2. PRENUPTIALS

So far, Bella had been keeping her word by complaining only minimally when I gave her gifts as my wife-to-be.

“What’s mine is yours now,” I’d said and she couldn’t find a good argument to counter that. The next item I wanted to give her was a cell phone. Then she could call her mother whenever she wanted, or her school friends, or me, without worrying about Charlie listening in on her conversations.

Bella had been enjoying her recent talks with Carlisle at our house. Since we’d announced our engagement, Carlisle had become like a vampire rabbi, an elder of the tribe of vampire, sharing our history, our laws, and our stories with her. She was eager to learn as much as she could about her new life before she “converted.” With a cell phone, she could call Carlisle whenever she liked, or she could call Esme or Alice to get updates on the wedding arrangements (though that seemed unlikely, since she practically covered her ears and chanted “La la la la la…” whenever the topic came up).

Mostly, I wanted her to have a cell phone in case she needed to call me—if she got in a jam or had a flat tire (ignoring the fact that she could drive the Mercedes Guardian on four flat tires, if necessary). She didn’t need me to pick her up at the Quileute reservation boundary now that Jacob was gone and the other wolves, except for Seth, weren’t interested in talking to her, but if she had a phone, she could call Billy or Seth if she wanted to.

Bella would accept a cell phone if I presented it to her as a safety precaution. Once she had it, then perhaps she’d use it at other times too. I’d tell her that we had a great “Friends and Family” plan and now that she was family-to-be, she was eligible to join—something along those lines, so she wouldn’t be concerned about the cost.

Life was easier now that Bella had relaxed about the whole gift-giving thing. She viewed marrying me as such a huge concession on her part that she’d stopped worrying so much about “having nothing” to give me in return.

Bella was also accepting gifts more readily because I had finally agreed that we would try making love on our honeymoon. I was regretting that decision more as the wedding date grew closer, but she was determined to hold me to my word. Her attitude about our wedding night was “Practice makes perfect.” Mine was “No foul, no harm.”

Since that afternoon in the meadow when I had been more than prepared to make love with her—and she had refused me—I’d reverted to my earlier state of caution. Bella was continually pushing the limits of my control and I was forever putting on the brakes. The powerful sexual need that had made itself known to me that day had not disappeared,
though. Lying with her at night had become an exquisite melding of pleasure and pain—an intense arousal to the limits of my control, followed by the denial of gratification.

I’m not human, so my body doesn’t work like a human man’s…I don’t have great surges of testosterone that render me desperately needful of sexual release or full of aggressive energy as Emmett has described his human experience. For vampires, sexual energy—once set in motion—is more constant, with less dramatic peaks and valleys. With that constancy comes a certain tolerance for the need. I’m always aroused when I’m near Bella, always available, but never outright desperate (at least so far). It isn’t as difficult to manage as blood-lust is, in most ways.

My father recently told me that one hundred percent of human males masturbate. No, that’s not right. What he actually said was “ninety-nine percent of men masturbate and one percent lie.” It’s a joke among physicians, apparently.

My memories of being human during puberty are vague. Except for the slow suffocation one experiences with the Spanish Influenza—a trauma never to be forgotten—bodily sensations one had as a human quickly fade from memory after becoming a vampire. So while I dimly recall the act of masturbation, I don’t remember the sensation of it.

Masturbation is possible for male vampires—I don’t know whether that’s true for females—but it doesn’t provide the great sense of release that it apparently does for humans. I don’t fully understand why, unless it has something to do with our inability to procreate, as I assume that the continuation of the human species is what fuels the irrational sex drives of humans. Since we can perpetuate our species through nonsexual means, requiring only mouth contact with a victim’s blood, our most maddening drive is to drink human blood. But I don’t really know all the facts. I intend to have a “birds and bees” talk with Carlisle soon and learn everything that I don’t know about vampire sexuality.

I presume that human women are much the same as human men. If I’m driving Bella half as crazy as she’s driving me, then I’ll bet she finds private moments to give herself some relief. I’m sure that she does, actually. The signs aren’t so hard to identify…her scent, for example, undergoes subtle changes.

