This Beautiful, Broken Thing

by FlamingMaple

Summary

Back from Italy, Bella has reached her limit for Edward's refusal to change her. Alice sees that keeping Bella human will only result in the Volturi's ire. At college, Bella explores all the opportunities a human life affords, with an anxious Edward on her tail. HEA. Bella x Edward.
“But you won’t change me. You won’t make me your equal,” Bella said.

“I would think,” he said carefully, “after what you saw, that you’d be grateful for that.”

She recalled, with a clarity she hoped time would loosen, the sounds and sights of their visit with the Volturi had left her with.

“I want to be with you,” she said. “I love you.”

He breathed out, “despite everything I’ve done. I don’t deserve you,” he said, “but I love you. More than you could possibly understand.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “I won’t damn you, Bella. Not to this frozen half-life. No.”

She grimaced, but didn’t pull away. His touch still felt so tenuous. She wasn’t’ entirely convinced she wouldn’t wake up and find this had been a dream. “I will grow old, Edward. I will die.”

“Yes,” he said, “but you will have a life between now and then. A long, beautiful life full of experience.”

She imagined the very short time they would be seen as a couple, to the world, anyway. Then she would be seen as his mother, and then his grandmother.

She shuddered.

“What is it?” he said.

She shook her head. “People will think I’m your mother, Edward, and then your grandmother.”

“And when,” he said, “has what other people think ever bothered you?” He pulled back, hands still on hers, an eyebrow arched.

Her brow furrowed. “That matters to me,” she said softly.

“Do we need the company of the world, if it thinks that way of us?” He asked, just as quietly

“Don’t you see how unequal this will make us, leave us?” Bella asked. Tears were close now. She had just gotten him back. It felt dangerous, having this conversation. What if he just left again? But...if he stayed, and she continued to grow, what then? A more vital fear struck her. “And the Volturi? They won’t forget what you promised.”

“No,” he said. His chuckle surprised her. “They won’t forget, Bella, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it wasn’t a good sixty years before they remembered to check.” Seeing her disbelieving look, he added, “think about it. They’ve been alive for thousands of years. Their concept of time is so distant to yours, it’s hard for me to explain. I’ve heard their thoughts Bella. Trust me. They are the least of your worries.”

But she didn’t trust him. Not with this. And not with his other judgement.

He pulled her closer, trying to move the conversation away from this morbid topic. “I love you, Bella,” he said softly.

She could barely speak, her heart was thumping in her throat. She felt like she could breathe again,
having him here. Her hands traced his cheeks, and then his shoulders, his back. His own stopped hers before they could go further.

Then he leaned in and kissed her.

The world stopped.

A silence that subdued all other sensations descended, and all that there was, was him, there, and her, lips together with his, and the air between them shared.

It couldn’t last long enough, as far as Bella was concerned.

But it ended.

It always ended.

His eyes were a sparkling black. Deep, entrancing, and entirely lethal.

She hated to be separated from him, but knew he needed to hunt. Knew he’d denied himself to a point of wasting. “You need to hunt,” she said.

“I’m fine,” he said.

It was her turn to raise a disbelieving eyebrow. “I doubt it,” she said. “And considering your insistence on me sleeping, and eating, and generally taking care of myself, you don’t get to skimp.”

“I’m fine,” he said again.

She took in a deep breath, and let it out. She knew that her efforts on this front would be in vain. “Alright,” she said, “but I think I should try to get back to sleep.” She cleared her throat, “and I think having you here might be something of a distraction.”

Edward didn’t believe her for a minute, but accepted that she needed the space. He didn’t want to go far, but perhaps he could hunt a short distance away if she needed some time. He looked at her, his eyes marginally narrowed. “I’ll go hunt then,” he said, “if you’re sleeping. Alice,” he added, “will be nearby.” Seeing Bella’s eyebrows furl, he explained, “I don’t think there’s any danger, but I want to be certain. I’ll be back in the early morning.”

“OK,” Bella said, closing her eyes as he touched her face again. “Be careful too,” she said. “Don’t forget to come back.”

He smiled, whispering “see you soon,” and was gone.

Bella knew she couldn’t sleep. Wouldn’t be able to until the next night at the earliest, after how long she’d been out. She settled, instead, for the reliable company of a book, curling her legs up under her, and spreading out the pages in her hands. The text was a well loved one, and laid flat easily, its words skipping over themselves in familiarity.

After a good half an hour, Bella figured Edward would be well out of earshot. “Alice?” She whispered. “You there?”

“Yes,” came the soft reply, Alice’s form appearing silently in her room.

It was still startling, even having been with her in the last few days, to see her, and witness her silent speed.
“Sorry,” she added. “Shall I ring the doorbell next time?”

Bella gave a small smile in response, but became more serious. “Can he hear us?”

There was no question as to who.

“No,” Alice said, “I told him to actually hunt properly. I doubt he will, but he’s far enough way to pretend he is.” She shrugged, but then looked at Bella, features solemn. “You sure you want to have the answer to your question?”

“I haven’t asked you a question, Alice.”

Alice was serious, though, and ignored her quip. “Are you sure?” She asked instead.

“Yes,” Bella said, just as firmly, sitting up fully, as Alice sat beside her.

“There is no chance, no,” she said softly. “Not from the decisions I saw him making.”

Bella closed her eyes, and swallowed, nodding.

“There is some good news, though.”

Bella snapped open her eyes quickly, turning her head to look squarely at Alice’s now yellow eyes.

“They won’t come looking for the next year, maybe more, but certainly not in the next year and a half. Maybe two.”

“Why?” Bella asked.

Alice frowned. “From what I could see, there are problems in the Sudan.”

“The conflict there?”

Alice’s face shifted into an apologetic smile, “war is an easy cover for our kind, run amok,” she said softly. “There’s already a lot of tension there between religious groups. It didn’t take much to foment it. But,” she sighed, “the Volturi are concerned enough with the elements at play to deal with it, so that will consume a good chunk of their time.”

Bella nodded, thinking.

“I meant it, Bella,” Alice said. “I will change you, if you want me to.”

“Thank you,” Bella said, putting her hand over Alice’s. “But...if he doesn’t want it, what’s the point?”

She pulled her fingers away to wipe her cheeks.

“Bella—” Alice started, a soft reprimand in her voice.

“No,” she said. “I’m right. If he doesn’t want me to be with him that way, it means he wants me to be human. That...perhaps he only wants me as a human. Not as an equal. And,” she blew out a sharp breath through her nose, “we’ve seen how that’s worked out.”

Alice could only agree with this last statement, her sympathetic smile curling up, but then wilting on her lips.
They sat together, each mulling over their own thoughts. Alice avoided looking at Bella’s future, trying to give her some privacy.

Bella’s next request, though, made Alice look at her wide eyed.

“Not at all?” She asked, blinking in disbelief.

“Only if I ask,” Bella said.

“And if Edward does?” Alice asked, tilting her head forward in emphasis. “I can’t just tell him I don’t see anything.”

“No,” Bella said, “I don’t expect you to. Tell him I asked you not to.”

It was Alice’s turn to sigh dramatically.

“I’m not trying to be difficult Alice,” Bella said, “but if he wants me to have a human life, then it needs to be a human life. One with surprises—and privacy, for me.”

Bella watched Alice thinking, the emotions playing out over her face.

“Do you not think I deserve that? If he wants me to be human?”

“Yes,” Alice said quickly, “I’m just...thinking about how I’m going to handle this. Sometimes, things just...come, unbidden.”

“Then they do. I won’t fault you for it. But, please, try to keep it to yourself.”

“Alright,” Alice said. “Speaking of which,” she said quietly. “You’re about to be interrupted—by your dad.”

She was there one second, and gone the next.

“Bells?” Charlie’s voice called from the door, a sibilant whisper.

“Yeah Dad,” Bella called back.

“You talking to yourself or something?”

“Yeah, actually, I was,” she lied. “Rehearsing my apology.”

He sat down beside her, giving a quiet snort, “I’ll say.”

He’d had a day and a bit to calm down since the night she’d returned home, and she’d slept through almost all of it. “You’re grounded,” he said succinctly, “forever.”

Bella nodded, mouth a grim line, “kinda figured,” adding, “Sorry, Dad, for frightening you. For taking off.”

“Still grounded.”

“Yep.”

Then he pulled her into a hug. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I won’t,” she said, and meant it. At least, not for a year and a half. Or, until the Volturi found her, and killed her.
Or, she realized, with a more visceral horror, they came looking for her, and found Charlie instead.

“I should head back to bed,” Charlie said, “and you should probably try to get some sleep.”

Bella could only nod wordlessly, the horrors of what might be swirling before her.

It wouldn’t do, she realized, to wait on Edward’s choice. Not at all. She needed her own plan, and now that she had Alice’s promise of privacy, she had the means to make it.
Away

Things had returned, with an eerie easiness, to a state approaching normalcy. They were a few weeks back into school, Edward’s classes exactly what they had been before the Cullens had left.

Charlie’s hostility towards Edward had not abated, and while he didn’t like that Edward picked Bella up, and dropped her off every day for school, he couldn’t exactly change the terms of her grounding to suit his prejudices, much as he wanted to. Instead, he lingered between ignoring him, or making surly comments that he thought Edward couldn’t hear.

Edward didn’t blame him in the slightest. He deserved every ill wish the man had to throw at him. He wasn’t going anywhere, though.

Bella tolerated Charlie’s hostility. She counted it as cheap payment for her time with Edward.

Tonight she and Edward were busy at the dining room table, working on a stack of university applications. Bella felt this was a solid waste of time, considering most universities and colleges had deadlines in the fall, but Edward persisted.

When he presented the paperwork for Dartmouth, though, she threw down her pen. “No way.”

“Why not?” He asked. “I think you’d like it.”

She looked at him, eyebrows raised. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I think you would.”

“Edward,” Bella said softly, as if she was explaining something to a small child. “I can’t afford Dartmouth, and” she frowned, “I’m not exactly Dartmouth material.”

“You absolutely are,” he said, eyebrows creased. “And you don’t need to worry about the cost.”

She huffed out a breath, and crossed her arms. “No.” Then she changed her mind, and went to pick up the applications, but they were gone. “Where—?”

“Never mind,” Edward said, “you’ve already written most of the essays anyway. Besides, I can write your signature better than you can.”

She eyed him narrowly. “Fine, waste your money on an application that goes nowhere. Be my guest.”

“Happily,” he said cheerily.

“What are you two hissing about?” Charlie called from the living room, then standing, walking towards the dining room table. “Are you having a fight?” He asked this second question with optimism.

“No Dad,” Bella grumbled.

Charlie wandered back to the couch with a beer, grumbling something she didn’t catch. Edward smiled, but shook his head when Bella looked at him.

“Where do you see yourself next year, then?” Edward asked, when Charlie’s attention was fully engaged in the game.
“Washington state,” Bella said. “Close to home. Nice variety of courses. Reasonable tuition that I have a hope of affording.”

Edward ignored this baited comment, and instead drummed his fingers on the table. “Have you been there?” he asked.

“No,” Bella said, but suspecting further disapproval from his quarter on her university of choice, said, “I’m guessing it’s like most other universities, Edward—nothing special.”

He’d put her on edge about her choice of school, clearly. How would undig that particular hole? “Is that where you’d really like to go?” he asked quietly. He’d moved his hand to hers.

She nodded. It didn’t matter that much to her. She knew school would only be temporary. Just a year.

“Then you should visit the campus,” he said. “Get to know it a bit.”

“Sure,” Bella sighed, looking back at Charlie, “and by the time I’m twenty, I’m pretty sure he’ll have ungrounded me.” She laughed a little at the end of this soft statement, but the sound of it was tinged with bitterness.

Edward’s mouth twisted a little. “Give it time,” he said, “I doubt he plans on grounding you forever.”

Bella made a loud “tch.”

Charlie turned his head again, and grinned. He thought they really were fighting. When he turned his face back to the TV, it was with the contentment of a man who believed the world turning to his course.

“After what Jacob pulled,” Bella said quietly, standing, stretching, “I won’t be surprised by anything.” she grumbled.

And yet, Edward thought, with no small amount of his own bitterness, she still wanted to be friends with this...boy.

“I think,” he suggested carefully, “that we might spring you for a weekend.”

She looked at him, the expression on her face communicating all her incredulity.

“The tickets,” he said, “that Esme and Carlisle gave you—they’re about to expire.”

Bella had forgotten about them completely, and felt a guilty stab. She should have given them to someone, or used them...anything but just forgotten about them. “Right,” she said. The guilt was written all over her face.

“I’m not saying that to make you feel badly,” Edward said, taking her hand. “But I don’t think Charlie could object to you visiting your mother.”

The reaction, to the idea of seeing her mother, was visceral. To drag all the danger that lurked in every corner here, to her mother’s door, made her take in a shaky breath, her stomach collapsing in on itself.

“No,” she said softly, controlling the edge in her voice. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Edward was undeterred though. “Alright,” he said, “if not that, then I happen to be aware that Washington State is running an event for prospective students next weekend.”
Bella allowed herself a moment to marvel that he knew this. She didn’t ask how, but said instead: “And you really think that Charlie would let me go away for a weekend—I am assuming, with you?” She was half turned to him, murmuring quietly, eyebrows stretched upwards.

“I think,” he said calmly, still stroking her fingers, “that if Alice happens to mention it, and Esme politely asks him if you’d like to come along with us, there’s a slim possibility of it happening.”

“Slim indeed.”

It wasn’t so slim though, and Bella felt the need to keep pinching herself, as she and Edward drove away from his house, Esme, Alice and Jasper dropped off, having completed their part of the ruse.

“So,” she asked, a little nervously, but excitedly too, “why aren’t they coming? Seeing as you’re apparently all so very interested in a state university these days?”

Edward faced her, giving her favorite grin. It almost made her forget her question. “Do you want them to come?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said, too quickly to appear nonchalant.

What she was wondering, was if a weekend away, together, meant something more than just a chance to not be grounded.

She was hoping—very much—for more.

Had his views on that softened, perhaps? In his time away? He was so set against changing her. Was there at least one crucial concession he was willing to make?

“We haven’t had much time, just to be together,” he said, “just you and me. And, I figured it would give you more of a chance to actually see a university. Enjoy it as a student, not surrounded by jaded vampires. But,” he said, seeing her look, “we can turn back and get them, if it makes you feel better.”

She smiled at his teasing, laughing, and offered a chuckled, “no,” in reply.

The drive was long, but it gave them a much needed chance to simply talk, away from all the spaces that held memories, pleasant and not, and for Bella to wonder together at things she hadn’t seen before. The last time she’d been to Seattle was years ago, long enough for that the drive’s sights were a novelty.

He stopped too often for her tastes, but insisted she needed to at least eat, and stretch her legs. These breaks in their trip were sweetened with his kisses, snatched against the car.

“Lascivious woman,” he chuckled, when she insisted, on their third stop, that he ‘pay the toll’ before she got back in the car. He obliged her nonetheless.

It was dusk when they reached the hotel, an imposing building, with multiple, liveried young men poised at the entrance. Edward let the valet take the keys, but pulled out their bags himself, sparing his other hand for hers.

“Two rooms,” Bella asked, a little quizzically, when the concierge handed over the room keys.

He raised his eyebrows at this. “Of course.”

