!” I screamed.

“She was there with him,” she whispered, her eyes finally meeting mine. “She was alive, but she was terrified. And he was looking at her with the sickest look of pleasure I'd ever seen. Her blood is taunting him, and it can only keep him playing his game for so long.”
I clenched my fists and a snarl ripped through me. Carlisle and Emmett were immediately at my side, hands on my shoulders and silently willing me to remain calm. We needed to leave the airport without attracting any attention, then when we were outside we could formulate a plan without fear of anyone overhearing us. All of us lost in our own devastating thoughts, we hurried to a deserted area of one of the parking lots.

“Alright, none of the humans can hear us,” I snapped angrily. “Now what do you intend to do to get Bella back?” I was yelling at them and I felt terrible for taking out my anger and terror on my family when all they'd done was help and put themselves at risk for Bella and I. But my mind had lost all touch with reason the second Alice had let her guard down and a picture of Bella's horror struck face flashed through her mind. It was one thing to hear Alice tell me what she'd seen and another to have to witness it myself. I'd never hated anyone as much as I hated James in that moment. Except perhaps myself for having allowed all of this to happen.

“Well, Bella seemed to think the room I saw was a ballet studio here in Phoenix,” Alice said, her eyes closing as if she were trying to get another view of it. “She told us it was very near her mother's house, and I'm sure James is in one of those two places. We'll run together then Jasper, Emmett and I will go to the house. You and Carlisle try to find the studio and if James isn't at the house we'll meet you there as soon as we can.” This will work, Edward. I promise you she's still alive, and we'll be there shortly. It will all be over soon.

I tried to take comfort in her assurance, and I trusted that she'd told me everything she had seen. As of now, Bella was alive and I promised myself I would keep repeating that thought until the moment I could end the miserable creature who was threatening her.

It worked for about a mile. Then without my consent, images of Bella lying helpless and bleeding flooded my mind. I stared wide eyed at Alice, worried for a moment I was seeing another one of her visions but her mind was focused on finding the house. With a sigh of relief, I realized it was only my own imagination tormenting me. As we ran I started to think of every terrible and unacceptable reality that might be waiting when we found her. If we were too late, if my love, my reason for everything was taken from me I felt the certain what Carlisle had known all along was the bitter truth.

I wouldn't survive it if I lost her.

The five of us had been running at equal speed, but that sudden realization made me move faster than I ever had before. My mind was racing as fast as my body, sifting through possibility after possibility of what end I would meet if Bella were gone. The easiest way would be to surrender to James, let him finish what he'd started. That is if he could be bothered. Bella, protected by her own “army of vampires” as he had put it, had been the real challenge. What fun would it be for him to kill a vampire who didn't put up any resistance, who'd already given up trying to survive.

Besides, my family was with me and I knew they'd never let any harm come to me, even if it were what I wanted. I decided it would have to be calculated, planned and executed far away from them. I knew all the ways Carlisle had tried to kill himself in the beginning and thereby knew how infective they were. There was really only one way I could think of to ensure I would not have to go on without my Bella.

Volterra.

I know what you're thinking, Carlisle interrupted my silent musings. I glanced over my shoulder to see him struggling to keep up with me. With a low growl I slowed my pace slightly. I'm not a mind reader, but I know you. And I know what you're thinking about right now.

“Leave it alone, Carlisle.” I mumbled, though the guilt was already starting to settle in.
I know you love her, but please try to remember that the rest of us love you, too. I don't want to lose you, son.

“She's everything, Carlisle,” I whispered, hoping the others were far enough behind and too lost in their own thoughts to overhear. “Would you want to go on if you lost Esme? Would there be any point to this miserable life without her?”

There was utter silence for a moment until Carlisle, learned as he was at blocking me from things he didn't want me to hear, started reciting countries and their capitals. Irritated, but quite certain I'd made my point, I charged on ahead. Of course I didn't want to put my family through that, least of all Carlisle who had truly been a father figure to me all these decades, so I channeled all my energy into making the continuing of that conversation unnecessary. We would reach Bella in time and she'd be safe with me again. The others would destroy James and Bella and I could go back to being two idiots in love.

Bella will be safe. We'll be together again. It became my mantra as we ran until finally we reached our destination. With a quick nod, Alice, Jasper, and Emmett headed towards the house and Carlisle and I circled the block. With a stab of fear, I heard James's mind and I knew we were close. Like so many times before I wished I could hear Bella as well, though of course the need had never been so great. As if granting me some kind of masochistic answer to my desire, I could suddenly hear her.

I heard her scream and cry my name.

Leaving Carlisle behind and having absolutely no regard for the fact that I was about to hurl myself at James single handedly, I flew toward the door of the studio.

“Go get the others!” I screamed as I kicked the door entirely off its hinges. I didn't stop to see whether he was still behind me or had turned around to do as I'd asked. It didn't matter. Bella needed me and I was certain the rage I felt at her anguished cry would be sufficient to take on a whole coven of vampires.

The moment I entered the room, the smell of Bella's blood assaulted me. It was potent and fresh, yet I could feel no blood lust. My jaw tightened and the venom pooled but my only desire was to rip James apart, make him suffer the way he'd made her suffer. My eyes scanned the darkness until I found a shape huddled in the farthest corner. Misshapen and mangled, Bella was no longer crying out. If it weren't for the faint beating of her heart I might have feared I was too late.

James was crouched over her holding something that appeared to be a video camera. His breathing was ragged as he desperately sought what he craved. His thirst was overtaking him to the point that he didn't hear me enter the room. A smile pulled my lips back over my teeth as I contemplated the fact that he wouldn't even hear my approach.

I crouched, readying myself for the attack then flashed toward him like a bolt of lightning. Being careful to launch him in the opposite direction from where Bella was lying, I hit him with the full force of my fury. A snarl ripped from his throat as he crashed into a wall of mirrors, the camera in his hand flying across the room. He was stunned but only for a moment as he threw himself at me, teeth bared and hatred in his eyes. We held each other at arms length, both of us pushing the other away with the fullness of our strength.

I knew you'd come for her, he thought, instantly confirming what I'd already figured out. He knew I could read his mind. It was what had made the execution of his plan possible. He'd used my own powers against me. Granted, I didn't think you'd make it here quite so quickly. Don't you know the chase is half the fun?
His voice, full of ire reignited my rage. I pushed him back with crushing force, smashing another row of mirrors behind him.

“You will do no more harm to her,” I growled as he snapped his teeth futilely at me. “This ends now!”

The scent of Bella's blood still thick in the air sent a fresh wave of fiery anger through my body. I felt as if my own blood had once again begun to course through my veins as I lunged forward and dug my teeth into the side of his neck. I ripped and spat chunks of his disgusting granite skin as his horror struck howls filled the room. All the while he continued to fight me, pushing and snapping his teeth in an attempt to get the upper hand back.

Amid the snarls and ripping I heard Carlisle's voice behind me and I wished I could finish the job more quickly, not wanting him to have to be a part of the kill. I violently tore at his limbs, trying to speed up the process when Jasper and Emmett appeared, each taking one of James's arms in their grasp.

Go! they both though in unison as they took over where I'd left off, ripping and biting as James's strength slowly diminished. Consumed with the act of killing the monster who'd hurt Bella, for a moment I couldn't understand what they were telling me. Wasn't my place here, destroying the source of all our problems?

Bella is hurt, Carlisle will need your help, Emmett added as he pulled one of James's arms off. With that, the reality of the situation came crashing down on me once more.


I was at her side in a millisecond. Though I'd smelled the blood and heard her screams, nothing prepared me for the sight of her. Her body was contorted, her hair matted with blood.

“Oh no, Bella, no!” I screamed, my gaze quickly shifting to Carlisle as I silently pleaded for reassurance.

She's alive, Edward. Focus on that.

His thoughts did nothing to calm my fears. Desperate, I looked at Alice who was staring at me with blank eyes. Her mind was racing through countless visions of different possible outcomes, and after a few moments I forced myself to block her out. Hearing what might happen simply wasn't good enough.

Focusing my attention back on Bella, I noticed her breathing was regular and she appeared unconscious, for which I was grateful. I couldn't imagine the pain she must be in and although I desperately longed to hear her voice, I hoped more than anything Carlisle would be able to mend and medicate her before she woke up.

After an injection of morphine, Carlisle began working his way from top to bottom, inspecting every bone and bloody wound. As he pressed his hands gently into her chest, I could see her ribs twist and move in a way that sent shivers down my spine. Surely the pain was unbearable and she would wake up crying at any moment. Though I was thankful she wasn't having to endure the agony, the still lifelessness of her body as Carlisle examined her was making me panicked.

“Bella, please!” I cried involuntarily, willing her to make just one sound, any sound to assure me she was okay. “Bella, listen to me, please, please, Bella, please!”

I know you're scared but perhaps trying to wake her isn't the best idea. The morphine has only been in her system for a few minutes. It hasn't had time to spread.

“Carlisle!” I screamed when I heard her heartbeat slow down. “Bella, Bella, no, oh please, no, no!”
Edward, be calm. It's normal for her pulse to slow as the medication takes effect.

I tried to relax as I watched Bella's steady breathing. Her chest moved up and down rhythmically, her eyes gently closed as if she were merely sleeping. I'd almost calmed myself down when I heard her gasp in pain.

“Bella!” I screamed, both relieved and terrified.

“She's lost some blood, but the head wound isn't deep,” Carlisle said, speaking aloud for Bella's sake. I hoped she understood his words and could believe through all the pain that she was in fact, more or less okay. As terrible as what had been done to her was, none of her wounds were life threatening. “Watch out for her leg, it's broken,” he added as I leaned in to be closer to her.

I growled loudly at the thought of my Bella being broken, and allowed myself one brief moment to look over at the fire that was now consuming the monster who had inflicted all this damage. Emmett and Jasper were still gathering scraps of James and tossing them into the flames. The foul smell emanating from the fire would have disgusted me had it not been for what it meant. That revolting stench meant that James would never again be able to hurt my precious angel.

“Some ribs, too, I think,” Carlisle continued softly, and I refocused my attention on Bella.

“Edward,” she whispered, her voice strained.

“Bella, you're going to be fine,” I promised her, overwhelmed by my emotions at having her awake and speaking again. “Can you hear me, Bella? I love you.”

“Edward,” she repeated, this time a little louder. A rush of relief ran through me and I reveled in the sound of my name on her lips.

“Yes, I'm here.” Always here. Forever.

“It hurts,” she choked out.

“I know, Bella, I know,” I said, wishing there was a way for me to take all of her pain upon myself. I'd gladly endure a thousand deaths and the fires of my transformation ten times over if it could make her agony go away.

“Can't you do anything?” I begged Carlisle.

“My bag, please...” he said to Alice, knowing I would not leave Bella's side for even an instant. “Hold your breath, Alice, it will help.”

“Alice?” Bella struggled to ask.

“She's here, she knew where to find you.” I would owe Alice forever for getting us to Bella in time to save her, and unlike Rosalie and her little “list,” I would gladly spend the rest of my existence repaying Alice.

“My hand hurts,” she whispered, the anguish in her voice intensifying.

“I know, Bella. Carlisle will give you something, it will stop.”

“My hand is burning!” she screamed, eyes opening as her body began to tremble.

“Bella?” I asked, horrified as I realized what she was saying. I took a sharp inhale of breath and wondered how I could have missed it. There was something off about the smell, something tainting her blood's otherwise perfect scent and I immediately knew what had happened. My eyes searched her body for the shape I was certain I would find.

“The fire!” she yelled. “Someone stop the fire!”
As Bella began writhing in pain under my fingertips I finally saw it. Underneath a layer of caked on blood, the glistening crescent shape that could only mean one thing appeared to me, bringing back all my fury.

“Carlisle! Her hand!” I screamed, still frozen in disbelief that none of us had figured it out sooner.

“He bit her,” Carlisle said, his voice marred with disgust.

I gasped as I felt Alice take the hand that wasn't on Bella into her own. She looked deeply into my eyes and showed me with a new sense of clarity the vision of Bella, stone cold and pale, fingers locked with mine and surrounded by my family.

_Can't you see this is what she's destined for? I know it will be difficult to watch, but you have to let the change happen._

I shook my head violently at her, my gaze drifting back to Bella who was writhing and twitching beneath my touch.

“Edward, you have to do it,” she said, gently reaching out to wipe sweat and tears off of Bella's face.

“No!” I screamed, unwilling to believe it was happening.

“Alice,” Bella cried and I felt my chest tighten. She was in so much pain, how could I just sit next to her and let her burn?

“There may be a chance,” Carlisle said softly and my eyes shot up to him.

“What?” I asked, desperately clinging to any hope he could give me.

“See if you can suck the venom back out. The wound is fairly clean.”

I watched him closely, shock written all over my face. Did he really think that would work?

More importantly, did he truly have that much faith in me, that I could taste Bella's sweet and perfect blood and then stop myself before I'd gone too far?

_Edward, you asked what you could do. I'm merely giving you options. How greatly do you value her humanity?_”

I wanted to speak but couldn't find the words. I faintly heard Alice ask him, “Will that work?” though my every thought was centered on whether or not I'd have the restraint to even try.

“I don't know,” Carlisle said, still looking at me meaningfully. “But we have to hurry.”

“Carlisle, I...” my words faded as I contemplated the ramifications if I were to fail. After saving her from James, how could I risk killing her myself? “I don't know if I can do that,” I admitted, humiliated once again by my own weakness. My eyes silently pleaded for him to take the burden away from me. All but immune to human blood, he could certainly save Bella without risking her life.

“It's your decision, Edward, either way. I can't help you.” _This has to be your choice. You know I've already accepted her into our family, whether she be human or vampire. The rest is up to you._

Finally releasing me from his stare, he quietly added, “I have to get this bleeding stopped here if you're going to be taking blood from her hand.” It was as if he knew my decision before I'd actually made it and in the same instant I realized that, Bella screamed my name again.
“Edward!” Her pain seared through me and when her eyes once again flew open and locked with mine, I knew I would find the strength to save her. Our love had always been enough. Even in the worst of moments, it would always be enough.

“Alice, get me something to brace her leg!” Carlisle shouted, as he quickly cleaned and put pressure on the gash across her head. “Edward, you must do it now, or it will be too late.”

I brought every memory of Bella and I that I could recall to the forefront of my mind. I remembered the warmth of her touch, the way her soft lips felt caressing mine, her unwavering trust in me even when I didn't trust myself. Above all I remembered the tenderness of her voice when she told me she loved me, how those three words had made a century of loneliness disappear.

I clenched my jaw and prepared myself for the rush of ecstasy that I knew would come the moment I tasted her blood. Thinking only of her soft skin and gentle grace, I was determined to allow myself no pleasure from the act. I would be her guardian, her personal savior as I had vowed to be. I would save her life in the only way possible and then the nightmare would be over.

Carefully but firmly, I wrapped my fingers around her bloody hand, shut my eyes and leaned down to press my lips against her skin. The moment I felt her blood pour into my mouth, the thirst I’d been depriving for so long was reignited and I felt a low moan boil in my chest. My head swirled and a foggy euphoria took over my entire being.

Then I heard Bella scream again and all the intoxication was ripped away. She thrashed beneath my lips, trying desperately to rip her hand away from me, but I could still taste the venom that was poisoning her. Alice was whispering gently to her while Carlisle helped hold her in place. Grateful that I was once again centered and focused, I continued to drink her in until she began to relax beneath me. Eventually her cries softened and I could taste the change in her blood. Now nearly pure, it was even sweeter than the first taste that had sent me into a rapturous oblivion, yet the frenzy had long since subsided.

“Edward,” Bella whispered, no longer tortured but completely exhausted.

