“No. No way!” Bella objected vehemently to Alice’s announcement. “No, this doesn’t count. I stopped aging three days ago. I am eighteen forever.”

My wife had always had this odd obsession with being older than me in human years. The fact that I almost lapped her by a century never seemed to quite sink in.

Alice was breaking the news. “Whatever. We’re celebrating anyway, so suck it up.” That wasn’t entirely true. Bella and I were the only ones who would be celebrating, which was the whole point.

“Are you ready to open your present?” There was only one right answer to Alice’s question.

“Presents,” I amended, as I pulled the key to Bella’s Ferrari from my pocket and smoothed out the blue ribbon attached to it.

“Mine first.”

How could such a tiny person be so pushy?

“Mine is closer,” I pushed back.

Alice stuck her tongue out at me. “But look at how she’s dressed. It’s been killing me all day. That is clearly the priority.”

Bella hadn’t changed from her shredded silk dress and my white oxford shirt. I had located a shirt to put on once I realized that Bella’s eyes were glued to my half-naked body. She was also twining her fingers together, trying not to touch me, I guessed. The electricity between us had been intense all day. Probably, she wanted to avoid giving everyone a repeat of our “R-rated” performance from earlier. Once my thoughts headed in that direction, I almost forgot that I was still arguing with Alice. I didn’t much care about the outcome, actually, only about being alone with Bella.

“I know—I’ll play you for it. Rock, paper, scissors,” Alice was saying.

I sighed. That game could go on all night between Alice and me, so I quickly gave in. It would get us to the cottage faster anyway.

“Why don’t you just tell me who wins?” I suggested.

Alice grinned happily. “I do. Excellent.”

“It’s probably better that I wait for morning, anyway. I think it might be more fun if Jacob was awake for the big reveal, don’t you agree?” I smiled crookedly at Bella. “So that someone there is able to express the right level of enthusiasm?”

Bella grinned in reply. We both knew that she would have a hard time appreciating what was waiting in the garage for her. Jacob, though, would know exactly what he was looking at when he saw the Ferrari F430 under the tarp. He’d probably wet himself, which would be an appropriate response to that rocket-on-wheels.

“Where does she usually sleep?” Bella wondered.

“In Rose’s arms. Or Jacob’s. Or Esme’s. You get the picture. She has never been set down in her entire life. She’s going to be the most spoiled half-vampire in existence.”

I laughed at the potential truth in that, though I didn’t think it would do Nessie any harm. She would outgrow it too soon. I hadn’t taken a turn because I’d been at Bella’s side every night since delivering the baby. Perhaps it was for the best.

Rosalie smiled companionably at Bella as she took Renesmee into her capable arms. “She is also the most unspoiled half-vampire in existence. The beauty of being one of a kind,” Rose pointed out.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” Alice barked impatiently, directing Bella toward the kitchen door.

“Is it outside?”

“Sort of,” Alice waffled.

“Enjoy your gift,” Rosalie called to Bella as we left the house. “It’s from all of us. Esme especially.”

Maybe Rose and Bella really would be sisterly now that Renesmee had arrived. I was starting to think that my child was magical in many different ways. She seemed to be healing Rosalie’s deep-seated wounds to an extent.

“Aren’t you coming, too?” Bella turned around as she suddenly realized that nobody else was following us out.

“We’ll give you a chance to appreciate it alone.” Rosalie smiled at her own eyebrow-raising thoughts, which I would not repeat. “You can tell us about it...later.”

Emmett hooted with laughter. More eyebrow-waggling thoughts. Those two were having just a bit too much fun at our expense. Too bad I’d played the gentleman by ignoring their newlywed antics all those years ago. It would be less effective to reciprocate in kind now.

After jumping over the river, Bella and I followed Alice through the woods at high speed for five minutes until she stopped short. Then, in a feat of bravery, Alice leaped onto Bella’s back with just a brief warning. Bella was amazing—any other new vampire would have defended herself instantly, but Bella stayed calm. Alice’s intent was to make herself tall enough to hold her hands over Bella’s eyes before unveiling the secret.

I sighed. Sometimes when Alice was making up for her lost youth, I felt like we had another child in the family. We’d gotten so used to indulging her, though, that I didn’t expect it ever to change. I interlaced my fingers with Bella’s to lead her forward. Despite her objections, we did things Alice’s way...as usual.

“Just a few seconds more, Bella,” I whispered, “Then she’ll go annoy someone else.”