She let her eyebrows stay high at the expense. And it was expensive, she was sure, looking around the lobby, at least that, if not more.
“I fully expect Charlie to call and check that there are two rooms,” he murmured to her, as they moved towards the elevator. “He thinks well of Esme, but…”

They didn’t walk into separate rooms, though, and he showed her into hers, handing her the key. He was surprised by the flutter in her heart. She was nervous. He just couldn’t figure out why.

“Is there something wrong with the room?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said, very quietly, swallowing, running a finger over the spread on the bed’s high surface. He cocked his head to the side. “There’s a nice pool. Want to go for a swim?”

She relaxed, immediately.

Strange, he thought.

“Sure,” she said, “just let me get changed.”

“OK,” he said, and set her bag on the bed, and slipped through the adjoining door to the other room.

It took him a second to slip on his swimsuit, and he waited, listening to see if she was ready. He’d heard the soft slap of clothes dropped onto the bed. The softer ruffle of fabric told him she was looking through her bag, as if she couldn’t find something. The quiet, but incredulous, “what?” was a surprise, though.

“Everything OK?” he asked, suddenly anxious something was wrong.

Her voice was a bit strangled when she answered. “These aren’t my clothes.”

Edward thought for a moment. He’d pulled Alice and Esme’s bags out of the trunk, placed there for show, but packed nonetheless. They were thorough with their human charades. Always. There was no way he could have gotten the wrong bag.

Then it clicked. They’d stepped out of the garage for a minute.

“Alice,” they both said, and Edward laughed. He thought he’d caught a glimpse of something in her thoughts.

Bella was not laughing though.

Alice had replaced everything she’d packed, but with Alice-ized versions of everything. There was a swimsuit, alright, but it was high where it should have been low, and low where it should have been high. Bella put it on, and when she looked in the mirror, couldn’t doubt that it looked...she supposed, what Alice thought was good—it just left more of her looking good than she’d ever worn before. She quickly grabbed one of the hotel robes out of the closet, and put it on before she called out “I’m ready,” to Edward.

He grinned when he saw her. “That,” he chuckled, taking her hand, “is going to be difficult to swim in.”

He was wearing his t-shirt, and a pair of long swimming trunks. He still looked like a model.

Or a minor deity.

“Good thing I don’t actually really swim,” Bella said, distracted by his appearance.
“You don’t?” He asked, surprised. They’d never been near water before, together. He’d been looking forward to seeing her in this element.

“Not really, no,” she said. “I can usually keep myself from drowning. Most of the time.”

Edward’s face darkened at this allusion to her cliff jumping.

She shrugged. “Never really learned.”

“You should,” he said, more concerned than he wanted to be. “It’s important.”

“Perhaps you can teach me then,” she said, “just not…today. In this swimsuit.”

“You checked everything else in there?” he asked, lifting his chin towards the bag.

She looked at him, suddenly very still. “Did you—?”

“Oh no,” he held his hands up, as if washing them of Alice’s business, “I know better.”

She sighed. “I’ll make do,” she said grimly.

“There’s time still,” he said, “if you need anything. We can go out to get it.”

She knew that this meant him paying for things, and she was already feeling stretched beyond her capacity there for the weekend. He’d made the lamest of arguments that one of them would be coming to this weekend, to play their part in the school charade, that the cost was nothing. Still, it made her uncomfortable, accepting this. Their inequity felt deepened.

“No,” she said quickly, “you just might be seeing a lot of this hotel robe, that’s all.”

“And it looks fantastic on you,” he said, pulling her into a hug. “As everything does.”

Her heart was flying again, feeling him so close, with so little on.

“Shall we?” he said, pulling away.

She nodded, the words sucked out of her.

The pool was deserted, the windows tinted against any straying sunlight.

“Convenient,” Bella said, noticing this.

“One of the reasons Carlisle stays here,” Edward said.

“He likes to swim?”

“He does,” Edward said, “though we all prefer slightly larger bodies of water.”

Knowing their natural speed, she could well imagine.

He threw off his t-shirt onto one of the chairs, and slipped almost soundlessly into the water. “It’s warm,” he said, knowing how much she hated being cold.

“Do me a favour and turn around,” she said, untying the robe.

He did, without comment, and she made what felt like a loud ‘splosh,’ trying to slide gracefully into the pool.
“Am I allowed to turn around yet?” he asked.

She was neck deep by this point. “Yes.”

He could see, most exquisitely, why she was so uncomfortable. She looked stunning. He swam over to her with one easy stroke, “you look lovely,” he said softly.

Her cheeks answered with their high colour, and she took a tentative, and incredibly awkward stroke towards him in the water.

She hadn’t been underestimating herself. She really didn’t know how to swim.

“Can I show you something?” he asked, watching her struggle.

“Sure,” she said, a little out of breath.

“Here,” he said, and showed her the curve of his arm, face down in the water. “Try that.”

She did, but he could see she wasn’t quite getting the angle right.

“Slightly higher, and then down—right there.”

He persisted for a bit, but realized he wasn’t the teacher she needed. She was also shivering from his repeated touch. He concluded, incorrectly, that she was cold. Her high heart beat could be attributed to that too. But no, she was vibrating with excitement at their closeness, mitigated only by the water, and the very little clothing that their swimsuits provided.

“Hot tub?” he suggested, watching the latest shiver.

“Sure,” she said, ready for things to warm up, literally, and figuratively.

It didn’t help that he pulled her over to his lap in the hot water, or that he let her kiss grow more animated than it normally did.

After a few minutes, he could feel her fingers beginning to wrinkle, and not wanting her to be uncomfortable, suggested that they go back to the room. He meant for them to dry off.

Bella took it to mean something else, entirely.

She turned and kissed him with a clarity and energy that he hadn’t experienced since before he left.

His heart ached, feeling it, not wanting to push her away, but uneasily aware of just how many of their normal barriers were absent. When her fingers hooked lightly into the elastic at his waist, he put both hands at her wrists, and pulled them gently away, not breaking the kiss.

He did stop when he felt her shiver, pulling back, “you’re cold,” he said, grabbing the robe she’d discarded when they’d returned to the room, and going to wrap it around her.

“I’m fine,” she said, moving to kiss him again.

“You’re not,” Edward said, more insistently, watching another shiver take her. “I’ll go get changed, too.”

The look of confusion that blossomed on her face was there one instant, and then gone the next. A line of red swept up her cheeks, and she looked away.
“Bella?” he asked, “what?”

“Nothing,” she said, realizing that she had been completely wrong on what everything had meant.

She looked down, shrugging on the robe, and picking up her clothes from the bed. Her movements were controlled, but he could see the anger there. It was the small, huffed in breath made everything click for Edward.

“Bella,” he said softly, taking her hand. He pulled her to sit down beside him, “did you think there was some other significance to this weekend?”

She said nothing, but swallowed again, looking down, utterly embarrassed, and humiliated.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If I’d realized—” he stopped, speaking even more gently. “You know we can’t. I can’t risk hurting you.”

Her breathing was becoming more erratic, and her hands trembled. She was angry. Angry beyond words.

He waited, hoping she would speak, but she only shook more.

Finally, she opened her mouth. “You won’t change me,” she said, her voice shaky too.

Edward, wisely, said nothing, but listened, uncertain, and worried.

‘And you won’t be with me. Or believe me, when I tell you that I know you won’t hurt me.”

He still didn’t speak, listening, watching her intently.

“And you want us to be together, while I age, while I wait, worrying about when the Volturi show up. Or Victoria. And potentially, other people, or your family, get hurt, because of me being human.”

If he had a heart, it would have been vibrating with anxiety. She saw, he realized, finally, with clarity, how little right he had to her heart. Of her. How utterly undeserving he was of her life. Of her love. That he only brought trouble. Death.

That he was a monster.

Did she see it all? So clearly, as he did?

He had no answer to her words, but looked at her, hoping against the many barriers to their togetherness.

“I think I need a few minutes alone,” she said. This time, her voice was cracked and broken. She was crying.

“Bella—”

“No,” she said, and pulled away. He didn’t dare try to keep her hand in his. “Please,” she added.

He stood, and against every impulse screaming at him, walked away from her, hearing the tears slap at her lap as they fell, each one a loud and deserved recrimination.
The hour he’d waited had felt like forever. His knock was quiet, and tentative. She’d stopped crying, and showered, and changed. He could hear her move occasionally, the soft shuffle of her feet whispers against the carpet. He wanted to comfort her, but had nothing to answer her complaints. She was right.

It would serve him so well, to have her finally realize what he truly was, and how completely undeserving of her his very nature made him—to be paid back for the pain he’d caused her.

He knew he deserved it, but could only berate himself for his selfishness.

He simply wanted her—still.

He loved her.

“Bella?” he asked, loudly enough that he knew she would hear him, but quietly, so that she could have plausible pretense to ignore him, if she wanted.

She answered, though, and his insides squeezed together in relief.

“Yes,” she said, voice soft and hoarse.

“Can I come in?”

She was wiping her face. He could hear the wet sound of her hand against her cheek.

“Sure,” she called.

He didn’t bother moving at a human speed after that, and had her in his arms, tentatively, but still there, warm, her heartbeat vibrating through her flesh. It reassured him, just being near her. “I’m so sorry,” he said, “I—”

“It’s OK,” she said, “it was stupid of me to make assumptions. I should have known—”

He stopped both their next apologies with a well placed kiss, and it left her breathless, all worrisome thoughts silenced momentarily.

When it subsided, he let his hand play over her back, moving it in what he hoped was a soothing rhythm. She held her cheek against his chest, feeling her own body calm itself, just being next to his.

Her sense of unease persisted.

“I am sorry,” he said, “do you—would it be better if I took you home, or—?”

“No,” she said, “that would just be a waste. And then,” she smiled a little ruefully, “we’d be stuck explaining ourselves to Charlie, and I’d just be back to being grounded. No, let’s...spend the time together. Go see the school,” she shrugged.

This was almost worse for him, watching her try to behave as if this disappointment didn’t matter.

“Alright,” he said, “perhaps we can head for dinner then?”

“Sure,” Bella said, “let’s,” standing.
Dinner was quiet, subdued even, and while Bella tried to enjoy their conversation, it remained tinted by her disappointment. Every word was heavier, her laugh slower. She felt like she was still in the pool, trying to walk through the water, weighed down by it.

She’d suggested a movie, which she had no interest in watching, but it relieved her of the burden of making conversation. They sat together on the bed, he with a careful arm behind her, and when he felt her beginning to slip into sleep, flipped the blanket over her, turning off the TV.

He felt a deep worry that he couldn’t put words to, watching her. He’d hurt her profoundly today, not catching her misapprehension. He just wasn’t sure when it would all come to a head. Or how.

When she woke in the morning, more herself than he’d seen the evening before, he allowed himself to enjoy the feeling of relief.

Perhaps he was simply worrying.

The day’s events proved interesting, and the tour was impressively well guided by third, and fourth year students.

It was only when they came to the intramurals section that Edward had to encourage her to stay.

“Edward,” Bella said, “let me get this straight. This is like phys ed, only voluntary, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, it’s much more interesting—dare I say, fun even. Come on—just go on the tour. They’re just going to show you things.”

It was Bella who was surprised to find herself intrigued by the competition they described. The student leader was impressive with his pitch.

Edward almost did a double-take when Bella put up her hand to ask a question. “So everyone on a team participates in each physical part, but only for a portion?”

“That’s the idea,” the young man answered, “sorry, didn’t catch your name—?”

“Bella,” she said, trying not to blush at the attention it drew.

“Bella,” he repeated it.

Eyes and thoughts away, Edward growled silently, hearing the boy’s ruminations.

“Yeah, everyone participates however much they’re able in each part, but that frees them up to really play to their strengths. Makes it a real team effort.”

“Huh,” she said to herself.

“You interested?” Edward whispered to her.

“Maybe,” she said.

“I’ll let Emmett know,” Edward murmured.

“Emmett?”

“Mm-hm,” Edward said, scanning the crowd. Many were feigning polite interest, but there were a few who were truly intrigued. “Emmett lives for this kind of stuff.”
“Really?” she asked, “I thought you guys hate having to slow down for,” and she whispered the next part “human competition.”

“Well, that part, yes,” he said quietly, waiting to see if anyone had caught the bent of their conversation. When he was sure they were safely being ignored, he continued. “Emmett loves being part of a team. We can do the sporting part as a family, in part, but he really misses the...culture, the camaraderie.”

“So,” Bella said, “why doesn’t he join a team or something?”

“Too many formalities these days,” Edward said, “intramurals are informal. No blood tests required.”

“I might be willing to try this,” Bella said, almost to herself.

“Good,” Edward smiled, “I’ll come cheer lead.”

She laughed nervously at this. There was no way she’d let Edward witness her efforts, but she did want to try, and it surprised her.

“When are sign ups for teams?” she called, when they asked for last questions.

“Right now, if you want to be on my team,” the leader answered, smiling.

Bella hadn’t been expecting this response, but figured, why not? “OK,” and moved forward. She stopped, when she felt Edward behind her. “I think I can sign up on my own, Edward,” she said lightly. He nodded in acknowledgment, and backed away, grinning.

He’d grown accustomed, in his time back in Forks, to the covetous thoughts of the boys at school, but it hadn’t made him immune to them, and his eyes narrowed, hearing the speculative thoughts of the young man—Jun—she spoke to, exchanging contact information with him.

He liked even less how petty it made him feel.

She was doing something completely out of her regular span of comfort. He should be glad for her—and it rankled, that he would allow such a jealousy to come between them.

His face was carefully composed when she came back, as they finished the tour. “I’m glad you signed up,” he made himself say. He was. He just wished it was with someone else, who wasn’t quite so interested in her.

It was a full day, and she again suggested a movie, and she again fell asleep during it. When she said she wanted to attend the last session on the Sunday morning, he was caught off guard. He’d expected her to want to head home. She was rapt though, taking notes on some of the lesser known courses being promoted for first year students. He marvelled at her, and how she’d grown in his time away.

The drive home was much quieter than the one there. Edward left Bella to her silent thoughts.

Her soft “can we stop at your place?” was unexpected.

“Sure,” he said, his eyebrows pulled together, “any reason why?”

“Do you really have to ask?” she said, her laugh not quite fully formed. “I’d like to have a word with Alice.”

“She’ll be ready for you,” he said.
Bella was unexpectedly confident in her response. “No,” she said, “I don’t think she will.”

It was Edward’s turn to be confused, but only briefly. There was only one way she could be certain of her privacy.

“Did you ask her not to look at your future?” His voice was so carefully controlled, Bella couldn’t help but catch the dangerous lilt of it over the car’s hum.

“Yes,” she said, meeting his gaze, the line of her mouth making the challenge clear.

Edward turned his attention back to the road, trying to keep logic, and his suspicion from coming together.

He wasn’t successful though, and his hard wrench at the wheel made Bella brace herself.

“Whoa!” she said, “what’re you doing?”

He was livid. Or, he would have been, if he had any blood with which to be. “Is this your plan?” he almost yelled, the sound of his voice filling the car with an uncomfortable volume, “to blind me? To not have me see danger coming? To force your change?” That she should be so reckless, as to willfully remove Alice’s protection—but to scheme—and against his wishes...

She was so stunned by the force, and double-standard of his accusation, that she could only blow out a breath before opening her mouth to speak. “Really?” she said to him, her own voice rising in volume. “For your information, no. That isn’t my plan.” His hypocrisy had raised her own ire. “But it’s pretty damn rich and high-handed that you think you’re the only person allowed to make decisions about my life!”

