

## 9. Changes

Racing away from the reservation, I expected to return in two or three hours. Bella said she would not be out late and after all, how long could a bonfire cookout last? I went home to talk to Carlisle about the situation in Seattle, but we had no new information to help us decide on a strategy. Alice couldn't see us in Seattle and until she did, we were reluctant to go without knowing what we were facing. So we postponed...again.

I drove back to Charlie's house to check on Esme, who was taking her turn at guard duty, and to kill some time while waiting for Bella to call.

"Edward, how is Bella holding up?"

"She's amazingly steady, though she's in more of a hurry for Carlisle to change her."

"What do you think about it?"

"I'm against it, of course. I wish she would postpone at least for a few years, if not forever."

"You're not angry with us for taking her side, are you?"

"No, it's what she wants," I said, resigned to it.

"I bet she would rather have *you* change her than Carlisle. Would you consider that, do you think, if she's going ahead with it anyway?"

I thought for a moment before deciding to tell her about my condition, not sure whether it was wise. What if Bella declined? But trying to keep secrets in my family was a pointless endeavor.

"I have, actually. I have agreed to it if Bella will be my wife."

"Oh, Edward, that's wonderful!" Esme enthused. "Has she accepted you?"

I looked down at my feet. "No, not yet. I'm hopeful, though."

"What is her reason?"

"She says that her mother would disapprove—that Renee's always told Bella she made a mistake marrying Charlie so young. Bella doesn't want to let her down, I guess, but I can't help but believe there's some other reason."

"I can't imagine what it would be."

"Well..." I began, reluctant to put words to my biggest fear. "The most obvious possibility is that she might not want to be stuck with me forever..."

"Oh!" Esme exclaimed. "You don't believe that, do you? That can't be it! She loves you."

"Thanks, Mom. I think she does, but maybe not enough. I don't know."

My mother put her arm around my waist. "Keep after her. She'll come to her

senses.”

Hour after hour passed...three...four...five... and with each one, my anxiety level rose. What if something had happened to her? How would I know? Alice couldn't tell! I calmed down slightly when I realized that Billy Black would call Charlie if there was any trouble, even if he had to lie about the reason. We hadn't heard the phone ring inside the house, so probably everything was all right, but I was surprised Bella hadn't called me to come get her yet.

It was only a minute or two later when Charlie's phone began to ring. I jerked my head up and braced myself for the worst. Unfortunately, I could only hear Charlie's side of the conversation.

“Hello, Bella?” He sounded as concerned as I was.

“Oh! Hi, Jake. What's going on?”

“Is that right?” Charlie chuckled and I exhaled in a whoosh. She must be okay. “Are you bringing her home, then?”

“Oh. Well, all right. Say hi to your father.”

*So is he or isn't he?* I wanted to shout. But the conversation ended there.

“Okay, 'bye then.”

Charlie hung up the phone and I watched his shadow pass the living room window as he returned to his chair and the late-night sports report. Before I had time to get too worked up about not knowing what was happening, my cell phone vibrated. I yanked it out of my pocket and flipped it open.

“Bella?” I asked. I could hear the apprehension in my voice.

“No, it's Jacob. Surprise!”

“Jacob? What's going on?” I'd asked the exact question Charlie had.

“Bella's ready to come home. She passed out at the bonfire and I had to haul her back to my house. She's in my car now if you want to meet us at the border. I could carry her all the way home, though, since I'm coming to watch Charlie's place, anyway.”

“No, that's okay. I'll meet you in five minutes, as planned. And...thank you, Jacob.”

“Sure, sure,” he said and hung up.

“Bye, Mom. I'm going to pick up Bella. See you in a bit.”

I made the border in only three minutes and parked fifteen yards behind it to wait. Shortly thereafter, I heard Jacob's poorly muffled engine chugging up La Push Road and I hopped out of my car to pace impatiently.

“C'mon, Bells. We're here,” Jacob said, stopping his car well behind the line.

“Oh, crap!” Bella cried, waking up in a confused state. “How late is it? Dang it, where's that stupid phone?”

“Easy,” Jacob said to calm her. “It's not even midnight yet. And I already called him for you. Look—he's waiting there.”