“You might be a little more appreciative,” Alice scolded me. “This is as much for you as it is for her.”
“True. Thank you again, Alice.”
“Yeah, yeah. Okay.”
Alice switched to a film director’s voice for the big reveal.
“Stop there. Turn her just a little to the right. Yes, like that. Okay. Are you ready?”
“I’m ready,” Bella replied.
Alice removed her hands from Bella’s eyes. When Bella saw the stone cottage, she froze into stillness.
“What do you think?” Alice demanded. Bella’s mouth opened but no words came out. She was literally speechless.
“Esme thought we might like a place of our own for a while, but she didn’t want us too far away,” I explained softly in Bella’s ear. “And she loves any excuse to renovate. This little place has been crumbling away out here for at least a hundred years.”
Bella still could not speak. Alice, worried that Bella’s silence meant she didn’t like her gift, started peppering her with questions and proposing solutions for problems that didn’t exist until Bella told her to “be quiet.” The birthday girl continued to gaze at the cottage, taking it all in, before verifying what she saw.
“You’re giving me a house for my birthday?”
“Us,” I interjected. “And it’s no more than a cottage. I think the word house implies more legroom.”
“No knocking my house,” Bella chided.
“You like it,” Alice ventured. Bella shook her head no.
“I can’t wait to tell Esme!”
“Why didn’t she come?”
Alice fumbled around for an answer.
“Oh, you know…they all remember how you are about presents. They didn’t want to put you under too much pressure to like it.”
“But of course I love it. How could I not?”
“They’ll like that.” Alice patted Bella’s arm and then tried to find a delicate way to escape. “Anyhoo, your closet is stocked. Use it wisely. And…I guess that’s everything.”
“ Aren’t you going to come inside?”
Alice eased her way backwards. “Edward knows his way around. I’ll stop by…later. Call me if you can’t match your clothes right. Jaz wants to hunt. See you.”
“That was weird,” Bella commented after Alice had disappeared into the woods.
“Am I really that bad? They didn’t have to stay away. Now I feel guilty. I didn’t even thank her right. We should go back, tell Esme—”
“Bella, don’t be silly. No one thinks you’re that unreasonable.”
“Then what—”
“Alone time is their other gift. Alice was trying to be subtle about it.” In the time-honored Cullen tradition.
“Oh.”

I saw a look cross Bella’s face and I thought I knew what it meant. What it meant for me was that I’d better get my wife inside immediately.

“Let me show you what they’ve done,” I said quickly, taking Bella’s hand. She didn’t move, but instead laughed quietly.

“Do I get to hear the joke?” I inquired.

“It’s not a very good one. I was just thinking—today is the first and last day of forever. It’s kind of hard to wrap my head around it. Even with all this extra room for wrapping.” We chuckled together.

I gestured toward the arched cottage door, encouraging Bella to unlock it. She put the key with the pink ribbon into the lock and turned it.

“You’re such a natural at this, Bella; I forget how very strange this all must be for you. I wish I could hear it.”

Bella’s mental silence had never bothered me more than it did now. She had given up her human life because of me, and though she’d always said that that was what she wanted, I couldn’t know for sure. Now that it was done and there was no going back, her feelings were more of a mystery than ever, since her face was harder to read too.

Her body, on the other hand, was speaking loudly to me. Mmm…. My impatience finally got the better of me and I whisked Bella into my arms.

“Hey!”

“Thresholds are part of my job description,” I explained. “But I’m curious. Tell me what you’re thinking about right now.” I was hoping she felt as exhilarated as I did, but I didn’t think it was possible. I pushed the door open and carried Bella through.

“Everything,” she answered. “All at the same time, you know. Good things and things to worry about and things that are new. How I keep using too many superlatives in my head. Right now, I’m thinking that Esme is an artist. It’s so perfect!”

I was seeing the finished renovation for the first time and it was more beautiful than Alice had shown me…absolutely stunning. Furnished and decorated, it had a timeless quality that made it feel like it had been there forever. Esme was gifted at creating inventive and atmospheric interiors. And this one, with its stone floors and walls, and kiva fireplace in the corner was the coziest I’d seen her do.

“We’re lucky Esme thought to add an extra room. No one was planning for Ness—Renesmee.” Oops.

“Not you, too,” Bella groaned.

“Sorry, love. I hear it in their thoughts all the time, you know. It’s rubbing off on me.” Time to change the subject. “I’m sure you’re dying to see the closet. Or, at least I’ll tell Alice that you were, to make her feel good.”

“Should I be afraid?”

“Terrified.”
I carried Bella into the hallway with its succession of small arches that made it feel like a medieval stone castle in miniature.

“That will be Renesmee’s room. They didn’t have time to do much with it, what with the angry werewolves…”

Bella laughed in a relieved sort of way.

