Esme was happy to see Bella. She hadn’t seen her since we returned from Italy.

“Oh, Bella, dear! How are you?” my mother inquired, meeting us at the kitchen door and wrapping her arms gently around Bella to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek. My father joined us from upstairs.

“I’m great, Esme. Charlie just un–grounded me—much sooner than expected.”

“That’s marvelous,” my mother gushed. “He doesn’t know how absolutely brave and heroic you were in going to Italy! We still thank you in our hearts every day that you’ve given us back our Edward!” Esme touched my cheek with her palm and I smiled at her. Bella’s face had gone rose–colored from the compliment and she was looking down at her shoes.

“Guess what?” I interjected to give Bella time to recover. “Bella and I are using your plane tickets to Florida this weekend!” I could see by their smiles that they already knew. Alice, of course.

“Wonderful,” my father replied. “Please say ‘hello’ to Renee for us.”

Carlisle had met Bella’s mother the spring before in a hospital in Phoenix. Both Renee and Charlie had been exceedingly grateful to my father for his emergency care of Bella after she “fell through a hotel window.” I wasn’t sure whether Charlie’s distaste for me had colored his opinion of Carlisle since then. Probably not, though. He really was a hero.

Alice thinks Victoria might arrive on Friday. You’ll want to leave before that, he told me silently.

I nodded to him while Bella was still looking at her feet.

“Hi guys!” Alice stuck her head into the kitchen. “Come play chess with us!”

“Sure, Alice,” I said. “If it’s okay with Bella.”

“I’m pretty bad at it, but I don’t mind getting beat,” Bella said, looking up with a grin.

We followed Alice into the living room where Jasper had the chess board set up and ready to go under the staircase.

“You play first,” Bella said to me.

“All right. Alice?”

“Let’s do it!”

Alice and my chess games rarely lasted for more than a few minutes. Since neither of us could help ourselves and—true to vampire nature—we both liked to win, we exploited all of the assets we had at our disposal. Alice predicted my moves and I read in
her mind how she would respond until we’d played most of the game in our heads. Usually, we moved only a couple of pieces before the outcome was fully determined. I suppose we could follow through and physically play the whole game. Maybe I could change my mind on a move at the last second and trick Alice into screwing up. It hadn’t worked so far, though.

Alice tipped over her King. “You win,” she conceded. We had each moved one pawn. Bella started snickering at us.

“You find that funny, eh?” I asked her.

“It’s hilarious! Do you two always just sit there and stare at the board for three minutes until one of you surrenders?”

“Yes,” Alice trilled.

“Pretty much,” I confirmed.

“That’s the funniest thing I ever saw!” Bella cackled some more. Her amusement made me chuckle too.

She didn’t think it was quite so funny when Jasper beat her in five moves. He knew more strategies and counterstrategies than anyone I’d ever met, but he wouldn’t play with Alice or me. He found our special skills too irritating, so mostly he played with Carlisle, the only one of us who could give him a challenge. Jasper is extremely good at games of strategy, but he prefers games with an element of chance, such as poker or blackjack. He’s by far the best gambler in the family based on sheer skill. Alice and I can beat him, but not fairly.

“Sorry ‘bout that, Bella,” Jasper apologized like the Southern gentleman he is. “That was a pretty short game. Would you like to play another?” Bella tried again and Jasper beat her in seven moves. He was incapable of throwing a game.

“We should do this more often,” he told Bella. “I could turn you into a serious player. You’ve got the smarts.”

“Thanks, Jasper. I might take you up on that.” None of us mentioned the incident with Jasper on Bella’s last birthday. It was too painful. Jasper was now being careful to hunt more frequently than he used to.

We left early because Bella didn’t want to challenge Charlie any further that night. When I pulled the car to his curb at ten o’clock, I heard Charlie’s thoughts blaring from inside the house and I almost laughed out loud. The images he had conjured earlier of Bella and I with our clothes half off had stuck with him and he’d been fretting over his obligations as a modern father while we were gone. He was waiting to talk to his daughter.

“You’d better not come inside,” Bella warned. “It will only make things worse.”

“His thoughts are relatively calm,” I told her, trying not to smile. I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

“I’ll see you later,” Bella said miserably. She thought Charlie was going to yell at her some more, but I knew that he wasn’t. I laughed and kissed her forehead in farewell.