“You called Edward for me?” Bella sounded very surprised.

“I figured if I played nice, I’d get more time with you,” Jacob replied. I could almost see his teenager’s grin in my mind.

“Thanks, Jake,” Bella said. “Really, thank you. And thanks for inviting me tonight. That was... Wow. That was something else.”

“And you didn’t even stay up to watch me swallow a cow.” Jacob laughed at some private joke. “No, I’m glad you liked it. It was... nice for me. Having you there.”

I picked up the pace of my strides. I wasn’t enjoying Jacob’s heartfelt goodbyes or his wistful thoughts.

“Yeah, he’s not so patient, is he? Go ahead. But come back soon, okay?”

“Sure, Jake.”

“Sleep tight, Bells. Don’t worry about anything—I’ll be watching out for you tonight.” Like she would need *him* in the yard when she had *me* in her bed! I grunted in annoyance, even though I was grateful for his help.

Bella climbed out of Jacob’s car and hobbled toward me. When she finally reached the reservation boundary, I hurried to pull her into my arms. I’d been so anxious and suddenly, here she was in the flesh. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Bella,” I murmured, holding her close.

“Hi. Sorry I’m so late. I fell asleep and—”

“I know. Jacob explained.” With one arm around Bella’s waist, I began walking her to the car, but she was having trouble with her feet.

“Are you tired? I could carry you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let’s get you home and in bed. Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah—it was amazing, Edward. I wish you could have come. I can’t even explain it. Jake’s dad told us the old legends and it was like... like magic.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it. After you’ve slept.”

“I won’t get it right,” Bella mumbled through a big yawn.

I opened the passenger side door, lifted Bella inside, and buckled her seatbelt. Jacob shined his bright lights on us as he turned his car around. Bella waved. I ignored him.

When we reached Charlie’s house, I carried Bella to the front door in spite of her protests. “I’ll see you in a little while,” I whispered into her ear. Then I gave her a quick kiss and sent her inside to face Charlie. I wondered if he would be upset at Bella’s late return, though I didn’t particularly care if he was since it was Jacob’s fault, not mine.

I drove my car around the corner out of sight and walked back to locate Esme in the woods. She’d not seen anything unusual in the area and so I suggested that she drive my car home. I’d keep an eye on things until Jacob showed up, as he’d promised to do. She agreed and I handed her the car keys.

I was still waiting for Charlie to go to bed so I could join Bella, when Jacob arrived in his wolf form. I didn’t see him, but he was nearby. I could smell his scent and he could smell mine.

“I’m here, mind reader,” he called to me silently. “You don’t need to hang around. I got this.”

Fine by me. I approached Charlie’s yard and saw Bella leaning out of her window staring into the dark as the icy rain pelted her in the face. I had expected her to be asleep already. Curious, I leaped to the eaves and slipped through the open window to stand beside her. I put my arm around her waist and took her hand.

“Is Jacob out there?” Bella asked.

“Yes...somewhere. And Esme’s on her way home.”

“It’s so cold and wet. This is silly.” She shivered.

“It’s only cold to *you*, Bella,” I pointed out, chuckling.

When Bella finally climbed into bed, I lay down beside her. She snuggled into the crook of my arm and quickly dropped off to sleep. A bit later, I noticed she was shivering and got up to shut the window. On my way back to the bed, I noticed that Bella’s copy of *Wuthering Heights* was lying on the floor, so I picked it up and took it with me. I’d read it before and knew every word in it, of course, but I’d never really understood the characters—or liked them either.

Heathcliff, in particular, was vicious, spiteful, and cruel, especially to the woman he had married. His beloved Catherine had chosen to marry a man of means over him and so Heathcliff married the man’s sister. Then he set about degrading and tormenting her until she ran away.

