

3. BIG DAY

“I miss you already.”

“I don’t need to leave. I can stay...”

“Mmm.”

It was the eve of our wedding and Bella and I were lying in her narrow bed together, as was our habit. Though it was August, she was wrapped in her usual swaddling blanket, a protection against the chill of my skin.

The bulky afghan did not prevent Bella’s hands from wandering about, exploring the unclothed parts of my body. If she had her way, both of us would be even less clothed. I found shirtless to be challenge enough. With Bella’s fingers probing the outlines of each muscle and bone above my waistband, her lips on mine, I was both awash in pleasure and sinking into concern. Some might call it performance anxiety and I could not deny it. When one’s performance was a matter of life and death, there was no shame in that.

Bella dragged her tongue across my top lip and a surge of desire shot through me. It was all I could do to remain still and let the sensation fade. If she were a vampire, I would have rolled on top of her, stripped off the bulky afghan and pressed my entire body into hers. I would have kissed her passionately, tasting her lips, her tongue, and pulling her as close to me as the laws of physics would allow. *Ahhh...* I groaned and retreated from her caressing hands and her delicious, warm tongue.

“Wait,” Bella murmured, clutching my arms. I watched as she kicked her right leg free from the blanket and wrapped it around my waist. “Practice makes perfect.”

I chuckled. I’d heard *that* one before. Numerous times.

“Well, we should be fairly close to perfection by this point, then, shouldn’t we? Have you slept at all in the last month?”

“But this is the dress rehearsal,” she protested, “and we’ve only practiced certain scenes. It’s no time for playing safe.”

Playing safe. My body froze as I considered how easy it would be to break Bella’s arm, or tear out a handful of her beautiful hair, or snap her spine, or...

“Bella...”

“Don’t start this again. A deal’s a deal.”

“I don’t know. It’s too hard to concentrate when you’re with me like this. I—I can’t think straight. I won’t be able to control myself. You’ll get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Bella...”

“Shhh!”

Bella put her hands on either side of my face and pressed her lips against mine. I would like to have been distracted by that, but it was too late. My mind was already elsewhere, drifting from the thousand-and-one ways I could harm Bella to enumerating all she was giving up for me...her family, her friends...her chance to be a mother, to grow old, to become something more than what she was right now. It was too much to sacrifice just to be with me. In my mounting distress, I revisited an argument that Bella and I had had repeatedly. I'd never convinced her before; I don't know why I thought she might change her mind now.

"It's not *right*! I don't want you to have to make sacrifices for me. I want to give you things, not take things away from you. I don't want to steal your future. If I were human—"

Bella stifled my objections by putting her hand over my mouth.

"*You* are my future. Now stop. No moping, or I'm calling your brothers to come and get you. Maybe you *need* a bachelor party."

My brothers must have agreed with her, for Emmett's thoughts suddenly interrupted my own. *Maybe we'll catch them with their clothes off! Hope so. Ha, ha!*

"Oh, for the love of all that's holy!"

"What's wrong?"

"You don't have to call my brothers. Apparently Emmett and Jasper are not going to let me bow out tonight."

Bella tightened her grip for a moment before releasing me. "Have fun," she said.

Perhaps it *would* be better for Bella if I left. Then I wouldn't upset her with the "cold feet" I'd told her I didn't have. I had no second thoughts about marrying Bella—I could hardly wait to do that! My second thoughts were all about the wedding night. Yes, I should leave. Maybe she would get some sleep if I did.

"If you don't send Edward out," Emmett threatened in his best, creepy-monster voice, "we're coming in after him!"

Bella laughed. "Go! Before they break my house."

Kissing her forehead, I advised, "Get to sleep. You've got a big day tomorrow."

"Thanks! That's sure to help me wind down."

"I'll meet you at the altar." I gave her a sly smile, reaching for my shirt.

"I'll be the one in white," Bella announced nonchalantly, as if we were planning a rendezvous at the mall.

I chuckled at that, considering the anxiety attacks that overcame her every time I mentioned the wedding. "Very convincing," I tossed over my shoulder as I leaped out the window. My feet landed squarely on Emmett's head, knocking him to the ground.

"Dammit, that hurt!" Emmett stage whispered, as he jumped up and took a swing at me. I dodged the punch easily. His thoughts always gave him away.

"You'd better not make him late," I heard Bella warn my brothers.

Jasper leaped up and grabbed the eaves outside Bella's window. He turned on his soothing vibes.

"Don't worry, Bella. We'll get him home in plenty of time."

"Jasper? What do vampires do for bachelor parties? You're not taking him to a strip club, are you?" she whispered and I had to smile. As if *that* would be fun for me! No woman had ever affected me like Bella did. Women could dip themselves in blood and parade around naked all day and it wouldn't do a thing for me. I should know—Tanya had tried such tricks many times to get me into her bed.

"Don't tell her anything!" Emmett hissed at Jasper, earning himself a friendly forearm shove that knocked him to the ground...again. I could never beat Emmett if we fought strength to strength, but with my mind-reading skill, he rarely got in a good punch. I laughed at his expression as he stood up and brushed the grass off his jeans. He tried to look casual as he readied himself for a "surprise" counterattack. Just as he launched himself at me, I took off running, knowing he couldn't catch me at full speed.

"Relax," I heard Jasper reply to Bella. "We Cullens have our own version. Just a few mountain lions, a couple of grizzly bears. Pretty much an ordinary night out."

