

18. THE GAME

“So what happens now?” Bella inquired.

“We take you and your truck home, though at the moment, I’m quite content going nowhere at all.” I bent my head to Bella’s hair and inhaled her lovely floral scent.

“Mmmm...”

Still sitting on my lap, Bella turned her face toward mine and looked into my eyes. No doubt they were “dazzling,” if feeling blissful had anything to do with it.

“So...,” she started, then lost her train of thought.

“Yes?” I prompted. Bella’s deep eyes widened and her heartbeat quickened. I pulled her hair back from her right ear and touched my lips to her jaw just below it.

“... Emmett will be there. Will Rosalie and Esme come too?”

“Rosalie will play. Esme will come if Carlisle can get away from work.” I spoke against Bella’s warm skin, sliding my lips down her jaw to her chin. She began to pant invitingly. It was profoundly satisfying—and more than a little exciting—to observe the effect of my touch on the one I loved. I brushed my lips across the bow of her lower lip and her left arm rose toward my neck. I caught it in mid-air and held it to my waist. Her other arm was trapped against my body. If I could keep her still, my predatory instinct was less likely to be triggered, it seemed.

Intimate contact with Bella was dangerous territory, I knew, but after more than twenty-four hours together, I had become less sensitive to the scent of her blood. I felt strong enough to experiment and Bella seemed willing.

I placed my left hand at the back of her waist and stretched my fingers to rest on the curve of her left hip bone. I squeezed her waist gently and felt her soft flesh give beneath the pressure. She began gulping air.

“Breathe slowly, Bella, slowly Bella, slowly,” I said softly and rhythmically, like a mantra, my lips moving down the side of her throat and across her left collar bone. I didn’t want her to faint again, or hyperventilate, but I loved the way her flushed skin pulsed against my lips. The burn in my throat was fierce, breathing as I was against her skin, but it was offset by intense new pleasures.

I stroked her ribs with my fingertips, feeling each ridge down the left side of her back, across her waist, and up the right side. She shuddered, then, as I ran my middle finger down her spine from her neck to her waist.

“Slowly, Bella, slowly,” I whispered, my cool hand against the back of her neck; my lips touching the hollow at the front.

I drew my lips up her neck and along her jawline before pressing them gently against hers, which parted softly in response. I inhaled her sweet breath, then moved slightly away and became still to let my excitement subside. Bella’s heart was knocking wildly inside her chest, but she froze when I did and gradually her panting eased. When it had, I brushed my lower lip slowly across her upper lip, then pressed my lips to hers once more. Her breathing quickened again. I became still, my lips touching hers, inhaling her breath, slowly in, slowly out. When her panting subsided, I leaned back and gazed at her face. Flushed and beautiful, she opened her eyes. I held her against my chest and stroked her hair. Her heartbeat gradually returned to somewhere near normal.

“Are you all right?” I murmured into her hair.

“Yes, I... I think so,” she replied in a raspy voice. “Your breath is so...sweet...so

intoxicating.”

As is the scent of your blood. Alice’s teasing had put evil thoughts in my head again. If Bella’s fragrance was any indication, and I was sure that it was, her flavor would be delicious beyond anything I could imagine. Sadly, we weren’t made to sample blood—once we’d tasted it, the frenzy began. I was unable to imagine being strong enough to stop at that point. But of course, it could be done—Carlisle had done it four times.

It occurred to me that forty-eight hours ago, I could not have indulged these forbidden thoughts without instigating a crisis. Even now, my desiccated, flaming throat was telling me it was time to remove myself from temptation. I had learned something new, though...with Bella contained on my lap, unable to make any sudden movements, my hunting instinct was not engaged. Perhaps it was not a necessary condition, but it was someplace to start.

“Perhaps we should go,” I said. My words rumbled in my chest.

“Mmm hmm,” Bella agreed.

I cradled her in my arms and stood up. She rested her face on my chest and pressed her hand against my silent heart. I held her close for a few moments, then gently kissed her forehead and set her on her feet. When her legs wobbled, I wrapped my arm around her waist and we walked side-by-side through the hallway and down the staircase.

According to Alice, we had several hours before the thunderstorm would arrive. It started drizzling in Forks just as I turned Bella’s truck onto her street. I’d left my thoughts back in my bedroom or I would have caught it sooner.

Billy and Jacob Black were at Charlie’s door, their car parked in the driveway. They were not speaking aloud, but I caught Billy’s intention.

“Damn interfering aborigines,” I muttered, too softly for Bella to hear.

Billy was wondering how he could alert Charlie to the dangerous nature of the Cullen clan, and of me in particular, without breaking the treaty or incurring Charlie’s wrath. He had angered Charlie once before by disparaging our family.

“This is crossing the line.” I was very angry, but controlled.

“He came to warn Charlie?” Bella asked.

I nodded. Billy and I stared each other down as I pulled the truck to the curb. I knew Charlie had great respect for my father and I was hoping that that would give me some positive currency with Charlie as well. The last thing I needed, besides meddling Quileutes, was the Chief of Police watching my every move.

