

14. CONFESSIONS

Nothing could have surprised me more. Bella had not reacted with revulsion to my startling appearance. On the contrary, and beyond all my expectations, I no longer had any doubt that Bella—unbelievably and inexplicably—was physically attracted to me. It had become increasingly clear over the course of our afternoon together.

When I moved into the sunlight, her jaw dropped, her eyes grew huge and round, and a long, soft “Ohhh!” escaped from her lips. Her knees trembled as if they might buckle and I resisted the urge to run forward and catch her. This was a moment I could not protect her from. My stony, white skin sparkled and gleamed in the sunshine, throwing off rays of rainbow-colored light as if thousands of tiny crystals were embedded in the surface. It took some getting used to.

Bella stood frozen for a moment, her mouth gaping, her eyes moving from my face to my neck, to my shoulders, across my bare chest, down to my stomach, to my hands and up my arms. Her close scrutiny sent a shiver through me.

She took a step forward as if in a daze, one arm reaching in my direction. Then she stopped, seeming confused, before taking hold of herself. She closed her mouth, dropped her arm, and stood motionless, her eyes wandering again over every inch of my exposed skin. I suddenly understood how she must feel when she blushed. A ripple of heat swept through my body and my stone-cold skin became electric with sensation.

Watching her examine me, I did not detect fear. Her eyes were filled with wonder and curiosity. I remained motionless, allowing her to become used to my appearance from a distance. Minutes passed as she gazed at me, mesmerized, before she came to herself again.

Slowly, but with a sure intention, Bella stepped toward me, her eyes seeking mine as she crossed the twenty feet that separated us. As she approached, her scent floated toward me on the air and I closed my eyes and inhaled, holding my ground as the familiar burn scorched my throat.

When she grew close, Bella reached for my hand. I allowed her to take it and pull me into the clearing. To hold her warm, pliant hand in mine—it was one of my fantasies come true. I felt the electricity spark between our palms. A surge of joy shot through me.

When we reached the center of the clearing directly beneath the sun, I disengaged my hand reluctantly. Had its cold temperature disturbed her? I folded my legs and dropped to the ground. She followed my lead and sat near me.

Her eyes settled on my face, then scanned downward slowly, resting on my chest and shoulders before moving lower. The thrill of her eyes on me was overwhelming. I lay back on the grass and closed my eyes, giving her some privacy as she grew accustomed to my sparkling skin. I began to sing softly to myself. It was both an expression of my joy and a soothing palliative to my tension. I couldn't read Bella's thoughts, of course, but her reaction to me had been clear in her wide eyes.

Today, we existed outside of time in our own private world. I had never been in the presence of a human without adopting the façade of dress, mannerisms, and behaviors that allowed us to blend in. I was exhilarated by the sense of freedom I got from just existing, without artifice and without effort, allowing Bella to see me for what I am.

At some point in that timeless idyll, I felt Bella's finger stroke the back of my hand. The electrical charge was soft, a warm buzzing sensation. I remained still, allowing her to

explore my skin, knowing that it must seem inordinately strange to her. After a few moments, I opened my eyes to try reading hers. She seemed calm and untroubled, with wonder in her eyes.

I ventured a smile. "I don't scare you?"

"No more than usual," she replied.

It was an amusing—and surprising—answer. Satisfied that she was more or less at peace, I closed my eyes to absorb her touch. Her heated fingers skimmed along my forearm, tracing the lines of muscle and sinew. They trembled slightly against my skin, but I understood now that this was not due to fear, or at least, not *only* to fear. She enjoyed touching me.

"Do you mind?" She spoke softly, tenderly.

"No. You can't imagine how that feels."

I released a deep, long-buried sigh. In my existence, I had never been touched like this by someone who wasn't my mother or sister. And even then, it was a profoundly different experience.

Her fingers trailed softly to the sensitive inner surface of my elbow, an exquisite sensation. She pressed the side of my hand as if to turn it over and I flipped it for her. Startled at the speed of my movement—natural to a vampire, shockingly fast to a human—she froze for a moment and held her breath. I opened my eyes just long enough to see that she had recovered from the surprise.

"Sorry," I murmured. "It's too easy to be myself with you."

Never before had I so completely lowered my guard, either with human or vampire. And because her mind was silent to me, I expended no energy to read or to avoid reading her thoughts as I did around others. It is hard to exaggerate the tranquility that this gave me.

Bella lifted my hand and rotated it back and forth, presumably to see the crystalline sparkles dance in the light.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I whispered, unable to keep my curiosity at bay for long. "It's still so strange for me, not knowing." I gazed at her face, trying to read her mind through her eyes.

"You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time."

"It's a hard life," I admitted. "But you didn't tell me."