I have become an expert in Bella’s scent. Being with her as much and as closely as I am has taught me how Bella’s scent changes at various points during her menstrual cycle. Two weeks before her flow, she becomes very, very sweet-smelling. Looking back, I suspect that that was the point in her cycle when I first met her, she was so profoundly, mouthwateringly aromatic. Reviewing fertility charts tells me that the sweet scent corresponds to her ovulation. It makes sense biologically…or it would if I were human. I’d be most attracted to her during her period of fertility. As a vampire, I’m still attracted, though I can’t impregnate her.

In contrast, just before her period, Bella has a lush, ripe scent, an extra layer over her normal, freesia-like sweetness. The lavender flavor rises during that time and she takes on a muskier aroma. The musk, combined with the scent of blood on her person is also
extremely attractive to me. Unfortunately, that phase produces an increased burning sensation in my throat, which the presence of blood always activates. (Incidentally, I wonder if vampires are more likely to choose female victims who are having their menstrual periods. I bet so.)

Bella’s lavender musk scent also rises when she is particularly aroused. I can make it out beneath the fragrance of the soaps and shampoos she uses in the shower. I’d wager that Bella makes time to masturbate in the bath, unaware that the artificial perfumes in bath products have no effect on the subtler natural scents of her body. I wouldn’t ask her, though, not right now, at least. It would probably embarrass her, for one thing, and for another, if I begin talking about Bella’s sexual release with Bella, I can see that conversation ending in only one way…and that’s not a path I want to walk down just yet. I’ve reverted to my earlier position on pre-marital sex…with Bella’s soul in the balance, I’d just as soon wait. I’m not immoveable on the subject, as I proved to myself in the meadow, but it remains my preference. My fear gives me another good reason to avoid “going all the way” just now.

Still, Bella does push me mighty close on a regular basis. We “practice” a lot. One thing that helps keep us chaste in spite of our nightly practice is the chattering of Bella’s teeth. Once Bella strips me to the waist, something she insists upon now that we’re engaged, and she presses her t-shirt-clad torso against me, it doesn’t take long before she begins to shiver. We’ve taken to wrapping her in a heavy afghan to keep her warm. She reaches out from her cocoon to stroke my body, which I allow to the extent that I am able.

I never imagined in all my years as a vampire that I could respond so powerfully to the touch of a human hand…her human hand. Her hands are conductors for the electricity that flows into me wherever they contact my skin. Her light touch makes me shudder; her firm grip makes me moan. My lips feel like fire against hers, with all of the heat, none of the burn. I long to touch her everywhere with my lips. Just thinking about it…ahhhh…

“Edward!”

Alice had been calling silently for a couple of minutes, but I was ignoring her, because I knew she’d just prod me to make more decisions about the wedding. I was standing in for the bride for the purposes of wedding planning. It is my understanding that the bride-to-be is ordinarily the one running around making thousands of decisions, going to appointments, writing invitations, choosing colors, and everything else that goes along with hosting a traditional wedding celebration.

