The night had been difficult, painful in the extreme. Something good had come of it, I suppose…Jacob and I had faced one another in a couple hours of honest exchange. We both knew more about each other than we had before. Strangely, I no longer felt compelled to use Jacob’s vulnerabilies against him in our battle for Bella’s heart. He did not feel the same way, however.

Jacob had a moment of triumph about 3:30 a.m. when Bella began talking in her sleep. He was disgusted and annoyed by what she said…at first. She spoke of me and called my name. She seemed to be dreaming that I was there in the sleeping bag with her. I wish I had been. Her dream changed, however, much to my dismay.

“Jacob, my Jacob,” Bella stated clearly with apparent pleasure.

Once he got over his initial surprise and delight, the object of her affection was overcome with glee. That’s gotta be frostin’ his buns! Jacob gloated. I guess the competition isn’t as over as he’d like to think it is!

Fortunately for his health, Jacob decided to keep his comments nonverbal. If he’d spoken them aloud, I would have felt compelled to rearrange his face for him. After considering it further, though, I realized that Bella might not survive the night intact without his body heat, so I had to put up with him until morning no matter what he did.

Did calling his name in her sleep along with mine mean she had conflicted feelings? Dammit! It had to, didn’t it? If so, then getting Bella to agree to marry me didn’t mean very much in the end—it didn’t mean that she was sure, for instance. I was relieved when Jacob dozed off and his soft snoring rather than his conscious thoughts filled the silence, leaving me alone to ponder my dilemma until dawn.

The sun reflected off the remnants of the night’s snowstorm and made the light very bright outside. Unused to morning sunshine, Bella woke early. I heard her scuffling inside the sleeping bag, but she seemed unable to move. With difficulty, she stretched her neck enough to peer at me around Jacob’s inert mass.

“Is it any warmer out there?” she whispered, not to awaken the hound.

“Yes. I don’t think the space heater will be necessary today,” I said, consciously erasing all emotion from my voice.

Bella’s wiggling grew more frenzied, but to no greater effect.

“Some help?” she requested softly. If she wanted out, I was more than happy to assist her. The thought made me smile.

“Did you want me to take his arms all the way off?”

“No, thank you. Just get me free. I’m going to get heat stroke.”
With rapid movement, I reached forward and unzipped the sleeping bag in a single long stroke. Jacob was jammed so tightly inside that the sudden release dropped his naked back squarely onto the frigid tent floor. Now I was amused at his expense.

Jacob’s eyes flew open and his body jerked reflexively from the cold surface. In one swift movement, he had launched himself from the floor and landed on top of Bella. A whoosh of air was forced from her lungs when Jacob’s weight compressed her soft form. *That* had not been my intention at all! I grabbed his left leg and flung him off of her in a carefully controlled movement to avoid collapsing the tent.

Jacob had barely hit the cold floor again before he was on his feet and crouched to attack, fierce growls erupting from his chest. His body shook uncontrollably and his hands clenched into fists. I jumped to my feet between he and Bella and snarled. Outside the tent, Seth joined in with noisy growls of distress.

*It’s a fight! It’s a fight!* he relayed to the pack, some of whom cheered Jacob on.

“Stop it, stop it!” Bella shouted, crawling around me to get between Jacob and myself. She stretched out her arms and pressed a palm into each of our chests in the small space. Though the touch seemed to calm him, I didn’t trust Jacob’s control. I grabbed Bella around the waist to shift her out of harm’s way at the first sign of danger from the werewolf.

“Stop it, now,” Bella ordered me.

I was merely defending. Jacob was the aggressor, I grumbled to myself, though he seemed to be regaining some control. Seth was growling furiously, caught up in the excitement of having a pack member stand off against a vampire. It was hard for him not to come crashing into the tent to help. I admired his control, actually, for such a young werewolf.

“Jacob?” Bella inquired. “Are you hurt?” He broke his stare to look at her.

“Of course not!” he returned, offended by the question.

Why was she so worried about *him*? It was *his* fault!

Bella turned to me and said. “That wasn’t nice. You should say sorry.”

“You must be joking—he was crushing you!” I was astonished…and annoyed.

“Because you dumped him on the floor! He didn’t do it on purpose, and he didn’t hurt me.”


“No harm done,” he replied magnanimously, as if he really were the injured party.