“Keeping you alive is high-handed?” he yelled. “You’re the most danger-prone person I’ve ever met!”

“Yes!! And there’s a very simple solution to fix that problem!” she snarled out.

They were staring at each other, both with balled fists trembling in rage.

After a few heavy breaths, she said, slightly more calmly, “There’s not much point in me being changed, if you don’t want me that way, Edward.” The anger was waning, and the very deep rejection she’d felt was reasserting itself. It was pressing her to the verge of tears, and she was scrambling to get the anger back. “If you want me...human, then I’ll be human. But I’ll live my life without the curse of someone’s prescience.”

Edward’s own anger slipped back, but he was still on edge, wondering how he could have missed this with Alice. How long had this been going on?

“When?” he asked, “since she last looked?”

“Weeks,” Bella said curtly. Did it really matter exactly when? She dropped her eyes, trying to lose herself in the studying the car’s upholstery.

“Bella,” Edward said, breathing out in anxiety, or anger, she couldn’t tell, “you can’t—”

“Yes,” she said through clenched teeth. “I will. You’ve got what you wanted. I’m human. I’m not endangering myself by being near werewolves. You’re certainly not endangering me in anyway you think is dangerous.” Her voice was marked with bitterness here. “Relationships have compromises, Edward.”
She was right, he knew, but that she would hobble him, without Alice’s gift. It was infuriatingly stupid, short-sighted, immature—

“I think I should go home,” she said quietly. He was alarmed by her tone. She sounded...defeated.

He went to reach for her hand, but she snatched it away.

“No,” she said. “I’d just like to go home. Please.”

He was beyond anxious when he cut the engine in front of her house.

“Thank you,” she said softly, taking her bag from him.

“I’ll see you later,” he said quietly. Hopefully.

“No,” she said. “I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” As in, she wanted to drive herself. And not see him until then.

“All right,” he said, keeping his self-control in tact. It felt taut, his hold tenuous.

“How was the weekend?” Charlie asked, as Bella walked glumly into the house.

“Fine,” she mumbled, heading directly upstairs.

Charlie didn’t press the point, but peered outside, frowning when he saw Edward’s anxious face at the wheel.

Edward pulled away, fighting the urge to park the car, and return to listen, to watch. He would, later, he told himself, but for now, he needed to think. To calm himself. He should probably hunt, too.

And, he thought more angrily, he needed to speak to Alice.
"How could you think it was alright not to tell me?!"

They’d gone outside, and far enough away from the house that they would have some privacy.

Alice looked at him, closing her eyes and shaking her head. He just didn’t get it. “Edward,” she said slowly, “how obtuse can you be?”

“She’s a danger magnet, Alice. You’ve seen it. How could you agree to what she asked?”

“Really, Edward?”

“ANSWER ME!” He roared.

“You’re pushing her away!” Alice snapped back.

“How? By trying to keep her safe?!”

“By insisting on your own terms! With everything! By living in denial of the danger she is in.”

“And you think that not using your gift is helping with that?!?”

“If you insist on her being human, Edward, then let her be human. Let her enjoy the life she has. God knows it won’t be very long with the Volturi coming to check on her.”

“Have you seen?” he asked, suddenly still, the fear a cold possibility at his back.

Alice was quieter too, turning away, kicking at a stone by her feet. “I’ve only had to check your future for that, Edward,” and she showed him what she’d seen. The flashes of multiple possibilities all ended the same way—with him, and Bella, dead. She didn’t show him the rest of it. She didn’t want to see it again.

“There are other possibilities,” he said coolly.

Alice grimaced, and shook her head at his obstinacy. “They all end the same way, Edward. How can you even hope to evade Demitri?”

“He can’t find her,” he said, shaking his head. “There has to be a way.”

“All he has to do is find you,” Alice gritted out, hissing “Quiet!” at him when he again went to interrupt. “I left her, because you asked. I didn’t say goodbye. I just left. Look how well that worked.” She met his angry gaze. “You’re out of favours from me on this front. I owe her this. You’ll have to find another way to manage your own anxiety.”

She didn’t wait for his response, but disappeared, mentally grumbling at his obstinacy, heading East. He heard her silent goodbye, and knew it would be at least a few days before he saw her, or Jasper again.

In some ways, he was glad. It would give him time to calm down.

If he could.

The night passed fitfully, and he stopped himself, several times, just on the verge of moving towards
her window. It was instinctual, the need for her, and he struggled to contain it.

He was beyond himself by the time he met her at school the next morning.

She was reserved, though, still holding her hands to herself, not sparing him even the slightest touch.

It was eerily reminiscent of the days after her last, disastrous birthday party, and he had to tell himself that he was being ridiculous, drawing parallels. It was hard to believe it though, and Bella’s spare conversation throughout the day did not reassure him.

It was a mild reprieve, when he asked if he was welcome to join her, to be told yes.

She was still reticent though, and talked minimally, working on her homework as he pretended to attend to his.

He’d never seen her shut down like this, but when he apologized—again—for yelling, she only shook her head, giving him a wan smile.

“See you later?” he asked quietly at the door.

“Please,” she said, but her forehead was wrinkled when she spoke.

She was worried.

He leaned forward, kissing her quickly there, snatching in a deep breath of her scent. He felt like a man drowning, and fighting for air, having it there.

When he returned, hours later, she was uncharacteristically still, sitting in bed, seemingly staring at nothing. Waiting.

Her face blossomed when she saw him, but not in the way he’d come to expect. The transformation unravelled a string of fear there, and he felt his own self shifted by it.

“Hi,” she said, not standing to greet him.

“Hey,” he made himself say, moving to the rocking chair, not certain of his welcome beside her.

She swallowed, audibly, and her heart skipped a beat. Her hands remained folded over her knee, one leg crossed over the other. She looked as precarious as he felt.

He knew enough to know that everything was balanced, for the moment, but about to fall. He just didn’t know what way. She’d been waiting for him. And not with eager expectation. She was nervous.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said softly, needing to clear her throat again. “About us.”

Edward made himself remain calm.

“Oh,” he said, trying to appear at ease, waiting for her to continue.

She gave an apologetic smile. “I understand you don’t want me to be changed.”

“No,” he said, “I don’t.”

“And that you want me to remain human.”
He nodded, waiting for her to go on.

“And I will be,” she said, “for a time.”

For a time? What did she mean—?

“After that, though, I will be changed.” She met his eyes.

The look on his face must have alarmed her, because she started a bit before he could muster his control again. “No,” he said, “I won’t—”

“It won’t be up to you,” she said, her jaw a hard line.

“No,” he said, the intonation making it a command.

“Alice will do it,” Bella said quietly. She wasn’t arguing, he realized. She was simply stating a fact.

*Alice had agreed to this.*

Alice *already* agreed to this, his mind supplied. Because the Volturi had pressed.

“Bella—,” he started, but she wouldn’t let him continue.

“Listen, please,” she said. “This is important.”

He took a deep breath in, sitting up in the chair, leaning back, forcing his hands to unclench. He nodded.

“Is it...that you don’t want me, as a vampire?” she asked, curiosity—and then fear, in her voice.

“Oh Bella, you know the answer to that.” How could she ask?

“No,” she said, “I don’t.” Her voice shook here.

“I don’t want this for you,” he said, his hand pointed to himself, then trying again to reach for her hand.

She pulled it back more definitively this time. “Please don’t,” she whispered.

He put both his hands on his knees, commanding them to be still.

“Of course I want you, Bella, but I won’t see you damned for it.”

“Would you want me as a vampire?”

“I love you, Bella, no matter what. Yes.”

“But you won’t change me.”

“No.”

She nodded, as if expecting this. She thought for a moment before saying what came next.

“We can’t be together while I’m human.”

“No,” he said, “not without me hurting you—”
“No,” she said immediately, “I mean as a couple.”

His insides felt like they’d collapsed. Was she—? “What?” he managed. His knees were beginning to ache under the pressure of his hands.

“We’re not...equal, Edward, and we never will be. Not while I’m...this,” and she gestured to herself.

He was breathing shallowly. It was a human instinct, one dredged up by the sharp pain that was threatening to spread inside.

She was leaving him.

He closed his eyes.

He deserved this. What he had loosed last fall had come back to him.

“I’m not asking you to leave,” she said. “But if we’re going to be together—what point is there, if we’re never equal partners?”

Edward wanted to interject, but he kept his mouth closed

“I need to be able to grow, Edward. To be free to...be myself. To do things you don’t approve of—would stop me from doing. To have all those human experiences you say you want me to have...but won’t let me.”

“I—” he started.

“It’s true,” she said.

She paused a bit here, and Edward watched her face, trying to wrangle all the feelings that were competing for space, trying to think logically.

“I love you,” she said, a crack splitting the words. “But there can’t be a future for us, until we’re on level ground. That won’t happen until I’m like you.”

Edward closed his eyes again. There was certainty painted in her voice. And if Alice had promised...Damn you, Alice, he thought.

It took him some time to dredge his voice up, without bringing his heart along with it. “What do you mean, you ‘need to be able to grow’?”

“I mean,” she said, “that I need time to be on my own. I need space. Time. A year seems a logical place. Then,” she added, “we can reevaluate. If we want to be together as a couple—equally—” she stressed the word, “we can.”

His relief was almost palpable. A year. She wanted to be separated for a year. Of course, his feelings for her wouldn’t change.

If hers did—he stopped himself there. He couldn’t consider that.

“And,” she said, voice tenuous, “if our feelings...are different, after I’m changed, I’ll leave as soon as I’m able.” She finished this last part with difficulty.

She thought he wouldn’t want her. His hand escaped him, reaching for his, but her “No,” stopped it, halfway there.
“I need you to give me...space, Edward.”

She didn’t mean just right now. She wanted them to be physically apart.

His insides resumed their distressed squirm.

“Of course,” he said.

“No being my bodyguard, or any other Cullens, either.”

“No.” He stopped himself from growling it out, but it was a close thing.

“This isn’t negotiable.”

“Bella,” he said, his voice louder than it should be, “Victoria—”

“Hasn’t been here in ages.”

“That’s no guarantee—”

“No,” she said, her voice steely. “There are no guarantees. When you’re human.”

“This is ridiculous!” he spat out, half standing, “Bella, when we can keep you safe—she could kill you!”

“Yes,” Bella said, nodding, “she could. Or Charlie, or my mother, or my friends, or anyone I care about. And I am helpless to protect them.”

“We can—”

“Yes,” she said, “you can. I can’t. That’s what it means to be human. If you don’t like it, there’s a very simple solution.”

This wasn’t an ultimatum, it was an ambush.

He closed his eyes again. There had to be a way around this.

“I’m not saying they can’t be around me, but I’m done with the Cullen bubble wrap.”

There it was.

She could at least be safe. They would find a way. She wouldn’t know, but they would.

Bella watched him think. She’d expected him to be angry, to fight this, but to see him accept, even part of it, only fanned the flame of fear that had never left her from last fall. He would let her go. There were no guarantees.

“Can I ask you some questions?” he finally said.

“Yes,” she said more calmly than she felt. She clutched at her knees still. She couldn’t trust herself to touch him, or him her.

“Can we have a friendship during this time?”

“What,” she asked slowly, watching her fingers twitch, “would that mean?” She hadn’t trusted herself to propose this. She was terrified her resolve to do this would crumble at the first test.
He leaned forward, fingertips pressed together, elbows on his legs. “Just that. Friendship.”

“That doesn’t sound like space, Edward.”

“Friends,” he said, “see each other somewhat regularly. Sometimes even a few times a week.” This was an exorbitant overestimation, but it would make her counter with something reasonable. Something he could accept.

“I think once a week would be more accurate.”

“Once a week works for me.”

She dared to meet his eyes. “In September,” she said. “We can start then.”

He would see her at school for now. That was inevitable. But then it meant two months of giving her… ‘space’.

Of not seeing her.

He nodded against this distress.

Bella was once again composing her face.

“Do you have other questions?” she asked. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“Yes,” he said. “I want to know if you’ll call us for help, if you need it.”

“What kind of help?” she asked, immediately suspicious.

“The kind that we are suited to provide,” he said evenly, and then pleadingly. “Please, if you ever feel you are in danger, or need us, you won’t hesitate.”

“No, if I feel I need it, I’ll ask.” She looked away again, his gaze heavier on her. “Anything else?” She was ready to be done. Almost pushed to her own limit.

He thought carefully before he asked. “Is this...perceived inequality...the only reason for this separation?”

This perceived inequality? Was he blind? She stared at him for a moment. Did he really think them equal? The question strengthened her resolve even more.

She only nodded. Perhaps he would understand.

Perhaps.

Perhaps he would simply lose interest, too, the small voice of doubt whispered.

“I um, need to get some sleep,” she said, trying to avoid his eye contact. “Unless you have more questions?”

*Only a million. Only anything to delay this.*

“Good night,” he said, “I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Good night,” she said.

And he was gone.
She shakily texted Alice, before the tears took over: “It’s done.”
Bella reminded herself, every day, every hour, and for the first few days, almost every minute, that if there was any hope of having anything worth having with Edward, they needed the time to be apart. For him to see that her remaining human was just not a possibility. That it would endanger anyone whose life was connected with hers.

She focused on the very few benefits this separation provided, one of which was the freedom it allowed her to mend her friendship with Jacob Black. He’d all but crushed her in his hug, the first time he’d seen her.

“You OK?” he’d asked.

“Now that I can breathe again, yes,” she’d rasped, smiling at him.

“Sorry,” Jacob mumbled, but with a chuckle. “It’s just good to have you back. Even if, well, I’m sorry...I know it’s not how you wanted things.” Then he’d kind of squished his face up in an expression she hadn’t seen before, and said, “who am I kidding? I’m not sorry—I’m just happy you’re here.”

She’d laughed too, tucking away the very deep, and painful mixture of emotions clawing at her innards.


Then she’d said a silent prayer that this didn’t all blow up in her face.

She’d seen Edward at school, at a distance, but he’d respected her wish for space as much as he could. The other Cullens knew no such boundaries, though, and came and went at will. Alice and Bella’s friendship grew, and it surprised Bella to realize just how much Edward’s presence had dampened the possibility for growth there.

Perhaps she was more right than she’d initially thought.

It was a tenuous list of benefits, though.

Charlie’s reaction had surprised her.

He’d put down his stack of files, when she’d mumbled her news to him from the kitchen, and with a gruff, “hey, come here,” and given her a hug.

“I’m sorry,” he’d said.

“Why?” she’d asked, returning the gesture, head against his chest, “You hate Edward.”

He’d sighed. “Hate is a strong word. I love you, though.”

Bella had pulled her head back a bit, looking down, “it’s just for...now,” she said. “I think it’s important for us to have some time apart.” This made it sound more temporary than she knew it could be.

It could be forever.

Charlie’d looked at her. “Wait,” he said, “you are, or you aren’t together?” He wasn’t angry, but his
confusion was tinged with suspicion. He was the kind of man who operated in the clarity of black and white. Together, or not together.

“We’re not together,” she had said deliberately. “I need time….space.”

This fell into the uncomfortable realm of muddily unclear to Charlie, but he hadn’t pressed. He’d suspected it would only become more confusing the more questions he asked.

“OK,” he’d said instead, feigning understanding.

Jacob was watching Bella, as they ambled towards the house. “So,” he asked, “whatcha wanna do?”

She looked at him, her smile small, but genuine, “you know, I would love to go to the beach.”

“Sounds good,” he said, but then his face fell a bit with his darker humour, “as long as there’s no cliff diving.”