"I *was* wishing I could know what you were thinking..." Her voice trailed off.

"And?" I coaxed.

"I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. And I was wishing that I wasn't afraid."

"I don't want you to be afraid." Though I knew she should be, I wished so much that she didn't have to be.

"Well, that's not exactly the fear I meant, though that's certainly something to think about."

Her statement surprised me and I wanted to understand what she meant, immediately. I flipped myself onto my right side, my free hand propping up my head. My eyes were near hers now, my palm in her hand. This time she was not startled by my speedy, vampiric movement, but I realized that her heart rate and respiration had increased and her translucent skin was coloring with blood. She looked into my eyes.

"What are you afraid of, then?" I asked, a little nervous to know.

She seemed poised to answer, but instead, leaned toward me precipitously. Her

eyes looked dazed and she began breathing in short gasps. I felt the sweet heat of her breath on my face as her lips parted and approached mine. The smooth arc of her throat stretched beneath, her veins pounding visibly with blood. Unwisely, I inhaled, tasting her breath on my tongue and feeling the dry, burning ache I knew so well. I shuddered as venom poured into my mouth and my muscles coiled to spring.

Disaster was imminent.

With only a fraction of a second to contain the monster, I leaped away from my would-be prey, back to the forest's edge. Panting, I clung to a massive spruce tree, borrowing its strength to fix me in place.

It would be so easy...so easy...

Using every bit of will I could muster, I somehow held my position. I clenched my jaw viciously against the unholy desire and focused on calming my frantic breath. Gradually, I regained sufficient control to know that I could run if I had to. I raised my eyes to Bella.

She looked stunned.

"I'm...sorry...Edward," she stuttered, unable to hide her bewilderment and pain.

Her eyes had misted over and the anguish I saw there completely short-circuited my hunting instinct. That was an unexpected blessing, something I could use.

"Give me a moment," I called from my cautious distance.

When I had fully mastered myself, I stepped into the sunlight and paced toward Bella. I remembered the principles of preventing fear in humans: move slowly, keep a distance of three to four feet, and look into their eyes. I followed all of these rules while approaching Bella, then sat on the ground opposite her. I felt chastened and raw, determined never again to see that expression of shock and dismay on Bella's face.

"I am so very sorry." In an effort to ease her distress, I joked gently, "Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?"

She nodded, a slight trembling apparent in the line of her mouth. There could be no doubt that Bella finally grasped the danger she had invited today. The scent of fear floated toward me in her perspiration.

I flashed a sardonic smile. Wasn't it my duty to demonstrate the extent of the danger so that she would fully understand? Maybe it excited me, in a perverse way, to frighten her; or perhaps the day's tension was suddenly too much for me; or maybe I simply wanted to release the last of my habitual bindings. For whatever reason, I pressed the point home.

"I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my *smell*. As if I need any of that!" I leaped to the spruce tree in a single bound, then raced around the circumference of the meadow in a fraction of a second.

"As if you could outrun me!" An evil-sounding laugh erupted from my lips.

I grabbed the largest limb I could reach on the massive spruce and snapped it like a twig, tossing the huge object effortlessly across the meadow. Where it crashed, a gigantic domino effect rippled through the woods from tree to tree. Before the noise dimmed, I reappeared in an instant at Bella's side, rigid and motionless.

"As if you could fight me off." I spoke quietly, dangerously, predator to prey.

Her fear was tangible now. She huddled where she sat, trembling, pale as snow, her breath halted altogether. But, miraculously, unaccountably, her gaze never swerved from me and she made no move to flee. As I met her frightened eyes, their liquid depths spoke to

me—the human part of me—and brought me back to myself, to her, and to the tender moment we’d lost.

From wanton and fearsome, my mood swiftly rebounded to sadness and remorse. Now that I had proved to Bella how dangerous I was, I wanted desperately—unreasonably—for her to disregard it, to trust me, to feel safe with me.

“Don’t be afraid,” I begged, knowing it was far too much to ask. “I promise...” but the word felt wholly inadequate, “...I *swear* not to hurt you.” If I said the words with enough certainty, perhaps I could make them true forever.

“Don’t be afraid,” I whispered again, craving to re-enter that space close to her. I moved as cautiously as I could, crossed my legs and sank to the ground, still watching her eyes, which were now a mere twelve inches from my own.

“Please forgive me.” The gentleman I had been as a human re-emerged. “I *can* control myself. You caught me off guard. But I’m on my best behavior now.”

Bella remained as silent and inscrutable as the moon. I tried again.

“I’m not thirsty today, honestly.” I winked at her, enlisting all of my charm to disrupt her rigid immobility. It worked. She laughed a subdued, shaky laugh.