Jasper had told Bella the truth. We would be celebrating our boys' night out with a hunt. I didn't need the blood at the moment, but it was still a good idea. If I fed now, then I wouldn't have to leave Bella to hunt for the first two weeks of our honeymoon. Besides, I only had one more day to remain chaste until Bella and I were married. I did not want to slip-up at this late date—getting out of Bella's bed would make that a whole lot easier.

Running gave me time to think about the last couple of months. As my fiancé, Bella had accepted the black credit card with her name on it attached to my account. Like the cell phone, I'd presented it as a "safety precaution," but she'd started to use it for other things too, and that had been the point.

Bella had quit her job at Newton's Olympic Outfitters, so she didn't have any pocket money to speak of. I was glad that she'd quit. I preferred not giving Mike Newton the opportunity to gape at, and entertain salacious thoughts about, my bride-to-be as was his habit. Also, I was happy that we could spend more time together. I didn't have to part with her company for the three or four days a week she would have worked for what I considered to be spare change. Unless she really liked the job—and I knew that she didn't—I saw no point in sacrificing our time together.

It had been a great summer. The only slight comedown was the "father-in-law talk" Charlie had initiated with me. I haven't encountered many people who could surprise me in the last eighty years, but Charlie was one who could. His mind was so quiet—in the sense of relatively impenetrable to me—that while I could perceive his feelings, I often couldn't hear the inner dialogue that went with them. I didn't like the sense of insecurity it gave me not knowing what he was thinking. I was used to having more time to consider how to react to people than I ever had with Charlie.

One evening five weeks earlier, Charlie had grabbed my arm as Bella and I were leaving his house for the evening. We'd found a number of private parking spots around the area and we liked to visit them as often as possible. Because he'd surprised me, I reflexively yanked my arm out of his grip at my natural strength.

Immediately, he'd put both palms up as if he was surrendering. He'd mistaken my quick reflex as a sign of anger. The interaction reminded me of the television show "Cops," in which hooligans whirl around and punch an arresting police officer just on principle. Charlie must get that a lot. I quickly raised my palms to indicate a mutual surrender. I would have smiled if I hadn't thought Charlie would interpret it as a taunt. Bella had missed our interaction and was continuing toward the car.

"What can I do for you, Charlie?" I inquired politely.

"I was just wondering what your folks think about you proposing to my daughter."

"Oh, they love her, they really do."

"That's not exactly what I meant."

"No?" I wasn't going to help him interrogate me.

"No...uh...I meant what do they think of you getting married right out of high school?"

"Oh! Well, you know they got married quite young themselves. Esme already had Jasper and Rosalie to look after when she met Carlisle. They fell in love and Carlisle wanted to help support the kids, so he proposed when Esme was younger than he might have otherwise. They've been extremely happy, so they don't have any prejudice against getting married young."

"Do you think you're old enough to handle this kind of responsibility? That's my daughter you're promising to support for the rest of your life. Are you one hundred percent sure that you're ready for that?"

"I will be there for Bella always. I can assure you of that."

"What if you screw it up and things fall apart?" Charlie pressed.

I thought about that for a moment before answering. I knew what he was referring to without having to read his thoughts.

"There are many ways I could mess things up," I admitted. "I've already made mistakes with Bella. I know that. I wasn't here for her when she needed me. I swear to you, Charlie, I left because I wanted Bella to have a chance to find somebody better than me. But I found that I couldn't live without her and so I came back. Jacob might be a better choice for her, but she still wants me and as long as she does, I won't leave her. I don't make the same mistakes twice."

Charlie just gave me his dark-eyed, policeman's stare. I didn't blame him. He'd watched Bella suffer daily after I abandoned her. Jacob had impressed upon me all the painful details he could summon about that time.

"Jacob's a good young man," Charlie finally responded, "but I wouldn't want him marrying her at his age, either."

I took another moment to consider my response, and then sighed, knowing I'd never convince him with words.

"The only way to know whether I'll be good for Bella is with time. I can't offer you proof, but I love her more than my own life and I *will* take care of her, Charlie. I just hope that I can make her as happy as she makes me, though I hardly think it's possible."

Charlie's stare didn't change, so I continued.

"If it makes you feel any better, my family is behind us, and you know Carlisle well enough to know that he would never let Bella down...even if I did. My family would step in for me. That's just the way my parents are. They're great people."

"I know they are...Edward. I trust Carlisle and that's why I'm not making more of a fuss about this."

I acknowledged his statement with a nod. "Just so you know, Charlie...Bella and I discussed eloping to Las Vegas and marrying without telling anyone. But Bella didn't want to cut you out of her decision in that way, so we decided to make it a family event."

"I *knew* there was something going on!" Charlie exclaimed. "I had a feeling you two were going to take off together!"

"Bella wants you there to walk her down the aisle, or the stairs, rather. I hope you can see your way clear to do that for her on her day."

Charlie nodded stiffly and I turned to follow Bella to the car. "That's a fancy car you got my daughter."

"Yes, it's a loaner. Carlisle called in a favor for me. It's a very safe car."

"Well, that's good. You can hardly get a car that's safe enough to share the roads with all the bad drivers and drunk drivers out there."

"I agree. Goodnight, Charlie."

"Night."

Charlie shut the front door and I saw that Bella was coming back to get me. I hurried toward her.

"What was all that about?"

"Charlie wanted to have a little 'man-to-man' talk about his precious daughter, but I told him I agreed with everything he said, so he loves me now." I grinned and winked at Bella. She didn't buy it.