*Stupid mutt!*

Bella was annoyed at me for treating Jacob roughly, but she didn’t have all the information I had. I was almost sure that he had been in full control of himself when he landed prone on top of her, and that he was just taking advantage of the situation. In his plan to steal Bella, he had been looking for excuses to touch her in more and more intimate ways, believing that he could provoke her into realizing she loved him. After my midnight admission that I “couldn’t” make love to Bella, he’d also wanted to show her just how
ready, willing, and able he was to “take care of her needs.” And I think he wanted to rub my
nose in it too. Bella didn’t have a clue and I wouldn’t tell her, of course.

I noticed that Bella had started to shiver in the icy morning air, so I picked up
Jacob’s parka and wrapped it around her.

“That’s Jacob’s,” she protested.

“Jacob has a fur coat,” I said evenly. It was time for the wolf to get out of my tent.

“I’ll just use the sleeping bag again, if you don’t mind. I wasn’t quite ready to wake up. That wasn’t the best night’s sleep I ever had.”

“It was your idea,” I reminded him.

Jacob settled himself back into the sleeping bag. “I didn’t say it wasn’t the best
night I’ve ever spent. Just that I didn’t get a lot of sleep. I thought Bella was never going to
shut up.” Of course he would bring that up in front of her.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” I said, concealing my annoyance.

“Didn’t you have a nice night, then?” he continued in a mocking tone. This was not
a wise tactic on his part.

“It wasn’t the worst night of my life.” The worst, by far, was when I thought Bella
had died jumping from a cliff. Perhaps it was good to be reminded of that just then. It put
things in perspective.

“Did it make the top ten?” Jacob pressed. All right. He was begging for it.

“Possibly,” I admitted. “But if I had been able to take your place last night, it would
not have made the top ten of the best nights of my life. Dream about that.”

Jacob sat up abruptly. I had put the thought into his head and it would torment him
for a long time to come. Now he couldn’t help but think about Bella and I lying together
night after night, doing whatever his active imagination conjured up. Served him right for
being so smug.

“You know what? I think it’s too crowded in here,” he said, suddenly
uncomfortable.

“I couldn’t agree more.”s Bella gave me a poke in the ribs for my rudeness, which
no doubt gave her a bruised elbow.

“Guess I’ll catch up on my sleep later, then,” Jacob decided. He unpacked his
enormous frame from the sleeping bag, which would have to be destroyed. The
combination of his sweaty human and wet dog scents mixed with Bella’s flowery essence
was too much to take. “I need to talk to Sam, anyway,” he said, excusing himself.

Good riddance, I thought with relief, but the feeling dissolved quickly when Bella
grabbed Jacob’s arm to prevent his departure.

“Jake, wait—” she protested. He shrugged her off. “Please, Jake? Won’t you stay?”

Begging him to stay? Whatever was she thinking?

“No,” he answered sharply, before adding in a gentler tone, “Don’t worry about me,
Bells. I’ll be fine, just like I always am. ’Sides, you think I’m going to let Seth go in my
place—have all the fun and steal all the glory? Right,” he snorted.
“Be careful—” Bella began, but Jacob quickly exited the tent and zipped up the door behind him.

“Give it a rest, Bella,” he mumbled. Then he phased to his wolf form.

Bella wanted both Jacob and I to sit out the battle with her. A stab of pain pierced my chest and I inhaled sharply. She cared for him too, of course she did. I just didn’t know how much.

My mind shuffled through everything I had learned during the night, weighing things Jacob had said. Would it be more advantageous to tell Jacob the competition was over or to keep the engagement a secret from him? Bella and I sat together in the tent for a long time without speaking. It was one of those moments when I wished I knew what she was thinking.

“How much longer?” Bella asked, breaking the silence.

“Alice told Sam it should be an hour or so.”

“We stay together. No matter what,” Bella verified, clinging to my arm.

“No matter what,” I promised.

“I know,” she said. “I’m terrified for them, too.” I wondered what she had seen in my expression to make her say that. I was more worried about my family than I would be if I were fighting with them. Then I realized that Bella had been referring to the wolf pack.

“They know how to handle themselves,” I said, with forced confidence. “I just hate missing the fun.”

Bella grimaced and I wrapped an arm around her.

“Don’t worry.” I kissed her on the forehead.

“Sure, sure,” she said noncommittally.