Of course, Alice was doing most of the work with lots of help and advice from Esme and Renee, the latter two seemingly on the phone with one another every day. Bella said that Renee adores Esme. I’m both unsurprised and delighted, partly because Bella will feel that her family is involved and supportive of her decision, and partly because our mothers’ friendship might be a way for Bella to remain connected to Renee, maybe even after she is changed. Though she won’t be able to talk to or see Renee in person, Bella could use Esme as a link over the phone, perhaps.
Since I hadn’t replied to Alice, she appeared in my bedroom doorway, irritated. “Edward, why didn’t you answer me?”
“Sorry, Alice, I’ve been daydreaming.”
“Well, Bella will be back soon from the printer’s. She was going into town for groceries, so I asked her to pick up the invitations. I will give each of you a small stack to hand address. Esme and Rosalie will do most of them, but there will be several you should write yourself…like Billy’s, and Seth’s, and Tanya’s. And I want Bella to hand-address the ones to our high school friends, because they will recognize her handwriting. I hate getting personal invitations written by somebody’s mother or cousin. It always feels like your supposed loved one just put your name into the invitation hopper instead of giving you personal consideration.”
“Okay, Alice, that’s fine.”
I’d been thinking about invitations myself. Despite the guest-list veto Bella had demanded from Alice, she hadn’t said anything about vetoing my choices. Bella was planning not to invite Jacob because she didn’t want to force him into thinking about our wedding and having to decide whether he should attend or not.
I realized, though, that if I were Jacob, I’d want to decide for myself whether to come, and I thought Jacob should have that choice. I decided that I would send him an invitation without Bella’s knowledge, and write a note leaving it up to him. If he came, it would be because he wanted to and not because he felt obligated. He could easily ignore an invitation from me without worrying about hurting my feelings.
It would be a treat for Bella if Jacob showed up and surprised her with his presence. I knew that she wanted him to be her best man, but she felt it was unreasonable to ask him…and it was, probably.
“And Edward, I want to see the tuxedo you said you were wearing. I have to update it, or at least approve it.”
“ Alice, it’s a fantastic tux and I’ve only worn it a couple of times.”
“You said you bought it for Carlisle and Esme’s wedding?”
“Yes, I was his best man. I love that suit and it’s of my era, you know, in line with the rest of the wedding you’ve planned.”
“I know, Edward, but I still want to see it. Have you even tried it on? Maybe you’ve gotten fatter since then,” Alice added, laughing at her own joke.
“Come with me now, if you want to. The suit’s in the attic,” I replied, as I hauled myself off the couch and led the way. “I have a top hat too.”
After Alice examined every inch of my old-fashioned tuxedo and vetoed the top hat (as I would have done if she hadn’t), she declared that it would work fine if I let her update the lapels and perhaps the fit here and there. I allowed the first suggestion, but not the second, as I wasn’t keen on standing still for Alice while she endlessly poked pins into my clothing.
“Feel free to modify it, Alice, but not in such a way that I’ll have to be fitted. I think the fit is perfect as it is.”

I was rather partial to it. It was the classic black coat with modified tails (not cutaway) and soft wool trousers, gray with subtle stripes. That was a popular alternative to the men’s traditional black tuxedo in the 1920s.

“I’ll put Charlie and Carlisle in gray suits that match the gray of your trousers, with black pocket handkerchiefs, and I’ll insist that you wear a gray bowtie or gray pocket handkerchief. That combination will go beautifully with Rosalie’s and my silver gowns. Perfect.”

Carlisle had agreed immediately to be my best man and Charlie would be giving Bella away in the traditional fashion. There was a point to such rituals, I thought. They helped humans to face and accept new realities. Funerals, for example, gave mourners a way to process the fact that a loved one was gone; bar- and bat mitzvahs announced that a child had transitioned into responsible adulthood.

Alice was still talking, but I was saved from being assigned further duties by the sound of Bella’s “before” car coming up the drive. She’d dropped off her groceries at Charlie’s house and was delivering the invitations to Alice.

“Hold on a second, Edward,” Alice added as I turned to leave. “Do you want Rosalie to play Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus” for Bella’s entrance? I would suggest Pachelbel’s Canon for seating the parents and guests.”

“Yes, definitely, and Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” for the recessional, please. No other music symbolizes those iconic moments in the same way. It’s like “Pomp and Circumstance” for graduation—you have to have it… Rosalie’s agreed to play piano?” I interrupted myself.

“Of course. You’re her brother. She wants to be involved. She’s the best pianist of all of us besides you, anyway.”

“Yes, well, tell her I said ‘Thank you.’”

“Tell her yourself.”

I rushed downstairs and just had time to lift my betrothed off her feet and give her a proper hello before Alice took Bella by the hand and dragged her off for a dress fitting. Bella was locked away for an hour with Alice and then she went home to make supper for Charlie.