"No, what did he really want?" she demanded. "Tell me, or I'll march right back and ask him!"

I sighed. "Charlie just wanted to warn me about the dangers of marrying too young and make sure I knew what I was doing."

"What did you say?"

"I said that I was old for my age," I replied, giving her a crooked smile.

"You did not!"

"Sure, why not? I am, aren't I?" I teased.

"Ancient. I should be grossed out being with someone as old as you."

“Fortunately, I still look good and that’s what really counts.” We both laughed and, to my relief, Bella dropped the subject.

Bella’s mother, Renee, had flown in two days earlier and Bella was sticking close to her except when our mothers worked on the wedding. It was odd behavior for a bride-to-be, but I wasn’t marrying Bella because she was like everyone else. Quite the opposite.

When I’d come home two evenings previous, Renee was visiting Esme. In an attempt to demonstrate her acceptance of me as her almost son-in-law, Renee had dashed across the living room and thrown her arms around my neck.

“Welcome to our family, Edward!” she’d said. I thought perhaps she was overexcited by the trip or by meeting my family. I hadn’t expected such an exuberant greeting, though she had no particular misgivings about Bella marrying me. Renee ended the hug abruptly when her arms encountered my cold, hard self.

“Hmm,” she mumbled as she broke off contact. *Hard body!* was her thought, and I almost laughed out loud. The picture in her mind was complimentary, not literal. She was imagining what my upper body looked like without a shirt. I’d already gotten acquainted enough with Renee when Bella and I went to Florida that I knew she didn’t mean anything by it. A cougar... just like Bella, I thought, and smiled to myself.

It was a little sad to meet Renee again, knowing that this was the last time Bella would see her, or possibly even talk to her on the phone. As I watched Bella over the course of the two days, I sensed that she was saying her goodbyes. If I’d had to give up Carlisle and Esme to be with Bella, I could have done it. I had given them up once before. But it was hard to accept that I could make Bella happy enough to give up seeing her parents. I’d asked her again last night whether she was prepared to do that and her response had been, “Are you trying to ditch me?” Then we’d started laughing and the question had gotten lost.

My brothers and I didn’t get back from hunting until a couple of hours before the wedding. Esme collared us immediately and sent us to the back garden to hang flower garlands for Alice. It had to be done at the last minute or the August day would wilt them.

Alice had prohibited me from going anywhere near where she was preparing Bella, so I headed to my third-floor room to make myself presentable. Alice had changed my old-fashioned tux just enough to convert it from “vintage” to “vintage chic,” as she put it. It did look good, I had to admit.

I tried to neaten my normally unruly hair. I put some hair gel on it and convinced it to lie down in a semi-orderly fashion. After a time, Jasper came upstairs to tell me that the first guests were arriving. He and Emmett would be ushering them to their seats. Of course, Jasper could have told me that from downstairs, but Alice had specifically asked him to come get me, so that I wouldn’t be parading down the bride’s decorated stairway in full view of the guests. I walked outside through the kitchen door, telling Carlisle that I’d be

waiting out back. He and Esme were standing by the front door to greet everyone as they arrived.

This was the most important day of my life, but I hoped to have infinitely more wonderful days to enjoy with my Bella. I felt exceedingly fortunate that she wanted me as I wanted her. I could have lost her so easily.

I heard the Denali clan arrive and recognized Tanya's mental voice: *Where's Edward? It will be good to see that man again...mmm hmm! Who is this human girl? I can't imagine Edward with a woman, not even a vampire woman. This will be interesting...*

I smiled, glad to be escaping Tanya's clutches for good. She'd given me a hard time when we were living in Alaska. She wasn't used to being told "no thank you." Neither vampires nor humans ever turned down Tanya's advances. She was beautiful and charming, everything a man could want. She just wasn't for me and she never could accept that. It was one of the reasons Carlisle decided to move our family farther south. He told everyone that we were too conspicuous and perhaps we were, all there together, but I'd had the chance to hear another reason in his mind—that *Tanya can't leave Edward alone*.

My father empathized when Tanya set her sights on me. Carlisle had had plenty of pushy admirers in his life. During his first few weeks at any new hospital, nurses would line up three deep to ogle him. He had to temper that initial interest by telling some number of them that he was happily married, thank you. Of course, he wore a wedding ring, but that didn't discourage everyone. Once people met Esme, though, they usually stopped chasing Carlisle. She was simply too beautiful, inside and out, to compete with.

I know Esme had always worried that I wasn't fully mature as a man when Carlisle changed me and that I might never find, or even wish for, a mate. It was true that I wasn't interested in any of the Denali ladies. And after the trouble I'd had with Rosalie when she joined our family, I didn't expect anything good could come of such interest anyway. When the Denalis met the only bachelor vampire they'd seen in years, each of them had set about seeking my affection. I didn't blame them, particularly. Perhaps they'd gotten tired of human men and wanted someone more durable to partner with for a change. I could understand that to a certain degree.

I didn't go inside to greet the Denalis or any of the other arrivals. I couldn't focus on anyone but Bella—it seemed like such a long time since I'd seen her. I was trying to reason myself out of an irrational fear that she wasn't really there in our house, that she had changed her mind and would leave me standing alone at the altar. If I listened, I could hear her voice now and then, but I couldn't hear her thoughts and that had never bothered me so much as it did at that moment.