“He's right here, Bella,” Alice told her sweetly.

“Stay, Edward, stay with me...”

I smiled as I gently removed my lips from her hand. It was over. I’d done the impossible and taken all my love's pain away.

“I will,” I promised her. I wanted to say more, to tell her exactly how much what had just happened meant to me, to us, but her eyes were fluttering closed. She sighed as she drifted and I joyfully watched her peaceful expression.

“Is it all out?” Carlisle asked.

“Her blood tastes clean,” I said, proud and still somewhat disbelieving that I could make such a statement. “I can taste the morphine.”

“Bella?” Carlisle said gently.

Eyes still closed, she made a low “Mmmmm?” sound in response.

“Is the fire gone?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Thank you, Edward.”

“I love you,” I said, repeating the words that I was certain had given me the strength to endure.

“I know,” she said softly and I laughed, utterly beside myself with relief.
“Bella?” Carlisle asked.

“What?” she said with a small, enchanting little pout. She was longing for sleep and I felt my fingers twitch with the desire to scoop her up into my arms and sing to her forever. I wanted to block out all the terrible memories and make sure they never troubled her, even in her sleep.

“Where is your mother?” he asked.

“In Florida,” she said, eyes still closed but turning her face toward me. “He tricked me, Edward. He watched our videos,” she said angrily, though her extreme drowsiness took the edge out of her words.

“Alice,” she said, eyes half opening as she searched the room. “Alice, the video – he knew you, Alice, he knew where you came from.”

Alice inhaled in surprise then without a sound, stood up and raced to where the video camera had fallen. I watched her for a moment as the look on her face changed from anger to curiosity. It seemed that out of these terrible events, some good might actually come. Alice would finally have answers about her clouded past.

“I smell gasoline,” Bella said, confused as her eyes drifted around the room.

“It's time to move her,” Carlisle said, obviously as unwilling as I was to let Bella's attention wander to the flaming pile of ashes in the corner. There was no need to burden her with the horror of what was now behind us.

“No, I want to sleep,” she muttered sounding frustrated.

“You can sleep, sweetheart, I'll carry you,” I told her gently. The most wonderful feeling engulfed me as I picked Bella up and pressed her against my chest. She sighed, nuzzling closer to me as I whispered, “Sleep now, Bella.”

With my family at my side and Bella safely in my arms we left the building, flames consuming the last pieces of our nightmare.

"An Impasse – EPOV"

The drive to the hospital seemed endless but it couldn't have been more than thirty minutes. Carlisle sat in the back seat beside Bella monitoring her heart rate and breathing as she drifted in and out of consciousness, though I felt confident I could detect the subtle changes better than he could. All his years of medical knowledge had nothing on the countless hours I'd spent listening to and learning the rhythms of Bella's body.

Jasper had gone back to the hotel with Alice to watch James's tape with her. She was both excited and nervous by the prospect of learning about her past, and it was something they needed to share together. Always the protector, Emmett had elected himself Designated Watch Vampire, and taken it upon himself to circle the hospital for any sign of Victoria. I assured him that Rosalie and Esme would let us know if they'd lost her trail, and that if she did somehow manage to get within a mile of us I would hear her.

Leave it to me, he'd insisted. I don't want you wasting your time listening for Victoria. Bella deserves your full attention...and you deserve a break.
I grew increasingly nervous as we pulled up to the emergency room entrance. I wished we were back in Forks so Carlisle could have taken care of Bella himself, but with her head injury and the amount of blood she’d lost, there was no choice but to check her into the Phoenix Memorial Hospital.

“What are we supposed to do about the bite mark?” I whispered softly.

Don’t worry. The shape may be obvious to us, but I can assure you that no human is going to see her hand and think, “vampire attack.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Yes, normal people thought of vampires as nothing more than legends, stories. It was only my Bella who thought there was nothing strange at all about the events in her life since she’d met me.

Carlisle hurried on ahead to get Bella checked in while I carefully scooped her up and carried her inside. She stirred a little, mumbling my name and I smiled at the peace hearing it brought me. Then she said something that sounded like “safe,” though how she could still say my name and that word in the same sentence, even in her subconscious was beyond me. Instinctively I held her closer, wishing more than anything that I could keep her safe like I had promised, but fearing I’d never truly be able to. Although I had conquered the monster inside myself, her staying with me and being a part of my world would always bring her too close to danger. What if the next time she was threatened, I was too late?

“Edward,” Carlisle called to me, the calm in his voice momentarily ripping me from my worries. He was pushing a wheelchair towards us and my grip around Bella tightened, unwilling to let her go yet.

Edward, appearances...he warned, and I reluctantly set her down. Still sleeping, Bella's head rested back against my stomach as I pushed the wheelchair and followed the doctor to her room.

As soon as she was placed on the bed, Bella was being strapped to monitors and given oxygen. Carlisle kept silently assuring me that everyone was doing exactly what they were supposed to and that Bella was in very good hands – but I’d never felt more helpless. There had to be something I could do for her.

“Why don’t you check in with Alice and Jasper?” Carlisle said gently, sensing my anxiety. “They’re probably on their way by now. You can let them know what room we’re in.” There’s nothing either of us can do for Bella right now, and Alice might need some comfort.

I nodded and stepped just outside the door, though I made sure to keep Bella in my sight. Obviously not too distracted to have heard my intentions, the phone started buzzing after I’d dialed the first number.

“Honestly Edward, you’re so predictable,” she teased, and I was grateful for the smile it brought to my face.

“Only to my psychic sister,” I grinned, making sure my voice was far below the ranges of human hearing.

“At least you find my little gift useful. Apparently my own family didn't quite see it that way.” Her voice had turned acerbic and the smile left my face.

“What happened Alice? What did he say?”

“Oh, I’ll fill you in on all the lovely details later, but basically I was thrown into the nut house for having visions. Apparently shock treatment was enough to disintegrate any human memories, and James killed the vampire who changed me. You know, just for fun.”
I felt a stab of pain listening to Alice, a bitterness in her tone I'd never heard before. She'd always been so carefree, so happy with our existence, and I was concerned that learning the atrocities of her past would change her somehow.

“Alice, I...”

“No, Edward,” she interrupted. “Don't spend one second grieving over things I can't even remember. I'm certainly not going to. Now, about Bella's cover story...” she said impishly. I breathed a sigh of relief. I should have known it would take more than that to bring down our Alice.

“Yes, I heard some of your plans but I'd like to get all the details for when Bella wakes up.”

“It was quite enjoyable, actually. Got out some of my frustrations.”

“And watching James get torn to shreds didn't do that for you?”

“It would have been better if I could have done some of the tearing myself. But no, I got to sit around making sure my stupid brother managed not to kill my best friend.”

“And how did I do?” I asked, smiling at how quickly she seemed to have gone back to her normal, joking self.

“Well, so far you've managed to sidestep both visions. Keep it up and you may just have me doubting my own skills.”

We laughed together for a moment and I reveled in the fact that I had indeed kept Bella safe from both unthinkable outcomes. She was alive and she was human.

So far.

I hated to think about what needed to be done in order to keep her that way, and although it was torturous to think such a thing, a part of me hoped that Bella would hate me for having allowed her to bear so much pain. No matter how difficult the next step might be however, I would always take comfort in knowing that I had kept both her and her humanity safe.

“Alright, Alice. What's the official story?” I asked, desperate to get my mind off of what had to be done.

“Why don't you let me show you myself?” she asked slyly, and in the same instant I felt her arm lock through mine. Amazingly, I was actually startled.

“Okay, how did you sneak up on me?”

“Easy. Jasper is outside running around with Emmett, and you can bet neither one of them is thinking about anything interesting enough to get your attention. And I've only been thinking about what I was telling you, so here I am.”

“Alright, little genius, now show me what you did. Is the hotel still standing at least?”

“It's perfectly fine,” she sighed. “Nothing insurance won't cover.” With that she closed her eyes and let her mind wander through the destruction of the hotel that was the stage for Bella's supposed accident. She'd had far too good a time banging up the staircase and hurling herself through the window. She always did have a flair for the dramatic.

“How is she?” Alice finally asked after the last details were done playing out for me.

“About the same, I guess,” I said, staring back into the room toward her. “Alice, they're sticking tubes and things into her. It's difficult to watch, even though I know she's still asleep and probably can't feel a thing. Still, I can't help thinking this is all my fault.” And she'll be better off once I leave, my mind added unconsciously.
“Edward, you have to stop thinking like that. She chose you. Goodness knows you tried to stop her. We all thought you were crazy, running off on us that first day. And I've seen you agonize over whether or not you should stay with her, but you have to accept that being with you...that's her choice. You're what she wants.”

“Is this what she wants?” I snapped, pointing at Bella, bruised and broken. Alice flinched and I felt instantly remorseful.

Edward, cool it, Jasper thought, suddenly coming into view behind Alice. I could feel that outburst from outside. I know you're upset, but you have no right to take it out on Alice. She's had a rough day too.

“I'm sorry,” I said quietly to both of them.

“Edward,” Carlisle said, stepping out of the room. “They were trying to delay until family arrives since she's still a minor, but I thought it best to have tests run right away to see the extent of the damage. Alice was able to get Charlie on the phone to give his consent. She also called Renee and she'll be here as soon as she can. You're...not going to be her favorite person,” he added, looking at the floor before he continued.

“They're going to take her for x-rays and she will probably need a blood transfusion. She's heavily sedated, but I've always believed that patients can hear those around them on some level, even when they're asleep. I've convinced the doctors to give you a few minutes alone. Go talk to her, give her strength.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, and I watched as Carlisle led Alice and Jasper down the hall.

“Tell her I love her too”, Alice called over her shoulder.

Careful not to pull at any of the tubes or wires she was connected to, I sat down gently on the edge of her bed. It was so painful to see Bella broken this way, and even harder because I knew I was to blame. If I hadn't taken her out into the middle of nowhere, none of this would have happened. The worst part of all though, was not being able to trust myself when I was the only one who could save her. The taste of her sweet, perfect blood would linger forever in my mind, along with the knowledge of how wonderfully intoxicating it had been, how much pleasure I'd felt as Bella experienced nothing but pain.

“I'm sorry, Bella,” I whispered, wanting to touch her but not believing I deserved that joy. “You've been nothing but understanding and forgiving of every wrong I've caused you, every terrible desire I've ever had toward you. I don't deserve you, Bella. But I need you.”

I paused for a moment, wishing for a sign that she could hear me. I listened to her heart, even checking the monitor in case there was some flux I somehow missed, but there was nothing. I'd grown so used to hearing her talk in her sleep, I didn't realize how unsettling it would be to so see her lie completely still and silent beside me. I allowed myself one moment to reach out and put my hand over her heart, letting the steady beat and her warmth comfort me. She took one breath that felt a little deeper than the last and it gave me hope that even if she couldn't hear my words, my presence was still helping her in some small way.

“The doctors here are taking good care of you, Carlisle is making sure of that,” I said, reminding myself I was here for her sake and not my own, to comfort and reassure her. “Your mother will be here as soon as she can and even though she will probably hate me before she even gets to know me, I want you to know I'm not going anywhere. I'm watching over you, just like I said I would. I'm only sorry I wasn't enough to keep you safe to begin with.”
I had been staring at her face, but out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw her hand twitch. Of course. It would be just like Bella to come out of a near coma to tell me to stop being so hard on myself.

“Sleep, Bella. And if you can find a way to forgive me, dream of me. I'll be right here when you wake up.”

Slowly, I pulled my hand away from her fragile body and stood up, wishing there was something more I could do. As I stood and watched her, I heard Carlisle outside the door with Bella's doctor. They were discussing her injuries at length and I had to smile. Human perception was coming into play yet again. There was only so much the hospital would tell a seventeen year old girl's teenage boyfriend, but even though he wasn't family, being a doctor himself Carlisle was getting every detail of her condition. There was a strained smile on both of their faces as they entered the room.

“Edward, they're going to take Bella for some x-rays now. Why don't you try to get some rest?” It's not like they're going to let you follow her around everywhere, but if you sit down and relax you can do the next best thing... follow her by listening closely. No one will bother you if they think you're sleeping.

I nodded and sat down in the chair beside Bella's bed, leaning my head against the wall and closing my eyes after watching them wheel her out of the room. I listened closely as time passed, seemingly more slowly that usual, until finally Bella was brought back to me. She had about as many broken bones as we had guessed, though I was reassured that they'd found no sign of internal bleeding or hemorrhaging. Because of her severe loss of blood, transfusions were still necessary. Carlisle suggested I leave the room for the process, but I'd made Bella a promise and I was determined not to break this one.

It was hard to watch, seeing foreign blood taint her perfection, and for awhile she began smelling like all the other humans who surrounded her. I was relieved when after several hours the familiar burn returned to my throat, proving once again her complete and total resilience.

I stayed with Bella through the night, both concerned and comforted by how little she changed. Her heartbeat was regular, her breathing was steady, and she showed absolutely no movement. Occasionally one of the nurses would come in to check on her, and they always eyed me curiously before leaving the room. Eventually I decided to feign sleep any time I heard someone approaching. If they still stared at me at least I didn't have to see it.

The next morning Alice brought me an empty tray with a few wrappers and a dirty plate on it. Don't want everyone to think you're starving yourself, do you? she thought with a grin. A few hours later I heard Carlisle's warning voice from down the hall. 

Edward, Renee is here. You might want to give her some time alone with Bella. When several moments passed and I didn't leave the room, I heard him sigh. Then will you please pretend to sleep, at least for a little while? Let her have a moment to take it all in. She really doesn't need to be any more upset that she already is. The doctor and I will be in soon, you can “wake up” then.

Of course he was right, so I stared at Bella for one more moment before closing my eyes and leaning back in the chair, making sure to keep my breathing deep and steady. A few seconds later Renee burst into the room and I could hear her gasp as she took in her daughter's appearance. She didn't move for several minutes, but I could hear her muffled sobs as she tried to build up the courage to go to Bella's side.

Renee's mind was clearer than Charlie's, but I was still only catching words here and there rather than hearing her every thought. It was like I was getting the abridged version rather than the full story. It was a fascinating combination that had created the mystery that was Bella.
Eventually Renee calmed her tears and I heard her walk over to Bella. As she muttered soothingly, “I'm here” and “everything is alright,” I chanced a peek at her. She looked like Bella, only with much shorter hair and slightly more pronounced features. Her eyes were red from crying, but I could see the warm love and compassion in them that I saw each time Bella looked at me. The way Renee looked at her and touched her so delicately made me ache for Bella to wake up so I could see that look in her eyes once more. If she still felt it. If she still loved me.

As promised, a few minutes later Carlisle and the doctor came into the room.

Wow, she thought and I had to stifle a laugh. Renee definitely wasn't looking at Bella's middle aged, pudgy, bald doctor. Oh well, at least she liked one member of the Cullen family. Renee was given a full update, including the much fabricated details of Bella's accident, at the end of which I made a show of stretching and slowly opening my eyes.

“I'd like to introduce you to my son, Edward,” Carlisle said with a warm smile.

“Very nice to finally meet you. Bella talks about you all the time,” I said as I walked over to her.

“Uh huh,” she said, her eyes narrowing. Carlisle cleared his throat and I watched her expression slowly transform. I could tell it was a struggle, but her eyes softened and she said, “Pleased to meet you."

After Carlisle and the doctor left, she watched me carefully for a long time before returning her gaze to Bella. I wondered if I should say something, but decided it was best to let her speak first. Besides, I was in no particular hurry. It wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation. The minutes passed in uncomfortable silence, until finally she spoke.

“So, you followed her here?” she asked without looking at me.

