No Stone Left Unturned

by CheckAlexa

Summary

Louisa Collins vowed that she was done with sleuthing when her family moved to the tiny town of Forks. She was done sticking her nose in other people's business. Not even the mysterious Cullen family could entice her to go back on her word... right?
Chapter Notes

This work will detail investigations that may not be suitable for all audiences. If at anytime you feel that you need support, please contact your local crisis center.

The drive from home to Hell was the approximate length of the *Hamilton* and *Come from Away* soundtracks, not including traffic, and Louisa had to drive the whole way. Her sister, Dottie, was in charge of navigation, because, even though she had her driver’s permit, she steadfastly refused to drive without an adult present. Their father had sent them ahead to the new house while he finished tying up loose ends in Tacoma, even though neither of the sisters knew anything about setting up a house. Privately, Louisa thought her father wanted to get her out of the city before she got into mischief, but she didn’t have any evidence of such a plot. She didn’t even have proof that it was her actions that spurred the decision to move to Forks, Washington, but the timing of the move and the events of the last month were too coincidental to ignore.

Dottie hummed along happily to the music, Louisa pushed her theories on the matter to the back of her mind, not wanting to spoil the younger girl’s good mood. Unlike Louisa, Dottie was more than get a fresh start somewhere else. The past nine months had been hard on the whole family, but especially on Dottie.

“Where do I go next?” Louisa asked her sister. The realtor had given their father directions to her house so that they could pick up the new keys. Apparently, the house was so remote that Google Maps wouldn’t be able to find it. Louisa was instantly suspicious of this — only meth dealers and murderers lived in such remote locations — but she didn’t comment when their dad had given them the orders.

“Mrs Cullen says that there should be a sharp turn up here on the right,” Dottie read aloud. “Her first name is Esme. Isn’t that a pretty name? It sounds like a silent movie star.”

Louisa gave a noncommittal sound of agreement, focusing more on the turn than the conversation. There was a disgusting amount of foliage in Forks, and with the added rain it was nearly impossible see to any hidden driveways like the one Mrs Cullen had described.

“What do you think she looks like?” Dottie asked.

“I don’t know, Dot.” Louisa sighed, growing frustrated. She pulled over to the side of the road and pulled the instructions from her sister’s hands. “Light brown hair, heart shaped face, and pale? I hardly looked her up before we left.”

“Louisa Collins not doing her research?” Dottie said sceptically. “Who are you and what have you done with my sister?”

Louisa wanted to snap and say that she had been left behind in their old home. Or maybe buried with their mother and younger brother nine months ago. But she knew that it would make the bright smile slide off her sister’s face and she couldn’t do that to her.

“Like I said to Dad, Dottie,” Louisa replied, trying to force her stiff facial muscles into a grin. “I’m
done with investigating now. No more mysteries for me.”

Dottie’s blue eyes scrutinized her with an intensity one would not expect from a fifteen-year-old. “Right.”

Louisa squirmed in her seat and pretended to focus on the directions. “Do you think we missed the turn?”

The question seemed to distract the younger sister for the moment. She took the directions back from the elder girl and tried to pull up the directions on Google Maps. Not only could she not find the house just like the realtor said, the two were also dismayed to learn that there was no cell phone coverage. If Louisa hadn’t hated Forks before, she definitely did then. Without a phone, or even a real map, it took the better part of an hour trying to find the house. Louisa spent most of the time cursing out of their father and speculating that the Cullens were actually a reclusive drug cartel that supplied the Italian mafia with methamphetamine.

After they finally found the turn and made their way up their long, winding drive, they were greeted with the sight of a three-story white house, complete with a wraparound porch. It was large without being ostentatious and undoubtedly beautiful. It radiated a kind of warmth that gave off the impression that this was not just a building that people lived in, but a home. Growing up in the city, Louisa had never actually seen a house as large as the Cullen’s in real life, and she had to admit that she felt a little intimidated by the sheer size of it.

“They definitely sell meth,” Dottie murmured after staring at the mansion in shock.

Louisa pondered the house for another moment. “Actually, I change my answer to marijuana. Their house is way too nice for meth dealers.”

Dottie turned to look at her sister, blonde eyebrows raising in interest. “I thought meth was really profitable, though?”

“And also really volatile. During the extraction of component chemicals from the reagents and during the production of the drug itself, there are several points where flammable substances are made, some of which explode when they are exposed to heat or air. There is no way a house that large would be able to contain a meth lab.”

Dottie looked like she was questioning why her sister knew this, but decided to say nothing. She had learned many years ago that it was better to be able to claim ignorance when it came to affairs of her older sister. “Maybe they’ve got a barn somewhere we can’t see?”

“I honestly doubt it. Marijuana is the best bet if they sell drugs,” Louisa explained, glancing curiously at the dense treeline that surrounded the home.

“What about heroin?”

Louisa was saved from answering when the front door of the house opened and a tall, blond man in a dark blue jumper stepped out. His head tilted in confusion when he saw the silver Prius in his driveway, before giving them a tentative wave.

“I think that’s our cue, Dottie,” Louisa said before unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the car door. Dottie scramble out after her older sister and latched onto her sleeve, trailing behind her.

“May I help you?” The man asked, his voice a smooth baritone with a hint of an accent to it. Up close Louisa could see that he was unbelievably handsome; Dottie seemed to notice as well because she dug her fingers into Louisa’s arm to the point that it was becoming painful.
Louisa tried to ignore the biting of her sister’s nails through her sweater and gave him a small grin. “My name is Louisa Collins, and this is my sister Dorothy. Does a Mrs Esme Cullen live here?”

The man’s eyes lit up in understanding and waved for the girls to follow him into the house. Louisa made sure that Dottie wiped her feet on the welcome mat, not wanting to dirty the pristine entryway. She was unsurprised to see the interior was just as stunning as the exterior; the wood floors were polished within an inch of their lives, the couch’s accent pillows tilted at precisely forty-five degrees, and not a speck of dust in sight, give Louisa serious Martha Stewart vibes. The sound of music caught her attention the moment she crossed the threshold, and she glanced to the left where a dais with a grand piano sat. A bronze haired teenager was playing the instrument and nodded to them as they entered, but didn’t move to greet them further.

“My son, Edward,” the blond man explained, extending a hand towards Louisa. “I am Carlisle, Esme’s husband.”

*Lucky woman*, she thought briefly, nodding in greeting to Edward before taking Mr Cullen’s offered hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet the both of you,” Louisa said. *Cold hands, well-trimmed nails, lack of hair on the back of his hand. Why didn’t he introduce himself as Dr Cullen?*

Her pondering was interrupted by the arrival of a woman who could only be Esme. She was as finely dressed as her husband and her light brown hair styled in elegant waves. When she smiled, she gave off a motherly aura that put even Dottie at ease. She stuck out her hand for Louisa to take and her handshake was surprisingly firm for someone who was left-handed. *Makes sense. She would have to greet a lot of people as a realtor.*

“I must say,” Mrs Cullen said when she handed the elder sister the keys to their new house. “I was surprised that someone was interested in the property. It’s been abandoned for a while.”

“Are there not many people moving to Forks?” Dottie asked, finally finding her voice. Louisa could understand that—she hardly wanted to live there either. The one good thing about the move was that Dad had tasked her with choosing the house they would move into. Of course, there was a reason Louisa has specifically chosen the property that she did, and it didn’t have anything to do with a nice view or the number of bedrooms.

She tried to subtly shake her head, but Mrs Cullen must have missed the cue. “Oh, did your sister not mention the house’s history to you?”

Dottie shot the girl in question a look that was a mix of confusion and irritation. “No, she didn’t.” Louisa could hardly redirect the conversation at this point. “I must have forgotten to mention it, you know, with how busy we’ve been and all.” She tried to give her sister an appeasing smile, which Dottie saw right through with a dead stare. “There was a murder in it, about 20 years ago. Never solved. Interesting, right?”

Dottie’s glare intensified. “Fascinating. I’m shocked you managed to keep it quiet for this long,” she said in a flat voice. “I’m sure Dad will be happy.”

Louisa gave an uncomfortable-looking Dr and Mrs Cullen a small smile. “Thanks for the keys. We should probably get going.”

Mrs Cullen nodded and showed them to the door. “Call me if you have any concerns about the house.” They exchanged pleasantries for a moment more before Louisa allowed Dottie to drag her
towards the car.

“You’re impossible!” Dottie shouted in a shrill voice the moment the car doors banged closed. “You promised Dad that you were done with solving crimes!”

“To be fair,” Louisa replied, turning over the engine and throwing the car into reverse. “I made the promise after we bought the house.”

This statement did little to appease her. “Promise me, Lou,” she pleaded. “No more sleuthing.”

“Dot, you are acting like something dangerous is going to happen if I investigated it,” she said, turning back onto the winding driveway to the main road. “Forks is totally safe.”

“Promise me.”

Louisa sighed. As tempting as an unsolved mystery was, she knew her investigations usually upset her little sister. “Yeah, Dot. I promise. No more snooping around.”

Dottie watched the rain that was beginning to fall for a moment. “So, a murder house, huh?” she paused, waiting for her sister to respond. When she didn’t, she continued on. “It’s not haunted, is it?”

“I doubt it.”

“That’s not very reassuring, Lou!”

Louisa cracked a grin at her sister’s antics. “I am reluctant to make promises I can’t keep.”

Dottie was more than happy to express her displeasure in loud noises, all the way into town.
Choosing the house was one of the hardest decisions Louisa had to make in her entire life. On one hand, the house had a fascinating history — an unsolved mystery and a long list of previous tenants that had vacated the building within six months of moving in. It was also aesthetically pleasing, in a tiny logger town sort of way. The off-white two-story was by no means a grand house, though it was much larger than their cramped apartment in Tacoma. The kitchen had been recently renovated, the property was secluded enough for privacy from nosey neighbours but not too remote in the event of an emergency, and there was central heating and air (which was another improvement from Tacoma). On the other hand, there was only three bedrooms.

True, there were only three people in the Collins family, so only three bedrooms were really needed. This also meant that Louisa and Dorothy wouldn’t have to share a living space — while the sisters did love each other very much, they were vastly different people and their ways of living didn’t always mesh together well. No, the real issue with amount bedrooms centred on the fact that only nine months previously, the Collins family would have required four. There was a finality, Louisa decided, to moving into a three-bedroom house, one which she hoped would help heal her fractured family, rather than hurt it further.

There was an unspoken agreement between the sisters that the master would be their father’s bedroom. The moment Louisa unlocked the front door, the two thundered up the staircase to claim the larger of the two remaining rooms. Louisa, who had already viewed the property, knew that the room that faced front of the house was not only much larger, but had more natural light, and scrambled to claim that one. Dottie, who knew her sister had more knowledge of house, followed after, cursing the four inch difference in their heights.

In a moment of desperation, Dottie yanked on Louisa’s jumper, causing her sister to slip on the hardwood floor. Vaulting over the fallen teenager, Dot sprinted into the room and slammed the door shut, making sure to lock the door so that Louisa couldn’t try to pull her out. Louisa, though annoyed with her sister, was mildly impressed with Dottie’s dirty tactics (not that she would ever admit it). Swearing colourfully and rising from the floor, Louisa gave Dottie’s newly acquired bedroom door a few half-hearted kicks and hollow threats before turning and trudging towards the other bedroom.

Unlike Dottie’s open and airy bedroom, Louisa’s was much smaller, with one wall made up entirely by built-in bookshelves. The room itself might have originally been a library or a study (though according to Mrs Cullen, the shelves were added after the house was built), but a small closest had been built into the far corner during some renovation so that the room could be labelled as a bedroom. Louisa briefly wondered if she should purchase a wardrobe to accommodate all of her clothes, though, with the addition of her desk and a twin bed, she wondered if it would even fit. If she even needed a desk, now that she had given up solving mysteries. She’d have to ask her father what he thought when he arrived. In the meantime, there was a lot of unpacking that had to be done.
Stuffing her long blonde hair under a Rainiers baseball cap, Louisa called out for her sister while she trudged back down the stairs, demanding help at unloading the car. They had been able to cram a surprisingly large amount of boxes into their tiny Prius, including the two inflatable mattresses the sisters would be using until the movers arrived with their furniture. But between the two of them, they made short work of sorting out their belongings. At some point, Dottie turned on the Rent soundtrack and managed to find a hammer, and the teenagers spent the remainder of the afternoon singing and hanging pictures. Louisa’s heart would throb painfully in her chest every time they came across a picture of their mother or brother and silence would fall between them, broken only by Idina Menzel’s voice.

Dottie and Louisa were debating what they should do for dinner when there was a knock at the front door. The movers weren’t supposed to arrive until the next day and they didn’t know anyone in the town yet. Commanding Dottie to remain behind her, Louisa crept to the living room, hammer still tightly gripped in her hand, to peer out the window. She could just make out the form of a tall man with curly brown hair shifting from foot to foot as he stood on their front stoop.

“Good evening, Officer,” Louisa said after she opened the door. The man was wearing a black jacket with a police emblem on the left breast and the name ‘C. Swan’ printed on the right in yellow letters. Louisa quickly hid the hammer behind her back, at the same time wondering if their car was illegally parked. Louisa tried to peek around the tall man, only to see the little Prius sitting in their driveway, right where she had left it. As a precaution, she pulled off her baseball cap from her head so that the police officer could see her face better. “Is there a problem?”

The gruff-looking man gave her a little smile that twitched his moustache. “Only if you have something to confess, Miss. I’m Charlie Swan, the chief of police around here. I just thought I’d come and introduce myself.”

He stuck out his hand and Louisa was so shocked that she almost didn’t shake it. Shakily, she took his hand, mind still reeling that an actual police officer was at her door, and Louisa wasn’t even in trouble this time. Divorced father. Lives alone. Maybe he was lonely?

“Hello, Chief Swan,” she said. After introducing herself, she realised that it was raining, and the chief didn’t seem to have an umbrella. “Would you like to come inside?”

“Is it normal for the chief of police to introduce themselves in small towns? I’ve never had a police officer come to my door for anything pleasant before.” Louisa asked, moving them into the living room.

Chief Swan let out a low chuckle. “In Forks it is,” he replied. “We don’t get many people moving here. It must be quite a culture shock from Tacoma.”

“Word travels fast,” Louisa responded, trying to hide a scowl. She had heard of small town gossip and she was less than keen to experience it first-hand.

“I would say you get used to it, but that would be a lie,” Chief Swan said, shrugging his shoulders. “It doesn’t help with that hat,” he added, pointing to her baseball cap.

Louisa looked down at the hat still in her hands then back to the police officer in mild surprise. She got the impression that the man didn’t usually talk this much, and was taken aback by him driving the conversation. He must miss his child quite a lot to be talking to a total stranger for so long. “Most people didn’t follow the minor leagues.”

“I prefer the major league, but I’ll watch minor every now and again,” he explained.
“Do you think the Mariners will make it to the World Series?” Louisa watched as Chief Swan launched into a passionate speech about Seattle’s baseball team. His child was definitely estranged from him. Didn’t like sports all that much either. And judging on his interactions with Louisa, most likely a girl. Brunette, like her father, if genetics was to be assumed.

“I’ll let you get back to your unpacking,” Chief Swan said after a few more minutes of rambling about baseball. “If you have any problems, I live down the street. Just look for the police cruiser.”

Dottie reappeared from the kitchen the moment the front door was closed behind the chief, blinking owlishly at her sister. “He seemed nice.”

Louisa tossed her sister an amused grin. “How would you know? You hid the moment I let him inside the house. So, what do you want for dinner?”

As it turned out, however, they wouldn’t have to decide. The visit from Chief Swan must have broken some sort of dam because it seemed every family in town wanted to drop by and goggle at the newest additions to Forks that evening. The Lutheran minister, Mr Weber, dropped by with his children and his wife piled six casserole dishes into the Collins sisters’ arms. A Mrs Mallory offered help with decorating the house after their furniture arrived. Cora Forge offered a nervous Dottie a job down at her diner after discovering that the younger sister loved baking. Bob Marks offered to teach an enthusiastic Louisa how to ride a motorbike, much to Dot’s horror. By the end of the night, Louisa’s voice was hoarse and a headache was beginning to form in her temples.

“Thank goodness,” Dottie sighed after the final visitor was gently nudged out the door. “I didn’t think those people would ever leave.”

“You didn’t seem too upset when that D.J. Garret came by,” Louisa teased, ruffling her sister’s hair. “He’s single, you know.”

Dottie scowled in annoyance at her sister’s antics. “I’m not looking for a boyfriend.”

“Good answer,” Louisa replied.

Dottie rolled her eyes. “I’m going to bed.”

Louisa watched her sister stomp up the stairs and called after her, “When the rest of the boys from school come calling, I’ll just remind them that you are 15 and not interested.” Dottie’s bedroom door slammed shut in response. Louisa giggled to herself, listening to her sister’s movements. While she waited for her sister to fall asleep, Louisa organised the mountains of gifts their new neighbours had delivered.

When she was certain she would not be disturbed, the teenager pulled out her cell phone and snuck out of the back door. She hadn’t even sat down on the back steps by the time she was calling her best friend. She knew that her father would be furious to know that she had called him, but Louisa needed to hear a familiar voice.

“Privet,” Pyotr answered after the first ring. “I am surprised you are calling so soon, Lastachka.”

“It’s been a rough day,” Louisa sighed, rubbing her head with her free hand.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he replied. Louisa could hear papers being rustled on his end, and she wondered if she had disturbed him. “What is wrong with you?” Louisa had to smile; while Pyotr’s English had improved immensely in the five years they had known each other, he still struggled with conversational phrases.
“I met a lot of people today,” the blonde replied, her voice heavy with exhaustion. “Everyone in this damn town wanted to meet us, I think.” Louisa paused for a moment, reflecting on her words. “Well, no, I know that’s true.”

Pyotr hummed in understanding. “Yes, I imagine that would be thoroughly overwhelming for you. Have you added them to your library?”

Ever since she was little, Louisa had been incredibly curious about other people, and some would go as far to say that she was nosey. Her mother would read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes with her for hours and encourage her eldest child’s inquisitive nature. One of Louisa’s favourite games growing up was deducing things, just like Holmes: she would try to guess a stranger’s job or their favourite food or how many dogs they had, and more often than not, she was right. With practice, Louisa could pick up a lost child’s hairbrush and know exactly where they had been, or touch businessman’s pen and discover precisely how much money he had been embezzling from his company.

The facts Louisa learned were often so specific that people often thought she was a mind-reader. In her humble opinion, that was a rather ridiculous idea. The information she could deduce, however, was as overwhelming as it was extensive. Thus, Louisa decided to build a ‘brain-attic’ just like her favourite detective, which took the form of an elaborate mental library, filled with books about every person she met. It helped her stem the onslaught of information, filter out the important things from the insignificant, and remember more clearly what she saw. Her Library wasn’t nearly as perfect as Holmes’ (she wasn’t a book character after all), but it helped focus her in both her investigations and daily life.

“That’s the problem,” Louisa sighed. Not only was there a sudden influx of new books that needed to be created, there was some unknown, but incredibly distressing problem with the creation of three books in particular. “There was this family I met today.” She wasn’t exactly sure how to put into words her issue with the Cullen family, or even what that issue was, but she was keenly aware that there was something… wrong. It was a feeling she had never encountered before and it threw her off balance.

Pyotr’s voice was gentle and soothing, grounding the girl in her growing anxiety. “Tell me about them,” he said patiently. “Let us figure them out together.”

And so Louisa began to describe the elegant Mrs Cullen, who looked oddly familiar despite Louisa being absolutely positive that they had never met before. She told him about Mrs Cullen’s handsome doctor of a husband who didn’t introduce himself as a doctor. About the youngest son Edward, and their four other children she knew that Cullens had but had not met. She explained how the Edward, Mrs, and Dr Cullen looked strikingly similar, despite none of them being related, and she didn’t know why. For some reason, the Cullen family disturbed her, and she wanted to do nothing more than open up her laptop and begin researching them. She couldn’t though — it would be a violation of her promise to her father.

“Perhaps you are not classifying them correctly?” Pyotr replied after listening to her rant for a few minutes.

“How so?”

“Well,” he said slowly. “In libraries, there are different types of books. Some are fiction, some are non-fiction, correct?”

“So, instead of sorting them in the literary fiction section, they should be in the mystery?” Louisa
asked. “Petya, my Library isn’t exactly organised by the Dewey Decimal System.”

“Let us assume that I know what that means for a moment,” Pyotr chuckled. “Perhaps a well organised Library is what you need, Lastachka.”

Louisa sighed in frustration and massaged her temples harder. Creating the Library had been hard enough — how on Earth was she supposed to organise it? Where would she even start? There had to be over a million books in her mind. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“I understand that this is not something you want to hear, Lastachka,” Pyotr said soothingly. “But think of it as making your mind more efficient.”

Louisa almost snapped at her friend for adding to the list of things she needed to do, even though she knew that he was not the enemy. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I generally am,” Pyotr replied, and Louisa could almost picture a satisfied smirk on his lips. “Call me again if you have a problem.”

Louisa was suddenly aware of how late it actually was getting to be, and how she had most likely interrupted her friend from doing something important. She felt a little embarrassed for keeping him occupied with her problems. “I can’t call you if I just want to chat?”

Pyotr hummed in thought. “I suppose you could do that as well,” he said. “As long as it is safe for you to do so?”

“You make it sound like my father will hurt you if we contact each other.”

“Neyt, he would not hurt me,” Pyotr replied. “Just incarcerate me. And do not apologise, Louisa Collins. It was my fault, and mine alone, for what happened.”

“I think we can both accept considerable blame,” Louisa sighed. She leaned her head forward on her knees and took steadying breaths, the cool night air tickling her lungs. “You are far too kind to me, Petya.”

“That is true.”

Louisa chuckled lowly so as not to attract the attention of her sister. “I’ll let you go then. Poka,” she said while she stood, wiping off her wet backside.

“Spokoynoy nochi.” Pyotr ended the call and the dial tone began to blend with the chirping of crickets and the patter of raindrops falling from the leaves in the backyard.

Louisa’s skin began to prickle with anxiety. She had that feeling of eyes being on her and she turned her head to survey the forest that lined their property. It was almost as if something was watching her.

Probably an animal of some sort. But she still felt freaked out. Louisa threw open the door to the house and ran inside, making sure the deadbolt was engaged fully. The call to Pyotr had only served to remind her that she was indeed a long way from home.
The two weeks that followed were hectic, to say the very least. Shortly after the arrival of Louisa’s father was the arrival of their furniture. Mr Collins was under the impression that, if kept busy enough, his eldest daughter would not be able to find any sort of trouble to get herself into. Louisa, therefore, was charged with the task of being his girl Friday, and run every single errand that he could possibly imagine.

“Why can’t you send Dot?” Louisa complained after her father informed her that she would need to return to the home improvement store for the third time that week. “I’m sure she can pick out… paint rollers, just as easily as I can.”

“Dot doesn’t have her driver’s license.”

“She has a bike, doesn’t she? Besides, it would be better for the environment if the car wasn’t used. Decrease the amount fossil fuels used and reduce our carbon footprint and all.”

Mr Collins light grey eyes, so very much like his daughter’s, peered over the top of his reading glasses. “If you are that concerned about the environment, you may take your bike, I won’t stop you,” he replied in a steady voice. “Just as long as you hurry; the store will probably be closing soon.”

“It’s raining outside.” Because of course it was. That’s all it did in this town.

Mr Collins gave Louisa a serene smile. “Then perhaps the car will be more comfortable.”

Louisa scowled at her father before turning and storming into the kitchen. She knew that it was useless arguing with her father— he wasn’t one of the best lawyers in Tacoma for nothing.

Dottie, who had wandered into the kitchen, gave her sister an apologetic smile. “I would go with you,” she murmured to her irate sister. “But Daddy needs my help starting dinner.”

Louisa rolled her eyes. The day Stephen Collins needed help in the kitchen was the day that she quit solving mysteries. Well, at the moment, Louisa has stopped solving mysteries, but it was really more of a sabbatical, rather than a retirement. She would be back to it soon enough. The blonde pushed away the wave of guilt at that thought. She had promised her father and her sister that she would stop, after all, and that wasn’t to be taken lightly. Louisa would go and get the paint rollers, and whatever other small, inconsequential thing her father asked her to get. Her father was only trying to protect her, after all.

Still, all of that constant back-and-forth driving was annoying, so she allowed herself to fume for the rest of the day at the injustice of her situation. Or at least until dinner. Her dad’s cooking was really good.

No Stone Left Unturned
At least it wasn’t raining on the first day of school, Louisa thought grimly when her alarm woke her up at some ungodly hour. It was days like this when she wished that she would invest in an actual alarm clock, instead of using her phone, just so that she could have the satisfaction of hurling it at a wall when it woke her up.

Louisa dragged herself out of bed and stumbled through her morning routine. Dottie, who could practically see a dark cloud of general irritation emanating from Louisa, brought up a cup of coffee and braided Louisa’s hair. She even went so far as to pick out Louisa’s outfit when she noticed her sister had dozed off. Looking at the chosen clothes, Louisa concluded that Dottie was under the delusion that they would need to dress well in order to make a good first impression.

“It’s not like we haven’t met the entire town already,” Louisa groused. Still, she pulled on the dark skirt and green woolly jumper that Dot had picked out for her. At least this school didn’t require uniforms.

Louisa allowed her sister pull her down the stairs and into the kitchen, where their father had was waiting with two plates of pancakes. Louisa was sure that her father had made a comment about making them a “special breakfast” for their “first day of school,” but she was too focused on pouring herself another cup of coffee.

“First day of school pictures,” he chirped excitedly. He was smiling, but Louisa knew that he was just as miserable as she was at the thought of it. A rush of nausea filled Louisa’s stomach as her father pulled out the old camera after they finished eating, ordering them outside with their backpacks. Dad had never taken their first day of school pictures. Only Mom.

Louisa grit her teeth in an effort not to cry as her father had them pose on the front stoop. All she could think about was how incredibly unfair the whole situation was. How could her father even think that this was a good idea? He was always gone by the time they left for school. Mom would have them pose for pictures with their backpacks, before all four of them piled into the minivan and drove to school. This wasn’t right.

*A sense of normalcy.* She could hear the words almost as if the therapist had spoken them to her, instead of her father. *Kids need routine.*

“Do try to smile, Louisa,” Mr Collins said, exasperated. “I would like a nice picture for your first day of school.”

“What’s it matter? It’s going to suck anyways.”

“Thank you for my daily dose of petulance, darling. Now that you have that out of your system, please smile.”

Dottie rolled onto her tip-toes so that she could whisper into her sister’s ear. “The sooner you do it, the sooner it will be over.”

It took a few tries, but Louisa was finally able to arrange her features so that they didn’t look like she was about murder someone. The next thing she knew, her father was pulling her into a hug and wishing them a good day. Then the sisters were sitting in the car and Louisa was pulling out of the driveway.

Out of the corner of her eye, Louisa could see Dottie fiddling with her seatbelt. She knew that she should be a good big sister and offer Dottie words of comfort or encouragement, but the words felt like hot rocks trapped in her voice box. How could she even give solace to her sister, when Louisa herself was just as upset? She couldn’t say that it would be okay, because it wasn’t. She hated
feeling so useless.

Louisa reached across the centre console to grab her sister’s hand and gave it a small squeeze. She could practically feel her sister’s own sadness as acutely as her own. There were no words that she could say that would make her sister feel better, no matter how desperately Louisa wished. She didn’t believe in filling the air with useless words, so she remained silent and offered Dottie what little she could: the reminder that Louisa was there and just as miserable as she was.

When the Collins sisters arrived at Forks High School (Home of the Spartans!), Louisa briefly stopped the car in front of the office and ordered her sister out of the car. “You deal with the schedules,” Louisa ordered. “Find me in the parking lot when you’re done.” She didn’t even wait for Dottie to reply before peeling off.

Completely accustomed to Louisa’s surly personality in the morning, Dottie sighed and wandered towards the red brick building behind her. Despite it being early September, the warm gust of air that assaulted her was a nice surprise as she entered into the main office. Maybe those that had lived in the Pacific Northwest all of their lives would have grown accustomed to the cold rain, but Dottie had always found the wet cold dreadful.

Students were starting to trickle into the office, wanting to get their schedules before the morning rush. Dottie headed to the line labelled ‘A-H’. She gave her and her sister’s names to a woman with dyed red hair, flushing when the woman let out a shriek of happiness, “It is wonderful to finally meet you my, dear, so glad that we have two new Spartans!” It was a good thing Louisa had gone to park the car, Dottie thought as the woman in front of her hummed merrily while flipping through a file folder for their schedules. Lou hated morning people.

With class lists and school maps in hand, Dottie spun around to leave, only to walk straight into what she first assumed to be a wall. The girl-that-actually-wasn’t-a-wall looked down her nose at Dottie, obviously insulted to not only be mistaken for an inanimate object, but actually touched. Dottie wanted to stutter out an apology, but the words seemed to die in her throat. The girl in front of her was heartbreakingly beautiful: her long hair was closer to gold than blonde and her piercing amber eyes seemed to freeze Dottie where she stood. She was tall too — even taller than Louisa, who had a good four inches on Dot. But whereas Louisa had the stringy, fragile look of someone who had grown a lot in a short period of time, the girl in front of Dot looked confident and strong, as if she could easily run ten blocks after a purse thief and beat him up. In heels. This girl was easily the most intimidating and awe-inspiring person Dottie had ever met (Louisa not included, of course).

“May I help you?” The girl drawled after several moments of Dottie’s awkward gawking had passed. When Dottie shook her head, still slightly dazed, the girl’s impassive expression shifted to one of annoyance. “Do you mind moving? You’re holding up the line.”

Dottie blushed fantastically before stammering out an apology and stepping out of the way. The girl didn’t acknowledge Dot any further and brushed by with a flip of her shining hair. Mortified, Dottie scurried towards the door, relieved that there had been very few people in the office at the time to witness the encounter. She had almost made it to the door when a hand stuck itself in front of her and halted her hasty retreat.

A lanky boy with reddish hair and a desperate need of a tan had stopped her.

“Oh, hello,” Dottie said, feeling slightly out of breath. “Edward Cullen, right?”

Edward gave her an easy grin. “That would be me. And you are Dorothy Collins?” When Dottie gave him a slow nod, he continued. “I would like to apologise on behalf of my sister. She can be
rather…” Edward’s eyes flicked up and Dottie turned to see the blonde was standing behind her, glaring at Edward. “Anyway, it was lovely to see you again. Have a pleasant day, Miss Collins.” And in a fashion similar to two supermodels exiting a runway, Edward and his sister left the office.

After a few moments of collecting her scattered thoughts, Dottie realised that her heart was pounding painfully against her ribs, making it difficult to breathe. For a fleeting second, she felt as if she may faint. Knees shaking violently, Dottie managed to drag herself out of the suddenly stifling office and into the light drizzle that had started to fall. She slid down to crouch against the red brick wall, trying to calm herself. Was this what a panic attack felt like? It was lucky that they had come so early, or else her new classmates might have seen her little break down. No one was around, for which Dottie was incredibly thankful for. When Dottie felt composed again, she headed to the parking lot. It was also fortunate that Louisa was such a mess in the morning. The last thing she needed was her big sister worrying about her.

No Stone Left Unturned

By the end of second period, Louisa had woken up enough to remember that Dottie had seemed upset when she returned with their schedules. The younger girl had tried to hide it, sure, but now that Louisa had emerged from her zombie-like state, it was almost pathetic that she hadn’t picked up on her sister’s rather obvious distress.

Perhaps Dot was worried that they would be attending a co-ed school? After all, their previous school was all girls. The added safety net of a uniform was also taken away at Forks High School (Home of the Spartans!).

But that didn’t make much sense. Dottie was never bothered much by changes like that. There had to be another explanation. Unfortunately, Dottie was not in front of her, so Louisa couldn’t figure out exactly what was wrong. She would have to wait until lunch. Until then, she would come up of the perfect segue into such a topic which was, admittedly, slightly more interesting than calculus, and infinitely more interesting than her new classmates.

Okay, almost infinitely. That Joseph Bowman in her history class was incredibly attractive.

But Dottie was absolutely most definitely her top priority.

Louisa got her opportunity right before lunch when she spotted Dottie pulling her lunch box out of her locker.  **Blood sugar slightly low and hangry.** Louisa would need to tread carefully.

“How were classes so far?” Louisa asked, materialising next to Dottie.

Dottie jumped, startled but smiled when she saw her sister. She allowed Louisa to take her lunch box and followed her sister into the lunch room, chatting animatedly about her new classes. The two sat at an empty table and Louisa handed Dottie her food. Perhaps this wasn’t the most sociable of moves for two new students, but the sisters were more than happy to just eat their lunch together.

New friends could wait, Louisa thought.  **Family is much more important.**

She watching Dottie carefully, looking for any signs of upset. At first glance, nothing seemed wrong with Dot, who was casually nibbling on celery sticks. Well, there were only so many ways once could actually consume celery sticks, but Dot somehow managed to make it look like she was putting on an act.

Or maybe Louisa was in mystery withdrawal after five weeks without a case. It was hard to tell at
“What class do you have after this?” Louisa asked, biting into an apple.

“English.”

“I have Spanish,” Louisa grumbled. She didn’t personally have any problems with Spanish, but both sister had been learning it since they were in kindergarten. Louisa was by no means fluent, but she could easily be dropped in, say, Guatemala, and have no issues communicating. Taking a beginner’s level Spanish-class would be useless.

“I have that last period. It should be an easy A,” Dottie supplied with a small grin. Dottie’s Spanish was even better than her sister’s. Watching Spanish soap operas did wonders for fluency.

“He just doesn’t want me to take Russian.” She wasn’t positive of course, but got the impression last week when they were deciding their classes. Louisa was pretty sure that her father would be more than relieved if she would move away from anything to do with Russia.

Dottie rolled her eyes at her sister’s antics. If anyone could find a plot in a completely innocuous situation, it would be Louisa. “Forks doesn’t even offer Russian courses, Lou.”

Louisa watched Dottie de-crusting her PB&J for a moment. “Speaking of classes, have you had any with the Cullens yet?” Louisa asked, hoping to catch her sister off-guard.

Dottie froze for the briefest of seconds before continuing to peel the crust off her sandwich. “I haven’t. Why do you ask?”

Louisa ignored her sister’s question and leaned forward in her seat. A flush was starting to crawl up Dot’s neck. “Then what do the Cullens have to do with this morning?”

“Nothing. I ran into Edward and his sister when I went to get our schedules.” Dottie’s response was even, almost rehearsed. Dot’s blue eyes never left her grey, but something felt off to Lou. Dottie was definitely hiding something.

“Then why did one of them upset you? Which one was it? Edward? He seemed decent enough, but I promise I’ll kick his ass if he was mean to you.”

“No, Lou. He didn’t do anything wrong. Nothing happened.”

“Then why did one of them upset you? Which one was it? Edward? He seemed decent enough, but I promise I’ll kick his ass if he was mean to you.”

“No, Lou. He didn’t do anything wrong. Nothing happened.”

“It’s not nothing, Dot,” Louisa reached across the lunch table to grab onto her sister’s hand. She could feel her anxiety welling up in her chest, as if she knew that something was dreadfully wrong. If only she could figure out what was causing it. “Did you have a panic attack?” Panic attacks weren’t something that Dottie had ever suffered from, but the younger blonde had been through so much in the previous nine months that it wouldn’t be all that surprising.

“I’m completely fine, Lou.” Dottie gave her sister a smile, relieved when the tension in Louisa’s shoulders seemed to loosen. A flare of affection rose up in her chest as she watched her sister lean back in her seat, suddenly very aware how lucky she was to have an older sister that cared so much for her happiness.

“You would tell me if you weren’t?” Louisa asked, picking up her own sandwich and taking a bite. Dottie nodded, a few stray curls falling into her face. “You would be the first to know.”

Louisa was silent for a few moments. “So what did you and Edward talk about?”
The younger Collins sighed in exasperation. “Does it matter?”

A grin stretched across Louisa’s face. “I’m instinctively inquisitive.”

“More like naturally nosey.”

And as if some sort of gate had opened, the two sisters bickered good naturedly for the rest of lunch.
Louisa took as long as humanly possible to walk to her Spanish class. Dottie would have grumbled about her taking three months to walk from the cafeteria, but that was an exaggeration. It probably only took her twenty minutes. Her reluctance to make an appearance did cause a bit of a problem, however, when Louisa was the last person to arrive to class. By a quarter of an hour. Everyone, including the teacher turned to stare at the blonde as she shuffled her way into the classroom.


The teacher looked dubious at Louisa’s claim of being lost, but didn’t comment. The teacher was correct in her assumptions, of course, but Louisa wasn’t about to rat herself out. She simply handed Louisa a syllabus and directed her to take a seat. Never one to disagree with authority (well, within reason), Louisa slunk through the tables of staring teens and plopped down in an empty seat at the back of the classroom.

Mrs. Goff finished up her interrupted lecture before instructing the students to introduce themselves to their neighbour. Louisa, who had no partner at the isolated table in the back of the class, began to pull her chair to the next table over, where two bored looking girls had begun to explain their summer vacations in broken Spanish.

“Howdy, Louisa?” one of the girls asked, turning to look at Louisa, who was still in her seat.

“I noticed from your transcript that your Spanish is rated at an advanced level,” the woman began. She fixed Louisa with a stern look over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses, giving off the vibe that she was thoroughly unimpressed with Louisa thus far.

“How best to play this? She could act cocky and unconcerned, but Louisa did have another two years at this school if the move became a permanent thing, and Forks was a small town. Did she really want the reputation of being a troublemaker? The teen took in the teacher’s appearance: married happily enough; two children, though both adults; mother recently passed away; one cat, most likely tabby; teaching for at least twenty-five years. Mrs Goff would be a hard teacher to get an upper hand on. Best play it safe.

Louisa settled for a shy smile. “Am I?”

“Yet your entrance exam indicated that your proficiency was lower intermediate, at best.”

“I wasn’t really feeling well when I took the test,” Louisa said, suppressing the desire to sigh
heavily. She really should have known that someone would catch onto the charade. Louisa had actually considered getting every question on the exam wrong, but that would have taken a lot more effort to learn all of the correct answers. There was also the possibility that the school thought she had been cheating in her previous courses if she failed too spectacularly, so Louisa had to settle for taking a class that was only slightly below average in terms of difficulty.

Mrs Groff’s stern gaze softened drastically. “Yes, the school psychologist made your teachers aware of your situation.” Poor girl.

Louisa felt her skin crawl at the look on Mrs Goff’s face and felt the words die in her throat. She had actually had been going more for the ‘Test Anxiety’ angle, rather than ‘Traumatised Teenager’. Did the entire school know about her history?

Probably the whole damn town, if the small town myth was to be believed, Louisa’s mind provided helpfully.

“You can take the test again, if you want,” Mrs Goff said quietly, in a way that indicated that Louisa had gone white as a sheet. “Perhaps afterschool this week?”

The last thing Louisa wanted was for her teachers to think that she was going to break. “No thank you, ma’am,” Louisa said in a wooden sounding voice. “It will be nice to review the basics.”

Louisa felt a weird sort of guilt well up in the pit of her stomach: the teachers would assume that she was having trouble adjusting to the death of her mother and her baby brother, and Louisa wasn’t about to correct them, even though they couldn’t be farther from the truth. By staying silent, she was using her mother and brother’s deaths as an excuse to… what? Not take a harder class?

She was a shitty person.

Completely oblivious to Louisa’s inner turmoil, Mrs Goff smiled and leaned forward to pat her hand. “I’m going to pair you with Mr and Miss Hale for the rest of the year.” They are probably as nearly as qualified as I am to teach the class. “Perhaps the three of you could challenge each other?” Louisa nodded numbly and followed behind the older woman to a table where a boy and a girl were sitting, and let Mrs Goff explain to the two what was happening while she dragged a chair over.

Louisa slid into her seat and nodded stiffly to the teens in front of her. The girl was blonde, incredibly beautiful, and wore her disinterest in Louisa like a very expensive scarf. The boy was also blond, and though he was just as attractive as his sister, his features were marred by a look that one might wear if they were constipated.

“I’m Rosalie, and this is my brother, Jasper,” the girl rattled off in rapid Spanish. “Over the summer we visited our family in Alaska.”

Louisa nodded and provided her own name to her new partners. She hesitated, unsure of what to say about her own summer. While being held hostage for nine hours was undoubtedly the most interesting thing that happened, she figured that that line of conversation would make her new classmates uncomfortable. Plus, she wasn’t even supposed to talk about it legally, so it was moot point anyway. Louisa settled for describing her family’s recent move to Forks instead.

Rosalie didn’t seem to care all that much anyway. “In my spare time I enjoy fixing cars. Jasper enjoys reading and playing chess.” There was something incredibly annoying about how Rosalie spoke. It was as if this conversation was so below her level of intelligence, and she couldn’t believe that she was being forced to interact with mere commoners. This was something Louisa was familiar with; she could easily deal with a bitchy and entitled person, as she had been doing so
since she was in kindergarten.

“Can Jasper not speak for himself?” Louisa snapped, a single blonde eyebrow hitching up in annoyance.

There was a soft chuckle, and Louisa’s gaze slid over to the other occupant of their table. “Jasper can,” he replied, his voice still soft. It took everything in Louisa not to shiver when he spoke. It was a pleasing baritone that was so smooth Louisa could almost feel it wrapping around her, without even the slightest of scratches you usually heard in teenage boys. Even from the little he had said, Louisa was of the opinion that Jasper sounded like walking sex and she desperately wanted to hear more.

Louisa angled her body towards the young man so that she could look more closely at him. She decided that, when his face wasn’t screwed up in pain, Jasper Hale was actually insanely hot. His blond hair stopped right before his shirt collar, but instead of looking scruffy, Jasper looked like the more attractive older brother of Heath Ledger in *A Knight’s Tale*. He had similar golden eyes to his sister’s, but his looked much less homicidal than hers, and therefore much more pleasant to look into.

“Social anxiety, introverted, or shy?” Louisa asked. Upon further reflection, this was probably not the best question you could ask someone who had any of those characteristics, but what was done was done.

“Neither, he just doesn’t like you.” Normally, Louisa would have found Rosalie’s constant interruptions rather sweet, in a weirdly protective sort of way, but it did make it difficult for any sort of flirtations to be exchanged.

Louisa didn’t even bother to look over at the girl. “I thought we already decided that Jasper can speak for himself, Miss Hale,” she said as she continued to observe Jasper. His body was lean and muscular, and the casual way he reclined in his chair reminded her very much of a lion. His posture was much too relaxed for him to be considered anxious. He was probably just introverted. Louisa could work with that. “So, Alaska, huh?” Louisa said, leaning back in her chair. “Are you from there originally?”

Rosalie gave an irritated huff. “Where else would we be from?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, Miss Hale, but I would have assumed that Jasper here hailed from the planet Babe.” Jasper pressed his lips together and looked down, his wavy blond hair obscuring his face. Louisa saw a silvery scar peeking out above the collar of his button front shirt. “Or Texas. I’m still undecided.” She could definitely imagine Jasper riding a horse.

The moment the words left her mouth, there was a change in the atmosphere. Rosalie still looked like she was considering throttling her, and Jasper continued to recline in his wooden chair like he was a Roman aristocrat at a dinner party, but the way the two watched her made Louisa’s skin prickle. They seemed far more interested in her glib comment than Louisa had anticipated.

“And what makes you say that we are from Texas?” Jasper asked, his voice still soft, almost hypnotic.

A small part of her brain was screaming at her to shut up, that she had said something very, very wrong. “Oh no, just you,” Louisa found herself saying. “Your, um, sister, isn’t from Texas.”

Was Louisa imagining it, or was there the sound of wood splintering coming from Rosalie’s direction?

Louisa could see that she had dug herself into a hole. She wanted to panic. She wanted to laugh and tell Jasper that she was just messing with him. She wanted to change the subject. But she also had the overwhelming desire to… impress Jasper? Yes, impressing the very attractive young man in front of her sounded incredibly appealing. “Your Spanish is unaccented. Hers isn’t.” Should she also tell him that she knew that Rosalie was married? Or that he should be careful the next time he worked with newborns so they don’t bite him?

No. She didn’t want to scare him. Not everyone was impressed with her deductions.

“I just study more than my sister,” Jasper replied with an easy grin.

Yes, that was definitely it. Jasper and his sister. They had lived in Alaska with their family.

Louisa nodded, her head swimming as if she had stood up too quickly.

Jasper resumed his lounging. “Tell us about your family?”

“I live with my father and my younger sister, Dorothy.” Dottie. Hadn’t something happened to Dottie today?

“Rosalie and I have younger siblings too. How old is she?” How could one man’s voice be so compelling? He sounded like walking sex.

“She’s fifteen. She’s a sophomore.”

Jasper’s smile was charming: it was small enough so as not to make him look deranged, but big enough to display what was either the result of good genetics or a skilled orthodontist. “How interesting. Edward and Alice are both sophomores. I wonder if they have any classes together.”

Edward. She knew that name. Had he been the one to upset Dottie? Louisa’s eyes slid to the blonde who was currently scowling at her brother. “Are you rude to everyone you meet, or just people who come in close contact with?” Louisa blurted out, shaking off the dazed feeling in her head.

Rosalie’s face contorted in anger, though she still somehow managed to make it look beautiful. “What are going on about?”

“You’re behaviour towards strangers, Miss Hale. I can’t really tell what your deal is. Maybe you are in a bad mood today, or maybe you are just overly protective of your family. All I know that you upset my sister this morning,” Louisa said, leaning forward so that she was facing Rosalie fully. “And like you, I don’t appreciate it when people mess with my family.”

Louisa didn’t have any proof that Rosalie was the one to upset Dottie, of course, but she had a funny feeling that it was the statuesque blonde before her that was the source of the morning’s drama.

Rosalie opened her mouth to respond, only to be cut off by Mrs Goff, who was calling attention to the class. Louisa gave the two Hale siblings a mock salute before slouching off back to her seat.

Louisa somehow made it through the rest of the day, though she had no real recollection of this happening. She vaguely remembered a massive guy in her English class whose bicep was the circumference of her head… Emmerson, or something. One of the odd Cullen bunch. It was hard to remember around the thick fog that had encompassed her after meeting Jasper the Babe™.
This in of itself was an odd occurrence, as Louisa never so easily distracted by attractive people. Petya, for instance, was conventionally handsome, and she had no problem whatsoever staying focused around him. Of course, Petya was a massive dork, so any attraction she could have felt had evaporated shortly after she had met him. Plus, she was pretty sure that he had a crush on Dottie.

It was sometime between Spanish and Gym, however, that the headache started. It wasn’t the worse she had ever experienced (that prize went to the one from falling off a cliff, but that’s a whole other story), but it was bad enough that it made reading incredibly difficult. It had begun as a small pinch behind her left ear and had spread with a bizarre warm, throbbing sensation to encompass the entire left side of her head.

When the dizziness started, however, Louisa was convinced she was dying. She’d had migraines in the past, but nothing to this extent. Maybe she was having a stroke?

By the time school was finally finished for the day, Louisa couldn’t even be bothered with having to drive home; she merely tossed her sister the car keys before climbing into the front passenger seat and tucking her head between her knees. Louisa ignored Dottie’s protests to driving in favour of taking deep breaths and not puking all over the floor mats.

Focus. Compartmentalise. Put the pain away.

She had met too many people today, obviously. She was just over stimulated.

“Are you unwell, Miss Collins?” A male’s voice came from outside of the car. Louisa sat up slowly to look out through the windscreen, where the semi-familiar form of Edward Cullen stood next to Dot. Edward was apparently the same age as Dot, though he towered over her by nearly a foot.

“Oh, hi there;” Dottie replied in shock. “I’m fine I suppose. It’s my sister. She’s not feeling well, I think, and she wants me to drive.”

“And that is a problem for you?” Edward asked, his head tilting like a confused puppy’s.

Dottie’s cheeks heated up. “Well, I don’t know how to drive,” she tried to explain, without sounding like a total loser. “I only just got my permit a few months ago.”

Edward nodded in understanding. “I see, you require assistance.”

Dottie’s eyes widened and she waved her hands in front of her. “No, that’s alright. I’m sure she just needs medicine or something.”

“You don’t even have medicine with you.” The girl in Dottie’s art class appeared next to Edward. Alice, if she recalled correctly. Her light brown eyes were squinted in concern. Where had she even come from? “If you can’t drive, and she’s unwell, you seem to be stranded here.”

Behind Alice stood what could only be her other siblings, each wearing an expression that ranged from confusion to outright anger. The tall blonde girl from the office was standing next to a big scary boy, a scowl etched onto her face. Big scary boy gave her a grin, though she wasn’t sure if it helped his appearance any. Behind them stood a blond boy, as if he were hiding behind his sibling. He shuffled from foot to foot, evidently uncomfortable by having to interact with a stranger. Somehow, the Cullen family had cornered her and some little part of her brain was informing her that it might be a good idea to get the heck away from them.

“I’m sure we can figure something out. I’ll just call my dad,” Dottie said, hoping that she didn’t look nearly as panicked as she felt. She took a step back, only to find her legs bumping into the
front of her car. Dottie glance back at her sister, who was sitting up and watching her through narrowed eyes. Why did Louisa have to choose now to be sick? Louisa was much better at dealing with people.

Alice gave Dottie a smile that was probably supposed to look sweet, but reminded Dottie more of a shark. “Nonsense. Jasper can drive you home.”

This seemed to surprise the last Cullen sibling just as much as it surprised Dottie. The boy with the wavy blond hair started when he heard his name and looked at his sister as if she had suggested he strip naked. “I can?”

“Yes, Jazzy,” Alice said slowly, as if she were addressing a toddler. “Rose can still drive Edward and I home, and Emmett can pick you up after you drop Dottie and her sister off. It will be fine.”

Every instinct was telling her to refuse them. But then Louisa slumped forward in the passenger seat, possibly unconscious.

That was how Dottie found herself in the backseat of their little Prius and giving a total stranger directions to her house. Louisa, if she had been coherent enough to understand what was happening, would have mentioned how this would either be the start of a horror movie or a really cheesy rom-com. But as it were, the oldest Collin sister had her eyes screwed tightly shut, with few thoughts in her head beside the immense pain she was in.

Well, there was one thought that occurred to Louisa, right after Jasper opened the passenger side door and picked her up, though she wasn’t entirely sure what it meant.

All she knew was that newborns didn’t have teeth.
Louisa Collins had a very lovely scent, Jasper decided as he gathered the sleeping girl into his arms. All humans smelled good, of course, but their scents usually awakened his homicidal side. Louisa, though smelled more like a bakery, instead of a cake; appealing, but not edible. It was a pleasant change from wanting to rip out his classmate’s throats and drink them dry. Jasper had almost thought he was cured of his bloodlust during Spanish when he spoke to the odd girl until Mrs Goff had walked by, and the familiar burn returned to his throat. It was incredibly easy to forget that the lithe blonde in his arms was actually human.

He also liked her emotions, tempestuous as they were, which were pure and alarmingly intense for a human. When Jasper had watched her argue with his adoptive sister, he could feel what she felt so strongly that it almost felt like they were his own, and he had sat, transfixed, by the beauty of them. He had regretted it immensely when he had to manipulate the girl’s emotions, but he had to know what she knew: he had to keep his family safe, and no matter how fascinating Louisa Collins was, she could not become a liability.

Louisa Collins was clever by half, he would give her that. Humans were often too distracted by their beauty to focus on their accents. Jasper ran through their conversation before her declaration again, recalling how he had only said two words. How had she been able to decipher his accent from that? And why not assume that he was from a Spanish speaking country? Something did not add up about Louisa, but Jasper wasn’t sure if he should investigate or stay as far away as possible from her.

The question was, of course, if he could even stay away from her. The unappealing blood, her entertaining wit, the devilish smile she had given him in Spanish… something had changed today, and he wasn’t sure if he would be able to fight it.

And Jasper had always had poor impulse control, as Rosalie was often quick to point out.

He glanced down at the blonde in his arms, whose emotions flowed out of her steadier than the Rio Grande after a good rain, even in sleep, and it was… well not beautiful, as she was in a whole lot of pain, but it was… refreshing (Jasper realised the irony of an empath not being able to identify his own emotions) if he had to choose a word. Her sister’s emotions were nowhere near as potent and had it not been for the tantalizing blood pumping through the little Collins’s veins, Jasper might even have forgotten that she was there.

Jasper carried Louisa to the front door and waited patiently for her sister to open the door and invite him in. She hurried along in front of him and showed him to Louisa’s room, which was surprisingly small. There was another scent in her room, beside her own, that was human and quite masculine. It most likely belonged to her father, as he had noticed it when he had walked through the house. Unless Louisa had a boyfriend, of course.

Jasper forced down the growl that was building in his chest and laid the sleeping girl down on her bed before he could crush her. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was disturbed by the thought of Louisa having a boyfriend, but upon further reflection, he realised that he definitely was. Which was ridiculous, seeing as he had no opinion on his classmate, other than her interesting emotions. Her mild scent was only a bonus.

He could hear Louisa’s sister fretting next to him, Emmett talking to him from the car parked in the driveway, birds singing from the trees outside. But it was her breaths, her heartbeat, that he was interested in that moment. He stood and watched her sleep and let her emotions wash over him and
her scent wrap around him. It was…

No. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. Because Louisa Collins was human and fragile and a liability to his family’s safety and her life was fleeting compared to his. Jasper gave his head a little shake and brushed by the littler Collins girl, who was just as human as her sister, and her blood much more compelling. He showed himself to the front door, ignoring the little one’s thanks.

Dottie wasn’t entirely sure what had happened, she just knew that she was relieved when Jasper finally left the house. Because, while that boy certainly was pretty, he was terrifying. It was the eyes, Dottie decided. They were just as dead looking as his siblings. She also wasn’t sure if she liked how Jasper had watched her older sister with those eyes either.

She watched from her bedroom window as the Cullen brothers pulled out of her driveway and speed off down the street at a speed much faster than most people would consider to be safe on wet pavement. But then again, the Cullen’s weren’t like most people. There was something off about that family, and Dottie would need to keep a close eye on them. Not that she really knew what to do, of course, as Lou was more the detective in the family. She wasn’t entirely sure what she could do if she did find out the Cullen’s secret. She was just fifteen, after all, and this wasn’t a *Harry Potter* book.

With a sigh, Dottie turned away from the window and considered what to do next. Lou was unconscious so there was little she would be able to do for her until she woke up. Homework didn’t sound all that appealing, but she had finished decorating her room last week and dinner wouldn’t have to be made for a few more hours at the very least. Netflix it was then.

Dottie grabbed her laptop from her desk and nestled herself on her bed under the fuzziest blanket she owned. It was rather cold in her room, now that she thought about it. She glanced back over to her window, wondering if she had opened it by accident, only to find it closed. Dottie selected *Stranger Things* before hopping out of bed to check the thermostat. The Wi-Fi was terrible in this new house, and Dottie knew that it would take a few minutes for the episode to load. She slipped her feet into her pink bunny slippers and trudged into the hallway. The thermostat read 68 degrees Fahrenheit, but it felt much colder, as if someone had left open the door on a windy day.

Jasper, she realised suddenly, had obviously forgotten to close the door. One more thing to not like about him. Dottie directed her steps down the stairs and through the kitchen, only to see that the door was shut.

Did she have a fever? Dottie ran the back of her hand over her forehead. Perhaps whatever Louisa had was contagious? But no, she didn’t feel sick, and she didn’t appear to be running a temperature.

The sound of crying jolted Dottie out of her musings. Louisa had woken up.

Dottie sprang into action, filling up a glass of water at the kitchen sink and grabbing the bottle of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet. She scurried towards her sister’s bedroom and pushed open the door, only for the crying to stop the moment her hand touched the knob. Dottie paused, confused. Was Louisa pretending that she was fine? It really wasn’t her sister’s personality to suffer in silence: if Louisa was sick, she made sure that everyone knew it. Dottie frowned and pushed open the door.

Only to find that Louisa was still fast asleep.

Confused, Dottie edged towards her sister, placing the glass of water and bottle of medicine down on the bedside table. She was positive that she had heard Louisa crying just moments earlier. Was she crying in her sleep?
Even as Dottie watched her sister, the crying started again from somewhere behind her. Dottie jumped and glanced towards the open bedroom door, before giggling to herself. It was probably her computer. She hadn’t paused the show and it had finished loading. Pleased that her mystery was solved, Dottie exited Louisa’s room keeping the door cracked if her sister needed her before heading towards her own bedroom. The crying had stopped and she could hear whispering coming from her bedroom.

She was probably two feet from her door when it slammed shut. Right before her eyes.

Dottie’s heart leaped to her throat and she blinked, trying to process what she had seen.

“What’s going on?” She slurred, shooting up into a sitting position. She was obviously in her room, but how did she get there? She remembered sitting in her car and then… Jasper the Babe?

Regardless of the fact that she had probably gotten to take a ride in his very toned arms, Louisa wasn’t sure how she felt about him seeing her so pathetic. Especially after she had chewed out his sister only a few hours before.

But all thoughts of Jasper had to put out of her head in order to deal with her distraught sister. Dottie was complaining about it being really cold in the house, which hardly seemed like a reason to wake her up. Something about doors closing too.

“You promised that this place wasn’t haunted!” Her sister complained in a register that was more suitable for calling dogs than human speech.

Of course it isn’t, Dorothy,” Louisa sighed, noticing the medicine that her sister must have laid out. She leaned forward and fumbled with the cap on the Tylenol bottle. “Ghosts don’t exist.”

“Doors don’t slam shut on their own,” Dottie snapped, as if this were definite proof of a haunting.

Louisa rubbed her forehead. “A window in your room was probably—”

“Aren’t you listening? I told you that my windows were closed!”

“Then there was a breeze that came from somewhere else. You’re being ridiculous.”

Dottie glared at her sister, which might have been intimidating, had she not been wrapped up tighter than a burrito in Louisa’s duvet. “And what about the woman crying?”

“You were watching a show on your computer. I’m sure that was what you heard.”

Dottie hopped off her sister’s bed, huffing in annoyance. “That wasn’t what I heard.”

Louisa flopped back down on her bed and pulled a pillow over her head. “Then you’re hallucinating. Check the carbon monoxide detector.”

Dottie leaned forward and ripped the pillow off Louisa’s head. “Why aren’t you taking me seriously?”
“Because I’ve got a wicked awful headache and you just woke me up with a stupid theory that our house is haunted. Now, if you are done, get out of my room.”

“I’m so telling Daddy,” Dottie snapped, though she stormed out nonetheless, making sure to slam the door behind her.

“Be my guest,” Louisa grumbled after her, far too exhausted to yell.

And tell their father she did, because, not even five minutes after the front door had opened, Mr Collins was walking into his eldest daughter’s room, asking what Dottie had meant about living in a ‘murder house’.

“Dottie’s exaggerating,” Louisa replied, her head still buried under her pillow.

“So there wasn’t a woman who was murdered in the house?”

She sighed and sat up. Obviously, nobody was going to let her sleep. “No, that part is true. She’s just acting like this was home base for a serial killer.”

Mr. Collin’s eyebrows shut up to his hairline. “So, naturally, this house has a mystery for you to solve. How convenient.”

“It would be, if I were planning on solving it,” she snapped.

Mr. Collins didn’t seem to be satisfied with this answer for some reasons and grounded Louisa by taking away her cell phone for a week. This was an inconvenience (she did use her phone as an alarm, after all), but a week without it wasn’t the end of the world. It was when she was handing the device over to her father, however, that Pyotr chose to text her and she ended up losing her phone for the rest of the month.

Dinner that night was an uncomfortable affair. Mr Collins tried to coax conversation out of his daughters by asking them about their days, but as Louisa’s headache still had yet to abate, Dottie was traumatised by a supposed ghost, and both sisters were giving the other the silent treatment, the atmosphere was tense. After eating, Dottie scurried off to her room to finish homework and Louisa was forced to clean the kitchen as part of her punishment.

“Break anything, Louisa Jane, and you won’t be seeing your phone until Christmas,” her father said after Louisa put away a plate with more force than necessary. “This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t been sneaking around.”

“I wasn’t sneaking anywhere! I made that promise after we bought the house and I haven’t gone back on it.”

“You could have told me at any time about the history of this house, yet you chose not to,” Mr Collins said in a voice that he often used with his most difficult clients. “But I am referring to the Yakovlev boy. I told you to stay away from him, Louisa.”

“And I have. I haven’t seen him in nearly two months.”

Mr Collins’s gaze was even as he watched his oldest child over the top of his glasses. “Do not play this game with me, Louisa. You will lose.”

“I’ve already lost my only friend, what more can you take from me?” Louisa snapped, throwing the rest of the cutlery into a drawer and slamming it shut.
Mr Collins’ face remained a smooth mask. “Would you like to try that again?” When Louisa scowled at him, Mr Collins sighed and pushed the chair next to him out from the table. “Please spare me the dramatics, Louisa, I’ve had a long day. Now come sit down.”

Louisa considered storming out of the kitchen but she knew things would only end up worse for her. Reluctantly, Louisa stalked over and threw herself into the chair next to her father, staring resolutely at the opposite wall.

“There is a reason I don’t want you talking to him, Lulu,” Mr Collins began, reaching up a hand to grab hold of his daughter’s chin and forcing her to look at him. “And it’s not because I want to make you miserable.” Louisa mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like ‘you could have fooled me,’ under her breath, and Mr Collins had to bite back a smile. Louisa might look a great deal like him, but that stubbornness was all Clara. “He’s not good for you, darling.”

“Seattle wasn’t his fault,” Louisa snapped, her grey eyes finally meeting his own. “You keep blaming him for something that was my idea and—”

“He didn’t stop you,” Mr Collins replied steadily, though his heart was constricting painfully at the sight of tears welling in his daughter’s eyes. “He enables your reckless behaviour, Louisa. Both of you could have died that day.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Louisa wailed, pulling away from father and burying her face in her arms on the table. When her shoulders started to shake with quiet sobs, Mr Collins pulled her to him and stroked her hair, letting her tears soak into his dress shirt.

When she had composed herself enough, Mr Collins pulled away so that he could look her in the eye. “The biggest reasons I want to separate you though is because the prosecution will almost definitely call him as a witness for the trial, and you can’t be discussing the trial with him.”

“We never talk about what happened though,” Louisa explained. Because, honestly, who wanted to talk about it? “And what does this even have to do with me?”

This was the moment Mr Collins had been dreading since he had arrived home. He had fully intended to show tell her when he had walked in, but he had been pounced on by Dottie and then Louisa had been her charming self, and it got pushed to the wayside in order to prepare dinner. He took his daughter’s shaking hands in his own and angled his body so he was facing her completely.

“I got a call from one of the prosecutors today, sweetheart.”

Louisa stared at him blankly. “What—”

“They think they have a strong enough case to take Lambe to trial,” Mr Collins explained quietly. “And the prosecution are considering calling you to testify.”

Louisa dropped the letter on the kitchen table as if it had burned her. “But I’m only sixteen! I thought minors couldn’t be called?”

He gave her tight smile. “Anyone can be called to testify, regardless of age,” he explained. “If they go to trial, they will most likely issue something call a subpoena, which will require you to attend the trial and tell them what you saw.” He wanted to say more, to try to give her as much information as he could so that she wouldn’t be afraid, but stopped when he noticed her bottom lip began to tremble. He reached out and pulled his daughter against his chest once more. “You’re not alone, darling. I’ll be there with you the whole time.”

“Not when I get on the witness stand,” she mumbled, her voice muffled by his shirt.
“No, you will have to do that by yourself,” he acquiesced.

“I’ll have to see him again, won’t I?”

“I wish there was something different I could tell you, darling.” God did he wish he could take away her pain. If it were up to him, he'd take the girls and go to Australia and never have to deal with any of these things again. If only life were that simple.

Later that night, after her father had gone to bed, Louisa sat at her desk in front of her bedroom window, her eyes unfocused. She tried not to focus on the smell of smoke, on the redness of the blood, on the taste of tears, because they weren’t important. She needed to focus on the facts, not the feelings. She remembered how she was tied up back-to-back with Petya, not how the ropes dug into her skin. She remembered how the gasoline was poured around them, not the coldness of the gasoline seeping through her shorts. She remembered the exact words Lambe said to her, pushing aside the terror that still welled up in her when she recalled his smile.

Only the facts were going to put that bastard in prison. And she wasn’t about to stop that from happening.
Blueberry-Banana Smoothies

Louisa had planned on thanking Jasper the very next day for helping her, she really had. But then she saw his beautiful face and humiliation flooded her veins at the thought of him seeing her so vulnerable and she never got around to it. Louisa instead chose to pretend like it never happened and Jasper at least had enough tact to realise that she didn’t want to talk about it. He still rarely spoke in class and she still shamelessly flirted with him, much to his sister’s ire.

Rosalie seemed to take it upon herself to protect her brother’s honour, and Louisa found much enjoyment in trying to get under her skin. The two girls had developed a reputation for arguing passionately over inane topics and roasting each other any chance they got, much to the amusement of the entire class. Neither girl ever got the upper hand in their squabbling: some days Rosalie won and others Louisa did, but the elder Collins found herself quite enjoying debating with the Hale sister. It had truly become the highlight of her day. Jasper the Babe being present was just a bonus.

When Louisa found out that they had homeroom together every morning (well, the entire junior class had homeroom together every morning, but Louisa rarely reached full functionality before 10 am), school even became enjoyable. Rosalie’s husband Emmett also seemed to find their arguments entertaining, as he had forced her to sit next to them in the mornings, just so he could get a front row seat to the action. He had lamented on more than one occasion that he had Spanish class with them, to which Jasper cheekily replied that he could have his spot.

Louisa wasn’t sure if Jasper or Emmett were actually her friends, but she certainly liked to pretend they were. She had made friends in Forks, of course, but she found that the Cullen kids were her favourite. Of course, Louisa wouldn’t go as far to say that she and Rosalie were even close to being friends, but she liked to believe that Rosalie was as fond of her as she was of Rosalie. It was always difficult to tell with the blonde.

In early October, Louisa found herself sitting in homeroom when three girls from the student body government marched in and asked for volunteers to help plan the Halloween dance. Louisa had never been to a school dance before, as her old school was all girls and dances without boys were lame, and was actually rather interested in the prospect. She knew realistically that the dance probably would be nothing like what she saw in movies, but she couldn’t help imagine dancing the night away with a handsome young man (who interestingly enough, looked suspiciously like Jasper) in a beautiful dress.

That didn’t mean she was any less surprised when she raised her hand and boldly volunteered herself. Rosalie was equally surprised when Louisa also volunteered her to help.

Rosalie let out an unladylike snort that would have horrified her mother if she had been alive. “When Hell freezes over,” she snapped, glaring at the irritating blonde. She kicked her husband in the shin when he began to chuckle at the girl’s antics and everyone in the room seemed to hold their breath in anticipation for the newest Collins–Hale showdown. Rosalie had to suppress an eye roll. The children were so easily amused.

Collins glanced at her and gave her a devilish grin. She whipped out her phone and, without breaking eye contact, said, “Hey Siri, what’s the temperature in Hell?”

“It’s pretty cold in Hell, Norway. -6.1 degrees.”

“Wow, I can’t believe that actually worked,” Collins replied in shock, staring down at her phone.
Emmett let out a booming laugh. “It looks like you’re helping out then, Rosie!”

Collins at least had the decency to look embarrassed. “I was just joking, Rosalie. You don’t have to do it.”

Rosalie had planned on saying that she wanted nothing to do with the stupid Halloween dance, but an odd feeling washed over her and she found herself strangely agreeing to it. The idiotic girl from student government looked surprised but wrote Rosalie’s name down with a shrug before eventually wandering out of the room. The second the door closed, the compliant feeling drained out of her and she turned to face her adoptive brother.

“Why would you do that?” She hissed. “You knew I didn’t want to join!”

“Relax, babe,” Emmett whispered in her ear. “You might even have fun.”

Rosalie sent both boys disgusted looks and leaned away from her husband. Collins kept sending Rosalie apologetic looks for the remainder of homeroom, and the moment they were dismissed, she leaped up alarmingly fast for a human and blocked Rosalie from making an escape.

“Rosalie, I can get you out of the planning committee, if you want,” Louisa said. She wasn’t sure how she would, but she was sure she could figure something out. If worst came to worst, she could always threaten to expose the student body president for cheating on her boyfriend with the captain of the tennis team.

“It’s fine, Louisa. She said that she wanted to do it,” Jasper said, offering a small smile at the girl.

Louisa, for once, didn’t seem receptive to him at all. “I believe Rosalie can speak for herself, Mr Hale,” she said with a frown. It was if they were in a weird twilight zone of their first Spanish class when Louisa turned to face his sister again, completely dismissing him from the conversation. He wasn’t really sure how to react. “Just say the word, and I can have you removed.”

Rosalie watched Louisa for a moment with a calculating look on her face. Jasper was surprised by the wide range of emotions that flitted through his sister, moving so fast he barely got a chance to process one before it disappeared and a new one manifested. “No, I’ll do it,” Rosalie said, much to his surprise. She glared at Emmett one last time then stormed off, hissing under her breath about not having sex for a week as she went.

Emmett looked unfazed by his wife’s reaction. “She’ll be fine.”

“It’s not something she decided,” Louisa replied, craning her neck so that she could look Emmett in the eye.

Emmett gave her an easy going smile. “Nobody makes Rose doing anything she doesn’t want to do.”

Louisa found her gaze shifting back over to Jasper. “She didn’t decide to help out.” She replied again. Surely he could see that? It was totally obvious to her that Rosalie hadn’t wanted to join the planning committee, and while Louisa couldn’t figure out why Jasper would know this, she knew that he did. “Her choice was taken away from her.”

Jasper wanted to say that they knew Rosalie much better than she did, but something about Louisa’s wording gave him pause. Her main emotion was disappointment of all things and her the look on her face was almost accusatory as if she thought that he was somehow responsible for Rosalie’s agreement. She was right of course, but how? He wanted to ask Louisa what she had meant, pry apart her mind and understand her, but pinned under the gaze of her piercing grey eyes,
his mind was strangely blank. And then Louisa was spinning on her heel and storming off, just as Rosalie had, disappearing into the crowd of students.

The two brothers stood in stunned silence for a moment. Emmett watched the Collins girl’s blonde head as it wove through the throng of students on their way to first period, his eyes narrowed. “Do you think she knows?” he asked his brother in a voice too quiet for human ears to hear.

Jasper found himself gnawing on his bottom lip in concern. Her emotions never read as being afraid of them at any point, and wouldn’t that be the appropriate response after discovering one’s classmates were members of the undead? “I don’t think so,” he replied. But it wouldn’t hurt to have Edward keep a closer eye on her in any event.

No Stone Left Unturned

Rosalie regretted agreeing to the dance committee exactly 0.8 seconds after the meeting was called to order. She counted. And Collins didn’t even have the decency to at least sit near her so that she could have someone to bitch to.

“So,” the preppy redhead whose name Rosalie never bothered to learn said, clapping her hands together. She was standing confidently at the front of Mr Hewitt’s chemistry classroom which they had commandeered for the afternoon, brandishing a marker to the dry erase board like a conductor’s baton. “I think the first thing we need to do is introduce ourselves. That way we can build a sense of trust. I’ll start. I’m—” Rosalie tuned the girl out and shot a dark look at Collins. It was her fault that she was here, after all. At least Collins looked as annoyed as she was at the small talk. Rosalie rolled her eyes when it was her turn to introduce herself. As if she actually cared about getting to know these children. They would all be dead in a few decades anyway.

“Now, I was thinking we could call it ‘A Night to Remember,’ and—”

Rosalie sighed. This was as excruciating as she thought it would be. She really should have taken Collins’ out when it was offered to her.

“What is this? High School Musical 3?” Collins asked, unable to control her laughter. “It’s a bit cliché, don’t you think?”

“It’s also the name of a movie from 1958,” Rosalie supplied, watching Collins with a calculating look. “It’s about the Titanic sinking if I remember correctly.”

Collins pointed at Rosalie as if this somehow proved her point. “See, it would be a terrible name. Nobody would want to come to the dance.”

Annoyed titters filled the room at this, many of the girls turning glare at her. The redhead called for silence and watched Collins with narrowed eyes. “What do you suggest then?”

Louisa was quiet for a moment as multiple scenarios ran through her head. “Well, it’s a Halloween dance, right? Why not make it about Halloween? We can have a ‘pretty’ dance any time of year.”

The committee president regarded Louisa with pursed lips. “I see where you are coming from Louisa, but we want people to come to the dance. We need to choose a theme that won’t exclude anyone.”

When the group muttered in agreement, Louisa turned glace at the only silent member of the room. “Rosalie, when was the last time you went to a school dance?”

“Never,” Rosalie replied.
Louisa grinned and shifted in her seat so her knees were tucked underneath of her. “Why not?”

“I never saw the point. If you’ve been to one school dance, you’ve been to them all.”

“Exactly!” Louisa cried triumphantly, turned back to face the president. “Look, you want the dance to be a night for people to remember, right? Then the dance actually needs to be memorable. If it’s different, then people might actually come.”

All of the members of the planning committee were quiet as they watched their leader debate with the newest member. “What exactly do you have in mind then?”

Rosalie found herself actually interested in what Collins might suggest, and sat forward in her seat. The girl’s eyes had a glazed look to them while she thought, totally unaware that most of the room was waiting on bated breath for her reply. She looked relaxed and in her element as her mind ran a thousand miles an hour.

“A Halloween themed dance. Everyone wears a costume and there can be prizes awarded for the best ones. We’ll need a photo booth. Everybody loves those things. We need to have awesome food. And the decorations have to be awesome. Finally, we’ll need an activity for us to do. I suggest a haunted house,” Collins said, hopping off her chair and joining the redhead at the front of the room. She grabbed a marker and began scribbling on the dry erase board, drawing out a crude diagram of the school gym and mapping out where things could go. The redhead slowly sat down in Collins’ abandoned seat, content to watch this play out.

“That sounds fun and all, Louisa,” Emily, the committee’s treasurer interjected. “But we have a budget of five hundred dollars. There is no way we could possibly do all of that.”

Collins seemed unfazed by this. “Okay, strike the food. The football team will either eat it all within the first fifteen minutes or nobody will eat anything and we will have food waste. Totally not economical.” She drew crossed out what was probably supposed to be a table that had been labelled ‘food’. “What else?”

“We would also need actors for a haunted house, so unless it’s done by the theatre department, parents would probably end up doing it,” a sophomore sitting in the front row pointed out.

“That would be so lame,” a girl (who Rosalie was pretty sure had been in her gym class) said. Rosalie found herself agreeing: while loved Carlisle and Esme, even she had to admit that she wouldn’t want to see her adoptive parents at a school dance. In the off chance that she ended up going, of course. “Does it have to be a haunted house?”

The planning committee went quiet while each member tried to think of something. “What do you think Rosalie?” the redhead replied. “Anything to add?”

Rosalie was used to people staring at her, but there was something unnerving and a little… empowering about having people wait to hear what she thought. Rosalie could suddenly see why Collins seemed to like being at the centre of everything. “Well,” she began, straightening up in her seat and trying to think of something that scared her. Not many things, in all honesty. She was a vampire after all. “I don’t know how it would work, but my brothers like to play this video game.” For some reason, her eyes flicked over to Collins, as if she somehow needed the girl’s approval. “It’s basically a glorified version of hide and seek.”

“Like manhunt?” A girl who looked way too young to even be in high school asked curiously.
Rosalie thought back to the horrifically gory game. She wasn’t sure what manhunt was, but Jason was tracking down counsellors to murder in *Friday the 13th* which she guessed technically qualified as a manhunt. “Sure.”

A boy raised his hand, trying to get the attention of the now excited committee. “I hate to be that person, but I’m sure there is a rule about students staying in the gym during dances.”

“You think or you know?” Collins asked. “Does anyone have the school rulebook on hand?” there was a flurry of movement while the committee scrambled to produce a copy. Someone found the book and they tossed into Rosalie’s lap and commanded her to read through it.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything,” Rosalie said, flicking through it quickly.

“Did you even bother to read it?” A boy with an alarming amount of acne called out, his voice laced with irritation.

“Rosalie’s a fast reader,” Collins replied quickly. “You should see her in class. It’s impressive. So there is no rule that says we can leave the gym?”

“The teachers might still say it’s a liability and shut the game down. They wouldn’t want any student falling or getting lost in the woods,” a tall sophomore with glasses pointed out. Angela something.

“We can stay in the school,” gym class girl replied. “And everyone who plays can wear a glow bracelet or something.”

Rosalie observed Collins as she sat on the teacher’s desk and watched the committee debate the logistics of the Halloween dance. She had first assumed that the girl wanted to be the centre of attention, but there was something wrong about that. Her body language screamed that she was content with just sitting back and watching everything unfold. Her face was blank as she surveyed the students, listening to what they had to say and adding comments when the group’s conversation started to stray off topic.

Rosalie had the sudden realisation that Collins reminded her a lot of Jasper. She knew how to work a crowd in a way that was almost alarming: whenever people got too far from what she wanted, she would redirect them in a way that made it seem like it was their idea. She knew exactly what to say to get people to do what she wanted. Collins was like a puppeteer, commanding her marionettes to do her bidding with a single flick of her wrist. It was simultaneously horrifying and fascinating to watch.

“So what will be our theme?” The redhead asked, who, even though she was supposed to be leading the meeting, now seemed content to allow Collins take over.

A grin spread across the Collins’ face. “Well, I was thinking something along the lines of ‘A Night to Dismember.’”

No Stone Left Unturned

She had actually volunteered to be paired up with Rosalie when assignments were given out. She was now questioning her sanity. It started off when Rosalie insisted that they leave for Port Angeles at 7 am. On a Saturday. Something about needing to catch the ferry to Victoria. Honestly, she had shut down the second she had heard the time she was being picked up.

Louisa had tried to stumble through her morning routine, which was made infinitely more difficult
with the convenient addition of one of her debilitating headaches. Her father almost hadn’t let Louisa leave the house and only acquiesced when she assured him that she wouldn’t be the one driving. The pain was so bad that Louisa didn’t eat breakfast because she was so afraid she might vomit in Rosalie’s car.

Which was about as appealing as an open heart surgery without anaesthetics.

She wasn’t able to completely shake off her dad’s concern, though, and he made her a doctor’s appointment for the next day. “You’ve been having these headaches for a while now. That’s not normal,” Mr Collins said after he got off the phone.

“You worry too much,” Louisa grumbled, too tired to lift her head from where it rested on the kitchen table.

“I’m your father,” Mr Collins replied dryly, setting down a glass of water and a bottle of pain reliever in front of her. “It’s my job to worry.”

Louisa tried to smile, but even that hurt and it turned into more of a grimace.

“Maybe I should go with you. I don’t know if I like you crossing the border without me.”

“Rosalie’s mom was coming with us,” Louisa sighed, taking a sip of water. “It’s hard to cause an international catastrophe with adult supervision.”

“That’s never stopped you before,” Mr Collins deadpanned. “Isn’t there somewhere closer you could go?”

“Rosalie said that her sister was able to find what we wanted in Tacoma,” Louisa replied. “Seattle was also an option, but you wouldn’t have let that happen.”

Mr Collins pursed his lips in annoyance. “Do you at least have your passport?”

Louisa hummed in confirmation, too nauseous to nod. “And I’ll exchange some money when I get there. It’ll be fine, Dad.”

The second reason that proved that Louisa was insane to agree to go with Rosalie occurred when the Cullen’s black Mercedes (because of course) slid into their driveway. Louisa was able to quickly make her escape with Rosalie after her and her mother knocked on the front door, but Mr Collins trapped Mrs Cullen in one of those boring adult conversations where they exchanged inane small talk.

“What do you reckon they are talking about?” Louisa asked after sliding into the back seat of the car.

“Your father thinks you’re falling apart,” Rosalie replied from the passenger seat without bothering to turn around. “If you hurl in this car, I’ll make sure nobody will find your body.”

“Duly noted,” Louisa replied. This promise became very difficult to keep, however, when it turned out that Mrs Cullen shared the same proclivity as her adoptive sons for speeding. Louisa would have asked Mrs Cullen to slow down, but the reality of vomiting had become too real a possibility for her to open her mouth. She was extremely relieved when they reached Port Angeles, even if it was nearly an hour sooner than it would have been, had Louisa been driving. But the pain reliever was finally starting to kick in when the boarded the ferry and by the time Mrs Cullen had dropped them off at the mall with the instructions to meet her at the botanical gardens in four hours, Louisa almost felt human again. Modern medicine was a marvelous thing.
The two teenagers got to work scouting out Halloween decorations. As they filled the trolley with supplies for the dance, Louisa began to wonder exactly why they had needed to come all the way to Canada. Sure, there was a lovely selection of products, but it wasn’t anything they couldn’t find at a store much closer to home.

Louisa came to the conclusion that Rosalie’s sister was weird. When she voiced this aloud, Rosalie merely shrugged and agreed.

It was nearing dinner time by the time the two finished, and Louisa realised that she hadn’t eaten all day. She still felt too nauseous to eat, but after Rosalie snapped and replied that she wasn’t about to carry Louisa when she fainted, she allowed Rosalie to push her into a nearby smoothie shop while the taller blonde went to put their shopping in the car. When Rosalie returned, the two headed off in the direction of the botanical gardens silently, as neither girl knew each other well enough to feel comfortable having a conversation.

“Hey, sugar,” a greasy looking young man called out as they passed by him and his group of friends. They were lined up against a wall of a building, leaning against it and smoking, as if they were trying and failing rather spectacularly in an imitation of the T-birds from *Grease*.

Rosalie appeared totally unfazed by this and kept walking as if she were completely used to being catcalled. And the sad thing was, she probably was used to it. This realisation made Louisa’s blood boil, and though she knew Rosalie could fight her own battles, Louisa felt strangely compelled to tell the idiotic boys off.

“Ignore them, Collins,” Rosalie hissed quietly, reaching down to grab Louisa by the wrist when she saw the human’s steps falter slightly.

Louisa glanced up at Rosalie, surprised at the sudden contact. To a casual observer, the grip probably didn’t look like much, but Rosalie was gripping her wrist so tightly that Louisa was actually concerned that her wrist might break, and she could feel minute tremors shaking through her. Rosalie was apparently a lot more upset by the men than she was letting on.

“If you want to take a break from babysitting, sugar, I’d be happy to show you a good time.”

She wasn’t sure if it was his words or the terror that flooded through Rosalie’s violet eyes that set her off. Louisa halted mid-step and spun to face the ringleader of the wannabe greasers.

“Fuck off, jackass,” she yelled, tossing her half-finished smoothie at him. The lid popped off the cup and the thick blue beverage arched so perfectly, it was like something you would see in a movie, before the greasers were covered in it. There was a heartbeat where everyone stopped to process what had just occurred.

Then Rosalie, still gripping Louisa, took off so fast that she nearly dislocated Louisa’s shoulder.

It didn’t take long for the greasers to recover, but by the time they had, Rosalie had already whipped them around the corner and into a nearby shop. The girls crouched next to the storefront window and watched as the smoothie covered boys thundered by, swearing loudly.

“What the actual hell, Louisa!” Rosalie snapped as they caught their breaths. “Why would you do that?”

Louisa had no good explanation for her actions. “Your guess is as good as mine,” she panted. “I’m just as surprised as you are.”

Rosalie rose from her crouch and glared down at Louisa, her golden eyes flashing with annoyance.
“You’re a lunatic.”

Louisa shrugged her shoulders and straightened up as well. “I never claimed I wasn’t.”

Rosalie pursed her lips in what appeared to be an effort not to laugh. At least, that’s what Louisa wanted to believe. “Are you ready to run again?”

She grinned up at the girl in front of her, heart still beating with adrenaline, and feeling more alive than she had in months. “I’m ready when you are.”
Faulty Wiring

The universe didn’t want to let her sleep, Louisa decided. Everybody knew Sundays were for sleeping in. Her dad must not understand this though because her doctor’s appointment was scheduled for nine in the morning. Why people thought it was acceptable to wake up before nine every day was beyond her. What was so important that it couldn’t be done at later, anyway?

Sunday also saw the return of her headache, which only served to make her more irritable and grouchy. Not even looking at the gorgeous face of Dr Cullen could fix that. He kept shining a light in her eyes and telling her to follow it. She considered snatching up his light and tossing it out the window, but she didn’t think that would go over well.

“And you’ve had these headaches for about a month, now?” Dr Cullen asked, opening up an official-looking folder. “Have you had any changes in your mood or behaviour?”

Louisa looked over at her dad, who rolled his eyes. “She’s been more emotional lately—”

“Have not.”

“But nothing that I would consider abnormal.”

“What do you think, Louisa? You’re with yourself more than your father is,” Dr Cullen asked. “Do you find yourself losing your temper often? Or do you cry more than you used to?”

Louisa tried to think back but found it rather difficult. “I threw my smoothie at a group of boys yesterday,” she replied. At her father’s heavy sigh, she realised that this probably wasn’t the best thing to admit in front of your father. Particularly after you had promised not to cause any problems. “They were asking for it,” she added, as if this somehow made it better.

“Yes,” Dr Cullen replied, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “My daughter told me about that.” He pulled on a pair of exam gloves and stepped forward to feel the sides of her neck.

“You should remind her that snitches get stitches,” Louisa grumbled. She tilted her head side to side when directed, the slight movement making her stomach roll.

Her father gave her a short rebuke, but the doctor seemed to find her comment funny. “Your file indicated that you have lost some weight. Was this intentional?”

This was news to her but it made sense, considering how nauseous she had been lately. She told the doctor this much. He hid it well, but Louisa could tell that he didn’t like her answer. He stepped backward and scribbled a note into her file. “And your memory, how has it been?”

Louisa had been about to give a witty retort about how she wouldn’t be able to give a reliable answer if her memory was bad, but it died on her tongue.

Refuses to make eye contact. Increasing distance. Concerned about something.

“But that I’m aware of,” Louisa said, her head tilting slightly as she observed Dr Cullen. “You think I have a brain tumour, don’t you.” She wasn’t sure how she knew this, but if felt correct. Her father made spluttering sounds from the chair next to her, but she didn’t feel like trying to interpret them.

Dr Cullen turned his head slowly, his eyes narrowed. “The thought crossed my mind,” he replied
hesitantly. He held her gaze for a moment as if waiting for something. “It could be a number of things, but the nystagmus has me concerned. I am going to order a CT scan. We won’t know if there is a problem until we can get a look inside of your brain.”

Louisa found herself trotting off after her father towards the radiology wing.

“I had that MRI done a few months ago,” she stated to her worried looking father. “They didn’t say anything then. Brain tumours don’t grow that quickly, right?”

Her father gave her a tight smile. “Right.” He had no clue; he was a lawyer. His agreement was all he could do to set his and his daughter’s mind at ease, though.

“Yes,” Louisa whispered to herself. She reached forward and caught her father’s shirt sleeve and fought the urge to bite her nails.

Mr Collins looked down at his daughter and tucked her under his arm. If he didn’t want it to be a brain tumour, it couldn’t be, right? He didn’t know what he would do if she was sick. He tightened his grip on his daughter’s shoulders. She would be alright. She had to be. He led them to a pair of uncomfortable looking chairs after signing into radiology.

There was a lot of sitting around despite being the only two people in the waiting room, Louisa thought. She flipped through an out of date *Time* magazine, trying to compartmentalise her feelings. Panicking never helped anything, and if she really did have a brain tumour, there was nothing she could do about it at the moment. After having x-rays shot into her head, she was shuffled over to the lab to have her blood drawn.

“Do you need me to come back with you?” Her father asked when she was called back.

“I’m not Dottie,” Louisa scoffed.

“So, yes?”

Louisa didn’t respond and stomped off after the nurse, resolutely ignoring her father’s chuckles as he rose to follow after her. Louisa tossed herself into the chair and rolled up her sleeves.

The phlebotomist was a young man with dark brown hair and incredible cheekbones. He looked up at Mr Collins in surprise but didn’t ask why he was present. He probably saw a lot of teenagers who were afraid of needles in his job.

At least that’s what Louisa wanted to think.

Louisa tried to focus on anything besides what the man in front of her was doing. There was a poster of a kitten hanging on a tightrope that said ‘hang in there!’ and a picture of a dog wearing dentures, but neither of these things helped her relax. Especially when the phlebotomist found her vein. She tried to think of happy thoughts, like how nice Jasper’s ass looked in his jeans on Friday, but she still jumped when she felt the prick of the needle.

“You should definitely propose to her,” Louisa said to the phlebotomist after he placed a Band-Aid on the crook of her arm.

The man jumped in shock, nearly dropping the vials containing her blood. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t be,” Louisa replied. She hopped out of the chair and was pleased that she didn’t faint as she left the lab. She did hate it when her dramatic exists were ruined.
There was more sitting around after this as Dr Cullen took his sweet time to join them. Louisa occupied her time by attempting to deduce the other occupants in the waiting room, much to her father’s annoyance. As if it was somehow Louisa’s fault that one of the nurses had a gambling addiction or a sallow-skinned patient in the corner was an avid swimmer. Mr Collins simply ignored her offer to include him in the game.

“Well, the good news,” Dr Cullen said, sitting down on a metal stool in front of her, an open file resting across his lap, still somehow managing to look like a model. “Your CT scans looked completely normal, and though your blood sugar levels are low, it is nothing I am concerned about.”

“So, it’s not a brain tumour?” Mr Collins asked. When Dr Cullen nodded, he let out a sigh of relief and slumped forward in his chair.

“And the bad news?” Louisa asked.

Carlisle turned to face the girl in front of him. Her face wasn’t clenched in pain like it was earlier, but she still didn’t look comfortable. “I have no idea what it is.” He admitted. “I would like to test you for seizures, as soon as possible.”

Migraines could be ruled out, based off what she described, but for the life of him, he could think of what type of condition would give her such odd symptoms: debilitating pain, sensitivity to light, shaking eyes, neck stiffness, nausea… the list went on. He had been practicing medicine for two centuries (okay, 238 years, but who’s counting), and couldn’t recall a single text that described all that she was experiencing.

Unless it wasn’t natural.

She had described having headaches when she was in large groups of people, so perhaps she was telepathic? Carlisle had only met one mind reader that was human but Edward had been dying of a fever at the time, which didn’t give him much to go off of. Both from what he had observed himself and anecdotes from his children, Carlisle knew that Louisa often said things that were too close to the truth. If she wasn’t reading minds, her ability to guess what other people were thinking was uncanny. Luckily, living with Edward meant that Carlisle knew a few tricks in dealing with those gifted with telepathy.

*Are you reading my mind, Louisa?* He asked the girl, watching her closely.

Her eyes were unfocused as she stared at the jar of cotton buds on the counter behind him, but she gave no indication that she could hear him. Well, Edward had said that he didn’t think Louisa could read minds, and wouldn’t his son know? She was probably just observant, Carlisle concluded. More observant than he felt comfortable with if he was honest.

Carlisle discussed their options with her father a few minutes, explaining how he would like to have an MRI done, instructed Louisa to take acetaminophen the next time she experienced a headache before excused himself from the room and set off towards his office. He wasn’t sure what to make of Louisa Collins: His children seemed to think well of her, if perhaps a bit odd, and he found himself having to agree.

If nothing else, she certainly presented a medical mystery. Carlisle just hoped Esme wouldn’t mind too terribly that he would be shutting himself in his office to figure it out.

No Stone Left Unturned
The next day, Louisa somehow managed to beat both Rosalie and Jasper to their table in Spanish. She wasn’t sure why she found this so interesting but she didn’t question it, choosing instead to spread out her class notes over the table. She was fairly certain that there would be a pop quiz today and she wanted to make sure she got the appropriate amount of questions wrong: too many incorrect and Mrs Goff would berate her for ‘not applying herself’; too many correct and Mrs Goff would insist on moving her up a level. Honestly, Mrs Goff needed to mind her own business. Pushy teachers were the worst.

“How was your appointment?” Rosalie asked, gracefully throwing herself into her seat. She shoved Louisa’s notes out of the way with a disgruntled look.

Louisa had to admit that she admired Rosalie’s straightforward personality. “Your father didn’t say?”

Rosalie rolled her eyes. “That would be illegal. All I know is that he said ‘I have a lot to think about,’ and locked himself in his office.”

“Well, I’m not dead,” Louisa offered.

“Let’s keep it that way,” Rosalie snapped, pulling her backpack into her lap and digging around for something. “Jasper would be quite bent if you kicked the bucket.” Jasper, who had finally arrived, widened his eyes in shock before turning to glare at his sister.

Louisa grinned at the blondes. “It’s okay to say that you would miss me, Rosalie. I don’t mind.” Rosalie rolled her eyes, but Louisa could see a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. Louisa made eye contact with the Babe and gave him a wink. “You can miss me too, Jasper.”

“Thank you for the permission, ma’am.”

Mrs Goff called the class to order, and after a brief pop quiz and a lecture, she passed out worksheets to complete by the end of class. Jasper snatched in up and began working on it immediately, ignoring Louisa when she reminded him that they were supposed to do it as a group. His fountain pen flew across the page, answering the questions in his neat cursive.

“Please,” Rosalie scoffed. “It’s not like any of us need the practice.”

When she didn’t say anything else, Louisa furrowed her brows in confusion. “So, are we just going to sit here and stare at each other?”

Rosalie’s head tilted, eyes narrowing as she watched Louisa. “Are you going to the dance with anyone?”

“While I’m flattered by your interest, I do think Emmett would be upset with the arrangement.” Jasper the Babe let out a soft chuckle at this, and Louisa’s stomach swooped in happiness.

Rosalie kicked Jasper’s chair. “So that’s a no then?”

“The dance was announced a few days ago, Rosalie. I haven’t had time to find a date,” Louisa explained, her confusion growing. Sure, Rosalie and she were almost friends, but Louisa hadn’t thought that they were close enough to discuss things like this. The blonde had to be planning something: only a few weeks ago, the two had been at each other’s throats. What was Rosalie’s endgame?

Or was there no agenda in her questioning and this was the type of things that sort-of friends discussed, and Louisa had somehow failed to pick up on this all along? Her friends at her old
school never asked her about her date to dances, but then again, she had been pretty vocal on her refusal to attend them. Perhaps this was normal and Louisa had simply been excluded from the girl talk? There didn’t have to be plots within plots everywhere. Maybe Louisa had just conditioned herself to look for hiding meanings in everyone’s words for too long and had forgotten how people acted.

“Good. You can go with Jasper then.”

Jasper’s pen snapped in half, spraying the three of them in blue ink.

Nope, Louisa definitely wasn’t crazy. But apparently, Rosalie was. Rosalie, defender of Jasper’s virtue and honour, who glared at girls that dared to glance at her brother, was suggesting that she go to a dance with him? Louisa wondered if this was some sort of test and Rosalie was trying to gauge Louisa’s loyalty to her, but for the life of her, she couldn’t figure out what the test was. Was Rosalie somehow trusting Louisa with her brother, or was she trying to decide if Louisa was only befriendning her to get close to her brother?

Body angled towards her, interested in the answer. Eyes narrowed in either hostility or concentration. Hands spread across the table in confidence: delicate hands, hands of a pianist, hands of a mechanic. Results, inconclusive.

Rosalie had information that she didn’t, and there was only one correct response that Louisa could give.

Louisa noticed her heart rate accelerating, anxiety slowly starting to flood her veins. She suddenly felt like she was teetering on the edge of a precipice, and one wrong step would send her tumbling to her death. A familiar itch appeared behind her left ear, spreading faster than it had ever before. Pressure began to build in her head, but Louisa refused to blink. Blinking in front of Rosalie could be very dangerous, though she had no idea why.

Focus. What does she want?

“Rosalie, enough,” Jasper snapped, his voice harsh. He thrust a handkerchief at Louisa though he kept his glare fixed firmly on his sister. They seemed to be having a conversation, though Louisa wasn’t sure that they were even exchanging words.

Louisa picked up the handkerchief with shaking hands and lifted it to her face to dab away the ink that had splattered across it. It had a warm, smoky smell to it that Louisa couldn’t quite describe yet found herself enjoying. It reminded her of sunny, open fields; sheets drying on a clothesline; wrap around porches with a farm dog resting on the front stoop; vegetable gardens and horses; gunpowder, smoke, yelling, and so much blood.

“What’s going on here?” Mrs Goff asked. Louisa had never felt so relieved to be interrupted by the stern woman. Mrs Goff surveyed the Hale twins, before turning her attention on Louisa, her eyes widening in surprise. “Miss Collins, would you like to go to the nurse?”

Louisa pulled the handkerchief away and was surprised to find the white cotton stained blue and red. It was her blood. From her nose. Her nose was bleeding. Blood was not good. She found herself nodding, simultaneously lightheaded and feeling like her head was about to burst from the pressure. Louisa stood from her seat and allowed a concerned classmate lead her from the room.

Louisa told her father about the headache. She didn’t tell him about the nosebleed. She probably
should have; it was a new symptom, after all, but she just… didn’t. She was permitted to leave school early either way and spent the most of the afternoon napping. At some point, Louisa heard Dottie slip into the house, though she wasn’t entirely sure how her sister had gotten home.

The sound of Dottie crying made Louisa sit up in bed, the sound distant with a metallic echo to it. Okay, that last bit didn’t make much sense, but Louisa was finding it difficult to focus on anything besides the pain in her left temple. Throwing back her blankets, Louisa stumbled out of bed and towards her bedroom door, following the sound of Dottie’s sobs.

Clouds of condensation left Louisa’s mouth as she entered the hallway and shuffled towards Dottie’s room, the crying becoming louder the closer she got. Louisa threw open her sister’s door, the door banging loudly against the wall. The crying stopped, and as Louisa surveyed the room, she noticed that she was completely alone.

“Lou?”

Louisa jumped at the sound of her name and spun to face the person, only to find it was her sister.

“Lou! You’re covered in blood!” Dottie exclaimed.

Louisa glanced down at herself, only to find that her blouse was indeed covered in dried blood. She had forgotten to change when she came home. “Oh, yeah,” she replied lamely. “Don’t tell Dad.”

Dottie watched her sister in concern. “Lou, is everything alright?”

Louisa waved her hand and turned away from her sister to inspect the room again. There was a stack of notebooks on the desk next to an open textbook and a framed family photo. The purple bedspread was pulled up to the pillows, untouched since it was made this morning. “Where is your laptop?”

“It’s downstairs, I was working on an essay,” Dottie replied. She grabbed her sister’s arm and forced her to turn around, taking in the sight of Louisa’s pale face. Her pupils were dilated and she was shivering. “What’s wrong?”

“I heard crying. Was that you?”

Dottie’s eyes widened in shock. This wasn’t normal for Louisa. She was clearly awake, and she seemed lucid enough. Was she hallucinating? She pulled her sister closer and felt her forehead for a fever. “No, it wasn’t me.”

Louisa pushed her hands away and stumbled further into her room. “I heard a woman crying. Did you hear anything?”

“No, it’s just the two of us,” Dottie replied, trying to steer her sister back into her own bedroom.

