

13. BALANCING

Fuming, I sped away through the back streets of Forks until it occurred to me that it would be better to know what Billy Black had to say to Charlie than not. I turned my attention back toward Bella's house and looked for her image. There she was, approaching her front door through the eyes of someone following behind. It had to be Jacob. He had a crystal clear mental voice, deeper in tone than I had expected. I watched as Bella reached under the eaves to retrieve a spare key and unlock the front door.

I pulled my car to the curb a safe distance away to eavesdrop. Bella had led Jacob to the kitchen where she was working at the stove while he watched. Rather than listen for his father's voice, as I had intended to do, I couldn't resist watching Bella instead.

Jacob was distinctly curious.

"Is something wrong with the truck?" he asked.

"No," she replied curtly, avoiding his probing eyes.

This was the Jacob who'd let Bella in on our secret—unknowingly, since he didn't believe the legends. Nevertheless, it was still a violation of our treaty with the Quileute. Her flirting had definitely had an effect on him—he held more than a passing interest in Bella.

He persisted. *"Oh. I just wondered because you weren't driving it."*

Bella kept her back to him and replied, *"I got a ride with a friend."*

Friend, indeed. Irritation crackled through me, as I realized she did not want to tell him about me. Why not?

"Nice ride. I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around here."

Did I detect jealousy in his words? Is that what sparked the fury I felt toward him as well? Why was he questioning Bella, anyway? What did he want?

When Bella failed to reply, Jacob went on, *"My dad seemed to know him from somewhere."*

Bella continued to dodge his implied questions.

"Jacob, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink."

How well I knew that technique! Jacob was not going to let it drop. Annoying as it was, I rather admired his persistence.

"Sure. So who was it?"

Bella sighed heavily and finally gave in. *"Edward Cullen,"* she admitted. Once again, I thrilled to the sound of my name on her tongue.

Jacob seemed unfazed. He laughed and said, *"Guess that explains it, then. I wondered why my dad was acting so strange."* Though Jacob didn't believe the old stories about us, his father knew from his own father that they were true.

"That's right," Bella said, pretending—unconvincingly—that she didn't remember the vampire story Jacob had told her. *"He doesn't like the Cullens."* That was the understatement of the year.

"Superstitious old man." Jacob seemed embarrassed. So he thought none the worse of us at least.

"You don't think he'd say anything to Charlie?" Bella blurted out.

So Bella doesn't want her dad to know that she's hanging around with this Edward Cullen. I wonder why, Jacob thought. *Hmm...surely, she's not serious about him. Is she?*

“I doubt it,” Jacob finally responded to Bella’s question. *“Charlie chewed him out pretty good last time. They haven’t spoken much since—tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don’t think he’d bring it up again.”*

I had to give Charlie credit for disregarding the gossip and rumors about the Cullens. To be sure, Carlisle is impressive by anyone’s standards, and no doubt Charlie had met him more than a few times in the hospital emergency room, where he was always at his best.

I cringed, reminded of my cruelty to Bella at the hospital. It had seemed necessary at the time to protect my family from her knowledge that I was not an ordinary human being—she had seen me lift Tyler’s van with one hand, after all. And I regretted being unforgivably rude to her for several weeks afterward in an attempt to protect her from my insatiable interest. In hindsight, the first effort had been entirely unnecessary—Bella had never told anyone anything—and the second, an utter failure. So much for controlling fate.

Bella seemed acutely uncomfortable with Billy Black in her home and I didn’t fully understand why. Billy wouldn’t dare divulge what he knew about us to Charlie. He would never break the treaty his grandfather had made with my family seventy-odd years ago. Surely Bella knew that.

So perhaps she just didn’t want her father to know about me, period. My heart sank at the thought. If I were human, she would have no reason to be ashamed of me. Or maybe she just thought her father would disapprove.

Seriously, Edward, what father wouldn’t? I had to smile at the thought, but it was a sad smile.

I left then, no longer concerned about Billy Black turning Charlie against me. I was a little troubled by Jacob, though. It seemed I had yet another rival for Bella’s affections.

I had a few hours to kill before Bella and Charlie went to bed and I could safely creep in through Bella’s window. I decided to go find Alice. Though I dreaded seeing her visions of Saturday, I also wanted to be prepared for the worst.

Jessica and, therefore, Mike (and probably the rest of the lunch gang as well) knew that Bella would be spending the day with me. It wasn’t necessary that they know where we were going—just knowing we were together was enough insurance for Bella’s safety. Should Bella not return, my entire family would be in danger from the townspeople, then the authorities, and eventually—through too much publicity—our vampire law enforcers, the Volturi. Of course, the worst possible consequence for me, if things went badly, would be her death. Were I to hurt Bella, I would wish for my own swift death. Still, I could not endanger my family.

Alice was waiting for me on the porch as I drove up.

Yes, I’ll take a walk with you, she thought before I had asked the question.

We walked around the house toward the Sol Duc River that separated our home from the deep forest adjacent to Olympic National Park. I leaped across the river with no fanfare, not feeling particularly joyful. Alice’s indistinct visions had rattled me. In an effort to improve my mood, Alice bunny-hopped over the river, grabbed a tree branch with one hand and cart-wheeled around it, landing adroitly by my side. She grinned.

“Sorry, Alice. I’m in a filthy mood. Billy and Jacob Black from the Quileute tribe are visiting Bella’s father tonight.”

And that’s significant why? she inquired.

“You weren’t with us back then, but Billy is the grandson of Ephraim Black, the

former chief. Billy wants to warn Bella's father to keep her away from me. And he's right, of course—she *should* stay away from me, especially considering your vision.”

Alice blanked out for a moment while she tried to clarify Bella's immediate future. *Edward, I still see Bella in danger in the meadow, but the danger doesn't feel imminent now. It comes later, I think.* She paused again, her eyes empty, before returning to the present.

I'm eighty percent sure that Bella won't die on Saturday.

“Eighty percent, Alice? That's just great. Thanks a lot.” My words oozed sarcasm.

“Well, that's better than it looked earlier in the week, Edward! Your confidence must have had an off day,” she said, flashing me an impish smile. “Anyway, it looks like you're strong enough not to commit any grave (ha! ha!) errors on Saturday.”

“That's not funny, Alice! Don't even JOKE about that!” I yelled. I snarled too, for good measure.