To distract myself, I listened at random to our guests' thoughts and found that everyone was astonished by the decorations. Alice had put her all into planning this wedding and it showed. The flowers alone were beyond imagining. Exquisitely fragrant arrangements covered every surface of our living room and the reception area outside. Alice was particularly fond of flowers. I thought perhaps it was because she'd been

deprived of beauty for so many years at the asylum. Whatever the reason, it was a boon for us all.

Rosalie had started playing my grand piano, making the one instrument sound like several. I knew that Pachelbel's *Canon in D* was my cue to enter the living room with Carlisle and stand in front of the flower-covered archway. He would come looking for me in the kitchen when the time came, so I walked back into the house.

In due course, Carlisle came to retrieve me and after a final, heartfelt hug, we took our assigned places in front of the assembled crowd. I stood, frozen with emotion, and watched anxiously for my beloved to appear at the top of the stairs on her father's arm. I had waited a lifetime to stand in front of these witnesses and declare my undying devotion to the one and only woman I would ever love.

Time had stopped making sense when I finally heard the familiar C-F-F-F notes of "Here Comes the Bride." I *could not* believe my eyes when an angel from heaven began to descend the stairs, one by one, her eyes lowered to watch her feet. It was only when I heard her whisper "Don't let me fall, Dad," that I knew for sure it was Bella...*my Bella*.

I fretted for a second that my angel might fall and I readied myself to dash across the room to catch her. Seeing the groom disappear and reappear somewhere else would not go over well with anybody, though I reasoned that all of the guests would be looking at Bella, not at me. Still, perhaps we should have served champagne before the ceremony, just in case something like that did happen...but then, Bella was descending the final step. She lifted her face, searching for me.

When our eyes finally met, a look of such utter joy crossed her face that I broke into an ecstatic smile. Bella's feelings often were written on her face, but today her expression was utterly transparent. The adoration in her eyes was unmistakable and I was jubilant enough to break out in song...almost.

Our eyes remained glued to each other while Bella carefully traversed the fifteen-foot aisle that Alice had kept short to give Bella a fair chance of remaining upright. With the way she looked in that dress, with that makeup, with everything...the glow, the scarlet blush, the prisms of tears in her eyes...I wanted to rush down the aisle to meet her and carry her back to the altar. But I remained patient, stretching out my palm so that Charlie could place Bella's hand in mine. He regarded me seriously as he did so and I nodded my thank you to him for his great sacrifice.

Charlie seated himself beside Renee, with Phil on her other side, and Bella and I turned to face the minister. I loved the traditional wedding ceremony with its promises and pronouncements, but on this occasion, each word resonated with newly unveiled meaning. When I declared "I do" to my beloved, I'd never been happier in my life. I wanted to repeat the words in every language I knew.

My lovely new wife was overcome with emotion. When I leaned over to kiss her for the first time as her husband, Bella's arms encircled my neck and she held on as if she would never let me go. The audience had disappeared—she only had eyes for me. I kissed

her with a swell of love and tenderness that made my eyes burn with the tears that didn't come, and she met my passion with her own. Emotion poured from her as she clung to me, melding her lips with mine as if we were utterly alone in that moment. I did not mind in the least. Bella was *happy* to be married to me—I could feel it in my bones.

When the guests began to titter, I eased my love's face gently away from mine and looked into her tear-filled eyes. I felt my happiness radiate from me like the heat of a coal fire and I wondered briefly if my skin was sparkling in its glow. When Emmett cleared his throat unsubtly, I turned us both to face the loved ones who had gathered there and everyone broke into smiles and quiet laughter.

I could not let go of Bella for a second. I wrapped my arm around her waist and practically carried her down the aisle when she forgot to move her feet. Fortunately, they were hidden by the length of her dress. Another detail that Alice had not overlooked.

Bella was so *stunningly* beautiful that I wasn't surprised to hear a number of inappropriate thoughts as the reception line shuffled slowly past us and on to the buffet. Alice had timed things well, so that the vampires would not have to step outside until twilight, just in case the sun came out. It was good that she did, because we had a beautiful wedding day with plenty of sunshine filtering through the ancient cedars.

I was extraordinarily pleased that Billy Black and Sue and Seth Clearwater had come to the wedding. Despite the Cullens' official status as "mortal enemies" of their tribe, the three of them were there in support of Bella and Charlie, and perhaps as a gesture of gratitude to Carlisle as well. Seth was there for me, too. Our friendship had not faded since we'd joined forces to battle Victoria and Riley.

"Congrats, guys," Seth said, coming toward me with his arms out. I hugged him with one arm while I held Bella tightly with the other. "It's good to see things work out for you, man. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Seth. That means a lot to me." Releasing Seth, I faced Billy and Sue with honest gratitude. I knew they were not there for me.

"Thank you, as well. For letting Seth come. For supporting Bella today."

"You're welcome," Billy replied cordially and I hoped his attitude boded well for the change that was coming.

I didn't know how I was going to approach the Quileute wolf pack about Bella's upcoming transformation. It was possible that if we left the area to avoid their ancient vendetta, that Jacob still would come to hunt us down. He had no motivation to let me change Bella, but I hoped that he and all the wolves would agree to the one exception to our treaty. Billy wasn't giving anything away with his thoughts, but Sue's mind was full of concern about being in a house with so many vampires.

As the receiving line moved along, the only slightly awkward moment was introducing Tanya to Bella.