I remembered a particular paragraph that had always stuck with me and which seemed especially relevant now. With Bella curled against me sleeping, I located the passage:

*And there you see the distinction between our feelings: had he been in my place and I in his, though I hated him with a hatred that turned my life to gall, I never would have raised a hand against him. You may look incredulous, if you please! I never would have banished him from her society as long as she desired his. The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drunk his blood! But, till then—if you don’t believe me, you don’t know me—till then, I would have died by inches before I touched a single hair of his head!*

Since returning home to Forks and my beloved, I’d found myself in a strikingly similar position. Jacob Black and his kind were my sworn enemies, having evolved for the distinct purpose of eliminating my kind. If not for Bella, I easily could have, and might have, torn his heart out, and drunk his blood! But because I could not hurt her, I would not touch a single hair of *his* head. I loved her so much that no longer could I even banish him from her society. Though I could not understand Heathcliff’s cruelty to those in his life, I *could* understand his all-consuming love for Catherine.

Bella groaned in her sleep and turned to bury her face in my chest.

“Did I wake you?” I whispered as I dropped the book onto the floor, its loose spine

saving my place.

“No,” she muttered. “I had a bad dream.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

Bella shook her head. “Too tired. Maybe in the morning, if I remember.” Her voice dropped away, making the final words nearly imperceptible.

“In the morning,” I repeated, chuckling. I would be *here* in the morning. It was a great privilege and one of the joys of my existence.

“What were you reading?” Bella mumbled, still half asleep.

“*Wuthering Heights*.”

She frowned. “I thought you didn’t like that book.”

“You left it out,” I said softly. “Besides...the more time I spend with you, the more human emotions seem comprehensible to me. I’m discovering that I can sympathize with Heathcliff in ways I didn’t think possible before.”

“Mmm.”

“He despises the part of Catherine’s life that does not include him and he wants to destroy it, but he can’t because that would destroy a vital part of her. It’s the paradox of his life,” I explained softly, half hoping that she wouldn’t see me too clearly in him, but Bella was already asleep.

The next morning, I asked about her bad dream.

“Umm...I was cold...and something bad was going to happen...but I can’t remember what. I was just glad that you were here when I woke up.”

“Well, I’m glad too,” I said, rolling toward her and pushing her onto her back. Holding my weight on my left arm, I brushed my fingers down her cheek and across her lips and watched the color rise in her face.

I leaned in slowly, and she wrapped her arms around my neck and raised her head to touch her lips to mine. We kissed gently for several moments before I started to pull away. Bella clung to me and groaned her displeasure until I relented and leaned forward again. She opened her mouth hungrily and our lips moved together, touching, pressing, tasting. As we kissed, I let my fingers wander down her jaw onto her neck, absorbing the heat of the blood swirling beneath her skin. I wrapped my palm across her throat and felt both carotid arteries pulsing excitedly to the rhythm of her racing heart. *Mmm...* I brushed my fingers downward to her delicate collarbones. Time to stop. She clung to me again in protest. This time, though, I unclasped her hands and kissed each palm before tucking her arms under the covers.

“Goodbye, love.”

I found Emmett in the woods keeping watch. “Hey, Em,” I called quietly, running to greet him. “I thought Jasper would still be here.”

“Yeah, we traded so he could spend time with Alice before she goes to school. Only one more week before you graduate again, eh?”

“Yes, thankfully. I’m hoping that Bella and I will be joining you and Rose at

Dartmouth in the fall,” I said, grinning.

“Well, sure. We can all study together, and play foosball at the student union, and drink beer at the football games. It’ll be great!” We both laughed.

Though Emmett and Rosalie supposedly had been attending Dartmouth the entire school year, in fact they’d been traveling on several continents and periodically visiting the family in Ithaca, New York, and in Forks. It *would* be fun for us all to go to New Hampshire and attend Dartmouth together—if I could convince Bella to postpone her transformation, that is.

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“No, Alice, that is unacceptable,” I told my sister later. “If you decide to go ahead with it, then you have to tell her beforehand. I won’t have her surprised like she was at prom last year. She still hasn’t forgiven me for that.”

“Oh, Edward, you’re ruining all my fun!” Alice complained.

“It’s her only real graduation. It should be about *her*.”

“But that’s what I want too!”

“Well, being *about her* means taking her feelings into account, don’t you think?”

“I *suppose*,” Alice responded irritably.

“It can still be fun...”

Walking to my car after school, I gave Alice a “get on with it” look behind Bella’s back and she made a face at me. Then she sighed.