“Yes. She left rather abruptly and I was worried about her. She wouldn't answer her phone and I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“You know, when a girl leaves you and then doesn't take your calls, that usually means they don't want to talk to you,” she said dryly, glancing up at me.

“I understand that,” I answered as calmly as I could, reminding myself of the need to keep everything about our ruse believable. “However I also know her reasons for leaving were made very spur of the moment, and I was hoping that given some time to think, she might be willing to reconsider.”

“Charlie said she left because she was starting to get too attached...to you...and she was afraid she'd end up stuck in Forks. She told him she hated it there. She really hurt him and it just isn't like her to say something so hurtful. I want to know why.”

“She was afraid,” I said simply, happy that at least one statement was true. “Everyone gets scared sometimes, frightened by their own feelings and emotions. She left so quickly and, as you said, her actions were very unlike her. That's why I was hopeful I would be able to convince her to come home.”

“Home?” she asked, her voice skeptical.

“Yes. I believe Bella considers Forks to be her home now.”

“You still think that, after everything that's happened?”

“I'd like to. Although of course I will understand if Bella has truly made up her mind to leave. We...didn't really get a chance to talk, so all I can do is hope.”

Renee watched me silently, and her thoughts were jumping around so quickly it was hard to discern what she was thinking.
“She really means a lot to you, doesn't she?” she finally asked.

“More than anything in the world,” I told her truthfully, hoping it wasn't a little too much truth for a first meeting. I really wished we'd been able to be properly introduced by Bella, and under considerably better circumstances. There was another long silence, though this one wasn't as uncomfortable as the first had been.

“You're staying?” she eventually asked. It didn't really sound like a question, but I nodded and she nodded in return.

Renee stayed in the room all day, and after our initial conversation she made no more effort to talk to me. When she started to yawn, I motioned for her to take the recliner at the end of the bed, explaining that the plastic chair was fine for me. She scrutinized me for several seconds, but exhaustion must have won the battle because she made her way across the room and leaned it all the way back.

As it turned out, Renee talked in her sleep almost as much as Bella. I felt guilty for listening to her, but I'd promised Bella I wouldn't leave and I wasn't about to break my word. Most of Renee's mutterings were incoherent, but there was no doubt that they were all about Bella. All except for one about Carlisle, which I did my best to politely ignore.

During the night, Alice brought me another tray with a dirty bowl and an empty orange juice box. She smiled as she set it beside me and I eyed her curiously.

*I saw Renee asking you if you wanted to join her for breakfast and while I'm sure you'd appreciate the gesture, I didn't think you would want to leave Bella. Or try to explain why you weren't eating.*

In the morning, Renee stretched and let her eyes adjust. Then her gaze fixed on the empty tray and with a sigh, excused herself to get a bite to eat. I could see the stress was getting to her and I was glad to see she was at least attempting to take care of herself. She hadn't eaten since she'd arrived.

*How are you?* Carlisle thought, entering the room as soon as Renee left. Wordlessly I shrugged as my eyes drifted once more to Bella. *Alice wanted me to tell you she sees Bella waking up soon.*

Instantly I moved my chair until I was pressed into the side of her bed. I bent down until my face was touching her pillow, watching her closely and hoping selfishly that she would awaken before her mother returned. I needed a moment with her, to see for myself she was alright and to determine whether or not she could ever forgive me for all the damage I'd caused. I was so torn, both desperate for her forgiveness but also knowing it would be easier if she demanded I leave. I didn't know if I would have the strength to do it on my own.

*And Edward...she wouldn't explain what she meant, but Alice also wanted me to tell you, “Don't try to make her choices for her. If you upset her at all, I'll come throw you out a window.”* I smirked at Carlisle and he just grinned. *Her words, not mine, though I have to say I'm in agreement.*

“I'll do my best,” I said sarcastically as he turned to leave the room.

In the minutes that followed, I allowed myself to think about the implications of Alice's warning. She knew I felt guilty and would blame myself for what had happened. Perhaps she had already seen me leaving and was telling me how wrong that decision would be if I were to force it upon Bella. Feeling a slight reprieve, I decided I would do my best to ensure Bella made up her own mind. For all I knew, she wouldn't want anything to do with me when she woke up and realized
just how much damage I'd caused. Until that moment came, however, I would cherish every second I had with her.

Yet again, Alice didn't fail me. Within a few minutes Bella's heart rate started to speed up slightly. She took several long, deep breaths until finally her eyes fluttered open. I didn't make any motion to move, letting her adjust to her unfamiliar surroundings, but when she reached up to pull the oxygen from her nose, I gently stopped her.

“No, you don't,” I said softly.

“Edward?” she muttered, turning her head slowly until her eyes were locked with mine. They were still half closed and straining to focus, but as they adjusted they widened in surprise and she shouted, “Oh, Edward, I'm so sorry!”

“Shhhh,” I whispered, wondering what in the world she could be apologizing for. “Everything's all right now.”

“What happened?” she asked, confusion written all over her face. I wondered how much she remembered, and if remarkably she had managed to block out a significant portion of the events, how much I should even tell her. She'd handled the situation with so much grace, but now that she was safe and James was dead the reality of the fact that she'd been bitten by a vampire, knowing she'd nearly lost either her life or her humanity, would surely haunt her forever.

“I was almost too late. I could have been too late,” I said quietly, deciding to skip to the only part that really mattered at that moment. It was the truth that I feared would forever change the way Bella saw me.

“I was so stupid, Edward. I thought he had my mom,” she said, and I cringed as she once again found a way to blame herself.

“He tricked all of us,” I assured her.

“I need to call Charlie and my mom,” she said, her heartbeat racing with worry.

“Alice called them. Renee is here – well, here in the hospital. She's getting something to eat right now.” Again feeling miserably selfish, I hoped the cafeteria line was really long. I needed this time with Bella.

“She's here?” she asked, making a feeble attempt to sit up. I noticed her pupils dilate slightly and I knew how dizzy such a sudden movement would make her. Carefully I guided her back to her pillow.

“She'll be back soon. And you need to stay still.”

“But what did you tell her?” she asked, looking slightly irritated. Was I already do exactly what Alice had told me not to do? Certainly looking out for her physical well being didn't fall into the category of making choices for her. She was disoriented and lightheaded. I was simply making sure she didn't pass out.

“Why did you tell her I'm here?” she persisted.

“You fell down two flights of stairs and through a window,” I said, hoping she wouldn't be too offended by the fact that we had used her natural lack of balance to create a plausible story. “You have to admit, it could happen,” I teased, trying to get a smile from her. Instead all I got was a sigh, and a concerned expression as she started scanning her body for damage.

“How bad am I?”

I took a deep breath and prepared myself to say the words as objectively as I could manage. “You have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises covering every inch
of your skin, and you've lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I didn't like it – it made you smell all wrong for a while.”

“That must have been a nice change for you.”

“No, I like how you smell,” I said sincerely. Didn't she understand yet that any pain being with her might cause me I considered a small price to pay? There was nothing I wouldn't withstand for Bella. Loving her, knowing she loved me, was worth any torture this world could put upon me.

“How did you do it?” she asked, breaking me from my thoughts. She was staring at me with a look of such wonder in her eyes, and in that moment I knew she remembered every detail about the event that had almost changed everything. Unfortunately I was sure that meant she remembered the pain as well. I was foolish to think a little head injury could erase the memory of vampire venom in her veins, even if it had only been there for a few minutes.

“I'm not sure,” I finally admitted, unsure of what else I could say. Honestly I was baffled myself, grateful but completely at a loss. Though I'd been momentarily overtaken by the powerful rush of finally tasting her, as soon as I heard her agonized screams all I could think about was saving her. I took her bandaged hand in mine and held it softly, staring at the place where the wound was hidden beneath a layer of gauze. She would have that scar forever and every time I looked at it I would be reminded of two things.

I would always remember that because of my carelessness, Bella had suffered more than anyone should ever have to. However I would also remember that our love had been enough to keep me strong, and that I had saved her life when my very nature was fighting against me.

“It was impossible...to stop,” I said sadly. “Impossible. But I did.” I met her eyes once more and tried to smile through the guilt I couldn't fully put aside. “I must love you.”

“Don't I taste as good as I smell?” she asked in the most adorably teasing voice. I would have enjoyed the gesture more had I not seen the way her face contorted in pain as she grinned.

“Even better – better than I'd imagined,” I groaned, as fire ripped through my throat at the memory. I welcomed it. It reminded me what I had accomplished, and of the sheer force of my love for her.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Of all the things to apologize for,” I said, exasperated by her constant need to blame herself for everything.

“What should I apologize for?” she asked relentlessly. Knowing she wouldn't let it go without my giving her some sort of answer, I came up with the only thing I could ever imagine accepting an apology for.

“For very nearly taking yourself away from me forever.”

“I'm sorry,” she said. Good. Now that was out of the way.

“I know why you did it,” I said gently, wanting her to know I wasn't mad at her for making the decision she did. Her intense love for her mother had driven her to give up everything in order to keep Renee safe. I couldn't blame her for that. In fact now that I had her safely beside me, I realized her choice had made me love her even more. Self sacrificing to a fault, she had an unending capacity to love.

“It was still irrational, of course,” I continued, wanting her to understand that the only part of her choice I couldn't come to terms with was that she hadn't trusted in me enough. “You should have waited for me, you should have told me.”
“You wouldn't have let me go.”

“No, I wouldn't,” I admitted.

I watched her expression closely and her eyes seemed to glaze over. After a few moments of silence, her whole body shook. I felt my fists clench.

“Bella, what's wrong?” I asked nervously. They were supposed to be monitoring her medication. She wasn't supposed to be in pain now.

“What happened to James?”

I relaxed slightly, realizing it was probably just a manifestation of something resembling post traumatic stress. Bella would probably shake from her memories for quite some time. I hoped she didn't talk about it too much in her sleep with Renee around. That would make for quite an interesting conversation and I wasn't sure Bella was up for that amount of creativity.

“After I pulled him off you, Emmett and Jasper took care of him,” I said dryly. I know revenge is an ugly monster all its own, but a part of me would always wish I had been the one to finish him off.

“I didn't see Emmett and Jasper there,” she said, confused.

“They had to leave the room,” I hesitated. “There was a lot of blood.”

“But you stayed.” Her eyes suddenly filled with all the love and compassion I'd been so desperately needing to see. I wasn't worthy of any of it, but I needed it like humans needed air. It was the only thing sustaining me.

“Yes, I stayed,” I answered simply, trying to convey all my love for her through my eyes the way she had just done for me.

“And Alice, and Carlisle...” she trailed off, not understanding how deeply they all cared for her.

“They love you, too, you know.”

Her brow suddenly pulled together and nervously she asked, “Did Alice see the tape?”

“Yes,” I said coldly, recalling her bitter tone as she described the harsh truths of her human life.

“She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't remember.”

“I know. She understands now.” My hatred of James was momentarily overshadowed by hatred for the humans who had so callously thrown Alice away because of her gift. They'd feared her or been ashamed of her, and she'd been made to suffer for the talent we were now all so grateful for. Alice had been punished for the very thing that had ended up saving Bella's life, and I simply couldn't reconcile that.

“Ugh,” I heard Bella groan and I glanced down to see her attempting to lift her hand to me, but she was stopped by the carefully placed IV.

“What is it?”

“Needles,” she said, staring at the ceiling as her breathing accelerated.

“Afraid of a needle,” I mumbled. She was still always afraid of the wrong things. “Oh, a sadistic vampire, intent on torturing her to death, sure, no problem, she runs off to meet him. An IV, on the other hand...”

“Why are you here?” she asked, stopping my babbling with a jolt I wasn't ready for. She'd seemed so thankful, so glad to have me at her side. Perhaps I'd deceived myself into thinking I was forgiven. Of course I knew it made more sense that she would want nothing to do with me
now that the threat was gone. She'd escaped death once, why would she stay with me and invite
more danger into her life?

This was the moment I had been waiting for, the truth I both feared and needed. It was smarter,
safer for me to walk away. I just didn't know if I had to ability to exist without her love anymore.
I braced myself for her reaction, and miserably I finally asked, “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” she yelled, her face instantly distraught. I was confused but relieved as she continued.
“No, I meant, why does my mother think you're here? I need to have my story straight before she
gets back.”

“Oh,” I sighed, loosening my grip on the sheet I hadn't realized I was holding onto. It collapsed
in a crumpled mess at her side. “I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you
to come back to Forks,” I said plainly, the words perfectly memorized and rehearsed. “You
agreed to see me, and you drove out to the hotel where I was staying with Carlisle and Alice – of
course I was here with parental supervision,” I added with a smirk. Alice had come up with that
part. She assured me that on top of explaining hers and Carlisle's presence, it would help get me
back on Renee and Charlie's good sides. She also informed me I was going to need all the help I
could get in that department.

“But you tripped on the stairs on the way to my room and...well, you know the rest,” I finished.
“You don't need to remember any details, though; you have a good excuse to be a little muddled
about the finer points.”

“There are a few flaws with that story,” she said after contemplating it briefly. “Like no broken
windows.”

“Not really,” I sighed, thinking of the lengths Alice had gone to ensure the story was believable.
I think it was a rather cathartic experience for her after the ordeal with James and the tape. The
bitterness had passed quickly and she was as chipper as ever. Nothing flinging herself down a
couple flights of stairs and through a window couldn't fix. “Alice had a little bit too much fun
fabricating evidence. It's all been taken care of very convincingly – you could probably sue the
hotel is you wanted to. You have nothing to worry about,” I murmured, grazing my fingertips
across her soft cheek. “Your only job now is to heal.”

I grinned as the heart monitor began beeping wildly, amplifying the sounds of her increased
heartbeat which I was already reveling in.

“That's going to be embarrassing,” she said, blushing wildly.

I laughed, feeling more lighthearted than I had in days, comforted by the fact that Bella still
seemed to want me close even after all I'd put her through. It made me want to touch her more,
hold her, kiss her...

“Hmm, I wonder...” I said with a smirk, and carefully leaned toward her. I smiled, listening to
her heart race as I closed the small distance between us. Softly I let my lips brush against hers. I
couldn't believe how much I'd missed the feeling. I'd barely begun the kiss when I heard her
heart stop and I immediately pulled away to see what I'd done wrong. As she stared at me wide
eyed, her heart returned to normal and I sighed in relief. Well one thing hadn't changed. She still
had the most absurd reactions to my kisses.

“It seems that I'm going to have to be even more careful with you than usual,” I said sadly,
wishing that for once we could just be together like a normal couple. Was it too much to ask to
be able to kiss the woman I loved with making her heart stop or having her faint or attack me.
Although I might not complain about that particular response right now. After all, I was much
more practiced in my control than I'd been that first time...
“I was not finished kissing you,” Bella said, and I realized I was staring at her lips with probably a bit too much longing. “Don't make me come over there.”

Apparently that was all the encouragement I needed. Without a moment's hesitation I swooped down to kiss her once more, and thrilled to the way I made her heart race.

Hospital food...tubes...broken everything...crowded...Cullen...

Renee's broken thoughts were getting closer, so reluctantly I ended our kiss.

“I think I hear your mother,” I said, grinning at how disappointed Bella looked when I pulled away.

“Don't leave me,” she said frantically.

“I won't,” I assured her. I wasn't going anywhere. “I'll take a nap,” I said innocently.

Deciding the whole charade might look more believable if I were lying down, I opted to move to the recliner. I didn't take my eyes off of Bella who was still breathing harder than normal, her cheeks and lips having significantly more color in them than when Renee had left. I leaned back and closed my eyes, fighting the smile that played at my lips as I wondered whether or not Renee would know I'd been kissing her daughter in between “naps.”