"Ah, Edward, I've missed you," Tanya said, pulling herself close to me in an intimate embrace. She lingered a bit too long in my one-armed hug—on purpose. I

chuckled at her audacity as I employed one of Carlisle's tricks for dealing with forward women...to press her shoulder away as if to admire the full length of her.

"It's been too long, Tanya. You look well." Though Bella would never believe it, her beauty outshone Tanya's many times over in my eyes.

"So do you," Tanya replied, a familiar note of longing in her voice.

With a great swelling of pride, I interjected, "Let me introduce you to my *wife*." Kate and Carmen giggled at the emphasis. My joy at using that word for the first time sang in my words. "Tanya, this is my Bella."

Bella had been uncertain about inviting Tanya and her coven, but I'd convinced her that as extended family—orphans, to boot—they must be included. I also wanted Tanya there specifically to underscore the point that I was officially and permanently unavailable.

"Welcome to the family, Bella," Tanya responded appropriately, if not altogether enthusiastically. "We consider ourselves Carlisle's extended family, and I am sorry about the, er, recent incident when we did not behave as such. We should have met you sooner. Can you forgive us?"

"Of course. It's so nice to meet you," Bella replied, blushing. I noted the brief flare of excitement among my cousins at the rush of blood before each of them contained it.

"The Cullens are all evened up in numbers now. Perhaps it will be our turn next, eh, Kate?" Tanya grinned.

Kate's sarcastic sense of humor kicked in. "Keep the dream alive," she said, rolling her eyes. "Welcome, Bella." Kate took Bella's hand and Carmen stepped up to add hers.

"I'm Carmen, this is Eleazar. We're all so very pleased to finally meet you."

"M-me, too," Bella stuttered. I thought she was holding up well considering she was meeting my "relatives" for the first time.

"We'll get to know each other later. We'll have *eons* of time for that!" Tanya remarked, laughing.

I enjoyed performing the rituals of the wedding celebration. Alice had ordered a gorgeous, artfully decorated cake, its beauty being the only aspect of it I could truly appreciate. I did not relish swallowing the chunky blob Bella pushed toward my face, but that could not be avoided with such an attentive audience. Flashbulbs popped, capturing the uncomfortable moment for all time. Bella tossed her bouquet to Angela, who blushed puce and carefully avoided the eyes of her escort, Ben, which are six inches lower than her own.

When it came time to lift Bella's skirt and remove her garter with my teeth, she blushed hotly while Jasper and Emmett guffawed at her embarrassment. I wasn't allowed to venture *too* far up her dress, since she slid the garter below her knee before I got the chance. Still, it was a fun moment, biting the elastic band and dragging it slowly down her calf. After detaching it from her leg, I stretched the elastic into a slingshot, aiming for Mike Newton's head. The garter snapped him in the forehead and his mouth dropped open.

Ha! I win! I thought triumphantly, as the blood rushed to Mike's face. Cameras flashed simultaneously. That would teach him to ogle my bride!

Soon thereafter, the dancing music began and I gladly swept Bella onto the dance floor, proud of her for not hanging back in fear. I held her slightly off the ground so she wouldn't stumble and whirled her around to a waltz.

"Enjoying the party, Mrs. Cullen?" I murmured in her ear.

"That will take a while to get used to," Bella replied, chuckling.

"We have a while," I said, thrilled at the truth in that. In high spirits, I leaned over to kiss my wife and once again, the cameras flashed in our direction.

When the song ended, Charlie approached me from behind and tapped my shoulder. I returned his daughter to him as graciously as I could now that she was mine and went to find Esme for the exhibition dance. Esme had taught me how to dance, so our efforts were well-rehearsed and we moved together flawlessly.

I couldn't take my eyes off Bella as I danced gingerly with Renee—*My goodness, he moves well! Lucky Bella!*—and then with my sisters. While all the men jostled for a dance with my wife, no human women (except for Bella's mother) stepped up to claim a dance with me. Though I was happier and more genial than I'd ever been, my vampire nature still frightened them away to a degree. It didn't bother the Denalis, though, and I danced with Carmen, Tanya, and Kate.

When Mike Newton finally got his chance to dance with Bella, I didn't wait long before cutting in, much to his annoyance.

"Still not that fond of Mike, eh?" Bella asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not when I have to listen to his thoughts," I snarled. "He's lucky I didn't kick him out. Or worse."

Mike was still Mike, and his mental pictures were nearly as vivid as Jacob's, though less respectful. (*If that freak Cullen hadn't been around, Bella would have done it with me last year! We'd still be doing it! I'd sure like a taste of...*)

Bella didn't believe that Mike lusted after her.

"Yeah, right," she challenged.

"Have you had a chance to look at yourself?"

"Uh, no, I guess not. Why?"

"Then I suppose you don't realize how utterly, heart-breakingly beautiful you are tonight. I'm not surprised Mike's having difficulty with improper thoughts about a married woman. *I am* disappointed that Alice didn't make sure you were forced to look in a mirror."

I couldn't believe she hadn't, in fact. Bella could not see herself as others saw her and tonight of all nights, she ought to. Perhaps then she would believe me when I told her she was beautiful.

"You are very biased, you know."

I sighed. She would never get it.

"Biased, am I?"

I gestured toward the reflective glass windows of our living room. I sensed her initial confusion and then, finally, saw her eyes grow large in recognition that the stunning princess in the glass was her. Bella's mouth dropped open and I smiled.