Bella chuckled, “sure.”

It was deserted when they arrived, and they ambled through the rocks and driftwood, skipping, or in Bella’s case, slipping over the tide pools. Jacob caught her a few times, and he saw her begin to twist, her ankle turning at an odd angle grabbed her with both hands, awkwardly pulling her towards him.

“OK,” he said, letting go, “maybe, have a seat before you need stitches again.”

She snorted derisively, but acquiesced. They sat, leaning up against the large tree trunk that had been bleached by the wash of the sea, and tenuous strokes of the sun. It was peaceable, sitting there, listening to the waves slip over, and off the rocks.

Jacob threw small stones out into the tide’s pull, watching them disappear with larger ‘plops.’ He’d been so surprised when she’d called.

He’d been a stubborn idiot too. That was the nice way of putting it, he thought.

He’d shown up at her place, leaving her bike there for Charlie to see. And her dad had, alright. Jacob’d done it deliberately, knowing it would get her into trouble.

She’d still called him though, trying to talk. He’d been so angry. Refused to speak to her.

It was Billy, passing along the message that she’d broken up with Edward. That if he could call her, she’d appreciate it.

He’d felt like the idiot he was then.

She’d been so gracious when he had finally phoned. Said she was just happy to be able to talk to him.

He was ecstatic.

Sure, she said it was just a separation. That she still loved him.

Sure.

But she was here.
He risked snaking a hand around her back. It was still cool on the beach, the off-shore breeze nipping at their extremities.

She didn’t pull away, but leaned against him. It was chilly, after all, and he was not.

“Excited about graduation?” he asked.

“Not really, no,” she said, shrugging. “University, kinda.”

“Mm,” he said, wishing he could join her there this year.

“How’re things with...everyone?” she asked, flicking her eyes up and around. She was careful with their secrets. Even here.

“Good,” he said, “quiet,” and looked at her. “Not something you should have to worry about.”

He didn’t anticipate her reaction. She snorted, and pulled away, hunching her arms around her legs. “I really hope that is not you placating me.”

Jacob’s eyebrows moved high up his forehead. “No,” he said carefully, “it really has been quiet.”

After a bit, she unfolded herself, “sorry,” she said, “bit of a sore spot.”

“I can tell,” Jacob said, elbowing her in a friendly way. “Trust me, Bella. I won’t lie to you about stuff like that.”

She looked at him, watching his face shift in the light. “OK,” she said. After a moment, she stood, “it’s too cold here, though. Elsewhere?”

“Sure,” he said. “We could…um…go pretend not to ride our bikes?” He’d apologized so much about his stunt after she’d forgiven him, that she’d refused to talk about it anymore. He hoped bringing them up didn’t make her uncomfortable.

She laughed. “Oh, no. Knowing my luck, I’d end up road pizza. Sorry. Charlie really would blow his top.”

“Fair enough,” Jacob said.

They walked slowly back the way they came, but when they reached the trailhead, Jacob stopped abruptly.

“Hey,” he said softly, “remember how I said I wouldn’t keep anything from you?”

“Sure,” Bella said, missing his tone, her keys jingling in her hand.

“I’ll meet you back at my place, OK?”

“Why?” Bella asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Jacob said, but he lifted his chin towards the eastern stretch of the trees, “but I’m about to find out.”

Bella swallowed. “OK,” she said. “Sure.”
It was one of the most harrowing drives she’d had. She half expected Victoria to come bounding out of the trees, her angry mouth the last thing Bella would see.

The sanguine, and utterly ordinary appearance of Jacob’s house was less reassuring than she wanted it to be, and she paced there, not wanting to go inside until Jacob arrived. Minutes stretched to the tens, and then a half hour, and she changed her mind, cold and anxious. She was sitting on the couch when the door creaked open.

“Sorry,” Jacob called, coming and sitting beside her. “Everything’s fine.”

“And?” Bella asked.

Jacob’s mouth twisted.

“Jake?” Her tone had risen.

“She was here,” he said, “but she left,” he shrugged. “Took off into the water.”

“Near—where we—?”

“No,” he said, “further north. Anyway, the lee—your—uh...ex’s sister? The one that was waiting for you—”

“Alice?”

“Yeah, that one, she called Sam.”

Why would Alice call Sam? “And?”

“Asked that one of us escort you part way home.”

What? “Escort me?”

“Yes. Her words. Not mine.”

Bella’s anger was visceral. Alice? After what she’d promised?

She huffed out a breath. “Fine,” she said, “let’s go then.”

“But Bella—”

“No,” she said, “i need to talk with her. In person.”

“OK,” Jacob said, clearly disgruntled, despite his thin efforts to hide it. He’d hoped their visit would be longer. He was angry that the Cullens had managed to ruin their time together.

The drive was quiet, Bella harder on the accelerator than she should have been.

“Careful,” Jacob mumbled, hearing the engine whine. And then, when he heard a crunch in the gears, furrowed his brow. “When was the last time someone looked at your truck?”

She shook her head, driving onwards. When they reached the boundary line, she almost sped past it. “Here,” he said, “pull over.”

“Why?”

He looked at her sharply. “This is the line.”
“So?”

“They take over. I get out.”

“What?” Bella asked, the syllable angrily clipped.

“They take over. I get out,” he repeated, and then lifted his chin towards the treeline, where Alice emerged from the shadows.

The words, *you have got to be kidding me* ripped through Bella’s brain, but then so did others. Far less polite ones.

“See ya Bells,” Jacob called quietly, and then wisely disappeared.

When Alice slipped into the cab, Bella gave her a dark look. “Alice,” she said, “didn’t we have an agreement about this?”

Alice put both hands up in the hair, in a brief, mock surrender. “Wasn’t watching you,” she said, “I saw Victoria heading their way and called them. Sam mentioned Jacob was with you, and I hoped you wouldn’t mind hanging out with me for a bit.”

“Alice—” Bella said through gritted teeth.

“Bella,” she interrupted her, “I’m telling you the truth.”

They stared at each other.

Bella blinked first, and then sighed. “Fine.”

They drove on for a bit, each privy to the quiet of their own thoughts. The truck grumbled much of the way.

Alice frowned, hearing it. “How was your visit with Jacob?” she asked, trying to keep her thoughts squarely in the present.

“Good,” Bella said, “until it was interrupted—not by you,” she added, “thank you,” she added. “Sorry, I’m…”

“Utterly right to be suspicious. It’s fine,” Alice said, giving an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry your life can’t be more...normal, Bella.”

“Who wants normal, when you can have a blood thirsty vampire on your tail?” she quipped.

Alice didn’t laugh. It stretched every one of her instincts against its grain, to not watch Bella’s future. It was like trying to play catch with an invisible ball. She could see everyone else's reactions around it, just not the ball itself.

It sucked.

She knew Bella needed the space. Deserved the privacy.

But she still wished Bella would let her look, and just hide her thoughts from Edward.

“How’re things...at home?” Bella asked. Alice understood her question perfectly.

The days he saw her.

Bella nodded, jaw tight. It was just as difficult for her. But it had to happen. Had to.

“I support you,” Alice said. “I’ll do my part.”

Bella risked glimpsing at her, sideways, snapping her eyes back onto the road. “Thank you,” she said.

The constant squirm of misgiving and doubt thrashed about in her midsection.

*Long term plan*, she told herself, *long term*.

She just hoped, against what felt like a swelling tide of improbability, that she was right.
The rain could be mesmerizing, if you let it be.

Right now, it was following the proscribed path of the spruce needles, concentrating in drips at their tips, these dipping in deference and rising again, a repetitive dance of water and greenery.

The distraction was a soothing neutrality.

It wasn’t long lasting, though.

“Please don’t,” he said to Jasper. The tendrils of his gift were almost physically palpable, a light brush at his back.

He snorted when he heard the mental reply.

“Sorry,” he said, “I know this is hard on you too.”

Jasper’s “tch” seemed loud in the drippy forest.

Edward sighed, his own irritation flaring.

They were all on edge, mostly because of him. He knew he’d been miserable and insufferable. He’d tried to give them all space, but it was difficult to balance. Esme missed him, and didn’t want him to leave again. Alice fretted more quietly at his absence, but fretted nonetheless.

Rose, well...Rose felt otherwise.

“You’ll see her Monday,” Jasper said.

Edward nodded. He would. See her. Not speak to her. Not touch her. Not reassure himself of her wellbeing.

He could just end this, Jasper thought, it would be so easy if she—

“Don’t!” Edward growled.

“Sorry,” Jasper said, “it’s—you know—” he sighed, for lack of words.

“I do,” Edward said slowly, looking up and then at his brother, “sorry for snapping.”

Jasper nodded, accepting his intent, and sat down beside him, both of them studying the rivulets the water was carving beneath the coniferous canopy.

“Why, though,” Jasper asked. “I mean, Alice has seen it—why not give her what she wants? If Alice will do it, anyway, in a year?”

Edward gave a small and bittersweet chuckle. How anyone in his family could ask this, still amazed him.

“If we could be human, we would,” he said simply, “and to turn her into...this, to rob her of every human possibility, or move it forward beyond necessity….and I’m still not convinced it is necessary...no. I can’t.”
“Her visions haven’t changed,” Jasper said, “you’ve seen.”

“Yes,” Edward said, “I’ve seen.”

He had. The ugly possibilities of the Volturi, sending someone to check, had only continued. Alice had repeated them, in detail to him. He shivered, remembering them.

They still had time though. He wouldn’t rob her of it, and perhaps, in time, they would figure something out. A way to evade their promise.

A way to let her live.

Slim as it was, he clung to this chance.

“And you aren’t...worried,” Jasper said carefully, “that this won’t push you further apart? Damage things?”

Edward felt the now familiar seismic crunch in his being. He was absolutely worried. Beyond himself in fear at what he’d wrought.

Every time he saw Charlie’s future disappear in Alice’s mind, his body clenched automatically in on itself. He knew she would likely disappear there to. To Jacob.

To the mutts.

He kept his distance, but made wide circuits around her house on those nights, waiting for the sounds that told him she’d returned.

If it hadn’t held the possibility for such dire consequences, he would have laughed when Alice threatened him. “I'll tell!” she’d roared at him, the first night he’d been tempted to assure himself of Bella’s safety. “Give her space!”

He had. But just.

Alice seemed to feel that these wide circles he made around Bella’s home were respectful enough. Esme and Carlisle tried to keep their worries to themselves.

Rose, though, was positively vitriolic.

“Are you kidding me?” she’d spat. “It’s not enough that you fall in love with a human. A human. But that you have to spurn the Volturi, too? Endanger us doubly? God...what messed up kind of world do you live in?”

Edward hadn’t held back. “Considering you helped get us into this mess, you’re not one to comment!”

“I didn’t force you to run off and try to kill yourself!” she’d hissed.

“But you would, if it was Emmett you lost, wouldn’t you?” he’d growled back.

“I didn’t leave him human!” she’d said. “Be realistic Edward!”

Here he’d shaken his head, “you’ve never wanted her changed, Rose! I thought you’d be the strongest proponent of her having this time!”
“Not if it risks all of us,” she said, her voice still high, “and Alice sees this so clearly. Of all the times to cling to your stubborn ideas!”

He’d given up on her after that. She was too tied up in her own bitter self-centredness to see any reason.

Emmett’s quiet support of Bella’s choice to remain human for a time was a surprise though.

“I know it sucks man, not being with her, but...I think it’s good. We can keep her out of trouble.” Then Emmett had shrugged nonchalantly, as if this task would be effortless. He was ever irrepressible and buoyant in hope.

Edward’d taken Emmett’s support with a grateful nod.

“Have you considered how you’ll manage this summer?” Jasper asked. He wondered, idly, if Edward would leave, go north, not torture himself with her presence, tantalizingly out of reach.

Edward listened to his brother’s thoughts. “No,” he said, “I can’t leave.” He didn’t need to explain why.

“We’d keep her safe,” Jasper said. His thoughts were suddenly, and vibrantly coloured by the guilt of what had driven them away the year before.

Edward sighed. “We’ve been over this Jasper. It wasn’t your fault.”

Jasper’s nod was barely observable. He swallowed. Edward tried to focus again on the patterns of the water, and its interplay with the light wind that had risen, giving Jasper some privacy.

After a while though, Jasper’s resolve was loud enough to be unavoidable.

“She’s right,” he said. “You can’t be equal.”

Edward almost sneered the words out. “Of course we can.”

Jasper looked at him directly, eyebrows raised. “Really.” He showed Edward all his memories of him disregarding Bella’s wishes, overpowering her physically when he felt it was a matter of her safety, and finally, the last time he’d seen them kiss, and Edward very clearly pushing her away. Ending what she wanted.

Edward hid his physical wince, but there was no keeping the emotional cringe from Jasper.

“She’s right,” Jasper repeated. “And you….well, you seem pretty sure of everything being there in a year to pick up again.” He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side. “I’m not so sure it will be, and I’m not sure you should sit on your thumbs and wait.”

Here Edward chuckled. “So I should show I respect her by disrespecting her direct wishes? Thanks brother, I think I’ll wait.”

“No,” Jasper said, “You misunderstand.” He blew a breath out of his nose, searching for the right words. “She’s insecure in your love of her Edward. I think it’s dangerous to wait. Yes, you need to honour what she’s asked for, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do anything. Reassure her.” After a moment, he added, “but you can’t smother her either.”

Edward rested his head in his hands, groaning.

He felt, as the youth of today put it, screwed.
Utterly screwed.
“Geez Mike, what’re you doing?” Ben said, shifting the log back with a big stick.

“Makin’ it awesome!” Mike exclaimed, waggling his hands in the air.

“You’re not letting him drive, are you?” Bella whispered to Angela. He was a good few beers in.

“No,” she said, “I think Jessica is driving him home.” She snickered. Things were a little strained between the two, and the sparks that flew from the fire paled in comparison to the flaming barbs they’d watched fly between Mike and Jessica earlier in the evening. The beer seemed to have lubricated things well enough, though, and shoulders were more relaxed in the semi-circle around the brightly coloured flames.

Ben occupied himself by poking at the resurrected tripod of logs, fiddling with stray bits he seemed to want to shove into proper order.

“Leave it,” Angela called, “come relax. Have another marshmallow or something.”

He grinned, looking back at her, his smile radiant, looking at her.

Things there were going well, Bella thought. Good. It made her happy to see them so content together.

“You got room for one more?” a familiar voice called.

Jacob.

Bella bristled a bit. Two distinct discomforts snarled inside her. Was he here because there was danger—? No, she told herself, she wouldn’t see him if he was. More annoyingly, he had made his presence more present of late—casually dropping by her house in Forks.

Charlie had been thrilled.

Bella had initially been glad to see him, but less glad to see the bent of his interest.

“Sure,” she said softly, scooting over, and then followed him with her eyes as he sat down beside her.

He saw the small swallow, the nervous tightening in her jaw, and shook his head minutely.

“Purely social,” he said softly, looking at her. “We’re covered, anyways.”

“What’s covered?” Mike said too loudly.


Mike grunted, and the others pretended he hadn’t said anything. His inebriation was verging on the embarrassing.

“Nice fire,” Jacob said, trying to be more appropriately social. He didn’t like the look Mike had given him. He liked less the sounds and eyes he’d been making at Bella.

He wanted his interest to be very clear, and very public in this group.
“You cold?” he asked her.

Not that he needed to. She was always cold, even on this fairly warm night in June.