I took a short stack of invitations from Alice to address the envelopes for my personal guests. I opened the first invitation and lifted the two overlapping layers of transparent tissue embossed with roses. My stone heart leapt in my chest as I read the words written in elegant script beneath:
Mrs. Renee Dwyer and Mr. Charlie Swan
request the pleasure of your company
at the nuptial ceremony of their cherished daughter,

Isabella Marie Swan
to
Edward Anthony Masen Cullen,
beloved son of
Mr. & Mrs. Carlisle Cullen
on the thirteenth of August, 2006, 4:00 p.m.
at the Cullen home, Forks, Washington.

It was truly happening! It said so right there on the expensive linen paper. Bella would hate the invitations, I realized. They were embossed with what appeared to be gold leaf. The extravagant embossing was of the style popular in the late 1800s, which, not coincidentally, was called “The Gilded Age.” Persons of the higher social classes carried gold-embossed calling cards when they performed their ritual afternoon visits, leaving them on silver trays in entrance halls to announce their presence. Alice was giving us quite a few early-century touches, it seemed. These invitations weren’t exactly inconspicuous, though.

I took a sheet of notepaper from one of the boxes and thought for a moment before putting pen to fancy linen paper.

Jacob,
I'm breaking the rules by sending you this. She was afraid of hurting you, and she didn't want to make you feel obligated in any way. But I know that, if things had gone the other way, I would have wanted the choice. I promise I will take care of her, Jacob. Thank you—for her—for everything.

Edward

I folded the page in half and wrote Jacob Black on the back. I tucked the note inside one of the invitations, closed it, and addressed the outside of the envelope to Mr. Billy Black. That way, Billy would see the note first and if he thought it was better for Jacob not to read it, he could destroy it—though I hoped he wouldn’t.

I put another invitation in an envelope and addressed it to Mrs. Sue Clearwater & Seth. A third, I addressed to Tanya and her family in Denali. That pretty much covered my obligations.

I retreated to my room and turned on my MacBook. I’d taken to working on plans for our honeymoon during Bella’s dinner time with Charlie. In addition to my mother’s
loan of Esme’s Island for the honeymoon, Alice and Jasper had given Bella and me first-class, round-trip tickets to Rio de Janeiro, the launching point for the island. Emmett and Rosalie were having the island’s cottage stocked with food and drink for Bella, and had rented a boat for our use while we were there. Alice was packing Bella’s bags for the trip so that I could surprise her with our destination. That pretty much took care of everything we would need while we were there. I was planning for Bella’s entertainment in case the consummation scenario didn’t work out.

Esme’s Island is a small piece of land jutting from the South Atlantic about thirty minutes by boat from Rio. It has a yellow-sand beach leading from the master bedroom to the water, and the boat dock is a short walk from the front door. One end of the island retains a bit of indigenous jungle behind which is a cliff that drops fifty feet to the water below. No jumping allowed! There are many small islands in the area that we could motor to and explore, and a coral reef where we could snorkel. Dolphins live in the area, and whales migrate through there too.

Esme’s Island is one of the places we Cullens and our friends can go for reunions or vacations, or as an escape from other places that we might need to leave in a hurry. Carlisle owns a few such bolt holes, both for enjoyment and for safe haven, as do the Denali clan.

After checking on the seasonal temperatures in Rio, memorizing a couple of nautical maps of the area islands, and creating a list of the supplies we’d need, I shut down the computer and hurried to my car. Bella and I had found one excuse or another for going out in the evenings after her dinner, because Charlie had turned curmudgeonly since our betrothal. Bella said he was moping around and was angry at her mother for not opposing the wedding.

“Do you think there’s anything I can do for him?” I asked her, as we drove away from the house following Charlie’s usual unenthusiastic and taciturn interaction with me.

“You? Not likely. He knows we’ve got him over a barrel. There’s nothing he can say about our engagement.”

“He’s that unhappy about it, is he?”

“You tell me. You’re the one who reads minds.”

“Charlie’s mind is pretty quiet, Bella.”

“What do you mean? You can’t read his mind? Like me?”

“Not exactly like you. I get some things, but there’s a lot of silence, and then sometimes I get strong feelings, but I’ve never gotten many words. It’s a less complete silence than yours, perhaps one or two steps up the ladder from you.”