“Are you all right?” I inquired in my gentlest voice, seizing the opportunity to place my hand carefully back in hers. I awaited her verdict, searching her face for a sign, a *yea* or a *nay*. She looked at my hand, then up at my eyes, then back down at my hand. Finally, her index finger resumed stroking my palm. The corners of her mouth rose slightly and she looked up at me with absolution. My heart soared—she’d forgiven me.

After a long pause, I asked, “So where were we before I behaved so rudely?” I wished to return to that magical moment before the beast in me had surfaced.

“I honestly can’t remember,” she admitted. I had frightened it from her mind.

I was ashamed, but my curiosity had not lessened and, of course, I had not forgotten a thing.

“I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason.” As if that weren’t enough cause to stay away from me.

“Oh, right,” Bella answered, but offered no more.

Impatient, I prodded, “Well?”

Bella continued to stroke random lines across my palm. I could have shut my eyes and sunk back into the amazing sensation of it, but my need to know her fears overrode the desire. Still, she remained silent.

“How easily frustrated I am,” I admitted sadly. It was a human discomfort I found hard to bear. She took pity on me.

“I was afraid...because for well, obvious reasons, I can’t *stay* with you. And I’m afraid that I’d like to stay with you, much more than I should.”

She couldn’t meet my eyes and I realized then how difficult it had been for her to admit this. It was certainly a valid fear. I could barely breathe, though, with the thrill of hearing her say the words—she wanted to be with me! If she truly wanted me, I would suffer anything, bear anything, to make it come true! But it had to be her choice and she had to fully comprehend the danger. And it was wrong of me to want her to choose me. I knew that.

I selected my words carefully. “Yes, that is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That’s really not in your best interest.” I forced myself to continue, to tell her the truth as I knew it.

“I should have left long ago. I should leave now. But I don’t know if I can.”

“I don’t want you to leave.” I heard the sadness in her voice.

“Which is exactly why I should.” *Someone here should be strong enough to protect you from me...and from yourself*, I thought. “But don’t worry. I’m essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should.”

“I’m glad.”

“Don’t be!” My better nature struggled to assert itself and I returned my hand to my side. “It’s not only your company I crave! Never forget *that*. Never forget that I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else.” Must I tell her this? She *will* run away from me, screaming.

“I don’t think I understand exactly what you mean—by that last part anyway.”

No, how could she? I smiled at the rarity of such a conversation. But I must answer all her questions. I must not withhold any information as vital as this.

“How do I explain? And without frightening you again...hmmmm.” I noticed my right hand move back into hers of its own accord. She grasped it with both of her hands. I wanted her never to let go. “That’s amazingly pleasant, the warmth.” I could be happy just sitting here for days with my hand in hers. But the explanation. I owed it to her.

“You know how everyone enjoys different flavors? Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?”

She nodded.

I suddenly regretted my choice of words. “Sorry about the food analogy—I couldn’t think of another way to explain.”

She let me off the hook with a gracious smile. I returned it, chagrined.

“You see, every person smells different, has a different essence. If you locked an alcoholic in a room full of stale beer, he’d gladly drink it. But he could resist, if he wished to, if he were a recovering alcoholic. Now let’s say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac—and filled the room with its warm aroma—how do you think he would fare then?”

I paused, allowing her to come to her own conclusions and trying to gauge her reaction. Her eyes were asking questions, more questions. I pressed on, willing her to understand something that was possibly beyond a human’s comprehension.

“Maybe that’s not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin addict instead.”

“So what you’re saying is, I’m your brand of heroin?” She offered me an unflinching smile and I was exceedingly grateful. She understood.

“Yes, you are *exactly* my brand of heroin.”

“Does that happen often?”

This was a question I couldn’t answer with any certainty. There weren’t many vampires who had the relevant experience and even fewer of whom I could ask such a sensitive question.

“I spoke to my brothers about it,” I told her, reviewing their responses in my mind. “To Jasper, every one of you is much the same. He’s the most recent to join our family. It’s a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn’t had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor.” The word escaped before I had considered its effect on my audience.

“Sorry,” I apologized with a quick look to see how Bella responded to my words.

She was generous. “I don’t mind,” she answered my questioning eyes. “Please

don't worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whichever. That's the way you think; I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can."

Bella's equanimity on this subject was startling, but appreciated. I inhaled deeply, then gathered my thoughts.

"So, Jasper wasn't sure if he'd ever come across someone who was as"—how could I say this delicately?—"appealing as you are to me. Which makes me think not. Emmett has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger than the other."

"And for you?" Bella inquired.

"Never." Which would help explain my extreme discomposure when I first caught her scent. I recalled the shock as if it were today, but it was a memory I couldn't afford to replay when in Bella's presence. It was much too dangerous.