“I’ll be back when Charlie’s snoring.”
I considered hanging around to listen to the “birds & the bees” talk Charlie had planned, but since it was meant to be private, I decided to try not to listen. As I drove away, though, I realized that his thoughts were so agitated and so personal to me that they were hard to block. If I didn’t concentrate, I would probably hear his thoughts as far away as my own home. I headed that way and, in fact, could find nothing to distract my mind enough to avoid them. The conversation was too intriguing to ignore anyway.

“Okay, Bella. Here’s the thing,” Charlie began. He was trying hard to erase the pictures in his head of me molesting his daughter, but the more he tried, the more the images stuck and also the more elaborate they became. My grin turned into a laugh.

“You and Edward seem pretty serious, and there are some things that you need to be careful about. I know you’re an adult now, but you’re still young, Bella, and there are a lot of important things you need to know when you…well, when you’re physically involved with—”

Charlie wasn’t looking at Bella, so I couldn’t see her reaction, but her words spoke volumes.

“Oh, please, please no! Please tell me you are not trying to have a sex talk with me, Charlie.”

“I am your father. I have responsibilities,” he replied gruffly. “Remember, I’m just as embarrassed as you are.”

“I don’t think that’s humanly possible. Anyway, Mom beat you to the punch about ten years ago. You’re off the hook.”

“Ten years ago you didn’t have a boyfriend.” That last word seemed to stick in his craw. He cleared his throat uneasily.

“I don’t think the essentials have changed that much,” Bella muttered. I could see her red blush through Charlie’s eyes. His face must be nearly as red.

“Just tell me that you two are being responsible,” Charlie begged, suddenly losing his will to say the words “birth control” and “venereal disease” aloud.

I was getting beyond actual hearing range, but I didn’t miss a word since I could read Charlie’s mind clearly when his thoughts involved me. Which they certainly did!

“Don’t worry about it, Dad, it’s not like that.” I could imagine Bella standing with her arms crossed defensively and staring a hole through the floor as she spoke.

“Not that I don’t trust you, Bella, but I know you don’t want to tell me anything about this, and you know I don’t really want to hear it. I will try to be open–minded, though. I know the times have changed.”

About now, Bella would be aching to put her fingers in her ears and sing “La, la, la,” at the top of her lungs. Instead, she issued a short laugh, but the sound came across as ironic, possibly even a little caustic.

“Maybe the times have, but Edward is very old–fashioned. You have nothing to worry about.” Charlie accepted that about as readily as he did the lies of the petty criminals he interrogated at the station.
“Sure he is,” he rejoined.

“Ugh!” Bella groaned. I wished Charlie would look at her face so I could see her blazing red cheeks. “I really wish you were not forcing me to say this out loud, Dad. Really. But… I am a... virgin, and I have no immediate plans to change that status.”

Charlie flinched inwardly at the “V-word,” but then suddenly became calm. He knew Bella would not say something so embarrassing if it wasn’t true. Charlie adjusted his image of me in his mind.

_Have I misjudged him? The Cullen kids always have been exceptionally polite and well–mannered. Wait... what does she mean by “old–fashioned?” No sex before marriage? Surely not._

Then Charlie’s thoughts turned darker when he realized there were other things Bella could be doing that technically wouldn’t compromise her virginity. He tried to push those pictures out of his mind too, with limited success. But he was in luck. I wouldn’t be splitting hairs about what did or did not constitute sex like certain American ex–Presidents. Given my potential for killing my lover, it was all equally dangerous and out–of–bounds.

_Bella was begging Charlie to end their little chat, but he hadn’t finished with her yet. His thoughts became vague to me, though, and I assumed that was either because they no longer involved me or because they carried less emotion. I caught a few key words—“balance,” “Angela,” “Jake”—and could fill in the gaps pretty easily. Charlie must be urging Bella to spend time with her other friends, including Jacob._

_Grrr… I wished so much that I could explain to Charlie exactly what he was asking his very mortal and breakable daughter to do. Unfortunately, I couldn’t say a word about the Quileute without breaking our treaty with them._

_A few minutes later my cell phone vibrated in my pocket._

“Alice?”

“Edward, where are you?”

“Almost home.”