“Let me deal with this,” Bella offered, no doubt sensing my fury.

I considered it for a second before assenting. “That’s probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea.” I didn’t want to lose my temper in my recently heightened emotional state. And I didn’t want to give them an excuse to break the treaty.

Bella objected. “Jacob is not that much younger than I am.”

“Oh, I know.” *Psychological warfare.* I grinned. I could hear Jacob’s thoughts too and they were all about Bella. I didn’t appreciate his excessive interest, or as I liked to think of it, his “adolescent crush.” He did have the decency to be embarrassed by his father’s behavior, though.

Bella sighed.

“Get them inside so I can leave. I’ll be back around dusk.”

“Do you want my truck?”

I rolled my eyes. “I could *walk* home faster than this truck moves.”

“You don’t have to leave.” Bella sounded forlorn. I didn’t want her to feel sad, but knowing she would miss me lifted my spirits. I smiled.

“Actually, I do. After you get rid of them”—I indicated the unwelcome guests—“you still have to prepare Charlie to meet your new boyfriend.” I smiled with glee.

“Thanks a lot,” Bella groaned.

I didn’t let her lack of enthusiasm dampen mine. This was a human experience I’d never had and for Bella to declare me to her father...well...I became exuberant thinking about it. I flashed her my sideways smile—the lopsided grin that always seemed to cheer her up.

“I’ll be back soon,” I assured her.

I looked to see if Billy was still staring at us. He was, so with impish delight, I bent my lips to Bella’s throat and kissed her just under her jaw line. I might have kissed her there if Billy hadn’t been watching, but it was even more satisfying that he was. My lovely Bella’s heart leaped and, once again, I marveled at the magic of love and the miracle of desire. I saw her glance toward the porch and my eyes followed hers. The shock on Billy’s face was highly amusing, as was the death grip he held on the armrests of his wheelchair.

“*Soon*,” Bella reiterated, as she exited the truck and rushed through the drizzle to the porch.

“Hey, Billy. Hi, Jacob. Charlie’s gone for the day—I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” Bella sounded excessively cheerful.

“Not long,” Billy replied. “I just wanted to bring this up.” He indicated a bag in his lap.

“Thanks. Why don’t you come in for a minute and dry off?” Bella suggested. She motioned for them to precede her through the front door, then turned and met my eyes. I wished her luck, but knew she would handle the situation better than me. I had no patience for Billy’s meddling or Jacob’s pining. Jacob, especially, had a noisy mind. He had interrogated Bella about me the last time he was here, and he was disappointed to see me with her again.

Never mind. You’ve got other things to do, I reminded myself. As soon as the front door closed behind Bella, I started running for home.

When I arrived, Emmett was sitting in front of the big, flat-screen television, watching Sunday sports.

“Hey, Bro,” he greeted me. “You’re coming to play, right?”

“Yes. May I borrow your Jeep to drive Bella to the end of the road?”

“Sure, no problem. The keys are in it. I guess if Bella is coming to the game, her visit today didn’t freak her out too much.”

“She is remarkably resilient. How’s Rosalie?”

Ah, same-same. There’s definitely more to it than being exposed. It seems personal almost, but I don’t see what Bella’s ever done to her.

“Change is hard.”

Yeah, I guess. Later. He turned back to his game.

Alice poked her head around the partial living room wall to greet me. She was at the computer, playing with a new fashion design program Esme had bought for her.

“Hi Edward! It was fun having Bella here today,” she chirped. “I’m designing some new clothes for her. She really needs help with her wardrobe.”

“Okay, Alice, but you might want to break it to her slowly.”

Jasper stepped out from behind Alice. “Are you headed upstairs?”

“Yes, I need to make some preparations for the ride up the mountain.”

“Mind if I join you for a bit?”

“No, not at all.”

I led the way upstairs and Jasper followed me to my room. “Thanks for giving Bella space, Jasper.”

Sure. It’s for the best, anyway. I just don’t understand how you do it. I could have sworn she was a goner when we came to your room.

“Was Alice worried? Is that why you two showed up when you did?” I asked, alarmed. That would certainly be cause for concern.

Surprisingly, no. She got a kick out of seeing you two together, though. But seriously, Edward, do you have any advice for me?

“I don’t know, Jasper. Mine is something of a special case because I am highly motivated to keep Bella safe. It’s not easy, but it gets easier the more I’m around her and, especially, the more *continuously* I’m around her. A certain amount of desensitization occurs. But everybody’s different, as you know. I’m not convinced that pushing yourself to your limit is the right approach for you. None of us have had anything like your history and who’s to say that that hasn’t altered your makeup to a certain degree? I hate to see you push yourself so hard. It’s just not necessary.”

Perhaps. I keep thinking there’s a trick or something that I’m missing.

“Not that I know of. The early days are challenging. I’ve gotten more confident with time. You know, it took Carlisle two hundred years to develop the tolerance he has now and he’s barely even tasted human blood. He was also motivated—by his respect for humanity and his dedication to medicine.” I thought about that point for a second and came to a new conclusion.

