

15. MIND OVER MATTER

On the drive back to Forks, I kept glancing at Bella, marveling that she was sitting there beside me. We could have been any human couple spending a Saturday together. I reached for her hand and held it on the seat between us. Now that I knew I could do so safely and that she didn't object, I wanted never to stop touching her. It was another dream coming true.

Her old Chevrolet truck was not part of my fantasy, though. I didn't have much appreciation for classic vehicles unless they were of the high-octane, high-speed variety. The evolution of transportation in general, and automobiles in particular, was one of the most worthwhile advances of the twentieth century. I was in no way nostalgic for old-time cars or trucks. One of these days, I would buy Bella a new car, especially if I would be driving her around in it. Fortunately, her ancient radio worked and I twirled the dial until I found a station to my liking.

"You like fifties music?" Bella asked.

"Music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties, or the seventies, ugh! The eighties were bearable." I hadn't seen where this conversation was heading until we were already there. It was one of the many pitfalls of not being able to read Bella's mind.

"Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?"

"Does it matter much?"

"No, but I still wonder... There's nothing like an unsolved mystery to keep you up at night." Always curious, she was.

"I wonder if it will upset you." So far, Bella had maintained a remarkable equanimity through all of my startling disclosures. I kept wondering what bit of information would finally push her over the edge and away from me.

"Try me," she prompted when I hesitated.

I sighed in resignation. She'd heard more frightening things about me than my age. I supposed one more disquieting fact would make little difference. Still, I gazed into her eyes to try to predict her response. She looked calm.

"I was born in 1901." Her reaction seemed carefully controlled. She didn't flinch, at least. So I continued.

"Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and dying of the Spanish influenza." Bella inhaled sharply and I could see that this news hurt her. I hastened to reassure.

"I don't remember it well—it was a very long time ago, and human memories fade." I wondered how much of this Bella should hear. "I do remember how it felt when Carlisle saved me. It's not an easy thing, not something you could forget." The words carried me painfully back.

"Your parents?" she interjected.

"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?"

The details of how to create a vampire were not something I wanted to reveal to Bella. I hadn't thought it through, exactly, but the idea of discussing it with her made me uneasy. Becoming a vampire was not something I would ever wish on anyone, especially someone I loved. Every member of my family, if given a choice, would choose to be

human. But I owed Bella at least part of the truth.

“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. For me, it was merely very, very painful.”

I paused for more questions, but Bella remained silent, so I went on. “He acted from loneliness. 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. They brought her straight to the hospital morgue, though, somehow, her heart was still beating.”

“So you must be dying, then, to become....” We each finished the question silently.

“No, that’s just Carlisle. He would never do that to someone who had another choice. It is easier he says, though, if the blood is weak.” Perhaps that was more than I’d needed to say.

“And Emmett and Rosalie?”

“Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next. I didn’t realize until much later that he was hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him—he was careful with his thoughts around me. But she was never more than a sister.” I couldn’t hide my disdain at the memory.

“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 than 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 gazed at Bella, raising our joined hands to caress her cheek. As contentious as my relationship with Rosalie could be, I had gained a new respect for her today. Carrying Bella, bleeding, for one hundred miles without succumbing—it was almost beyond imagining.

“But she made it,” Bella brought me back from that horrific image.

“Yes. 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. 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 recalled a silly picture from the 1990s called *Groundhog Day*. The memory made me laugh. “I suppose we’ll have to go to their wedding in a few years, *again*.” That was our existence in a nutshell, reliving the same milestones, over and over, *world without end. Amen.*

“Alice and Jasper?” Bella cut in.

“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. 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?” Bella was intrigued. “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.” Like with Bella. I could no longer even imagine hurting Bella, let alone killing her, and I definitely wouldn’t change her. So Alice was just wrong in this case. Surely.

“What kinds of things does she see?”

Does Bella suspect? I glanced at her expression. *No, I think not.*

I attempted an answer. “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 that answer led to another question.

“Are there a lot of... your kind?” She seemed a little alarmed by that prospect.

I reassured her. “No, not many. But most won’t settle in any one place. Only those like us, who’ve given up hunting you people” — I monitored her reaction from the corner of my eye—“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.” We’d arrived at Bella’s house. I pulled the truck to the curb and turned off the engine.

“And the others?”

“Nomads, for the most part. We’ve all lived that way at times. It gets tedious, like anything else. But we run across the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North.”

“Why is that?”

“Did you have your eyes open this afternoon?” I smiled. “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.”

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

“Probably.” And another reason why twilight was often a sad time for me—too many nights spent alone.

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

“No, and that *is* a mystery. Alice doesn’t remember her human life at all. And she doesn’t know who created her. 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.” Alice was the true miracle among us. She was a great treasure and a comfort to me in a myriad of ways.