The room was empty and white with a pale wood floor. The first thing we’d need was a crib. If she stayed nights with us at the cottage—which is what I expected, most nights, anyway—she definitely would be in a bed at night.

“Here’s our room. Esme tried to bring some of her island back here for us. She guessed that we would get attached.”

Now that it was decorated, the room was remarkably similar to the master bedroom on Isle Esme. Esme had put in a king-size bed and dressed it in white with mosquito netting encasing it in a white cloud. The pale wood floor was the color of beach sand and the walls the color of the sky on a sunny day. The garden beyond the double French doors was fully landscaped with roses climbing the walls and hyacinths, small evergreen shrubs, and ferns planted around the pond. It was gorgeous and wonderfully scented.

“Oh.” Bella was speechless again.

“I know,” I whispered. Memories of our honeymoon flooded over me as we both gazed silently around the space. When I saw Alice’s masterpiece, I laughed.

“The closet is through those double doors. I should warn you—it’s bigger than this room.”

Bella’s eyes were regarding me in a way that fueled the slow-burning fire I’d been too aware of all day. It was hard to take in how beautiful she was with her glorious new body. More than anything, I just wanted to gaze upon her naked body and touch her and be joined to her.

“We’re going to tell Alice that I ran right to the clothes,” Bella murmured, bringing her lips close to mine. Her sweet breath washed over my face and her fingers worked their way into my hair. “We’re going to tell her I spent hours in there playing dress-up. We’re going to lie.”

Bella’s words released the restraint that had kept my desire in check all day, and raw desire surged through my body. A deep moan rumbled in my chest as my lips found hers. All the love and hunger and need I felt for her came pouring out and, for the first time, I held back nothing. Bella responded as never before, her excitement urging me on. With our lips locked together, I set her on her feet to free my hands for urgent necessities. I lost patience immediately with the buttons on her shirt and sent them flying when I tore it apart. Bella’s hands grasped the hem of my shirt and ripped it decisively from bottom to top, and then yanked it off my shoulders. When her silky hands caressed my chest, I shredded what remained of the bodice of her dress and it fell softly to her waist. *My beautiful, beautiful Bella…*

The last time I’d seen Bella without her clothes, she was lying on Carlisle’s surgical
table, still half-human, the scars and bruises from her pregnancy ordeal not yet faded. I’d loved her body then too, but desire was tempered by anxiety and sadness. All I felt now was joy and lust…powerful lust.

I simply could not wait any longer. I wrenched Bella’s skirt into two pieces and the thin fabric hiding the rest of her from me puddled onto the floor. She yanked the front of my trousers apart, bursting the zipper. Her hands were all over me in an instant, skimming, caressing…ahhh…. Bella pressed herself against me forcefully as my hands explored her naked skin. Then with an unexpected swell of strength, she upended me and we toppled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Neither of us paid any heed in our frenzy of passion.

Bella was even more physically stunning as a vampire than as a human, though I would have thought it impossible. Her smooth white skin glowed in the low bedroom light, which highlighted every elegant angle and provocative curve. Rather than collapse at my slightest touch, her flesh now held firm in my hands. I could squeeze her and stroke her without concern.

I slid one hand between her legs and felt her open for me. Though the surface texture of her was different, the soft red hair and the profound wetness that met my fingers were the same.

“Bella, I need you now…,” I moaned, rolling my body on top of hers.

“Yes, yes, yes…,” she whispered as her hand stroked my rigid penis. Ahhh! The sensation was even more intense than I had remembered. Bella raised her knees and guided me to her center. As I entered her slowly, savoring the feeling, I threw back my head and shut my eyes in pleasure. A growl escaped from my throat.

“Edward, I love you…” Bella gasped as she raised her hips to meet me. She was firm and silky smooth inside, and her flesh yielded to me as I pushed into her. The shocking contrast of ice in fire was gone. She felt naturally warm inside, slightly hotter than me.

“I love you too, my darling,” I whispered as her slick walls slid back and then clung to me. I bent to kiss her neck but in the excitement of the moment, I pressed my teeth into the side of her throat instead. The taboo had been lifted. She moaned and the titillating sound drove me hard into her depths. I pulled away, pushed into her, and pulled away again with no restraint. Bella was panting as she grasped my buttocks in her hands and pulled me back with force, burying me inside her. I growled loudly and began moving faster and with more purpose. Bella shrieked.