“Oh, Edward, you need to lighten up. All this worrying will just make you more prone to accidents. Anyway, I don't see you hurting Bella on purpose anymore.”

“Well, thank God for small favors!” I snapped. “Alice, what do you mean about danger in the meadow? Obviously, I'm a danger to Bella, but is there something else?”

I don't know, Edward. Look...see what I mean?

The picture in Alice's mind had Bella standing on the edge of the familiar clearing, gazing toward the forest on the other side, her body trembling uncontrollably. A figure had stepped out of the trees and was moving toward her. The image was fuzzy... was it me? All I knew for sure was that Bella was utterly terrified. As the figure got closer, it, Bella, and the meadow itself, suddenly faded to black.

This image is sometime in the future, Edward. I don't know when exactly, but the season is late fall or winter, judging by the leafless foliage. Bella seems extremely fearful, but nothing happens. The picture just goes black. Sort of like a dream.

“Could that be because she—” I could barely think the word; my body froze in place “—*dies*, Alice?” I couldn't look at her, or move, or breathe.

No, Edward. That's not how it works. I've never seen this kind of, umm, blackness before. A death is just another image, but this scene ends in no image at all. It's baffling. I don't know. Maybe you should take her someplace else. It doesn't seem like a real threat, but it is very strange...

Her thoughts trailed off. Well, one thing seemed clear—if Bella *was* in danger and if the figure in the image wasn't me, then it was all the more reason for me to stay close to protect her. That conclusion fit so well with my chosen role as Bella's guardian vampire that I half smiled. I could live with that.

As we turned toward home, Alice threw one more thought at me. *You know, Edward, the other image hasn't faded.*

I knew immediately what she meant. “No, Alice! I don't accept that!” I shouted, as if yelling would make her vision less true.

It's always been a choice, Edward, one or the other. Either you kill her or you, or someone else, changes her. Since the chance of your killing her—on purpose, anyway—seems to be lessening, the other possibility grows stronger.

“You're wrong, Alice! I won't do it. I won't risk her soul.”

You know I love you, Edward, but you might not have a choice. I'm sorry.

A stab of pain stole my voice and I could formulate no reply. The possibility was

too dreadful to consider. I launched myself toward the river as fast as I could run, leaping much farther and higher than necessary to clear it. The air rushing over my face soothed the sudden ache in my chest.

“Bye Alice,” I murmured as I raced toward Forks and my beloved.

It was not yet midnight when I arrived at Bella’s house. It was a little earlier than usual, so I listened carefully from outside the house before I opened her window and stole through. I told myself that these nightly sojourns were good practice in acclimating to Bella’s scent and tolerating the searing pain in my throat. If I shut her bedroom window, the heat of her respiration filled the room. Her scent intensified overnight, increasing the burn, but slowly enough that I could adjust gradually to it. My tolerance for the pain and for the blood cravings grew stronger every day.

But in truth, that wasn’t why I kept returning. Being separated from Bella was far more painful to me than my scorched throat. Each time we parted, I felt like a piece of me was being ripped out. I became aware of a void in the center of my chest that I’d never noticed before I met Bella. It gaped open painfully when I left her and healed instantly when I returned.

She knew me. She knew what I was and she still wanted to be with me. It was a miraculous gift—one I’d never expected—and I feared it would destroy me to lose her now.

Nighttime had always been a lonely time for me, but loneliness was such a part of who I was that I gave it little thought. Before I met Bella, another lonely night was like a raindrop falling on the ocean. It melded with the whole of my experience, not significant enough to be regarded.

Loneliness is a chronic condition of our kind, almost integral to our nature. When Carlisle changed me, he was seeking a remedy for the pain of his isolation. Though he had spent some of his three-hundred-plus years with other vampires, they were so unlike him in the way they lived that he remained always singular, always alone. I know that creating me eased his pain. He had waited so long to find a kindred soul. He taught me what he believed to be the meaning of our existence. He taught me of honor, loyalty, and love.

Then he found Esme, and suddenly there were three of us. I never begrudged Carlisle his Esme and she became a mother to me. But there was always something extra between them than between he and I. Carlisle changed profoundly. He was no longer restless. He was more content, and though he had always been compassionate and giving, his medical service to humans no longer taxed him. Esme filled him with a joy and love that spilled over in an endless font. He was truly happy.

We lived as a family and spent our days together, but when nighttime came, they celebrated each other. Though I tried to give them privacy, it was next to impossible. Their thoughts—and images of one another—popped into my head no matter how I tried to block them. I frequently resorted to traveling far afield to hunt or to pursue my own interests.

Then Carlisle discovered Rosalie, broken and dying in the street. Out of compassion, he changed her, and then there were four of us. I’d known Rosalie Hale as a human teenager. She was the town prize, daughter of a banker, beautiful and wealthy. Boys wanted her and girls wanted to be her. She was haughty and self-absorbed before her

death, and desperately bitter and unhappy afterwards. She took particular exception to me because I had been unmoved by her charms. Rosalie was not easy to love. Still, nighttime was less lonely with someone to talk to and quarrel with. Our relationship was often difficult, but Carlisle and Esme embraced Rosalie, despite her bitterness and pain.

Two years later, Rosalie found Emmett, and I returned to my solitary nights. I pursued my studies and various diversions. I followed Carlisle's example and studied medicine, though I never attempted a hands-on practice. Humans were not interesting to me except in theory, and the discomfort of being near their heated breath and pulsing blood removed any desire I might have had to become a doctor.

Emmett was a godsend. He changed all of our lives, but especially Rosalie's. He soothed her resentment and taught her to love in spite of herself. He made us all laugh and lightened every difficult situation, eased every transition and every uprooting. He was constant and caring, large and loud. Everything he did, he did with gusto, and without reservation. We fought and played and laughed, and he pulled me out of myself. He was the only brother I had ever known.

We carried on. My days were spent with family and my nights were spent alone. True to Emmett's nature, he and Rosalie shared a noisy, boisterous, physical love. Their coupling shook walls and collapsed roofs. It was so disturbing that Carlisle and Esme encouraged them to live apart from us, though nearby. Of course, they couldn't live apart from my head. Emmett, especially, was easier to read than anyone I had known. His thoughts had no protection, no masks, no subterfuge. Without realizing it, I learned about a man's love for a woman...again, in theory. I couldn't understand a lot of his feelings for Rosalie. They did not resonate with anything I had ever felt.