My thoughts had wandered in their own direction for a moment, so Bella's next question caught me by surprise.

"What did Emmett do?"

Immediately, I recalled the scene that ran through Emmett's mind when he'd told me the story. Reviewing his experience was almost as dangerous as reliving my own. I turned my face away from Bella and locked my muscles down to prevent myself from reacting instinctively to Emmett's memory. I waited while the urges lessened, then cleared.

"I guess I know," Bella admitted.

How it pained me now that I had revealed this information about Emmett to Bella! Emmett, like all of my family, was in that rare tenth of one percent or so of vampires who even *attempted* to modify their eating habits. We were the most humane of our kind. The fact that even we had made such mistakes and taken human lives revealed how truly damned we all were. I wished now that I could erase the memory of Emmett's blunder from her mind.

"Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?"

"What are you asking? My permission?" Her words cut me to the bone. I felt the misery in them. "I mean, is there no hope then?"

"No, no!" Regret coursed through me at the implication I had made. "Of course, there's hope! I mean, of course I won't..." My words trailed off, but she knew what I meant.

Was it really a promise I could keep? I believed so, or at least I hoped so. Wanting to be as honest as possible, I recognized suddenly that I was still unsure about my ability to control myself. But when I thought about where I was now, with the feelings I had for Bella, it became clearer that something had already changed in my basic makeup.

I tried to explain. "It's different for us. Emmett...these were strangers he happened across. It was a long time ago, and he wasn't as...practiced, as careful, as he is now." I waited to gauge her reaction to my backpedaling.

"So if we'd met...oh, in a dark alley or something..." she abandoned the sentence. We both seemed determined to avoid the actual words.

Telling the absolute truth at this juncture was excruciating, but perhaps more vital than it ever had been before. I forced myself to continue.

"It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class of children and —" *Too vulgar.*

I started again. "When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle

has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself." The memory of that near disaster galled me. "You must have thought I was possessed."

"I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me so quickly..." It was the first time she had revealed her pain in that moment.

I tried to explain. "To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin... I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow..." I peered into her eyes as my words entered her consciousness and struck their mark.

"You would have come." I knew this as surely as I knew my name. The ability to seduce was one of our weapons.

"Without a doubt," Bella conceded and I wondered how *she* knew that.

But there was even more to the story and she was still sitting here with me. It was my duty to continue to the bitter end. I dropped my eyes in shame.

"And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there—in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there—so easily dealt with." The worst had been said. Now just the fallout remained.

I glanced up. Remarkably, Bella, though shivering, stayed where she was. Perhaps she was too afraid to run. I continued.

"But I resisted. I don't know how. I forced myself *not* to wait outside for you, *not* to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn't smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home—I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong—and then I went straight to Carlisle, at the hospital, to tell him I was leaving."

Bella's eyes grew wide and her mouth slackened, but I pressed on.

"I traded cars with him—he had a full tank of gas and I didn't want to stop. I didn't dare to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn't have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary..."

"By the next morning I was in Alaska. I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances...but I was homesick. I hated knowing I'd upset Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I'd dealt with temptation before, not of this magnitude, not even close, but I was strong. Who were you, an insignificant little girl"—the word amused me now—"to chase me from the place I wanted to be? So I came back..."

"I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it."

"It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica's mind...her mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that. And then I couldn't know if you really meant what

you said. It was all extremely irritating.” How clearly I remembered that feeling. I had it still.

“I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting. I found myself caught up in your expressions...and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again...”

“Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes. Later, I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment—because if I hadn’t saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don’t think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are. But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, ‘Not her’.”

I had completely relinquished control of my words and allowed them to flow however they would, to lay everything out before this angel and let her face the devil in me. Whatever she thought, however she responded, it was all in her hands. I would fulfill my duty.

She gently pushed me to continue. “In the hospital?”

I looked her in the eyes and said, “I was appalled. I couldn’t believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power—you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you.” The baldness of that word in this peaceful place felt sacrilegious. I hurried on...

“But it had the opposite effect. I fought with Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper when they suggested that now was the time...the worst fight we’ve ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Alice.” *Though Alice still saw you dead in my arms or changed at my hand.* “Esme told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay.”

Then I thought of something that I couldn’t say out loud, but the inference was easy to make. Bella was concerned that my family didn’t like her. Now she would know exactly where each of them stood on the issue of taking her life. We Cullens are not your typical neighborhood family. It would almost be amusing if it weren’t so real.

“All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn’t understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn’t become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair...it hit me as hard as the very first day.”

“And for all that, I’d have fared better if I *had* exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here—with no witnesses and nothing to stop me—I were to hurt you.” That was as deep a truth as I knew. And now she would know it too.

But she didn’t understand. “Why?”

I prepared myself to be as clear as I could be.

