

## 16. THE VISIT

Dawn was on its way when I climbed through Bella's window and sat in her rocking chair. Charlie had just departed on his fishing trip after fiddling under the hood of Bella's truck for a few minutes. He must not have bought her acting job the night before. I chuckled to myself.

Despite my frequent visits to Bella's bedchamber, I had never met the sunrise with her. On this special morning, I could be there when she awoke. Bella was sleeping soundly when I arrived. I listened to the gentle beating of her heart and watched the subtle rise and fall of her chest under the blanket. I was absolutely content. It had been a minor shock returning to her room after a couple of hours away. After all the fresh outdoor air, her concentrated scent burned my throat, but I could tolerate it. The continual exposure to her hair, skin, and breath yesterday had built my tolerance to such a degree that two hours away set me back only a little.

I was thinking a lot about my conversation with Emmett. Though nothing had been solved, I felt better for having gotten some worries off my chest, and I had learned something too. It seems that in the world of desire, vampires and humans had more in common than I might have thought. If it weren't for the possibility of killing Bella in an uncontrollable fit of bloodlust, or by squeezing her to mush in an excess of passion, we might even be physically compatible. Perhaps what I was could satisfy what she needed. Though it was no real consolation, it was good to know. I had to laugh at the absurdity of this situation. For now, I decided to put these concerns aside and just enjoy my time with Bella to the fullest extent possible. The future was unknowable, despite Alice's visions.

Just then, Bella began to stir. She threw her arm over her eyes as if to block the light, then moaned and rolled to her side.

"Oh!" she cried, then sat straight up, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging loose. She was not quite awake.

"Your hair looks like a haystack...but I like it," I said.

"Edward! You stayed!" Bella launched herself off the bed, flew across the room, and landed in my lap. Though she couldn't move fast enough to actually surprise me, such a rambunctious attack would have been disastrous yesterday. I'd had neither the knowledge or the self-confidence to hold myself in check. Today was altogether different. I wanted to press my face into her hair and inhale her scent.

When she realized what she had done, Bella froze and nervously checked my reaction. I just laughed. It felt so good to just laugh.

"Of course," I said, rubbing her back. She laid her head against my shoulder and I got my wish, burying my nose in her hair.

"I was sure it was a dream," she said, referring, I assumed, to our day together.

"You aren't that creative," I joked.

"Charlie!" she squealed, jumping off my lap, only to stand awkwardly in the middle of the room.

"He left an hour ago—after reattaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?"

She didn't answer, just stood there, apparently stalled by indecision.

"You're not usually this confused in the morning." I stretched my arms out to

encourage her to return to my lap.

“I need another human minute,” she confessed.

“I’ll wait.” Bella was manic, her heart racing, her head befuddled, her skin flushed. It was endearing.

She came back a few minutes later, slightly less disheveled, her heart still racing. I reached toward her and she returned to my lap. I held her and rocked, relishing the contact, barely believing it was possible.

“You left?” Bella challenged, noting my clean shirt.

“I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in—what would the neighbors think?” I teased.

She gave me a disgruntled look.

“You were very deeply asleep. I didn’t miss anything.” I smiled to myself. “The talking came earlier.”

“What did you hear?” Bella demanded.

I paused, remembering her words. “You said you loved me.”

She hid her face. “You knew that already.”

“It was nice to hear, just the same.”

“I love you,” she reiterated into my shoulder.

“You are my life now,” I told her, rocking gently back and forth.

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“Breakfast time,” I announced. I was not going to be guilty of starving my love again.

Bella stiffened on my lap, her eyes wide, and slapped her hands over her throat.

*She thinks...I meant...?!* Shocked, I went rigid.

“Kidding!” she hooted. “And you said I couldn’t act!”

“That wasn’t funny,” I groused.

“It was very funny, and you know it.” She looked into my eyes and I gave her a disapproving frown.

“Shall I rephrase? Breakfast time for the human.”

“Oh, okay,” she agreed reluctantly.

I stood up, lifting her by the waist, and slung her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She howled at me, but I held her firmly in place and carried her down the stairs to the kitchen where I flipped her upright and set her in a chair. That’ll teach her to tease the monster!

“What’s for breakfast?” she inquired, as if waiting for service.

The surprise question stumped me. “Er, I’m not sure. What would you like?” I could give it a try...

She grinned.

Got me again! *I must be extraordinarily unguarded*, I thought. *It’s not at all like me.*

“That’s all right, I fend for myself pretty well,” Bella went on. “Watch me hunt.”