“Don't forget to breathe,” Bella whispered and I took one slow breath for show.

Renee was right outside the door, and I was surprised to hear that she was talking with Carlisle. She was trying to direct the conversation toward myself and what exactly my relationship with Bella was, but Carlisle was keeping her focused on the accident and Bella's recovery. His calm assurances seemed to pacify her, at least for the moment. I'd have to thank him for that later.

Eventually the door creaked open and, keeping up the facade that I was sleeping, Bella whispered very softly, “Mom!”

I didn't risk opening my eyes but I could tell Renee was watching me.

Persistent...be careful...nicest family...

“He never leaves, does he?” she muttered, sounding both irritated and in awe. She seemed to be somewhere in between cautious and accepting, but she wasn't kicking me out of the room which was more than I had hoped for.

“Mom, I'm so glad to see you!” Bella said, still quiet but clearly excited.

“Bella, I was so upset!”

“I'm sorry, Mom. But everything's fine now, it's okay.”

“I'm just glad to finally see your eyes open,” she said, her voice cracking slightly. I could tell she was on the verge of tears again.

“How long have they been closed?” Bella asked nervously. It was a subject I'd been purposefully avoiding.

“It's Friday, hon, you've been out for a while.”

“Friday?”

“They had to keep you sedated for a while, honey – you've got a lot of injuries.” I was suddenly glad that it had taken Renee so long to get to the hospital. Not just because I wanted to be the one to wait by Bella's side, but because I could only imagine how hard it must be for a mother to sit helplessly and watch her only daughter lie motionless and hooked up to countless monitors.

“I know,” Bella said, and I could almost feel her wince.
“You're lucky Dr. Cullen was there. He's such a nice man...very young, though. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...”

“You met Carlisle?” she asked, probably surprised that my family was still here. No matter how many times I said it, she simply wouldn't believe how important she was to them.

“And Edward's sister Alice. She's a lovely girl.”

“She is.”

There was a slight pause and I tried to listen to Renee, but her thoughts were too scattered to pick out anything distinctly.

“You didn't tell me you had such good friends in Forks,” she finally said. I didn't need to be a mind reader to know that the comment was directed at me. Clearly Bella had either failed to mention my existence at all to her mother, or at the very least had downplayed our relationship. I guess it shouldn't surprise me. I had been taking up a great deal of her time lately. And even if Renee knew about me, how many details could Bella really offer her? *Hey Mom, I'm in love with a vampire,* isn't exactly acceptable conversation.

Bella made a pained sound and without thinking my eyes flew open so I could make sure she was okay.

“What hurts?” Renee asked worriedly.

“It's fine,” she said, throwing me a quick but meaningful glance before looking back to her mother. “I just have to remember not to move. Where's Phil?” she added, as eager as I was to get the attention off of me.

“Florida – oh, Bella! You'll never guess!” Renee said, her voice jubilant. “Just when we were about to leave, the best news!”

“Phil got signed?” Bella asked, obviously proud of her step-father.

“Yes! How did you guess! The Suns, can you believe it?”

“That's great, Mom,” she said, and I wondered if she even knew who The Suns were.

“And you'll like Jacksonville so much,” she continued and I felt my chest tighten. Renee assumed Bella would go home with her when she was well enough. Bella and I had barely had any time to talk and already I could feel her slipping away. Obviously it was the smartest choice and the safest for Bella, but I wasn't ready to say goodbye. I listened halfheartedly as Renee described how wonderful their new house was, and how happy Bella would be in the sun and the warmth.

A part of me wanted to open my eyes to read her expression, but I was honestly too afraid to look. I didn't think I could bare to see the excitement that must be in her eyes at the prospect of being with her mother again. Now that she and Phil were settled, there was no reason for her to banish herself to the rain and the gloom of Forks. There was no reason to continue putting herself in constant danger by remaining a part of my world, though we all desperately wanted to keep her there. The only thing that mattered was that she would be happy now. She would be safe. Always.

“Wait, Mom!” Bella shrieked, graciously stopping my train of thought. I tried to smooth out the expression on my face, but I was sure if Bella looked at me she would see nothing but misery. I couldn't figure out how to let her go, yet I knew I was going to have to try.

“What are you talking about?” Bella asked, sounding almost irritated. “I'm not going to Florida. I live in Forks.”
“But you don't have to anymore, silly,” Renee said with an easy laugh. “Phil will be able to be around so much more now...we've talked about it a lot, and what I'm going to do is trade off on the away games, half the time with you, half the time with him.”

My fists clenched with every passing second. It all made sense. Renee knew it, I knew it. It wouldn't take Bella long to figure it out. I began working hard, trying to convince myself it was for the best.

“Mom,” Bella said, her voice almost a whisper again. I held my breath, clinging to her every word as my own conflicted thoughts warred against each other. “I want to live in Forks. I'm already settled in at school, and I have a couple of girlfriends...” she trailed off, and I heard her heart speed up just a little. I could almost feel her desire to look at me, and I fought against my own urge to look at her. As much as I wanted her with me always, a part of me was expecting her to be looking for an excuse to run away. I deserved nothing less than her total desertion, and Renee was offering her the life she truly wanted. With her mother, away from the dreary rain soaked town she hated, and above all safe. Away from me and the ridiculous existence I'd been trying to make her a part of.

“And Charlie needs me,” she continued. “He's just all alone up there, and he can't cook at all.”

“You want to stay in Forks?” Renee asked.

*Boys...life decisions...seventeen...*

“Why?”

“I told you – school, Charlie – ouch!”

Again my eyes flew open, hoping Bella would give me some assurance she was okay like before, but this time she was staring only at her mother. Renee tenderly stroked her forehead and I could feel the concern and love radiating from her.

“Bella, honey, you hate Forks,” she said softly.

“It's not so bad.”

There was a long pause and a string of racing thoughts, until finally she asked, “Is it this boy?”

“He's part of it,” Bella said sheepishly. “So, have you had a chance to talk with Edward?”

“Yes,” she said, pausing.

*Brace yourself,* I thought, hoping Renee didn't hate me as much as she had every right to.

“And I want to talk to you about that,” she continued slowly.

“What about?” Bella said, trying to sound casual, but her heart rate gave her away. And thanks to the monitor, not just to me anymore.

“I think that boy is in love with you,” she whispered and I almost laughed at the way she said it. As if it was a secret and Bella was finding out for the first time.

“I think so, too,” Bella whispered in return and I nearly chuckled.

“An
“Well, he seems very nice, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking,” she said, her thoughts drifting back to Carlisle. Yes, apparently I inherited my looks from my adoptive, vampire father...

“But you're so young, Bella...”

“I know that, Mom. Don't worry about it. It's just a crush.” I knew she was just trying to placate her mother, but I cringed a bit at the term “crush.”

“That's right,” Renee sighed, the word obviously serving its purpose and calming her fears that her little girl wasn't desperately in love and throwing her life away.

“Do you need to go?” Bella asked after a long pause.

“Phil's supposed to call in a little while...I didn't know you were going to wake up...”

“No problem, Mom,” Bella said a little too hastily. I suppressed a smile at the notion that she was anxious for me to be back beside her. “I won't be alone.”

“I'll be back soon,” she promised. “I've been sleeping here, you know.” I wasn't sure why, but it sounded like Renee was trying to prove herself. I hoped my being there wasn't making her feel badly. Since she'd arrived she'd been at Bella's side almost as much as I had, the only different being that she had to occasionally eat while I only had to appear as if I had.

“Oh, Mom, you don't have to do that! You can sleep at home – I'll never notice.”

“I was too nervous. There's been some crime in the neighborhood, and I don't like being there alone.”

“Crime?” Bella asked, alarmed but for a reason her mother could never know about. As was I, Bella was thinking about the destruction we left behind and what the police would blame it on.

“Someone broke into that dance studio around the corner from the house and burned it to the ground – there's nothing left at all!” We'd made sure of that. “And they left a stolen car right out front.” Oops, Bella didn't know about that part. I hoped it didn't upset her too much. “Do you remember when you used to dance there, honey?”

“I remember,” Bella said softly, and I peeked at her just in time to see the strained look on her face at the memory.

“I can stay, baby, if you need me,” Renee offered.

“No, Mom, I'll be fine. Edward will be with me.”

A string of less than pleasant words sifted through her mind, though she never seemed to land on one she would actually voice. I closed my eyes again and resumed my exaggerated breathing.

“I'll be back tonight,” she said, her words obviously pointed in my direction.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, Bella. Try to be more careful when you walk, honey, I don't want to lose you.”

I knew Bella well enough to picture the look of indignation that would spread across her face at Renee's warning, and I couldn't help smiling. Besides, it was nice to have someone other than myself telling Bella to be careful. Maybe she'd actually listen to her mother. Renee reluctantly left as one of the nurses entered the room. As she walked away, it sounded like she was counting the minutes until she could return without seeming too overprotective.

I noticed the nurse's mind was frazzled and disjointed. She'd been working for nearly twelve hours straight and was more than ready to go home, but she'd developed a sort of attachment to
Bella and wanted to check on her once more before leaving. She sounded concerned as she checked the monitor.

“Are you feeling anxious, honey? Your heart rate got a little high there.”

“I'm fine,” Bella said, and I could hear her purposefully slow down her breathing and try to calm herself further. I knew she didn't want any more medication, she already felt she'd been unconscious for too long. I wished she would understand how important rest was right now, and stop worrying about looking weak or vulnerable.

“I'll tell your RN that you're awake. She'll be in to see you in a minute.”

The second the door closed I flew across the room to Bella. I couldn't believe what a difference it made, being beside her as opposed to across the room. Instantly I felt relief rush over me when I could once again feel the warmth radiating from her skin. I inhaled deeply and let her scent wash over me as I stared into her eyes and tried to convince myself yet again that she truly was alright. Quickly sifting through all her mother had said to her, I wondered for about the millionth time since I'd known her what would be going through her mind.

“You stole a car?” she asked skeptically.

I grinned at her, because of all the things she could chose to focus on of course it would be something trivial like that. I guess being the daughter of the chief of police made her a bit sensitive to lawbreaking.

“It was a good car, very fast,” I told her, hoping she realized I would have stolen a jet if it had gotten us to her any faster.

“How was your nap?”

“Interesting,” I said softly, thinking of how conflicted I was at the idea of her going home with her mother. It made the most sense for her, and I didn't understand how she could still love me enough to want to stay with me when she had the chance to have her old life back. Her old, safe, vampire free life.

“What?” she asked, concerned by what must have been written on my face. I was afraid to lose her, but I was also afraid to keep her with me. Not wanting her to see the pain in my eyes, unwilling to sway her decision because of my own selfish desire for happiness, I stared at the floor as I spoke.

“I'm surprised. I thought Florida...and your mother...well, I thought that's what you would want.”

“But you'd be stuck inside all day in Florida. You'd only be able to come out at night, just like a real vampire.”

A smile tugged at my lips. She still didn't think of me as a real vampire. I guess I can blame a lifetime of ridiculous folklore for that, although in truth I'd like to believe that the real reason was that my loving her had resurfaced enough of my humanity that perhaps I wasn't quite the monster I believed myself to be. I felt a thrill rush through me at knowing she would still want to be with me, even if she did indeed move back to Florida with her mother. Of course I'd never allow that to happen. It wouldn't be fair to her, trying to keep her in my world while everything else was pulling her back toward her own. The world she belonged it.

“I would stay in Forks, Bella,” I said slowly, the words I wasn't sure she would accept tearing me apart. “Or somewhere like it. Someplace where I couldn't hurt you anymore.”

She watched me as if I were speaking a foreign language. Maybe I hadn't said it out loud, maybe I'd thought the words but couldn't bring myself to say them. Then I heard her heart start beating faster and her breathing turn erratic. A look of agony took over her beautiful face, one far worse
than I'd seen even when she was being attacked by James. She still hadn't spoken a word, but I felt as if I could hear her screaming.

Just as I was about to speak and try to fix what I'd destroyed, a nurse walked in and looked nervously at Bella's expression.

“Time for more pain meds, sweetheart?”

“No, no,” she said firmly, still staring directly into my eyes. “I don't need anything.”

“No need to be brave, honey. It's better if you don't get too stressed out; you need to rest.”

Bella shook her head, determined as ever until the nurse sighed, “Okay.” Stubborn girl...can spend time with her boyfriend when she gets better. “Hit the call button when you're ready.” She glared at me, then at the heart monitor which still hadn't returned to normal and left the room.

Bella hadn't taken her tear filled eyes off of me for one second, and I was no longer able to contain the need to touch her, comfort her. Here I'd sworn to never let anything hurt her again, and already I was the cause of her pain once more. So much for not being a monster.

“Shhh, Bella, calm down,” I begged, wishing her heart would stop jumping. It was making me nervous.

“Don't leave me,” she pleaded, her voice shaking and miserable.

“I won't,” I assured her, reminding myself of Alice's warning. I had listened to her very clearly tell her mother she didn't want to leave Forks, and yet I was trying to make the decision for her. “Now relax before I call the nurse back to sedate you.”

I watched her intently, waiting for her to calm herself like she'd gotten so good at doing for everyone else, but her heart continued to race. I wished she would believe me when I said I'd stay. I hadn't even been sure I could let her go when I thought it was what she would want, and now with her in tears at the idea of us being separated, I knew without a doubt I wouldn't have the strength to leave.

“Bella,” I said soothingly as I ran my fingers across her cheeks. “I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here as long as you need me.”

“Do you swear you won't leave me?” she asked, her voice still trembling.

I cradled her face in my hands gently and leaned into her until I could feel her breath against my face. It was beyond my comprehension that she could still want me, but I would continue to accept her love as the greatest gift I'd ever received for as long as she chose to give it to me.

“I swear,” I said sincerely, encompassing every oath I'd ever made to her in those two words. I swear to stay beside her, to protect her, to love her, to be worthy of her. I swear to be hers, completely.

As I stared at her, her breathing finally returned to normal and I could feel the tension in her body ease. We both breathed a sigh of relief, feeling the worst was behind us.

“Better?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said warily, though I didn't entirely believe her. She was always trying to seem so brave.

I shook my head, still baffled by how strongly she felt about me. Silly, absurd overreaction, I'm not worth getting so worked up over, I muttered under my breath, too soft for her to hear.
“Why did you say that?” she asked after a few quiet moments. Her voice was mostly back to normal though I could still detect a hint of panic. “Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you want me to go away?”

And I thought she was absurd before. “No, I don't want to be without you, Bella, of course not. Be rational,” I said, wondering why I still needed to explain it to her. Didn't she know by now that she's everything to me? “And I have no problem with saving you, either – if it weren't for the fact that I was the one putting you in danger...that I'm the reason that you're here,” I added miserably.

“Yes, you are the reason,” she said with a frown. It was completely true, but it still hurt to hear. “The reason I'm here – alive,” she added, stunning me again.

“Barely,” I whispered, hardly comprehending that through it all, she was still convinced I was the hero. Did it really count that I saved her life if I was the reason she'd almost died? “Covered in gauze and plaster and hardly able to move,” I added, once again taking in her battered appearance and wishing I could make all her pain go away.

“I wasn't referring to my most recent near-death experience,” she said, sounding strangely irritated with me. “I was thinking of the others – you can take your pick. If it weren't for you, I would be rotting away in the Forks cemetery.”

I cringed at the callous way she could speak of the times she'd nearly died, as if her death were an inevitability that I was merely delaying. That thought made another terrible realization cross my mind. If I hadn't been strong enough to save her, if I'd succumbed to my thirst the way I'd feared, then my saving her all those other times would have proven to be the cruelest of ironies. Save her from a van where her death would have been quick and painless only to let her be attacked by a sadistic vampire. Rescue her from a group of strangers only to have her sucked dry by the one who loved her the most.