“Isabella...” saying her beautiful name aloud filled me with joy; I reached toward her to ruffle her shining mane of hair. The fragrance was heavenly. “Bella, I couldn’t live with myself if I ever hurt you. You don’t know how it’s tortured me.”

“The thought of you, still, white, cold...to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses...it would be unendurable.” I held nothing back now. I had nothing left to retain, not even my pride.

“You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me

ever.”

I let the words sit there. I had no heart left to conceal myself, to demand a response, or even to hope for any future at all. I had revealed myself to her, with no attempt to hide what would surely turn her away. An eternity passed in those moments.

Then I remembered something Alice had said to me recently. “Don’t underestimate Bella.” Perhaps I had been, for she remained where she was, quietly contemplating, her eyes focused on our hands. She wasn’t running away from me, screaming...yet.

When time no longer had any meaning to me, Bella answered all of my words with just a few of her own. Her soft, even voice assured me of their truth.

“You already know how I feel, of course. I’m here...which roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you.” Her face crumpled into a frown. “I’m an idiot,” she added.

Her words shocked me with their simplicity. The tension I had been holding onto for hours broke free in that moment. “You *are* an idiot,” I concurred, and we gave ourselves over to laughter at the impossibility of our situation.

“And so the lion fell in love with the lamb,” I quoted. Bella looked away shyly, then replied.

“What a stupid lamb.”

“What a sick, masochistic lion.”

What would become of us? Yes, there was hope. But was there a future? Any at all? I had no idea.

Bella broke into my thoughts with a word. “Why...?” Even her inexpressible curiosity gratified me.

“Yes?” I pressed.

“Tell me why you ran from me before.”

Owww... The memory of losing control stung.

“You know why.” I couldn’t bring myself to repeat the words. But I had misunderstood.

“No, I mean, *exactly* what did I do wrong? I’ll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn’t do. This, for example”—she stroked the back of my hand—“seems to be all right.”

Yes, it *was* all right. More than all right. I smiled reassuringly.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Bella. It was my fault.” It would always, always be my fault.

“But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you.” That was *so* Bella. Even when her life was threatened, she was concerned for the would-be murderer. It was no wonder I loved her. But it *was* important to know what particular thing had tripped my hunting trigger.

“Well...” I considered each step leading to my panic and identified the precise moment it rose. “It was just how close you were,” I realized. “Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness...I wasn’t expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your *throat*.” I reveled in the memory before realizing the word’s likely effect on Bella. I turned my eyes her way.

When I looked at her, she dropped her chin, covered her throat with her hands and said, “Okay, then, no throat exposure.” Her silly expression, along with the idea that her little hands could prevent me from doing *anything* I chose to do, made me laugh in spite of

myself.

“No, really,” I told her, “it was more the surprise than anything else.”

I sought to prove it to myself. I reached out and placed my free hand on the smooth, ivory skin of her neck. I could feel her racing heart and the blood pumping beneath her skin. Absolutely enticing. The burn that had been with me all day intensified sharply. I held myself still and waited for it to subside.

“You see? Perfectly fine.”

Bella seemed to react as strongly to my touch as I had to hers. Her heartbeat quickened markedly and the rush of blood to her pale face turned her skin a soft pink color.

“The blush on your cheeks is lovely,” I murmured, almost to myself. I would allow myself to touch her heated skin. I was testing my control, after all.

I loosened my left hand from her grip and stroked her cheekbone gently before molding both hands to the heart shape of her face. *The warmth!* Electricity flowed through my palms with a soft buzz. *Heavenly.* The welling of joy inside me made it easy to ignore the fire clawing my throat. Bella’s heartbeat was so compelling, so enticing, that I wanted to be nearer to it.

“Be still,” I warned, as I drew my face closer to hers. She became as motionless as a human could be. I examined her eyes for any sign of fear, then laid my right cheek at the base of her throat. Pressing my face against her flushed skin was as profoundly pleasurable as listening to the rush of her blood beneath it.

My craving for Bella’s blood had not lessened, but I was experiencing another kind of desire that was becoming more urgent, nearly rivaling the thirst. If I focused my attention on the new sensations, the burn faded somewhat from my consciousness.

While keeping my cheek at Bella’s throat, I allowed my hands to drop slowly from her face onto her neck, an embrace familiar from the habitual hunting of humans. It had been so long since my hands had touched a human thus that I wasn’t compelled to follow through with my teeth. Instead, I concentrated on the friction of my cold hands against Bella’s soft flesh and the warmth that her skin transferred to mine.

As my hands moved slowly down her neck, a shiver traveled through Bella’s body. It passed into my hands and face and vibrated through me. The excitement of it throttled my breath, but I kept my hands moving, settling them on her shoulders. Then ever so slowly, I trailed my nose across her right collarbone, finally placing my cheek over her galloping heart.