Alice and Jasper brought with them more of the same—a perfectly matched pair, sharing a world unto themselves. Their thought patterns were different than either Carlisle and Esme's or Emmett and Rosalie's. They were knit tightly together, perhaps because of the terrible traumas they both had suffered in their previous lives, or maybe because of their special talents.

As for me, I was still the odd man out, but Alice became the best friend I'd ever had. We both lived with many others in our heads—me, reading their thoughts, and Alice, seeing visions of their futures. It was disabling in some ways and made blending into human society more difficult.

Jasper also had become disabled as a human predator. Where I had heard my victims' thoughts before killing them—the good and the bad, the pathos and the cruelty—Jasper had felt his victims' feelings. Both of us would have gone mad if we hadn't stopped killing humans. Drinking a human's blood was also next to impossible for Alice, who, all the while she was feeding, would see her victim's potential future fade before her eyes.

But none of these connections with my family had prepared me for what I now felt for Bella. My feelings went far beyond the familial love that I had known. I became a moon in her orbit, iron to her magnet, a river to her sea. Every part of me was unalterably drawn toward her.

Nighttime is when I noticed the changes most, the time that heretofore was my own, when mates turn to each other and I had always turned inward. Since beginning my nocturnal visits to Bella's room, the old loneliness stands in high relief to the fullness of my present feelings. Now that it's gone, I truly understand what loneliness is. I can never return to who I was before, now that I know what I know. I am forever altered.

It made me happy just to stand in a corner or sit in Bella's rocking chair and watch her sleep—to see her chest rise and fall, to watch her restless eyes follow the pictures in her dreams, and to be a ready audience for her words. She was quiet tonight, peaceful, though she still spoke a few words.

"Green," she said abruptly about halfway through the night. I wondered if our long conversation about Phoenix had made her homesick for the brown of the desert. To soothe her mind, I softly sang her lullaby and she grew quiet.

As dawn approached, she became restless again and began to speak.

"Edward," she whispered. My heart soared.

Some time later, she began to moan and mumble. The words were mostly unintelligible until she said, "Kiss me." Dare I hope that it was me she wanted to kiss? Was it possible?

In our darkened biology lab, it had seemed like she was fighting the same urge to reach for me as I was for her. Also, I'd seen her hand twitch toward mine once or twice in the school parking lot before she'd snatched it back. And the electric current flowing between us was palpable. But to *kiss* her?

My own desire was abundantly clear. Whenever I looked at her full lips, I longed to touch them, to trace their outline with my fingertips, to feel their soft heat against my cool skin. I wanted to press my lips to other parts of her too: her eyelids, her cheekbones, the line of her jaw, the base of her throat, and lower, along her collar bones and the gentle curves below.

Bella suddenly shifted in her bed and her unconscious movement jerked me sharply from my fantasy. With a shock, I found that I had moved across the room to Bella's bedside and was slowing lowering my face toward hers. I flung myself backwards and hit the far wall with a thud. My breathing was fast and ragged. If I had had a working heart, it would have been pounding like a drum. I froze where I landed and listened for sounds from Charlie's room. There was no disruption in his snoring pattern and I gradually relaxed my vigilance. Bella rolled over in her sleep. As I looked toward her still slumbering face, my breathing began to quicken again.

What had I almost done? Was Bella safe from me? With mounting concern, I realized that I didn't know the answer to those questions. Without a doubt, my desire for her contained an element of blood lust...perhaps a lot of blood lust. But it wasn't torturing me as it would have just two short weeks ago. To be here in this overheated room amidst clouds of her sweet fragrance should have overwhelmed me, but it didn't. The burn was there, but it was tolerable.

I was starting to wonder whether I should be worrying more about my desire for physical contact in its myriad forms. These new cravings were more difficult to control in a way. I wasn't accustomed to this kind of desire and it kept catching me by surprise. I was acting on impulse before I even knew what I was doing. I *must* be careful...very, very careful. I clasped my hands together in a belated attempt to prevent their wandering.

Just then, Bella spoke, soft and clear: "I love you, Edward."

My heart leaped with joy! She loved me! Was it true? It shouldn't be true. It was not safe for Bella to have these strong feelings for me. I would hurt her...one way or another, I would hurt her. But I refused to dwell on that now. I blocked the thought from my mind so I could revel in my elation.

She. Loved. Me.

As dawn began to break, I made my exit from Bella's room and sprinted home. I didn't want to be separated from her for a second longer than necessary.

As usual, Alice saw me coming and was sitting outside on the porch steps. She smiled knowingly as I walked by and my wide smile met hers.

Can I meet her now, Edward?

I sighed. "Yes, Alice, I will introduce you at lunch. Do you want to take the afternoon off and go hunting with me? I need to prepare for our outing tomorrow."

Yes, of course, Edward. Wouldn't miss it. She grinned and I went inside to change my clothes.

Bella would need her own vehicle to drive herself home from school today, but I could not resist picking her up anyway. Though it took only a few minutes to drive from her house to the high school, they were minutes I cherished. I positioned my car on Bella's street past her house, far enough along that Charlie wouldn't notice me when he left. As he drove around the corner, I rolled forward to Bella's curb.

We were playing a little game. She made a habit of rushing out the front door as soon as Charlie was gone, but no matter how quickly she appeared, I was always parked and waiting for her. Today, I was quick enough to kill the engine and roll down the windows as if I'd been sitting there for an hour. Her eyes widened when she saw me, and she approached the car laughing.

"How did you sleep?" I asked disingenuously, suppressing a grin.

"Fine. How was your night?" she countered.

"Pleasant," I said, unable to hide my amusement. If she only knew just *how* pleasant!

She eyed my expression with suspicion. "Can I ask what you did?"

You can ask..., I thought, chuckling. Aloud, I said, "No. Today is still *mine*."

As we rode to school, I continued with my questioning. I knew from her dreams that she missed her mother, Renee. I wanted to know more about Renee. Was she anything like Bella? I had already identified many similarities between Bella and her father: their taciturnity, their seriousness, their sense of responsibility, their tempers. She had implied that her mother was very different—flighty, intuitive, impulsive, somewhat out of touch with the realities of everyday living. That helped explain Bella's maturity. But what was their life together like? How did they relate to each other? What did they do together? I looked forward to meeting Renee.