“You have to get back to Bella’s right now! I see her going to the reservation, but then she disappears. I can’t see if she even makes it home, much less if she makes it home safely…”

I snapped the phone shut. _Charlie!_ A mean growl ripped through my chest, shaking the car with bass–toned fury. I punched the gas pedal for the last quarter mile home. It would be faster to run back to Bella’s. The rear tires of the Volvo skidded around the corner as I turned the car into my family’s driveway and slammed it to a stop. Everyone would hear that from the house.

_I didn’t know how many minutes I had before Bella climbed into her truck and drove to her potential doom. If I got there in time, I would do as Charlie did and disable the old wreck. That would be the best way to handle the situation. She’d be furious, but that couldn’t be helped. As long as she was determined to do risky things, I’d be just as determined to prevent her._
I jumped from my car and sprinted back to town, arriving at Charlie’s in under four minutes. Silently, I opened the hood of Bella’s truck, pulled off the distributor cap, and plucked out the rotor inside. Without it, the truck would not start. Thank goodness for vintage engines. That trick didn’t apply to modern, fuel–injected ones.

“Stay as long as you like,” I heard Charlie tell Bella in the living room.

*She has no curfew when it comes to Jacob Black!* Charlie was not helping matters at all! Oddly enough, he didn’t conjure up unsavory images of Jacob with Bella, and I wondered why not. I didn’t know Jacob Black very well, but I thought he was unlikely to have my particular scruples. And unlike me, he was capable both of impregnating Charlie’s daughter *and* giving her a venereal disease—at least I assumed so. Charlie had things all wrong, though I had to admit that Jacob Black probably would never drain Bella of her blood. I grimaced.

Bella emerged from the front door of the house, pulled it shut behind her, and rushed recklessly to her truck, nearly stumbling twice on the way. My arms twitched reflexively to catch her. She yanked open the door of her truck, hopped in, and turned the key.

*Click, click, click…*

Bella grasped the steering wheel with both hands and stared straight ahead, the gears in her mind turning, turning, turning…

“Gah!” she exclaimed when she suddenly realized I was sitting on the passenger side of the truck. I spun the detached rotor in my palm, watching it turn round and round, but she refused to look at me.

“Alice called,” I said softly. “She got nervous when your future rather abruptly disappeared five minutes ago.”

Bella turned to me with wide, questioning eyes.

“Because she can’t see the wolves, you know. Had you forgotten that?” I kept my voice soft and gentle. I had no desire to upset her, but this was how it had to be. “When you decide to mingle your fate with theirs, you disappear, too. You couldn’t know that part, I realize that. But can you understand why that might make me a little…anxious? Alice saw you disappear, and she couldn’t even tell if you’d come home or not. Your future got lost, just like theirs.”

“We’re not sure why this is. Some natural defense they’re born with?” I mused, watching the crucial metal object spin in my fingers. “That doesn’t seem entirely likely, since I haven’t had any trouble reading their thoughts. The Blacks’ at least. Carlisle theorizes that it’s because their lives are so ruled by their transformations. It’s more an involuntary reaction than a decision. Utterly unpredictable, and it changes everything about them. In that instant when they shift from one form to the other, they don’t really even exist. The future can’t hold them.…”

Bella stared through the windshield, her mouth in a hard line. I could feel her fury, but she said nothing. I waited…still nothing.
“I’ll put your car back together in time for school, in case you’d like to drive yourself,” I promised. Without looking at me, Bella removed her keys from the ignition, opened her door, and climbed out of the truck.

“Shut your window if you want me to stay away tonight. I’ll understand,” I whispered before she slammed the truck door as hard as she could.

With a stab of sadness, I wondered whether she would refuse to see me. Even if she broke up with me, though, I couldn’t do anything differently. I would still have to prevent her from visiting the werewolves. I would never allow any harm to come to her if I could help it. And the werewolves were harm personified!

I stayed where I was and listened to the front door slam, followed by a short exchange between Bella and Charlie. After a brief time, the light in Bella’s room came on and I saw my love come to the window. Could she see me here in the darkness? Probably not—if she even looked. She grasped the aluminum window frame and slammed it closed with a clatter. The old single pane of glass shook in its frame and sorrow flooded through me. I hoped she would forgive me, but it was her life at stake!

I sat motionless and pondered the situation for a moment. Then much to my surprise and great delight, Bella reappeared at the window and yanked it all the way open!

She did forgive me! How I loved her…!