Then out of nowhere, I heard my name being called in someone's thoughts. I directed my attention to the wooded area behind the dance floor. *Mind reader! Bloodsucker!* That was familiar enough. For a moment, I thought that we were in for trouble, but then the thought continued. *I've come to see Bella.*

"Oh!" *Jacob Black!* We hadn't heard from him for weeks. Billy's gracious calm in the receiving line might have had something to do with his son's return home. I grinned happily, grateful for the gift Jacob was giving Bella.

"What is it?"

"A surprise wedding gift," I told her. This one was from Jacob *and* me.

"Huh?"

I twirled Bella to the rear of the dance floor beyond the twinkling lights and into the shadows of one of the ancient cedar trees that stood sentry over our home.

"Thank you." I spoke with heartfelt appreciation into the darkness of the forest. "This is very...kind of you."

"Kind is my middle name. Can I cut in?"

Bella gasped at the sound of the familiar voice. I felt her body slump against my arm momentarily as her legs faltered beneath her.

"Jacob!" Bella sputtered breathlessly. "Jacob!"

"Hey there, Bells."

I guided Bella to Jacob's huge, hot hand, and he engulfed her in his arms, throwing me a curt nod.

"Rosalie won't forgive me if she doesn't get her official turn on the dance floor," I said, excusing myself so that Bella could have some private time with her best friend.

Jacob's thoughts were a mixture of joy at seeing Bella and sadness at seeing her in her wedding dress, but only because it *was* a wedding dress and he was not the groom. Bella was too beautiful not to inspire his awe.

As I danced easily with Rosalie—Esme had perfected her skills—I listened for any sounds of trouble. Then I realized that Sam and Quil—in their wolf forms—were waiting in the woods nearby as a precaution. They were there mainly to protect Jacob and Seth, but also to protect their secrets in case Jacob lost control of himself. I breathed a little easier, grateful for their protective presence, although feeling that way rather surprised me.

Rosalie and I took a few more turns around the floor before I heard Bella's angry voice behind the music and the chattering of the guests. The humans probably could not hear it, but to me it sounded like Big Ben chiming midnight.

"...and *yes I can* have a real honeymoon! I can do anything I want! Butt out!"

I stiffened, all my senses directed toward the rising emotion of the conversation amongst the trees.

“What? What did you say?” Jacob’s voice rang with alarm, which confused Bella.

“About what...? Jake? What's wrong?”

“What do you mean? Have a real honeymoon? While you're still human? Are you kidding? That’s a sick joke, Bella!” Jacob’s stress was mounting. I was riveted to the conversation, preparing to dart to Bella’s side in an instant. Alice turned up the music.

“I said butt out, Jake. This is so not your business. I shouldn’t have...we shouldn’t even be talking about this. It’s private—Ow, Jake! Let go!”

“Bella! Have you lost your mind? You can’t be that stupid! Tell me you’re joking!”

I knew that Rosalie and the rest of my family could hear the altercation, even if the humans couldn’t over the sound of the music.

Do you have this? I looked around for Emmett so I could nod yes, and that gave Jacob a half second more than he should have had.

“Jake—stop!” Bella’s voice rang out in pain.

Rage burned through me and I shot to Bella’s side.

“Take your hands off her!” I commanded Jacob in what Bella calls my “razor-blade” voice. I could have struck him down in that moment without a second thought, but his hands still gripped Bella’s arms. I struggled to contain my fury. The wolves were becoming restless in the woods. With Jacob still in human form, he was ignoring Sam’s commands to let go and move away. He seemed frozen in shock. Suddenly Seth was there too.

“Jake, bro, back away. You’re losing it. You’ll hurt her,” Seth begged in a whisper. “Let her go.”

“Now!” I snarled. It would be my last warning. My brothers were hovering nearby and would join me instantly if I signaled them.

Within the same quarter-second that Jacob released Bella’s arms, I whisked her to safety behind me and swung around to face him. Instantaneously, Sam and Quil had positioned themselves as a barrier between us, facing Jacob. I was startled out of my anger by the trust that their stance signified—turning their backs on a vampire.

Seth had moved close to Jacob, his arms wrapped around the big man’s waist, and was trying to pull him backwards. His effort was like a mouse tugging at an elephant and just as dangerous for him.

“C’mon, Jake. Let’s go,” Seth implored, but Jacob didn’t budge.

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you myself! I’ll do it now!”

Jacob’s fury had risen to a peak and I could see the desire to attack me in his mind, but his muscles were frozen. I suddenly realized that he *couldn’t* phase to his wolf form. I stood ready to assist in removing Jacob from our property, but Sam’s thoughts told me that he would take care of it. Sam pressed his huge skull into Jacob’s chest and put his enormous power to work shoving Jacob backward into the forest.

“I’m sorry,” Bella whispered.

“It’s all right now, Bella,” I replied, before I saw that she wasn’t talking to me. One wolf remained, staring me down. Quil warned that he and Embry would back up Jacob if a fight started. I nodded tersely and he launched himself into the forest.

“All right,” I said, steadying myself. The problem was under control. Time to put the supernatural back into its box and rejoin the party, pretend that nothing had happened. “Let’s get back,” I said to Bella.

“But Jake—” Bella was worried about Jacob? Really? I was concerned *only* for her. Jacob had crossed the line.

“Sam has him in hand. He’s gone.”

“Edward, I’m so sorry. I was stupid—”

Of course, Bella would blame herself. I was the guilty one for having invited Jacob Black to our wedding and he was guilty for losing his temper on Bella’s special day.