Between classes, I turned my questions to a topic about which I was extremely curious—Bella's romantic history. How many boyfriends had Bella had before she came to Forks? What were they like? Did she keep in touch? And especially, *how did they compare to me?* I wanted to know what distant rivals I might have. Even as that thought occurred to me, I knew by the sharp pang in my chest that it was wrong...*very* wrong...to view myself as competition for any human boy. True to form, I forged ahead anyway.

"Did you date a lot in Phoenix?" I asked Bella, trying to sound casual.

"No," she replied.

Though I was impatient with her short answer, I tried to keep my tone level. I wanted to know every detail about every one of them! Clearly, she was not eager to talk

about it and that made me even more curious.

“How often did you go out?” I kept the question generic, hoping to elicit more information while masking my intense curiosity.

Her prolonged hesitation frustrated me. Finally, she looked down at her hands and replied, “Uh...never.” An appealing blush colored her cheeks.

“You *never* went out?” I responded in disbelief. I couldn’t let her dodge the question and that blush had to mean *something*.

“No, never.”

I was baffled, but my heart soared with hope. Could it be that Bella had never said “yes” to anyone until now, until me? Was that possible?

“So, you never met anyone you wanted?” I pressed, even more anxious for details.

Bella refused to elaborate. “Not in Phoenix,” she said.

So what did *that* mean? Was there someone here in Forks she’d been interested in? Who? *Tell me it wasn’t that weasel, Newton!* I suppressed a growl. *Crowley? Yorkie? Jacob Black? Someone else I hadn’t yet met?* How she frustrated me!

I decided to end this line of questioning and address our plans for tomorrow. “I should have let you drive yourself today,” I told her.

“Why?” She raised her tone slightly. Annoyed? Angry?

“I’m leaving with Alice after lunch.”

“Oh,” she said, her face falling. She was disappointed! Would she miss me?

“That’s okay,” she continued. “It’s not that far of a walk.” How could she imagine that I would be so unchivalrous? She must not think very highly of me after all.

“I’m not going to make you walk home. We’ll go get your truck and leave it here for you.”

“I don’t have my key with me,” she said, as if that were some kind of deterrent to me. “I really don’t mind walking.”

I refused to budge. “Your truck will be here and the key will be in the ignition—unless you’re afraid someone might steal it.” I laughed at my own joke.

“All right,” she finally conceded. I knew she was wondering how I would retrieve her truck without the keys. How little faith she had in me. Or...how little she knew of my wily ways.

“So where are you going?” she asked, seeming not all that interested.

I hated to admit my weakness, but I had to be honest.

“Hunting. If I’m going to be alone with you tomorrow, I’m going to take whatever precautions I can.” Remembering last night’s incident, a wave of concern for Bella’s safety washed over me and took my confidence with it.

“You can always cancel, you know.” She *should* cancel, of course. Could she see that in my eyes?

She dropped her head and whispered, “No, I can’t.” Then she raised her eyes and peered sadly into my face. Backwards instincts, again.

“Perhaps you’re right,” I replied. *But I could. And I should to protect her from herself as well as from me!* But I was not strong enough—or perhaps, not good enough—to say the words out loud. My selfishness knew no bounds.

“What time will I see you tomorrow?” she asked. Why did she sound sad?

“That depends...it’s a Saturday, don’t you want to sleep in?”

“No.” Her forceful response amused and gladdened me.

“The same time as usual, then. Will Charlie be there?” I hoped so. A witness.

“No, he’s fishing tomorrow.” She grinned widely as if this were a good thing.

“And if you don’t come home, what will he think?” I barked, my worry automatically compensating for her seeming lack of concern. Why wasn’t she afraid?

“I have no idea,” she continued. “He knows I’ve been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he’ll think I fell in the washer.”

So she refused to tell Charlie that we’d be together! That angered me in more ways than one and I glared at her. She responded with her own kittenish anger and attempted to stare me down. I almost laughed.

“What are you hunting tonight?” she asked calmly, as if this were an ordinary, everyday conversation.

“Whatever we find in the park. We aren’t going far.” It was impossible to stay angry with her.

“Why are you going with Alice?” she continued.

Remembering my family’s reaction to my recent activities sobered me at once. I tried to be honest. “Alice is the most...supportive.” *At least she will still talk to me*, I thought.

“And the others? What are they?” Bella seemed concerned.

How should I reply? “Incredulous, for the most part.” That was certainly true. No matter what else they thought about my pursuing Bella, none of them could believe I was doing it. And they especially didn’t understand why. I had no convincing argument for them. Bella’s eyes wandered toward my siblings.

“They don’t like me,” she concluded.

“That’s not it,” I countered. *They don’t like that you’re human*, I thought, but even that wasn’t quite it. “They don’t understand why I can’t leave you alone.” To my knowledge, not one of my vampire family had ever been attracted to a human, though I knew that Carlisle had become attached to my mother and me in the hospital where we both lay dying of the influenza.

“Neither do I, for that matter,” Bella interrupted my wandering thoughts.

How could I make her understand? “I told you—you don’t see yourself clearly at all. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever known. You fascinate me.” She gave me an evil look. She thought I was kidding! Silly Bella.

“Having the advantages I do,” I began, pointing to my forehead, “I have a better than average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you...you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise.” Can she understand how remarkable that is? How extraordinary? How intriguing?

But, of course, that wasn’t the most important thing. Not at all. It was perhaps an initial lure and it kept me on my toes—Bella was never boring—but there was much more to it than that. My voice softened.

“That part is easy enough to explain, but there’s more...and it’s not so easy to put into words—” I was thinking of the words she’d spoken to me in her dreams, but I couldn’t return them now. I didn’t want to scare her away.

Glancing at Bella’s face, I saw that she was staring over my shoulder with a look of terror—*terror!*—in her eyes. What was frightening her? I followed her gaze to find Rosalie staring fiercely at her. Then I heard Rosalie mentally screaming at me and silently threatening Bella. *I can still take her out! If I hear that she’s spoken one word about us to*

anyone, I will do it! Either I had been so engrossed in this conversation or had gotten so good at tuning her out that I was missing her latest tirade.