“You never told me about Charlie before!”

“No, it’s never really come up and it took me some time to figure it out.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. He has quite strong feelings, but their meaning isn’t always clear. For a while, I assumed that he didn’t have a lot of thoughts.”

“So what feelings do you read in him lately?”
“Hmm...that’s a good question. Concern, mostly, and some loneliness, I’d say.”
“I guess I’m a lot like my Dad. Renee said that commitment was never my problem, like it was for her. And it’s been obvious since living with Charlie that he’s still in love with Mom. After fifteen years apart. I wonder if he’ll ever find someone else.”
“Alice might know.”
“Alice is doing a good job of worming her way into Charlie’s heart. She’s got him wrapped around her little finger.”
“Good. Maybe that will soothe his ruffled feathers before the wedding date arrives. “Wedding! Ewww…let’s not talk about that!”
I parked the car at the bluff road overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It’s a place we liked to come lately in the evenings. Tonight the skies were clear and there was a full moon casting trails of light across the water. What a lot of people don’t realize about Washington State is that it’s far enough north that days became quite long during the summer months. The sun doesn’t set until after 9:00 p.m., so twilight is extended for several hours. It doesn’t rain much either, because summer is also the dry season. Summer evenings in western Washington are one of the great pleasures of living there.
“As you wish, m’lady,” I said, using the electric seat controls to lean halfway back and to give myself some leg room. Then I pulled Bella onto my lap, her legs stretched across the center console, her feet on the passenger’s seat. I used the master controls to lower the windows and let the balmy 70-degree evening air drift through the car. I wondered if Dr. Mariano—or her drivers, anyway—would notice the salty scent of the sea when the automobile returned to the landlocked desert town of Phoenix. Bella hardly could have moved to a more divergent environment than where she came from—the desert to the rainforest.
Bella laid her head on my shoulder and I began stroking the long locks that hung down her back.
“How are you holding up?” I asked.
“It’s not so bad, really. Alice and the moms have handled almost everything. They hardly even ask me to participate, so that’s working out really well. I’ll bet when all this is over that Renee will invite Esme to visit her in Florida. They’ve become such good friends—at least Esme has become Mom’s friend. She doesn’t know many people in Jacksonville, but she sure has hit it off with your mom.”
“Esme has that effect on people. The only place my mother could go to spend time with your mother would be here, though, where the sun never shines, and your mother won’t visit here, will she?”
“She probably would if you and I ‘settled down’ in the area. Though she hates Forks, she does love me.” Then Bella added, “It’s too hard to be around Renee, though. She’s much too perceptive and I’m much too bad a liar to fool her about anything. She’d guess something was up if she hung around here.”
“So, she and Phil aren’t staying after the w...ceremony, then?”
“They’ll just stay overnight in Port Angeles, and then they’ll take a pond-hopper to Seattle to catch a flight to Florida in the morning. Phil’s gotta be back for a game.”

“I thought he broke his leg?”

“Yes, but he’s still required to sit on the bench and support the team. Anyway, Mom’s hoping he’ll have his cast off by then.”

“Bella…,” I began, as I raised her chin with my index finger so I could look into her eyes.

“Yes, Edward?” she responded, raising her eyebrows as I leaned in to smell her sweet breath and touch my lips to hers. I blew my breath across her face, something that seemed to intoxicate her. Often, she’d lose her train of thought and her eyes would go glassy. Then I’d lean in for a passionate kiss. I would not always have this effect on my beloved. It was fun to exercise the power while I still had it.

Bella kissed me back, twining her left hand through my hair while she used her right hand to unfasten the bottom button of my shirt. Then she unbuttoned the next, and the next, then slipped her hand beneath the woven cotton and traced a line along my waistband with her fingers.

_Mmm…_her fingers felt so warm against my skin, so electric, the charge shooting from her fingertips and traveling downward from the places where she touched me. Bella trailed her fingers upward to my chest, tracing the curves of my pectoral muscles, running her fingers through the light hair at the center of my chest. I shuddered in the most delicious way.