I observed the steps she took to prepare herself a bowl of boxed cereal. It was not something I’d had as a kid. The Kellogg brothers invented cold cereal before I was born, but it didn’t become standard American breakfast food until automobiles replaced horses and all that cheap grain had to go somewhere. It still seemed like horse feed to me.

Bella sat down to eat, then interrupted herself. “Can I get you something?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Just eat, Bella.” I could hardly have what I wanted.

I watched her every move. I rarely paid attention to humans eating, but like everything else, it was fascinating to see her do it.

“What’s on the agenda today?” she asked.

I had been toying with an idea and wondered how she’d take it. I hesitated.

“Hmmm... What would you say to meeting my family?”

She swallowed hard.

“Are you afraid now?” I asked, equal parts hope and concern.

“Yes.”

It was not like her to admit it. I was taken aback.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “I’ll protect you.”

“I’m not afraid of *them*,” she corrected. “I’m afraid they won’t... like me. Won’t they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone... like me... home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?”

“Oh, they already know everything. They’d taken bets yesterday, you know, on whether I’d bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alice, I can’t imagine. At any rate, we don’t have secrets in the family. It’s not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alice seeing the future and all that.”

“And Jasper making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don’t forget that.”

“You paid attention.”

“I’ve been known to do that every now and then,” Bella asserted. Then she frowned. “So did Alice see me coming?”

What could I say? I turned to look out the window so she wouldn’t see my reaction. I would not tell her about Alice’s predictions. There was no point.

“Something like that.” I turned back toward her and changed the subject. “Is that any good?” I asked, indicating her bowl. “Honestly, it doesn’t look very appetizing.”

“Well, it’s no irritable grizzly...” Bella quipped.

I scowled, but my mind was already somewhere else. Being here in Charlie’s kitchen reminded me of something that had troubled me more than I liked to admit. When Charlie had pulled into the driveway yesterday, Bella became agitated about my being in the house with her. I could understand why she didn’t want to surprise Charlie with my presence in his kitchen. If he were the suspicious type—which as the Chief of Police, he undoubtedly was—he might think that I was sneaking around to see his daughter and that we were up to no good. I had seen no need to set him off.

But that begged the question of when I should meet him formally. It would be best to introduce myself and put everything aboveboard from the beginning. And though I hated to admit to being possessive, my newly awakened human side wanted Bella to acknowledge me, to let it be known that I was hers and she was mine. I wasn’t sure she’d see it my way, though, and I was preparing to charm her into it. I turned and gave her my most brilliant smile, looked into her eyes, and spoke.

“And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think.”

“He already knows you,” she replied.

“As your boyfriend, I mean.”

“Why?” she challenged, immediately resistant.

“Isn’t that customary?” I smiled sweetly.

“I don’t know.” Bella seemed confused. “That’s not necessary, you know. I don’t expect you to... I mean, you don’t have to pretend for me.”

“I’m not pretending.”

Bella bit her lip and fidgeted, both signs of anxiety. Her resistance made me feel insecure and suspicious—less than admirable human traits—but I couldn’t help myself.

“Are you going to tell Charlie I’m your boyfriend or not?” I asked petulantly, annoyed at her avoidance.

“Is that what you are?” Stalling.

“It’s a loose interpretation of the word ‘boy,’ I’ll admit.” My voice was harsher than I intended.

“I was under the impression that you were something more, actually,” Bella mumbled.

*Oh.* That softened my temper a bit, but she was still avoiding the question. What was she thinking? It was impossible to know.

“Well, I don’t know if we need to give him all the gory details.” I needed to read her eyes, so I reached across the table and lifted her chin. “But he will need some explanation for why I’m around here so much. I don’t want Chief Swan getting a restraining order put on me.”

“Will you be? Will you really be here?” Bella asked.

“As long as you want me.”

“I’ll always want you,” Bella replied. “Forever.”

My heart melted, but an inevitable sadness touched me too. This beautiful, loving girl shouldn’t set her sights on a creature such as me, but I was too selfish to stop her. I moved to her, looked into her eyes, and reached out to stroke her cheek.

“Does that make you sad?” She was perceptive.

I could not explain myself...my doubts, my regrets. I sank into her eyes for a long time. Finally, I decided that I wouldn’t let melancholy ruin this day.

“Are you finished?” I asked, referring to her breakfast.

“Yes,” she said, rising.

“Get dressed—I’ll wait here.”