“Do you want me to distract you?” I offered, stroking her cheekbone with my fingertips. Bella shivered violently. “Maybe not right now.” _So much I cannot give you that he can_. The thought rolled around in my mind, battering me anew every few seconds.

“There are other ways to distract me,” Bella said, interrupting my bout of self–pity.

“What would you like?” I asked.

“You could tell me about your ten best nights. I’m curious.”

So she had caught that. I chuckled, my mood suddenly lighter.

“Try to guess,” I suggested.

She declined with a shake of her head. “There’re too many nights I don’t know about. A century of them.”

“I’ll narrow it down for you. All of my best nights have happened since I met you.”

“Really?”

I replied with the confidence of perfect recall. “Yes, really—and by quite a wide margin, too.”

“I can only think of mine,” Bella said after a pause.

“They might be the same,” I pressed. I very much wanted to know what memories were precious to her.
“Well, there was the first night. The night you stayed.”
“Yes, that’s one of mine, too. Of course, you were unconscious for my favorite part,” I said, remembering her words, Edward...I love you.
“That’s right. I was talking that night, too.”
“Yes.” So she remembered. That was heartening. Caught up in the memory, I didn’t foresee her next question.
“What did I say last night?” she whispered, a slight agitation in her voice.
I shrugged, downplaying it.
“That bad?” Bella groaned.
I sighed. I had to tell her. It made it worse knowing that Jacob was within hearing range. Though he was silent, his thoughts were loud in the stillness of the snow–blanketed forest. He was listening intently to our conversation.
“Nothing too horrible,” I murmured under my breath, beneath what I thought was his hearing range.
“Please tell me.”
“ Mostly you said my name, the same as usual,” I said, raising my voice a little. Got that, mongrel? She said your name once in all the months I’ve lain with her, and mine nearly every night.
“That’s not bad,” Bella stated tentatively.
Whispering just loud enough for Bella to hear, I told her, “Near the end, though, you started mumbling some nonsense about ‘Jacob, my Jacob.’” I paused to collect myself.
“Your Jacob enjoyed that quite a lot.” I trained my eyes on the ceiling so Bella couldn’t see what I couldn’t hide.
“Sorry. That’s just the way I differentiate.”
“Differentiate?”
“Between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Between the Jacob I like and the one who annoys the hell out of me,” she clarified.
I thought about that for a moment. So, a part of Bella loves a part of Jacob. It wasn’t the same as what she felt for me, I realized with relief.
“That makes sense. Tell me another favorite night.”
“Flying home from Italy.”
I crinkled my forehead in confusion. That couldn’t be right. Bella registered my doubt.
“Is that not one of yours?” she asked.
“No, it is one of mine, actually, but I’m surprised it’s on your list. Weren’t you under the ludicrous impression I was just acting from a guilty conscience, and I was going to bolt as soon as the plane doors opened?”
“Yes. But, still, you were there.” Bella smiled warmly at me, her eyes shining. With tears?
I leaned over to kiss her tangled mass of hair. That she could have been happy
flying home with me after what I’d done to her, especially since she believed I was about to do it again, was beyond my comprehension.

“You love me more than I deserve,” I told her, reconsidering my fears and misgivings.

Bella laughed dismissively.

“Next would be the night after Italy,” she went on.

“Yes, that’s on the list. You were so funny.” I didn’t bother to lower my voice.

Jacob was still within hearing range, but feeling reassured of Bella’s love, I didn’t mind his hearing our conversation.

“Funny?” Bella queried.

“I had no idea your dreams were so vivid. It took me forever to convince you that you were awake.” I grinned, remembering her surprise and prolonged confusion that I was still in her room in the morning.

“I’m still not sure,” Bella added. “You’ve always seemed more like a dream than reality. Tell me one of yours, now. Did I guess your first place?”

“No—,” I began, surprised that it wasn’t obvious. Well…now everybody would know and maybe that was for the best. “That would be two nights ago, when you finally agreed to marry me.” I heard the flurry of Jacob’s thoughts while he processed what I had just said. He froze in disbelief.

Bella screwed up her face to indicate her disagreement.

“That doesn’t make your list?” I looked at her sideways, a challenge.

She paused, contemplating. I didn’t have to read her mind to know what she was thinking. She squirmed a little before answering.