_“Mmm…Bella…I love your hands on my skin,” I whispered to her. “But go easy, please. You make me lose my wits so quickly.”_

_“Shhh…just kiss me,” Bella whispered back, running her left thumb across the hard, smooth surface of my bottom lip and back across my top lip. I took her thumb into my mouth, followed by her index finger, and on down the line. After releasing her pinkie, I grasped her by the waist, picked her up, and rotated her until she was kneeling over me on the seat. I moved my hips toward the steering wheel slightly and pulled her buttocks high up my legs. Bella gasped a jagged breath as she settled onto my lap and started rocking her hips. I groaned and pulled her face to mine. There was so much energy flowing between us. I found some release for the excess by moving my lips with hers and pressing into her. My breath accelerated and I longed to grasp her buttocks and rub her back and forth against me. I caught myself in time, though, and lifted her a few inches above my lap, holding her aloft while we continued to kiss._

_“Edward,” she moaned, “I want you.”_

_“And I, you, my darling,” I replied softly, as I balanced her weight on one hand and opened the car door with the other. I rotated in the seat, and then held her head against my chest as I rose from the car. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I stood up. I inhaled the musky scent that rose from her. Bella was highly aroused._

_“You smell so good to me…I want to eat you.”_
“Doesn’t everyone?” Bella quipped and I laughed.
“All the vampires I know do…absolutely! And then there’s Tyler, and Mike, and Eric, and that Shawn kid from the Junior class, and the bagger at the grocery store….”
“What do you know about him?” Bella demanded, pulling her face back a few inches. I’d successfully distracted her.
“I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he’s packing your Apple Jacks and frozen peas.”
“You have not! You’re making that up!”
“Would I lie to you?”
“Yes, as a matter of fact, I think you would, Mr. Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire!” she sing-songed.
“My pants are on fire about as much as yours are,” I teased.
“That’s got to be pretty hot then,” she muttered, as she put one arm around my neck and the other under my chin and guided my mouth to hers.

I had Bella home before 11:00. Charlie was imposing no curfew now that Bella was eighteen and engaged, but he did wait up for her on the couch, so I made sure to get her home before his bedtime to keep him from losing sleep. Nobody needed the Chief of Police to be groggy on the job. I didn’t mind bringing her home early, for I simply took a walk around the block or more often, a run through the forest behind Bella’s house and when I returned, Charlie usually had retired to his bedroom. That’s when I leaped to Bella’s second story window and slipped through.

“Bella, do you have any musical preferences or requests for the ceremony? Alice asked me today and I told her to have Rosalie play the traditional pieces.”
“Rosalie’s playing the piano for us?”
“That was exactly my response, but yes, she is. Alice said Rose wanted to as a gift to us.”
“I haven’t heard her play.”
“She’s very good, of course.”
“But not as good as you, I bet.”
“She’s extremely gifted.”
“So not as good as you.”
“You don’t have any other preferences for music?”
“No, whatever you choose is fine with me. At least if we have the standard ‘Here Comes the Bride,’ I’ll know when I’m supposed to start walking in.”
“I’m sure Alice will not let you miss your entrance,” I said, slipping under the covers and wrapping my arm around Bella’s waist.

“I’m sure Alice will not let you miss your entrance,” I said, slipping under the covers and wrapping my arm around Bella’s waist.
“Are you having a bachelor party?” Bella asked out of nowhere.
“Oh, Emmett’s been having thoughts about it. He doesn’t want me spending my last single night in your bed, though I can’t think of a better place, actually,” I said, tracing my fingers along Bella’s right collarbone where it extended from beneath the scooped
neckline of her t-shirt. I touched it with my lips and then brushed my way up to her shoulder, up her neck and then down her jawline, then back up her jawline. I kissed her in the hollow beneath her ear. Bella’s heart sped to its usual frantic pace.

Bella hadn’t attempted to remove any of my clothes yet, but I felt her left hand take my right and place it on the side of her rib cage. I gladly ran my fingers along each rib in turn, memories of both Bella’s and Jacob’s broken bones distracting me for a second.