“Perhaps if there is a ‘trick,’ it’s that. You have to have a good reason for trying at all. Having a conscience isn’t enough. That’s a negative incentive—avoiding depression and self-loathing. You also need a positive incentive, I think. Maybe for you, it’s Alice.”

Jasper was standing rigidly upright, a habit he’d developed as a soldier. He had cupped his chin in his hand as he contemplated my words. He looked like a standing version of Rodin’s “The Thinker.” We all resembled statues in our motionless state—we made good artists’ models.

That makes a certain amount of sense, Jasper eventually responded. I hate having to hunt more than the rest of you, though. It galls me to be so weak.

“I understand how you feel, Jasper. I got a dose of that after meeting Bella. None of us cares, though, except you. Maybe your first effort should be to conquer your own head. I’m not convinced that pushing the limits of your tolerance will make you more tolerant. It might just be a question of time. If that’s true, then there’s no point in suffering so much. It’s not worth it.”

Well, you’ve given me a lot to think about. I’ll consider your suggestions.

“Altering one’s natural tendencies is hard, no doubt about it.”

Jasper stared at my face for a few seconds, thinking about how much I was changing, then gave me a curt soldier’s nod and disappeared. I hoped the talk would help. I

just wanted him to stay fed. The less thirsty he was, the less of a danger he would pose to Bella. I was dangerous enough all by myself.

I changed my clothes in preparation for the game, then went looking for Esme. I knew my mother wanted to see me—I could hear her eager thoughts if I listened. I made a point of seeking her out when I was home, as I had been spending most of my time away lately. Esme had dreamed of this day for decades, when I would bring the love of my life home to meet her. I also knew she was concerned about my future, given that my love happened to be human.

I headed to her office where she sat sketching. In the same instant she saw me, her arms were around me in a bear hug, warm and heartfelt.

“Oh Edward, I’m so happy for you! Bella’s a lovely girl! What did she think of us? She was so brave to visit.”

“You’d have to know Bella to understand this, Mom, but she wasn’t afraid of the family...she was afraid the family might not like her.” Esme stepped back and looked at my face in disbelief.

“She wasn’t afraid to visit the Cullen home?”

“No, not at all, but she was quite nervous about making a good impression.”

Esme laughed her melodious laugh.

“She did have a worried moment when Alice and Jasper came upstairs to eat her.” I laughed, remembering the shocked look on Bella’s face.

“Edward, you kids shouldn’t tease her that way! She won’t want to come back!”

“I think it was a one-time joke. She won’t fall for it again, I’m sure. She’s quick that way.” I laughed once more, then added, “She’s coming to the baseball game.”

“Oh, good,” Esme enthused. “I’ll have a chance to get to know her a little better. Did you take her home already?”

“Yes, I’m going to formally introduce myself to her father when I pick her up.”

Esme switched to “privacy mode.” *So, I take it that Bella’s father doesn’t know you’ve been spending nights in his home.*

“No. Actually, Bella didn’t even know until yesterday.”

Don’t you think that’s a little risky?

“There’s not much risk of Charlie seeing me when I shouldn’t be seen, but I don’t like courting Bella behind the police chief’s back. That’s the point of introducing myself. I’m hoping he’ll allow me legitimate entry to his home after school and in the evenings. He’s quite protective of Bella. We have that in common.”

Well, don’t be a pest. And I hope you’ll bring Bella over here sometimes too. Let me know if you plan to and we’ll make sure to have food on hand for her.

“Thank you. It might be a while. Rosalie’s not happy about it, and I don’t want her to hurt Bella’s feelings.”

We’ll work on Rose. Her distress is understandable. Esme pondered for a moment. *You know, Edward, I’m very proud of you. You are becoming so like your father.*

“I’m afraid I’ll never be as selfless as Carlisle. It’s dangerous for Bella to be with me. I know I should leave her to live her human life in peace, but I can’t help myself. I love her.”

I know, son. And it’s obvious that she loves you too. As long as you’re honest with her and she accepts you, then perhaps it’s not up to you alone to decide. I don’t believe that you will hurt Bella—you’re much too good for that.

“I can’t be one hundred percent sure that I won’t. Even if I can control my thirst, I could hurt her so easily just by accident. I have to concentrate all the time to be gentle enough. On top of that, do you know how many ways there are for a human to die? It’s mind boggling.”

Do you think you might change her? she asked cautiously.

“No! I won’t steal her life and condemn her to our soulless existence!” I snapped, then was instantly remorseful at my flare of temper. But why did everyone assume that was an acceptable solution?

Well, Edward, I have faith in you. And whatever you decide to do, we’ll stand by you.

“I know, Mom, thank you. I’d better go. I’ve got a Chief of Police to charm.” I smiled to indicate there were no hard feelings.

“And I’m sure that you will.” I left her to her architecture and design books and headed downstairs. Time to face Rosalie.

“See you all at the game.” I tossed the words out as I exited for the garage, where Rosalie would be working off some steam. She knew it was me and didn’t bother removing her head from under the hood of her car as I entered.

“Hey, Rose,” I greeted her.