He noted that her curled hunch had only disappeared briefly, those few months she and...Edward...were together.

She seemed OK right now, but...still, her jaw hadn’t relaxed. He could see the tightness there, pulled up into her face, the eyes too wide for the right amount of concentration. She was faking it well, but she was faking it, he was sure.

He risked placing a hand, fingers spread widely, on her back. Just enough for her to feel the heat of it. She could lean in if she wanted more.

It was cold, she told herself, shivering at a new breeze up the beach. She’d need to head home soon, if the temperature dropped any more.

Jacob looked at her, an eyebrow up. She sighed a little, almost whispering to him, “Jake, I’m just cold. ‘K?”

“‘K,” he said lifting his arm to make space for her against him. It was enough for him, to feel her breathe beside him. To take the chill from her body to his.

Mike was not done embracing his ignominiousness. “Way to go on the rebound there, Bella.”

Bella’s face flushed a bright and satisfying red. She hoped everyone else would attribute it to the fire. Everyone except Jacob looked away in obvious discomfort. The holds on Mike’s propriety were well loosened. Jacob said nothing, preferring to ignore the pettiness he saw as beneath him.

“You drive?” he asked Bella, instead.

“Yeah,” she said, “why?”

“Wondering how your truck’s holdin’ up.”

“It’s fine,” she shrugged.

Remembering the last time they’d been in it, Jacob resolved to look at it the next time daylight presented opportunity.

“Graduation’s soon,” he said, shifting his arm to cover more of her.

“Yeah,” Bella said, yawning, “couple of days.”

“Hence the ‘kegger’,” Ben said quietly to Jacob, curling his fingers dramatically around the words. “Some people though…” he muttered quietly, not looking at Mike. They’d all had a bit of a beer, but most of them weren’t drinkers.

Mike was more than making up for everything they lacked in that area.

“Hey,” he said, standing up with a distinct wobble, “who wants to go loose some boats?”

Everyone stared again.

In a surprising move, Jessica stood to join him. “Sure,” she said, “let’s get in the car and go do that.”
Her look to everyone but Mike made it clear that the only ships she was loosening was Mike’s. She was taking him home.

“Sure you’re OK with him?” Lauren hissed to the side, the nameless and pimply boy beside her looking on worriedly, hoping his access to the current social scene wasn’t leaving too.

“Yeah,” Jessica said. Her voice was a flat shade of bitter resignation.

Bella couldn’t help but let her eyebrows rise in respect. Jessica was rising beyond the petty.

Who knew? Maybe they were all growing up a bit.

“Thanks Jess,” she said softly, as they left. “Night Mike,” she called too, for good measure.

“Night Bells!” he slurred back, tripping over a rock on his way up the beach with Jessica.

There was an audible sigh that rose up from the group, watching the awkward pair leave.

Their eyes returned to the elegant flicker of the flames. Small sparks made their hasty journeys into the sky, and then nothingness. The water licked at the pebbles nearby, and these peaceful sounds made their own conversation unnecessary.

Those in the shrunken semi-circle of light whispered their thoughts to the people closest, and soon, even these soft suggestions of words faded.

Ben broke the mood with a loud, and jaw-cracking yawn. “Some kegger. Think I might be done for the night. You?” he asked Angela.

“Me too,” she said, “still have exams to study for tomorrow.”

Lauren and her pimple boy made their excuses as well.

“You want a hand with the fire, or anything?” Ben asked, a little awkwardly, not sure about Bella and Jacob. He was superficially aware they were friends, but he wasn’t so sure he wanted to leave her alone with him. Something at the back of his neck told him it wasn’t wise. The something wasn’t loud enough, though, to make him press the point hard.

“No, I’m good, but thanks,” Bella said, content and warm in Jacob’s comfortable silence.

Jacob was trying to keep himself from vibrating with excitement. He too, was content, but his eagerness at being with her again was its own, irrepressible thing.

When the last departing headlights had scanned the beach, and then the trees, swivelling around to leave, Bella breathed a sigh of relief.

“Parties always sound like such a great idea, until you get there,” she said. “Thanks for crashing, by the way.”

“No problemo,” he murmured back. “Crash your parties anytime.”

She snickered at this, something sounding funny to her.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

She kept giggling. “I was just imagining you literally crashing into them. Wolf shaped.”
“Oh, nice,” he smiled, “sure, make fun of us poor supernatural creatures. Like we can help it.”

Her laughter stopped.

Crud, he thought. Way to go. Too far.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, almost surly.

“It’s fine,” she said, making herself sound light. “I kinda like that you don’t walk on eggshells around me. Everyone else does.” She looked up to where her friends had been before. “It’s nice to be able to be myself with you.”

He nodded. “You too.”

Wouldn’t it be nice if they could be much more? he thought.

He let his fingers shift a bit on her, sliding them around her arm.

No rush, he told himself, wanting to rush this very, very badly. They had time.

“How’s it been?” he asked, “seeing the freaks at school and everything.”

She rolled her eyes but tolerated the insult. “Fine, I guess. Alice is great. Jasper is...still creepy,” she laughed a bit, “and...well, I’m trying to just avoid...him.”

“Mm,” Jacob said. “Easier when you’re here, I guess.”

“Subtle, Jake. Subtle.” She looked at him, eyebrows up.

“King of,” he grinned back.

They stared at the flames a bit. The fire was low now, starting to glow more than burn. “So,” she said, “things are...quiet here?” She was hoping they were. She had no guarantees on that front anymore.

“Sure,” Jacob shrugged, “nothing concerning. Why?” His hand tensed now. Had something been happening, and would she say if it had?

“Just curious,” she mumbled, yawning.

There was no need for her to rush home, but he didn’t like the idea of her driving tired. She’d had something to drink, he was sure, but he expected not much, and certainly not enough to prevent her from driving safely. “Want to stay at my place tonight? Billy won’t mind.”

Bella shrugged out from under his arm, “no, but thanks,” she said, ending the contact, “Charlie’d worry if I stayed late.”

“You could call,” he said softly, not standing to follow her, not wanting to intimidate her.

“No thanks,” she said finally “I’ll be fine to get home.”

“Then I’ll walk you to your car. I can take care of the fire in a sec,” Jacob said, standing slowly. He towered over her small frame.

“Some guest I’d be, leaving a mess for you,” she said, starting to douse it.
They had the fire out safely, well drenched in mud and water before long.

As they walked slowly back to Bella’s truck, Jacob’s hand shot out to steady her, she finally accepting its presence in her own, as a necessity against falls in the dark.

She felt an uncomfortable lurch, his hand in hers. She recognized it: guilt. She thought she’d been clear. There wasn’t a future for them that way. Despite what Jacob thought, with her separation from Edward.

The brushing of his side against her own was an uncomfortable reminder. She let her hand fall away, almost immediately tripping. He took her hand back again. He knew she was trying not to send mixed signals. He was happy to have all the signals mixed up to wherever the hell they needed to go, as long as he got to hold her hand.

The walk to her truck seemed far too short for Jacob. Standing there, he wondered how he might delay her leaving.

“So,” he said, casting about for the topic that was never far from his mind, “your vampires giving you your space?”

“Sure,” she said.

He turned his head, a little inquisitively. “You don’t seem certain.”

She shrugged a bit, saying much more softly. “I doubt very much I’m left alone, Jacob. Not with...her, around.”

Her. Yes.

“We keep watch too,” he said. “You’ll be safe.”

She nodded, and tired, and a little off her usual reticence, mumbled to herself, “all I need is a year.”

“What?” Jacob asked. His eyebrows were pulled tigtly together. “What do you mean, you only need a year?”

If swear-words had expressions, they would have been all over Bella’s face.

Jacob’s stomach sunk to the bottom of his body with a sickening thuck. He didn’t have to ask why. He understood perfectly.

“NO!” he roared. “You can’t! Anything but that!” His hand had shot out, gripping her arm in a painful clench.

Her cry made him stop, releasing it quickly. Her own hand flew there, trying to massage the tender spot.

He’d left a bruise.

“Sorry,” he said, still distraught, his breathing quickening beyond what he wanted. “You can’t. It violates the treaty Bella. It’s wrong, it means you’d be—”

“Dead,” she finished for him. “I know.”

He made himself breathe intentionally, trying to calm himself. He was afraid he would phase, and with her so nearby. Emily’s face swum before him.
When his own lungs had slowed their rhythm, he could see that hers had not. She was upset.

She should be.

“Why?” he asked.

She took a shaky breath in. “You remember when I left?” she asked.

He nodded.

“And why?”

His face darkened. “Yes,” he said, voice clipped.

Her voice shrunk in on itself, producing the horrified whisper that was the only sound she could use to describe that harrowing experience. “He went to Italy to destroy himself. The Volturi, they’re...well, they’re powerful.” How inadequate this description seemed here, in this corner of the world, far from them. “They enforce their only rule—secrecy.” She took another breath to steady herself. “They were going to kill me, because they knew that Edward wouldn’t change me. But Alice,” she said, “they trusted that she would change me. So they let us go. But,” she breathed shakily in again, “they will send someone to check. And if they find me human,” her voice broke, “they will kill all the Cullens, and anyone else they suspect might know. Everyone.” Here she swallowed again, watching him carefully. Did he understand?

Jacob shook his head, almost closing his eyes. “We can protect you, you don’t need to—”

He didn’t.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, closing her eyes, images of wolves and people mangled and broken, strewn throughout the town. “No, Jacob. You don’t understand—”

“No,” he said, more loudly, “you don’t understand, Bella. You were terrified that Laurent would kill us. They would be no match—”

“Dozens of them, Jacob,” she rushed out, “at least, and some....some with powers. No,” she shook her head. More firmly she added, “And besides, it isn’t your choice.”

She was leaning against her car, arms curled around herself, eyes now closed, trying not to remember what she’d heard, what she’d seen, as they left the audience chamber. She wasn’t successful, and shuddered.

Warm hands laid themselves gently on her forearms. “You have a choice, Bella. You don’t have to.”

She wasn’t surprised by the tears that left her cheeks wet. “Thank you,” she said, wiping them away. “I should...I should go.”

She was half-turned, about to open the cab door, when she felt his hands again, this time with a grip that spun her back and against the driver’s side window. His lips were soft, and hot against her own, but the force behind them had her pinned there.

Wriggling her hands up from between them to his shoulders, she gave as powerful a shove as she could, but it only squished her further back against the truck. She could breathe, but her indignant “stop!” was a muffled and squeaky “nnnrgn!” under his mouth. Jacob continued, his hands beginning to explore her back. His stance left him unprotected in some decidedly squishy parts—that were none too squishy at the moment—and Bella took full advantage of this, shoving her knee high
and hard into his groin.

If she hadn’t been so blisteringly angry, she might have stopped to wonder, or appreciate the fact that despite his many other supernatural abilities, he remained remarkably human in this one respect.

But, she didn’t.

“**I DID NOT END THINGS WITH ONE PUSHY, SUPERNATURAL CREATURE JUST TO GET SHOVED AROUND BY ANOTHER ONE! SCREW OFF JACOB!**”

Then she climbed into her truck, started the protesting engine, and sent gravel spraying, pulling away. She did check in the rear-view mirror to make sure she hadn’t accidently run him over, but beyond that, let the wave of angry indignation carry her home.
“Hey,” Alice said, making Bella jump.

Bella mumbled a word not often produced by her lips, and tried to slow the frantic beating of her heart. Looking at Alice, she saw her friend holding a garment bag out to her.

“How—?” Bella asked, frowning.

“Oh,” Alice said, “No. Not what you’re thinking. I’m just intimately acquainted with the contents of your wardrobe.” Here it was her turn to frown, but in the direction of Bella’s closet. “Gonna try it on?”

“Uh, sure,” Bella said, still a bit numbed by Alice’s sudden, and unexpected appearance. The contents of said, and now clearly maligned wardrobe, were largely laid out on her bed, and she’d been standing there for the better part of a half hour, trying to figure out which item to wear. What did one wear to graduation? Not that it mattered, Bella supposed. The yellow robe would be the only thing visible.

Alice unzipped the bag, revealing a simple blouse and skirt. Both were a tasteful blue. Bella didn’t think twice about slipping off her t-shirt in front of Alice, but the sudden intake of air from her friend made her stop, mid-way, the cotton jersey hiked part way up her back.

Crap, Bella thought.

There were more startled thoughts in Alice’s mind.

Jacob’s idiotic moves had left a trail of bruises up the contours of her spine, and a distinct, hand-shaped one purpling around her upper arm.

The softly growled “who?” was menacing from Alice’s lips. Her hand shot out to take Bella’s arm, eerily gentle, inspecting the damage. When Bella didn’t say anything, she repeated her question.

“It’s nothing,” Bella said, and shook her head. Just Jacob, being an idiot. Her cheeks flushed at the memory. Her anger hadn’t faded.

“Like hell it isn’t,” Alice said, but handing her the shirt. “Someone hurt you. Friends don’t let stuff like that slide, Bella. Have you at least told Charlie?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head again. She’d come home fuming mad, leaving Charlie with a curt, worrying and surly goodnight.

Alice was watching her move, eyeing the bruises, gauging the force needed for them. She ran through the candidates available, and wasn’t long in coming to a logical conclusion.

“Jacob,” she spat out.

The intensifying of Bella’s blush only confirmed it.

Alice shook her head, angry and rattled. The Cullens knew what the wolves were capable of. Had seen their fresh work on Emily’s face. There had been others in their time before.

But Bella, no. This just could not happen. She couldn’t let this happen—
“I told him, Alice,” Bella sighed, sitting down, buttoning the blouse. “He...wanted, well,” the crimson in her cheeks swelled again.

Alice could well imagine what he wanted, and she purposefully kept her facial features loose, and unarranged.

“Understood. And?”

“I told him I would be changed,” Bella finished, this time in a small voice.

“What?” Alice said, her voice a ghost of itself. She became utterly still.

There was a clenching knot inside Bella’s stomach. She’d been so angry in the last few days, she’d managed to keep the deeper implications and worries of her stupid move at bay.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I know I shouldn’t—”

“It’s fine,” Alice reassured her. It really wasn’t, but it was graduation night, and she wasn’t going to let this moment be marred by the squabbling of the supernatural creatures in her life.

Not on her watch, no.

Besides, nothing was going to ruin the surprise graduation party she’d planned for Bella.

Nothing.

Not even a pack of wolves.

It might complicate it, though, seeing as the one in question had been invited.

“It’s better,” Alice said placatingly, “in some ways, that they know now. It’ll give them time to come to grips with it.” Or, interfere with it, she thought silently.

She would need to prepare the rest of the family.

“Everything will be fine, Bella,” Alice said gently. She added, more fiercely, “and Jacob won’t hurt you again.”

The knot in her stomach became a flame of terror, would Alice do something? Or worse, tell Edward?

Bella grabbed Alice’s arm with a force that left her fingers stinging, “You can’t tell anyone about the bruises.” Her voice was low, tremulous. She could imagine, all too clearly, the dangerous and violent reaction to such information.