In that brief moment, Bella had pulled my hand onto her left breast and my fingers automatically cupped around the soft sphere. Her t-shirt had been washed so many times that the cotton knit fabric was tissue thin, leaving very little to the imagination. Bella had shut her eyes and placed her hand over mind, encouraging exploration. I squeezed her breast gently through her shirt and stroked my thumb across the rise of her erect nipple. I felt my desire surge and I stopped moving to let it wash over me and away. I heard myself groan.

“If you keep this up, Bella, I’m going to have to go home,” I muttered, my voice deep and raspy. I moved my hand reluctantly onto her neck.

“If you don’t keep this up, we’ll be very ill-prepared for our wedding night,” Bella said, inhaling a jagged breath. I could see her impish grin in the dark.

“You seem quite prepared to me,” I replied, as I rolled over her. I balanced on my forearms and toes, and gently touched the length of her body with mine. Bella gasped, then threw her arms around my neck and tried to pull me down onto her with no effect. I kissed her lightly on the neck and under her jaw, and then moved to her lips. Her heart was racing like a filly at Churchill Downs. I focused on her heartbeats to distract me from the aching in my groin. Bella was starting to hyperventilate, so I flexed my arms and knees and sprang upward, maintaining the flat plane of my body. While in the air above her, I rolled Bella onto her side, and then landed on my side behind her. I pulled myself against her back, buttocks, and thighs and wrapped my arm around her waist.

“You should get some sleep,” I suggested.

“Sleep might be beyond my abilities right now,” she replied.

“Try. I’ll sing to you. You’ve been getting very little sleep lately. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“I won’t get sick. I’m too happy for that. Where are we going on our honeymoon, Edward?” Bella liked to throw out that question at random moments, hoping futilely that she would catch me off-guard and I’d blurt out our destination.

“It’s a surprise,” I reminded her.

“North, South, East, or West?”

“Yes. Now go to sleep.”

“You’re impossible,” Bella sighed, but I could hear the fatigue in her words. I began to hum her lullaby and within five minutes, she had dropped off.
Well before dawn, I crept out the window and ran home to check in with Esme and to change clothes. I planned to be back before Bella awoke, so she wouldn’t be startled by my absence. Esme was in her office, happily piecing together some lengths of bridal netting and satin on her sewing machine. I couldn’t tell exactly what she was working on.

“Hello, Mom,” I greeted her. How are things going with the preparations?”

“Oh, Edward, it’s going to be a beautiful wedding. Alice has considered everything. And while I’m thinking about it, let me give you the keys to the honeymoon cottage.” She darted to her closet where a small safe was tucked behind rods and racks of clothing. She had it open in an instant and placed the keys in my outstretched hand.

“Thank you so much for this. Bella will love it! Plus, the heat will be more comfortable for her. I’m really looking forward to seeing the place again.”

“Well, it’s just sitting there empty right now, and I thought it would be nice privacy for you two in the sunshine. Gustavo will come once a week to look after things and get you anything you need that isn’t already there.”

“It will be magnificent!” I exclaimed, leaning forward to kiss her on the cheek. Then I went in search of Carlisle. It was time for that talk.

“Carlisle,” I called, once I’d located him outside heading toward the river.

“Edward! I’m surprised to see you without Bella.”

“Just giving Charlie a break,” I said, smiling.

Not too keen on giving away his daughter is he? Carlisle asked silently.

“No, I don’t think he’s buying into the old adage, “You’re not losing a daughter; you’re gaining a son,” I said ruefully.

Hard to blame him, I guess. Bella’s been with him for only a couple of years.

“I’m starting to think that Charlie has a talent for precognition. He’s been sensing that Bella is going to ‘disappear.’ That’s what he told her.”

It will be hard on both Charlie and Bella to be apart, won’t it?

“Yes, it’s one of the things that worries me about her choice. I don’t know if she can really predict what it will feel like being separated from her parents.”

I think you have to trust Bella with the decisions she’s making. She knows who and what you are, so she has all the information you can give her. You can’t protect her from yourself, son.