The lights overhead flickered, causing both teenagers to jump in surprise. They watched in morbid fascination as the lights pulsed once, twice, three times, before going out completely. Weak daylight from the outside was still filtering through the window, but the room felt off, as if it were somehow colder.

“A circuit probably flipped,” Louisa explained when Dottie shot her a confused look. “Do you know where the circuit breaker is?”

Dottie trotted after her sister downstairs to the kitchen, where Louisa yanked open the closet where the washing machine and dryer were kept. She watched as her sister clambered on top of the dryer
and flipped open the circuit breaker, running a finger along the rows of switches.

“It all looks fine,” Louisa said after a moment. She slid off the appliance and turned to face her sister. “It’s probably just some faulty wiring. Old houses have those sorts of problems. I can call Mrs Cullen to see what she says about the electricity if you want.”

When Dottie nodded, Louisa walked over to the kitchen table where she had tossed her backpack earlier and rifled through it before emerging with her cell phone in hand. She had her sister read Mrs Cullen’s number to her, which had been taped to the refrigerator. There were two rings before the call was dropped. Louisa pulled her cell phone away from her ear and stared at it in confusion. Sure, the reception in Forks sucked, but it wasn’t that bad. She redialed, only for the call to be dropped again.

“The, um, cell phone towers must be doing some maintenance?” The excuse sounded weak to her own ears, and Louisa could tell that her sister was not satisfied with the response.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Dottie snapped. “Try it a—“

The sound of a sobbing woman cut her off and the two sisters stared at each other in horror. It began in the next room until the keening rose to such a pitch that it sounded like it was surrounding them. A shiver went down Louisa’s spine and she felt her sister take a step closer to her. The woman sounded like she was in agony as if she had lost someone she loved dearly. The woman sounded… exactly like her father had when the police officers told him that his wife and son had died. She could hear Dottie let out a sob of her own as she reached over to grab onto Louisa’s sleeve.

“Did you leave anything on?” Louisa hissed, pulling Dottie behind her so that she was in between her sister and the family room. She backed up until Dottie was sandwiched between her and the stove. Louisa could feel her sister shake her head as it rested between her shoulder blades. “All of the windows and doors are locked?”

“I locked the front door when I came home,” Dottie whispered. The crying was so loud now that Louisa could barely hear her sister’s reply.

Louisa swivelled her head around, trying to find the source of the sound. There had to be something. There always was a logical explanation. If only she didn’t have this damn headache and she could just think.

She glanced down at her cell phone, which had a banner across the screen that read ‘no service’. “Where is your cell phone?”

“I left it in the family room.” Right where the crying had originated from. There was no way in hell Louisa was going to let her sister go in there.

Louisa reached around Dottie until her hand connected with the knife block. She drew out the bread knife and brandished it before her as if it were a broadsword and not a flimsy kitchen utensil in desperate need of sharpening. “Stay here,” she commanded before pulling away from Dottie, despite her sister’s best efforts to make her stay. She tried to make her movements appear more confident, to at least act that she wasn’t terrified for Dottie’s sake, but even Louisa could not pretend that something wasn’t wrong. She put one foot in front of the other, inching towards the arch that separated the two rooms. Then she stepped over the threshold.

The sobbing ceased at once, with only the sounds of the sisters’ ragged breathing filling the eerie silence.
Louisa wasn’t sure what she had expect to find, but as she looked around the room, she could see that it was devoid of distressed women. She glanced back at her sister with a confused look, as if wondering if they had experienced some sort of dream, or perhaps a form of *folie à deux*. Dottie’s bloodless face confirmed that she too had heard the crying.

“Right, executive decision,” Louisa said, giving the family room a final look before hurrying back into the kitchen. “You have three minutes to get everything you need. We’re spending the evening with Chief Swan until Dad gets home.”

Dottie nodded and nervously scurried into the family room where Louisa assumed she was shoving her laptop and homework into her backpack.

Louisa’s eyes focused briefly on the lights overhead which were still out. Faulty wiring had to be the blame for that because there was no other explanation for it. No matter how many times that evening Dottie insisted it was because they lived in a haunted house.
Brain Games

“Remember, you have your MRI today at one,” Louisa’s father said while he handed her a note that would excuse her from her afternoon classes. “But I want you there at least forty-five minutes before. They’ll have you fill out paperwork.” Louisa nodded and pushed soggy cheerios around in her breakfast bowl. “How are you feeling today? Do you have a headache?” Louisa shrugged her shoulders, prompting a sigh from her father. “A verbal response, if you please.” “My head hurts a little,” she admitted, dropping her spoon into the bowl and sitting up to face her father. “Maybe I should come with you,” Mr Collins said, taking in his daughter’s pale skin. He sure if he wanted Louisa driving if she had a headache; these episodes only seemed to be increasing in frequency and severity, and he would be lying if he said he wasn’t worried.

“You’ve got a meeting with a client today.”

Mr Collins was unsure how his daughter knew this. “I can reschedule.”

Louisa shook her head and stood, walking over to the sink and pouring her cereal down the drain. “I’ll be fine. You should go to work.”

Mr Collins pursed his lips. “You should eat something before you go.”

Louisa shrugged again and dry swallowed two pills of Tylenol that she pulled out from the cabinet next to the sink. “I’m not hungry.”

“I’m sorry, did that sound like an option? Because it wasn’t.”

After a fair bit of grumbling, Louisa grabbed an apple from the refrigerator and eat it angrily as she waited for her sister to make an appearance. When she did, Louisa thought that Dottie looked nearly as exhausted as she was, which was impressive, considering that Louisa had gotten less than four hours of sleep.

The sisters had decided not to tell their father about what had occurred the previous evening, though for different reasons. Louisa didn’t want to admit that the house that she had chosen was scary to her. Dottie was convinced that if she were to talk about the supposed hauntings she would upset the spirits even more, which would only serve to make the paranormal activity worse. The younger sister had spent the evening at Chief Swan’s researching ways to protect a home from supernatural entities and wouldn’t hear a word that Louisa said to reassure her that ghosts did not exist. Particularly, after Louisa failed to think of a logical explanation for what had happened when challenged.

The ride to school was quiet, with Dottie dozing off in the passenger seat for most of the trip. After Louisa put the Prius in park, she leaned her head forward on the steering wheel and closed her eyes. She didn’t exactly have a headache at the moment, but she could feel the uncomfortable pressure behind her left ear that told her that she would have one soon. She took a few deep breaths before leaning over and gently shaking her sister awake. Louisa slid out of the car, glancing around the car park while she pulled her backpack out of the back. Dottie bid her a quick farewell before scurrying off towards the school.

“Good morning, Louisa,” a smooth baritone said from somewhere too close behind her, causing her to jump in surprise with an undignified yelp. She spun around only to be greeted with the glorious visage of none other than Jasper Hale. He had a small grin and his light brown eyes seemed to glow with amusement. If she wasn’t awake before, she certainly was after that.
“Oh, hey. I was just about to look for you,” Louisa said, hoping that he couldn’t hear the slight breathiness to her voice (how embarrassing would that be?), and she took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. She reached into her backpack and pulled out Jasper’s freshly washed handkerchief and held it out for him. “Thank you for lending it to me yesterday.”

Jasper’s head tilted as he looked at it in surprise before shaking his head. “No, you keep it.”

“Oh, right, the blood.” Louisa let her arm drop back to her side. Of course he wouldn’t want it back. But what was she supposed to do with it? Louisa was hardly the type to use handkerchiefs—they were so old-fashioned. She supposed she could throw it out, but that seemed a bit wasteful. Maybe sniff it when she missed him too much? Extract his DNA from it and bare his children? Well, she had washed it too much for that last one to work, but she could probably make a voodoo doll out of it if he ever displeased her.

Her response seemed to startle the blond boy. “I beg your pardon?” He asked, his eyes wide.

Louisa tucked his handkerchief back into a pocket of her backpack. “I probably should have guessed you wanted it back after I bled all over it. I wouldn’t want it back either. It is kind of gross.”

“Oh. That. No, it’s fine, I have too many anyway.”

There was a very loud shriek from across the car park, and Louisa glanced behind Jasper to see a small, dark-haired girl bouncing around with a deranged grin on her face. “Isn’t that your sister?” Louisa asked, glancing briefly at the tall boy next to her before focusing on the excited looking girl. “Is she alright?”

Jasper let out a long, suffering sigh. “As well as Alice can be. She’s a few bulbs short of a full chandelier.”

“Oh.” She watched Alice in confusion, who made eye contact with her and gave her a thumbs up. Louisa gave her a confused wave in return, then looked up at Jasper again “Well, if that’s it, I’ll see you in homeroom?”

“Where are you off to?” Jasper asked, trotting after her.

“The Main office, I’ve got a note I need to turn in. Boring stuff, really. Though I do get to skip classes after lunch.”

“So you won’t be in Spanish?”

“I thought I would give you and your sister a break,” Louisa said, craning her neck so that she could grin up at him.

Jasper grimaced at her words. “Speaking of, I do apologise for what happened.”

“With Rosalie? Why?” Louisa dodged around a girl from the planning committee who was carrying a large stack of fliers and a roll of tape.

Jasper beat her to the door to the office building and held it open for her. “She put you in an uncomfortable position, and I failed to intervene before it got out of hand.”

Louisa had the sudden mental image of Jasper in a floppy hat, tipping it towards her as she passed by. “I’m sorry, but I still don’t understand why you are apologising.”
“Because my sister—”

Louisa stopped without warning and Jasper walked into her, nearly knocking her to the floor. She turned to face the boy, brows furrowed in confusion. “No, I get that your sister was out of line, but I fail to see why you are the one apologising for her behaviour. You’re not in charge of your sister’s actions any more than I am in charge of mine, Jasper,” she said before spinning back around and striding up to the desk, where the red-headed receptionist was watching them with undisguised interest. “If Rosalie wants to apologise, she is more than welcome to do so.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “I’ll pass along the message.”

Louisa shrugged. “If you want.” Louisa tried not to be upset at the prospect of losing her newfound friendship (if one could call it that) with Rosalie but couldn’t help the small bit of disappointment that washed over her. She pushed her feeling aside and tried to focus on what she was there to do. She shoved her hands into her pockets, searching for her note, only to find them empty. This was odd, as it was unlike her to lose things— usually, she was good at keeping track of her belongings. It was probably Jasper’s fault. If he wasn’t so gorgeous, she might actually be able to string two thoughts together.

“Do you have any idea what she up to with those questions?” She asked Jasper before apologising to Mrs Cope, who seemed much more interested in the two teen’s conversation than whatever they had actually come to the office for.

Jasper, of course, knew exactly what his sister had been aiming for in class, but he was hardly going to share it with Louisa. He could only imagine how that conversation would play out: My psychic sister is convinced you are my soulmate and wants you to join the family as soon as possible. She started planning our wedding over the weekend. Hope you like spring ceremonies, because that’s when it’s going to be.

Yeah. That would go over well.

“I think she just wants you to have a date for the dance.”

“Oh,” she replied, shooting him a confused look. “That’s rather anticlimactic. And here I was thinking she was asking some sort of trick question. I feel silly for worrying so much now.” The girl let out a little chuckle before throwing her long blonde hair over her shoulder so it rippled in waves down her back. She pulled her backpack up onto the counter, accidentally knocking over one of Mrs Cope’s picture frames in the process.

The secretary was watching him and Louisa with screwed eyes, and he felt much more nervous about his next question. He briefly considered not even asking her; what did he expect to happen, even if he did ask her to the dance? It’s not like they could date, no matter how much Alice insisted they could. Louisa was a teenaged girl and he was a one-hundred and sixty-year-old Civil War veteran, and a vampire to boot. Even if he didn’t accidentally kill her, what would they even have in common? The phone in his pocket vibrated, and he knew without even looking that it would be a text from Alice, berating him.

Gathering up all of his courage (and a fair bit of it from the other occupants in the room), he straightened his back and walked closer to the girl. “Do you?”

Louisa’s emotions were distracted. She was still digging through her backpack, looking for that damn note. “Do I what?” She pulled out her day planner and began rifling through the pages.

She really was a mess in the morning, Jasper thought. Which was lucky for him, or else the girl
would have noticed him stealing her note from her pocket when she got out of her car. But her
distraction did make it considerably more difficult to ask her to the dance. Perhaps he should have
waited until later in the day. Or just not bothered. Why would she want to go to the dance with
him? Why did he even want to go to the dance with her? Besides her human nature and her body’s
fragility, she was kind of weird. Attractive, no doubt, and funny, and clever, but weird. She said the
strangest things sometimes and he often didn’t know how to respond. Sometimes she joked about
things that were too close to the real truth that she had no way of knowing, and that could be
incredibly dangerous for his family. He needed to protect his family.

He felt stupid for letting Alice talk him into this. Besides, Louisa wasn’t interested in him at all,
she was just being friendly. Even if she had been flirting with him, it was probably just to annoy
Rosalie. He pulled Louisa’s note out of his pocket, discreetly dropped it on the ground, then bent
down, picked it up, tapped her on the shoulder, and handed it to her. Louisa gave him a smile and
accepted it. The phone in his pocket vibrated again.

Damn Alice. Damn her to Hell.

There was no choice, he would have to ask her. If he had to choose between being rejected and
Alice yelling at him for the rest of his very long existence, he would take the rejection any day.

Jasper ignored the pitying look Mrs Cope was giving him and repressed the urge to sigh in
annoyance. Of all the creations on God’s green earth, he had to be attracted to this irritating
human? Was she being dense on purpose? Because she was doing a terrific job. Jasper briefly
wondered if it had been difficult to ask girls out when he had been human. “Are you going with
anyone to the dance?”

“I hadn’t really planned on it,” Louisa replied, turning around and handing the piece of paper to
Mrs Cope, who gave her a disapproving look. “I’ll probably be so busy the night of the dance, it
wouldn’t really be fair to my date.”


The secretary extended a pass to her, excusing her from her afternoon classes, their fingertips
brushing when Louisa reached forward to take it. It was then she realised what Jasper had been
asking, and Louisa felt very cold and very warm at the same time. He had been asking her to the
dance. And she had turned him down. She had just rejected Jasper the Babe.

What was wrong with her?

How was she supposed to fix this without looking lame?

Louisa followed after Jasper, thanking him when he held the door open for her again and walked
quietly next to him as they made their way to homeroom. They joined the other students funnelling
into the various school buildings, who gave the pair funny looks when they passed by.

“You know, Jasper,” Louisa said finally as they approached homeroom. The boy halted and
glanced down at her, his face expressionless. “If someone were to ask me, I wouldn’t be
necessarily opposed to it.”

A tiny grin flitted across his lips after processing her words. “I’ll keep that in mind, ma’am.” He
stepped aside to let her into the room first, and she gave him a small smile in return.

It was official. Jasper Hale was going to be the death of her.

No Stone Left Unturned
Louisa showed up thirty-five minutes before her MRI: ten minutes later than she promised her father and thirty minutes earlier than she actually needed to be there. She texted her father to let him know that he worried too much. The only other people in the waiting room was a freshman from the baseball team and his mother. The boy didn’t know that he had a torn rotator cuff, but Louisa could see his mother reading a pamphlet about them and she wasn’t the one in the sling.

“Is this your first MRI?” The boy asked, tossing his dark hair out of his eyes. He was evidently excited about having someone besides his mother to talk to. “I’ve never had one done before, but the doctor said it could be noisy.”

Louisa shrugged. “It’s not too bad, just kinda boring. You’re going to be in it a while.”

The boy’s eyes widened dramatically, giving her the impression of a cartoon character. “Wait, in it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Louisa replied slowly. “It’s an MRI. What were you expecting?”

The boy turned to his mom, who had ditched the pamphlet and was flipping idly through an old magazine. “I have to go into something? You never told me this!”

The boy’s mother gave a loud sigh and glared at Louisa, as if it were somehow her fault that the kid was woefully uneducated about medical diagnostic equipment, before turning to reassure her son. She didn’t have too long to calm his nerves, however, because the technician was calling the boy back, and he was stumbling away, his breathing uneven.

“He’s claustrophobic,” Louisa commented.

“Incredibly,” his mother snapped. “I wasn’t planning on telling him. Thank you for that.”

“Glad I could be of service.” Louisa knew that the woman was being sarcastic, but honestly, why would she not prepare her son for something that she knew would traumatise him? That didn’t seem like very good parenting. And why would she be mad with Louisa? How was she supposed to know that the kid was claustrophobic? It’s not like she was psychic.

The mother and Louisa sat in awkward silence, punctuated only by the flipping of magazine pages and the woman’s irritated sighs. Louisa thought that she was going to cry with relief when Dr Cullen of all people wandered into the room.

“What brings you to this neck of the woods, Doctor?”

Carlisle smiled at the girl and lifted up the large envelope in his hand for her to see. “I needed a patient’s images.”

“And here I thought you just wanted to see me,” she replied, jumping up and walking away from the woman sitting opposite her.

If Carlisle still had a heartbeat it would have skipped. He had, after all, smelled the scent of his most interesting patient at the moment and had followed it. He had been hoping to watch the MRI but now that she had seen him, he felt like he was intruding on something, which was addlepated because he was a doctor and he had every right to be there. And how could she know that he had been following her? Either she was more observant than he had originally discerned or he was becoming less stealthy. Not that that made much sense; he was a vampire. They were very capable of moving silently. Perhaps— no. She’s joking, he realised, taking in her large grin. “It wasn’t my original intention, but I am happy nonetheless.”
"That’s good. I would hate for you to have to explain to your wife why you are stalking me."

Stalking was a strong word. Surveillance at a distance was more accurate.

Carlisle tried to hide his discomfort at her words and gave her another small smile. “How have you been feeling?”

Louisa shrugged. “I’m alive.”

“Yes, I heard about yesterday,” Carlisle replied dryly. “I am surprised you didn’t come in.” Surprised was a more polite way of saying that he was furious that she hadn’t come to the hospital. He had nearly called the Collins’ house after Rosalie had described the incident, and only Alice reassuring him that the girl would survive without any apparent damage stopped him.

Louisa looked down at her feet and shuffled them, refusing to meet his eyes. “Yeah, I just figured it wasn’t important.”

“If I told you that your symptoms yesterday matched those of a brain aneurysm, would you still think them unimportant?” Carlisle asked, doing his best not to snap at the girl. “Or those of haemophilia? Or anaemia? Or myelodysplastic syndrome?”

He watched as Louisa sucked her top lip into her mouth and began to gnaw on it. “It didn’t seem all that important at the moment.”

Carlisle repressed a sigh. Of course, she wouldn’t. She was 16 and hadn’t been practising medicine for hundreds of years. “Until we know what is wrong, Miss Collins, we need to treat every symptom like it’s important.” He noticed that the woman that Louisa had been sitting across from was leaning forward to listen to their conversation. Carlisle rolled his eyes and led the girl farther away so they couldn’t be overheard. “After you finish your MRI, I would like for you to schedule an appointment with me. Preferably as soon as you are able.”

Louisa nodded, thoroughly chastised, and unable to meet his eyes. “Of course, Dr Cullen.” She was saved by a technician, calling her back, and she scurried off after giving the doctor a wave.

She was then led down a number of hallways, handed a blue hospital gown, and told to change into it. From there, Louisa was led into the MRI room where there a nurse helped her climb onto the bed, had her to put in a pair of earplugs, and covered her in a heated blanket. The nurse then handed her a call button with the instructions to press it if she had any problems. A cage-like helmet was placed over her head and then she was slid into the machine.

This wasn’t Louisa’s first time in an MRI machine, but she could imagine how scary it would be for someone who had never been in one before. She wondered how that boy had fared. Maybe she should ask him if he had made it through alright if she saw him in school. Or maybe not. That would be really weird. She was still confused as to why that mother hadn’t explained to her son what was going to happen. MRIs were uncomfortable enough, without the added burden of claustrophobia. The space was pretty small, she could see why someone might have a panic attack.

She had forgotten how loud MRIs were. It roared away and Louisa was very glad that the technician had given her the earplugs. And the heated blanket. Why was the room so cold anyway? Louisa would need to look that up later. The roaring stopped and one of the technicians spoke to her over an intercom, asking her how she was doing.

Incredibly bored was her reply.

It was annoying how still you had to be during MRIs. And that there really was only one way out.
That had to be a safety hazard. What if the building caught on fire? Louisa was certain she would have difficulty wiggling out of the machine on her own. And heaven forbid that there was an earthquake and the ceiling collapsed. She could be stuck in it for days until she was dug out. That was assuming, of course, that the machine didn’t collapse on top of her and crush her; in that case, she would die pretty much instantaneously. The roaring stopped and the technician asked her again how she was doing.

Ready to have the procedure over and done with was her reply.

She wondered how long had she been in the thing. How long were scans supposed to take? Perhaps she should have read the pamphlet that had been outside on the table.

But wait, hadn’t she done one of these before? Louisa was certain she had. She took a deep breath and tried to relax. Why was she so tense all of the sudden?

Again the roaring stopped and the technician asked her how she was doing.

She was fine. She was doing great. Never better.

The hole she was in was smaller than she imagined. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been in a space this small. Maybe when her cousin Logan had locked her in the cupboard under the stairs at their grandparents when she was 11— it was darker than this and had smelled like mothballs. In contrast, this was incredibly bright.

Wait, Louisa didn’t have a cousin named Logan. And she had never been locked in a closet before in her life. Where was this coming from?

There was the technician’s voice again, asking her how she was doing.

Not well. Was this almost done? She was feeling lightheaded.

Louisa’s head hurt. The lights were too bright. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Her breathing was accelerating. She needed to calm down. She was almost done. When she was done, she could go back to school. There was planning committee today. They needed to choose a colour scheme today. Her chest felt tight and it was getting harder to breathe. She was too hot and she wanted to kick off her heated blanket, but she knew that she had to stay still.

The technician told Louisa that she was almost done and then asked her how she was doing.

She was having a panic attack, she was certain.

Louisa looked up at the ceiling of the MRI, which seemed to be closing in on her, blinking tears out of her eyes. The tears rolled down the sides of her cheeks, pooling in her ears. The sensation was uncomfortable but it grounded her to reality; she realised that she was looking straight up at the inside of the machine, nothing obstructing her vision. Where had the cage over her head gone? She was certain the technicians had put one over her head.

Her breaths were coming in gasps. The technician asked her to hold still a moment longer, that he was doing really well, and that he was nearly done. But he couldn’t wait any longer. He needed to get out. He pressed the call button.

The second Louisa’s head was clear of the machine and the bizarre birdcage, she sat upright and promptly vomited over the side of the bed. She could feel a hand on her back, soft and warm, rubbing the spot between her shoulder blades. A mother’s touch. She vomited again, this time into a basin another technician had thought to provide.
“Wow,” one said over Louisa’s strangled sobs. “Two in one day.”

“Duncan,” the technician that was rubbing Louisa’s back snapped.

“It’s got to be a record,” Duncan replied. He took the basin back from Louisa disappeared from her line of sight. She could hear him calling for people to clean up the mess, and her cheeks burned in humiliation.

“It’s alright, honey,” The woman said. “We’ve seen much worse than this.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Louisa rasped, her throat burning from the bile. She accepted a paper cup full of water and downed it in one go. “This has never happened to me before.”

“Sometimes things like this just happen.”

Not to Louisa they didn’t. Besides, she’d been inside an MRI on more than one occasion and had never had a problem. Had she somehow developed claustrophobia without noticing? A phobia seemed like a difficult thing to not notice. She swivelled her head to inspect the MRI, its opening appearing much larger now that she was no longer in it. She had felt fine before she gone in and she felt fine now. She didn’t even have a sense of dread at the thought of going back into the machine. So what had happened?

The technician informed Louisa that they had gotten all of their pictures before she had pressed the call button and congratulated her for being so brave. Louisa just nodded her head, her whole body feeling heavy and weak. She wiped at her nose, relieved when she saw that it was just snot on the back of her hand. At least she wouldn’t have to talk to Dr Cullen about another bloody nose today.

The technician helped Louisa off of the bed and then caught her when her knees gave out. Maybe she wouldn’t go back to school after all.
When Louisa arrived at school the next day, she was stopped by no less than four people from the dance committee, all asking about her opinions on various things related to the dance. She had been kept in the loop about what she missed the previous afternoon via text, but apparently, the committee found this unsatisfactory. Grace Saunders seemed particularly distressed by the overwhelming amount of ticket sales that they had generated, citing lack of supplies and not enough funds. Louisa tried to reassure her that this was actually a good thing, but they were interrupted by Angela Webber, who wanted to write an article for the school newspaper. By the time Louisa managed to escape, she found herself having to sprint to homeroom. Mr Varner gave her an annoyed look when she dashed into the room before returning to a large stack of papers on his desk.

The Babe and his siblings were already present, somehow managing to make the plastic chairs they were sitting on look like thrones. Rosalie had dragged her chair away from her desk and was leaning casually against her husband, texting. As Louisa approached, Jasper turned his attention from the nearby window, and gave her a small smile, causing her to nearly collide with a desk.

“Running late today?” Rosalie asked without bothering to look up from her phone.

“I was accosted by many people this morning. Please be sympathetic.”

“That’s what you get for skipping yesterday,” Rosalie said in a huff, locking her phone and dropping it on her desk. “And I seeing as I was by myself, my tolerance is running incredibly thin.”

Louisa sagged into her seat, stretching her long legs out. She felt her foot connect with the Babe’s, but she didn’t move it, and he didn’t seem all that concerned about it either. “You’d think I was the president or something.”

“You sort of are,” Rosalie replied with a snort. “If you had graced us with your presence yesterday, you would have heard Katie Hyde telling everybody to text you if they had questions.”

“That does explain the large number of texts I received,” Louisa said slowly. She had planned on taking a nap the moment she had returned to the house but had been inundated with questions about decorations and playlists.

“Will you be joining us today?”

“I’ll be there. Unless I’m not.”

Rosalie sighed in annoyance and sat up. She looked like she wanted to say something more but was cut off by Mr Varner, calling the class to order. Louisa briefly wondered in Rosalie had been planning on apologising for the other day, but quickly dismissed it. Rosalie wasn’t the type to ask for forgiveness. Not that Louisa wanted an apology from Rosalie, now that she understood the blonde’s intentions. Well, Louisa couldn’t truthfully say that she understood Rosalie’s intentions, but she didn’t harbour any ill feelings towards the girl.

When they were dismissed from homeroom, Louisa bid farewell to the Babe and company and wandered off to her first class of the day. After classes, she would be bombarded with questions about the dance and have to fix problems that she really didn’t know how to fix but everyone seemed to believe that she did. This pattern continued in a similar fashion for weeks, and before Louisa knew it, there were only a few days before the dance, and Jasper had yet to ask her out.
She supposed she shouldn’t be all that surprised, she had basically told him that she didn’t want a date, but she still felt a thrum of disappointment shoot through her every time he gave her a shy smile in class. Perhaps she could have asked him, but a part of her really was reluctant to have a date for the dance, especially one like the Babe. You couldn’t just take Jasper Hale, hottie extraordinaire, to a dance and then ignore him for the entirety of the night. So she waited and held out in the hope that he would ask her again.

And besides, there were bigger problems on Louisa’s plate, besides dance planning and dates. Namely, her sister. Dottie had become more paranoid lately: she was sleeping less and she refused to be alone in the house most days. On more than one occasion, Dottie had crawled into Louisa’s bed at night, too terrified to sleep by herself. Louisa desperately wanted to comfort her sister but was at a loss as to how. Especially when Dottie was so convinced that their house was haunted.

Two days before the dance, Louisa returned home after a long session of preparations and was greeted by a lot of salt. There were lines on window sills, across thresholds, in front of doorways, and even a ring around the toilet in the bathroom. On her way to her room, Louisa counted fourteen empty and abandoned cylinders of kosher salt. Confused, she picked one up and sought out her sister, who she found sitting in the centre of a ring, doing her homework.

“Why has the house been assaulted?” Louisa asked, giving the empty salt container a shake.

Dottie gave Louisa a nasty glare. “You’re hysterical.”

Louisa nearly made a quip about Dottie being the one who was a hysterical but stopped herself at the last second. “Is there a particular reason you have covered the house with enough salt to fill the Dead Sea?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Dottie snapped, closing the textbook on her lap. “I read that the salt would keep the ghosts at bay.”

“Right,” Louisa said slowly. “And what are you going to do when Dad gets home?”

“Tell him that the house is haunted and the salt lines are not to be broken until I have thoroughly smudged the place.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“I got watched a video on YouTube and ordered the supplies off Amazon.”

“Of course you did,” Louisa said with a sigh before walking over to Dottie’s bed. She dropped heavily onto it face first. When she spoke again, her voice was muffled. “You know that ghosts don’t exist, right?”

Louisa didn’t have to see her sister’s face to know that Dottie was giving her an unimpressed look. “Then explained what happened!”

Louisa flipped over and stared up at the ceiling, recalling the way the lights had flickered. They were working fine now, just as they had been when their father had taken the sisters back home as if nothing had happened at all. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t give her sister an explanation. The wind had been non-existent that day, and the electric company that Louisa had called had claimed that there had been no power loss to the house. Mrs Cullen had even confirmed that the house’s electric wiring had been updated recently, with the most current renovation. Dottie had taken this as proof that something paranormal was happening, much to her annoyance. Louisa massaged her temples in frustration.
“I don’t know, Dot. But it isn’t ghosts.” There wasn’t proof for the existence of ghosts. Ghosts weren’t logical.

“We can agree to disagree, then,” Dottie huffed. She turned her attention back to her textbook.

After a few minutes of angry flipping and sighing, Louisa sat up to watch her sister in interest. “Speaking of scary things,” she drawled, pleased when Dot glared up at her. “What are you planning on doing for the dance?”

To Louisa’s amazement, a light blush tinged her sister’s ears. Dot’s glare softened and she looked back down at her textbook. Avoidance of eye contact. There was definitely a story there.

“You’re planning on going,” Louisa stated.

Dottie nodded, still not meeting Louisa’s eyes.

There was no easy way to pry secrets out of her sister when she was determined to keep things quiet. Louisa had learned this years ago and had worked hard to perfect her interrogation techniques. With Dottie, you had to lure her into a false sense of security and then catch her off guard. Anything outright would cause her sister to shut down completely. Louisa settled herself back down onto the bed and looked back up at the ceiling.

“What are you going as then?” Louisa asked, trying to calm her heart, which had begun to race with excitement. “I’ve been browsing Pinterest for days now, and I still can’t make up my mind.”

The pink had receded from Dot’s ears and she looked up at her sister through her eyelashes. “You still don’t have your costume?

“I’ve been a bit preoccupied.”

Dottie let out a long sigh. “What were your ideas?”

Louisa scooted over on her sister’s bed and patted the spot next to her. Dottie rose from her salt ring and ran to join her sister on the bed. Louisa shifted, allowing her sister to rest her head on her shoulder, and pulled out her phone.

“My original thought was a gender bent Sherlock, but I couldn’t find anything that I liked that would be easily recognisable.” Louisa pulled up Pinterest on her phone and began to show her sister her most recent searches. “I liked the idea of Sandy as a Pink Lady from Grease, but I didn’t want to commit to heals for the night.”

“And Sandy before her greaser transformation wouldn’t be easily recognisable either,” Dottie said, following her sister’s train of thought. “What about something more dramatic?”

“Well, I thought, maybe Scarlett O’Hara, from Gone with the Wind, but—”

“Too dramatic,” Dottie said, cutting her off. “Not to mention how difficult that would be to wear to a dance, let alone make.”

Louisa nodded, her sister’s hair tickling her nose. “I wanted it to be a couple’s costume though,” Louisa explained. She didn’t actually, but Louisa had a feeling that she needed to push the conversation in this direction. “But I’m kind of stuck on what to do.”

Dottie sat up and retrieved her laptop from her desk. “If you had told me a few weeks ago that you wanted to do a theme, I would have been able to help you. I’ve already got my costume figured
out.”

Louisa sat up when her sister joined her back on the bed, the laptop perched on her knees. “Oh,” Louisa said, trying to sound disappointed. “What are you planning on going as then?”

“Eleven from Stranger Things,” Dottie replied simply as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“And your date will be dressed as Mike?”

Dottie jumped in surprise and her head spun towards her so fast that Louisa could hear her sister’s neck crack. “Date?” Dottie stuttered, the blush returning.

Louisa watched her sister, her head tilted in interest. “Yeah, you said that you had your costume figured out already when I mentioned that I wanted to do a couple’s costume. If you didn’t have a date, you wouldn’t have had a problem being my partner.”

Dottie spluttered for a moment, trying to find a way to deny her sister’s statement. “No,” she managed to stutter out. “He didn’t want to match.”

Louisa pushed this comment aside, deciding to reflect on it when her sister wasn’t so flustered. “And does this date have a name?” It was fascinating watching as Dottie’s face turned bright red in embarrassment, and Louisa had to wonder if she had ever seen her sister react like this.

“I’m not telling you,” Dottie managed to stutter out. “You’ll just harass him.”

“I just want to make sure that he’s worthy of you,” Louisa responded, suppressing a laugh.

Dottie was focused on her computer screen and was flipping through Pinterest. “Why do you even need a couple’s costume? Are you going with someone?”

If Dot had intended to embarrass her sister with her question, she didn’t succeed. Louisa merely shrugged and leaned forward to rest her chin on her sister’s shoulder. “Maybe. Jasper Hale sort of kind of asked me to the dance.”

Dottie paused and her back straightened. “You mean the boy who drove us home that one time?”

“Let’s not talk about that,” Louisa replied. She reached around Dot to click on a link that promised a list of 14 genius couple costumes for Halloween. “Anyway, it’s not official.”

“Did you screw it up?” Dottie asked, her tone laced with amusement.

“I might have accidentally rejected him,” Louisa replied. “To be fair, he didn’t really ask me outright. It’s a bit of a mess.”

“Yeah,” Dottie said, glancing over her shoulder. “You are.”

Louisa rolled her eyes and gave her sister a little shove. “Anyway, do you have any ideas?”

The sisters continued to rib at each other, Dottie steadfastly refusing to reveal the name of her date and Louisa growing more frustrated on what to wear to the dance. By the time their father had arrived home, not much had been done, though Louisa could see the tension in her sister’s shoulders had lessened, which seemed like an accomplishment in and of itself.

Mr Collins was not amused by Dottie’s creative usage of salt and refused to hear the reasoning behind the decision, forcing her to clean it up whilst he cooked dinner. Louisa, taking pity on her
sister, held the dustpan while Dottie swept.

“What about Mary Poppins?”

The question only caused her sister’s scowl to deepen. “That would require you being practically perfect in every way.”

“Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz.”

“If anyone should be Dorothy, it would be me.”

“A zombie then?” Louisa asked. She could always do a classic costume. And it would be easy.

Dottie rolled her eyes and swept away a large line of salt from around the television in the sitting room. “You and the rest of the school.”

“A weeping angel?” Weeping angels were scary. But how many people in Forks would understand the reference?

“You want Jasper to talk to you, not run away screaming.”

“One of the three blind mice?”

“What happened to the other two?” Dottie asked, turning to face her sister with an amused look. At least the scowling was gone for the time being.

“They got lost?”

Dottie let out a laugh and returned to sweeping, shaking her head.

“What about Rey from Star Wars?” Dottie asked suddenly.

Louisa looked up at her sister, only to see that she wasn’t even looking at her, but a picture on the wall: a photo of a boy with light blond hair and a face full of freckles, sitting under a beach umbrella. He had a tight smile on his face as if he were being forced to take the picture, which he had been. Louisa could clearly remember having to steal the book he had been reading in order to get him to look at the camera. It had been taken on the family’s summer vacation, the last one before the accident.

“Laurie would have loved that,” Louisa said, throat tight. Laurie had loved everything to with space: he had always said that he would be the first man to step foot on Mars. His room had been filled with model rockets, an alarming amount of physics textbooks, and from the ceiling, hung a scale model of the Millennium Falcon. He claimed that, while the sequel trilogy could never replace the originals, they were an acceptable way to help bleach the memories of the prequels from his mind, which, coming from Laurie, had actually been a glowing endorsement. He had been so excited to see The Last Jedi, that he had created a countdown calendar for its release. When Louisa had packed up his room, the calendar had been stuck at 352 days. “Yeah, that’ll be perfect.”

Dottie reached out to touch picture frame. The glass that separated Laurie and her fingers were cold and hard, nothing like how his skin had been. If Dottie thought hard enough, she could still remember how he had smelled like pencil shavings and the B.O. that he had started to get when he turned thirteen. She let her hand drop to her side. “What about Jasper?” She asked, turning away to scrub her eyes.

Louisa reached forward and pulled her sister into a hug. She wanted to say something comforting,
like ‘it’s alright to miss him’ or ‘he wouldn’t want us to cry,’ but the words felt inauthentic and cheap in her head; something the therapist they had been forced to see after the accident would have said. Instead, she pushed her sadness inside a little box and shoved it in the deepest corner of her mental library. “If he wanted to ask me, he would have done it by now.”

Dottie made a noise that sounded like a mix between a hiccup and a laugh before pushing away from her sister. She tightened her hold on the broom and began to sweep. “His loss then.”

“Indeed,” Louisa replied, squatting once more to collect a large pile of salt. “Do you have any plans this evening?”

“Apparently, I’ll be helping you make your costume,” Dottie sighed, pretending to be annoyed at the idea.

“I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

It was nearly one in the morning by the time Louisa fell into bed, too exhausted to even change into her pyjamas. Her homework was ninety percent finished (what was left could easily be done during lunch the next day) and her costume was draped over the back of her desk chair. She could imagine her little brother pointing out the inaccuracies of her costume, his voice cracking in odd places, too deep to belong to a child but too high to belong to a man. She would have told him to stuff it before she stuffed him in the closet. He would have taunted her and told her that he’d like to see her try. It wouldn’t have been hard: the kid was seven stone soaking wet. She would have chased him throughout the house, letting him get far enough away that he thought he was safe before grabbing him and tickling his sides until there were tears in his eyes. His skin would be flushed and warm, his hair stuck up in the back.

Louisa turned on her side so that she was facing the window. She could just make out a few stars, peeking through spots in the clouds. Laurie would have loved to be able to see so many stars. As her eyes grew heavy, Louisa wondered just how many Laurie could see now.
"It’s too high on the right," Rosalie drawled, taking her eyes off her nails long enough to look at the backdrop for the photo station that Louisa was attempting to hang between a volleyball pole and a basketball hoop.

Louisa, who was standing on a chair, batted a candle that had been suspended from the ceiling out of the way so she could glare down at her partner. "You could help me, you know."

"And have Cody Williams try to look up my dress? Pass."

Louisa shifted her gaze to the boy in question, a portly freshman with a wispy moustache that really needed to be shaved off, who was watching Rosalie in a way that was bordering on leering. Louisa called out to him and demanded that he help the students decorating outside the building. Once he had shuffled away, Louisa hopped off the chair.

"You’re taller than me, you do it," Louisa snapped.

Rosalie surveyed the set up in front of her, which consisted of a photorealistic, hand-painted backdrop of a graveyard (courtesy of Alice) and several foam tombstones. "Why can’t you just use a ladder like a normal person?" Rosalie replied. "We’d probably be done with this by now."

"If you want to use a ladder, knock yourself out," Louisa said. "I’m not doing it."

"What, is the great Louisa Collins afraid of heights?" Rosalie asked, throwing a smirk over her shoulder at Louisa, who looked unamused. "I promise I won’t let you fall."

"How reassuring," Louisa replied. "Now, are you going to hang the backdrop or not?"

"Again, I’m wearing a dress," Rosalie said, motioning down at her body. "I’m not climbing a ladder."

"I don’t see why I have to suffer from your bad decisions," Louisa snapped, rubbing her temples in frustration. "Why are you even wearing that? You weren’t wearing it during Spanish."

"It’s my costume. And it wasn’t my decision. It was Alice’s. She chose all of our costumes," Rosalie replied, remembering how the little terror that was her sister had forced her into the long-sleeved white dress and thick heels the moment the final bell rang. "Well, all except Edward. He never said what he was supposed to be."

"He is coming though, right?"

"Of course he is. If I have to suffer through this, he does too."

"That’s the spirit!" Louisa cheered. "Now, speaking of costumes, hang up that backdrop while I go change into mine." She all but threw the painted sheet at Rosalie and sprinted off in another direction, leaving Rosalie alone in the gymnasium.

Rosalie looked around, checking for security cameras and humans. Seeing none, she jumped up to the basketball hoop, tied the string to metal rim, and landed on balls of her feet, making sure not to break the heels of her shoes. They might be ugly, but Alice would throw a huge fit if they were damaged. After arranging the tombstones in front of the backdrop, Rosalie wandered off, following Louisa’s scent to the girls’ restroom. She found the girl sitting on the floor in front of a mirror.
dressed in what could best be described as tan rags, brushing her hair.

“You need a haircut,” Rosalie pointed out, moving to lean on the wall next to her.

“Nah, I need all of them cut,” Louisa replied.

“That wasn’t even funny.”

“It actually was. It’s not my fault you have no sense of humour.”

“What are you even supposed to be?” Rosalie asked, watching as Louisa attempted to wrestle her long hair into some sort of up-do. “A vagabond?”

“I knew you were uncultured, Rosalie, but I didn’t realise that it was this bad,” Louisa said, turning to give her an impish smile. “Have you not seen Star Wars?”

Rosalie recalled Emmett being excited about the movies when they came out, back in the late seventies, but had never watched them herself. “No.”

Louisa’s head spun around so quickly Rosalie could hear the joints in the human’s neck pop. “Like, at all?” Louisa asked, her eyes wide. When Rosalie shook her head, the girl gasped. “We need to rectify this. We’re having a sleepover.”

Of all the response that Rosalie had expected, it hadn’t been this. “A sleepover?”

Louisa nodded, sending her hair flying out of its bun and down her back. “Yeah, it’s when friends get together, watch movies, gossip, and do each other’s hair,” Louisa said. “Speaking of hair,” she thrust a print out of a dark-haired girl with three buns tied at the back of her head. “Do mine.”

Unsure of what else to do, Rosalie sank to her knees behind Louisa and began to carefully pull the girl’s long hair into a style similar to the picture, moving slower than she would if she were doing her own hair, so as not to rip Louisa’s hair from her scalp. “I know what a sleepover is, by the way,” Rosalie grumbled as she tied off the last of the hair. She glanced up, meeting Louisa’s dark grey eyes in the reflection in the mirror.

“When was the last time you were invited to one?” Louisa asked, her voice curious.

Rosalie couldn’t remember much of her life as a human, but she was certain that she had never been to a slumber party before: not only would her parents never permitted her to, but Rosalie could distinctly remember that she had never had many friends. Be it her beauty or her award-winning personality, females had often been intimidated by her. Then she was turned into a vampire, and girl’s reaction to her became even more severe: they hissed snide comments about her character behind her back. The comments were always loud enough for her to hear, even if she had been human. But this had been happening practically all of Rose’s life. She was used to it. Her heart became colder and she learned to block out the whispers. Humans held no interest to her, could offer her nothing. So what was it about Louisa’s question that made Rosalie want to open up to her?

It wasn’t so much the question itself, Rosalie decided, but the way Louisa had asked it. There was no malice in her tone, no suggestion that it was somehow Rosalie’s fault that the other girls in their class pushed her away, nothing that implied that Rosalie was a bitch (even if she totally was) that deserved to be excluded.

“It’s been a while,” Rosalie admitted.
Louisa nodded her head, her grey eyes compassionate as they roamed over Rose’s face, and giving her the impression that the girl in front of her knew exactly she had been implying by her answer. “Then we’ll have to have one soon. You can teach me how to do a French braid and I’ll introduce you to all of the pop-culture things you apparently have missed.”

Rosalie felt the corner of her mouth twitch up into a smile. She stood, offering her hand to Louisa, who heaved herself up. “You don’t know how to braid your hair?” She led them out of the restroom and they made their way back towards the gymnasium at a leisurely pace where they could hear a pop-song coming from. They nodded to some of the committee members who were putting up the final decorations in the hallway. Rosalie had to admit that it looked far less tacky then what she had imagined when Louisa first proposed the idea.

All but the emergency lights were off and an alarming amount of fake cobwebs were stretched across the ceiling and down the walls. Fake spiders had been liberally tucked into the webs and hung from the ceiling, giving the hall a claustrophobic feel, as if she were a fly walking through a spider web. Not only was it eerie, but it also served the purpose of keeping students out of most of the classrooms during Manhunt.

Louisa shrugged. “Mom always did it better than I could so I never bothered to learn. It’s usually Dottie who does my hair if it’s necessary.”

“Where is your sister?” Rosalie asked, trying to steer the conversation away from anything too touchy-feely. She had reached her girl-talk quota for the day and didn’t particularly want to crack open the dead mother subject.

Louisa’s brow furrowed. “She said that a friend was taking her home so that she could get ready for the dance.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“No,” Louisa replied slowly, trying to put her thoughts into words. “That’s not the problem. She said her date was going to bring her. She wouldn’t tell me who it was,” Louisa said before Rosalie could ask any questions. “And normally I would butt out, but something feels wrong.”

“Has she ever been on a date before?” Rosalie asked opening the door to the gymnasium. When Louisa shook her head, Rosalie gave a little shrug. “That’s probably it then,” she said.

Louisa gave a non-committal sound in response. “Perhaps.” Louisa didn’t have much time to dwell on her sister’s predicament, however, because the moment she walked through the gymnasium doors, she was swamped by last-minute decoration questions. Rosalie gave her a mocking salute and left her to wolves.

The last few hours before the dance started were hectic and stressful, to say the least. Bonnie Willson tripped and knocked over most of the decorations in the haunted carnival section. The photographer for the photo station caught a flat tire and was running late. Michael Chew yelled at Taylor Long so much that she ended up crying. Louisa was just pleased that she didn’t have a coronary when she caught a group of juniors smoking weed behind the gym (“Not on school grounds, morons!”) instead of decorating. Still, the end result was definitely worth the grey hairs she had probably sprouted when all was said and done. Most of the planning committee had raided their family’s Halloween decorations, giving the group a plethora of material to work with, despite the small budget allotted to them by the school.

The building that contained the gymnasium was decorated like an old, abandoned graveyard, complete with empty coffins for students to take selfies in. In between headstones, there were wire
humanoid structures, though, in the rapidly fading light, the structures were nearly invisible, making it look like the clothes that covered them were floating. Lining the path, there were fake skeletons, holding trays of glow bracelets for students who wanted to participate in manhunt later in the evening.

The committee had agreed that the inside of the gymnasium should be kept as a ‘spooky-free’ zone for students who weren’t as keen on scary things. The overhead fluorescent lights were exchanged in favour of green mood lighting, which contrasted surprisingly well with the flickering yellow LED lights from the fake candles that had been suspended from the ceiling. In one corner, there was the photo station with a table of props, and in another, a table full of mini bottles of Gatorade. In the centre of the gym, there was a large open space for dancing, not too far away from the DJ and his sound system. Leading out of the gym, however, if students were to walk towards the classrooms, they would encounter the hall of spiders, where they would be able to hide during Manhunt. Out on the blacktop, they could find Pennywise the Dancing Clown hosting carnival games for them to play in between dancing and manhunt.

When the first wave of students began to trickle into the gym, Louisa walked out onto the blacktop to help the school chemistry teacher who had been kind enough to dress up as Pennywise for the evening and chaperone the dance.

“You make a horrific clown, Mr Hewitt,” Louisa called out as she drew nearer.

Mr Hewitt turned around and gave her a smile. “I wouldn’t let my seven-year-old see me because I was afraid it would give him nightmares,” he admitted. “But I’m glad that at least one kid finds me scary.”

Louisa laughed. “Do you just keep that lying around in your house, waiting for the chance to wear it?”

“I tried to wear it to the premiere of the movie, but my wife wouldn’t let me out the door,” he chuckled.

The two exchanged pleasant conversation before a steady stream of costumed students wanting to play games made it impossible. Louisa was in charge of the ring toss and spent a large majority of her shift chasing down errant throws. Nearing the end of her shift, she trotted back over to the game after retrieving a particularly wayward ring and handed the rings to a tall, curly-haired blond in a grey flight suit, an orange vest, and a pair of glasses that would have been considered fashionable had it still been 1975.

“Thank you, rebel scum,” the boy intoned in a deep voice.

Louisa paused for a moment, taking in the boy’s appearance. “No problem, Kylo.”

The boy’s lips quirked up in a smile before he resumed a neutral expression. “You must be mistaken. My name is Matt and I’m a radar technician. I’m nowhere near as shredded a Kylo Ren.”

Louisa threw her head back and laughed raucously. “Well then, ‘Matt,’” she replied. “When I finish up here, we’ll need to get a picture together.”

The boy gave her a charming smile and accepted the rings, their fingers brushing. It was at the moment, Louisa realised that she knew that smile very well. She had, after all, been trying to coax it out of the boy daily. “Jasper?” She yelped in surprise. Jasper merely winked a tawny eye at her and tossed the rings at the witches hats, all three hitting their marks. Stunned, Louisa handed Jasper his raffle tickets and he strutted away, looking far too attractive in a flight suit.
“What happenstance!” cried a tiny dark-haired girl dressed like Mavis Dracula, who Louisa recognised to be Alice Cullen. “That you and Jasper should match. You didn’t plan it, did you?”

Still too dazed to offer a coherent response, Louisa shook her head. She hadn’t planned to coordinate with Jasper at all about their costumes, and as much as she wanted to write it off as a coincidence, she could feel something shaking in her mental library, trying to get out. Louisa turned away from Alice to retrieve the rings that Jasper had thrown, trying to recollect her wits.

Obviously, either this was one hell of a coincidence, or Alice was psychic.

It wasn’t my decision. It was Alice’s. She chose all of our costumes.

Louisa shook her head and tried to eliminate impossible theories. Psychics fell very firmly in the impossible category. Louisa chuckled to herself as she turned back towards Alice, pushing away her unease and handed the girl the rings. Alice accepted them with a wide smile, showing off her pointy vampire teeth, and tossed the rings just as accurately as her brother had. Louisa reciprocated her large grin and handed the girl her tickets, who skipped off after her brother.

Not too long after the Cullen kids had departed, Louisa was relieved from her station by another committee member and wandered off. Her original plan had been to seek out Jasper and his sister when Louisa realised that she had yet to see her own sister. She made her way into the crowded (or as crowded as it could be in Forks) gymnasium, searching for a familiar head of blonde hair.

“Looking for someone?” A musical voice asked far too close to her left ear. Louisa jumped in surprise, only to find Edward Cullen staring down at her in amusement. He was dressed in his usual button-down shirt and trousers, though he had added a necktie and a bright red cardigan to the ensemble.

“My sister,” Louisa replied, having to shout over the music. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”

Edward shook his head before pressing his body back against the wall when a pack of freshman girls passed by, looking at him interestedly.

Louisa joined the youngest Cullen boy against the wall and extracted her cell phone from her pocket. She considered calling the home phone, but if Dottie had already arrived, she didn’t want to cause her father any alarm just because she couldn’t find her sister. She decided on a text message, quickly sending one before shoving the cell back into her pocket and turning to face her companion. She looked him up and down for a moment, taking in his appearance.

“Okay, I give up. What are you supposed to be? A wallflower at a high school dance?”

Edward gave her a crooked smile in response. “No, I’m Mr Rogers,” he explained. He lifted up his right hand to show her a sock puppet that looked like a sad, deformed goat a small child might create. “This is Silas.”

Louisa blinked rapidly at the puppet, waiting for her brain to catch up, a rather unfortunate occurrence she often experienced when confronted with a Cullen sibling. She glanced up at Edward who grinned and nodded at the puppet. “Uh, hello, Silas?”

The puppet’s mouth shifted from side to side, causing the poorly attached horns to wiggle precariously. Then its mouth opened and released a deep, guttural screech, causing Louisa to jump backwards in surprise. “Hello, Louisa Collins,” the puppet said in a voice that could only be described as demonic. “How are you today?”

Louisa glanced up at Edward, whose mouth hadn’t moved.
“You never mentioned that you were a ventriloquist, Edward.”

“Edward is dead. Only Silas remains,” the puppet intoned menacingly. Edward offered a pleasant, if somewhat vacant, grin in response.

Louisa grinned and shook her head. She wasn’t sure if she should be amazed at his talent for ventriloquy or his ability to keep a straight face whilst delivering his lines. “It’s incredible you’re still single, Edward.”

Edward smiled sweetly at her but stayed silent. Louisa felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and pulled it out again, reading her sister’s response.

Decided to show up fashionably late. On my way now.

On my way? Was she by herself?

There was a brief pause before Dottie responded, I forgot that date and I were meeting there.

Louisa furrowed her brow, certain that Dottie had said that her date was going to pick her up. Something wasn’t sitting right with Louisa about Dottie’s tone.

Louisa turned her attention back to Edward, who was gazing out across the horde of dancing teenagers, his lips pursed with annoyance. “You know my sister, right?” When Edward gave her a sharp nod in response, she continued. “Do you know who her date is? She wouldn’t tell me.”

Edward jerked his chin in the direction of a dancing couple. “Tommy Garner,” he replied through thin lips. “He asked her out for a dare.”

Louisa felt her blood run cold before it began to boil. She followed Edward’s gaze towards the boy in question and surveyed how closely he was dancing with the girl. If one could even really call it dancing. Grinding was a more appropriate term.


Louisa tilted her head at this before turning her attention to his girlfriend, who she recognised as a theatre kid in the school’s upcoming performance of Othello.

“Does the girlfriend know?”

“Yes. And the whole of the baseball team.”

Louisa didn’t bother to ask Edward how he knew this. She dodged under Edward’s arm when he moved to catch her and slipped into the throng of students, towards her target.

“Watch where you’re going!” Garner snapped as she brushed passed him.

Louisa flipped him the bird before disappearing into the crowd. She pushed her way towards the front building, clutching the stolen cell phone tightly in her hand, and walked outside. She slid down against the brick wall, sitting on the ground, the wet earth soaking her clothes. Louisa didn’t notice this, nor did she stop to think about how she knew Garner’s passcode to unlock his cell phone.

Louisa tapped on the messages icon and looked at the recent messages.

New Girl: Hey, where are you?
New Girl: Is everything alright?

New Girl: We’re still going to the dance, right?

He had stopped responding a week ago to Dottie’s enquiries.

Louisa took a calming breath and pulled up a new conversation on his phone, a group chat between what looked like the entire baseball team. Garner was sending them screenshots of Dottie’s texts, mocking her. Another conversation was between him and a ‘Spencer’, who was berating Garner for treating Dottie this way. Louisa made a mental note to look up Spencer later.

She continued to scroll through Garner’s text messages until she found a conversation between him and his girlfriend. Sexually active indeed. A twisted grin spread across her lips as she took a screenshot of part of the couple’s most recent conversation on his phone. Louisa went back to his conversation list and pulled up the one labelled ‘Birth-Giver’ and attached the screenshot in a new text and sent it with the words: “dude, she’s pregnant. What do I do?”

It took approximately fourteen seconds for Garner’s mother to respond. A feeling of schadenfreude washed over Louisa as she watched Garner’s phone light up with the barrage of text his mother was sending him.

A car door slammed and Louisa peaked around the tombstone she was hiding behind, only to see Dottie leaning through the passenger side window of their father’s car. Louisa turned off Garner’s phone and rose to greet her sister, only to walk straight into a boy dressed in clothes reminiscent of the 80s.

He pointed at the phone in Louisa’s hand which she was attempting to shove into her pocket. “That’s Tommy’s,” he said simply, his light brown eyes calf-like.

“Is it? I just found it,” she replied, coolly.

“I don’t know what you did, but he deserved it,” the boy said.

“You wouldn’t happen to be Spencer, would you?” Louisa asked, taking in his short, wavy hair and gangly body.

The boy raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You’re a fast reader.”

“You need better friends,” Louisa replied.

The boy nodded in agreement and turned to face Dottie, who had stopped in front of them, a confused look on her face. “Lou, what’s going on? Do you have another headache?”

Spencer, who turned out to be Spencer Garner, jumped in before Louisa had the chance to speak, telling her all about what his brother had done. Louisa heard Dottie let out a tiny, ‘oh,’ in response, and looked away from the two, blinking rapidly. Louisa felt her temper spike again, her whole body shaking in anger.

She was about to reach forward and pull her sister into a hug when Spencer began speaking again. “If you still want to go inside, I’d be happy to accompany you though. It’s really cool inside,” he said, and even in the dark Louisa could see his cheeks flushing. “Or not, if you don’t want to. You could go home. Or we could go and get ice cream. Girls eat ice cream when they’re sad, right? Or we can go to this really cool bookstore near here. Books always make me feel better. Or we could —”
“Spencer,” Louisa said, amusement breaking through her haze of anger. “Let her reply.”

Spencer blushed and bit his lip, looking down at the ground.

Dottie glanced at her older sister in confusion. “Are you going home?”

“Only if you want to,” she replied with a shrug.

Dottie looked back at Spencer, who was toeing a pebble on the ground. “You don’t happen to be dressed as Mike from Stranger Things, do you?” She asked.

The boy looked up with wide eyes. “Yes! Nobody could figure out who I was. I don’t need to ask who you are, you’re El. Did you know—” Dottie tossed her older sister a bemused expression over her shoulder as she allowed her newly acquired date to whisk her into the gymnasium. Louisa stood outside, taking deep breaths and letting the night air cool down her burning cheeks.

Dottie was strong. A lot stronger than Louisa gave her credit for. She would be okay.

The door to the gymnasium opened again, and a familiar curly blond head poked out. At the sight of Jasper the Babe, she felt her remaining anger wash out of her body, leaving her feeling strangely tranquil, which was not an emotional state she usually felt when she was around her hunky Spanish partner. He gave her a hesitant smile and stepped outside to join her, pushing his hideous glasses up his nose.

“Everything alright?” He asked as he approached, his tawny eyes raking over her face in concern. “Edward said you looked like you were off to start a fight in an empty house.”

Louisa laughed in response. “I very much doubt he said anything of the sort.”

“Not in so many words, no,” he replied, his grin returning. “If everything is alright, I believe you owe me a picture?”

Louisa reached out to take his offered arm. “That I do.”
It was raining. It was the sixteenth day in a row it had rained, and frankly, she was sick of it. Sure, it always rained in Forks, but usually, there was at the very least a few minutes when the storm quelled. Even rainclouds had to run out of rain sometime, right? She traced a raindrop that ran down her bedroom window with a finger, her breath fogging up the glass.

She didn’t turn around when she heard the door open, choosing instead to stay curled up under the blanket, cocooned in her window seat. She began to draw hearts into the condensation, trying to collect her thoughts. She tried to ignore his looming presence behind her, but he cleared his throat, making it impossible. He was so impatient.

“I got your message,” he said. She could just make out his reflection in the window: he crossed his arms, uncrossed them, stuck his hands in his pockets, shifted from foot to foot. “You know you can’t contact me.”

“This is important. I didn’t have a choice,” she replied, still staring out the window. She lifted her arm and wiped away some of the condensation with her shirt sleeve so she could see out into the backyard. The leaves on the tree outside her window were flip-flopping in the wind, the silvery underbellies flashing themselves. She knew her silence was annoying him, but she didn’t know how to say it, where she should begin, when to say it, if she should say it. Maybe this was a mistake, asking him to come.

“It better be,” he huffed. His reflection shifted, reflecting his movements as he sat on her bed. “What could possibly be so incredibly urgent that you had to—?”

“I’m pregnant,” she said, cutting him off. She barely recognised her voice. It was detached, cold. She was surprised her breath was able to fog up the window, with how icy her words were. She lifted her arm again to wipe away the condensation. “It’s yours.”

The room was silent at this, save for the pitter-patter of rain falling on the roof, hitting the window, smattering against the tree leaves outside. He had stopped fidgeting on her bed, frozen in… shock perhaps, though that didn’t seem like quite the right word if he was feeling anything quite like she
was. Surprise, terror, dread were similar, but all fell short, not precise enough, big enough, for the magnitude of emotions she was feeling.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," she replied, just as the pregnancy test she had stolen from Mrs Mallory, the woman whose children she babysat, and who, unlike her, actually wanted a baby, had said.

She could hear him exhale and watched his reflection as it rose from her bed. He paced back and forth and back and forth and back and forth across her small bedroom. "How? You said you were on birth control." He had stopped, facing away from her. His breathing was heavy.

At last, she turned away from the window to look at him. "I was. Obviously, it didn’t work."

"You have to get rid of it," was his sharp reply.

"Get rid of it?" She repeated, the words tasting foreign in her mouth. Her brain felt sluggish as it attempted to process what her ears had heard.

"Yes, Anna, get rid of it," he snapped, spinning around to face her, though she couldn’t lift her eyes to look at his face. She kept her gaze focused on his light blue button-down shirt. "You can’t be pregnant. You don’t even have a boyfriend. People will talk."

Anna let out a cold laugh at this. "And what, they think they will suspect you? Besides, how would I even get an abortion? Where would I go? Are you planning on paying for it?"

He let out a snort of derision. "Of course not. How do you think that will look if I did? Think, Anna."

"Even if I found a clinic, how would I get there? My dad won’t let me use the car without a good reason."

"Make something up," he replied. "I don’t care what you do, just get rid of it. And don’t tell anyone about this." He stepped around her, his shoulder brushing against her arm as he moved towards his door.

"Yeah, we can’t have your precious wife finding out about this," she said before she was even aware she had said it. "I wouldn’t want to have to explain to your kid that he has a half-sibling because Daddy slept around."

"Shut up," he snarled, stopping at the door and spinning to face her. "Don’t talk about them."

"Oh, have I hit a nerve? I just didn’t think they meant all that much to you."

"I said shut up."

She knew that she should, but she couldn’t. Her mouth had taken over and she was flinging all of the anger filled vitriol she could at him. He was the one who had approached her, he was the one who insisted that he didn’t have to use a condom. This was just as much as his fault, and he was acting as if she was somehow the cause of it all? How dare he act if she was nothing more than a troublemaker, a homewrecker, wanting to break up his marriage? As if she was just some silly little girl who got herself knocked up by an older, married man? As if he was somehow the only one who was affected by this, the only one with something to lose.
“You know, you were the one who wanted to start something up with a teenager. I wonder what your wife would think about our little hook-ups.”

“I said shut up!” he roared, crossing the tiny room in two steps.

“Better yet, maybe I should just go straight to the police. I bet they would be really interested that you’ve been fucking your eighteen—” she didn’t get the chance to finish because he had grabbed her by the neck and shoved her against one of the bookshelves that lined the bedroom walls.

“I said, shut up!” His grip was tight and she couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. She tried to pry his fingers away, but he didn’t seem to notice that he was choking her. He stooped his head, her eyes meeting his for the first time since he had entered her bedroom. “Don’t you dare talk about them, and don’t you dare talk to them. Do you understand what will happen if you do, you stupid girl? My life will be ruined if you say anything!”

Her neck was burning and his fingers were unrelenting. She clawed at the back of his hands in desperation. Her vision was going dark. Everything hurt, and she couldn’t get away from him. He was still ranting, screaming in her face, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on her cheeks.

His eyes, such a beautiful blue, the colour of a pair of Levi’s, or the sky on one of those rare sunny days, were the last thing she saw before everything faded.

She awoke with a gasp as she hit the floor, flailing as she tried to free herself from his grip. No, not a man. A blanket. Her blanket. She had pulled off her bed. She glanced over at her bed, which was empty, devoid of any strange, faceless men. She looked up at the window seat she had been sitting in. The other she. Anna. Her name had been Anna. She wasn’t Anna, though. She was Louisa.

Louisa had also been sitting in the window seat, in the exact same spot as Anna. She had been reading. Anna had been watching the rain. It wasn’t raining at the moment. Louisa had been reading. Louisa pulled a book out of the tangle that was her comforter. She had been reading her science textbook and she had fallen asleep reading, in the window seat.

Louisa had had a dream. A nightmare of Anna, a girl who had been strangled, murdered, by her lover. Who was Anna? The name sounded so familiar. Louisa looked around her bedroom, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. Louisa had been in her room in the dream, she was sure of it, she knew because of the three walls full of bookshelves. She could see her bed on the opposite wall, which stood in front of the built-in bookshelves. Anna’s bed in the dream had been in a different place, tucked onto the shorter side of the room, so that it was surrounded on three sides by the shelves, which had been covered in books. A lot more books than Louisa herself had.

Anna. Why was Anna familiar?

Louisa didn’t get to chance to pursue this line of thought, however. There was a knock on her bedroom door and she jumped in surprise. She tried to rise to her feet, only to find that she was shaking so badly that her legs couldn’t support her. The door opened and a man entered, having heard her fall. He crossed the tiny room and Louisa found herself enveloped in his arms before she could comprehend what had happened. Louisa stiffened and tried to pull away from the contact. Was her cheek pressed against his shoulder in a hug? Yes, she was being hugged, not strangled. By her father. This man was her father.

“Lulu, what are doing on the floor?” Her father asked, grabbing her discarded comforter and wrapping it around her shoulders when he noticed that she was shaking.
Louisa realised that at some point she had started crying, though she wasn’t entirely sure why. It had just been a nightmare, after all. So why had it felt so real? Why did the tips of her fingers feel cold, as if she had just been drawing shapes on the cool glass window? Why could she still smell the strange man’s spicy cologne when her nose was buried in her father’s faded Stanford t-shirt? Why did it feel like her windpipe was being crushed? Louisa pulled away from her father to massage her neck, which didn’t really hurt but felt like it burned.

“Does your throat hurt?” Mr Collins asked, sitting back on his heels, trying to take in his elder daughter’s face in the dark room. He reached around his daughter to turn on the lamp next to her bed. “Or is it your head again?” He turned his head towards Louisa when she didn’t answer, squinting as he waited for his eyes to adjust, only to startle when he realised her face was bleeding profusely. “Did you fall and hit your head?”

Now that he mentioned it, Louisa realised that she did have a rather large headache developing. “I don’t know,” she said, her voice scratchy. “I was asleep— I fell asleep. In the window seat.” She couldn’t recall hitting her head when she fell, though. Of course, she hadn’t been able to remember who she was when she first woke up, so her memory was less than reliable. “I couldn’t remember.”

“Couldn’t remember what, sweetheart?” Her father asked while he stood, searching for a box of tissues. He handed her one and instructed her to pinch her nose and tilt her head forward.

“Me.”

Louisa felt her father stiffen next to her. “Elaborate.”

It was a testament to her shock that Louisa answered honestly. “My name is Louisa,” she said firmly. “Not Anna.”

“And do you know where you are?”

_It always rained in “Forks.” That sounded right._

“Do you know when your birthday is?”

The first images that Louisa recalled were odd, like she was watching an old eight-millimetre film reel: a bonfire in the backyard, roasting marshmallows, a large group of teens sitting on logs; a pumpkin pie instead of birthday cake; a yellow lab wearing a blue collar eating the discard wrapping paper. “Soon.”

Louisa looked up at her father, whose face, even in the dim lighting, was pale. “What do you mean by soon?” he asked.

That was a good question. What did she mean by soon? The birthday presents suggested that her memory was from a birthday party, and the bonfire and pumpkin pie led her to believe that the event took place in the fall. She felt like she was missing something, but the more she thought about it, the more the ache behind her left ear seemed to worsen. “November seventeenth.”

If it was possible, Mr Collins’ face grew paler. He rose to his feet and left the room. Louisa could hear him making a phone call, though she couldn’t quite hear whom. Louisa reached over to her bedside table and picked up her own cell phone, only to see that it was just after midnight. Just below the time were the words ‘Friday, November 17’. Louisa frowned. It wasn’t her birthday, was it? It didn’t feel like it should be her birthday. Louisa placed her phone on the floor next to her and let her eyes fixate on the bookshelves that lined her walls. Bookshelves. Louisa had more
bookshelves, somewhere. In her mind?

Yes, that was very correct. Louisa closed her eyes and tried to think of a library. It was the library her mother had taken her to when she was younger. There was a pretty blonde woman behind the front desk. Her mother. Her mother handed her a book, a thick, dark blue, leather-bound book, with ‘Louisa’ embossed in gold on the front. Louisa flipped it open.

“March seventeenth,” Louisa whispered to herself. That was her birthday. Where had November come from?

“That took entirely too long,” Mr Collins said with a huff, reinterring her room. Louisa’s eyes opened and she watched her father as he drew closer, shoving his wallet into his jeans’ pocket. He had changed out of his pyjamas. He was going somewhere. “I’m taking you to the emergency room. Can you stand?”

Louisa nodded, her head feeling like it was overstuffed with cotton. She grabbed onto her bed and tried to heave herself up, but her legs gave out. Her father seemed to be expecting this and scooped her up into his arms, and carrying her out to the car. Louisa rested her head on her father’s shoulder, which was covered by a thick winter coat. Louisa wondered if she should have changed too. She glanced down at her pyjamas, her top covered in blood. She decided she didn’t care too much and she doubted a doctor would care either. It’s not like they were blood drinking vampires, after all.

No, Louisa didn’t care much at all who saw her covered in blood and shaking like a leaf. Just as long as it wasn’t Jasper the Babe. She didn’t think her dignity could survive.

No Stone Left Unturned

When Jasper heard that Louisa was in the hospital, his first instinct had been to rush to her side to make sure she was alright, which he found to be as confusing as it was alarming. Louisa was only his classmate, after all, and he had no real reason to feel so concerned for her wellbeing. So he allowed Emmett to pull him back down into his seat and continue their game of chess, resolving to see her as soon as visiting hours began at the hospital.

“You need to go to school, sweetheart,” Esme reminded him, amusement swirling around her. “You can visit her after.” When Jasper pointed out that he didn’t mind skipping, as he had already graduated high school many times, Esme laughed out loud and wandered off towards the kitchen, shaking her head.

He and Emmett had been playing a game of chess in the den when Carlisle had gotten called in for an emergency involving one of his patients. His adopted father hadn’t said what it was for at the time, but he had taken an alarmingly thick medical file with him as he dashed out the door, a mixture of frustration and unease trailing after him. It hadn’t been all that difficult to figure out who the patient was. Carlisle had done little else in his free time besides reading through Louisa Collins’ medical file since it had arrived from Tacoma the month before. Jasper would be lying if he said that he had no real desire to read the file for himself, but declined, wanting to give Louisa as much privacy as possible. Edward, on the other hand, had no such qualms and assured him one day while they were out hunting that the bizarre contents explained a lot about the human.

“It will look weird if you visit her this morning,” Alice said, appearing next to him and handing him his backpack, eyes glazed. “She’ll want to know how you found out about her so quickly. Wait until after school. That way you can blame the small town rumour mill.”

“You definitely don’t want to look like a stalker in front of your age-appropriate love interest,”
Edward added, standing up to retrieve the car keys and his own backpack.

Jasper was rather glad that he no longer blush because if he could, his face would have been redder than a sunburned hog. “I’m over a hundred years older than her.”

“A semi-age appropriate love interest, then.”

Jasper looked down at the chess board, unable to keep his face neutral. “She’s not my love interest,” he mumbled, taking Emmett’s rook.


Despite being forced to endure a day of school, there was little any of his family could do to stop him from visiting Louisa when it was finished. Too impatient for Edward to drive him to Forks General Hospital, Jasper ran on foot the moment the final bell rang, where a helpful nurse pointed him towards paediatrics. Not that Jasper needed the assistance. He could just make out Louisa’s sweet scent over the sterile environment of the hospital waiting room, which he followed down a maze of corridors until he was standing outside of the paediatrics wing. That was when his mind caught up with his body and he halted, his hand hovering over the door.

What on God’s green earth had he been thinking? What was he doing here? He was a vampire, with poor self-control, unsupervised, in a building full of bleeding people. He could have killed someone. He could have killed Louisa. Coming was a mistake, obviously. A familiar burn was making itself known at the back of his throat, and Jasper stopped breathing. He needed to get as far away from the hospital as soon as possible before he killed someone.

A tug on his pants interrupted his thoughts. Jasper glanced down at a little redheaded girl with wide brown eyes who was looking up at him with determination. She was probably around eight, and her thin frame was swamped in a hospital gown covered in teddy bears. The hot pink band on her right wrist read the name ‘Kelly Beckett’.

“Are you looking for someone?” She asked in a squeaky voice.

Jasper shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

Kelly’s face split into a wide grin, revealing a missing front tooth. “Good! You can play the knight in dirty armour.” She reached up and grabbed his hand and began to pull him through the doors, into the paediatric wing, rambling a mile a minute about how she needed a companion for her quest. He allowed himself to be dragged by the tiny human into a worn down playroom, where she pushed him into a child-sized plastic chair and placed a paper hat on his head. “What’s your name, Sir Knight?” she asked while she dug around in a toy chest.

“Jasper?” he replied. He sucked in a quick breath, waiting for the burning in his throat to reappear, only to discover that it didn’t. He took in another tentative breath, only to pick up a sour odour coming from the little girl in front of him that reminded him strongly of ammonia.

“Sir Jasper, then,” she intoned. She extended a plastic sword to him as if she were presenting him with Excalibur itself. “Will you help the Dragon Kelly free the princess from her tower?”

The blond considered saying no, getting up and leaving the hospital like he had originally planned. Go home and wish that he was stronger, better at controlling his bloodlust. But the feelings of hope and excitement pouring out of the little body in front of him were persuasive. She was lonely. Jasper knew what it was like to be lonely. He reached out and took the sword from her. “Why is my armour dirty? Aren’t knights supposed to have shining armour?”
Kelly gave him an annoyed look as if she thought he was asking an incredibly dumb question. “Knights who did anything had dirty armour. Only lazy knights had shiny armour. Nurse Mary said so.”

Jasper couldn’t argue with that logic. He stood and followed Kelly around as she crawled on the floor roaring and narrating a landscape only she could see. He awkwardly swung the sword when she instructed him, and she congratulated him for taking out a pair of nasty gnomes. At one point, Kelly grabbed Jasper’s arm and managed to swing herself up onto his back in order to avoid walking in an acid river. When Jasper asked why he had to walk through the acid river, she reminded him that he was the one with armour, not her. Their game continued on like this for longer than he had expected, and while Jasper felt awkward lifting the little girl up so that she could reach the magical pears or army crawling on the ground to avoid the mad scientist’s death ray, he couldn’t bring himself to care too much, particularly whenever Kelly flashed him gap-toothed grin.

“I thought I recognised your dulcet tones,” a warm voice said from behind him while he was trying to explain to Kelly why he wouldn’t fit inside the toy chest with her, despite her insistence that it was bigger on the inside. Jasper jumped and spun towards the playroom door, probably faster than what a human would have considered normal, where a pale Louisa was standing. She was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and an oversized hoodie, her long blonde hair tied up in a messy bun on the top of her head. The skin under her eyes was shadowed like his were whenever he went too long without hunting.

“You look like you were ridden hard and put away wet.” Brilliant. Insult her, Major. Women love that.

Louisa didn’t seem to mind, though, because she let out a tired laugh. “Trust me, I feel even worse.”

Kelly, stood up to get a good look at the newcomer. “Detective Louisa! Have you returned for our quest?”

Louisa shook her head sadly. “Alas, my horrific dragon, I have not. I’ve come to bid thee farewell.”

Kelly clambered out of the toy chest and bounded over to Louisa. She grabbed the teen by her arm and tugged her down so that their faces were level, and she tapped on her forehead. “You’re head isn’t sick anymore?”

“Not that the doctors could find,” Louisa replied, her eyes only briefly flicking to him. He could tell that she was embarrassed by his presence. “They’re sending me home now.”

“You’ll come back and visit me though, right?” Kelly asked. “And you’ll read me that book you were telling me about?”

The corner of Louisa’s mouth twitched up. “How does next Friday sound?”

The eight-year-old let out a squeal of delight and hugged Louisa before zooming off out of the playroom. Louisa watched her go, straightening up before turning back towards him. “You made her week, you know that, don’t you?” she said.

For the second time that day, Jasper was glad that he didn’t have the ability to blush. “What do you mean?”
“Her dad bounced when she was diagnosed with some sort of kidney disease and her mom has two jobs to pay for her treatments. The nurses try to keep her as happy as possible, but it’s not the same, you know? There aren’t too many other kids here.”

He was surprised by Louisa’s bluntness, though upon reflection, he knew he really shouldn’t have been. “She told you this?”

Louisa gave him a wan smile. “Not in so many words, no.”

“I have a feeling that your detective title was well earned with our esteemed dragon.”

Even in her exhaustion, there as a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. “You’d be correct.”

Jasper found himself stepping closer to Louisa, drawn in by her amusement. He found himself wanting to lift up a hand, close the distance between them, and touch her face, realising he had never actually touched her skin before. He’d carried her in his arms, he’d offered his arm to her (like the gentleman his mama had raised him to be, thank you very much), and he’d placed a hand on her back. Yet he never had actually touched her skin, to feel its softness, its warmth. He wanted to trace a finger across her defined cheekbones and find out if they were as hard as they looked.

Okay, so maybe he did have a tiny crush on the girl.

“Maybe you could tell me about it sometime over coffee.”

Louisa’s eyes widened at his words. She recalled being in a similar position not too long ago. This time, at the very least, she wasn’t distracted. She tried to think of something cool and witty to say, but everything sounded lame in her mind. Had she been silent for too long? What if Jasper thought she was going to turn him down again? “I drink coffee,” she blurted out before immediately wishing she could take the words back. He probably thought she was stupid now.

Jasper’s lips quirked up into a smile. Was he laughing at her?

“Maybe sometime next week then?”

Holy shit. That worked? Louisa found herself nodding and exchanging phone numbers with Jasper the Babe. He gave her another one of his tiny smiles before departing with a wave, leaving a dazed Louisa standing alone in the playroom.

Chapter End Notes

Skippers, here is that summary for you: Louisa has a dream about an eighteen-year-old young woman named Anna, who is telling her lover that she is pregnant with his child. The man is married, and when she threatens to expose their affair, he strangles her. Louisa wakes up from the dream and unable to tell if she is Anna or Louisa. Papa Collins takes her to the ER.
It seemed almost sacrilegious that there was no Starbucks in Forks, which was unfortunate, because the rain had turned colder and promised the arrival of winter, making it the perfect weather for a caramel macchiato. It was the day before Thanksgiving break, meaning absolutely no student at Forks High (Home of the Spartans!) would be doing their homework, giving Louisa the perfect excuse to take Jasper up on his coffee date. After dropping Dottie off at home, Louisa drove over to the diner in town, where Jasper had promised to meet her.

The little bell above the door tinkled as Louisa pushed her way inside, a buffet of cold air close on her heels, causing her blonde hair to whip her face and momentarily obscure her vision. Her entrance caused a stack of papers belonging to the chemistry teacher, Mr Hewitt, to fly off the counter where he was sitting. She tried to tame her hair into a ponytail with one hand while helping the chemistry teacher corral his errant papers with the other.

She didn’t know if she felt bad for Michael Hall for failing the most recent test, or Mr Hewitt, for having to grade it as she stacked the papers back into a hasty pile and handed to the man, who waved off her apologies with an easy-going grin.

“You should leave your hair like that,” a smooth voice called from behind her. “It looks great.”

“What,” Louisa replied, turning around to face the speaker. Jasper was sitting in a booth tucked away in the far corner of the diner, his back to the wall. “In my face?”

“Oh, yes,” Jasper said, standing as she approached. Louisa was very glad that Jasper couldn’t hear her heart beating faster when his fingers had brushed against the back of her neck as he helped her out of her coat. He helped her into the booth, which she found both weirdly old fashioned and incredibly charming. “It’s very fashionable.”

“You would know,” Louisa teased, giving his outfit an exaggerated look. He had on a different shirt than what he had worn in Spanish, a dark purple button-down that contrasted sharply with his light hair and fair skin. The sleeves were buttoned at the wrist, not rolled up like Louisa would expect for someone of his age, giving the impression of a philosophy professor at a college, rather than a high school student.

Jasper smiled, retaking his seat. “I can take no credit,” he admitted. “Alice picked this out.”

“Alice is your sister, correct?” Louisa asked, recalling the dark-haired girl who was often seen bouncing through the hallways at school, practically vibrating in excitement. “She’s in a class with mine, I think.” A waitress walked over with Louisa’s coffee and placed it on the table in front of her. Louisa thanked the woman, managing to look away from Jasper long enough to give her a polite smile.

Louisa decided that she didn’t really care what Jasper was saying, as long as he was saying it. He spoke in a baritone and his words had a charming lit to them—it was unquestionably Texan, but it was subdued as if he hadn’t spoken that way in a while. Each word he said was saturated with purpose and importance like he was used to giving concise answers that he expected to be followed. He moved his hands a lot while he spoke, as well, which Louisa found interesting given how reserved Jasper tended to be. The best thing about Jasper, though, was how he spoke to you as if you were an old friend he hadn’t seen in a hundred years, and that nothing could possibly be more important than catching up at that moment.
One of Jasper’s hands was wrapped around his mug of coffee while the other was propping up his chin as he stared at her. His yellowish eyes were watching her as if he were looking for something, though he wasn’t quite sure what. “You went to visit Kelly again?”

“You went to visit Kelly again?” Louisa replied. “But that’s not what you want to know.”

“You are good.”

“I try,” she responded with a laugh. “Though it helps that you aren’t too subtle.”

“No, I suppose that wasn’t,” he agreed. “But I have waited patiently for a whole week to find out your secrets.”

“All of them in one date? My, you don’t ask for much, do you?”

“I always have had lofty aspirations,” Jasper replied, a grin flitting across his lips. “But we are getting side-tracked.”

“Good thing we have you to stop that from happening.” Louisa picked up her coffee and took a sip, considering the boy across from her. “What do you want to know?”

“You always know more about a person than you should. How?”

“Well, I’m not a mind reader, if that’s what you are asking,” Louisa replied. “It’s not even really supernatural at all, really. I just observe.”

His eyes narrowed at this. “I’m observant, and I don’t see half of the things you seem to,” Jasper argued.

Louisa gave a shrug and took another sip of coffee. “No, you do. You just don’t understand what you are seeing.”

“What do you see in me?”

“A dashingly handsome man,” Louisa replied.

“It came with the package,” Jasper said, leaning forwards and resting his forearms on the table. “But that wasn’t what I meant.”

That was the question Louisa had been dreading. People always asked her to read them when they found out about her talent as if she were some sort of attraction at a circus. The inquiries were usually well-meaning like Jasper’s were, but it didn’t make it any less annoying to have to prove herself time and time again. “People are rarely happy with what they hear,” Louisa said slowly. She placed her cup down on the table and sat back in the booth, the vinyl seat cushions squeaking as she did so.

“I won’t be mad.”

“You’re a horseback rider. Western style.”

“Is this your way of saying that you still think that I’m from Texas?”

“You are from Texas,” Louisa replied with a raised eyebrow. She wasn’t sure why he was so reluctant to admit it, but that was his business, not hers. “Your hands are what told me that you ride horses.”
Jasper released his hold on his coffee cup to glance down at his hands, then looked back up at her.
“My hands?”

Louisa nodded and held out her own, making grabbing motions so that she could hold onto his. His fingers were cooler than she had expected as he placed them softly in her open palms. Louisa gripped his wrists and gently turned his hands over so that his palms were up, then cradled his hands in hers. “Hands can tell you a lot about a person if you know what to look for.” Louisa stroked a thumb stroke over the creases of Jasper’s right palm. “You’re right-handed,” she began, sneaking a glance at Jasper. When he opened his mouth to speak, she cut him off. “And I know this not just because I’ve seen you write something in class. The veins in your wrists are more pronounced on it—you use it more than your left.”

Jasper watched her intently, and she had to resist the urge to pull away. “You keep your nails well-trimmed and maintained. My first assumption would be that you play a musical instrument, but you lack the necessary calluses to play a string instrument, and the muscles of your fingers are not developed enough for a pianist. Therefore, I have to assume that you prefer to keep them this way, which suggests that you do manual work with your hands.

“But these are the most telling,” Louisa said, tracing the bumps on the fingers of his left hand and trying to ignore how intimate the gesture was. “Unless they were gloves, horseback riders always have calluses on the pinky side of their ring finger. They come from holding the reins. The calluses on your left hand are more prevalent, meaning you are used to holding the reins in this hand which is common for western style riding. It frees up your dominant hand for other tasks.”

Louisa watched Jasper look at his hands in confusion. “You could tell all of that just by a few calluses?”

“No, I made it all up,” Louisa deadpanned. “I just wanted to hold your hands.”

Jasper looked up at her quickly, a surprised look briefly crossing his face before he threaded his fingers with hers. “I knew you had an ulterior motive.”

Louisa tossed her head back and laughed. “Did I pass muster, Major? Or do you need further evidence?”

Major. The title sent jolt of panic through his body. It was obvious by her smile that Louisa was being facetious, but what were the odds that she had chosen that exact word? He tried to compose himself, hoping that she hadn’t noticed his panic. “Only if you want.”

Louisa shrugged and extracted a hand so that she could grab her coffee cup again. “Did you have Mr Hewitt for chemistry?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, confused by the abrupt change of topic. “Last year.”

She watched him from over the top of her cup, her grey eyes narrowed in concentration. “What were his tests like?”

“Long answer, mostly,” he replied. “He focuses on theory more than numbers.”

Louisa’s attention moved to the napkin holder that was sitting on the end of the table as if she were watching something. “Don’t make it obvious that you are staring, but Mr Hewitt is sitting at the counter grading papers. What can you already learn?”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Jasper said.
Louisa’s gaze fell back on Jasper. “A man is sitting in a fairly busy diner, grading. Why?”

“He likes the atmosphere?”

Louisa wore a look that was torn between finding his response annoying and endearing. “If you have a lot of work to do, something that requires concentration, where do you do it?”

“At home,” Jasper replied. Louisa watched him steadily, and he realised what she was trying to say. “But he’s not at home. He’s here.”

“So why isn’t he at home?”

“He’s got three kids, I think. He probably needs to focus.”

She was shaking her head before he had even finished. “At home, he could tell the kids to shut up. He can’t do that here. So why does he come to a noisy diner that he has no control over, instead of putting on a movie for his kids to watch in another room?” When Jasper didn’t answer, Louisa gave him a smile and scooted over on the bench, patting the open spot next to her. Following her hint, he rose from his spot and joined her on her side of the table, their knees brushing under the table. She grabbed the napkin holder and positioned it so they could see the chemistry teacher in its reflection. “Watch him, and describe what you see.”

Jasper glanced over at Mr Hewitt, taking in his appearance. The man’s shirt was rumpled slightly at the back and untucked from his trousers. His dark hair was stuck up at odd angles in the back from running his hands through it, and there was a spot of shaving cream hidden behind his ear. He watched as the chemistry teacher thanked the waiter for his coffee, and then proceeded to stir in eight packets of sugar, barely looking up from his grading. Jasper might have cheated slightly and felt out the man’s emotional state, which was stressed and slightly irritated, though he kept that to himself.

“You missed the unmatched socks and the way he is fidgeting with his wedding band, but that’s impressive for your first time. Now, what conclusions can we draw from these data points?”

Jasper was at a loss. “He’s stressed probably. And he’s got a bit of a sweet tooth.”

Louisa giggled at this, her amusement so intense that he almost felt high. For a vampire, his mind was incredibly scrambled, and all he could think about at the moment was how he wished he could hear more of that laugh. “A bit? He used eighty-nine percent of his daily sugar intake on one cup of coffee. What could be a better explanation?”

”Maybe he doesn’t like coffee?”

“More likely,” Louisa agreed. She had propped her arm up on the table, chin resting on her hand, and she looked at him with a grin. “So why does he drink it?”

Jasper couldn’t remember if he ever drank coffee when he was human, but he imagined that he must have because he remembered the sleepless nights he had when leading his company. “He needs the caffeine,” he replied.

Louisa bumped her shoulder with his. “See, it’s not that hard. It just takes a little practice.”

Jasper’s lips quirked into a tiny smile. “But I’m sure I missed something.”

Louisa nodded. “Yeah, a lot. But it was a good start.”
“Define a lot.”

“He’s going through a rough patch with his wife.”

“And how would you know?”

“Is that a challenge I hear, Mr Hale?” Louisa joked. At Jasper’s smirk, she looked over at the chemistry teacher who was still hunched over his grading. “She made him sleep on the couch last night. His wife didn’t tell him that his socks don’t match or about the shaving cream behind his ear, so she isn’t talking to him. He’s avoiding her after their fight. And the ring he’s playing with? It’s about ten-years-old and needs to be cleaned. Wedding bands are symbolic of their marital vows, so why does he not take care of it? They’ve been fighting. For a while, most likely.”

“How did you know that he’s sleeping on the couch?”

“If he’s fighting with his wife, of course, he’s sleeping on the couch.”

He looked down at her in amusement. “Anything else?”

“He’s an avid clarinettist, but that’s unrelated,” Louisa replied. “Possibly.”

“And how do you know that one?”

Louisa let out a dramatic sigh. “Have you learned nothing?” she asked, raising the hand she was still holding and giving it a little shake. “It’s all in the hands.”

Jasper couldn’t stop a laugh from bubbling out of him, and when she started to laugh with him, he found it difficult to stop. He had always thought that Louisa’s emotions were cleaner, stronger, than most people’s, and sitting so close to her, in a little booth with their knees brushing and their fingers linked and her scent surrounding him… he felt almost intoxicated in her presence.

“I have to admit,” he finally said after trying to get his mirth under control. “You’re impressive.”

A wave of fondness wrapped around Jasper at these words. “Most people find it creepy,” Louisa replied. A faint blush had spread across her cheeks, and he doubted that he would have been able to see it had he been human. The sight didn’t send venom pooling in his mouth like it usually would have, had he seen any other human do it. So why was she so special?

“Why do you do it?” Jasper asked.

Louisa knew that he was asking from a place of genuine curiosity, and not because he agreed with her. The question was probing, too personal for a first, or even a second or third, date question. It felt like it was asked so that he could understand her on a deeper level, even if that wasn’t how he intended it to sound. And maybe that was why she found herself answering him truthfully. Because as attractive and witty Jasper Whitlock obviously was, there was a quiet, gentle something in his person that she wanted to know all of, and for that part of him to know her too.

The only problem, how did she let that happen? How did she even being to answer his question?

“I guess,” she began slowly, looking down at their still intertwined fingers, her brow furrowed in concentration. “It’s because it’s all I know.” She extended her free hand and picked up her mug of lukewarm coffee and took a sip as she tried to collect her thoughts. “When I was seven, I fell off a cliff.” When she felt Jasper stiffen next to her, she looked up at him, though she couldn’t find the ability in her to give him a reassuring smile. “I don’t remember it happening. I don’t remember most things before the accident, truthfully.
“One of my first memories is actually waking up in a hospital. Everything was so white and my head hurt so much. There was a woman sitting next to me. I remember thinking that she was an angel, as cliché as it sounds. She had long blonde hair and these beautiful blue eyes. She seemed happy to see that I was awake, but I had no clue who she was, where I was, who I was.” Louisa fell silent for a moment and Jasper stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “I learned later that it was my mother.

“No one would explain to me what was going on. I could hear the doctors outside though. Total retrograde amnesia. They refused to let anyone answer my questions, tell me my name even, because they wanted me to remember them on my own. They let Mom see me and told her to read to me, hoping that it would jog a few memories. She had refused to leave the hospital the whole time I was there, but she had apparently found a copy of The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Not her first choice of reading materials for her seven-year-old, but it was the only book she could find at the time.

“Not knowing who you are is… horrible. You’re confused all of the time, and your body doesn’t feel like it should belong to you.” Louisa said. “You look for anything that could give you an identity, and for me, I guess that happened to be Sherlock Holmes. He was the only thing in that hospital room that made sense and I guess it sort of stuck with me. I was making deductions like he did by the time they sent me home. I even made a memory attic like he had, so I could never forget anything again.”

“Did you ever get any of your memories back?”

“A few,” Louisa admitted. “I could remember my parents the best. Dottie was six at the time, but I remembered her as a toddler. I had no clue that I even had a little brother.”

Jasper was at a loss for words. He wanted to comfort her, but everything that came to mind sounded empty and hollow compared to the overwhelming shock he felt at her story. So he simply did what he did best, and sent her the emotions he couldn’t adequately say. He watched the tension in her shoulders dissipate slowly as his power worked on her. He didn’t want to remove what she was feeling, her emotions were hers to feel and completely justified. Instead, he wrapped his support around her, letting it intertwine with her sorrow and buttress her pain so she didn’t have to carry it on her own.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She was looking up at him through distant her eyes as if she were looking at something that didn’t exist, or maybe did exist at one point but no longer existed.

“For what?”

“For listening, I guess,” she replied. “I’ve never told that to anyone.”

He wasn’t sure what about that confession that resonated with him. Perhaps it was because he was one of the few people on Earth that could possibly know what she had said. Maybe it was the peace and gratitude that accompanied her words. Whatever it was, it was deep, powerful, intimate. It was a pulsing feeling in his chest where his heart should have been and it was a fluttering sensation across his skin that made him feel, for the first time in over one hundred and fifty years, alive. It scared the hell out of him. And he was pretty sure that he liked it.

And it was all ruined when the door to the diner open, the cold wind pushing the scent of a group of teenagers with it.

Louisa jumped in surprise and turned to face the rowdy boys. She felt Jasper stiffen next to her. He
hadn’t turned to face the boys, but something in his posture had changed. He had shut down for some reason, and he seemed less confident in himself. It was almost like he was holding himself back. Louisa mimicked his earlier actions and rubbed her thumb across the back of his hand. When he looked back down at her, his eyes seemed darker, more guarded.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Louisa said, standing up. She was about to drop a few dollars on the table but he beat her to it, claiming that it would be rude of him to ask her on a date and then not pay for it. She allowed him to help her into her coat, and she took his arm as they exited the building, the cold wind biting at her face the moment they stepped outside.

“Where do you want to go?” Jasper asked as she guided him towards her car.

“I’m not sure,” Louisa admitted, fumbling for her keys. “You just looked a bit uncomfortable in there.”

“I wasn’t uncomfortable,” Jasper replied.

Louisa smiled at him over the top of her car. “Yes you were,” she stated. She opened her door and slid in behind the wheel, giving Jasper no choice but to follow her. The tiny Prius was too small for his long legs, forcing him to slide the seat back, but it was full of her scent, which more than compensated for the lack of room.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” Jasper replied in a low voice. “I was fine.”

Louisa let out a hum as if she didn’t believe him, before starting the car and pulling out of the car park. “I won’t pry. It’s your business,” she said. “But it was entirely selfish, I assure you. Your smile didn’t reach your eyes the moment those kids came in. It was bumming me out.”

Jasper knew certainty that Louisa had felt no such emotions at any point since she had arrived at the diner but there was no real way for him to tell her this without saying too much about his real nature. Instead, they drove in silence, Louisa apparently not going anywhere in particular. It was comfortable silence, the kind where words didn’t need to fill, as if their closeness was enough to fill the space where words could have been placed, but didn’t really need to be put.

“You were right,” Jasper said.

“I generally am,” Louisa replied, taking her eyes off the road for a brief moment to flash him a cheeky smile. “But about what in particular this time?”

“About me, being from Texas.”

He wasn’t sure what possessed him to say this. Telling her this would ruin their carefully scripted backstory, could endanger his family. Yet he felt the need to tell her something, something truthful after she had been so honest with him. Something personal. He wanted her to know him, the part of him that wasn’t Jasper Hale, twin brother of Rosalie, but the part that was Jasper Whitlock. The part of him that wasn’t a vampire or a human but was just him.

“What part?”

“Just outside of Houston. My father taught me how to ride a horse when I was about seven.” He couldn’t tell her more. Partly because it wasn’t safe to and partly because he didn’t know much more. His human life was a collection of water-damaged photographs at best, the memories faded over the decades, his human senses too dull to properly encode the necessary information and store it in his vampire brain. But it was something. Something that only he knew and could share. And something was better than nothing.
He wondered if she understood how significant such a small detail was. He watched her as she drove around through the tiny, godforsaken, unremarkable town in the middle of practically nowhere. Her lips didn’t move up into a smile, but they didn’t have to, because when she turned her head for a second, grey meeting gold, her eyes were alive with happiness, with relief. With understanding.

“Thank you.”
Nothing Good Ever Happens in a Closet

Louisa hadn't told anyone that she was going on a date with Jasper Hale, so naturally, by the end of the Thanksgiving holiday, everyone in Forks knew that Jasper and Louisa were kind-of-sort-of-a thing. In the days following the date, so many things changed, though only in ways that were important in high school. The most significant, however, was that Jasper Hale of the elusive and mysterious Cullen Clan had started eating lunch with Louisa.

Well, originally, was supposed to be the two of them, but Rosalie accused Jasper of trying to steal Louisa from her and invited herself to their table, and where Rosalie was, Emmett was. Then Alice had complained about being excluded. Edward didn't seem to care one way or another if he sat with the juniors but after all of his siblings had abandoned him at the Cullen's usual table, he had learned the hard way that handsome boys sitting by themselves were the perfect conversation starter to some of his braver admirers.

So really, Louisa had somehow managed to breach the invisible boundary between the Cullens and the population of Forks High School (Home of the Spartans!), which many took as her being some sort of mythical creature. Her peer's reaction to her had noticeably changed, with some angry that the new girl had captured the Cullen's attention in a few months when they had not been able to do so in the entire year before, while others found Louisa as unapproachable as the Cullens seemed to be. Louisa took this in stride, not particularly concerned about anyone's opinion on the matter, save Dottie, who though confused about why Louisa would want to associate herself with the intimidating siblings, trusted her older sister wholeheartedly.

Whilst sitting with the Cullens didn't have the same mythic qualities as her peers thought, it was definitely entertaining. Each of the siblings had their own quirks and idiosyncrasies that were fascinating to watch in action. Emmett, for instance, apparently lacked the ability to stay still and on more than one occasion had nearly upended the table on account of his bouncing leg. Alice, on the other hand, had no concept of personal space, and Louisa found herself nudging Alice out of her lap at least once a day.

There was the odd fact that none of them seemed to eat, however. Sure, they bought lunches, but she had never seen any of them actually put food in their mouths. Jasper didn't even try to hide the fact that he wasn't eating, unlike his siblings, who at least pushed the food around their trays. She would be lying to say that their behaviour didn't make her self-conscious of her own eating habits, and had taken to bring food that could be eaten quickly as she walked to lunch. She didn't want to ask them why they didn't eat, though. It wasn't her business, and she was sure Dr Cullen would have intervened if he was concerned about his children's aversion to food.

"Is that all you're planning on eating?"

Louisa had become so accustomed to Jasper appearing next to her that she didn't jump when she heard him speak as she was pulling out a bag of trail mix from her locker. She turned to face him, "You're one to talk."

Jasper at least had the decency to look embarrassed at this. "I had a big breakfast."

"Was it a bear, by any chance?" Louisa laughed.

"Mountain lion, actually. Emmett had the bear."

"I can see why you're not hungry then."
"You're avoiding my question," Jasper pointed out while she closed her locker. He took her hand and began to lead her towards the cafeteria.

"It's weird that I'm the only one who eats, Jasper," Louisa said with a sigh. She stopped and tugged on his hand, forcing him to turn and face her. His head tilted as he looked at her, brow furrowed. "What?" she asked when he didn't say anything.

