

Epilogue: AN OCCASION

Bella was absolutely stunning. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

It was the evening of the much ballyhooed prom and Bella and I were on our way. She, of course, was not happy about it. I'd picked her up at her house—grumpy, but gorgeous—after my sister had tortured her for most of the day in “Alice's Bathroom of Horrors.”

The results were magical. Bella was wearing a deep blue, shoulder-baring gown, with nothing holding it up but her curves and a side zipper. It had a snugly fitted top with tiered ruffles cascading down from the waist. Alice had made up Bella's eyes to appear even larger than they are, and arranged her hair in a partly-up, partly-down design with wisps of hair around her face and long, soft curls in the back. She wore a simple silver necklace and high-heeled shoes. Well, *one* high-heeled shoe...and one walking cast.

Bella had finally healed enough to be released from the hospital. Carlisle had returned to Phoenix and accompanied us back to Seattle—parental supervision and all that. It was reassuring to have him there, knowing that if Bella became ill or experienced pain during the trip, he could help. Charlie couldn't argue with that logic when Carlisle had suggested he fly down and escort us home. Bella had said goodbye to her tearful mother at the hospital and we'd whisked her to the airport.

When we delivered Bella to Charlie's house six hours later, his mind was a jumble of mixed emotions. First, he was happy and relieved to have Bella back, more or less intact, after two-and-a-half weeks away. Next, he was utterly grateful to Carlisle for having been on the spot to save Bella after the accident. Finally, he was furious at me for inciting Bella to leave—as he saw it—and only slightly less angry at her for going.

After I'd escorted Bella into the living room and she'd asked me to help her up to her bedroom, Charlie had moved between us and taken Bella's hand from my arm and placed it on his. She protested, but—all in all—I thought it better not to make a fuss. I would come back in a few hours anyway and climb through Bella's window. Besides, it had been ages since I'd hunted. I was starting to feel a little unsafe.

I could use a short break, too. I wanted to think about our disastrous experience of the last three weeks and what to take from it. The problem was that what I *should* take from it and what I *could* take from it were not the same thing. What I should have learned, without a doubt, was that it was time for me to leave. Bella couldn't bring herself to move to Jacksonville with her mother because I was here. She was not going to accept my leaving either, but I knew now more than ever that I must. My world was simply too dangerous for her, and I wasn't willing to make her one of us...but I couldn't make myself go either.

Carlisle and I rode home in silence. It was only when we'd reached our driveway that Carlisle spoke.

“What's on your mind, son?”

So, my distress was that obvious. His question released a flood of emotion in me.

“She's going to die, Carlisle,” I blurted out. “If I stay with her, she will die.”

“Yes, well Edward, she *is* going to die sometime. Why would you think that you're any more responsible for that than Fate itself?”

“Being tortured to death by a vampire isn't exactly an ordinary human death.”

“No, but have you forgotten that if you hadn't been near when Bella was almost hit

by the van, she would already be gone? My point is that as a human, Bella has to live according to the rules of human existence, including the certainty that she will die and that her death could occur at any time. You will have to accept that for as long as she remains human.”

“Yes... I see what you mean, but the other way is completely untenable.”

“Why is that, Edward?”

“Because I don’t want Bella to be damned to our way of life! I can’t be a party to destroying her soul!”

Carlisle paused for a moment while I pulled myself together.

“You know, son, I find it hard to believe in an omniscient being that doesn’t care for you, or Esme, or Alice just as much as any human. I’m not saying that we are the same, but perhaps we’re part of God’s creation too.”

“I don’t believe it, Carlisle.”

“No, I know you don’t. That puts you in a tremendously difficult position, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, impossible. I want her so much. I’m afraid I’m too selfish to leave her alone.”

Carlisle grew quiet as he pulled the car into the garage and cut the engine.

“I’m here for you, Edward. Whatever I can do.”

“Thanks, Dad.” It solved nothing, but I felt slightly better for having put words to my misery.

I returned to Bella’s house several hours later after I’d hunted. She was asleep, I saw when I entered her window. I needed to hold her, though; I needed reassurance. As gently as possible, I straightened the covers over my beloved and lay atop them, wrapping my arm around her waist. I didn’t want to wake her with my icy touch.

Bella wriggled against me in her sleep and said, “Edward, stay.”

For now, I thought. I had no will to leave, especially since I was lying beside her again, listening to her heartbeat and smelling her hair. What a cruel joke it was, this existence of mine.