Bite me.

I proceeded with my speech, undeterred by her anger. “Rosalie, I understand that you don’t like Bella with me and I can accept that. What I can’t accept, however, is your actively being cruel to her or frightening her. She’s going to be around here sometimes and if you must be rude, I’m asking, as a favor to me, that you at least keep your mean words, your hisses and growls, and your terrifying glares to yourself. Please. I’m not even asking that you be actively nice, as that appears to be out of the question. I’ve made a point of not telling anyone *why* you dislike her so much, and I promise to keep that information to myself if you will try to comply with my request.”

She snarled from under the hood, but didn’t hurl any words—or wrenches—at me. I could hear her mind churning in the background, but I tried to block it out.

“Bella will be at the baseball game.” Rosalie’s lack of response was the best I could hope for. If she were still raging as she had been, she couldn’t have kept her mouth (or her mind) quiet. To be sure, her mind wasn’t silent. *...not even pretty...won’t keep me away...won’t end well...*

I left it at that. As I backed the Jeep out of the garage, I reversed a little too aggressively, spinning the tires. Her ungenerous thoughts followed me down the drive as I left.

The rain was pelting down when I pulled up outside Charlie’s house. Emmett’s Jeep was an impressive vehicle, with oversized tires, fog lights, light guards, and a roll bar. I drove it rarely, as I preferred speed to climbing, but it would get Bella and I halfway up to the baseball clearing and save her the long ride on my back.

I caught Charlie’s voice inside the house, “You must really like this guy.” So she *had* told Charlie about me. *Good.*

I turned off the ignition.

As usual, though I could hear him speaking, it was difficult to read Charlie's mind. I couldn't get many words, but it felt like his hackles were up. Bella had surprised him with her news. Charlie was both suspicious and protective, but he seemed like a fair man. I thought he'd give me a chance.

I rang the doorbell, and he was right there waiting for me. He opened the door, using his body to block the doorway. I recognized the posturing of an "alpha" male meant to intimidate an upstart youngster, but I maintained a respectful smile. It was time for me to put away the century-old, human predator that I was, and play the teenage suitor. It was about time I got the chance!

"Come on in, Edward." Charlie got my name right the first time. Bella didn't realize he'd been tormenting her for his own amusement when he kept referring to me as "Edwin." It was funny. I liked him already.

"Thanks, Chief Swan."

"Go ahead and call me Charlie. Here, I'll take your jacket."

"Thanks, sir."

"Have a seat there, Edward." He meant for me to sit on the couch, but I took the only chair instead, so he couldn't face Bella and me together like an interrogator. Now Bella had to sit beside him on the couch, of course. She scowled at me and I winked back.

"So I hear you're getting my girl to watch baseball."

"Yes, sir, that's the plan."

"Well, more power to you, I guess." Charlie laughed at a remembered image of Bella, the one summer she'd tried to play softball. It was funny, I had to admit, and I grinned.

Bella was annoyed. "Okay, enough humor at my expense. Let's go." Charlie and I got up to follow her to the front door.

"Not too late, Bell."

"Don't worry, Charlie, I'll have her home early," I told him.

"You take care of my girl, all right?"

It's what I lived for, actually. Bella, who hated being taken care of, groaned in protest.

"She'll be safe with me, I promise, sir." I meant it. Bella made us both laugh again by stomping out.

When Charlie spotted Emmett's Jeep parked in front of the house, he whistled, either in appreciation or uneasiness, I wasn't sure which. He was having second thoughts about letting Bella go, but he said only, "Wear your seat belts." Charlie didn't know me yet, but I would be looking out for Bella's welfare at least as carefully as he would have himself.

Bella had no hope of climbing into the Jeep without damaging herself, so I hoisted her in with one hand, hiding the maneuver from Charlie with my body.

"What's all this?" Bella was fumbling with the safety harness when I got behind the wheel.

"It's an off-roading harness."

"Uh-oh," she replied.

She wasn't going to figure out the buckles any time soon, so I leaned over to help. I became distracted by the long line of her neck and the way her open-necked shirt exposed her jutting collarbones. Except for lifting her into the truck, I hadn't touched Bella for

sixty-seven-and-a-quarter minutes and I couldn't resist. It was raining too hard for Charlie's eyes to see our movements inside the Jeep. So when I ran my fingers along her jawline, down her throat, and across her collarbones, each side separately, I was the only one who knew her heart was galloping and her breath was shallow and fast.

I leaned close to taste her enticing breath and, suddenly, my throat blazed with fire. I could hear her blood rushing beneath her rosy skin, and I felt a jolt of electricity surge through me and settle in my groin. *Ah!* The burning above, the tingling heat below—it proved almost overwhelming. I withdrew my hands and clutched the steering wheel to get a grip on myself. I *must* be more cautious.

A minute later, I turned the key and started the engine. Charlie closed the front door, and Bella broke the silence.

"This is a...um...*big* Jeep you have."

The better to haul you away and ravish you, my dear, I thought, feeling like the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood."

"It's Emmett's. I didn't think you'd want to run the whole way."