"I forget how observant you are," he said finally. He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. "If you wish, we can hide from my siblings."

"I'd like to see you try," Alice said, bouncing up out of nowhere, an eyebrow raised in annoyance. "Louisa, now that we're friends, I can add you on Snapchat, right?"

Louisa shot Jasper a confused look, only to see that his face was set in an expression that could only be described as resignation. "Uh, sure."

Alice gave her a brilliant smile. She reached forward and grabbed Louisa's hand, giving it a surprisingly strong tug for someone so small, and half dragged the older girl towards the cafeteria. Louisa heard Jasper let out an annoyed sigh, but when she turned her head back to him, she saw that he was following along behind them. He placed his hand briefly on the small of her back before moving ahead to open the door for them. Louisa listened to Alice's rambling with half an ear and allowed herself to be led to where the rest of the Cullen siblings were sitting.

"We'll have to have a sleepover soon," Alice said. She paused then, feet from the lunch table, her eyes going glassy and unfocused. Jasper strolled passed his sister, unfazed by the behaviour, and pulled out a seat to offer Louisa. "Rosalie, you, and me. We'll want to have it at Louisa's house," Alice continued. "Her father will be upset when she tells him she'd be staying in the same house as Jasper."

Louisa was about to ask her how she could know how her father reacted but was cut off by Emmett's booming laugh. He didn't seem to notice that several nearby kids jumped at the sound. "Yeah, that should be fun. Say hi to Anna for me, Rosie."

Rosalie sent her husband a scathing look, but Louisa cut in before she could respond. "Anna?"

"Yeah, didn't you know? Your house is haunted." Emmett replied, evidently confused.

Louisa shook her head. "You said Anna," Louisa said.

Emmett sat back in his chair and watched her with a curious expression. "Has nobody told you that your house is haunted?"

"Yes, my sister, but she's biased," Louisa said. "Tell me what you know."

It was Edward who answered. "Every town has its haunted house or some sort of legend. Your house happens to be the haunted house of Forks. It has a reputation, you see."

"I know a woman was murdered there about ten years ago."

"Not really sure if you could call her that," Alice interjected thoughtfully. "I heard that she was only eighteen when she died. She was really young. Still in high school."

"Esme had a lot of trouble keeping the local kids out when she was renovating it. They kept breaking in and try to camp out for the night. Even stole our equipment on a few occasions," Emmett explained. "We caught a few of them, and they all said that they wanted to see the ghost."
"But her name was Anna, you said?"

"Why are you so curious, Louisa?" Edward asked, watching her closely.

Louisa hesitated, remembering her dream with the strange man who strangled her. She could hardly explain what she had seen without sounding like a lunatic. Her dream would be chalked up to just that: a dream. It had no basis in reality, offered no quantifiable evidence. Perhaps she had read the name when she was doing research on the house, and forgot about it? "I didn't know her name," Louisa replied.

"That doesn't surprise me," Rosalie said. "From what I heard, they kept her name out of the papers. They wanted to respect the family and give them privacy after their kid was murdered. Not like it was really a big secret. Everyone knew. Forks is a small town and people talk."

Well, there went that theory. She must have overheard the name at some point. Edward was still looking at her oddly, so she smiled and changed the subject on something besides the potential ghost living in her house. "What happened to the family?"

"They moved away, I imagine," Emmett replied. "I haven't heard of any other Sweets in Forks."

Anna Sweet. That was her name then? Louisa briefly wondered if Anna Sweet was the girl from her dream. Alice said that she was a student when she died, maybe she could find an old yearbook and look her up.

But what was the point? Even if she did, what could the information possibly provide her? A face to the name? She hadn't seen the face of the Dream Anna, so there was nothing to even say that it was the same person. It was probably just a coincidence that she had had a dream of an Anna being murdered in the same house a real Anna had been. Louisa had probably just heard a student talking about Ghost Anna at one point and her tired brain had provided Dream Anna and filled in the gaps with what she knew about the house.

But then why had her bedroom looked different in her dream? Shouldn't they have looked the same? Louisa had to admit that her knowledge of dream interpretation, or even how dreams worked, was severely lacking. She made a mental note to make a trip to the library after school and find a book on the subject. And while she was there, it wouldn't hurt to brush up on the history of her house, could it?

Louisa's attention focused on the cafeteria around her, and her eyes landed on Dottie, who was sitting with Spencer Gardner and a few friends. Dottie. She had promised Dottie that she was done with mysteries. As if she sensed her eyes, Dottie looked up and their gazes locked. Her little sister gave her a smile and a wave before turning back to her friends.

No, she couldn't go back on her promise to her sister.

She pushed the thought of haunted houses and murder mysteries out of her mind, locked the information in a vault in her mental library and handed her mother the key. Louisa forced a smile onto her face and focused on the conversation that had sprung up around her, nodding in sympathy with Emmett when his siblings teased him about the fact that their mother always beat him in Mario Kart.

The people at the lunch table were real, tangible. Not supernatural in the slightest. Normal. These were the things she needed to focus on.

After she made that decision, it seemed as if the rest of lunch flew by, and before she was really
certain of what was happening, Louisa was being led to Spanish class by Rosalie and Jasper. Louisa had retrieved her books from her locker and was heading towards class when she heard laughter. It was light, airy, happy. Feminine. This wasn't so odd, seeing she was in a hallway that was by no means empty, but for some reason, it gave Louisa pause.

Someone else chuckled in response. This one was deeper, huskier. Masculine.

Goosebumps covered her skin in an instant, the little hairs on her arms standing on end. It wasn't the chuckle that disturbed her. No, it was the scent that accompanied it. It was musky and heavy, and Louisa was positive that she has smelled it before, though she couldn't pinpoint when or where.

The bell rang, signalling the beginning of class. Louisa shook her head and hurried towards her Spanish class, mentally preparing an excuse for Mrs Goff. The hallway was almost completely empty, giving Louisa the opportunity to jog towards class, unimpeded by the usual swarm of students.

The woman giggled again, her voice sounding father away. Louisa halted in her tracks, straining her ears for the sound. She heard a door open, somewhere close, and without making the conscious decision to, Louisa changed course and took off after the laughter. She made a sharp turn around a corner and found herself in another empty hallway. Louisa scanned the doors, looking for the source of the sound, only to find nothing out of the ordinary.

And yet, why did she want to walk towards the janitor's closet?

"Louisa?"

She jumped and spun around, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

It was just Mr Hewitt. He was standing in the doorway of the teacher's lounge, a plastic fork in his hand. He must have seen her sprint past. "Are you alright?" He asked, taking a step forward. "Your nose is bleeding."

Louisa lifted a hand to her face and her fingers came back bloody. "I was looking for a bathroom," she replied hastily.

Mr Hewitt gave her a concerned look. "Maybe you should go to the nurse. You look awfully pale."

Louisa shook her head. "No, it happens all of the time." At least they seemed to happen a lot recently. Maybe she was allergic to something? "I'm late for Spanish."

Mr Hewitt's brow was still furrowed in concern. "I'll write you a pass."

Louisa had no choice but to trudge to Spanish after that. Rosalie gave her a confused look the moment she walked in, but it was Jasper's expression that gave her pause. He was sitting up in his chair for once, leaned forward slightly, his eyes narrowed as he watched her. She couldn't decipher his expression other than he was concerned about her late entrance. Louisa tried to subtly look down at her blouse to see if she had gotten blood on it, only to find it clean. She made eye contact with him again and tried to give him a reassuring smile, though it had little effect.

The moment Mrs Goff finished her lecture and told them to work in pairs, Jasper pulled Louisa over to his and Rosalie's table.

"Are you alright?" Jasper asked, reaching forward to press the back of his hand to her forehead. She didn't feel like she had a fever, but Jasper hadn't had all that many interactions with humans outside of eating them, so he could be too sure.
Louisa smiled and gently pushed his hand away. "I'm fine," she assured. "It was just a nosebleed."

"You've been having a lot of those lately," Jasper stated. Should he be concerned? He would have to ask Carlisle about it as soon as possible.

Louisa shrugged. "Cold weather, I suppose," she replied before changing the subject to Spanish. The Hale twins both looked annoyed at this but didn't push it further. Still, they kept a watchful eye on her for the rest of period, Jasper even going so far as to walk her to her next class.

She appreciated the gesture, of course, but it was hardly necessary. Dr Cullen hadn't found a cause for her headaches and the nosebleeds didn't seem to be linked, so there really wasn't anything to worry about. Probably. Even so, she would never turn down a chance to see the Babe, and willing let him escort her to his heart's content.

Headaches and bloody noses aside, the rest of the day passed without incident and Louisa was standing at her locker, filing up her backpack with her homework for the day. Dottie had made a brief appearance and informed her that she was going over to Spencer's house. Louisa tried to get in some good-natured teasing but her sister knew her too well and waved goodbye before she could start. Smiling, Louisa closed up her locker and began the trek towards the car park. She nodded to a few people she had worked with on the planning committee, stopping to talk to a few now that she was no longer in a hurry to make it to her car.

She had just bid farewell to Katie Hyde, promising her to think about helping plan the winter dance, when she heard it again: the same feminine giggle. Louisa turned her head towards the sound, only to see her by the hallway from earlier. She looked around to make sure that nobody was watching her before she slowly began to make her way towards the janitor's closet.

The sound was growing louder, someone was clearly inside. Two someones, in fact. The male's laugh joined the female's. Louisa turned her head towards the sound, only to see her by the hallway from earlier. She looked around to make sure that nobody was watching her before she slowly began to make her way towards the janitor's closet.

The sound was growing louder, someone was clearly inside. Two someones, in fact. The male's laugh joined the female's. Louisa was in front of the closet door, her hand outstretched when she paused. Even if they were the same students from earlier, it would be rude to interrupt them. There were only so many things two people could possibly do in a closet, very few of them something she wanted to interrupt.

"Looking for something?"

Louisa jumped at the sound of Jasper's voice, her heart practically leaping into her throat. She lightly slapped his arm when he began laughing at her reaction. "Don't do that."

He gave her a serious nod though he was unable to hide the mirth in his eyes. "What sort of mischief are we getting ourselves into?"

Louisa was unable to stay upset with him when his golden eyes looked like that. "Are you including yourself in that question?"

"Naturally."

*What the hell*, she thought, reaching forward and turning the doorknob. She yanked open the door to the janitor's closet, expecting to find two very annoyed lovebirds inside. Only it was empty. Confusion coursed through her. Hadn't she just heard two people laughing inside? They had been loud enough to hear halfway down the hall, as well. There wasn't another way out of the closet, either, unless she counted the small air vent near the ceiling.

Despite this, Louisa stepped inside anyway. She could hear Jasper's light steps as he followed. She fumbled around for a moment, trying to find the light switch on the wall, but when she flicked it,
the lightbulb didn't turn on. Undeterred, Louisa pulled out her phone and turned on its light, shining the beam around the small space.

"What are we looking for, exactly?" Jasper asked, reaching up to give the lightbulb a tap.

That was a very good question. She wasn't sure how to explain the laughter she had heard, or even if she should. Not only did she think she sounded crazy, but she didn't want to sound crazy in front of the Babe. They had only started kind-of-sort-of dating a week ago, after all. "A place to hide."

Jasper looked down at her to give her a smirk. "And what are we hiding from, exactly."

"Your siblings, my siblings, the rest of the school, take your pick."

"What would we need hide from the general public?"

"I'm sure I could think of something—" Louisa didn't get the chance to finish her flirty comment, however, because her foot snagged on a mop. She flailed for a moment, trying to regain her balance, but it was no use, the ground was rapidly coming towards her face, and she was pretty sure she was going to hit her head on a bottle of floor cleaner. But just before her nose connected with the bottle, a solid arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her upright.

Then Louisa was running, which didn't make any sense because she knew that was standing still. She also knew that she wasn't in a dingy alley, full of garbage cans and empty cardboard boxes. She looked around, taking in the graffiti on the brick wall, the rusty fire escapes. It wasn't her usual way home, but it was faster: her mama was sick and needed the medicine she had gone out to get. It wasn't even that late out, the sun had only set a few minutes ago, and she had passed quite a few people on her way. The air was humid and her dress was sticking to her skin.

She dodged around an alley cat, mumbling an apology to it when it hissed at her. When she looked back up, she was surprised to see a man standing at the end of the alley. She halted and surveyed the stranger for the briefest of moments. He was tall, taller than her cousin Sammy, and he was probably the tallest man she had ever met. He had wavy blond hair, and though it looked like it was in dire need of a combing, the stranger oddly made it work. He was beautiful too, not in a movie star sort of way, but in a rugged hero sort of way, the kind of handsome that knew the value of a long day's hard work, yet had no problems saving a damsel in distress in his spare time. But it was his eyes that gave her pause: they were blood red and belonged to a man who hadn't eaten in a very long time and she was the solution.

She took a step backwards, and then another. When the stranger didn't make any advances towards her, she turned and took off at a run. The alley cat yowled when she stepped on it, but she didn't bother to apologise this time. She was perhaps twenty yards from the opposite end of the alley and she could see pedestrians out for an evening stroll. She had been far enough away from the stranger, that she could make it, hadn't she?

She glanced over her shoulder to see if he was still standing at the mouth of the alley. He was, the street lamp making his blond hair look as if had a halo. She knew, almost instinctively, that the stranger was the very opposite of an angel.

She tripped then, her foot caught on an old milk crate, and she went sprawling. Just before her face made contact with the pavement, however, a hand wrapped around her waist and pulled her upright. A cold, corpse-like hand. She wrenched herself free, spinning around, only to find herself face to face with the stranger. He was even more beautiful up close. His hair fell in golden waves to his collar, and his bone structure more perfect than a Renaissance marble statue. The only thing that marred his beauty was his blood red eyes. The eyes of a demon.
"I do apologise, ma'am," the demon said, his silky voice sending shivers down her spine. But not in a good way. It was instinctual in a very bad way, like an agitated dog before an earthquake. He reached out and took her in his arms once more and then he was bending down as if he might kiss her. She tried to jerk herself away again, but the demon wasn't as relenting this time. His cold arms were cold and locked like steel beams around her.

She felt a sharp, shooting pain in her neck. She tried to scream, to push him away, but he was too strong and she was growing weak. The pain in her neck was burning, throbbing. She scratched at the demon's back, but he didn't seem to notice. Her legs were giving out, her thoughts growing muddy. The alley was darkening, or maybe she was losing consciousness. She was floating, up, up, up, fading away.

She slammed back into her body. No, not her body. A different body. And she was somewhere else, somewhere dark and smelled like floor cleaner. She could feel a hand wrapped around her waist and her eyes followed it, up to its owner. It was the same stranger from the alley. The demon.

She jumped, pulled herself free, and backed away. The demon let her go.

"Louisa?" He asked, his honeyed voice sending more shivers down her spine. "What is it?"

Why did he call her Louisa?

The answer came to her almost instantly. Her name was Louisa. Louisa Collins and she was in Forks, Washington. She was not in an alley with a demon. She was in a closet with a demon.


Her kind-of-sort-of boyfriend who actually might be kind-of-sort-of a demon who kind-of-sort-of drinks people's blood.

She stumbled back towards the door, not taking her eyes off him. He had his hands out, still extended from where he had caught her, and his expression was confused. "I have to go," she managed to stutter. She continued to back away out into the hallway until she ran into the opposite wall. No, not a wall, a person. Louisa broke her eye contact with Jasper and looked up at the person she had backed into.

It was Edward Cullen. Jasper's brother.

"Are you well, Louisa?" Edward asked, staring at her, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Did he know what Jasper was? Most likely. It was probably hard to hide the fact you were a blood-sucking demon from your family. Louisa's eyes darted back towards Jasper, who had exited the closet and was slowly approaching her. His head was tilted, his eyes narrowed.

Unless, Louisa realised in horror, Jasper's family were blood-sucking demons too.

And Louisa was stuck in between two of them. She remembered how the girl had tried to run, and Jasper had still caught her. So demons were fast. There was no hope in out running either of the brothers. But she had to try.

"I have to go," Louisa repeated, dodging away from the brothers and slowly backing up the hall. She reached the next hallway and took off at a sprint.

Jasper watched Louisa go. "What was she thinking?" He asked. Her emotions had been fine, happy, flirty even, right up until she tripped. He had caught her of course, but she had frozen in his
arms, staring at something he could not see with unfocused eyes. Her emotions had slowly morphed into confusion, then horror.

"She knows that we aren't human," Edward replied. "It was like she was having a vision of some sort. She saw you killing a woman in an alley and your eyes were red. She keeps referring to us as demons."

Well shit. This was not how Jasper imagined this conversation would happen. He instructed Edward to tell the family what was going on while he himself started off after his… well, whatever the hell Louisa was.
Miraculously, Louisa made it to her car with all of her blood intact, though she wasn't sure how. There was no way she could possibly outrun Jasper if that… vision… was to be believed. Which meant that Jasper must have let her go. But why? Was he toying with her, like a cat with a mouse? She didn't wait in the car park for long: the moment she made it to the Prius she locked the doors and started the car. She was speeding away from the school before she even had the time to put on her seat belt.

And then there was the matter of her vision. How did she see what she saw? It didn't make any sense. Perhaps it was a hallucination? What if it she was wrong, and Jasper was just a human, a very attractive, strong human, who now thought she was insane because of how she reacted? But no, that didn't feel right. Whatever Louisa had seen, she knew deep down that it was the truth. Jasper killed women in alleys and drank their blood and his family did too.

The only thing that Louisa couldn't get out of her mind, however, was his eyes. In the vision, they were blood red and had the same dead, empty quality of a shark’s. The Jasper in the closet had gold eyes which had shown nothing but confusion when she had wrench herself away. She knew that the Jasper in the vision was the Jasper in the closet, but her brain had trouble reconciling the two. Had her brain changed the colour of his eyes in the vision? Again, that didn't feel correct, and Louisa wasn't sure how she knew that it wasn't correct, but she was positive that her brain wasn't playing tricks on her.

She tried to push the terror out of her mind as she sped the familiar drive home when another thought occurred to her: if she went home, who was to say that Jasper wouldn't follow her there? Dottie could be at home, her father could be at home, when Jasper came to kill her, and who was to say that he wouldn't just kill her entire family? Louisa slammed on her brakes and spun the steering wheel as far as it would go. The tires of the Prius squealed loudly and she could smell the scent burning rubber as she turned the car around.

No, she couldn't go home, she decided as she took off the way she had come. It wasn't safe for her family. She needed to get out of town. She was doing eighty by the time she hit the highway. If she had been any less distressed, she would have been amazed that she hadn't been pulled over for speeding. But as it was, her hands were trembling and her teeth were chattering and her knees were shaking so violently that they kept hitting the steering column.

She took a few calming breaths and tried to clear her mind. She needed a plan. It was obvious that she couldn't go home, but where should she go? Where would she be safe from the Cullens? She wished that Pyotr was here to help her make sense of this; he was always so level-headed. Even when they had been in that warehouse in July, he hadn't cried, begged for his life, shook with fear.

Pyotr, of course. He would know what to do.

Louisa couldn't reach her phone; it was in her backpack, which had slid off the passenger seat when she had turned the car around. Besides, she didn't think she would even be able to dial her cell and drive at the same time. She would have to pull over briefly. She checked the gas level on her car only to see that it was half full. She calculated how far she could go without having to stop to fill up her car. Olympia, probably. Seattle if she was lucky.
But that was stupid. If she couldn't find a gas station before then, she could be stranded on an abandoned stretch of highway, a sitting duck for Jasper and his family. She would have to stop, if only for a few minutes, and hope that they wouldn't catch up in time. She could call Pyotr then.

She tried to relax after this, now that she had a plan. She turned on the radio, hoping that would help. She slowed down to a more reasonable speed, knowing that if she were pulled over the Cullens would have even more time to catch up. Still, she kept checking her rear-view mirror, looking for the silver Volvo she knew that they drove, or any other car that seemed to be following her. Time seemed to simultaneously fly by and drag on as she drove down highway 101, and every flash of silver had her accelerating the Prius just as fast as her heart rate accelerated.

An hour into her drive, she pulled into a gas station, lamenting the fact that it was empty and worrying if she was far enough away from town. While her car filled up, Louisa dug around in her backpack and pulled out her and considered what to say to her friend. She could hardly tell him that her classmates and the town doctor were demons, at least not over the phone. She would have to meet him in person. Her father wouldn't like it, but maybe she didn't have to tell him.

Pyotr answered after the second ring.

"I am fairly certain that we are not allowed to speak to each other," he said in lieu of a greeting.

"I need to see you," she replied, glancing over her shoulder towards the road. "I wouldn't call if it wasn't an emergency."

Pyotr was silent for a long time, and Louisa had to check her phone to make sure that the call hadn't been dropped. "When?"

"I'm driving towards Tacoma now," Louisa said.

"Nyet, do not come all the way here," Pyotr replied. "It is too far. We will meet in Olympia."

Relief flooded through Louisa and she nearly collapsed at his words. She would see him soon. He would be able to help, just like he always did. "Thank you," she whispered.

"We will see if you are still thanking me in an hour, no?" was all he said before hanging up.

Louisa was feeling less stressed now that she knew what she was doing. She could survive an hour. Well, that was unless the Cullens caught her. With this in mind, Louisa quickly finished filling her gas tank and sped off again.

No Stone Left Unturned

"You look unwell," was the first thing Pyotr said to her when she sat next to him on the picnic bench he had chosen. He had grown since the last time she saw him, nearly four months ago now, and he was taller than her. He had cut his black curls so they no longer covered his ears and Louisa found that it made him look older. His sharp cheekbones were more prominent, masculine. But there were still the undeniable signs of boyhood in his face: his face too thin for a man, the button nose he still had to grow out of, the faint spots of acne along his jaw.

"I feel unwell," Louisa replied truthfully. The two sat in companionable silence, a few watching Olympians walk briskly through Capital Lake Park. It appeared that most of the population of Olympia, Washington had enough common sense to stay inside on such a cold day, unlike the pair of teenagers. The trees had shed their leaves months ago, giving them a skeletal look, and in the light of the setting sun, they cast long shadows over the grass. "It's been an eventful day."
Pyotr unwound his scarf and offered it to her. "Tell dyadya Petya what troubles you."

Despite the situation, Louisa laughed and accepted his scarf. "Uncle Petya? Pyotr, we're the same age."

"I am offering to listen to your, what will most likely be, numerous problems. Be grateful."

Louisa smiled at her friend's bluntness. She had forgotten how much she had missed him and she wished that they were meeting under more ideal circumstances. She also wished she had been around to witness the changes he had gone through, subtle though they were. The thought filled her with a wistful sort of feeling, and she quietly lamented all that she missed. Somethings were still the same, of course; he still held onto the faintest hint of his accent, he still didn't understand the point of small talk, and he still preferred to get straight to the point. "You have big news," she replied instead.

Pyotr's dark brown eyes flicked over to her. "You are still observant, I see."

"Forks hasn't changed me that much," Louisa replied. "Before you listen to me, I want to hear about you."

Pyotr gave her one of his rare smiles. "I passed my paramedic training," he admitted. "I start next week."

Louisa threaded her arm through his and gave it a squeeze. It was no secret that Pyotr had dreams of being a doctor like his father had been. And with his level-headed demeanour, Louisa was positive that he would make a fantastic paramedic. "That's wonderful, Petya."

Pyotr nodded. "Papa is very pleased as well."

Louisa knew that this was especially exciting for him, as Pyotr's father was a difficult man to please. Andrey Yakovlev was a stoic man who, if rumours were to be believed, was part of the Russian mafia in Saint Petersburg back in the 90s. He had taken his young son to America at the request of his dying wife, hoping to give him a better life, one where Pyotr could grow up happily and away from violence. He had always pressured his son to be the best, to succeed in the new foreign country, so that he could live a life better than him.

Even so, the cultural adjustment had been significant and the language barrier immense. Parents refused to let their children interact with him and his classmates called him a communist. It was also hard to succeed when you knew very little of the language you were required to learn in. He had been placed in a separate class for children who didn't speak English as their first language, but the teachers didn't know Russian and practically everyone had written him off as too stupid to learn anything. He had spent his first years in the new country, a country that promised a better life but had only shown him isolation and intolerance. It was difficult to comprehend how Pyotr had grown into the companionate young man he was.

She could remember, clear as day, the first time she met Pyotr. It was a Friday and her mother had taken her to the library after school to pick up books for her to read over the weekend. She was ten years old and had was looking for a book on Neptune for a school project when she stumbled across Pyotr, had been struggling with his English homework. Louisa had watched as he tried to draw English letters, but somehow always managed to switch to Cyrillic before a sentence was completed. She had never seen Russian before and had demanded that he teach her. He had understood very little of what she was saying, but he had been so pleased that someone was willing to talk to him, he had agreed without a second thought. They had been inseparable ever since.
Pyotr reached over with his free hand to pat her arm. "Spasibo," he said. "But this is not why you have called me."

Louisa reminded silent as she tried to collect her thoughts, unsure of how to broach the subject. "Do you believe in monsters?" she asked.

Pyotr, for his part, didn't seem confused by her question. He stared off into the distance, his expression pensive. "When we first moved here, Papa would read me fairy tales from home. Proper Russian ones, so that I would not forget where I came from. There is this one, Baba Yaga, which always scared me. She was a powerful witch who lived in a hut in the forest. One day a brother and sister stumbled across her hut, and she set out tasks for them to complete. When they were finished, Baba Yaga told them that she would make them a meal, but the children had heard her singing while they worked: she was planning to eat them. The children pushed Baba Yaga into the oven and ran back home, always making sure to stay out of the forest after their experience."

"That sounds like the plot of Hansel and Gretel," Louisa replied.

Pyotr nodded. "I have always found it interesting how fairy tales are more or less the same from culture to culture."

"You could argue that the two cultures influenced each other's stories," Louisa pointed out.

"This is true," Pyotr agreed. "But even so, the idea of witches exists in many cultures. There is Medea in Ancient Greece, Chedipe in India. The Diné feared witches in wolf's clothing called Mai-cob. Adding to that, in Armenian lore, there are women who, in consequence of deadly sins, are condemned to spend seven years in wolf form, which causes her to acquire frightful cravings for human flesh soon after. Werewolves, you could call them. Similar to these, I suppose, is the selkies from Irish mythology, which live in the ocean as seals but can shed their skin to become human, and live on land. Another classic example of a monster would be a vampire, like in Dracula. But the Gullah people have a boo-hag and Filipino's have the aswang. It seems unlikely to me that cultures so far apart from each other have similar stories. So why do they?"

Louisa drew her knees up to her chest, partly to preserve her body heat in the rapidly darkening evening, and partly to give her something to do whilst she pondered her friend's words. "Fairy tales teach lessons, I suppose," she replied. "Don't go into the woods, or you might get eaten. Lying to people makes your nose grow."

"Perhaps some do. But what is the purpose of terrifying children with stories of monsters?" When Louisa was silent for too long, he continued. "To answer your question: yes. I do believe that monsters exist. That is why every culture across the world has these stories."

Louisa looked at her friend dubiously. "Pyotr, if werewolves and vampires existed, don't you think we would have noticed by now?"

Pyotr shook his head. "We see monsters every day, Lastochka. Monsters are very much real, and they walk amongst us. Maybe not in the way most would expect, but they do exist."

Louisa realised at once to what he was referring. "You mean Jason Lambe," she stated.

Pyotr's eyes had taken on an almost glassy quality. "I have read that 'No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself.' This is sometimes our biggest mistake. We cannot see monsters because we like to think that nobody would be capable of cruelty. This, I think, is a reason for fairy tales. To remind us that evil does exist in the world, though not always in ways we expect."
"And what is the other point?"

He remained quiet for a long time before turning his head to look down at her. "What your favourite fairy tale?"

"Rumpelstiltskin," Louisa replied without hesitation. If she focused hard enough, she could remember her mother reading it to her and her siblings, Laurie growing frustrated when he was unable to say it properly because of his lisp.

"And how does it end?"

"The queen reveals his name, and he loses their bargain," She said. "She gets to keep her child and Rumpelstiltskin runs away and never returns."

Pyotr nodded thoughtfully. "Good triumphs over evil," he said. "The lesson we can learn is that while monsters exist, they can be defeated. We tell these stories to remind us that evil does not have to win, as long as something good is there to beat it."

The two lapsed into silence once more, Louisa considering Pyotr's words, while he was simply comfortable to sit quietly as she did so. The sun had nearly set, and nearby lamps had begun to turn on. Aside from a man walking his dog, the two were totally alone.

"These stories," Louisa began at last. "What if they don't tell us how we can beat the monster?"

Pyotr turned his dark eyes to her and regarded her thoughtfully. "Then perhaps you should ask yourself if what you are dealing with is truly a monster."

Louisa's reaction was to scream that yes, she was dealing with a monster. Not even a metaphorical one, but an actual, blood-drinking monster who could bite into a woman's neck as easily as biting into a sandwich. It even had red eyes.

But if Jasper is a monster, a small voice whispered in the back of her mind, then why did he spend time with her, make sure she was eating properly, and overall concerned for her wellbeing? Would a monster really do that?

She recalled Jason Lambe once more. His eyes weren't red. His eyes were a pale blue. Those eyes that had haunted her nightmares for weeks, even though she was safe in her house, and not in a warehouse, choking on the scent of blood and gasoline and smoke and burning flesh. His blue eyes were of a crazed madman.

"Why do you ask this, Lastochka?" Petya asked, reaching over and taking her hand. "What bothers you?"

She felt her eyes being to sting, but she couldn't be bothered to tame the oncoming tears. This was Petya. Still, she wasn't sure how to voice what was bothering her. How could she say that she was having terrifying visions of strangers that she had never seen murdered, and worse still, it felt like she was the victim, like she was being murdered? "I think I'm going crazy."

Petya turned so that he could fully face her and pulled her into a hug. He let her cry into his shoulder, stroking her hair, rubbing circles on her back. "You are the opposite of crazy, Louisa. Why do you say this?"

"I'm hearing voices. I heard a woman laughing today, and nobody else could hear it." My sort-of-kind-of boyfriend is a blood-drinking demon, she wanted to say, but the words caught in her throat. Jasper's golden eyes, warm, inviting, understanding eyes, flashed in her mind. Jasper who held
open doors for her and offered to hide her from his siblings. Jasper who offered her handkerchiefs when she nose started bleeding. Jasper, who trusted her enough to tell her that his father taught him how to ride horses. Jasper, the kind, quiet, gentle boy who everyone seemed to be afraid of, who didn't trust people easily and rarely talked to strangers.

She knew in that instant she couldn't betray him. Not like this. Because whatever he was in that vision (if she could really call it that) wasn't who he was. Yes, Jasper might be a blood-sucking demon, or a *boo-hag*, or an *aswang*, or who the fuck knew what else. But he was also her friend, and she would do anything for him. "Dottie is convinced that our house is haunted, and I'm starting to think she's right," she finally settled on.

"While the haunted house seems like a fascinating story, let us discuss these hallucinations."

Louisa nodded and began to explain her bizarre day, hearing the disembodied laughter, and the intense terror that often followed it. She also admitted that she was having nightmares of being murdered, and how she wasn't sure what was causing it. Pyotr listened, as he always did, still holding her close and rubbing comforting circles on her back while she spoke into his coat.

"You probably have PTSD," he replied once she had finished speaking. "When was the last time you spoke with a psychologist?" When Louisa tried to object, saying that, no, she didn't have PTSD, and no, she wasn't crazy, but he stopped her. "You watched a deranged man burn a woman alive and then nearly met the same fate yourself. Yes, Louisa, you probably do."

"You were there too," Louisa challenged.

"I did not see what you saw, Louisa," he replied evenly. "I have seen the psychologist many times about my experiences. When was the last time you did the same?"

Louisa knew what happened in June had no correlation to what was happening now, but she still paused at his words. Her father had tried to get her to see a therapist after the incident, but she had refused it, saying that she was fine. The doctors had even backed her up on it, and her father had been too busy to push the matter further, though he sometimes mentioned that he thought refusing help had been a mistake on her part. Had he been right?

Pyotr stood and helped her off then picnic table. "You should call your papa, Louisa. Let him know what has happened so that he does not worry."

Louisa nodded and pulled out her cell phone, shocked to see how late it had gotten. Her father was probably already at home. The drive took nearly two hours, and though she didn't have school the next day, her father would not be happy that she was out so late. She sent him a text, giving a slightly edited version of the story. She couldn't tell Dad about the Cullen family, of course, but he would buy her story about PTSD. It probably wasn't even that far from the truth. She considered not telling him that she had met up with Pyotr but knew he would find out eventually. It might even raise his position in her father's eyes, once he learned how her friend had helped her.

Her friend led her back towards the car park and helped her into the Prius before waving and driving away. Her father called while she was sitting and staring blankly out of the windscreen, wondering when life had become so confusing. She had predicted correctly that he wasn't thrilled about the evening's events but after making sure that she was okay, he instructed her to drive carefully and they would talk about it when she got home.

After hanging up, she still sat in her locked car, unsure of what to do. Should she call Jasper? That seemed appropriate given how she had taken off like a bat out of hell. But what would she say? That she knew that he was a monster, but she was sort of okay with it? Was she even okay with it?
Either way, she knew that it was a conversation she would have to have with him in person, not over the phone or through text messages. She lifted her phone back up, ready to send him a text asking to meet up with him when someone knocked on her passenger side window.

Louisa jumped in surprise. It was a tall man, but she couldn't see his face from where she was sitting, just his hand, which was raised in a fist and rapping gently on the glass. She knew those hands. When she unlocked the car, the passenger door slid open, and the man slid in, filling the small space with his light, sweet scent. He seemed content to sit in silence, but eventually, Louisa couldn't take it anymore.

"How did you get here?"

"I ran."

"How did you find me?"

"Alice told me," he replied as if this answered her question adequately.

"What are you doing here?" She asked finally, her voice tired and filled with resignation.

Jasper slowly turned his head, his light gold eyes shining even in the dark car. "I think we need to talk."

"No man really knows about other human beings. The best he can do is to suppose that they are like himself." -John Steinbeck

Chapter End Notes

A list of words that Petya uses:

Nyet: no

Dyadya Petya: Uncle Petya

Spasibo: thank you

Lastochka: a pet name meaning 'little swallow'
Louisa was pretty sure her brain had broken by that point. Jasper probably thought so too. She knew that her mouth was opening and closing, but she was unable to grab hold of one of the billion thoughts swarming around her brain for longer than a second, let alone formulate any of them into a question. Sure, she had been planning on talking to him, but not today, and certainly not now, here in her car.

Jasper, as if he were able to sense her confusion, gave her a placid smile. “Let me drive, and you can ask me anything.”

That seemed to kick-start her brain, or at least give her a general direction of her thoughts to travel in. “I can drive myself,” she snapped, buckling her seatbelt as if to prove her point.

His smile became amused. “I have no doubt in your abilities. If I thought you were incapable of driving, I would have stopped you before you made that very impressive U-turn earlier.”

Louisa’s jaw dropped open. “Were you following me?”

Jasper shrugged, clearly not understanding how creepy it was. Dear Lord, her kind-of-sort-of boyfriend was not only a demon but a stalker too. “I was on your way to your house. I really do want to talk to you.” When she didn’t reply, he tilted his head and watched her with curious eyes. “I am unsure if you are upset with me or exhausted from your previous adrenaline rush.”

His statement only brought forth more questions. “How did you know that I had an adrenaline rush?”

He gave her another smile, this one close-mouthed and slightly strained. “Let me drive, and I will answer any questions you have for me truthfully,” he repeated.

Louisa hesitated for the briefest of moments. What if this was only a ruse to get her to a secluded area where he could drain her dry and leave her body for animals? Should she text Dottie and let her know that if she didn’t make it back tonight that she loved her and Jasper was a monster? But no, Jasper wasn’t really a monster, was he? A demon? Probably. A stalker? Still gathering data on that one, but possibly.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened her car door. Jasper was already waiting next to it, holding out a hand for her. Louisa jumped in surprise and swivelled her head back to the now empty passenger seat and then back to Jasper. “Can you teleport?”

“Get in the passenger seat and you’ll find out.”

Years from now, if she were declared missing under mysterious circumstances, her family would say that her thirst for knowledge would have been her downfall. They wouldn’t even be incorrect with that statement. But she shouldn’t just not know. She accepted Jasper’s hand and allowed him to lead her to the passenger side and help her inside. He was sitting behind the steering wheel before she even had the chance to buckle up her seatbelt.

“Teleportation?” She asked when he started the car.

“No,” he replied, adjusting the rearview mirror. “Just incredibly fast.”

“How fast are we talking?” Louisa asking, sinking back into her seat and trying to not get
distracted by Jasper’s stupidly pleasant-smelling cologne.

“I’ve never measured how fast I could go, but it wasn’t difficult to keep up with you going ninety miles an hour on the highway.”

“It was only eighty,” she mumbled.

She saw his eyebrows raise. “We can agree to disagree if it makes you feel better.”

Louisa resisted the urge to slap him. Especially when he started to chuckle. Then she had to resist the urge to slap herself when she heard the sound. Kissing Jasper Hale would not be conducive to getting the answers she wanted, no matter how pleasant she thought it would be. Instead, she carefully considered her next question, deciding she might as well get the biggest out of the way. “What are you exactly?”

“I’m not a demon, though I’m sure Edward will try to argue about that,” Jasper replied evenly like they were discussing a Spanish assignment rather than his species.

She was surprised by his frankness, though perhaps she shouldn’t have been. He did say he would answer her truthfully. “So you are a blood-drinking...”

“Vampire is the word you are looking for.”

“You’re a vampire?”

“My family and I, yes. They’re all very interested to speak with you. It’s not often a human learns of our secret.”

Louisa pursed her lips in frustration. “But you come out during the daytime? Shouldn’t you be sleeping in a coffin or something?”

“If we could sleep,” Jasper began, his voice taking on a playful quality. “It would be in a casket, rather than a coffin. It would be more comfortable, I think.”

“You can’t sleep?” She asked, swivelling her head towards him. “At all? What do you do at night?”

Jasper shrugged his shoulders. “We find ways to amuse ourselves,” he said.

When he didn’t feel the need to elaborate further, Louisa launched into her next question. “Okay, so you don’t need to sleep. Fine. But you come outside during the day. Doesn’t the sun burn you to death?”

To her surprise, Jasper actually chuckled at her question. “No, nothing so dramatic, though I can understand where the rumour originated from. What truly happens is far more ridiculous, but nobody asked for my opinion when vampires were designed. To understand what happens, you need to understand a little about our anatomy. When we become vampires, venom is injected into our bloodstream and systematically shuts down all organs in the body, leaving in place hardened cells. This,” He said, releasing the hand on the steering wheel that was closest to her and extended it so he could stroke the exposed skin of her cheek. “Is why we feel cold. Our hearts are unable to beat, and if it could, there is no blood, only venom.”

“Sort of like a corpse in rigour mortis,” Louisa found herself saying. She cringed when she remembered that people usually found her knowledge of decomposing bodies morbid. Not only that, but she realised that this was probably an insensitive thing to say to her sort-of-kind-of
boyfriend who was actually-totally-completely dead.

Jasper, at least, didn’t find her comparison uncomfortable. “An apropos analogy,” he replied. “Our skin is hardened during the change, becoming stronger, more durable. Few things can actually injure us.”

“That sounds convenient,” Louisa interjected. “So the sun is not one of these things?”

“No,” he replied. “Instead, light diffracts through the venom in our skin cells, reflecting back like a prism.”

It took a moment for Louisa to comprehend what he was saying, trying to recall how light behaves from her physics classes. “So you turn into a rainbow?” she asked, unable to keep the amusement out of her voice.

Jasper turned his eyes away from the road to give her a playful glare. “No, we sparkle.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Louisa laughed. Particularly when her brain offered her a picture of Emmett glittering like a Swarovski crystal chandelier. Jasper didn’t join in with her laughter, but she could see the corner of his mouth quirking up in amusement. And all of the sudden, she found the conversation became even more hysterical, and she found herself unable to keep tears of mirth from filling her eyes.

“Don’t do that!” she wheezed between giggles.

To her astonishment, the feeling receded immediately. Wiping her eyes, she looked at his face, squinting in the dark car, her eyes narrowed in confusion. “Was that you?”

Jasper’s brow was furrowed and Louisa had to fight the urge from reaching across the small distance that separated them to smooth out the wrinkles in his forehead. “It was,” Jasper admitted. “I do not usually have an issue with controlling my power, though in large groups of people, I find myself easily influenced.”

“Your power?”

“Yes,” he replied. He wasn’t looking at her, staring resolutely out at the road. “Some vampires have gifts, in addition to the enhanced senses, increased speed, and great strength. I am an empath. I can sense and influence the emotions of those around me.”

Louisa’s first reaction to this revelation was astonishment, though it quickly morphed into humiliation. “So that means you know what I am…”

“Feeling? Yes. Particularly you. You have strong feelings for a human.” He finally shifted his yellow eyes towards her and gave her a pleading look. “Please do not be embarrassed.”

She wasn’t sure if that was possible. Did that mean he knew how incredibly attractive she found him? She tried to ignore the fact that he most likely knew how often she stared at his ass and focused on his words. “What do you mean by that? How are they stronger?”

Jasper’s lips pursed as he tried to find the words to describe what he had observed, and had the situation been less serious, Louisa would have had a very difficult time refraining from kissing them. “They are very pure. Almost vampiric, in all honesty. Vampires feel much more deeply that humans do, and I would say that your emotions work in a similar way,” he said slowly. There were was a pause as he weighed his next words very carefully, trying to phrase them so he did not alarm her. “Although I believe that I am particularly attuned to you, rather than you having a supernatural
A chill ran down her spine. She had no clue what he was talking about, but she knew, instinctively, that it was something important. She knew that whatever he was going to say was monumental, would impact her for the rest of her life, and if she were one hundred percent honest, she wasn’t sure she was okay with this knowledge. “What do you mean that you are attuned to me?” she asked anyway, despite something in her telling her not to speak, that this was a stone better left unturned.

Jasper didn’t say anything for a long time, continuing to stare out at the road, his fingertips drumming the steering wheel. “Vampires,” he said slowly. “Have something called mates.” The fingers stopped their beating, and Louisa could feel something in the car change. The air felt the way it often did, right before a thunderstorm: thick, charged. A small part of Louisa’s brain wondered if the change in the atmosphere was due to Jasper’s power, but the larger part of her consciousness was too focused on the young man across from her to ponder the idea for any substantial amount of time. “There isn’t a human analogue for mates. It is not simply someone with whom you are in a relationship. It’s stronger, more intense, instinctual. Permanent. There is nothing that you would not do for them to keep them safe, to make them happy. Meeting a mate changes a vampire: all priorities shift to the other, and you are no longer who you once were.”

Has Louisa been her usual smartass self, she would have pointed out that this was the most she had ever heard Jasper speak at one time. But she as it was, she was confused, stressed, wrung out, exhausted. She barely recognised her voice when she said, “Why is this important?”

To his credit, he didn’t pause and make her wait. When he spoke, it was in the same swift, matter-of-fact way he usually did, as if he were ripping off a bandage. “You are mine.”

Louisa’s blood ran simultaneously freezing as it boiled, her blood pressure skyrocketing and dropping at the same time. She felt dizzy, dissociated. She couldn’t wrap her mind around what he was saying, grasp the implications of his statement. She leaned forward and rested her head on her knees in an attempt to ground herself. Her mind was racing faster than the manic speed Jasper was driving at, too fast for her brain to comprehend, analyse, and compartmentalise her thoughts and feelings. She was glad that Jasper seemed to respect her need to feel her emotions, instead of manipulating them into something more comfortable. When she next spoke, her words were muffled by her legs, though with his apparently superior hearing, he probably had no problem discerning her question. “How do you know?”

Jasper took his sweet time answering. “How do geese know where to fly each winter? How does a mother know the sight of her child? There are things that cannot truly be understood or explained,” he said finally. “You waltzed into Spanish class at 1:17 pm on the 6th of September. I thought myself insane when I wanted to grab you and run. Especially when Rosalie began planning your murder. She is no longer planning your untimely demise, by the way.”

“I should hope not. We’re having a sleepover soon,” Louisa replied. She took a slow, calming breath, and sat up. She stared out the window, watching the trees whizz by, her eyes barely able to make out their shapes. “What does this mean?”

Louisa wondered if Jasper was regretting his decision for an AMA session, but he never gave any indication that what they were discussing was uncomfortable for him. He had simply answered her questions succinctly with very little hesitation. That was why she was surprised when he sighed and ran a hand across his face. “This wasn’t exactly how I planned on telling you this.”

She turned to look at the man in the driver’s seat. “But you were going to tell me?”

Jasper met her gaze, confusion flitting across his face. “Of course I was, Louisa. I didn’t exactly
want to keep this from you.”

“When were you planning on it?” She couldn’t exactly label her tone, but she thought it fell somewhere between challenging and pleading.

“When I was sure you wouldn’t run for the hills. You still can, if you so choose. I won’t bother you.”

She considered this, trying to imagine a life where Jasper was not present. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to cut him out of her life and ignore him as if they had never met. The only way she could avoid this was to move, run away and never see him again. Something hot and large settled in her throat and constricted her breathing. Why did the thought of abandoning him freak her out so much? Until three months ago, she hadn’t known Jasper Hale from Adam. Now she was sitting in a car with a young man who she had been on one date with and he was telling her that he was a vampire and she was his mate, whatever the hell that entailed.

Funny what life threw at you.

“What if I didn’t?”

The tone of her voice told him that she wasn’t agreeing, not yet. She was critical: gathering data, weighing her options, and making an informed decision. Jasper respected that. “Then I will one day in the semi-distant future, change you into a vampire as well. Time is more difficult for me to judge, but I would most likely do it after you finish high school.” When she asked him to elaborate, he sighed sadly. “I have existed for many years and will continue to do so for many more.”

He launched into the tale of the boy that had once been Jasper Whitlock, born in Houston, Texas in 1844. A boy who loved to ride the horses and hated sitting through Sunday church. Who loved his parents, liked his classmates, and absolutely detested the bully Jeremiah Hayward, whose parents were friends with his so they always had to interact. A boy who, at seventeen, was not yet a man but desperately wanted to be and signed up for a war he didn’t understand and was too young to be a part of. Who was a respected major in the Confederate army despite being a boy. The boy who was introduced to manhood during his first battle and thrown into a short time later when watched Jeremiah Hayward die from gangrene from an infected bullet wound, even after the surgeon had sawed off the ruined leg. A man whose life was ended in a cruel way by three beautiful women on the road to Galveston. Of the years and years and years the man had to endure the senseless violence of a new war that he hadn’t signed up for. A story of a confused man, who was truly still a boy in many ways, who had run from the blood and the violence when he learned of something that wasn’t just an existence, but a way of life.

Louisa listened to the story of Jasper Whitlock, trying to make sense of it. Sometimes she watched his face, but most of the time she stared out of the windscreen, watching as signs for Montesano, Nisson, Queets, flew by. Sometimes when he spoke, she felt her heart might actually break from grief. Sometimes she wanted to stop him and ask questions (and there were plenty she wanted to ask). She usually had to fight the urge to tell him to stop the car, only so could pull him to her chest and hold him. It was urges like those that truly confused her. So she stayed silent, listened, and wrote down everything he was saying in the largest book she had ever created in her mental library.

“My family drinks exclusively from animals. Rose and Carlisle have never even had human blood before. I drink from animals too, though I’m afraid I’m not very good at it.”

“If you’re trying to reassure me you’re doing a terrible job,” Louisa replied.
Jasper didn’t seem to appreciate her comment. “It wasn’t my intention to reassure you. I’m letting you know what you are getting into.”

Louisa wanted to say that she still wasn’t sure what she was getting into. Or running away from. “You make it sound like I’m about to make a deal with the devil.”

“Perhaps you are,” he responded after a long moment of silence. His voice was soft and sad and very, very tired. When he spoke, he didn’t tell her what he wanted her to choose but it was very obvious which option he favoured. She knew that he would respect whichever decision that she made. He sounded downtrodden, lonely, tortured, and at times, filled to the brim with self-loathing.

Louisa wasn’t sure if she wanted a life of watching her family and friends age and die, while she stayed young, frozen at the age Jasper had changed her at. She couldn’t fathom letting her sister lose her older sibling when she had already lost her youngest. She couldn’t imagine putting her father through the agony of losing one more member of his family. But she also knew that she couldn’t let Jasper go through life thinking he was unworthy of love or anything good in his life, simply because he had been bitten by a vampire in 1863.

“Jasper, I’ve met monsters before,” she said as the tiny Prius crossed over the Hoh River. “I’ve been inside of their heads and I know what they think. Trust me when I say that you’re not one of them.”

He scoffed at her words. “I’ve killed people before. Thousands of innocent people.”

“Yes, you have,” Louisa conceded. She tried to form her thoughts into a coherent sentence without her words sounding melodramatic, stupid, or like something someone might read out of a trashy paranormal romance novel. “I think the problems of our past can shape who we are, but they don’t have to define us. What you did back then, who you were, maybe it wasn’t right, Jasper. But that was then, and if you don’t want to be that person, you don’t have to be.”

She probably was telling him something he already knew or had at the very least been told by someone who loved him. But she couldn’t not tell him, because… because maybe she loved him too. In some bizarre, inexplicable twist of fate, Louisa realised that she cared for Jasper in a way that was too strong for a friend or a crush or a sort-of-kind-of boyfriend. Her feelings were too strong for a girl who only met the guy in September. She couldn’t definitively say that she was in love with Jasper because the word felt cheap somehow. Wrong. Empty even. It was something deep inside her, itching, irritating, and raw. She tried to imagine a life without Jasper and the idea made her blood burn and her chest to constrict. She wondered if Jasper could hear her heart pounding or feel her stomach churning.

She could feel his eyes on her and her skin prickled. She took a shuddering breath, knowing that her next words would change the course of her life. “And if you let me, I’d like to stick around for who you’ll become.”

The occupants of the car lapsed into silence once more, staring out into the night. Slowly, Jasper reached over and took her hand that had been resting in her lap, pressing a kiss to her wrist. Louisa thought that his skin was full of sadness, which sounded stupid but felt right.

When they passed the ‘Welcome to Forks’ sign, Jasper dramatically reduced the speed. Moments later, a cop car drove by. “I’d like for you to speak with Carlisle.”

“Because you think I’m in shock?” Louisa asked. “Because I don’t need your father to tell me that.”
“Amusing, but no,” he replied, still holding her hand hostage. “He thinks he knows why you are ill.”

She wasn’t sure if she was excited by the prospect of learning what was wrong with her or dreading the news. “And?”

“You’re not truly ill,” he replied, rubbing his incredibly cold nose against the inside of her wrist. “I would have done something about it.” The tone of his voice left no doubt in her mind that him doing something about it meant she would already be a vampire. “You will have a doctor’s appointment with Carlisle tomorrow, and he will be able to explain it then. You can tell your father that Carlisle will be assessing your PTSD.”

“Will Dr Cullen even be able to see me so soon?”

“You take priority. Even so,” he said. “Alice made an appointment for you last week.” Sensing her confusion, he elaborated further. “She’s psychic.”

“Which is how she knew my dad would flip if I spent the night at your house,” Louisa replied, suddenly understanding most of the weird quirks that Alice had. “And how she knew that we were going to hide today at lunch.” Damn, was it only earlier today that that had happened? It felt like it occurred months ago.

“Precisely,” Jasper said, pressing one last kiss to her wrist before pulling up to her house. The porch light was on and she was surprised her father hadn’t already wrenched the door open and dragged her inside. In seconds, the Prius was turned off and he was standing by her car door before she even had the chance to unfasten her safety belt.

Louisa allowed Jasper to help her out of the car, her keys pressed gently into her palm as she stood. She looked up at the man in front of her. The clouds were gone and the moon was out, and his blond hair looked almost silver in the moonlight. She was acutely aware of how close they already were as he closed the car door behind her, but she stepped closer. His posture straightened but he didn’t move away, his head tilting to the side as he watched her, waiting.

“You said if I wanted, I could run away and you wouldn’t bother me,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, with a terse nod, his tone even, his face a smooth mask. A true Southern gentleman, if perhaps a touch expressionless.

She had told him that she wasn’t running, and that was true. She had no plans to leave him anytime soon. She was still confused: she wasn’t entirely sure what the hell being a mate meant, and she wasn’t entirely sure what she was feeling. She didn’t want to leave Dottie and her father, even if that meant that she could be with Jasper. But that was a later problem. The now problem was conveying that she, quite possibly, felt something for him too. Something much stronger than a crush. It scared the hell out of her in the same exhilarating way a rollercoaster did. “What if I told you that you could bother me all you like?”

Jasper’s face was still blank of emotions, but she could feel them. Good lord, could she feel them. They flowed through her, soft and gentle; swirled around her, so violently that she was surprised that her hair wasn’t moving; flitted across her skin like static electricity, the little hairs on her arms standing on end. She wasn’t sure what emotion he was giving her, she had never experienced anything like it before. She just knew that it was Jasper and she enjoyed it quite a lot. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said finally. Then, so quickly that later she would wonder if she had merely imagined it, he stooped to press a kiss to her forehead. Before she had time to process completely what had happened, he was gone.
“What happened in the past that was painful has a great deal to do with what we are today, but revisiting this painful past can contribute little or nothing to what we need to do now.” - William Glasser
Unusually Large Hippocampi

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her father had been waiting in the kitchen for her, sitting at the table. He hadn't yelled at her for taking off or for seeing Pyotr. He didn't take away her phone or ground her for a month. He watched her with sad grey eyes. Then he hugged her, told her that everything would turn out alright, that he was going to help her through his.

And somehow, that was so much worse.

Her father was exhausted, she could see that. He was working nine hours a day at a law firm an hour and a half away. He was raising two teenagers, all by himself. He was still mourning the loss of his wife and son, not even a year ago. Yet he still told her that he loved her, that they would get through this too.

He sent her off to bed, telling her that she had a doctor's appointment in the morning. Louisa laid in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, pretending that she couldn't hear her dad talking to her dead mother. She knew that she was hurting him, letting him think that she was so mentally ill. But what else could she do? Tell him that vampires exist?

"...I had to leave Dorothy at home by herself when I took Louisa to the hospital…"

She rolled over and shoved her head under her pillow, trying to force herself to fall asleep.

She must have drifted off at some point, because her dad was shaking her awake, telling her to get up. She got dressed, eat breakfast, rode to the hospital, all the while, not once looking him in the eye. If he noticed her weird behaviour, he didn't say anything about it. Probably wrote it off as a symptom of her alleged illness or penitence for scaring him the night before. She tried to push away the guilt, but no matter how hard she tried, she still felt like a phoney. She was incredibly relieved when Dr Cullen called back into his office and tried very hard to look like she wasn't sprinting away.

Louisa followed Dr Cullen into his office, only to stop abruptly when she realised that the room was not empty. Jasper was standing at ease by the window, evidently having just been staring out of it. He didn't smile to great her, but she felt his emotions bump up against her, letting her feel that he was happy to see her. The other occupant of the room was Edward —the pianist with the odd taste in Halloween costumes— who was spinning in Dr Cullen's desk chair though he sprang to his feet when his father closed the office door behind him. The doctor offered her a seat on the leather couch by his desk.

She considered standing back up when she realised none of the men felt inclined to sit either. She wasn't entirely sure why she felt so uncomfortable sitting, but she was pretty sure it had something to do with either being surrounded by tall men who towered over her. Or it could be that she was would be sitting defenceless, easy prey, should the vampires in the room go berserk and decide to drink her dry. Probably because of the vampires.

Jasper seemed to sense her discomfort because a moment later it was gone, replaced with tranquillity. She blinked and he was sitting at her feet, back pressed against her shins. She was relieved that his chosen sitting place had been between the two other men, but she was suddenly very conscious of her hands and wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with them. Particularly
when she noticed just how close they were to Jasper's wavy hair.

"Standing is just as comfortable for us as sitting," Edward said as if this clarified something. Well, it did, but she hadn't asked a question.

"I'm telepathic," Edward replied drily. "Did you not tell her, Jasper?"

"There were many things I had to tell her last night, none of which included you," Jasper snarked. His voice vibrated through his back and Louisa jumped at the sensation. "Louisa, just so you know, Edward can read your mind," he said. He turned his head to give her a confused look but didn't comment on her fidgeting.

"It's quite the experience," Edward said with a grin. "Though I must say, you have one of the most organised minds I have ever had the pleasure of reading. Your library is exquisite."

"Thank you?" Louisa responded, unsure if she should be flattered or not.

"You should be," Edward said. "Though I do wonder why Jasper gets his own book and the rest of the family is lumped together in a cardboard box labelled 'Cullen.' That hardly seems fair."

"She likes me more," Jasper supplied.

"That's enough boys," Dr Cullen said, finally stepping in. "We can discuss the matter of Louisa's box another time." He strode over to his desk and swivelled the computer monitor around so that she could see an MRI image of a brain. "You're patient history says that you fell off a cliff when you were seven."

"Yes," she replied slowly, glancing at her boyfriend and his younger brother. Wasn't this a violation of HIPPA?

"I have two M.D.s," Edward replied helpfully. "Jasper holds a PsyD and specialises in childhood development and axis two disorders."

"Which you do not have and neither of his statements are relevant," Jasper said evenly, turning to look up at her, his hair tickling her fingers. "Carlisle is trying to piece together a timeline, not discuss your medical history."

"I apologise, Louisa, I assumed you knew this already," Dr Cullen said, nodding his head before continuing on, undeterred. "You file say that you experienced a personality change after the accident."

Louisa shrugged. She honestly couldn't remember.

Dr Cullen smiled at her reaction and began to scroll through the MRI scans of her seven-year-old brain. "You showed remarkably little damage for a seventy-foot fall. A broken wrist and a concussion." He pointed out the areas of her brain with a pen as he continued to scroll through the pictures. "Your doctors found no significant damage that could not be attributed to the concussion, though they did note larger than average hippocampi."

"The hippocampus is the part of the brain that is involved in forming, storing, and processing memory," Jasper translated, sensing her confusion.

Dr Cullen didn't seem annoyed by the constant interruptions, and merely apologised, before switching over to a new set of pictures, these of a significantly larger brain. "This MRI was taken back in June," he said. "You were hit in the back of the head with a blunt object."
"It was a baseball bat," Louisa supplied quickly, hoping to move away from the topic. "I didn't have a concussion then."

"That is correct. The doctor noted larger than average hippocampi, but dismissed it because of your patient history." Again, he switched to a new set of images. "This was the MRI taken we took when we were trying to rule out brain tumours. It's clean and shows a perfectly healthy brain of a sixteen-year-old female."

She was beginning to sense a pattern. "How are my hippocampi?"

"Larger than we would expect," Dr Cullen replied with a smile. Once more, he switched to another set of MRI scans, making Louisa realise that she had too many problems with her head in her short life. Edward snickered but didn't comment. "These, however, are from the seventeenth of November."

The gentle breeze against her legs was the only thing that alerted Louisa that Jasper had moved. By the time her mind was able to process what had happened, Jasper was standing in front of the computer monitor, staring at it intently. She peeked around his lanky frame though all she saw was a similar picture of her brain. She took in the faces of the men in the room and judging by the serious their serious expressions, these new pictures were significant.

"Is it bad?" She asked, standing up to join the others.

"They have grown," Dr Cullen replied when nobody else decided to explain. "It's very slight; the radiologist wouldn't have been able to see it. I only noticed myself yesterday. I thought it was the wrong image at first. The changes are slight, but it is enough to look like a completely different brain."

"Don't brains continue to grow until, like, twenty-five though?" Louisa asked.

It was Jasper who answered her. "Yes, but not this rapidly, and very rarely a specific region."

"Do you think it's increasing the intracranial pressure?" Edward asked.

"It would explain the nosebleeds and the nystagmus," was Dr Cullen's reply.

Louisa would be lying if she said she knew what was going on. She knew very little about brains, but she figured that increased pressure around it wasn't a good thing. She tried to not panic, but when the phrase 'lumbar puncture' was thrown into the mix, her heart started to accelerate rapidly. Jasper finally tore his gaze away from the computer screen, either in response to her pulse or the high-level anxiety coming from her. He reached out and pulled Louisa to himself, her nose pressing into his chest. Edward and Dr Cullen broke off abruptly and began to apologise.

"It's cool," Louisa said, her voice muffled by Jasper's sweater. She tried to step away to face them, but found that it was impossible: his hold wasn't painful but it was tight enough that she couldn't move very much. He might as well have been carved out of stone. Louisa wondered if it was a vampire thing.

"If it's not a brain tumour, what would cause the growth?" Jasper asked, his voice rumbling in his chest, buzzing along her skin. Louisa tapped on his arm, hoping to at least remind him that she was still there. When he looked down at her, she tried to pull away again. He looked confused but gave her a little more room, allowing her to turn to face his father and brother.

It was Edward who responded. "On the seventeenth, you had a nightmare, correct? That's what woke you up."
Louisa's eyebrows raised in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"You were thinking about it during lunch yesterday," he replied. "When we were talking about Anna Sweet."

Louisa glanced up at Jasper, who was watching her, his expression flat. "You get used to it."

"Anyway," Edward continued. "I've been paying attention to your thoughts since early September." He walked over to a worn leather satchel—*repaired twice, holds sentimental value* — that was hanging on a coat rack next to the door and withdrew a spiral notebook from it. "I try to gauge how wary people are of us, or if anyone suspects what we are. You are weirdly observant, so I've kept a close tab on you. Until yesterday afternoon, I thought that you had no clue."

Goosebumps erupted on her skin and it had nothing to do with how cold Jasper's body was. Did that mean Edward seen the vision she had had of Jasper? If he could see what it was, did that mean it was real, and not just all in her head?

"A paranoid schizophrenic has hallucinations that can cause them considerable distress. The fact that nobody else can see what they see doesn't make it any less real to them," Edward replied, crossing back over to them. He hopped up on Dr Cullen's desk, narrowly avoiding knocking over a picture frame as he crisscrossed his legs.

Louisa wasn't sure if this made her feel better or not.

"For the last two months, I've been tracking your thoughts. I started writing them down, trying to find a pattern. I didn't see much at first, but then Jasper described how you read people. He said that you are usually correct, but the logic is off. I started focusing on those instead. Anything that could be considered a deduction is highlighted in green."

*Favourite colour? Green like his eyes? No, he doesn't have green eyes.*

"Every single one?" Louisa asked, unsure if she should be impressed or immensely creeped out by his dedication to his special version of stalking. "I make a lot of them."

"This is only the current notebook. There are two more at home," Edward replied, reaching forward to hand it to her, his tone indicating that he was very much aware of how many deductions she made it a day.

Yeah, definitely creepy she decided as she flipped the notebook open to a random page and focused on the words written in a beautiful script. *Fountain pen... nostalgic for his past. The soft pressure indicated sensitivity and empathy. Leftward slant, reserved, introspective. A moderately long loop of the 'y'... the writer has a bit of a wanderlust.* She tried to focus on the words themselves, but the book was snatched away from her before she had the chance. She blinked and looked up, only to see Edward with a fountain pen in hand, scribbling in the back of it. He handed it back to her with a look of annoyance.

"Graphology is hardly an exact science," he snapped.

She flipped to the last page of the notebook and read what he had just written. It was a detailed description of what she had just been thinking and with an addendum of why her reasoning was incorrect. All he had written was there was, 'graphoanalysis is a wishy-washy pseudoscience that does not hold up in court'. That was true. Louisa had heard her father's rants on the subject. Edward probably had too, with his own father being a lawyer. The notebook was once more wrenched out of her hands only to be tossed at her moments later.
"Graphoanalysis was still accepted in 1917 and had only fallen out of favour in the latter half of the twentieth century. No reasoning how she knew the occupation of my father."

Louisa read aloud. She looked up at Edward and blinked owlishly. "You need a better hobby."

Dr Cullen was able to disguise his chuckle as a cough, whilst Jasper made no attempt to hide his amusement.

She flipped to a random page and read the first entry:

_9 October, 10:43 am: mentally refers to Emmett as Rosalie's husband. Does not provide a reason._

"That's an easy one," Louisa supplied. "She wears a ring on a chain around her neck. I noticed it when I first met her. She doesn't wear it at school because she doesn't want to draw attention to it, but she doesn't want to leave it at home."

"That's what I mean about the incorrect logic," Jasper said. "It could easily belong to a deceased family member."

"Considering that the style of the ring is about eighty years out of date, it would be a more logical conclusion," Edward added.

"I was still right though," Louisa asked, glancing between an interested Dr Cullen and an increasingly frustrated Edward. "Why does it matter?"

"My theory," Dr Cullen finally said. "Is that you have some sort of psychic power."

"You've known about vampires for a while now, whether you were conscious of it or not. You make jokes about us being vampires, or me being a mind reader quite frequently," Edward added. "Your 'deductions,' aren't deductions. They're you unknowingly using your power."

Louisa was suddenly very glad that Jasper had not released her from his hold earlier, because she wasn't sure if her legs would have been able to support her. "Psychic powers?" She repeated, her voice breathy. She understood the words of course, but at the same time, they felt like they were light years away. Her eyes squeezed shut, as if would somehow make the situation disappear. First, she finds out that vampires exist and now they were trying to explain that she was psychic? A laugh bubbled out of her lips, a manic, nervous sound that startled her.

She felt Jasper shift, and when she opened her eyes, she was sitting on the black leather couch again and he was kneeling in front of her. He must have done his not-really-teleportation-just-really-fast thing. That made her laugh harder. Why was she laughing? God, she sounded like a lunatic.

Jasper's lips were moving. Was he talking? He just kept saying, "Breathe, Louisa. Breathe."

Breathing sounded like an excellent idea, now that she thought about it. She inhaled, exhaled, in, out. Breathing. Breathing was good. Jasper reached up and wiped her face. When had she started crying? Breathe, in, out, in, out. Slowly. Relax, calm down. She could feel peace start to creep through her veins, Jasper's influence, no doubt. Relax, breathe, calm down, focus. Louisa closed her eyes again and imagined a desk drawer. Focus, calm down, breathe, relax. She imagined shoving her panic into it, stuffing, cramming. She needed a bigger drawer. Relax breathe calm down focus. Filing cabinet then. Stuff, stuff, jam, slam. Lock the drawer. Focus calm down breath relax.

She opened her eyes again. Jasper was still in front of her, one hand wrapped around her knee, while the other cradled her face. Skin to skin contact amplified his power. She shouldn't know that.
Yet she did.

"What's happening to me?" She whispered.

Jasper didn't respond. He sent a wave of calm to her. He didn't know what to say. Words failed him, as they usually did. Never enough meaning. But emotions, those were loaded. Feelings were much easier to convey, understand.

"You think I'm psychic?" She asked, her voice distant, dissociated. They were probably wrong. They had to be wrong. Psychics didn't exist. Pseudoscience, like graphoanalysis. This was all just a really fucking bizarre dream and she would wake up soon, she had to, didn't she? Because vampires didn't exist and neither did mind readers. She kept waiting for one of them to laugh, shout 'got you!', but it never came.


Louisa stayed focused on Jasper's eyes, afraid that if she looked away she would fall apart. Funny, less than twenty-four hours ago, she was convinced the Cullens was going to murder her (Well, the jury was still out about the rest of the family, but she was fairly certain that Jasper didn't want her dead). And now she was sitting in a room with three vampires, hoping that one would keep her from breaking into tiny little pieces on Dr Cullen's black leather couch. She was afraid to blink because if she did, he might disappear, and then where would she be?

Dr Cullen's voice sounded like it was moving through water. "We think it has something to do with memory."

"Which you think is the cause for my unusually large hippocampi," Louisa stated. She lifted her hand to cover the one Jasper had pressed against her face. He had large hands. Or maybe she just had a small head. Large hippocampi, tiny cranium. What a combination.

Relax breathe calm down focus.

Dr Cullen was explaining about possible compensation for the number of memories she gathered, growing so it was able to process more efficiently. It sounded dodgy to Louisa, but she wasn't the one with a medical degree. "My theory is that you are psychometric." She could pick up, gather, leftover information that had been deposited on objects, he said. The more emotionally charged a memory, the more likely it was to be left behind. The stronger her reaction.

"People, too," Edward added. Kind of like she was doing to Jasper that very moment.

Jasper didn't move away, didn't seem annoyed or disgusted at his invasion of privacy. His thumb continued to stroke her cheek, his eyes never once straying from hers. Of course he didn't mind. She couldn't control it. He lived with Edward, who was much more invasive. Edward, the mind reader. That sounded much more inconvenient than psycho-whatever.

Jasper can feel people's emotions and Edward could hear their thoughts.

An empath, a telepath, and a psychopath. It sounded like the beginning of a really bad joke. All they needed now was a psychic to complete the set.

"Psychometric would be a better term," Edward replied to her unspoken thoughts. "And Alice is the psychic."

Or right. How could she forget about Alice?
She felt tired, wrung out. She bet Jasper could tell that she was. She wanted nothing more than to rest her head on his shoulder and take a long nap. For the rest of her life, if at all possible. But first, she needed answers, and she couldn't get them if she hid. "How do you know?" She asked, at last, still looking at Jasper. She needed proof, data. Lots and lots of evidence, all of which would need to hold up in a court of law.

Edward had that damn notebook again, talking about visions in closets. MRIs and panic attacks. Dreams about the details of a murder that had never been released to the public (and yes, he had checked). Knowing the passcode to phones she had nicked. On and on and on. Things that had definitely happened, she was there for them, remembered each event clearly, yet she still had trouble wrapping her brain around it.

"You thought that my eyes were green," Edward said. "Just by holding a piece of paper I had touched. My eyes used to be green, but there is no way you could have ever known. It isn't something you could possibly deduce."

Eye colour? The word caught her attention, and her brain offered forth another memory. She finally turned her attention to Dr Cullen. "The day before my first appointment with you. I went to Vancouver with Rosalie."

"The Smoothie Incident," Dr Cullen interjected.

"Yeah, but before I threw it," Louisa started. For the briefest of seconds Rosalie's eyes, she could have sworn, had been a different colour. Not blue, lighter… almost…

"Violet," Edward interrupted.

Louisa wondered if interrupting people was a vampire trait too, like drinking blood or having really strong arms. "I didn't think much of it at the time. We were kind of busy."

The more Edward talked, told her of his findings, the less she needed to hear. Her brain began to fill in gaps that had always confused her: cases she had solved when it should have been impossible, things she had found that people swore were lost, secrets she shouldn't know but always did. From the day she had woken up in the hospital nine years ago, she had been doing it—looking, watching, observing. Her brain filled in the gaps with stories, gave her excuses for how she had known what she had known, trying to clear away the discomfort because of course the paranormal doesn't exist and of course she had a reason for knowing the impossible.

She knew all of these things, but it still felt wrong. She glanced at Jasper, still on his knees in front of her; at Dr Cullen, sitting behind his desk, watching her with a fascinated expression; at Edward, who had an intent look on his face, no doubt reading her mind, trying to unravel all of its secrets. Louisa got the impression that they were waiting for something. She felt a bit like an animal in a zoo, which was ridiculous to think because she was a perfectly normal human. They were the weirdoes in the room.

At the moment, all they had presented her with was anecdotal evidence. She needed to experiment, test their theory. Maybe she could prove them wrong still. Silence the tiny voice in her head that agreed with them. So she got a bunch of stuff right with her educated guesses. Correlation doesn't imply causation. Empirical data. That's what she needed. "Prove it," Louisa said.

It was Dr Cullen who came up with the idea. He instructed Jasper to move away from her so he couldn't distract her, influence her. She felt colder at the loss of contact and nearly rescinded her demand. But she didn't, because she wanted, had, to know.
Dr Cullen told her to close her eyes and focus on the object he placed in her outstretched hands. Louisa reluctantly did so, attempting to quell her discomfort at losing sight in a room full of vampires. Jasper wouldn't let them hurt her though, right? And Dr Cullen had been around on her on several occasions and hadn't indicated any desire to snap her neck. Really, it was only Edward who was the wild card in the situation. Something he could undoubtedly hear. Her thoughts were probably offensive, but honestly, fuck politeness. She didn't want to die today. Edward laughed, and she wondered if hearing everyone's thoughts over the decades had driven him insane.

"I'm just glad to see you are still rational," Edward clarified.

They started off with small objects. Edward's favourite fountain pen. A framed picture of the Cullen family, Jasper's wristwatch. Each time Louisa gave her deductions—that weren't really deductions and Dr Cullen would make a sound of approval before switching to a new object. A medical journal Dr Cullen was reading, correcting with a red pen, annoyed at the questionable data that his peers had submitted. She felt the annoyance. It was like a pulsing thread, fluttering around like it was caught in a riptide or a hurricane. She tried to picture it more clearly, lunged for it with mental hands.

Edward hummed in fascination, breaking her concentration. Louisa slowly opened her eyes to look at him. "The mental imagery might help you focus," he agreed. "You're following the emotions that you encounter for the memory."

"She does better with older objects or something with more sentimental value," Jasper pointed out, confirming what they had hypothesised. His watch was new, just replaced after Emmett destroyed the last one during a wrestling match. The picture frame stood on a desk and was rarely moved.

The men stood around for a moment, brainstorming on how to test her further. Dr Cullen paused and told her to close her eyes again, which she did so grudgingly. As entertaining she was sure this was, it was incredibly exhausting. She had never felt the need to fall asleep sitting up as acutely as she did then. She wished Jasper hadn't been forced to move away. She could have used him as a support to lean on. She nodded at Edward's instructions to focus on a memory, follow the emotional path.

Something cold and hard was dropped into her palms. She manipulated it with her fingers, feeling the edges, the grooves and planes. A necklace with a cross. Made of bronze. Old. Very old. "It belonged to…" A fuzzy memory started to form. A stern man, very tall, grey hair, a roman nose. Father. Dr Cullen's father. "Your father was a pastor. Anglican." Very, very, proud. "You're religious." Protection. "You clutch this when you fly. You hate flying. God didn't give humans wings for a reason." Protection, God, fear. So much fear. Terror. She could taste potatoes in the air. She was hiding. Burning. He hadn't been protected, he'd been attacked by the thing he was looking for. Hunting. The pain was increasing, his heart felt like it was about to explode.

Louisa knew she needed to leave the memory. She grabbed the first thing she felt. A new thread. Grey, sickly. Sadness. A young man in a bed. Very ill. He was screaming, crying, his red hair sticking to his sweaty temples. Sadness, guilt… and maybe a little hope? She latched onto that instead. Followed it, a faintly glimmering thread, thin, delicate.

She burst into a new memory. An unfamiliar room. A teenaged girl sitting on a couch. He's near her and her scent is everywhere, floral, like honeysuckles. He's putting a cast on her leg, she's fallen out of a tree. She beautiful and his heart is dead but might start moving again when she laughs. She sixteen and he looks like he's twenty-three and he's very much a vampire who wants her to be a vampire too. Shame tingess the memory. How could he take someone so pure? He realises he knows this girl from somewhere. No Louisa recognises the girl from somewhere. No,
not a girl. A woman. In a white dress. Her heart might implode with happiness as she looks at him. The woman's eyes are golden and her hair is swirling in the wind. How could one person possibly feel all of this happiness and joy and light? He was full. So full she wasn't sure how to swallow, breathe. Too much too much too much.

"Too much," she whispered. Her face was pressed against something hard, cold. Arms surround her, enclosed her, protected her. Jasper. She drew in a shuddering breath, his sweet scent tickling her nose. "Too much."

"Too much," he agreed, tightening his arms around her, one hand cradling her head, the other gripping her ribs. She had been pulled into his lap at some point, probably when he sensed her panic. She wondered briefly if he could feel the emotions she had felt from the object, or only her reaction to the information. But that was a question for another day when her brain didn't feel so itchy and swollen, burning like it was melting and about to pour out of her ears.

Instead, she tuned out Dr Cullen's and Edward's theories about what she had experienced and listened to the air whoosh in and out of Jasper's lungs, focused on how his fingers massaged her scalp and tried to identify all of the components of Jasper's cologne. Some sort of firewood burning. Apple and cinnamon. Cotton on a clothesline on a sunny day.

Relax, breathe, calm down, repeat.

"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" — J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Chapter End Notes

It's finals week and I hate everything. Writing is a great distraction for me. What do you think? This was a fun chapter for me to write. Louisa is trying so hard to understand what is going on but it's hard to do that when everybody around you is nuts. Let me know what you think and any predictions you have for where this story might go. I already know, but it's fun to read what you think. -CheckAlexa
Not much had really changed about their relationship, besides the fact that Louisa referred to Jasper as her boyfriend (he didn’t particularly care what she called him, as long as he could call her his, which was about as creepy as it sounded. She brushed it off as a cultural difference): she still slept through most of homeroom, she still ate her lunch surrounded by his family, and she still was Spanish partners with the Hale siblings. The only real difference was that Jasper was in much closer proximity whilst she did them.

“Now that we don’t have to explain to you why we don’t sleep, the three of us can finally have that sleepover!” Alice chirped at lunch the following Monday. Louisa wondered what would happen if she told the excitable woman that learning that they were vampires wasn’t all that much better.

Immediately after the thought had occurred to her, she felt ashamed. Alice (and all of the Cullens for that matter) had been perfectly lovely to her, even before she knew that they were vampires. They had never given her any reason to fear them. They were the same people Louisa had known before their secret was revealed. It was unfair to condemn them for something they hadn’t even chosen. She knew all of this but the discomfort still lingered, curled up in the pit of her stomach, waiting for the most inopportune time to make its presence known.

“If I recall correctly,” Rosalie cut in. “You weren’t invited, Alice.”

Alice stuck her tongue out at her sister. “Louisa would have said yes if I asked. I was simply sparing her from having to answer.”

Louisa rolled her eyes but smiled nonetheless.

“It will have to be next Friday,” Alice said, her eyes taking on a glazed look. She sat in silence for a moment, staring off into the distance before shaking her head, like a dog trying to clear its ears of water. “Your father won’t let us do it this weekend, not on such short notice. And we’ll be in Denali for winter break.”

“We will?” Emmett asked in surprise.

Alice hummed in affirmation. “Carlisle will an invite today. He’ll ask us tonight.”

Edward sighed in frustration at her announcement, prompting snickers from his siblings.

“We have… cousins of sorts that live in Denali. One of them holds a torch for Edward,” Rosalie explained at Louisa’s confused expression.

“Her thoughts are worse, trust me,” Edward added, his nose wrinkling in a disgust.

“So she sexually harasses you?” Louisa asked. That didn’t seem very funny.
His siblings didn’t think so either, their faces wiped clear of amusement the moment the words left her mouth. “I wouldn’t go quite that far…” Edward began, clearly uncomfortable by the direction the conversation had taken.

Rosalie cut him off. “I would,” she said, watching her brother through narrowed eyes. “Tanya doesn’t always know when to stop.”

“Alice, would Carlisle let us stay here if we said we didn’t want to go?” Emmett asked. His arm was laid casually across the back of Rosalie’s chair, but the way his eyes darted between his wife told Louisa that there was more to his concern than his brother’s discomfort.

“That wouldn’t really be necessary, but—”

“Yes,” Alice said, her eyes glazed over once more. “Esme would shut down the whole trip if Edward asked.”

“You should definitely ask,” Jasper said.

Edward shot him an annoyed glare. “You just don’t want to leave Louisa.”

Jasper flicked a grape at his brother’s head and shrugged. “I’m allowed to have ulterior motives.”

“We could invite the Collins’ over for Christmas,” Alice said. “I can see them coming over.”

Louisa jumped in, wanting to stop the line of conversation before it started. “My dad would agree to it, but only not to seem rude,” she said softly. “I don’t think we’ll do much for the holidays this year.” She clenched her jaw and swallowed, trying to get rid of the feeling like her throat was swelling shut. It would be their first Christmas without Mum and Laurie, and none of the Collins’ felt much like celebrating. Dad was an only child, and his parents had died when Louisa was nine. Her maternal grandparents, who had never liked her father very much, had flat out refused to see them, a sentiment echoed by her aunts and uncles.

She felt Jasper’s knee brush up against her leg. She could see him out of the corner of her eye. He wasn’t staring at her in concern. His face was the same smooth surface it usually was. But she could feel his concern for her all the same. She gave his knee a small squeeze in appreciation before focusing on the rest of the Cullen’s whose conversation had devolved into who was going to give the worst Christmas present that year. Apparently, Esme had been going strong for twenty-eight years in a row, much to Alice’s displeasure (“I can see the future, yet I can’t figure out how to beat her!”). Jasper assured her that the annual ugly sweaters she knitted them would win this year for sure.


“They’ve never read Harry Potter,” Louisa explained after a moment of blank stares from Forks’ resident vampires.

Dottie’s eyes widened in shock. “Why are you friends with them?”

Louisa shrugged. “They’re pretty to look at. What’s up?”

Dottie shifted from foot to foot, her eyes darting between her sister and the Cullen family. Louisa could see Dottie’s reluctance etched across her face and decided to take pity on her little sister. She gave Jasper’s knee a final squeeze and stood, bidding farewell to the family, and led her sister out of the cafeteria.
“I can’t find Spencer. We were supposed to meet for lunch,” Dottie said, biting her lip, eyebrows furrowed.

Louisa wasn’t sure what her sister wanted her to do with this information. “Have you asked any of his friends where he might be?”

“I am his friend,” Dottie replied. “His only friend.”

Louisa tramped out the pity she felt for the gangly teen and focused on her sister instead. “Where was he last seen?”

“He had gym before this,” Dottie explained, her voice taking on a hysterical edge. “We always meet outside of the library for lunch. He doesn’t like eating in the cafeteria.”

Louisa reached up and eased Dottie’s lip from her teeth before she bit through it before assuring her sister that she would help find her friend. She linked her arm with her sister and the two made their way towards the gymnasium. She listened to her sister ramble about how she usually helped him with his Spanish homework in exchange for math tutoring, and how missing a meeting was very unlike him. Louisa had a sneaking suspicion that there was more than simple tutoring happening, but didn’t mention it to her sister.

The gymnasium was empty when they arrived and Louisa wasn’t sure why the sight filled her with anxiety. Louisa ran her fingers across a bin of volleyballs, thinking, trying to picture Spencer’s last known movements. He would have had to have been in gym class—Dottie had seen him go in that direction. He played volleyball, or at the very least attempted to. He was in the middle of a growth spurt and was still getting used to how long his limbs were. After class, he would have had to change out of his uniform. Louisa’s feet were moving towards the boy’s locker room before she was aware of it, and pushed open the door.

It was empty too, and Louisa heard her sister sigh in relief. She repressed a snicker, trying to focus. She surveyed the room, taking in the lines of benches and small metal lockers. It smelled like…well, teenage boy was the only real way to describe it, but times a thousand, and she gagged (Louisa felt a surge of pity for all of the Cullen boys who had to enter the room). She breathed through her mouth and tried to focus. Again, she moved before making a conscious decision, this time towards a specific locker, tucked away in the farthest corner from the door. To hide from the others. Her fingers brushed against the combination lock. 35-27-07. The locker door swung open, still full of clothes.

“Hey, Spencie,” a voice drawled to her left. She cringed, her eyes darting to the side, looking for a place to hide. Seeing no escape, she turned around to face him. A vaguely familiar teen was standing, dressed in his street clothes, hair darkened from a recent shower.

Louisa blinked, and the image was gone, her heart pounding in her chest. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Sure, she had investigated, hunted down missing people before. But that was before she knew she was a psycho-whatchamacallit. She should have at least told Jasper that she was going. Dottie’s voice broke her internal worrying. She needed to focus.

Louisa didn’t respond, brushing past her sister instead, her hand trailing behind her, fingers running against the cool metal. She could see other students adverting their eyes as the tall boy dragged Spencer by. She passed the showers, water still dripping from the faucets, the air humid. Two more boys had appeared, grabbing hold of Spencer’s flailing limbs, picking him up. Louisa began to walk faster, pushing open the door to the locker room. He had been ambushed while he had been changing, water droplets falling from one of the boy’s hair onto his bare chest. She was sprinting by the time she pushed open the gymnasium door, ignoring Dottie’s shouts as she ran out onto the
blacktop. The air was cold and the rain was colder against their skin. She vaulted over the short fence that separated the blacktop from the field where they played football when the weather was nice, not bothering with the fence a few feet away.

Spencer was shivering violently, dressed in nothing but his gym shorts and soaked to the bone. Even before Louisa reached him, she could see that his skin had taken on a bluish-grey tone by the time she reached him. She wasn’t sure if her hands were shaking from anger or horror, but she had trouble untying the jump ropes that forced him to kneel in the mud, arms outstretched, tied between the opposite ends of the football net frame. She managed to catch him before he fell face first into the ground. Louisa was already stripping off her jumper and wrapping it around him by the time Dottie caught up with her.

She didn’t bother to ask him what had happened, even if she thought he could have answered her. She tried to help him stand, but even with Dottie’s assistance, he was too heavy, too tall, and shaking too violently for them to get a proper grip on him. She screamed as loud as possible in her head, hoping that Edward could hear her. A moment later, Emmett Cullen materialised in front of them, and Louisa had never felt so relieved to see the mountain of a man so much in her life. He scooped up Spencer like he was a rag doll, and jogged back towards the school, perhaps a tad bit faster than what was possible for a human, Louisa and Dottie hurrying behind.

Edward was standing at the door, holding it open, a grim expression on his face. “Alice called for an ambulance. She’s gone to fetch the nurse.”

Rosalie was standing a few feet behind Edward, towels in her hands. She tossed one to each sister before turning her attention to Spencer, peeling away Louisa’s soaked jumper and beginning to dry him off.

“Be careful that you don’t rub his skin,” Edward instructed, closing the door and stepping towards them.

Rosalie gave her brother a dirty look. “I know what to do,” she snarled.

Louisa stepped backwards, away from her sister and leaned against a wall, shaking from adrenaline. The wall wrapped its arms around her, and she jumped, craning her neck, only to realise that the wall was actually Jasper. He rested his chin on her the top of her head, evidently unconcerned that his own clothes were getting wet. They watched as the school nurse arrived, then paramedics, who strapped Spencer onto a gurney, and wheeled him away. Another paramedic approached her and asked her if she needed assistance as well.

Louisa realised that the dripping sensation coming from her face was not rainwater, but blood from her nose. Louisa shook her head and informed the paramedic that she usually got nosebleeds in the winter. She accepted a handkerchief from Jasper nonetheless.

“What is going to happen?” Louisa asked, mostly to fill the silence that had filled the air after Spencer had been wheeled out of the gymnasium, a concerned Dottie trotting behind.

It was Alice who answered, her voice sad. “Nothing. He won’t tell anyone who did it.”

Louisa pictured the faces that she had seen in her mind and asked Edward who they were.

“A few of his brother’s friends. They’re on the baseball team,” Edward replied. “But it doesn’t matter.”

Anger pulsed through her veins at his words. “Of course it matters,” she snapped, ignoring Jasper’s
thumbs as they stroked her arms.

Edward shook his head. “He won’t tell anyone what happened. There is nothing we can do.”

“Can’t we look through the footage from the security cameras? Surely they would have captured it,” Louisa asked.

“You’re not in Tacoma, Louisa,” Edward explained gently. “There aren’t any security cameras.” Which was convenient for the Cullens, should they do something less than human. Not so much for Spencer.

She turned around to face Jasper. His face was emotionless. He raised a hand and brushed a strand of wet hair out of her face, his motions smooth, methodical, steady. She realised then that he wasn’t particularly bothered by what had happened — Spencer didn’t mean much to him, and he was only concerned because Louisa was dripping with water and blood and frustration. For an empath, he wasn’t the most empathetic. She resisted the urge to scream because she knew it wouldn’t do any good. It probably hadn’t occurred to Jasper that he should worry about Spencer.

The rest of his family was bothered by the situation but knew they couldn’t logically do anything without revealing themselves. And neither could Louisa. She rested her forehead against Jasper’s chest in defeat.

No Stone Left Unturned

Louisa went to bed furious that night. She wasn’t sure when she fell asleep, but she assumed she must have at some point. It was a light sleep, one where you could sort of hear what was going on around you and your brain incorporated it into your dream— the nonsensical kind that you wouldn’t be able to describe when you woke up. There were footsteps, somewhere close by, and her brain tried to tell her that they were coming from within the walls, but most likely belonged to her father when he checked on her before turning in for the night. There was breathing, soft, steady. Her own most likely. Scratching. Rats.

Rats, those were problematic, she tried to reason with her brain. They carried the Bubonic Plague in the 1300s. Louisa didn’t want to get the plague. It sounded like a very unpleasant illness. She wondered if any of the Cullens had been around then. Maybe Dr Cullen had been. He seemed pretty old. Louisa wondered if Dr Cullen knew how to treat the plague. She should ask him when she next saw him. For research, of course. Not because she was worried about the rats living in her walls. That would be—

But what Louisa thought exactly, was interrupted when she hit the floor, landing hard on her shoulder.

She lay on there for a moment, the hardwood floor cool against her skin, her brain trying to process what had happened. She had been curled up under her covers one second and was tumbling to the ground the next. Had she fallen out of her bed? Louisa sat up, massaging her shoulder and squinting at her bed in confusion. She’d never rolled out of bed before. Her mother had always said that Louisa has slept like a rock, even as a baby, prompting many frantic checks to ensure that she was still breathing. Fitful sleeping was not something she was prone to, but perhaps there was a first time for everything? Tiredly, Louisa reached up for her bed, prepared to drag herself back in and fall asleep, only to stop short. Something didn’t feel right.

It was almost as if her bed was too close to her. Louisa dove for the table lamp next to her bed, flooding the tiny room with light. She thought that it was because her eyes hadn’t adjusted to the brightness at first, but after almost a minute of furious blink, Louisa had to admit to herself what
her brain was seeing: her bed was no longer standing flush against one of the bookshelves, but nearly a foot away, angled as if someone had grabbed the foot of the metal frame and shoved it violently towards the centre of the room— and with more than enough force to throw her out of her bed.

She backed slowly out of her room, refusing to take her eyes off the bed until the last second, as if afraid that it might hop up and chase her. She threw herself into the dark hallway, her socks slipping on the wood floors, and sprinted towards her father’s room. If she had to choose between waking him up or spending a second longer in her room, she would take an irate father.

Tiredness overwhelmed her the second her fingertips brushed against the cool metal doorknob of her father’s room, so strong that Louisa nearly fell to her knees. It was the kind that settled deep in your bones and made you feel heavy; the kind that you couldn’t get rid of, no matter how long you slept. It took her a moment for her to untangle the sensation from her already scrambled thoughts. Her father was exhausted.

Louisa wrenched her hand away from the doorknob and backed away from her father’s closed bedroom door. She couldn’t wake him up, not for something as stupid as this. She was almost seventeen, for God’s sake. She couldn’t go running to her dad every time something scary happened. She glanced over her shoulder back towards her own bedroom, the door ajar, yellow light spilling into the dark hallway. But it didn’t feel stupid, and it didn’t feel just scary. Gooseflesh erupted across her skin at the thought of entering her bedroom again.

She glanced briefly in the direction of Dottie’s room and considered going in there instead, but rejected the idea almost immediately. If she woke Dottie up, her sister would want to know what had happened, and Louisa was too stressed to think of a plausible lie. She couldn’t tell Dottie about her bed moving or else the younger girl would start to panic, and a panicked Dot was not something Louisa wanted to deal with. She considered calling Pyotr but quickly dismissed the idea as well. She had harassed him enough this month, and no matter how good of a friend he was, she was positive that he wouldn’t appreciate being woken at three in the morning to hear her rambling about how her house might be haunted for real. If only she had a friend who she didn’t have to worry about waking up.

Jasper. The thought came to her at once, and she was almost embarrassed that she hadn’t thought of it sooner. He was dead and didn’t need to sleep. He also had the added bonus of being much scarier than a potential ghost. She would call him, she decided, quietly padding back towards her bedroom. He would be able to put this into perspective for her. She was just stressed and tired and obviously wasn’t thinking clearly, and he would be able to reassure her of that.

Steeling her nerves, Louisa stepped back in her room, crossing it in a few steps to where her cell phone was sitting on the bedside table, charging. Then she froze her hand centimetres from the device. Was calling Jasper even a good idea? Sure, she wouldn’t be waking him up, but surely he found something to occupy his time with at night. Even if he wasn’t busy, who was to say that he would want to listen to her paranoid ramblings?

Her phone lit up, a message from an unknown number appearing on the screen:

*Make up your mind, you’re giving me a headache –A*

Perhaps it was because she was exhausted, but the only A she could think of was that chick from *Pretty Little Liars*, which did not offer her any comfort in her present situation. Hesitantly, Louisa picked up her phone and was about to ask who was texting her, when another alert flashed across her screen.
"I’m hurt that you don’t have my number saved in your phone, Louisa. –Alice"

Oh, right. Psychic. Maybe she would be able to tell Louisa if calling Jasper was a bad idea.

*Don’t call. You’ll wake up your dad.*

Louisa was saved from having to ask any further questions by another text alert, this one from a number that had actually been programmed into her phone.

*The Babe: what’s wrong?*

Simple and to the point, just like Jasper. Louisa grabbed a pillow and her comforter off her bed and exited her room as she considered how to respond. By the time she got herself situated on the couch in the den, she had three new texts from her boyfriend, each one tinged with increasing worry. The final one informing her that he was on his way over.

She responded quickly to that one, but he didn’t reply, most likely because he was en route to her house. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that: more than a little weirded out (they had only been dating for a week, after all) but perhaps relieved too, that she didn’t have to deal with this all on her own. Louisa retrieved a bag of ice for her shoulder from the kitchen then sat in the darkened den, picking at her cuticles, and waiting for her newly acquired boyfriend to show up. She didn’t have to wait long— less than ten minutes after his last text, Jasper was standing at the back door, tapping lightly on the glass.

“You’re injured,” Jasper noted after stepping into the kitchen. He gently took her arm and inspected what would surely turn into a spectacularly colourful bruise come morning. “What happened?”

Louisa had to admit that she had no idea, which terrified her. Still, she tried to explain to Jasper, whose face was blank, but the look in his eyes grew more and more concerned. “Do— are ghosts real?” Louisa finished hesitantly. The question sounded stupid, she knew it did, and she felt idiotic for even entertaining the idea, but her boyfriend was a vampire and so was his entire family, so there wasn’t really a point in trying to pretend like the existence of ghosts wasn’t a possibility.

Jasper leaned forward, his nose skimming across her skin from her jaw to her hairline and back again. “Perhaps,” he said finally. “It would be unwise to exclude the possibility.”

“So you’ve never run across one?”

“Not that I’m aware,” Jasper replied. “Though you look quite close to one at the moment. You’re quite pale.” He led her through the kitchen and back into the den, depositing her on the sofa before kneeling in front of her. He gently pushed her into a reclining position and covered her with her duvet. When she asked him if he was comfortable kneeling on the floor, the corner of his lips quirked into a grin and he leaned forward to rub his cold nose against her face once more.

“Why is this happening?” She whispered. She could barely see him in the dark, and maybe that’s why she felt it was safer to ask him: she couldn’t see his expression and worry about whether or not he thought she was pathetic, and he couldn’t see the how scared she was. Of course, he could no doubt feel it, but somehow that didn’t seem as daunting.

In one fluid motion, Jasper rose to perch on the sofa, and Louisa shifted to give him more room, ignoring the odd feeling in her belly that arose from their closeness. She had been closer to Jasper before, but this felt different, more intimate. And the most frightening and confusing part was that she didn’t mind the feeling. Relished in it even. Jasper lifted a hand to stroke her cheek while the
other rested on her hip.

“She died in my room,” Louisa said when it became obvious that he wasn’t going to say anything. “Is that why I keep having visions of her? Did she somehow cause my —”

“No,” Jasper said firmly, stopping her. He grabbed hold of her growing anxiety and tugged at it, removed it, and replaced it with calm. “Nothing caused your psychometry, Louisa. It’s always been a part of you.”

“But it’s never been like this,” Louisa replied, her words more hysterical than what she was able to emote. “Even if I’ve always had this thing, I’ve never had this problem before. It’s gotten worse, ever since I’ve moved here.”

Jasper took hold of one of her wrists and raised it to his face. His nose began to rub against it, gently gliding over the thin skin that covered her veins. “You speak of your gift more like it is a curse,” he noted.

“Isn’t it?”

“No more than you are,” he replied. Very slowly, as if he was approaching a spooked horse rather than his mate, he placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist. “It’s a part of you, Louisa. It always has been. Nothing caused it. If you asked your father, he would probably tell you that you had always been an inquisitive child, even before your accident. The amnesia was most likely a catalyst. It forced your brain to look for clues about who you were and rely on your gift for information about your past. It’s simply become stronger over the years.”

“But I’ve never had headaches or nosebleeds before I moved here.”

Jasper watched her for a moment, noticing how tears were leaking from the corners of her grey eyes. She probably didn’t realise he could see them, or else she would have wiped them away already. He resisted the urge to do so, not wanting to disabuse her of the notion. He liked being able to see what she was truly feeling. He could sense it, but usually, she always hid it behind a mask, particularly anything negative. Vampires (that was, everyone who wasn’t the Cullens), were usually expressionless. It kept you safe, others not knowing what you were feeling. He guessed that her face wouldn’t be quite so expressive if she was aware that he could see her perfectly, but he liked to pretend that she did know because then he would know that she trusted him. “You are surrounded by history, Louisa,” he explained. “More than you have ever been before. I alone have existed for over one hundred and fifty years, never mind the rest of my family. Your brain is trying to catch up with what you are experiencing.”

“I don’t like it,” Louisa murmured.

Jasper’s heart both dropped and soared at her confession. He wondered how often Louisa truly shared her innermost thoughts with anyone, usually concealed behind sarcasm and jokes, and felt lucky that she was blessing him with them. But the weight of her words tugged at his dead heart; how could she not see how incredible she was? He felt frustrated, unable to express his thoughts in words. He didn’t want to tell her that she would come to accept her gift—he hoped that she would, of course, but he didn’t want to try to tell her how to feel.

Instead, he offered her reassurance in a way that he knew she would understand. “You used your powers today to find Spencer Garner,” he said. “When you found him, his core temperature was twenty-eight degrees. Edward estimates that he was minutes away from cardiac arrest.” He began to rub his nose along the inside of her wrist, feeling the blood pulsing through the delicate skin, as he waited for her to process his words. “You saved his life.”
They sat in the darkened den, silent, Louisa trying to process his words, and Jasper more than content to let her. She listened to his deep breaths, and she wondered why he rubbed his nose against her so often. She could have asked him, but she was exhausted and figured that it could be a conversation for another day. “How was I thrown out of my bed?” Louisa asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “We can investigate after you have slept.”

Her heart thudded painfully at the idea. She reached up with her free hand and cupped his jaw. His eyes opened lazily, the colour almost glowing in the dark. “Can you stay?”

His lips quirked into a smile and he leaned forward to place a kiss on her to her temple before resting his forehead against her own. “Until the sun rises,” he promised.