“Yes…it does. But with reservations. I don’t understand why it’s so important to you. You already had me forever.” I felt Jacob’s shock at hearing Bella verify my words.

“A hundred years from now, when you’ve gained enough perspective to really appreciate the answer, I will explain it to you,” I said, smiling. By then, all of this turmoil and doubt will have passed away along with all the humans we knew. But there would still be “us,” the one thing in our future that we could hold onto forever.

“I’ll remind you to explain—in a hundred years.” I hoped that she would.

Jacob’s paralysis of shock and denial wore off as the werewolf absorbed what he’d heard from both Bella’s lips and mine.

“Are you warm enough?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, as usual. “Why?”

I didn’t have to reply. Jacob’s howl of rage and pain exploded into the quiet morning air. It went on and on and I felt the rage gradually lessen and the pain increase until, finally, the sound spent itself in a muffled stutter. The only recognizable word in his mind was “escape.” He began to run.

I answered gently. “Because your space heater has reached his limit.” Then to myself, I muttered “Truce over.”
Jacob had had one memorable night to entertain his fantasies and to hold onto his misapprehensions before dawn came and tore them away.

“Jacob was listening,” Bella stated flatly.

“Yes.”

“You knew.”

“Yes.”

“I never promised to fight fair,” I told her. “And he deserves to know.”

Bella slumped over, hiding her face in her hands.

“Are you angry with me?” I asked quietly.

“Not you. I’m horrified at me!” Her voice came out a tortured wail.

“Don’t torment yourself,” I implored, stunned that she would feel responsible for Jacob’s pain, as if she had caused it or could ever heal it. On second thought, though, maybe she did have that power over him.

“Yes, I should save my energy to torment Jacob some more,” Bella cried. “I wouldn’t want to leave any part of him unharmed.”

“He knew what he was doing.”

“Do you think that matters?” Tears welled in Bella’s eyes. “Do you think I care whether it’s fair or whether he was adequately warned? I’m hurting him. Every time I turn around, I’m hurting him again. I’m a hideous person.” The antipathy in Bella’s voice was agonizing, directed at herself as it was. What had I done?

“No, you’re not,” I countered in an effort to reassure. I pulled her to my chest, trying to interrupt the escalation of emotion I could feel building in her, taking over.

“I am! What’s wrong with me? I have to go find him.” Bella tried to shake off my embrace and I released her, letting my arms fall limply to my sides.

“Bella, he’s already miles away, and it’s cold,” I said, trying to reason with her.

“I don’t care. I can’t just sit here. I have to—I have to…” Bella was thrashing wildly, flinging off Jacob’s parka and jamming her feet into her boots. I sat, helplessly watching as she scuttled through the tent flap into the bright sunshine outside.

I shook myself into action when I heard snow crunching beneath Bella’s feet. At first, I trailed her through the clearing, uncertain what to do. Then she staggered into the dense forest, frozen evergreen limbs creaking as she pushed them out of her way, and spraying snow into the air when they snapped back. In one version of the future, Alice had seen Bella stumbling about in the woods searching for her.

“Seth,” I spoke softly, directing my question to where he lay beneath a spruce tree at the edge of the clearing. “How much time before the battle? Ask Sam to ask Alice.”

Then I took several quick steps to catch up with Bella, and reached for her wrist to stop her progress.

“Seventeen minutes,” Seth thought in answer to my request.

“You can’t go after him. Not today,” I told Bella. “It’s almost time. And getting yourself lost wouldn’t help anyone, regardless.”
Bella tried to break my grip.

“I’m sorry, Bella. I’m sorry I did that.” Remorse colored my words. I’d hurt her again, this time in my selfish effort to stake my claim and fend off Jacob’s challenge.

“You didn’t do anything. It’s my fault. I did this. I did everything wrong. I could have…When he…I shouldn’t have…I…I…” Bella’s voice disintegrated into a sobbing stutter.

“Bella, Bella,” I crooned, trying to soothe her as I held her shaking body to my chest. Tears ran down her face.

“I should have—told him—I should—have said—” She paused. “He shouldn’t have—found out like this.” Her wracking sobs tore at my heart. I had to do something.

“Do you want me to see if I can bring him back, so that you can talk to him?” I spoke quietly, working hard to control my voice. “There’s still a little time.”