"Where do you keep this thing?"

"We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage."

"Aren't you going to put on your seat belt?" Bella inquired.

I raised both eyebrows at her, surprised she still had to ask such questions.

Then her mind caught up with my previous comment.

"Run the *whole* way? As in, we're still going to run part of the way?" Her voice became shrill with stress.

"You're not going to run." I smiled, but I knew this was going to be a problem.

"*I'm* going to be sick."

"Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine."

She was biting her lip now, a sign of anxiety. I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. The fragrance of her damp hair seared my throat and sent another jolt of electricity through my body.

"Ooohhhh..." A low, guttural moan escaped me.

Bella looked at me, a question on her face.

"You smell so good in the rain," I gasped.

"In a good way or in a bad way?" she asked warily.

"Both, always both." I exhaled hard to release some of the tension. The short separation from her followed by the closeness of the vehicle was proving a challenge. I needed to focus on something else.

Fortunately, four-wheeling provided a distraction. I headed toward the mountains and turned onto the abandoned logging road that would take us upward for several miles. The road, barely more than a trail, really, was quite rough. I had to drive slowly to avoid bouncing Bella's brain against her skull.

When we reached the end of the road deep in the ancient forest, the rain had slowed to a drizzle. Alice was right, of course, that the sky was clear higher up the mountain. Bella's face registered distress.

"Sorry, Bella, we have to go on foot from here."

"You know what? I'll just wait here." She seemed not to be kidding.

"What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning."

"I haven't forgotten the last time yet."

I jumped from the truck, opened her door, and started unbuckling the harness. I couldn't let my impulsive trip through the forest the previous day ruin her for running with me forever.

"I'll get those, you go on ahead," she offered.

"Hmmm... it seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory." *When all else fails, try the magical monster cure.* I lifted her out of the Jeep and shut the door.

"Tamper with my memory?" Bella looked at me, half-believing.

"Something like that."

I leaned over her with my hands on the Jeep—one on either side of her head—and stared into her eyes. As I moved closer, she pressed her body flatter against the vehicle.

When my face was only inches from hers, I said softly, "Now what exactly are you worrying about?"

"Well, um, hitting a tree... and... dying. And then getting sick," she stuttered.

I suppressed my smile and leaned forward to touch my lips to the base of her throat.

"Are you still worried now?" I murmured, my lips moving against her skin.

"Yes." She struggled to focus. "About hitting trees and getting sick." Her voice was breathy.

I brushed my nose up her throat and onto her chin, exhaling as I went.

"And now?" I asked, speaking the words against her jaw.

"Trees," she panted. "Motion sickness."

I raised my face and pressed my lips against her eyelids, one at a time.

"Bella, you don't really think I would hit a tree, do you?"

"No, but *I* might." She was losing her will to argue.

I trailed kisses slowly down her cheek, stopping at the corner of her mouth.

"Would I let a tree hurt you?" My lips brushed her lower lip. I felt her body tremble and resisted the urge to press myself against her from stem to stern.

"No," she whispered, emptied of words.

"You see," I said with my lips touching hers, "there's nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

"No." She sighed in surrender.

With a sharp intake of breath, I took her face between my hands and kissed her with more passion than was absolutely safe. I didn't want to stop. And in my aroused state, I neglected to heed the vow I'd made less than an hour before.

Bella responded eagerly to my kiss, twining her hands through my hair, pulling me toward her, and pressing her entire body into mine, point to point to point. Her lips parted, releasing her breath across my face, and I felt a powerful urge to devour her mouth, her jaw, her throat...

In a split second of lucidity, I battled for self-control, uncertain which side of my nature would win. But somehow, from somewhere, I summoned enough strength to preempt disaster. I grasped her hands and released their grip on me, then lurched backward, gasping.

"Damn it, Bella! You'll be the death of me, I swear you will." *Because I will die if I kill you.*

"You're indestructible," Bella gulped.

"I might have believed that before I met *you*. Now let's get out of here before I do something really stupid." I was so angry at myself, I couldn't contain a snarl.

I flipped Bella onto my back, and she wrapped her arms and legs around me. “Don’t forget to close your eyes,” I prompted, silently blaming motion sickness for the current crisis.

Bella laid her face against my hair. Though I thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of her body pressed against my back, her limbs encircling me, I blocked my reaction to it and started running. It was a good way to re-channel the excitement in my body and burn off some of my self-disgust.

We reached the clearing after a short time, and I stopped to let Bella down. She didn’t move a muscle, so I reached over my shoulder and stroked her hair.

“It’s over, Bella.”

She raised her head and abruptly let go with her arms, but not her legs, which caused her to slide down my body like a fireman on a pole before her rear end smacked into the mud.

“Oh!” she grunted, wide-eyed astonishment on her face.

For a moment, my mind couldn’t grasp that Bella had executed such a silly maneuver. The fall was almost a parody of grace, except for Bella’s expression of surprise upon landing. My previous displeasure evaporated, and I burst into laughter.

Bella rose stiffly and slapped ineffectually at the mud and debris on her jacket. With a withering glare in my direction, she stomped off into the forest.