“To see what is right and not do it is the worst cowardice.” –Confucius

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, I've gotten hypothermia in the summer when it was about 37 outside. I was attempting my scuba diving certification. I was passed, under the condition that I would always wear a thicker wetsuit. They teach you in training that the body loses heat faster in water than air, which is why it is usually a poor decision to dive without a wetsuit. Anyway, what did you think? I would love to hear your thoughts on the chapter or predictions for any future chapters. Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
Don't Reach Twelve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Louisa awoke at an ungodly hour with a terrible crick in her neck. It wasn't quite dawn if the pale grey light filtering through the drapes was anything to go by, but it was right around that time. She could hear a choir of birds screaming their morning song somewhere not too far away. But most importantly, she could feel a cold hand resting on her hip, the thumb drawing absent mind circles as its owner stared out of the window. She sat up, and Jasper turned to face her, evidently surprised that she was awake.

"You stayed," she whispered.

His head tilted, brow wrinkling in confusion. "I told you that I would," he said, making Louisa realise that she quite like hearing his drawl first thing in the morning.

Louisa had to smile at his words. "Thank you," she said. Then, before she could lose her nerve, she leaned forward and placed a kiss on his cheek. The toothy grin she received when she pulled away supported her bold actions. "I appreciate it."

A warm, bubbly feeling wrapped around her, particularly when he leaned their foreheads together. "Of course, ma'am."

"Will you be in trouble for staying the night?"

Jasper gave her an amused look. "Carlisle and Esme aren't really my parents, you know."

Louisa pulled away, her brow furrowing. "But surely they'd have some sort of opinion for spending the night at my house."

"It was just Alice and me when I left," Jasper stated, leaning forward so their heads were pressed together once more. "The rest of the family went on a hunting trip. They'll be home tonight, I imagine."

"Why do you do that?" She blurted out.

"Do what?" he asked, his expression still amused.

"Keep touching me?"

Jasper pulled away, his eyes wide. "I apologise, I wasn't thinking it might be uncomfortable for you."

"No, no," Louisa replied quickly. "I don't mind. I... like it a lot, she wanted to say, which surprised her, but she realised was true. "It's just something I noticed. You don't seem particularly fond of physical contact from any of your siblings."

"I'm not. I'm just fond of you," he drawled, the boyish grin returning to his face.

Louisa had to resist the urge to grab his stupid face and kiss him for real. "I'm flattered," she said, horrified to hear her voice sounded breathy. The grin grew wider when he heard it too. "When are you leaving?"
"Trying to get rid of me already, Miss Collins?"

"I've been trying for a while now," she deadpanned.

Jasper chuckled softly. "Your father is waking up," he said. "I'll return in a few hours, at a more respectable time. Unless you want to explain that I spent the night?"

"Get out of here, you rascal."

He chuckled again before swooping in and planting a kiss on her cheek. He was gone by the time her brain had processed what happened, the scent of apple pie and cotton sheets the only clue that he had been there moments before. "Ass," she said, hoping he could hear her, before sliding off the sofa and gathering up her pillow and blanket. She bumped into her father on the upstairs landing.

"What are you doing up already?" He asked, unable to hide his surprise to see his eldest daughter awake at such an early hour. He could count the number of times she had woken up willingly before noon on one hand. "Are you feeling alright?"

Louisa shrugged and tried to stifle a yawn. "I couldn't sleep last night," she said, because she didn't want to tell him about being thrown out of her bed, and even more reluctant to explain that Jasper 'the Babe' Hale spent the night on the sofa with her. "Can I have coffee?"

"No," her father replied, amusement lacing his voice. He kissed her forehead and brushed passed her, his steps light on the stairs as he descended into the kitchen. Louisa could see that his eyes were still shadowed and felt confident in her decision to let him sleep the previous night. Quickly, she tossed her belongs into her room and padded down the stairs after her father, hoping she could convince him to make pancakes.

Dottie joined them a few hours later, long blonde hair wild, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "What's wrong with you?" she asked, noticing her sister sitting at the kitchen table.

Louisa stuck her tongue out at her sister and went back to her breakfast. Dottie made herself a plate of pancakes and sat next to Louisa in a way that screamed of false casualness. Louisa pretended not to notice her sister's odd behaviour, knowing she would talk about what was bothering her on her own time. Or, at least, that was what she had planned on doing. But even after their father had wandered upstairs to shower, Dottie continued to fidget in her seat, poking at her pancakes and watching the syrup ooze out of them.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Louisa asked finally.

Dottie dropped her fork and turned to face Louisa, her eyes narrowed as she regarded her older sister's face. "How did you find him yesterday?"

Frankly, Louisa was surprised Dottie had managed to wait for as long as she did. She sat in silence for a few moments, trying to collect her thoughts. When she answered, she continued to stare down at her plate, unable to look her sister in the eye and lie to her. "His street clothes were still in his locker, along with his shirt. The rest of his kit was missing, so I assumed he was still wearing it. People would have noticed that he was walking around shirtless, so he had to be somewhere he couldn't be seen."

"And you just happened to guess the soccer field?" Dottie asked, scepticism colouring her words. Her tone confused Louisa, and she glanced up at her sister. Dottie's face was weirdly blank, and she wasn't entirely sure why.

"It was the closest place to where he last was seen," she replied.
"How did you know that that was where he last was?" Dottie challenged.

Louisa was growing more confused at the questioning. "You told me he had gym, Dot. He would have had to change after class." She reached forward to grab her sister by the arm. "What's wrong?"

Dottie pursed her lips. "How did you do it?" she asked. Her tone wasn't angry, exactly, but she was definitely frustrated. "Nobody else knew where he was, except for the people who put him there."

Louisa pulled back quickly. "If you are asking me if I had anything to do with Spencer, the answer is no." She stood and walked her plate over to the sink. "I have better things to do than attempt to murder sophomores in high school."

Dottie stood up from her chair as well and bound over to Louisa, eyes narrowed. "That wasn't what I was implying, and you know it, Louisa." She grabbed her arm and spun her sister to face her. "I want to know how you did what you did."

"I did what I always do, Dorothy," she snapped, wrenching her arm from her sister's grip and turning back towards the sink, focusing on washing her plate.

"No, this was different," Dottie insisted. "You knew which locker was his, and how to get into it. You didn't wander around, looking at things. You moved like you knew what you were doing."

Louisa placed her plate on the drying wrack and pulled a skillet off the hob, trying to make herself look busy. "I've always been like this, Dot," Louisa replied, echoing what Jasper had told her the night before. "It's not like you've ever seen me work before."

"Why are you lying to me?"

Louisa dropped the skillet in the sink and threw her hands up in the air. "What you want me to say, Dottie? That I have some sort of psychic ability?" She pushed passed her sister and began to make her way towards the stairs. She paused and glanced back at Dot, whose expression was a mixture of frustration and hurt. Louisa's heart squeezed painfully at the sight and tried to think of an explanation that would satisfy her sister. "It's just practice, that's all. Dr Cullen told me it was a coping mechanism from after I lost my memories." Not an outright lie, but not exactly the truth. Either way, Louisa didn't like keeping her sister in the dark like this. But what else could she do?

When Dottie didn't respond, Louisa trudged up the stairs towards her room, locking the door behind her. She leaned her back against the door for a few minutes, breathing slowly and trying not to cry, a feat that became harder when she caught sight of her bedframe, which was still pushed away from the wall. Why had she wanted to live in this house again? Maybe Dottie had been right: living in a murder house was a bad idea. Louisa mentally berated herself at the thought. There was a more logical explanation than the paranormal (notwithstanding the Cullens). There had to be.

By the time doorbell rang a few hours later, Louisa had showered, dressed, and cleaned her room. She bounded down the stairs, only to see that her father had beat her to the front door and was welcoming, not Jasper, but a raincoat-clad Rosalie into their home. She was almost as tall as Mr Collins, and with her wavy golden hair and well-proportioned features, she looked so much like a model cosplaying as a high schooler that Louisa had to resist the urge to laugh. Instead, she shot her friend a confused look but played along when Rosalie scolded her for not telling her father that they were hanging out for the day. After Rosalie had toed off her boots, Louisa dragged her up towards her bedroom.

"Your father wouldn't have let Jasper up into your room," Rosalie explained the moment the door closed behind them. "And he'd rather know that you are safe. He'll stop by later tonight." She didn't
give Louisa time to reply, choosing to walk over to her bed and begin to inspect it. "You said you were asleep?"

Louisa appreciated that Rosalie didn't feel the need for small talk, preferring to get straight to business. She moved towards the bed, lying down, imitating her position from the night before. Rosalie proceeded to pick up the bed and tried to throw Louisa out of it. "A little warning would have been nice," Louisa grumbled, picking herself up off the floor. "And that wasn't what it felt like. The bed didn't tilt. It felt more like a shove if anything."

Rosalie scowled. "Unless the wall was the thing that shoved you, Louisa, what you are describing is impossible."

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Louisa replied. She sat cross-legged on her bed, patting the spot next to her in invitation. Rose rolled her eyes but sat down next to her. "But whatever did it, was strong."

"And you think it is a ghost?" Rosalie asked, her eyes narrowed.

Louisa groaned and flopped backwards onto the pillows. "The whole town seems to think that the house is haunted."

"Perhaps it is," Rosalie replied. "Something is in this house. The longest time anybody has lived here after the murder was nine months. The shortest was three days. The previous owners can't all be crazy." She reached over and stilled Louisa's hands, which had begun to pick at her cuticles. "You're going to make them bleed."

"Sorry." Louisa sat up again and faced her friend. "She died here," she said after a moment.

Rosalie nodded. "In this room, right?"

Louisa shook her head. "No, against this wall," she said, extending an arm to tap the wall her bed was standing against. "The last thing she saw was his eyes. They were blue."

Rosalie was staring at her intently, a curious expression on her face. "This was from your dream?" When Louisa nodded, Rosalie picked up her purse and pulled out an iPad, opening up a notes app. "Walk me through what happened."

Louisa rose and walked over to the window seat and curled up like she remembered Anna had been. "I couldn't see his face," she said, extending an arm to tap the wall her bed was standing against. "The last thing she saw was his eyes. They were blue."

"Before we continue, I want to remind you that you didn't argue with him," Rosalie said. "Try to keep yourself separate from this." Louisa turned her head towards Rose, whose fingers were still poised over the touchscreen. "Jasper, Alice, and Edward all agree that the only way to deal with their powers is to remember that what you are experiencing belongs to someone else. You'll drive yourself mad if you don't."

Louisa gave a shuddering breath but nodded. "Right, I don't need to be more insane than I already am." She stood up from the bench and continued on with what she could remember about the dream. "I— she was angry at him because he kept blaming her for getting pregnant. She told him that she would tell his wife... and the police I think. She was eighteen. She felt like this was an important detail..." Louisa pressed her palms to her eyes. A headache had begun to spout somewhere that was between her eyes and her ears, but she continued anyway. "He killed her then," Louisa finished. She pointed to the spot directly behind where Rose was sitting, trying to clear her
eyesight, which had gone fuzzy. "My bed wasn't there. It's in the corner."

Rosalie hopped up and gently pushed Louisa back into the window seat. "Separate yourself, Lou," she whispered, sitting down next to her and rubbing her back. "You aren't Anna."

Her instructions were easier said than done. It was so hard. Louisa closed her eyes, bit down on her lip, and tried to concentrate on breathing evenly. Centre herself. Focus. On the rain *pitter-patter* on the glass window. On Rose's hand sliding up and down her spine. On the hot air hissing out of the vents, rattling like leaves in the wind. When she opened her eyes again, she stared at the metal bed frame in frustration. "Anna's bed wasn't there." She pointed to the shorter wall of the room where her desk was, the one that was surrounded by bookshelves on three sides. "That's where hers was. She had a single bed and it fit really well between the walls." Louisa stood up abruptly and strode over to her desk and pulled it away from the wall. "Help me move my bed over here."

"I'm not sure if this is a good idea," Rosalie said, still sitting at the window.

"I need to remember more of my dream. I'm missing something," Louisa pleaded.

With a sigh, Rosalie stood and picked up one side of Louisa's bed, moving it to where Anna's had been ten years before. "She didn't have a desk," she said after a moment of Louisa closing her eyes and grimacing.

"How do you know that?"

Rosalie reached into her purse and extracted a thin manila folder, which she handed to Louisa. "I have the crime scene photos."

Louisa snatched up the folder and jumped onto her bed, her grey eyes flying across the pages of police reports. "How did you get these?"

"Emmett is very good with computers," Rosalie explained. "I wanted to see what you knew about the incident before you read the file."

"Her body is in the wrong place," Louisa said after a moment. "She died against the wall. They found her in her bed."

"So she was moved," Rosalie responded, not understanding why Louisa found that detail so important.

Louisa gave a huff of frustration and hopped up, pulling Rosalie towards the approximate spot Anna had died in her dream. "If what happened in my dream was a memory of the past, she died here, right?" She grabbed Rose's hands and wrapped them around her neck. "You choke me out. I've died from lack of oxygen or pressure on the jugular. I slide down the wall," she said, mimicking just that. "So how did I get in my bed?"

"Her murderer moved her," Rosalie stated.

Louisa shook her head. "That's significant," she said. "He spent extra time with her. He could have just run when he realised she was dead, but he didn't. He picked her up, a cooling corpse, and placed her in her bed."

Rosalie furrowed her brow and sank to the floor next to Louisa. "Okay, why though?"

"That's a good question," Louisa replied, rubbing her forehead. "It could have been some sort of
forensic countermeasure, I suppose, but he choked her; there wouldn't have been anything to clean up." She sighed in frustration, and pulled the folder towards her, rifling between the pages of the report, the frown on her face deepening the longer she stared at the words. "I'm missing something important." Louisa tossed the folder away and moved to touch the bookshelf behind her, only to be stopped by Rosalie.

"You've used it enough today," she said. "Pushing yourself won't do you any good."

"I need to know," Louisa replied, trying to keep her tone from sounding like a petulant whine.

"Another day. You nearly fainted earlier. Yes," Rose said forcefully when Louisa tried to protest. "You did. Jasper will have my head if anything happens to you."

"You're allowed to care about me, Rose," Louisa snarked, settling down beside the other girl. "I won't judge you for it. It means that we are friends."

She missed whatever Rosalie's response was, having caught sight of a name on the police report. "Charles Swan," Louisa said aloud. "Chief Swan was a responding officer. Do you think he'd talk to us?"

Rosalie regarded her question, face pensive. "It's possible. We'd have to phrase it right, though. I can't imagine the police department trying to solve crimes."

"They don't," Louisa confirmed. She pulled her laptop off of her desk and opened up the internet and typing 'Anna Sweet Murder' into Google. "We'll need to be even more careful about what we ask. He'll be hella suspicious if we know the contents of a police report."

Within thirty minutes, the two teens were surrounded by printouts of old news articles (it would've taken less time had the Wi-Fi not chosen that moment to be painfully slow). Rosalie, who was a much faster reader than Louisa, would flip through the article first, highlighting important details for Louisa to cross-reference with the police report. At one point, Mr Collins poked his head into the room, prompting frantic shuffling of papers to be tossed under the bed. He commented briefly about the rearrangement of the furniture but seemed to buy Louisa's hurried excuse for it. In the end, it took a distressingly short amount of time to comb through the files: Louisa wasn't sure if she had ever seen such a pitiful police report. It was too easy to hide the papers in the false bottom of her desk drawer.

They trudged downstairs and pulled on their shoes and coats, Louisa calling over her shoulder to her father that the two of them were going out. Louisa had planned on walking the short distance to Chief Swan's house, but Rosalie flat out refused, pushing her towards the passenger seat of a flashy red car, grumbling about dumb humans and walking in the rain. The comments gave Louisa enough fodder to tease Rosalie about her drama queen tendencies for the incredibly short ride.

"Next time you drive getaway," Louisa said as they walked up the driveway of Chief Swan's house. "Choose a less conspicuous car." She snickered when Rosalie gave her a rude hand gesture.

Chief Swan was, understandably, rather surprised to find the two girls standing on his front stoop on his day off. He waved them into his sitting room, belatedly offering them drinks. He didn't entertain very often. They made idle small talk that made him uncomfortable, bored Rosalie, and annoyed Louisa. None of them seemed to be a fan of the social custom, but nobody seemed to know what to do. Unable to take the awkward atmosphere any longer, Louisa took the direct approach and asked him about the Sweet murder point blank, eliciting a sigh of exasperation from Rosalie.
The Chief of Police blinked, thrown off by the abrupt change of topic. "Your father warned me that this might happen," he said after composing himself.

Louisa, who prided herself on being unpredictable, found herself annoyed by this revelation. "When?"

Chief Swan's moustache twitched as if he found the situation amusing. "Not long after you moved to town. He told me that you were often incapable of minding your own business, and under no circumstances was I to allow you to insert yourself into any ongoing investigations."

"I think I'm offended," Louisa replied, even though he was one hundred percent correct. She lightly kicked Rosalie in the ankle when she snickered.

"He's correct," Chief Swan said.

"Is this really an ongoing investigation though?" Louisa asked, undeterred. "It seems more like a cold case to me. Technically, neither of us would be disobeying my father's commands."

"Louisa," Chief Swan sighed. "This isn't something that you need to be involving yourself in. Your sleuthing is not only dangerous but illegal. Civilians have no place aiding in investigations."

It was Rosalie who replied, "That's not necessarily true, though, is it? The police appeal to the public for help all the time."

"Yes, for reporting crimes. Tip lines are very different than actively investigating a crime."

Louisa felt her temper rising and clenched her hands into fists, fingernails digging into her palms, trying to resist the urge to shout. "In 1998, Todd Matthews positively identified the murder victim known only as the 'Tent Girl' to be Barbara Ann Hackmann Taylor. He went on to cofound the Doe Network, who since their formation in 1999, have successfully identified 81 Jane and John Does. The group is run entirely by civilians, and they work closely with local law enforcement."

Chief Swan gave her a smile that he probably meant to be polite, but she took to be incredibly condescending. "That's not exactly the same—"

Her heart was pounding, blood roaring in her ears so loudly she could barely hear herself when she began to speak over the older man. "In 1991, the non-profit group NecroSearch International was founded. It's run by civilians, and they aid law enforcement officials using scientific evidence to find the location of graves. They specialise in homicide cases that have gone cold due to the lack of a body."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Rosalie watching her intently. Chief Swan looked either annoyed or scandalised at her brashness. Louisa ignored both of them. He needed to understand and he wasn't. She switched tactics.

"You have a teenage daughter who is somewhere between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. She not athletically inclined, most likely pretty clumsy. You haven't seen her in a while. You miss her, but you don't want to bother her. You think she doesn't want you in her life, maybe because she never calls, most likely because she refuses to visit. You spend a lot of your time alone. You used to fish often, but have recently stopped after a falling out with your friend. Your diet consists of mostly food that can be heated up in the microwave and cheap beer. You throw yourself into your work because you are lonely, but don't make friends easily. Just because I don't have a badge like you do, doesn't mean I can't help you, Chief Swan."

No one spoke when she finished, the silence only broken by Louisa's jagged breaths. She had stood
up at some point during her rant, but she couldn't remember when she had done so. Slowly, she sank back down next to Rosalie on the sofa, trying to calm herself down. "Mr Sweet's daughter died, Chief Swan. He deserves answers. Would you be satisfied if you didn't have answers to your daughter's murder after ten years?"

"Eleven years and three months," Chief Swan said after a moment. "She died eleven years and three months ago. It was the first major case I took after my divorce. It was my first and only murder investigation. I never really stopped looking into it."

"Forks is a small town. Murder capital of the world it is not," Rosalie pointed out. "Why wasn't it ever solved?"

Chief Swan sank back into his armchair, looking exhausted. "Besides the lack of evidence? Nobody wanted to investigate."

Rose let out an indigent huff. "A girl in a small town was murdered and nobody cared?"

"I cared," Chief Swan replied sternly. "But I seem to be the only one most days."

"But why?" Rosalie asked. "Why didn't anyone else?"

Chief Swan rubbed a hand over his face. "The theory at the time was that Anna knew her attacker," he began slowly. "There was no sign of forced entry: all of the doors and first-floor windows were locked. Her father unlocked the front door when he came home after work. Anna never left Forks in her life."

"You think it was someone from the community?" Rosalie guessed.

Chief Swan nodded. "No one was exactly keen to point fingers. Speculation was beginning to tear up the town. Nobody felt safe, everyone was a suspect. Residents began locking their doors for the first time. Then someone let slip that Anna had been pregnant when she died. Suddenly, it was Anna's fault. She wasn't the victim, she was the villain. A lot of nasty rumours began to circulate about her character after that. I'm sure I don't have to explain what they were about.

"Her mother used to call the station every day, asking for updates. Sometimes she would even come down in person. She wanted to make sure that we didn't slack off or get distracted, not that there were many other cases at the time. Once the rumours started, they started coming in less and less. One day, she just stopped. The family moved away about a year after the murder. They couldn't go anywhere without people harassing them. Their house and cars were vandalised on more than one occasion."

"Her own mother gave up on her?" Rosalie asked, scandalised.

Chief Swan looked pensive. "I'm not sure if that was the right word. I think she was tired, more than anything. Parents are people too. Sometimes they are incapable of fighting anymore. I can only imagine what those poor people went through, having to defend their own murdered daughter."

They lapsed into silence. Louisa could see how white Rosalie's face had gone and reached out to place a hand on the girl's clenched fists. She was furious, Louisa could tell that much. But heartbroken too. Louisa was angry too, yes, but something had resonated with Rosalie. She rubbed the girl's wrist, trying to offer a small amount of comfort and was relieved to see the hands relax somewhat.

"Every time I try to reopen the case, there is a lot of public outrage. They want to move on, forget
the whole affair," Chief Swan said finally. "They want the dead to stay dead. They're more than happy make murder into a legend and turn Anna into a ghost story. It's easier to deal with when they forget the person behind it all, I suppose."

"No one deserves to be forgotten," Rosalie replied softly.

"No, they don't," he said firmly before sighing. "I'm breaking a lot of rule, girls."

"We just want to help," Louisa explained. "You are one person. We can investigate on our own free time. If we find anything, I swear, we will call you and let you deal with it."

"I promised your father that I wouldn't let you get involved," he reminded the teen.

"And I promised him that I was done with sleuthing. But Chief Swan, I can't let this go unsolved, not any longer. Whatever happened in that house is still there, still effects it," Louisa said. She leaned forward, resting her forearms are her knees, her words pleading. "The Sweet family deserves answers. Anna deserves justice. Don't let it become twelve years, Chief Swan. Let us help."

Warring emotions flittered across the man's face: annoyance, frustration, anger, and exhaustion to name a few. But also a little bit of hope. "If you stop by the station on Monday, there might be a file sitting on my desk. I don't know what would be in it, but you might find it helpful."

Louisa could stop the grin from blooming across her face. "I can't imagine why we would need it," she said. "But I'm sure we'll find it interesting."

The girls didn't linger much longer, excusing themselves from the chief's house. They piled into Rose's car and drove the short distance back to Louisa's place. When she turned off the engine, the remained in the car for a moment, contemplating their next moves.

"This has to be quiet," Louisa said. "My dad would probably murder me if he found out I was doing this. I promised him I was done with crime-solving when we left Tacoma."

Rosalie smiled at her, a sinister, shark-like grin, where there was no humour or any emotion behind the eyes— just a row of glittering teeth. The sight sent shivers down her spine, and Louisa realised exactly why so many people avoided the Cullen family. "Oh, trust me," she replied. "I can do discreet."

"Do you want to come back in?" Louisa asked. "We don't have to do anything involving murder."

Rosalie laughed. "I appreciate it, but perhaps another time. Jasper will want to know what is happening."

"Alice wouldn't have already told him?"

"Oh, no doubt. She rarely keeps things from him." Rosalie said. "But he'll want a full status report in person."

"Yeah," Louisa agreed. "That sounds like him."

Louisa moved to get out of the car, but paused and asked Rosalie to wait for a moment before dashing into her house. Rosalie didn't have to wait long before the human had returned, a gift bag in her hands. Rosalie rolled down the window and Louisa passed the gift to her.

"It doesn't really keep to the theme of horrible presents, and I know it's not much," Louisa said. "I
had a few hours to kill."

Rosalie reached into the bag and pulled out a long, silvery-blue scarf. It was lacy and delicate and looked like it took a lot longer than a few hours to create. Rosalie had received a lot of gifts in her existence, but she couldn't remember the last time a human gave her one. Or a friend. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

"I crochet when I'm stressed," Louisa replied, her cheeky grin not quite masking the relief on her face. She waved to Rosalie and promised to see her on Monday before turning around and hurrying back inside her house.

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." –Elie Wiesel

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I found out I passed all of my classes, which means I am done with university. I wrote this chapter to celebrate. What did you think? My first draft had Jasper instead of Rosalie in it, but the tone wasn't right and I ended up scraping most of it. I am much more satisfied with how it turned out. Leave me a comment and let me know what you think! I love reading your theories about what might happen. -CheckAlexa
By Monday night, it became very clear why the Sweet case had gone cold. Except for a single short brown hair and a smudged fingerprint found on one of the bookshelves, there was no physical evidence. There were no witnesses to the crime, and nobody could identify Anna's whereabouts in the five hours between the school day ending and her father discovering her body. Her friends and family had been interviewed, but they all painted the same picture: Anna had grown increasingly withdrawn and secretive in the months before her death.

The hair had a root attached and DNA was extracted, but no match was ever found in the national DNA database. Five years after Anna's death, the DNA from the hair sample was identified as belonging to the father of Anna's unborn child, giving the police a clear motive for her murder, but by that time, interest had been all but lost in the case and hostility towards it had risen. What should have been a breakthrough ended up crammed in an evidence box and shoved in a corner at the Forks police station, gathering dust for who knew how long.

It was hard to say who was the most frustrated with it all: Louisa who had heard about, but never actually witnessed first-hand, such a gross miscarriage of justice; Rosalie, who seemed to take the unsolved murder of a complete stranger and the apparent apathy surrounding the case personally (Louisa figured there was a story there but didn't want to push it); Emmett, who hadn't realised how long and boring the sleuthing process usually was; or Jasper, who had to deal with all of their angst.

At least Mrs Cullen ("Please, call me Esme. I'm only twenty-six.") was kind enough to let them occupy the family dining room for their investigation, reminding Louisa that they didn't really need it anyway. The investigation would have been a lot harder had the teens used the Collins' residence as a centre of operations. Louisa had decided to keep her family in the dark about the case. She felt guilty, knowing she was sneaking around behind their backs and going back on her promise, but once she had started, she found it impossible to stop. As soon as school ended for the day, she would drop Dottie off at home before making the increasingly familiar drive to the Cullen's house, where she and Rose would sit and research for hours on end until she had to be reminded to go home for dinner. Even then, Louisa would stay up late into the night, reading over the case file and making jotting down possible leads to follow up on in a notebook by flashlight.

To explain her disappearances, Louisa introduced Jasper to her father as her boyfriend. Her father had been slightly confused by the abrupt announcement, but had taken it in stride, and had invited Jasper over for dinner. Jasper, who couldn't eat human food due to his… less than savoury meal preferences had managed to weasel out of the invitations thus far by claiming to be allergic to whatever had been offered to him, though Louisa knew it was only a matter of time before her father found the perfect 'hypoallergenic' recipe. Stephen Collins was nothing if not stubborn.

Jasper, for his part, didn't seem to be all that bothered by Louisa's preoccupation with the case. He would usually sit in the dining room with the two girls, sometimes helping them, sometimes reading quietly. She wondered if she should ask him out on a date since they were technically dating, but the only activity she think of that they could do together was breaking and entering locations she wanted to investigate more thoroughly, which didn't seem like it would make for a very romantic evening.

But even still, despite her wishes, life didn't stop just because she had a case. It hadn't when her
parents had tolerated her snooping and it certainly didn't when she was sneaking behind her father's
back. She had a history paper due Friday and naturally, she didn't start it until Thursday night.
After excusing herself from an evening of theorising at the Cullen's house, she had stationed
herself on the sofa in the lounge, laptop perched on her knees, ready to crank out the six-page
paper that was due in twelve hours.

At two in the morning and four pages into the essay, she heard her father moving around upstairs.
She didn't think too much of it, too focused on the probable causes of the Salem Witch trials and
the role of women in Colonial American society. That was, she didn't pay it any attention until she
realised his movements were coming from too far away from his room. It sounded almost like it
was coming from her own room.

Louisa's fingers stilled over her keyboard, her ears straining, attempting to identify the slight
squeaks emanating from the floorboards above. Yes, that was definitely coming from her bedroom,
and it was definitely her father—the footsteps were too heavy to belong to her sister. He must be
checking to see if she was in bed, Louisa decided, turning her attention back to her computer
screen. She shook her head to gather her thoughts and refocus on her paper, trying to ignore her
father's movements as he walked towards Dottie's room.

A blood-curdling scream destroyed what little was left of Louisa's concentration. She was up and
out of her seat before she knew what she was doing, her laptop dumped unceremoniously on the
floor, and sprinted towards the sound. She ran into her father in the upstairs hallway, his eyes wide
behind his glasses and wearing nothing but a pair of flannel lounge pants, and she followed after
him towards Dottie's room. Her door was open, and by the time the two of them burst into the
room, the screaming had ceased, though the terrified sobs that had replaced it was not much better.
Louisa hung back, turning on the overhead light while her father crossed the room and pulled a
distressed Dottie into a hug.

Mr Collins pushed Dottie's mane of hair out of her face and sat on the edge of her bed, rubbing
soothing circles it his daughter's back. He could feel her heart beating madly and he shifted so that
she could crawl into his lap. Out of his three children, Dorothy had always been the most sensitive
and the most likely to positively receive physical contact. Even as a baby, she had been the most
likely to cuddle, though it wasn't a difficult title to win when she was compared to the
rambunctious Louisa and later, the aloof Laurence. It wasn't that uncommon for Dot to have
nightmares either, especially after Clara had died. So, for what must have been the thousandth time
since the accident, he rubbed her back and whispered comforting words into her hair, gently
rocking her back and forth.

"It wasn't a dream," Dottie managed to say in between her gasping sobs. "It was real."

"It wasn't real, Dot," he replied gently. "You know this."

"No!" she said firmly, pushing away from him a little so that she could look him dead in the eye.
"No, this wasn't a dream. There was someone at my door."

This obviously piqued Louisa's interest, who stepped farther into the room. "What did she look
like?"

Dottie shook her head, her blonde hair flying. "No, it was a man. Not a woman."

Louisa pursed her lips. It couldn't be her father, obviously, he had been in his room when the
screaming started. Suddenly, those footsteps that Louisa had heard were a lot more worrying than
she had originally thought. She took a deep breath and tried to think clearly. Maybe it was Jasper?
He had been to her house a few times, but why would he not see her in the lounge? Why go to
Dottie's room? "How tall was he?"

"He was shorter than Daddy," she said, glancing back up towards her father and scrubbing at her face.

That ruled out any of the Cullen boys. They were all the height of the average moose.

"It wasn't a dream," Dottie continued. "I saw someone standing there. I was so scared I couldn't even move. He ran when I was able to scream."

Louisa released a sigh of relief. "It sounds like sleep paralysis, Dottie."

Dottie's blue eyes flashed angrily. "It wasn't! I know what I saw. There was a—"

"Your mother also suffered from sleep paralysis," Mr Collins said finally, not wanting to have to mediate a fight between the girls in the middle of the night. "Louisa is right, you just described the same thing she used to see. It's distressing, but nothing you see is real, baby."

Louisa listened to her father comfort her sister for a moment before backing quietly out of the room. She was overreacting. It wasn't footsteps that she had heard. It was probably just the house settling. She turned around and made her way down the hallway, towards the stairs, trying to calm her own heart rate down. Thanks to the little interruption, it would take her at least thirty minutes to refocus on her paper. She really should have started it earlier.

"Stop it, that tickles," a girlish voice giggled.

Louisa stopped dead in her tracks, hand on the bannister and foot raised mid-air. That wasn't her sister's voice. It hadn't even come from the direction from her sister's room… it almost sounded like it had come from her own room. Louisa's heart accelerated and a weird tingling sensation ran over her scalp. Very slowly, she twisted, eyeing her bedroom door cautiously. Thinking back, she was almost positive that she had closed her door earlier, just in case someone decided to snoop and stumbled across her case notes. So why was it wide open?

She glanced back to her sister's room, trying to hear her sister and father's conversation over the ringing in her ears. Surely they must have heard that too? Unless, she realised with horror, they couldn't hear it. Louisa turned her attention back to her own bedroom. She tried to swallow, but her throat had gone dry and her mouth burned as if her saliva had been replaced with battery acid. Either this was one of the psychometric episodes Dr Cullen had described to her or Dottie was right and the house haunted. Neither sounded very appealing.

When asked later, Louisa wouldn't be able to say why she walked towards her room that night. In fact, she barely remembered even doing it. It was almost like a dream, she would say. It felt like she was floating towards her bedroom door, rather than walking. She couldn't feel the cool hardwood beneath her feet, nor could she recall placing her hand on the door frame, which had tiny little nicks in it, remnants of what had once been a child's growth chart but had long since been painted over. It was a surreal experience— it was like she had stepped out of her own body for a moment and if she were to turn around, she would see it standing, frozen, in the hallway.

Then Louisa's foot crossed the threshold to her bedroom, and the spell was broken. She gagged. A second later, she dropped to her knees, her legs giving out the moment she registered the blinding headache. A wave of nausea hit her and she slapped a hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to stop herself from puking all over her bedroom floor. The hand on her mouth doubly served to stop herself from crying out loud. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and bit down on it so hard she tasted blood.
Her consciousness took a moment to catch up with her body. A scent was surrounding her, overwhelming her, choking her. She knew that scent from somewhere: it was spicy, burning her nostrils with each shakily inhaled breath, yet musky, heavy, pooling in the bottom of her lungs and making it hard to exhale fully. She knew she knew it, but she was pretty sure her brain was melting and running out of her nose, making rational thought nearly impossible. In fact, the wetness she was feeling on her fingers was probably brain matter. She pulled her hand away and tried to focus on it, though her vision was fuzzy and dark around the edges, making it rather difficult to identify what coated her fingers.

Focus, she tried to command herself. She imagined one of those cages that her father put in the attic to catch the squirrels that were eating the insulation, and shoved as much pain as she could into it, which wasn't the most effective mental imagery, seeing as it was full of holes, but it was the best she could come up with. She began cataloguing the sensations she was experiencing: Feeling, her brain was possibly melting, she had bit into her lip, and she felt like driving her cranium into the hardwood floor; Scent, spicy and musky. A man's cologne that she had smelled from somewhere; Hearing, a girl giggling. All very unhelpful.

Focus.

The giggling girl, possibly Anna. Cologne man, her boyfriend. Psychic or paranormal?

Louisa's eyelids fluttered shut on their own accord. A girl giggling. Had she been tickled? She was chastising someone. The man with the cologne? But what was real, or had been real? All of it, she supposed. Or maybe none of it. Either way, how the hell was she supposed to tell the difference? She could hardly call her father or her sister for a second opinion.

Focus.

Louisa nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt fingers ghost over her rib cage. Her eyes snapped open and she spun around, moving so quickly that her limbs tangled together, causing her to land on her bum. Her heart was beating a tattoo in her chest as she surveyed her dark and empty room. Tears began to gather in the corner of her eyes and panic began to bleed through her pain. Was that real or had she imagined it? She realised with horror, that she couldn't tell the difference. She had to get out. Stumbling to her feet and using the walls for support, she managed to walk to the bathroom down the hall. After locking the door behind her, she walked over to the sink, hands gripping the edge so hard that her knuckles turned white. She barely recognised her reflection in the mirror: her skin had taken on a translucent, paper quality and was bleached of any colour; blonde hair falling out of its messy bun, pieces plastered to her sweaty face; her grey eyes wild and shifting as if looking for a threat; and blood dripping steadily out of her nostrils and covering the lower half of her face. She looked like something out of a horror movie. Bloody Louisa could be the title. Co-starring the Cullen family.

She turned on the tap and lowered her face into the water, washing off some of the blood, while she considered her next move. The easiest thing to do would be to call her dad, who she could hear walking back to his room. But how on earth could she even begin to explain what was going on in her head? Besides, he'd take one look at her and take her right to the ER, which would be a waste of everybody's time. Petya was out— he would have no clue what to do. The only option, it seemed, was the Cullen family. Louisa turned off the tap and straightened up, watching her reflection in the mirror while she dried her face. In a way, it made sense: they knew lots of things about the supernatural and would probably be able to tell her if her current problem was internal or not. They also had the added benefit of no sleep, which meant they would most definitely be awake if she were to contact them. But even if she did contact them, what would they be able to do for her?
Nothing, she realised.

Her situation sucked, but what else could they do besides listen to her fears? Perhaps Dr Cullen could offer her a painkiller. But if it was her house that was haunted, unless they had a Proton Pack lying around, there was little they could do to fix it. And if it was her head that was haunted, well, that was really just a problem of her own.

She opened the medicine cabinet, pulled out a pot of acetaminophen, and measured out an appropriate dose. Too exhausted to turn the tap back on, she popped the pills in her mouth and swallowed then dry, watching blood continue to trickle out of her nose in the reflection of the mirror. Louisa leaned over and grabbed a handful of toilet tissue and tried to stem the bleeding, realising with frustration that she would need to change her shirt in order to avoid awkward questions from her father. She opened the door, turned off the bathroom light, and walked towards the stairs, eyes avoiding her bedroom door which was still standing ajar.

Focus.

Women in Colonial America were often described as witches if they did not fit into social norms. Women who were different religions, mentally ill, or sexually deviant were often targets for local gossip. Would Anna have been considered a witch if she had lived back then?

Push away. Focus.

Louisa descended the staircase and walked through the dark kitchen and into the lounge. Her laptop had gone to the save screen and she ran her finger over the mouse pad. Her essay appeared back on the screen and Louisa settled down into the couch cushions and began to type again.

In 1976, Linnda R. Caporael hypothesised a biological explanation behind the strange symptoms of the girls: ergotism, caused by the ingestion of rye bread infected by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*, a natural substance from which LSD is derived. This, however, is not widely accepted by historians and public health professionals, who claim that there would have been an infection seen on a grander scale. Modern historians focus more on the psychological causes of the event: human emotions.

Louisa wondered what Jasper's take would have been on the event, had he been alive at the time. She deliberately didn't think about what Jasper would think if he found out about her little episode tonight.

She rolled her neck and shoulders out.

Concentrate.

It was going to be a long night.

No Stone Left Unturned

She shouldn't have been surprised when she woke up with a migraine. Louisa printed out her essay and gave it to her sister with the instructions to turn it into her history teacher before informing her father that she wasn't going to school. He rolled his eyes at her explanation, believing that she was faking illness to catch up on sleep. Louisa may or may not have vomited in the kitchen sink to prove her point. Then she trudged back into the den and fell face first onto the sofa. She told her father she would sleep on the sofa because she was too dizzy to make it up the stairs, which was easier to explain than being too afraid to sleep in her room.

She also shouldn't have been surprised when she was awoken around lunchtime by a cold hand
rubbing against her face. It took a moment for her eyes to focus on the person in front of her, and when they did, she scrambled back, pulling her blanket closer to her. Jasper was sitting on the edge of the sofa, hand still outstretched, and watching her with a pensive expression.

"How did you get in here?" Louisa asked after a beat of stunned silence.

"You weren't at school this morning," Jasper stated in lieu of an answer. "Are you ill?"

"It's just a migraine," Louisa insisted.

"And the nosebleed?" Jasper asked, an eyebrow arching. At her confused look, he hooked an index finger around the collar of her oversized shirt and gently pulled it down, revealing streaks of dried blood. "You missed a spot."

Louisa pursed her lips. "That happened last night."

"Did it happen to have anything to do with the Shadow Man your sister saw last night?"

She sighed in annoyance and flopped back down onto the cushions. Louisa was willing to bet the entire contents of her bank account that Edward had tattled on her. "I don't know," she admitted finally, staring up at the ceiling to avoid looking him in the eyes, even when his hand began to rub her leg.

"What do you mean that you don't know?" Jasper asked.

Louisa let out a heavy breath and tilted her head so she could look at him. His face was blank and his eyes were darker than she was used to. She was tempted to ask, but she knew he would see through her attempts at distraction. So instead, she proceeded to fill him in on the events from the night before.

He didn't seem impressed that she hadn't called him and told her as much.

"What would have been the point of it, Jasper?" Louisa asked, trying to keep the exasperation out of her voice. She appreciated his concern, she truly did, but she couldn't understand why it mattered that she hadn't called him. He would have been no more helpful hovering over her shoulder than he would have been sitting at his house.

Jasper's brow furrowed at this and he watched her in silence for a few minutes. Louisa fidgeted under the intensity of his gaze. He wasn't angry, per se, but he wasn't entirely pleased with her either. "The point," he said finally, his voice slow and his words heavy. "Is that you wouldn't have to be alone."

"I'm fine on my own, Jasper," she replied, lifting an arm to cover her face. "I've always been in the past. This time isn't any different."

Jasper let out a bizarre sound that was the cross between a sigh and growl, making the hairs on the back of her arms stand on end. Her eyes snapped open and she pulled her arm away from her face to watch the boy in front of her. His expression had darkened, though she couldn't tell if it was angry or hurt. Frustration hit her like she had run headlong into a brick wall and it took her a moment to realise that this wasn't a feeling of her own.

"Jasper," she said, sitting up, ignoring the light-headedness that overtook her. She leaned forward and reached out a hand to touch his face. "What is it?"

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, leaning into her palm. "Please excuse my language,
ma’am, but that’s fucking bullshit.” Louisa’s eyes widened in surprise and she tried to withdraw her hand, but Jasper was too quick for her, snatching it up and keeping it pressed against his cheek. "I’m right here, Louisa, and I want to be here. Please don’t push me away." He rubbed his nose over the inside of her wrist, inhaling deeply as he chose his next words. "I understand that you are human and you don’t feel the mating bond as acutely as I do, but please don’t say things like that. To a vampire, it sounds close to a rejection."

Guilt flooded through her veins, making it almost impossible to breathe. "I’m not trying to,” she managed to stutter out. She knew that her intentions hadn’t been to upset him, but seeing him react to her words in such a way caused an inexplicable feeling of distress. It came from somewhere deep within her, sort of behind her sternum yet at the same time nowhere close. The knowledge stirred up feelings that were almost… old? No, not old. Primal. Louisa scrambled to her knees, a feat made difficult by the soft cushions underneath her. She placed her free hand on his bicep and tried to pull herself closer to him until she was on her knees. Before she knew it, she straddling his hips, their faces centimetres apart. It was a reflex, like spitting out bitter food or running from a venomous snake. She didn't make the conscious decision to act— she just did. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

It was a peculiar experience: She could hear the words coming out of her mouth, but it was like she had no control over them. Her brain was whirling at a million meters a second, yet the only thoughts that crossed it were that she had hurt him and that she needed to reassure him, to comfort him. It felt like she was merely a passenger, rather than the driver, as she felt her body take control. She could vaguely recognise that she didn't like the feeling, but her brain pushed the thought away before she had the chance to dwell on it. She leaned her head forward so that her forehead was resting on his temple, and when he turned his head towards her, their noses bumped against each other. Jasper's lips pursed in thought before slipping his hand into her hair and gently massaging her scalp.

Was this the mating bond? If this was what she felt as a human, how horrible must it be for Jasper? At least he had the benefit of not having a pulse— Louisa felt that her heart was about to explode in her chest. The compulsion to comfort him was terrifying and she could honestly say that she didn't like the feeling. To lose control of herself so completely, even if it was for a relatively benign reason, made her stomach clench with anxiety.

Jasper slid his free hand around her waist, fingers splayed out across her spine and rubbed her hip with his thumb. They sat on the couch for a few minutes, her heavy breaths the only sound to fill the silence, as she considered how to voice her thoughts. She wanted to tell him that if her actions had been influenced by their bond, she thought the bond straight up sucked, though she didn't think it would be received well. But facetiousness aside, what she truly felt, and what he most likely knew without her having to say so, was that she was scared.

Now, Louisa didn't wake up each morning thinking of how to hurt someone's feelings, of course, but she rarely went out of her way to make someone happy, especially someone not in her family and definitely not someone who she had met four months ago. And true, Jasper was her friend and her boyfriend, which placed him pretty high on the list for people she cared about, but her reaction was something she had never experienced. When she fought with Dottie or Laurie or her parents, she had never felt the overwhelming urge to comfort them when they got upset. Yet, here she was, straddling Jasper Whitlock's hips, practically begging for forgiveness, and absolutely petrified that she might hurt him.

"This is so confusing for me," she admitted at last because it was true and like a felt safe confession.
When Jasper next spoke, his breath fanned across her face, cool and apple pie scented. It caused her heart to contract painfully and she had the overwhelming urge to do something she couldn't quite identify but felt she desperately wanted. "I imagine our powers don't help any," he said, still massaging her scalp and hip. "You can read strong emotions left behind and I can project emotions."

"An emotional rollercoaster," Louisa quipped.

"Coming from the human-sized tornado that leaves a trail of confusion and chaos in her wake," he replied dryly. "I think I'm just along for the ride."

"Careful," Louisa replied, sitting back and raising an eyebrow, giving him a look of reproach. "There's already a Dorothy living in this house. We don't need another."

"Then who am I?" he asked, his head tilting and the corner of his lips quivering in amusement.


"So you want me to melt in the end?" Jasper asked.

"You know, I really need to introduce you to the musical Wicked," Louisa said.

He gave her a smile, the one that was toothy and boyish and was quickly becoming one of her favourite sights (not that she would tell anyone that), and gave her hip a light squeeze. He must have sent her some sort of emotion because she found herself sagging down into his lap. She wondered idly if her bones turned into jelly, but found that she was to content to care, and she laid her head in the hollow of his shoulder. Gooseflesh erupted across her arms as Jasper's fingers lazily ghosted over them. "As you wish," he said, his accent strong but his voice soft.

Louisa chuckled at his words. "You've seen The Princess Bride?"

She couldn't see his face but she could feel his confusion poking at her. "No, Rosalie is the one that prefers to watch chick-flicks."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Well, you'll like this kissing movie," she said while she hopped off his lap. She stumbled a bit, her vision going black for a few seconds, and a wave of nausea reminded her just why she had stayed home from school that day.

Jasper caught her before her knees hit the floor and helped her lie back on the couch. She instructed him to where the movies were kept, and when he sat back down, she hesitantly rested her head on his lap. He didn't comment, shifting instead to cover her with a blanket before his fingers started to run through her hair. By the time Buttercup arrived at the Fire Swamp, Louisa was fast asleep.

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"I knew nothing but shadows and I thought them to be real." —Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was particularly fiddly. I just couldn't get the tone... write. Puns aside, I had to rewrite the chapter almost completely, and doing so took a lot longer than usual. I'm not very good at writing romance, and one of the whole points of this story is to
help me develop my skill set in this genre. Essentially, my whole rationale behind this chapter was to show that Louisa isn't totally on board with the whole mating bond thing. One of the weirdest things about fanfiction is that a lot of authors have their characters just... accept the mating bond, which never really made sense to me. But I'm asexual, so what do I know, lol. Anywho, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Leave a review and let me know what you thought! Lots of love, CheckAlexa
"For me,' said Sherlock Holmes, 'there still remains the cocaine-bottle.' And he stretched his long white hand up for it," Louisa finished, her voice carrying over the beeping of the heart rate monitor and the buzzing of the dialysis machine. She closed up her battered and well-loved copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* and looked at the girl on the bed in front of her. "Well," she asked. "What did you think?"

"I wish I could solve mysteries," Kelly sighed. She was sitting cross-legged on top of her blankets, elbows resting on her knees, her hands propping up her head. The steroids the doctors had put her on had caused her cheeks to swell, which, paired with her expression, gave the impression of a disgruntled chipmunk.

Louisa picked her rucksack up off the floor and tucked her book carefully inside while she considered how to respond to the statement. She could hardly tell the girl that solving mysteries was overrated, especially not after regaling some of her own adventures. "Perhaps we can when you feel a little better."

Kelly's face lit up with excitement. "Really?"

"Of course, every Holmes needs their Watson."

The little girl nodded seriously. "Yeah, you'll need me for sure. You'll make a good Watson."

Louisa suppressed a grin. "I'd be honoured," she replied, her voice solemn. "But if you're going to be fighting crime, you're going to need to study more."

Kelly's nose wrinkled at the thought. "Like science? We're learning about the solar system at school right now, but it's real boring. I like history more. Last week, we finished our unit on the ancient Egyptians. I want to learn hieroglyphics but the library doesn't have any books. The librarian told me that they have lots of books in Spanish, but that's not the same."

"There is a distinct lack of pictures in Spanish," Louisa agreed before reaching back into her rucksack and extracting a gift bag. "But I was thinking more along the lines of something else," she finished, handing the gift to Kelly, who gasped excitedly before diving for it.

The eight-year-old looked around the outside of the bag for a moment before looking up at the teen with a confused expression. "There isn't a card? Mummy says I should always read the card before opening a gift."
Louisa laughed and shook her head. "Nah, cards are boring. Nobody keeps them."

Kelly nodded, her red hair falling into her face, only for it to catch on her nasal cannula. Louisa leaned forward to help the little girl untangle her hair. "Yeah, why do adults give them in the first place?" Kelly asked while Louisa slid a spare hair tie off of her wrist and help her pull her hair into a ponytail.

"That's a good question. We should ask one. They know boring stuff like that," Louisa replied before redirecting Kelly's attention towards her gift.

The little girl complied and seconds later, pink tissue paper was flying. She extracted a crocheted doll wearing a deerstalker and a trench coat, gasping in surprise, fumbling with the doll in her swollen fingers before she managed to hug it to her chest. "It's Holmes!"

"He'll be able to read with you when I can't be here," Louisa explained, watching as Kelly pulled out the second part of her present, an illustrated copy of the complete works of *Sherlock Holmes.* "It's not hieroglyphics, but at least there are pictures in this book."

If it wasn't for the multitude of wires connected to her, Louisa was sure Kelly would've tackled her in a hug. Instead, she was blessed with a radiant, gap-toothed smile. Her heart swelled with happiness as she watched Kelly began to read through her new book, oohing and ahhing at the appropriate times when the little girl pointed out a particularly colourful picture.

Nurses filtered in occasionally to check on Kelly. They wore smiles and laughed when Kelly told them a joke or some fanciful idea that popped into her head, but Louisa could see the tightness in their eyes. Louisa didn't need to deduce the nurses to know what had them worried: the two nosebleeds and obvious weight loss the little girl had experience spoke volumes about her current condition. Kelly's kidneys were starting to fail and it seemed that even the dialysis treatments she received multiple times a week were not able to stop.

Kelly either didn't realise how sick she was or she did know, and simply didn't care. Louisa wasn't sure which was more upsetting. The little girl chose to speak over the beeping of the various machines, chattering away about her school lessons, as though she was simply taking a vacation from her education, rather than essentially putting it on hold. And though her feet were too swollen to run around in the playroom, she seemed more than content to sit on her bed and play with her menagerie of stuffed animals.

"Is Jasper going to come back and visit soon?" Kelly asked, pausing from her dramatic enactment of

"I'm not sure. He's afraid of doctors," Louisa lied for lack of a better thing to say. She could hardly tell the girl that the tall blond was a vampire and it was unwise for him to be around so much blood. He had shared with her that the only reason he visited her back in November was because she had been there and it had been incredibly reckless of him.

Kelly nodded with understanding. "I used to be too. Maybe he can go on an adventure with us when I am feeling better?"

"I'll make sure to ask him," Louisa replied. "But if I'm Watson and you are Holmes, who would he be?"

"Miss Morstan," she responded without hesitation. She leaned forward, her expression serious. "He has a crush on you," she whispered.
Louisa blinked in surprise. "I should hope so," she said. "He's my boyfriend."

Kelly looked at her with wide eyes. "Really? That's so cool."

Louisa couldn't help but laugh at Kelly's childlike fascination. She could vaguely remember being eight years old and holding a similar belief that having a boyfriend made you a grown-up. Now at eight years later, she didn't really feel all that grown up, if anything, she felt young, especially when she was with Jasper. "He has his uses," she agreed.

Kelly sank back into her pillows, her disappointment evident on her face. "I wish I had a boyfriend. But all of the boys in my class are dumb."

"I don't know, girls can be pretty dumb too," Louisa said. When a nurse popped her head into the room and let Louisa know that visiting hours would be ending soon, she leaned forward to help Kelly settle into her bed, pulling up the blankets around her tiny body.

"You're not," Kelly said as if this somehow proved her point.

"Are you kidding? I'm the biggest dummy of them all," Louisa laughed. "I didn't even figure out that Jasper was asking me out the first time he did."

Kelly's brows furrowed as she considered the teen. "Yeah, you're right. That is pretty dumb."

Louisa chuckled and pressed a kiss to the little girl's forehead. "We all have our moments." She turned to leave, only to pause when a little voice stopped her at the door.

"You'll come back, right?"

She turned and looked over her shoulder, only to see that little girl she had grown so fond of had already drifted off to sleep.

No Stone Left Unturned

Louisa was so used to seeing Jasper in her room that she didn't even startle when she entered after her shower that evening. He was sitting at her desk, long legs crossed at the ankle, and inspecting one of the picture frames that stood there. Louisa continued to dry her hair off, only briefly pausing to run her fingers through his hair before padding towards her wardrobe in search of a pair of socks. Jasper let out a little hum of content at her actions but didn't look up from the picture in his hand.

Ever since her last episode, Jasper had taken to spending the night with her. He hadn't asked if he could, he had just sort of showed up one evening and kept doing it. Whilst she did find it a little annoying that he had no problem invading her personal space, and more than a little creepy that he showed up to her house nightly for the express purpose of watching her, she couldn't deny that her anxieties were lessened in his presence, and not just because he was an empath, though that certainly helped. There was something calming about his presence, and whether that was because she was his mate or simply because she didn't have to be alone, she had no plans to evict him. Being in her room still gave her gooseflesh, and though she could avoid it during the day, she knew her father would become suspicious if she suddenly decided to abandon her bed in favour of the sofa in the lounge. Instead, she began leaving the back door unlocked for her boyfriend so she didn't have to keep getting up to let him in, and the two slowly began to adapt to sharing a small space together.

The first few nights had been awkward and hesitant. Louisa had fretted about such a major change in their relationship, particularly so soon after they started dating, and what it meant. Were they
moving too fast? What sort of things would he expect of her, now that he was in her bedroom? Was she even okay with the new developments? She couldn't answer the first, was too nervous to ask the second, but the third… that answer terrified her. Because, she knew, even before the thought had finished crossing her mind, that the answer was yes. This revelation, in turn, brought up the first question again and her mind began to ruminate over that *ad nauseam*. And then, of course, she wandered about the physical implications of allowing Jasper into her room. What would he do whilst she slept? She imagined that he would be rather bored, watching her lie still and unresponsive for hours on end. Also, what if she snored, or made weird sounds when she was sleeping?

As it turned out, Jasper usually brought his laptop with him and he claimed that she was usually so still when she slept, he often had to check if she was even still alive. He easily assuaged her fears and discomfort, and despite the acceleration in their relationship, seemed more than content to allow her to set the pace of it as far as the situation could allow. He never demanded anything of her and he gave no indication of needing something more than she was willing to give him. His attitude was definitely what made the transition into the new level of intimacy as smooth as it was. Or maybe it was the mating bond, manipulating everything.

Even if it was the bond, however, she found it less and less something to be worried about, and more a fact of a life. Did the idea weird her out? Absolutely. Did she like the idea of not being in control of such a massive part of her life? Hell no. But could she avoid it? The truth of the matter was, she couldn't fight it any longer. The more time she spent with Jasper, the less she found herself wanting to resist. She enjoyed their verbal sparring matches, how he could easily give as good as he got, how his eyes light up when he delivered a particularly well-crafted gibe, and his toothy grin that always foreshadowed the warm chuckle that made his chest vibrate. She was fond of the way he knew a little bit about a lot of things and could always surprise her with a new fact, or the way he listened intently when she went off on rambles about a subject he was not familiar with. She was grateful for how he seemed so calm and collected, especially when she felt like a nervous wreck, and how he didn't seem to overthink things like she did.

It was on the fourth night, however, that any pre-existing hesitation flew out the window, and it started with Louisa accidentally inviting him into her bed. She had awoken abruptly after a dream involving being strangled, and Jasper had been sitting on the edge of her mattress, watching her with concern. He had helped her sit up, supporting her weight when her muscles had seemingly turned to jelly and handed her one of his many white handkerchiefs for her bloody nose. He helped her sort out what was true for her and what had been true for Anna. He blocked the spot where Anna had died from her view with his large body. He let his comfort and peace wrap around her like a snug blanket. She had fallen asleep in his arms and had it not been for the migraine she had when she woke up in the morning, she had had one of the best nights of sleep in her entire life. If anyone asked, she would say him lying in her bed at night was simply for logistical reasons—to keep the nightmares away. It wasn't really the truth, of course, she still did have the dreams about Anna, but his presence upon her waking offered a sense of safety and security that calmed her scrambled thoughts so they could be assembled back into the correct order again.

As it would turn out, sleeping next to someone created a sense of trust, meaning that she got to see the parts of Jasper that she knew realistically had always been there, he had just never shown her. He wasn't shy, just introverted, though he could be quite the chatterbox if you got him on the right subject. He loved being warm, and though he never explicatively stated it, she got the impression that he missed living in sunny places. He was incredibly tactile, and while he was always hesitant to initiate physical contact, he would turn very cuddly when allowed the opportunity, which went directly against the war-hardened vampire image he liked to project. He was sassy, silver-tongued, and could swear enough to make a sailor blush (which, in turn, always seemed to bring out the manners his mother had instilled in him, causing for many apologies after an especially colourful
Louisa tossed her towel in her hamper before wandering over to her boyfriend, wrapping her arms around Jasper's neck and resting her chin on top of his head to see which picture he had picked up. It was of her and her mother on an ice skating rink, Louisa clutching tightly to her mother's arms, trying desperately to stay upright. Clara Collins was laughing at her oldest child's struggle, her lips pulled back to show front teeth that were slightly bucked, blue eyes crinkling at the corners. Louisa didn't look much like her mother (in fact, all you really had to do was take a look at her father to see who she had taken after), who had a willowy sort of body that, even in frozen in a photograph, seemed to move with elegance and grace. She was a pretty woman in a girl-next-door sort of way: she had soft features that could turn heads, certainly, but the way she carried herself was what truly caught your attention. She had a confident air about her like she knew exactly what she wanted and how she was going to get. "Laurie took that picture. He refused to get on the ice."

"Your brother?"

"Laurence," Louisa supplied with a nod. "He was always a bit of a grump. He's three years younger than me, but I think he's really an eighty-year-old man in disguise. Like you."

Jasper craned his neck to look up at her in mock annoyance. "Excuse me, little lady. I will have you know that I am one hundred and seventy-three."

Louisa grinned. "Little lady? Five foot eight is rather tall for a girl. I can't help it if you are freakishly big."

Jasper placed the picture frame back on her desk before spinning around and wrapping his arms around her, gently tugging her into his lap. She went willingly, her arms lifting to encircle his neck, fingers playing with the soft hair at the nape. He ducked his head to touch his nose to the little patch of skin between the back of her ear and where her hair started, his breath tickling her throat. "You know what they say about men with big bodies," he murmured into her neck, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin there and sending shivers down Louisa's spine.

Louisa pushed away from him, the tips of her ears turning pink. "Please don't finish that sentence."

"Their hearts have more love to give," Jasper finished, his eyes alight with mirth. "Get your mind out of the gutter. It's not becoming of a lady."

Her nose wrinkled in annoyance. "Good thing I'm not a lady then," she said.

Jasper chuckled and pulled her closer. "Good thing indeed," he agreed, ducking his head to press a kiss to her temple.

Louisa's heart jumped and her stomach swooped oddly at the sight of his boyish grin, her skin growing warm and prickly as if an electric current had been applied. She was certain he could hear her heart accelerating if his roguish grin was anything to judge by. He leaned forward and began to rub his cold nose along the jaw, occasionally giving her throat a playful nip with his teeth. It was never enough to break the skin (she would have been royally pissed off at that), but it always caused her to jump, the sensation making her hair stand on end. She wasn't sure if it was because she was afraid that he might accidentally sink his teeth into her or because she enjoyed it. Then again, Jasper wouldn't knowingly upset her so he was probably aware of something she wasn't.

"Anything interesting happen while I was gone?" she asked, quite proud that it didn't sound nearly as breathy as it had been the previous times Jasper had done this to her.
Jasper shrugged, his fingers running along her ribs in lazy strokes. "Edward has somehow managed to shove his head farther up his ass, Carlisle cured cancer, and Alice has achieved world domination and is our new overlord." When he nibbled on her clavicle, a strong electric shock jolted through her body and she thought her heart might stop. Her skin felt tight and her muscles were twitching and she felt a familiar emotion well up inside of her: the one that made her stomach tingle and her breath hitch and she knew she wanted something but she had no clue what it could be. She didn't have a name for it, but she experienced it enough around her boyfriend that she was certain he was the source of it.

She took a shuddering breath and pushed him away, attempting to give him a disapproving look. The expression on his face told her that he knew exactly what he was doing and he wasn't about to apologise for it. He truly was incorrigible.

"Is that all?" she laughed, standing up, her hands shaking with adrenaline. Jasper let her go, his eyes tracking her movements as she crossed the room and got into bed. She patted the mattress as an invitation and he rose and followed after, toeing off his boots before settling down next to her, pulling up covers around them.

Jasper hummed, the sound tickling Louisa's cheek when she rested her head on his chest. "Oh, I almost forgot. Emmett tracked down Mrs Sweet."

Louisa sat up in bed and stared at him with wide eyes. "Did he really?" The rag-tag team of teen sleuths (which Emmett had affectionately dubbed Mystery Incorporated Junior) had realised that they would have to re-interview all of Anna's friends and family about two weeks into their investigation if they wanted to gain any sort of traction on the investigation. The transcripts they had received from Chief Swan were not exactly incomplete, but they indicated that the police at the time had little experience with interviewing. Someone had to know something, but it seemed like the police hadn't wanted to push the subject, which Louisa called a miscarriage of justice. Even if they hadn't wanted to upset grieving friends and family, it should have been the top priority to understand everything about Anna, no matter how personal (Rosalie told her that most people weren't as insensitive as Louisa was when she said this).

"She has been living in Portland under her maiden name," Jasper explained. "Which explains why it took so long to locate her."

"Portland, that's what, a four-hour car ride?" Louisa asked. "I wonder if she would be willing to talk to us." They had managed to contact Anna's father the previous week, only to be shot down for an interview. Louisa could understand his desire to move on with his life and not bring up such painful memories with a group of teenagers. He had, after all, he had lost his daughter, moved away from the only place he had ever lived, and had his marriage fall apart in the span of a few years. Even still, it didn't make his rejection any less frustrating. She had wanted to visit him anyway and try to cajole the information out of him, but the plan was nixed after Alice informed them that Mr Sweet would call the police if they did.

"Alice thinks she will, but she still hasn't decided," Jasper explained, reaching up to brush a lock of hair behind her ear. "Alice has planned a road trip playlist in the event that she says yes."

Louisa leaned into his hand, biting her lip as her mind whirled through the possibilities the interview could present. It would be a hard sell, getting her dad's permission to go on a trip to Oregon for the day. She could hardly say she was following up a lead, after all. Her dad would insist on driving them, citing the distance, which wasn't really an option. What was something that her dad would let her do alone? The answer came to her almost immediately.

"Jasper, will you go to prom with me?" Louisa blurted out.
The boy looked appropriately confused by the abrupt change in topics. "Pardon me?"

"Prom," Louisa repeated. "Will you be my date to prom?"

His brow was furrowed in confusion and his hand dropped to rest on her hip. "Yes?" he was rather pleased that he even managed to respond without stuttering. There never was a dull moment with the little blonde around.

He was rewarded with a blinding smile and a swift kiss on the cheek. She curled up next to him, using his chest as a pillow once more and his fingers found their way into her still drying hair. Louisa's phone vibrated on her bedside table, a message from Alice popping up on the screen.

_Fairy Princess: that will work_

"May I inquire to what she is referring?" he asked.

"I'll tell my dad that I'm going prom dress shopping with Rose. He won't want to go and Dottie doesn't need a dress because she's a sophomore," Louisa explained before burying her face into his shirt. "We'll be able to interview Anna's mum then."

"Oh," he said softly. He continued stroking her hair for a moment before adding on, "But we're still going to prom together, right?"

She looked up at him, an eyebrow raised. "Unless you want to go with someone else?"

"Not particularly," he replied. He'd been to prom a few times before, and always under the threat of bodily harm from Alice. He wondered if it would be different, going with someone you actually wanted to dance with. Not that he didn't love Alice, of course, but she was tiny, making her a less than ideal dance partner. And she just wasn't Louisa. (There was also the fact that he didn't enjoy being stuck in a room full of what were essentially sweaty blood bags, but he tried not to think about that.)

Louisa hummed. "We can go after the new year," she said. "No sense in making the holidays more miserable for her than they already are."

Jasper's hand stilled, and Louisa gave him a critical look. "You seem opposed to the holiday season," Jasper noted.

"Not really," she said, her voice trailing off and her eyes going glassy, her thoughts apparently a million miles away. "I can relate to her," she said slowly. "Holidays are a time for family, and she's missing hers." She lapsed into silence while she gathered her thoughts. "It's our first Christmas without them, you know?" Louisa finished.

Her tone was even, but Jasper didn't need to be an empath to know how much it belied her true feelings. The pain and sadness were written across her face, plain as day. He shifted so he could pull her into his arms so that she was laying on top of him. She let him, all but melting into his embrace.

"May I ask what happened?" he asked, his voice low.

Louisa sighed deeply, her eyes screwed shut. "It was a car accident," she began. "The other driver had decided to start celebrating St Patrick's Day a day early. Mum was picking Laurie up from a mathletes practice. Laurie and the driver died on impact. Mum died on the way to the hospital." She was silent for so long that Jasper thought that she was finished. "It was the day before my sixteenth birthday. I just..." she trailed off, her breath hitching. "It's hard to think about. I keep
waiting for Laurie to burst into my room to inform me of some inane fact, or to walk in on my parents making out in the kitchen, or… I don't know… something. And I keep waiting for it to stop hurting, you know? But it doesn't."

Jasper stared up at the ceiling, trying to collect his thoughts. He wanted to offer her some sort of comfort, but he wasn't sure how to do so without it sounding like he was trying to minimalize her feelings. "I don't think it gets any easier, Louisa," Jasper said, stroking her hair. "It just becomes less difficult. The part of you that was ripped out when they died stops bleeding, scabs over, but there is still two people sized craters, and there always will be."

"Maybe," she replied before sighing once more. "Sorry to drop this on you."

He craned his neck down so he could press his lips to the top of her head. "I don't mind," he murmured.

She let out a watery chuckle. "You're my boyfriend, not my therapist."

"I'm whatever you need me to be," the answer flowing off his tongue easily. "You don't have to deal with this all on your own."

"I don't know how not to deal with it on my own," she admitted quietly.

He ran his fingers along her spine in slow, even strokes. "If you'd let me, I might be able to help with that," he whispered. Her breath hitched again and he could smell the saltiness of her tears as they began to form in her eyes, each one scalding hot when it landed on his chest.

"I think I would like that."

She cried quietly. Not because that was what was came naturally to her, but because it was what she had trained herself to do. She was so used to trying to hide her feelings. A part of it was because she wanted to seem strong for her sister, or she didn't want to give her father one more thing to worry about, but mostly it was because she wanted to hide her emotions from herself. She was afraid that one day she might start crying and never be able to stop, that her tears would overwhelm her and that she might fall apart. And maybe, if she cried too much, she would have to actually admit that her mum and little brother were never coming home.

He let her cry, soak his shirt with tears, and empty herself out. He wanted nothing more than to take away her pain and shoulder it himself. He had the ability to do it and every part of him was screaming that he needed to ease the pain she was experiencing. And God was she hurting. But he didn't because there were some things people needed to feel. Sorrow was is of those emotions that left your muscles fatigued and your bones aching as if they might crumble to dust; it seems unbearable and it always leaves you asking how you would ever recover from it. But life goes on. Time does not stop because of grief, so muscles must grow stronger and bones become harder to break. But in order to do that, Louisa would have to break down, becoming undone, to allow the jagged pieces of her heart could be puzzled back together again. So he laid in her bed, her head on his chest, her burning body curled around his cool form, her scent blending with his, and held her as tight as he could without snapping her in two, knowing that when she eventually emerged from this, maybe tomorrow, maybe next year, she would be stronger.

Grieving as a long process and everyone experienced it differently. It would be foolish to think that a single session of crying would help her come to terms with her mother and brother's death. But, like Jasper was so fond of reminding her, at least she didn't have to do it alone. So she allowed herself to be comforted by him, his embrace uncharacteristically warm and soft. His strong arms were wrapped around her like an anchor, a tether, a lifeline.
It was that evening when she began to realise that the mating bond wasn't simply romantic in nature. It was stability when the ground was eroding beneath her feet, comfort when her heart lay in painful shards, and support when she needed scaffolding to rebuild. It implied safety after waking up from a psychometry induce nightmare, companionship in the long stretches of silence that didn't need to be filled, and calm when the stress from school and family and unsolved mysteries became too much. It meant nagging to eat enough, wrapping a blanket around shoulders when their temperature difference became too apparent, correcting grammar on Spanish homework, tracing the patterns the early morning sun made on bare skin. It was an uncomplicated state of being that the messy world couldn't infiltrate, where people with all of their drama and the confusion they caused were left behind, and time seemed to slow down just enough to catch a breath. The nature of their relationship was intimate on a level that Louisa hadn't realised she could ever be comfortable with, but very slowly was starting to realise that maybe she truly relished in it.

True, the mating bond had dumped a lot of feelings on her way too fast, and maybe if she had been a vampire at the time she met Jasper, it would have been easier to adjust. But either way, it had formed the day they met, as thin and fragile as a spider silk, only to grow as she stayed with him until she was caught in it like a fly stuck in a web, and no matter how hard she fought against it, she was resigned to the fact that she could not easily break free. Assuming, of course, that she wanted to.

She didn't.

"There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness but of power. They are messengers of overwhelming grief and of unspeakable love." –Washington Irving

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading is chapter! What did y'all think of it? The return of Kelly was actually a random inspiration whilst I was waiting for my mum in the A&E (she's fine!) and I forgot how much I loved writing her. She's important to the plot, so don't crucify me if you think that it was just a filler. Also, if the part with Jaz and Lou seems to rattle those of you who actually understand how a timeline works, please don't leave me a comment telling me that it seems a bit wonky. I know. It's one of my many faults as a writer. Just roll with it and know that this chapter takes place a week before Christmas. Anyway, thank you all who have reviewed. I do read all of your comments and they never fail to brighten my day. Thank you also to those who follow this story. It makes me happy that there are people who actually want to read my work. Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
As you know, I try not to start off with author notes, but I do feel that it is necessary in this case. I urge all of my readers to read through it. This chapter addresses the murder and rape of female character, namely Rosalie. I will mark the sections with break lines for those of you who don’t feel you are in the right place to read it. It isn’t graphic, but you might find it distressing.

One of my biggest qualms with the Twilight saga is how Stephenie Meyers uses violence against women as a plot device. For instance: Bella goes to Port Angles with her friends and is rounded up to be most likely raped by a group of men; Esme was abused by her husband; Rosalie was gang-raped; Alice and Bella were both stalked by James who sought to kill them for sport; Bella is kissed against her will and emotionally manipulated by Jacob on more than one occasion. Now compare these to the men in the series… the closet you get is Jasper, who was kidnapped and turned into a war machine.

The fact of the matter is that she uses violence against women, in doing so, normalises the fact that this violence is a very real reality to millions of women worldwide. I, as an author, cannot condone this. Yes, women (and men!) are assaulted, raped, abused, and even murdered. It is a disgusting reality of life that we need to strive to end. But it should never be something that is used to define them. Meyers had the ability to talk about the impact of how Rosalie’s rape changed her, but she neglected it in favour of explaining away why Rose was such a bitch to Bella. She had the ability to show empathy for victims of assault, to show her impressionable readers that it is possible to overcome and step out of the shadows of a traumatic event. She had the ability to teach readers — mostly young girls, who God forbid, might one day experience something as terrible as Rosalie did or even already had— that it is NEVER the victim's fault. But she didn’t.

If you or anyone you know has been a victim of violence — physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual — I want you to know that the victim is never at fault. There is no such thing as ‘doing all of the right things’ to protect yourself. When somebody hurt you, THEY made the decision to do so and it is THEIR fault. And for those of you who carry this secret with you: do not be ashamed. You are not dirty or broken or unworthy of getting help. You are a survivor, you are brave, and you are not alone. Click this link if you need support. It's a list of crisis hotlines by country.

In the end, the Cullen's decided not to visit their family in Alaska. It had started off with Jasper's refusal to leave Louisa for such a long period of time and no amount of pleading on Mrs Cullen's part could change his mind. Louisa herself had tried to reassure him that she would be fine if he left for a few days, to which he responded with an unimpressed look and the instructions that if she was going to lie to an empath, she should at least be convinced of her own feelings. With Jasper staying behind, Alice declared that she had no real desire to go to Denali either, and after informing her parents how Tanya treated Edward, the trip was called off in favour of a quiet holiday at home.

Not that Louisa could complain too much. Jasper had entirely correct in his assessment when he had called her out for lying to him: Louisa had experienced an overwhelming feeling of dread at
the thought of Jasper leaving for even a week. She tried to rationalise the emotion, telling herself that it was only because she didn't want to be left alone in her room with the potential ghost of a homicide victim, but she knew that was only a small part of the issue. She knew, even if the very independent part of her didn't want to admit it, that being around Jasper just felt... right.

Christmas passed in a whirlwind of snow and emotions. The Collins family celebrated the holiday as a quiet affair, exchanging gifts next to a balsam fir that Jasper had helped Mr Collins set up, and trying to ignore the fact that two members of their family were missing. After a hearty breakfast of their father's Christmas pancakes, the three piled into Mr Collins's car and they made the three-hour drive to Tacoma to visit the graves of Laurie and Mrs Collins. Jasper showed up that evening and held her as she cried herself to sleep. The New Year passed in a similar manner, though with the two sisters under what was essentially house arrest. Louisa didn't have the heart to explain to a confused Dot that their father really just didn't want them on the roads with New Year's revellers.

Before she knew it, it was almost time to return to school, something that Louisa took as a welcome distraction. But before they could, there was one final thing that she needed to do: interview Anna's mother, Ms Morales. The woman had returned their phone call, agreeing to meet them at her house in Portland, Oregon, much to the excitement of the teenagers. Because Louisa wasn't sure if she would be able to interview the woman after classes resumed, it was decided that she and Rosalie would drive down the last weekend of break to meet with her under the guise that they were buying their prom dresses. According to Alice, their dresses were waiting in a little boutique not too far from Ms Morales' house, which she had already taken the liberty of purchasing.

When Louisa tried to object, Alice scowled. "I've waited thirty-eight years for this, Louisa Collins, and I will not have you ruining it!" she snapped, firmly putting an end to any and all arguments on the matter.

Hence the reason for a dishevelled and half-asleep answering the door on the last Saturday of winter break. "We really need to stop meeting like this," Louisa moaned upon seeing Rosalie, who was standing on the porch casually spinning the keys to her car around her long fingers.

"You said you wanted to leave early."

"I didn't mean eight in the morning," Louisa said, trying to pull on her coat with one hand and juggle a travel mug of tea in the other. She called out a farewell to her family over her shoulder before following after the tall blonde to the flashy red BMW that was sitting in the driveway. "It's far too early to do anything."

Rosalie rolled her eyes at the girl's dramatics. "Get in the car, looser."

"Sure thing, Regina," Louisa said, complying with her friend's demands. She wiggled around for a few seconds, trying to get comfortable and closed her eyes, hoping to at least get a few more hours of sleep.

"Oh no you don't," Rosalie snapped, tossing her surprisingly heavy purse into Louisa's lap, startling the human. 'I'm not your damn chauffeur. If I'm driving, you're at least going to talk to me.

"What do you keep in here? Bricks?" Louisa asked, shuffling the bag around before dumping it onto the floor with a muted thunk.

"I tore off Jasper's head," Rosalie deadpanned, starting the car. "I thought you might miss him and I didn't want to listen to your whinging for the next twelve hours."
"Oh, you shouldn't have. I didn't get you anything," Louisa replied. "Maybe if I call Emmett right now I can catch him right before they get out of cell range." The brothers were also originally supposed to accompany them as well, but Jasper was anxious about the upcoming term and being surrounded by so many humans again, so the three brothers had decided to take a last minute hunting trip near Mount Rainier.

Well, Emmett and Edward had decided and Jasper had been cajoled. Her boyfriend had been reluctant to leave her for the weekend and she would've been lying if she said she wasn't just as hesitant to be without him. She had become quite accustomed to falling asleep in his arms at night, though she did wonder if she was becoming too dependent on him. When she voiced her concerns about being able to keep psychometric-Anna-murder dreams away Alice informed her that the long-awaited sleepover would be happening at Casa de Cullen, and there was absolutely no way around it. Well, there probably was, but Louisa was too relieved that she wouldn't have to sleep in the murder room by herself to argue.

Rosalie gave an indelicate snort. "Don't worry, I got all I needed from him before he left."

Louisa didn't let her mind consider the meaning behind Rosalie's words. There were just some things you didn't need to know about your best friend. She instead occupied herself with digging through Rose's purse, pulling out her fancy laptop—one of those touch screen ones that you could write on and probably cost more than three of Louisa's own computers—and reading through the notes that she had made. Or at least tried her best to. She was too embarrassed to admit to the century-old vampire that she could barely read cursive.

"You were busy last night," Louisa commented idly, squinting and tilting her head as she attempted to decipher a particularly elaborately written word.

"That's one way to put it."

Louisa closed the computer and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to will the image of Emmett wearing far fewer clothes than she had ever hoped to see out of her mind. "I swear, you're worse than your husband."

Rosalie snickered. "Why do you think we get along so well? The two of us are quite compatible."

"If you can pull over here, I'd like to get out and walk the rest of the way."

"Come on, you walked straight into that one."

"I want to walk straight off a cliff," Louisa replied, rubbing her temples which had begun to throb. "Seriously though, your driving is already making me feel sick. You don't need to add to it."

"Please, this is slow for me. I usually go much faster."

"Rose, you're doing 90 in a 55."

"Like I said: slow."

Despite the vampire's manic driving habits, or perhaps because of them, the two girls made it to Portland in record time. They picked up their dresses first, from a boutique that served them champagne despite neither girl being of legal drinking age, and where there was apparently only one of each dress in stock. Louisa's eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw the price tag on one of them. When she mentioned to Rosalie that most likely all of the dresses were way over her budget, the vampire rolled her eyes and tossed the two garment bags into the boot. She hadn't even been allowed to look at the dress, a fact that she complained about rather vocally all the way
Ms Emilia Morales lived in a small yellow ranch house in the suburbs of Portland. The front garden was covered in several inches of snow and, had it not been January, Louisa was sure that it would have been a spectacular sight if the number of flower beds and bare shrubs was anything to go by. Louisa held open the front gate for Rosalie before the two slowly made their way up the icy front path. Rosalie had barely lowered her hand from the knocker when the door opened, revealing a thin woman with dark greying hair. She was wearing a dark purple jumper, the collar of her white shirt pressed neatly above it and dark black trousers that had been ironed so sharply there was a crease running down the front of each leg. They shook hands and she stepped aside to let them into the house.

*Catholic, professional woman, lives alone with two cats.*

They were lead into a living room which was just as neat as Ms Morales' appearance and smelled heavily of violets. A fat orange cat was lounging on the sofa when they entered, only to give an angry hiss and bolt out of the room, its tail puffed up. There were several home and garden magazines as well as a copy of *Vogue* all of which sat glossy-covered and artfully arraigned, untouched on the coffee table in front of the loveseat the two teens had chosen. Louisa shifted a needlepoint pillow so she could sit down, breaking the uniformity with the rest, which had all been tilted to fourth-five degrees. Their host reappeared with a silver tea tray and she sat down on the recently abandoned sofa, passing them steaming cups of what smelled like quite possibly the strongest coffee Louis had ever experienced. Louisa took a sip. Melancholy. That's how it tasted, she realised. Melancholy and lonely.

Ms Morales perched on the edge of her seat, hands clasped in her lap, watching them with an unreadable expression. "You have questions about my Anna?"

Louisa nodded and placed her cup of coffee back in its saucer. "Like I said on the phone, I'm currently living in your former house and I'm working with the police to help solve your daughter's murder."

"Charlie, you mean," Ms Morales said, her voice taking on a bitter edge. "And aren't you a bit young to be working on a murder investigation?"

"And aren't you a bit young to be working on a murder investigation?"

Louisa bit the inside of her lip, considering how to gain the woman's trust. She could easily be the sympathetic detective, willing to help her bring closure to her daughter's death. But a brief glance around the room told her that that wasn't what Ms Morales needed.

The lounge looked like something out of a Martha Stewart magazine: everything was perfectly in place and exquisitely kept. Everything was arranged to give off the impression of a perfect life, yet somehow missed the mark. The pictures of Anna on the mantelpiece above the fireplace were carefully dusted and diligently cleaned. The magazines on the table were the newest additions but never read. The cats were permitted on the furniture, yet there was no fur. Pillows that needed to be moved because nobody ever visited. Ms Morales was, by Louisa's observations, completely alone.

And then there were the woman's words. Louisa's first instinct had been to defend her ability to solve mysteries just like an adult, ready to cite numerous cases she had worked on and successfully solved, but the words died on her tongue. The way Ms Morales had phrased her question hadn't been in one of derision, as if asking how a teenager could do what the police could not in over ten years. The question had been one of concern. The woman had noticed their ages and wanted to ask if it was wise for them to be working on a murder investigation. She was worried about them, and what they might see. Her question was one of motherly worry.
She didn't need a sympathetic ear. No, she needed a daughter.

"Chief Swan allows us to do the paperwork portion, so we've seen most of the files, some of the pictures from the crime scene have been withheld. We're permitted to interview people, and if we come across any evidence, we inform him and let him deal with it properly. Like I said before, I'm a detective, but I work with the police, not for them."

Some of the wrinkles that had formed in her forehead had smoothed out at her words, and Ms Morales picked up her cup of coffee to take a sip. "Charlie is a good man—the only one who still cares about her. He calls, you know? Every Christmas. Lets me know he hasn't given up on her."

"He is," Louisa agreed, her mind racing to come up with something that would garner her trust. "My sister and I sometimes stay with him when my father has to work." Which had more to do with being too afraid to stay in the house and less to do with needing adult supervision. But she didn't need to know that.

"Your mother is working too?" the woman asked.

Louisa wasn't surprised by the query. A woman who lost her daughter would naturally want to know why another mother wouldn't spend time with her children. "No, she died about nine months ago," Louisa replied. She wondered in the back of her mind if she was exploiting her mother's death by bringing it up in an interview. She'd have to ask Jasper when he returned from his trip.

Despite whatever qualms Louisa had about the matter, she couldn't deny that it was effective. Ms Morales' dark eyes softened and she leaned forward, placing her coffee cup on the table. "I'm sorry, darling."

Louisa gave a brief smile. "Thank you." She could feel Rosalie's surprise at the change in Ms Morales' behaviour but didn't want to call too much attention to it. The hardest part of manipulating someone, after all, was not letting that person know that they are being manipulated.

"How can I help you?"

"I'd like to start from the very beginning. I've been trying to get a sense of who Anna was as a person, but everything I have read seems horribly biased."

A thin eyebrow arched at this. "And you think that I won't be?"

"Mothers are supposed to be biased," Louisa agreed with a grin. "But they usually have a pretty good understanding of their children."

The woman's lips pursed, dubious. "I'm not sure what you could say that wasn't already asked by the police during the original investigation."

"Police often don't know what to ask," Louisa explained. "They try to understand the crime for what it is, not why it is. Sure, you look for things like motive, but you have to ask, why that certain victim? Most police officers, I find, don't realise that this is an important question."

The scepticism was still written on her face and Louisa could tell that she was humouring them. "What do you want to know?"

Rosalie pulled out her laptop, perching it on her knees and reading the first question. "What was Anna like as a child?" Her fingers were poised over the keys, ready and waiting for Ms Morales' response.
A wistful expression flitted across the woman's face and her eyes drifted away to stare at a photograph on the mantelpiece. "She was a headstrong girl, even as a baby. She always knew what she wanted. She had dyscalculia and struggled academically. Math was her worst subject. She was musically inclined, though—she loved to sing. She had such a beautiful voice. The school did *The Sound of Music* one year. She played Maria." Ms Morales rose from her seat and bustled over to a bookshelf, extracting a thick red photo album from the collection of neatly arranged books. She flipped through the pages while she walked back and handed the book to Rosalie, sinking down next to the blonde, pointing to one of the pictures. It was of Anna wearing a brown dress and a white bolero, surrounded by seven children in grey uniforms. "This was from her junior year. She was so proud of herself. She fell in love with *The Sound of Music* when she was five. She idolised Julie Andrews." She turned back a few pages and pointed to a very young Anna wearing a blue gingham dress and sparkly red shoes, her long brown hair tied into two pigtails. "This was the first play she was in: *The Wizard of Oz*. She was six. She used to tell me that she would be on Broadway."

"Do you think she would have?" Louisa interjected.

"Oh, I have no doubt," Ms Morales replied. "If she didn't get roles on talent alone, she would have gotten them for sheer persistence. Like I said, she knew what she wanted and she never let anything get in between her and her goals."

"Did that ever bother people?" Louisa asked.

"If it did, I never heard of about it. She never met anyone she couldn't be friends with," Ms Morales said. "And, I know, you probably hear that a lot. But for Anna, it was true. She could light up a room, just by walking into it."

Rosalie made a note on her laptop at this. "What were her friendships like?"

"She was popular. She had so many friends, I honestly wouldn't have been able to tell you all of their names."

"Can you remember any names in particular? Anyone she was closest too?" Rosalie asked.

"Bernie," Ms Morales said without a moment of hesitation. "Bernadette Krantz."

Louisa's brow furrowed, recognising the name. She leaned over Rose's shoulder to see what she had typed, wondering if they had made a note about the girl before. "Can you describe their relationship?"

"They were inseparable," Ms Morales explained. "The Krantz's went to church with us. Bernie was always over—sometimes I think she saw more of our house than her own. They had sleepovers together all the time, usually once a week. The Krantz family was really helpful when Anna died."

Louisa scrolled through the laptop, looking for Bernadette's interview with the police. It was short, like all the others, and took place the day after the murder. It was undetailed and spoke of a girl too traumatised by the death of her best friend to talk to the police. Louisa found it odd that she hadn't been re-interviewed a few days after giving her initial statement. The best friend of a teenager would have been a helpful source of information, yet it seemed that the police had yet again underutilised the lead. No wonder Anna’s case hadn't been solved.

"Do you think she would be willing to talk to us?"

"It's possible. She was the only one of Anna's friends who still cared about her after her death," Ms
Morales said. "All of the others seemed to forget about her the moment she died."

Rosalie’s fingers were flying across the keyboard, words appearing so fast, Louisa wondered if one of the Cullens had made some sort of modification to it. She was firing off an email to Emmett, asking him to look up Bernadette. She waited a few moments for Rosalie to catch up before asking a new question.

"I know you said she struggled academically," Louisa said. "But did she have a favourite school subject?"

"English would probably be her favourite," she replied. "She loved reading. She had so many books that her father built bookshelves into the walls of her bedroom one year for her birthday." Ms Morales let out a sad little laugh. "I would always joke and say that if Broadway didn't work out, she could always be a librarian. Then she would sing 'Marian the Librarian'." She smiled, her eyes glassy and unfocused. "You know, she used to sing all the time. Sometimes they were real songs, sometimes, it was her just narrating what she was doing. "She was such a silly girl. I miss her singing."

Louisa felt Rose stiffen next to her. She spared a glance towards her friend, only to see that what little colour Rosalie's face had possessed had drained out, making her look more corpse-like than usual. Her fingers had frozen over the keyboard, her wrist drooping so they rested on the laptop. Louisa watched as Rose's fingers slowly curled into fists, confused by her friend's sudden change in behaviour, but not wanting to call attention to it. She continued to probe Ms Morales, hoping to glean more information about Anna's personality, keeping an eye on how distressed her friend was. Eventually, Rosalie excused herself, dumping the computer into Louisa's lap before walking briskly out of the house.

Ms Morales watched her, her face set in concern. She had half risen from her seat, as if wanting to run after the blonde, but unsure if it would be appropriate. "Is she okay?"

Louisa privately was concerned by her friend's behaviour, as well. She had gathered that Rosalie cared a great deal about the case and had a strong sense of justice, but her reaction indicated that there was something deeper going on. The case was almost… personal to her. Louisa quickly reflected on Rosalie's dealings with the case. The blonde had, from the beginning always gone above and beyond in the amount of effort Louisa had expected her to put into the investigation— carefully thought out notes, an overabundance of research—and realised that what she had mistaken for her friend's enthusiasm was actually something that bordered on obsession. She empathised with Anna more than what was considered normal or healthy.

Not that Louisa could say any of this. Instead, she made an excuse for her friend, citing the side effects of a new medication for her behaviour and redirected their conversation back to Anna. They spoke for a while longer, Ms Morales painting a picture of the assertive yet thoughtful girl whose life had been cut too short. It was just before Louisa was ready to pack up the laptop when Ms Morales dropped a surprising bombshell that had the teen practically running for the car.

"She had a diary," Louisa said while sliding into the front seat of the BMW and buckling up her safety belt. "But the police were never able to find it after she died." Not even Ms Morales and her husband had been able to locate it, even after they cleaned out her room. Ms Morales admitted knowing of its existence and had seen her daughter writing in it frequently each night before bed, but exactly where it had been kept was something that had only been known to Anna.

"That wasn't in the police reports," Rosalie replied, turning on the engine and pulling away from the curb. "Shouldn't they have made a note about its possible existence?"
Louisa shrugged. "This is where I admit that I am not actually a member of the Forks police department and therefore have no clue if they should or shouldn't have."

"Shocker," Rosalie drawled. "You really had me going there for a while. I feel betrayed."

"Will a sleepover make it up to you?"

"It would be a start, I suppose. Though you'll be the one doing all of the sleeping."

"I hope you don't feel too left out," Louisa said. "It's a vital part of the slumber party experience."

The two lapsed into silence while the car flew down the highway. Louisa knew that Rosalie was aware she wanted to ask about what had happened earlier, but the vampire didn't seem inclined to offer anything. Louisa wanted to respect her friend, of course, but she couldn't just ignore that her best friend was upset. And, well, she was nosy. She wasn't entirely sure what had upset her friend, but she had a pretty good idea of where to start.

"Remember that day when we went to Victoria?"

"And you threw your smoothie at those morons." Rosalie finished.

"Nobody is ever going to let me live that down, are they?"

"It was pretty spectacular," Rosalie said.

Louisa rolled her eyes but continued on with her original thought. "I didn't understand it at the time why I had reacted like that, but now I think I do. Dr Cullen said that my… power works when strong emotions are imprinted on an object. That day, you felt fear, but I think you felt something similar to it before. Back when your eyes were violet. Back when you were human, I guess." She turned her head towards her friend whose face was hard as flint. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to."

And for a long time, it seemed like she wouldn't. The vampire stared out of the windscreen stony-faced, driving so quickly the gas pedal might as well have been glued to the floor. "I just wonder," Rosalie finally said, her voice brittle. "If my mum was like that. If she called the police station every day or if she just moved on with her life." Slowly, her voice breaking on more than one occasion, she began to tell the horror story that was Rosalie Hale's last night as a human.

Periodically, she would lift up a hand and swipe at her eyes, trying to stem the tears of venom that began to leak out. Louisa listened in silence, her heart constricting painfully at each word, wishing that there was something she could say to help her friend.

"Some days I think about what I could have done differently that night," Rosalie admitted. "I shouldn't have walked home alone, I know that. Maybe if I had accepted my friend's offer to stay the night, I wouldn't have died."

"Rose," Louisa said finally. "I know this is probably something you've already heard, but what happened that night wasn't your fault. There is no such thing as making a mistake that means that what those monsters did to you was justifiable or makes any sort of sense. It was their fault, their decision to hurt you. You are the victim and they are the ones who chose to do something wrong that night. Not you."

"I know that," Rosalie said. "But it still doesn't make any sense. How could I not see that he was a monster, you know?"
"I think we like to call people who do bad things monsters because it distances them from us. It's something we would never do, is so far out of the social norms, that we think that there is something inherently evil about them," Louisa said after a moment of thought. "We expect them to look like how they act, but in doing so, we forget that they are human too."

Rosalie tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel while she considered her words. "I killed him, you know. And his friends."

Louisa didn't feel as shocked by this revelation as she suspected she should have. "Please told me you wore your wedding dress when you did it."

"Of course, I did," Rosalie replied. "Though it's weird that you know that."

"It would be suitably dramatic," Louisa explained. "I have a lovely mental image in my mind of you with bright red eyes and wearing a bloodstained veil." She tried to stop it there though before it got too violent.

"You're an odd one, Louisa Collins."

Louisa, despite the seriousness of the situation, had to laugh. "Says the vampire."

Rose's lips quirked up in amusement before changing the topic back to something less morbid. The trip back home took less time than expected, though Louisa couldn't be sure if it was because she was enjoying her friend's presence, chatting about inane topics and singing along with the radio, or because Rosalie drove like a maniac. It probably was a mixture of both. Either way, the four hundred kilometre drive flew by and soon the Collins' two storey house was in front of them.

Louisa hopped out of the car and sprinted towards the front door, trying to avoid getting soaked in the sudden downpour. Rosalie materialised next to her, wearing the 'drowned rat' look much better than Louisa did. She quickly unlocked the door and let them into the house, kicking off her boots by the front door. She could hear her dad walking around upstairs so she called up to him, letting him know that they were home. She shucked her coat and hung it in the hall closet and moved to throw her keys on the table in the front hall where they usually left the mail only to pause, her hand frozen mid-air. The bowl where they kept all of the car keys was empty. Her mind flashed the memory of pulling up the driveway to the house and realised with horror that her father's car had been missing. Louisa's eyes darted up towards the ceiling where she could still hear the footsteps. They were heavy and moving quickly as if the person making them was in a rush.

"Do you hear that too?" Louisa asked, her voice low.

"What your dad upstairs?" Rosalie replied, confused by her friend's change in demeanour.

Louisa shook her head and pointed to the bowl on the table where the Collins family kept their keys which empty. "His keys are gone," she hissed. "Whoever is up there isn't my dad."

"There's no tragedy in life like the death of a child. Things never get back to the way they were."
— Dwight Eisenhower.
I'MM BAAACCCCKKKKKKKK. I went on holiday for a while and didn't have the opportunity to write. But I'm here now! What did you think of the chapter? Leave me a comment and let me know. I love to hear from you. Thank you also to all who have commented, favourited, or followed my story. It still blows me away with how supportive you all have been. Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Louisa looked at her friend, her eyes wide in horror. Her father wasn't home and the footsteps were too heavy to belong to Dottie. Jasper had gone on a hunting trip for the weekend with his brothers and wouldn't be back until Sunday night. Which meant that whoever was in her house with her wasn't supposed to be there. And she had just let him know that she was in the building.

Her heart rate began to accelerate, her skin turning hot and tingly as adrenaline began to flood her veins. She could hear Rosalie hissing at her to stop moving, but she ignored her, creeping into the kitchen while she pulled her mobile out of her pocket. Her fingers fumbled over the screen as she attempted to dial 911 and she was shaking so badly she nearly dropped the device. She slid a knife out of the knife block on the kitchen counter and held it in front of her with one hand while the other pressed her phone tightly to her ear, waiting impatiently for the call to go through, her breath coming out in shaky rattles. She knew that adrenaline made time seem like it was passing slower so she counted slowly to one, five, ten. Still, nothing. She pulled her mobile away from her face to look at the screen.

There was no signal, she realised, her horror growing. Of all of the times their house decided to turn into a dead zone was when she was in the house with an intruder. Fan-fucking-tastic. She turned back towards Rosalie, only to find that her friend had moved to the base of the stairs and was peering up them intently, her head tilted to the side as she tracked the movements of the intruder. The common sense part of her brain (which was suspiciously starting to sound more and more like Jasper) was screaming at her to get out of the house. Surely she would be able to call for help when she got out of the house? That would be the smart thing to do.

An almighty crash sounded from upstairs, shaking the walls and rattling the windows in their panes. A picture frame fell to the ground, glass shattering on the wood floor.

Let it be known that Louisa never claimed to be smart.

At the sound of the glass breaking, she was jolted out of her stunned reverie, and, without thinking (obviously), charged up the stairs towards the sound. She made it up to the landing, brandishing her knife in front of her, and her head tilted to the side as she tracked the movements of the intruder. The common sense part of her brain (which was suspiciously starting to sound more and more like Jasper) was screaming at her to get out of the house. Surely she would be able to call for help when she got out of the house? That would be the smart thing to do.

"Who's there?" Louisa called out, her voice eerily calm, even to her own ears. When there was no response or even a sound of movement, Louisa inched towards the door, knife held out slightly in front of her, her head swivelled around, looking for the source of the sound, ears straining to detect the slightest of movement. She didn't have to look too far as her eyes landed on her bedroom door which was standing ajar, something she was positive she hadn't done when she left earlier that morning. Rosalie had beaten her using her not-teleportation and had sunk into a defensive crouch, a low, guttural sound emanating from her throat.

Her room had been, for lack of a better term, destroyed. Every book on her bookshelf had been pulled off and tossed to the ground, pages torn from their spines covering the hardwood floor like snow. The drawers on her desk had been pulled out, the contents dumped. Bedsheets were flung across the room, her mattress resting crooked on the bedframe. All of her clothes had been ripped
out of her wardrobe, piles of socks and pants sitting discarded, the drawers that had contained them halfway across the room. Most distressingly, however, was her laptop computer which had been smashed to pieces.

A chill ran down Louisa's spin when she saw that, save herself, her room was void of any other living being. Louisa spun around and stalked throughout the rest of the top floor, looking for the intruder, only to find similarly empty rooms, which, oddly had been left untouched by the trespasser. Louisa lifted her phone to her ear again and tried to call for the police, but once again, the call wouldn't connect.

"We're alone," Rosalie confirmed, her voice laced with confusion.

"You heard it too, though, right?" Louisa asked.

Rose nodded, grabbing Louisa by the elbow and leading her down the stairs. "We need to leave. It's not safe for you."

"This isn't a ghost, is it?"

"No," Rosalie replied. "I could hear their heartbeat. It was definitely a human."

"How can we hear them in my room, only for them to disappear when we came up the stairs?" Louisa asked, trying to tramp down on the wave of panic that was welling up in her chest. Now was not a good time to break down, she thought, blinking back tears. She needed a plan. Her phone wasn't working so they couldn't call the police, or anybody really, for help.