Bella bounded up the stairs to her bedroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Apparently, I was going to proceed as if I were a legitimate human suitor, rather than a cruel joke of nature. I couldn’t stop myself.

I looked forward to taking Bella home with me. I wanted to share the private side of my life with her and show her off to my family. Alice and Esme would share my happiness, I knew. Carlisle would too, though tempered with legitimate concern for my well-being...and hers.

Just then, Bella appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Okay,” she chirped, “I’m decent.” She descended enthusiastically, but awkwardly, misjudging the last step and stumbling into me. I set her upright, then stepped back to look at her.

I was overcome by the beauty of her long mahogany hair and pale skin set against the deep blue color of my favorite blouse. She took my breath away.

“Wrong again,” I whispered, my lips now at her ear. “You are utterly indecent—no

one should look so tempting, it's not fair."

She misunderstood. "Tempting how? I can change..."

I shook my head and sighed. She had no idea how desirable she was.

"You are *so* absurd." I pressed my lips to her forehead and felt her heart wind up.

*Tempting, yes.* I paused to listen to the beating inside her chest and remembered then that the last thing she'd asked last night was whether I was attracted to her. Perhaps my feelings had not been as obvious as I'd thought.

"Shall I explain how you are tempting me?" I held her close and dragged my fingers gently down her spine, tracing the curve of each vertebra through the soft, clingy fabric of her blouse. My own breath accelerated as my body responded to the pressure of her breasts against my chest, the scent of her hair, the pounding of the blood through her veins, and the delicate geography of her spine. My lips burned with the memory of yesterday's aborted kiss. I looked into her chocolate eyes, then leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, inhaling her heated breath. A jolt of electricity shot through my body and burned fiercely in my groin. I longed to carry her back up the stairs to her bedroom.

Without warning, Bella went slack in my arms.

"Bella?" I exclaimed, as I caught and supported her body. She remained unconscious only briefly.

"You...made...me...faint," she gasped.

I exhaled with relief, but my voice was agitated.

"What am I going to do with you? Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!" She remained limp in my arms, chuckling.

"So much for being good at everything," I lamented.

"That's the problem," she whispered. "You're *too* good. Far, far too good."

*Hmmm...was that it? It was nice to know.* Her physical collapse did concern me, though.

"Do you feel sick?" I inquired, not sure what course to take.

"No—that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all. I don't know what happened. I think I forgot to breathe."

"I can't take you anywhere like this."

"I'm fine," she asserted. "Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, so what's the difference?" Holding her close like this, I couldn't attend to her words. I was wholly distracted by the subtle curves beneath her blue blouse.

"I'm very partial to that color with your skin," I said, my voice gravelly. Bella blushed and averted her eyes.

"Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?" she complained, jolting me from my trance. Funny, that *she* should curb *my* excess passion today.

"And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won't approve of you, correct?"

"That's right."

"You're incredible." Incredibly odd, incredibly funny, incredibly appealing.

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Bella handed over the keys to her truck without resistance. It seems I had won her trust on

our return trip yesterday. It was still a chore to drive the slow, old truck, but I kept my comments to myself.

She was unusually quiet the entire trip—nervous, perhaps. Her eyes grew large as I turned into the dense forest several miles outside of town and proceeded along our circuitous driveway through ancient trees. Our land was natural rainforest, with huge sword and deer ferns covering the ground, along with native salal, salmonberry, and huckleberry bushes. The trees were cedar and Douglas fir, with some spruce and hemlock sprinkled around. Closer to the house, clusters of native vine maples decorated the landscape, leafless now, their red-edged branches creating sculptures in the air.

The house stood in a meadow shaded by six majestic cedar trees. They blocked the sunlight so that uninvited human visitors would not see our sparkling skin even on sunny days. This beautiful house—northwest traditional with three stories, soft white paint, and a large wrap-around porch—was all Esme’s doing, as she enjoyed restoring old houses, remaking them into modern homes. We relied on her architectural and design skills to create a suitable home for us wherever we lived. What you couldn’t see from the front of the house was that the entire back side had been converted to glass and overlooked the forest and river view.

“Wow,” was Bella’s first word in half an hour.

“You like it?”

“It...has a certain charm,” she said, downplaying her reaction. I laughed and gave her ponytail a yank.

“Ready?” I asked as I opened her door.

“Not even a little bit—let’s go.”