I tried to stifle my merriment before I leapt to her side. “Where are you going, Bella?”

“To watch a baseball game. You don’t seem to be interested in playing anymore, but I’m sure the others will have fun without you.”

“You’re going the wrong way.”

She reversed direction and resumed marching until I grabbed her around the waist.

“Don’t be mad, I couldn’t help myself. You should have seen your face.”

“Oh, you’re the only one who’s allowed to get mad?”

“I wasn’t mad at you.”

“Bella, you’ll be the death of me’?” she mimicked.

“*That* was simply a statement of fact.”

She tried to pull away in frustration, but I couldn’t let her go.

“You were mad,” she accused.

“Yes.”

“But you just said—”

“That I wasn’t mad at *you*. Can’t you see that, Bella? Don’t you understand?” I was now anxious that she should.

“See what?”

“I’m never angry with you—how could I be? Brave, trusting...warm as you are.”

“Then why?” She spoke softly, as if she thought it was *valid* for me to be angry with her.

I cupped her face and looked into her eyes.

“I infuriate myself, the way I can’t seem to keep from putting you in danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to—”

Bella covered my mouth with her fragrant hand. “Don’t.”

Her eyes reflected pain at my words. I slid her hand to my cheek and savored its

warmth for a moment, then said, “I love you. It’s a poor excuse for what I’m doing, but it’s still true. Now, please try to behave yourself.”

I leaned forward slowly to signal my intention before pressing my lips to hers.
Mmmm.

Bella sighed. “You promised Chief Swan that you would have me home early, remember? We’d better get going.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, ignoring the pull of longing I still felt for her. I took her hand and led her through some ferns, under some hanging moss, and around a large hemlock tree. We were there.

Our baseball field was an idyllic setting in the Olympic rainforest, a large, former clear-cut, deforested by a lumber company back when replanting wasn’t considered necessary. The colossal, old-growth trees had tied up most of the soil’s nutrients in their wood, bark, and leaves, so new trees had never taken hold. The open space was roughly twice the size of Chicago’s old Wrigley Field, which is what we required to make the game any fun. It let us hit the ball hard and get a decent run going between bases.

From the edge of the clearing, I could see Esme, Emmett, and Rosalie sitting on a granite outcropping some distance away. Rosalie growled when she spied us.

Damn him, he brought the human! You’d think she was part of our family or something. She stood and picked up a bat, then turned her back on us.

Emmett watched her regretfully before he and Esme came toward third base to greet us. *Sorry, Edward, I tried. You know how stubborn she is.*

I nodded once. I wouldn’t fight with Rose as long as she maintained her distance from Bella and kept her nasty comments to herself.

“Was that you we heard, Edward?” Esme called as she approached.

“It sounded like a bear choking,” Emmett said in reference to my raucous laughter.

“That was him,” Bella acknowledged.

“Bella was being unintentionally funny.” I flashed her a sideways grin. She responded with a twisted expression, and all but stuck out her tongue at me.

Carlisle had just finished marking the bases when Alice left Jasper at home plate and came twirling toward us.

“It’s time,” she called, cocking her head when she reached us. On cue, thunder boomed overhead.

Bella flinched and gazed at Alice in surprise.

“Eerie, isn’t it?” Emmett winked at Bella.

“Let’s go,” Alice said, grabbing Emmett’s hand. The two raced away, Alice to her position on the pitcher’s mound and Emmett veering off toward home plate.

“Are you ready for some ball?” I asked Bella, unable to contain my excitement.

“Go team!” she offered.

I chuckled at her insincerity, then flipped her ponytail, and took off for left field. Carlisle moved to a shallow right-field position. He’d cover the infield and the bases while I defended the outfield.

“Shall we go down?” Esme said to Bella, then explained her preference for refereeing the games in order to moderate our bad sportsmanship.

Bella laughed. “You sound like my mom.”

“Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I never could get over my mothering instincts—did Edward tell you I had lost a child?”

I hadn't mentioned that. I'd said only that Esme had "fallen" off a cliff. Though I knew my family members' histories in detail, some of that information came directly from their thoughts, and it wasn't my place to divulge it. It pleased me no end that Esme, who'd already begun to think of Bella like a potential third daughter, was freely sharing her story.

None of us had happy human endings (or happy vampire beginnings, depending on how you looked at it). As far as I knew, there was no non-traumatic way to become a vampire. Everything you knew was ripped from you in unfathomable agony, and you were thrust against your will into an incomprehensible nightmare existence from which there was no easy escape.

The Cullen's stories differed from those of other vampires, though. Carlisle's respect for human life meant he would not change a person unless they were already dying. My father had rescued each of his progeny from human death—I through illness; Esme, Rosalie, and Emmett through violence—by transforming us into the blood-drinking creatures we became.

Esme had spoken my name, drawing my attention to her words: "...in one way at least. That's why I'm so happy that he's found you, dear." She continued, and I couldn't resist listening, "...far too long; it's hurt me to see him alone." Esme's love was one of the miracles of my new existence. No natural mother could care more or want more for me than she did.