But she didn't need to, she remembered. Chief Swan lived just down the street. He was a police officer and he had a phone. Without thinking, Louisa broke away from Rosalie, much to the vampire's annoyance, and took off sprinting the four hundred meters to the chief of police's house, praying that he was home. He was, and he looked rather alarmed to see her on his front doorstep without a coat or shoes and still clutching a kitchen knife.

She did her best to explain what had happened, though she was certain that in her shock, she was completely unintelligible. Rosalie wasn't much help explaining either, choosing instead to call someone, probably a family member, instead of talking to Chief Swan. The man stepped aside, letting the two teens inside and ran upstairs to grab towels. Louisa used the time to try to call her father, knowing that he would probably want to be informed of the break-in.

"Someone broke into the house," Louisa said, launching into the previous half hour's excitement before her father had the chance to say hello.

Her father swore colourfully before telling her to stay where she was and that he was on his way. He hung up and Louisa stared at the device for a few seconds before turning to face her friend. Rosalie was talking so quickly that her lips were a blur and Louisa couldn't register what was actually being said. Finally, her friend snapped her phone shut moments before Chief Swan bustled back into the lounge, which was probably a good thing, considering that she had been doing something decidedly not human. Chief Swan handed them the towels and ushered them into the kitchen where he sat down at the table.

He attempted to question them, but when Louisa saw that he was putting on his boots and coat, she jumped up from the table. "I'm coming with you."

"Louisa," Chief Swan said in a voice that was probably supposed to calm her down but only really served to agitate her further. "It's a crime scene. I can't have you there."
"Bullshit," she snapped. "The Forks police department is too small for you to spare someone to babysit us and you'll need our statements."

"We can stand outside of the bedroom and talk to you," Rosalie supplied helpfully when Chief Swan began to protest, rising and standing behind Louisa. "We won't go in. We'll let you deal with all of the evidence."

Chief Swan gritted his teeth and sighed noisily but conceded and the three trudged through the heavy rain back towards the Collins residence. He was already taking their statements by the time two uniformed police officers showed up. Louisa led them up towards her room and watched with a sense of detachment as the doorway was sectioned off with yellow police tape. Rose must have sensed her dissociation because she placed a hand on her shoulder to ground her to reality. Louisa looked up at her friend with a wan smile, and Rose returned it, her face wrinkled with concern.

Together, they stood and watched as Chief Swan and the two officers donned blue disposable gloves and white-footed jumpsuits. Louisa personally thought that the two officers looked overwhelmed as they began to place tented markers around the room, but chose not to comment and explain what exactly had transpired between walking in the front door and going to get Charlie. Louisa wondered if her story sounded as insane to the police as it sounded to her. Judging by the glances the two officers were sharing, it probably did. After all, how did a person just disappear into thin air?

"Lou," Rosalie said once it seemed that Chief Swan had run out of questions. "Why don't we go downstairs?"

Louisa knew that doing so would be a good idea though she was reluctant to leave the scene of a crime— it just wasn't in her nature to. Even so, she let her friend lead her down to the lounge, where Louisa sank slowly into the couch. She expected to feel exhausted at the very least, but as the seconds ticked by, she still found herself numb. Rosalie sat down next to her and fiddled with her phone. Louisa wanted to ask her why she was still using a flip phone in 2018 but figured that it would elicit an annoyed glare and an accusation of trying to change the subject.

"I've called Jasper and left a message for him. I don't know when he'll see it, but he'll be back soon."

"I'm fine," Louisa tried to insist. "He doesn't need to hurry back. I was planning on spending the night at your house anyway."

"You're in shock," Rosalie pointed out. "Once you come out of this, you'll want him with you."

"He'll ruin tonight's sleepover," Louisa said. "It's supposed to be all girls."

"You'll have to convince your dad to let you stay with us tonight," Rosalie said. "He'll try to keep you close to him and if Jasper comes home early, my brother might do something stupid."

Louisa was saved from trying to think of a response when she heard a car door slam outside. She didn't need to look out the window to know that her father had arrived home. She could hear him running up the front path and he burst into the house, calling out loudly for her. A moment later, he was standing in the doorway looking pale and confused. Rosalie scooted over to give Mr Collins room as he descended on his eldest child, dropping to his knees and pulling her into a tight hug. Louisa then went through the tedious task of explaining what had happened again. Okay, maybe Rose was right about the whole shock thing.

"Can I still stay with Rose?" Louisa asked. "Obviously, I won't be able to sleep in my room, and I
doubt that they'll let you stay in the house."

It took some convincing but Mr Collins reluctantly agreed. Louisa wondered aloud if the police would let her take clothes with her. She ignored the way Rose and Mr Collins exchanged a concerned look over the top of her head. She tried to focus on her breathing and ground herself in reality, but it was like trying to catch a piece of thread in a hurricane. Everything felt distant and her memories felt woolly. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Chief Swan reappeared and began asking her more questions. Was anything missing from her room? Were any of the doors unlocked when she came home? Had she noticed anybody lurking around lately? It frustrated her to no end to have to admit that she didn't know. They were interrupted by the front door opening once more, this time by a tall, dark-haired man who strolled confidently into the house without even bothering to knock.

"Sorry, Chief," the man said, his tone carefree. "I only just got your message."

Annoyance flooded through her veins at the man's lackadaisical attitude. But annoyance was good. She could work with annoyance. It was a far cry better than the floating detached feeling that accompanied acute stress disorder.

Chief Swan waved away the newcomer's apologies and introduced the man as Sergeant William Todd. The man in question gave her a patronising smile and it took everything in Louisa's willpower not to insult him. Sergeant Todd was broad shouldered with dark hair and blue eyes, and looked to be around her father's age. He carried an impressive amount of arrogance with him, despite the fact that he only got his job due to lack of applicants. Louisa had to bite her tongue so she didn't tell him this.

"I can't say anything about shady characters lurking around the property," Louisa said slowly, a thought popping into her head with the appearance of the sergeant. "But I don't think this is the first time something like this has happened." Louisa sat up straight and focused her attention on her father. "A few weeks ago, Dottie saw the figure of a man in the doorway of her room. We wrote it off as sleep paralysis, but what if it wasn't?"

Mr Collins' brow furrowed but he was cut off before he could reply. "You think it was, what? A ghost?" the sergeant scoffed. "You heard about the little girl that was murdered hear and think she haunts the place, then?"

"Of course not," Louisa snapped, her mind spinning. "My sister said she saw the figure of a man. Keep up. And she wasn't a little girl, Sergeant. She was an eighteen-year-old young woman."

"You think that the figure your sister saw was the person who broke in today?" Chief Swan asked, partly to intervene before the two could argue.

"I had heard footsteps before she woke up screaming. I thought it was my dad or the house settling or something, but what if it wasn't?" Louisa said, her voice rising in excitement. "Dottie is always trying to convince me that this place is haunted, and I thought she was nuts. But she isn't the first person to report odd things happening in this house."

"The last owners fled after two months of living here," Rosalie supplied.

Louisa nodded. "What if there is some truth to what everyone has been experiencing? What if someone has been breaking in and trying to make it look like the place is haunted?"

"And you think that it was today's intruder?" The sergeant asked dubiously. "For the last ten years?
Why?"

Louisa was too excited at the turn of events to even give the man a sassy retort. "He'd have to find a way to watch the house from a distance, though," she explained quickly. "There is no way he could keep it up for so long and not be caught."

"Look, kid," the sergeant said. "Things like that don't happen outside of movies."

"It must suck to be so unimaginative," Louisa snapped before turning back towards Chief Swan. "Listen. Lots of weird things happen in this house: cold spots, flickering lights. But all of that stuff can easily be faked if you know what you are doing."

"I've never seen or heard anything out of the ordinary here," Mr Collins interjected. "The strangest thing that ever happens is that the house turns into a dead zone."

Louisa opened her mouth to remind him of the time that they had heard the disembodied crying of a woman but paused. He hadn't been there. Thinking back, her father had always been at work when anything odd happened. In fact, only Louisa and Dottie had ever experienced anything that could be labelled as paranormal. But that didn't make any sense. Ghosts didn't take the weekend off or work between the hours of three and five in the afternoon. So why did this one?

"This 'ghost',' Louisa said slowly. "He's been trying to make us think the house is haunted, right? But he can't do it all the time."

"A part-time ghost?" Sergeant Todd asked.

"A part-time anything, really," she corrected, her brow furrowing. "We're looking for a man who has a day job, but with flexible hours. One that would give him the afternoon off or one where his absence wouldn't draw any attention. He might even work from home," Louisa explained. "But something is keeping him away from here in the evenings."

"What if he has a family?" Rosalie asked. "Maybe he's got kids. They come home for dinner, he has to go back."

"It would explain why dad has never experienced anything out of the ordinary," Louisa agreed, kneading her thumb against her temple. "But that still doesn't explain how he has never been caught before. He's got to have some sort of way of watching us."

Louisa glanced at the chief of police to see how he was taking their theory. Not well, if the incredulous look on his face was anything to go by. He opened his mouth as if he was about to tell them that they were nuts when one of the police officers shuffled into the lounge and stepped up to him.

"We've got something weird," the man said in a low voice in Chief Swan's ear. He cast a nervous glance towards Louisa before continuing on. "We just found a camera hidden in the girl's room. In the air duct."

Louisa knew that it wasn't totally rational for her to feel so excited by this announcement. Indeed, both Rosalie and Mr Collins looked like they might vomit. Her father sank back into the sofa and buried his face in his palms.

She turned towards Sergeant Todd, her eyebrows raised. "You were saying?"

The room was so silent for a moment that, as cliché as it sounds, you probably could have heard a pin drop. Then the men were talking over each other. Louisa noticed Rosalie pulling out her phone
as if to call someone, only to see her grimace to herself in frustration and snap it closed once more. The action reminded Louisa of something, and she found herself raising her voice to be heard over the din of men who were all but shouting at each other.

"If you want to hear my theory," Louisa said. "I'd be happy to share it."

Mr Collins turned to give her a withering glare. "No," her father said. "You're going to stay out of this, Louisa. Let the police handle it."

"Dad—"

"No, Louisa," her father repeated. "You promised you were done with this when we left Tacoma."

There must have been some sort of guilty expression on her face because her father suddenly had his full attention on her, towering over her. He lifted a hand to her chin and forced her face upwards to look at him. "You haven't." It was an accusation, not a question.

Looking into her father's dark grey eyes, she knew she couldn't lie to him. "It just been paperwork," she admitted. "I've been trying to piece together a timeline."

"And you thought that you could do what the police couldn't?"

"For eleven years, Dad!" She found herself shouting and she had to take a deep breath to try to calm her pounding heart. "It's been eleven years and they are no closer to solving the case now than they were then."

"It's still not your responsibility, Louisa," Mr Collins snapped. "How did you even get all of the information, anyway?"

An awkward silence settled over the lounge as the elder Collins scanned the faces of the other occupants of the room. Sergeant Todd looked like a gleeful child who had just learned that he could eat cake for dinner. Rosalie's face was smooth and frozen like a porcelain doll's. Chief Swan, however, didn't seem to have quite mastered the art of a poker face and Mr Collin's glare turned to focus on him.

"Stephen," Chief Swan began quietly.

"The last case she worked on ended with her kidnapped, held hostage for nine hours, and watching a woman burn to death," her father snapped. "She is sixteen. She's not an adult and she doesn't work for the police. She has no business helping. I told you this."

"When she was twelve, she helped the police find three children who had gone missing from a Portland mall. When she was fifteen, information she gathered during an investigation aided the FBI's White Collar Crime program to arrest seven government officials suspected of money laundering."

"That's not an excuse!"

"If I thought, for one moment, that she would be in any danger," Chief Swan said. "I would never have given her the file. But Stephen, your daughter has a talent that exists only in novels. You just saw her predict that our suspect had some way of long-distance surveillance before we even found the cameras."

Her father took slow breaths, the kind parents always took when they really wanted to smack their children but knew they shouldn't. "And your case?" Mr Collins said through gritted teeth. "Even if she does help solve it, you are risking the case being thrown away in court. All the defence would
have to say is that the evidence was mishandled."

"That's why she comes to me if she does find anything," Chief Swan said. "She did it tonight. The second she realised that someone had broken into your house, she came and got me. I deal with the evidence. She just points me in the right direction."

Her father still looked pissed, but she could tell that his resolve was wavering. Louisa saw an opening in the conversation and took it. "I needed to know, Dad. She died in my room. I've been having nightmares about it for months. I can't sleep knowing that whoever killed her is still walking around. It's like he walked through walls that day, Dad. All of the windows and doors were locked. If he could get into a locked house and murder Anna, he could get into a locked house and murder me."

*Pathos.* Appealing to the emotions of the audience. She doubted her English teacher had envisioned her using it to manipulate her father when they learned about it in class, but she couldn't deny that it was incredibly helpful.

Mr Collins suddenly looked so much older than his forty-two years. "If anything happens to her," he said, his voice trailing off.

"She doesn't work on this without my supervision. She can work on it a few days a week, down at the station. If her grades slip, she's off the case." A fair, if annoying, stipulation.

Her father was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed, and she knew that she had won the argument. "She stays with you," her father said finally. "If she goes to a crime scene, she is glued to your side."

It took every bit of Louisa's willpower not to sprint off up the stairs towards her bedroom. Still, she couldn't help the small grin that appeared on her face, which didn't disappear even after her father informed her that she was still grounded for a month for lying to him. At last, the group made their way up the stairs towards her bedroom, where Louisa ducked underneath the yellow tape and donned a white jumpsuit offered to her by a confused officer. Her father and Rosalie hovered outside of the room both watching Louisa's movements with scrutiny.

"My laptop is broken," Louisa noted. "It had most of my case notes on it."

"Do you think it was intentional?" Chief Swan asked, picking up the pile of plastic and metal and slipping it into an evidence bag.

"No doubt," she said. "If there was a camera in my room, he probably saw me working on it."

Louisa tried to ignore what else (or, more specifically, who else) the intruder might have seen in her room. "Have you checked the rest of the house for cameras?"

An officer looked startled at the suggestion and scurried out of the room.

She continued to pick through her belongings, categorising what had been destroyed and possible motives for it. "He was angry," she said finally. "This sort of destruction is angry." It was an inelegant way to express her thoughts, something Sergeant Todd seemed to agree with if the snort of derision was anything to go by. "He didn't need to destroy my room this much, but he did."

"What do you think made him so angry?" Rosalie asked, her head tilting to the side in confusion. "If he knew you were on his trail, wouldn't he be scared?"

*He was scared,* Louisa thought to herself. She could almost feel the nervous energy swirling around her ankles as she waded through the debris. But his anger was even greater and it made her...
skin practically itch at the thought. He had seen something while surveying her room, something that pissed him off royally. But, for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Can you think of anything else that might help us, Louisa?" Chief Swan asked.
Think of anything else? What more could there be? She swivelled her head around as if looking around her room, but her eyes were glassy and unfocused while she mentally catalogued her surroundings. Four walls, three built-in bookshelves, two tiny windows that barely let in any light (not that there was ever much to begin with in Forks), and one door. One door. That bothered her the most. If there was only one door, then how did the intruder get out of the house without being seen? They couldn't have used the window— he would have broken his ankles jump from the second story window, and besides, it had been closed when she entered.

Something was niggling at the back of her mind, itching and irritating, telling her that she knew the answer, only she just didn't know how she knew the answer. Even a brief jaunt into her memory library didn't yield anything besides the beginning of a painful headache. She reached out and placed her hand out on the wall to brace herself, trying to force her brain to bring a certain memory to mind, though without a clue as to what it might be. It was kind of like groping around in the dark for a light switch— she knew that what she wanted existed but she didn't know how to find it.
Sergeant Todd scoffed in annoyance and turned away, clearly finding her as irritating as she found him to be. She glared at the back of his head, wishing she had a useful power. Then maybe she could at least set his dark hair on fire. She could practically imagine the man rolling his blue eyes in derision at the idea that a teenager could assist the police. She was aware of her nails digging into her palms and she wouldn't be surprised if she looked later and found that she left marks.

"Rats," she responded quietly. "I can hear something moving in the walls sometimes."

"And the rats destroyed your room?"

"Sure," she snapped, her temper rising. "They whisper things to me at night. Mostly about what jackass you are."

"Louisa," her father ground out in warning.

She didn't spare him a glance, choosing instead to focus on the bookshelf that shared a wall with the door. His door, her mind supplied helpfully, though she had absolutely no idea what it meant. "My bed used to be against that bookshelf," she explained, pointing to the wall in question. "I moved it back in November when I was thrown out of bed."

"Those are some rats."

"That's enough, Todd," Chief Swan replied evenly. His eyes narrowed and he watched the girl in front of him intently. "What else, Louisa?"

The blonde crouched down to the floor, staring at the base of the bookshelf. Her fingers ran along the floor until they found faint scuff marks. "This is where my bed used to stand," she explained. "What do you notice about the marks, Chief Swan?"

The chief of police ignored the huff of annoyance from his subordinate and crouched down next to the teenager to get a better look at the faint scratches. They looked unusual, though he couldn't explain why. Still, he snapped his fingers for one of his officers with a camera to join them and document the scuffs.

"Now look around the area," Louisa said, her brow furrowed. "What looks similar?"
Charlie swivelled his head, trying to follow her instructions but it was difficult when the girl was so vague. He appreciated her help, of course, but he much rather that she would get straight to the point instead of wasting his time to find the answer to a question she already knew. He opened his mouth and was about to tell her this much when he saw it—or rather, didn't see anything. The destruction that surrounded them was missing from this area of the room. Indeed, the girl hadn't even needed to move anything to point out the scuff marks.

He stood up and stepped back to get a better look at the area. "The marks match," he said. "They push out from the bookshelf in an arc."

Louisa nodded and rose as well, her face grim. "This is his door, Chief."

A strangled laugh pulled him out of his reverie. Charlie turned to look at Sergeant Todd who was watching them with disbelief. "I hate to break it to you, Miss Collins, but that is a solid wood bookshelf. This isn't Hogwarts."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course it isn't," she replied. "This is Forks, Washington. Not a castle in Scotland." She reached out to one of the officers and asked for a pair of disposable gloves. The woman, who barely looked old enough to be out of college, glanced at Chief Swan questioningly but supplied them to the girl when he nodded. She snapped them on with practiced ease and stepped forward and gave the back of the bookshelf a knock. "It's hollow back here," she noted before beginning to run her hands along the shelves.

"And what, exactly, are you hoping to find?" Sergeant Todd snapped.

Louisa ignored the man and continued to run her fingers around the shelves. Chief Swan stepped forward to help her with the shelves she couldn't easily reach. Then, on the about halfway up, her fingers connected with a little indent on one of the partitions which gave way when she pushed on it. There was a click and the bookshelf swung forward.

She tossed a triumphant smile over her shoulder towards the surprised Sergeant Todd before stepping back, allowing Chief Swan to pull the bookshelf forward. Behind it, where a wall should have been, was a tunnel with a ladder that led down. Chief Swan pulled out a torch and shined it down the hole, illuminating muddy handprints that were smeared over the walls. An officer swore under her breath, which succinctly summed up what everyone in the room was thinking.

"Todd," Chief Swan said, his voice faint. "Go back to the station and call for the State Police. We are going to need some help."

"I will not let you go into the unknown alone." —Bram Stoker

Chapter End Notes

How many of you were expecting that? What did you think of the chapter? This one was hard to write. I originally wasn't going to have Mr Collins find out about the case so soon, but then I thought he was sounding a bit on the neglectful side. Like, how could he not notice that she is disappearing all the time? But because of this revelation, it took a while to get the tone of the conversation right. I didn't want to post
a chapter I wasn't happy with, you know?

Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
Nine. That's how many cameras the police found around the house, one of which hidden in the smoke alarm, of all places. Louisa and Rosalie didn't stay very long after that. Grabbing the overnight bag she at least had the foresight to pack before Rosalie had picked her up that morning, she kissed her father goodbye before trotting off after her friend. The drive to the Cullen house was much quieter than the drive to the Collins house three hours before, neither of the girls knowing what to say.

The temperature had plummeted and the morning's rain had turned to snow, falling in large, fluffy flakes. Louisa could see the lights from the Cullen house glowing like a beacon as Rosalie wound up the drive. A large rectangle of light spilling onto the lawn originating from the opened front door. Esme was standing in the open doorway, her arms crossed in front of her body as if she were cold. The moment Rosalie killed the engine to her car, Louisa found herself pulled out of the front seat and into a tight hug. Louisa let herself be comforted a moment, imagining she was receiving a warm embrace from her mother, rather than a hard one from Rosalie's.

Esme pulled back, stroking Louisa's hair, her yellow eyes alight with concern. "I got a hold of Carlisle. They'll be back early in the morning," she said, rubbing a cold thumb across Louisa's cheekbone. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Louisa shook her head and resisted the urge to lean into Esme's motherly touch. Extracting herself from the hug, Louisa reached into the car and pulled out her overnight bag, slinging it across her shoulder before following the two women into the house. The inside of the Cullen home was as warm and welcoming as ever and Louisa made quick work of shucking off her shoes and winter coat.

"Where is Alice?" Rosalie asked while they stepped into the lounge.

"In her room," Esme explained in a quiet voice. "She's upset."

Louisa glanced towards the staircase that led to the upper floors of Casa de Cullen, presumably where their bedrooms were located. She half expected to see Alice sliding down the banister to greet them, and her absence left the room uncomfortably quiet. Esme didn't linger for very long, staying only to inform Louisa that she would be staying in Jasper's room for the night before disappearing into the kitchen where what smelled like chocolate chip cookies were baking.

Despite the many long afternoons that she had spent at the Cullen's, Louisa had never been inside of Jasper's room and wasn't sure what to expect. She trotted behind Rosalie up the stairs to the second floor of the house and down a long hallway panelled with honey-coloured wood. Rose stopped at the last door on the right and opened it, waving Louisa in behind her.

It was a small room, not much larger than her own, though the windows that looked out on the front lawn made it appear bigger than it was. It was sparsely decorated: a double bed taking up most of the room, with a matching wardrobe and desk on opposite sides. A large steamer trunk sat at the foot of the bed, which could barely visible under the numerous blankets that covered it. Textbooks had been lined up by size on the desk, where his laptop was sitting, closed. The room was bordering on Spartan, giving the impression of a soldier rather than a nineteen-year-old boy. In fact, the only personal touches were three framed photographs standing on the bedside table. The
rest of the room was reserved and minimalistic, rather like the boy who occupied it. The only thing that actually surprised Louisa was the lack of books in it.

Louisa set her overnight bag on the bed and ran her fingers across the carved headboard. "He made this?" she asked. It was simple, much like the rest of the room, made of a light brown wood, and sanded down so it was glass smooth.

Rosalie paused to give her an odd look before nodding slowly. "Yeah, Jasper made a lot of the furniture in the house. Esme does the upholstery. How did you know?" Her friend walked over to the small door next to the wardrobe, opening it up to reveal a massive bathroom which appeared to be shared with Alice.

Louisa opened her mouth to tell her that it felt like Jasper but snapped it shut quickly. That sounded dumb. She settled for what she hoped was a nonchalant shrug and turned away to inspect the pictures on the table.

One was a black and white photo of Jasper and Alice, taken sometime in the fifties, judging their clothes. Neither were looking at the camera when the picture had been taken as they were dancing. Jasper wasn't smiling in it though he clearly looked amused. The second was even older and depicted what could only be a young Jasper and his family. He was probably eight or so in the picture and standing next to his mother, who wore a black dress with a massive skirt. On her lap was a sleeping toddler. His father stood behind them, a hand resting on Jasper's shoulder, his mouth obscured by a large moustache. The final was of her and Jasper in their Halloween costumes at homecoming, her arms looped around his waist and a massive grin on her face. It was like the photo Louisa had at home except in his copy, Jasper's gaze was trained quite obviously on her. His expression was one of surprise and wonder like he couldn't believe that she was willingly standing so close to him.

She tore her gaze from the small collection of pictures and turned towards Rosalie, only to find herself alone. Rolling her eyes at her friend's abandonment, she crossed the room and started off down the hall. She didn't make it too far before she stopped, her eyes sliding to the door that was next to Jasper's. Louisa hesitated for a moment outside of Alice's bedroom, trying to decide if she should knock or not. Whilst her experiences with distressed siblings were limited to Dottie's fits of melodrama and Laurie's occasional meltdowns, she did consider herself to be somewhat adept at dealing with upset teens, human or not. The question being, of course, was whether Alice wanted comfort. The big sister part of Louisa won out and she inched forward, lifting her hand to knock on the door.

"Alice?" Louisa said, tapping on the door. She could hear a muffled order to 'go away,' from the other side. "Can I come in?" she asked. When there was no response, Louisa reached out and jiggled the doorknob. Finding it unlocked, she nudged open the door and poked her head inside.

"Alice?"

The girl in question was lying face down on a violet tufted fainting couch, her head buried in an accent pillow. Louisa pushed open the door a little more and stepped inside the room, casting a curious glance at the half-completed garments pinned to dress forms, and inching towards the obviously distraught vampire. She pushed a pile of fabric to the side so that she could kneel down and placed a hand on the vampire's back. A second later, she had an Alice shaped necklace hanging off her, the girl's face pressed into the crook of Louisa's neck. Slightly stunned, it took a moment for Louisa to realise that Alice was sobbing.

"It's okay, Alice," Louisa said, raising her arms up and wrapping them around her, rising so she could sit next to Alice on the couch.
Alice shook her head, her short hair tickling Louisa's nose, before pulling back to look at the blonde, her expression a mixture of terror and sorrow. "No, it isn't. I didn't see anything," she said, her voice heartbroken. "You could have been killed and I wouldn't have seen until it was too late."

"I'm alright, Alice," she repeated. "Nothing happened to me."

"I almost lost you again," Alice replied. "Jasper would be devastated. You don't know him like I do, Louisa. If you died, he wouldn't make it. I can't lose him!"

As dreadful as that did sound, Louisa found herself latching onto one word in particular. "Again?"

Alice went still before becoming fascinated in the buttons on her shirt.

"I've been waiting for you," she began, her voice so quiet that Louisa found herself leaning in to hear better. "For a while."

Unsure of what to do, she lifted a hand and carded it through Alice's short hair like she used to do to Laurie when he was upset. Alice jumped at the sudden contact but didn't pull away. "Define a while."

Alice pulled back even further and pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her body, and began to rock back and forth. She was quiet for so long that Louisa was surprised when she finally whispered, "Since 1951."

Louisa's brow furrowed in confusion and her hand dropped down to grasp Alice's arm. "That's fifty years before I was born," she noted. How powerful were Alice's psychic abilities anyway? And if she could see Louisa before she was even born, then why couldn't she have seen what happened at her house? Louisa wracked her brain, trying to remember how Alice's power worked, only to come up empty-handed. One of the many things she didn't know about Alice, she realised.

Alice reached a hand up and began to tug at her hair in agitation. "The future isn't exactly concrete," she said, still refusing to make eye contact with Louisa. "There are some things that are inevitable, like you and Jazz, but a lot of the smaller details can change."

"Like what?" Louisa asked, leaning forward to still Alice's fingers. "Jasper met me in Tacoma instead of Forks?"

"No," Alice said, drawing out the word. "You have to understand, Jasper was the first thing that I saw when I woke up to this life in 1933. I didn't know my name, where I was, or what I was, but I had a vision of him and I knew I had to find him. I had a vision of the Cullens not too long after that.

"It was April 1948. I was sitting in a diner in Philadelphia and it was raining something awful. He walked in to get out of the weather and ordered a cup of coffee at the counter. His hair was plastered to his face and his eyes were dark—he hadn't fed in a while. I invited him over to my table and scolded him for making me wait. He was so confused," she said with a laugh. "But he bowed his head and apologised anyway. We stayed there for hours, and I explained to him that he would come with me and we didn't have to feed off humans. It took a while, but I was able to convince him to come with me and together we went searching for the Cullens. We tracked them down in Syracuse, New York in 1950. But we weren't complete. I knew that. That's when I saw you."

Alice's eyelids fluttered closed, her voice growing more distant with each word she spoke. "I knew that you would be born in March of 2001. Your mother chose your name because it meant 'warrior'. 
You were an easy baby who became a rambunctious toddler. When you spoke your first words, you were eleven months old and your sister had just been born. You told her to 'no cry'. Your parents were so proud of you because all the books they read on parenting told them that you wouldn't be able to speak simple sentences for at least another year." Her eyes snapped open and her gaze landed on Louisa, watching her with curiosity and no small amount of amusement. "Your maternal grandmother, on the other hand, was convinced you were possessed by the devil."

Louisa's lips twitched in an odd mixture of humour and annoyance. "My parents had me before they were married," Louisa explained. "Gran has always hated me." Louisa was positive that her father was unaware that she knew this tidbit of information, but you didn't have to be a psychometric sleuth to know how to count.

"I saw you fall," Alice whispered. "Your family was having a picnic on Puget Sound. Your brother was getting fussy so you all stopped at the top of an outlook." Alice stared at her hands in silence for a long time, contemplating her next words. "You and Dottie had walked too close to the edge of the cliff and part of it gave way. You managed to push her out of the way right before it happened."

Louisa could almost see herself, seven-years-old, standing on the cliff with her sister, hear the cry of a bald eagle, the scent of decaying bull kelp on the warm summer air. She felt the ground give a tiny shudder when she stepped closer to the edge, buckling under her added weight. Laurie, only three, was having a meltdown of epic proportions, requiring the attention of both of her mother and father. Dottie, stumbled towards her, her shoes crunching over twigs as she darted about, picking wildflowers. The ground beneath her feet shuddered again, a little stronger this time, pebbles clattering as they fell far below. She knew something was wrong, like a deer that heard rustling in the forest. She lurched forward and shoved her sister with all her strength a split second before the earth dropped out from beneath her. She was falling, dust filling her nose, a rock clipping her shoulder. She flipped once, twice, spinning faster and faster, the sound of her sister's screams inaudible over the roaring of the wind in her ears. Something black and white crashing into her was the last thing she could remember before it all went dark.

Louisa wasn't sure if the memories of the event were hers or if she had plucked them out of Alice's head, but in the end, perhaps it didn't matter. They sat in silence for a long time as the pieces of Louisa's past, the parts that never had made sense to her finally fell into place. The memories that had always lurked out of reach, solidified, no longer shadowy and vague, but a solid and real moment.

"You caught me," Louisa breathed, too stunned to move.

"Barely," Alice replied. "I was moving too fast, I think. Your head hit my shoulder when I caught you and it knocked you out. With our combined momentum, we landed wrong and your wrist broke when we hit the ground." More silence followed at this proclamation. Louisa realised that she had begun to pick at her cuticles at some point and forced herself to stop before she made them bleed.

"I don't just see the future. The future is constantly changing, shifting with every decision someone makes." Alice said at last. "If it was only the future, I wouldn't have seen your parents stop at the cliff in time to catch you when you fell. You fell that day because you had to. If not that day, then another. Just like happened in Seattle."

"You saw Seattle?" Louisa asked in astonishment. And if Alice had seen what had happened, why hadn't she stopped it?

"Who do you think called the police? I couldn't stop you from going, Louisa. It had to happen. If
you hadn't gone into that warehouse, Lambe would have sought you out. It would have been a lot worse," she said, responding to Louisa's unasked question. "Fate is beyond anyone's control."

"I don't know if I believe in Fate," Louisa said.

It was like a switch had been flipped: Alice's face split into a grin and she uncurled her body, turning to face Louisa properly. "Neither does Jasper. He believes in the supreme free will of man. He says that it is experimentally verifiable that our behaviour affects the environment and what happens to us, and that no rational person believes in fatalism," she explained with a giggle. "He's silly like that."

Louisa was stunned into silence at the abrupt change in topic, but Alice didn't seem to mind. She crawled into the blonde's lap and threaded her arms around her neck. She rested her head on Louisa's collarbone, content to sit and listen to the human's beating heart. "You can't tell him, okay?" Alice said.

"Jasper?"

Alice nodded. "He'd never let you out of his sight and you are far too independent for that. You'd try to kill him before the end of the first week. Not that you'd be all that successful, but it's the principle of the matter."

The affection that Alice held for Jasper was laced through her words and it brought a smile to Louisa's face. "You love him," Louisa stated.

Alice hummed in agreement, a little grin flitting across her lips. "He's my Rosalie," she explained. "He's been my constant companion for over fifty years now, and I have never seen him as happy as he is now."

Whilst Jasper was far from the cheeriest of vampires, Louisa couldn't imagine him ever being unhappy. She assumed he must have been at some point (if the stories about his past were any indication) but she had trouble comprehending just how miserable he might have been. To her, Jasper was always the soft-spoken and sassy boy who preferred to use his gift of pathokinesis to communicate before his voice. It brought a sharp pain in her chest to think about how he might have suffered and she could not comfort him, even if it had happened years before her birth.

Alice took advantage of Louisa's distractedness and slid off the blonde's lap, flitting over to a bookcase where she lifted an ornate wooden box off one of the shelves. She wandered back to sit next to Louisa, flipping the box open and placing it on the couch between them. Inside, Louisa could see dozens of photographs, bundles of faded letters, yellowing newspaper clippings, and oddly enough, pressed flowers. Alice dug around the contents of her collection for a minute before extracting a picture of a grim-faced Jasper and handing it to her. He wasn't looking at the camera, too focused on the piece of wood in his hand that he was whittling with a pocket knife. He was sitting on a log in a forest somewhere, bare-chested save for a pair of stays that hugged his broad shoulders.

"He didn't smile much in those days," she explained. "Not like he does now. You bring him peace." In the picture, he wasn't as peaceful as his posture appeared. Tension coiled in his muscles like a rattlesnake ready to strike, his body ready to flee at a moment's notice. They were deep within the woods where he didn't have to worry about a human stumbling across him, which was just as well, considering how the sun periodically broke through the leaves, light diffracting off the surface of his heavily scarred skin. He knew that she was there, but he didn't turn around or look up as she approached. He must have taken their conversation on trusting each other to heart. That was progress. Two months ago, he wouldn't have dared turn his back on her.
She raised the camera up to her face and gently pressed the button. Jasper jumped at the soft click and spun around with a hiss. She peeked over the edge of the camera and gave him a chagrined smile. He was still so skittish. They would need to work on that. Their new family would be uneasy around him if he jumped at random sounds—it wouldn't do to have them think him unstable. He was rough around the edges, that's all.

"Louisa?"

She looked up, blinking rapidly. The room felt oppressively quiet in the absence of the hum of cicadas.

A woman with long brown hair was kneeling in front of her, a crease forming between her delicate eyebrows. Esme. "Are you alright, Louisa?"

Alice was standing a few feet away, rocking back and forth on her heels, tugging at her hair again. Rosalie hovered in the doorway, her face impassive. Louisa turned her gaze back to Esme, who had one hand placed on her cheek, the other gently removing the photograph from her hands. Louisa loosened her grip, her face screwing up in confusion. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You've been unresponsive for a few minutes, sweetheart," Esme explained. "Do you feel ill?"

Louisa shook her head and the room seemed to spin as she did so, pain beginning to radiate from somewhere behind her left ear. She reached up and swiped at her nose, her hand clean of blood when she pulled it away. Small victories, she supposed. "I'm fine."

Esme gave her a look that said that she didn't believe her. Must be a mum thing. "Why don't you come downstairs? I made dinner for you." She grabbed Louisa by the elbows and helped her stand, something Louisa appreciated when her knees almost gave out.

"Wait," Louisa said, her voice sounding faint even to her own ears. "I think… wasn't I doing something before?" Alice looked like she might cry and had it not been for the vice grip Esme had on her elbow, Louisa would have jumped forward to comfort her. But why did she need comforting? Her head swivelled between the three vampires in the room. "What happened?" And when did they get there?

"What do you remember?" Rosalie asked, her eyes narrowed like a cat watching an insect.

Louisa opened her mouth to respond that she had been in the woods but hesitated. No, that wasn't right. How could she have moved there and back? Her heart began to pound in her chest, the room spinning in earnest. She really wished that Esme would release her so that she could at least sit down. "We were taking pictures." She knew immediately this was the wrong thing to say. "Talking about pictures. We were in the forest talking about pictures." No, that didn't make sense! She tried to stutter out a coherent sentence but her mouth might as well have been filled with rocks.

Panic blossomed in her chest and she found herself choking for air. *Breathe,* she tried to remind herself. *Slow down and breathe!* Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes and she screwed them shut. She wouldn't allow herself to cry, or at least not to be seen crying. She tried to focus on Esme's hands that were gripping her own, how, in her panic, the vampire's skin didn't feel all that cold. Though she was shivering violently enough for her teeth to chatter and gooseflesh covered her skin, she felt like she was burning up on the inside. *Breathe!*

Something large and black was shoved in her face, and it took a moment to realise that it was a hoodie. Hands shaking, Louisa accepted it and slipped it over her head, the scent of cinnamon and apples filling her nose. *Jasper.* He would know what to do. The intense desire to rest her head on
his chest, to feel his arms wrap securely around her, overwhelmed her, and for a moment she
thought she might throw up. She took another deep breath, not even trying to hide that she was
sniffing Jasper's hoodie like a bloodhound. Louisa tried to focus on how Esme stroked her hair
though she couldn't help but think that the fingers were too thin, too dainty, and not his.

Louisa pulled away from Esme with a shuddering breath, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. Her skin
felt too tight and it twitched like an electric current had been passed through. "I was having a
conversation with Alice," Louisa said in a detached sort of voice. "She was showing me a picture
of Jasper."

Jasper, whose hands she would much rather have stroking her hair instead of Esme's. Jasper, whose
jumper she wore, that smelled like him but wasn't as the real thing. She wanted to feel his presence
wash over her, his emotions bumping up against her own, and for him to ease the knot in her chest.
Never in her life had Louisa wanted to see, to feel, to breathe, someone who wasn't there—not
even her own mother. There was an aching sort of emptiness in her that she knew, almost
instinctively that could only be filled by one person. Just thinking about the distance between them
made Louisa's heart feel heavy. Jesus, what was wrong with her?

Esme gave her a sympathetic smile as if she knew exactly what Louisa was going through. And she
probably did. The woman helped her stand up once more, careful to not touch any of Louisa's
exposed skin and led her out of Alice's room. She found herself in the kitchen, sitting at the
breakfast bar, a plate of steamed vegetables and rice in front of her and only a vague recollection of
how she actually got there. Though her stomach was in knots, Louisa still managed to choke down
the dinner Esme had been kind enough to prepare. It was almost a relief when Rosalie pulled her
away towards the lounge. She let her friend pick a film on Netflix, paying enough attention to the
plot to gain the general idea of it. It was a rom-com and while some part of her recognised that she
should make an effort to laugh at the jokes, she couldn't muster the energy to. She felt weary, right
down to her bones, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in Jasper's arms and fall asleep.
Perhaps this was what Rosalie had meant when she said that she would want him once the shock
wore off.

It was odd, she thought. Louisa had had similar episodes and she had never craved Jasper's comfort
so acutely before. She worried the cuff of his hoodie, mentally recounting the hours that they had
spent together and trying to pinpoint when their relationship had changed. They hadn't even kissed
yet, aside from the occasional peck on the cheek or lips to the forehead, which seemed a bit silly,
all things considered. He did share her bed, after all. Louisa made a mental note to rectify that as
soon as possible.

She attempted to stifle a snort at that thought. Kissing your boyfriend wasn't something you
pencilled into your day planner. He might even think she was a lunatic if she announced her plans
to kiss him. It was something that just sort of... happened. Or at least, that's the impression Louisa
got from reading books or watching movies or listening to her classmates. She herself had never
been in a relationship before Jasper, and kissing Michael Lee from the brother school back in
Tacoma in their joint production of *Much Ado About Nothing* hardly counted as a real kiss. Jasper
was almost two-hundred-years-old, he would have had a lot more experience than her— would he
think she was a naïve little school girl?

She dismissed the thought as soon as it occurred to her. This was Jasper; he wouldn't care that she
was clueless when it came to boys. He probably already guessed as much. Still, a part of Louisa
wished that there was someone she could ask about these sorts of things. Her dad was a possibility,
of course, but there was something attractive about being able to talk to a woman about these sorts
of things. She excluded Rosalie right away, being Jasper's sister, and while Esme might be an
option, she was Jasper's mum. And not her mum. That was the heart of the matter.
What she really wanted was to talk to her mum.

No. She wasn't here to wallow in self-pity. She was here to have an enjoyable evening with her best friend. She tucked her thumbs inside of her closed fists so she couldn't pick at her cuticles and focused on the film she was watching, laughing at the appropriate parts, crying when applicable, and ignoring the side looks that Rose kept shooting her every few minutes. When that film ended, they selected another—a thriller that looked stupid—and by the end of it, the empty hole in her chest didn't feel like a crater and she could almost breathe.

Esme sent Louisa to bed at what she considered to be a sensible time for humans, and perhaps under different circumstances, she might have been correct. But as it were, two hours after her imposed bedtime, Louisa was staring up at the ceiling of her boyfriend's bedroom, her mind reeling from the events of the day. At least downstairs with Rosalie, Louisa had the benefit of a distraction. Instead, she was left to her own thoughts, obsessively recounting what had occurred at her house, her conversation with Alice, her little foray into Alice's past and her subsequent meltdown. She tried to organise her mental library, but the moment she breached the cardboard box labelled 'Cullen', a new wave of panic filled her, and she backed away and resolved to deal with it another time.

The distraction that she wanted finally came around three in the morning, in the form of Jasper, ripping the door off of the hinges. His blond curls were windswept and filled with twigs. The right sleeve of his jumper torn and hanging off, exposing a pale and scared forearm, muscles twitching. He didn't seem to notice the doorknob still clutched in his hands when he crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed. Even in the darkness, she could see Jasper's iris darken to black.

Louisa sat up to give him more room. "You're back early," she noted, for lack of better thing to say. "How was your hunt?"

Jasper shot her an unamused look. He reached to take her face in his hands, dropping a dented and gnarled piece of metal in her lap in the process, like a cat presenting its owner with a dead bird. Louisa repressed the urge to thank him for the doorknob, figuring her facetiousness wouldn't be appreciated at the moment.

"I'm alright, Jasper," she said instead. "Rose wouldn't let me get hurt." At least in this circumstance. Louisa could easily imagine Rosalie tripping her down a flight of stairs in retaliation for something or another.

Jasper still didn't respond. He leaned forward, rubbing his nose against her jaw for a moment before burying his face in her neck. Louisa wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, letting out a sigh of relief that she didn't know she had been holding. She lifted a hand to his head and massaged his scalp, working out the foreign objects stuck in his hair. In an instant, all the tension she had been carrying in her body melted away, and she took a moment to rest in the feeling. It wasn't like she could forget about the day's troubles but for a few seconds, it was like they were somewhere far away and they couldn't touch them.

The spell was broken when her skin began to tingle and a restless feeling settled over her like she needed to get up and run. A second later, that's what he was doing. Jasper scooped her up, blankets and all, and did his not-quite-teleportation thing, the air whistling in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut. Then, just as soon as it started, he stopped moving. Louisa dared to open her eyes and she realised that he was standing by the front door of the house. Alice was blocking the front door (to the best of her abilities, at least), an annoyed expression on her face.

"Put her down, Jazz," she commanded.
A vibration rumbled through Jasper's chest, and it took Louisa a second to realise that he was growling. Not growling like a dog, though. A deeper sound, more feral, like a mountain lion or a bear. Like a vampire.

Alice's lips pulled back, baring her teeth, and growled in return.

"Were you raised in a barn?" Esme, ever the peacekeeper, snapped, materialising between her two children. "Jasper, if you aren't going to let Louisa sleep, then at least set her down."

Jasper ignored this, his eyes flicking around, looking for an escape route.

"You can't take her," Alice said, her voice stern as if she were berating a child. "You know you can't." She must have seen Jasper's reply because she rolled her eyes. "Well, we do."

Unable to tolerate their once sided conversation any longer, Louisa cleared her throat. "Into the microphone for the jury, please?"

Her comment got a strained chuckle from Rose but Louisa was otherwise ignored. She could feel Jasper's body shifting with minuscule movements, ready to run the second the opportunity presented itself. He was frustrated with Alice and her refusal to move. Didn't she know that Louisa wasn't safe? That something was threatening his mate? Another growl ripped through his chest.

"She's safe right now, Jasper," Alice said firmly. "If you take her, she won't be."

There was a pause in his growling, and his eyes narrowed in confusion. How could she not be safe if he was protecting her?

"If you run away, the FBI will get involved. They'll think that whoever broke into her house kidnapped her and if you are missing, they'll think you were somehow involved. They'll start asking questions about us, poking around in our lives. The Volturi will get involved."

Louisa didn't understand why everyone froze at Alice's announcement, but her announcement clearly held some significance to the others. She filed away their odd reactions for further analysis (preferably at a time when her boyfriend of two months wasn't planning on committing a felony) and focused her gaze on her boyfriend's face, which was set in frustration. In terror. In helplessness. She reached up and stroked the furrow between his brows. He glanced down at her.

"You'll get wrinkles," she explained, knowing full well that it was impossible for him to do so. "We can't have you showing your age." His face didn't soften, but his eyes lightened, if only slightly. "Seriously, what would my father think if he knew I was dating someone who was old enough to be my great-great-great grandfather?"

Her quip elicited an eye roll from him, but she considered it a victory when his arms loosened around her. She wiggled around and managed to extract a leg from her cocoon of blankets. "Will you please let go of me? This is quite disconcerting."

Jasper's lips pursed in annoyance but he complied nonetheless, gently placing her on the nearby couch, and sat next to her, his closed fists resting on his knees. She reached out and tried to massage some of the tension out of his body, only for him to snatch up her hand and tug her closer so that she was cradled in his arms once more. She tuned Rosalie and Alice out, content to relax whilst they recounted the events of the day to Jasper who remained silent throughout the exchange.

"How is it," Jasper said at long last, "that I leave you for two days and you somehow manage to find trouble?"
"What can I say?" she replied, her voice growing faint. Her eyelids were slowly becoming heavier, far too heavy for her to keep them open. She buried her nose in Jasper's shoulder and took a slow and steady breath, the coolness of his body soothing her pounding head. "I have a talent."

If Jasper said anything in response, she must have missed it. The last thing she was aware of was his cold lips pressing into her temple before she finally drifted off to sleep.

"For those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don't believe, no proof is possible." –Stuart Chase

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read/reviewed my story. I'm still in shock that people actually want to read what I write. My English teachers always told me I was too morbid. Side note: I had to move Alice's birth year back by about ten years. Stephenie Meyers claims that Alice received ECT as a human for her visions and in cannon, Alice was changed into a vampire in 1920. ECT, however, wasn't invented until 1927.
It was hard to sleep when your vampire boyfriend was purring like a cat. If it wasn't so damn cute, Louisa might have actually been pissed off for being woken up. Jasper was curled up next to her, the top of his head tucked underneath her chin, his wavy hair tickling her nose. Every so often, he would nuzzle his face into her shoulder, his purrs growing louder when he did. She extracted a hand from her cocoon of blankets and carded her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. His head pressed against her hand and he tilted his neck back, watching her through lidded eyes.

"Good morning, kitten," she murmured, twisting a blond lock around her index finger.

Jasper slid over her body, forcing her to roll onto her back, and rested his chin on her sternum, never once taking his yellow eyes off her face. His arms looped around her body, cold hands finding a patch of exposed skin where her jumper had ridden up. A wave of contentment filled her in response, though she wasn't sure if it belonged to herself or Jasper.

Louisa wiggled around, sliding her legs out from under his body positioning them so he was laying between her knees. She rested a foot on his thigh and began to rub it up and down the back of his leg, resuming her ministrations to his scalp. As Jasper's eyelids fluttered closed an enormous desire to kiss him came over her.

"You're trying to distract me," Jasper accused, eyes still closed.

"Is it working?" she asked, using her free hand to trace along the planes of his face.

"I'm still rather cross with you, at the moment."

"So no?" she asked, dragging herself into a sitting position. Jasper gave a small growl of annoyance and held on tighter to her waist to keep her from moving too far, his face buried in her lap. Now that she was more awake, she could see that he was still in his torn clothes from the night before and she began to pick twigs and leaves out of his hair. His purring returned full force, sending tingles through her body, and Louisa half expected to see a tail flicking back and forth. She leaned down to press a kiss to the top of his head.

A laugh sounded from downstairs, breaking the quiet atmosphere.

"When did the others get back?" she asked, recognising Emmett's boisterous guffaw.

"About an hour ago," Jasper responded, his voice muffled. "Carlisle wants to check you over after you've eaten breakfast."

Louisa hummed in acknowledgement, though neither one of them felt inclined to move. She continued to run her fingers through his hair, her eyes drifting around the room, which was bathed in the pale morning light. She couldn't remember how she got to Jasper's bedroom but she assumed he must have carried her up sometime after she had fallen asleep. The room didn't look all that different in the daylight, though she could see that the walls were painted a muted blue and the floor was covered in a thick white carpet. Several of the blankets that had rested at the foot had made their way onto the bed. Had it not been for Jasper's cooler body temperature, Louisa thought
she would have died from heat stroke. Her gaze finally landed on the pictures next to his bed, focusing on the family portrait.

"Is that your human family?"

Jasper turned his head, resting it on her knee and nodding. A long arm snaked out and picked up the hinged metal frame which he handed to her. She accepted it carefully, afraid that it might disintegrate in her hands. Up close, she could see that the image had a mirror-like quality to it: oddly raised, sort of like a hologram on a bank card instead of sitting on the surface like a normal photograph. The subjects of the picture were surprisingly sharp despite its obvious age.

"My parents and my sister," he explained, pointing out each person. "Ruby."

"I'm guessing your parents have a thing for gemstones?"

"My father was a jeweller," he replied, his mirth lacing the air. "I had a kid sister named Pearl too."

"Why is she not in the picture?"

"Technically, she is," he said, tapping on his mother's image. "She was born a few months after this picture was taken."

That seemed oddly specific for him to remember, given how poor his human memories were. When she said as much, his eyebrows furrowed in contemplation. "Lou, do you know what this is?" he asked. When she shook her head, he chuckled and sat up, gently manoeuvring her so that her back was resting against his chest, her body caged in by his long legs. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss into her hair. "It's a post-mortem photograph. Ruby probably died the day before. I think there had been some sort of outbreak."

"Diphtheria," Louisa muttered, the answer springing to her lips before she even knew the thought had formed. "You almost died from it too."

She could feel Jasper stiffen at her words, but he did little else that gave away his emotions. "Did I?" he asked, his hands massaging circles into her sides.

Reassured, Louisa nodded, her thumb stroking the ornate metal frame. "Your parents had a hard time getting someone to make this plate — the photographers were afraid of getting sick." Plate. That was an odd way to describe the heavy photograph, but she found it fitting. She kept her gaze trained on the image in front of her, though it was difficult to focus on it. Her vision began to fade in and out, ideas leaking into her mind that felt foreign. "You weren't allowed to hold this when you were a kid."

The picture was out of her hands and sitting on the table next to the bed before she had the chance to learn more. "That's enough for now," Jasper said, pushing on her shoulders so that she turned to face him. His lips were pursed and his shoulders tense. He wasn't angry at her, she could tell that much, but concerned. Perhaps even nervous.

"I'm sorry," she said. She should have guessed that he didn't want to share such personal information, much less have her say it out loud.

His eyes widened in surprise. "No, no, my love," he murmured, ducking his head to rub his nose against her throat. "I'm not upset with you. I should have realised that the picture would have triggered your gift. Your mind is still fragile from the events of last night and I am only concerned that this has brought you more discomfort."
"It's not fragile," she groused.

"So you didn't forget that you were sitting in Alice's room, instead of standing in the woods of Black Mountain, North Carolina?"

"Was that where it was? She never said."

Jasper's face was impassive but she felt his annoyance all the same. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Well, Mum occasionally debated selling me for scientific experiments. Perhaps that is something you could look into?"

"The idea does hold some degree of merit."

Louisa wrapped her arms around him and pulled his body closer, one of her hands finding the nape of his neck and playing with the hair there. Her fingers roamed over his skin, grazing over a raised patch of scar tissue. The thought brought back memories of what she had seen the night before in Alice's picture. Unwittingly, Louisa's hand slid down Jasper's arm, grasping his wrist and pulling it up to her face. He allowed it without resistance though he made his curiosity and confusion evident to her. She pushed back one of the torn sleeves of his jumper, exposing the skin of his forearm.

She had known that Jasper was covered in scars, of course. He had told her about them, but she rarely ever saw them for herself. Even sitting in front of him, her fingers ghosting across the skin, she could barely see them. But she knew they were there. She had seen them in Alice's memory, through the vampire's own high-resolution eyes. There had to have been hundreds—if not thousands—of them, crisscrossing across the surface of his marred skin and Louisa could only imagine how much obtaining them must have hurt. She bent forward and pressed a kiss to one of the marks on his wrist, letting her lips linger there for longer than what was strictly necessary. When she glanced up, he was watching her, his head tilted and his eyes darker than they had been seconds before.

Something began to fill the space between them, large and powerful, like a tsunami, yet gentle, like a lover's caress. It made her insides burn as if they were laying in the summer's sun and her skin tingled. The space between them felt as charged as a lightning storm, yet as peaceful as the eye of a hurricane and she wasn't afraid of it. Despite the chaos, the feeling was controlled. Comforting. Safe. He was so close she could almost taste his sweet scent on her tongue and in that instant, she needed more of it. She tilted her head up, pressing her forehead against his, their noses brushing against each other's, the distance closing—

"Hey, lovebirds!" The spell was broken by Emmett, banging on the other side of the bedroom door, followed closely by a yelp of pain after what sounded like a slap upside the head.

Jasper closed his eyes and let out a sigh of annoyance, his body relaxing in defeat. When he opened them again, his eyes had returned to their customary light gold. "Come, let us spread the good news of your survival," he said, standing up and helping her off the bed. "Carlisle is chomping at the bit to give you his medical seal of approval."

Louisa allowed him to pull her into a standing position, bracing herself on his shoulders when blood rushed to her head. She pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw before extracting herself from his embrace and stepping away to where she had set her bag the previous evening, rifling through it until she found her the clothes she had packed. As she stepped towards the bath, she realised that Jasper hadn't moved and was watching her, a pensive expression on his face.
"You good?"

He inched towards her, his hands slipping under the hem of her hoodie to grip her waist. "This is mine," he stated, thumbs pressing into her hip bones. When he felt confusion (or in Louisa's own words, 'weirded out') flood through her at his statement, he gently tugged on his jumper, which she still wore.

The tips of her ears turned pink when she realised that she had misinterpreted his words yet again. Perhaps he should ask Alice for advice on intonation?

"Yeah, Alice told me to wear it. Do you want it back?"

If Louisa wearing his hoodie made her smell like him, Jasper would gladly hand over every single one in his wardrobe. He'd have to thank his friend later. He hadn't realised how intoxicating Louisa would smell when she was covered in his scent and it made it hard for him to form logical thoughts. It took all his willpower not to… well, do something most ungentlemanly with her. Damn this magnificent creature. He shook his head and stepped around her so that he could access his wardrobe. "Just be prepared for the shit Emmett will inevitably throw."

"Who knew vampires were such gossips?"

"It passes the time."

No Stone Left Unturned

Emmett did indeed give them a lot of flak. Though Louisa had showered and changed out of Jasper's jumper, the massive vampire could apparently still smell her boyfriend's scent all over her. "What exactly were you two up to last night?" he asked, eyebrows wiggling.

"Is there a reason you are so fascinated with our sex life, Emmett?" Jasper, who was sitting next to Louisa in the kitchen, countered without bothering to face the man in question.

Louisa was immensely thankful that Jasper had the ability to repress her embarrassment or else her cheeks would have turned scarlet at the comments. Instead, she turned to give Emmett an amused grin, laughing at his dumbfounded expression. "Yeah, Emmett, what the hell?"

He recovered quickly and tossed the closest object at her head. Jasper batted it out of the air with a lazy flick of his hand before sending a wave of lethargy at Emmett, bringing the brunet to his knees.

"Not in the house, boys," Esme said from her spot in front of the range.

Jasper let up on his brother with a smug look before turning to face Louisa once more. He picked up a strand of her hair and twirled it around his fingers, giving his adoptive mother a hum of understanding. "He started it though." He ducked a swat to the back of his head from Esme.

"I wasn't sure what to make you," Esme said, placing a plate of pancakes in front of her. "Jasper said you don't eat a lot of meat and I don't have many reasons to cook. You'll have to let me know if it's edible."

Louisa thanked the woman and picked up her fork, cutting the pancake. She lifted the food to her mouth only to pause with it halfway to her mouth. Esme was still standing on the other side of the counter, watching her. Louisa gave her an awkward half-smile and slowly ate it, made a hum of appreciation. Esme smiled brightly in return and continued to stare at the human, her eyes flicking back and forth between her and her newest son.
Jasper cleared his throat, breaking whatever trance Esme was stuck in. "Oh, right," she said before disappearing.

"Is she okay?" Louisa asked, knowing full well that Esme could hear her.

Jasper was quiet for the briefest of seconds as he tested his mother's emotional state. "She's happy," was his simple reply.

Louisa was about to open her mouth and inform him that Esme seemed happier than normal when Edward appeared at the counter next to her. "We could hear Jasper purring upstairs," he explained. "Esme thinks it is adorable. Emmett thinks it's hilarious."

"I'm not adorable," Jasper said with a huff.

"Sure you are," Louisa replied before focusing on the redhead in front of her.

"Vampires sometimes purr when they are happy," Edward said before she got the chance to ask the question. "None of us really purr, so it was entertaining when we heard him."

"The Cullens are domesticated," Jasper drawled. "You might get a hiss or a growl out of them occasionally, but they are about as wild as a house cat."

"House cats can purr," Edward said. "So your analogy is dumb."

"Bless your heart," Jasper replied.

"Well," Louisa said before their light-hearted argument got out of hand. "That's a shame. I thought it was quite pleasant."

Jasper chuckled and bent forward to kiss the side of her neck before resuming his fiddling with her hair. She continued to chat with the youngest Cullen boy for the rest of her meal and Jasper remained mostly silent throughout the conversation, tossing in a comment on occasion. When she was finished, Esme appeared and stole her plate before she had the chance to stand up and was washing it by the time Louisa realised what was going on. She turned to face Edward, only to jump in surprise when she saw that he had been replaced with Carlisle. She heard Edward snicker from somewhere close by and she lamented her inability to give him a rude hand gesture.

Carlisle had a penlight in his hand and waved it in front of her face, instructing her to track it with her eyes. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh I bet she did," Emmett called out from the next room.

A collective sigh of annoyance went through the kitchen.

"Don't worry, Louisa," Alice said, flitting by. "He'll get over it soon."

"How soon are we talking here?" Louisa asked while Carlisle began to feel around her head.

Alice's eyes glazed over for the briefest of seconds. "Two years, maybe? Until Bella comes. She blushes a lot. It's most amusing."

"Who's Bella?" Edward asked, reappearing in the kitchen, head tilting. "Why are you hiding your thoughts from me?"

Alice cackled in delight and dashed out the back door, Edward hot on her heels.
Carlisle rolled his eyes at his children's antics. "Did you have any dreams? Jasper mentioned that you've had dreams related to your psychometry." When Louisa shook her head, he smiled and sat back. "Perhaps we can experiment with your gift later if you would be willing. I'd like to see if we can test some of its limits."

Louisa nodded. "Let me call my dad first and see when he wants me home."

"You're not going back there, Louisa," Jasper cut in.

"I kind of have to," she replied, turning to face him. "I live there."

A series of emotions ran through her so quickly that she was barely able to identify them: annoyance, frustration, worry, terror, desperation. She reached forward to place a hand on his cheek in an effort to calm him down. His brow was furrowed and she could feel his jaw twitching beneath her palm.

"Your house is currently a crime scene," he pointed out. "You can hardly stay there."

"Not at the moment," Louisa agreed. "Dad and Dot are staying at a motel in town, but it shouldn't take too long for the house to be returned to us."

"You're not going back," he repeated. If it weren't for his obvious terror that she could feel speeding through her veins, she would have been pissed at him for being a control freak and trying to tell her what to do.

"That's not for you to decide," Rosalie interjected. Louisa tore her eyes away from her boyfriend and shifted her body towards the tall blonde, whose hip was resting against on the edge of the breakfast bar, arms folded across her body. "What is she going to say, Jasper? 'My boyfriend won't let me return?' I bet that will go over well."

"Some pervert has been watching her for God knows how long," Jasper snapped. "If—"

"You too," for some reason, Louisa's mouth thought it would be a brilliant decision to blurt this factoid out, and when all of the eyes in the room focused on her, she felt compelled to continue on with the thought. "You've been in my room every night for weeks now. There's no way he hasn't seen you too." The vampires froze at this, tension spreading through the room the moment the words left her mouth.

"Jasper, I need you to think very carefully," Carlisle said. "Have you done anything that might have exposed us?"

"Besides not sleeping at night?" Jasper asked. "No." He didn't add in that it was because he knew doing things too "vampire-y" freaked Louisa out.

"I painted the walls of the house," Emmett said, appearing next to his wife. "Before the Collins's moved in. When Esme was renovating it. I helped with the electrical and the painting. Depending on how long the cameras have been in place, he might have seen me moving too quickly."

"No," Esme replied. "We would have come across at least one of the cameras when we replaced the fire alarm in the kitchen."

"I ran up the stairs yesterday," Rosalie said. "That could have been seen."

"Yeah, but the intruder had just left the house," Louisa pointed out. "He wouldn't have been able to watch it."
"You're assuming that the cameras are live feeds," Rosalie said. "He could have been recording the footage."

Louisa realised that she had started shaking her head during Rosalie's reply. "He's not," she whispered, more to herself than as an answer. "That's not what the cameras are for." Her eyelids fluttered shut and she pulled up a mental image of her room, trying to remember how it looked when she had arrived the previous afternoon. She could easily picture how the bed had been flipped over, how loose-leaf paper covered the floor, how her clothes had been strewn across the room. But something was missing. She needed to see the crime scene again. It would make sense then, she was sure of it.

A cold hand on her wrist interrupted her inner musings, the pad of his thumb massaging the pulse point there. She opened her eyes only to find that Jasper had slid off his chair and was standing so close that she could feel every time he inhaled. She leaned forward and rested her forehead on his chest. She took a shuddering breath, a feeling of dizziness overcoming her, and tried to focus on Jasper's arms as they snaked around her shoulders, holding her tightly to his body. Edward and Alice arrived and joined in on the conversation, the former asking the latter to search for debacle's the outcome.

"It's hard to tell," Alice said. "I don't know who I am looking for."

"Try looking at our future," Edward suggested. "If he decides to say something, it would impact us, right?"

"That's assuming he will say anything," Alice pointed out.

"Why wouldn't he?"

"He won't," Louisa replied. "Even if he did see anything, who would he tell? And what would he tell them? That the son of the town's surgeon is an insomniac?"

"Even if he did see Rose and Emmett moving too fast, he could easily explain it away as a camera glitch," Carlisle agreed. "Vampires isn't the first thing logical explanation, at least to a person possessing a sound mind. I would be accused of giving my children steroids before the townspeople would assume that we are members of the undead." The silence that filled the room was calmer this time, the family accepting Carlisle's words, if somewhat grudgingly in Jasper's case. Louisa lifted her arms and wrapped them around Jasper's waist, her fingers weaving through the belt loops of his jeans, and listened to the air moving through his lungs.

The atmosphere was broken by Louisa's mobile ringing. Most of the Cullens disappeared in the blink of an eye, taking the call as a sign of conclusion of their impromptu family meeting. Louisa pulled far enough away from Jasper to dig her mobile out of her pocket, not needing to glance at the screen to know who was calling her.

"Hey, Dad," Louisa said, pressing her phone to her ear while she leaned back against her boyfriend's chest. She listened to her father ramble on about living arrangements for the upcoming days, making humming sounds when necessary. Apparently, Chief Swan said that the house would be clear for them to return to by the end of the week. When her father started to tell her that they would be staying at a motel in town in the interim, Esme appeared in front of her, her hand out. Confused, Louisa slowly lowered the device into her palm, and watched with fascination when Esme proceeded to convince her father, who was quite possibly one of the most stubborn people in the world, to allow her to stay at the Cullen's residence.

"No, they got back early," Esme said, mobile pressed between her cheek and her shoulder while she
flitted around the kitchen, pulling out cookbook after cookbook, an excited grin on her face. "Jasper caught the flu."

"Yeah, the Lou Flu," Emmett said from the next room.

Louisa rolled her eyes and buried her face into Jasper's chest again. "You're impossible, Emmett Cullen."

"He's not wrong," Jasper replied, giving her hair a gentle tug. His amusement washed over her when she groaned. "Does this mean I don't have to attend school tomorrow?"

"If Jasper isn't going, I'm not either," Rosalie yelled from somewhere else in the house.

Carlisle sighed when the rest of his children began to chime in, claiming illness. "No, Alice, you don't have smallpox. People don't get that anymore. And everyone but Jasper is going to school tomorrow. Go finish your homework or something," he said before disappearing himself, undoubtedly somewhere his children couldn't bother him.

"You're staying in the spare bedroom," Esme said, returning Louisa's mobile to her.

Louisa was ninety-nine percent certain that the Cullens did not have a spare bedroom and that this was code for Jasper's room. She nodded and accepted the device, pressing it to her ear.

"I don't think I need to remind you that you're already grounded for a month, but if I hear that you've caused Mrs and Dr Cullen any sort of problems, you won't be leaving the house until you are twenty."

"Understood. Am I allowed to get more clothes from the house?"

"Mrs Cullen said that you already had some there," was his confused reply.

Louisa opened her mouth to respond when Alice breeze by, giving her a pleasant grin and tapping the side of her nose. "Oh, right. Sorry, I'm still a little tired."

After finishing up with her father, Louisa spent the rest of the day at the dining room table, finishing up the schoolwork she had been procrastinating on over the holiday, all the while ignoring the Cullens who seemed hell-bent on distracting her (namely Emmett). Jasper spent the entire day within five feet of her, which might have been endearing under normal circumstances, but it began to lose its charm when Louisa found herself explaining to him for the third time why he didn't need to follow her into the bathroom.

"Jasper," Louisa sighed in exasperation, placing a change of clothes that Alice had provided on the toilet seat before turning to face her boyfriend. "You really don't need to follow me. I doubt that even I could find anything perilous whilst I'm taking a shower."

He stood unnaturally still in the doorway but otherwise said nothing, looking very much like a kicked puppy. The only clue that he hadn't turned into a statue was the fingers on his right hand, which tapped against his thigh in a pattern that Louisa couldn't decipher. She didn't even need to feel the discomfort that he was emoting to know something was wrong: seeing such an expression on his usually stoic face gave her pause. Jasper wasn't one to show anything that he perceived as a weakness, so to see him look so vulnerable immediately set off alarm bells in her head.

Louisa stepped forward and placed a hand on his chest, giving him a gentle shove. They both knew that she wasn't strong enough to do so, but Jasper was enough of a gentleman to let her push him back towards the bed. It was a testament to how upset he was that he didn't even make a raunchy
joke at her actions. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her down to the bed with him, settling her on his lap before dipping his head down to bury his face in the crook of her neck.

"Talk to me, Jazz," Louisa murmured, her arms snaking around his neck, pulling him closer. "What's wrong?"

Worry was the main emotion that he shared with her and Louisa felt her heart began to accelerate in her chest as her body adjusted to his influence. Frustration, helplessness, and confliction wove through like an undercurrent to his worry, so potent that tears began to prickle at her eyes. Then, as soon as it had started, it ended. His face was still tucked into her neck so she was unable to see his expression but she could feel his jaw moving as he ground his teeth, which told her more than she needed to know about his emotional state.

"How can I help you, Jazz?" she asked, massaging the curls at the nape of his neck.

Frustration ripped through her again, this time coloured by confusion.

"Do you not want me to help you?" she asked, hoping she interpreted his response correctly. She wanted to tell him to use his words but knew that her request wouldn't be received well: Jasper was reluctant to speak when he was happy. Well, at least she could never say her boyfriend was emotionally unavailable. "Or do you not know what you want?"

More frustration, accompanied by a huff. Of course, he knew what he wanted. He also knew he wasn't going to get it.

"Why aren't you going to get what you want?"

Jasper's head finally snapped up, his amber eyes wide. Confusion and curiosity flashed through her before he finally settled on understanding. He reached up to unwind Louisa's arms from his neck and held them at her sides. "We need to work on controlling your power," he said finally. "It can't be healthy for you to be reading my thoughts when you touch me."

"Carlisle said that they're based on how charged a memory or thought was," Louisa replied. "It's not my fault that you're a walking emotional battery."

Despite the tension in his body, a small smile flitted across his face and he leaned forward to press a swift kiss to her jaw. Louisa tried to use his momentary distraction to wiggle her arms free from his grip but his annoyingly strong vampire strength once again proved to be recalcitrant. Jasper noticed her struggles and shifted so his back was against the headboard and Louisa was resting between his legs. She waited in silence for her boyfriend to find his words, massaging the taut muscles in his arms in the hope of helping him relax.

"I want to take you and run," he said finally, his body still tense behind her.

Louisa had no doubt that Jasper would try to make good on that statement— hell, he had attempted to the previous night, before his family stopped him. She was certain that his inability to do so was part of the reason behind his frustration. "Where?" she asked, curious more than anything else.

"Somewhere secluded," he replied. Absently, he raised a hand and began to stroke her hair, his eyes glazed over and gaze distant. "The Rocky Mountains would be ideal. Somewhere there is a lot of wildlife and few humans."

"That sounds lonely," Louisa pointed out. She wasn't sure where he was planning on taking the conversation but she felt like she was missing something,
Jasper shook his head. "Vampires don't crave human interaction—we tend to be solitary creatures. The Cullens are unique in this regard." Why did it matter if Jasper didn't need anybody but her? She was a human and still would need some social outlet other than her boyfriend or else she would go insane. Or try to kill him. Whichever came first, in all honesty.

"I know you are a strong person, I don't want to imply that you need constant protection or rescuing," he continued, oblivious to her confusion. "But humans are so fragile."

"Oh," she whispered, the final pieces clicking into place. "You want to change me." She had known that Jasper planned to turn her into a vampire, of course. He had said as much when she first found out what he was.

He had given her the option of remaining human, of course, but she turned down the offer. Why wouldn't she have? It was easy to agree to something that didn't seem possible. Vampirism had been like a fantasy plucked straight out the pages of a novel, rather than something that was real and would happen to her; but wrapped in Jasper's embrace, watching the shadows creep across the room as the sun outside set, the momentous thing she had agreed to two months ago started to seep into her brain. And now, staring her inevitable transformation in the proverbial face, she realised that she didn't know much of what being a vampire entailed—something she realised scared the hell out of her.

"Yes," Jasper replied. "And I understand that now is not the right time—it would only cause suspicion for our family, I get that, but what if you get hurt and I can't help you in time?"

Louisa's first reaction was to tell him, 'that's how life works.' She wanted to say that life rarely went how you planned it, that it was unpredictable, and that sometimes bad things happened. But that wasn't what he wanted to hear. He didn't need her to reiterate them, because he knew how fast things could go to hell in a handbasket.

She shifted around, craning her neck so that she could see his face, and reached up to stroke his jaw. He leaned into her touch, his face set in a frown. "I trust you," she murmured finally. It wasn't comforting words or false platitudes that he desired. He wanted someone to listen to his worries, not ease them. "How can I help you?"

He lips were pressed together, his mouth flattened into a thin line, but the tension in the corners of his eyes lessened, if only minutely. "We need to figure out some sort of plan," he replied. "Some sort of timeline."

"Okay," she said, sitting up and turning so that she was facing him. "Short term, I'm going to have to return home." When he opened his mouth to protest, ploughed on, shaking her head. "It is unavoidable, Jazz. I will have to return."

He shared his displeasure with her at this but nodded nonetheless. "But you can't be alone. One of us should stay with you."

That was fine with her. She had no desire to be alone in that house. "I want to go to college," she said.

"As a human?"

"That would be preferable," she replied. "But I understand that you don't want to wait for that long."

"A lot could happen to you in five years," he conceded, running his fingers up and down her ribs.
"What if I attended after my change? How different would it be as a vampire?"

"Well, aside from your inability to do keg stands at frat parties—"

"Sounds like a deal breaker, then."

"—the bloodlust would cause a substantial amount of discomfort. Even after your newborn period, being around humans is difficult. It might be years before you have sufficient control over your thirst to pursue a degree, at least at a physical college."

"Which means I won't be able to see my family during that time," Louisa surmised.

Jasper took a deep breath and pulled her closer, tilting her head up so that he could look her in the eyes. "You must understand, love, that after you are a vampire, you will look different. Those that are closest to you will notice that something is wrong with you. Even if you are able to control your bloodlust, it would still be inadvisable to have much contact with them, especially in person."

"Wrong how?"

"Your facial features will change," he murmured, extending a hand to caress her face. "They'll be symmetrical. Your skin will be paler from lack of blood and will harden due to the venom that replaces it. Your voice will be smoother, your scent will be sweeter. Everything will be changed about you to turn you into the perfect predator for your prey."

"Humans."

Jasper nodded. "I'll make sure that you drink off animals, so your eyes will be gold, but yes. Vampires are meant to drink from humans. And even though they don't know what we are, they can sense something is different about us. We make them nervous and they tend to keep their distance."

"That's why Dottie usually leaves the room when Rosalie is over," Louisa guessed.

"Your sister is extraordinarily perceptive to us," Jasper explained. "We've theorised she has some sort of psychic abilities. Those things tend to run in families. Unless she's changed, she'll most likely never be able to access them. It's a bit of a mystery about how you can access yours as a human. But we digress."

"So what I'm hearing is that I'll need to cut off all contact with my family," Louisa said. The thought was horrifying to her. How could she choose to walk away from them? Yes, they had their disagreements, but they loved each other. Furthermore, how could she cut contact with Dad and Dottie, when they had already lost Laurie and Mum? She knew first-hand the pain that they went through. How could she willingly choose to inflict even more of it upon them?

But that was the heart of the matter, wasn't it? She already had chosen. Two months ago, without even understanding what she was choosing. And the most horrifying part of the whole situation was, that, if she could to go back in time, sitting in the passenger seat of the Prius speeding towards Forks, she would still make the same decision. If she had to choose all over again, choose between remaining with her family and being with her boyfriend of two months, she would, without hesitation, choose Jasper. It didn't make any logical sense, she knew that. But the idea of leaving him made her heart contract and the air leave her lungs.

"For the first year or so, you won't be able to see them in person," Jasper said, sensing her rising panic. "After that, it would be safer for them and yourself if you were to keep a distance from them. But in this day and age, it is easier to remain in contact."
"They'll notice that I don't age," Louisa managed to choke out. "I won't age, will I? You're almost two-hundred and don't look a day over twenty."

"There are ways around that, darling."

"There isn't a way around watching them die."

Silence filled the space between them and Jasper watched as she folded in on herself, looking tiny and fragile. He couldn't remember much of his human family, something he realised was a blessing in disguise. His change had been sudden, unplanned. There was no agonising realisation that his impending transformation would mean he would never see his family again.

"I'm so sorry, my love," he whispered, gathering her into his arms. He might not feel the same emotional attachments as she did, but he was around them enough to understand that, to a human, there was no replacement for family. Yes, she might be with him for the rest of their existence, but humans couldn't fathom the notion. Their time on this earth was limited, coloured by the people they interacted with, lived with, and loved. The idea that a single creature, their mate, could bring them total contentment was not only foreign but beyond comprehension.

Jasper could feel her turmoil swirling about her like a tornado ready to touch down. But there was also some sort of spark in her, a fighting spirit that kept her moving forward. He could feel her muscles stiffening and she pulled away, her shoulders squaring despite the load that rested upon them. There was a hard, determined set to her eyes like she was ready to charge Hell with a bucket of ice water. She was stronger than he gave her credit for, though, he shouldn't be so surprised. It was impossible to remain unchanged after all that she had been through. Or maybe the can-do, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps sort of attitude had always been a part of her.

Either way, he knew that she would move mountains to get what she wanted, and whether she needed him or not, he would be right there, moving them with her.

"When we were children, we used to think that when we grew up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability… to be alive is to be vulnerable." – Madeleine L'Engle

Chapter End Notes

Hey there! This chapter was difficult to write. There were a lot of character development things that needed to take place and I didn't want to half-ass it. Let me know what you thought of it!
Louisa didn't have to be an empath to know that Rosalie was getting frustrated, and she had to wonder if Rose had even taken so long to complete a task since becoming a vampire. Despite no longer having to work in secret and having the backing of the Forks Police Department, their investigation into the murder of Anna Sweet was no further along than it had been since they had interviewed Ms Morales the week before. Add into the fact that with the start of the new semester, homework had begun to pile up and the two teens had to split their time in between school and sleuthing, making very little progress on the case. Louisa could understand her friend's frustration of course — she'd be lying if she said she wasn't the slightest bit frustrated herself— and she had to remind Rosalie that solving mysteries wasn't like what you saw on television. Sometimes, it took a long time.

Take the mysterious tunnel that had been found in her bedroom, which dropped into a crawl space underneath the house. Despite two days of around the clock investigation done by the state police, nobody could say why it was built or who built it. While the crawl space was in the original design of the house, the secret passageway wasn't on any of the blueprints that Mrs Cullen had produced. She guessed that it had been added sometime after the house was built, though, considering the building was at least forty years old, this revelation wasn't that much help.

Even still, the house had been searched thoroughly and all surveillance cameras had been removed. The hole in her wall would be patched up, so there wasn't a good reason for the Collins not to return to their home by Friday. Jasper was, understandably, distressed by the prospect, and Louisa couldn't blame him; she wasn't enthusiastic about the prospect either. She would miss the dynamic of the Cullen family almost as much she would miss how open she could be about the nature of her relationship with Jasper. (Sure, Mr Collins knew that they were dating, but watching movies in the lounge was very different than finding out your sixteen-year-old was sharing a bed with her boyfriend.)

Add in the fact that Louisa had been all but forbidden from injecting herself into the mystery of intruder/possible stalker ("You've got a perfectly good murder to focus on," her father had pointed out when she bemoaned the unfairness of it all), and she was in a foul mood by Tuesday afternoon. Rosalie ambled along behind her as she stormed into the police station after school, sending shrugs to the surprised members of the Forks police force that were left in the wake of Louisa's tempestuous mood. By the time the vampire had sat down at their assigned desk space, Louisa had already pulled out a dry-erase board and was furiously scribbling her theories and the evidence she had to support her conclusions. It was pathetically little, but it at least served the purpose of organising the thoughts in her head.

"Judging by Anna's age, he was either the same age as her or not too much older. My guess, no younger than sixteen and no older than twenty-five." Louisa began. "The crime scene is organised, and the suspect left behind very little forensic evidence. However, there is nothing that indicates that this was a planned attack, which by definition would make the crime disorganised. The attention to detail makes me think that the man was at the upper end of the age bracket. And we are looking for a man, judging by the extent of the bruising and the angle it was applied at."

"It could have been a tall, very strong woman," Sergeant Todd pointed out from across the room,
not even bothering to glance up from his computer screen. Had it been anyone else, Louisa would have taken the comment as an innocent suggestion.

"I'm an equal opportunity blamer," Louisa declared. "But statistically unlikely, particularly in a town this small. Besides, the hair left at the crime scene belonged to a man." Her first inclination had been to blurt out about her dreams, despite knowing that it would be a stupid thing to do. Despite what she had seen, there was no way she could know the things that she did. Even if Chief Swan did believe her, she had no evidence to back up her claims.

"No, it belonged to the baby-daddy," Sergeant Todd argued. "It's a theory that he killed her, but it could have been left behind from any other time he visited. Its presence doesn't mean he did it."

Louisa wanted to grab the officer by the shoulders and scream at him 'yes he did!' whilst shaking him furiously. She somehow found the strength in her to refrain. He did have a point, after all. "The skin under her fingernails, then," she ground out.

Immediately she realised this was the wrong thing to say. Everyone in the room froze and turned to stare at her. "What skin?" Chief Swan finally responded, breaking the tense silence.

Louisa's brain flew through her mental copy of the police report, then the coroner's report, and finally the witness statements, all coming up empty. For some reason, the DNA sample from under Anna's fingernails hadn't been reported, yet she had a niggling feeling that the police should know this information. Her mind replayed the last moments of Anna's life, recalling how she had clawed at her attacker's hands. "He choked her," Louisa managed to respond, hoping she didn't sound as rattled as she felt. "If I were to wrap my hands around your neck right now and squeeze, what would you do?"

"Stop you," Chief Swan replied immediately.

To her surprise, it was Rosalie who responded, shaking her head. "She'd try to breathe," the blonde corrected. "It's instinctual. She wouldn't attempt to eliminate a threat. Her mind would prioritize keeping her alive. She'd try to remove the thing that was stopping her from breathing, not necessarily stopping the person from doing it."

Louisa felt the bubble of panic that had risen in her chest deflate a little at Rosalie's words, relieved that her friend had been able to express the thoughts that she herself had not been able to formulate. "She'd would have scratched at his hands." Louisa continued. "That skin sample would have the same DNA profile as the person who killed her."

"There was no skin sample found, though," Chief Swan said. "It's not in the coroner's report."

"Our first order of business is to find out why then," Louisa stated, making a note on a post-it and attaching it to the case file. "Either he didn't know about it, or he did and the information never made it to you." Which didn't bode well for the already scandal-ridden case. "But moving on, we next have to consider when the murder took place."

"The father called for emergency services at 5:08 pm, Pacific time," Chief Swan supplied. "She had been dead for at least two hours, judging by rigor mortis and internal body temperature, putting the time of death at approximately three in the afternoon."

"When most adults are at work," Louisa muttered under her breath.

"Are we looking for a student?" Rosalie asked. "You said that he could have been around Anna's age. Maybe they went to school together?"
"That explains why she would be comfortable enough to let him into the house," Chief Swan replied.

"A young woman would also let a police officer or a handyman into the house," Louisa replied. "It could just as easily have been an adult." And it was an adult, this much she was certain of. An adult she knew and trusted. "But it would have been someone she knew. There was no evidence of a struggle, either. She trusted him enough to get close to her, which is when he killed her."

Sergeant Todd scoffed.

"Do you have something you'd like to share with the class, Sergeant?" Louisa drawled.

Todd didn't seem phased that she called him out. "Yeah, you described half of this town."

"More like a quarter of it," Rosalie pointed out. "But I agree, Lou. That's not very specific. Forks is a small town; everybody knows each other."

"I know Sergeant Todd, and I wouldn't willingly let him into my house," Louisa almost snapped, her frustration rising. There was so much she knew and wanted to say, but it was like all the information in her head had been written on separate sheets of paper and tossed into the wind. Grabbing a hold of single thread long enough to focus felt impossible. "There is a difference between knowing of someone and actually knowing them." She raised a hand and kneaded the heel of her hand into her forehead, trying to ignore a growing headache.

"Look, kid, your little trick is cute and all," Todd said. "But it's not necessary. It's obvious who did it."

Rosalie leaned back in her seat and waved a hand, a blasé expression on her face. "Please, do enlighten us."

"It was the father," Sergeant Todd explained, rolling his eyes. "No one wanted to blame him."

"There is no evidence of that," Chief Swan said sternly.

Todd didn't seem bothered by the rebuke. "The man happens to come home from work earlier than usual, and happens to find the kid's body?"

"The coroner report said that Anna was dead for at least two hours by the time her father reported it," Louisa pointed out in case he hadn't been listening to their earlier discussion. "Mr Sweet hadn't even left work then. Even if he did kill her when he got home, he would have had to wait for two hours before reporting his daughter's death to the police, in which case, he wouldn't have an alibi. But his entire office saw him during the time the murder took place."

"Then the coroner screwed up. He was incompetent," Sergeant Todd replied, tossing his hands up in the air.

"That seems to be a theme in the Forks Police Department," Rosalie snapped.

Chief Swan let out a heavy sigh before shaking his head and excusing himself from the room. Louisa felt a similar sort of exhaustion, slowly sinking into a nearby chair. What was with Sergeant Todd's hostility? Louisa could understand his discomfort with an outsider, and a teenager to boot, trying to solve a cold case. It wasn't the first time that police officers had been annoyed by her presence. And Louisa wasn't stupid. She knew that she possessed an extraordinary ability to push people's buttons. But for the man to completely ignore forensic evidence and established alibis? That couldn't be normal.
"Alibi," Louisa muttered under her breath, drawing her case file towards her, oblivious to the bickering going on around her. She started to flip through the statements that had been taken nearly twelve years prior, not actually reading them but letting her fingers trace the indents the pen had left on the paper. These weren't photocopies of the statements, she noticed. Black ink on white paper. The handwriting on one was shaky, another firm. One was written by an older woman—she used to babysit for the Sweet family. These were original. Personal. Alive.

Tears had stained words on another, but what would you expect? Her only child had been murdered.

Spiky handwriting. Loopy handwriting. A statement where all the i's had been dotted with hearts. Barely legible cursive.

Large, rounded letters that had written hundreds, thousands, of notes before, but never a police statement. She much preferred passing notes to her best friend, penned in a carefully crafted code. It wouldn't do to have Mr Banner intercept it and read it out loud again. The whole class didn't need to know that she thought Ethan Cheney was fit. Only Anna needed to know that. Anna knew everything though. They told everything to each other. Where did she even start? How could she fit everything they wanted to know on a single piece of paper? Was this betraying Anna, if she told the police something that her best friend had said in confidence?

"Louisa?"

She jumped in her seat, blinking and turning to face whoever had called her. Rosalie and Sergeant Todd stared back at her, the first looking more worried than the latter. She cleared her throat and sat up in her chair, straightening the witness statements into a neat pile. "We should re-question people," she said, ignoring her momentary lapse in attention.

"You're suggesting that we call in the original witnesses and have them give new statements?" Todd asked, his eyebrows raised in disbelief. "Do you know how long that will take? And how expensive that will be?"

Chief Swan picked the best possible time to re-enter the room. "It might be our only option," he agreed. "But twelve years is a long time. People will have forgotten most of the details."

"I know," Louisa said. "But someone knows something, and right now, this the only plan that we've got."

A heavy sigh drew all eyes over to Sergeant Todd, who sank down into a chair, running his fingers through his hair. "So we really are reopening this case?" Todd groaned.

"It's always been opened," Chief Swan pointed out. "It will just be an active investigation."

"The town isn't going to like this, Charlie," Todd said.

"They shouldn't like that someone has gotten away with murder," Chief Swan replied, his tone firm. "I'll start calling up everyone who submitted a witness statement."

"Start with Bernadette Krantz," Louisa said, handing the witness statement in question to the chief of police. "The best friend."

"Let me guess," Todd said, sounding exhausted. "You think she did it?"

"Of course not," Louisa said. "But she knows who did."
"And what will you be doing?" Todd asked.

Louisa shrugged and rose to her feet, grabbing her coat and trying to ignore how the room was spinning. It was a good thing that Rosalie drove. "I'll do what I do best."

"Annoy the hell out of people?"

"No the other thing," Louisa replied. "Snoop."

No Stone Left Unturned

The next morning, Louisa willingly woke up early and go to school early in order to spend the maximum amount of time in the library before the bell rang. The librarian was kind enough to help her locate old yearbooks, and she selected the one that coincided with Anna Sweet's senior year. Louisa spent the entirety of homeroom inspecting the pages and trying to discern who would have known Anna the best. The answer came to her the moment Mr Mason walked into first period and began lecturing about symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*. Rosalie gave Louisa a confused look when she slid the yearbook out of her backpack, balanced the book on her knees under the table, and began to flip through the pages, trying to make the least amount of noise possible.

There, on page 42, was the portrait of a less bald Mr Mason. In a school the size of Forks High School (Home of the Spartans!), there wasn't a need for multiple teachers in each discipline, so if Mr Mason taught junior English in 2007, he would have taught Anna the year before that. Her heart pounding in excitement, Louisa dragged her notebook towards her and began to jot down potential teachers to interview in the margins of her notes.

She felt the yearbook slip out of her lap moments before she heard Mr Mason clear his throat. She looked up at the noise, only to find herself staring up at the annoyed face of her English teacher. "Is there something more interesting than the works of F Scott Fitzgerald, Miss Collins?"

"Well, while *The Great Gatsby* is considered today to be his greatest work, it originally sold poorly and Fitzgerald considered it to be a failure. It wasn't until World War Two when American soldiers were sent copies of the book, was there any interest," Louisa rattled off. She gave him a brilliant smile, acting as if this was a common fact that everyone knew and that she hadn't written an essay on the topic the year before. "So technically, I guess so?"

Her classmates turned around in their seats to watch her like one might watch an animal at the zoo. Someone gave an awkward little cough in a poor attempt to cover up their laugh.

Mr Mason blinked in confusion before glancing down at her notebook and snatching it up. "And what were you writing? Passing notes in my— what language is this even in?"

"Russian, mainly."

"Miss Collins," Mr Mason said with a sigh. "Do you give your parents this much trouble at home?"

"Much more, sir," she chirped.

"Please stay after class," he replied, dropping the notebook on her desk before turning around and continuing his lecture.

The yearbook slid across her desk, and Louisa glanced over at Rosalie, who looked thoroughly confused. Louisa gave her friend a shrug before returning to her notes. When the bell rang, Louisa hung back, waving Rosalie ahead before trudging up to the teacher's desk. He pretended that he was busy by shuffling his papers around whilst the last student filed out.
"You are an impressive student, Louisa," he began, giving her an indiscernible look. "Your essays are well researched, eloquent, and refreshing. I requested your previous reading lists and papers from your former teachers, so I know you've read all of these books before."

Louisa shifted from foot to foot, not sure what was happening. She had expected to be at least chastised for her behaviour, if not handed a detention.

"Your old school had you reading at a college level since you were in middle school," Mr Mason continued. "I understand you are bored, Louisa. But I can't have you not paying attention during class."

"Detention?" Louisa guessed.

"If I thought that would be an actual punishment for you, I would," he replied. That was how Louisa found herself holding the senior reading list and a paper detailing the first essay she would have to write.

"So my punishment is to make me read?" A bit weird, but okay. At least it wasn't detention and it would look good on a college application. If she did well enough, she might be able to get a recommendation out of Mr Mason too. "Do I still have to come to class?"

Mr Mason actually laughed. "Yes. Just make sure everything is written in English from now on."

Louisa rolled her eyes and sighed. "Dull. But I supposed I could manage."

Mr Mason shook his head and pulled out a notepad and began to write her a note, excusing her tardiness for her next class. "Your resilience is something to be commended."

Louisa stretched out her hand and accepted the note, her fingers brushing against his for the briefest of seconds. This wasn't the first time he had done something like this for one of his students, though it had been quite a while. He only hoped this one turned out better than the last. "Sir, one more thing, if I may?" Mr Mason nodded and waved his hand for her to continue. "I know you taught Anna Sweet."

"Miss Collins," he said, cutting her off. "There are some things that shouldn't be looked into. What happened to her is one of them." When Louisa opened her mouth to protest, he stood from his desk and escorted her towards the door, where a line had begun to form outside. "I have another class about to start. I'll give you your new book next class."

Some students gave her a curious glance when they walked by, but were otherwise uninterested in what had happened. How could they continue on with their day when something out of the ordinary happened? Didn't they want to know? Or was there something wrong with her need to know everyone's business? Louisa shook her head as if doing so would clear the thoughts out of her head, before making her way towards her next class.

The teacher didn't seem to care when she wandered into history ten minutes late, though Emmett was ready to grill her the moment she sat down. Louisa was rather proud of herself for managing to ignore the vampire for over half the lesson before giving in to his demands for answers. If the teacher noticed the two passing notes back and forth, she didn't care.

After class, Louisa managed to squirm out of Emmett's grasp and escape towards the gymnasium to change into her gym uniform. Coach Clapp gave her a weird look when he noticed that she was one of the first students to arrive in the gym, rather than her customary last. She managed to corner
him while the other students were playing volleyball and interrogate him about Anna, but his
response, while less frigid than Mr Mason's, was hardly enlightening.

"Anna Sweet was the perfect name for her," he said, giving her an odd look. "I don't think she
broke a sweat in the three years I taught her. That girl hated physical education and would do
anything to get out of it. Sort of like what you're doing right now." Louisa had to wonder if the
little bit of insight into Anna's character was worth the three laps she had to run around the
gymnasium.

Jasper was waiting for her when she arrived at her locker, a brow arched in amusement. "I hear
you've had an interesting morning."

"That's one word for it," Louisa replied, spinning the dial on the locker before extracting an
orange.

"Now, I'm no expert," Jasper began, watching as she tore the skin off the fruit. "But that doesn't
seem to be an adequate amount of food for lunch."

"That's because we're not going to lunch," Louisa agreed. "Well, I'm not going to lunch. You can,
but fair warning, Emmett will harass you about 'not being able to entertain me very well'."

"I'll follow you," Jasper replied immediately, trotting after her when she started off down the hall.
"What are we doing in the meantime?"

Louisa began to explain her idea for interviewing Anna Sweet's former teachers. They first headed
towards the theatre, figuring that Mrs Tran, the elderly drama teacher would remember Anna if she
was half the performer her mother claimed she had been. Jasper followed inside, sitting next to her
quietly as she interviewed the teacher, occasionally using his power to manipulate the woman
when she hesitated for too long.

"Anna was a talented girl. She could have made a name for herself. She always talked about
getting out of Forks," Mrs Tran admitted. "There were so many rumours about her, about her
character. I used to tell her that bad press was still good, as long as they spelt your name right.
Well, they didn't even put her name in the papers when she got herself killed. You start to wonder
if those rumours had something to them."

Louisa was glad that Rosalie hadn't been around to hear that comment. Poor Jasper already had to
deal with her own irritation and had to all but drag her out of the room before she lost her temper.
The next interview with Mr Hewitt, the chemistry teacher, wasn't much better, but at least Louisa
didn't have the urge to commit homicide (though she had a sneaking suspicion that Jasper was
behind that).

"It was my first year as a teacher," Mr Hewitt explained, running his hand through is dark hair.
"They tell you that the first year is the hardest, but to lose a student that year on top of it? It was
devastating. I almost quit teaching. Anna, she wasn't my best student. She was pretty smart when
she applied herself, and a nice girl when you got down to it, but wild. Loved to party from what I
heard."

Jasper dragged her out of the room after that comment. He led her down the hallway, and pressed
her into an alcove, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles into sides. He leaned down to press his
forehead against hers and she could feel peace seeping through her veins, slowing down her
pounding heart and lowering her blood pressure. Louisa snaked her arms up around his neck and
pulled him closer, her nose brushing against the underside of his jaw, her breathing jagged. She
wasn't sure how long they stood in that alcove wrapped up in each other's arms, but she drew back,
knowing that the end of the lunch period had to be near. Jasper's lips quirked up into a small smile and he brushed his fingers across her cheek, a pulse of curiosity running through her.

"Yeah, I'm better now," she whispered, watching as his honey coloured eyes darkened to a light hazel. "Thank you."

Jasper let out a little hum before leaning down to press their foreheads together again. It was at that moment that realised how close they were, or more specifically, how close his lips were to hers. Whether he had done that on purpose or not, Louisa didn't care. All she knew was that Emmett wasn't there to interrupt them again. She shifted onto the balls of her feet and tilted her head upwards, her arms moving to wrap around his neck again, pulling him close. She could almost taste his scent he was so close, and her eyelids fluttered shut on their own accord.

A giggle from the opposite side of the hall broke the spell and she sighed and leaned back. As much as she wanted to kiss Jasper, she wasn't about to do it with an audience. She opened her eyes, Jasper was watching her with a confused expression.

"What's wrong?" He asked, his tone disappointed.

Louisa nodded her head towards the girl who had laughed, and they both turned to look down the hall.

"I don't understand," Jasper said, his eyes darting between her and the empty hallway. "What's wrong?"

Louisa disentangled herself from Jasper and began to creep down the corridor, peeking into classrooms, only to find them empty. "I just heard a girl laughing. Didn't you hear her?" How could he have missed it? It had been loud enough for even her to hear it, and he was the one with bat ears.

"There was nobody but us, Lou," Jasper replied, moving to stand next to her. "I would have noticed."

"No, I swear I heard—" she broke off when the giggling started up again, this time joined by a man. "There it is again. It's a female laughing, and there is a man with her. Please tell me you can hear that."

Jasper stared down at her, watching as the colour drained out of her face and her pupils constricted to pinpoints. He glanced between Louisa and the still empty hallway, ears straining for movement. He could hear Mr Hewitt the next hall over, shuffling papers as he prepared for his next class. Emmett was chatting animatedly with Rosalie in the next building. Students were pouring out of the cafeteria on the other side of campus. If there was someone in the hallway, he couldn't see them. Louisa's hand wrapped around his wrist, her nails poking into his skin.

"It's not real," she muttered, more to herself than to him. "It's... they're..." Her nose wrinkled and she looked like she was refraining from gagging, her emotions flip-flopping between frustration and revulsion. Without warning, she took off down the hallway, dragging him along behind her, while she wound through the corridors, following something only she could hear. He let her pull him along, feeling a mixture of curiosity and concern until they stopped outside a janitor's closet.

"This is where..." Jasper trailed off, not willing to point out that they were in front of the place she had figured out he was a vampire in case someone was nearby.

"I heard something that day, too," she admitted. "That's why I was poking around in here."

Jasper rested a hand on the small of her back. "Do you want to go back in?"
"I don't know," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I feel like it's important, but…"

She was scared. He knew that without even having to read her emotions. He knew what it was like to have so much power at your disposal and not have a clue how to use it; it had taken him almost a decade to fully utilise his own gift, and his didn't cause him physical pain to use. "I'll stay with you, no matter what you decide," he said, pulling her into a hug, and resting his chin on her shoulder. "We can always come back after school—" he stopped when she stepped away and threw open the closet door. "Right now works too."

"Who knows when I'll have this chance again," she replied, grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him in after her.

"We do have class in five minutes," Jasper reminded her. He didn't care if he missed it, but Louisa didn't strike him as the type to skive off.

"I'm still learning something," Louisa said, running her hands along the walls, looking for a light switch. She flicked it on, but the closet remained dark, just like the last time she was in it. At least this time she wasn't afraid that her boyfriend would drink her blood.

"What now?" he asked, after searching the room for a few moments.

Louisa paused, her gaze unfocused. What now indeed. What exactly had she been expecting? Last time they were in here, she hadn't found anything either. Of course, her search had been interrupted by a vision of Jasper killing someone, but that wasn't the point. Besides, she hadn't even been consciously using her power at the time. It had just sort of happened. She ran her hands along the wall while she pondered what to do next.