I was feeling a sense of ceremony in this classic human occasion, bringing the girlfriend home to meet the parents. It might have happened this way ninety years ago if my human life had continued. Seeing their son enact this rite of passage—at one hundred eight years old—would be a new experience for Carlisle and Esme. Alice had told them we were coming and they were waiting to welcome us.

Bella uncharacteristically fussed with her hair and clothing.

“You look lovely,” I told her, taking her hand as I led her to the front door.

Bella’s eyes grew wide when she stepped into the house. Esme had converted the entire downstairs into a great room with a large staircase on one side. The floor-to-ceiling windows at the back brought in lots of light despite our forest setting. The whole house was decorated in the white-on-beige color scheme Esme favored. It was a very clean look and, along with warm lighting, made us appear less pale.

Captured by the beautiful view, it took a minute for Bella to notice my parents. As I expected, Carlisle and Esme were standing to the side of the foyer on the raised platform where my grand piano sat. They made no move to approach us as we entered. When Bella’s attention returned from the view, I introduced them, though of course everyone already knew who everyone was. This was a ritual ceremony of sorts and my family members were all from more formal eras than the present one.

“Carlisle, Esme, this is Bella.”

“You’re very welcome, Bella,” Carlisle declared. His natural kindness put humans at ease, but because Bella knew what we were, he was careful to move slowly and predictably toward her in case she was frightened. He offered his hand and Bella stepped forward to shake it.

“It’s nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen.”

“Please, call me Carlisle.”

“Carlisle,” Bella echoed and smiled. She was suddenly confident and seemed completely at ease, even when grasping Carlisle’s—to her—ice-cold hand.

Esme smiled and stepped forward, also offering her hand. “It’s very nice to know you,” she said warmly. I could see my mother’s eyes sparkle with delight at the occasion. Bella grasped Esme’s hand, again behaving as if touching ice were the most natural thing in the world. I suppose it was, in a way, given how much I had touched her in the last twenty-four hours.

“Thank you. I’m glad to meet you, too,” Bella responded. It was obvious that she was not addressing Carlisle and Esme as vampires, but as her new boyfriend’s parents. It was such a skewed version of a Norman Rockwell moment that I almost laughed.

*Edward, I’m glad you brought Bella to our home and that she’s so much at ease here. She’ll always be welcome,* Carlisle conveyed silently. I blinked at him and raised one side of my mouth in response.

Esme also shared her elation. *Edward, she’s beautiful. I’m thrilled you’ve found her after all this time. And look at you two together, holding hands. Not to embarrass you, but I’m just so happy for you. For all of us.*

I smiled and dipped my head minutely to thank her.

“Where are Alice and Jasper?” I inquired just before they appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hey, Edward!” Alice bounced down the stairs toward us, stopping short a foot away.

“Hi, Bella!” she enthused, springing forward to kiss Bella’s cheek. I tensed at her quick movement and close proximity to Bella’s throat—it was unnerving—but I knew Alice wasn’t a threat.

Carlisle and Esme, however, were not so placid. They threw disapproving looks at Alice and reprimanded her in their minds. Alice couldn’t hear them, but I knew she had received their messages loud and clear—not that it would do any good. Wisely, my parents remained silent, knowing that to do otherwise might frighten Bella more than Alice had.

As for Bella, she was surprised by Alice’s enthusiasm, but did not seem alarmed. Anyone else surely would have been, but inexplicably, Bella didn’t see us as human predators. She *was* unused to being embraced by semi-strangers, though. Alice already felt that Bella was her close friend, forgetting, as she often did, that others weren’t always caught up to her reality.

“You do smell nice, I never noticed before,” Alice announced unselfconsciously. Bella, now quite self-conscious, blushed scarlet. Carlisle and Esme were aghast. There was just no containing Alice, but that was part of her charm once you got used to it.

True to form, Jasper chose that awkward moment to step closer to the circle. He radiated his soothing energy around us and everyone relaxed. I raised an eyebrow both to acknowledge his effort and to remind him of my warning.

“Hello, Bella,” he said, keeping his distance.

“Hello, Jasper,” she replied with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you all—you have a very beautiful home.”

“Thank you,” Esme responded. “We’re so glad that you came.” Esme was amazed at Bella’s courage, surprised that she dared to enter our house. So few humans had ever

passed through our doors, and nobody ever shook hands with us. We'd never seen Alice kiss a human before, either.

*Edward, Carlisle interrupted my thoughts. I glanced over to acknowledge him. Alice says that we will soon have visitors—nomads. They know we are here and will seek us out. The timing is a little unclear. You may or may not want to tell Bella, but you should be aware.*

I nodded discreetly, hiding my immediate concern. I'd have to keep a close eye on Bella.