"You don't mind, then..."—Bella spoke haltingly—"that I'm...all wrong for him?"

"No," Esme replied. "You're what he wants. It will work out, somehow."

I hoped with all my heart that she was right, but I seemed to be pursuing this course regardless. I felt a pang of remorse then, and of doomed inevitability, which frightened me less than the thought of leaving Bella.

Thunder cracked again, closer this time.

Emmett took a couple practice swings with an aluminum bat. Aluminum might distort with a particularly hard hit, but it wouldn't explode in splinters or crumble into dust in your hands like wood. He stepped up to home plate, and Jasper squatted behind him. The at-bat team supplied the catcher since we always played with six or fewer players.

"All right. Batter up!" Esme called.

Alice was the funniest pitcher anywhere. She could throw hard, like any of us, but with our fast reflexes, the speed of the pitch wasn't a great advantage. Instead, she used the stealth approach. She would stand vampire still, holding the ball in both her tiny hands. Then she'd flick her wrist faster than a human eye could see and pop the ball out over the plate while the rest of her body barely moved.

"Was that a strike?" I heard Bella whisper to Esme after the first pitch got by Emmett. Jasper caught it and tossed it back to Alice.

"If they don't hit it, it's a strike," Esme explained.

Emmett whacked the second pitch hard. I saw Bella cringe at the impact before I took off running for the trees. Experience told me that the ball would easily overfly the seven-hundred-foot clearing between home plate and left field. In the background, I registered Bella's comment to Esme, "...home run."

Not if I could help it.

I hit the forest at full speed and darted between the trees in an effort to outrun the ball. Just before it would have hit and shattered the top of a fir tree, I leaped into the air and

flung my hand in front of it.

“Out!” Esme called when the ball smacked my bare palm.

I loped back to the clearing and showed off my prize to Bella, a huge grin on my face. This was a human rite of passage, impressing your girlfriend with prowess on the sports field, and it pleased me out of all proportion to the meager accomplishment.

“Emmett hits the hardest, but Edward runs the fastest,” Esme told Bella.

Emmett yelled a litany of rude mental comments in my direction, *You suck!* and *I’ll get you on the flip side!* being the least offensive.

It was an ordinary Sunday game for us, with no spectacular plays and no serious accidents. Bella watched in utter fascination, though, if her gasps and cries of astonishment were any indication. We didn’t get many opportunities to let loose in our life of mimicry among the mortals and never among them, of course.

After catching Rosalie’s pop fly to end the third inning, I checked in with Bella behind home plate. “What do you think?”

“One thing’s for sure, I’ll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again.”

“And it sounds like you did so much of that before,” I teased.

“I am a little disappointed.”

“Why?”

“Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn’t do better than everyone else on the planet.”

Silly, silly Bella. She should see me try to throw a pot. Disaster! I smiled her favorite crooked smile and was rewarded with a hitch in her heartbeat.

I trotted off to bat and hit the ball short to center field on a gamble that I could outrun Emmett’s fielding slightly easier than I could get the ball by Rosalie’s catching arm in left field. Emmett fumbled the ball, which allowed me to beat him to second base. Then Carlisle pounded a pitch over Rose’s head, and we each scored a run. Emmett would want a rematch, I could see (and hear). I’d thwarted him a couple times in this game, and he never took that well.

Occasionally when fielding, Carlisle or Emmett tried to outrun the batter to first base and crashed into him instead. The first time it happened, I watched Bella’s mouth gape at the colossal *CRACK* of Carlisle and Jasper smashing into one another, followed by the ground-shaking *THUD* when they landed together in a heap. Bella leapt up to see who was hurt, which made everyone (but Rose) laugh.

Bella observed Alice’s ball-playing skills with great amusement. My tiny sister had never seen a human baseball game before she started playing with us, so she developed a style of play all her own. As with pitching, she batted surreptitiously, not attempting to hit the ball hard like Emmett or strategically like me, but rather, making the infielders guess which pitch she’d try for. She’d stand fully upright and utterly still, holding the bat at a casual angle in one hand. Sometimes she’d let the pitch go by, perhaps twitching to pull the pitcher off the mound, and sometimes she’d tap a foul. When she had the infielders sufficiently irritated, she’d bunt the ball between the pitcher and catcher or between the pitcher and base player. Because we all played aggressively, we’d often crash into, or trip over, one another trying to field the hit. Even when the fielding was adept, though, Alice would often get on base by dancing or cart-wheeling toward first, foreseeing the fielder’s intentions and dodging the required tag. We gave her a lot of leeway, but traded her

between teams on different outings, so no one would get too frustrated by playing against her. Alice is Alice.

It was the fifth inning—Jasper pitching, Carlisle at bat, and I crouching down to catch—when the warning came.

OH NO! The words screamed from Alice's mind.

Her thoughts snapped me to attention, and Jasper's pitch pinged off my arm and bounced back to him. I barely noticed. The picture in Alice's mind showed three vampires—two men, one woman—approaching the clearing on a run. By their disheveled state, I could see they were nomads unaccustomed to living among humans. Their first instinct would be to hunt Bella.