“That's not the worst part, though,” I explained, horrified by the notion that the death I almost brought her would have been a hundred times worse than what I'd saved her from. “Not seeing you there on the floor...crumpled and broken. Not thinking I was too late. Not even hearing you scream in pain – all those unbearable memories that I'll carry with me for the rest of eternity. No, the very worst was feeling...knowing that I couldn't stop. Believing that I was going to kill you myself.”

“But you didn't,” she said without missing a beat.

“I could have. So easily.” Without my permission, waves of memories that held the sweet taste of Bella's blood flooded my mind and made fire rage through my throat. Now that I'd tasted her, knew beyond any doubt that she was every bit as divine as I'd imagined her to be, would it be harder to resist than before? Would I lose control and put her in danger again as we grew closer?

“Promise me,” she suddenly said, her voice quiet but fierce. As if she could read my thoughts.

“What?” I asked, though of course I knew what she would ask of me.

“You know what,” she answered angrily.

“I don't seem to be strong enough to stay away from you,” I said, frustrated at my own weak selfishness. “So I suppose that you'll get your way...whether it kills you or not.” I hated saying the words aloud, but in order for me to stay with anything resembling a clean conscience, I needed her to understand the magnitude of her decision.
“Good,” she said, though I could tell she was still incredibly upset. My nearly killing her she could easily forgive, but forgiving any talk of my leaving was apparently a bit more difficult. Still frustrated, she said, “You told me how you stopped...now I want to know why.”

“Why?” I asked, certain she wasn't asking why I hadn't let her die. There was only one other option and I didn't want to believe she was asking me that question. It was a discussion I didn't think either of us were in any state to have.

“Why you did it. Why didn't you just let the venom spread? By now I would be just like you.”

I felt a low growl build up in my chest. Alice. I should have known that she’d be unable to resist answering any and all of Bella's questions. And of course Bella would have taken full advantage of her time alone with the one vampire who would tell her whatever she wanted to know. All the things I didn't want her to know.

“I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,” Bella continued, ignoring the fury that must have been clear on my face. “But it just seems logical...a man and woman have to be somewhat equal...as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally.”

She spoke with such conviction, it all but dissipated by anger with Alice. Bella had always acted like I was the prize and she the lucky recipient, though I knew it was completely the opposite. This was just her way of trying to even us out. All I needed to do was make her see that I was truly the lucky one, and that having her love was more than I ever could have asked for.

“You have saved me,” I whispered, recalling how pointless and lonely my existence had been before her.

“I can't always be Lois Lane. I want to be Superman too,” she said, reverting to the comic book stories she'd once tried to base her speculations about me on. It would have been adorable and I might have teased her, but her persistence in the matter was disturbing to me to say the least. She couldn't possibly want this life. 

“You don't know what you're asking,” I said gently, trying to reason with her without making her feel I didn't want her. In truth there was nothing I wanted more than Bella for all eternity, but that didn't mean I was willing to sacrifice her humanity, her soul to get it.

“I think I do,” she replied sincerely.

“Bella, you don't know,” I said, still keeping in mind Alice's warning. I wasn't trying to make the choice for her, but rather ensure that she really understood what she was asking. As she'd made clear before, she didn't really think of me as a true vampire. She had some glorified idea of how we existed and was therefore unable to see the more difficult of our realities.

“I've had almost ninety years to think about this, and I'm still not sure,” I admitted. Honestly the only thing that made this existence worth it was knowing that if I'd died all those years ago, I never would have met Bella. Bella didn't have to give up anything to have me. I was hers, for as long as she lived.

“Do you wish Carlisle hadn't saved you?”

“No, I don't wish that,” I said, debating whether or not to tell her the reason why I couldn't make myself be sorry. Knowing Bella, it would probably only serve to fuel her point, that vampire life was the obvious answer where love was concerned. “But my life was over. I wasn't giving anything up,” I continued, deciding to keep the rest to myself.

“You are my life,” she said, eyes piercing into me and wavering my resolve for a split second. “You're the only thing it would hurt me to lose.”
“I can't do it, Bella. I won't do that to you,” I said firmly, making the promise to myself as much as I was to her.

“Why not?” she asked, sounding irritated again. “Don't tell me it's too hard! After today, or I guess it was a few days ago... anyway, after that, it should be nothing.”

My eyes tightened and I studied her intently. She really thought this was about me, about my not being able to change her? Oddly enough, she was right that saving her had proved to me that I would be able to handle the actual act. But it wasn't about that. It was about her life, and she needed to understand just how precious that was to me.

“And the pain?” I asked, grasping at anything that might deter her from what she so foolishly wanted. She'd had vampire venom inside her, burning her furiously. I'd heard her agonized screams. Surely she wouldn't willingly invite that kind of pain again. The brief but tortured expression that quickly crossed her face showed me that she remembered it all too clearly, yet her voice was calm when she spoke again.

“That's my problem. I can handle it.”

“It's possible to take bravery to the point where it becomes insanity,” I said, wishing she could just admit how terrifying the idea of the agony of transformation would be. Maybe she thought she'd already endured the worst, that she'd lived through the pain once so she could do it again. Though it had felt like a lifetime, watching her writhing in pain, in truth it had only lasted a matter of minutes. If she knew she would have to burn for days...

“It's not an issue,” she said firmly, interrupting what was going to be my next argument. “Three days. Big deal.”

Of course, I thought angrily. Why wouldn't Alice have told her that detail too? There were definitely going to be words with my dear sister when all this was through.

“Charlie?” I asked, digging through the last of my arsenal for anything that would deter her. “Renee?”

I watched her closely and listened to every change in her body. She was reacting to my words, there was no doubt of that. She wasn't ready to give up her family, they were far too important to her. I smiled victoriously and hoped that I had finally brought the conversation to a close.

“Look, that's not an issue either,” she said after several minutes. The smile didn't leave my face, because I knew even she didn't believe what she was saying. “Renee has always made the choices that work for her – she'd want me to do the same. And Charlie's resilient, he's used to being on his own. I can't take care of them forever. I have my own life to live.”

“Exactly. And I won't end it for you,” I said, exasperated that she was unwilling to let it go. “If you're waiting for me to be on my deathbed, I've got news for you! I was just there!”

“You're going to recover,” I reminded her.

She took a deep breath, as if preparing herself for what she wanted to say next.

“No, I'm not,” she said, and I couldn't understand what she meant. Her injuries were severe, but the doctors had assured all of us she'd make a full recovery. Was all this talk of changing her stemming from a fear that she was going to die after all?

“Of course you are. You may have a scar or two...”

“You're wrong. I'm going to die,” she said, anxiety coloring her tone. Though logically I knew she was going to be fine, Carlisle and Alice both having made their own assurances to me, I couldn't stand to hear her talk like that. She was going to be perfect again, she had to be.
“Really, Bella. You'll be out of here in a few days. Two weeks at most.”

She looked angry again, like she refused to believe what I was telling her. “I may not die now... but I'm going to die someday. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I'm going to get old.”

Slowly her words hit me, and while I felt relieved that she wasn't trying to insist her injuries were fatal, I sensed a new debate beginning, one I wasn't sure how to combat. I closed my eyes, desperately trying to remember a time in my human life when I'd feared old age. I tried to put myself in her place but I couldn't comprehend it. It wasn't something most humans started thinking about at seventeen, though obviously most humans weren't in love with someone who would stay seventeen forever.

“That's how it's supposed to happen. How it should happen. How it would have happened if I didn't exist – and I shouldn't exist,” I said, suddenly having the exact opposite existential anxiety that she was having. I'm not sure what reaction I was expecting, but my eyes flew open when Bella snorted.

“That's stupid,” she said bluntly. “That's like going to someone who's just won the lottery, taking their money, and saying, 'Look, let's just go back to how things should be. It's better that way.' And I'm not buying it.”

“I'm hardly a lottery prize,” I said coldly, feeling somewhat patronized and more than a little irked that she still held me in such high regard.

“That's right. You're much better,” she said sweetly. I rolled my eyes and decided that at least for the time being, while I would never understand it I would need to accept it. Bella may be absurd and unreasonable, but she was my absurd, unreasonable Bella and I was tired of arguing with her.

“Bella, we're not having this discussion anymore. I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it.”

“If you think that's the end, then you don't know me very well.” Then she got the most mischievous look in her eye, and added, “You're not the only vampire I know.”

“Alice wouldn't dare,” I snapped angrily.

Bella's breath caught for a moment and I forced my expression to soften. I hadn't meant to frighten her, but without knowing it Bella had made me consider one possibility I'd never thought of. Alice was thoroughly convinced of Bella's future as a member of our family, not to mention how adamant she was that I not try to make decisions for Bella. Should I be worried that Alice would change Bella if I continued to refuse?

“And Alice already saw it, didn't she? That's why the things she says upset you. She knows I'm going to be like you... someday,” Bella said quietly, and I knew there was no going back. She already knew everything else I hadn't wanted her to know. She might as well know what Alice had seen.

“She's wrong,” I insisted. “She also saw you dead, but that didn't happen, either.”

“You'll never catch me betting against Alice,” she said, using my own words from so long ago against me.

We watched each other for an endless stretch of time, both trying to read each other's minds, though I was sure I was infinitely more frustrated than she was. I was trying to figure out why and how she could possibly want to be like me when Bella and her beautiful humanity were the only thing that made my existence bearable. I was also now trying to figure out how worried I should be that Bella would go to Alice if I continued to deny her what she seemed to want. It would have to be a quick decision on Alice's part, no premeditation at all or I would be sure to
hear. It wasn't the type of thing she could likely hide from me. But Alice was so certain of Bella's future, it seemed likely that she wouldn't hesitate if Bella pleaded with her as she had with me. Like Alice had made very clear, she loved Bella too. She would be all too eager to give her what she wanted.

Feeling exhausted in a way I wasn't used to, I finally decided that the only choice for us at that moment was to not think about it. It wasn't like Bella would ask Alice to bite her while she was hooked up to monitors and lying in a hospital. I would just have to work particularly hard at making sure Bella got all the enjoyment she could out of her human life. I'd show her that she and I were equals in every way that mattered. We both loved each other fiercely, and there shouldn't be anything more important than that.

“So where does that leave us?” she finally asked.

I laughed, deciding she'd been more successful at the mind reading thing than I had. “I believe it's called an impasse,” I said slowly.

“Ouch,” she said with a sigh.

“How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine,” she said, trying to disguise the pain that had contorted her face. She'd been awake too long and had gone without pain killers longer than was necessary. There was nothing more we needed to say at that moment, and no reason she shouldn't be resting.

“I don't believe you,” I said softly.

“I'm not going back to sleep.”

“You need rest. All this arguing isn't good for you.”

“So give in,” she said. She was trying to keep her voice teasing, but there was far too much sincerity in her words. I suddenly felt guilty for not having ended the conversation long ago. I knew we weren't going to come to an agreement and it had been very selfish of me to keep her awake attempting to.

“Nice try,” I said as I leaned across to press the button that would call the nurse back.

“No!” she protested as a voice came over the speaker.

“Yes?”

“I think we're ready for more pain medication,” I said as Bella stared at me angrily.

“I'll send the nurse.”

“I won't take it,” Bella said, growing more and more stubborn by the second.

I eyed the tubes that were attached to her. “I don't think they're going to ask you to swallow anything.”

Her heart started racing again and I wondered what she was so scared of. She wouldn't feel anything and then she'd be able to sleep again.

“Bella, you're in pain. You need to relax so you can heal. Why are you being so difficult? They're not going to put any more needles in you now.”

“I'm not afraid of the needles,” she said, looking somewhat embarrassed. “I'm afraid to close my eyes.”
I smiled as I realized what she was saying, baffled but flattered that all her protest to sleeping had been because she thought I'd be gone when she woke up. I reached out to hold her face gently in my hands again.

“I told you I'm not going anywhere. Don't be afraid,” I told her, happy to once again be taking on the role of her protector. “As long as it makes you happy, I'll be here.”

“You're talking about forever, you know,” she said with a smile that warmed my cold, still heart.

“Oh, you'll get over it – it's just a crush,” I teased.

“I was shocked when Renee swallowed that one,” she said, shaking her head. “I know you know better.”

“That's the beautiful thing about being human,” I said, feeling a twinge of sadness at the truth of what I was about to say. “Things change.”

“Don't hold your breath,” she said, glaring at me slightly. I laughed, unwilling to admit how relieved her words made me. It seemed the rest of my existence was to be like this, the constant internal battle between wanting Bella to love me, and wishing she would grow tired of me so she could have the life she deserved.

Just then the nurse walked in and muttered, “Excuse me” as she brushed past me. I went to the other side of the room to give her space, Bella watching me closely the whole time. It was as if she thought I was simply going to vanish into thin air. I hoped she realized I wasn't planning on leaving the room for one second.

“Here you go, honey,” the nurse said sweetly. “You'll feel better now.”

“Thanks,” she said blandly, fighting it though I could instantly see her eyelids grow heavy.

“That ought to do it,” the nurse said, and turned to leave the room. In the second it took me to cross the room, Bella's eyes were closed. I reached out to touch her face lightly, tracing my fingers along her cheekbones and down to her chin.

“Stay,” she mumbled, her voice barely a whisper.

“I will. Like I said, as long as it makes you happy...as long as it's what's best for you.”

“'S not the same thing,” she said almost incoherently.

“Don't worry about that now, Bella,” I said with a small chuckle. “You can argue with me when you wake up.”

“Kay,” she said, a half smile bringing up her soft lips. It was irresistible.

I lowered my lips to her ear and whispered, “I love you.”

“Me, too.”

“I know,” I laughed, as her head drowsily turned toward mine. Barely conscious and eyes closed, I could still tell she was searching for my lips. Excitement surged inside me as I gently pressed them to her own, sighing at the soft, warm caress I was met with.

“Thanks,” she mumbled when I finally pulled away. I felt the weight of her exhaustion taking over.

“Anytime,” I promised her.

“Edward?” she breathed.

“Yes?”

“I'm betting on Alice.”
I sighed. *Anyone would be a fool not to*, I thought, utterly defeated.

**Epilogue – EPOV**

During the weeks following Bella's near death experience, things returned to normal much more quickly than I would have anticipated. She was only in the hospital for about a week after waking up and during that time I had all of three conversations with Renee, none of which lasted more than five minutes. Carlisle assured me it was just her protective nature as a mother and that I should simply be happy she was allowing me to stay in Bella's room. Alice promised me she could see Renee and I getting along in the future, and that the next time we met she would genuinely try to get to know me.
The day Bella was discharged, her mother took her out for lunch before our flight left. It was the first time I'd left her side in almost two weeks and it was nearly unbearable. Alice convinced me it would help get Renee on my good side if I allowed them that time alone, and reluctantly I agreed. However it didn't stop me from hovering outside the restaurant and listening in.

For the most part, they avoided the subject of what Renee referred to as “that first big crush.” They managed to make it all the way to dessert before my name officially came up.

“Bella, just promise me you'll be careful, okay?” Renee asked, her voice catching slightly.

“I promise, Mom. I'll wear my seatbelt and watch where I walk and all that. And avoid stairs, if possible,” she added, her tone teasing.

“Well that's good, honey, but that's not exactly what I meant.”

I heard Bella sigh deeply and could almost see her rolling her eyes.

“Yes, I'll be careful. I hope you understand that Edward really cares about me though, and he looks after me. I mean, when I'm not stupidly running away from him and gracefully falling through windows,” she laughed. Bella had really embraced the details of her “accident” story, and frequently made jokes about her clumsiness. Maybe it didn't bother like it normally would because at least this time she knew it wasn't actually true.