“You did nothing wrong—”

Bella interrupted me to berate herself.

“I have such a big mouth! Why would I... I shouldn’t have let him get to me like that. What was I thinking?”

“Don’t worry. We need to get back to the reception before someone notices our absence.” Bella looked at me as if I were asking the impossible before she suddenly took charge of herself.

“Give me two seconds,” she gulped, seeming to remember who and where she was. It was not always comfortable to be a Cullen, but we had responsibilities.

“My dress?” Bella asked, as she smoothed the skirt with her hands.

“You look fine. Not a hair out of place.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

I wrapped my arms around my wife protectively and escorted her back to the dance floor. We twirled into the crowd as if we’d never left.

“Are you—” I began, before Bella cut off my inquiry.

“I’m fine. I can’t believe I did that. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with *you*,” I said, barely controlling the anger in my voice. I wasn’t angry just at Jacob, though. I was furious and disgusted with *myself* for having agreed to endanger my bride’s life.

“It’s over. Let’s not think of it again tonight,” Bella advised, but my thoughts were already focused on the folly of the promise I had made.

“Edward?”

I shut my eyes against my dismay and leaned my forehead against Bella’s.

“Jacob is right. What *am* I thinking?”

“He is not. Jacob is way too prejudiced to see anything clearly.” Bella’s words didn’t quell my misery.

“I should let him kill me for even thinking...” I began under my breath.

“Stop it.” I knew Bella was talking to me, but I couldn’t attend to her words in my sudden, acute wretchedness. Then I felt her hands cup my face and realized that she had stopped speaking. I opened my eyes and found her gazing into them.

“You and me. That’s the only thing that matters. The only thing you’re allowed to think about now. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” I replied, sighing.

“Forget Jacob came. For me. Promise that you’ll let this go.” How could I disregard the pleas of my beloved Bella? I decided that I would try to do as she asked and put the issue aside for the moment. This was Bella’s day and I had to make it a happy one for her.

“I promise.”

“Thank you, Edward. I’m not afraid,” she added.

“I am,” I muttered.

“Don’t be.” Bella smiled. “By the way, I love you.”

“That’s why we’re here,” I said and tried to give her a genuine smile in return. Just then Emmett saved me from myself by cutting in.

“You’re monopolizing the bride. Let me dance with my little sister. This could be my last chance to make her blush.” Emmett let loose with a raucous laugh.

That was a great idea. I bowed out and went to find Esme. Maybe she could help me calm down and let go of my worries. I tapped my father on the shoulder.

“May I?”

“Of course.” *Are you okay?*

I nodded, though he knew me well enough to know that that wasn’t entirely true. He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment and then exited the dance floor. It wasn’t a minute before Tanya had her arm around his waist, pulling him back out.

“Is everything all right, Edward?” Esme inquired.

“Yes. I’m just concerned about Bella.”

“Why? Did Jacob hurt her?” She pulled back abruptly to look at my face.

“Slightly, but that’s not why.”

She raised her eyebrows and waited for my explanation.

“Did Carlisle tell you of our agreement regarding our honeymoon?”

She nodded. “Is that what Jacob was upset about?”

“Yes, he knows the danger. So do I...that’s the problem. I’m concerned for her welfare.”

“You talked to Carlisle about it?”

“Yes, he advised me that it was dangerous, but he doesn’t seem as worried as I am.”

“Edward, all you have to do is remember that you love her. If this is what she wants and she understands the ramifications, can you try to give that to her?”

“I have promised exactly that...to try. I just can’t be sure she’ll be safe.”

“No, I suppose not, but the fact that you are so worried about it makes me think that she will be.”

“I can’t know.”

“Not until you try. And that brings us back to where we started. I think you’ve made a promise that you can keep.”

I thought over what she had said and saw that she was right. If things didn’t work out, Bella had already agreed that we wouldn’t go through with it. I kept that thought in my mind as Carlisle returned and swung my vampire mother away.

I watched from the sidelines as one man after another lined up to dance with my gorgeous wife. The first man I saw who tried for a second dance would be disappointed, though, because I would step in and reclaim her.

Alice approached and pulled me onto the dance floor. She was a skilled dancer, but with almost eighteen inches difference in our heights, our dancing together was somewhat amusing. Jasper was an inch taller than me, though, so Alice was used to it. I gripped her waist and lifted her to a more comfortable height so I wouldn’t have to bend over.

“Edward! Put me down! You’ll wrinkle my dress!”

I just laughed and twirled faster until my tiny sister threatened to bite me on the neck. I knew she would do it.

“All right, all right,” I said, chuckling. I flipped her laterally around my waist in an extreme country-swing maneuver before releasing her to the floor. She stomped on my foot without losing a beat and then adopted a superior expression. I grinned at her and she pursed her lips, trying not to smile. Alice could always cheer me up.

I continued my duties by dancing again with each of the Denali sisters. I stepped up to ask Carmen for a dance and saw that Eleazar was approaching Rosalie. Tanya had been relatively well behaved, so I danced with her next. It seemed she was prepared to accept my new status, though I knew she didn’t always respect marital boundaries. With me, she would have no choice.

“Bella is lovely, Edward.”

“Yes, she is,” I said, smiling down at her.

“So someone finally stole your heart...I’m surprised, I must say.”

I smiled again, but made no comment.

“I suppose it was just a matter of time. A *lot* of time,” she added a bit spitefully.