Bella’s stomach growled. *How inconsiderate I am!* It hadn’t come to mind that Bella would need food in the middle of the day, especially after a five-mile hike. I couldn’t delay her any longer. “I’m sorry, I’m keeping you from dinner.”

“I’m fine, really,” Bella demurred, minimizing her needs. Typical.

“I’ve never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget.” *But never again!* I promised myself.

“I want to stay with you,” Bella confessed timidly.

Joy!! And I you...! Fortunately, that could be accomplished quite easily.

“Can’t I come in?” I inquired.

“Would you like to?” she asked with surprise, as if it hadn’t occurred to her that I might want to follow her everywhere, forever. What was she *thinking?*

“Yes, if it’s all right.” I exited the truck and opened her door for her in the same instant.

“Very human,” she remarked, ignoring my speed.

“It’s definitely resurfacing,” I told her, marveling at how much closer to human I felt in her presence. Then I did something not at all human. Perhaps I was showing off a bit. Having reached the front door first, I retrieved the key, used it, and replaced it, all in a fraction of a second. I held the door open for Bella to enter.

“The door was unlocked?” she asked, puzzled. My quick movements had been too fast for her eyes to detect.

“No, I used the key from under the eaves.” The secret, hidden key. This admission would open a can of worms, no doubt. She stepped inside, then turned and raised her eyebrows at me, the question unspoken.

“I was curious about you,” I confessed.

“You spied on me?”

I couldn’t apologize for my obsession, for wanting to know everything about her, or for wishing never to be separated from her. And I felt too blissful right now to fret about her reaction. “What else is there to do at night?”

I led her to her kitchen and sat down at the table like I belonged there. She stared at me with deep, unfathomable eyes, then proceeded with the task at hand.

It was fascinating to watch Bella work in the kitchen. This was not a time of day I had ever spent with her. Her waking hours inside her home were a mystery. I’d never seen her cook, get ready for school, interact with her father, or do homework or household chores. As she fixed herself something to eat, I absorbed everything—what she was doing, how she moved, where she stored things, what was in her refrigerator.

“How often?” Bella’s question came after several minutes of silence.

“Hmmm?” I was much too distracted to have followed her train of thought.

She remained facing away from me and clarified the question. “How often did you come here?”

“I come here almost every night.” I was not shy to admit it. It was impossible to feel remorseful for something that made me so happy.

Bella whipped around to face me. “Why?” she demanded.

In for a dime, in for a dollar.

“You’re interesting when you sleep. You talk.”

“No!” she protested, a deep red blush coloring her face.

Okay, I was a *little* sorry for her distress, after all.

“Are you very angry with me?”

“That depends!”

“On?” I prodded. Might as well get it all out.

“What you heard!” she cried, overcome with dismay. I rushed to her side and took her hands in mine.

“Don’t be upset!” I begged, looking deeply into her eyes. I could see that she felt embarrassed, exposed. She didn’t understand that everything about her was beautiful to me. She had nothing to be ashamed of. I tried to calm her with my gentlest voice.

“You miss your mother. 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. Once you said, ‘It’s too *green.*’ ” I chuckled at the memory.

“Anything else?” Bella pressed, obviously wanting to know something in particular.

I relented. “You did say my name.”

She sighed, resigned. “A lot?”

“How much do you mean by ‘a lot,’ exactly?” I stalled.

“Oh no!”

She knew by my answer that it had been more than a little. And each time had been a treasure to me. I reached for her and hugged her to my chest.

“Don’t be self-conscious,” I pleaded. “If I could dream at all, it would be about you. And I’m not ashamed of it.”

Holding her had been such a natural reaction to her distress that it didn’t occur to me until later that doing so would have been impossible a mere twelve hours ago.

Just then, Charlie pulled into the driveway and Bella tensed.

“Should your father know I’m here?” I asked.

Charlie’s mind was so clouded and vague that I didn’t know how he would react to finding me in the house alone with his daughter. Judging by Bella’s stress level, it wouldn’t be the ideal way to meet him.

“I’m not sure...” She seemed befuddled, so I made a quick decision.

“Another time then...” I said and retreated to her bedroom, making myself at home on her bed. I loved the smell of her sheets.

“Edward!” Bella called in a half whisper. It must have looked to her like I had disappeared into thin air. I chuckled.

“Bella?” Charlie called.

While Bella fed Charlie and asked him about his day, I reviewed our day together with enormous satisfaction. Alice’s “eighty-percent certainty” hadn’t given me eighty-percent confidence that things wouldn’t go badly today. And when Bella revealed that not only had she withheld her plans from Charlie, but also had gone out of her way to mislead Jessica, my self-confidence had dropped well below that eighty percent.

Bella’s initial reluctance, or fear, or whatever had soured her mood before our hike had further eroded my faith that everything would turn out all right. I still couldn’t understand why Bella had followed me into the trees when the bottom so plainly had dropped out of her resolve at the last minute. I would give a lot to know what she’d been thinking. But she would not tell me then and I was pretty sure she would not tell me now, either.