No matter what she thought, I would not allow her to threaten Bella. Without turning around, I sent Rosalie a warning hiss I knew she could hear. She turned her eyes away from Bella, but she didn't stop yelling silently at me. That was fine.

Imbecile! Idiot! How dare you tell Bella anything about us! How dare you risk everything! I tuned her out again. She was frightening Bella and wasting our time together. I would deal with her later.

"I'm sorry about that. She's just worried," I said, trying to downplay Rosalie's reaction. "You see...it's dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly..." A stab of remorse cut through me.

"If?" Bella pressed.

I hesitated, not wanting to frighten her. "If this ends...badly." What was I thinking? Of course she should be frightened! How could I be so reckless?

Run, Bella, run!

But like her, I was already in too deep to stop, come what may. Her calm voice broke through my torment.

"And you have to leave now?"

At least my hunting would improve her odds.

"Yes." *But I hate to go! I miss you already!* I declared to myself. Then I remembered biology class.

"It's probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in biology—I don't think I could take any more."

At least not without breaking the furniture or hauling her off to my monster's lair. I almost smiled at the image in my mind of the evil vampire in his black cape, his fangs bared, with the innocent maiden slung over his shoulder.

Time to introduce me, Edward! Alice had stepped up behind me and was smiling at Bella.

At least one of the Cullen sisters is anxious to know her, I thought.

"Alice."

"Edward," she answered aloud, for Bella's benefit.

"Alice, Bella—Bella, Alice."

Finally! Thank you, Edward! "Hello, Bella. It's nice to finally meet you." *You're going to be my sister some day! If Edward doesn't kill you first,* Alice added in her head.

She just couldn't help herself, could she? And what did she mean by "sister," anyway?

"Hi, Alice," Bella replied.

"Are you ready?" Alice asked me. *You've told her, right?*

"Nearly." I answered both questions at once. "I'll meet you at the car." Happy now, Alice left us discreetly alone.

"Should I say 'have fun' or is that the wrong sentiment?" Bella inquired, the corners of her mouth drooping slightly as she tried for a smile.

Ah, she *would* miss me! My heart sang.

"No, 'have fun' works as well as anything." I used to, but all I could think about now was getting back as quickly as possible. The separation was necessary, though.

"Have fun, then." Bella attempted to sound cheerful, but her ability to fool me was

limited.

She's an extremely poor liar, I thought. My smile widened.

"I'll try. And you try to be safe, please." That was a problem, of course. She could fall out a window, or pass out and drown in the school drinking fountain, or attract hungry, wild animals. *Like me?*

"Safe in Forks—what a challenge," she mocked.

"For you it *is* a challenge." Visions of roving vampires danced through my head. "Promise," I demanded.

"I promise to try to be safe," she intoned slavishly. "I'll do the laundry tonight—that ought to be fraught with peril."

Laundry...okay. I remembered her joke about the laundry being a dangerous endeavor.

"Don't fall in." The image amused me in spite of myself.

"I'll do my best," Bella replied, as we both rose from our seats. "I'll see you tomorrow." She sighed. I knew how she felt.

"It seems like a long time to you, doesn't it?" I ventured.

She nodded unhappily and I was pleased I'd gotten it right.

"I'll be there in the morning," I promised, though I knew I wouldn't have to miss her for as long as she would miss me. I fully intended to see her as soon as she fell asleep.

I reached across the table to let my fingers say goodbye. Slowly, my fingertips stroked her silky cheekbone. *Ahh...* I tore my hand away as a warm blush rose up her neck and spread across her face.

Mmm...the smell of her...the heat...the galloping heart...the bottomless chocolate eyes...the blood swirling beneath her skin... Everything about her was an invitation to me. I wished I could stay. Instead, I rose abruptly and hustled myself out of the cafeteria before I got too carried away. Time to hunt.

Alice was waiting in the car with the stereo turned up, singing along in her inimitable way.

"Thanks for being nice to Bella, Alice. Rose was giving her the evil eye. And I think she senses everyone's ambivalence."

"I have no-o-o am-bi-valence wha-a-at-so-ev-errrr," Alice replied in time and in tune with the music. *I'm just going to assume that you won't kill her. Or if you simply can't keep from biting her, that you'll stop before you drain all her blood.*

"That's not funny, Alice! Don't even think that in jest!" But the evil thought had already been planted in my head.

To taste Bella's blood! I could imagine the profound pleasure it would be. Was such a thing possible? It was possible in the vampire lore of movies, television, and books. Vampire "love bites" were commonly depicted as the climactic moment of making love with a human.

Myth.

The truth was that if a vampire indulged in any biting behavior, then the human didn't survive—at least not as a human. Venom was venom. There was no "safe" way for a vampire to bite. Wouldn't it be something if there were...?!

Ahhh!! No, no, no, no, no! What am I thinking? If I harbor secret thoughts of tasting her blood, I *will* kill her! And if, miraculously, I *don't* kill her, the venom would still end her human life...very, very painfully. Unthinkable! Well, clearly, not unthinkable—I was

thinking it, wasn't I? *Ahhh!*

My head was a mess!

This was one of those times when I was glad Alice couldn't read my mind. My thoughts had traveled in exactly the direction her visions and her little asides had suggested.

"Ah, damn it, Alice!" I didn't even bother to explain myself. My teeth would never, ever touch Bella's skin and that was the end of it.

We'd arrived at Charlie's house and I stepped out of the car. I was angry with Alice, but also, and especially, with myself.

"You take the car. I'll find the truck keys and meet you back at the school parking lot." She was already sitting in the driver's seat, so obviously, she'd seen my plan.

You can go in the window, as long as you do it in the next four minutes forty-five seconds, Alice thought. She was one step ahead of me. I shut the car door and she zipped off without another word—or evil, suggestive thought.

Though I could have used Bella's hidden key to enter through the front door of the house, I was accustomed to going in through the window. Anyway, the window put me right into Bella's room, where I expected to find her truck keys. I definitely didn't want to be seen climbing through Bella's window in broad daylight, but four minutes was an eternity to me. I leaped to the window, grabbing the eave with one hand while I opened the casement with the other. I slipped in and inhaled deeply.

Ahh, the lovely, familiar scent of her bedroom. I would never get enough of it. But no keys in sight, not on the dresser or the desk. I'd noticed that Bella didn't choose to tell me where to find her keys when we were talking at lunch. That explained her dubious look when I told her we'd bring her truck to the school. She was challenging me. She had no idea....