In the weeks that followed, Alice became a fixture at Charlie’s house. She had arrived the evening after we returned, when Bella called to ask her for physical assistance. Bella couldn’t take a shower with her leg in the cast and she needed help to bathe. It became Alice’s routine to show up at Charlie’s house at nine o’clock in the evening to lift Bella in and out of the bathtub and, every few days, to wash her hair. She returned in the morning to help Bella dress for school. Bella had argued vehemently that she could dress herself, but Alice went anyway.

I knew Alice’s secret motive—she was appalled by Bella’s clothing. So, piece by piece, she began to upgrade Bella’s tiny—and in Alice’s view, unfashionable—wardrobe. Bella was like a dry leaf in a stiff wind trying to curb Alice’s enthusiasm for dressing her. Once Bella realized that she could not stop Alice from bringing her new clothes, she changed tack and tried at least to influence the selections.

As Alice had predicted, she and Bella became close friends and her vision of the two of them together came true. It was now common to see Bella with her arm over Alice’s shoulders and Alice’s arm wrapped around her waist as Bella hobbled down the hallway in

her dressing gown. Naturally, when Charlie wasn't watching, Alice simply picked up Bella and carried her like a doll from room to room.

One side effect of Alice's routine was that, even though I was not present for the bathing, I sometimes caught glimpses of Bella in the bath through Alice. I tried to block the pictures in Alice's mind, but she liked to tease me by tossing a bathroom memory at me when I was off guard. Though I protested and chastised her, she just laughed and feigned innocence. Heaven knows, I'm no saint, and I wasn't as disturbed by the images as I pretended to be. Alice had an ulterior motive for her antics and, to my embarrassment, her strategy worked—catching fleeting glimpses of my beloved partially clothed further destroyed my willpower to leave her. I wanted her more than ever.

Charlie had grounded Bella after she returned from Phoenix. She had to be home half an hour after school, and I was allowed to visit only after Charlie got home from work. The latter was a compromise Bella exacted from her father, who would have preferred we not see each other at all.

In addition to our time together at school, I came to Bella's window every night after Charlie was asleep. Except for my continuing anguish over how to do the right thing for Bella, those nights were blissful. I'd promised her in the hospital that I would stay as long as it was best for her. Judging by the near-hysterics she had suffered when I suggested we should separate, it *was* best for Bella if I set aside talk of the future at least until she was healed—or so I told myself.

In the meantime, there was prom. I didn't want Bella to miss any human experiences because of me. Alice had agreed wholeheartedly that Bella should go to prom and began to plan how to get her there. Her idea was to present the evening as a surprise formal occasion, but not tell Bella what the occasion was. I was certain she would know immediately when we told her the date of the event, but she didn't seem to catch on, not even when Alice reserved most of the day with her for doing her hair, her nails, her makeup, and whatever else ladies do for such events. Bella had grumbled for several days beforehand, submitting only reluctantly and with bad humor. It didn't seem to dampen Alice's enthusiasm.

When I arrived to pick up Bella, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. She looked absolutely exquisite, despite the ugly walking cast on her leg. Alice had pulled Charlie into the surprise, so with little resistance, he had agreed to allow Bella out of the house for the evening. Charlie wanted to see Bella go to prom and, since it was not something she normally would have agreed to do, he was pleased that Alice had arranged everything.

I was surprised that Bella was so cranky about not being told our destination. I could hardly believe she hadn't figured it out, and I couldn't fathom where else she thought we'd be going, with her in a French gown and me in a tuxedo.

When my cell phone rang in the car and I saw that it was Charlie on the line, I wasn't sure whether to answer or not. Had he changed his mind? As far as I knew, I'd never given Charlie my cellphone number. Bella must have done so as part of the deal with Charlie that enabled us to go out.

It could be important, I thought. I didn't dare ignore it.

"Hello, Charlie."

"Hello. Listen, I've got this kid on my doorstep who's dressed in a suit and claiming Bella's going to prom with him."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed, laughing.

“Nope. It’s the kid that nearly ran down Bella with his parents’ van,” Charlie said, sounding disgusted.

“Why don’t you let me talk to him?” This conversation was going to make my night complete!

“Hey, what’s going on?” Tyler queried when Charlie handed him the phone.