Once in the meadow, I’d given her plenty of reasons to be frightened—such as nearly sinking my teeth into her neck. I wonder if she knew how close I’d come to losing control. It was one thing to test my own limits—apparently, it was quite another for Bella to test them so unexpectedly. Still, her provocative reaction to my touch was enormously gratifying.

I had avoided killing Bella at least twice today, demonstrating to myself that I had enough self-control—barely enough, perhaps—to thwart my deadly instincts when highly provoked. This gave me hope for the future because I felt sure that today, when everything was so new and intense, would prove to be the most difficult of the days to come.

And Bella had survived. Not only that, but she had neither run away nor been repulsed by what she had seen and heard. She wanted me to stay. I wasn’t going to think about how long that might be possible. Not now. Now was the time to relish the

moment—to feel what it was like to be truly happy.

Something downstairs caught my attention. I felt anxiety enter Charlie's mind—suspicion.

"No plans tonight?" he interrogated Bella.

"No, Dad, I just want to get some sleep." Bella's voice sounded a little higher and tighter than normal to me. A police chief, even one from a tiny jurisdiction, was unlikely to miss that. He didn't.

"None of the boys in town your type, eh?" His attempt at sounding casual made me chuckle. He might be a better actor than Bella, but that wasn't saying much.

"No, none of the *boys* have caught my eye yet." Fortunately, Charlie missed the emphasis. I didn't—it would seem that Bella didn't consider me to be in the same category as the *boys*. That was flattering.

"I thought maybe that Mike Newton... you said he was friendly." I stifled the growl that rose in my throat at the mention of his name. It angered me that they ever had discussed the vile Mike Newton.

"He's *just* a friend, Dad." I appreciated Bella's disavowal of Newton, but I resented her use of the word "friend." Possibly that was unreasonable.

"Well, you're too good for them all, anyway." That was certainly true. Even me. *Especially* me. "Wait 'til you get to college to start looking."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Bella humored him. Not convincingly, I thought.

Bella's steps were so heavy and slow on the stairs when she finally ascended that she could have been carrying a body. Lying on the bed, arms behind my head, I watched her enter the room, slam the door, tiptoe noisily to the window, and open it.

"Edward?" she hissed.

I laughed silently at her amusing performance and answered, "Yes?" from behind her. The look on her face when she whipped around and saw me was priceless. Unconsciously, I presumed, she slapped a protective hand across her throat. I could not control my grin.

"Oh!" She exhaled in surprise and slumped to the floor.

"I'm sorry," I apologized reflexively, trying to suppress my smile.

"Just give me a minute to restart my heart," she gasped.

Watching her eyes for fear, I slowly sat up and reached to help her off the floor.

"Why don't you sit with me?" I wrapped my hands around her waist and lifted her into place beside me on the bed. Then I took her hand and queried, "How's the heart?"

"You tell me—I'm sure you hear it better than I do." That was true. I was eminently aware of her excitable heartbeat. I laughed, remembering some of its gyrations today. We sat quietly on the bed until she had recovered from her fright. Her heart slowed and steadied, then fluttered as she inquired, "Can I have a minute to be human?"

"Certainly," I acquiesced, wondering what thought had prompted the glitch. So frustrating it was not to know!

I laughed again when she ordered me to "Stay!" like an errant puppy. That was something I could do well.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, watching her eyes as I froze my body into the perfect stillness of the vampire.

Though I had spent many secret hours in this room, it was an utterly new experience now. Sitting on Bella's bed, waiting for her to return, I was a guest rather than

an intruder. It felt very different.

As a vampire, my entire existence was that of an outsider. We lived hidden from the humans among whom we mingled. As Edward Cullen, the vampire, I was a constant intruder, privy to the thoughts, wishes, and dreams of everyone around me. Except, of course, for the one whose thoughts I most longed to know.

Listening to Bella talk in her sleep was a poor substitute for my usual capabilities, but even had she not revealed some of her thoughts in her sleep, I likely would have visited her bedchamber just to observe her, to be near her. I was too besotted to stay away. Intruding on others was such a part of who I was that I hadn't thought anything of entering her window without her knowledge or permission.

I could see now that being asked in, being welcomed, was an intimate act. It was more satisfying to be here knowing I was truly wanted. Paradoxically, it also made me feel vulnerable, an emotion that, until now, had been largely foreign to me. Having been given this gift meant that it could also be taken away. I was beginning to understand what Bella meant about being afraid I would disappear.

Though I was engrossed in considering this new perspective, I was also aware that Bella was taking a shower and brushing her teeth. I heard the door open when she exited the bathroom and noted her rushing footsteps on the stairs.

“Night, Dad,” she said, a little too loudly.

“Night, Bella,” he replied.