"Do you play?" Esme asked Bella. I noticed then her fascination with my piano.

"Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?" she asked Esme.

"No," Esme laughed and looked at me with mild reproof. "Edward didn't tell you he was musical?"

"No." Bella gave me a mock-churlish look. "I should have known, I guess."

Esme raised her eyebrows, a question.

"Edward can do everything, right?" Bella said.

*Yeah, everything except make love to his girlfriend!* Jasper teased silently. I shot a vicious glare at him when Bella looked away.

*That's great, Emmett, just great.* Good thing he's keeping his distance. He might get that fight he wanted.

I returned to the moment when Esme addressed me. "I hope you haven't been showing off—it's rude," she chastised. Just like a mother.

"Just a bit," I told her, laughing.

"He's been too modest, actually," Bella amended.

"Well, play for her," Esme pressed.

"You just said showing off was rude."

"There are exceptions to every rule," Esme replied.

"I'd like to hear you play," Bella added.

"It's settled then." Esme nudged me toward the piano. It was almost as hard to refuse Esme as it was to refuse Bella. They had just ganged up on me, I realized.

I grabbed Bella's hand and pulled her onto the piano bench with me. I didn't want to stop touching her just because my hands would be busy.

To please Esme, I began playing the song I'd written for her. It was a fun piece, with complicated counterpoint melodies, and it kept my fingers moving as fast as the piano could respond.

Alice and Jasper were chuckling at Bella's wide-eyed, loose-jawed expression. Esme chuckled at Bella's reaction too, before herding the family upstairs. They were all gone in a split second, leaving us alone.

I winked at Bella. "Do you like it?"

"You wrote this?"

I nodded. "It's Esme's favorite."

Bella closed her eyes and shook her head in dejection.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm feeling extremely insignificant."

I began weaving the melody to Bella's lullaby through Esme's love song, then bit by bit, dropped Esme's melody until the piece became a simple, soft paean to Bella at rest.

"You inspired this one," I told her.

She remained quiet.

“They like you, you know. Esme especially.”

Bella realized I was speaking only to her and looked around for the others. She hadn't heard them leave. “Where did they go?”

“Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose.”

Bella sighed. “*They* like me. But Rosalie and Emmett...”

She was so concerned about what my family thought of her; it was touching. And Rosalie had already hurt her feelings by not making an appearance. *Damn her pigheadedness!*

“Don't worry about Rosalie,” I soothed. “She'll come around.” I could hope, anyway.

“Emmett?” she asked.

“Well, he thinks *I'm* a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Rosalie.”

“What is it that upsets her?”

I didn't want to have this conversation particularly. No matter what I said, Bella was going to feel badly, through no fault of her own and with no way to resolve the problem. This was a vampire thing—our attitudes were petrified, like our bodies, and very difficult to alter. But I owed Bella some explanation. I sighed.

“Rosalie struggles the most with...with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous.” A lot jealous, in truth.

“*Rosalie* is jealous of *me*?”

“You're human. She wishes she were too.” What I didn't say was that Rose, with her enormous, immutable ego, also resented Bella for turning my head when she never had.

“Oh.” Bella let it drop. “Even Jasper, though...”

“That's really my fault. I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to keep his distance.” *Plus, he vowed to kill you a few weeks ago*, I thought ruefully.

Bella shuddered as if she had heard my thoughts. She *should* be afraid of Jasper... of all of us really, but I still didn't want her to be. Or rather, I didn't want her to *have* to be.

“Esme and Carlisle...?” Bella continued.

“Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Esme wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Carlisle changed me....She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction.” And I am more than happy to indulge her. I smiled at the thought.

“Alice seems very...enthusiastic,” Bella went on.

“Alice has her own way of looking at things,” I said, tightening my jaw. I could almost hear the words in Alice's musical voice...*It doesn't matter if somebody bites Bella, because she'll be changing anyway—if you don't kill her*. Alice could be a little cold in a loving, sisterly sort of way.

“And you're not going to explain that, are you?”

*No. Hell, no! Not now, at least.* I looked at Bella and she looked at me. As much as I wanted to be honest with her, this was something I couldn't talk about. She would just have to understand. I looked away.

“So what was Carlisle telling you before?” Bella changed the subject.

I scowled, surprised. “You noticed that, did you?”

“Of course.” She spoke as if it were obvious.