“I have foreseen...,” Alice began in a phony fortuneteller’s voice. I attempted to elbow her in the ribs, but she dodged me. “Fine,” she complained. “Edward is making me do this. But I *did* foresee that you would be more difficult if I surprised you.”

“In English?” Bella requested.

“Don’t be a baby about this. No tantrums.”

“Now I’m scared.”

“So you’re—I mean *we’re*—having a graduation party. It’s no big thing. Nothing to freak out over. But I saw that you *would* freak out if I tried to make it a surprise party—” I reached over to ruffle Alice’s hair for the white lie, but she dodged me again— “and Edward said I had to tell you. But it’s nothing. Promise.”

Bella sighed heavily. “Is there any point in arguing?”

“None at all.”

“Okay, Alice. I’ll be there. And I’ll hate every minute of it. Promise.”

“That’s the spirit! By the way, I love my gift. You shouldn’t have.”

“Alice, I didn’t!”

“Oh, I know that. But you will.” Alice gave her an impish grin.

Bella suddenly looked confused.

“Amazing,” I said. “How can someone so tiny be so annoying?”

Alice laughed. "It's a talent."

"Couldn't you have waited a few weeks to tell me about this?" Bella groused. "Now I'll just be stressed that much longer."

Alice gave Bella an odd look.

"Bella," she said slowly. "Do you know what day it is?"

"Monday?"

"Yes," she answered, rolling her eyes. "It is Monday...the fourth." She rotated Bella toward the gym door where a graduation poster hung.

**JUNE 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006** was written in big black letters on a yellow background.

"It's the fourth? *Of June?* Are you sure?" Bella asked.

Alice and I looked at her in surprise.

"It can't be! How did that happen?" Bella's eyes rolled upward and to the right as she mouthed numbers and counted on her fingers. Then her face paled and she went silent, staring straight ahead as we continued to the car.

I opened the car door for her and as she slowly climbed in, Alice flashed me a knowing look. Bella was no longer with us. I didn't attempt to break her silence as I drove her home and Alice filled the quiet by chattering away in the back seat. When we arrived at Charlie's house, I left the engine running and helped Bella out of the car. Alice jumped from the backseat into the front to drive herself home.

Inside the house, I pulled Bella to the living room and sat her down on the couch next to me. She remained distracted and disconnected, staring out the living room window at the rain. Clearly, she was upset about something and though I didn't want to pry, I was becoming increasingly distraught, wondering what was going on. For much of an hour, we sat together silently and watched the day fade to dusk through the window.

Suddenly, I could stand it no longer. I took Bella's face in my hands and turned her head in my direction. Was she mad at Alice? At me? Upset about the party? I looked into her eyes.

"Would you please tell me what you are thinking? *Before* I go mad?" I pleaded.

Bella looked around nervously, but found no words.

"Your lips are white. Talk, Bella."

She exhaled heavily and dropped her chin to her chest. "The date took me off guard," she whispered. "That's all."

I didn't understand, but I waited for her to continue.

She began hesitantly. "I'm not sure what to do...what to tell Charlie...what to say...how to..." Her voice trailed off.

"This isn't about the party?" I asked in surprise.

She frowned. "No. But thanks for reminding me."

I gazed at her face searching for clues to her distress. If it wasn't the party, then the date was significant for some other reason.

Then I knew. "You're not ready," I declared.

“I am,” Bella argued, raising her head to look at me. Even she didn’t appear to be convinced as she added, “I have to be.”

“You don’t have to be anything,” I contradicted her.

Her eyes were wide. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. “Victoria, Jane, Caius, whoever was in my room...!”

“All the more reason to wait,” I insisted.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Edward!”

I held her face securely and spoke slowly, carefully. She needed to understand.

“Bella. Not one of us had a choice. You’ve seen what it’s done...to Rosalie especially. We’ve all struggled, trying to reconcile ourselves with something we had no control over. I won’t let it be that way for you. You *will* have a choice,” I vowed.

“I’ve already made my choice.”

“You aren’t going through with this because a sword is hanging over your head. We will take care of the problems, and I will take care of you,” I promised. “When we’re through it, and there is nothing forcing your hand, then you can decide to join me, if you still want to. But not because you’re afraid. You won’t be forced into this.”