Before I knew what had happened, I was on my back beneath her, her lips pressing against mine almost to the point of pain. This was an altogether new experience. I was used to guarding Bella’s vulnerability from my density and strength, but I was not used to being vulnerable to hers. Never before had she had the power to physically hurt me, as she did now. I sensed that she was trying not to squeeze me too tightly or press against me too forcefully, but she lost her focus periodically and my ribs creaked in complaint. That discomfort was quickly lost, though, in the overwhelming pleasure she was giving me.

Her breaths became more frenzied as she sat upright and rubbed me against the
front side of her, over and over. Then she leaned forward so that her long hair tented my face and kissed me long and deep. As my hands stroked the softer recesses of her anatomy, her movements became smaller and smaller, her attention focused on one spot only until suddenly, her scream tore through the air. I could only imagine that the responsiveness of her new body was more intense than she was used to. As for me, the power of her interior muscles was so enhanced that for a nanosecond I feared my flesh would not withstand the force. But then...

“Oh!! Bella…,” I cried as a wave of ecstasy broke over me, followed by another, and another. I was completely paralyzed. If I’d still had a beating heart, I swear it would have stopped.

Bella collapsed on top of me, her hands gripping my back, her head resting on my shoulder, her lips against my neck. I felt small tremors inside her as her movements slowed and eventually stilled. My eyes burned as I stroked her hair and held my cheek to hers…vampire tears. I was profoundly grateful to have her back. I would never let her go.

The floor was plenty soft to lie on and in less danger of damage once we’d stopped moving, but I thought perhaps we might transfer ourselves to the bed. It was probably good to demonstrate a little decorum now that we were parents and all. I smiled to myself. It was fortunate that Nessie was such a sound sleeper if she would be spending nights at the cottage.

I stroked Bella’s cheek with my fingers and she raised herself up to look at my face.

“You okay?” I asked quietly.

“Never better,” she whispered. “You?”

“Only slightly dented in a couple of places. Entirely worth it.” I grinned and she leaned forward to touch her lips lightly to mine. I traced the smooth line of her jaw with my fingertips and then dragged them across her sculpted lips. She drew in her breath sharply and then took two of my fingers into her mouth, smoothing her lips down their length and back. Her eyes watched mine as she repeated the stroke slowly. Her mouth felt warm and sensuous around my sensitive fingers, but the power of suggestion made the action highly erotic. I pulled my fingers slowly from her mouth and pressed my lips to hers, replacing fingers with tongue. She stroked the length of it with her own tongue and our breathing sped in tandem.

I wanted more. In a flash, our lips still connected, I sat up, holding myself inside of Bella by grasping her buttocks with my hands. I leaped to my feet and felt her legs wrap around my waist as I found a gap in the mosquito netting and slipped through it. I tipped us prone onto the bed with Bella beneath me. Still connected, our legs intertwined, I began moving inside of her again. Ahhh... She caressed my back and buttocks as I dove into her depths. It was liberating not to worry about how my hands might hurt her, or to be afraid I
would crush her, or to fear I might lose control and open an artery. For the first time, I could simply move with her, fast or slow, shallow or deep, and savor her response.

Bella began panting into my mouth, her hands tracing a path from my chest to my belly and below, where she reached between her legs to hold me in her hand as I slid into her, out of her, and into her again. Ahhh!! When she transferred her fingers to herself, finding a habitual rhythm, a low moan vibrated through her body.

I didn’t know I could experience greater pleasure than I already had with my wife, but something had changed in her along with her physical changes. Though not shy before, Bella now showed no hesitation to take the lead. Perhaps the release of my fear released something in her, but we were equals in every way. She had a new confidence.

I’d been disappointed that I could not hear Bella’s thoughts after her change, but as we made love, I almost felt that I could hear them because her body spoke so eloquently. I understood that she loved me...every part of me. I could feel it in the brush of her lips, in every touch of her hands, and in each moan that escaped her as our bodies joined together. My love for her increased, though that was hardly possible.

At some point during that timeless night, my bride and I lay side-by-side, stroking each other’s bodies, skin on skin. I let the palms of my hands move from her shoulders to her breasts, to her stomach, between her legs, and along the insides of her thighs, remembering each of her curves, which were now more solid, less vulnerable. I caressed the roundness of her buttocks and the smooth crevice between them. I stroked along the backs of her thighs, over her hipbones, and into the small of her back. I felt the curves of her ribs and the ridges of her spine. My fingers combed through her long hair again and again. I wanted to touch every inch of her, every rise and every fall, inside and out.

I don’t know how many times we made love—it was more continuous than anything—but between more intense periods, we lay together touching and marveling and appreciating one other. Late in the night, I curled around my wife, a seashell within a seashell, and sang her lullaby, and then Renesmee’s song. We didn’t talk much, preferring to reconnect physically and spiritually.