How did her gift even work? Was she supposed to feel some sort of energy on an object? That time when Dr Cullen had tested her, she had imagined threads of memories attached to the object, but that was after the memories had already appeared. How was she supposed to get them to start? There had to be some way to trigger a memory, she realised. When she had tripped in the closet and Jasper had caught her, she became the girl who had tripped in the alleyway. What if they recreated what the laughing couple had been doing in the closet? If they did, it might trigger a vision. Louisa didn't have to guess too hard to know what the couple had been up to. There were only so many things you could do in a janitor's closet, after all.

"I'm going to kiss you," Louisa declared, turning to face her boyfriend.

He blinked in surprise. "Okay?"

It was inelegant, unromantic, and the exact opposite of how she had imagined their first kiss to be. She grabbed him by the belt loops on his jeans and pulled him towards her, before reaching up to grab his head. Somehow, her lips ended up pressed to Jasper's, and his arms wrapped around her waist. His lips were warmer and softer than she had imagined, and yet they still managed to send a shiver down her spine. His kissed her once, twice, three times; his lips brushing against hers, hesitant and surprised that this was actually happening after so long, waiting for her to push him away or stop and say things were moving too fast, but she didn't say anything and nobody was around to distract her or take her away from him. This was good. He pressed his lips more firmly against hers, pushed her back towards the wall, bent down so his neck wasn't at a funny angle, five, six, seven, still, she wasn't saying no and she wasn't shocked by her own actions anymore, but enjoying them. Eight, nine, ten, eleven. It was nice, but it wasn't enough, she wasn't close enough and he wanted more was he allowed to ask for more he didn't want to upset her but she wasn't pushing him away so that meant she liked it, right? She gasped in surprise when he pulled her bottom lip between his teeth and he took the opportunity to slip his tongue into her mouth and that..."
was better but still not close enough and she was enjoying it and kissing him back and she was so soft and warm and still too far away.

He lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist to balance herself, a giggle escaping from her throat.

"Be quiet," he muttered into her lips, unwilling to break their kiss. "Someone will hear us."

"That hasn't stopped us before," she teased, running her fingers through his thick, dark hair.

"Do you know how much trouble I could get in?" he asked. He pulled his head back to look at her, and even in the small amount of light that was seeping in from under the closed door, she could make out his beautiful blue eyes.

"Nobody will hear us," she replied, pulling his mouth back towards hers, eyes drifting shut again.

"I'm serious, Anna," he tried to say around her lips.

"You're bleeding."

Her eyes snapped open. She was still in the janitor's closet, her back pressed against the wall and her legs wrapped around a man's waist, but he wasn't her… boyfriend? No, he was, but her other boyfriend wasn't her boyfriend. This was her boyfriend. This was her Jasper. He was cradling the back of her head with one hand, while the other guided a handkerchief to her nose. She accepted it, pinching the bridge of her nose and trying to stem the flow of blood. In an instant, she was in his arms, and he was pushing his way out of the closet, and striding down the hallway. He turned a corner, nearly knocking over a freshman, before wading through the steadily crowding corridor.

"Spanish is the other way," Louisa pointed out, resting her head on his shoulder.

"We're not going to Spanish," Jasper replied, his voice harder than usual. "I'm taking you to the nurse, and then we are leaving."

"It's only a nosebleed," Louisa said, confused. He had pushed his way out of the building, the damp January air biting her exposed skin. He gripped her tighter to his chest and sped up to a point that people might either think he was inhuman or an Olympian power walker. "I don't need to leave school."

"There are four other vampires in the school," Jasper murmured into her ear, keeping his voice low as he passed by a curious group of students. "You need to get out of here."

"Rosalie has seen my nosebleeds before," Louisa pointed out. Was he walking to fast or was everything actually spinning? She tried to wrap an arm around Jasper's shoulder to keep her balance, but her arms refused to move. "You're a vampire, too?"

"I'm not going to hurt you," Jasper replied. They were at the main office and Louisa had no recollection of how they got there. Edward was standing by the door, his face bloodless.


Jasper gave a low hiss and the next moment, Edward was gone. He marched her into the office, brushing past a stunned Mrs Cope, and pushed his way into the infirmary. Then Louisa was draped across Jasper's lap, and… why was he holding the handkerchief for her? She could have done that. She went to replace his hands but her arms weren't moving. All she could do was allow her
boyfriend to tilt her head forward and pinch her nostrils shut. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the clock on the wall ticking away. They would definitely be late for Spanish.

"This is an overreaching… no overarching… no… overreaction," Louisa tried to inform her boyfriend, but her tongue felt abnormally heavy. "I'm fine. When did you get here?" Who even were these people? They looked pretty familiar. She'd probably seen them around town before. Why did they have a gurney with them?

Jasper picked her up and placed Louisa on the stretcher, his hand trailing down her leg to rest on her ankle, shuffling out of the way of the paramedics without letting go of her.

"You good?" She asked, her words slurred from both the blood loss and his gift.

He let out a strained chuckle. Louisa would ask him if she was okay when she was the one practically haemorrhaging out of her nose. "I'm good."

"That's nice," she said with a lazy smile. "You're really pretty. Did you know that?"

"I'm flattered," he replied. A paramedic asked him to let go and step back, they needed to move her into the ambulance. But if he lost contact with her, all of the numbness he was giving her to suppress her pain would be dispersed throughout the room. The last thing he needed was high paramedics, but he couldn't allow her to be in pain. "I'll see you in a bit, Lou."

The last thing she did before succumbing to the exhaustion was to give him a thumbs up.

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." –Oscar Wilde

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thoughts? Questions? Comments? Concerns? Leave me a comment. I promise I do read them all. I just got a new job on top of the one I already have, so my life is a wee bit hectic right now. But never fear: I will not abandon this story. Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
I would like to dedicate this chapter to the anonymous user, Asif, who left me a lovely review on chapter 7. Thank you for your kind words and taking the time to read my story.

Louisa was aware of the pain: a throbbing, sharp stab somewhere behind her left ear that wouldn't let up. Without opening her eyes, her hand drifted to the spot to massage it, only to stop when she felt a tugging at her fingers. Her eyelids fluttered open and she found herself surveying a grey plastic… thing clipped on to her right index finger. The squeaking of… a thing drew her attention and her eyes drifted towards the sound, only to find herself face to face with a little girl with curly red hair. Louisa gasped and tried to move away, but her body felt too heavy to move.

"Sorry," the little girl said, cuddling a crocheted doll to her chest. "He told me not to surprise you. Your brain is sick again, right?"

It took a moment for Louisa to recall the little girl, her memories flowing slower than molasses in the dead of winter. Memories of sitting in a hospital room, reading books together leaked their way into Louisa's mind, and with it, a name.

"Who told you that?" she asked Kelly. She squinted her eyes, unable to decide if she couldn't see the girl because the room was too dark or because the room was rocking.

"Sir Jasper!" Kelly exclaimed with a squeal that left Louisa's ears ringing. "He was here earlier before a fairy came and took him away. He said you had a big bruise on your brain, which makes your head hurt. He used a funny word for it."

Jasper had been with her? Where was he now? Why did he leave? Louisa took a deep breath, trying to calm her accelerating heart and focus on the redhead, which she found was surprisingly difficult.

"A…a…" Louisa began, only for the word to slip away from her. "Thing?"

Kelly's eyebrows furrowed. "It started with a 'C', I think. It was like, 'cushion' or something. He said it makes it hard for your brain to think."

"Was it a… confusion?" No that wasn't it. "No, a contusion." No that didn't sound right either. In fact, why did her voice sound so slurred? "Con-cue-sion. Con-cushion. Con-dammit."

Kelly let out a nervous giggle. "You said a bad word."

"Don't repeat it," Louisa sighed, her eyes sliding shut. "Do you know what happened?"

"Jasper said that you tripped and hit your head," Kelly explained.

That didn't feel right to Louisa. She was pretty sure she had been doing something important, but for the life of her, she didn't know what. "Where is Jasper?" He would know what had happened.
He had something to do with the events that landed her in a hospital bed. That much she was certain of.

"The fairy took him away, remember? I just told you that."

What did that even mean? "What happened?"

"To Jasper?"

"No," Louisa said. "Maybe. I don't know. Where am I? Why am I here?" Her heart began to flutter in her chest as panic began to settle in. Where was Jasper? What had happened? Had something happened? Something must have happened, otherwise, he wouldn't have left. A tiny hand patted her face in concern. Why was she acting like this? Was this what Sir Jasper had meant when he said that Louisa might be confused when she woke up? She would be okay, though, right? She had to be.

"Kelly, darling," a smooth voice said, prompting Louisa's eyes to snap open. She tried to focus on the man but it was like she was looking through a frosted window. She could tell that he was blond and his voice was familiar, but… what was his name again? How did she know him? He wasn't her father and he wasn't Jasper. She knew that she knew him, but her brain couldn't seem to figure out in what context. "What did I say about touching her?"

"That her brain isn't feeling good and I shouldn't touch her in case I move her brain again," Kelly parroted, her hand drawing away. "But I didn't hurt her!"

The man drew nearer and his features coming into focus. Dr Cullen gave the little girl a kind smile. "She has a concussion, darling. Anything could hurt her. We need to be very careful."

Kelly's head drooped, her chin resting on her chest. Red ringlets fell in front of her face, swaying as she nodded.

"Chin up," Dr Cullen said, reaching forward to tilt the girl's head back up. "Why don't you go and play for a little while? I need to talk to Louisa about some boring stuff."

The little girl nodded and slid out of her chair. She gave Louisa a sad look and a mumbled apology before darting out of the room. Louisa watched her go, her brain trying to figure out something, but unsure what it was trying to process. Was Kelly sick? Well, Kelly had always been sick, Louisa remembered. But she was sicker than normal. The letters ESRD appeared in her mind, scrawled on the end of a chart. A sad pat on the head. Memories that didn't belong to Louisa. Memories. Something had happened with memories. Memories and Jasper. And a closet?

"Where is Jasper?" Louisa asked again, hoping to get a real answer.

Carlisle pulled Kelly's vacated chair closer to the bed and sat down.

"He's out hunting," Carlisle explained in a low voice, even though nobody else was around to hear. "How much do you remember?"

That was a very good question, Louisa thought. What had happened? What had she been doing? Where had she been? Who had she been with? And why didn't she remember the answers? Had she forgotten everything again?

The thought almost made her vomit. Carlisle must have been thinking along the same lines because he produced a bucket from somewhere and held it under her chin. He spoke soothing words in her
ear, which might have relaxed her except... was it her imagination, or was he avoiding touching her? Was something wrong with her? Panic filled her chest and her breath came out in strangled gasps.

No. Breathe, relax, focus. Don't panic; panic doesn't solve anything. Deep breaths to stop the hyperventilation. Release the tension from the shoulders. Unclench fists and jaw. Count to ten in Spanish and back to zero in Russian. Breathe, relax, focus. It wasn't as good as Jasper, but the focusing helped somewhat, even if was more difficult than usual. That made sense. Concussions made it hard to focus. They also made it difficult to recall what had happened moments before the accident. She hadn't forgotten everything— it had gotten a bit scrambled, that's all.

Focus, relax, breathe.

She closed her eyes, drawing up a door in her mind's eye, watched as her hand reached forward and pushed it open. Her mental-self poked her head into the library, taking note of her surroundings: some of the shelves had fallen over, but nothing seemed to be on fire. That had to be a good thing. Things were still intact. A mental-Dottie wandered by and gave her a scathing look.

"As if I'd let you forget me again," she said in a huff before tossing a manila folder at her. "Now, if you don't have anything else to bother me with, I've got to go clean up your mess."

Louisa glanced down at the folder, which had the date scribbled across the front in large block letters. The pages were written by either a dyslexic gorilla or an over-enthusiastic toddler with a green crayon, making it slow reading. She leafed through the events of the day, which were unsurprisingly boring, starting with her morning routine and leading all the way up to—

"Holy shit!"

Carlisle, who had been leaning over her, jumped in surprise. "What is the matter? Are you feeling ill?"

"I kissed Jasper?"

"Yes," Carlisle confirmed. "Do you—"

"Nice." Louisa sank back into the pillows on her bed, or at least as much as they would allow. They were hospital pillows, after all. "It's hard to remember. It was very dark. Or was that because my eyes were closed? And then there was—" she broke off as more of her memories began to resurface. Anna. The man (the one who killed her?). Shhh, don't get caught. Blood? Louisa lifted her hand to her face. "Was I bleeding?"

"Yes," Carlisle said again, sitting down on the edge of her bed. "Jasper was afraid he had broken your nose at first. There was quite a lot of blood. We thought he might have given you the concussion too."

"Jasper wouldn't hurt me," she snapped. How dare he accuse him of something like that? Jasper couldn't hurt her, whether he wanted to or not. Which he didn't. He loved her and wouldn't let anything happen to her. Louisa might be foggy on most of the details at the moment, but she knew that much.

Carlisle, for his part, seemed to pick up on her sudden mood swing. He leaned back, palms facing her in an appeasing gesture, his face repentant. "I know that," he agreed. "We thought it might have been an accident. He wouldn't willingly put you in danger. We were incorrect in our assumptions, either way. He probably only played a small role in the accident." When Louisa opened her mouth
to argue with him, the doctor hurried on. "Edward saw the tail end of the memory."

Louisa pursed her lips in annoyance. "Anna was there. And her... what's the name for someone who kills someone?"

"A murderer?" Carlisle provided.

"That's the bitch," Louisa said, snapping her fingers. Was she usually so foul-mouthed? She didn't think so. "Her murderer. He was at the school with her. How do I prove that? I need to prove that."

"No," Carlisle interrupted, his tone firm. "No more investigation for at least a month. Louisa, we believe that your concussion was caused by your gift. Do you understand that?"

Her gift? Like a birthday gift? And what did sleuthing have to do with her concussion? When she asked Carlisle for clarification, he gave her a sympathetic, tight-lipped smile, leaving Louisa to try and put together what felt like a million piece jigsaw puzzle. She was a... psychometrist. Had she been using her psycho-thingy recently? Yes, that's why she was in a closet with Jasper. "I used my gift, and saw a vision of Anna," Louisa muttered under her breath, less for Carlisle's sake and more to organise her scrambled thoughts. "I've used my power before, though. I usually get headaches from it."

"We're not sure what caused it," Carlisle admitted. "You're MRI shows that your hippocampus has grown. We have hypothesised that it swelled this afternoon and in the process, created too much intracranial pressure."

"That pesky hippocampus," Louisa muttered, closing her eyes.

"We can't be certain of course," Carlisle continued with a chuckle, despite the heavy conversation. "You are the only human that possesses the gift of psychometry that we know of, making it difficult to conduct research on the matter."

She rubbed her hand across her face, trying to think but finding it very difficult to. That was the concussion, she supposed. "Where is he?"

"Hunting with Alice. He accidentally drank some of your blood. He seemed to be in control of himself, but it was better to be safe."

Louisa took a deep, shuttering breath. That was fine, sensible even. So why was her heart beginning to pound? "When will he be back?" she asked, hating the way her voice wobbled. It couldn't be healthy to be so attached to your boyfriend of two months. But Jasper wasn't merely her boyfriend, was he?

"You'll be released in a few hours, I suspect. Your father has been notified, but he does work quite a distance away," Carlisle said in a soothing voice, reaching forward to pat his arm. "Alice said that he will want you to stay with him for the night at the motel, but you'll be able to see Jasper for a few minutes before—"

"He's not coming?" Tears began to prickle at the corner of her eyes and she blinked, attempting in vain to stop them from falling. The worst part of it was that she didn't even know why she was crying. She had been away from Jasper before and had never reacted like this.

"It's not safe for him to be here, darling," Carlisle replied, his cold hand rubbing up and down her arm in what was intended to be a calming gesture. "He's consumed human blood and we don't know how he'll react to being around humans."
"He won't hurt me," Louisa tried to argue.

"We don't know that," Carlisle said. "But we also have to think about the other patients in the hospital. It might not be safe."

Why did he doubt Jasper so much? Sure, Jasper didn't have the best track record when it came to following the Cullen's strict diet, but that didn't mean he couldn't control himself. He had visited her before in the hospital and there hadn't been a massacre then. There was no need to doubt that he wouldn't stay in control again. Besides, Kelly had said that he had been present before, and that was before he went hunting. Louisa wanted to tell Carlisle this. She tried to tell him this. But her tongue felt too big for her mouth, the air too heavy in her lungs, and it took her a moment to realise that she was angry. Livid, in fact, that anyone could doubt that Jasper couldn't be trusted. Her mate was a good man. How dare Dr Cullen suggest otherwise?

"Carlisle," a beautiful voice said only seconds before serenity filled the room. "You said that you were going to speak with her, not cause her distress."

Like a magnet attracted to metal, Louisa flew forward before she even realised what she was doing. Carlisle let out a startled gasp and moved to stop her. The heart rate monitor screamed when the digital reader was ripped off her finger. Jasper stepped forward to catch her, one arm wrapping around her waist whilst the other cradled her head to his chest. She buried her nose in his shoulder, breathing in his comforting scent. It felt like she was choking and unable to breathe, but not from terror, but rather because of relief. He tilted his head down to press a kiss to her temple before easing her back on to the hospital bed with a gentle hand and sitting down next to her.

"You shouldn't be here, Jasper," Carlisle said in a low voice.

"Then release her from the hospital, because I'm not leaving her side." While it wasn't rude, his tone was full of authority that she had never witnessed before. It wasn't aggressive, but rather a confidence that his orders to be followed with a swift, militaristic-like precision. Gooseflesh erupted across her skin and she realised that this was the Jasper that the Cullens were most familiar with. Not the gentle boy he was with her but a dominating and aloof war veteran.

Despite the harshness of his tone, there was a tenderness in the way his large hands held her face, his thumbs wiping away her errant tears. He bent down and rested his forehead against hers and she could feel his slow breaths fanning across her lips, close enough to kiss. And kiss he did, this one slower, sweeter, and infinitely more gentle than their last. There was no desperation or frenzy, though it was no less passionate. It was warm and loving and so inexplicably Jasper that for a moment Louisa thought her heart might actually burst because it felt so full. When he pulled away, she swore could still taste him on her lips.

He ran his nose across her cheek, along her jaw, down her neck, coming to rest over her carotid. He lips skimmed over the delicate skin there for only a second before parting, his tongue sliding over her pulse point. She jumped in surprise at the sensation and she could feel his amusement at her actions. He placed a gentle kiss over the same spot before sitting up, his dark brown eyes watching her with nothing less than unadulterated love. His hands slid down her sides before coming to rest on her hips, thumbs massaging the skin where her shirt had ridden up.

Dr Cullen had to ruin the moment. "It's not safe to be touching her," he said after clearing his throat with an awkward cough. "We don't know how active her gift might be or what the consequences of using it in a concussed state." Which explained why Kelly had been scolded for touching her. She knew she wasn't that delicate.

Jasper's lips pursed as if he were considering his adoptive father's words, fingers freezing, though
he didn't remove them. "Do you think it is something she will adapt to? If we were to practice, she might be able to control it."

Dr Cullen took the seat next to her bed, his elbows resting on his knees. "It's hard to say," he admitted. "I've never heard of a human using a supernatural gift before. At least not in the capacity that you do, Louisa."

"I'm an overachiever," Louisa drawled before moving to lay her head in Jasper's lap.

"Except in Spanish," Jasper said, running his fingers through her hair.

"¡Qué te jodan!" she deadpanned moments before squawking in protest when Jasper nipped at her ear.

"It does pose a fascinating question, however. If this is what you can do now," Carlisle mused, his expression pensive. "I do wonder what you will be able to do when you are changed."

The two vampires continued with their (rather boring) speculations, for a while longer. Louisa tuned them out, choosing instead to close her eyes and focus on the sensation of Jasper's fingers in her hair. Eventually, Dr Cullen's pager went off and he excused himself from the room. They watched him go and it was a few moments before Jasper finally turned back to look at her. The corner of his mouth twitched and his eyebrows were furrowed. Every few seconds, she would feel the fleeting influence of his emotions before they disappeared.

"I'm okay, Jazz," Louisa whispered.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead in response and she tilted her head up, trying to capture his lips. She made a noise of protest when he pulled away to pick up his backpack. He withdrew a worn hardback novel and shifted her so that she was sitting up, propped up against his side.

"I know it's not *Sherlock Holmes*, but I like it."

"*The Hobbit?* I never pegged you for a Tolkien fan."

Jasper chuckled and pressed a kiss to her temple. "It's one of the first things I bought after leaving the army. It took me a while to figure out currency. Imagine my surprise when I found out that Confederate money wasn't accepted anymore. Have you read it?"

"I've seen the movies."

Jasper scoffed. "Jackson added a completely unnecessary love triangle. The book is much better."

"Then, by all means, read away," she said before ducking under his arm and snuggling into his side. Just as he flipped open the book and turned to the first page, a mop of red hair peeked around the doorway, and Kelly inched her way into the room. Her eyes shifted around as if she were looking for someone who might try to stop her, and, finding none, trotted up to the side of the bed.

"Can I join?" she asked in a hesitant voice, looking up at the two teenagers with wonder.

Jasper glanced down at Louisa, thinly veiled panic etched across his face, not trusting himself around the girl. She gave him an encouraging smile, trying to convey her support without words. Kelly had made her way to the bed, eyes wide and hopeful. His nervousness lasted for only a second longer, his features softening as he gave the girl a small smile.

"You'll like this one, I think," Jasper said, sliding his hands under Kelly's arms and lifting her up
onto the bed and positioning her on his other side. "It has a dragon in it."

"Read." Kelly demanded, pointing at the book resting in his lap.

"Well, ain't you bossy?" He said with a laugh before picking up the book again. Louisa closed her eyes, relishing in the feeling of Jasper's voice rumbled in his chest. "'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort…'"

No Stone Left Unturned

The only good thing about having a concussion meant that she didn't have to go to school for the rest of the week. Instead, Louisa spent her days with Esme at the Collins' home, which had finally been vacated by the police. Louisa began the boring task of cleaning up the mess that had been left behind by both the intruder and various police officers. It was slow going as Louisa had to sort through trampled clothes and torn bits of paper piece by piece, trying to decide what was salvageable. Her bed, for instance, had been cracked in half and was beyond saving. Until a suitable replacement could be found for her bed, Louisa would be sleeping in the lounge. Dottie had offered to share her bed with her older sister, but Louisa had declined, citing her frequent headaches making it difficult to sleep. She could hardly say that Jasper refused to enter Dottie's room, after all.

Esme worked almost non-stop, patching up the hole, and, upon Louisa's request, removing most of the bookshelves in the room. It wasn't like Louisa had that many books, and she didn't want the reminder of how the intruder had concealed his frequent comings and goings. Alice had arrived one afternoon carrying an armful of new clothes to replace the piles of clothes that had been destroyed. Louisa pointed out that all the clothes were at least an inch too long and wouldn't fit, prompting a vague reply from the psychic.

Jasper was surprisingly firm about Carlisle's investigation ban, though Rosalie was far more liberal, showing up daily with status reports about the case. The most exciting development, by far, was the agreement of Bernadette Krantz, Anna's best friend, to be interviewed. Rosalie had burst into the Collins' house with the news one day, eliciting a surprised squeak from Dottie who had been sitting next to Louisa in the lounge. Rosalie ignored Dottie's response and vaulted over the back of the couch and settled herself on the cushions next to Louisa. Dottie, who had always been intimidated by the tall blonde, muttered an excuse under her breath before scurrying out of the room.

"You'll sneak me in to watch, won't you?" Louisa almost begged.

"Naturally," Rosalie scoffed, rolling her eyes to produce the optimal dramatic effect. "As if you'd miss this."

"This is why you are my favourite Cullen."

"Don't let Emmett hear you say that," Rosalie replied, slouching down on the couch and throwing her legs across Louisa's lap. "He'll be crushed."

Their conversation drifted back to the case, and she tossed theories back and forth with her friend. As they spoke, Louisa got the distinct feeling that Rosalie was withholding information from her, or at the very least trying to distract her, which didn't make much sense, as Rosalie had a very low tolerance for bullshit and small talk.
When asked how Sergeant Todd was taking their meddling, Rosalie groaned. "He's as insufferable as always."

"I have a theory about that," Louisa said, pushing Rosalie's legs off and standing up. She didn't of course, but Louisa had a niggling feeling that her friend didn't want her to go upstairs. "I left it up in my room. Follow me."

True to her intuition, Rosalie sat up and grabbed Louisa's wrist, holding her in place when she turned to leave the room. "No, I believe you," Rosalie replied. "You shouldn't be moving around."

"I also shouldn't be discussing the case, yet here we are," Louisa pointed out, pulling away and making her way towards the staircase. "Is there a reason you don't want me to go into my room?"

Rosalie swore under her breath, confirming Louisa's suspicions. "Has anyone told me that you are annoyingly perceptive?"

"One or two people." They were at her bedroom door which was closed despite the fact that Louisa remembered leaving it open. She tossed a curious look over her shoulder to Rosalie who was standing behind her with an exasperated expression. Louisa gave her an impish grin before pushing open her door and stepping inside her room only to stop in confusion when her brain processed the sight in front of her.

Jasper was sitting at her desk, watching her with amusement, twirling a pen between his long fingers. A laptop she didn't recognise was humming from where it sat in front of him next to a stack of her neglected schoolwork. Esme had evidently finished her renovations, and with the removal of a majority of the built-in bookshelves and a fresh coat of light green paint, the bedroom looked less cramped and more cosy. The most startling addition, however, was a familiar full sized bed that had been tucked into the far corner of the room.

"Is that your bed?"

"Technically it's your bed now," Jasper pointed out. "You were supposed to keep her occupied, Rose."

"If you know how to keep secrets with her around, please inform me," Rose snapped, brushing by Louisa and crossing the room to sit in the window seat. "Between her and Edward, nothing will ever be safe again."

Louisa was too preoccupied with the large piece of furniture to feign offence. "How did you even get it into my room?"

"Through the window," Jasper replied in a tone that made it difficult to decide if he was kidding or not. When he noticed her hesitation, he reached forward and pulled her down into his lap, burying his face in her mane of hair. "I hardly need it and I can always make another."

A fuzzy feeling, one that made her feel loved and cared for, spread through her, starting in her chest and warming her all the way to the tips of her toes. She turned her head to nuzzle his neck and tried to convey her thanks without words. She must have done a sufficient job because she felt his arms snake around her and a purr rumble through his chest. Rosalie had enough tact to pull out a magazine and flip through it to give them a semblance of privacy.

At some point, Louisa realised that her eyes had closed, and when she opened them, her eyes focused on the laptop on her desk. It wasn't Jasper's and Rose refused to use anything that wasn't an apple product so it couldn't be hers either. And seeing as her laptop had been destroyed by the
unwelcome guest and the hard-drive seized by the police as evidence, she knew that it wasn't hers. "Emmett tried to save your old one," Jasper explained when he noticed her gaze. When Louisa didn't reply, merely blinked in surprise, he ploughed on, an undertone of worry lacing his voice. "It's not too much, is it? Alice said it would be fine but if it's too much I can—"

She cut him off before panic could set in. "It is fine, Jasper. It was very thoughtful." She tilted her head up to place a kiss against his cheek. "Thank you."

He relaxed under her touch and pulled the laptop closer, his fingers sliding over the trackpad while he showed her the new device. "It has all your files on it," he said before she could ask. "It's best you don't know how Emmett did it."

"It runs faster than that dinosaur you had too," Rose called out.

"I bought that two years ago," Louisa informed her.

"Precisely."

Louisa grabbed a pen from her desk and chucked it at Rosalie, who dodged it without bothering to look up from her magazine. She huffed in annoyance and snuggled back up to her boyfriend, who lifted a hand to run through her hair. The gift was a bit extravagant and would be hard to explain to her father, but Louisa recognised that Jasper's heart was in the right spot.

"My laptop," Louisa said suddenly, sitting up and turning to face Jasper. "He destroyed my laptop."

Jasper looked at her, confused. "Yes," he said slowly. "That's why I bought you a new one."

"No, like, why?" She closed her eyes and managed to bring up the image from her room, though it was foggier than she would have liked. The bed had been flipped, the drawers had been pulled out. Her backpack had its contents spilt on the floor.

She glanced over at Rosalie, who had dropped the magazine on the bench and was leaning forward. "Does it matter?"

"How many people break into a house and start ripping pages from books?"

"Someone who wants it to look like a burglary?" Jasper guessed.

"Then why break the laptop?" Rosalie countered. "Lou's right, it was a weird scene. He trashed the room, sure, but he obliterated her laptop."

"We thought it was because he saw me working on the case on my computer," Louisa said. "He had a camera in my room, after all. But think about it, how powerful would those cameras need to be to see what was on my screen?"

"Way more high-tech than what they found," Rosalie agreed. "He might have heard you talking about the case and assumed that that was where you kept your notes?"

"But why?" Louisa asked, a twinge of pain flashing across her brain. "What is it to him? Why does he care so much that someone is trying to solve this case?"

"People have tried before," Jasper reminded her, reaching up to massage her scalp. "And there's been a lot of opposition from the town. That's why Chief Swan doesn't tell people the case is still open."
"But breaking and entering with a side of vandalism is a bit different than complaining to the Chief of Police," Rosalie pointed out. "Lou is right. Whoever broke in is way more invested in stopping this case from being solved. What they did is going way beyond the call of duty."

"Exactly," Louisa replied. "But why would someone break into my house and destroy my laptop? That's the part that doesn't make sense to me."

"What if it was to scare you off?" Rosalie suggested. "It could have been a power play. To show you that he was in control of the situation and not you. That's why it was your room and not the whole house."

"You think he was a sending a message to me? Telling me to back off from the case?"

"Oh hell," Jasper said suddenly, his body stiffening beneath her. His hands were on her hips in an instant, holding them so tightly that she was afraid he might leave bruises. "Whoever broke into your house— they had to have killed Anna." When nobody spoke, only stared at him in confusion, he continued on, speaking so fast that he was tripping over his own words. "Think about it. Anna was killed in a locked house. Our intruder also managed to get into a locked house. What if they got in the same way? And if they did, what are the odds that two different people know about a tunnel that shouldn't even exist?"

It seemed that everyone was too shocked to speak after Jasper's proclamation. Louisa brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, trying to swallow the urge to vomit. Sure, she had a (somewhat) unhealthy fascination with true crime. But the knowledge that a murderer had access to her when she was sleeping? It was enough to turn her stomach. She was suddenly grateful that Jasper had insisted that he camp out in her room for the last few months. If he hadn't been there, would Louisa even be sitting here, having this conversation? Jasper must have had the same thoughts because his arms snaked around her, holding her so tightly to his chest that it hurt.

At last, Rosalie broke the silence with her musings. "I wonder if previous tenants got the same treatment. People reported that the house was haunted. Maybe he was messing with them too?"

"Can you find out who used to own the house after the Sweet's moved out?" Louisa asked. "We should talk to them and ask what actually caused them to move out."

Rosalie nodded before opening up the window and sliding out, evidently deciding that using the front door like a normal person would be too slow. They watched her go, staring at the open window long enough for the room to drop several degrees. After what felt like hours, Louisa managed to extract herself from Jasper's embrace and crossed the room to slide the window shut. She sank down onto the window seat and stared at her boyfriend who was sitting still as a statue in her desk chair.

"I know you don't like it—"

"Correct," was his sharp reply. He knew just as well as she did that she wasn't about to forget about the case; she didn't have to say it out loud. And whilst she was resigned to the fact that she would have to see it through, he was reluctant to let her. There was so much tension in his shoulders it looked like the slightest touch might break him in half. She yearned to cross the room again, curl up in his lap, relax his muscles, and soothe his worries. She could see that her decision was hurting him and the knowledge broke her heart. But she couldn't stop, just like she couldn't stop when her father and sister begged her to. She felt disgusted with herself. She raised her hands to rub them over her face, partly to stop the tears that were pricking her eyes from falling, but mostly so that Jasper couldn't see her face.
A dumb sentiment, all things considered. He could, after all, feel her emotions.

Cold fingers wrapped around her wrists, pulling her hands away to reveal her face. He was kneeling in front of her, eyes pitch black. But even with their darkness, she could still see the agony in them. She didn't realise that she was crying until a sob escaped her. She grabbed either side of his face and pulled him closer, placing her lips on his, trying to convey her feelings, even if she didn't understand what they were. The kiss wasn't sweet or happy. It was angry and sad, aggressive and possessive. It was passionate, not in a loving way, but an obsessive, all-consuming way that crushed her lungs. Still, despite all of the negative emotions swirling between them, she wanted—no, craved—more.

"I'm sorry," she managed to choke out when she broke away for air.

Jasper didn't respond so much as growl in response, pulling her off the window seat towards him. She went to him, wrapping her legs around his hips. Despite their feelings, despite knowing that they could only get comfort from the person that hurt them, they were still drawn to each other. Jasper's teeth raked over her bottom lip to the point that he almost broke skin and when she gasped, his tongue forced its way into her mouth. But as strong as Jasper was, as ironclad his will was, she was just as stubborn, and she wouldn't let him win. She shifted, sitting higher on his hips and forcing his head to tilt backwards, her tongue pushing against his, fighting for dominance. It was hard to tell who won (perhaps neither of them did), but Jasper eventually pulled away, his lips trailing down her neck, nipping at the skin.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. She felt a sense of self-loathing, knowing that she was not only the reason behind his pain but also because she was unwilling to fix it. There was a compulsion, a deep need to finish what she had started, that wouldn't allow her to walk away from the case. "I'm so sorry."

Everything sounded hollow and inconsequential. Her words didn't mean much when she couldn't follow through with her actions. But she truly was sorry for causing him pain. Still, she needed to tell him, somehow make him understand. When his nose skimmed back up her jaw, running across her cheek, that warm feeling rushed through her again.

He may not like her actions or her reasoning, but he knew.

"Would 'sorry' have made any difference? Does it ever? It's just a word. One word against a thousand actions." — Sarah Ockler
Jasper had stepped out of the shower when his mobile chirped, alerting him of a text message. Towelling off his hair, he swiped the device off the bathroom counter and wandered into his room. Alice had laid out clothes for him to wear, a note placed on top instructing him that he was not to change the outfit. He was surprised that she had bothered. Alice had been having confusing visions and would spend hours in a trance, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. He had been uneasy when she first mentioned them almost a week ago, which had morphed into full-blown concern when she started skipping school so that she could focus on them.

He glanced over his shoulder towards their shared bathroom, despite knowing that her door was still firmly shut. For her to take the time to pick out clothes for him to wear (something she knew he didn't like her to do) when she was already forgoing her much beloved human charade made his skin prickle with anxiety. Or maybe it was Alice's anxiety he was picking up on. He rolled his shoulders out and began dressing with his free hand, trying to read the latest text message from Louisa.

Louisa: I just wanted to let you know that if I die today, I appreciate you very much

It was difficult to tell if Louisa was serious or this was one of her fatalistic, Gen Z jokes. Before he had the chance to reply to this, his mobile buzzed again, and another text popped up on the screen.

Louisa: and I think you've got a glorious ass.

A joke then.

Much appreciated. Why do you have doubts about your continued existence?

Dottie's driving us to school today.

My condolences. I'll prepare a beautiful eulogy for your funeral.

She responded with a series of emojis, few of which he knew how to decipher. Rolling his eyes at his mate's antics, he tucked his phone into his pocket and picked up his backpack, ready for school, despite his unwillingness. The only reason he attended was because Alice insisted. And Louisa.

God, he hoped he wouldn't have to go anymore after she was changed.

He exited his room and started down the hall, only to pause when he reached Alice's room. Despite her desertion, he still felt loyalty to his best friend, and with the amount of angst pouring out of her room, it hardly felt right to leave her. He pushed open the door without bothering to knock (it's not like she had any concept of boundaries anyway) and strode into the room, dodging a pile of fabric she had left lying on the floor- her latest project which she had abandoned when the visions first started. Alice was sitting on her fainting couch, knees pulled up to her chest, and wrapped so tightly in a fuzzy blanket that only her face was visible.
"I can dress my self, you know," he said, coming to a stop next to her.

"It's important. You are wearing that today," Alice said, her eyes screwed shut. "I can't figure out… it's all so confusing."

He sighed and sat down next to her, pulling her into his lap, her head tucked under his chin. They sat in silence as she browsed the future and he ran his hand through her short hair, sending her waves of tranquillity. She sighed, the tension leaving her body, and she leaned her head against his arm.

"There's been a decision," she whispered, her voice muffled by the fabric of his shirt. "But I don't know who's made it. There is… I think it has something to do with a box?"

"A present?" He had been toying with the idea of giving Louisa a birthday present, though he assumed she wouldn't want to actually celebrate the event. Perhaps that was what Alice was seeing?

"I don't know," she sighed, rubbing her face against him. "It's still undecided when it will be sent."

A pang of frustration rushed through her which he quelled almost instantly. He could hear Rosalie bitching at him downstairs to hurry up, which Edward attempted to cover up with a spritely tune on his piano.

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

"No!" her eyes snapped open and she all but glared up at him. "You need to stay with Louisa."

"I can't leave you like this, Ali," he insisted, pulling her into a tighter hug.

"No, you've got to stay with Louisa. You need to ride home with her today."

His hand stilled and he looked down at her in concern. "Because Dorothy is driving today?"

She pulled back to look at him in confusion. "What no—" Her eyes went unfocused for a moment. "Damn, she's dreadful at driving. Maybe."

Edward snickered in amusement, the music below halting and Rosalie took advantage of the silence to resume her yelling.

Jasper sighed and pressed a kiss to the top of Alice's head before sliding her back onto the sofa.

"You'll message me if you need me?"

She patted him on the cheek, her eyes already glassy and unfocused, and gave him a noncommittal hum of agreement. Jasper rolled his eyes and picked up his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder before he walked out the door. His siblings were waiting in the Volvo by the time he made it down the stairs, and he slid in next to Rose in the backseat. The moment the door was closed, Edward threw the car in reverse and took off down the long, winding drive.

"Hot date, Ed?" Emmett asked when the speedometer inched past one-twenty miles.

Edward let out a manic laugh. "Oh, I've got to see this." Though he didn't care to elaborate on what 'this' was.

They made it to Forks High in record time, Edward parking a spot far closer to the school than usual. Whatever had him so excited was apparently more important than the scratches his car
would receive. For lack of a better thing to do, the four remained sitting in the car, watching as students began to trickle in. Edward refused to take his eyes off the road, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. Jasper rolled his eyes, ignoring the youngest brother in favour of reading the barrage of status updates Louisa was sending him.

we left half an hour ago.

We live ten minutes away.

we haven't gone over fifteen miles an hour the entire drive.

dad says I need to be supportive and positive

I'm positive I'm going to die

After informing his mate that she was ridiculous, he put he looked up at the youngest Cullen, who hadn't lost the deranged smile from before. "Boy, you're grinning like a possum with a sweet potato?" Jasper noted. "What's got you so excited?"

Edward responded by pointing in excitement down the road where a silver Prius appeared, alternating between rolling and jerking halts. Jasper could feel Louisa's anxiety from where he sat.

"You're doing great, Dot," Louisa said, though her voice gave away her terror. The Collins' car inched into the car park, garnering curious stares from the arriving students. "Let's not ride the brakes, though, alright?"

Edward slapped his thigh and began to bounce in his seat.

"Holy shit!" Louisa screeched, her pulse skyrocketing. And for good reason too: Dorothy had hit a student crossing the lot. Not enough to hurt him or even to knock him down, but definitely enough to surprise him and cause him to drop the cup of coffee he was carrying. The boy looked back and forth between his coffee and the car a few times, trying to make sense of what happened, while inside the Prius, Louisa began yelling at her sister for her carelessness. Dorothy's face had lost all colour and she was staring, stricken at the boy she had almost ploughed down.

"Seriously, Edward," Rosalie snapped, pulling out a book from her backpack. "You dragged us here for early for that?"

Edward held up a hand to quiet her, never taking his eyes of the Collins sisters. "Wait for it."

The boy who Dorothy had hit seemed to make up his mind on how to react. Picking up his empty coffee cup off the ground, he circled around the side of the Prius and tapped on the driver side window, indicating for Dorothy to roll down the window. She did so, her eyes wide.

"Dorothy, right?" When she nodded, her hands, the boy continued. "There are better ways to hit on me, you know."

They didn't get to hear her response because Edward broke out into delighted cackles.

Jasper sighed and got out of the car, ready to calm his mate down before she had a stroke. He sent a wave of calm to the girls as he approached, listening with amusement to Louisa try and talk her sister through parking. There was a lot more profanity than Mr Collins had been expecting when he told his eldest child to be supportive.

"Morning," he drawled, opening the passenger side door before Louisa had the chance to. She gave
him a wan smile and reached out with a shaking hand to take his own. He calmed her, slowing down her heart rate to a less concerning level and helped her out of the car. "Difficult drive?"

Louisa threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. "I'm alive," she said after pulling away. "And I can't wait until I'm cleared to drive."

Jasper hummed and pressed another kiss to her lips. "I'll ride back with you after school," he promised. He bent down to peer into the car. Dottie was still frozen in her seat, hands gripping the steering wheel so hard her knuckles were white. "Was that your first time driving, Dorothy?"

"Since the accident," Louisa whispered in his ear when her sister didn't respond. She pulled away to grab her backpack from the backseat. "We just need more confidence. Right, babe?"

Again Dorothy didn't respond. Jasper flooded the little Collins' veins with tranquillity and watched as the girl's muscles relaxed and her death grip on the steering wheel loosened. She nodded slowly before grabbing her own backpack and getting out of the car. Without a word, she placed the keys on the top of the Prius and walked away.

"Well, that could have gone worse," Louisa said after Dorothy disappeared into a crowd of students. She locked up the car before threading her fingers through Jasper's leading him in the direction of homeroom. "Dad and Dottie had a massive fight about it, not long after you left. She's been refusing to drive since Mum died. Dad hasn't had the heart to force her, but with me out of commission and him working, we don't have much of a choice."

"I could drive," he offered, holding the door to the school for her.

She gave him a sweet smile and raised their joined hands to kiss the back of his hand. "That's a thoughtful offer, but she needs to learn. If you want to give her driving lessons, though, I wouldn't be opposed." She shooed a couple that was making out on her locker away before entering the combination and tossing in her lunch bag. "What's wrong with Alice?"

Jasper wasn't even surprised by her question at this point. "Visions," he said quiet enough so that the group of students passing by couldn't hear. "We can talk about it later."

A locker slammed shut nearby at the same time the warning bell rang. Louisa jumped in surprise, a spike a pain shooting through her. Jasper stepped closer, his hands moving to rest on her hips, shielding her body from the throng of their peers.

"It will be alright," he murmured into her hair. "You're safe."

"There are be so many people," Louisa whispered, turning around to bury her face in his chest. "I can't do this."

"Of course you can," he replied, rubbing his hands along her ribs. "That's why we spent last week reorganising your library."

Louisa gave him a weak smile, raising up on to her toes to peck his lips. His reassurance was accompanied by a smile of his own, something that Louisa focused throughout her morning classes, especially when the presence of others became too oppressive. Even still, by the end of history, she knew far more about Emmett's night than she would have liked, and though she was excused from participating in gym class, she learned the impressive scope of Coach Clapp's k-drama obsession without having to exchange more than a few words with the man.

Although, she had to admit that *Hello, My Twenties* sounded pretty good.
New Netflix recommendations aside, Louisa found herself collapsing into Jasper's waiting arms the moment she stepped out of the gymnasium. She allowed him to lead her through the crowds of hungry students and sit her on a bench outside of the school library. He produced her lunch bag from his backpack, handing it to her before sitting next to her, pulling out a book to read while she ate.

Louisa found herself appreciative of his thoughtfulness as well as the silence and rested her head on his shoulder while she munched on carrot sticks. He shifted the book away when he realised she was trying to read it, giving her an unimpressed look before pressing a kiss to her temple. After putting the book away to remove any temptation on Louisa's part, Jasper informed her of Alice's visions (at least, what little he knew). While Louisa couldn't offer any insight into the matter, she enjoyed exchanging theories with him. The topic carried them through most of lunch, at least until the sound of footsteps approaching captured their attention. Louisa looked up just in time to see Edward wandering around the corner, her sister in tow.

"What happened?" Louisa asked, sitting up straight at the sight of her sister's tear-stained face.

"Tommy Garner was being an insufferable ass," Edward supplied, guiding Dottie to sit next to her on the bench. With Dottie taken care of, he backed up so that he could lean against the far wall, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Louisa pulled her sister into a hug, giving Jasper a smile when she felt a blanket of calm settle around them. "What's he done this time?"

"It's stupid," Dottie said after a shuddering breath. "It's not that big of a deal."

"I wouldn't say that," Edward said, eyes still fixed on the ceiling. While Louisa didn't interact with the youngest Cullen as much as she did with his other siblings, she recognised the gesture as Edward's weird way to give them privacy—something that was difficult to do with this mind-reading and impressive hearing. "He was quite rude."

Louisa's brow furrowed in confusion. If Edward, aloof as he tended to be, was getting himself involved in something, it had to be bad. "I'm going to find out," she told her sister. It was fortunate that Jasper's influence hadn't let up, or Louisa would have been out of her seat, ready to track down the little shit and beat him to a pulp. Even still, she had to take a calming breath before she continued. "It would be better if you told me now."

Dottie pulled away and buried her face in her hands. "He said 'like mother, like daughter,'" Dottie said. "Because I almost killed Noah this morning."

Louisa was out of her seat before she realised she had moved, blood pounding in her ears and a rage like she had never felt before coursing through her body. No, a baseball bat would be far more poetic for Tommy Gardner. She'd start with his legs first, that way he wouldn't be able to run. Break his jaw so she wouldn't have to listen to his screaming. She would castrate him for good measure—the world didn't need his spawn in it. Then crush his pelvis for no other reason but because it would hurt like hell. She'd have to wait for the rib cage, though. It wouldn't do to have him suffocate before she was through.

An arm wrapped around her waist before she got too far, spinning her around and pushing her against a wall. Jasper trapped her between the wall and his body, standing so close that she could see nothing but the buttons on his shirt. His hands gripped her arms, his fingers wrapping all the way around her bicep in an ironclad grip. "Don't be foolish," he hissed, tilting his head down speak into her ear.
For a fleeting second, Louisa thought he was telling her not to be angry, which only served to make her angrier. That was her mother, her dead mother who had been killed in a car crash, which Garner was talking about. She had every right to be angry. Especially when Garner was using her death as a weapon.

Jasper's lips touched the shell of her ear and in an instant, her thoughts became sharper, less frenzied. Through the haze of her fury came a moment of clarity. He wasn't telling her not to react. He was telling her to wait. If he hadn't wanted her to retaliate, he would have taken away her anger. But he hadn't. She could still feel it, burning icy-hot through her veins. No, he was telling her to wait. If she reacted now, ran off with a half-baked idea of murder with a blunt force object, she would be sloppy, leave too much evidence behind. If she wanted revenge, she needed to enact it with a level head. Something smarter, harder to trace back to her. It would be much more satisfying, watching Tommy Garner snap mentally, rather than feeling his bones snap beneath her. Though that did hold quite a bit of appeal.

More coldness ran through her veins under Jasper's influence. No. She needed to take her time with this. Tommy Garner would regret having harassed her sister. Louisa sagged forward, resting her head on her mate's chest, breathing in his scent. She still wanted to smash something, but she was decidedly less homicidal. He pressed his lips to her temple and she had to fight the urge not to pull his lips to hers in an aggressive kiss.

"He's terrified of spiders," she said, at last, pulling away from her boyfriend so she could see Dot. "I can fill his backpack with them. His locker too."

"Do you think you could get a jar of them into his bedroom by climbing through his window?" Dottie asked, her voice weak. She wasn't sure what she had just witnessed, but it made her skin crawl. She knew Louisa had a temper, but that was something to the extreme. And then there was the way Jasper had… dealt with it. Even then, she wasn't sure if she would rather have an apocalyptic Louisa or the cold, detached Louisa who was standing in front of her. She glanced over at Edward, whose already pale face had gone so colourless that his lips had bleached white. He was watching her sister with a look of horror on his face as if he didn't seem to know how to react to Louisa's sudden change either.

"I'm not one for heights," she replied with a huff. "Besides, they keep the key to the house inside the window box to the right of the front door."

Dottie gave a watery chuckle at that. "As long as they aren't poisonous."

"Of course not," Louisa replied. They'd be venomous. She made a mental note to look up where she could find enough spiders to suit her needs. The bell signalling the end of lunch hour rang and Louisa sighed heavily, rubbing a hand across her face. "We can talk about this more when we get home."

Dottie nodded and took off towards her next class. Edward lingered for a little longer, looking slightly nauseated, having no doubt heard her thoughts.

"Then he should butt out of her head, she thought, irritated, as she grabbed her backpack where it lay abandoned on the bench. Jasper's hand wrapped around hers for a moment before she ducked under his arm, resting her head against his shoulder. He bent down and nipped at Louisa's ear, distracting her long enough to steal her backpack, slinging it over his shoulder before she had the opportunity to protest.

Rosalie seemed to understand something was wrong when the two entered into Spanish and wordlessly offered her chair to Louisa so that she could sit closer to Jasper. Louisa tried to give her
a friend a smile of appreciation though it came out more like a grimace. The class was unremarkable in the fact that nothing interesting happened, though Louisa guessed that had to do with Jasper's influence, as Mrs Goff would have objected to their seating arrangement on a normal day. After Spanish, Jasper walked her to Calculus, pressing a swift kiss to her jaw, a trend that continued until school finished for the day, much to her relief. And perhaps Tommy Garner's life.

The drive home was much smoother than the drive to school. Jasper rode shotgun, guiding Dottie through the motions of operating a car, his gift keeping the anxiety levels of the Collins sisters down to a manageable level. Without the all-consuming fear of dying in a crash, Dottie even managed to drive the speed limit at one point. Louisa dozed in the backseat, relieved that the day was over and surprised that she had made it through the entire day. She had a splitting headache, though she couldn't be sure if it was because of her concussion, interacting with too many people, or her anger.

Dottie turned onto their street at a snail's pace, passing by Chief Swan's house, his cruiser parked in the driveway. Their house appeared a moment later, icicles hanging off the front porch and a family of misshapen snowmen sitting on the front lawn.

"Did you order something?" Louisa asked, noticing a brown box sitting on the stoop. It was a bit too early for the mail, but maybe it hadn't been delivered with the USPS?

"Not that I can think of," Dottie replied, pulling into the driveway and parking the car.

"Maybe it's your birthday present?" Louisa supplied, unbuckling her safety belt and sliding out of the car when it came to a full stop. Dot's sixteenth birthday was less than a month away and Louisa could only hope that Dot's sweet sixteen was better than her own had been.

Louisa scurried up the front path as quick as she dared, dodging patches of ice that refused to melt despite the copious amount of salt her father had applied on top of it. The air had a humid, frigid quality that promised more snow in the near future and clouds of condensation trailed in the air as she hurried towards the warmth of the house. Hot tea and a heated blanket crossed her mind, though, knowing Jasper, he would probably end up stealing the blanket from her. She skipped up the steps and bent down to pick up the box, calling for Dottie, who had the house keys, to hurry up. She needed to stop meddling. It was her fault. She just couldn't leave it alone.

Louisa froze. Where had that come from? She glanced down at the box in her hands. Unmarked, without postage or even a return address. Where had this come from? It had to have been hand delivered, but by whom? More curious than before, Louisa brushed passed her sister and into the kitchen, not bothered to take off her snow-covered boots. Digging a pair of scissors out of a drawer, she sliced open the top. And gagged.

Jasper felt Louisa's panic a split second before he heard her vomit into the sink. Not caring if Dorothy saw him moving at an inhuman speed, he was in the kitchen before Louisa had straightened up. He was by her side in an instant, pulling back her hair and turning on the faucet to rinse away the sick. The smell hit him next, the unmistakable, nauseatingly sweet scent of burned flesh, emanating from the package Louisa had brought inside. He inched forward, surveying the box's contents, or more accurately, what was left of it. The charred remains of what appeared to be a crow.

He glanced back at Louisa who was washing her mouth out, taking note of her mental state. He reached out with his power, mentally stroking her, trying to calm her. Only nothing happened. Confused, he stepped towards her, resting his hands on her hips, hoping that the contact would increase his influence. It did nothing but to cause her to jump in surprise and spin around.
"We need to get out of here," she whispered, pupils blown wide.

His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"He's going to blow us up."

He glanced between the package and his mate in confusion. Had she picked up on something? Was there something besides a dead bird in the package? Had someone sent the Collins' a bomb? He stepped closer to the box, inhaling and trying to detect the presence of chemicals beneath the scent of death. Louisa grabbed him before he got too close and pulled him back.

"No, don't get too close," she hissed, her panic increasing. "We need to get out of here before he comes back."

"Who?" Jasper asked, not understanding the urgency behind her words. There was nothing else inside the package and certainly not something that could blow them up. "Did you see something?" He reached out again with his gift and tried to calm her but to the same results. It wasn't often his gift didn't work on people. He had noticed that humans on the autism spectrum didn't react well to his influence, and those with schizophrenia rarely saw any benefit from his emotional manipulation, particularly during a psychotic episode. But Louisa didn't have either condition, so why was she suddenly outside his sphere of control? Unless…

"We're going to be next!" she shouted, grabbing him by the wrist and yanking him towards the back door.

… she was suffering from a flashback of some sort. He slipped a handkerchief out of his pocket with one hand and grabbed Louisa around the middle with his free arm, dragging her over to the spice cabinet. It didn't take him long to find the bottle of peppermint extract, which he poured out onto his handkerchief, the cool, sharp scent stinging his sinuses. He guided the handkerchief to her nose and instructed her to breathe deeply. Her fingers clutched at the back of his hand, pressing the cloth closer to her face. Whether it was because the scent of the bird had been replaced or because the peppermint grounded her, Louisa slowly sunk back against Jasper's body as his calming influence, at last, began to relax her.

He glanced back at the charred bird, and to his surprise, he saw that Dorothy was standing at the bench, a look of disgust twisting her features as she peered into the open box. "Don't touch that," he commanded. "We don't know what's in it."

"Well we can't keep it in here," she snapped. "Or else it will just start again." Her eyes darted to her sister, whose legs no longer seemed capable of supporting her.

"This has happened before?"

"Last time it was burned bacon," Dorothy replied. "We don't cook meat often, especially not pork. She says that one smells most like it."

"It?"

"Human flesh," Dottie finished in a whisper.

He almost demanded an explanation to how his mate could possibly know what that smelled like but he stopped when a sudden, horrifying realisation came over him. Louisa wasn't a vegetarian because she disliked the taste of meat or was morally opposed to eating it. It was because it reminded her of what happened in Seattle. He had a vague idea of what had happened from what he had been able to coax out of Louisa, but she had always remained stubbornly silent about that day.
"Do you think it is from him?" he asked, pulling Louisa tighter to his body.

Dorothy shook her head. "He's being held without bail until his trial. They're supposed to notify us if he's released early."

"Go get Chief Swan," Jasper commanded. "I don't know who sent this, but I'm not taking any chances." She bit her lip and sent an anxious look to her sister. "She's staying with me. Go now."

There was a flash of irritation, but the little Collins complied, and a moment later the sound of a slamming door echoed through the house. He half carried his mate into the lounge, pulling her down into his lap after sitting down on the sofa. She collapsed against him like a boneless cat, her hand falling away from her face with a thump. He went to press the handkerchief back to her face but she turned her head, pressing her nose to his neck.

"It was him," Louisa said quietly. "Anna's murderer.

"How do you—?"

"It felt like him," she explained, her warm breath fanning against his cool skin. "He's pissed. He knows we're investigating. It's a warning to leave it alone."

Every fibre of his being wanted to tell her that she should follow the suggestion, but he held his tongue, knowing it would be pointless to argue the matter further. "It hasn't been publicised," he said instead, lifting a hand to run his fingers through her long hair.

"He has to be a local," she whispered. "This is a small town. Even when things should be a secret, people find out about it. He knows now, and he's terrified."

"Does he think you're on to him?" Jasper could hear Dorothy returning with Chief Swan. He hated to press her but he knew that their time for a private conversation was running out.

She shrugged and nuzzled her face against his shoulder. "He thinks we are. Or will be. I'm not sure. I don't want to touch it."

He dipped his head so that he could kiss the spot between her eyebrows. "You don't have to."

The front door opened, bringing Chief Swan and a hesitant Dorothy, who, after showing the man the package, joined them in the lounge. Louisa shifted, sliding out of Jasper's lap, but not before pulling him in for a brief kiss. What followed next was a flurry of all police officers Forks had to offer, who catalogued the box, dusted for fingerprints, and interviewed the three students about the package. Not that there was really much to tell. After all, Louisa could hardly inform them that it had been sent as a warning to stop her from snooping.

But it turned out, she didn't have to. Not even half an hour after the police arrived, the door opened once more and Sergeant Todd entered the house. He walked into the lounge, his gait lacking its usual confidence and swagger, his hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched in on themselves. He dropped into the chair across from the sofa and watched Louisa for a minute, his eyes weary.
"Because," Sergeant Todd said, the freckles that covered his face standing out against his abnormally pale face. "I got the same thing, nine years ago."

"How people treat you is their karma; how you react is yours." – Wayne Dyer
"Someone sent you the charred remains of a bird nine years ago?" Louisa managed to ask. Jasper had gone so still next to her that she was positive that he had stopped breathing. Her hand sought out Jasper's before she was aware of it, their fingers intertwining. His grip was so tight he was cutting off the circulation to her fingers, but she was reluctant to bring it to his attention. The pain helped ground her and focus her scrambled mind.

Sergeant Todd let out a massive sigh and slid farther down into his chair. He raised a hand to his face, rubbing his eyes. "My pet cat, actually. Though he didn't set it on fire. That's new."

No one seemed to know what to do with this information and the room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Dottie, having had enough of the tense atmosphere, excused herself, and wandered into the kitchen to make tea. Louisa almost wanted to follow her. Instead, she closed her eyes, her brain conjuring up the numerous police reports filed in Forks that she had read. Most were minor things like traffic violations or petty theft. Some were more serious, like domestic violence or possession of drugs. In 2002, eighty-three-year-old Mrs Parkington filed a complaint against her six-year-old neighbour who she believed was possessed by the devil. But nobody had reported someone killing their cat that she could find. That alone was odd: why would he not have made a police report? Louisa was no expert on Washington's animal welfare laws, but she was sure that killing someone's cat was illegal. The absence of a police report wasn't the only thing that bothered her, though.

"You didn't live here," Louisa blurted out. "We looked up every person who owned this house since the Sweets and no one with the surname Todd ever lived here."

"You don't leave any stone unturned, do you?" Sergeant Todd gave an unamused chuckle and shook his head. "My maternal grandparents owned the house."

"Norman and Edith Hoffman?"

"We get it, Miss Collins," Todd replied with an eye roll. "You did your homework. I stayed here the summer between my senior year of high school and my first year of university with my younger brother. My parents sent us here while my dad was undergoing chemotherapy." His eyes were unfocused as he surveyed the room as if he was remembering what it had looked like nine years earlier. "I had heard about the murder, of course; in a town this small, who hadn't? My grandparents were the first to own the house after the Sweets moved out, and had lived there for several years by the time we joined them.

"My brother and I needed a distraction from what was going on with Dad, and solving a mystery seemed like something that would keep us busy. We spent a lot of time in the library, researching the murder." He huffed, a smile tugging at his lips. "The librarian must have thought that we were up to something, with how often the two of us were there."

She could imagine. Two teens in the library during the summer did seem weird. And considering how rare it was to see newcomers in such an isolated town like Forks, Louisa probably would have been suspicious too.

"Not too long after that, the 'hauntings' started. Things would go missing, only to be found in odd places (if we found them at all). We'd hear footsteps upstairs, talking in another room, crying. The stereotypical sort of thing. Then it began to escalate. There'd be movement in the walls, breathing. On more than one occasion, we'd come home, only to find that all our research had been either stolen or destroyed. Once, after a shower, green slime leaked from the vents." Todd shivered at the
"We started finding notes too. Telling us to leave." At this, he reached into his jacket pocket and extracted an Altoids tin. He flipped open the lid and pulled out a weathered, folded up square of paper, which he handed to Chief Swan, who had been watching the young sergeant with an expression of horror. When it was passed to Louisa, she was disappointed to see that the words 'LEAVE NOW!' had been written in a chisel tip marker. How unoriginal.

"He's left-handed," Jasper noted, pointing at how the letters were smudged, even accounting for the age of the note. His chin was resting against her shoulder and he was holding her so tightly to his body it was beginning to hurt. "That at least can narrow down the suspect pool."

Louisa felt a strange sort of pride at his words and had to resist the urge to kiss him, choosing instead to inspect the note that had been passed to her, her finger tracing the letters on the paper. Her initial shock of Sergeant Todd's words began to recede as she inspected the note only to be replaced by suspicion; his story seemed almost too well rehearsed and convenient to her. If he had lived in the house and experienced the things that she had, why hadn't he reported it to anyone? Before he joined the Forks police department, there wasn't any record of him living in the city either. Not only that, he had tried to stop the investigation of Anna's murder on more than one occasion, yet now he was claiming that he had once tried to solve it?

The note itself was odd too. Jasper was correct when he said that it had been written by a left-hander, but a quick glance at Sergeant Todd told her that he was ambidextrous. He could just as easily written the note himself and the capital letters would also help to disguise his handwriting. And then there was the odd feeling that emanated from the note: it was hard to describe, but it felt almost anxious as if Sergeant Todd carrying it around for nine years had left an emotional thumbprint on it. Or was it because he had written the note and was nervous that they would find out? It wasn't that difficult to distress a piece of paper. And then there was the timing of it all. He just happened to be carrying this piece of paper with him at all times?

She handed the note back to Chief Swan, who placed it in an evidence bag. If the note was genuine she doubted that, given its age and the fact that everyone had handled it without gloves, that there would be any physical evidence left on it. Was the point? Or was she being paranoid?

"This is interesting, and all," Louisa said. "But a dead cat is different than a vaguely threatening note. What would have caused the escalation?"

"We were close, I think," Todd explained. "We must have been. We figured out what Collins did: that Anna knew her attacker, that he was probably older than she was, and that he most likely had some sort of position of authority over her. We knew that she came from a religious family, so we theorized that he might have been a youth leader or some sort.

"Then my cat went missing. We had brought her with us for the summer because Mom was worried about animals around my dad's weakened immune system. Poppy hated the rain and never went outside, so we knew something was wrong when we came home from the library one day and she was gone. She wouldn't have run away." Todd lapsed into silence, looking down at his hands. "The next morning, when my grandfather went to get the morning paper, he found a box on the front porch, and inside was Poppy. Or what was left of her, I suppose. Granddad wouldn't let me see her, but it wasn't pretty, from what I've gathered.

Louisa was so engrossed with Sergeant Todd's tale that she had completely missed that Dottie had re-entered the room until she let out a strangled sob. She disentangled herself from Jasper and moved to sit next to her sister, pulling her into a hug.
"My grandparents wrote it off as a cruel prank. But that night, I found this on my pillow." He pulled out a picture from the Altoids can and unfolded it, passing it around the room. It was a picture of two teens: a young Sergeant Todd and a younger boy who could only be Todd's brother. They were walking parallel to the photographer, and the brothers appeared to be conversing with each other. It was clear from the photo that whoever had taken it had done so without the two's knowledge. The younger boy's face had been circled in black marker and written underneath in the same block letters were the words, 'HE'S NEXT.'

"We dropped the investigation after that. My brother moved back in with our parents and I left for university."

You could have heard a pin drop, the room was so silent. Nobody seemed to know what to say or how to even react. Even Dottie had stopped crying, save for a few stray tears that rolled down her cheeks.

"Why is this the first I'm hearing of this?" Chief Swan demanded. "Why didn't you report this nine years ago?" A valid point. Louisa was almost relieved that he had brought it up if only so she didn't sound paranoid herself.

"And risk something happening to my brother?" Sergeant Todd replied with a scoff.

A logical reply.

"Why did you come back then?" Jasper asked. "If you were worried about your brother's safety, why did you return? Surely he would have recognised you."

"It was a calculated risk. I heard that this house had been bought by the Seattle girl," Todd explained, turning to look at Louisa. "I had to stop you from investigating. You've fought me, every step of the way. But now you know." He sat forward in the chair, his elbows resting on his knees as he watched Louisa with an imploring expression. "This will be your final warning. You need to drop this. We all do."

That hardly made sense: how would a total stranger know that she would try to solve the Sweet murder? Even if he was concerned about the case being solved, he could have stayed away from Forks. He would have been safe until everything had blown over as he had done for the previous nine years. Instead, he involved himself in the investigation even further. If he hadn't been a target before, he had might as well have painted a bulls-eye on his back by returning to Forks.

And now he wanted them to drop the whole investigation, especially when they were so close? Louisa didn't think it was possible. Besides the need for long, overdue justice, didn't he want to know who killed Anna? Was he not curious? Did it not keep him awake at night, running over theories as it did her? How could he live with themselves, with the knowledge that he had let a murderer walk free? A murderer who could murder again?

"No." It was Jasper who said this. The occupants of the room jumped at the sound of his voice, which had taken on a commanding, almost threatening tone.

Todd looked up at her boyfriend in surprise before a look of annoyance flashed across his face. "Look, son—" he began.

"No," Jasper repeated, this time more emphatically than the last. "We won't be 'dropping' the matter. You want to protect your brother, fine. Be a coward and run. But I won't be cowed into submission by a man who doesn't have the fortitude to confront me." He rose at this and moved to stand behind Louisa, placing his hands on her shoulders. His thumbs dug into her skin as he
massaged her shoulders with a little too much force to be comfortable.

"The best thing would be for him to be behind bars. We'll be walking around, looking over our shoulders in fear for the rest of our lives, if we don't," Louisa agreed.

"Think of your sister," Todd snapped, pointing needlessly at Dottie. "This man could go after her next. Do you not care? Are you really so arrogant to believe that you are untouchable?"

It was a dirty move, using Dot's safety against her. She looked down at her sister still wrapped in her arms, whose face was tear-stained and bloodless, and for the first time since she began investigating the Sweet murder, she felt a strong thrum of guilt at her actions. Her little sister was terrified. What kind of sister would Louisa be, if she didn't do everything in her power to protect Dot? Sure, solving the case would mean a murder would be off the streets but was solving this really protecting her sister? It clearly caused her emotional distress. Would the man harm Dottie if Louisa continued investigating like Sergeant Todd implied he might?

"We can take Louisa off the case," Chief Swan suggested.

"And what good will that do?" Todd asked. "He already knows that she's been investigating it. Even if she stops, he would think it was a bluff. She's already a target."

Was that a threat or a fact? Her stomach rolled when she realised she couldn't tell.

"Then we solve it," Louisa said, finding her voice at last. "We're a target already, whether I stop or not. The faster we solve it, the faster it goes away." It sounded naïve to her own ears, but still, she persisted. "Look, I don't like it any more than you do, Sergeant, but this new development proves to us that we are on the right track. He's panicking now."

"Panicked people act irrationally," Chief Swan pointed out. "He could lash out and hurt you."

Louisa was thankful for the tight grip Jasper had on her shoulders, otherwise, she would have leapt across the room to grab Chief Swan and shake him vigorously, shouting 'Whose side are you on?' Instead, she took a calming breath, gritted her teeth, and allowed Jasper to lower her blood pressure before she had a stroke.

"Panicked people also make mistakes," Jasper explained for her.

"I think he's already made a big one," Louisa pointed out, reaching up to give Jasper's had an appreciative squeeze. Chief Swan and Sergeant Todd turned their eyes to her, staring at her in confusion and annoyance. "He knows that we are investigating the case, sure, but it hasn't been publicised that I have been included in it. The only way he could know that is if he knows me."

"He did have cameras throughout your house," Chief Swan pointed out. "Of course he knew that you were involved."

Jasper shook his head. "Not necessarily. He knew that she used to be. Sure, small-town gossip might have seen her hanging around the police station, but there is no reason for them to know how involved she is."

"And nobody knows how close we actually might be to solving the murder. They might know we're investigating it but not much more than that," Chief Swan conceded.

"The only people who could know that I am involved are the people who I've interacted with," Louisa explained.
"You've already spoken to him," Chief Swan breathed.

It was a frustrating realisation. It felt like they were standing in a dark room, holding nothing but a candle, and every time they lit a new one, they could see that the room was even bigger than they had previously thought. All they could do was fumble around, hoping to stumble upon what they were looking for, all the while not knowing if it was safe.

Chief Swan had her write down a list of everyone she had spoken to about the investigation, everyone who she had interviewed. It was simultaneously too long and alarmingly short. She hadn't spoken to too many people, yet it was long enough that it could take weeks to rule anybody out. The worst part was, that most of the people who knew about her involvement she trusted.

Some people, like Dottie or Petya, were ruled out at once. Both lacked the motive, and in Petya's case, had a solid alibi in the four-hour drive between Tacoma and Forks. Jasper and the Cullens were also excluded, as none of them were in Forks when the murder occurred.

There were some of Anna's former teachers: Mr Mason, Coach Clapp, Mrs Tran, Mr Hewitt. They had been interviewed, but their motives for killing Anna were about as foggy as their recollections of her.

Ms Morales, Anna's mother, had been much more cooperative than her ex-husband in the investigation, but was it possible she was hiding important information? Has she been coerced into silence, like Sergeant Todd? Was that why Mr Sweet was so confrontational when they had approached him for an interview?

And then there was still Sergeant Todd, who looked sour at the prospect of continuing the investigation. Sure, he hadn't even been in Forks when the murder took place, but those notes could have been faked. Was he being blackmailed or was he hiding more? After all, who spent close to a decade hiding such a dangerous secret?

The arrival of a charred bird served two purposes that day: to unsettle Louisa and scare her away from the case and to introduce seeds of doubt into the entire investigation.

No Stone Left Unturned

Later that night, after the rest of the Collins had retired for the night, Louisa lay awake, waiting for Jasper to make an appearance. She didn't have to wait long. He arrived shortly before nine, appearing on the bed next to her. She peeled the covers down for him and he slipped in next to her, folding his body around her and resting his head on her chest. She ran her fingers through his hair, which normally would have elicited a purr from her boyfriend, but he remained quiet, intent to listen to her heart. Louisa figured he wasn't in the mood to speak— neither was she if she were to be honest.

"What happened in Seattle?" Jasper asked, at last, his voice soft.

Her hand froze for a brief second. She knew that the question was bound to come up at some point and she was surprised Jasper had waited so long to ask. She had told him bits and pieces, of course, but never discussed it at length with him. Not even Rosalie, who was as nosey as Louisa was herself, knew what had happened that day. He had respected her silence on the matter, but she knew he was curious, if only so that he could understand her better. But now that curiosity had morphed into concern. After witnessing her breakdown he was worried for her, and Louisa knew it wasn't fair to him, keeping him in the dark when he wanted nothing more than to help her.

Still, it didn't make reliving a traumatic event any less difficult.
She sat up, pulling her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on top, staring at the opposite wall while she considered her words. Jasper sat up with her and picked her up, depositing her in his lap, and wrapping his arms around her body.

"I first started on the Seattle case in late February of 2017. Women were disappearing from downtown—not any location in particular. We noticed that it was more likely to happen in places with higher homeless populations. The Seattle PD didn't even know that it was happening."

"But you did?"

"No," Louisa said slowly. "A man, Jason, who worked at a soup kitchen actually contacted me. He told me how two of his regulars hadn't shown up in a few weeks. He assumed that they were ill but when he asked around, he learned that nobody had seen them either. He had read about me in the newspaper and reached out." Louisa began to pick at the skin around her nails. "I went out to Seattle, took some notes, and left them for the Seattle PD. I didn't live there, so I figured I would let them handle it. About a month later, Mum and Laurie died."

She fell silent for so long that Jasper was sure she wasn't going to continue. He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck, hoping to ease some of her anxiety. Her body relaxed from the tight ball she had curled herself into and she turned in his lap to better face him, though she had trouble meeting his eyes. Her hands lifted to his shirt and began fiddling with it as she spoke, her voice distant.

"Once the shock wore off, I kind of went off the deep end. The adrenaline rush that I got reminded me that I was still alive. I needed something to distract myself and I latched onto the Seattle case."

"Sometimes it feels easier to fix another's problems than our own," Jasper conceded, pulling her to his chest. She went willingly, burrowing her head into his shoulder and taking in an unsteady breath. "So you went back to Seattle?"

"Pyotr would come with me if only to make sure I didn't do anything too stupid. The problem is, he's never been good at telling people no. He's more of a follower than a leader. Petya's only ever had me and his dad, and he gets overwhelmed trying to make his own choices," she explained, sadness and guilt lacing her voice.

Jasper carded his fingers through her hair and wrapped her in a blanket of comfort when he felt her anxiety rise. She gave him an appreciative smile and leaned up to press a soft kiss to his lips before sinking back down into his arms.

"In July, I decided to visit the soup kitchen and interview some of the people that were there. It was late afternoon when we arrived. We didn't even make it to the kitchen when a woman pulled us over. She told us how her friend had disappeared a few hours ago and that was out of character—the friend had a baby at home and wouldn't wander off. I should have called the police at that point, but I didn't. I went after the friend instead.

"We didn't know where the victims were kept, but we guessed that it had to be somewhere isolated enough that they wouldn't be discovered. I knew, somehow—and looking back, I guess it was the psychometry thing—that it was a warehouse, so we started checking every abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city. It took hours, but we stumbled across it. I should have called the police then, but I didn't. My reasoning was that we didn't have time."

"The ultimate adrenaline rush," Jasper interjected. His body has stiffened beneath her, eyes widened with horror, and Louisa found herself rubbing a hand up and down his chest in an attempt to alleviate his distress. He took her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. "Darling, that's reckless to the point of insanity."
She squirmed in his lap and he felt her discomfort flare. "I was just… I was in a bad place after Mum died."

That was putting it lightly, Jasper thought. Her actions sounded borderline suicidal. The thought caused his chest to constrict and he leaned forward to skim his nose along her jaw if only to remind himself that she was still safe. He wanted to interrogate her about her behaviour but that was a whole 'nuther bucket of possums. Broaching the subject would only cause her to shut down and he wanted to know what happened next.

Sighing heavily, he rested his head on her shoulder. "What happened then?"

"We broke into the warehouse. The woman was there, still alive. She wasn't even tied up, just lying there on one of those wood shipping pallets; Pyotr guessed it was because both of her ankles were broken. That's when he returned."

Jasper pulled away so that he could look at her, his brow furrowed. "The perpetrator?"

"It was the man from the soup kitchen. Jason Lambe."

"The one who brought the case to you?" Jasper asked, unable to stop himself. "Why? If nobody had linked the cases, why call attention to them at all?"

Despite the gravity of the conversation, Louisa had to laugh at his reaction. "I think he was bored, to be honest. It's like a game to them, I guess, only instead of game pieces, they use humans. Nobody was playing with him, so he brought the game to someone he knew would."

They fell into a pensive silence at this. Jasper was familiar with the type of person she was describing. He remembered working with men during the war who had seen their soldiers as little more than cannon fodder, rather than actual humans. Hell, he had been guilty of this himself on more than one occasion. But that had been war. Even as a vampire with very little patience for humans he could never imagine being so callous with a life.

Jasper was jarred from his introspection when she continued to speak once more. "Anyway, when Lambe walked in, we ran. Or at least tried to. Petya carried the woman, which slowed us down a lot, but we couldn't leave her behind. We made it all the way to the far side of the property, where there was this tall chain link fence. If we had made it over, I think we would've been safe. Petya helped the woman up to the top first but she wasn't able to get down to the other side because of her ankles. Petya went next and turned to help me over. Louisa broke eye contact with him and began playing with his fingers. "I wouldn't scale the fence. It was too high."

"You're afraid of heights?" He guessed.

She let out a self-derisive laugh, shaking her head. "Stupid, isn't it?"

"Everyone is afraid of something," Jasper murmurs, leaning forward to nuzzle her jaw. "Alice is afraid of lightning and Edward is afraid of geese."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't usually almost get people killed," she sighed. "Dad blames Petya for what happened that day, you know. It was my fault. If I wasn't such a coward, we would've all made it."

"If you had called the police in the first place, none of it would have happened," Jasper pointed out. She looked up at him in betrayal at his words and he reached forward to rub his thumb along her cheek. "If I hadn't stopped my horse for three women on the side of the road to Galveston, I wouldn't've been changed. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, darling." He pulled her to his chest and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "What happened then?"
She burrowed her face in his upper arm and when she spoke, her voice was muffled. "Lambe hit me over the head with a baseball bat."

"Suitably dramatic," Jasper interjected.

She giggled but didn't look up at him. "It was a control thing, I think. He could feel us injured, opposed to a gun, which keeps a distance between him and his victim." She paused, her whole body stiffening, a thought occurring to her. "Control…" Louisa muttered, sitting up.

"I beg your pardon?"

Mind racing, Louisa hopped off the bed, and grabbed Jasper's hand, pulling him with her. She dragged him towards where the tunnel lay, sealed behind a foot of wood, metal, and insulation, and leaned her back against the wall so that she faced him.

"Choke me," Louisa instructed.

"Excuse me?"

Louisa rolled her eyes and moved his hands up to her throat. "The way someone kills can speak a lot about how they think. So, you're Anna's murderer and you're choking her." The look he gave her indicated that he thought she was a lunatic, but he didn't move his hands away. "She was standing right about here when she died," she began.

"The case file said that her father found her in the bed was lying in the bed," Jasper added, playing along, trying to ignore how soft and delicate the skin felt under his hands and the way her pulse thudded against his fingers.

Louisa was still watching him, her grey eyes burning with the intense fire they always possessed when her brain was running a million miles a second, waiting for him to finish speaking. "You said that it was significant that he moved her. Do you think he moved her because he needed to get to the tunnel?"

Louisa hummed in thought, reaching up to stroke Jasper's fingers. "I suppose it's possible. It's just…" She dropped her hands, only to hook her fingers through Jasper's belt loops, and pull him closer. "It doesn't make much sense."

Jasper wasn't following. What didn't make sense? The murderer killed the girl and needed to get out of the room. Why wouldn't he move her out of the way? When he voiced as much, Louisa shook her head.

"He could have dragged her a few feet out of the way. He didn't need to pick her up and move her across the room. He moved her not out of necessity, but because he felt that he had to."

Her fingers disentangled themselves from his trousers, only for them to slide up his hips and slip underneath his shirt, hands coming to rest on his waist. Despite that she was unaware of her movements, he had to suppress a shiver of pleasure at her touch.

"If you were to kill me, Jasper, how would you do it?"

The question was jarring and about as welcome as a porcupine at a nudist colony. "I wouldn't," he said, offended that she would even ask.

She didn't seem to realise what she had said if the distant, glassy look in her eyes was any indication, but merely speaking her thoughts aloud. "Would you make it fast, or would you prolong
"I would never—"

"If I had to do it, I think I'd use poison," she said in the same dazed voice. A flash of panic coursed through his veins at her words. As if sensing that she had upset him, though still very much lost in her thoughts, her thumbs began to stroke his hips in an almost soothing gesture. "That way I wouldn't have to be around to watch them die. It might be slow though. It might hurt them. I think you'd do it fast, so I wouldn't feel any pain. Break my neck, maybe."

"Please stop," Jasper whispered, his hands releasing their light grip on her neck to slide them up to cradle her face. "Please don't talk like this. I don't want to even entertain the idea of killing you." Because he had before, and it made him sick to his stomach. Not killing her on purpose of course, but there wasn't a day that went by that he was unaware that he could kill her, especially by accident. She was so fragile compared to him. He had killed before, felt their lives drain from their bodies, seen the light leave behind their eyes. If he wasn't careful, it could just as easily be her.

Why was he even touching her now? His hands dropped from her face and he took a step back. A painful throb shot through his chest and he suppressed a gasp. He knew that it was idiotic for him to be so close to her, especially with her still human. But he couldn't leave, not when he had gotten so close to her, become accustomed to having her in his daily life. He was a selfish creature and he didn't want to leave. The only option would be to change her, as he knew he should have done the day he met her, if only to save himself from the heartbreak. But then that would break her heart and that would break his heart to break her heart and—

Perhaps it was the lack of contact or the discomfort he had projected towards her, but when Louisa met his gaze it had lost the distant, pensive look in her eyes and had replaced it with one that was contrite. Stepping forward, she wrapped her arms around his neck and she shifted onto the tips of her toes to kiss him, whispering an apology into his lips, though the regret she felt was more than adequate in conveying her apology for him.

"Sorry about that," she murmured, burying her face in his shirt. "I'll behave now, I promise."

He hummed in appreciation, playing with the ends of her long hair whilst he collected his thoughts. "Was there a point to your morbid soliloquy?"

She nodded, her face rubbing against his chest. "Lambe chose a baseball bat. Anna's murderer chose strangulation," Louisa explained in a clearer voice than before, pulling away enough so she could focus on him better. "It's painful and slow. She would have suffered. He would have felt her die. That's personal. And then he moved her body. He didn't dispose of it or set it on fire like Lambe. He placed her in the bed where she would be found. Because he wanted her found."

The answer came to Jasper at once, not through any deductive reasoning or brilliance on his part, but because he had once been in the murderer's shoes. "He felt remorse for what he had done," he said. "He wanted her body to be found because he felt guilty that he had killed her. He put her to bed because that was the only way he could respect her after what he had done."

"He didn't put her there to make a spectacle of her or to brag about what he had done, and he didn't want to destroy the evidence or hide her," Louisa agreed. "He loved her."

That was going a bit too far, Jasper thought. "He killed her," he reminded her.

"He didn't mean to," she replied, resting her forehead on his chest. He pulled her closer to his body and began to run a hand up and down her spine. "He was so angry. She was going to expose the
affair and he was afraid that it would ruin his life. But he didn't mean to kill her. He's still a massive dick for doing it and deserves to go to jail, but it wasn't premeditated murder."

Jasper could feel the exhaustion from the day beginning to overwhelm her and he scooped her up into his arms, carrying her to the bed. He slid in next to her, wrapping the duvet around her before burrowing his head into her shoulder.

"Do you believe him to be dangerous?" Jasper asked. Contingency plans began to formulate in his head should this godforsaken investigation go south. If the situation got more dangerous, Jasper wondered if it would be more prudent to change her. A human would be less of a threat to a vampire, after all. They would need to leave the state though. He had a small cabin in Colorado which he had built several decades ago; they could go there, at least until her newborn year was complete. There wasn't running water or electricity, but that could be remedied.

Louisa took a moment to respond. Seemingly without her knowledge, a hand rose up to stroke Jasper's hair whilst she considered his words. "It's hard to say," she began. "While I don't believe he meant to kill her, he's desperate to keep it a secret."

Jasper tilted his head back so he could rest his chin on her shoulder. "I don't understand; why does it matter that he feels remorse for what he's done? How does it help us to know that he wants to keep his involvement in the crime a secret? Wouldn't anybody?" Jasper questioned.

"Not necessarily. People like Lambe involve the police because it makes them feel like they have power and they do it believing that nobody is smart enough to actually catch them. But Anna's murderer, he's desperate, and desperate people do desperate things. They're unpredictable," Louisa explained. "It matters because it helps us understand him. If we understand him, we can find him."

"Nothing is easier than denouncing the evildoer. Nothing more difficult than understanding him." – Fyodor Dostoyevsky
Dr Bernadette Krantz had created an impressive life for herself. After fleeing the dreary town of Forks upon her graduation from high school, she was accepted to Brown where she doubled majored in psychology and chemistry, graduating summa cum laude after three years. From there, she went on to obtain a PhD in chemistry from Harvard. She was currently employed by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and living in the much sunnier Atlanta, Georgia with her husband of four years and their two cats. She wasn't very tall, standing at five feet two inches, though the three-inch heels that she wore compensated for her lack of height. Her dark brown hair was smoothed back into a severe bun and though her brown eyes were obscured by a pair of thick red glasses, she gave off the impression that she was not a woman to be trifled with.

Yet none of that all seemed to matter as she sat under the harsh fluorescent lights of the Forks Police station, her shoulders hunch while she listened to and attempted to answer the questions of a bored Sergeant Todd. The fingers of her left hand drummed against her thigh with an uneven tempo, a pen rolling between the fingers of her right. Her eyes cast nervous glances around the room when they weren't focused on the piece of paper that contained the statement she had made over a decade before.

Louisa watched through the one-way mirror as Chief Swan and Sergeant Todd volleyed question after question at the woman, watched as the normally well-spoken scientist tripped and stumbled over her words, and watched as the muscles in her body wound so tight they seemed like they might snap from the tension. She had to look away when the first tear slid down Dr Krantz's cheek.

"What are they hoping to accomplish in there?" Louisa ground out, grabbing a nearby chair and throwing herself into it.

Rosalie didn't respond, instead tilting her head tilted to the side, watching the interview through narrowed eyes. "Does anything look wrong to you with this scene?"

Louisa snorted and tossed a disgusted look at Sergeant Todd's back. "Besides the fact that they are botching the interview? Mark my words, Todd's going to waltz in here the moment he's done and proclaim that this was a waste of time and taxpayers'—"

"She's surrounded by men."

At Rosalie's gentle words, Louisa sat up in her chair, focusing on the interview that was crashing and burning less than ten feet from her. Sergeant Todd had stood up and was pacing the room, circling the table at which Dr Krantz and Chief Swan both sat. The former chief of police who originally oversaw the Sweet case had been invited to the interview and was leaning back in his chair next to Chief Swan's, starring at the ceiling in disinterest. Off to one side, an acne-scarred officer was huddled into a corner working on a completely unrelated case (as the interview room technically doubled as his office), his fingers flying across the keyboard of the laptop perched on his knees. And in the centre of it all, sat Bernadette, who was being asked in the most insensitive of ways, to recall a traumatic event that had occurred some eleven years prior.

Surrounded by men indeed.

Louisa didn't have the opportunity to respond before Rosalie had leapt from her chair, storming out of the observation room. She rose and followed after her, more interested in what her friend might do than the travesty that was masquerading an interview. By the time Louisa had rounded the corner, Rosalie had already descended on the desk of the lone female police officer Forks had to
offer, a young woman who looked barely old enough to be out of college, let alone having graduated from a police academy.

She watched as her friend tossed herself in the chair next to the desk, her face transforming from a scowl to sweet, cautious smile. "Hey Officer Nguyen, you got a sec?"

The young woman looked up at them in alarm at their sudden appearance but nodded none the less. "You can call me Mary. Everyone does."

Rosalie shrugged. "Sure thing, Officer Mary. Are you busy?"

Officer Mary glanced up at Louisa in confusion, who was only able to offer a shrug in response, before focusing on Rosalie. "Not particularly."

"Do you want to hijack the interview?" Rosalie asked, tilting her head and looking the picture of innocence. "They're going to bungle to the investigation in there."

Officer Mary's eyes widened at the candour with which the girl spoke. She hadn't interacted much with the two high schoolers, as she was usually acting as the gopher for the more senior officers on the force, but it was usually stories of Louisa Collins' abrasiveness that she heard, not Dr Cullen's oldest daughter. "I've never conducted an interview before," Officer Mary replied after a moment to recollect her thoughts.

Louisa couldn't stifle the snort that rose up from her chest. "By the looks of it, neither have they."

Rosalie waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "It wouldn't hurt to ask, would it? They have been able to learn anything useful. If there is nothing to learn, then there is no harm in you trying."

After a moment of hesitation, the young officer nodded, causing identical, wolf-like grins to spread across the teens' faces. In the blink of an eye, the two descended on her, handing her file folders she hadn't even know that they were carrying, lists of potential questions to ask, and, for some reason, a box of tissues. They whisked her away in the direction of the interview room, hissing instruction on how best to get Chief Swan and Sergeant Todd out of the room. Louisa Collins, it would seem, had quite the silver tongue.

Surprisingly enough, their instructions worked, and Officer Mary was left in the interview room with Dr Krantz. They watched in surprise as the former Chief of police grumble as he followed after an annoyed looking Sergeant Todd. Even the officer who used the interview room as an office vacated the area. The two women were left in a sort of stunned silence which was only punctuated by the ticking of the analogue clock on the wall.

Officer Mary introduced herself with a firm handshake to the doctor, hoping her hands weren't as sweaty as they felt. She offered the woman water, which she declined before she sat down in the chair opposite Dr Krantz. She shifted the papers in front of her as if this would somehow help her collect her thoughts. It didn't. In fact, all it managed to do was knock the cheat sheet of questions Louisa had given her off the table and onto the floor.

"How old are you?" Dr Krantz said, watching Mary through narrowed eyes.

Thoroughly off balance at the question (wasn't she supposed to be asking the questions?), Mary managed to stutter out, "Twenty-four," without sounding too pathetic.

Dr Krantz sighed and slid down into her seat. "Let me guess, your first interview?" She didn't wait for confirmation before steamrolling on, her words clipped. "They figured it doesn't matter who took my statement, I suppose. It's not like they're going to find out who killed Anna."
Mary figured that it wouldn't be the best time to admit that two juniors at the local high school were behind all of this, not the police. Instead the words, "Do you know who did it?" slipped out of her mouth and she fought the urge to slap herself.

Dr Krantz levelled an impressive glare at the young officer. "If I did, I would have told the police when they asked me, eleven years ago. Is that all that you're going to ask? Because I have a lot of things I need to do, none of which involve this Godforsaken town." She rose from her seat as if to leave and Mary found herself diving across the table to grab a hold of the woman's wrist. This interview wasn't going well.

"Ma'am, please," she whispered. "I want to help."

Dr Krantz watched Mary for a moment, the lenses of her glasses obscuring her dark eyes, her lips pursed. "Why?"

Mary's brain raced for an answer, trying to find one that didn't seem stupid or sound vain. "Because..." panicked, her brain swirled around, searching and unable to settle on an adequate response.

"Because it's the right thing to do?" Dr Krantz sneered. "How noble of you." She wrenched her wrist out of Mary's hand and started towards the door.

Mary stood up so fast that her chair clattered to the floor. "Because Anna deserves better than what she got," she snapped, her voice much stronger than she expected. It sounded strong without being aggressive, and Mary found that she kind of liked it. She would need to remember it the next time one of the other officers tried to pawn their paperwork off on her. "Because I wasn't here eleven years ago. But I'm here now, and I want to help Anna."

Bernadette's hand paused over the doorknob. She didn't turn around, but her head was tilted, listening to what Mary was saying. Emboldened, Mary took a step towards the woman, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Let me help her. Help me put her murderer in prison. Help me bring closure to her mother. Anna deserves justice."

They settled back at the table, Mary flicking on the tape recorder and began shifting through the stack of notes Louisa had shoved at her on her way into the room.

Start easy, Louisa had hissed into her ear as she and her friend frogmarched her towards the interrogation room. Establish rapport with her. Make her like you, trust you.

"When did you first meet Anna?"

The question seemed to surprise Bernadette. "I always knew her. I can't remember a time in my life when she wasn't a part of it. Our parents went to church together, so we grew up together. We were in the same year at school," she replied. "Sunday school, primary school, even throughout most of high school."

"So you spent a lot of time together, then?" Mary asked, settling down in her seat, growing more confident that Dr Krantz wasn't going to leave. "What sort of things did you get up to?"

Bernadette shrugged. "What most girls get up to, I guess. We used to have sleepovers and make movies with her mum's camcorder. She was always a bit of a drama queen," she replied, a soft smile playing at her lips. "Once, I slipped when we were filming and cut open my knee— there was blood everywhere and I ended up needing stitches. Anna was the one who fainted."

"When you say she was a drama queen," Mary began, trying to choose her words so they didn't
come across as aggressive. "Would you say that she liked to be at the centre of attention?"

"It was more like she overreacted to things. If her favourite characters broke up on television, you'd have thought it was actually her that got dumped—she'd have to miss school the next day, she would be so distraught. And if you told a joke, no matter how funny, she'd laugh until she cried," Bernadette replied, drumming her fingers against the table. "She felt things more deeply than other people, I guess. Things affected her more, no matter who they happened to. Your wins were her wins, and your losses were her losses. People liked that about her and she had this sort of infectious personality where you always felt like you wanted to make her happy because then she'd share it with you."

"So she was popular then?" That more or less lined up to what Mr and Mrs Sweet had said in the original investigation.

"I guess. She wasn't Heather Chandler popular," Bernadette explained. "But you would have been hard-pressed to find someone who had anything bad to say about her. Well, at least, before…"

The implication that this was no longer the case anymore hung heavily in the air. Mary might not have grown up in Forks, but she had heard whispers of how wild Anna Sweet could get, especially after a few shots of alcohol. She lifted the box of tissues Louisa had provided to the doctor, who accepted one with a weak smile.

"After she was murdered, everyone claimed to know her secrets. Which is ridiculous, of course—Anna only told me everything. And what she didn't tell me, she wrote in her diary."

Her diary. Louisa had mentioned something about a diary after interviewing Anna's mother. Mary rustled through the notes in front of her, extracting the notes from that interview, scanning them. This was the second time someone had mentioned the diary. The original investigation had never turned one up. "Could you tell me about this diary?" she asked.

Bernadette tilted her head, her brows furrowing. "She started keeping one when she was eight, I think. Wrote in it every night. I never got a good look at it. Whenever I saw it, it was because she was shoving it under something." She shook her head and focused on Mary with such an intense expression, the police officer had to force herself not to squirm in her seat. "You think she might have written in it her boyfriend's name?"

Mary's eyebrows shot up at this, disappearing beneath her fringe. "Her boyfriend? She had a boyfriend?"

"Technically, no," Bernadette explained through pursed lips. "I always suspected that she did, but I was too afraid to ask. Anna became increasingly secretive in the year leading up to her death. All of the sudden, she would be too busy to hang out or she'd be going out of town for the weekend. I would ask her about it and she'd give evasive answers: a service project with the church, or going to see her grandparents, or she'd have too much homework, or she had play practice. I believed her at first, because why would she lie? We told each other everything." Bernadette leaned forward and rested her crossed arms on the table. She looked away, her eyes focusing on a distant memory, and when she spoke, her voice was quiet. "We went to the same church though, and I knew there were no service projects, or else I would have gone too. That was my first clue something was wrong. I asked her about it, of course. She didn't talk to me for a week. I never brought it up again."

On the other side of the mirror, Chief Swan and Sergeant Todd had joined the two teens and were watching the interview with rapt attention. Despite the shaky start, Officer Mary had indeed been able to get Dr Krantz to open up and the two were chatting like old friends. The tension had all but
drained out of Dr Krantz body, and her words were less sharp and more informative. What the two men had tried to do for a whole hour, Officer Mary had accomplished in less than half that.

"She's doing great," Chief Swan said, his eyes trained on the back of Officer Mary. "How is she doing this?"

Rosalie glanced at Louisa and they both rolled their eyes at the same time.

"Was there any sort of mentor in her life? An adult she was comfortable with? It could have been a sports coach or a youth group leader."

Bernadette actually laughed at that. "Anna only ran if someone was chasing her," she explained through chuckles. "But she liked the chemistry teacher. Mr Hewitt. We all did. He was young, just out of college. Anything with math was not Anna's strong suit but he would spend hours after school tutoring her."

Mr Hewitt? That didn't make any sense. Louisa had interviewed the chemistry teacher and he claimed that he barely knew her. Sure, he probably had had many students over the years, but one would think that the girl you used to tutor, especially if she was murdered, would stick out. Something wasn't adding up here, and Louisa wished more than anything she could burst into the interview room and take over the questioning herself.

As if sensing her thoughts, Rosalie laid a hand on her shoulder, shaking her head. Not only would it undermine Officer Mary's confidence in her interviewing abilities, but it would most likely piss off Dr Krantz. The interview continued uninterrupted for some time as the two discussed Anna's behaviour in the months leading up to her death.

"That wasn't Anna's room, you know?" Bernadette explained when asked about the day of Anna's death. "Her room was originally the one that faced the front garden."

Louisa sat forward, her eyes narrowed in concentration. She had never thought about it before, but Anna was an only child. It would make much more sense for her to take the bigger room, over the tiny library. So why did she switch rooms? Was it because of the secret tunnel? It must have been if that was how her lover had been able to sneak in and out. The only question being, was the tunnel there before or after the bookshelves were built?

Officer Mary seemed to be thinking along the same lines because she made a note on the case file. "Who built the bookshelves?"

"Her dad and one of the neighbours, I think. It was supposed to be for her seventeenth birthday but it took longer than expected. Anna always wanted to be surrounded by books—a personal library, sort of like Belle, from Beauty and the Beast."

Chief Swan pushed Sergeant Todd out of the viewing room at this proclamation, with the order to contact Mr Sweet, no matter what. "Go to his damn house if you have to!"

On a whim, Louisa chased after him, confident that Rosalie would fill her in on anything important. She perched on the edge of his desk, earning a scowl from the surly officer. "Ask him about the diary," Louisa instructed.

"I'm not your errand boy," Todd snapped.

Louisa fought the urge to roll her eyes. "We need to find that diary, Sergeant. If Anna wrote in it who—"
"We have no proof that she did," Sergeant Todd pointed out. "Even if she wrote his name down—"

"She would have."

"It won't prove that he was her murderer."

"Circumstantial evidence is still admissible in court," she reminded him. He paused at this, and sensing him wavering, Louisa decided good old fashioned begging couldn't hurt. "Please."

Sergeant Todd sighed. "Any idea what he should look for?"

Louisa wanted to make a sarcastic comment about looking for a diary but held her tongue. For once, the two were holding a civil conversation and she didn't want to ruin it by antagonising him. Instead, she leaned forward, resting her chin on her fist, and let her mind wander.

Anna kept a diary, meaning she was most likely detail and goal oriented. She was a personable woman and had a lot of friends. Yet she valued her privacy. Her diary was a secret to even the most trusted of her friends. She would have hidden it well, not under a pillow. She would have kept it somewhere safe, where she could keep a close eye on it. The police would have run across it when they searched the room and her belongings, so she hid it well. Inside the vents, perhaps? But no, it would have been found after the police found the hidden cameras in the house or even by the person who placed the cameras. Under the floorboards? No that would have been too difficult to access on a regular basis. Somewhere easily accessed, if you knew where to look. She had so many books that her father built bookshelves into the walls of her bedroom one year for her birthday. English would probably be her favourite math was her worst subject she struggled academically she had dyscalculia you know Anna always wanted to be surrounded by a personal library she could always be a librarian for her seventeenth birthday.

"She loved reading." She wasn't sure when her eyes had closed, but when she opened them, she noticed Sergeant Todd watching her with an almost concerned expression on his face. Louisa reached up to wipe her nose and was unsurprised when it came away covered in blood. "She would have kept the diary close at hand for easy access but disguised it so nobody could read it. If I were her, I would have made it look like a book."

"Which book?"

"Her favourite. You'll have to ask him what that was," she said, swaying as she stood up. "If you don't mind, I'm going to go…"

"If you get any blood on my things, I'm arresting you."

Louisa gave the sergeant a mock salute before stumbling in the direction of the toilet, pinching her nose to stem the bleeding. Fortunately, either the nosebleed wasn't that bad, or Louisa was becoming more adept at stopping them. She bent down and splashed cold water on her face, removing all traces of blood from her face. No doubt Rosalie would smell it when she left the interview room, but at least it would be easy to convince her that it wasn't a big deal—she hadn't even fainted this time, which was fortunate because she doubted Jasper would let her out if his sight that had happened again. She was, after all, still banned from investigating, thanks to the concussion she had incurred the previous month.