She raced back up the stairs to her room and shut the door behind her. The lights were still off, but I could see her as clearly in the dark as I would have in the light. I had faithfully obeyed her order, having not moved a millimeter from my frozen position. She smiled, noticing that, and I returned her smile, marveling at this new, post-shower Bella in her nightclothes. Of course, I had seen her in her holey t-shirt and ragged sweatpants many times before, but never upright and awake. Animation changed everything!

“Nice,” I commented.

She thought I was making fun of her.

“No, it looks good on you.” I meant it, though of course, I would have appreciated her dressed in a potato sack.

“Thanks,” she murmured, sitting down beside me. Shyly, she dropped her eyes toward the floor.

“What was all that for?” I asked, tilting my head toward the door.

“Charlie thinks I'm sneaking out.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Apparently, I look a little overexcited.”

I had missed that in Charlie's murky mind. I seldom heard anything he was thinking. My first impression of him was that he had a slow-moving, uncultivated mind. Eavesdropping on his conversations had revealed that, in fact, he was smarter than most of the humans around him and plenty literate. I just couldn't read him. His mind wasn't as frustrating as Bella's, but nearly so.

Charlie had said Bella looked “overexcited.” To see for myself, I lifted her drooping chin and scrutinized her face. She was flushed and her eyes were bright. So, so appealing.

“You look very warm, actually.” I yearned to feel the heat of the blood that colored her skin. I leaned forward and placed my cheek against hers.

“Mmmmmmm....” Yes, warm. And that intoxicating scent! It held me enthralled.

Bella stuttered an observation with uneven breath. “It seems to be...much easier for you, now, to be close to me.”

“Does it seem that way to you?” I questioned softly as I brushed my nose along her jaw line, inhaling her sweet fragrance. Drawing her hair aside, I pressed my lips to the hollow beneath her ear, feeling the thrum of blood in her carotid artery.

It was miraculous, really, that I was strong enough to kiss Bella’s neck and not pierce her skin with my teeth. I felt the inevitable searing of my throat, but the thrill of touching Bella’s smooth, ivory skin with my lips completely overshadowed the impulse to drink. A different kind of desire was ascending now.

“Much, much easier.” Bella continued, her voice raspy.

“Hmm,” was all I could offer. Her sensuous, curving collarbone had distracted me. I placed my fingers there, tracing the enticing line it drew to her sternum.

“So I was wondering...” Bella croaked, then stopped and took a ragged breath.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Why is that, do you think?” Her voice trembled, charming me.

The answer boiled down to that pivotal moment when I had laid my cheek against her heart in the meadow. Before that, a beating heart had always signified the quenching of thirst. There had never been any other reason for its existence in my vampire’s life. Now, it had an entirely different significance—one that made it easier to suppress my thirst.

“Mind over matter,” I simplified.

Without warning, Bella recoiled from me. I snapped my jaw shut, held my breath, and froze into a statue—the opposite of a predator’s natural reaction to retreating prey.

I assessed the moment, scanning for potential danger. Reading no threats, I slowly relaxed and resumed breathing. Bella’s breathing had evened out.

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked warily.

Her reply amazed me. “No—the opposite. You’re driving me crazy.”

“Really?” My face opened into the widest of smiles. How thrilling!

All through the day, I had registered Bella’s accelerated heart rate whenever I drew close to her. I knew now that her response signaled her attraction for me, though she’d never said so directly. And although I understood this in theory, in my innocence, I never considered that my touching Bella in the ways I longed to do might be as exciting to her as to me. Perhaps I did have a guardian angel.

Bella brought me back down to earth. “Would you like a round of applause?” she said tartly.

I couldn’t stop grinning. “I’m just pleasantly surprised. In the last hundred years or so,” I joked, “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...” It was hard to find the right words.

“You’re good at everything,” Bella stated flatly. In my euphoria, I just smiled and shrugged, as if it were entirely true. We both laughed.

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

“It’s not *easy*,” I admitted. “But this afternoon, I was still...undecided. I am sorry about that, it was unforgivable for me to behave so.” I was ashamed.

“Not unforgivable.” She was being generous...again.

“Thank you.” I took her hand and held it gently against my face. “You see, I wasn’t sure if I was strong enough....And while there was still that possibility that I might be...overcome,”—I inhaled the scent radiating 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...” Again, I couldn’t find the words. My sentences kept veering off into the macabre. But I think she understood.

“So there’s no possibility now?”

“Mind over matter,” I declared.

“Wow, that was easy.” The incongruity of her comment laid next to the effort involved, struck me as hilarious. Or perhaps I was just glad that she could joke about it.

“Easy for you!” I poked the tip of her nose. But it was also time for some serious truth. “I’m trying,” I confessed. “If it gets to be...too much, I’m fairly sure I’ll be able to leave.” That was as much as I could honestly promise at this moment. “And it will be harder tomorrow. 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.” There was no way to know for sure. I’d never seen a self-help book titled *For Vampires Who Love (Humans) Too Much*.