“Ah,” I exhaled heavily, as the sound, heat, and electricity from Bella’s body entered mine. A sense of fullness in my chest radiated through me. Her heart throbbed against me until it felt like my own. I savored my borrowed humanity for ten minutes, fifteen... Gradually, Bella’s frantic heart and ragged breath, as well as my own, slowed to a calm, even rhythm. I let my hands drop and raised my face to look at hers.

“It won’t be so hard again,” I said, knowing this truth in my bones. I had made contact with the part of her most likely to provoke my hunting instinct and it had not. Without a doubt, this had been a dangerous experiment, but something in me had changed today. I knew now that I could never intentionally hurt her.

“Was that very hard for you?” Bella asked, no fear evident in her voice.

“Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be,” I told her. “And you?”

“No, it wasn’t bad...for me.” I smiled at her implication that it had been the opposite, happy that she hadn’t been afraid.

“You know what I mean,” I chastised.

She smiled mysteriously.

“Here.” I placed her hand against my cheek. Her body heat had transferred to me. Maybe she wouldn’t mind touching me there now. “Do you feel how warm it is?”

She didn’t reply, but gazed at my face with a look of what? Longing?

“Don’t move,” she whispered. It was easy to submit to her wishes. I calmly locked my muscles, closed my eyes, and settled into stillness.

Bella leaned slowly toward me, her temperature hotter and her scent sweeter the closer she came. Her careful approach gave me time to adjust to the proximity of the heady fragrance. Her soft hand stroked and cradled my cheek, then her fingertips explored the contours of my closed eyes, down the length of my nose, and finally, around the sensitive curves of my lips. They parted at her touch and I inhaled her scent, tasting her essence at the back of my throat. Taste, touch, and scent prompted an array of physical responses in my body. Incompatible urges competed for precedence, building a confusing tension. Remaining silent and absolutely still allowed me to feel each one while resisting acting on any of them.

Abruptly, Bella withdrew her hands and leaned away from me. I opened my eyes slowly, my head swimming in sensation, my breath uneven.

“I wish...” My voice came out in a whisper; my thoughts were difficult to organize. “I wish you could feel the...complexity...the confusion...I feel. That you could understand.”

I wanted to touch Bella, too. I reached out to smooth her hair from her face, then stroked her cheek once with the back of my hand.

“Tell me,” she implored, her voice husky.

“I don’t think I can. I’ve told you, on the one hand, the hunger—the thirst—that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though, as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can’t empathize completely.” I smiled ruefully.

“But...” I touched my fingertips to the bow of her tantalizing upper lip, then along her plump lower lip. I wanted to press my lips against them. “There are other hungers. Hungers I don’t even understand, that are foreign to me.”

Bella’s breath became rapid and jagged. “I may understand *that* better than you think.” It was then I knew with certainty that Bella felt the same desire for me as I did for her. It was a heady moment.

“I’m not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?”

“For me?” Bella responded. “No, never. Never before this.”

I collected her soft hands and held them between my own. Again, I told her the raw truth. If she wanted to be physical with me, as she seemed to, she needed to know my doubts... and my limitations.

“I don’t know how to be close to you. I don’t know if I can.”

In silent reply, Bella looked into my eyes and leaned slowly toward me. I remained very, very still and watched as she moved her face toward my chest and placed her cheek against my bare skin. Her warmth where my heart should have been and the scent of her hair so near my face were intensely pleasurable.

“This is enough,” she assured me. Whether that was true, or if so, whether it would always be true, were unanswerable questions. But this I *could* do and I would hold onto this

new experience for as long as she would allow. I wrapped my arms around her waist and nestled my face in her hair.

“You’re better at this than you give yourself credit for,” Bella remarked.

“I have human instincts—they may be buried deep, but they’re there.”

And this was another truth I suddenly recognized. Holding Bella was as natural to me as breathing. I couldn’t escape the burning in my throat when I inhaled or the intrusive thoughts of her arteries pulsing with blood, but these troubling reactions were balanced and contained somehow by the delicious electricity that flowed between us wherever we touched, by her softness and warmth, and by the intimate connection I felt with her that I had never felt with anyone before. Love and desire intertwined.

We remained there, my arms holding Bella against me, and we listened to the sound of one another’s breathing until daylight began fading toward twilight. The time of endings. Bella sighed.

I knew what she was thinking. “You have to go,” I said.

“I thought you couldn’t read my mind.”

“It’s getting clearer.” Or at least more predictable over time. I smiled.