The door behind her opened and Dr Krantz entered, startling when she caught sight of Louisa. When the two made eye contact in the mirror, Louisa could see a look of concern flash in the older woman's eyes. Dr Krantz inched towards her and laid a hand on the teen's shoulder. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"
Louisa gave her a weak smile and nodded. She could understand the scientist's concerns: Louisa did look a fright. Her skin was ashen and her cheeks had hollowed out in the last few months, and she knew that beneath her clothes her ribs and hipbones were beginning to jut out, a fact that concerned Carlisle. Beads of sweat were forming at her hairline, despite that she was so cold that her skin had goose pimples and her toes were numb. All in all, Louisa was hardly the picture of health. "Nosebleed. I get them a lot," her explanation punctuated by sniffs.

Dr Krantz's eyes widened and darted down Louisa's body. "Oh," she replied softly before slipping into one of the stalls. Louisa fled before the woman could come back out.

After collecting her belongings, Louisa bid farewell to Chief Swan before exiting the police station. Rosalie was already in her shiny red BMW and had the engine running the moment Louisa slipped inside. "Dr Krantz thinks I'm a coke head," she said, pulling on her safety belt.

"What are we going to do with you?" Rosalie sighed as she threw the car in reverse and peeled out of the car park. Within minutes, they were on the road that would take them out of town, towards the Cullen's house. "You're a walking disaster."

Louisa shot her friend an impish grin before lifting her hands to the vents. The rain had picked up while they were inside the station, and Rosalie had to turn her wipers on high in order to see through the torrential downpour. At least it wasn't snowing, Louisa had to remind herself. "Don't worry, I'll save all of my major travesties for when you return on Tuesday. I wouldn't want you to miss out."

Normally, the two would spend Saturday together, but Alice had foreseen a sunny day on Monday and proclaimed that the entire family would go on a hunting trip. Jasper had told her about it the previous evening, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice, practically giddy at the prospect of catching carnivorous prey. Mountain lion was a rare delicacy near Forks in recent years, apparently.

"Yeah, about that," Rosalie began. "Alice said that it's going to be sunny Tuesday too."

"I hope you know that I can't be held accountable for what happens in your absence. You and Jasper make up eighty per cent my impulse control, and I tend to get destructive when I'm bored."

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "Jasper will return by Monday morning, so do try to curb your urges until then. I might come back too if I finish early. Emmett enjoys playing with his food and I have no desire to stick around and witness it. Alice will definitely be back by Tuesday night. She says that we'll be having a movie night at your house. Something called Gal-entine's day."

"Who am I to bet against Alice?" Louisa said with a shrug before turning to watch raindrops streak across her window. The soft hum of the engine and the pelting the rain on the windscreen the only sound filling the silent cabin. Despite their light-hearted conversation, the interview they had witnessed weighed heavily on the minds of both girls. "Do you think Mr Hewitt did it?"

"I don't know," Rosalie said, her voice soft. "Whatever you do, don't engage with him, if you can help it. At the very least, wait until Jasper or I am there."

"I have no plans to," Louisa sighed, sinking lower into her seat and rubbing her face. "The idea of running into him on Monday makes me want to vomit."

"Don't go in then. Say you're not feeling well. You've been ill so much lately that nobody will question it."
"I've missed too much school. I don't want to fall behind," Louisa explained. Besides, it was completely ridiculous to be afraid of him. She had no proof that Mr Hewitt was Anna's killer. A lot of damning circumstantial evidence, certainly, but no physical proof. If only the medical examiner hadn't lost the skin samples he had taken from under Anna's nails. How did one even lose a vital piece of evidence from a murder investigation?

And then there Louisa's memory-visions she had seen. The one from the closet came to mind first. She got the impression from the memory that it would have been a big deal for Anna and her boyfriend to get caught—a way bigger deal than if it was two horny teens in a supply cupboard. Was it because Anna was seeing her teacher? And then there was the memory from the night Anna died. What had she said?

"Better yet, maybe I should just go straight to the police. I bet they would be really interested that you've been fucking your eighteen—" had she been about to say student? The thought made her stomach clench.

"Mum was a teacher, you know," Louisa began, watching the trees whizzing by as Rosalie sped towards her house. "She always said that her first year of teaching was the most difficult and that she almost stopped teaching after it."

"I didn't know that," Rosalie said, turning to look at her, her face set in a frown. "What did she teach?"

"Physics. She taught for ten years, but she always said that she never forgot her first year. She learned a lot during it, apparently." Louisa's voice drifted off as her thoughts raced, her grey eyes stormy and unfocused. "Mr Hewitt said that Anna died his first year of teaching," Louisa added. "But Anna died her senior year. So unless she took chemistry as a senior, then she couldn't have had him as a teacher. It's possible that he got the years mixed up, of course…"

"You think he was lying?"

"He said he didn't know her that well, and yet he tutored her?" Louisa looked down at her hands in her lap, resisting the urge to pick her cuticles. "I don't like this, Rose." Now that the seed had been planted, more and more strange things didn't add up about the chemistry teacher's story. And then there were her visions. First of Anna, telling her boyfriend that she was pregnant: Louisa had never gotten a good look at the man's face, only his blue eyes. She knew from the vision in the closet at school that the man had dark hair, but that description could apply to so many men. The fact Mr Hewitt had these features could be a total coincidence.

Louisa leaned forward, digging the heels of her hands into her eyes and suppressing a groan. What she wouldn't give to be able to see the surroundings, rather through someone else's eyes during one of the visions. If only she could turn around and see the man's face the day he killed Anna. If only she could turn on a light in that damn cupboard. Instead, all she got was a vague idea and wicked headaches. What was the point of her 'power' if it couldn't even be useful? She couldn't use it to solve the case unless she wanted to be locked up in a mental hospital after explaining how she came across the information. And the case...

She sat up, trying to ignore the ringing in her ears as she did so. "Do you think we're doing the right thing?" At Rosalie's curious glance, Louisa elaborated further. "Is solving this case the right thing to do?"

Rosalie slammed on the breaks and Louisa flew against her safety belt, which dug into her skin. Her friend paid no mind to her discomfort, however, and turned to face her, eyes wide. "What the hell are you going on about?"
Louisa shifted in discomfort under Rosalie's scrutiny. Okay, so perhaps Rosalie wasn't the best person to ask these sorts of philosophical questions. But the words were out there now, and she would have to commit to it. "Are we doing the right thing by solving this case?" she managed to say, her voice low.

"Is— are you fucking serious? Of course, it is."

"Jesus Christ, Rosalie," Louisa snapped. This wasn't going well. Rosalie was the absolute worse person to ask. She took a deep breath, trying to word her next sentence so she didn't sound so combative. Or insane. "My sister is in his son's maths class. It's a real fucking person that we could be sending to jail."

Nailed it.

"And it's a real fucking person that he killed," she retorted. Her eyes had narrowed to dangerous levels and Louisa was certain that if they weren't friends, she would be dead.

The air felt too hot and the walls of the car seemed to be closing in on her. She realised on some level that she was panicking but that level was very far away and completely inaccessible to her at the moment. She wished Jasper was there. He would understand her worries, wouldn't he?

Louisa dove for the car handle, only to watch as the door locked, courtesy of Rosalie's superior vampire reflexes. "No, you're not running from this. Explain it to me."

But Jasper wasn't here. He was back at his house, no doubt preparing for his upcoming hunting trip, and it looked like she would have to comfort herself. She swallowed and it felt like a lump of coal was being shoved down her throat. Focusing on her hands, she tried to collect her racing thoughts and ignore the death glare Rosalie was giving her. She could understand Rosalie's agitation, of course. Rosalie took this case personally, especially after what had happened to her. The last thing Louisa wanted her friend to feel was like she was betraying her. And in a way, maybe she was. So why did she feel this way? God, why did she have to say anything? There was no way in hell that Rose would let her drop the conversation.

"Who are we helping?" she asked, her voice quavering. At least she wasn't crying; that would have really pissed Rose off. Small daily victories, she supposed. "Solving this won't bring Anna back. And will it be any comfort for her parents to know that their child's killer was her tutor and teacher? If it's Mr Hewitt, what about his family? They'll have to deal with the fallout from all of this too. I mean, if we're right, and it does turn out to be Mr Hewitt, think of the impact it could have on not only his family but the entire town. For fuck's sake, after Anna died, people tortured her family. What would they do to his family? If they even believe that he did it, of course. This could turn the town against itself, people siding with Mr Hewitt as the likeable small-town science teacher or siding with the girl they more or less vilified for years! It could turn into one of those he-said-she-said things, where Mr Hewitt will get off with a light slap on the wrist, and then what happens?"

She took a deep breath, which rattled her shoulders and left her feeling light-headed. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it might burst. "It's just… what's the point of it all?"

Rosalie didn't respond, but the judgment in her yellow eyes was more than enough. Without a word, Rosalie started the car, pulling a U-turn and driving back towards town. It looked like Louisa wouldn't get to say goodbye to Jasper after all. The drive to Louisa's house was painfully quiet and the tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. It made her chest constrict and her eyes water. Rose and she had had disagreements in the past, sure. Their spirited debates in homeroom were the thing of legends if Emmett were to be believed. But this wasn't a disagreement. This was a
lot more serious. If only she had kept her fat mouth shut.

The BMW pulled up to the Collins' home, stopping in the drive behind Louisa's silver Prius. She didn't even put the car in park. Knowing when to retreat, Louisa unbuckled her safety belt and scooped up her bag from the floor.

"I never took you for a coward, Louisa Collins." Rosalie's voice was cold as ice and Louisa froze, hand poised over the door handle.

She wasn't sure why the words stung so much.

Louisa didn't respond. She wasn't even sure how to. She settled for opening the door and sliding out of the car. Rosalie took off before she had the chance to step back, the tyres squealing as the car took off back down the street and she flinched at the sound. She wasn't sure how long she stood in the drive, watching the street. She couldn't feel the rain drenching her or the coldness soaking into her bones. She didn't feel much of anything.

She knew, realistically, that Rosalie was pissed off and would be fine once she cooled down a little. But it didn't feel like that. It felt like she was losing a best friend, all over again. The last thought she had before tearing her eyes away from the street and trudging inside, was if this was only the beginning of the fallout from the investigation. And the worst part was that it wasn't solved yet.

"One day soon, you'll hear a car pull up to your curb, an engine cut out. You'll hear footsteps coming up your front walk. Like they did for Edward Wayne Edwards, twenty-nine years after he killed Timothy Hack and Kelly Drew, in Sullivan, Wisconsin. Like they did for Kenneth Lee Hicks, thirty years after he killed Lori Billingsley, in Aloha, Oregon.

The doorbell rings.

No side gates are left open. You're long past leaping over a fence. Take one of your hyper, gulping breaths. Clench your teeth. Inch timidly toward the insistent bell.

This is how it ends for you.

"You'll be silent forever, and I'll be gone in the dark," you threatened a victim once.

Open the door. Show us your face.

Walk into the light."

-Michelle McNamara
Rosalie was ranting. This wasn't anything unusual: Rosalie enjoyed ranting and Jasper was more or less a willing audience. It was unusual, however, that Louisa was the topic of said rant. Rosalie hadn't been so incensed since the day the two girls had met. Jasper listened to her dutifully, torn between wanting to defend his mate and offer sympathies to his coven member. It was two days into their trip and Rosalie was still angry about a discussion she had had with Louisa over her doubts in the investigation.

"I'm surprised it's taken so long," he murmured, staring out over the trees. The view was quite lovely, even in the winter. The snow-capped trees looked like they were covered in powder sugar and icicles glittered when they caught the sun. He wondered if Louisa would enjoy it. Unlike himself, she never seemed to mind the snow. Though the edge of the cliff he was sitting on would certainly give her pause. He wondered if she would allow him to help her overcome her fear of heights.

His comment threw his adopted sister off kilter. She stopped pacing, and Jasper was certain that if he were to turn around, Rosalie would be glaring at him. She was angry enough. "What do you mean?" she snapped.

"For her to have doubts," he explained. "I'm surprised that she didn't have them sooner."

"She shouldn't be having them at all!"

"Her feelings are valid, Rose," he chastised. "This is the first investigation where she is involved directly."

"She solved all those—"

Jasper was shaking his head before she had the chance to finish. "Those aren't the same. She couldn't see the impact it would have. You're correct, of course. If Hewitt is guilty, he should go to prison. Louisa knows this too."

"Then why is she pussyfooting around?"

"She didn't know those people like she does the people in town. She knows Mr Hewitt and his children," he explained, patting the rock next to him. Rosalie plopped down next to him with a dramatic huff, the toe of her boot brushing against his ankle.

"I know them too," she argued.

Jasper shook his head again. "No, you don't. You separate yourself from the townsfolk; you don't bother to know them," when she opened her mouth to argue, he turned to give her a tight-lipped smile. "I'm the same way. Alice and Emmett are too, to an extent."

"Not Edward?"

"He's already expressed his concerns to me," Jasper admitted. "Despite how much he and Louisa argue, they are quite similar."
"Edward is the most reclusive one out of all of us."

"Physically, perhaps," he conceded. "Because of his gift, he is rather attached to the people in town, no matter how hard he tries. He knows them too well. He cares quite a bit for them, truthfully."

Rosalie rested her head on his shoulder and they stared out over the scenery in silence. In the distance a flock of birds took flights, the distant sound of Emmett's booming laughter punctuating their indignant squawks. "So she cares too much? That's why she doesn't want to solve this case or get justice for Anna?"

"She does want to finish it," he disagreed. "But she's afraid to do so. Despite Edward's continued insistence of her psychopathic tendencies, she is not without compassion."

"She has compassion for a murderer."

"Indeed." There was no point in denying it. "But such is the curse of humans. They are such fickle creatures. Then again, so are vampires. How many times did I convince myself that the human I fed upon deserved to die? Yet, every time I did so, I felt remorse for my actions. It is a burden, to play the judge, the jury, and the executioner."

"But she's not playing any of those roles. She's investigating a murder."

"Isn't she?" Jasper said in mild surprise. "In this case, she believes she is faced with a situation where solving the case might not the best course of action: one of her peers could lose a parent, like as she did, albeit under different circumstances. For her, that is as tragic to her as letting a murderer walk free. Her personal feelings have confused her, and in turn, confused the relationships she has with sleuthing."

"So because her mum died, she doesn't want to send a murderer to jail?"

Jasper huffed in frustration, trying to explain his thoughts in a way Rosalie would be receptive to. "Think of it this way: solving mysteries has always been a positive experience for her. She shows up, fixes everyone's problems, and the world is a better place because of it. She's starting to see the impact she has on those around her. No matter the outcome, she ponders how useful her mystery-solving is or whether some mysteries are better left unsolved. These are difficult lessons to learn, Rosalie, and she is still so young. We shouldn't be surprised to see her struggle with it."

The silence that followed was a long one, not that he minded. They stared out over the snow-covered terrain once more, listening to the murmurs of the Cullen family whose voices were too far away to be distinct, even with their advanced hearing. They caught sight of Esme glittering in the sunlight as she wound through the trees, her shrieks of delight echoing through the forest. A moment later, Carlisle appeared, chasing after his wife, who allowed him to get close enough to take a swipe at her before darting away.

"I suppose you think I should apologise."

Jasper shrugged. "It doesn't matter what I think. It's your relationship. Handle it as you see fit."

"That's not helpful."

"If you spend your days asking people what you should do, you have to wonder if it is your life you are living," Jasper pointed out. Rosalie aimed a kick at his ankle, which he leapt to his feet to avoid. He offered a hand to her, flooding her body with tranquillity when she accepted. "But seeing as you are seeking my advice on the matter, I would hazard a guess that you already know what you want to do."
Jasper knew that if Rosalie hated Louisa, she wouldn't even bother being angry: she would simply write her off and ignore her as yet another inconsequential human. At the end of the day, Rosalie loved Louisa, plain and simple, and this argument only served to prove to Rosalie how important Louisa was to her. She missed her best friend.

"I should go see her when we get home."

Jasper had originally planned to return the previous evening but had been strong-armed into staying by Emmett, who had whined incessantly about not seeing him enough lately. Jasper had pointed out that his mate did potentially have a murderer stalking her, but had sneaked away to a nearby town to call Louisa about the change in plans nonetheless. Louisa had been gracious about the situation, only requesting that he try to convince his adopted sister not to hate her, should the topic come up.

"You could call her," Alice said, hopping out a nearby tree and landing with a flip that would have put professional gymnasts to shame. "She stole her phone back from her father on Friday night, in the off chance you decided to call her."

"She's still grounded then?" Edward asked materialising next to her. "How long has it been now? Since the New Year, wasn't it?"

"Mr Collins will return it by her birthday," Alice replied with confidence. "Just as long as he doesn't find out that she— oh."

"He'll figure out she stole it, won't he?" Rosalie asked with a sigh.

But no, something was wrong, Jasper realised. Alice's eyes remained glassy while she watched the future pan out but her body began to tense. A moment later, Edward did the same, a ripple of fear slicing through the air. Had something happened to Louisa? Or was something wrong with her father? "I don't understand," Alice whisper.

"Check to see if tonight is any different," Edward commanded. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he stared at Alice, hovering over her and shifting on the balls of his feet.

"No, that's still the same," Alice replied. "But, now Jasper is there? He wasn't there before."

"The movie is different."

The two dissolved into a sort of half conversation, where Alice would mentally comment on what she saw and Edward interpreted it aloud for her. This was an everyday occurrence in the Cullen household, though for Alice to reply out loud meant that she was too busy scanning the future to predict Edward's responses. Yes, something was very wrong here.

"Will someone explain what the hell is going on?" Jasper snapped after a moment, his agitation rising. He stepped closer to his friend, kneeling down before her and grabbing a hold of her shoulders. Alice's eyes were unfocused and she gave no indication that she was aware of him. "Has something happened, Ali?"

It was Edward who answered. "Louisa wants to call us, but is unable to do so."

Jasper's head snapped towards the boy, who shifted in discomfort under his gaze. "Why would she—"

"It's about Dorothy— she's missing."
Louisa rubbed the palm of her hand into her eyes as if doing so would somehow alleviate the throbbing ache inside her skull. She wasn't sure if the headache was caused by a lack of sleep (the nightmares of Anna hadn't helped that she was already restless without Jasper around) or the lingering effects of her concussion, but it made it difficult to concentrate. Her inattentiveness had gotten so bad that Mrs Goff had excused her from Spanish with a concerned look and a hall pass to the infirmary. But hey, at least she didn't have to suffer through conjugating verbs.

Not that she planned to go there, of course. The nurse would only fuss over her, which was the exact opposite of the silence she craved at that moment. Instead, she wandered in the direction of her locker where she had stashed her mobile. And if she got caught, she could blame it on the concussion. Honestly, the concussion was the most convenient inconvenience to have ever happened to her.

She spun the dial on her locker, the squeaking of the metal hinges echoing in the deserted hallway. Reaching into the pocket of her bag, she extracted her mobile and turned it on. She sighed when she saw that there were no text alerts from Rose. Could her friend be out of range? Sure. But Louisa suspected that Rose was ignoring her still. Louisa had wanted to give her friend space to calm down as Jasper had suggested. But it was difficult, especially when Rosalie was the only person who would get excited about the developments in the Sweet case with her (Dottie would only get frightened and her father still wasn't allowing her to call Pyotr).

Whilst there were no new texts, she did have several emails. Figuring that those were far more interesting than wandering the halls of Forks High (Home of the Spartans!), she tapped on the screen to open the email app, her eyes sliding over an Etsy notification that Dottie's birthday present had arrived and coupons for Bath & Body Works. The fact that it was from Sergeant Todd let her know that the email was important far more than the subject line titled: "URGENT. READ ASAP".

Collins,

I don't think I'm supposed to tell you this, but you need to know. Mr Sweet found his daughter's diary and turned it over to us this morning. In it, Anna implied a sexual relationship with Lloyd Hewitt...

There was more, but she couldn't focus on the words, her mind racing with the possibilities. The police had focused their attention on Mr Hewitt, just as she suspected they would. His testimony not matching up to the timeline the police had established was almost as suspicious as his vague alibi. A hot ball of emotion spread through her chest and sinking down into her stomach, causing her to tremble with nervous anticipation.

This was a good thing, she tried to remind herself. Anna's mother will finally have answers.

Before she knew it, her nails were in her mouth, teeth shredding her cuticles. She skimmed through the rest of the email, ignoring the taste of blood. Jasper would have a conniption fit if he saw the damage she had done to them. It was fortunate that there were no vampires in the building.

"Miss Collins?"

A jolt ran through her body and she barely managed to suppress a shiver at the sound of his voice. Plastering a dazed look on her face, Louisa turned to give a vacant smile to Mr Hewitt. Of course it was him. It was difficult to tell if the chemistry teacher was following her or not. On one hand, he seemed to be everywhere she looked: the canteen, in the hallways, in the car park, or even at the
grocery store. On the other hand, Forks was a small town, and there were only so many places one
could be found, and as such, it was very likely she was hyperaware of his presence now that she
knew that he was potentially a murderer.

"What are you doing out of class?" Mr Hewitt asked.

"Mrs Goff sent me to the nurse," Louisa explained, waving the hall pass. "My brain bruise makes
Spanish hard to speak." And English apparently. What a lame excuse.

"Brain bruise?" Louisa hoped that the blood didn't drain out of her face when she noticed that Mr
Hewitt was not only not alone but he accompanied by Dr Bernadette Krantz. Thinking that the day
couldn't get any worse, Louisa sent a prayer up to anyone who was listening that Dr Krantz
wouldn't recognise her. It had only been a few days, true, but their encounter in the bathroom had
been brief. Louisa wasn't even sure if Bernadette had gotten a good look at her face. She had to be
safe, right?

"You're the girl from the other day," Dr Krantz stated, her words killing whatever hope Louisa had
of making it out of the conversation without incriminating herself. "From the police station."

Damn it, Bernie.

"The police station?" Mr Hewitt asked. Was it her imagination, or was there an angry look in his
eyes? "Not getting into any trouble, are you, Miss Collins?"

Blue eyes, her brain thought to point out. Such a beautiful blue, like the colour of a pair of Levi's,
or the sky on one of those rare sunny days. God, she was an idiot. She had seen those eyes in her
dreams how many times? How could she have missed it?

Louisa heard a strained chuckle slip from her lips. "Oh, you know me, sir. I'm a troublemaker."
She turned her head to look at Mr Hewitt's companion, trying to think about how to get the
conversation to end in her favour. If she was too quick to excuse herself, she would come off as
rude to Dr Krantz and suspicious to Mr Hewitt. And seeing as how Dr Krantz had identified
Louisa, it would look odd to act like she had no idea what the doctor was talking about. "I didn't
catch your name, the other day."

There, make it seem like their experience was brief and that Louisa didn't know who Dr Krantz
was. Give no sign that she knew how Dr Krantz was related to the Sweet case. It wasn't perfect, but
it would have to do.

"Bernadette Krantz," she replied, reaching forward to shake Louisa's hand. Louisa already knew
this, of course, but she wasn't aware of that. "I graduated from here in 2007."

"Taking a stroll down memory lane?" Louisa jested, hoping she came across as charming instead of
as nervous as she felt.

A smile quirked in the corners of the doctor's lips. "Once a Spartan, always a Spartan. I live in
Atlanta and my flight doesn't leave for a few more hours," she explained. "I had to come and see
my favourite teacher before I left. He inspired me to become a scientist."

The tips of Mr Hewitt's ears blushed pink and a strained smile graced his face. "You flatter me,
Bernie."

"Are you interested in science, Louisa?" What, was she running for fucking mayor? Why did she
insist on engaging in a conversation with her? Couldn't she see that she wanted to be literally
anywhere else?
"It's not my favourite subject. I prefer the humanities, myself." Short and sweet replies. Don't give her too much to work with, and she might go away.

No such luck. "A noble and vital area of study for the betterment of society," Bernadette intoned with a grave nod. "As my friend would say."

Ten guesses as to whom that was.

Louisa shifted from foot to foot, unsure of how to respond.

Bernadette laughed after a second of uncomfortable silence. "I'm sure you have better things to do than to listen to an old woman be nostalgic."

"If you're old, I must be ancient," Mr Hewitt corrected before fixing his eyes on Louisa. "Judging by your current location, I gather that you've managed to find a new entrance to the infirmary inside of your locker?"

"It's like the T.A.R.D.I.S. It's bigger on the inside."

"I see, and where does your mobile phone factor into the equation?"

"I got lost?"

Mr Hewitt gave her an unimpressed look. "Mmhmm," he hummed through tight lips, holding out his hand. "The mobile, if you please, Miss Collins."

Louisa tried to protest but her complaints fell on deaf ears; Mr Hewitt gave her an unimpressed look and extended his hand further.

"Your father can pick it up after school today," he said.

With little choice, Louisa locked the mobile and handed it over, their fingers brushing as the device exchanged hands. What sounded like papers rustling, or leaves blowing on a windy day, filled her ears, so soft and distant that she thought that a storm was starting outside. But the sound condensed into whispers, which whilst echoing and faint at first, crescendoed until it felt like they had wormed their way right up against her brain, an itching and irritating thing that couldn't be scratched. Images flitted across her eyes, of a closet, dark and familiar tunnels, a young woman reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* beneath a tree. In one rush, she knew two things: Mr Hewitt killed Anna Sweet and he knew that she knew he did it.

She exhaled and the mobile was in Mr Hewitt's hand and he was drawing away. Her ears were ringing and Louisa wondered if she might faint.

"Are you alright, sweetie?"

Her nose was bleeding again. Of course it was. Louisa stepped back and wiped the trickle of blood away with the sleeve of her jumper. "I— bleed," she managed to stutter out, though her tongue felt heavy and gummy in her mouth. "A lot. Sometimes. Not..." Before she could finish that thought, Louisa felt herself pitching forward. She managed to land on all fours instead of face planting into the floor, but there was little room in her consciousness to celebrate such a small victory; she was too busy refraining from vomiting all over Mr Hewitt's shoes.

Bernadette dropped to her knees, rubbing a hand between Louisa's shoulder blades and whispering comforting words into her ear. Louisa watched as drops of blood landed on the linoleum floor, and though she didn't dare move her head, she could see Mr Hewitt was walking away, the clicking of
his leather shoes against the ground reverberating in the empty corridor. A teacher Louisa vaguely recognised as the Geometry teacher helped Bernadette pull Louisa to a standing position and they all but dragging the teen towards the infirmary. Louisa's earlier fears were proven correct, and the nurse fussed about, clicking her tongue at Louisa's stupidity ("You have a concussion, Miss Collins. You need to rest, not solve differential equations!") and general stubbornness to receive help. Louisa only just managed to stop the nurse from calling her father, or God forbid an ambulance. The last thing Louisa needed to do was to be sent to the hospital. What she needed was to grab Dorothy and put as much distance between them and Mr Hewitt as possible.

So whilst she impatiently waited to be issued a clean bill of health (or at least, as clean as it was going to get with a concussion and a still bleeding nose), she plotted. The safest thing would be to catch Dottie after class and then drive straight to the police station. The only problem being, of course, Louisa didn't know what class her sister was in. She supposed she could convince Mrs Cope to look up her sister's schedule, but it didn't look like the nurse was keen to let her go anytime soon. The only other option was to wait by her sister's locker after classes let out. This was less than ideal, because who knew what Mr Hewitt could do in that amount of time? Unfortunately, this was looking like the most likely course of outcome and Louisa spent the remainder of the school day in a constant state of anxiety.

Bernadette stayed with her for almost half an hour, hovering and attempting to comfort her, before she had to leave to catch her flight back home. It was hard to be annoyed with the woman when she was so sweet. If Louisa hadn't been so stressed by the situation Bernadette had put her in, she might have put in more effort to converse with her.

Luckily, the nurse couldn't hold her indefinitely, and by the time the end of the school day had arrived, Louisa was able to form coherent enough sentences to pass muster and be permitted to leave. She did so at a run, ignoring the nurse's protest at 'engaging in physical activity', sprinting all the way to Dottie's locker, making it there seconds before the final bell rang.

The wait was agonising and Louisa found herself swallowing her nausea as the minutes dragged on. The deserted hallway burst to life with activity as teens flooded out of classrooms, eager to go home after a day of lessons. The metallic banging of lockers punctuated the noisy conversations of her peers, the sounds setting her teeth on edge. She shoved away a boy who had bumped into her, giving him a rude hand gesture after he snapped at her for blocking the corridor.

Someone grabbed her arm and it took everything in her to quell the instinct to deck him in the face. She spun around, wrenching free from his grip, and glared at him. "What?"

"Louisa, right?" a younger boy asked, hand still outstretched. He looked familiar in a way that was more significant than simply passing by him in the halls on a daily basis, but in her distractions, she couldn't be bothered to match a name to his face. Still, sensing no immediate danger from him, she nodded and allowed her attention to return to peering over the heads of the students around her, searching for her sister's blonde curls. Where was she? It wasn't like her sister to dawdle.

"Are you alright?" He asked, drawing her attention away from the crowd of students. Her eyes flicked down to him in annoyance. She needed to find her sister and get to the hell out of Dodge. She didn't have time to talk to this stupid boy. "I heard you were in the ER again. Why are you here?"

"Not for a month or so," she snapped, impatience and anxiety growing by the second. Couldn't he see that she was a little preoccupied?

The boy was shaking his head. "No, Mr Hewitt said that you were sick again and it was real bad. He said that Dorothy was excused for the rest of the day."
"Where did she go?" she asked. She would have strangled the boy, but she was in too much of a hurry. And there were too many witnesses around.

"She left with him," he explained slowly as if trying to calm a spooked animal.

It was if a bucket of ice water had been dumped on her. She turned to look at the boy, who squirmed under her gaze. "What did you say?" she asked in a voice that was too cold to be her own.

"She—Dorothy left. Mr Hewitt said that he would drive her to the hospital."

"When?"

"I dunno, an hour ago or so? It was during sixth period."

Right around the time Mr Hewitt had sent her to the nurse, then. He must have ditched Dr Krantz and made a beeline for Dorothy. But why? She didn't know anything and posed no threat to him. Louisa had been very careful about keeping her sister in the dark about her investigations.

She had to be leverage, Louisa realised. The most likely scenario was that Mr Hewitt kidnapped Dottie as a ploy to draw Louisa to him. It's what Louisa would do if the position were reversed. Threatening a loved one was very effective in manipulative endeavours. What was less clear was Mr Hewitt's motives for doing so. Did he want Louisa's promise to sabotage the investigation? Or did he want to silence her permanently?

Louisa jammed her hand into her pocket, only to remember that Mr Hewitt had taken her phone. She wondered if he had done so on purpose so that she had no way of contacting Chief Swan. Well, she could rectify that.

"Give me your phone," she demanded, holding out her hand towards that confused boy.

"My— I don't have it with me," he managed to stutter.

She growled in annoyance before spinning on her heel and stalking off. Students parted out of her way like the Red Sea before Moses when they saw the thunderous expression on her face and those who didn't found themselves pushed to the side. There were many shouts of indignation left in her wake, but Louisa couldn't find it in her to care. Every second Dottie spent with Mr Hewitt, the less likely she would make it through the experience unharmed. Louisa knew the statistics: Fifty-seven per cent of children abducted by a non-family perpetrator were missing from caretakers for at least one hour and seventy-four per cent of abducted children who were ultimately murdered were dead within three hours of the abduction. It had been almost two hours since someone had last seen her sister, and if Mr Hewitt had any sort of malice towards Dorothy, there wasn't much time left to find her unharmed.

Louisa burst into Mr Hewitt's empty classroom, her feet slapping against the linoleum as she rushed towards the unoccupied desk. A picture of four boys ranging from seven to sixteen stood on the right corner of the desk, next to an ancient desktop. Opposite stood a lamp, a plastic cup full of pens and a landline. Papers were strewn across the desk as if they had been abandoned mid-use.

*Set up for a left-hander,* she noticed. *Picture shows sons, no picture of wife. Marital issues.*

Louisa dove for the landline. She didn't know Chief Swan's phone number or Jasper's or Sergeant Todd's or even her father's. It was 2018 and her mobile could remember that. But there was one number she knew, which had been drilled into her head since she was a small child.

"Nine, one, one— what's your emergency?"
"My sister's been abducted," she replied hastily, rifling through Mr Hewitt's desk whilst trying to answer the operator's questions concerning her sister's description and last known whereabouts.

"Are you sure this was an abduction?" Was the operator's cool reply. "Was there any chance that it could have been a miscommunication?"

Deep down, Louisa knew that there was no reason to snap at the man on the other side— he was only doing his job and was asking for clarifications. But rational thoughts were a bit difficult to access when faced with panic. "A man who is suspected of murder just took my sister from school without my father's knowledge or consent. Yes, she has been abducted and you are useless. If you aren't going to be helpful, I'm going to hang up and go find my sister." She didn't bother to wait for his response before slamming the handset back down into the receiver. Was this the best course of action? Louisa couldn't be bothered to decide.

She abandoned the papers on the desk, realising they were nothing more than homework assignments and tests that needed to be marked. Her eyes flicked across the desktop, searching for something helpful yet coming up empty. She supposed that made sense. Mr Hewitt would hardly leave a post-it note with the location of the cabin in the woods where he took his underage lovers lying around. So where would Mr Hewitt take Dottie? Certainly not back to his own house— if he believed that the police were coming for him, going back to his house would be a dumb move. It would be the first place they looked for him. It would have to be a secondary location. Somewhere secluded where there was no chance of his wife or children stumbling across them, like a hunting cabin or something. But where would that be? Louisa wracked her brain, frantically searched her mental library for any and all information she knew about Mr Hewitt.

Her eyes landed on the picture frame again, and she reached forward to pick it up. Was that… a cabin in the woods? She pulled it so close to her face that her breath fogged up the glass. The photograph featured four boys, ranging in ages from primary to high school, which were standing in front of a cabin. The boys each held a compound bow and were flashing identical toothy grins to the camera, a dead deer lying at their feet. Behind them stood an A-frame cabin, nestled between several massive maple trees. Mr Hewitt didn't live in a cabin, though. She knew that. He lived a small two storey not too far from the Catholic church in town. But if Mr Hewitt had kidnapped Dottie, the cabin was the most likely place he took her. He would want to keep her fairly close to town, if only because it was a terrain he was familiar and comfortable in. So where was this cabin? And how did she get to it?

There wasn't time to track down one of Mr Hewitt's sons and ask. She didn't have time to call Chief Swan. She didn't know how to hack into some database and find the address, like Emmett. Every minute she stood there was a moment her sister was in danger. The thought sent another wave of panic over her and her breathing hitched. God, Dottie must be terrified, wondering what was happening, why Mr Hewitt took her, wondering where she was.

The glass of the picture frame cracked under her fingers, jarring her back to reality. Louisa focused on the blood that had begun to drip out of the cut in her hand, unable to feel it. It pooled across the cracked surface of the picture frame, running down her wrist and splattering on the desk. It was a good thing Jasper wasn't there, she thought, her mind otherwise blank. He would be panicking, especially after the nosebleed—

Louisa actually reached up and slapped herself at the realisation. She didn't need Emmett to find the location of the cabin. She could do it herself. She could find Dottie, just like she had found six-year-old Marie Wu when she had strayed off of the playground during recess; just like she had done when she had pointed the police in the direction Sally Perks, Joshua Williams, and Michael Gomez after they had followed a woman out of the mall, even though she had not seen the
abduction take place; just like how in December, she had found Spencer Gardner after some members of the baseball team had tied him to the football goal. She had psychometry.

She wasn't sure how it worked and she was certain Carlisle would disapprove of her experimenting without him there to supervise. It was dangerous to use, she recognised, and it could very well leave her in a vegetative state. Her recent fiasco in the closet with Jasper came to mind. She also had no way to control her gift, and it seemed like every time she used it, it was by some sort of accident.

But one thing was for certain: She had to find her sister.

Her eyes fluttered shut, let her mind go blank. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, smell the faint metallic odour of her blood. Pressure built in her head starting behind her ears, a tingle running across her scalp. In the blackness of her mind's eye, she recalled the picture, mentally removing the boy's from the image so only the cabin remained. It was growing larger as if she was walking up to it… or a car was approaching it. She glanced down at the steering wheel, placing the car into park before killing the engine. He walked briskly, with purpose, circling around the side of the old cabin and heading off into the woods, following a worn path, hopping down into a creek bed, splashing through the frigid shin-high water. A drainage tunnel came into view and he switched on a flashlight, following the tunnel without the aid of a map. Left, right, straight, left, straight, left, straight, a final right and out of the tunnel, leaping out and into the creek below with practised ease. Up the embankment he went, sliding on the mud, gripping a branch when his feet nearly slipped out from beneath him.

Then a house. Her house. But it was still too light out, he couldn't be seen by the neighbours. He sneaked towards the back of the house, cracking open the door to the crawlspace under the porch. He crawled until he could go no farther, then he reached up and pushed the false ceiling away, revealing a tunnel. He stood, wiping his dirty hands his jeans before grabbing onto the ladder in front of him. Up he went, all the way to the top, gripping the lever to the door and tugging it down. She better have a good enough reason for making him come all the way out here in the rain.

Pain shot through her knees as she fell to the ground. But what she felt in her hands was nothing compared to the pressure in her head. Louisa vomited on the floor, sick splattering across her bloodstained hands. The room tilted and spun and it took every last bit of strength in her to not faint. Her brain was a jumbled mess, trying to sort out this new information, integrate it into her mind in a way that separated a foreign psyche from her own. Louisa panted, gritting her teeth, the sour taste of bile on her tongue. She wasn't sure how long she knelt there for, but she grew aware that she was wasting time her sister might not have. She staggered to her feet.

Wiping a string of saliva off her chin, she stooped to grab the picture frame, ignoring how the glass pricked at her fingers when she plucked the photograph from it. Although the method of gathering such evidence left much to be desired, it was effective. A flash of Anna Sweet's final moments flashed before her eyes, this time from Mr Hewitt's perspective. Louisa screwed her eyes shut counted to ten, and focused on folding the photo in half, then quarters, and shoved it in her pocket.

Mr Hewitt had thought he had made the biggest mistake of his life when he killed his lover in 2007, but that was incorrect. Lloyd Hewitt the worst mistake of his life on the thirteenth of February, 2018 when he abducted Louisa's little sister. Louisa was many things, but forgiving wasn't one of them. He had put a target on his back, marked himself as a dead man walking.

And she was coming for him.

"The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see."—Winston Churchill
Wooo boy. This was a tricksy one to write. Mostly because I kept getting anxious and having to walk away and make tea. I don't do well under stress— real or imaginary. But you know what will make me feel better? Leaving me a comment to know what you thought about it!

-CheckAlexa
When people asked Louisa how she got back to her house that day, especially considering she didn't even have the keys to the Collins' little Prius, she would reply that she had no idea. She suspected it had something to do with the bike that she found on her lawn, but she couldn't be entirely sure. There was a distressingly large gap in her memory between leaving Mr Hewitt's classroom and arriving at her house. The two storey house loomed over her as she dashed up the drive and up the front steps, plans forming in her mind regarding her next moves. Louisa had no illusions that she would be able to retrace Mr Hewitt's steps as he walked to Anna's room that fateful day and the last thing she wanted was to get lost down in the sewers. No, she would need to trigger a memory of him leaving the room and returning to his little cabin in the woods. And what better place than her bedroom, where he killed Anna. If Carlisle was correct about how her powers worked, it would be extremely unlikely that Mr Hewitt's emotions hadn't left a trace in the room.

She fumbled in her backpack for a moment before realising that Dottie had the key to the house. That was fine, her father kept a spare key in the largest flower pot... but no, Jasper had taken the key after they realised somebody was breaking into the house. Louisa let out a shaky breath, raking a hand through her hair. She spun around to stare out over the front garden, assessing her next move. A glance down the road told her that Chief Swan wasn't home, and neither were her closest neighbours. Even if they were, none of them had a key to the house. Louisa briefly debated breaking a window and crawling into the house, but with how her day seemed to be going, she would piss off her dad at best and have a shard of glass embedded itself in her carotid at worst.

Wait. Crawl.

She slapped herself in the forehead before leaping over the porch railing, ignoring the sting in her legs when she landed on the ground below. How could she be so stupid? The crawl space under the house was how Mr Hewitt had gotten in the first place. Sure, the tunnel between it and her bedroom was now boarded up, but he would have had to exit the house from there. It took her less than a minute to find the little door that opened into the crawl space. Using her feet, she shoved away at the snow that was obstructing to it and dropped to her knees, crawling into the dark tunnel. The weak winter light didn't do much to illuminate the space, but that was fine— it was a straight path and thanks to Mr Hewitt's memories, she knew where she was going. She inched forward until she couldn't go any farther before reaching up and pushing on the false ceiling. Nothing happened, which didn't surprise Louisa all that much— Esme was nothing if not thorough. But that was fine. She didn't need to actually get into her room.

It was easier than before and it took her less time to find the memory she was searching for. She focused on her panic to find her sister, which she guessed was similar to how Mr Hewitt had been feeling after he killed Anna. (Maybe they weren't comparable at all, but Louisa had never murdered someone, so she wouldn't know). She took a deep breath, focused on the knot in her chest, the thrumming of her pulse in her veins, how her tongue felt too large for her mouth.

Then she was moving, even though she knew she wasn't moving.

"Try to keep yourself separate from this," Rosalie had said. "Remember that what you are experiencing belongs to someone else."

Mr Hewitt kept crawling, his movements stiff and jerky. Louisa leaned back on her heels and
watched him go. Could she follow him? Or would the illusion dissipate when she left the tunnel? There really was only one way to find out.

She could feel the bite of the snow under her palms yet feel the rain beating down on her skin. The pain in her head had reached a record high and she had to bite down on her tongue to stop the wave of nausea that overcame her. Even though she knew it wasn't raining out, the world around her was dark as a storm raged on, the leaves on the trees rustling in the wind, flashing their silvery underbellies. She inched further out the tunnel, and the scene became faded, as if she were looking at two photos that had been exposed on top of each other, creating a fractured and uneven landscape. Even still, she could just make out Mr Hewitt's figure sprinting towards the tree line.

She staggered to her feet and kept moving.

Louisa sprinted off after the shadowy figure, her feet sliding on the icy ground. Despite living in Forks for six months, Louisa had never ventured far into the woods that surrounded her house. But, sure enough, a creek was nestled at the bottom of a steep embankment, just like she had seen in the vision. Her feet snagged on downed branches in her haste and snow found its way inside her trainers.

She jumped into the creek. The water was so cold it hurt, soaking her jeans all the way up to her knees. Her toes went numb within seconds, but Louisa forced herself to focus, sloshing through the knee-high water as fast as she could. Just like he remembered... she remembered, there was a drainage tunnel large enough to accommodate a fully grown man at the end of the creek. It was nestled in the side of the creek bed, at least five feet from the ground. It was fortunate that Louisa was so tall.

She took a running start and launched herself into the air, catching the edge of the drain with her elbows. Her feet fought for purchase as she scrambled into the tunnel, her clothes soaking through in a matter of seconds. She spat out a mouthful of dirty water as she stood up, her eyes unable to see more than a few feet in front of her. Had she lost Hewitt? Shivering, she closed her eyes and stretched out her arms, planting her palms against the walls of the drainage tunnel, grounding herself. She tried to focus as she had before, but it was no use: Mr Hewitt had no real emotional attachment to these tunnels outside of using them as a furtive means of transportation. Even if she was able to pick up anything, it was too dark to see in the tunnels and she didn't have access to a torch.

"Well, it's not like I would explore them. Daddy banned me from using them, remember?"

She jumped and turned to focus on the image of her sister, who was leaning against the side of the tunnel, her arms folded and an annoyed expression on her face. This wasn't a memory though. Louisa would remember a memory like this. So either her sister was dead and she was talking to her ghost, or Louisa was hallucinating and about to stroke out.

Dottie rolled her eyes. "I'm not a ghost, dumbass. I'm not even real."

The answer came to her at once, and it made a lot more sense than her original assumptions: an invented memory from her mental library. She had forgotten how bitchy she made her sister's avatar. Ignoring the insult her own mind came up with, Louisa recalled the memory Dottie was referring to. Her father had created a scavenger hunt for his three children to get them out of the house one summer. Louisa had partnered up with Pyotr and ditched her younger siblings, choosing to make it a competition, rather than a collaborative effort. Unable to drive and fearing the bus would be too slow, Dottie and Laurie had taken to the sewer system of Tacoma in the hopes of beating the older kids. Not only had they not succeeded, but they had gotten lost down there for several hours, ending up nearly ten kilometres away.
"How did you get out?"

"Unlike you," Dottie said. "I know how to listen."

It took a moment for Louisa to comprehend her sister's advice, and by the time she had, Dottie had disappeared. She pivoted around and faced back down the dark tunnel, before closing her eyes and taking a step forward. It took a few steps, but she eventually heard splashing coming from ahead. She kept her eyes closed, but even if she had them open, she wouldn't have been able to see without a torch anyway. But it didn't matter. Combined with the memory of Mr Hewitt's trip to the house and the vague splashing sounds she could hear, she had a good enough idea of where she was going.

At least, she hoped so.

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**No Stone Left Unturned**

Dottie was not having a good day.

Well, she had been having a good day. Spencer had shared a cookie his mom had made for him during lunch, and Mr Varner had decided to cancel the geometry test because his kids all had strep. But then Mr Hewitt said Louisa was probably dying in the hospital and then kidnapped her. She strongly suspected the Louisa wasn't even sick. And now she was sitting in a run-down log cabin tied to a chair. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to be terrified or pissed off. She settled for being moderately anxious.

Maybe Louisa was on to something when she said that every Collins was cursed to have terrible days before their sweet sixteenth.

Mr Hewitt paced in front of her, digging the heel of his hand into his temple. His clothes were rumpled and his hair stood up in odd spots, and Dottie wondered if it was because of her numerous failed escape attempts or his appearance was slowly becoming more dishevelled as his mental state eroded. While he technically wasn't armed, Dottie had seen a rifle by the door on the way into the cabin. She would need to tread lightly if she wanted to get out of here alive.

"Mr Hewitt?"

He ignored her and continued his pacing.

"Mr Hewitt!"

"What?"

"I have to use the bathroom."

He scowled at her. "And have you try to make a run for it again?"

"I really need to pee," she insisted, wiggling around as much as her bindings would let her. "It's super urgent."

"No."

"I'm going to piss all over this chair if you don't let me go. Honestly, this is such an indignity. Not only am I not free to go take a leak, but you're tying me up. It's like you don't trust me, or something."
That got a piece of duct tape slapped across her mouth, but at least he led her to the toilet.

"You have one minute. If you aren't out by then, I'm coming in after you."

Dottie hummed in protest, refusing to be pushed into the toilet. Mr Hewitt sighed and none too gently ripped off the tape.

"Can we make it two minutes?" Dottie asked. "And do you have a tampon lying around by any chance?" Not like she needed it, but if it bought her a few extra seconds, it didn't hurt to ask. Men were too squeamish about menstruation.

He growled in annoyance and slapped the tape back on, pushing her inside, with a grunt of "two minutes."

She closed the door behind her, resisting the urge to lock it. She was already on thin ice with the chemistry teacher and she really did need to pee. Glancing around, she quickly took in the tiny bathroom, consisting of a small stand up shower, a toilet, and a sink. Perhaps she could use the lid on the toilet's water tank as a weapon? But then she saw it, just above the toilet. Another path to freedom. A window. Just beyond the glass, she could see his car, a beat-up Toyota and a little further beyond, the forest.

Wow, Mr Hewitt was really bad at the whole kidnapping thing. She supposed she should be grateful for that.

Not wanting to tip him off of her escape plan, she relieved herself and used the sound of the flushing toilet to mask the squeak of the opening window. She leaned backwards and twisted the tap to run the water in the sink before stepping up onto the toilet seat and wiggling her upper body through the window.

She was lucky that Mr Hewitt had taped her mouth shut, otherwise, she would have screamed at what awaited her. Her sister was standing just outside the window, her face and shirt covered in blood, her long blonde hair dripping wet, and her lips an alarming shade of blue. She wasn't even wearing a coat. Louisa leapt forward and slapped her hand across Dottie's mouth in an attempt to further stifle the scream.

Louisa could hardly blame her sister's reaction: not only had she been kidnapped, but she was about to be rescued by someone who looked like a swamp hag. It had been a trying day for both of them.

"It's just me!" She hissed into her sister's ear. "Is he nearby?"

Dottie nodded frantically and tried to wiggle further out of the window, only for her hips to get stuck.

Louisa grabbed her arms and pulled. "Is he armed?"

Dottie nodded again, the window frame digging painfully into her hips. Louisa gave another powerful tug and Dottie was afraid her spine was going to pull apart.

"Are you hurt?"

Before she could respond again, Dottie felt a grip on her ankle, and she was roughly yanked back inside. Her head made contact with the window with so much force that she saw stars.

"What did I say about trying to run?"
Dottie allowed herself to be shoved back through the house, pushing her through a living room with a taxidermy deer head mounted over a fireplace and past a kitchen where the plates were piled high in the sink. They re-entered the original room, which appeared to be what was supposed to be a garage but had turned into Mr Hewitt's workshop for... stuff. It wasn't entirely clear what his hobbies were, but she noticed an impressive stockpile of archery bows and a beaker standing over an unlit Bunsen burner.

He pushed her back down into the chair and picked up the ropes to tie her up with. When Dottie started to struggle, he slapped her hard across the face.

"I told you not to run from me, Dorothy," he snapped. "I don't want to hurt you."

But kidnapping was apparently well within his moral limits. If her mouth hadn't been taped shut, she would have spit in his face.

He finished retying her and stepped back. She watched as he paced back and forth like a caged animal, trying to figure out his motive. Sure, she had his class third period, but she wasn't terrible at it. And even if she was, sucking at chemistry wasn't a good reason for him to commit a felony. No, this was about something else. And by the sound of his rabid mutterings, it really had nothing to do with her.

A loud bang followed by the sound his car alarm going off caused both of them to jump. Mr Hewitt didn't even spare her a glance when he left the room to investigate. The moment he was out of sight, she began to wiggle against the ropes, hoping that she would be able to loosen them enough to work an arm free. As it turned out, it wasn't necessary. Seconds after Mr Hewitt had disappeared, Louisa materialised in front of her, brandishing a dirty kitchen knife which she used to saw through her bindings.

"Are you hurt?" Louisa asked. When Dottie shook her head, Louisa stepped back helped her sister to her feet. "Stay close to me. We're going to get out of here."

Rubbing her wrists, Dottie crept behind her sister. Besides the windows, which Dottie had already proved she was unable to get through, there was only one way in and out of the cabin: the front door. It was no real surprise then, when Mr Hewitt came bursting through said door, a manic look on his face.

"You!" he shouted, ignoring Dottie, instead, focusing his attention on her rather waterlogged older sister.

Louisa's face probably would have twisted into a smirk if it hadn't been numb. "Me."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Dottie rolled her eyes at the dramatics of it all.

"How did you— where did you even—?" Mr Hewitt stuttered, a furious expression settling over his face. He reached towards the area next to the door where his gun rested, only to swipe at empty air.

"Yeah, I hid that. Can't have you shooting us as we run."

"You're not going anywhere," he responded, taking a step closer to the two teens. He didn't seem fazed by the kitchen knife Louisa brandished as he approached. "We're going to have a little chat."

"I'm not interested," Louisa said.

Mr Hewitt lunged and Dottie found herself being pushed to the floor by her sister. The two
struggled, Mr Hewitt hissing when he received a slash across his arm from Louisa's knife. Still, he had almost seven stone over Louisa, and the teen found herself being slammed by the throat into the wall. The knife clattered to the floor as Louisa's hand started scratching at the back of his hands.

"Is this what you did to her?" She managed to wheeze. At her words, the pressure against her throat lessened enough for her to breathe. "Did you watch the light leave her eyes too? Are you going to kill me like Anna?"

"Don't talk about her," he said. Even still, his hands dropped to his side, and he took a step back. "You don't know anything," he whispered. His voice had lost the intensity from before, and Louisa watched as his spine slumped in defeat.

Louisa raised a hand to massage her throat. "I know that she had a beautiful singing voice. That she loved to read, and her favourite book was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I know that she struggled in math. I know that she loved volunteering with her youth group. I know that she loved blackberry pie with vanilla ice cream." She watched as his hands trembled and he looked like he might collapse under the weight of her words. Her eyes briefly darted to Dottie, who had risen from the ground and was inching towards her side. "I know that she loved you. She wouldn't hold her death against you, Mr Hewitt. She knew it was an accident and that you didn't mean to do it." Louisa had no clue if that was true, but she needed to deescalate the situation: the last thing she needed was an angry man charging her. Even if she hadn't been exhausted, Louisa didn't like her chances fighting off someone who was physically stronger than herself.

"You didn't want to kill her, Mr Hewitt. It was a mistake. You loved her," she said. "Ten years is a long time to keep a secret. Aren't you tired of it?"

"I am tired. And now I'm done. I can't do this anymore." He let out a sound that was something between a laugh and a sob. His fingers were doing an odd, jerky motion against his leg that alternated between drumming and clenching.

"You don't have to," she murmured. Dottie had reached her side and latched onto her arm so tightly Louisa was positive it would bruise. She pushed her sister behind her, placing herself between Dottie and Mr Hewitt. If worse came to worse, she'd be able to give her sister a few precious seconds to run. "We can finish this. Just take us back to town."

"And have you run straight to the police?" he asked with a bitter laugh. "If you haven't already called them."

"We won't press charges," Louisa said with far more confidence than she felt. Something was wrong. The realisation made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

"No," he chuckled, the sound cold and grating. Crazed. "Just the murder charges, right? Well, what's two more?" The man stooped to pick up the kitchen knife that Louisa had dropped and when he looked up, the look on his face sent a chill down her spine. She had never seen a look like that on somebody's face, but could only be described as the face of a man who had nothing to lose.

"Anna wouldn't want you to do this," Louisa said, bumping into her sister as she backed away.

"How would you know? She's dead."

"Your sons," Louisa said, trying to move back, only to find Dottie had completely frozen in terror. She could dodge to the side, but that would put her sister in danger. "Is that the legacy you want to leave them? The knowledge that you murdered three unarmed teenaged girls?"
There were less than two metres between them and her words seemed to have no impact on his movements. They were going to die in that cabin if she didn't do anything. Louisa's grey eyes were stormy as they flicked from object to object, calculating their usefulness in the event of a fight, never straying too far from Mr Hewitt. But all the potential weapons were too far away and he was approaching too fast. Louisa began a mental tally of vulnerable targets to use in the event of a fight. The eyes would be the most painful, and if she managed to do enough damage to them, she might render him blind.

"Killing us won't stop the police from taking you away," she tried to point out. "They have enough evidence on Anna's murder alone that you are going to jail for a long time."

"It's all over," he finished after a shaky breath.

Mr Hewitt took a step towards the two girls, and Louisa made up her mind. "Dottie, run," she commanded, pushing her sister towards the open door.

Once, when Louisa had watched a movie with Pyotr, she remembered asking him why the protagonist didn't just deliver a swift kick his opponent's genitals: surely he would have won the fight.

"A man never goes for the balls," Pyotr had exclaimed, looking scandalised at the mere suggestion. "It's an unwritten rule. Ball shots go against everything in the bro code."

It was fortunate that Louisa was not a man.

Mr Hewitt gave a strangled gasp and sank to his knees, face turning purple. She didn't stick around to watch. Spinning around, she grabbed a stunned Dottie by the arm and yanked her in the direction of the door.

The two raced pell-mell towards the forest, making to the treeline just as the first shot was fired. The bullet embedded itself into a tree, inches from Dottie's head, showering her with wood splinters. She squeaked in surprise and nearly tripped, only kept upright by her sister, who grabbed her arm and tugged her along.

Even without the threat of bullets, their sprint was difficult. Dottie, despite a recent growth spurt, was still several inches shorter than her older sister. Add in the fact that they had to leap over ice-covered logs and wade through shin-deep snow, and it was a miracle that they made it as far as they had. And though they were in the forest, the lack of leaves on the trees meant that there visible, albeit a difficult movie target. But Mr Hewitt was a hunter, if the deer head over the fireplace was any indication, and would have no problems shooting them down. She could hear him crashing through the forest behind them, calling out their names. For obvious reasons, they didn't stop. They kept running until their legs ached and their lungs burned, and then they ran farther. Every time they stopped to take a breath, they could hear their stalker crashing through the underbrush, following the footprints they had no choice but to leave behind, bounding ever closer.

Branches tore at their hair and the wind stung against their exposed skin. Time flew by. In what could have been thirty seconds or thirty minutes later, the two found themselves at the top of a hill. It was too late to change their momentum and the girls tumbled down a nearly thirty-metre incline, rolling over downed trees and exposed rocks as they went. Snow managed to find its way into every opening in their clothes, painfully cold against their overheated skin.

Dottie hit the ground hard, knocking the air out of her lungs, before eventually rolling to a stop. The tape that had covered her mouth had fallen off sometime during her tumble. Small daily victories, she supposed, watching the trees above her continue to spin.
"Come on, Dottie," Louisa said, crawling into her line of sight. "We need to keep moving." Dottie wondered how Louisa was even able to speak, let alone want to keep running. Blood coated her face and matted her hair, though Dottie couldn't be sure if it was from her nose or from some new, unseen wound.

"I can't," she managed to gasp.

"Yes you can, baby. Get up. We need to run." Somehow Louisa managed to the strength to haul Dottie to her feet despite the burning ache in her muscles. "Come on. It's not much further."

"Where we going?" Dottie managed to ask, trying to ignore the stitch in her side. It had been painful before, but after taking more than a few hits to the side, it was almost unbearable.

"This way. Follow me," Louisa said, grabbing her wrist before taking off at a run once more.

They continued on, the sounds of the forest slowly quieting, until only their harsh pants and the crunch of snow under their feet could be heard. They didn't dare look back to see if Mr Hewitt had caught up because every second their eyes weren't trained ahead was a second they could trip in the dense bush. Slowly, the trees became more sparse, and Dottie thought that maybe they were nearing town. But no, she could hear… seagulls? The briny smell of the ocean stung her sinuses as they barrelled forward.

The trees vanished and they ran out of the forest before stumbling to a halt. They were standing on the edge of a cliff. Dottie walked forward to inspect their new surroundings, her legs shaking from adrenaline. The churning waves below were inky as they battered against the rocks, salt water spraying upwards in tall plumes.

"We need to jump," Dottie called back to her sister who was swaying where she stood.

A panicked look flashed across Louisa's face. "What?" She inched closer towards her sister, whilst remaining a safe distance from the edge. "There's got to be another way down."

"It's not that far, maybe twenty metres at most. If we jump far enough from the base of the cliff and hit it feet first, we'll be able to swim to the shore. I can see a house from here."

"No."

Dottie straightened and turned to give her sister an incredulous look. "What do you mean no?"

"I can't," she said, her voice barely loud enough to be heard over the roar of the sea below.

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't. I couldn't climb a ten-foot fence from a murderer. What makes you think I can jump off a fucking cliff?"

"Mr Hewitt could be here any minute. All he has to do is follow our footprints."

"We could die."

"And we will if he shows up here with a gun," Dottie snapped. She stepped towards her older sister and held out her hand. "Lulu, I'm right here. We can do this together. Please."

Louisa looked over her shoulder, back towards the forest. There was no telling how close Mr Hewitt was, or if he was even still following them. It was risky to backtrack in the hopes of finding
a path that could take them down to the house (and hopefully village) below. If it was only herself, she probably would have done it too. But she had her sister to worry about, and whilst imminent hypothermia (if they didn't already have it) was a concern, it was a lot easier to recover from than a bullet to the head. And Louisa was always bad at denying her sister things.

She took her sister's outstretched hand, their icy fingers intertwining. The two backed up slightly, preparing to take a running leap. Louisa swallowed the bile that began to rise up in her throat, silenced every part of her brain screamed at her that jumping off a cliff was a bad idea. She mentally scanned through every bit of information she had ever read, watched on television, listened to in her mother's physics lectures, on how best to survive a fall.

"When we jump, we'll need to let go of each other," Louisa instructed, squeezing her sister's hand so tightly that she could feel the bones shifting beneath her skin. "Feet first, mouth closed. Cross your arms across your chest to decrease the amount of surface area coming into contact with water. Swimming with a broken arm will hurt like a bitch."

Dottie nodded. A second later, the girls were sprinting towards the ocean, hand in hand, wind roaring in their ears.

The last time Louisa had fallen off a cliff it was a whirl of colours and confusion before the world went black. This time she kept her eyes trained on the horizon, the setting sun glinting off the dark grey water. Nobody caught her this time. Instead, she had a moment of weightless freefalling as she plummeted, then the stinging of her feet as she shoes came in contact with the water. If Louisa thought wading through a nearly frozen creek was bad, nothing prepared her from taking a dip in the Pacific Ocean mid-February. She resisted the instinct to gasp as she sank into the depths, the water like razor blades as it froze every inch of her skin. When her body finally slowed, she kicked up, her lungs burning. Her head broke the surface moments before Dottie's.

"I think I hurt my ankle," Dottie shouted over the crashing waves.

"Can you swim?" Louisa asked, reaching out and fumbling to grasp her sister's hand.

Dottie was already beginning to shiver. "I need help."

Louisa pulled her sister closer, ignoring the ache in her muscles as they fought against the waves that sought to batter them into the side of the cliff. She leaned backwards, pulling her sister onto her chest, securing her with an arm around her ribs. Together, they managed to slowly kick away from the cliff and into less tempestuous waters.

The two continued their tandem swim, trying to ignore the cold water that threatened to freeze their muscles and coated their eyelashes with ice crystals. Their breathing was shallow and their heartbeats were erratic, but they were alive. At long last, Louisa's one free arm brushed against the ocean floor, and they were close enough to crawl up onto the shore, smooth stones sliding beneath their hands and knees. They crawled out of the water before collapsing face first onto the rocky beach.

"You look like a frost giant," Dottie said in between spitting out mouthfuls of salt water. "Your skin is purple."

For some reason, the comment made her giggle. "Does that mean I'm Loki?"

Dottie giggled in response. "Tom Hiddleston is such a babe."

"Nah, Jasper is a babe."
"Jasper is one scary motherfucker."

Louisa shrugged her shoulders, unable to deny her sister's statement. "He's a great kisser."

There was a beat of silence before the sisters broke into raucous laughter. One thing was for certain: adrenaline was one hell of a drug.

They were interrupted by the booming voice of a man from somewhere above them, and they turned to look at a tall man with russet skin and black hair staring down at them with an incredulous expression. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked, running towards them. "You'll catch your death in that water."

"We'd have caught it if we hadn't jumped," Louisa managed to stutter out between chattering teeth. Her body shuddered violently, reminding her that it was below freezing out and she had just emerged from the ocean. "You need to call the police. Mr Hewitt kidnapped her. He has a gun."

"I need to call for an ambulance," he snapped. "You'll be lucky if you can keep all of your limbs." He muttered something in a foreign language under his breath that Louisa was sure were insults. "Sam, hurry up with those towels!"

A young man appeared and quickly joined the older man, dropping to his knees between the two sisters and tossing towels over them.

"Don't rub," Louisa instructed, watching the newcomer as he tended to her sister. "Not sure why. Ed says it's bad."

"You're bossy," Dottie said, her voice slurred in exhaustion. "Gimme another blanket."

"You're bossy," Louisa mocked.

"I got kidnapped today. I can be bossy if I want to be."

Well, Louisa could hardly argue with that logic.

No Stone Left Unturned

The hours that followed after being found (by who she later learned was a man called Harry Clearwater) were a blur of medical tests, being poked and prodded by doctors, and warm blankets. The two were remarkably unscathed if one ignored Dottie's sprained ankle, the frostbite on Louisa's toes, or either girl's case of hypothermia. Still, the doctors informed them that they would be expected to make a full recovery, thanks entirely to their rescuers on the beach.

Sometime during her first well-deserved nap, her father arrived. She blinked at him groggily before being instructed to go back to sleep. Jasper was sitting at her bedside when she woke up for the second time, eyes black despite his recent hunting trip. He pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist and sent her a wave of lethargy that she didn't attempt to fight. The third time she woke up, Chief Swan was standing at the foot of Dottie's bed, taking her statement.

Louisa struggled to sit up and she was thankful for Jasper's hands catching her when the room began to spin. He moved to sit behind her on the bed and wrapped his arms around her waist, supporting her. She rested her head against his shoulder, arms winding around his bicep, relishing in the warmth emanating from his body. Her father, noticing that she was conscious, moved to sit in newly unoccupied chair next to her bed. Louisa shifted to face him and they watched each other for a moment in silence.
"Is he dead?" she asked in a low voice, glancing over at her sister, who was still sufficiently distracted by Chief Swan's questions.

Mr Collins nodded. "Gunshot wound to the head— self-inflicted. Wrote a note confessing to the murder."

"Does she know?" she asked, jerking her head towards her exhausted and dishevelled sister.

"Not yet. She's still in shock."

Louisa hummed in acknowledgement and the two fell silent for a moment. "Am I still grounded?"

In light of all that had happened that day, her words were so innocent and juvenile that Mr Collins couldn't help but laugh. He reached forward to pat his daughter's leg, which was still covered with several heated blankets. "No. You can even have your phone back when we get home."

Louisa had the decency to look sheepish. "About that…"

It would be an understatement to say her father was less than impressed by the information that he would need to retrieve her mobile from the Forks High front office. Her confession led to an interrogation of her own by Chief Swan, and by the end of it, she felt ready to back to sleep.

Jasper stayed with her the entire time she was in hospital, a silent and soothing presence, even going as far as to help her wash out the drying blood that was still caked in her hair. When it was time to be discharged, he scooped her up and placed her in a wheelchair before Mr Collins even had the chance to offer to help her. Jasper slid in next to her in the back seat of the car, his left hand resting on her thigh, and stared out the window for the entire ride.

She shouldn't have been so surprised to see Rosalie or Alice when she arrived home— they had made plans for a movie night, after all, even if those plans felt like they were made a lifetime ago. She offered an apologetic smile to Jasper as Alice ushered her up to her room to change out of the saltwater stiffened clothes she had been wearing and into an unfamiliar pair of flannel pyjamas. When they returned to the lounge, Rosalie was waiting with an impressive array of hairstyling tools and got to work brushing out the numerous snarls in Louisa's hair. Dottie wandered down halfway through *Bridesmaids* to steal popcorn, only to be cajoled into joining by an over-enthusiastic Alice.

Despite it being a school night, Mr Collins allowed the Cullen kids to stay much later than he would have under normal circumstances, and it was nearing midnight before the three exited the house. Unlike her, Louisa knew that none of them required sleep. She wondered idly if her father would allow her to skip school tomorrow— at the very least, being shot at by a teacher seemed like a good reason to miss her first-hour class.

She moved through her nightly routine as fast as possible that night, exiting the shower in record time, and by the time Louisa made it to her room, Jasper was already sitting cross-legged on her bed. She closed the door softly behind her before running into his waiting arms. He didn't say anything, merely pulled her close to his chest, and placed a kiss on the crook of her neck. Louisa could tell he was upset, not with her, but rather the situation in general, and didn't press him to speak. He would speak when he was ready and had sorted through all of his jumbled thoughts and emotions.

She laid back, pulling him with her, resting his head on her breastbone and weaving her fingers through his blond waves. He turned and buried his face in her chest, arms tightening around her, and let out a shaky sigh, his breath cold against her skin even through the fabric of her shirt. It was an anticlimactic end for such a dramatic day, which in a way, sort of made sense. The world hadn't
stopped turning when her mother had died nearly a year before, and it wouldn't stop because the local chemistry teacher kidnapped her sister. Life had a funny way of moving on, whether one was ready for it or not, she supposed. Tonight, in her little bedroom in a little town in western Washington, listening to the sound of her boyfriend's breathing even out into low purrs, she would recall the events of the day, process and analyse them, before carefully tucking them away on a shelf in her mental library. And when morning came, she would be ready for the new adventures that awaited her.

"The murderer survives the victim only to learn that it was himself that he longed to be rid of." – Thornton Wilder

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Woo. Done-zo. What did you think? Did it live up to your expectations? I hope so! Also, have no fear, this story is not over yet. In fact, it's only really just begun. So stay tuned. In the meantime, leave me a comment and let me know what you thought of the chapter. Lots of Love, CheckAlexa
Louisa was disappointed to find that Jasper had already left by the time she awoke the next morning. That wasn't to say she was alone in her room, however. The reason for his absence became apparent when she realised that Dottie had snuck into her bed sometime during the night and had somehow managed to steal most of the blankets on the bed. Louisa brushed the hair out of her sister's serene face, fingers ghosting over the bruise on her temple that she had incurred during the previous day's events.

She disentangled herself from her sister and sat up, her vision blotchy. She reached over her sister for her phone, which usually rested on the bedside table, before remembering that her mobile was still at school. In its place was a glass of water, which she almost knocked over with her clumsy fumbling. Steadying the glass, she noticed that it had been placed on top of a folded up white handkerchief. Next to it was a pot of pain medicine, which she all but dove for, downing the maximum dosage when she realised how much her head hurt. The movement must have roused Dottie, who sat up, bleary-eyed and disgruntled with the rude awakening.

"Happy Birthday," Louisa murmured, wincing when her head gave a nasty throb.

Dottie hummed in appreciation before laying back down to rest her head in Louisa's lap, and when she didn't say anything else, Louisa assumed she had gone back to sleep. Louisa reached for the handkerchief Jasper had left behind, worrying the soft cotton fabric between the fingers of one hand whilst the other stroked Dottie's hair. She leaned her head against the headboard, trying to swallow back her nausea, and organise her thoughts. Chief Swan had requested her presence at the police station for a formal interview, and Louisa knew she didn't have much time to get her story straight. She could hardly say that she had used her psychic powers to find a mysterious cabin in the woods, after all.

As if sensing her thoughts, Dottie spoke, starting Louisa out of her reverie. "How did you do it?"

Louisa's hands stilled, body tensing at the question. She knew that Dottie knew Louisa had done something unnatural yesterday, so there was really no point in denying it. Lying straight to her sister's face would only serve to piss her off, but the truth was so preposterous, that Dottie might assume that she was lying anyway.

Oblivious to her sister's internal struggle, Dottie continued on. "It's like that time with Spencer. You had no way of knowing where he was, yet you found him minutes after I told you he was missing."

Louisa decided to ignore the last accusation. "And I couldn't have looked up the cabin before coming to get you?"

Dottie sat up and fixed her with a stern look. "I had the car keys in my bag, and I know you didn't steal a car. Even if you knew where the cabin was, you had no practical way of getting to me. So how did you do it?"

Louisa's chest constricted in panic, realising just how reckless she had been yesterday. How would she even explain her appearance at the cabin? She realised she couldn't even explain how she knew it existed when even the police had been surprised to hear about it. She cleared her throat, but each attempt to speak ended with choked half sounds that held little meaning outside of conveying that she knew she had been caught up in a lie
Dottie fixed her with a look that left Louisa feeling exposed. "You know about a lot of stuff that you shouldn't," Dottie accused when Louisa didn't respond. "And it's not just because you are nosy. It's way beyond that."

"You've put a lot of thought into this," Louisa finally managed to respond, her voice breathy. She put way more thought into her mysterious arrival at the cabin than Louisa would have thought she would have. And in one night too. Unless it wasn't all in one night, she realised. She pulled away from Dottie, drawing her knees up to her chest, and surveyed her sister with an expression that she hoped came off more calculating than panicked.

"Your sister is extraordinarily perceptive," Jasper's voice echoed in her ears.

No shit. Dottie must have known something was wrong for months but hadn't said anything. Yesterday had been one more piece of evidence, the final nail in the coffin of her suspicions.

"I bet the Cullen's know your secret," Dottie snapped. "Why can't I?"

"It's dangerous, Dottie." Louisa realised a second too late that she had walked straight into a trap and confirmed her sister's suspicions.

There was a beat of silence and Dottie seemed to surprise that Louisa had actually fallen for it. "So there is something."

Louisa buried her face in her knees before nodding. "Please don't make me…" Louisa let out a shaky breath. "I can't… I don't…"

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt Dottie rest a hand on her arm.

"You don't have to tell me everything," she conceded. "But the police… Lou, I'm not the only one who will want to know."

"It's not safe."

"Neither is tracking down a murderer or jumping off a cliff in the dead of winter, and you seemed to have no problem with that yesterday." It was a poor attempt at humour, but Louisa appreciated the attempt at lightening the mood all the same. She gave her sister a weak smile and the two sat in silence for a while, ruminating on the enormity of the situation. Louisa felt like she was walking along the edge of a cliff, and had no way of knowing which decision would lead her to safety or cause her to plummet into chaos. Dottie, though unaware of her sister's dilemma, seemed to understand just how serious the conversation had turned. She shifted to sit next to Louisa against the headboard, resting her head on Louisa's shoulder.

"Ever since Mum and Laurie died, you've been bottling things up and hiding how you feel, and I know you do it because you think you would be burdening Dad and me with your problems when we've got problems of our own. But one day, you're going to crack and break down under that pressure," she said, reaching to take Louisa's hand. Louisa's fingers tightened, clenching it as if it were a lifeline. "I am begging you, please, don't make me watch that happen. Let me help you. I want to help you. I'm not some little girl you need to protect."

A strained chuckle squeezed its way out of Louisa's throat. She realised with a start that she was crying when a warm tear rolled down her cheek. "You're my little sister. Of course, I'm going to protect you."

"Let me do the same for you," Dottie murmured, giving Louisa's hand a squeeze.
Why couldn't it have been herself that was kidnapped, instead of her sister? Or at least someone who knew about her psychometry, so they could help her provide an alibi? Then Dottie would be safe from the supernatural world and Jasper would be safe because more humans didn't know about the existence of the supernatural. If only there was some way she could tell Dottie without threatening Jasper's or her sister's safety with this stupid secret… and then she realised, maybe she could. Her psychometry and the Cullen's vampirism were not mutually exclusive. Just because they knew her secret, didn't necessarily mean they had a secret of their own.

Her mind whirled, an idea springing to life. She could tell Dottie, not everything, mind, but enough to placate her need for information. In doing so, she could gain a useful ally, who just so happened to be the only living witness to what happened yesterday.

"You'll think I'm crazy," she breathed, her heart pounding with anticipation.

"Louisa, I was just kidnapped by my murderous chemistry teacher who had me convinced that our house, which he was breaking into, was haunted. I'm okay with crazy."

So Louisa told her, starting with her first 'case' at the tender age of seven, after waking up in hospital with no memories and desperately trying to find answers to things she used to know. How that hadn't worked, but she found that she had a knack for gathering information and using it to learn things about the people around her, because if she couldn't remember who she was, at least she could figure out who everyone around her was. How she found missing children by holding their beloved toys, and outed crooked businessmen by touching the pen they used to sign contracts. How strong emotions like the ones Spencer felt when he was jumped by the baseball team got left behind, so to speak, ready to be read the moment she brushed her fingers across its surface. She told Dottie about Anna being murdered in the very room they were sitting in, and how she used that information to track down Mr Hewitt at the cabin.

"But you have no control over it," Dottie surmised, after listening to Louisa's long explanation. "And Jasper is trying to help?"

"Dr Cullen wants to test the limits of it," Louisa replied, which wasn't a lie. Louisa had undergone more brain scans at the Cullens' home than she had in hospital. "He can't publish it in a journal without losing his credibility, of course, but the scientific prospects thrill him. Jasper just wants to make sure it doesn't overwhelm me."

"Overwhelm," Dottie said slowly as if testing out the words. "As in cause headaches?"

"Or nosebleeds."

Dottie hummed her understanding, taking a moment to digest the new information. "So, you're kind of like Eleven in Stranger Things?"

Louisa rolled her eyes at the comparison. "I can't flip cars if that makes you feel any better."

Silence followed her statement, which was broken by Dottie's snort of amusement. The sisters shared a sidelong glance with each other before dissolving into a fit of giggles. After months of stress and secrecy, telling her sister, even an abridged version of the truth felt like a heavy weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She had no way of knowing how the Cullens would take the news, but she hoped they would at least respect her decision to tell someone.

The moment ended by the sounds of their father moving about in his bedroom, no doubt getting ready for the morning. He was taking the day off work to take Louisa to the police station for her statement, a fact Louisa felt guilty about; it always seemed like he was missing work nowadays.
because of her.

Dottie seemed to be thinking around the same lines as her, the last bit of mirth vanishing from her face. "What are you going to tell the police?"

Louisa found herself shrugging. "I can hardly say I got there through the sewer system," she said with a sigh. "Any suggestions?"

Dottie shook her head and the two lapsed into a silence that only grew more uncomfortable the longer they realised how bad the situation was. That was how their father found them a short while later when he poked his head into the room to remind them that they were needed at the station soon.

"Are you going to tell Daddy?" Dottie asked, extracting herself from the bedsheets after Mr Collins had left.

"No," she said firmly. Louisa wished more than anything she could tell her dad about it. Having her sister in on the secret, even in such a limited capacity, was just as much a blessing for Louisa as it would be a burden Dottie, and certainly not something she wanted for him. Her dad would obsess over how to help her to the point he would sacrifice himself to ease her suffering, something he had proved time and time again, from countless doctor's visits to uprooting his entire career to move to a sleepy town because she had gained the attention of a murderer.

Dottie pursed her lips and her brow furrowed as she watched Louisa through narrowed eyes. She gave a slow nod before wandering out of the room. Louisa dragged herself out of bed and got ready for the day. No sooner had she finished dressing, there was a knock at her bedroom window. Rolling her eyes, she moved to unhook the latch before stepping to the side to allow Jasper to swing himself into the room. His eyes were lighter today, though still darker than their customary yellow, and Louisa wasn't sure if it was because of his emotional state or his need for blood.

Jasper reached out and cradled her face in his hands, stooping to place a kiss to on her forehead. Louisa wound her arms around his middle, pulling him into a hug. He rested his chin on the top of her head before letting out a heavy sigh, and they stood in silence for a brief moment, savouring each other's presence.

"Was it a mistake telling her?" Louisa asked, her voice muffled by his shirt.

She felt Jasper shake his head. "Alice said it would have been worse if you hadn't," he replied. "She's safe this way." He didn't elaborate on how Dottie's new knowledge was safer, and Louisa didn't ask.

She let out a breath she didn't realise she had been holding and relaxed against Jasper's chest.

"What do I do now?"

It was Alice who answered, in the form of a text (or as close as a vague, two worded message could be to an answer) to Jasper's mobile: the bike.

"Does that mean anything to you?" he asked, looking up from his phone.

"I may or may not have committed petty larceny in your absence," she replied. Downstairs, her father was calling for her to hurry up. "Will you be here when I get back?"

Jasper's head cocked to the side, eyebrows furrowing. "Where else would I be?"

A smile played at the corner of her lips before rising up onto her toes to press a gentle kiss to his
cheek. He still looked bemused when she pulled away but gave her a curt nod before settling down in the window seat. Louisa spared him one last look before slipping out of her bedroom to join her family downstairs.

No Stone Left Unturned

"So to recap: you stole a classmate's bike?"

"I think so. It wasn't my bike."

"And you rode it ten kilometres in the snow?"

"Is that how far it was? It seemed a lot closer."

"Then rescued your sister?"

"Yes."

"And jumped off a cliff?"

"It seemed like a good decision at the time."

"And where is this bike now?"

"In the woods near the cabin, I'd imagine."

Sergeant Todd let out a heavy sigh and looked up from the statement she had written out. "Did I miss anything?"

"Did you see the part where I stole Lloyd's gun and shot out his tyres?" Louisa asked, casting a suspicious look at the paper in his hands. "Just in case the lab says I had gun powder residue on my hands. He was still very much alive when we left the cabin."

Sergeant Todd leaned back in his seat, watching her through narrowed eyes. "Do you understand how close you came to dying yesterday, Miss Collins?"

"The gun made it a bit obvious."

Her father sighed at her flippant response and she shot him an apologetic smile. She knew it couldn't be easy to hear how close you came to losing the last your surviving family, and she knew that it wasn't something that was to be joked about. But then Louisa remembered the blind panic she felt, and her gut began to churn like it was full of writhing snakes, and it felt like her only option was to crack a tasteless joke or she would dissolve into tears. "But yes, many adults have impressed upon me the recklessness of my actions. Though, to be fair, I did call emergency services," she amended.

"Next time something like this happens," Sergeant Todd said, fixing her with an annoyed look. "You should stay on the line with them, instead of gallivanting off on a half-baked rescue attempt."

"There won't be a 'next time,'" Louisa said. Her father and Sergeant Todd shared dubious looks with each other, and she resisted the urge to slap the looks right off their face. "Besides the fact that he's dead, this is Forks. How many murderers do you think there are walking around?"

"Before we moved here, I thought it was zero," her father replied dryly. "You managed to find one alright."
"Well I'm not going looking for another one," she said, fighting the urge to snap at him. The truth of his statement stung more than she thought it would. Louisa wasn't sure why their comments made her so angry. Hell, not too long ago, she would have laughed. "Am I done?"

Sergeant Todd was watching her with an expression one might wear when considering a particularly difficult math problem, his fingers drumming a slow beat on top of her statement. "One more thing: how did you know about the diary?"

"I told you about it," she reminded him. "Ms Morales said that Anna kept one."

He shook his head and sat forward, resting his crossed arms on the table. "But you knew Anna mentioned him in it. How?"

"Seriously? That's an easy one," Louisa scoffed. At her father's rebuke, she rolled her eyes before focusing on the still pensive police officer. "Do you keep a diary, Sergeant?"

"I can't say that I do."

Louisa leaned back in her chair, twirling a strand of hair around her fingers, and watching Sergeant Todd while she considered her words. It was hard to describe in a logical way how she knew Anna's dependence on her diary: she just did. She could feel the panic Anna felt after the first kiss, the shame of her actions when she realised that Lloyd was married, the elation she experienced when the two stole hours together in the cabin. She knew Anna's burning desire to tell somebody, anybody, about the affair, how the air left her lungs when she saw Lloyd with his young sons, and how her heart felt like it was going to burst from happiness when he kissed her. Her fingers twitched in anticipation at the sight of her journal, knowing that she could finally, finally, let out her anguish, her joy, her fears.

Louisa didn't know when she had learned this information, but she felt these things as keenly as if they belonged to her. She saw Mr Hewitt leaning towards her, hovering over her, enclosing her between his body and the soft surface of the bed, trapping her against the hard bookshelves that he built for her. She knew how his mouth tasted against hers and the exact notes of cologne which sank into her pillows and lingered on her clothes. She was privy to all this information, somebody else's life as if it was a book she could crack open and peruse when it struck her fancy. It left her feeling dirty, invasive, voyeuristic.

She must have been silent for too long because her father placed a concerned hand on her arm. She flinched at the contact, but it succeeded in pulling her from her reverie.

"A diary is a place where you can explain your innermost thoughts being judged for them," she explained at last. "Anna was having an affair with her married teacher. She felt conflicted and she was afraid to tell anyone about it. Her journal was a safe place to do that." She fell silent again, pulling her hands into her lap, and staring blankly at the table in front of her. She vaguely heard her father ask the sergeant if there were any more questions for her. The moment Sergeant Todd gave the negative, Louisa was out of her seat and out the door before either man had the chance to stand.

Dottie gave her a concerned look when she barrelled past her, but Louisa didn't bother stopping to talk. She wound her way through the now familiar halls of the Forks police station, her feet carrying in the direction of the front doors before she realised that she wanted to go there. Outside, despite the below freezing temperatures, a canopy was being set up, protecting a podium from the snow that had begun to fall. Reporters were loitering about, news vans jamming up the car park, ready to get the scoop on the sensational story of Forks' only murder in decades, being solved at long last. Anger burned in her veins at the sight of them and her stomach clenched. She shot them a glare, despite the fact that none of them were paying her any attention.
Louisa knew she was being irrational, but for the life of her, no matter how much she wracked her brains or browsed through books in her mental library, could she understand why. The revelation only served to make her angrier. She wished Jasper was with her. He would know what her damage was. He would be able to tell her why she wanted nothing more than to march through the front doors of the police station and start shouting insults into every voice recorder the reporters held, or smash every video camera in sight.

Something outside caught her attention, and a well-kept silver Volvo rolled into the car park. It captured the attention of the reporters too. For a brief moment, Louisa thought Alice had sent someone to rescue her. Then the driver stepped out of the car, sending the reporters into a frenzy. Cameras flashed. Ms Morales had arrived.

Two police officers rushed out to greet the woman, blocking the reporters from getting too close and crushing the poor woman. Her eyes were bloodshot and her tanned skin had taken on a sickly, milky pallor. She was ushered inside and Louisa flattened herself against the wall, partly so she wasn't run over in the tiny hallway, but mostly because she wished the wall could somehow swallow her up. Ms Morales was ushered to Chief Swan's cubicle, where she sat, shoulders hunched and shaking from the tears that wracked her body.

It was odd to think that the reason for Ms Morales' pain, the man responsible for her daughter's death, had been discovered after so long. Even if the man wouldn't be brought to justice, at least she had a name for the man who caused her so much pain. Not that it seemed to help her any. With the way she cried, it was like she had just learned that her daughter had been killed. Even Louisa's father, who had to bury his son not even a year ago, didn't seem to break down as Ms Morales did. And unlike Mr Collins, Ms Morales had had twelve years to process her daughter's death.

The scene reminded her of the therapist her father made her visit in the months following the car crash: Louisa had been sitting on the couch, asking the man when the pain would lessen. The grizzled old man hadn't been very helpful, and her father finally let her stop seeing him after months of complaining that he was a waste of money. The therapist would raise his eyebrows and pursed his lips, nodding sagely whenever she spoke, before going off on some non sequitur. Very rarely would he give her actual advice, and when he did, he would do it as if he were spouting of some deep piece of wisdom that he had thought of, instead of a quote he saw on a motivational poster.

"Time heals all wounds," he had said in a grandfatherly tone.

Louisa had known right away that his words were bullshit, and watching Ms Morales sob only reaffirmed her belief. She didn't miss Laurie or her mum any less than she did right after the accident, and in twelve years, she doubted she would feel any different. Time wasn't a factor for how long it took to grieve; there was no socially acceptable time frame one had to get over the death of a loved one. Each person had to work through it differently, and on their own time.

Still, she wondered if it were possible to mourn for the rest of your life. It didn't seem possible; you either moved passed your grief or it consumed you. Perhaps the ones who lived were the ones who were able to remind themselves that they were crying because they loved the one they missed. They found ways to fill the void in their heart, learned to smile when they stumbled across a reminder of their lost loved one. Perhaps the ones who lived in their grief, the ones who clung to it as if it were their new identity —the grieving mother, widower, child— weren't really living, but rather existing. Louisa turned her head, forcing herself to look away from the crying woman, and hoped with all her heart that Ms Morales would be able to move on.

Her eyes landed on Chief Swan, who had forgone his usual black jacket and was looking very
official (and rather uncomfortable) in a neatly pressed uniform, his badge gleaming over his heart. Next to him was a man in a smart blue uniform, a blue bow tie tied neatly under his chin. The two men saw Louisa and made their way over, warm smiles on their faces.

When Chief Swan called out to her, his companion blinked in shock. "So this is the one you were talking about. The girl detective," he said, sticking his hand out and introducing himself as Chief Rodriguez. "A glimmering law enforcement career in your future, I am sure."

Louisa took his offered hand and shook it with a wan smile. Rodriguez was a pleasant man, a family man with a loving wife and three kids. Two dogs, an old German Shepherd that had been retired as a police dog and a pit bull that he had rescued off the side of the road during a thunderstorm. A genuine and kind man. Despite this, his well-meaning word still irked her, and she had to fight the urge to snap at him too.

"In the flesh," she replied with a tight smile before turning to face Chief Swan. "Your tie is crooked," she said, stepping forward to fix it, giving him a stern look when he tried to swat her hands away. "We can't have it look like Fork's Chief of Police can't dress himself."

The man gave her a long-suffering sigh but allowed her to adjust the sloppily tied knot. She did have a point. He couldn't even remember the last time he wore a tie.

"Don't be nervous. You'll be brilliant," Louisa said, stepping back with a smile.

He grimaced in return. "You did all the work," he said. "You should be getting the credit. Not me."

Her stomach swooped at his words, and not in a good way. Six months ago, she would have grinned at his words, desperate to receive praise and recognition for her accomplishments. But what had happened last night, that didn't feel like an accomplishment. It just made her heart clench. She needed to leave.

Louisa shook her head, hoping her smile didn't actually look like a grimace. "You remembered Anna when everyone else forgot her. You fought for her when everyone else wanted her gone."

She took a step backwards, patting him on the arm. "It's your day, Chief Swan."

Before either man had the chance to respond, she slipped back into a crowd of policemen and vanished from their sight.

No Stone Left Unturned

Much to her relief, they didn't linger to watch the press conference take place. Mr Collins tilted his daughters' heads down and ushered them towards his car, ignoring the news reporters and television cameras that demanded a comment from them. The muscles in his jaw clenched as he tried to pull out of the car park, only loosening when Louisa suggested that he just run the reporters over. They made a brief stop at Forks High (Home of the Spartans!) to recover Louisa's mobile phone, which Mrs Cope handed over, conflicting looks of disgust and amazement pinching her face. No doubt she would be spreading the news of their visit to the teacher's lounge the moment they left.

The Collins family made it back to their home before lunch, her father wandering into the kitchen to make lunch for them. Dottie followed him, deciding to make use of her impromptu day off of school to make a batch of cookies. Neither commented when Louisa broke away and made her way up to her room. Just as he promised, Jasper was sitting in the window seat, in the same position he had been in when she left. The bedroom door closed behind her with a soft click, and
for a moment they stared at each other in silence. Jasper tilted his head before extending a hand to her. Louisa crossed the room and took it, allowing him to sweep her up into his arms and settle the two of them in the window seat. He nestled her between his legs, her back pressing against his chest, and rested his chin on her shoulder, arms snaking around her waist.

"It's over," she said, at last, her words quiet. "It's all over."

"How do you feel?"

"Don't you already know?" she asked, the teasing in her voice marred by how exhausted she sounded.

"I want to know the reasoning behind it."

It took a while for Louisa to find the words, which was kind of ridiculous, seeing as she had been ruminating over them all morning. "They kept acting like I am off to solve the next best thing, without even asking me if that's what I wanted. And maybe that's what I used to want, but what if that's not who I am anymore?" She took a shuddering breath and pulled her legs up to her chest, burying her face in her knees. "My heart used to pound with anticipation at the prospect of a new case; now I only want to throw up. I know I have this gift and that I could help a lot of people with it. Like, what's the point of even having this power if I'm not going to use it to help people?"

"It's not your job to fix these things, Louisa," Jasper said evenly. "You're sixteen."

"But I used to want to."

"I used to want to kill people," Jasper pointed out. "I thought that I had to because I didn't know anything different."

"That isn't the same thing," she muttered.

"Isn't it?" he asked, his voice mild.

She realised she didn't have an answer to that.

"What do I do then? What is the point of having this gift if I don't use it to solve mysteries?"

"I don't know if you'd ever be truly happy if you couldn't stick your nose into somebody else's business," he said, a teasing lit colouring his voice. "But there are a lot of mysteries in this world that don't involve murder." Louisa must have been emoting a fair bit of disbelief because Jasper continued on. "For instance, Emmett is convinced that Big Foot exists and would be delighted if you assisted in gathering evidence."

Louisa reached up to playfully tug a lock of Jasper's hair. He snickered and dodged her hands, nipping at the tips of her fingers. "If that doesn't tickle your fancy, then there are these giant spheres in Costa Rica that scientists have no clue where they came from or what their purpose was for. That might keep you busy."

Louisa couldn't help but laugh at his words. Shaking her head, she sank back against him, hugging his arms tighter around her body. They sat in companionable silence for a while, listening to the bangs emanating from the kitchen as Dottie and her father cooked lunch. Someone had turned on show tunes, and the two were singing a duet from The King and I. A grin spread across her face when she heard her father's warm tenor begin to serenade Dottie with I Have Dreamed.

"Your father can sing?"
"It has been said that time heals all wounds. I don't agree. The wounds remain. Time— the
mind, protecting its sanity—covers them with some scar tissue and the pain lessens, but it is never gone." —Rose Kennedy

End of Part 1
Louisa was spending a lot of time at Forks General Hospital, and for once, it was of her own volition. The newly turned seventeen-year-old strolled through the halls with the familiarity of one who was either a frequent visitor or a recurring patient of Forks’ paediatric ward, which, in Louisa’s case, was true on both accounts. It seemed whenever she wasn’t running away from murderers or jumping off cliffs, she was suffering from debilitating migraines which had left doctors scratching their heads and claiming that there was no rational cause for the headaches. Which, in all honesty, was a fair assumption, considering that the pains stemmed from a supernatural source—psychometry, an odd talent Louisa possessed, which gave her the ability to perceive information from objects that people left behind. The doctor who figured out the cause of the headaches, Dr Cullen, was no stranger to the paranormal, being a vampire himself (and coincidentally, also the adoptive father of both her boyfriend and her best friend).

“How was your trip?” Kelly asked the moment Louisa stepped into the room. Louisa gave a faint smile at the little girl’s enthusiasm as she sat down in a chair next to the bed. “It was nice,” she replied before pulling her purse into her lap. “The sunflowers were a good idea.”

Her father’s pale eyebrows had risen far above the rims of his wire glasses, but he hadn’t said anything when she had placed the yellow flowers on her mother and brother’s graves. The sunflowers stood out amongst the white tulips and white rose that her father and sister had laid down, though not as much as the Chewbacca Funko Pop that someone (Louisa suspected her friend, Petya) had placed at the base of Laurie’s grave. The sixteenth of March had marked the one year anniversary of their deaths, and the Collins family had made the three-hour drive to the cemetery in Tacoma where they were buried.

Kelly nodded with an air of wisdom more suited for a Buddhist monk rather than a ten-year-old. But instead of swathed in resplendent robes of saffron, the preteen was drowning in an oversized, teddy bear patterned hospital gown and attached to a dialysis machine. “Sunflowers are always a good idea.”

Louisa nodded in agreement and extracted a book from her purse, chatting with the girl about how her mother was doing (“Busy.”) and how she was feeling (“Tired.”). Neither answer was surprising to Louisa. Kelly’s mother had taken on a second job to pay for Kelly’s medical bills and always showed up to pick Kelly up from the hospital looking drawn and pale. Louisa had volunteered to babysit the girl on more than when occasion when the two women met, but Ms Beckett had waved her off with an exhausted smile and a kiss to the forehead. And Kelly, who despite her bright smiles and endless enthusiasm, was much sicker than she liked to let on: she had been born with a rare genetic disorder Louisa couldn’t even begin to pronounce, causing both of her kidneys to fail the previous summer. She had been placed on the transplant list, and doctors were confident Kelly would be able to undergo a kidney transplant. That was if they were able to find a kidney that was suitable. As it would happen, Forks General Hospital didn’t have too many child-sized organs laying around. During the interim, Kelly received several hours of dialysis each week, a number which had been steadily increasing in the five months they had known each other.

Unable to do little else, Louisa had increased her visits and sat with the girl during her treatments. They played games together in the paediatric ward’s small playroom, and when that became too strenuous for the girl, Louisa read to her. They had started with the *Sherlock Holmes* novels (something Louisa’s mother had read to her when she was sick), and when those were finished, the *Harry Potter* series. Her boyfriend, Jasper Hale, could also sometimes be cajoled into joining them.
and would bring along his first edition copy of *The Hobbit*.

Still, as the months dragged on and seasons began to change, it was clear that Kelly was only becoming sicker. Infections became more frequent and it wasn’t uncommon for Louisa to don a face mask when she came to visit. Kelly’s vivid red hair took on a dull sheen and her already skinny frame had turned almost skeletal. It was a difficult thing to witness for anybody, but it was even harder when the person who was wasting away was someone you loved.

“Are we going to start *Lord of the Rings* today?”

“No, Jasper said he’d read it to you,” Louisa said. “This a new series.”

“Does it have dragons?”

“Not really,” Louisa admitted, chuckling at the displeased look Kelly gave her. “It’s about a boy and a summer camp.” On her last visit, Kelly had all but shouted at her that her mother was allowing her to attend summer camp for the first time. She had been able to talk about little else in her excitement for sleeping in log cabins and roasting marshmallows (“There’s even a doctor on-site, so I don’t have to leave for dialysis!”).

“Well, I guess that sounds okay,” she admitted, peaking at the cover of the book. “*The Lightning Thief?* How do you steal lightning?”

“Shall we find out?” At Kelly’s impatient nod, Louisa thumbed to the first page and began to read aloud. “‘Look, I didn’t want to be a half-blood.’”

Louisa made it through three chapters before she was interrupted by Kelly’s soft snores. She marked the page in the book and rose from her seat, slinging her purse over her shoulder. Gently, so as not to wake the sleeping girl, Louisa adjusted Kelly’s blanket before pressing a kiss to her forehead and slipping out of the room. She shared wan smiles with the nurses she passed but was otherwise too exhausted to start up a conversation with anybody.

She made her way to the car park, sitting in her Prius for longer than was necessary whilst she collected her thoughts. Jasper and Rosalie had left early in the morning for a quick hunting trip and wouldn’t be back until later in the afternoon. Dr Cullen, she assumed, was at work, while the rest of the family were at Louisa’s house, setting up for her surprise birthday party. Not that she was supposed to know anything about that. The curse of psychometry, she supposed.

If she were being one-hundred per cent honest, Louisa wanted nothing to do with the party, and if anybody besides her family and the Cullens were hosting it, she would have skived off. She understood their reasoning, of course: it was supposed to be a way of reclaiming what was supposed to be a happy day for her. Last year she had been too numb to process that she wasn’t celebrating her sixteenth birthday, her brother and mother dying in a car crash literally the night before. This year, with new friends, a boyfriend, and some therapy sessions under her belt, she thought she would be excited at the prospect of a surprise party. Instead, she only felt gloomy and ready for a party that hadn’t even started yet to be over.

She could imagine Jasper saying something sensible, yet esoteric like ‘grief isn’t linear’ or some similar bullshit. Not that she cared what the reasoning behind her mood. What she wanted instead was to bury herself in Jasper’s arms and sleep for the rest of the day.

It didn’t come as a surprise, then, to find herself sitting in front of the Cullen’s home a short while later. A lamp was on in the front room, Edward’s red hair catching the light. He was sitting at his piano, head tilted to the side and eyes glazed, playing a song she couldn’t yet hear. She wondered
if he knew she was there.

Without looking out the window, Edward raised his right hand and made a rude hand gesture at her. Louisa had to laugh and she stepped out of her car, not bothering to lock it behind her while she dashed up the front steps and into the house.

“Good afternoon, Louisa,” Edward murmured, remaining at his piano, his fingers gliding over the keys and filling the room with Abba’s *Dancing Queen*. “What are you doing here? We didn’t expect you back yet.”