I felt Bella’s head bob twice, but she kept her eyes cast down. It was just as well. I wasn’t sure my expression was fully under my control.

“Stay by the tent. I’ll be back soon.”

I turned, sniffing the air to locate Jacob’s scent, then taking off at full speed. As I ran, my mind flailed around, trying to come to terms with Bella’s reality. It wasn’t just that Jacob loved my Bella and wouldn’t let her go, though that was true. Bella couldn’t let him go either. A part of her needed him badly enough that it tore her up when our natural animosity rose to the surface.

Jacob and I could not coexist in any proximity to one another. Bella had to choose between us and she had just made it clear that she was unsure. It was an opening for Jacob and I knew he would take his best shot.

Jacob heard me running behind him and whipped around to protect himself. I stopped a good distance away and held up my hands, palms raised, to show that I had no aggressive intentions. He flicked his tail and snarled. I didn’t blame him.

“Jacob,” I said, “Bella cannot bear for you to leave in this way. It’s tearing her apart. I’m begging you, please, for her, to come back and talk to her before you go. I’m afraid she’ll endanger herself trying to follow you down the mountain.” I stopped speaking abruptly when my voice quavered.

Jacob’s black eyes peered into my mine, considering, assessing. I turned my back to him—the wolf equivalent of laying down my sword—and began to retrace my steps, slowly at first, until I heard him grunt his begrudging consent, then I started running. He kept some distance between us, but I knew he was following. Seth growled when he heard us coming.

“It’s just us, Seth,” Jacob called from the woods as he pulled on his clothing (such as it was).

I entered the clearing where Bella was pacing back and forth along a short line like a tiger in too small a cage. Her body was rigid, but her tears seemed to have stopped. How I longed to know what she was thinking!
Seth approached me. Sam says that Alice says that the Volturi are coming. She thinks they are following the newborn vampires, but their intentions are fuzzy. That’s a big problem isn’t it?

The Volturi!? “Yes, that’s all we need,” I muttered. “I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised. But the timing is going to be very close. Please have Sam ask Alice to try to nail the schedule down better.” I carefully chose my words, so as not to alarm Bella. She didn’t need to hear that the second group who wanted to assassinate her was following in the footsteps of the first. We’d have to deal with each problem as it came at us.

I hurried to Bella’s side. Jacob was waiting on the edge of the woods for Bella to approach and speak to him.

“Bella,” I said gently, filtering my concern about the Volturi and all the pain I was feeling from my voice. “There’s a bit of a complication,” I said as lightly as I could manage. “I’m going to take Seth a little ways away and try to straighten it out. I won’t go far, but I won’t listen, either. I know you don’t want an audience, no matter which way you decide to go.” My voice faltered on the last words. I would try to accept whatever she decided, but my emotions had not yet caught up to my resolve.

“Hurry back,” she whispered, anguish written across her face. I composed my expression into a neutral mask and gave her a light kiss. I’m not sure what I meant by it, perhaps I just wanted to remind her that I loved her too and that I was still there for her.

I kept my word, leading Seth into the woods where we could confer with our allies below. Listening to the pack mind helped me shut my ears to what was happening on the ridge above us.

As best Alice could tell, the Volturi would arrive in fifty-five minutes. It was imperative that we finish off the newborns and get the wolves out of the area before then. If they learned of the wolves’ lethal power against our kind, they would commence destroying them immediately. We would be forced into supporting our werewolf allies in a battle against the Volturi that none of us believed we could win. Timing would be critical in determining whether any of us survived the day.

While Seth and I communicated with Sam, another part of my mind remained alert for sounds of distress from Bella. I blocked Jacob’s thoughts and hummed to myself to drown out Bella and Jacob’s conversation when I wasn’t speaking to Seth. If Bella raised her voice in a cry or scream, though, I would not miss it. I was close enough to reach her side in seconds if need be.

Eight minutes after I left Bella with Jacob, I heard him dash into the woods and run at full speed down the mountainside. His joy was obvious when he rejoined the pack mind. Was that it, then? It was time to find Bella and learn my fate.

She was lying on her stomach in the tent, her face buried in the folds of the sleeping bag. Things didn’t look good.

I lowered myself beside her and stroked her disheveled hair.