It was another hour before Charlie’s light went out and a few minutes more before I heard his deep, rumbling snore. I leaped to Bella’s window and slipped through, overjoyed that she still wanted me there. Soundlessly, I lay down beside her and stroked her hair. Usually, even in her sleep, she would roll toward me and put her arms around my neck and her head on my chest. Not tonight, though. I could tell by her breathing that she was still awake, but she kept her back to me and did not speak. I began to sing softly. After a time, she scooted backwards and snuggled against me, her back against my front like two spoons in a drawer, and fell asleep without a word.

***

Charlie would have been glad to know that Bella and I made it all the way to Jacksonville without my molesting his daughter once! She did molest me a couple of times, though, once in the SeaTac parking garage and once in our first-class airplane seats. I allowed it—to a point.

Renee met us at the airport in Jacksonville on Thursday night with a certain amount of squealing and hugging directed at Bella. She was warm enough to me, but not overly familiar, and I found it easy to be with mother and daughter and just listen to them talk. It was the first time I had witnessed them together when Bella wasn’t in a hospital, heavily drugged.

“You two look good together,” Renee remarked as we walked with her to her car, our bags slung over my shoulder.
“My father sends his regards,” I said. “My mother as well, though I know that you have not met her yet.”

“It was generous of them to give Bella plane tickets for her birthday.”

“They know how much Bella has missed you.”

And that was pretty much the extent of my conversation with Renee for the weekend. She was completely focused on Bella, and with Phil coaching and working much of the time, the two of them were like girlfriends on a holiday. It suited me perfectly.

Contrary to Charlie’s suspicions, Renee did put Bella and I in separate bedrooms. Bella was to sleep in the double bed in the guest room and I was assigned to a pull–out sofa in the den.

“Come to my room after they go to sleep, okay?” Bella whispered that first night.

I kissed her palm. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Phil got home about ten o’clock and he and Renee retired to their bedroom shortly after that. Since we’d flown in from a time zone three hours behind Florida’s, it was still early for Bella, so we stayed up to watch television. Though our hosts’ bedroom was on the other size of the house from us, it became clear rather quickly why Bella’s mother had chosen a husband nearly a decade younger than herself. Phil had been physically active all day, working out and then coaching his high school baseball team, but it hadn’t diminished his nighttime energies. Of course, they couldn’t know of my acute hearing or that I could read their thoughts, but Bella had been right—after dark at least, Renee and Phil easily could have been the same age. Their compatibility made me smile and I was glad for Bella’s sake that she couldn’t hear them (much). They were happy together—that was obvious.

For Bella and me, the night was just as always. We retired to Bella’s room after Renee and Phil went to sleep and I returned to the den before daylight.

The “Sunshine State” was sunny indeed. “I’m not used to this much light anymore,” Bella commented to her mother the next morning. Neither was I. Until recently, I’d not spent much time in the South. My family and I liked our daytime freedom too much.

“Isn’t it great, though?”

“It kind of hurts my eyes,” Bella admitted.

Phil was long gone by the time Bella rose. I’d been sitting at my laptop in the den after leaving Bella’s room, not bothering to pretend to sleep, except for rumpling the bed sheets a bit on the pull–out sofa.

I begged off on the women’s daytime outing to go shopping and to the beach, having concocted a false term paper assignment for myself to keep me indoors. That night, the three of us went to a movie. I indulged a bit by holding Bella’s hand throughout. Renee grabbed Bella’s other hand during the exciting and romantic bits. It was nice to have something so important in common.

Being at Renee’s house had an interesting effect on Bella. The previous year, she had often tried slipping her hands beneath my shirt or sweater at night while we lay
together. I wouldn’t allow it, because I had no faith in my ability to resist the scent of her blood if I got too distracted—and that kind of attention was extremely distracting. I had limited her caresses to my hands and arms, neck, and face and she had mostly accepted those boundaries since then.

In Jacksonville, though, perhaps because she was no longer under her father’s roof, or because we had been careful not to touch each other much in Renee’s presence, she once again began testing my limits. On our second night in Florida, I finally gave up trying to keep her hands above my waist and on top of my clothes and retreated to a lounge chair in the corner of her room.

“Don’t leave! Come back to the bed,” she begged in a whisper.

“Not if you can’t behave yourself,” I replied. “You’re much too tempting to risk it.”

“Pleeease…?”

“Maybe tomorrow night if you’re good,” I teased.