Now that I thought about it, I should have asked Alice where the keys were. She could have watched me searching for them and told me where I would eventually find them without my actually having to look. Oh well, sometimes it was good to go manual.

Okay, where to start. Hmm, Alice had touched those keys last week when we brought Bella's truck home. The leather "B" on the ring would hold her scent. Maybe I could locate Alice's scent somewhere in the house. I sniffed. Not in the bedroom. I went down the hall. Not in the bathroom. I headed downstairs toward the kitchen. Nope. Living room. Nope.

It can't be that hard. Wait! Bella has laundry to do. It's natural to stuff one's keys in a pocket, especially a coat or trousers pocket. If I didn't find her keys in the laundry, I'd check the coat closet. I located the laundry room off the kitchen and caught the tiniest trace of Alice's scent amidst the stronger odors of Bella's and Charlie's dirty clothes. Getting warm. I followed my nose to a pile of clothes on the floor, among them a pair of Bella's jeans. *Got 'em!*

I was rather pleased with myself, actually—found in under two minutes. I made sure the laundry pile looked completely untouched, just to mess with Bella's head a little. Maybe she'd think I could summon the keys into my hand from wherever they were in the house, just like Harry Potter.

"*Accio, keys!*" I ordered. Okay, that was just silly. This was reality here, not fantasy.

I decided to exit the house the same way I'd come and reiterate my message to

Bella—the one she didn't take seriously—along the way. Back in her bedroom, I found a sheet of paper and a pen on her desktop. I wrote two words:

Be Safe.

Aware of the irony of my writing those words to her, but unwilling to regard it, I folded the paper in half and stepped to the open window. I listened for anyone in the immediate area and, hearing no one, leaped through, grabbed the eave, and closed the casement in one motion before dropping to the ground.

I sat in Bella's truck and started the engine. *Unbelievably loud. But it's easy to find her when she's driving, so I suppose it's not all bad. But the speed! Ugh! How can she stand it?* Fortunately, it wasn't far to the school. Of course, nothing was very far away in Forks.

I parked the truck where the Volvo had been so Bella would find it readily, placed the folded sheet of paper on the seat, and joined Alice. She took us home, driving only slightly slower than I would have. I could tolerate it.

Since I wouldn't be using it for a while, I motioned to Alice to pull the car around to the garage. We got out and started walking toward the forest. *Are you still mad at me?* she wondered, almost to herself.

"I suppose not. But really, Alice, this is all hard enough without your unhelpful contributions."

"Women. Ya can't live with 'em. Ya can't eat 'em." She intoned, then chuckled at her own joke.

"Alice, pleeeeeease," I begged.

Try not to worry so much, Edward. I have every confidence in you. You love her. Love can do miraculous things. Just look at Jasper and me. Where would we be without each other?

"Speaking of Jasper, I haven't checked in lately," I noted, changing the subject. "How are things going at school? He's not keeping up this ridiculous exercise in building tolerance, is he? He was running a little too close to the edge last week."

I convinced him that he should hunt every week instead of trying to wait for two weeks. He sees the good sense in that, but it's hard on his pride. I don't know if he'll follow through. She paused and shut her eyes. No, looks like he won't. If you could check in with him when he tries to stretch it, that would be really helpful. If I bug him too much, he just goes all silent and stoic.

"I'll do my best, Alice. Remind me if you want to. My attention has been elsewhere recently." I looked at her and smiled wryly. All was forgiven.

I wanted him to come with us today, but he's going with Esme and Rosalie tomorrow. He's not pleased with the Bella situation.

"That's fine, as long as he doesn't interfere. Jasper is my brother, but I will fight him if he threatens Bella."

I don't see him doing that, Edward. Especially now that I've officially met her and we're going to be friends. I can't wait to do some girlie stuff with her. She needs serious help with her wardrobe.

It was no use trying to dampen Alice's enthusiasm and I wouldn't even try. "Just please don't say anything to her about—"

The visions. I know, Edward.

I let the subject drop. It was not something I wanted to think about right now and I certainly didn't want to argue the future with Alice. We'd reached the river anyway.

"Ready, Alice?"

Ready.

We leaped over the river and started running.

Charlie had just dropped off to sleep when I entered Bella's window. I recognized a CD of Chopin nocturnes playing softly. Bella was lying on her back, her hands crossed over her chest, almost as if someone had posed her in a coffin.

Yikes! Where did that thought come from? Alice's influence, again. I sighed.

By the heavy sound of her breathing, I knew Bella was deeply asleep, but the bedcovers were perfectly folded under her elbows and lay unruffled clear to the foot of the bed. She looked like she had made the bed, slid carefully under the blanket, crossed her arms, then hadn't moved since. It wasn't like her. Normally, she was a wild, restless sleeper with her sheets and blankets all untucked and tangled together.

I checked the CD player and found that it was set on Auto Repeat. I turned it off, deciding to sing to her instead. Her head turned slightly and her lips moved silently when I began, but she said nothing intelligible.

It had become my habit to sit in the rocking chair. It made me feel more human in this very human place. Standing like a statue, though my natural state, looked eerie to human eyes, I knew. It was one of the first lessons you learned living amongst them. Sit, don't stand. Twitch and fidget. Cross your legs. Move your hands. Blink. Humans were, by and large, very restless creatures. That's why Bella's position seemed so strange. She hadn't moved at all since she'd lain down. Was there something wrong with her?

I stepped to her bedside and leaned over to listen to her heartbeat. Perhaps a little slower than usual, but strong and regular. Slower, hmm. Surely she doesn't take sleeping pills! That could account for her stillness. Or alcohol, I supposed, though I'd never seen her drink or even heard her talk about it. Nope, no alcohol on her breath.

Curious, now, I opened the drawer of her bedside table. Books. Earplugs. A miniature book light. MP3 player. No drugs. Since I now knew the layout of the house, I headed to the bathroom to look in the medicine cabinet. I knew that I shouldn't snoop around, but now that I'd thought of it, I was worried that maybe Bella had taken drugs of some kind. She wouldn't, would she? It didn't seem like her. Or was she sick?