“Just try to remember that you're young, and you have a lot of life left to live.”

Renee and I might not see eye to eye on everything, but at least we agreed on one thing. Bella did have a lot of life to live, and I was certainly going to make sure she got the opportunity. In that moment I vowed not to let Bella miss out on one human experience, no matter how trivial it might seem to me and my hundred odd years. It was with that mindset that I went to Alice to ask her advice.

“Alice, I need your help,” I said after reluctantly watching Bella drive off with Charlie. He hadn't spoken a word to me when he met us at the airport, just grunted in my direction and then started thanking Carlisle profusely for making sure Bella was given the best possible medical care.

“Edward, who do you think you're talking to?” Alice chirped. “I've already picked out her dress.”

“Of course you have,” I sighed. “So you don't think she'll be too angry with me?”

“Not about prom,” she said ominously. I waited for her to continue but she just smiled and started to walk away.

“Alice?” I called after her. “A little help?”

“Nope. Sorry,” she said, not sounding the least bit sorry. “You're on your own for this one. And good luck with it. Who knows, maybe you'll listen to her for once. That'd be a nice change.”

I watched her, perplexed as she and Jasper ran off together. I hadn't picked out anything useful from her mind, seeing as it was completely dominated by thoughts of playing dress up with Bella and finally getting to style her hair the way she'd been wanting to for so long. I tried to focus on the fact that at least it sounded like Bella would enjoy her prom. If she figured out some other reason to be upset with me, I guess I would just deal with it when it came up.

Though we'd only been apart for a few minutes, I was already anxious to get back to Bella. I was sure she was currently being lectured by Charlie, but hoped he got the worst of it out of his system by the time they got home so she and I could relax together and talk about what had happened. We hadn't had any real time alone since she'd first woken up, and I needed to make sure she was really as okay as she seemed to be. I knew how good she was at putting on her brave act for the sake of those she loved. I just hoped she knew she didn't need to pretend for me.
As I approached the house I realized all hopes of being alone with Bella right away had been wishful thinking. Charlie was nowhere near finished.

“And another thing, no more unsupervised dates,” he shouted as I took a seat on their porch to listen in. I hoped somehow Bella knew I was there. Maybe it would help comfort her while she listened to Charlie's frustrated rant.

“We weren't unsupervised, Dad. If you'll recall I was with his entire family.”

“Oh, right. Well then, no more dates.”

“It wasn't Edward's fault I ran off!” she yelled. “It wasn't any of their faults. It was my own. I got scared and I left when I should have stayed and worked things out. Like you told me too,” she added, playing on Charlie's pride. “I should have listened when you told me to wait and think things through. It's my fault that I was being stubborn and I don't want you blaming Edward for what happened. It's because of him and his family that I'm here now, that I'm alive. They found me after...” I heard her voice break for a second and I knew what image had been conjured up in her mind. I took a deep breath waiting for her to continue. “After I fell,” she finished, all traces of fear once again hidden.

“But you wouldn't have gotten hurt if you hadn't left, and you wouldn't have left if it weren't for him,” he spat, saying the last word like it was an explicative.

“I'm home now, Dad. I'm home and I'm safe. And Edward is going to be in my life, so I'd appreciate if you could at least try to be civil to him.”

“He'll be in your life if I say he'll be in your life,” he said, sounding appropriately fatherly. I couldn't help but smile a little, because as firm as he was being with Bella, I could also hear the wavering in his thoughts. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep us apart and he didn't want to lose Bella's trust and friendship trying to make it happen.

“We'll see each other at school, you know,” Bella said.

“Fine. You'll see him at school. And then you'll come right home.”

“Are you grounding me, Dad? Seriously?” she asked, exasperated.

Charlie thought about it for a moment, his thoughts growing weary. He was ready for the fight to be over too.

“No, you're not grounded. But I want to know where you are if you're not coming straight home. And I want you home before it gets dark.”

“That's fine. You know I'm not much of a night owl anyway,” she said, sounding like she was finally smiling again.

“And I guess he can come over here, you know, for...dinner and stuff,” he added. The words were forced, but I could tell he was trying.

“Thanks.”

“But I want him gone by eight. Evenings are for families and I think you owe your old man some quality time. You put me through a lot, Bells.”

“I know, Dad. I'm really sorry.”

“I know you are. Just promise me you won't run off on me again?”

“I promise. I'm not going anywhere.”

I smiled as their conversation drew to a close, running around to the back of the house and up through her window. She'd promised Charlie she wasn't leaving anytime soon. I would definitely
remind her of that when the inevitable conversation about changing her came up again. I hoped that her dedication to her father would keep the subject at bay for a long time, but somewhere in the back of my mind was the nagging reminder that Bella was more stubborn that that.

When Bella opened the door and saw me lying on her bed, she gasped and looked like she was going to faint. I couldn't understand her not expecting me to be there. I thought she realized that after nearly losing her, I was never going to be far away.

“Edward, you'll give me a heart attack one of these days,” she whispered.

Instead of answering her, I reached my arms out and pleaded with my eyes for her to come join me. Without a moment's hesitation, Bella had crawled onto the bed and was resting her head against my chest. We didn't speak. We just basked in the love we could both feel radiating from one another. I'd thought we would talk about everything, spend the evening reliving and reassuring, but the way Bella snuggled into me as if I were her safe harbor was all the convincing we seemed to need. We were back where we belonged, together and content.

I'd missed the feeling of wrapping my arms around her and watching her steady breaths as she curled up against me. Logically I knew Bella was safe and we were home, yet I was having a hard time convincing myself it was true. I was glad to be incapable of sleep, because I knew if I were able to dream, I would be forever haunted by nightmares of Bella lying broken and bleeding. I hadn't realized how much I needed to feel her warmth again, have her sleep peacefully beside me so I could begin to convince myself the nightmare was truly over.

“Bella?” I finally whispered as the sun started to set. “Are you asleep?”

“Mmmm,” she mumbled drowsily, pressing herself more tightly into me.

“Sleep, my love. I'm here and nothing's ever going to hurt you again.”

Then I waited while her breathing slowed and I felt her drift off completely. She barely spoke that night, and the few times she did her words were incoherent. I heard her mumble what sounded like my name once, which was then followed by a warm and loving sigh. I cherished it and hugged her tighter, watching her in the darkness as I hummed her lullaby the rest of the night.

Early the next morning, I heard Charlie gently turning the door handle. I slid out from beneath Bella's embrace as carefully as possible, just in time to hide in the closet. Charlie watched her for a few moments, a tender smile spreading across his face, then he softly closed the door and retreated down the stairs. I waited until I heard his car pull away, then found my place once more at Bella's side. I glanced at the clock and noticing how late it was, wondered if Bella had planned on returning to school today. None of us had talked about it, and in the grand scheme of things it didn't seem like one more day would matter.

Instead of waking her to ask, I decided to enjoy her peaceful sleep a little while longer. As the hours passed I was glad I'd let her sleep. She clearly needed it because it was almost noon by the time she woke up. Yawning and rubbing her eyes, she turned to look up at me.

“Wow,” she said, grinning widely. “Even better than my dream.”

I smiled down at her at kissed her forehead, and when her cheeks grew pink I just had to kiss those too.

“Thanks for staying,” she whispered when I finally pulled my lips away.

“There's nowhere I want to be besides here with you.”

“School!” she cried, suddenly sitting up straight and diving for the clock beside the bed.
“I think it's a little late for that now,” I said, feeling a twinge of guilt for not waking her earlier so she could decide. “Don't worry though, I don't think anyone expected you back today. You only just got home. Give yourself one more day off.”

“I guess,” she mumbled, not entirely convinced.

“Besides, with all of Charlie's new rules who knows the next chance we'll have to spend a whole day together.”

“So you heard all that, huh?” I nodded and she let herself fall back onto the bed. “I hate that he's blaming you for everything that happened.”

“He's right, you know,” I said sadly. “I am to blame. For everything.”

“Would you please stop that, Edward? I'm tired of you always thinking everything is your fault.”

“Well whose fault is it then?”

She paused for a second and then said with a smile, “James.”

I rolled my eyes. “That's not what I meant, Bella.”

“Well it's true. James is to blame for all of this. Him and his stupid game of hide, seek and kill the human girl.”

“Bella,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “Can you please not talk about your almost death so nonchalantly? It makes me really nervous.”

“Why? Everything worked out fine. I'm here, you're here. Both of our families are safe. James is gone. Can't we just move on?”

I laughed, though I was still feeling terribly uncomfortable by how indifferent she seemed to be about the whole thing. I hated to think that Bella was passing the events off as just part of the territory. Fall in love with a vampire, eventually someone's going to end up trying to kill you. No big deal.

“Bella, I want to move on. I do. I want to forget that you were ever in danger, that you were ever hurt the way you were. But can't you see how difficult it is for me to forgive myself for allowing it to happen?”

“No, I can't. I don't understand why you blame yourself. You didn't know they were coming. Alice didn't even know they were coming until it was too late. You didn't purposely put me in danger, and in the end it was you who saved me. Against all odds, by the way. Miraculously. By doing something we both thought was impossible.”

“But don't you see? If we weren't together, you would have never been exposed to that danger to begin with. If I didn't exist, monsters would still only be myth and legend to you, rather than real life threats.”

“Stop it,” she said fiercely, sitting up again and turning towards me. “I don't ever want to hear you talk about not existing again. Edward, can't you see it breaks my heart when you say things like that? The thought of a world without you in it is worse than any of the supposed nightmares you think you've subjected me to. I love you, and whatever I have to face for us to be together, that's my choice. It's worth it, you're worth it, because without you in it my life doesn't make any sense. You think I don't belong in your world, but the truth is I never really belonged in mine. Being with you, being loved by you, that's the first thing that's ever made me feel truly whole. So please, no more talk about taking that away from me. I may not have known what my heart was missing, but now that I know what it feels like, I don't know how I would survive without it.”
All I could do was stare at her, amazed that she had just put into words everything I'd been
feeling but didn't know how to express. I never knew how empty my existence was, because it
was all I had ever known. Now that I had Bella, thinking about going back to the way things
were seemed incomprehensible. I simply couldn't believe that she felt the same way, that I was to
her everything she was to me. Yet there she sat, eyes filled with tears and nearly trembling,
pleading with me to understand.

Not knowing what to say, I did the only thing that made any sense in such a moment. I kissed
her. I felt her breath catch as I pressed my lips to hers, more passionately than I had ever allowed
myself. I felt her fingers tangle in my hair, but I wasn't afraid as I reached up to cup her face in
my hands. My thumbs traced idly along her cheeks as her breathing sped up. She locked her
arms around my neck and her body pressed against mine. Something in the back of my mind was
telling me I should stop her, but as I felt her heart racing against my chest I found it impossible
to let go. I poured all the love I had for her into that kiss, hoping it would be enough, that she
would know I felt exactly as she did. There was nothing in this world worth living for except her.
And now I knew she felt the same way.

Time seemed to stand still, and I had no idea how long we stayed locked in our embrace. I
couldn't bring myself to care. Eventually our lips parted and our breathing returned to normal,
and before either of us could say a word, Bella's stomach growled. So out of place in our blissful
moment, we both laughed before coming back for one more quick kiss.

"I'm neglecting your human needs," I teased.

"Not all of them," she said shyly, blushing and turning away. Before I let myself think about that
too much, I'd picked her up and was carrying her downstairs as I had our first morning waking
up together. She laughed as I set her down and mimicked what she had done that morning, filling
a bowl with cereal and milk. Technically it wasn't the right time of day for breakfast, but the
gesture felt right somehow, like we were going back in time to when things had been simple.
Before James and nightmares, before pain and fear. Everything was right again and there was
only our love for each other and my desire to take care of her.

We talked the rest of the day, about every trivial and unimportant thing we could think of. We
were making it clear that both of us had every intention of moving on and putting it all behind us.
Deciding we didn't want to ruin our day together by watching Charlie glare at me all night, I left
when I heard his car pull up. The only thing making it possible for me to leave was knowing that
in a few hours, night would fall and I'd be in her room and in her arms again.

After another peaceful night Bella insisted on returning to school the next day, unwilling to fall
any farther behind. She hated the cast she was stuck in, but said it helped her remember the
importance of sticking to the details of her false story. The hand James had bitten remained
bandaged until all that remained was a slightly raised scar. I cringed when she told me she could
tell it was colder than the rest of her skin, a constant reminder that it was a scar like none other.

Listening in on all our fellow classmate's minds as Bella explained what had happened was
fascinating. Most of them passed it off as just another example of the clumsy Bella they all knew
so well, though some of them had an inkling that there was more to it than that. Fortunately,
none of them had nearly creative enough imaginations to come up with anything that would
cause problems for either of us.

As the end of the year drew closer and thoughts of taking Bella to prom came back into my
mind, Alice became increasingly more persistent.
How are you going to ask her? Oh, can I tell her please? When can she come over so she can try on her dress? Do you think she'll let me practice on her hair first, you know, to make sure it's perfect? Hurry up, Edward, only a few days left.

After awhile I stopped responding, though it didn't slow her down any. I sifted through a dozen different scenarios of how I would ask Bella, hoping to distract her. Eventually though, she realized I wasn't planning on telling Bella where we were going until we got there.

“This is completely unfair, Edward,” she said once during the brief time I came home each evening. Bella got to spend time with Charlie and I was able to see my family, though somehow they usually managed to find something to bicker about.

“To you or to Bella?” I asked, frustrated as ever. “Because I'm pretty sure this is supposed to be about her.”

“To either of us. I was looking forward to spending the extra time with her, you know, bonding.”

“You can still do that. She still has to get ready even if she doesn't know what she's getting ready for.”

“Well I say it isn't fair to her, because essentially you're taking the choice away from her. Again. I don't think that's the best way to start the evening.”

“You already told me she wouldn't be mad about it.”

“That's when I saw you actually asking her to go with you.”

“And now?”

She closed her eyes for a moment before sighing. “You'll have a bit more trouble convincing her to go along with it, but in the end I guess it doesn't change anything.” Then after a dramatic pause she repeated, “Anything.”

She'd been hinting for weeks that something other than the actual prom was going to upset Bella, but refused to tell me what. It's your own stupid fault, she'd mutter, and that would be the end of it. I'd accepted that she wasn't going to give me any insight so I let it go yet again.

Charlie had grown somewhat more tolerant of me, mostly because I was obeying his rules so diligently. Of course he didn't know that I spent every night in Bella's room, holding her while she slept and counting the minutes until she kissed me good morning. By the time I got up the nerve to ask his permission to take Bella to prom, he merely sighed and recited a new list of rules in a manner that made me think he'd been waiting for me to ask.

“Straight to the prom and straight back home. No little side trips, got it? I need to know where you kids are. Have her home by midnight. And if Alice insists on putting her in heels, promise me you won't let her fall and break the other leg, okay?”

“Of course, sir. I won't let anything happen to her. Ever again.”

“You know, I believe you kid. Just don't give me a reason to doubt it.”

“I won't.”

Pleased to have Charlie's consent and excited that I could finally start hinting to Bella that I had something special planned, I found it difficult to keep my tone casual. I hoped she wouldn't immediately figure out my plan, although it wouldn't have surprised me. Prom was all anyone could talk about lately, and while the subject wasn't of particular interest to Bella, I assumed she'd been paying at least enough attention to know when it was.