“Don’t go away, then,” Bella responded hurriedly. Did I detect a pleading note in her voice?

“That suits me.” I would happily stay, of course. “Bring on the shackles—I’m your prisoner.” I grasped her wrists, one in each hand, as if to demonstrate. I could not remember ever feeling this lighthearted. I didn’t want it to end.

“You seem more...optimistic than usual. I haven’t seen you like this before,” Bella marveled.

“Isn’t it supposed to be like this?” I observed. “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?”

“Very different. More forceful than I’d imagined,” Bella agreed.

I nodded.

“For example, 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...” I was reliving a moment. “Do you remember the day that Mike asked you to the dance?”

Bella nodded. “The day you started talking to me again.”

“I was surprised by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt—I didn’t recognize what it was at first.” My words spilled out faster as the emotion of the memory gripped me.

“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? Was there someone else? I knew I had no right to care either way. I *tried* not to care. And then the line started forming. 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.”

“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, until you were gone,

that someday you would say ‘yes’ to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry.”

“And then,” I murmured, almost to myself, “as you were sleeping, you said my name. 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.” Bella’s heart pumped faster. I paused to listen for a moment.

“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...” A surge of anger shot through me again just thinking about it.

“I should have known you’d be listening,” Bella commented.

“Of course.”

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

“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?” I couldn’t tell whether Bella was trying to pass this comment off as kidding, or if she was serious. I took it seriously.

“There’s no competition,” I assured her. With her wrists still shackled in my hands, I stretched my arms behind my back, pulling her close. I held her against me; she laid her face in the crook of my neck. *Mmmm, the warmth...*

“I *know* there’s no competition,” she murmured, her heated lips moving against my throat. “That’s the problem.” Her breath on my neck distracted me and it took a moment before I could respond.

“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. 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.”

“It hardly seems fair,” Bella mused. “Why should I get off so easily?”

I laughed. “You’re right. I should make this harder for you, definitely.” I took both her wrists in one hand behind my back and touched her damp hair with my other hand, stroking slowly from the crown of her head down to her waist. Her body trembled against mine. I couldn’t help myself—I loved to feel her respond to me.

I continued, “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.”

“Not yet.” Perhaps she didn’t now. But as time passed and her human desires changed, how would she feel then? Surely, she would resent my intrusion into her life. And if I hadn’t killed her by then, I had little doubt that she would leave me. It was unbearable to imagine. Of course, I shouldn’t have put her in this position in the first place, but I couldn’t see myself turning back now.

She felt my change of mood and tried to peer into my face, but I held her tightly against me. I couldn’t allow her to see my sudden desperation—my expression was not under my control.

I was caught up in dejection and almost missed Charlie's step on the stairs. His mind was amazingly quiet.

"What—" Bella started, when she felt my sudden tension.

I leaped for her closet, causing her to teeter and almost fall onto the bed.

"Lie down!" I hissed and she understood just in time, throwing the covers over herself. She began heaving her chest up and down in a tortured imitation of a sleeping girl. Fortunately, it was too dark for Charlie to see as clearly as I could. He cracked the door, peeked in, and seemed satisfied that Bella had not escaped on some nefarious midnight adventure. Little did he know, the adventure was right here, only a short distance down the hallway from his own bedroom.

As soon as he shut the door, I joined Bella in her bed, her back to my front, my arm around her waist under the covers. It was a true miracle that this closeness was even possible. My heart soared, all my joy returned.

I put my lips to her ear and teased, "You are a terrible actress—I'd say that career path is out for you."

"Darn it," she said with fake disappointment. I smiled at her in the dark.

I felt Bella's heart racing—she was entirely too wound up to sleep. Without thinking about it, I began to hum her lullaby. After a moment, I thought to ask. "Should I sing you to sleep?"

"Right," Bella scoffed. "Like I could sleep with you here!"

"You do it all the time," I pointed out.

"But I didn't *know* you were here." I refused to acknowledge her implicit reproach for my "spying."

"So if you don't want to sleep..." I flirted with the open-ended sentence, but she didn't take the bait.

"If I don't want to sleep..." Savvy. I laughed.

"What do you want to do then?"

Bella was silent for a long moment before answering. "I'm not sure."

"Tell me when you decide," I said cheerfully. Until then, I would do what I wanted. I raised myself up on my elbow and inhaled the scent at the base of her neck beneath her now, almost-dry hair. I skimmed my nose along her jaw line and inhaled again.

"I thought you were desensitized."

"Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet. You have a very floral smell, like lavender...or freesia," I told her. Yes...a combination of sweet and musky. "It's mouthwatering."

"Yeah, it's an off day when I don't get *somebody* telling me how edible I smell."

I laughed, but I also felt an irrational twinge of jealousy. Who? I sighed at my own absurdity.