The medicine cabinet contained a selection of the usual creams, salves, shaving supplies, aspirin, cold medicine, toothpaste and floss. No prescription drugs. Wait a second...cold medicine. Does Bella have a cold? I hadn't noticed any tissues by her bed or any sneezing or coughing today at school. Humans were so fragile. She could catch anything at any time. It was frightening, really.

I wondered if Bella had been keyed up and turned on the nocturnes to relax. And maybe she even took some cold medicine to make her sleepy. Was she more worried about being alone with me tomorrow than she would admit? Not that I would get a straight answer if I asked. Well, I would give her every chance to back out. It might be for the best anyway. Alice had seen danger for Bella in the meadow. She said it wasn't imminent, but

she could be wrong...it might be.

I returned to Bella's room and sat down in the rocking chair. I began singing softly and watched as the corner of her mouth curved up. She rolled to her side and murmured, "Edward," as if she knew I was watching over her. I wonder what she would say if she discovered I actually was. Would that frighten her? So many, many questions.

Dawn arrived more quickly than I expected. It was so peaceful here, listening to Bella's breathing, knowing she was safe. Though the burn was always there in my throat, along with the hollow ache in my stomach, I had grown accustomed to it. It was like walking a long distance with a missing shoe heel. At first it seems intolerable, impossible to walk any distance at all. But by putting one foot in front of the other, your body gradually adjusts around the discomfort, easing it by bending one knee slightly or putting more weight on the toes.

I could partly compensate for the ache in my throat by focusing on Bella's intoxicating scent or by listening to the sound of her heartbeat or breath. I was also learning to mentally block the pain in my throat by concentrating on more pleasurable sensations in my body: the pleasant "burn" in my fingers after I'd touched her face, the electrical buzz that flowed between us when we were close, or a new sensation that I'd noticed in my lower torso, a tingling heat. Turning pain to pleasure. It required some effort certainly.

It was time to take my leave. Charlie would depart early on his fishing trip, no doubt, and I needed to run home, change clothes, and run back. I could use the distraction about now.

I was not feeling particularly hopeful when I knocked on Bella's door a couple of hours later. There was so much potential for the day to go wrong.

Bella was fumbling excessively with the front door lock. When she finally released it and opened the door, I looked her up and down and laughed.

"Good morning," I said, suddenly cheerful.

Responding to my amusement, Bella asked, "What's wrong?" It was just like her to assume that something was wrong—with her.

"We match," I said.

She was wearing blue jeans and a long tan sweater with a white, lacy collar peeking from the neck. I was dressed just like her—blue jeans, white shirt, tan sweater—sans lace. Her expression as she looked at my clothing was oddly comical. She seemed surprised to have her attention drawn to it as if she'd never noticed that I wore clothes. She laughed at the coincidence, though she began biting her lip and she avoided meeting my gaze. What did that mean? Was she frightened?

As we walked toward her truck, I dragged my feet, exaggerating my displeasure at being her passenger.

"We made a deal," she reminded me. "Where to?"

"Put your seatbelt on—I'm nervous already."

Humans were so fallible behind the wheel of a vehicle and vampires never were—or at least we had plenty of time to correct mistakes before accidents could occur. But she seemed to take great pride in driving me.

"Where to?" she repeated, and I submitted gracelessly to the inevitable.

"Take the one—oh—one north," I directed, then distracted myself by gazing at her face, trying to detect any misgivings she might have about being alone with me. She was trying to concentrate on the road. She was also driving intolerably slowly.

“Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?” I asked impatiently.

“This truck is old enough to be your car’s grandfather—have some respect,” she snapped.

More like great-grandfather, I thought, but kept it to myself. “Turn right on the one-ten,” I instructed, a second before she asked. There was much one could read in body language and expression if need be. I was getting better at it. “Now we drive until the pavement ends.”

“And what’s there, at the pavement’s end?” Bella inquired. Her question reminded me of John Russell’s delightful book of short stories by that name from my much younger days. *A surprise*, was generally the correct answer.

“A trail.”

“We’re hiking?” She sounded concerned.

“Don’t worry, it’s only five miles or so, and we’re in no hurry.” *I would be happy if this day could last forever. And I can always carry you.* But I kept that thought to myself. She wouldn’t accept help easily.

Bella turned strangely quiet, her lip-biting the only evidence that her mind was unsettled. How frustrating it was that her mind was closed to me! I could take the tension for only so long.

“What are you thinking?” I had to know. Was she afraid? She was so stubborn that she’d never admit it if she were.

“Just wondering where we’re going.”

I didn’t believe her, but let it slide. “It’s a place I like to go when the weather is nice.” *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as it were. There were parallels between Thomas Hardy’s hero and myself, including the pursuit of impossible love. I set the thought aside, wondering why book titles were so much in mind. Perhaps because of all the questions I’d asked Bella about her taste in books.

“Charlie said it would be warm today,” Bella noted, breaking the silence.

“And did you tell Charlie what you were up to?” I inquired.

“Nope.”

“But Jessica thinks we’re going to Seattle together?” It didn’t matter who knew we were together as long as someone did and I knew they did.

“No, I told her you canceled on me—which is true.”

“No one knows you’re with me?” I asked, alarmed. *Bella...Bella...what have you done?!*

“That depends...I assume you told Alice?”

“That’s very helpful, Bella,” I said sharply, sarcastically. No reply. “Are you so depressed by Forks that it’s made you suicidal?” I pressed.

“You said it might cause trouble for you...us being together publicly.”

“So you’re worried about the trouble it might cause *me*—if *you* don’t come *home*?”

Bella nodded.

Had this girl no sense of self-preservation at all? Insanity!

“You *will* take the risk seriously when you find me at your throat sucking the life out of you,” I blasphemed, too rapidly for Bella to understand my words.

I should have told her to turn the truck around, to give up the whole venture. It said a lot about my character that I couldn’t force myself to do it. Yes, I was in way too deep. So be it.

When the road ended, Bella pulled the truck to the shoulder and turned off the engine. I dared not look at her, angry and apprehensive as I was. If *I* was worried about what I would do to her, *she* should be positively terrified. But if she was, she wasn't going to show it.

I removed my sweater in preparation for our hike. It would be sunny by the time we got to the meadow. I liked to feel the sun's warmth on my skin, something that was only allowed when I was far away from human eyes. Bella would be the first and only exception to that rule.

"This way," I directed, glancing back to check that she was following me into the forest. I saw that she had removed her sweater and tied it around her waist.