“Hello, Tyler, this is Edward Cullen,” I said, in a pseudo-friendly voice. “I’m sorry if there’s been some kind of miscommunication, but Bella is unavailable tonight.” It was right to apologize, given that Tyler had been inconvenienced, but that was as much as good manners required of me.

I put just a touch of menace in my voice and continued. “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.” Okay, so I wasn’t *really* sorry.

The idiot child! How could he possibly have maintained the illusion for weeks that Bella had agreed to go out with him? And beyond that, why hadn’t he checked with her even once before now? Besides, he must have realized it was no coincidence that Bella and I both had missed over two weeks of school at the same time and that since we’d come back, we walked side-by-side everywhere and ate lunch together every day. I had no sympathy for him—the jackass deserved what he got.

I laughed heartily as I hung up the phone, but when I looked at Bella, I was startled to see her face turning red and tears forming in her eyes. What? Surely she wasn’t upset over Tyler!

“Was that last part a bit too much? I didn’t mean to offend you.” Maybe it *was* offensive to have announced that Bella couldn’t date anyone but me. That wasn’t really my decision to make and it would be far better for her if she dated human boys.

I had it wrong.

“You’re taking me to *the prom!*” Bella wailed.

No! She wasn’t going to make a big fuss about this when anyone else would have figured it out days ago. “Don’t be difficult, Bella.” Alice had invested too much in this evening for Bella to disappoint her.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Bella raged.

Gesturing toward my tux, I asked, “Honestly, Bella, what did you think we were doing?”

Tears ran down her face. I was dumbfounded.

“This is completely ridiculous,” I said. “Why are you crying?”

“Because I’m *mad!*”

Oh. I guessed I would have to turn on the charm.

“Bella.” I said, gazing into her eyes.

“What?” Her tears slowed as she stared back.

“Humor me,” I said in my most compelling voice. Bella’s face was softening. Thank goodness for my secret weapons.

“Fine,” Bella retorted. “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!”

Bella lifted the ruffles to reveal her bare, intact leg and the object of her derision. Beneath her long skirt, she wore the sexiest high-heeled slipper I’d ever seen, with a narrow stiletto heel, and tied on with ribbons wrapped around her foot and ankle. Perhaps we didn’t have to go to prom after all, I thought wickedly, as other, more interesting

activities came to mind.

“Hmmm,” I said as I admired her leg, which was shown to its best advantage by the scandalous shoe. “Remind me to thank Alice for that tonight.”

“Alice is going to be there?” Bella asked, her spirits lifting.

“With Jasper, and Emmett...and Rosalie.” I’d rather not have brought up my other sister’s name, but she *would* be there. Fair warning.

As I expected, Bella’s face dropped before she suddenly inquired, “Is Charlie in on this?”

“Of course,” I chuckled, “but apparently Tyler wasn’t.”

This story would keep me in laughs for a good long while. Bella seemed angry at Tyler, rather than amused by him as I was. I hoped he would put in an appearance. It would be extremely pleasant to see Tyler alone tonight while Bella was dancing on my arm. With self-reproach, I realized that much of my delight over taking Bella to prom was in showing off my beautiful prize. Bella had chosen me! I liked it that everybody would know. Selfish, again.

When we reached the high school, I opened Bella’s door and extended my hand to help her from the car. She just sat there like a stubborn child, her arms folded across her chest as if I couldn’t make her go. We both knew I could, but I wouldn’t, of course. I sighed in resignation. She made no sense to me sometimes.

“When someone wants to kill you, you’re brave as a lion—and then when someone mentions dancing...” I shook my head in disbelief. “Bella, I won’t let go of you once, I promise.”

Her expression softened. She was worried about falling or looking awkward, I guessed, but I would not let that happen. I bent over to take her around the waist and lift her from the car and she didn’t resist. It seemed she’d changed her mind. *Good.*

“There, now, it won’t be so bad.”

I carried Bella’s weight as she shuffled along beside me. Entering the gym, she seemed to cheer up when she saw the extensive decorations...balloon arches to walk through, twinkling lights, and colored crepe paper hanging from every surface. They’d used that stuff to decorate back in my day, I recalled vaguely. It had been around a long time.

“This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen,” Bella giggled.

“Well, there are *more* than enough vampires present,” I commented, seeing my siblings whirl about on the otherwise empty dance floor. Everyone had made room for Alice and Jasper and Rosalie and Emmett as they danced in their extravagant formal attire. Perhaps no one else could match their skillful maneuvers. No wonder—even Emmett, the youngest vampire in the family, had had sixty-five years to practice his ballroom dancing. We were naturally graceful creatures anyway...another of our “weapons.”

“Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?” Bella whispered to me, finding more humor in that scenario than I thought was warranted.

“And where do you fit into that scheme?” I challenged.

“Oh, I’m with the vampires, of course.”

“Anything to get out of dancing.” I smirked.

“Anything,” Bella agreed.

I’d thought that we were past the “refusing to participate” stage of the evening. So

when Bella became an anchor as I walked her toward the dance floor, I was surprised, but determined.

“I’ve got all night,” I warned.

“Edward, I *honestly* can’t dance,” Bella whispered, a look of true terror on her face. I couldn’t understand this kind of fear. It was ridiculous compared to everything else Bella had braved in the past month or two.

“Don’t worry, silly,” I said, “I *can*.”

I wrapped Bella’s arms around my neck, then lifted her by the waist and set her toes down on top of my feet. The pop song blaring from the speakers was in three-quarter time, so I swung Bella around in a waltz step. It was not your usual, twenty-first-century, prom fare, but all of us preferred the elegance of the classic steps to the random wiggling in place that passed for dancing these days.

“I feel like I’m five years old,” Bella laughed, finally relaxing now that she was whirling and twirling effortlessly.

“You don’t look five,” I assured her, a tinge of lust in my voice.

Bella was wondrously beautiful. She was beautiful without makeup or fancy clothes, but it was a special treat to see her looking so lavishly feminine. In her timeless gown, she looked like the sort of girl I might have married before going off to war in Europe. Given the brutality of that war, it was unlikely I would have lived to see twenty years old. World War I wiped out most British and European men of my age, as well as vast numbers of us from the United States. Those who remained were grossly damaged both inside and out. If I hadn’t contracted the Spanish influenza, I probably would have died in the war. Perhaps I should be more grateful to have survived that decade at all, even as I was now. At least I’d gotten the chance to know my true love.

My reminiscence was derailed when a familiar mind entered the gym. It was Jacob Black and he was looking for Bella. His mind was so loud and clear that it would be easy to mistake his thoughts for words said out loud. Damn this night! All of my irritating, former rivals for Bella’s affection were popping out of the woodwork. Jacob made me especially angry, for he didn’t just want Bella, he was here on a mission to separate me from her. Though I knew Bella would disregard his missive, the continuing interference of Jacob’s meddling old father infuriated me.

“Okay, this isn’t half bad,” Bella started to say before noticing the expression on my face.

“What is it?” she asked. Then she caught sight of Jacob walking toward us across the dance floor.

I snarled at the imminent intrusion. I didn’t practically kidnap Bella tonight just to have Jacob impose himself and his father’s edicts upon us.

“Behave!” Bella chastised.

“He wants to chat with you,” I sneered, irritated almost beyond good manners.

“Hey, Bella, I was hoping you would be here,” Jacob called.

The only thing that kept me from being openly rude was Jacob’s obvious discomfort at being here under such dubious pretenses.

“Hi, Jacob, what’s up?” Bella asked. I remained silent.

“Can I cut in?” Jacob asked, glancing over at my carefully neutral expression. Bella was willing to talk to Jacob, so I lifted her off of my feet and stepped aside.

“Thanks,” Jacob said without looking at me.

I started walking to the edge of the dance floor, but kept an eye on Bella to make sure she could manage with her crippled leg and the one high heel. I'd promised to hold her upright tonight. Jacob had better not let her stumble or fall, or I would...!

As I walked away, I heard Bella say, "Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself... Seen anything you like?"

"Yeah, but she's taken," Jacob replied. I snarled under my breath.

"You look really pretty, by the way," Jacob went on. I wanted to grab him by the necktie and hurl him across the room. He was pushing it.

Even if I'd tried not to listen to their conversation, which I didn't, I couldn't fail to hear Jacob's message. His father had bribed him with an expensive part for his car if he would come to Bella's prom and warn her to stop seeing me. I was enraged, but with some effort, held my position by the wall, outwardly calm. I watched for Bella's reaction. She laughed as if Billy were just a superstitious old native. Then Jacob said something painful.

"He was...kind of over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He didn't believe..."

"I fell," Bella interrupted.

"I know that," Jacob answered hastily. He was keen not to offend Bella. Too late. I could see that she was irritated.