“Are you all right?” I asked softly.
“No. I want to die,” she replied, her voice low and raspy.
“That will never happen. I won’t allow it.” That was the only thing I was certain of in that moment.
“You might change your mind about that,” Bella mumbled miserably.
“Where’s Jacob?”
“He went to fight,” Bella said, without raising her head.
Seth had followed me up to the ridge and was pacing back and forth outside. Jacob was trying to keep his thoughts to himself, but he couldn’t hide his ecstasy over Bella’s response to him. He’d finally gotten the physical reaction from her that he’d craved for so long.
The entire scenario played itself out in Seth’s mind as Jacob relived it in his own. I listened and felt the collective recoiling of the nine other souls connected to Jacob’s thoughts.
The pack consensus was: Too much information.
“Oh,” I uttered when I saw the passionate kiss Bella and Jacob had shared.
The word sounded surprisingly neutral, almost free of the gut-wrenching emotion that lay behind it. I flinched when the second kiss replayed, tender and sweet. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t figured out that Bella loved Jacob, but it didn’t make the pain any easier to take.
Then I began to process how Jacob had manipulated Bella into giving him that kiss. I saw how she had resisted his ardent embrace and how he’d manhandled her into feeling something. Not that what she felt wasn’t real—I knew that it was. And Jacob had gotten his wish. Bella finally recognized what he’d known all along…that her feelings for him ran deep. From my perspective the outcome was unpleasant, but I had to admit that Jacob’s maneuver was brilliantly accomplished. I chuckled at his shameless guilting of Bella into requesting his kiss.
“And I thought I fought dirty,” I said, smiling. “He makes me look like the patron saint of ethics.” Bella was still hiding her face from me. I brushed her hair back and stroked the side of her cheek. “I’m not mad at you, love. Jacob’s more cunning than I gave him credit for. I do wish you hadn’t asked him, though.”
“Edward, I…I…I’m—”
“Shh,” I said. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just that he would have kissed you anyway—even if you hadn’t fallen for it—and now I don’t have an excuse to break his face. I would have really enjoyed that, too.”
“Fallen for it?” Bella muttered, not understanding.
“Bella, did you really believe he was that noble? That he would go out in a flame of glory just to clear the way for me?”
Bella looked up at me with wide, startled eyes, a gullible lamb that had chased a handful of clover to the abattoir.
“Yes, I did believe that,” she said, lowering her eyes quickly.
I chuckled again. “You’re such a bad liar, you’ll believe anyone who has the least
bit of skill.”
“Why aren’t you angry with me? Why don’t you hate me? Or haven’t you heard the whole story yet?” Bella whispered, her tortured face finally turning toward mine.
“I think I got a fairly comprehensive look,” I told her, my lips twitching in amusement. “Jacob makes vivid mental pictures. I feel almost as bad for his pack as I do for myself. Poor Seth was getting nauseated. But Sam is making Jacob focus now.”
Bella dropped her face to the floor again and groaned.
“You’re only human,” I whispered, stroking her hair and rubbing her back as she wallowed in her mortification.
“That’s the most miserable defense I’ve ever heard.”
“But you are human, Bella. And, as much as I might wish otherwise, so is he….
There are holes in your life that I can’t fill. I understand that.”
“But that’s not true. That’s what makes me so horrible. There are no holes.”
“You love him,” I said softly. I had stopped fighting the truth and it was time for Bella to stop fighting it too. Such feelings didn’t disappear by wishing them away. Acceptance was the only way through.
After a long silence Bella replied with tears in her voice. “I love you more.”
“Yes, I know that, too. But…” I paused to regain control of my voice. “…when I left you, Bella, I left you bleeding. Jacob was the one to stitch you back up again. That was bound to leave its mark—on both of you. I’m not sure those kinds of stitches dissolve on their own. I can’t blame either of you for something I made necessary. I may gain forgiveness, but that doesn’t let me escape the consequences.”
“I should have known you’d find some way to blame yourself. Please stop. I can’t stand it.”
“What would you like me to say?”
“I want you to call me every bad name you can think of, in every language you know. I want you to tell me that you’re disgusted with me and that you’re going to leave so that I can beg and grovel on my knees for you to stay.”
Because I have the mind that I do, Bella’s suggestion ignited a fuse of secondary thoughts. In four seconds, I had silently rattled off a hundred insulting words in twenty languages for “unfaithful woman.” None of them applied to Bella. She wanted me to punish her for her feelings.
“I’m sorry. I can’t do that,” I sighed.
“At least stop trying to make me feel better. Let me suffer. I deserve it.”
“No.” I could never allow Bella to suffer over me as she had once before.
She considered for a moment, before discovering another way to punish herself.
“You’re right. Keep on being too understanding. That’s probably worse.”
Edward, Seth called to get my attention. Alice said the newborns are almost here. Bella noticed my distraction. “It’s getting close,” she guessed.
“Yes, a few more minutes now. Just enough time to say one more thing…. The
intensity of my emotion made my voice come out in a whisper. “I can be noble, Bella. I’m not going to make you choose between us. Just be happy, and you can have whatever part of me you want, or none at all, if that’s better. Don’t let any debt you feel you owe me influence your decision.”