“Bella is very special.”

“She must be, being human and all,” Tanya said in a low voice. “Are you going to change her?”

“When the time is right.”

“So, your honeymoon...?”

“Is our private concern,” I said firmly, cutting her off. I’d already learned my lesson about sharing such information and I knew Tanya. Give her an inch and she’d take a mile.

“Really, Edward, I wish you all the best. I’m glad you’ve finally found her.”

“Thank you Tanya, that means a lot to me. I’m sure you all will love her too once you get to know her.” I rewarded my cousin with a dramatic dip at the end of the dance. She laughed.

Just then, I glanced over Tanya’s shoulder and saw Mike Newton heading toward Bella with scheming thoughts in his head. Under the guise of their “close friendship” and the festive setting, he was planning to steal a kiss.

“Can you excuse me, please? I need to rescue my wife,” I said, moving away.

“By all means,” she replied, watching to see what I meant.

I subtly cut off Mike’s progress toward Bella and took her hands from Eleazar.

“May I?” I said, stepping in. I swung Bella away from Mike, leaving him stranded on the dance floor looking surprised and a little forlorn. This was not his night. Ha! I should have sic’d Tanya on him.

Bella seemed relaxed now as I pulled her to me. “I could get used to this,” she murmured.

“Don’t tell me you’ve gotten over your dancing issues?”

“Dancing isn’t so bad—with you. But I was thinking more of this,” Bella said, hugging herself tightly to my chest, “of never having to let you go.”

“Never.” I bent my lips to hers. As we kissed, I felt the heat rise in my body and I clutched Bella closer to me. *Mmm*. Perhaps my talk with Esme had settled my nerves. I was becoming more engrossed in the kiss the longer it continued.

“Bella! It’s time!” Alice called, but I had no intention of letting Bella go. My sister’s attempt to separate us only made me want to clutch her more tightly.

“Do you want to miss your plane?” Alice was standing next to us now. “I’m sure you’ll have a lovely honeymoon camped out in the airport waiting for another flight.”

“Go away, Alice,” I murmured, moving my lips intently against Bella’s.

“Bella, do you want to wear that dress on the airplane?” Alice warned menacingly. Bella paid no more heed than I had. We were only with each other now, joined at the lips.

Alice hissed, “I’ll tell her where you’re taking her, Edward. So help me, I will.”

Arrrgh! Damn Alice’s pesky, persevering personality! But I could not ignore her threat after all the effort I’d expended to keep the honeymoon destination a surprise.

“You’re awfully small to be so hugely irritating.”

“I didn’t pick out the perfect going-away dress to have it wasted,” Alice barked.

“Come with me, Bella,” she said imperiously, taking Bella’s hand to lead her off. I released her reluctantly, but she clung to me and stretched her lips toward mine one more time. Her heart was racing in a highly exciting way. Alice yanked on Bella’s arm, pulling her along and I heard snickers throughout the assembly. We were making a spectacle of ourselves, but I could not care less.

Ahhh...! I was beginning to wonder how I could wait eighteen more hours before Bella and I were alone. Then the realization struck me—Bella and I were married! Nothing stood between us now. All the rules had been satisfied and we were free to love each other

as we wished, without hesitation or encumbrance. Suddenly, I knew that despite my fear, I *could* make love to Bella and I would do so to the best of my ability.

I had over-prepared actually, studying Carlisle's anatomy and physiology texts to review the mechanics of human female sexuality. I had read every guide to marital union that I could acquire, including the classic, *The Joy of Sex*, which was particularly informative. Emmett had teased me mercilessly when he found me reading it.

"Now you can tell everyone that you learned about sex the hard way—by reading *books!*" He roared with laughter.

Emmett, of all people, should have recognized that he was standing a little too close to me to make such a comment. I was surprised he'd overlooked it. Not moving my eyes from the sexual positions for women's pleasure that I was studying, I smacked his nose with my fist.

"Ow!!" he bellowed and I leaned six inches to my left to avoid his return punch, then ducked six inches down to avoid his second...all without looking up from my book. Frustrated, he stomped away.

I had to admit that his joke was a *little* funny...by reading books! That was *so* like me! I chuckled.

I heard the women approach the top of the staircase and took a position at the bottom, waiting to take my new wife's hand. She looked absolutely stunning...again. She was dressed in a knee-length, linen sheath in the deep blue color that was so beautiful against her skin tone. Her cheeks were flushed in gorgeous contrast to the rest of her ivory skin and long, dark hair. While I gazed at her descending the stairs, she looked past me.

"Dad?" she called.

"Over here," I said, directing her toward Charlie who was standing against the farthest wall, shielding his emotional state from probing eyes.

Bella hugged her father, tears flowing down her face.

"There, now. You don't want to miss your plane," he comforted her awkwardly.

"I love you forever, Dad. Don't forget that." Bella was saying goodbye for the last time. No wonder she was crying. I could assume that she'd just had the same scene with her mother upstairs.

"You too, Bells. Always have, always will."

They kissed each other's cheeks.

"Call me," Charlie added.

"Soon," Bella replied.

"Go on, then. Don't want to be late." Though Charlie was always awkward in situations such as this, the emotion I felt rushing out of him ran deep.

"Are you ready?" I asked Bella quietly, wanting to know whether she was resolved to leave her parents. She could still change her mind about that by deciding not to change.

"I am," Bella replied firmly.

I nodded and we drove away to the sound of a lone wolf howling in the distance.