Alice groaned, hands over her face. “Bella,” she said, “if I try to keep it from my thoughts, he’ll know I’m keeping something from him, and he’ll go digging. When—not if—he finds out I’ve kept this from him, he will do something dangerous. It’ll be better if I just tell him. Besides, I’ll need to tell the family that the wolves know.” She paused, watching her. “I’m sorry,” she said, a cold hand on Bella’s knee, “I know you want your life to just be your own right now, but—”

“It’s fine,” Bella said, parroting Alice’s words back to her. “I get it, I just—” Her heart was thumping, each beat a painful stab, knowing this would hurt and torment him. She tried to shake off the emotion in her voice. “Please tell him I’m fine. I bruise easily—”

“Bella,” Alice said, still gentle, “don’t worry about Edward. I’ll handle it, OK?”
Bella nodded worriedly, frowning, trying not to let the tears manifest. Of all the nights to let things get to her.

“Deep breaths,” Alice reminded her, voice lighter. “And,” she said, “seeing as I’m here, want me to do your make-up?” It would give her a chance to strategize before telling her family.

Before telling Edward.

This made Bella groan herself, but good naturedly.

“Please?” Alice said, “You know I’ll make you look fabulous.”

Alice was happy to see a chuckle replace the worry she’d heard in Bella’s voice. “Sure, thanks.”

When she was ready, Alice disappeared, and Bella emerged from her room, startling Charlie with her appearance. “Wow, you look great!” he said.

“Thanks,” Bella mumbled uncertainly. She was trying not to be nervous about graduation, and trying, not successfully, to avoid being nervous about what Alice would be telling the rest of the Cullens.

“Excited?” Charlie asked, grabbing his keys.

“Nervous,” Bella answered. “Worried I’m going to trip getting my diploma.” She smiled a little at this, trying to tell him she would do her best to avoid it.

“Well,” Charlie said, “don’t think they stop you from graduating if you do, so I wouldn’t worry about it.”

They didn’t talk on the way there. Bella would have liked to say it was a comfortable silence, but it wasn’t. Her anxiety grew, and by the time they got there, she was perspiring nervously.

“Knock’em dead, kiddo,” Charlie said by way of farewell, waving airily as he walked away.

Bella could have sworn his voice was thick with emotion, but she was too rattled to be sure.

She could see Edward, Jasper and Alice at a distance, but their faces were perfect masks of human contentment. They gave nothing away.

Jessica’s mindless, and endless prattle gave her a thin distraction with which to preoccupy her mind. No response was necessary to her commentary; it just served to fill the space around them. When Bella received her diploma, and walked across the stage, she felt a strange sense of blurred accomplishment.

It was done.

What she didn’t expect though, was to hear Jacob’s voice, raised in loud whoops, over the rest of the audience.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up under the sweaty polyester of the gown as she descended the stairs and returned to the seat.

If Alice had already told them, and he and Edward found each other—

Alice turned to look and smile at her, several rows ahead. Her smile was soft and genuine. She was trying to reassure her. A sudden wave of calm descended, and Bella felt the worry slip away, the
emotion gone, but her mind still turning circles on itself, trying to find a way to manage things.

When the last celebratory shouts had gone up from the graduates, and the thrown caps had scattered about them, Bella made her way quickly to Charlie, who was standing by Billy Black.

“Congrats sweetie,” Charlie said, leaning in to kiss her.

“Thanks Dad,” she said softly, worriedly now. She seemed to be out of range of Jasper, and this made her panic more. Was he with Jacob?

“Was that Jacob I heard?” she asked Billy.

“Yup,” he said, “kinda embarrassing, huh?” He smiled widely, hiding his own anxiety. He didn’t know for sure where Jacob was, but he had a pretty good idea.

“Where is he?” Bella asked, eschewing all pretense.

“Said he was hot. Wanted some air,” Billy answered, turning his head towards the exit.

Charlie was waving to the Newtons, inviting them over.

“Think I might too, ‘K Dad?” Bella said. “Catch you in minute?”

“Sure,” Charlie said distractedly, remarkably social for himself.

Outside, Bella didn’t bother scanning the parking lot, but headed straight for the treeline, straining to hear the sounds she was searching for.

Jasper was there, instantly. “Not a good idea, Bella,” he said gently.

“Move,” she said, going to push past him, but he blocked her.

She huffed out an angry breath, ending it with a shrieked: “JACOB AND EDWARD!”

Jasper’s hand was over her mouth instantly. “Don’t. Draw. Attention.” he hissed. It was the cardinal Cullen rule.

But the noise of the crowd outside the gym was loud enough that her voice hadn’t gathered notice.

It had, however, drawn the attention it was intended to, and Bella heard what she needed to, which was Jacob’s raised voice, “What are you doing to her?”

She moved in the direction of it, Jasper shadowing her movements.

What she saw terrified her even more.

Edward, his hand at Jacob’s throat, had him pressed back into a tree.

“Do it!” Jacob hissed through his compressed larynx, “Beat me up. Mangle me. Let her see what you really are!”

“Better than you,” Edward shot back. “You hurt her!”

“Go ahead!” Jacob urged him, “Do it!” His eyes flamed, and Bella’s heart beat frantically, wondering why he wasn’t shifting.

Then she realized why.
He was doing an excellent job being an idiot.

“His thoughts are very clear, Bella,” Edward said, “he’s shown me exactly what he did, and he wants me to hurt him so he can attack, and stop us before you’re changed. I’m of a mind to oblige him.”

His face was a perfect replica of the one he wore when Demitri had moved towards Bella in Italy. She could see so very clearly that all his protective instincts were roused.

He was trying to protect her.

From being changed.

Still.

“Please let him go,” she said softly. “And please stop fighting, both of you.”

Her voice had cracked, all the emotion of the last few days too much to hold in, and now, topped with Edward’s repeated desire to keep her human.

Her doubt blossomed, watered and nourished by Edward’s blind stubbornness.

“Please,” she said again.

Edward had already released Jacob, coming to Bella’s side, anxious at what he heard in her voice. His hand was extended, reaching for her.

“No,” she said, moving away. “Don’t.” She turned, and walked away, knowing someone followed. She didn’t care who. She was just done with their stupidity, the hurt they had both wrought with it, and their utter indifference to what she wanted.

“It’s just me,” Emmett said, surprising her, making her stop and look, now at the treeline.

“Happy graduation?” he tried, smiling apologetically.

The ridiculousness of it made Bella snort out a laugh and a cry. Emmett opened his arms, only a few inches away, and Bella buried her face in his chest, letting the tears come. After a bit, she asked, “why are some boys so stupid, Emmett?” It came out muffled against his shirt.

He chuckled half-heartedly, “glad it’s just some. Uh, lots of practise?” he suggested. When she looked up at him, shaking her head, letting a small smile blossom on her lips, he patted her back lightly, “come on, Alice is hissing at me to get you to her so she can fix your make-up. Think Charlie’s looking for you.”

Alice was indeed waiting nearby, supplies in hand, a worried expression on her face. “I’m sorry, Bella,” she said.

“You’re not responsible for what other people do, Alice,” she said, “I’m just glad it wasn’t worse.”

Alice smiled weakly, dabbing at Bella’s face, removing the smudged make-up, and replacing it. “There,” she said, “you’re decent.”

“Thank you,” Bella said, “I’m going to go find Charlie. Have a good night,” she finished.

As she walked away, Emmett looked at Alice, both eyebrows up, “you didn’t tell her about tonight, did you?”
Alice shook her head. “I don’t think she’s going to be happy, either way.” She cursed herself again for her promise. What was more human than a graduation party? A surprise one at that? But, knowing Bella, she’d known it could backfire. She just hadn’t planned on it being primed to, quite so spectacularly.

Edward couldn’t exactly disappear for this party, purportedly thrown by Charlie and the Cullens.

No, Alice thought with a sigh. He couldn’t.

“And it surprises you, Alice, that a surprise party might not go well?” Edward said, appearing beside her.

“Not with you acting like your supposed age, no,” she said icily, “it won’t.”

She let his hand rest on her shoulder. “You know what she is to me, Alice. You can pretend, all you want, for Bella’s sake, that there can be this separation, but you know. Don’t make as if you can do otherwise with me. Don’t expect otherwise.”

“I don’t expect you to love her any less, Edward, I just expect you to think rationally before you pull stupid stunts like that. You endangered all of us tonight.”

“I was perfectly in control,” he growled back.

“Yes, almost taking the head off of Ephraim Black’s heir. Yes. Perfect control.”

“He hurt her.” This snarl was unmistakable, and Alice took a wise step backwards.

“Yes,” she said, “he did, and you’ve hurt her more, doing exactly what she didn’t you to do. Way to go protecting your mate.”

She ended the conversation there, disappearing in the direction of the house.

Bella and Charlie were on their way to dinner by this point, Charlie a little perturbed at her silence. “You find Jake?” he asked, having heard from Billy that “something” had happened between them, Billy feigning ignorance as to what.

“Yeah,” she lied, “told him thanks for coming. Saw some other friends too.”

She was glad of the twilight. It hid her blush, as she turned her face to look out the passenger side window. It was then that she realized they were taking the wrong road to be heading to dinner. “Um, Dad?”

“Yup,” he said, a little nervously.

“You’re going the wrong way.”

“Nope,” he answered, “Esme invited us for dinner. Kinda insisted, actually.” The rising flush at his neck marked this as an utter falsehood, and Bella’s face froze in horror.

What had Alice planned?

“Dad,” she said, “I hate surprises. Don’t.”

He squirmed a bit in his seat, shifting his weight under the seat belt. He stole a sideways glance at her. “Might have mentioned having a graduation party, too,” he mumbled.
“Dad, turn around.” She put her face in her hands for the second time that night.

“Com’on Bells, it’s just a party. They’re going it for all their kids, and Esme’s missed you a bunch, not having you around…” he’d hoped this would smooth things over, but clearly, he was off the mark. She was breathing through her nose, clearly trying to get herself together.

He got it, on some level. He hated surprises too.

“I’m sure...Edward will be respectful and everything.” He was sure of no such thing, and had expressed this concern to Esme, who had told him they’d make sure there were lots of other people there to dilute any possibility for this particular social interaction.

Yes, respectful enough to nearly kill...hurt? maim? her...she was about to think ‘best friend’, but settled on ‘good friend’...who had issues with boundaries...yes, what could possibly go wrong?

Bella suffered the rest of the drive, hands gripping the vinyl upholstery, slippery with sweat.

She had a stab of empathy for Edward, and his feeling towards Jacob. She was feeling, she was sure, exactly the same way about Alice: betrayed. Ready to kill.

“Now,” Charlie mumbled to himself, “I never know where the turnoff is, she said it would be— whoa!”

There was no missing the turnoff tonight. It was lit by trees, every other one up the drive sparkling with lights.

Crap.

She might as well make the word her motto.


When Charlie pulled up to the house, he didn’t get out.

“Wait, you’re coming, right?”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, no. It’s a party. For you all.” Bella stared at him. “Esme and Carlisle’ll be there. All above board. Call me when you’re ready to come home.”

Bella moved to get back in the car.

“Bella,” Charlie said, a warning note in his voice. “Go, have fun. Be with your friends.”

“Go be with my ex? Thanks Dad, awesome,” she grumbled.

It didn’t help when Charlie smiled at this description. Then he reached over and closed the passenger door, waving as he drove away.

She watched him leave, breathing in slowly, trying to calm the angry pounding of her heart.

“Bella?” a crystal voice called, soft and alluring.

Her body tensed, recognizing it, responding to it.

Edward.
“Can we talk?” he asked.
What choice did she have, really?

Well, she thought, she supposed she could start walking home, but figured her chances of being left alone were pretty slim.

“It’ll only take a few minutes, then I’ll leave you be. I have no desire to disrespect your wishes.”

It was barely the truth. His love for her was overwhelming him, and the veritable need to touch her made him ache. He didn’t want to disrespect her—no, he wanted to eliminate every source of harm that could come to her, physically protect her with his own body, and kiss in every place that would allow his self-control to remain in tact. Then he wanted to grovel for forgiveness, for her to take him back, to abjure this resolve to be separated.

Instead, he said, “I’m sorry, Bella. I didn’t go looking for him. He found me.”

She turned around at this, “and you think that makes what you did justifiable?” She was incredulous. “What happens to Angela the next time she accidentally bumps into me? You going to hold her up to a tree by the neck?”

“This is different, and you know it,” he said.

“Really?” she said, “Explain how.”

“He’s a werewolf Bella.”

“Well, then you should definitely go after Seth, because he left a bruise on my arm the other month.”

“It’s different, Bella,” he said, his voice low.

“And why is that, exactly?” she said, matching his pitch. “Because he kissed me?”

Edward had witnessed Jacob’s memories. The dog hadn’t held anything back, and he couldn’t avoid the memory even if he’d wanted to. His thoughts had been that loud.

“If they do it against your wishes, yes.” He was utterly serious, and Bella took a step back, unnerved. Frightened momentarily by the quaver in his voice.

“Let me get this straight,” she said quietly. “Anyone that you perceive as touching me against my will is in danger from you. Great. And you wonder why I didn’t find our relationship equitable and respectful.”

Edward stared at her. He realized, too late, that he sounded just as possessive as she accused him of being. This was different, though. The pack could be dangerous. Jacob was dangerous. The bruises in Alice’s mind flitted across his own, along with Emily’s face.

“I would never interfere with the relationships you make, Bella, but you cannot ask me to stand and watch people hurt you. Endanger you.”

“I’M NOT ASKING YOU TO STAND AND WATCH EDWARD! I’M ASKING YOU TO BACK OFF! IT’S CALLED SPACE FOR A REASON!”

Bella was shaking by now, full of frustration and rage. These feelings hovered over the grief and fear
that ran cross currents through her heart. What if he never learned? He always said they were frozen creatures. What if he just couldn’t let go of this notion that she be protected? Was this it? Was he incapable of being with someone his own equal? And if things couldn’t work between them—here her heart clenched painfully in on itself—would he challenge anyone she tried to be with?

“Edward,” Esme’s voice called from the front steps, “can you give Alice a hand inside, please?”

He closed his eyes. She meant well, he could tell, but he needed to speak with Bella. He knew this was his last chance. He had to respect what she’d asked for, for the space she needed.

In a voice that was too soft for Bella to hear, Esme said, “I don’t think any good will come of this, Edward. Let her be. People will be here soon. Give her a chance to calm down before that happens, please.”

His frustration was enormous. That he could hurt, so easily, and so effectively, the woman he loved with his protection, made his skin crawl.

“I’m sorry, Bella. I love you,” he said, “You have my word that I’ll respect your wish for space, and whatever relationships you have.” He gave her a moment to let this sit with her, hoping for a response.

“Thank you,” she managed, her voice raspy and hoarse from yelling. Then she watched him turn and walk away, the forest swallowing him. Part of her wanted to run after him, to cling to him, to ask him why it was so hard for him to respect what she asked for, to beg for his touch, to chastise him for trying to hurt her friend.

But she remained instead, flooded with feeling.

Esme put a tentative hand on Bella’s arm, and she turned to face her at the touch. “Is he gone?” she asked.

“Yes,” Esme answered.

“Can he hear me?” Bella asked.

As soon as Esme shook her head, the tears erupted.

How much worse could this evening get?

“Why doesn’t he understand, Esme?”

Esme pulled her close, and turned them towards the house, holding her so Bella could lean on her. “It’s hard to explain, Bella. Vampires,” she sighed, “When we mate, it’s...overwhelming. And because you are human—my guess is that the feeling is only magnified. He’s terrified of you being hurt, of losing you.”

Bella snorted. “He could just change me. It would solve all of this.” But she knew that she had no sympathy here. All of them would trade what they were for their humanity in an instant.