A human would not have survived such a night as we had. And thankfully, I never had to think of that again. Bella was much more powerful than me and would remain so for nearly a year, if the average vampire was any indication. Of course, Bella was far from average in any way.

Eventually, the sky began to lighten through the forest and birds started singing their early morning songs. Bella cocked her head to the side, listening. I lay with my head propped on my elbow, running my fingers lightly up and down her stomach. I imagined that I could feel a minute ridge on her lower belly where I had cut her with the scalpel and later sewn her up, though I could see nothing there.

Bella’s question cut into my thoughts.

“Do you miss it?”
I was immediately confused, wondering whether she was asking about the scar or her big belly or...

“Miss what?” I finally inquired when I realized that I wasn’t following her train of thought (of course not).

“All of it—the warmth, the soft skin, the tasty smell…I’m not losing anything at all, and I just wondered if it was a little bit sad for you that you were.”

I laughed softly at the absurdity of the question. “It would be hard to find someone less sad than I am now. Impossible, I’d venture. Not many people get every single thing they want, plus all the things they didn’t think to ask for, in the same day.”

“Are you avoiding the question?”

“You are warm,” I said, cupping my hand to Bella’s face. She did feel warm to me, perhaps one degree above my own temperature, but I knew what she meant. She no longer felt hot against my skin, except deep inside. She felt comfortable…right. It was a relief not to feel Bella’s body shivering on top of me and not to have to wrap her in padding to protect her from my chill.

I ran my fingers down her cheek and jaw, down her throat, and then dragged them across her breasts to her waist before telling her, “You are soft. And as for the scent, well, I couldn’t say I missed that. Do you remember the scent of those hikers on our hunt?”

“I’ve been trying very hard not to,” Bella replied.

“Imagine kissing that.” I watched as Bella’s jaw clenched and her hand flew to her throat.

“Oh.”

“Precisely. So the answer is no. I am purely full of joy, because I am missing nothing. No one has more than I do now.”

I leaned over to touch my lips to hers and, again, it felt like the very first time, but without the flame in my throat urging me to sink my teeth into her neck. It was gentle and soft, but quickly changed to intense and passionate. Then her hands were all over me and mine all over her and we began making the click-clack noises of two boulders bumping together. That was a change. Vigorous lovemaking between vampires sounds very different than between a human and a vampire…noisier, rougher…and though perhaps it sounded like we were beating each other up, there would be no bruises or lacerations or broken bones…ever. It was pure pleasure.

As the sun rose, Bella asked me another question.

“How long does this go on? I mean, Carlisle and Esme, Em and Rose, Alice and Jasper—they don’t spend all day locked in their rooms. They’re out in public, fully clothed, all the time. Does this…craving ever let up?”

Bella moved her left leg slightly and pressed even closer to me. I took a moment to enjoy the feeling of her body plastered against mine.

“That’s difficult to say,” I replied eventually. “Everyone is different and, well, so far you’re the very most different of all. The average young vampire is too obsessed with
thirst to notice much else for a while. That doesn’t seem to apply to you. With the average vampire, though, after that first year, other needs make themselves known. Neither thirst nor any other desire really ever fades. It’s simply a matter of learning to balance them, learning to prioritize and manage…”

“How long?”

Maybe I was trying to avoid the question as she suspected. I hated to put the idea into her head that there was any limit on the power of our love. For all I knew, it might never fade. Right now, that seemed very possible. But I knew she would continue to press for an answer.

“Rosalie and Emmett were the worst. It took a solid decade before I could stand to be within a five-mile radius of them. Even Carlisle and Esme had a difficult time stomaching it. They kicked the happy couple out eventually. Esme built them a house, too. It was grander than this one, but then, Esme knows what Rose likes, and she knows what you like.”

“So, after ten years, then?” Bella repeated. “Everybody is normal again? Like they are now?”

I smiled at her innocence. “Well, I’m not sure what you mean by normal. You’ve seen my family going about life in a fairly human way, but you’ve been sleeping nights.” I gave her a wicked wink. “There’s a tremendous amount of time left over when you don’t have to sleep. It makes balancing your…interests quite easy. There’s a reason why I’m the best musician in the family, why—besides Carlisle—I’ve read the most books, studied the most sciences, become fluent in the most languages….Emmett would have you believe that I’m such a know-it-all because of the mind reading, but the truth is that I’ve just had a lot of free time.”

We began laughing heartily then, which caused our closely connected parts to rub together. Humor and conversation quickly faded then as my groans, Bella’s panting, and a gentle click-clack were the only sounds that could be heard.