“Bella?” I asked the following afternoon during our drive home. “Do you have any plans this Saturday?”
“Saturday?” she said, not a hint of comprehension in her voice. “No, I don't think so. Why?”
“I wondered if you wanted to spend it with me?”
“Don’t I always?” she teased.
“Well yes, but I was thinking of doing something different. Special.”
Her eyes grew wide for a moment and I was sure she’d figured it out. Then her expression softened again and she smiled kindly at me.
“Whatever you have planned will be wonderful, I'm sure.”
She looked somewhat nervous when I told her Alice was looking forward to helping her get ready, but she reluctantly agreed to let her have free reign. I fought the urge to eavesdrop through the medium of Alice's mind while Bella was having her hair and makeup done. I was curious how she was handling it, but decided the two of them deserved to have the “girl time” Alice was so excited about, without my intruding.

When Bella emerged hours later, I was stunned into silence by her beauty, even if it was momentarily tainted by the furious expression pointed in my direction. Alice was beaming but Bella was shaking her head at me, mouthing never again. I stifled my laugh and ran up the stairs to meet her.

“Sorry,” I whispered, then kissed the spot right below her ear. She relaxed into me slightly and let out a soft hum.
“You're forgiven,” she said with a small giggle as I stepped back, really taking her in.
“You're too beautiful for words, my love,” I told her, grinning as she blushed through the makeup she wasn't used to having on.
“It's all Alice, I swear. I have no idea what she did, but whatever makes me pretty I guess.”
“You're far more than pretty, Bella. Just as you always are. All Alice did was make you stand out a little more than usual. You deserve to stand out tonight.”
“You're not exactly blending in either,” she said, eying the tuxedo I was wearing. “You look really nice.”
“I couldn't let you have all the fun by yourself,” I said.

She rolled her eyes, muttering, “Fun, right...” under her breath.

“Just one more thing,” I said, running to my room and back in less than a second. I held up the small handful of freesia I'd picked out earlier and clipped several blossoms into her cascading curls. “There,” I sighed, tracing my finger down her cheek and enjoying the small shiver than ran through her. “Now everyone who's near you will get a small hint of the divine scent I get to enjoy every day.”

Her cheeks turned impossibly redder, but she smiled at me as I leaned in to kiss them. Alice giggled beside us, then reached out to give Bella a quick hug as I pulled away.

“Thanks for putting up with me, Bella,” she grinned. “You do look lovely. Smell lovely too.” She turned to me with a stern look. “Don't forget to say good night to Carlisle and Esme,” she reminded me. “They'll be disappointed if they don't get to see her all dressed up.”

“Of course,” I said, trying to ignore the confused look on Bella's face. We'd come this far, I wasn't going to answer any questions now. She'd figure it out soon enough.
“I'll see you guys later,” Alice added with a wink, which only seemed to intensify Bella's baffled expression. I waited for her to ask me something, anything, but she seemed to bite her tongue and instead simply followed me into the living room.

“Oh, Bella!” Esme said, reaching out to hug her. “You're absolutely stunning!”

“Thanks,” she said shyly, returning the embrace.

“You do look marvelous,” Carlisle added, walking to Esme's side. “And it was really nice of you to let Alice have her fun. I know she can be a bit overwhelming at times, but she always has the best intentions.”

“No problem. Any time,” she said, though her quick squeeze of my hand told me there wasn't going to be a repeat experience any time soon.

“Will we see you two again later tonight?”

“Probably not,” I said. “What with the Charlie imposed curfew and all.”

“Well in that case, let me just say again how wonderful you both look. Have fun, and Bella, as always you are welcome here any time.”

“Thank you,” she said again, smiling as we turned to walk to the door.

During our brief conversation, Alice had gotten herself ready and she and Jasper were already on their way.

See you soon! Rose and Emmett are already there so don't take too long, she thought as they'd made their soundless exit.

Though Bella had appreciated Carlisle and Esme's kind words, the smile on her face had nearly disappeared by the time we stepped outside. She was looking increasingly irritated every second and I wondered if she had finally discerned what my plans were.

I held her hand tightly and steadied her as we walked down the stairs, just as I'd promised Charlie. I had tried to talk Alice out of the heels – well, heel I should say – but she insisted it completed the outfit, even if there was only one. When we reached the car, I lifted Bella up and placed her in the seat. I fastened her seatbelt for her and just barely resisted the urge to plant one soft kiss on her neck. Unfortunately, Bella's expression told me even that wouldn't have improved her mood any.

“At what point exactly are you going to tell me what's going on?” she asked as we drove away.

“I'm shocked that you haven't figured it out yet,” I said, smiling teasingly toward her. I was glad when her expression shifted, though I couldn't read the new look on her face.

“I did mention that you looked very nice, didn't I?”

“Yes,” I answered simply, happy she approved and hoping she felt as proud to have me at her side as I was to have her.

She glanced down again at the dress, as if she couldn't believe she was actually wearing it. After a few moments, the irritation crept back onto her face.

“I'm not coming over anymore if Alice is going to treat me like Guinea Pig Barbie when I do,” she said flatly.

I held my smile as I waited for her to put the pieces together. If she had any guesses she certainly wasn't letting on, though I did wonder what thought had crossed her mind and caused her heart to suddenly start racing. I was about to ask if she was feeling alright when my phone rang.
glanced at it, hoping I could ignore whoever it was, and was a little concerned when I saw Charlie's name flash across the screen.

"Hello, Charlie," I answered, looking over at Bella.

"Charlie?"
I gave her a reassuring smile while I listened to Charlie's voice. I could tell he was amused, even before he explained why.

"So it seems you're not the only one vying for Bella's attention tonight. Tyler is standing on our porch and seems to be under the impression he's her date for the evening."

"You're kidding!" I said, laughing at the absurdity of it. I'll say one thing for Tyler. He was persistent.

"What is it?" Bella asked, frustrated to be out of the loop.

"Why don't you let me talk to him?" I told Charlie, who laughed loudly as he passed the phone to Tyler.

"Who is this and what do you think you're doing taking Bella out tonight?" Tyler yelled. I could hear Charlie's laughter get louder in the background. "Not cool, man. I asked her months ago!"

"Hello, Tyler, this is Edward Cullen," I said as pleasantly as I could manage. He was delusional and it was rather amusing, but that didn't change the fact that he was still trying to lay some kind of claim to Bella when everyone knew she and I were together.

"I'm sorry if there's been some kind of miscommunication, but Bella is unavailable tonight." As long as we were clearing things up, it seemed as good a time as any to make things extremely clear to him. "To be perfectly honest, she'll be unavailable every night, as far as anyone besides myself is concerned. No offense. And I'm sorry about your evening."

With that I shut the phone with a smile, feeling quite accomplished. However all my happiness dissolved when I saw the look on Bella's face. Her eyes were filled with tears and she was bright red, though I knew the color of her blush well enough to know it was not embarrassment that was causing it. She was angry. She had realized where we were heading.

"Was that last part a bit too much? I didn't mean to offend you," I said gently, knowing that wasn't what she was upset about but figuring an apology of any sort couldn't hurt.

"You're taking me to the prom!" she spat as if it were an offensive word. I knew the idea of dancing, especially in public wasn't her first choice for any evening, but really I couldn't understand why she was so opposed to the idea. I thought she would want to see her friends, celebrate the end of the school year with them all.

"Don't be difficult, Bella," I begged.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she asked angrily.

"Honestly, Bella, what did you think we were doing?" I asked, pointing at my tuxedo. Suddenly I remembered what I was going to ask her before the phone rang and now given her over the top reaction, I really needed to know. What had she been expecting tonight?

I watched her, my mind racing through different possibilities but none of them making any sense. When tears started streaking down her cheeks I felt positively miserable. This wasn't how the night was supposed to go. And Alice had said she wouldn't be mad about prom, which meant...

"This is completely ridiculous. Why are you crying?" I asked, now more than a little worried about what was truly upsetting her if not the prom.
“Because I'm *mad!*” she spat. I tried to remember exactly what Alice had said. It would be more difficult convincing her to go along with it, but it didn't change anything.

“Bella,” I said, staring deeply into her eyes and probably using what some might call an unfair tactic. I didn't break our gaze as her heart fluttered erratically.

“What?” she asked, already sounding less upset.

“Humor me,” I pleaded, hoping she could somehow put aside whatever had been boiling underneath the surface long enough to enjoy herself. At least a little.

“Fine,” she sighed. “I'll go quietly. But you'll see. I'm way overdue for more bad luck. I'll probably break my other leg. Look at this shoe! It's a death trap!”

As she spoke the words, she lifted her leg and pointed her toe to illustrate the point. My eyes traveled of their own free will from her foot up her calf, to where the ruffles of her dress bounced off her knee. The way the dark silk and chiffon contrasted her creamy skin made a wide grin spread across my face.

“Hmmm,” I breathed. “Remind me to thank Alice for that tonight.”

“Alice is going to be there?” she asked, sounding moderately more at ease.

“With Jasper, and Emmett...and Rosalie,” I added, hoping that wouldn't bring her rage back.

I watched her expression go from angry, to nervous, to curious. She cocked her head to one side, eyes tightening and asked, “Is Charlie in on this?”

“Of course,” I laughed. Did she really think I wouldn't be gentlemanly enough to ask his consent? Then I added wryly, “Apparently Tyler wasn't, though.”

Another angry look flashed across her face, but it was quickly overtaken by anxiety as we pulled into the school's parking lot. She made no attempt to move when I turned the engine off, so I moved at an acceptably human pace around the car and opened her door, reaching my hand out and hoping she wouldn't put up too much of a fight.

Bella sat, arms crossed and lips in full pout mode. She really wasn't going to make this easy.

“When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion – and then when someone mentions dancing...” I sighed. I heard her take a deep breath as if she needed to calm herself. I simply couldn't understand what was so terrible about taking part in a very normal, traditional teenage experience.

“Bella, I won't let anything hurt you – not even yourself. I won't let go of you once, I promise.” I smiled at the thought of having my arms around her all night, helping her overcome her fears and proving what a good time she could have if she just relaxed and trusted me. The idea seemed to appeal to her as well, because after a few seconds her scowl softened into an almost grin and her arms unclenched and dropped to her side.

“There, now, it won't be so bad,” I said softly, reaching down and locking my arm gently but firmly around her waist. She took my hand and allowed me to help her out of the car. Supporting most of her body weight for her, we walked slowly toward the gym.

In all honesty I would have much rather taken her ballroom dancing, somewhere formal and luxurious. But this wasn't about me, I reminded myself. This was a human experience she deserved to have. We had the rest of our lives for formal. This night belonged to balloons and crepe paper, which incidentally made both of us laugh the moment we stepped inside.

“This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen,” she chuckled, and I breathed a sigh of relief that if nothing else the night would be entertaining for her.
“Well, there are more than enough vampires present,” I teased, spotting my siblings who seemed to have claimed the dance floor as their own. Apparently tonight none of us were concerned with blending in.

“Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?” she said softly, a slight twinkle in her eye. I decided then and there that she got far too much enjoyment out of making me uncomfortable.

“And where do you fit into that scheme?” I asked, staring at her wide eyed. Of course I already knew the answer.

“Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course.”

I forced a smile onto my face, trying to focus on the fact that she was having a good time, even if it was at my expense. “Anything to get out of dancing,” I sighed.

“Anything.”

After buying our tickets and officially making ourselves part of the event, I tried to gently steer Bella toward the dance floor. She tugged on my arm and stopped in her tracks, as if she could deter my intentions by sheer force of will.

“I've got all night,” I assured her, and reluctantly she resumed walking. Very, very slowly.

Several minutes later, we'd made it to the center of the room where Alice and Jasper, and Emmett and Rosalie, were gliding around and making everyone else in the room think incredibly nervous thoughts.

How come when they do it, it looks so easy?

Stupid, show off Cullens. Now I'm gonna look like an idiot.

They know how to dance. I mean, they actually know what they're doing. I'm doomed.

People in high school aren't supposed to know how to waltz.

I knew I should have taken lessons.

I'm totally getting dumped when she realizes I have no idea what I'm doing.

I laughed under my breath, thinking they were all a little foolish for letting it bother them so much, until I realized Bella was thinking the exact same thing. I felt her tense at my side, gripping my hand tightly as her heart raced.

“Edward,” she whispered painfully. “I honestly can't dance!”

“Don't worry, silly,” I said, smiling warmly at her. “I can.” I lifted her arms up to lock around my neck and raised her up just enough to slip my feet beneath hers. With a rush of excitement I realized all the jealous thoughts that had been aimed at my oblivious siblings were about to be turned toward us. I knew Bella had spent most of her life being embarrassed by her natural clumsiness and I was thrilled that now, with a little help from myself, everyone would watch in awe of her grace.

At first she looked a little nervous about letting me sweep us across the floor, but by the second song she laughed, clearly relaxing and beginning to enjoy herself.

“I feel like I'm five years old,” she said, giggling and looking lovingly up into my eyes. She was the picture of beauty.

“You don't look five,” I assured her, hugging her tightly to me with a deep sigh to emphasize the point.
She hadn't taken her eyes off of me since we'd begun dancing, which was probably best. I didn't want her getting overly dizzy. Then, as Alice flew by us I saw Bella flash a quick smile in her direction.

*You two look divine together. She's really having fun, isn't she?* Alice thought with a grin. I smiled widely at her before Jasper swept her into another turn. Looking once again into Bella's eyes, I was pleased to see that she truly did look joyful. There was no trace of irritation or nervousness. Only excitement, happiness, and love. Above all, I felt the love in her stare.

Then something interrupted my own happiness, a dark cloud descending on our otherwise beautiful night. Jacob Black was standing just inside the doors, staring directly at Bella and thinking a string of inexcusable thoughts. They ranged from irritation and jealousy toward me to affection toward Bella, both emotions fighting for dominance in his mind. Neither one had any place in my evening with Bella, and I grew furious as he began his slow but determined walk across the floor.

The closer he got to us the more anxious his thoughts became, and I was surprised by what I heard next.

*Stupid superstitions, can't believe he's making me do this. Bella's never going to forgive me. Ruining any chance I might have had...* 

“Okay, this isn't half bad,” Bella said casually. I wished I could have responded but my eyes were locked on Jacob, trying to figure out exactly what he was planning on saying. As much as I liked the idea of letting him take himself down a notch on Bella's friendship meter, I would not allow him to ruin this night for her.

“What is it?” Bella asked nervously, noticing the way I was glaring, but before I could answer she saw for herself.

*Wonder if Cullen will be able to detach himself long enough for me to get a word in. I mean really, can't he go bother someone else for awhile?*

Without meaning to, a low growl escaped from me and Bella's expression turned furious. “Behave!” she snapped at me.

“He wants to chat with you,” I told her dryly. And I decided I would let him. He was obviously nervous about whatever he was planning on saying. Wouldn't want to stand in the way of him digging his own grave.

“Hey, Bella, I was hoping you would be here,” he said, fidgeting with his collar. *Seriously what was Dad thinking? Why here, why now? With all these people around. With Cullen around,* he thought icily.

“Hi, Jacob,” Bella said sweetly. “What's up?”

“Can I cut in?” he asked warily, eyes meeting mine. *What if he says no? Just tell Dad I tried, I guess.*

Curious what the conversation would hold and figuring the child couldn't do too much harm, I set Bella down and took a reluctant step backward.

“Thanks,” Jacob said, obviously slightly stunned that I had allowed it.

I nodded at him, though I didn't attempt a smile. Then I turned and stared deeply into Bella's eyes, hoping she realized I would be no more than a few feet away, ready to intervene if anything he said upset her.
What's going on, Edward? Alice thought as I walked away, slowing down her dance enough to glance at the scene. I gave her a slight shrug, listening closely while Jacob and Bella went through the usual small talk. I smirked a little, watching him dance with her the way most of the other young couples were dancing. Awkward and clueless.