“Carlisle promised, after graduation.”

“Not until you’re ready,” I reiterated. “And definitely not while you feel threatened.”

Bella didn’t respond and I took that as agreement.

“There,” I said, kissing her forehead. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing but impending doom,” Bella joked weakly.

“Trust me.”

“I do,” she replied, but she still looked tense. I waited.

“Can I ask you something?” she said after a pause.

“Anything.”

“What am I getting Alice for graduation?”

I snickered. She was asking her boyfriend, the mind reader, to tell her what he’d seen while rifling through the thoughts of his precognitive sister, just to remind her of a gift idea she’d forgotten. It was a convoluted way to go about things.

“It looked like you were getting us both concert tickets—”

“That’s right!” Bella exclaimed. “The concert in Tacoma. I saw an ad in the paper last week, and I thought it would be something you’d like, since you said it was a good CD.”

“It’s a great idea,” I said. “Thank you.” The combination of my own abilities and Alice’s in the same household meant that I rarely got a surprise gift or surprise party or surprise anything—and that’s the way I preferred it. I could sympathize with Bella on that score.

“I hope it’s not sold out.”

“It’s the thought that counts. I ought to know,” I joked.

Bella sighed.

“There’s something else you meant to ask,” I probed.

Bella frowned. “You’re good.”

“I have lots of practice reading your face. Ask me.”

She’d avoided the question she really wanted to ask, meaning it was a hard one for her. Was she afraid of my answer? Bella closed her eyes and hid her face in my chest.

“You don’t want me to be a vampire,” she stated.

“No, I don’t,” I replied softly and then waited for her to continue. When she didn’t, I prompted her. “That’s not a question.”

“Well...,” she began uncertainly, “I was worrying about...why you feel that way.”

“Worrying?” Bella was worrying? That wasn’t anything I’d intended!

“Would you tell me why?” she requested. “The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?”

I was puzzled. “If I answer your question, will you then *explain* your question?”

Bella nodded by moving her face slightly against my chest, avoiding my eyes. Something about her question made her feel shy and vulnerable.

I felt a little uncomfortable too because the answer highlighted my great weakness, one of the faults in my character. I took a deep breath and braced myself for the painful truth.

“You could do so much better, Bella. I know that *you* believe I have a soul, but I’m not entirely convinced on that point, and to risk yours...” I shook my head, disgusted with myself. “For me to allow this—to let you become what I am just so that I’ll never have to lose you—is the most selfish act I can imagine. I want it more than anything, for *myself*. But for you, I want so much more. Giving in—it feels criminal. It’s the most selfish thing I’ll ever do, even if I live forever. If there were any way for me to become human for you—no matter what the price was—I would pay it.”

Bella did not respond and I stopped breathing. What was she thinking? Did she revile me as much as I did? That would be understandable.

“So...it’s not that you’re afraid you won’t...like me as much when I’m different—when I’m not soft and warm and I don’t smell the same? You really do want to keep me, no matter how I turn out?”

The breath I’d been holding came out in a rush. “You were worried I wouldn’t *like* you?” I was astounded. It was *ridiculous*! I started laughing. “Bella, for a fairly intuitive person, you can be so obtuse! I don’t think you realize how much easier it will be for me, when I don’t have to concentrate all the time on not killing you. Certainly, there are things I’ll miss. This for one...” I looked into her eyes and stroked her cheek with my fingers. The red flush moved upward through her neck into her cheeks. I chuckled at Bella’s predictable response to my touch.

“And the sound of your heart,” I went on softly. “It’s the most significant sound in my world. I’m so attuned to it now, I swear I could pick it out from miles away. But neither

of these things matter. *This—*,” I said, taking her face in my hands. “*You*. That’s what I’m keeping. You’ll always be my Bella, you’ll just be a little more durable.” It secretly thrilled me to think of it.

Bella sighed and finally—finally—relaxed, closing her eyes and resting her face in my hands.

After a moment, I asked, “Now will you answer a question for me? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?”

“Of course,” Bella answered, her eyes opening wide.

“You don’t want to be my wife,” I said slowly.

Bella’s heart stuttered and then began to gallop. The blood drained from her face.