Bella interrupted my thoughts. "I've decided what I want to do. I want to hear more about you."

"Ask me anything." After having risked her desertion many times today, I was prepared to tell Bella whatever she wanted to know, with only one or two exceptions. I watched her choose her first question.

"Why do you do it? 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."

“That’s a good question, 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.”

Bella was inexplicably quiet. I lay with my arm around her and listened to her breathing. After a few minutes, I grew curious.

“Did you fall asleep?” I whispered.

“No.”

“Is that all you were curious about?”

“Not quite.” She probably didn’t realize I could see her roll her eyes in the dark.

“What else do you want to know?”

“Why can you read minds—why only you? And Alice, seeing the future... why does that happen?”

“We don’t really know. 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?”

“Carlisle brought his compassion. Esme brought her ability to love passionately. Emmett brought his strength, Rosalie her... tenacity. Or you could call it pigheadedness.” I chuckled. “Jasper is very interesting. 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.”

Bella lapsed into silence. I waited.

“So where did it all start? I mean, Carlisle changed you, and then someone must have changed him, and so on...”

“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?”

“Right,” I chuckled. Then with a sudden surge of tenderness, I pressed my lips against the back of her head. I inhaled the scent of her hair, feeling the burn of the denied predator, but also the wonder of our proximity.

“Are you ready to sleep? Or do you have any more questions?”

“Only a million or two.”

“We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next...”

“Are you sure you won’t vanish in the morning? You are mythical, after all.”

“I won’t leave you,” I promised. I would do everything in my power to make it true. The pain of leaving her now would be unbearable.

“One more, then, tonight...” The warmth emanating from Bella’s face told me she was blushing. She was embarrassed about something.

“What is it?” I was extra curious now.

“No, forget it. I changed my mind.”

“Bella, you can ask me anything,” I encouraged her. She remained silent and I groaned in frustration. Why couldn’t I just read her mind already? “I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse and *worse*,” I complained.

“I’m glad you can’t read my thoughts. It’s bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep–talking.”

“Please?” I begged in my most seductive tone.

She shook her head “no.” *Arrrgh! So frustrating!*

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll just assume it’s something much worse than it is. Please?”

“Well,” she began, seeming to relent.

“Yes?” I encouraged.

“You said that Rosalie and Emmett will get married soon... Is that...marriage... the same as it is for humans?”

Oh! I laughed in amusement. Her embarrassment made sense now—I should have seen this one coming.

“Is *that* what you’re getting at?”

Bella fidgeted, but offered no reply.

“Yes, I suppose it is much the same. I told you, most of those human desires are there, just hidden behind more powerful desires.” Although for me, the two seemed to be converging or, possibly, even switching precedence. One held sway at one moment, the other at another moment—an altogether new experience.

“Oh,” was Bella’s only response. I knew there was more to the question and I was anxious to hear it.

I pressed her. “Was there a purpose behind your curiosity?”

She hesitated less this time. “Well, I did wonder...about you and me... someday...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, but she didn’t need to.

Her words sent a rush of desire through me and I froze, not sure how closely physical passion might be linked to my desire for her blood. Could the former ignite the latter? If I allowed the first, would the second be unleashed as well?

Enjoy the bouquet. Forego the wine, I reminded myself.

After a moment, I calmed enough to consider my answer and a feeling of sadness came over me. It didn’t take much thought to predict how lovemaking would end, even if I *could* control my thirst.

“I don’t think that...that...would be possible for us.”

“Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that...close?” she asked.

I had to restrain my imagination to keep it from rushing headlong down that road right now.

“That’s certainly a problem,” I acknowledged. “But that’s not what I was thinking of. 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.”

The knowledge pained me. I didn’t want to frighten her, so I softened my voice to a whisper. I rested my hand against her cheek.

“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."

Her silence was unreadable. "Are you scared?" I asked.

More silence. Then, finally, "No, I'm fine."

This was her standard reply when she was hurt or *not* fine, of course. I wondered whether it was fear or something else that distressed her.

Suddenly, I was distracted by a powerful pang of...what? Anger? Ah, no... jealousy... I recognized it now, but it was misplaced. I disregarded the feeling, but had to ask the question. I tried adopting a carefree tone.

"Have *you* ever...?" I let her fill in the blank.

The blood rushed beneath her skin in an enticing, warm flush.

"Of course not. I told you I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close."

Relief. "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." Bella sighed.

"That's nice. We have that one thing in common, at least."

Though it shouldn't matter what Bella had done with human boys before she met me, I felt unreasonably happy that there had been no one else.

"Your human instincts..." Bella began. I waited for her to continue. "Well, do you find me attractive, in *that* way, at all?"

How could she not know? I laughed and ruffled her mostly dry hair.

"I may not be a human, but I am a man," I told her with a smile. She couldn't see it in the dark, but surely it was evident in my voice.