It had been a miraculous day! I had shown Bella who—what—I was and she was still here. She seemed to want to be here. The sense of freedom this loosed in me was indescribable. As vampires in a human world, we could be ourselves only at home or far from human civilization. It was a glorious revelation that I could love Bella in this new way *and* be myself with her.

With my newfound liberty, I wanted to share something with Bella, one of the joys of my existence.

“Can I show you something?” I asked her, enthusiasm ringing in my voice.

“Show me what?” She seemed a little suspicious.

“I’ll show you how *I* travel in the forest.” Bella scowled slightly.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be very safe, and we’ll get to your truck much faster.” She couldn’t possibly want to repeat that five-mile hike in the semi-darkness. How could she resist my offer? I seduced her with a smile.

“Will you turn into a bat?” Was she *serious*? The thought of her buying that old myth was hilarious, and I laughed with great amusement. Transfiguration was definitely not one of my talents.

“Like I haven’t heard *that* one before!” I couldn’t contain myself.

“Right, I’m sure you get that all the time,” she said, poking fun. *Humans*. But she was just stalling.

“Come on, little coward, climb on my back.” She hesitated like *she* thought *I* was joking. I stretched my arms toward her and she allowed me to swing her onto my back. I wrapped her arms tightly around my neck and her legs tightly around my waist to secure her to me. The warmth of her torso and limbs encircling me and the pounding of her erratic heartbeat against my back were exciting, and comfortable, and felt natural to me.

“I’m a bit heavier than your average backpack,” Bella apologized.

“Hah!” How she made me laugh! Impulsively, I took her hand and pressed it to my nose and mouth, inhaling deeply. The combination of scent, heat, and electricity was intoxicating, and wonderfully—rather than painfully—stimulating.

“Easier all the time,” I noted, before dashing into the woods at vampiric speed. Running fast was one of my favorite activities. I hoped Bella liked it too.

As I ran, my mind reviewed everything that had happened between us today. Our careful balancing act was over. We had fallen from the razor's edge. Now we could pick ourselves up, examine the landscape, and decide where to go—together.

Our closeness had encouraged me greatly. Though I would love and honor Bella with or without physical contact, I was overjoyed that we could touch each other in some limited way. I did not want to deprive Bella of anything that wasn't absolutely necessary to keep her safe. I aspired to give her all that a human man could give her.

In particular, I had not forgotten the conversation Bella had had with Jessica after our fateful night in Port Angeles. Jessica was *sure* that Bella wanted me to kiss her. At the time, it had seemed highly improbable that Bella could want that, knowing what I was. More importantly, I didn't think I was remotely capable. It would take monumental self control.

After today, however, it did seem possible. I'd just held Bella's palm to my nose and her wrist next to my teeth (!) and it was fine. Better than fine! And I wanted more... I wanted to press my lips to her eyelids...cheekbones...jaw...throat...*and* lips. I wanted to feel her hot breath on my face and her warm, silky skin against mine. The desire was overpowering.

Our journey soon ended. Running back from the meadow, even carrying Bella, was fifty-four times faster than our morning hike. Not that I minded hiking at Bella's pace. Any time spent with her was precious and any excuse to touch her, if only to assist her around obstacles, was a pleasure. She clearly didn't enjoy hiking off trail, though. She probably didn't like hiking on trail much either with her physical awkwardness and faulty sense of balance.

When we reached Bella's truck, I stopped to set her down.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" No reply and no movement was forthcoming.

"Bella?" Surely she hadn't fainted. No, she was still clinging tightly to me.

"I think I need to lie down," she croaked.

"Oh sorry," I said, and released my grip to let her slide off. Again, no response from Bella.

Then finally, she squeaked, "I think I need help."

The run must have done her in. Chuckling, I released her grip around my neck and pulled her into my arms before setting her on some soft ferns.

"How do you feel?" I inquired.

She looked dazed. "Dizzy, I think."

"Put your head between your knees." I'd gotten the remedy from decades of high school gym classes. I sat down beside her while she tried to recover.

"I guess that wasn't the best idea."

Typically, Bella tried to brush off her distress as nothing, a wasted effort in this case. "No, it was very interesting," she said, her head still between her knees.

"Hah! You're as white as a ghost—no, you're as white as *me!*" I was not exaggerating.

"I think I should have closed my eyes."

"Remember that next time."

"Next time!" Her desolate tone tickled me and I laughed out loud.

"Show-off," she accused. She seemed to be recovering.

Sitting beside her, my body still warm from our close contact, my wants caught up

with me. I wanted to distract her from her discomfort; I wanted to give her something from my heart; I wanted to know; and I just plain wanted her...

I leaned my face close to hers, just as she had done so disastrously to me in the meadow. Maybe I could redeem myself.

"Open your eyes, Bella." I felt her heated breath sweep across my face. "I was thinking, while I was running..." How to proceed from here?