I leapt to Bella's side with a growl and cast my eyes about for signs of the unwelcome visitors. Jasper reacted to me instantly by materializing at Alice's side and curling his body protectively around hers.

"Alice?" Esme's voice resonated with concern.

Sensing danger, Rosalie and Emmett raced toward home plate at full speed.

"What the hell, Alice?" I spoke harshly under my breath, not wanting to frighten Bella. "You didn't see them coming? I thought you said they were headed east!"

"I didn't see—I couldn't tell," Alice muttered, aghast.

"What is it, Alice?" Carlisle asked, calmly as always, being careful not to overreact.

"They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before," Alice answered.

Jasper's eyes darted around the clearing as he hovered over Alice. "What changed?"

"They heard us playing and it changed their path."

Everyone glanced at Bella, all thinking the same thing at the same time, with more or less kindness and concern.

Bella's in danger! (Alice)

They'll hunt the human, and we'll get to fight! (Emmett)

We must get Bella out of harm's way. (Carlisle)

How can we hide Bella? (Esme)

Idiot! Why the hell did he bring her? She's nothing but trouble. (Rosalie)

Flank the human. Divide, divert, retreat and... (Jasper)

I blocked my family's thoughts to listen for those of the approaching intruders.

"You know of them?" (male with a French accent)

"I've heard rumors of a group in this area." (male)

"There must be at least several if they're playing baseball." (female)

"Perhaps they will let us join in." (French accent)

"Victoria and me, not you. Haven't you heard that baseball is the American pastime?" Laughter. (male)

I was beginning to recognize their location by the images in their minds.

"How soon?" Carlisle asked.

"Less than five minutes. They're running—they want to play."

My mind raced through our options: *run—not enough time; hide—they'll track Bella's scent; fight—seven against three, not a problem, but Carlisle won't like it;*

bluff—probably won't work; reason with them—who knows?

Edward—Carlisle claimed my attention—we need to get Bella out. Aloud, he said, “Can you make it?”

“No, not carrying—” Bella, I almost said. There was no need to alarm her any more than necessary, which is why Carlisle was carefully choosing his words. “Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting.”

Then we can't hide her for the same reason. We'll have to bluff it out. I don't have much hope of that working, but we won't fight except as a last resort.

I nodded in agreement.

“How many?” Emmett looked at Alice.

“Three,” she snapped. She obviously felt badly, but this *was* her fault.

No, it's my fault. She'd told us nomads were in the area. I was the one who kept putting Bella in danger.

“Three!” Emmett sneered. “Let them come.” *That's hardly even sporting. I could probably take them all by myself.*

Carlisle addressed everyone. “Let's just continue the game. Alice said they were simply curious.”

“Edward,” Esme spoke too softly for Bella's ears. “Are they thirsty?”

I'd continued to monitor their thoughts and sensed no pressing thirst. I shook my head minutely and saw her relax.

“You catch, Esme, I'll call it now.” That would keep my hands free to protect Bella. Alice and Esme moved to guard her open sides without seeming to.

“Take your hair down,” I told Bella. It would partially hide her face and throat. She was pale enough that they might mistake her for one of us if most of her skin was covered.

Bella searched my face. “The others are coming now.” She stated it as a fact, having followed much of our barely veiled conversation.

“Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don't move from my side, please.” I kept my voice as soothing and calm as possible while I rearranged her hair to cover more of her face.

There isn't any serious danger, I told myself. Seven against three was very poor odds for the newcomers, especially when you factored in Alice's and my skills. If worse came to worst, we would fight. And we had Jasper, an experienced and accomplished fighter, though he would exercise his calming talent first, another factor in our favor.

Watching me fiddle with Bella's hair, Alice said, “That won't help. I could smell her across the field.”

“I know,” I admitted. Even if Bella changed clothes with Esme, they would smell the human scent within our group, and it wouldn't take them long to figure out which of us had a heartbeat.

Carlisle stepped up to bat, and everyone else returned to their positions. We would act casual, but remain poised to fight. We held another advantage—the nomads didn't know we knew they were coming.

“What did Esme ask you?” Bella whispered.

Damn! Why did she have to be so perceptive at the wrong time? But I couldn't avoid the question. “Whether they were thirsty,” I said reluctantly.

We kept the batting to bunts and the fielding shallow, everyone paying more attention to the forest than to the game.

Edward! Rosalie screamed at me in her head. *I knew this wouldn't end well! Why are you putting us...*

I did my best to tune her out. Her tune didn't vary much and wouldn't for a good long while if I knew Rosalie—and I did. Bella was all that mattered now.

"I'm sorry, Bella. It was stupid, irresponsible, to expose you like this. I'm so sorry." I was furious at my thoughtlessness and lack of foresight.

Just then I heard faint sounds of our visitors moving through the trees beyond right field. They were no longer running, but approaching more cautiously. My family all turned at the same time, our vampire hearing on high alert.

I planted myself between Bella and the threat and prepared for battle.