There, I’d said the words to let her go. If she didn’t feel free to do what she wanted, then convincing her to marry me was a hollow victory. I couldn’t control her feelings—I wouldn’t try to control her choices either.

“Dammit, stop that!” Bella hollered.

I was stunned. “No—you don’t understand. I’m not just trying to make you feel better, Bella, I really mean it.”

“I know you do,” she said irritably. “What happened to fighting back? Don’t start with the noble self-sacrifice now! Fight!”

Fight? Jacob? I had no more strength for it. Winning her by hurting someone she loved was not a triumph. Bella continued to stare at me, a spark of anger in her eyes that I couldn’t comprehend.

“How?” I finally asked. Clearly, I was missing something.

Bella threw herself onto my lap and molded her body to mine.

“I don’t care that it’s cold here. I don’t care that I stink like a dog right now. Make me forget how awful I am. Make me forget him. Make me forget my own name. Fight back!”

Oh.

As much as I wanted to give Bella everything she wanted, what she thought she wanted now was not in her best interest. I could never take advantage of her while she was in such a vulnerable state. Nor did I want to. But at that moment, Bella was wrapped around me like a second skin, all of her tumultuous emotion channeled into kissing me passionately—just as she had kissed Jacob not ten minutes before. I met her lips with mine, but gently, in full control of my faculties.

“Careful, love,” I said, pulling back.

“No.”

I took her face in my hands and pushed her away slightly so I could see her eyes.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” I said mildly.

“I’m not trying to prove something. You said I could have any part of you I wanted. I want this part. I want every part.”

With her arms around my neck and her legs wrapped around my waist, Bella stretched up to kiss me again and I touched my lips to hers, feeling cautious and confused. She continued her assault, pressing her breasts into my chest and rocking her pelvis rhythmically in my lap. I desired her. Of course I did. I longed to throw her onto her back and tear off her clothes.

But I couldn’t. It wasn’t right. With effort, I collected my wits and placed my hands on her waist, calming her provocative movements. Then I took her face in my hands and
gently pushed her lips away. I exhaled a deep breath, trying to release the urgent feelings in my body.

“Perhaps this isn’t the best moment for that,” I observed.

“Why not?” Bella challenged belligerently.

I remained still and after a moment, she removed her arms from around my neck and went limp, dropping her head so I couldn’t see her face.

“Firstly, because it is cold.”

I grabbed the sleeping bag and wrapped her in it, completely separating her from the frigid temperature of my stone form. When we did make love—if we did—it should be somewhere warm, I suddenly realized. The warmer the better. I felt hope rise in me again. Perhaps we were both making more of this episode than was necessary. It still felt like Bella’s heart was mine. I hoped so.

“Wrong,” Bella retorted, interrupting that train of thought. “First, because you are bizarrely moral for a vampire.” I laughed at her description.

“All right, I’ll give you that. The cold is second. And thirdly…well, you do actually stink, love.” I wrinkled my nose. She did smell too doggy to be enticing. Jacob’s scent was in no way an aphrodisiac to me.

Bella sighed.

“Fourthly,” I whispered directly into her ear, “we will try, Bella. I’ll make good on my promise. But I’d much rather it wasn’t in reaction to Jacob Black.”

I felt Bella’s embarrassment as she shrunk slightly and hid her face in my shoulder.

“And fifthly…”

“This is a very long list,” Bella complained drolly and I laughed in response.

“Yes, but did you want to listen to the fight or not?”

With precision timing, Seth let loose a long howl, signaling that the battle had begun.