“I’ll be good, I’ll be good,” Bella stage-whispered.

I let her coax me back eventually. And she was pretty good, though she spent rather a lot of her usual sleeping hours with her hands and lips on my face, neck, hands, and forearms. Not that I minded.

Mother and daughter went to the beach again on Saturday and I was surprised that Bella hadn’t come home burned red like a lobster either day.

“Oh, I wore a big hat, Mom drowned me in sunscreen, and I sat under a palm tree,” Bella explained.

“Did you go swimming?”

“The water’s not that warm yet, but I got my feet wet at least.’”

I would have been more worried about not being with Bella on these outings, but I was counting on Alice to call if she saw any problems on the horizon and so far she hadn’t. Bella needed time alone with her mother. If she went ahead with her current plans, this could be the last time they saw one another. I wondered how much Bella might be thinking about that on this trip. Maybe seeing Renee would convince her to put off her transformation.

On Saturday evening, Phil came home early and took us all out to dinner. Though both Bella and I objected, he could not be deterred and I was unfortunately required to choke down a hamburger which I regurgitated in the restaurant washroom as soon as everyone finished eating. It was always a disgusting process, but sometimes necessary.

“Edward eats like a bird!” Renee whispered to Bella on the way to the car afterwards. It hadn’t occurred to her that I might have an actual eating disorder, though I showed all the signs of it. (Except for bad teeth, of course. Mine are perfectly lethal.)

“He’s very careful about his diet,” Bella told her truthfully.

“Well, he’s in great shape, I’ll give him that. He’s slim, but he seems strong.”

“Yeah, he is pretty strong.” I smiled at Bella’s understatement. She didn’t mention that I had once held a van in the air with one hand to keep it from crushing her legs.
After dinner, Phil chauffeured us around to look at the city lights. Jacksonville is a
huge city—much larger than I expected—that straddles the meandering St. Johns River. It
is rather magnificent with its numerous skyscrapers and seven artfully lighted suspension
bridges spanning the river at regular intervals.

Late that night, Renee got out of bed to visit the bathroom and, acting on a sudden
intuition, decided to check on Bella. I heard her coming through the house, but I decided it
would be best just to stay where I was and pretend not to hear her. When Renee looked in,
Bella was sleeping on my chest with her arms wrapped around my neck as usual, with her
under the covers and me fully dressed above them, also as usual. I closed my eyes so Renee
would think I was sleeping too.

Bella’s not telling me the whole story! Renee thought as she quietly closed the door
and left us to ourselves.

All weekend I had observed mother and daughter together and found the
comparison quite interesting. Bella is so different from Renee, complementary in a way.
She’s down-to-earth, practical, and responsible while Renee is flighty, unfocussed, and
impulsive. It’s easy to see how Bella’s personality must have developed partly in reaction
to Renee, especially with the two of them living alone together for so many years.

Renee exists very much in the present, her attention pulled toward whichever of her
senses is most prominent at the moment. Her thoughts flit continually from one thing to the
next. If she heard a particular song on the radio, she might start telling a story related to the
song. If something caught her eye in the middle of the story, she would interrupt herself to
remark on that. Even when she wasn’t talking, her mind operated in the same way, just
silently. Experiencing everything through her six senses as she did made Renee especially
observant when she was not otherwise distracted and she had a way of saying rather
profound things out of the blue.

“He loves you,” I heard Renee murmur to Bella in the kitchen when she thought I
couldn’t hear.

“Yes, I think so,” Bella replied.

Think? Doesn’t she know by now?

“You two are very young.”

“I know, Mom. Don’t worry about it. We don’t have any big plans or anything.” I
was surprised Renee didn’t see through that.

“You should come down here for college!” Renee exclaimed, hopping to a new
subject.

“I don’t know about that,” Bella answered as she followed her mother, who was
carrying a tray of iced tea, into the living room. I was in the attached den “working” when
Renee stuck her head in the partially open door.

“I brought you some iced tea!”

“Umm, thank you,” I replied.