She brought up a mental image of Kelly asleep in the hospital bed and Edward hummed in understanding. “Plus,” she said, toeing off her snow-covered shoes at the door and relieving herself of her coat. “Everyone is at my house right now, setting up the party.”

“How do you know about—” Edward demanded, before remembering to whom he was speaking. He shook his head, rolling his eyes. “Never mind.” The music shifted, and Edward began to incorporate the birthday song into the melody. “Happy birthday,” he added.

She dropped down on the piano bench next to him, realising with a jolt that he was composing the song off the top of his head. Jasper had mentioned that Edward played the piano, but he hadn’t expressed just how gifted the youngest Cullen was. “Happy isn’t the word I’d use,” she replied. “But thank you.”

Edward hummed before shifting over to the left-hand side of the keyboard, the melody shifting so that it was only the baseline. He nodded towards the keys and it took a moment for her to realise that he wanted her to join him.

“No, you’re going to make fun of me.”

“On your birthday? That hardly seems polite”

“I haven’t played in a year,” Louisa objected. “And I suck at the piano anyway.” Starting at the tender age of eight, the Collins siblings had been forced to sit in front of the piano with their crotchety old neighbour for an hour a week. Whilst Laurie had taken to the instrument like a duck to water, neither Louisa nor sister held much talent and spent many grudging hours on the bench if only to appease their parents. The sound of a metronome still made her blood pressure skyrocket.

Edward pounded out the opening notes of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* in response. (What the response actually meant, Louisa was less sure of.) She rolled her eyes at his antics but sat up to join him nonetheless. Edward didn’t even attempt to hide the smug look on his face.

“Shut up,” she snapped. He let out a little laugh before letting her pick the next song. If Edward was annoyed she picked a show tune, he didn’t comment. He was also nice enough to not comment on the tempestuous nature of her thoughts, which Louisa appreciated.

While visiting Kelly was never a chore, it certainly had become more difficult in the most recent months. When she had first met the fourth-grader back in November, Kelly had been a rambunctious force of nature and could spend hours in the playroom at Forks General Hospital. Now, however, only five months later, Kelly was often too tired to even leave her bed after her dialysis treatment. There was only so much Louisa could do for the child, and each time she visited, her heart felt even heavier than it had days before.

The nurses and doctors couldn’t tell Louisa much about Kelly’s condition, and it hardly seemed appropriate to badger Kelly’s mother for details when the woman was already so stressed.
“What will happen to her?” Louisa asked aloud, knowing that Edward had heard all of her internal musings.

“She’ll be put on a list to receive a transplant. Her age and the nature of her condition are advantageous, and she’ll be prioritised to receive a donation.” Edward explained, his fingers continuing to dance across the piano keys, switching to a sombre sounding sonata that Louisa had never heard before. She removed her hands from the keys and watched his hands if only so she didn’t have to see the pitying expression on his face. “It’s not a short list. There are hundreds of children in the state that just as sick as she is and who have been on the list for longer than she has. Her condition is progressing too fast for her to wait and her mother isn’t a candidate to donate a kidney.”

Louisa became aware that her fingertips had grown cold, numb almost, and shoved them under her thighs, her mind racing with so many thoughts she felt almost dizzy. There had to be a way to help Kelly, Louisa knew. But Louisa was a teenager— she had never been to medical school and had no clue where to even begin. Short of giving Kelly one of her own kidneys, Louisa was pretty much useless.

Unless…

“What makes someone a good candidate for a kidney donation?”

Edward’s hands stilled and Louisa could see him turn to face her out of the corner of her eye. “You wouldn’t be considered, Louisa,” he said softly.

“My blood type is O negative. I’m a universal blood donor. I could be a match for—”

“Lou,” he whispered, grabbing her wrist and pulling her hand out from under her leg. His fingers wove between hers and he gave them a gentle squeeze. “Have you see yourself lately?”

The question threw her for a loop and she tilted her head to look up at Edward. His lips were pursed and his brows were drawn together, a heartbroken expression on his face. What was that supposed to mean?

“No sane doctor would put you on an operating table unless doing so would save your life,” he explained. His hand slid up to her bicep, and Louisa watched in surprise as he encircled her arm between his thumb and his middle finger. True, Edward had long fingers (pianist hands, her brain was helpful to point out), but that didn’t seem like it should be possible.

“I haven’t been hungry,” Louisa said, feeling rather defensive. She tugged on her arm and she slid as far away from him as the piano bench would allow.

“I know,” Edward replied with a wan smile. “Between your headaches and nausea that accompanies them, why would you be?”

Louisa turned her head away and glared out the window, blinking furiously when she felt tears sting her eyes. “So what? I’m just supposed to let her die?”

Edward was silent for a while and she knew he was he watching her, his yellow eyes soft, pitying. “I know what you are thinking. I’ve been there before. You want to fix everything. But, Louisa, you can’t. Take it from someone who has lived far longer than you have, who has stood in the position that you find yourself in now, and believe me when I say you can’t save everyone.”

“I don’t want to save everyone,” Louisa replied in a watery voice. “And I don’t want to save the whole world. I just want to save hers.” Her gaze dropped to the floor and studied the plush carpet,
the cream and gold fibres bleeding together as her eyes filled with tears. Louisa wasn’t sure why
she was crying. Sure, she was sad that Kelly was dying before her eyes, but that didn’t really seem
to be the crux of the matter. She figured it had more to do with the timing of it all—the realisation
of Kelly’s most likely imminent death coming around the one-year anniversary of her mother and
Laurie’s death. It was hard not to love Kelly, and Louisa would be lying if she said that she didn’t
feel some sort sisterly affection for the girl.

Perhaps that was the problem. Maybe she felt like she was losing another sibling. And just like last
time, she felt powerless to stop it from happening.

“The burdens of the people in the world are not yours to shoulder,” he said, reaching forward to
wrap an arm around her shoulders, turning her so that he could pull her into a hug. “You will burn
yourself out trying.”

Louisa couldn’t stop the gasping sob from escaping her chest. “So what?” she asked, her voice
muffled in Edward’s shoulder. “I just don’t care anymore?” She supposed it would be easier,
especially when Jasper turned her into a vampire. Everyone she knew and loved would die around
her. She might as well get used to it.

Edward pulled away and fixed her with a stern look. “Never do that,” he said. “When you stop
caring, you stop being human.” Only it was no longer Edward saying the words, but Carlisle. She
could feel his fingertips digging into her shoulders despite the fact that nobody’s hands were on
them, and she had to swallow the bratty ‘but we’re not human,’ retort that was on the tip of a
tongue that wasn’t hers.

“Sorry,” she said, though she wasn’t sure what she was apologising for. The headache that always
seemed to be present nowadays gave a particularly nasty throb and Louisa reached up to make sure
her nose wasn’t bleeding.

Edward gave her an off-kilter look as if he only remembered that her gift could be just as invasive
as his, and let his arms fall away. Without a word, both teens turned back to the piano and Edward
began playing the baseline of a fugue she remembered from her piano lessons. The silence was
filled with contemplative sort of silence where they were both so lost in their own thoughts, neither
considered having a conversation. They moved onto a song from Beauty and the Beast, which
Edward played in a style far jazzier than what the original composers had in mind.

“What was her name?”

If Edward was upset by her question, he didn’t show it. “Josie,” he said.

“Did you go to school together?”

Edward shook his head, his eyes going glassy. His fingers began to play a song Louisa had never
heard before and she wondered if it was something he composed himself. “It was 1943. I met her
when I started my residency. She was a patient in the oncology ward. She had leukaemia.” Louisa
didn’t need to ask what happened to Josie: the tightness in Edward’s jaw spoke volumes for the
girl’s prognosis.

“I miss her,” he said. He moved onto a new song, one that was as sweet-sounding as it was sad. “I
never did complete my residency. I went through med school again back in the nineties but…”

For as long as she knew Edward, he was the loner of the Cullen family. Rose and Emmett, Carlisle
and Esme, Jasper and Alice. They all went off and did their own things together, and whilst they
generally invited Edward along, he was often the awkward third wheel in most situations. Louisa
wondered how much his mind-reading impacted his decision to seclude himself from others, or how much of it was because of Josie’s death. It had to be difficult, after all, to not grow attached to people after hearing their most innermost and intimate thoughts. Perhaps Edward kept to himself out of necessity, to protect himself. He wasn’t so much cold and aloof, as he was terrified of what people could do to him.

“I never wanted to feel like that again,” he confessed, surprising Louisa with his frankness. “Carlisle respects my decision of course, even if he doesn’t agree with them.”

“It sounds lonely,” Louisa commented, leaning over to rest her head on his shoulder.

“I suppose it can be,” he conceded. Neither knew how to continue after such a heavy conversation and instead sat in companionable silence, playing the piano. Every so often, Edward would get a text message regarding what Louisa assumed to be the status of the party, though he was careful to angle his mobile away from her whenever he responded so she couldn’t be too certain.

“I’m just going to go lay down in Jasper’s room if you don’t mind,” she said when her fingers began to ache, a tell-tale sign that she had been playing for too long.

Edward nodded and offered her a boyish grin when she stood to leave. A soft melody followed her up the stairs and which she could still hear after she shut the bedroom door behind her. Letting her hair out of its bun, Louisa crossed the short distance between the door and their bed, sliding beneath the covers and burying her head in the pillows. The sound of Edward’s soft music from below combined with the cinnamon and apple scent Jasper left behind quickly lulled her into a light sleep.

She was awoken sometime later by Jasper’s tuneless humming when he emerged from the adjoining bath and padded barefoot into his bedroom, a pair of jeans slung low over his hips. Even in the hazy light filtering in from the bath Jasper’s skin shimmered, highlighting the countless crescent-shaped scars that marked his back. The steam from his shower made the air thick, and his warm scent was seemingly intensified by the humid air. Jasper wandered towards his wardrobe as he towelled off his hair, before rifling through it for a shirt.

Louisa grinned at her partner, revelling in how a supernatural creature could act so… normal.

“How was your trip?”

Jasper froze for the briefest of moments before spinning around to face her. “My trip?”

“Yes,” Louisa drawled, propping herself up on her elbows. “Your hunting trip?”

“Oh, it was fine,” he said with a slight laugh.

His odd reaction caught her attention, and she narrowed her eyes. Did he not go hunting as he had said? She was reluctant to play the part of the suspicious girlfriend, but, well, he was acting rather suspicious. “Are you alright?”

Jasper nodded his head, humming in affirmation. In a swift motion that was too fast for Louisa to comprehend, Jasper was fully clothed, the cotton t-shirt he had selected darkening where it touched his still damp hair. “I didn’t realise you were awake. You surprised me.”

“I surprised the vampire?” Louisa asked, scepticism lacing her voice.

“Seeing how I need to wake you up in the morning, yes, I am rather surprised you are capable of regulating your own sleep cycle.”
“You ass,” she laughed, falling back down into the pillows. “Though I must admit I much prefer you over my alarm clock. You are slightly less shrill.”

“Little Miss,” Jasper said, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips betraying the stern look he gave her. “You better be nice to me, or you aren’t getting your birthday present.”

“Seeing you shirtless wasn’t my birthday present?”

He let out a belly laugh and crossed the room, crawling onto the bed and hovering over her before pressing a kiss to her lips. “I can do that anytime. All you gotta do is ask.”

“My, my, Major Whitlock,” Louisa murmured against his lips. “You sure do know how to spoil a girl.”

Jasper laughed at the annoyed sigh she let out when he pulled away. He leaned over to the bedside table and pulled out a velvet box from one of its drawers. He sat up and moved to rest his back against the headboard, before scooping her up and settling her in his lap.

“I know you know about the party,” he said, bending his head to place a kiss on the crook of her neck. “I wanted to give you your gift now before everyone else can distract you.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to know about that,” she responded, watching the box in curiosity. It was too big to be a ring (thank God, because that would start some uncomfortable conversations) but too small to be a bracelet.

“Are you claiming you don’t?”

“No, I do. I just thought we were pretending that I didn’t.”

“Just don’t let Esme know that you know,” he said, reaching up with his free hand to give her hair a small tug. “She has this way of making you feel so low that you’d have to look up to see Hell.”

“Good thing I’ve been practising my surprised face all morning,” Louisa deadpanned. She hadn’t of course. But if Esme was truly surprised that Louisa, who was perhaps the nosiest girl in the Pacific Northwest, already knew about her surprise birthday party, it was her own fault. Besides, asking her about her favourite cake flavour had been a dead giveaway.

Jasper snickered and buried his face in her neck. His nose was still warm from his shower but the action caused a shiver to run down her spine anyway. “Happy Birthday, my love,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. He handed her the little box without any fanfare, and she opened it up, her pulse thrumming with excitement.

Inside was a reddish-brown stone with thin white streaks, set in sterling silver. A silver cross-like design formed a loop at the top of the pendant where a thin chain fed through. It was small and understated and wasn’t much bigger than the end of her finger, but the design was somehow elegant in its simplicity. Louisa stroked the small stone with her thumb, half-listening to Jasper’s commentary about the gift while she stared at it in awe.

“Edward suggested that I give you an heirloom,” Jasper explained, his voice low in her ear. “Not that I have any to give you, but I’d be worried if I gave you something with too much history, even if I did.”

“It’s jasper?” Louisa guessed, unable to peel her eyes away.

“Emmett said that it was cheesy,” Jasper admitted. “But it was my father’s design. He made it for
my mother after I was born.”

“Jazz,” she whispered, craning her neck to look up at him. “It’s beautiful.” She reached up and pulled him down for a kiss, not even caring about the awkward position she had forced her neck into. When she pulled away, she offered the box to him and a second later, she felt the necklace’s weight settle against her sternum. Louisa twisted her torso and wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers weaving through his hair, and pulled him back down for another kiss. “Thank you.”

Jasper merely pulled her back and deepened the kiss. They were going to be late for the party and either of them could bring themselves to care.

Alice seemed to care, though, if the nineteen texts and three phone calls were any indications.

“It would be pretty rude not to show up for your own birthday party,” Jasper sighed, pulling away. “We shouldn’t keep your guests waiting.”

“The birthday girl is never late,” Louisa said, tugging Jasper down for one final kiss. “Everyone else is just early.”

They pulled up to Louisa’s house sometime later, both Edward’s and Dr Cullen’s cars already joining her father’s in the drive. Louisa let Jasper help her out of her car and together they walked up the front path, pausing at the door to stomp off the snow that caked to their boots. Jasper winked and ducked down to press a quick kiss to her cheek before he opened the front door and Louisa was assaulted with shouts of “Happy Birthday!”

But it was one ‘Happy Birthday’ in particular, the one shouted in a foreign language, which stood out to her. Because there, standing between Dottie and Rosalie, was none other than Pyotr, wearing a balloon patterned party hat and a shit-eating grin. He broke away from the loose formation the other party-goers had assumed and ran towards her. If it hadn’t been for Jasper catching her, Pyotr would have knocked her off her feet.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, glancing between his excited face and Jasper’s smug grin.

“I missed your sister,” Petya responded, giving her a sardonic look. “I couldn’t stand to be without her for one more moment.”

Louisa laughed after recovering from her shock and pulled her friend in for a hug. “I knew you liked her more than me.”

“Who doesn’t?” came Dottie’s unmistakable drawl from the lounge.

“But seriously,” Louisa said, glancing over Petya’s shoulder to look at her father in confusion. “I thought we weren’t allowed to see each other until after the trial?”

Mr Collins shrugged and gave his daughter a fond smile. “Just don’t discuss it.”

“But kidnapping and murder make for such good party conversation,” Petya replied, guiding her into the lounge by the shoulders. “No? Just me? Okay.”

Louisa laughed and shoved her friend, sending him crashing into the back of the sofa. “Still as violent as ever, I see,” he said before glancing over her shoulder at Jasper. “What do you see in her?”

To Louisa’s surprise, Jasper chuckled. Her eyes narrowed as she watched her introverted boyfriend interact with someone who was, for all intents and purposes, a complete stranger. Sure, Jasper
could talk to people he didn’t know, but he rarely did. So, had the two met before? When she wondered this aloud, it was Rosalie who answered.

“How do you think he got here?”

Oh.

Jasper hadn’t gone hunting at all this morning. No wonder he had reacted oddly when she asked about his trip. Across the room, Edward snickered in response to her thoughts.

“Shall we move to the kitchen for cake?” Esme asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement. Louisa knew it wasn’t every day she got to celebrate a real birthday and couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. Taking her hand, she allowed herself to be dragged into the kitchen where a small strawberry shortcake sat on the bench, decorated with seventeen candles.

“One second,” Petya said after she finished blowing out the candles, stepping up to her, a hand hovering over the top of his head. He moved it over to Louisa until it rested against her forehead. He repeated the action several more times, his expression darkening with each repetition.

“You’re taller than me,” he accused, eyes narrowed. He whispered something under his breath in Russian that sounded suspiciously like ‘Damn Americans’.

Louisa cackled at her friend’s thunderous expression. “Happy Birthday to me!”

“We’re born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we’re not alone.” –Orson Welles
What's In a Name?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Louisa couldn't remember the last time home had been so lively— before Mum and Laurie died, she supposed— but between the seven Cullens, Petya, and her family, it was almost difficult to move in the Collins' small house. The adults had secluded themselves in the kitchen whilst the teens took over the lounge, the thin walls separating them doing little to quell the growing ruckus. Petya, Emmett, and Alice got on like a house on fire and could be found giggling together for a majority of the party. Dottie, who still displayed various degrees of nervousness around the Cullens, had braved the crowd and joined Edward at the little upright piano in the corner of the room, assisting him in serenading the party guests. Rosalie sat next to Louisa on the sofa and watched her husband with a fond smile. Every so often, Emmett would look up to meet her gaze and flash her a dimpled grin before returning to his conversation. Jasper stood in the archway between the kitchen and the den, listening to both groups. He didn't participate in any of the conversations unless he was directly asked a question, but Louisa could feel his tranquil influence settling over the room.

She watched her family and friends interacting with each other, and for the first time in a long time, Louisa felt at peace. It didn't feel like she was hanging out with her human family or her supernatural friends, but rather, she was surrounded by loved ones. It was the meeting of the two very different worlds she walked through daily, but instead of clashing, they melded together to form one cohesive group. And she did love everyone present, albeit in very different ways. She, of course, loved her sister and her father and Jasper. She loved quirky and shrewd Petya, just as much as she loved phlegmatic and sensible Rosalie. She loved Emmett in all of his jovial cheer and Alice with her constant scheming. And whilst nobody could ever replace her mother or father, nurturing Esme and compassionate Carlisle had slowly become like a second set of parents to her. She even loved Edward like a dorky little brother who couldn't keep his nose out of her business (he shot her an exasperated look at that).

The realisation made her chest feel warm and fuzzy, which appeared to attract Jasper's attention. He pushed away from the wall and slinked over, inserting himself between her and the end of the sofa. Louisa curled into his side and rested her head on his shoulder, feeling so relaxed she wondered if she would fall asleep. Conversations buzzed around her and she couldn't muster up the desire to focus on them—though, considering the mischievous grin on Petya's face, she probably should. Instead, she laced her fingers through Jasper's, cuddled closer, and watched in contentment.

That was until Alice stiffened, sending an almost palpable tension through the room. Jasper's posture straightened and he leaned forward, watching his long-time companion with an inquisitive set to his brow. Edward's fingers stilled as well, leaving Dottie playing Rachmaninov's *Sleeping Beauty Waltz* by herself. Louisa didn't need to be able to see Alice's face to know that her eyes had gone glassy and distant.

"Is she okay?" Petya asked Emmett, watching Alice with concern.

Emmett gave him an easy-going smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "She gets like this sometimes. Nothing to worry about. Ali's always lived in her own little world."

This was a polite way of explaining to those unexposed to the supernatural that Alice saw visions of the future. And a particularly long one at that. Louisa had witnessed Alice's gift on numerous occasions, but she could count on one hand that they lasted more than a few seconds. Emmett's
comment must have caught Carlisle and Esme's attention because they entered the room moments later. Carlisle crouched down in front of his adopted daughter and cupped her face in one of his hands, stroking her cheekbone with his thumb.

"I don't understand," Alice muttered under her breath. She turned her head in the direction of the front door as if she could see it through the wall of the den. Jasper slid off the couch in one fluid motion and moved to kneel beside Alice as well, pulling her into a hug. She went easily, if a bit stiffly, and rested her temple against his shoulder, her eyes fluttering shut and her brow furrowing. "It's too early."

Petya made eye contact with Louisa over the top of the Cullen's heads, a baffled expression on his face. Her heart clenched at the soft look in his eyes. Petya had a soft heart and there were few things he enjoyed more than helping others, even the pixie-like girl he had only known for a few hours. The only problem was, he wasn't sure what he was witnessing. And how could he? He had no way of knowing that Alice was seeing a vision of the future, and Louisa wasn't about to tell him. There was nothing to be gained by either Louisa or Petya by introducing him to the world of the supernatural. She settled for a smile, hoping to reassure him that this was a common occurrence for the Cullen family.

There was a knock on the door and Chief Swan's gruff voice penetrated the stiff silence that had settled over the room. He offered Louisa a brief 'happy birthday' before Mr Collins ushered him into the kitchen. They spoke in low voices too faint for Louisa to hear no matter how much she strained her ears. Alice tracked their movement, her forehead wrinkled in concern.

The Cullens didn't stay for too long after that. Dr and Mrs Cullen ushered their adoptive children towards their cars, pausing to hug Louisa and wish her a happy birthday one more time. Jasper stooped to press a kiss to the top of her head, before carrying a still dazed Alice and placing her in the backseat of Edward's Volvo. Louisa didn't even get the chance to wave the Cullens off before Mr Collins appeared behind them, suggesting that she and Dottie show Petya round town. Louisa could see Chief Swan in the kitchen sitting at the table, his hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea. His normally stoic face awash with conflicted emotions, and it took every bit of her willpower to not ask questions.

"There's not much to see," Dottie complained as they donned their raincoats and shoes—it wasn't raining, but the three teens had lived in the Pacific Northwest long enough to know how quickly that could change—before stepping into the damp early evening air. "There are like, three stoplights."

"I counted two on the way in," Petya said, claiming the shotgun seat of Louisa's Prius. Dottie slid into the back with a huff, taking extra care to kick the back of his seat while she slid in. "But if the driver is taking requests, I'd very much like to see the cliff you claimed to have jumped from."

"That's a good thirty-minute drive," Louisa explained as she pulled away from the curb.

"I am fine with that," Petya replied. "Besides, it will give you time to tell me the details of your upcoming nuptials."

If Louisa hadn't already been sitting at a stop sign, she would have slammed on the brakes. "My what?"

"It's another word for a wedding. It was on my vocabulary test last—" Dottie began.

"I know what nuptials means," Louisa snapped, turning to give her friend a wide-eyed stare. "Why do you think I am getting married?"
"Besides the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off you for the entire party?" Petya asked, raising his eyebrows. "I think the eye sex I was forced to witness might have gotten me pregnant."

Louisa reached over to swat Petya at that.

"Dr Cullen's car is right there," Dottie chimed in, pointing to the familiar black Mercedes sitting at the stoplight ahead. "Flag him down so we can ask him."

"Stop it," Louisa demanded, her cheeks growing warm.

"No, truly. The two of you make a beautiful couple. I'm just curious when you will be making it permanent," Petya replied. Louisa didn't have to look at her friend to know that he was grinning like a fool.

"We've been dating for five months," Louisa snapped. "We've not getting married."

"Yet," Dottie corrected from the back seat. "Besides, Mummy and Daddy had only been dating for six months when she got pregnant with you."

"Louisa, are you pregnant?"

Louisa braked with more force than necessary at the stoplight, her safety belt biting into her shoulder. "Stop talking or I'm kicking you both out of the car." She kept her eyes trained on the red traffic light and not on Carlisle's tail lights, and focused on taming the blush that tinted her cheeks.

"That wasn't a denial," Petya pointed out. "Can I be godfather?"

"I'm not— We're not— I haven't—" Louisa spluttered. Was it her imagination or was the Mercedes shaking? "Will the two of you shut up?"

Dottie rolled her eyes. "Relax, it's not like they can hear us."

*If only you knew,* Louisa thought, glaring out the windscreen. Jesus, this had to be the longest red-light on the planet. She could only hope the Emmett was in a different car.

On que, Louisa's mobile chimed.

Petya dove for the phone and pulled it out of reach. "No, we don't text and drive in this family, Lastochka," he said, avoiding her hands and unlocking her mobile. "I'll be the designated texter."

"Don't go through my phone!"

He fixed her with an amused stare. "*You're* berating me for snooping."

Her friend had a valid point, but there were also sensitive conversations on her mobile of the paranormal variety. "How do you even know my passcode?"

"You haven't changed it since you got it," he exclaimed, opening up her text messages. "Rest assured, I have no interest in reading through sexts from your lover." When Louisa dove for her phone again, he expertly evaded her hands, raising his voice to speak over her shouted protests. "It is from... The Incredible Hulk? I am assuming this refers to Emmett. He's sent a picture with his parents and Rosalie in the car. Should we respond?"

"No!"
"That is fine, it is best you don't— the light is green, by the way. Care to respond, Dot?"

Her sister, the traitor that she was, stuck her head between the front seats and the two snapped a selfie, taking extra care that a red-faced Louisa could be seen in the background.

"The middle finger was a nice touch, Louisa," Petya said before sending the picture.

"Hey, Pyotr, how do you say 'fuck you' in Russian?"

"Such crass language," Dottie tsked. "There is an impressionable youth in the car."

"Besides," Petya continued. "We all know that it is Jasper you would like to—"

"I'm serious. Shut up or both of you can walk to La Push," Louisa growled out, glaring at the receding bumper of Carlisle's car. It was one thing to get light-hearted teasing from friends but it was a whole new level of embarrassing when your boyfriend's adoptive parents were in earshot. The fact that Emmett was also present made it downright mortifying. It would be a very long time before he let her live this down.

The two giggled and exchanged looks but complied with her demands. They drove in silence for a while, only for it to be broken by Petya asking, "Does this mean I won't be the man-of-honour?"

But despite Louisa's numerous threats to leave Petya and Dottie on the side of the road, all three teens made it to First Beach sometime later. The setting sun was peeking through the Olympic Peninsula's ever-present cloud cover, turning the ocean a soft lavender. It didn't take long of wandering along the grey, rock covered beach for the group to stumble cross the section Dottie and Louisa landed on a month prior. In the distance, a tall cliff jutted out over the crashing waves, which Louisa pointed at.

"That's the one," Louisa said when she got her friend's attention.

Petya let out a soft oath. "Bozhe moy," he murmured, reaching up his left hand to cross himself. "The two of you jumped off of that?"

"Yup."

"Are you mad?"

"Quite possibly."

"Louisa, that's got to be sixty metres."

"Forty-three, actually," A voice that did not belong to Louisa or Dottie, corrected. The group of three spun around to face the new-comer, a teen of below-average height, prominent cheekbones, and long, dark hair. She was dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a purple flannel, and she carried her trainers in her hand leaving her barefoot on the rocky beach. She opened her mouth to say more but was cut off.

"You're beautiful," Petya said the same time Dottie asked, "What's your skincare routine?"

"Ignore them," Louisa said. "What were you saying?"

"In the summer, some of the local boys jump off it for fun." She leaned in close and spoke in a low voice as if to reveal a secret, her smile laced with schadenfreude. "My dad said he saw two idiot white girls jump last month."
Louisa couldn't help but smile at that. "Yes, it was rather stupid, wasn't it? Though, to be fair, we were being chased by a madman."

The stranger blinked before stepping back a step, her cheeks darkening in embarrassment. "You are…"

"The 'idiot white girls?' Guilty as charged," Louisa replied, sticking out her hand. "Louisa Collins."

The girl took her offered hand after a moment of hesitation. "Leah Clearwater."

"I'm guessing your father was the man who found us. Harry Clearwater?"

"That would be him," Leah replied, falling into step with the little group as they continued their stroll down the beach. "My boyfriend, Sam, was there too."

Petya looked disappointed at the statement.

"He brought us blankets!" Dottie said, stepping forward. "Are they around? I'd love to see them again. I'd like to thank them."

"The six dozen cookies got the message across," Leah said. "Dad's out for the day. I'm on my way to Sam's house now, if you'd like to join me. He'd probably be interested in seeing what you look like when you aren't being dragged from the ocean."

"Less purple," Louisa supplied while they headed up the beach's embankment and began to trek through the woods. The girl led them down a well-worn, though easily overlooked path lined with towering evergreens and stubborn mounds of unmelted snow. Despite the rapidly fading light, Leah appeared unconcerned that they were walking through the woods so late in the evening. She walked with the confidence of someone who had made the journey hundreds of times before and could do it easily blindfolded if she so chose. In fact, they were almost definitely slowing the girl down, though Leah never said a word about it.

"Older sister," her brain supplied, watching when she reached out to catch Petya with a calloused hand when he tripped over a tree root. Has a brother, at least five years younger. Clumsy. Why else would she be carrying SpongeBob plasters?

The diminutive stature combined with the girl's well-defined muscles screamed of a competitive gymnast, which Leah confirmed at Louisa's gentle prodding. A very talented competitive gymnast, if UCLA was scouting her. Leah had every right to brag.

Very much in love with her boyfriend. No deductive reasoning skills were needed for that observation. The moment Sam appeared on the front porch, the tension in her shoulders slipped away and her face softened into a warm smile. Leah called out a greeting in an unfamiliar language and quickened her pace, tossing herself into his arms.

Even from a distance, Louisa could tell that Sam was a tall man. He was around Carlisle's height, with long, lean muscles and broad shoulders that all swimmers seemed to possess. His faded blue jeans hung a few centimetres above his ankles, and the way his shirt rode up when he scooped Lean up into his arms spoke of a recent growth spurt. And, just like Leah seemed to adore him, Sam appeared as equally enamoured with her. He stooped to press his forehead against hers and rubbed their noses together. It created a sweet yet intimate picture that the other three felt like they were intruding upon.

Petya cleared his throat and looked away, gazing into the surrounding woods as if he had never seen a tree before. The sound seemed to snap the two locals out of their reverie, and Sam
straightened, fixing the newcomers with a curious look.

"Who are your friends, Lee-Lee?" Sam asked, his deep, resonating voice.

She replied again in the same foreign language, her eyebrows raising and a smirk flitting across her face.

Sam's eyes nearly bulged out his head. "The Idiot White Girls?"

"I see we have a reputation," Dottie said to Louisa, who shrugged.

"It's better than the Teacher Killers, I suppose."

"It doesn't have the same gravitas," Dottie replied. She plastered on a dazzling smile and crossed the short distance between them and Sam's house, her right hand outstretched. "Dorothy Collins."

He leaned forward to shake her offered hand, though he had to lean around Leah to do so. "You look much… warmer?"

Leah huffed out a laugh before disentangling herself from her boyfriend's arms and bounding back to Petya and Louisa, leaving him to deal with Dottie's hero-worshipping. His face was a polite mask, though even from several meters away, Louisa could see the thinly veiled panic in his eyes. Especially when he tried to assure her younger sister that he very much did not need more blueberry muffins. Leah snickered at Sam's obvious distress, blowing him a kiss when he shot her a dirty look.

"Your sister seems quite… intense?" Leah commented, shooting Louisa a questioning gaze.

"This is nothing. Ask her if she thinks Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin were a good couple," Louisa replied. "That got a two-hour rant out of her."

"With textual evidence," Petya added, unable to hide the pain in his voice.

She let out a soft 'oh,' but didn't press the matter further. Instead, she turned her head to survey them, her eyes narrowing. "So are the two of you…" she made a vague gesture between the two friends, which took a moment for them to decipher.

"God no," Petya replied. "That's disgusting."

"I think I've been insulted," Louisa replied, rolling her eyes. "I have a boyfriend. Not him. We just get into a lot of trouble together."

"You get us into a lot of trouble, Lastochka," Petya corrected. "I'm dragged into it."

"Don't be like that, baby. You know you love it."

Leah watched them with the same calculating look for a moment longer before launching into her next question. And she had a lot of questions. Some of them were normal and friendly, like asking about school or their hobbies. Then there were the ones that were intrusive and were accompanied by a hungry gleam in her eyes. Louisa didn't pick up a malicious intent from the girl, but rather an intense curiosity. She got the impression that Leah was the type of person to break things not for the sake of destruction but to see how they worked. Even if she did have to ask Louisa to describe, in detail, what had happened between her and Mr Hewitt.

Leah Clearwater was an interesting girl, once you got past her prickly exterior: her biting remarks
were more witty than mean-spirited, and a mischievous light danced behind her dark eyes when she spoke. She gave off the impression of knowing more about someone than they would like and was waiting for the right moment to use the information. All in all, a girl after Louisa's heart.

They continued like this for what felt like several hours; the sun had long since set by the time they decided to call it a night. Sam offered to drive them back to their car so they wouldn't have to repeat their trek through the woods, to which nobody objected. Leah had a standing claim over the passenger seat, leaving Louisa, Dottie, and Petya to cram themselves into the back of Sam's faded Volkswagen hatchback.

Sam, in comparison to Leah, didn't say much, though Louisa got the impression that he was a man of few words, rather than harbouring any sort of dislike for three teens. He seemed content to allow his girlfriend to dominate the conversation, smiling at the young woman fondly, and answering any questions tossed his way in his deep, slow voice. When he dropped them off at the Collins' little Prius, he sent them a warm smile that made him look simultaneously boyish and like a wizened old man.

They didn't linger for long after that. After exchanging numbers and following each other on Instagram, Louisa herded her sister and friend back into their own car and departed, thankful that Sam had had the foresight to provide instructions on how to navigate the pitch-black backroads. Louisa shot a quick text to their father with their estimated time of arrival before tossing her mobile to Petya and instructing him to choose a soundtrack that they could all sing to.

Petya, they would find out, made for a very good Veronica Sawyer.

No Stone Left Unturned

They were nearly home when Louisa had to slam on her brakes to avoid hitting a herd of teenage boys who were running towards Tillicum Park. Their shouts were so loud that they could be heard over the sound of the *Heathers* soundtrack which was blasting in their car. Petya let out an oath in Russian, cutting off his rendition of *Dead Girl Walking*, and threw his arm across Louisa's chest to keep her from banging her head against the steering wheel. Louisa murmured a quick thanks to her friend before refocusing on the noisy group she had nearly ploughed down.

Her sister let out a strangled gasp from the backseat. "That's Spencer!"

Spencer Garner was a friend of Dottie. He was a soft-spoken and awkward boy who had yet to grow into his gangly limbs, and his calf-brown eyes gave off an air of distinct vulnerability. A weakness that others preyed upon. It was only several months ago that Louisa had found him in the rain, tied to a football goal, courtesy of the Spartan baseball team.

Dottie instructed Louisa to pull over. She complied, but by the time she had killed the engine, the boys had already vanished from sight. They tumbled out of the car and took off after the group, the cool night air burning in their lungs. It didn't take too long to locate the boys (as they made no effort to lower their voices), who had caught up with their prey. Two of the taller boys held onto Spencer's arms and kept him still whilst another stood before him, swinging a baseball bat, and mimend hitting Spencer in the gut.

The crowd jeered around them, shouting suggestions about what they should do with their victim. Spencer kicked out at the boy with the bat but his captors held him fast, and the boy was able to sidestep the flailing feet. The group cheered again, and this time another stepped forward, a well-built boy with dark wavy hair and bleach-white teeth. It took a moment to place him, but when she did, Louisa bit back a growl of anger. The newcomer was Tommy Garner.
Tommy Garner was Spencer's twin brother, though if there was any sort of fraternal loyalty between the two, Louisa never saw it. Tommy made no effort to curb his fellow teammate's abuse of his brother and could be found participating more often than not. He had first landed himself on Louisa shit-list after standing Dottie up for homecoming the previous year and had worked his way up with increasingly disparaging comments towards her sister. Dottie tried to downplay his bullying but even if her sister didn't have a supernatural gift for nosiness, Louisa would have heard about it anyways. Forks was a small town and people loved to gossip.

"Stop it!" Dottie cried, darting forward before either Petya or Louisa had the chance to catch her. She grabbed onto Tommy Garner's arm, trying to force the baseball bat down and away from Spencer. "You're hurting him!"

Dottie was able to duck the backswing of the bat but doing so unbalanced her enough for Tommy to shove her, hard, knocking her to the ground.

Louisa saw red.

"Enough!" Looking back, Louisa wouldn't be able to recognise her own voice in the memory. There was something primal— almost animalistic— that flared in her chest, red-hot and all-consuming. She stormed forward, shoving the boys aside and wrenched Spencer out of their grips. They were so surprised to see her that they let him go without a fight and scuttled backwards several paces.

"Dorothy, get up," she snapped, marching Spencer away from his brother and the rest of the baseball team, her grip so tight on the sophomore's arm her knuckles turned white. Petya, who had frozen several paces away, sprang into action and rushed forward, wrapping Spencer's free arm around his neck and guiding him away from the other boys. Louisa let Petya take over, and turned to her sister, who has still sprawled on the ground. "We're leaving."

"Well look who it is," Tommy sneered, recovering from his shock. "Fork's golden girl and Spencer's knight in shining armour."

"Ignore him," Louisa said, helping her sister up. "He's a 'high school has-been waiting to happen.'"

"'A future gas station attendant,'" Dottie quoted back.

A small smile quirked at the corner of Louisa's mouth and she slid a hand to the small of her sister's back and began to usher her towards the car. They didn't make it more than a few steps before Tommy's oily voice began speaking again, taunting them.

"Hey, Collins, I think Mr Varner lives over on Fir," he called at their retreating backs. "Do you mind paying him a visit? I have a maths test on Tuesday."

"Keep walking," Dottie hissed when she felt Louisa tense beside her. "He's not worth it, Lulu."

Sensing that he had her attention, Tommy went for a subject that he knew she wouldn't be able to ignore. Needing to look like he still had a semblance of control over the situation, Tommy hit below the belt with: "Better yet, do me a favour and pull a Mummy Collins. Crash your car and kill him for me?"

Louisa froze and for a moment all she could hear was the pounding of her own heartbeat, and despite the fire that had been lit in her stomach, an icy sort of feeling washed over her skin. Every nerve in her body felt jittery and electrified, her muscles twitchy, waiting for the decision to fight or take flight. She didn't notice Dottie tugging futilely on her arm, nor her pleas to continue on
towards the car. Instead, Louisa craned her neck to look over her shoulder, surveying the boys who stood behind her, all sweaty temples and huffing breaths, mud caked on their shoes and grass stains on their knees.

Then she let loose.

"I can sort of understand why you're here, Theodore," she said, nodding her head toward a wiry blond with a thin, rat-like face. "Your father beats you and attacking Spencer makes you feel like you have some sort of power in your life. It's a shame that you feel the need to resort to physical violence, but hey, I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree in this case." Theodore looked like he couldn't decide if he wanted to turn his fists on her or not, so she quickly switched to her next target: Casey Lewis, a lanky outfielder who was more legs than torso. "I know you're only here because you are in love with Tommy, but I'm afraid you are wasting your time. The two of you are batting for different teams if you'll pardon my pun. Besides, he already has a girlfriend."

Outing Casey was a cruel thing to do, but the vicious beast in her chest roared in approval as the words tumbled out of her mouth. She shifted her gaze to her final target, who was torn between watching Casey in horror and glaring furiously at her. Good. Her muscles tensed, red-hot and coiled tighter than a spring, read for a fight.

"Or did she dump your ass?" Louisa asked. "I certainly would have. Though maybe she plans to drain you for child support. Tell me, Tommy, are you ready to be a daddy?"

There was a collective gasp from the group at that. There were things you didn't discuss in Forks, and Tommy Garner knocking up his girlfriend was one of them. Marissa Lee had been Forks High's (Home of the Spartans!) leading actress, set to star in the fall production of *Othello*. Rumours had circulated when she suddenly disappeared in early November the previous year, claiming that her parents sent her away to live with relatives until the baby was born. No one, not even her closest friends, had heard from her since. Marissa's involuntary departure had split the students into two main factions: those who thought Marissa was a troublemaker who wanted to ruin Tommy's chances of getting into a good college; and the rest who thought Tommy was just a privileged white boy who could rely on his parents to get rid of any problem.

Bringing up Marissa was a sure-fire way to get a reaction out of him, and this time was no exception.

Tommy charged, letting out a furious, guttural scream. Louisa managed to step out of the way in the nick of time, sticking out her foot to trip him. "Good, Tommy. Use that anger to your advantage. It gives you fuel. Most people would say it makes you stupid in a fight, but honestly, I don't see much of a difference. That's why you beat up your twin brother, isn't it? Because he stole all of the brains at birth?"

Tommy let out a string of words so foul that had she not been accustomed to hearing similar language during Emmett and Jasper's video game tournaments, she probably would have blushed. He rose to his feet, his dead, shark-like glare never straying from her face. In the distance, she could hear the whine of sirens and she idly wondered if the police were coming to investigate a noise complaint or at Alice's request.

"You think you're so tough because you solved that slut's death."

"Solved Anna Sweet's murder," she corrected in an icy tone.

"We all know who the real murderer in this town is, and it wasn't Mr Hewitt."
His words were intended to hurt her and had she not already heard them hissed thousands of times since the incident in February, they probably would have. But as Jasper had reminded her, Mr Hewitt's actions were his and his alone; he had been the one too afraid to face the consequences of his actions, and it wasn't her fault that he had taken the coward's way out of the situation.

"The law would say otherwise."

"Mr Hewitt was a good man and his family were decent folk. They were run out of town because of you."

"You'll forgive me if I don't agree with your assessment. And nobody ran the Hewitts out of town."

Though she couldn't blame them for leaving. Whilst none of the residents of Forks seemed to blame Mrs Hewitt or her sons for what her husband had done, Louisa didn't have to imagine what it was like to feel like the entire town was watching your every move. Less than three weeks after Dottie's kidnapping and her husband's subsequent suicide, Mrs Hewitt had packed up their little house and moved with her children to live with her parents in Utah.

Some of the townsfolk blamed Louisa for what had transpired. They saw Louisa, a relative newcomer to Forks, Washington, as an interloper. Some seemed to think that she took some sort of perverse pleasure in stirring up trouble. In their minds, if it hadn't been for her, a nice family would still be together. (Louisa wanted to point out that Mr and Mrs Hewitt were less than a year away from divorce, but besides her psychometry, she had no evidence that would support this claim.)

Tommy moved towards her, towering over her, and blocking the flashing lights of the approaching police car. He was so close that she could make out the freckles that dotted his face despite the low lighting, the heavy scent of his cologne burning her nostrils. "Bitches like you always get what's coming for them. You all meet the same sticky end. Remember that, Louisa Collins."

She hoped he couldn't see the shiver of fear that ran down her spine, nor the gooseflesh that pebbled across her skin. Tommy Garner was a bully, undoubtedly, but looking into his dark eyes, she saw something she hadn't seen in almost a year, and it made her want to vomit. Because something sinister was lurking behind those eyes— something cold and savage— and it reminded her a lot of Jason Lambe.

"I look forward to it," she replied, hoping that her voice belied confidence she didn't feel.

He gave her a toothy grin that looked more like a feral animal baring its teeth. The police car had stopped in the car park, the heavy slam of the car door punctuating the night air. The sound seemed to break Tommy out of his reverie and he shouldered past Louisa, calling for his gang to follow him. Louisa didn't turn around until the last of them had disappeared into the trees that surrounded the park.

"Are you okay?" she asked, at last, turning to face Spencer who looked worse for wear. His clothes were ripped, one of his calf-like eyes had begun to swell shut, and a trickle of blood was streaming from the corner of his mouth. Dottie hovered over her friend, picking out twigs out of his wavy hair, murmuring words of comfort into his ear. Petya had manoeuvred the boy to sit on a park bench and was kneeling beside him, examining the extent of his injuries.

"Nothing feels broken," Petya stated, his hand still palpating Spencer's sides. "But you need inspection from a doctor. I do not know if you were hit hard enough to lacerate a kidney, but it is good to be nervous in these situations."

Spencer gave no indication that he heard Petya's words. He hunched his shoulders like he was collapsing in on himself, arms snaking their way around (what Louisa was sure was) his bruised rib
cage, and let out a shaky breath. A wet cough racked its way through his body, and when Louisa caught sight of his face, his lips were wet with she thought might be blood.

"Convince me not to slash all of his tyres," Louisa growled.

"His insurance would pay to have replaced," Petya pointed out. His words were slow and deliberate as if he were struggling to string them together into a cohesive sentence. "It would be inconvenience, but he would not lose much money in the process."

"It's also illegal," Dottie cut in.

Louisa nodded at their advice. "It's no secret in town that Tommy and I hate each other. I'd be the first suspect."

"Three-inch screw is enough to puncture inner tyre. It would look like an accident," Petya supplied.

She held back her reply when she noticed the police officer's approach. The torch he was carrying blinded her and threw his face into shadow, but there was no mistaking the bored drawl that came from the newcomer.

"What have you done this time, Collins?" Sergeant Todd asked. Louisa could only imagine how big the accompanying eye roll was. "We received several noise complaints."

Louisa launched into the story of what had transpired, with Dottie and Petya inserting their own commentary as she went. Sergeant Todd swung the beam of his torch towards Spencer as she spoke, looking for signs of injury. He didn't have to look too hard. In the light, Spencer's injuries looked far worse than she had initially thought, and Louisa wondered how long the baseball team had been assaulting him before they intervened.

"I am…" Petya said slowly, his words heavily accented. "Paramedic, in Tacoma. He should be transported for hospital."

Sergeant Todd nodded, moving to kneel in front of Spencer, and introduced himself to Spencer in a soft voice that surprised Louisa. She had only ever seen the cocky and abrasive side of the police officer, especially when they had been working on the Anna Sweet case together.

"I've called for an ambulance. Spencer, isn't it? Your dad works over at the firehouse."

When he still didn't respond, Dottie spoke up, filling Sergeant Todd in of all the sordid things Tommy did to his brother. Some of them, like shoves in the hallway or stealing his brother's lunch sounded like normal bullying. Others, like breaking Spencer's wrist or setting his bed on fire did not. The picture Dottie painted of Tommy sounded less and less like a jealous brother and more like a budding psychopath. But it wasn't until Dottie began describing the scene on the football field that Spencer reacted.

"No—" Spencer said, at last, cutting Dottie off mid-sentence.

"I— no?" She spun her head, her mouth dropping open as she gave her friend an incredulous look.

"No," Spencer repeated, his soft voice growing more firm. "This has been a misunderstanding."

Sergeant Todd looked dubious at the boy's announcement. "It's okay, Spencer. You're safe now—"

"No," he snapped, standing up. He glared down at Sergeant Todd for a moment, and it might have almost looked impressive if he wasn't swaying on the spot. "I'm fine. Thank you for your help, but
it isn't necessary." He pushed away from Dottie and stalked off, quickly disappearing in the night.

Silence reigned for several moments as they tried to process what had occurred. Dottie rounded on Sergeant Todd, asking what he was going to do about the situation. He attempted to explain that there was little he could do if the victim refused to report the crime, but his words did little to soothe Dot's anger. Louisa watched her sister rant for a moment before kneeling beside Petya, who was still crouched next to the bench Spencer had vacated.

"Are you okay?" She asked her friend, placing a hand on his arm.

"Da." It wasn't uncommon for Petya to substitute English words for his native language, but there was something in his voice that made her think it wasn't a conscious decision this time. It had been quite a while since Louisa had heard her friend fumble over his English, and hearing so many errors had alarm bells ringing in her head.

"What is wrong?" She asked, slipping into the foreign language. "Something is upsetting you."

He looked up at her at last, his dark brown eyes wild. Terrified. "It is nothing."

But it was something. It took a lot to rattle her easy-going friend, and she was going to get to the bottom of it, no matter what.

"Angry people are not always wise." — Jane Austen

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Back baby. Depression is a bitch. What was it that that Alice saw? What do you think Petya is hiding? Leave me a comment and let me know what you think. - CheckAlexa
Whatever thought had been plaguing Petya's mind the night before, Louisa never found out. By morning, his command of the English language had been restored and he had returned to his regular happy-go-lucky self if only a touch more subdued. Torn between wanting to respect her friend's privacy and her desire to know everyone's business, the majority of the car ride from Forks to Tacoma was an uncharacteristically awkward one. Sure, they sang show tunes and filled each other in on what the other had missed, but there was a nervous undercurrent to their conversation as they danced around the topic they both knew Louisa wanted to discuss.

This was an odd occurrence for the two friends. When Louisa first met Petya, he spoke basic English and she knew nothing of the Russian language. They learned early on in their friendship that it was best to speak plainly with each other instead of using colloquialisms or idioms that wouldn't translate well. As such, they had developed a blunt conversation style which rendered uncomfortable topics neutral and left little that could not be discussed. Massive secrets such as her psychometric abilities and the Cullen's vampirism aside, Louisa didn't know how to keep anything from her oldest friend, and she had assumed the same was for him. So what secret was so big that he felt he couldn't tell her about?

It couldn't be something at home— despite Andrey Yakovlev's gruff and stoic personality, he was nothing if not a loving and devoted father, and Petya thought the world of him. Besides, whatever had disturbed Petya was directly related to what had happened with Tommy Garner the previous night. Was it the fact that Tommy was assaulting of his brother? Or was there something more to it than that? She drummed her fingers against the steering wheel, listening with half an ear as Petya prattled on about a girl he wanted to ask to prom.

"I'm going with Jasper," Louisa replied when Petya asked her about Forks High's (Home of the Spartans!) own end of year dance.

"Must be nice," Petya said, slouching down in his seat. "Having a guaranteed date."

"Yes, well, Emmett got crazy jealous when I asked Rosalie, so I had to settle for my boyfriend instead."

Petya chuckled. "What are you wearing? Do you have a dress yet?"

Louisa opened her mouth to confirm, only to pause. She had picked up (picked up, not tried on, or even looked at) a dress in Portland when she visited Ms Morales with Rosalie. And when she got home, she had forgotten all about the dress when she realised someone had broken into her house. She didn't even know what colour it was. "I guess?"

"Prom is in May and you don't know if you have a dress?" Petya asked dubiously.

"I've had a lot on my mind."

"I can relate to that," he sighed. He launched into his next tale, which involved his father, astrology, and his father's residency at the local A&E, though Louisa wasn't entirely sure how they were connected. She began to tune out her friend's rambling once more, listening more to his voice than his words. She let him continue on for a while, her mind returning to what could be causing
her friend so much distress.

Was it the violence he had witnessed? The thought was discarded as quickly as it occurred to her. Petya was a paramedic in a large city. He was no stranger to violence. Was it Tommy's actions against his own brother that had rattled him? But that didn't make any sense either. Petya had frozen the moment they were close enough to see what was happening. Plus, Petya didn't even know Spencer and Tommy were related when they first came across the scene. So it was something that was enough to upset Petya that only required a visual stimulus. (Louisa was tempted to shut her eyes and pull up the memory in her mental library, but considering she was driving a car, it didn't seem appropriate.)

The answer came to her suddenly, and she felt stupid for not having realised it. The baseball bat. Tommy wasn't the only person Petya had seen wield a bat as a weapon. Jason Lambe had done it to them less than a year ago. Petya had claimed he had seen a therapist after the incident, but talking about a traumatic event could only go so far. It wasn't easy to have to relive such a memory. Louisa knew this from experience. She debated the wisdom of making Petya talk about the subject when he clearly was trying to avoid it, but in the end, she found the words tumbling out of her mouth anyway.

"Back in January," she began when there was a lull in the conversation. She made sure to keep her eyes focused on the road, instead of glancing at Petya, as if the confession was easier when you didn't have to look someone in the eyes. "The suspect in the case I was working on sent me a warning."

"The dead bird," Petya interjected. "Dottie told me about it."

"Did she tell you how I reacted?"

"You called the police."

"No," she replied with a shake of her head. "Dot went and got them. I was too busy panicking."

"Over a dead bird?"

"Over the smell," she corrected. "I don't really remember what happened, but Jasper said I had some sort of dissociated episode. I thought I was back—"

"At the warehouse," Petya finished in a small voice. His hands were folded in his lap and Louisa watched out of the corner of her eye as he began to wring them.

She nodded. "I can barely stomach the scent of meat anymore. It's just too similar." He didn't respond and the car fell quiet, with only the heat blasting out of vents to break the silence. "I talk about what happened with Jasper sometimes," she continued. "It helps a little. But he's my boyfriend, not my therapist."

"I'm sure it helps," he said. "I am glad he is able to support you."

"It helps more that I don't remember what happened," she pointed out. "I was unconscious for a lot of the time, I think."

"You were," he agreed. "But you were Lambe's target. Not me. You got the worse treatment."

"I don't think it's really a contest, Petya," Louisa said. "What happened to me doesn't invalidate what happened to you."
"We aren't supposed to talk about what happened," he pointed out. "We can get in trouble and what if Lambe gets off and he does not go to jail and he comes and kills us—"

"Nobody is going to get in trouble, Pyotr," Louisa interjected before he could work himself into hysteria.

"But your father—"

"Doesn't want our testimonies to influence each other. But there is no law that says we can't discuss what happened."

"I don't think I want to talk about it," he said, not unkindly. "Especially not with you."

Louisa tried to not let his words sting. "You're entitled to your privacy," she conceded. "But if you change your mind, I'm willing to listen."

Pyotr was quiet for so long Louisa thought he wasn't going to respond, and she was worried she had pushed him too far. "If you knew what really happened that day," he began with a shuddering breath. "You wouldn't love me anymore."

It was fortunate that the roads were so empty, or else she would have crashed the car at the speed with which she pulled over to the shoulder of the road. She shut off the engine and twisted in her seat to better face her friend. He was hunched over, his face turned to look out the window, wringing his hands so tightly his fingers had turned white. "How can you say that?" she asked, reaching over to pry apart his hands. "What makes you even think that?"

Petya furrowed his brow in frustration and sucked his lips into his mouth, looking furious with himself. He tried to pull away from her, only to sigh heavily when he didn't succeed. "He wanted me… I didn't want to…" Tears began to fill his eyes and Louisa pulled him to her, cradling his head against her shoulder and stroking his dark curls. "I am happy you were unconscious," he whispered, slipping into his native tongue. "To see me as such a coward…"

"You did what you had to do in order to survive," she replied, her voice even and steady, though very much at a loss for what else to say. When she had decided to broach the subject, she hadn't expected her friend to react so violently. What the hell had happened in Seattle?

"Nyet! Nyet!" He said emphatically, shaking his head and pulling away. He squeezed his eyes tight, though it did little to stem the flow of tears. "I was weak. I was so scared. I almost—" he broke off, a sob forcing its way out from deep within his chest, and he pressed his fingers to his lips as if he hoped it would stifle the sound.

She reached forward and pulled his head towards her, pressing their foreheads together. His breath was hot against her face as she forced him to look at her, his dark eyes clouded and full of pain. She felt a familiar stab of pain behind her left ear that always preceded a psychometric vision. It would be so easy to slip into Petya's mind and find caused him so much distress. Not only would she be out of the loop, but she could fix his problems, heal her friend.

The memories were right on the surface, ready for her to sift through. She could taste blood in her mouth from a split lip, the heavy smoke burning her eyes, her nose, his lungs. Panic, dread, terror, raced through his body, his hands shaking, his bones rattling from his sobs. Jason Lambe's smooth tenor vibrating against his back, arms wrapped tightly around him, imprisoning. Words starting as whispers, growing more defined, distinct.

"Pyotr."
No.

Louisa wrenched herself away from her friend, her elbow whacking the steering wheel, setting off the car's horn. She kept her eyes screwed shut and bit down on her lip hard enough to taste blood, willing the echo of Lambe's laughter to recede. She could hear Petya's ragged, hitching breaths despite his attempts to regain his composure.

Guilt flooded through her veins. No matter how good her intentions, she had no right to the information. Using her gift to find her kidnapped sister or solve a decades-old murder was one thing. Stealing information that he didn't want to discuss, just to satisfy her own curiosity was another matter altogether. It wasn't just wrong; stripping away his agency and free will was immoral and cruel. Petya would never force her into revealing her secrets. The fact that she was attempting to do so to him, especially in such a vulnerable state, was disgusting. Predatory. She would not violate her oldest friend's privacy, though she easily could.

Not like this.

It wasn't up for Louisa to decide when Petya should talk about his trauma. He would tell her when he was ready. What he needed, more than anything, though, was a shoulder to cry on. Petya's father was many things, but an affectionate man he was not. Louisa wondered idly when the last time Petya had even been hugged.

Taking a deep breath, Louisa pulled Petya back toward her, tucking his head into the crook of her neck, and wrapped her arms around his shuddering shoulders. She could still feel the memories at the edge of her consciousness, tugging, itching, waiting. It demanded her attention like an angry toddler and battered against her brain like waves against a ship. She bit down on her lip again, fighting the urge to slip back into her friend's mind, and glanced over her his shoulder, towards the dense green forest outside.

Petya let out a heaving gasp, trying to control his body wracking sobs but unable to do so. He kept his arms wrapped around his body as if doing so would help keep himself from coming completely undone. His tears were warm against her skin, soaking into her sweater. He wilted the longer he cried, and Louisa did her best to support his body weight as it grew heavier as time went on. Louisa continued carding her hand through Petya's hair and whispering comforting words to him. A heavy, almost oppressive calmness settled over the interior of the car, which would have been alarming if it wasn't familiar.

She scanned the treeline, looking for anything out of place. The rain had more or less stopped, though the wind continued to howl, leaving trees swaying and creaking. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of something purple, but it disappeared before she could get a good look at it. Despite her lack of visual evidence, she knew the lessening of Petya's sobs could only be attributed to one thing. Jasper. What he was doing there, or how he even found her was anyone's guess (though Louisa had a sneaking suspicion that Alice had something to do with it), but Louisa wasn't about to complain.

Pulling away from her friend, she wiped his tears away with the pad of her thumb before pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I would never, ever stop loving you," she promised.

"You don't know what happened," he replied through halting breaths.

She shook her head and held him tighter in her arms. "I don't care what you've done, or what you almost did, or what you didn't do," she said. "Who you are in life-threatening situations isn't a reflection of who you are. And even if it was, you are so much more than your worst moments."
"But I—"

"Are a victim. Just like me and all the women he killed." She pulled away so she could look down at his tear-stained face, his dark eyes bloodshot and puffy. "You have no blame in this Petya."

Pyotr look like he wanted to disagree with her but didn't have the energy. He settled for nodding and sinking back down into the front passenger seat, silent for the remainder of the journey. When they finally made it to the block of flats where Petya lived with his father, Louisa walked him to the door, pausing briefly to greet an exhausted-looking Mr Yakolev, who had just returned from a twenty-four-hour shift at the local A&E. After settling Petya back into his home, the two friends parted ways with hugs and promises to text more, now that Mr Collins' communication ban had been lifted.

"It's okay to not be okay, Pyotr," she murmured in his ear before pulling away. "I'll see you soon."

He let out a shaky breath and gave her a weak smile. "Do svedanya."

Walking away from her friend was harder than she thought it would be. Leaving didn't have the uncertainty and heaviness as it did when she moved from Tacoma the previous August, it somehow carried a finality. The mood was sort of sombre and sort of peaceful, like the end of a chapter that didn't end quite the way you expected it to— whilst she felt comforted by the knowledge that there was more to the book, she knew that what would come next would have the potential to change the rest of the story. What would happen and who would be in it, Louisa couldn't even begin to guess. She just hoped that Petya would remain a part of it.

Her car was already running by the time she returned. She slid into the passenger seat, and leaned her head back against the headrest, letting out a heavy sigh. "Thank you, for earlier," she said after several minutes of silence.

Jasper responded by threading their fingers together and raising their conjoined hands to place a kiss to her wrist. With one hand on the steering wheel, Jasper manoeuvred the Prius out of the car park, with a practised ease, and merged into the midday city traffic. The sleeves of his purple shirt were rolled up, exposing his sculpted and scarred forearms, and Louisa watched with fascination when they glimmered in a patch of pale sunlight.

"How long were you following us?"

If Jasper was embarrassed at being caught, he didn't show it. He merely lifted her hand once more and placed another kiss on the inside of her wrist, which Louisa supposed was an answer in and of itself. He drove on in silence (much faster than her original speed), allowing her ample time to gather her thoughts and examine her feelings.

"Am I a bad person?"

"Not particularly," Jasper drawled, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "Why do you ask?"

If it had been anyone else, Louisa would have been reluctant to share her lapse in judgement earlier when questioning Pyotr. But Jasper, not only had he himself done many morally questionable things, was her boyfriend (but-also-something-more) and therefore was stuck with her and her own morally questionable decisions. As such, she felt comfortable sharing the silent details that Jasper hadn't been privy to during her psychometric jaunt into her best (human) friend's mind. She shared her fears that her powers were growing out of control and she expressed her worry that one day she wouldn't be able to discern how to use it appropriately— if she hadn't already reached that point. She went on to describe the previous night, where she had exposed Theodore's horrible home life,
without even knowing his last name. She told him how she had outed Casey Lewis's carefully guarded sexuality for the express purpose of hurting him. And clearly she had no qualms on using it to invade Petya's privacy. Who was next on her metaphorical hit list? Rose? Dottie? Jasper?

"I just worry," she said finally. "I feel like that I have this thing crawling under my skin, and I can't control it. I used my power against Petya so easily, and part of me wanted to use it. It felt almost... good."

Jasper had remained his normal stoic self during all her concerned rantings. "So... you want to practice more?"

"What? Jasper, have you been listening?"

"Of course I was. You said you feel like your power is out of your control."

"No, I didn't!"

"Perhaps not directly," he acquiesced. "But you implied it. You are afraid of your gift. Don't deny it. I can feel it, even now," he stated when she opened her mouth to protest.

Louisa ground her teeth and glared out of her window, trying not to cry. Despite the blunt way he had delivered it, Jasper's assessment of her feelings was correct, and for some reason, that upset her even more. She didn't want to be afraid of what she could do, but she was. She felt like she was a ticking time bomb, waiting for the most inopportune time to slip into someone's or somethings past, completely by chance. But did that mean she wanted to learn how to use her psychometry at will? What if she did learn to control it, and it changed her? What if she started to use it deliberately? What if she hurt people?

"I use my gift on people all the time," Jasper pointed out. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"That's different," she protested, stubbornly refusing to turn her face towards him. "I have the ability to steal people's secrets and—"

"And I don't?" Jasper responded with a chuckle.

"Not like I do. I can crack open someone's brain and read their memories like a book."

Jasper gave her a funny look before he pulled off to the side of the road and turned off the car. He leaned over the centre console, gently turning her to face him. He cradled her face in his hands, his thumbs stroking her prominent cheekbones before pressing a firm kiss to her lips. When he pulled away, he watched her for a moment with an amused, and quite frankly, charming smile. "Tell me an embarrassing story."

"One summer at drama camp, I was cast as the Nurse in our production of Romeo and Juliet, and I completely forgot my lines. For some reason, my brain thought it would be appropriate to start quoting this sketch Catherine Tate did with David Tennant." On some level, Louisa knew she should have been embarrassed by the story spilling out of her mouth, but she truly couldn't find it in her to care. She just wanted to impress Jasper so much, to please him. So words tumbled out of her mouth faster than a professional gymnast, hoping that this story would be enough, but if it wasn't she had more! Whatever he wanted to hear. "So then, not only did I not know my lines, but nobody else knew what to say either, and I was just shouting in this dreadful Cockney accent. And the audience was—"

She was cut off by Jasper's finger, which he pressed to her lips. He raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'See what I mean?', and watched her with a blank, impassive look.
All at once, the overwhelming urge to babble evaporated, leaving her lightheaded. And pissed. "What the actual hell, Jasper?"

"Are you afraid of me?—"

"—was that for?—"

"—do you hate me?—"

"—why would you even—"

"Do you think I'm a bad person now?" he drawled, sounding bored and amused at the same time.

"That wasn't funny," she snapped, pulling away as far as the limited room in the car would allow. He let her go, his yellow eyes almost glowing as he watched her. "You didn't have to do that."

He nodded his head to concede her point, though he didn't look nearly as repentant as she thought he should. "Perhaps not," he said, leaning back in his seat. "But my point still stands: we all have the ability to ruin someone's life. Edward could do it, you could do it, and I could do it. Even Esme has the ability if she were to feel so inclined. Don't think you are so special to be alone with that power. You merely have a different set of tools at your disposal."

Furious because she knew he was correct, Louisa snapped her head away and resumed glaring out the window. She wanted to be angry at him for using his gift against her, though she knew it wouldn't be fair of her to do so when she used hers on him. True, she couldn't control her power as he could, but he was always patient with her, and never made her feel bad when she did invade his privacy. And it wasn't like Jasper was constantly messing with her emotions: when she was upset, he didn't calm her down, even though it was within his power to do so (and probably would've been more comfortable for himself). He always allowed her to feel her own emotions and work through them on her own.

But it still didn't make what he had done any less wrong. Just because he wanted to prove a point didn't mean he had the right to abuse his power against her.

Jasper resumed driving, though the silence that filled the car was much less comfortable than the previous one, and the two sat in stony silence for the rest of the drive. His fingers drummed against the steering wheel in a rare outer sign of agitation, and she wondered if he was fighting the urge to take her hand again. Louisa was glad he didn't. If he had, she might have felt compelled to forgive him, and she really didn't want to let go of her anger just yet. And whilst she couldn't say she relished in fighting with Jasper, the anger was easier to deal with than having to confront her own emotions.

As if he could also read her thoughts and not just her emotions, Jasper finally spoke, his voice gentle yet still infused with that hard, logical edge. "Refusing to practice your gift out of fear of losing control, or what you might do with it, won't make you any less afraid of it."

Perhaps it was bratty of her to turn her head and stare out the window, watching as the scenery melted into her neighbourhood. But the risk of looking petulant didn't stop her from doing it.

Jasper pulled into the driveway of her house and killed the engine. The silence was deafening.

He reached over and placed a hand on top of hers, stilling her from picking at her raw fingers. Part of her wanted to pull away, but another part couldn't help but savour his touch and how it made her skin feel as if it was prickling with electricity. Made her feel so alive.
"You are your harshest critic," he said. When his fingers sought out hers, she allowed it, letting him gather up her hand in both of his large ones. She watched out of the corner of her eye and watched as he brought her hand to his lips, shivering when he placed a kiss on her ragged, bleeding cuticles. "And you're not a coward."

When she turned her head towards him, he leaned forward and pressed a firm kiss to her lips. She could taste her blood on his lips. She felt her eyelids flutter closed.

When she opened them, he was gone.

No Stone Left Unturned

Mr Collins knew immediately something was off when he came home and found Louisa playing the little upright piano in the corner. He never could get Louisa to practice when she was younger, so to see her pounding out an aggressive rendition of ABBA's Waterloo on her own volition set off alarm bells in his head. But what really tipped him off that something was wrong was after dinner, when Louisa started washing the dishes without needing to be asked. Even Dorothy recognised something was wrong and made herself scarce the moment she finished eating.

It wasn't Pyotr that had upset her, he assumed. The boy was far too docile and submissive to pick a fight with Louisa. And because of the original language barriers they had encountered, they were used to keeping a cool head, especially given the likely event that one of them would inadvertently insult the other. So he was out. It couldn't have been Dot, either. When those two fought, it had a nasty habit of becoming physical and neither of them appeared to be sporting any injuries. Which meant that it was one of the Cullen kids. Or more specifically, one of the Hale twins. Louisa had been similarly sulky when she and Rosalie had fought back in February, but unless the two had a major falling out, he couldn't imagine Louisa looking so desolate.

Which left Jasper.

Stephen liked his daughter's boyfriend. He was quiet and polite, the fact that he snuck into her room most nights notwithstanding (and yes, he knew all about that, despite Louisa's best efforts at hiding it. The drawer full of his clothes was a dead giveaway). He had a commanding intensity about him, and whilst Stephen found it alarming that Jasper was so devoted to Louisa despite dating for less than six months, he could tell that the young man wanted nothing but the best for her. Did he wish that she was a little older when they met? Sure. But, it wasn't like he had much room to talk. He and Clara had gotten married within a year of meeting, and Louisa had been born not long after that.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best example.

He watched the tense set to his daughter's shoulders, and wishing, not for the first time, that Clara was still with him. She was always able to get through Louisa's surly moods and make her open up. He would know, she had done it to him countless times. But Clara wasn't with him anymore, and it was solely on him to help his daughter through this. But how were you supposed to approach the topic of your firstborn's first fight with her first boyfriend?

"You know, your mother had a terrible temper— she had no problem shouting at someone who upset her. Even if it was a simple mistake," Mr Collins said, joining Louisa at the sink. He plucked the plate she had been scrubbing for several minutes out of her hand, pretending he didn't notice how Louisa stilled. "She was a terrible cook. The number of toasters she managed to set on fire was truly astounding."

Louisa still didn't respond, the hot water still spitting out of the tap, though she made no move to
Stephen reached over and turned it off before resuming drying the plate. "She could hold a grudge until judgement day. She was blunt, audacious, and more than a little melodramatic. Just like someone else I know," he said, bumping his shoulder against Louisa's (when had she gotten so tall?) and tossing her a cheeky smile. "But she was also patient. She was willing to do anything for a friend. She'd give the shirt off her back to a total stranger if they asked. And you could tell her anything, and she wouldn't judge you for it."

The silence that followed was less because he wanted to give her time to contemplate his words and more to do with the fact that he wasn't sure where he was going with his lecture. Whilst he would wager that he was more comfortable with the emotional talk than the average American father (having two daughters had that effect), Clara had always been the true master at talking about feelings. He was better at just fixing their problems. But he couldn't really do that now. Not only did he have no clue what prompted the argument, but Louisa was growing up and she needed to learn how to solve her own problems, as much as it pained him to admit it. All he could do was give his advice and hope she took it into account.

Parenting really sucked sometimes.

"When the person you think you love is perfect, you don't love them. You love the idea of them," he continued at last. "Being in love means see your partner completely and accept who they are: not just the good parts, but their weird, quirky, and bad parts too. Ignoring your partner's flaws sets everyone up for disappointment. One day they will fall off the pedestal you put them on. Nobody is perfect."

Silence reigned once more, and Stephen waited on bated breath, hoping she would talk. What if pushed her too far? Or what if he was off the mark, and she was now confused as well as angry?

"We had an argument," Louisa said at last, confirming his suspicions. "Jasper wants me to do something that I don't feel comfortable with."

"Sex?"

She shook her head, before reaching for the next dirty dish. "There's a… test… that Dr Cullen wants to try. For my… headaches. Jasper thinks I should do it."

Mr Collins tried not to be annoyed that this was the first time he was hearing about any medical tests his daughter may or may not be undergoing and focused on the more immediate problem of said daughter's obvious distress. "Will it help you?"

She shrugged, handing him a pot to dry. "It's experimental. There's really no way of knowing without trying."

Experimental. He was not a fan of the idea of his child being used as a guinea pig for a scientific test. "Is it dangerous?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"A test that may or may not work, and may or may not be dangerous," he repeated, raising an eyebrow, peering down at his daughter.

She gave him a sheepish look. "It sounds even worse when you say it like that."

"I'm not sure how you can think it doesn't sound bad," Mr Collins pointed out. "Jasper and Dr Cullen want you to do this test?"
"I don't think Dr Cullen has an opinion, either way," Louisa replied. "But Jasper does."

"His heart is in the right place," he said. "I'm sure he worries about you. He loves you very much."

Louisa fiddled with the fork she was holding. "Yeah."

Mr Collins smiled softly and took the utensil from her hands. "Go," he said, jerking his head in the direction of the stairs. "You've had a long day. Just don't go to bed angry."

Louisa gave him a faint smile and kissed him on the cheek before retreating in the direction of her bedroom. He watched her go, a sad sort of longing knotting in his chest, wishing that she was still tiny and was more interested in talking about ladybugs than boyfriends. It was a lot easier to wrap her up in his arms then, back when kisses could fix anything from bruises to hurt feelings. It felt like only yesterday, they were bringing her home from the hospital, as cliched as that sounded. She was so tall now and looked less like a child by the day.

He wished he had had more time with his little Lulu, but he could never regret seeing the strong young woman he and Clara had created.

Later that night, he heard Louisa's husky voice whispering to whom he assumed was Jasper. The theory was quickly affirmed when he caught a snippet of his low drawl. Stephen rolled his eyes. Maturing or not, teens could still be dumbasses. He just hoped she didn't get pregnant. He really wasn't ready to be a grandfather yet.

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*Love is giving someone the ability to destroy you, but trusting them not to. — Unknown*

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Chapter End Notes

Yikes. Jasper and Lou's first real fight. Papa Collins to save the day though. Also, what do you think happened in Seattle? Let me know what you thought, and leave me a comment! -CheckAlexa
Chapter Notes

There is some violence in this chapter that some might find disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say that Carlisle was excited to experiment with Louisa's gift was a gross understatement. Within an hour of asking, the doctor had scheduled an MRI, procured something called an electroencephalogram, and downloaded a fancy software that would allow him to view her brain in real-time. With her permission, two family friends were also to be consulted. Eleazar from the Denali coven was Carlisle's first phone call. Eleazar, Carlisle had explained, possessed the peculiar (and helpful) ability to sense the gifts of those around him. Whilst Eleazar emphasized that his power was less effective on humans, he agreed that having a general idea of how her power worked would be more helpful than the vague assumptions they had. The second choice for assistance was much more controversial and had nearly caused a physical altercation between Carlisle and Jasper when the doctor had proposed it. Louisa, who had never heard of Aro of Volturi, couldn't figure out why contacting him was such a bad idea.

Catching her train of thought, Edward began to fill her in on what was the closest thing vampires had to royalty. "They are the most powerful coven in the world," Edward murmured, watching Carlisle and Jasper argue, his brow furrowed with anxiety. "They enforce our laws and keep us safe."

"Safe from what?" Louisa couldn't help but ask. Vampires were remarkably hard to kill, according to Jasper.

"Humans," Edward replied. Louisa wanted to laugh at his response, but the tight-lipped set to his face made the sound die in her throat.

They resumed watching the unfolding argument from a safe distance behind Edward's piano. Emmett and Rosalie had a similar idea and had taken shelter at the top of the grand staircase, peering down from over the bannister. Esme had rolled her eyes and removed herself from the situation altogether and disappeared into the kitchen. Only Alice was unbothered as she wandered through the house, eyes glazed and unfocused, seemingly unaware of the shouting match happening around her.

"If you think I'm going to let that psychopath anywhere near her, you're a fool." Jasper snarled and a hostile feeling settled over the room. He paced through the lounge, his movements stiff and jerky, clenching and relaxing his fists.

"Aro has no reason to harm Louisa," Carlisle said, raising his hands in an appeasing gesture.

"No reason to harm her?" Jasper repeated in a tone that was somehow mocking and incredulous. "She's a human who knows about vampires. Your 'friend' has killed for much less."

"Louisa is gifted," Carlisle pointed out. "Her situation is different than that of a normal human. We have broken no laws by telling her something she already knew from a supernatural source."
"You believe that matters to them? If anything, that put us in more danger. Aro likes to collect
gifted vampires, and he'll kill an entire coven if that's what it takes to get one."

"He hasn't harmed us yet, and he knows about Edward."

"Brilliant reasoning: 'He might not slaughter us because he has not yet done so'. And what of
Alice? Or myself? If Aro learns about us, he might think you are amassing your own army of
gifted vampires. What might your 'friend' say about that?"

"Your distrust of the Volturi is understandable but unfounded, Jasper," Carlisle said in a tone that
was calm, yet did nothing to placate him. If anything, it only served to agitate him further. "They
are not without reason. You plan to change Louisa as soon as it is safe to do so, and they will
recognise that."

Louisa let out a shaky sigh and glanced up at Rose, who rolled her eyes.

"Louisa," she called out in a sarcastic and patronising voice. "Seeing as this affects your life, what
would you like to do?"

Carlisle had the decency to look chagrined whilst Jasper remained tight-jawed and defiant. They
turned to look at her and waited for her answer. Louisa wiped her hands on her skirt, surprised to
find them clammy, and tried not to squirm under their scrutiny. This was really not how she
thought this conversation would go.

Truth be told, she didn't know what she wanted. Whilst she held a great deal of respect for Dr
Cullen, she trusted Jasper implicitly, and if he didn't believe it was safe, she was reluctant to agree
to the meeting with Aro. Then again, Jasper was known to fly off the handle when it came to her
safety, and Dr Cullen claimed to know Aro personally. If Dr Cullen thought it was safe, wouldn't it
be beneficial to consult the stranger's expertise? Would she truly be in danger if she agreed with Dr
Cullen, as Jasper feared? And if she did, would Jasper be angry and see it as a betrayal?

"No one will be angry," Edward murmured, hearing her worried thoughts. "We all want what's best
for you."

Jasper was beside her in an instant, growling at Edward, who retreated, hands raised. He spun her
around on the piano bench and kneeled in front of her, taking her hands in his. Louisa looked down
at her fingers, surprised to find them bleeding. A wave of calm washed over her and pushed the
panic far enough away so that she could gather her thoughts. Taking a steadying breath, she gave
her boyfriend a wan smile before turning back towards Carlisle.

"So, what exactly is Aro's gift?" She asked. "And why could he help me?"

Carlisle folded himself into a nearby chair, looking relieved. "It is referred to as tactile telepathy,"
he began. "It's similar to Edward, inasmuch that he can read minds. It is, however, both stronger
and more limited than Edward's gift. Aro can read every single thought anyone has had in their
lifetime but is limited by physical contact. The longer he touches you, the more he can see."

"So it's not like an automatic download sort of situation," she guessed. "He doesn't just gain every
single one of your thoughts by touching you?"

It was Edward who responded. "He has to search for the thoughts he wants," he confirmed,
shooting Jasper a cautious look before inching back into the room. "But there is no way to stop him
from reading those thoughts if he gets his hands on you."

Louisa pursed her lips as she contemplated this new information. She could see why Carlisle had
drawn the comparison between Aro and herself. Both could access information from a source (though Louisa's gift was emotions based rather than thoughts), and both required physical contact. "So you think he might have ideas on how to control this?"

"If it is possible," Carlisle affirmed, nodding his head possible. "Though we do not yet know the true extent of your gift. It could be as developed as it will ever be, you might be able to strengthen it more now, or you might have to wait until you have been changed. Eleazar might have some idea, but his gift is more powerful on vampires, rather than humans."

"So in other words, who knows how this all will go?" Louisa summarised, leaning back into Jasper and trying not to feel defeated. There was something incredibly discouraging hearing Carlisle, both her doctor and a three-hundred-year-old vampire, admit he was walking into this blind. "Is it worth the risk of drawing the Volturi's attention?"

"Only you can decide that," Carlisle said, his face pinched with empathy. "You must understand, Louisa, that gifts possessed by vampires are amplifications of their strongest traits as humans. For Edward, he was extraordinarily good at guessing what other people were thinking. Jasper remembers being adept at convincing people to do what he wanted. But humans who claim to have paranormal gifts have always been disproven. What you can do is unheard of in the supernatural world."

Eleazar echoed this sentiment when he arrived several weeks later. He watched her with wide, golden eyes and nearly forgot to introduce himself when she shook his hand, prompting an eye roll from his wife, Carmen, who had accompanied him.

"You must forgive him," she said, pulling Louisa's face down to place a kiss on each cheek. "He assumed Carlisle was exaggerating about you."

Both Carmen and her husband possessed the chalky pallor that Louisa had come to associate with vampires, though their skin had an olive undertone that left them looking less like a reanimated corpse and more like they were in need of a good tan. Carmen had carefully sculpted dark curls, which added several inches to her height. While she spoke in a soft tone, her lilt had a powerful quality to it which led Louisa to believe that the woman had a beautiful singing voice. Eleazar, on the other hand, had a coltish, wiry build. He was around the same height as Louisa, though he held himself as if he was trying to take up as little space as possible- as if he was used to going unnoticed. Likely because of his former job as a… guard of some sort?

"Astonishing." The word was whispered in Spanish, and Louisa jumped, breaking off her conversation with Carmen to face a stunned Eleazar. "What do you know of us already?"

"Well, Carlisle mentioned…"

Eleazar shook his head, his eyes narrowing in concentration. "No, what do you know?"

Oh. She hadn't expected the experimentation to begin so soon. Louisa glanced back at Jasper, who gave her an encouraging nod.

"It's okay, Louisa," Emmett teased while he stepped forward to greet Carmen. He scooped the woman up in a hug, spinning her in an enthusiastic circle. "You can show off for them."

Louisa resisted the urge to give him a rude hand gesture, especially considering he was right. They had travelled all the way from Alaska to meet her. Feeling a little like an animal at a zoo, she took a centring breath and turned to face Carmen with a hesitant smile.
"You hate your shoes," Louisa began, giving the woman a thorough once over and noticing how she shifted ever so slightly from foot to foot. "You would prefer to be barefoot right now. You never wear shoes if you can help it." She turned her attention to the woman's hands, noting the ink stains on her fingers. Louisa's hands twitched and she repressed a phantom desire to type. "You use a typewriter," she continued. "You like the funny sounds they make."

Carmen fixed her with a warm smile. "Well done, Lou-"

"You're very sound-oriented," Louisa continued, accidentally cutting the woman off. "You sing a lot."

An unpleasant tingle ran down Louisa's spine, her head buzzing, mind kicking into overdrive. Her eyes fluttered shut on their own accord and she found herself picturing her mental library. Rows of shelves stuffed with books that were filled with information she had accumulated over the years, unfolded before her. She imagined a carpet beneath her feet, and when she looked down, she found it littered with hundreds, thousands of loose leaves of paper. She stooped down and picked one up, noticing the hand-drawn musical notes and foreign lyrics.

"You are a former opera singer, though I can't place the style," she whispered, though she wasn't sure if she said it out loud or only in her head. She trusted that Edward would translate for them if need be. "It's Spanish," she continued before humming the melody on the page. Another voice, smooth and warm, joined in, singing along. "Definitely baroque. She's a soprano— she sounds like a spinto."

She stooped down again and picked up another piece of paper, this one thick and yellowed with age. A hyper-realistic drawing of a village covered every inch of it. There were no colours, but the black ink it had been drawn in had no trouble conveying the dancing flames that ravaged the buildings. It felt different than the last piece of information. More masculine.

"Eleazar visited a town," she said, running her fingers across impressions left behind by the nib. "He didn't start the fire though." She flipped over the drawing, hoping for more clues. Why had Eleazar been standing in a burning village in… Prussia? She glanced at the man standing next to her, a tall, towering man built like the trunk of an oak tree. He gave her a jovial smile, his red eyes glowing in the moonlight. The stranger nodded towards the vampires standing motionless before them, petrified by fear.

"Will they be of use?" he asked in a language that she knew she shouldn't know, yet somehow understood.

She shook her head.

Felix shrugged before loping forward and ripping off a woman's arms. Chaos descended before her, and try as she might, she couldn't look away or even close her eyes. She watched with a resigned sort of horror as bodies were dismantled with sickening screeches. Demitri trailed behind Felix, chucking discarded limbs into a roaring fire which sent thick plumes of purple smoke up into the night. Jane, the little psychopath that she was, giggled whenever someone screamed.

"Hilfe!" A young girl who didn't look much older than twelve yelled. She held out her hand towards him, ruby eyes wide with panic, a blue ribbon at the end of one of her braids coming undone. She opened her mouth to call out again but was silenced when Felix delivered a death blow. Jane picked up the girl's head by one of her braids and tossed it towards the funeral pyre. But only the girl's hair caught the flames and the head went crashing through one of the village's cottages. It took only a few seconds for the fire to spread, and soon dozens of homes joined the growing blaze.
Panic rushed through him but he tramped down on the urge to run. He had a job to do. One more job, then he could go home to see his Carmen. One more job and he would ask to leave. One more job, and God willing, there would be no more violence. He was nearly down now. It wasn't the time to freeze up in horror, no matter how much he wanted to. He couldn't flinch, not even when a body flew across the village, completely devoid of a head. He needed to calm down and focus on the task at hand, not the sickly sweet smoke that was filling the air, his nostrils, his lungs making it impossible to breathe and he wondered if he would ever get the scent off of his clothes his hair his skin he needed to calm down he was almost done now they were almost free but not the ones he was sent to destroy would Carmen still love him after all he had done was he a—

A heavy, forced calm settled over him and he sagged to his knees or at least he would have had a strong pair of arms not tightened around his waist. The man behind him let out a warning growl, then tension in the room almost palpable. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to find Carlisle kneeling in front of him. He was instructing him to pinch his nose shut to stem the flow of blood, which didn't make much sense given that he didn't have a beating heart. He glanced around the room, recognising each of the Cullens, who watched him with concern, his eyes finding his beloved Carmen who was holding hands with… himself?

A sharp, stabbing pain shot through his, no her, brain. Her brain because her name was Louisa. Louisa Jane Collins, born March seventeenth, dating-but-also-something-more Jasper Whitlock. Her sister's name was Dottie and her father was called Stephen, and Mum and Laurie were dead. Petya lived in Tacoma and she lived in Forks and she was at the Cullen's house. She was bleeding in a room full of vampires, which wasn't the wisest decision she had ever made, and probably making a terrible first impression for Carmen and Eleazar, who came to visit all the way from Alaska.

She sank further into Jasper's arms, feeling shaky and exhausted. She managed to grip the handkerchief Carlisle held to her nose to stem the bleeding. "Sorry," she whispered for lack of a better response. Carlisle waved her apology off but didn't back away, instead producing a penlight and shining it in her eyes.

"Is she concussed?" Jasper asked, his voice rumbling through her body.

"No," Louisa grunted, pleased that her words weren't slurred. It was embarrassing enough to have had a fit in the presence of so many people. The fact that she was a fragile human surrounded by immortal vampires only served to amplify her mortification. She didn't need a concussion on top of that.

A smile quirked at the corner of Carlisle's lips despite the seriousness of the situation. "It is unlikely," he agreed. "But you should rest before trying something like that again."

Louisa gave him a thumbs up before glancing back towards a stunned Carmen and Eleazar. She was tempted to ask if she had risked brain damage for no reason, but couldn't think of how to make it sound like a joke, so settled for a faint, "Was that helpful?"

"Yes," Eleazar said, watching her with concern. "I can see why you called me."

No Stone Left Unturned

Carmen and Eleazar ended up staying for most of April, and while Louisa liked the Alaskan vampires, she wasn't sad to see them go. Eleazar had been disappointingly unhelpful in their quest for answers. Whilst he was able to confirm that they were correct in their assumptions regarding the nature of her gift, he could only offer vague suggestions on how best to control it. That didn't stop him and Carlisle from using her like an overgrown lab rat though. Louisa had had more MRI's
in those three weeks than in her entire life.

No, if Louisa wanted to learn to use her power, she would have to find another psychometrist to teach her or figure it out on her own. And according to Eleazar, the world seemed to be in short supply of them. He did agree with Carlisle's original idea to consult with Aro, though, much to Jasper's dismay. Fortunately, the resulting conversation had far less shouting involved, and Eleazar was able to soothe some of their hesitations.

"He'll be curious, more than anything," Eleazar, who had worked for the Volturi for over a century, explained. "You're an aberration. I've never encountered a human with this level of control over a gift before."

"But I'm still a human who knows about vampires," Louisa pointed out.

Eleazar shrugged. "You won't be for long. Jasper plans to change you, correct?"

The flippant way he regarded her humanity left a sour taste in her mouth.

Jasper sensed the change in her mood and answered before she had the chance to deliver a scathing retort. "No later than nineteen," he confirmed, shooting her a look she couldn't quite decipher.

She pursed her lips and turned her head away, wishing she was somewhere else. The two men continued to talk about her like she wasn't there, discussing her condition, her options, and possible timelines for her future. Louisa tried not to let it get under her skin, but it was surprisingly difficult. Carlisle, she tried to forgive— his actions came from a place of concern for her. Eleazar, however, had no reason to decide anything about her life. Friend of the family or not, he was more or less still a stranger to her.

"Aro would enjoy the prospect of meeting her," Eleazar said. "He might be willing to help her."

"Jasper is concerned that he will try to recruit her for the guard," Carlisle said.

Eleazar shook his head. "Aro will see her as a less powerful version of himself. If you cannot be used to maintain order, you are more or less useless to them."

Jasper gave her leg a comforting squeeze when she heard that delightful reassurance. Rolling her eyes, she stood, kissed Jasper, and left. Neither Carlisle nor Eleazar noticed her leave. She was at La Push long before either man noticed she was gone.

"What brings you here, white girl?" Leah asked after Louisa pulled up in front of the Clearwater house.

"Normalcy, I hope." Somewhere besides vampires, supernatural gifts, and anything remotely paranormal. Not that she told Leah this much.

Leah hopped in the passenger seat of the Prius, propping her feet up on the dash. "We can go cliff diving if you want. I hear the water has warmed up."

They didn't end up jumping off any cliffs, though they did start a bonfire on a secluded stretch of beach. They lay side by side on the pebbled ground, watching the flames curl up towards the darkening sky. They talked about everything and nothing at the same time. After spending a month having to use her gift to learn information, it was nice to not have to figure out for herself. There wasn't much that she could share with Leah, but it didn't seem to bother the other girl. She was more than happy to chatter away about how her gymnastics season was going, the antics of her little brother, and her plans after she finished high school.
"I can't wait to graduate," Leah said, her voice oozing with contempt.

Louisa hummed in agreement. She would be graduating in a little over a year, and she had no idea what that meant for her. Lately, it felt like her life had paused and it was difficult to actually care too much about what the future held. She was going through the motions of finishing high school and looking at universities for her father's sake, but would she even get to go to university before she was changed? "Where will you go?"

"Who cares? Anywhere is better than here." Louisa frowned. Sure, cultural capital of the world Forks was not, but it wasn't the worst place in the world. Leah must have seen the look on her face and shook her head. "You're from Forks, white girl. It's different for me. My only hope of getting out of this hellhole is a full ride on an athletic scholarship."

While it wasn't the first time Leah had expressed her desire to move, there was something in her voice that gave Louisa pause. "Is everything alright at home? Or with Sam?"

Leah scowled and Louisa wondered if she would tell her to mind her own business. They hadn't known each other long, now that she thought about it, and despite enjoying each other's company, Louisa couldn't describe their relationship as close. Even still, Louisa could tell that something was bothering the other girl and she wanted to help.

And okay, sure, she had to admit, she was curious about it too. With the lack of an ongoing criminal investigation, she was in desperate need of a juicy piece of gossip.

"The elders have been… weird lately. Like weirder than usual," Leah admitted in a low voice as if she were divulging a sacred secret.

That didn't seem like a reason to want to leave, but then again, she wasn't well versed in the politics of the reservation. "How so?"

Leah pursed her lips and stared up at the starry sky, her hands folded on her stomach. "About a year ago, they stopped letting kids go to Forks. They said it wasn't safe," she explained. "Even the adults were asked not to go. My parents had a huge row about it. Mum was working as a nurse at Forks General at the time and Dad kept ranting about how it was dangerous."

Louisa's brow furrowed. Former murderous chemistry teachers aside, Forks was a pretty peaceful town. "Did she quit?"

"Yeah," Leah replied with a hysterical laugh. "All because a bunch of old men were worried about a stupid legend."

"That must be one hell of a legend," Louisa said. "What's it about?"

Leah rolled on to her side to face her, propping herself up with one hand. "Something about wolves," she said, mouth twisting into a humourless smile. "We're supposed to be descended from them, or some bullshit like that."

"Sounds kind of badass, to be honest."

Leah let out a real laugh at that. "You would think that," she said, her teeth glinting in the firelight. "Anyway, about a month ago, the elders started getting real antsy. It feels like they've been calling council meetings at least once a week. Dad goes to them, and when he comes back, he's got this weird look on his face."

"What goes on at the meetings?"
"I don't know," she huffed. "They've been watching the boys in town like they're ticking time bombs. Something's got them nervous."

"Have you asked your dad about it?"

Leah let out a cold laugh. "Yeah, he pats my head and tells me to be a good little girl and not worry about it."

Despite the editorialising, Louisa could hear the frustration underneath her anger. "So what's he protecting you from?" she wondered aloud, her mind beginning to formulate hundreds of possible scenarios.

"Protecting?" Leah repeated, redrawing her attention. She managed to sound incredulous and sarcastic at the same time.

"Well, yeah," Louisa said, sitting up and shifting to face her. "You said he's upset about something right? He probably doesn't want to have to burden you with it either."

"Shouldn't I get to decide that?" she asked, heated, sitting up as well.

"He is your dad," Louisa pointed out. "That's what dads do, right? And it might not have to do with you. Why bother you with it if it won't affect you?"

Leah sent her a glare even Rosalie would have found impressive. "Whose side are you on?"

Louisa raised her hands in an appeasing gesture. "I'm just offering another explanation."

"So I should just drop it, is what you are saying."

"Not at all. That would be hypocritical of me," Louisa said.

"Then what?" Leah demanded, her body leaning forward in anticipation, elbows resting on her knees.

"Well," she said slowly. "If they aren't going to tell you, maybe you should find out for yourself."

No Stone Left Unturned

She was unsurprised to find Jasper waiting for her when she walked into her dark room that night. He was sprawled out on their bed, hands behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling, so motionless she wasn't sure if he was even breathing. In fact, the only sign of life was when he tilted his head to watch her, his yellow eyes nearly glowing in the low lighting. He had changed out of the jeans and button-down he had been wearing last she saw him into a pair of sweatpants, looking more like a teenaged boy than she had ever seen him (that is, if you were to overlook his well-toned muscles and his absurd amount of scars). He pushed himself up as she approached, and pulled her into his lap, his fingers slipping under the edge of her blouse and massaging her hip bones. Louisa sank into his body and buried her face in his shoulder, savouring his warm, clean scent.

"Did I miss anything?" she asked, her voice muffled.

Jasper shook his head. "Carlisle wants to apologise for being insensitive."

Louisa nodded and craned her neck back to kiss him before disentangling their limbs and rising to her feet. She crossed her tiny bedroom and began to rummage through her wardrobe for pjs.
She could feel Jasper's eyes on her back as she changed her clothes, calculating and curious, and whilst he didn't say anything, Louisa got the impression that he wanted to. Arms wound around her waist the moment she finished, and she couldn't help but laugh.

"You're impatient tonight," she noted, twisting in his arms.

His lips twitched as if he might smile, before leading her back to the bed. He sank back into the mattress and pulled her on top of him, one of his hands finding its way to her hair while the other rubbed circles along her spine. Louisa let out a content sigh and pressed a kiss into his chest. They lay in silence, enjoying the feeling of the other's touch, and relishing the unique comfort they could only bring each other.

Well, for the most part. Something weighed heavily on Jasper's mind, and whether he was projecting it or she was simply attuned to his moods, Louisa could sense it. Lifting her eyes to meet his, she cocked her head and sent him a searching look. "What's up?"

"Do you not want to become a vampire?"

Her first instinct was to say no, but deep down she knew it wasn't really true. The more she thought about it, the more she realised that she was largely indifferent to the matter. Her life had become so intertwined with Jasper's that it didn't even occur to her to not become a vampire anymore. She had made her peace with her inevitable change. Some people married their partner; she would become a different species for hers. No, vampirism wasn't what bothered her. It was the unintended collateral that came along with it.

"Talk to me, love," he murmured, caressing her face. "What troubles you?"

She slid off him and burrowed into his side, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I feel like I'm stuck," She admitted. "Like everyone around me is moving on with their life, but it doesn't matter what I do, because in two years I'm going to be more or less dead. What's the point of taking my SATs or sitting AP exams if I'm going to be stuck as at nineteen for the rest of my existence? My friends are going to go to college, my sister will get married and have kids. And on top of that, I've got this stupid gift that I can't control any more than I did a month ago and I feel like a fucking lab rat and it feels like everyone else has more control over my own life than I do." She said this all in one hurried breath, afraid that if she were to stop, she might never be able to speak again.

Jasper rolled over onto his side and curled his long limbs around her body as if it would somehow shield her from the world. "What do you want?" he asked.

Louisa opened her mouth only to close it once more. She couldn't think of the last time someone had asked her that. Despite her efforts, tears sprang to her eyes. "I don't know," she admitted. "That's the problem. I can't even bring myself to care anymore. It all feels so pointless- like my life is already over and I'm trapped in limbo."

Jasper didn't offer her false platitudes, saying that it would all get better. He didn't manipulate her feelings or try to convince her that her life wasn't a wreck, or invalidate how she felt. He didn't say anything. All he did was wrap her up in his arms and hold her as tight as he dared, and listen as she attempted to voice her scrambled and confused thoughts.

"And then today," she continued, feeling like a dam had burst in her chest as her frustration began to pour out. "Carlisle and Eleazar were discussing what to do with me. They didn't ask me for my opinion. And when Eleazar had a question about me, he asked you, even though I was sitting right next to you, and it feels like I'm just some puzzle for them to solve or a problem to fix or some stupid little girl who needs her boyfriend to speak for her and it didn't even matter that I was there
and when I left it took them almost an hour for them to notice I was gone, that's how much I didn't matter, and—" There was so much more that she wanted to say but her breath caught in her throat and a choking sob ripped through her body.

Jasper sat up, pulling her with him, and cradling her in his arms. "You matter, Louisa," he whispered into her hair. "You aren't stupid. You aren't a problem."

She could feel his gentle influence, pulling her back from the brink of hysteria, and she pulled herself closer, welcoming the offered peace. He rocked them back and forth, and when the sobs subsided into hiccups, he took her face in his hands and peppered it with kisses. When shame for breaking down tried to settle over her, he snatched away, his eyes darkening in sadness each time he did. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on his lips and how each touch sent a rush of warmth through her body.

"How can I help you, my love?" he murmured, his lips running over the exposed skin of her neck. "Ask anything of me and I shall do it for you."

Louisa shook her head and pressed her lips together, trying to calm her breathing. She didn't know what she wanted, or what her problem even was. Her grievances felt so inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, yet she couldn't help but feel like she was a bird, trapped in a cage—where each day was as monotonous as it was meaningless, confined and isolated from the rest of the world. Part of her wanted to take off, leave everything behind, run away from everything remotely supernatural. A larger part of her felt sick that she even entertained the idea, considering it meant she would have to leave behind Jasper.

Jasper, who was distressed, simply because she was and it hurt him to see her upset. Jasper, who would move mountains for her if she only asked. There wasn't a single thing he could do for her that he wasn't already doing, and her heart, heavy as it was, swelled with love for her mate.

"I just need you."

Jasper's arms tightened around her, pulling her into his chest and tucking her head under his chin. "You have me," he promised. "I'm right here, darling. I'm not going anywhere."

She clung to him, what felt like her only real tether in all of this, and cried even harder.

"It was not despair, but it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promises broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth had held out to her." — Kate Chopin

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Putting my quarantine to good use and knocking out this chapter I've been meaning to write. Hope you all are healthy and safe! Leave me a comment and let me know what you think of the chapter. I can't wait to hear your thoughts! -CA
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!