"He thinks Edward had something to do with me getting hurt." She sounded disgusted. "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."

It felt good to have Bella defend me to her would-be suitor, but I knew she was being generous. Perhaps I had saved her life, but it wouldn't have been at risk at all but for me.

"I know," Jacob replied, seeming slightly more convinced.

Bella tried to soften her criticism of Billy by making excuses for him. She didn't realize that Jacob had more to say.

"We'll be watching'," Jacob quoted his father's final message to Bella. Of course they would. I didn't blame them, really.

Bella just laughed.

"Sorry you had to do this, Jake," she snickered.

Finally, Jacob was at ease, too. "I don't mind *that* much," he said, ogling Bella in her fancy dress. I hurried across the floor as the song ended, anxious to see Mr. Black remove his hands from my girl and to send him on his way. He offered her another dance just as I cut in.

"That's all right, Jacob. I'll take it from here," I said, standing silently and dangerously just off his left shoulder. I was gratified to see him flinch when I spoke.

"Hey, I didn't see you there," he said to cover his discomfort. "I guess I'll see you around, Bella."

Good. He was leaving. How dare he? I felt especially protective of Bella now. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her slightly off the floor. She leaned her head into my chest and we swayed gently, ignoring the music and the other dancers around us.

"Feeling better?" she smirked.

"Not really."

"Don't be mad at Billy. He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It's nothing personal."

“I’m not mad at Billy, but his son is irritating me,” I said, the anger still in my voice. He had a lot of nerve.

“Why?” Bella asked, surprised.

“First of all, he made me break my promise.” Bella didn’t get it. “I promised I wouldn’t let go of you tonight,” I said, raising one eyebrow.

“Oh. Well, I forgive you.” Of course she did.

“Thanks. But there’s something else.” What really angered me were his wandering eyes, his blatant desire for her, and his vivid imagination. If he knew I could read his thoughts, he probably *would* be afraid of me. He should be. But I wasn’t going to reveal Jacob’s excessive interest in Bella to her.

“He called you *pretty*. That’s practically an insult, the way you look right now. You’re much more than beautiful.”

She disregarded my irritation with a laugh. “You might be a little biased.”

She had no idea how gorgeous she looked, how desirable. Had she not seen the jaws dropping around the room as she entered? If only she could hear the thoughts of half the boys in the room...but I was glad she couldn’t. It might put her off men altogether.

“I don’t think that’s it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight,” I reminded her. Her blindness to her own beauty was part of her charm.

“So are you going to explain the reason for all of this?” she inquired.

All of what? Oh, prom, I realized when she looked pointedly at the crepe paper decorations. Since she didn’t care about being there and since numerous other males wanted to follow Jacob’s lead and get their hands on her, I decided to find a quiet place to be alone with my stunning, desirable date. I guided us around the dance floor, her feet on mine, aiming for the back door of the gym.

When we were outside and out of sight, I lifted my love into my arms and carried her across the grounds to a bench under the madrona trees from where we could watch the tail end of the sunset. We could still see some color in the sky through breaks in the clouds near the horizon. The moon was already glowing too, casting beautiful white light onto Bella’s blue silk, which contrasted sharply with her pale skin and dark eyes. She looked like one of us. Remorse swept through me as I considered my failings: my selfishness, my lack of will, my inability to let her go, my very existence in her life.

“Twilight, again.” I spoke almost to myself. “Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end.”

And not just the day. The sun that Bella had brought into my never-ending, midnight existence also would have to set. Transience was part of the beauty of creation...everything changed, all the time. I was reminded of a passage from the Bible, Ecclesiastes, 3:1–8:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die...a time to kill, and a time to heal...a time to weep, and a time to laugh...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; ... a time to love, and a time to hate...a time to keep, and a time to cast away...

This summed up what I knew mattered most in life. That is why my kind were such an abomination—we lived forever, always there, but never changing. Or not much,

anyway. It was why Bella and I were never meant to be together.

“Some things don’t have to end,” Bella said very softly. I sighed, knowing that all things that were *good* did come to an end.

“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.”

With all of my being, I wanted her to have her life—but I also wanted to be with her forever, with all of my being.

“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.” Bella responded with anger, but somehow I didn’t think it had anything to do with prom.

“It wasn’t so bad, you said so yourself,” I replied, ignoring what was really bothering her.