"About not hitting the trees, I hope," Bella interrupted.

"Silly Bella, running is second nature to me, it's not something I have to think about," I informed her, amused.

"Show-off," she reiterated.

"No, I was thinking there was something I wanted to try."

There was only one way to know...I took her face in my hands and very slowly, very carefully, moved closer to her, at each moment weighing the strength of my self control. I felt the electric fire in my hands and tasted the sweetness of her breath on my tongue. I inhaled her flowery scent and braced against the searing of my throat. When at last I pressed my cold stone lips gently to hers, the sensation was profound, intense...and extraordinarily pleasurable.

Bella's response was immediate and shocking. Her heart pounded frantically, flooding the capillaries under her skin—and her lips—with blood. It sang to me as it raced and swirled and throbbed. Her hands reached for me, lacing themselves tightly through my hair as she pressed her body into mine with startling force. Her lips parted as she inhaled in jagged gasps and exhaled her delicious breath over my face. I inhaled fire.

It was too much. Abruptly, I froze, locking my muscles—especially my jaw—against a rising tide of conflicting desires: to touch, caress, to pull her body powerfully against me, to kiss her face, her neck, to pierce her transparent skin, to drink...to abandon control and take all that I craved.

I have no idea how I prevented myself from committing the worst kind of atrocity at that moment. Perhaps some part of me never forgot that I held Bella, my beloved. I clutched her face and detached it from mine, calmly, but firmly, shifting her head back a few inches. I held us there in a vice of restraint, trying to avert the dangerous panic that had pained and frightened us both this afternoon. One by one, I mastered my worst impulses.

"Oops," Bella whispered, contrite.

"That's an understatement," I uttered through clenched teeth.

"Should I...?"

Bella tried to move away from me, but I couldn't let her go. Her retreat might also serve as a deadly trigger.

"No, it's tolerable. Wait for a moment, please." I breathed in, breathed out, and struggled to calm myself. Slowly, my muscles uncoiled, the venom slowed, and the intense sensations in my body receded. I smiled and released Bella's face.

"There," I said, triumphant.

"Tolerable?" Bella mocked.

I laughed, reveling in my victory over myself.

"I'm stronger than I thought. It's nice to know."

"I wish I could say the same. I'm sorry."

"You are only *human*, after all," I teased.

"Thanks so much," she replied tightly.

It was time to go. I leaped to my feet, not bothering to slow my movements, and extended my hand to assist Bella. She looked at it for a moment, seeming almost puzzled, then reached to take it. I lifted her to her feet where she swayed slightly, unable to find her equilibrium.

“Are you still faint from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise?” I joked, exuberant with joy. I had imagined a hundred different scenarios for this day with Bella, ranging from an avowal of love, to her violent demise. Today’s events had so far exceeded my expectations that I could not contain myself. Not only was Bella still alive, but she loved me too! And beyond anything I had dreamed was this new possibility of loving Bella in another way, a physical way. I was ecstatic, though I knew the future would be perilous and would require more from me than anything ever had before.

“I can’t be sure, I’m still woozy. I think it’s some of both, though.” I was delighted.

“Maybe you should let me drive,” I said.

“Are you insane?” she retorted.

Bella hated to show weakness. It was an endearing, if frustrating quality. “I can drive better than you on your best day. You have much slower reflexes,” I countered, grinning.

“I’m sure that’s true, but I don’t think my nerves, or my truck, could take it.”

“Some trust, please, Bella.”

“Nope. Not a chance.” How stubborn she was!

She started to walk around me toward the driver’s side of the truck when she lost her balance. I caught her around the waist and boosted her upright.

“Bella,” I said, “I’ve already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive. I’m not about to let you behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can’t even walk straight. Besides, friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” The analogy was too obvious to ignore.

“Drunk?” she questioned with a sideways look.

“You’re intoxicated by my very presence,” I accused, laughing.

Her protest collapsed, but not her resistance. “I can’t argue with that,” she admitted, lifting her keys above her head and releasing them. I snatched them out of the air effortlessly.

“Take it easy—my truck is a senior citizen,” she added.

“Very sensible,” I agreed.

“And are you not affected at all?” She scowled at me. “By my presence?”

Despite her irritation, her insecurity touched me and I felt a rush of tenderness for her. But really, how could she not know? I leaned in and touched my lips to her jaw, then gently swept them across her soft skin from her ear to her chin, back and forth, back and forth. With smug satisfaction, I felt her heart race, watched her lips turn a luscious scarlet, and heard her breath quicken to a pant. A thrilling shiver passed from her body into mine.

“Regardless,” I finally responded, “I have better reflexes.”

And thank heaven, better control. Easier all the time.

I couldn’t stop smiling.