“That’s not a question,” she muttered.

I released her face and took one of her hands in mine. It was cold and sweaty.

“I was worrying about why you felt that way,” I said tentatively.

Bella gulped and then whispered. “That’s not a question, either.”

“Please, Bella?”

“The truth?” I had to read her lips as she made no sound.

“Of course. I can take it, whatever it is.” I felt tense and slightly afraid, but I would not let her see that.

“You’re going to laugh at me.”

I stared at her face to see whether I had heard her right. “Laugh? I cannot imagine that.”

“You’ll see,” she mumbled and sighed. Then her pale face suddenly blazed red in mortification. “Okay, fine! I’m sure this will sound like some big joke to you, but really!”

I could not imagine what the problem was.

“It’s just so...so...so *embarrassing!*” Bella sputtered, hiding her face in my chest again.

“I’m not following you,” I finally replied when she didn’t continue.

Bella opened her eyes and glared at me. “I’m not *that girl*, Edward,” she exploded. “The one who gets married right out of high school like some small-town hick who got knocked up by her boyfriend! Do you know what people would think? Do you realize what century this is? People don’t just get married at eighteen! Not smart people, not responsible, mature people! I wasn’t going to be that girl! That’s not who I am...”

She was worried about “what the neighbors would think”? I couldn’t believe it. I waited for her to drop the other shoe, but she said nothing more.

“That’s all?” I queried.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s not that you were...more eager for immortality itself than for just me?”

And suddenly, out of nowhere, Bella was laughing at me! I had asked her a serious question and she was laughing at me! It had been my biggest concern since I first uttered the words “marry me.”

“Edward!” Bella gasped, giggling uncontrollably. “And here...I always...thought that...you were...so much...smarter than me!”

She thought *I* was being silly! Was that possible? A huge smile stretched across my face and I began laughing too, possibly a little hysterically. I wrapped my arms around her in joy.

“Edward,” Bella explained, “there’s no point to forever without you. I wouldn’t want one day without you.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I replied, relaxing finally. I did not doubt her words because her laughter was so obviously genuine.

“Still...,” Bella reminded me, “it doesn’t change anything.”

“It’s nice to understand, though. And I do understand your perspective, Bella, truly I do. But I’d like it very much if you’d try to consider mine.” I knew she thought I was being unreasonable, odd, perhaps a little pushy, even. But there was no way for her to understand where I was coming from unless I told her. I gazed into her eyes.

“You see, Bella, I was always *that boy*. In my world, I was already a man. I wasn’t looking for love—no, I was far too eager to be a soldier for that; I thought of nothing but the idealized glory of the war that they were selling prospective draftees then—but if I had found...” I stopped to consider. “I was going to say if I had found *someone*, but that won’t do. If I had found *you*, there isn’t a doubt in my mind how I would have proceeded. I was *that boy*, who would have—as soon as I discovered that you were what I was looking for—gotten down on one knee and endeavored to secure your hand. I would have wanted you for eternity, even when the word didn’t have quite the same connotations.”

I gave her a crooked smile.

Bella was frozen still, her eyes wide.

“Breathe, Bella,” I said, smiling.

She exhaled the air she’d been holding in.

“Can you see my side, Bella, even a little bit?”

She looked into the distance like she was trying to imagine it. I didn’t know if she could. It was such a different time—but it’s who I was. Even though I passed for a modern teenager...man—as best I could—I wasn’t. Not at all.

“The thing is, Edward,” Bella said, dodging my question, “in my mind, *marriage* and *eternity* are not mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive concepts. And since we’re living in my world for the moment, maybe we should go with the times, if you know what I mean.”

“But on the other hand,” I pointed out, “you will soon be leaving time behind you altogether. So why should the transitory customs of one local culture affect the decision so much?”

Bella cast about for an answer. “When in Rome?”

I laughed. “You don’t have to say yes or no today, Bella. It’s good to understand both sides, though, don’t you think?”

“So your condition...?”

“Is still in effect. I do see your point, Bella, but if you want me to change you myself...”

“Dum, dum, dah–dum,” Bella intoned solemnly, finishing my sentence for me with four notes of a tune everyone recognized.