“I suppose not, which brings me to why I came looking for you.”

I was just heading into the forest for a quick hunt. Would you like to come along?

“Yes, I’ll come with you for a ways, but I want to head back to Bella’s within an hour or so.”

“Let’s go, then.” We took off running for several miles before catching the scent of Wapiti about fifty yards away.
I dipped my head in that direction, indicating that Carlisle should take the prey. He nodded once, then dropped into a hunting crouch and dashed off. In a few minutes, he rejoined me.

_So what did you want to discuss, Edward?_  
I stared at my hands for a moment before meeting his eyes. “Can you guess? The traditional topic for a groom-to-be, I suppose…the wedding night.”  
Carlisle just smiled and waited attentively for me to continue.

“Bella and I have made a series of bargains regarding our nuptials. She’s been raised with a healthy mistrust for the institution of marriage and if she had her way, we wouldn’t marry at all for another ten years, if then. I, on the other hand, still believe in the traditional values surrounding marriage.” I paused, thinking how to present my questions. “What Bella does want is something I never intended to give her, but it became part of our bargain….” Another pause while I stared at my hands, still uncomfortable with our agreement. “Bella wants to have a ‘real’ honeymoon, as she puts it—as a human. She wants to make love with me before she changes.” I looked up to see Carlisle’s reaction, but he just nodded at me to continue.

“Heaven knows we’ve been pushing the boundaries in that direction anyway, but I’m terribly afraid that I’ll hurt her. I’d prefer to wait until after she’s changed, but she argues that she won’t have the same feelings then as she does now without all those hormones flowing through her system.”  
_She has a point, though to the best of my knowledge, she’ll be happily surprised._  
“Well, I can’t say how Bella will feel, but Esme was extremely happy with our sex life after we married._  
“Her former husband was not kind.”

_That’s true, though that wasn’t the only difference. We are capable of feeling everything that humans feel and with our heightened senses, a lot more besides. But that is neither here nor there if she doesn’t want to wait._  
“I am glad to hear that. It seems that way for me. My desire for her is extremely powerful.”

_We only become more of what we already are when we change, so if Bella is passionate now, then she is likely to be even more so as one of us._  
“I don’t think I’ll share that information with her. She’s already in much too much of a hurry to give up her life.”

_But I haven’t answered your original question, have I?_  
“No, not exactly. I guess there are several things I need to know. My real problem is that I’m terrified I will hurt Bella. I can already tell that it’s next to impossible to concentrate on being gentle with her in the heat of the moment. I could even kill her! I thought that if I knew a little more of what to expect with intercourse, it might help me
figure out a way to keep myself in check.” I knew I hadn’t really asked a question, but I looked at Carlisle’s face, with a question in my eyes.

Well, you’re right that coupling with you will be dangerous for Bella, but with your level of sensitivity and control, not impossible, I should think.

“What will happen? How can I keep from hurting her?”

*It’s primarily an issue of strength and weight. I think your challenge will be to become as still as you can when your release approaches—you will know when. The less you move, the less you flex your muscles, the less likely you will be to hurt her. It won’t be your first instinct—as sexual tension builds in your body, your natural reaction will be to grip and push and contract your muscles. Instead, you should try to relax and be passive. If Bella is as anxious to go through with this as you say, then she won’t mind taking the lead. That’s the best advice I can give you. It is a risk, certainly.*

I nodded, digesting what he had said and considering whether it would be possible to become still at the right moment. Carlisle surprised me by continuing.

*If you were anyone but who you are, I would almost be more worried about what physical intimacy might do to you. It’s not something to be taken lightly. As vampires, we rarely undergo dramatic changes in our beings, but experiences that are as profound and emotional as sexual love can permanently alter us. In your case, though, Bella has already changed you to such a degree that I’m not so concerned about the impact of the physical act itself. She has been so good for you, Edward. I can’t imagine that you won’t be good together, in whatever way you choose to be with her.*

Carlisle had given me much to consider. I carried his words in my head all the way back to Bella’s house.