“That’s because I was with you,” she said quietly, placing her hand where my heart used to beat.

I gazed at the moon, knowing that it too would set.

Finally, I decided to face the difficult issue I suspected was troubling Bella.

“Will you tell me something?”

“Don’t I always?”

“Just promise you’ll tell me,” I said, knowing she would try to refuse after she heard the question.

“Fine,” she said begrudgingly.

“You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here...”

“I *was*.”

“Exactly. But you must have had some other theory...I’m curious—what did you *think* I was dressing you up for?”

“I don’t want to tell you.” I knew it.

“You promised.”

“I know.”

“What’s the problem?” She must be embarrassed.

“I think it will make you mad—or sad,” Bella admitted. Yes, it probably would.

“I still want to know. Please?”

Bella sighed and stared at her feet, before eventually answering.

“Well...I assumed it was some kind of...occasion. But I didn’t think it would be some trite human thing...prom!”

“Human?” So Bella thought it would be some kind of nonhuman occasion. I knew already, but I waited for her response.

“Okay, so I was hoping that you might have changed your mind...that you were going to change *me*, after all.”

Yes, she was asking me for her own death. She wanted me to take away what was most precious...her life, her humanity. And I wanted to, heaven knows. If I could have my selfish way, I *would* do it—I would take everything from her just to keep her with me forever.

Suddenly, the silly side of Bella's thought process occurred to me. "You thought that would be a black tie occasion, did you?" I smirked, gesturing toward my formal attire.

She was duly embarrassed by her reverse Sleeping Beauty fantasy and scowled at me, the imposter prince.

"I don't know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does." I was still amused by her naiveté. "It's not funny," she added, in response to my grin.

"No, you're right, it's not. I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious."

"But I am serious," Bella insisted.

"I know," I said with a heavy sigh. She couldn't grasp the pain, the horror, the finality of such a choice. And she didn't know how desperately all of us wished we could return to being what she was. "And you're really that willing?" I asked her, already knowing her answer. To imagine taking such a beautiful soul. It was appalling. "So ready for this to be the end," I mused, saddened. "For this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything."

"It's not the end, it's the beginning," she murmured.

"I'm not worth it," I told her. I was no Prince Charming and that was the honest truth.

"Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly? You obviously have the same blindness."

"I know what I am." *Living death.*

Bella sighed heavily, as frustrated as I was. What would she do if I called her bluff? Would she finally feel the fear and aversion that she should feel? "You're ready now, then?" I asked in a lower, more somber tone of voice.

"Um, yes?" Bella said uncertainly.

Exactly! I leaned toward her, touching my lips to the top of her throat just below the hinge of her jaw. "Right now?" I whispered against her skin. She shivered deliciously, but I couldn't be sure whether it was from fear or desire.

"Yes," she whispered back.

She *was* serious. She wanted to give up her life for me. It was a heady realization, but not one I could honor.

"You can't really believe that I would give in so easily," I said, drawing away.

"A girl can dream."

"Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?"

"Not exactly," Bella replied, sadness evident in her voice. "Mostly I dream about being with you forever."

My heart touched, I took pity on her then. Though I was a monster, though I was not worth it, though she would lose everything of value in her life, she would do it just to be with me. As I would for her, I supposed, if our positions were reversed. I *could* understand it. I just couldn't accept it for her. Was there another way?

"Bella," I said touching my fingertips to her lips. "I *will* stay with you—isn't that enough?" I said, knowing that she did not understand what a huge concession this—just *this*—would be, given what I knew to be right.

"Enough for now," she muttered.

I sighed, exasperated, but resigned to Bella's stubbornness. She simply couldn't

accept reason. It was as much of a concession as I could give her and she still wanted more—or less, actually.

She touched my cheek and looked into my eyes. “Look, I love you more than everything else in the world combined. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yes, it is enough,” I said, smiling, a wicked, unthinkable thought in my mind. What she wanted was what I wanted too, truly. “Enough for forever.”

I leaned in toward her throat. Her heart pounded wildly. Her carotid artery throbbed beneath her translucent skin—I could hear her blood rushing rhythmically through it. If my teeth barely pierced her skin there, her sweet, hot blood would pump into me with the full force of her frantic heart. The thought was enticing, seductive. It made my mouth water. *Would I be able to stop?*

Then I bent over Bella’s thumping artery and pressed my mouth to it. I was a monster, after all.