“How’s the paper going?”
“Very well, thanks.”
“He’s so polite,” Renee whispered to Bella after leaving me to my fake studies.
“And even more handsome than I remembered!”
Bella didn’t reply.
“He sure could use some sun, though.” Renee laughed softly. “Like you. You’re still as pale as ever.”
“Well, we do live in Forks, you know,” Bella reminded her. Renee laughed again. Bella’s mother had never liked the dark, rainy days and hadn’t stayed very long in Washington State after Bella was born.
“That’s why you should come to the University of Florida for school! It’s in Gainesville, not that far from here. Just think—sunshine every day!” Renee enthused.
“I’m liking Forks better than I used to,” Bella admitted.
“Well, if not Florida, then where are you thinking of going to college?”
“I got accepted at the University of Alaska Southeast this week.”
“You’re not serious!”
“Yeah, I guess I am.”
“You can’t go to Alaska! Of all places! It doesn’t even get light in the winter, does it?”
“Oh, you’d be surprised. Juneau is pretty far south,” Bella fudged. “And it’s not like colleges are lining up to take me, you know. I was late to apply.”
“What does Charlie think about it?”
“Oh, he’s fine with it.”
“What about Edward? Is he going to Alaska Southeast too?”
“I’m…not sure,” Bella hedged.
“Hmm…” was all her mother said—aloud, that is.
Okay, so maybe they’re not as serious as they seem to be. But they’re so “together.” Bella said they’re not having sex, though. That’s weird, isn’t it? So if they aren’t that serious, then why was he in her room last night? And if they are that serious, then why aren’t they sexually involved? Could he be gay? He is awfully clean and well-groomed. He doesn’t really seem gay, though…hmm… Would it be rude to ask? Maybe Phil could find out.

I chuckled to myself. Times had certainly changed since my days as a human teenager.

Alice called me on Sunday. Bella and Renee had gone for a beach walk and I was working on my computer in the den.

“Alice?”

“Just wanted to let you know what’s going on. Victoria showed up yesterday. She came through the Quileute reservation and the wolves started chasing her. I knew she was coming, so we were lined up at the reservation border, but she kept jumping back and forth over the river so we couldn’t follow. It was very frustrating, especially for me! But then
Emmett dove for her and crossed the line. One of the wolves went for him and it was a little
dicey for a while, but Jasper got everybody calmed down. Unfortunately, Victoria escaped.
It was not the best day, but I don’t see her coming back…right now, anyway.” Alice finally
paused.

“Is Em okay?”

“Yeah, I was more worried about the wolf, really. Well, I didn’t care, really, but the
wolves fight as a pack, so that’s a bit of a problem. You can’t pick a fight with just one of
them without getting the whole gaggle on you. Anyway, everything came out okay, but we
didn’t get her. How’s your trip going?”

“It’s quite nice, actually, except I’m stuck inside, of course. But Bella seems happy
to be with her mom, so it’s all fine.”

“Good. Okay then, Jazz and I are going hunting. See you when you get back.”

“Thanks, Alice.”

“Sure thing.”

On the flight back, Bella was neither talkative nor amorous. When we got far
enough across the country that the sun finally sank below the horizon, I raised the window
shade so she could see the sunset before we dropped below Seattle’s heavy cloud cover.
Bella remained silent in the car driving back to Forks.

“You’ve been very quiet,” I said. “Did the plane make you sick?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sad to leave?”

“More relieved than sad, I think.”

Not at all the answer I was expecting. I raised an eyebrow.

“Renee is so much more…perceptive than Charlie in some ways. It was making me
jumpy.”

I laughed. “Your mother has a very interesting mind. Almost childlike, but very
insightful. She sees things differently than other people.”

Hers certainly was one of the more unusual adult minds I’d read. I wondered how
much of that mind had ended up in Bella. I would never know. At least Bella wasn’t
unhappy about coming home, but I was left not knowing what effect seeing Renee had had
on her and her decisions about the future. She seemed pensive, but obviously she wasn’t
ready to talk about it.

Bella dropped off to sleep before we reached Port Angeles and remained asleep
until I pulled up in front of Charlie’s house. He was waiting anxiously for Bella, happy to
have her home again.

I stroked her cheek with my fingers.

“We’re home, Sleeping Beauty. Time to awake.” Bella opened her eyes and looked
at me. I smiled at her, but then lost the smile when I heard what else Charlie was thinking
about…Jacob Black. I looked toward the house where the porch light was on and saw the
curtain at the front window move. Jacob had been calling…and calling…and calling. What
I walked around the car to open Bella’s door and she noticed my expression. “How bad?” she asked. “Charlie’s not going to be difficult,” I told her, not mentioning that Jacob Black might be. “He missed you.”