“So, how did you end up here tonight?” Bella asked.

“Can you believe my dad paid me twenty bucks to come to your prom?”

And then I understood perfectly. Billy was doing his part, interfering with my relationship with Bella without causing a scene, using Jacob like a pawn.

“Yes, I can,” Bella said. “Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself, at least. Seen anything you like?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking down at his feet. “But she's taken.”

Another soft snarl ripped through me and Alice was instantly at my side.

Relax, Edward. He's just a kid. Bella is here with you, she's simply humoring him.

“Uh huh,” I muttered, cringing as I heard Jacob tell Bella how pretty she looked. Pretty. He really was just a stupid child. Calling Bella pretty was like staring at a masterpiece and calling it a nice painting. Idiot.

I listened while Jacob babbled about the bribe Billy had made him, car parts for agreeing to talk to Bella in what he considered a “safe place.” What exactly did Billy think he was going to accomplish? Did he think she would walk out on me then and there because Jacob told her to?

“Don't get mad, okay?” Jacob asked, finally working up the nerve to say what he'd been paid to say.

“There's no way I'll be mad at you, Jacob,” she said, far more kindly than I felt he deserved. No, technically it wasn't his fault. He didn't believe any of the stories about us the way Billy did. That of course didn't change the fact that he was thinking inappropriate thoughts about stealing Bella away from me.

“Well – this is so stupid, I'm sorry Bella – he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'please.'” Please, Bella.

“He's still superstitious, eh?” Bella asked, and I could tell she was fishing for information. She was as curious as I was to know how much Billy had shared with Jacob, and more importantly how much Jacob believed.

“Yeah. He was...kind of over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He didn't believe...”

Oh, don't make me say it out loud. She's gonna hate me.

“I fell,” Bella said firmly, irritation creeping into her voice for the first time in their conversation.

“I know that,” Jacob said. Don't like him, doesn't mean I think he could hurt her.

“He thinks Edward had something to do with me getting hurt,” Bella said, and the ire in her eyes almost made me go to them right then and stop him from upsetting her further.

Shouldn't have come, shouldn't have said anything. So not worth it. What am I doing?

“Look, Jacob, I know Billy probably won't believe this, but just so you know, Edward really did save my life. If it weren't for Edward and his father, I'd be dead.” I smiled at the earnestness of her voice, her desperation to defend me even to Jacob.

“I know,” he said softly. Geez, I could have really lost her. Guess I owe the guy after all.
“Hey, I'm sorry you had to come do this, Jacob. At any rate, you get your parts, right?” Bella said, obviously trying to end the conversation. I took a deep breath, ready to rush to her side again.

“Yeah,” he mumbled. Not worth it, not worth it. Going home, not gonna say another word. Dad can fight his own battles from now on.

“There's more?” Bella asked. Of course there was.

“Forget it. I'll get a job and save the money myself.”

“Just spit it out, Jacob,” Bella said, frustrated.

“It's so bad.” I'm just gonna look like an even bigger idiot. Don't make me do it.

“I don't care,” Bella persisted. “Tell me.”

“Okay...but, geez, this sounds bad.” All Dad's fault. This is so all his fault. Couldn't he have just let me do this my way, “may the best man win” and all that? “He said to tell you, no, to warn you, that – and this is his plural, not mine – 'We'll be watching.'” Air quotes. I actually used air quotes in front of Bella. Just kill me now.

Okay.

I took two deliberate steps in their direction before Alice pulled me back.

What do you think you're doing? The gym is packed, you can't just throw him out into the street. Besides, you heard him. This is all Billy's idea. Jacob doesn't even want to be here.

“Good, at least he and I agree on something. Now if you'll excuse me, I believe my date is minus a dance partner who can actually dance.”

Ridiculous, overreacting...

But I didn't let her thoughts slow me down. The song had ended, Bella's arms were at her side, yet Jacob had to audacity to still be touching her.

“Do you want to dance again? Or can I help you get somewhere?” he asked.

“That's all right, Jacob. I'll take it from here,” I said, using the calmest tone I could muster. Jacob was eying me nervously as I took my place at Bella's side.

“Hey, I didn't see you there,” he muttered, turning his gaze back to Bella. “I guess I'll see you around, Bella.” Then he slowly backed away as if he could sense my urge to reach out and toss him across the room. Bella just smiled.

“Yeah, I'll see you later.”

“Sorry,” he repeated before turning around. Seriously, what does she see in Cullen? Overprotective, brooding...downright creepy if you ask me.

Deciding it wasn't worth it to spend one more second of our evening thinking about Jacob, I chose to ignore his parting thoughts. I pulled Bella close to me, and sighed as she leaned in to rest her head on my chest.

“Feeling better?” she said through a grin.

“Not really,” I admitted, though I wasn't about to tell her why.

“Don't be mad at Billy,” she said sweetly. “He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It's nothing personal.”
“I'm not mad at Billy,” I said calmly. It wasn't entirely true, but at the moment all I could think about was Jacob and the attachment he seemed to have developed toward Bella. “But his son is irritating me.”

Bella took a step back, staring at me as if my words made no sense. She really had no idea how he felt, which I guess shouldn't have surprised me. It took her a long time to believe I loved her, and I told her all the time. Why would she be able to read any of Jacob's pitiful signals?

“What?” she asked, and I quickly wracked my brain for the safest possible explanation.

“First of all, he made me break my promise,” I said and Bella continued to stare at me, confused. “I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight,” I explained softly, truly regretting that I'd had to break my word.

“Oh,” she said, relaxing again. “Well, I forgive you.”

“Thanks. But there's something else.” I suddenly felt the need to hint at the true source of my irritation, without actually having to voice it. “He called you pretty,” I finally sighed, expecting a blush, a laugh, anything. Her expression didn't change in the slightest, no blush, not even an eye roll. It was as if she hadn't even registered that he'd been trying to compliment her.

“That's practically an insult, the way you look right now,” I continued, eager to remind her just how magnificent she was. At least she usually seemed to appreciate it coming from my lips. “You're much more than beautiful.”

Still unable to take a compliment, Bella laughed. “You might be a little biased,” she teased.

“I don't think that's it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight.” I watched as the familiar blush colored her cheeks again, and pulled her in closer as we resumed our dance.

“So are you going to explain the reason for all of this?” she said a moment later. I stared at her, wondering what explanation she was searching for, when she shifted her gaze to the absurd decorations that surrounded us. I thought for a moment about the best way to explain it to her, my uncontrollable need to make sure she enjoyed life to the fullest. Deciding it was a conversation best had away from people, I spun us around and led her outside.

Once I was sure we were far enough away that no one would see, I scooped her up and carried her to a bench that sat beneath the long line of trees lining the school. How could I explain it so she would truly understand, when I knew everything I said would conflict with what she thought her heart wanted most?

“The point?” she repeated, but I wasn't ready quite yet. Between her anger about being forced to go to the prom and Jacob's interruption, I felt we'd barely had time to enjoy ourselves tonight. And I could tell she was enjoying herself, for the brief time when it was just she and I, dancing and holding each other close. If only all our moments could be as simple as that. Things seemed to make sense when we only had each other to think about. Yet somehow we kept getting stopped us in our tracks, forced back into reality where we had to worry about appearances and fitting into each other's very different worlds.

“Twilight again,” I finally whispered, staring up at the moon. “Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end.”

“Some things don't have to end,” she murmured, her voice quivering. I sighed, knowing what she must be hinting at. Why did she insist on bringing it up tonight of all nights? Hoping to distract her, I tried to answer the question that had brought us here as best I could.
“I brought you to the prom because I don't want you to miss anything. I don't want my presence to take anything away from you, if I can help it. I want you to be human. I want your life to continue as it would have if I’d died in nineteen-eighteen like I should have.”

As soon as I'd said the words I regretted them. Remembering the passion and fervor she'd spoken to me with the last time I made reference to my not existing, I realized that this must be what Alice had refused to warn me about. She'd said Bella would be upset about something other than prom, and that it was my own fault. I watched Bella's eyes grow furious and silently cursed myself for speaking so foolishly.

“In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have gone to prom of my own free will? If you weren't a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this.”

I tried to smile, though I still felt incredibly guilty for having upset her needlessly. “It wasn't so bad, you said so yourself.”

“That's because I was with you.”

Miserably I looked away from her, hating to see the anger on her face. Anger that I caused. Anger that I could have avoided.

“Will you tell me something?” I finally asked, hoping to change the subject quickly.

“Don't I always?” she sighed, sounding defeated but more like herself.

“Just promise you'll tell me,” I said, smiling as she seemed to sift through possibilities of what I might ask.

“Fine.”

“You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here.”

“I was,” she interrupted.

“Exactly. But you must have had some other theory...I'm curious – what did you think I was dressing you up for?”

Her expression froze and she grew unmistakably nervous. “I don't want to tell you.”

“I know.”

“What's the problem?” I asked, wondering what silly theory could have her looking so embarrassed. I was reminded of our early days together, when I pushed her to share all the creations of her imagination, trying to figure me out. Of course in that case she'd been right, seeing through my facade to what I truly was. I couldn't understand how that had come to her more easily than deciphering my plans for this evening.

“I think it will make you mad – or sad,” she said, looking at the ground.

I wanted to believe that there was nothing Bella could ever do or say that would make me angry, but the look on her face was telling me I might be wrong. Forcing myself to stay calm, whatever she told me, I softly said, “I still want to know. Please?”

She let out a long breath as if preparing herself, which only served to make me more nervous.

“Well...” she said, struggling for words. “I assumed it was some kind of...occasion. But I didn't think it would be some trite human thing...prom!”

She tried to gloss over it, but I'd heard it. The utter disgust in her voice at the word human, like she no longer considered herself one of them and wondered why she should still be subjected to
their silly traditions. It took most of my family years to feel that kind of apathy to the world we were still somehow trying to fit into.

“Human?” I repeated, not really wanting to hear more but knowing I'd started it and I would need to finish it. She looked down, embarrassed again, and tugged at the edges of her dress like they offended her. I know she was waiting for me to say more, but until I knew exactly where the conversation was going I was keeping my mouth shut.

“Okay,” she finally said, her voice shaking. “So I was hoping that you might have changed your mind...that you were going to change me, after all.”

Alice! Suddenly all her cryptic messages made sense. Really though, couldn't she have given me a little heads up about this? Bella's irrational desire to cast aside her humanity had been joyfully pushed to the back of my mind these past few weeks. I'd watched her grow closer to her father, become more outgoing at school. She looked like she was actually taking her mother's advice, remembering that she was young and really trying to live her life.

Knowing that at the first sign of my giving into her foolish request, she'd give up everything made me miserable and guilty. What lengths was she willing to go to in order to convince me to help her throw her life away? She'd even let Alice dress her up and cover her in makeup. Apparently she thought looking her best was a requirement for vampire transformation. This only proved to me further her misguided and glorified vision of what the experience would be like. If it wasn't so infuriating, it might have been somewhat entertaining.

“You thought that would be a black tie occasion, did you?” I said, deciding it was easier to keep my frustration at bay if I joked about it.

“I don't know how these things work,” she said angrily, admitting the very same conclusion I'd just come to. She didn't understand what she was asking at all. “To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does,” she added, then noticing my smile she snapped, “It's not funny.”

“No, you're right, it's not,” I said flatly, anger seeping back into my voice. “I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious.”

“But I am serious.”

She said the words with such conviction, sadness quickly took over anger as my dominant emotion. I could reason with her, I could give her all the things in life I thought she wanted, but in the end I would always end up denying the thing she truly believed would make her happy. How long would it take her to lose faith in me, falling out of love because she could never understand my refusal?

“I know,” I breathed, trying unsuccessfully to hide the misery behind the words. “And you're really that willing?” I knew the answer but glutton for punishment that I was, I needed her to say it in uncertain terms. She nodded, and I took small comfort in the nervousness I could read in her eyes.

“So ready for this to be the end,” I whispered, “for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything.” I always thought it was my thirst for her that made me a monster, but now I understood. This was why I was a monster. Though my love for her had brought me back to life, her love for me was making her chose death. Yet I couldn't make myself leave. I needed her too much.

“It's not the end, it's the beginning,” she said softly.

“I'm not worth it,” I assured her.
“Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly? You obviously have the same blindness.” Her eyes were fixed, stubborn, daring me to disagree with her.

“I know what I am.” Stone cold, dead heart, the only life in me existing because of Bella, who now sat beside me asking me to make us the same.

Alone together with only the moonlight illuminating her face, I watched Bella closely, looking for any sign of doubt. For the first time, I longed to see a glimmer of fear in her eyes, but they were nothing but determined. As I fought against my opposing emotions, Alice's warning floated through my mind.

*Who knows, maybe you'll listen to her for once. That'd be a nice change.*

Ha ha. Very funny.

“You're ready now, then?” I asked, hoping she would finally let her guard down and show her fear, giving me a reason to deny her that didn't make her hate me for it.

“Um,” she said, swallowing a gulp of air as if it were last. “Yes?”

I smiled widely as the word came out like a question. Though I wasn't foolish enough to think she would give up, at least in that moment I could tell her mind wasn't entirely made up. She was afraid, though she'd never admit it to me. She didn't want to give me any more reason to refuse.

I leaned forward until my lips were pressed against the tender skin that barely concealed her throbbing pulse. She stood her ground but I could hear the way her heart sped up, smell the fear induced adrenaline start to pump through her veins.

“Right now?” I repeated, and I watched the shiver run down her body.

“Yes,” she breathed, all her bravery suddenly vanishing. Her fists were clenched and she was breathing so hard I thought she might hyperventilate. While I'd actually started to quite enjoy myself, I figured I'd made my point. I didn't like frightening her, but I did hope the terror of having the moment upon her would weaken her resolve, at least for a time.

With a laugh I pulled my lips away, and muttered, “You can't really believe that I would give in so easily.” I expected her to be angry or frustrated, instantly bounce back to that practiced facade that showed no fear. Yet her next words were soft, disappointed but not upset. In a way it was worse, because with all the other emotions gone I could once again see the longing in her eyes.

“A girl can dream.”

“Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?” I knew she hated when I called myself that, but it was the truth. I was a monster and she thought she wanted to be just like me. By the time she realized what we both were, it would be too late.

“Not exactly,” she said sadly. “Mostly I dream about being with you forever.”

I felt a dull ache wash over me as I took in her words. Though I could not justify what would have to be done in order to make that happen, Bella had just stumbled onto the only thought that ever made my resolve falter. Being with her forever was what I wanted more than anything. I couldn't make myself think about a time when she wouldn't be beside me. It was more than painful, it was unfathomable. Yet I couldn't see the need to dwell on things that were far into her future when she was young and healthy and only just beginning to live. I would keep her safe from any dangers, and old age was decades away. We both had a lot of life to live, together.

“Bella,” I said, gently touching her lips with my icy fingertips. “I will stay with you – isn't that enough?”
She forced a weak smile onto her face and gave me the only assurance I could have asked for. It was as far as even my own mind allowed me to go.

“Enough for now.”

I felt my expression shift in the dim light, though I was determined not to upset her further. Breathing deeply and fighting against the pain that was building in me, thoughts of Bella and I together, forever, swirled around in my mind.

“Look,” she said, reaching out to me and pressing her warm hands to my cheeks. “I love you more than everything else in the world combined. Isn't that enough?”

“Yes, it is enough,” I breathed, her perfect love momentarily taking over my sense of reason. “Enough for forever.”

Then I kissed her throat once more, savoring her scent, her taste, her very being. As her fingers brushed lightly through my hair I allowed my mind to wander, as close to dreaming as I would ever get, and silently wished for things that could never be.