Esme sighed as she opened the door. She knew Bella understood the quandary there. “I have faith in him, Bella,” she said, “I know he’ll learn to respect you. To treat you as an equal, but it’ll take time.”

“Thank you, Esme,” Bella said, meaning it. They hadn’t had a chance to really talk since she’d ended things with Edward. “I wasn’t sure how you would feel...about this.”
“Oh, sweetie, no,” Esme said, taking her hand, “You’re family. Whatever happens. There is no question there.” Then, she looked around, hearing something that Bella was missing. “I want you to remember that,” she added, “because Alice is a bit worried right now.”

Damn right she was, Bella huffed mentally.

Esme saw the corners of Bella’s mouth tighten. She still had her hand around Bella’s, and spoke, the rich tones of her voice soft and almost solemn. “This is for you, from all of us,” she said, “we want to honour this passage in your human life. You’ve been through so much. It would be wrong not to recognize your strength, your perseverance in the face of so many difficulties.”

Bella felt like an utter heel.

Clearly, Esme had the whole arsenal of maternal guilt primed, and at her vampiric disposal.

“I know you don’t like surprises, but we didn’t think you’d want to spend weeks fretting over it, either. I hope you’ll enjoy this opportunity to see your friends, to celebrate what you’ve accomplished.”

She said “thank you” in what felt like a very small voice.

Alice had appeared, hearing this. “Hey,” she said, not quite sure what else to add.

“Thank you, Alice,” Bella said, moving her hand from Esme’s to hers, “I’m sure you’ve thought of everything.” She smiled softly, meaning it.

“Of course I did,” Alice said coyly, “right up to the part where I invited what I thought was your best friend.” She flicked her eyebrows up and then down, “but I suspect he might have felt uninvited by the earlier events of the evening.”

“You...invited Jacob?” Bella asked, stunned.

“Certainly,” Esme said, “it would’ve been an insult not too. I was sorry that your mother couldn’t make it, but with Phil’s leg—”

“And my mom?”

Alice rolled her eyes, pulling Bella into a gentle, but frigid hug. “Am I forgiven for surprising you?”

“Yes,” Bella said, returning the gesture, “thank you.”

“Good,” Alice chirped, pulling back and brushing something out of Bella’s hair, “because the first group of guests is coming down the drive.”

Jasper joined them, and along with Alice and Bella, they welcomed a car-load of Bella’s friends, apparently all too nervous to come alone.

“Hi Bella!” Angela said, Ben following uncertainly behind her. Mike and Jessica trailed after, and following hem, another car pulled up, this disgorging Lauren and her pimply accomplice.

The food must have been good, because Bella noticed it disappearing. The entire graduating class had been invited, and most had come. The dance floor was busy, but cleared every time any of the Cullens graced it with their presence. Emmett and Rose were pretending to be “home” from college, and twirled and snapped in elegant patterns, intimidating all other dancers around them.

By eleven, Bella had found refuge in the kitchen, nose deep in a cup of tea, chatting quietly with
Angela Weber.

“Is he here?” she’d finally asked, not having seen Edward. Trying to figure out how he was missing his own graduation party.

“Yes,” Bella said, “but Esme said he wasn’t...feeling well.” This seemed a safe approximation to the truth. She imagined he wasn’t, and felt a twinge of sadness and guilt. And grief. His absence ached. She felt it, like an amputated limb.

“Oh, that’s awful,” Angela said. “Hope he feels better soon.”

Bella made a neutral “mmm,” in response.

“I was...surprised,” Angela said, uncertain of this understatement, “I mean, all relationships have their ups and downs, but you guys...you, well, you seemed...perfect. Sorry, I know you’re not together. I just...I didn’t expect you to be apart long. You’re like...magnets.”

“Oh?” Bella asked, taking another safe sip of tea.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Angela went on, swirling the contents of her own cup, “I get why you broke up. He was…” and she looked around, just to make sure they were alone, “possessive.” It was said in a solid stage whisper.

And a control freak, Bella added silently. Utterly paranoid about her safety. Unable to let go of any aspect of control, in case it brought harm to her. And totally unwilling to make her his equal.

And she still wanted to be with him.

“Yeah,” Bella said, changing the topic. “How’re you and Ben doing?”

Angela gushed enthusiastically, telling Bella their plans for the summer, excited that Ben would be joining her family for their annual camping trip.

“Actually,” she said, “I’ll be coming to see you at work, we have to stock up this week. You still surviving there?”

The question threw Bella a bit. She’d sunk into quiet rumination, the waterfall of Angela’s words washing over her. “Yeah, it’s fine. Should be more interesting now that the warmer weather’s here,” she said. The regulars who frequented the place were friendly enough, but Bella liked meeting the people who passed through town. They were frank in their assessments, and easy with their views on what they saw. It was refreshing, compared to the stale and well worn patterns of small-town gossip.

“Oh!” Angela jumped, fumbling in her pocket for her buzzing phone, “that’s my Dad. I should find Ben. Thank you for the tea, Bella!” She reached over, answering the phone with one hand, hugging Bella with the other.

She’d miss Angela, Bella realized. When school started in the fall.

When her life ended next year.

She’d been a good friend. Kind. Honest. Funny.

Human.

Alice slipped into the room as Angela left. “Ready to retire from your evening of greatness?” she asked.
“That obvious?” Bella smiled.

“You’re hiding in the kitchen, chatting with the preacher’s kid, drinking tea. No clue,” she said, raising her eyebrows, and managing to flop into a chair. She made it look graceful.

“Good party,” Bella said. She’d found moments to enjoy. Not all of it, no, but bits. The Cullens had worked hard at diverting unwelcome conversations, and spared Bella the too cloying attention of Mike Newton, and a few other awkwardly stilted moments when people asked how she’d managed to be included in a graduation party for her ex and his siblings.

Bella giggled, remembering Emmett’s brotherly ‘intervention.’ He’d sidled up to Mike, who’d cornered Bella near the food table. Emmett had grinned widely, the lights flashing unnervingly off his teeth. “Hey sis,” he’d said, “havin’ fun?”

“Sis?” Mike had asked, confused, his hand dropping away from where he’d been about to pat Bella on the back in an attempted bit of chumminess.

“Yeah,” Emmett said, “Bella’s practically family here. Like my little sister.” Then he’d grinned wider, and more mancingly at Mike, who had mumbled an incoherent excuse, and tripped, walking away too quickly.

“But Alice,” Bella said, “you know that whole respect thing that seems to be a challenge for certain members of the Cullen family?”

Alice looked at her levelly, hands folded primly on her lap.

“I’d appreciate you asking before planning...anything else.”

This request was met with an arched eyebrow, then a sighed, “alright.”

“And,” Bella said, this time a bit more uncertainly, quietly, biting her lip. “Emmett isn’t going to try to scare all my new friends away, is he?”

“No,” Esme said, “he won’t.”

Emmett had entered the kitchen at this point, carrying a stack of trays. “Party-pooper!” he called, winking before he disappeared again, and then reappearing. “No,” he reassured her, “Mike’s just a total twerp sometimes. You didn’t look like you were having fun.”

Bella blushed, imaging Emmett intervening at every awkward moment they were together. “I can handle not having fun, Emmett. And believe it or not, even more than that.” She dared to meet his eyes.

His quiet, “OK,” and nod were serious. She knew she could trust him to respect her.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Spose it’ll be more fun to watch you get yourself into some trouble than keep you out of it,” he grinned wickedly. Then he was gone, the sounds from the living room telling Bella that cleanup was going at Vampire speed.

Bella stood, “I should call Charlie, head home,” she said.

“Why don’t you call him, and tell him I’ll take you home,” Carlisle said, walking into the kitchen with four punch bowls balanced on his hands.
Bella took a moment to admire his grace and skill setting them on the counter before answering, “thank you. I’m sure he’d appreciate that.”

Carlisle nodded, pulling keys out of one of the cabinets.

It felt odd, climbing in the car with Carlisle. He felt still much like a father figure, even though technically, he was not to Edward, or to her. He was the undisputed patriarch, though, and his authority seemed an awkward thing to sit beside.

Her mood was as readable as anything else in front of him, though, and Carlisle gave a small grin, “vampires, vampires everywhere,” he chuckled. “It must still be strange for you, Bella. Moreso now, I imagine.”

She nodded, and returned the small expression, glad of his efforts to put her at ease.

He pulled smoothly out of the garage, reversing in a pristine line, and then turning to move the car onto the gravel drive. He drove at a decidedly human pace, to Bella’s great relief. She wondered if it was because of his work, that he behaved so much more like a human than the others did.

“I wanted to ask you about how you were feeling about your choices,” he said softly.

Bella looked at him, not quite sure what he meant.

“I wanted to make sure they were ones you were comfortable with,” he clarified.

To not be with Edward? Bella was wondering. Talk about awkward and uncomfortable.

“Being changed,” he continued, “and your timeline.”

Oh.

“Yes,” she said, without hesitation.

Carlisle nodded, not questioning this.

“I know that Alice has agreed to change you,” he said, “and I trust you to make your own choice in that regard. I also wanted to offer to do it myself, if you prefer.”

It hung, unspoken between them, that Alice had never changed anyone before. That she had expressed her reservations and worries to Bella.

“Thank you,” Bella said. She didn’t want to insult Alice, but knowing Carlisle had changed people eased her mind considerably.

“Alice is in a unique position to understand and accept people’s choices,” he added, grinning a little, “I don’t think you need to worry about upsetting her by changing your mind, considering the ultimate outcome is the same.”

“No,” Bella said, “I suppose not.” What she didn’t say, though, was that she wanted Edward to be the one to change her. To be willing to take that step to make them equals in all senses of the word, and to give them their forever.

The sudden clouding of her features spoke eloquently to Carlisle. The familiar ache for Edward asserted itself. He wanted, so very much, for him to be happy. Bella was so very clearly his mate. His inability to see what the rest of them perceived so easily, was a frustration that jostled the family’s easy cohesion.
He didn’t tell Bella that Edward would come around, or that he would see sense. He’d known him long enough to measure the depth of his stubbornness. He hoped, but he didn’t dare offer assurance.

“I think,” he said softly, turning onto the main road, “that you’re wise to be clear about what you want, Bella. To set boundaries. Edward is…” he searched for a succinct way to put it, “so very intelligent, and yet, so very young...and still inexperienced with an intimate relationship.”

The word intimate made Bella want to squirm in her seat.

She was glad when Carlisle didn’t linger in this particular area of the topic. “He’s heard so much from the thoughts of others, but...feelings, and the feelings of a vampire for his mate are...enigmatic.” He smiled apologetically. “It is hard to understand, let alone explain to a human. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be condescending. We are truly different creatures in so much more than just physical ways.”

Bella nodded. She had an inkling of the depth, at least, that Carlisle hinted at, of what she didn’t know.

Carlisle let her think over this in silence, the night passing by them, marked by the billboards that stood on the approach to town.

As they pulled up in front of her house, he cut the engine, saying, “we love you both. Equally. You are family now, Bella. We’ll support you both, whatever the outcome of this time is.”

It was shocking to hear it, and Bella took a slow, and deep breath in, murmuring a choked, “thank you,” in response. Carlisle’s hand reached over to squeeze hers lightly, and she nodded, wiping her eyes with her other.

He walked her to the door, sweeping the forest unobtrusively with his gaze as they walked. When they reached it, Bella opened it, Charlie standing up from the couch to greet them. “Thank you, Carlisle, that was really nice of you to drive her home.”

“No problem, Charlie. Congrats Bella.”

“Thank you,” she said, “it was really kind of you to include me.”

Carlisle smiled softly, waving goodnight, his words from the car ringing in her ears as she watched him pull away.

Family.

She hugged Charlie extra tight before heading to bed, he offering his own, gruff, “congrats,” as she did, startled by the gesture, but glad of it too.
Maybe

He was feeling her hair beneath his hands, knowing its softness, the flickers of chestnut dark in the moonlight. Her lips were rich beneath his, but not pliant. No, they were stiff and angry. Braced.

He hadn’t known a kiss like that with her.

Ever.

The flesh of her arms was tight with resistance, and he could feel the angry push of her hands on his chest.

A twist of guilt overrode all sensations of pleasure, seeing what Jacob’s memory had shown him.

Then Edward flinched, feeling the next, and definitely not pleasant sensation Jacob had remembered.

It served the dog right.

He allowed himself a small chuckle, before he let the guilt claw back into its rightful place.

Guilt and anxiety had become his closest friends, of late. Their company left much to be desired. Anxiety was the most possessive of his new friends, keeping him well stewed in worry, and wondering for her well being.

Jacob’s thoughts had brought no comfort on those fronts.

Werewolves. She was spending her time with werewolves.

At least she wasn’t entertaining Jacob Black as anything more than a friend.

This too offered little consolation. They were as dangerous as always, and the discrete flashes Alice had shown him confirmed this. Bella’s back, snaked with bruises, and her arm gripped with a ghostly purple hand print.

His guilt dug its fingers in to his midsection, squeezing and scraping.

If he hadn’t messed things up so spectacularly, he would still be there to at least keep her safe.

If.

If only.

His indiscretions were laid out before him in a perfect litany.

He’d left her, and left her to suffer horrifically, in mortal danger, and then returned when she came to save him, only to fail her again. He could barely find a front on which he’d done right by her.

There was one, though, and to this he clung stubbornly: he’d made sure she remained human.

This he could do. Keep her from the clutch of a living death. Give her the chance to feel the joys of life.

Even if it meant she felt them without him.

For now.
Even if it was Jacob Black she was sharing them with? A small voice asked.

Not going to happen, he told himself. It hadn’t while he was gone, and it wasn’t now.

But the images of her back and arm surfaced again, making him shiver with suppressed rage. If he listened closely enough to his feelings, he knew it was just guilt, festering.

His fault.

He reviewed, again, his plans for the summer. She wouldn't see him, or feel his presence. She would be safe. That was just a given. But he would respect her wish for distance. Human minds were mutable things. By the fall, she might be ready to talk again, to entertain less space, or even give up on this charade altogether.

Maybe.

Or not, that small voice suggested.

If she was happy, this would sustain him. If she could taste what it was to be human on her own, to grow, to mature, to realize just what it was she was so currently eager to throw away, maybe she would see sense.

Maybe.
Bella was ready to deck Mike Newton, but kept her face casually composed, instead tagging the box of energy bars in front of her. Why they needed to be individually labelled, she had no idea, but Mrs. Newton had asked her to do it, so…

“And when you put it into third gear, it positively purrs…”

_Beep me_, Bella thought. _If my ears aren’t bleeding by the end of this shift, it’ll be a miracle._

The jingle of the bell over the door made Mike stop talking.

_Miracles do happen_, Bella thought, still intent on her pointless task.

“Hi,” a flatly intoned, but beautiful voice called.

Bella looked up, and Mike scurried away with a mumbled, “‘scuse me.”

Rose was standing at the entrance way, her own face technically formed in polite lines, but with the makings of a sneer growing. It reminded Bella of the look Jacob would make when she saw him after she’d been with Edward.

“Hi,” Bella said, somewhat mechanically. _What was Rose doing here?_

“Esme sent me,” she said, still looking around distastefully, “to get some things for our... _camping_ trip.”

If the displeasure wasn’t dripping off her tongue, Bella didn’t know what was.

_Maybe venom_, the thought came, unwillingly.

Bella had never seen Rose here before.

“Sure,” Bella said, “what do you need?” She put down the last bar in its box, and shelved it on her way to meet her.

Rose held out a piece of paper.