"The trail?" She stared at me in shock.

"I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it."

"No trail?" She seemed greatly disturbed, but I wasn't sure why.

"I won't let you get lost." I smiled in spite of myself and turned to face her. As I did, her face transformed into a wretched mask of despair.

Finally, she's beginning to understand the danger! I thought, both relief and anguish washing over me in a confusing flood of emotion. I'd promised myself that I would give her every chance to back out.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

She stepped toward me with a determination that belied her desolate expression.

"No."

"What's wrong?" I inquired gently, desperate to know what was going on in her mysterious, closed mind.

"I'm not a good hiker. You'll have to be very patient." She seemed discouraged by this admission. I was certain there was more to her distress than that, but I couldn't force her to tell me what she didn't want to say.

"I can be patient—if I make a great effort," I joked, realizing that I was not demonstrating patience to any degree at all today. At least I could do something about that.

She tried to smile, but the attempt faded before it reached her eyes. And her heart had begun pounding wildly. She must be very frightened, but was trying to put up a good front. I couldn't allow her to defy her better judgment for my benefit...again. I must put a stop to it.

"I'll take you home," I said, my heart sinking with disappointment.

Then Bella surprised me, of course. "If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way," she snapped.

Really? She's seriously upset by the prospect of hiking through the forest? I didn't truly believe it, and she seemed determined to proceed, so I reversed course again and headed into the woods.

I tried to make the journey easier for Bella. Her feet seemed a great curse to her, as they unflinchingly found and faltered on every protruding root, stone, and patch of moss. This was difficult for her, I realized. Ashamed of my insensitivity, I focused on easing her way without calling attention to her awkwardness. She seemed to appreciate the assistance when I pulled aside ferns and branches, and cupped my hand under her elbow to help her over obstructions.

What a convenient excuse I had to touch her! I felt a powerful zing of electricity flow between us each time I did so. Her heart raced and thumped whenever I reached for

her. Did the chill of my hand on her elbow put her off?

Then I remembered my earlier conjectures about Ms. Cope and her similar physiological reactions whenever I drew close to *her*. I recalled her erratic, speeding heartbeat, the subtle flush of blood under her skin, and the dilation of her pupils. Her thoughts were easy to read—she was physically attracted to me. With a deep thrill of hope, I wondered if Bella’s racing heart and flushing skin were also due to attraction. Perhaps the surreptitious glances she cast toward my chest were not merely an attempt to avoid my inquiring eyes.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I was baring far more of my body today than I ever revealed in public. On these private sunny days, it was my habit to enjoy the sunshine and expose as much skin as was seemly. Today I had worn a shirt, but it had no sleeves and I’d left it unbuttoned to catch more of the sun’s rays. Was it possible that Bella was reacting to me just as I would to her if she were to do the same?

Instantly, my mind raced down that forbidden pathway, imagining Bella with her sleeveless shirt unbuttoned. I felt sensations in my body that I recognized as physical desire, my version of Ms. Cope’s reactions to me. A warmth spread through me, beginning in my lower torso and flowing toward my head, my feet, and my hands in waves. I stopped walking and rested my hand against the nearest tree, allowing myself a moment to process the sensations. I was surprised to have such a strong physical reaction to mere mental pictures.

I knew that fantasizing about Bella was a dangerous pleasure. First came desire, then came contact, and then she died. I must *never* forget that. The thought dampened my ardor immediately, but I refused to let despair overtake me on this glorious day. Bella and I were together and I must make the most of this time.

To distract myself, I decided to ask more questions as I resumed walking. What was her favorite school subject?

“English.”

Which year of primary school had she liked best?

“First grade.”

Why?

“That’s when I learned to read.”

What were your favorite birthday presents?

“Books and music.”

Did you have any childhood pets?

“Three goldfish, killed them all.”

So she could take care of her childlike mother, but couldn’t keep fish alive. The irony tickled me.

I’d had no idea that the five-mile hike would take this long, but I was in no hurry to arrive. I just wanted to enjoy the pleasure of Bella’s company for as long as I had it. I had decided that I would let her see me for exactly what I was on this pivotal day. It was the only way she could freely choose whether she wanted to be with me or not.

It was a difficult resolution to keep. At every revelation about my wretched existence, I expected her to turn and run away. Which disclosure would stretch her tolerance beyond its limits? Would it be my appearance in the sunlight? I grew tense as we got closer to the meadow, fearing that she would bolt, or worse, that I would repulse her. But there was no avoiding the moment. I was determined to move forward.

Much of our hike was spent in silence, marked only by our breathing, the beating of her heart, and the sounds of wild creatures in the woods. I wondered if she noticed that the birds grew quiet at my approach, and that small animals skittered away in terror. Perhaps not, human senses being what they are. Animals had a much more adaptive reaction to my presence than Bella did. That was undeniable.

When the sun appeared above the trees, Bella's pace quickened, though I was pretty sure her human eyes could not detect the upcoming clearing in the forest.

"Are we there yet?" she inquired with humorous impatience.

I smiled. "Nearly. Do you see the brightness ahead?"

"Um, should I?" she replied, mystified.

"Maybe it's a bit soon for *your* eyes," I teased.

"Time to visit the optometrist." As if that would help. I smiled and we pressed on.

I knew that my time with her might end abruptly when we reached the sunlit clearing, so I dragged behind as we approached it.

When Bella stepped into the meadow, *my* meadow, as I liked to think of it, she seemed entranced by its beauty. I watched her proceed alone into the circle of sunshine amidst the colorful wildflowers and waving grasses. She looked so beautiful in this natural setting with the light glinting off her hair. I felt a pang of sadness in my nonexistent heart. How could she care for such as me?

I had another reason for hanging back in the shadows of the tall trees. I didn't want Bella to be too close to me when I stepped into the light. My appearance would startle, probably frighten, and perhaps repel her. If I kept my distance, I hoped that she wouldn't run. I watched her move forward, dread gripping me.

Suddenly, she spun around, her eyes scanning anxiously when she realized I was no longer beside her. Then she spotted me twenty feet back and turned around as if to retrace her steps. I raised a hand to caution her against approaching me. I couldn't bear to be close to her if she screamed, or fainted, or bolted in terror. I braced myself, took a deep breath, and stepped into the sunshine.