I didn’t know how she would take this news...run screaming?

“He wanted to tell me some news—he didn’t know if it was something I would share with you.”

“Will you?”

“I have to, because I’m going to be a little...overbearingly protective over the next few days—or weeks—and I wouldn’t want you to think I’m naturally a tyrant,” I explained.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, exactly. Alice just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we’re here, and they’re curious.”

“Visitors?”

“Yes...well, they aren’t like us, of course—in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably won’t come into town at all, but I’m certainly not going to let you out of my sight until they’re gone.” *And not even then, if I have my way...*

Bella shuddered.

“Finally, a rational response! I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all.” Bella looked away. She was examining our living space.

“Not what you expected, is it?” She’d probably envisioned something more gothic. I smiled.

“No.”

“No coffins, no piled skulls in the corner; I don’t even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you,” I teased.

She ignored the jab. “It’s so light...so open.”

“It’s the one place we never have to hide,” I told her, easing her lullaby to its melancholic, irresolvable end. I let the final notes fade to silence, then looked up.

Bella had tears in her eyes. I wondered if she could sense my ambivalence about *our* ending.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Her tears reminded me powerfully of her humanity. Though we were capable of feeling the kind of love and joy and pain that made humans cry, that release was no longer possible for us. In that moment, when my music moved my love to tears, I wanted to share that part of her humanity. Impulsively, I touched a tear in the corner of her eye and it transferred itself to my index finger. I examined it for a second, then touched it to my tongue. Slightly salty, slightly floral, entirely lovely. Not at all connected to my thirst, I was pleased to find. Bella was regarding me curiously. I let myself fall into the depths of her milk chocolate eyes. They were soft with tenderness—I basked for a long while.

Finally I smiled, breaking the spell.

“Do you want to see the rest of the house?”

“No coffins?” she queried, not entirely joking.

“No coffins.”

I led Bella up Esme’s grand staircase to the second floor and down the long hallway, identifying the rooms along the way.

“Rosalie and Emmett’s room...Carlisle’s office...Alice’s room...”

Bella halted in her tracks at the end of the hall where Carlisle had hung an odd, but

beloved artifact of his history. The large wooden cross had followed our family all over the continent and, before that, traveled with Carlisle across Europe.

“You can laugh,” I told Bella. “It *is* sort of ironic.”

She raised her hand toward it reverently, recognizing, perhaps, the heavy weight of its history. She extended a finger as if to touch it, but stopped before she did.

“It must be very old,” she speculated.

Its history no longer surprised me. “Early sixteen–thirties, more or less.”

She stared at me, gaping. “Why do you keep this here?”

“Nostalgia. It belonged to Carlisle’s father.”

“He collected antiques?” she guessed, dubious.

“No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached.”

Bella tried to cover her shock, but I saw it before she turned her head and rested her eyes again upon the cross. Stunned into silence, she stood inert for so long that I inquired, “Are you all right?”

“How old is Carlisle?” Bella finally spoke, her voice shaky.

I had decided the best way to deal with these disturbing revelations was head on. I could only hope that she wouldn’t be scared off.

“He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty–second birthday.” I watched Bella’s expression, but she just looked curious. “Carlisle was born in London, in the sixteen–forties, he believes. Time wasn’t marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell’s rule, though.”

Bella still seemed calm and curious, so I went on.

“He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves...and vampires.”

Bella froze at the word.

“They burned a lot of innocent people—of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

“When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Carlisle was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.”

“The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course”—the image was silly to me, but not funny—“and waited where Carlisle had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged.”

This part of the story always troubled me, but I went on.

“He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Carlisle heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Carlisle—he was twenty–three and very fast—was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Carlisle thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Carlisle first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Carlisle bleeding in the

street.”

I paused to carefully compose my next sentences, telling the story, but withholding a few details.

“Carlisle knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned—anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Carlisle acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It’s a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.”

“It was over then, and he realized what he had become.”

Bella was moved or stunned or catatonic. It was hard to tell.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, thinking of caffeine and sugar and wondering whether we had any in the kitchen.

“I’m fine,” Bella said. Of course. Coming from her, those words didn’t mean much to me anymore. Then I saw the cross-examination she was biting her lip to contain and I smiled.

“I expect you have a few more questions for me.”

“A few.” Curiosity was preferable to catatonia, so I was willing to accommodate her. I grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward Carlisle’s office.

“Come on, then. I’ll show you.”