My answer must have satisfied her, for I felt her relax in my arms. She yawned. What a long, wonderful day it had been!

"I've answered your questions, now you should sleep," I encouraged her.

"I'm not sure if I can."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" Bella almost shouted. I laughed, pleased.

Then I began to hum Bella's lullaby softly in her ear. After a time, her breathing slowed and evened out. "Are you asleep?" I whispered.

Her silence answered my question. I settled happily next to her and continued humming her song. Our song.

Four blissful hours later, I disentangled myself from Bella's arms and legs, which she had wrapped around me in her sleep. I gently lifted her head from my chest and slid my arm out from beneath her. Then I tucked the blanket around her and emerged from her bed. Though I had visited Bella's bedroom on other nights, this had been our true first night together. How glorious it was to hold her in my arms all night! My joy was matchless.

Though Bella had said some delightful things in her sleep a couple of hours earlier, she had settled into a deeper slumber afterwards. It was a good time to run to the forest and hunt for small game. I intended to keep myself as blood-sated as possible whenever I spent

time close to Bella, and I would spend as much time being close to Bella as she would allow.

I ran by my family's house on the way to the forest behind it and heard Emmett clicking through the television channels inside. He was grumbling to himself about Rosalie, annoyed at her annoyance with me. I was disrupting his sex life, apparently, and as physical a man as he was, Emmett considered this a great hardship. I decided to invite him to join me. Perhaps I could take his mind off Rosalie and possibly gather some information as well.

Emmett was the most forthright person I knew. He took things as they came and never worried about the past or the future. He was difficult to offend and never held grudges. He was also fearlessly honest about anything you might ask him. He didn't keep secrets (even if he *could* keep them from me) and he wasn't shy about speaking his mind.

Being bored, he quickly agreed to join me. Rosalie was working out some of her tension on the engine of her BMW. Working with iron and steel took less focus than other hobbies, simply because we didn't have to concentrate so hard not to break them. And Rosalie had trouble with breaking things. She was quick to fly into a temper and anything within her reach could be at risk.

You've been at Bella's? Emmett inquired.

"Yes, as usual."

So I guess things went fine yesterday in the woods? Emmett had an ulterior motive in asking. He had bet against Bella's safe return in the sibling betting pool. I didn't hold it against him. He tended to measure others' motives and actions by his own. He was upfront about his failure of will when he'd encountered a particularly enticing scent—or two.

"It went remarkably well, actually. Better than I had hoped."

Please tell me you struggled just a little bit!

"No doubt about it, Emmett. There were a couple of dicey moments."

Well, I'm glad you didn't lose it, Bro, even if I had my doubts. Alice informed us about halfway through the afternoon that you'd be bringing Bella back, though I told Jasper I wanted evidence before I paid him.

"I appreciate your faith in me, Em," I said with heavy sarcasm.

It's nothing personal, you know.

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't matter."

So what do you do with her all night when you're over there? She sleeps, doesn't she?

"Yes, she sleeps. We talk. Actually, last night was the first night we talked. Before that, she didn't know I was there."

She didn't know? What, you broke in? That's a little stalker-y, don't you think?

"Maybe it was. I really couldn't help myself, though. And I did tell her last night."

How'd she take it?

"Surprisingly well. She was embarrassed when I told her she talked in her sleep." I smiled, remembering.

Emmett came to a complete stop, stared at me, then erupted in hilarity. He cackled. He guffawed. He howled. Between gasps, he choked out, "No wonder you couldn't stay away. I would have hung out there myself if I'd known!"

"I shouldn't have told you. You mustn't let on that you know. It would truly distress her."

“You aren’t going to tell me everything she said, then, I take it.” He laughed harder.

I let him have his fun while we loped through the woods. After a short time, I said, “Em,” and raised my chin in a north–westerly direction. He quieted and crouched, then we ran purposefully toward a group of mule deer about fifty yards away. It wasn’t long before we were satisfied and heading back home.

“How’s Rosalie? Has she calmed down at all?”

Ah, you know Rose. It might take awhile. She wasn’t exactly rooting for you yesterday and now she’s miffed about losing her bet. Jasper is going to clean up.

“I’m sorry about setting Rosalie off, but why would she bet against Alice? Why would you?”

Jasper gave us 3–to–1 odds and Alice wasn’t sure about anything until halfway through the afternoon, so we were well in by then. And, by the way, Alice freaked out around two–thirty. Did something happen? She wouldn’t talk about it.

“Like I said, there were a couple of dicey moments. I don’t think it will happen again.”

So you’re going to keep seeing her.

“I don’t know how to stay away. I don’t think I can.”

Sucks being you.

“Actually, Emmett, I wanted to ask you something.”

Sure, go ahead.

“I know this is personal and you can tell me to get lost if you want to, but” —*Am I really going to ask this?*— “did you have physical relations with human women before you were changed?”