I took Bella’s small bag from the back seat. She reached for it, but I wanted to go inside and find out what was happening. Charlie came to the front door and held it open for both of us. He was extremely glad to see Bella.

“Welcome home, kid!” Charlie greeted her boisterously. “How was Jacksonville?” “Moist. And buggy.” “So Renee didn’t sell you on the University of Florida?” “She tried. But I’d rather drink water than inhale it.”

I stood behind Bella and remained silent, listening to Charlie’s thoughts. He decided he couldn’t ignore me any longer.

“Did you have a nice time?” he asked, glancing at me. That was a first. “Yes,” I replied with a smile. “Renee was very hospitable.” “That’s…um, good. Glad you had fun.” Charlie grabbed Bella and gave her a hug—something I had never seen him do.

“Impressive,” I heard Bella whisper in his ear. Charlie laughed. “I really missed you, Bells. The food around here sucks when you’re gone.” “I’ll get on it,” Bella told him. “Would you call Jacob first? He’s been bugging me every five minutes since six o’clock this morning. I promised I’d have you call him before you even unpacked.”

I went rigid beside Bella. Not only did I not like him calling, especially so many times in one day, but I was worried about what he wanted. “Jacob wants to talk to me?” “Pretty bad, I’d say. He wouldn’t tell me what it was about—just said it was important.” Right on cue, the phone rang.

“That’s him again, I’d bet my next paycheck.” Charlie mumbled. He was annoyed at Jacob’s persistence. “I got it.” Bella rushed to the phone in the kitchen and I followed. I wanted to know what he would tell Bella, especially after the news Alice had given me. We’d done a good job of protecting Bella from Victoria’s visit and I didn’t want Jacob Black to ruin all that effort.

Charlie went to watch television. Bella picked up the phone and turned toward the wall, as if seeking privacy.

_Sorry, no dice. What if he says something that frightens her or makes her faint?_ “Hello?”

I listened to Bella’s side of the conversation, but it seemed to amount to little until
she said, “Yeah, I know. I’m so glad you called me, Jake. I…” She hesitated, but the
yearning in her voice was tangible. My heart seized a little in my chest.

But then he hung up on her.

“That was short,” Bella remarked, confused.

“Is everything all right?” As far as I knew, Jacob had not called her for weeks. Why
now?

Bella turned toward me and I watched her face carefully.

“I don’t know. I wonder what that was about.”

“Your guess is probably better than mine,” I replied, smiling slightly.

“Mmm.”

Bella began to poke through the refrigerator to find something for Charlie’s dinner.
She was deep in thought and I watched her face for any clues. Did I perceive a little hurt
written there? Certainly bewilderment. She was moving around the kitchen like a zombie
when suddenly she froze and the package of meat from the freezer slipped out of her hand.
I caught it before it hit the floor and tossed it to the counter, then took her in my arms. She
was dazed.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered in her ear.

Bella shook her head, but remained frozen with her arms still hanging at her sides.
She always hugged me back.

“But?” I asked, shaking her shoulder gently. Was she in shock? I was becoming
concerned.

“I think…I think he was checking,” Bella muttered, her expression vacant.

“Checking to make sure. That I’m human, I mean.”

I hissed and clenched my fists behind Bella’s back. He was checking whether we
were at war! I had to clamp my jaws together to keep from growling. So, so eager he was to
fight my family.

“We’ll have to leave,” Bella mumbled. “Before. So that it doesn’t break the treaty.
We won’t ever be able to come back.” Her voice was bleak. I pulled her closer and she
leaned her forehead on my chest.

“I know,” I murmured. Never to see her father, or Forks, or for that matter, Jacob
Black, again. She was beginning to understand the consequences of her choice. I laid my
cheek against her hair. Then Charlie stepped into the kitchen.

“Ahem.” His warning startled Bella, who jerked away from me. I released her and
leaned against the counter, watching her face. She was distraught, but she was also
blushing, embarrassed by being “caught” by her father. He was not as annoyed with me as
usual, but I hadn’t yet figured out why.

“If you don’t want to make dinner, I can call for a pizza,” Charlie said, clearly
hungry.

“No, that’s okay, I’m already started.”

“Okay,” he replied, leaning against the doorway. He crossed his arms over his
chest, interrogation style.

So that was as far as we got with that conversation.