We both know that as soon as you ask me a question, you already know the answer because I’ll think about it whether I want to or not. It’s like that old joke, “Think about anything you want, except a purple–polka–dotted elephant.”

“I know. It’s not fair. But you can still decline to answer if you want to.”

Oh no, man, I don’t mind at all. Sure, I was a favorite with the ladies. I was a starter on the high school football team. Defensive tackle, of course. Emmett grinned.

“So you were a teenager when you had your first sexual experience?”

Yeah, sixteen. It was kind of a disaster. He laughed, recalling.

I tried to block out the scene playing in his head, but it was already too late. An eighteen–year–old, blonde senior had dragged him under the bleachers after a football game. His hands were up her blouse and hers went down his dungarees. And then it was over. I laughed along with him and he gave me a wry smile. *It got better. What about you?*

“No, actually. I was thirteen when the war in Europe began and sixteen when the United States declared war. I grew up playing war and dreaming of being a soldier. Girls weren’t yet on my radar, so to speak, when the influenza epidemic hit Chicago.”

I’m surprised we’ve never had this conversation.

“I guess I never had reason to be curious before.”

But you do now?

“Yes...well...no, not really, I guess.”

“What’s going on?” He stopped running and turned to look at me, all ears. I snarled at the rude images of Bella that were popping into his head, but kept walking. I had asked *him*, after all. He caught up to me.

“No, nothing like that!” I preempted him. “Bella just asked me—though not in so

many words—whether vampires had the same sex lives as humans. I told her “yes,” but as I have no direct experience of either, I was curious.”

“So the lady wants you, eh?” he teased. “That’s always good.”

“No, I can’t agree with you there,” I said, trying to divert his attention away from Bella. “I’ve never found that to be a particularly good thing in the past.”

Oh! I guess nothing ever happened in Alaska then. We kind of wondered with the way the Denali ladies were lining up for you at the time. Alice wouldn’t tell us anything.

When I didn’t respond to his comment, he chuckled, then considered how to answer my original query.

Okay...when I was a newborn vampire, sex was definitely not the first thing on my mind. It was all about the blood. Rosalie had been a vamp for two years, though, so she was ready for me. It wasn’t too difficult to oblige her. He smiled widely, a glint in his golden eyes. We all knew about Emmett and Rosalie’s relationship. They could be unbearable to live with at times.

“Is sex very different as a vampire from what it was like as a human?” I asked, knowing it was intrusive, but who else could I ask if not my own brother? Emmett, being Emmett, didn’t seem to mind.

Well, you know how vague human memories are. My sexual encounters as a human were always memorable, though... He cackled loudly to himself as a Rolodex of images flashed through his mind.

I wished I could put my hands over my ears like a human child and holler “La, la, la, la, la, la...” to block them out, but, regrettably, that is not an effective technique against mental pictures. I just had to wait him out. Eventually, his inner voice returned to a more thoughtful tone.

There is one thing I remember from my first experience with Rosalie. At the time, I was amazed at how much more intense sex was as a vampire than it had been as a human. It was way beyond anything I’d ever had. Once I was with Rosalie, the past quickly faded out, but I know my previous encounters were pretty pale in comparison. I can’t say whether that’s because my human experiences were casual, one-time things, mostly. There’s nothing casual about Rosalie!

He laughed again and I grinned at the truth in that.

“Are you thinking about, um...,” he started to ask. I heard his mind flounder for words in an attempt not to be crude. “...being physical with Bella?”

“I can’t help *but* think about it,” I admitted.

“So, you *can* touch her? Without losing it?”

“So far, so good. It’s getting easier.”

“I cannot even imagine how you could manage such a thing or why you’d want to, but hey, power to you, my brother!” It seemed ungentlemanly, but he raised his fist for a knuckle bump and I obliged, if only because he’d been so open and uncritical with me.

“To be honest, I can’t see it going much further in that direction. It just seems dreadfully risky. I would sacrifice sex to keep Bella safe, but I’m not sure that *she* could. And I never want to deprive her of anything, either. Changing her or giving her up are still the only solutions I can think of. I won’t do the former and I don’t think I can do the latter.”

Well, no one can ever say that you choose the easiest row to hoe. No pun intended. He grinned at his pun. I ignored it.

“If it weren’t so hopeless, it would be almost funny, wouldn’t it?”

I am not laughing at your dilemma. But don't give up hope. If you're truly in love with her, then you'll both be motivated to solve the problem. Hell, even I could probably come up with a couple of ideas for you.

My hopes soared for a second, before I felt the metaphoric wagging of his eyebrows and caught a couple of his pictorial suggestions. In current vernacular, I *so* did not want to go there with him right now. I interrupted his train of thought the surest way I knew. "Beat you home!"

"Hey, wait a second! Play fair!" Emmett hollered, but I was already gone.