It wasn’t Esme’s writing on it. No, it was Edward’s. The distinct loop of his ‘p’ and the perfect slant of his letters, a model of ancient schoolhouse discipline, were as recognizable to her as he was.

She took it, pinching the edge, knowing she’d have to return it, not wanting to send it back covered in the temptation of her smell.

“Do you want me to grab this for you?” she asked, a little nervously. Rose had never liked her, and the tolerance hadn’t grown since she’d ended things with Edward. Alice had only politely alluded to discord in the house, but it was enough. Alice’s phrasing, Rose was not pleased, was easily translated: pissed as hell.

“No,” Rose said, looking at Bella like she was stupid. “I’ll pick it myself. Just point the way.”

_Fine_, Bella thought, resigning herself to Rose’s angry condescension. She didn’t think she’d be here long.
“Here,” she said, gesturing to the small section that hosted the dehydrated foodstuffs.

“Ugh,” Rose said, almost to herself, stuffing several bags into her basket.

“Water purification tablets are this way,” Bella said softly, knowing she could practically just think it for Rose to hear.

More angry stuffing.

This went on for a few minutes, Rose acquiring a new basket when the first one was filled.

“Heading out on a long camping trip?” Bella asked, just to prod Rose a bit. Knowing she’d answer.

“Oh obviously,” Rose said, not bothering to roll her eyes.

“All of you?” Bella persisted. Hell, if Rose was going to be miserable, she might as well get as good as she gave.

Then Rose smiled, just a small curling at the corners of her mouth. “No,” she said, pretending to decide between brands of energy bars, emptying the contents of the box that Bella had just labelled into her basket. “Edward, and Alice are staying behind. Something about keeping an eye on things here in town.” Then she looked directly at Bella, watching the reaction.

Bella’s stomach dropped a solid inch. *They were?*

“Or on each other. Whatever,” Rose said, standing up from the crouch she’d used to gather things from the low shelves. It was like watching a lion rise to devour you.

Out of an abundance of caution, Bella took a small step back.

Rose’s smirk grew.

“Anyway,” she said, “I had other reasons for coming to town.”

“Oh?” Bella asked, eyebrows raised cautiously.

The store was still deserted. Mike had disappeared into the storage room, supposedly to complete inventory—which Bella knew he hated. He found the Cullens as alarming as most other people, none more so than Rose and Jasper.

A most unwelcome thought scurried across the forefront of her mind: *was Rose here to...do something?* Bella knew she’d always seen her as a danger. *She wouldn’t...take matters into her own hands, would she?*

“I heard a happy rumour that your truck had died.”

What?

“Um, yeah,” Bella said, still turning over the uneasy possibility her mind had suggested.

Rose looked at her nails, flicking a bit of something out from under one of them. They were perfectly manicured, their curves lethal and elegant.

“Don’t suppose you’d mind if I verified this bit of happiness, would you?” Rose asked, still not meeting Bella’s uncertain gaze.
Bella blinked.

“You want to look at my truck?”

She felt stupid, asking such a question of the creature in front of her.

“Yes,” Rose sighed. “Much as I find it an affront to the definition of the term, I’d hate to miss an opportunity to restore its use to you. My brother would be so pleased.”

*Ah*. All became clear.

*Two birds, one stone.*

She was attempting to repay her debt to Bella. For rescuing her brother. And giving it to Edward all in the same go.

*Wow. Only Rose.*

“You know where I live,” Bella said. It wasn’t like she needed to be there for it.

Rose found her gaze again, but this time the eyebrow was raised in legitimate questioning. “Think it might be a bit odd, me showing up there without you. And we all know it won’t do to draw attention to ourselves.” These last words were spat out with precision, and bitterness.

Bella sighed.

*More time with Rose. Awesome.*

“I’m off in half an hour,” she said, pretending to check her watch, confirming what she already knew.

“I know,” Rose said, pulling out a wad of cash from her purse, and handing it to Bella, who was now sliding Rose’s purchases towards her. “See you outside, then.” She turned, and walked away.

Bella put the substantial overage into the almost empty tip jar, frowning, drumming her fingers on the counter.

The store was quiet now, except for the muffled sounds of Mike’s work in the back. When her shift was done, she had to call him several times before he came out.

“Oh,” he said, “didn’t hear her leave.”

*No, you wouldn’t, would you?* Bella thought, but spared him her overt exasperation. Most people, she reminded herself, did find the Cullens unsettling.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, grabbing her bag.

“Wait, Bella, I’m off soon, too. Um, want to maybe—?”

Bella didn’t let him finish, hurrying out, “Rose’s waiting for me, sorry Mike, gotta run. Talk tomorrow!”

Then she did, trotting for the door, relishing the fresh air that hit her as she left, making herself not glower at the shiny red sports car waiting, rumbling on idle, in the lot.
Bella barely had her seatbelt on before Rose was whipping the car into reverse, and then planting Bella back into the leather with the force of her acceleration.

“Does he pant after all girls, or just some?” she asked. “I don’t normally pay attention to the puppies,” she added, by way of explanation. This was all said with overt distaste.

*Did she actually want an answer?*

“Not sure,” Bella said.

“If you don’t like it, I can always talk to him—”

Bella had a frightening vision of what ‘talking’ would look like with Rose, and blurted out, “No!” before Rose could continue.

With an eyeroll, Rose replied, “I wouldn’t do anything bad, just stun him a bit. Give him something to drool after that he can’t have. It’d keep him off your tail for a while.”

If Bella didn’t have whiplash from the car ride itself, she was sure she’d have it from the conversation alone.

“I’m, uh, good,” she said, “but thanks.”

Rose snorted derisively.

They were at Bella’s house in minutes.

The truck was covered, like a corpse, in a large white tarp.

Rose whipped it off, and had the hood open in a second.

Bella looked around nervously, hoping no one had seen the rapidity of her movements.

“No one’s around,” Rose said, “trust me, I wouldn’t risk exposure for this...thing.”

She disappeared in a flurry of movement, pulling things from the trunk of her own car, the sounds all clunks and rattles and the screeching of rust loosening its hold on things.

“Wow,” Rose said finally, holding out something that looked warped, and melted. “Did you not change your oil regularly?”

“No, very regularly. Jake...” and she stopped, the little lump at her throat making it difficult to talk. She was still angry with him, but more than anything, aggrieved at the loss of their friendship. “He warned me to change it more than usually recommended. I did.”

“Well,” Rose said, shaking her head, “I’ve never seen engine parts fuse like this, without neglect.” Then she looked at Bella accusatoringly, like she’d just charged her with abusing a child.

“Unless you have an entire spare engine kicking around,” Rose said, “then yes, sadly, your truck is irreparable.”

Bella tried to hide her disappointed sigh, but didn’t quite catch all of it.

“Sorry,” Rose murmured, reassembling the pieces that she’d laid out on the tarp.

Charlie hadn’t looked hopeful, that day Bella’d asked him to help her see if she could get the truck to
start, wincing at the sound it’d made when he’d tried to get it to turn over. She hadn’t held out much hope, but there’d been some. There was no doubting Rose’s skill.

“Thank you for looking,” Bella said, “I appreciate it.” The local shop would’ve eaten her savings, if she’d taken it in. And with her regular mechanic not on speaking terms...

Rose felt an unexpected stab of sympathy, but hid it, shrugging, and saying instead, “I’ll deliver the happy news to my brother.”

She watched Bella’s face flush angrily.

“Don’t worry,” she told Bella, “he won’t interfere. Much as he’d like to.”

It wasn’t that, though the thought of him doing so made the flush deepen. It was the fact that he so clearly still kept tabs on her, despite what she’d asked.

“Sure,” she said, and decided that their interaction had gone on long enough. “Take care, Rose.” Then she turned, and went inside, leaving Rose to the task of putting the corpse of her truck back together.

The thunk of its hood closing, just seconds later, told her Rose had dispensed with all human pretense. The growling purr of another engine confirmed it, and Bella was alone.

*Just me, and my dead truck*, she thought. How apt a metaphor for what she was, in comparison to the perfection of her future family. A precariously assembled bit of ambulatory flesh, ready to stop moving at the slightest touch of superior, and crimson machinery.

Like Victoria, or the Volturi.

She shook it off, and began the necessary business of making dinner, allowing her natural clumsiness greater reign as she banged and clunked pots about.

*All in good time*, she told herself. *All in good time.*
Bella blew out a big breath, and said, for what she hoped was the last time, “Dad, I don’t need or want a car.”

He looked at her over his paper, and let an eyebrow slide up, and then down. He shook his head. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll put it under a tarp in the back, in case you change your mind.”

The vehicle in question had arrived, a bequest from a distant cousin, several years dead. The estate had taken some time to be dealt with apparently, and Charlie found himself the owner of a fairly recent, and lightly used Toyota sedan.

“Good gas mileage on those things,” he’d mumbled, when Bella had eyed it suspiciously. She didn’t believe for one second that it had come from a family member.

Alice had denied any knowledge of it, but Bella had remained unconvinced that the Cullens were not involved Or, rather, one specific Cullen.

“You can’t know everything he does, Alice,” she’d grumbled, and Alice had shaken her head and rolled her eyes.

Her truck had finally been permanently retired in late July, the transmission too expensive to repair.

“No need to have a car in Seattle,” she’d said.

“Good for road trips...home,” Charlie had suggested.

Bella had countered with, “there’s a bus, Dad. I really don’t need it.”

He’d been mystified by her refusal, and thinking she was worried about cost, had offered to pay the insurance, make sure she had gas money. He’d finally chalked up her stubborn insistence on environmental aware-something-ness. He figured that after a few months without a car, her views would change.

“I don’t mind taking you,” he said, “it's a long bus trip, and with all your stuff—”

“Actually,” Bella said, “Alice is giving me a lift.”

“Oh,” he asked, “she in residence too?”

“No,” Bella said, “they’ve got a house near campus. All of them’ll be there.”

Charlie grunted. It was his universal response to anything Edward related.

When Alice pulled up to Bella’s dorm, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Expecting Charlie to check in, she pulled it out, and was surprised to see Edward’s message.

It was September.

Her heart fluttered out an unbalanced rhythm.

Alice politely ignored this.

*Lunch on Tuesday*? The message read.
After a moment, Bella typed *sure* back.

The response was immediate: *Federico’s on Main, 12?*

*Yes,* she punched in.

It was Monday.

She would see him tomorrow.

Friends, she told herself. *Friends.*

She hadn’t seen him in sixty-five days. Not that she was counting.

Alice chuckled beside her. “Thank you,” she said, “our evening will be much happier now.”

Bella’s face fell. “You—”

“I wasn’t looking at *your* future,” she said softly, smiling still.

“Sorry,” Bella said.

“S’OK. Our lives are more connected right now than I know you want them to be.”

Bella sighed, reaching out to touch Alice’s hand. “I’m glad they are, Alice. I just wish he could see….well, you already know.” She looked up at the building. It seemed large, the dark brown brick drab against the grey sky. “Shall we see what horrors await within?”

Alice peered over the steering wheel, dubiously eyeing the people in front of the building. “Grunge,” she muttered to herself, giving what Bella thought was a mock shudder. “It can’t get much worse than it is outside.”

“Swann?” the flustered looking residence supervisor asked.

“Yup,” Bella said, shifting the weight of the box in her arm slightly.

“Room fifty seven,” she said, “ground floor. Straight down that way.” She lifted her chin in the direction Bella should go, without looking, but her eye caught Alice, and her jaw dropped slightly. Alice smiled chipperly, revealing more of her teeth than was wise. The young woman blanched, but still stared, her gaze following them down the hall.

“So much for blending in,” Bella muttered.

“Oh, don’t worry. You will,” Alice answered, “all she saw was me. You’re probably going to have to re-introduce yourself next time you meet.”

Bella laughed, putting the box down on the mattress. “Probably.”

They had most of her things in her room in a few minutes. It was one of the few singles on the floor. Not large, but it had room for a bed, a desk, and a closet, with a bit of space remaining.

“I expected it to be smaller. I’m pleasantly surprised,” Bella said, as they unpacked her things. She didn’t let Alice near her clothes.

Alice was sitting on the edge of her bed, looking around, suddenly perking up a bit. “Oh! I almost forgot. Here, this is for you.” She handed Bell a small envelope, with what felt like a credit card
inside it.

“What’s this?” Bella asked.

“A gift from Jasper,” Alice said, with a wide grin.

Bella looked at it suspiciously.

“Open it!” Alice encouraged her. “Or, shall I? Wouldn't want you getting a papercut on your first day.”

Bella peeled it back carefully. Inside, was what looked like her Washington State Driver’s license, only as Bella looked closer, realized it couldn’t be. Her birth date was three years earlier than it should have been.

“You got me fake ID?” she asked, incredulous.

“No, Jasper did. And that isn’t fake. It’s as real as it gets—don’t actually show that to anyone in law enforcement, by the way, it’ll cause problems for the people who make it.”

“Wow,” Bella said, muttering, “exceptionally good, fake ID, made by people who do...I don’t want to know.”

“I’ll tell him you were thrilled,” Alice said drily.

“Thank you,” Bella said, more genuinely. What a strange gift.

“He thinks modern drinking laws are ridiculous. Thought it would give you an opportunity to have some irresponsible fun in decent locales while you’re human.” She cocked her eyebrows at Bella, showing her just what she thought of such things.

Bella tucked it carefully into the back of her wallet, away from her real ID. She didn’t want them to get confused.

“Alright,” Alice said after about an hour, “in keeping with plan inconspicuous, I’m disappearing. Try not to get yourself into any mortal danger before we cross paths again.” She said this as she leaned into a hug, hiding her worried expression.

“No dying. Got it,” Bella mumbled.

“I mean it,” Alice said, “and have fun too.”

With her fake ID.

“Thanks mom!” Bella called, as Alice walked away. She was just turning back, when two girls walked by her room.

They both stopped, staring at Alice’s departing form. “Seriously?” the taller one of them asked, “that’s your mom?”

“No,” Bella said smiling, “just a friend.”

The smaller of the two introduced herself, “sorry,” she said, returning Bella’s smile, “no filter on my friend. I’m Marie. This is Sam.”

They exchanged introductions, Bella discovering they were both new to the campus, but second year
students, transferring from another college.

“We were just on our way to dinner. Shall we check out our prospects on food poisoning together?” Marie asked. She was short, with smooth, shoulder-length brown hair. Her eyebrows moved expressively when she talked, and the eyes beneath them were shrewd. She had well established wrinkles beside them, and laughed frequently.

Sam was tall and lean, and quieter, but just as sharp as Marie. Her humour was droll, the perfect contrast to Marie’s exuberance.

Bella liked both of them instantly.

Marie corralled a few shy, and lost looking souls that wandered by, inviting, with insistence, their presence. Bella met a good five new people by the time dinner was over.

They all stuck together, comparing notes on first and second year courses, and chatting about where they were from, moving their conversation to the lounge. When ten o’clock hit, Bella excused herself, happily exhausted by all the new faces and names she was trying to memorize, to head to bed.

She was glad she’d packed ear plugs. Someone upstairs—maybe directly above, she wasn’t sure—kept a steady drone of music thumping through the ceiling ‘til twelve, when other, louder thumps at a door, she presumed, silenced most of the noise.

She almost missed her alarm the next morning, and was running to the dining hall when, not looking where she was going, ran straight into a very solid, and chest shaped object.

“I’m so sorry!” she said, bending over to pick up her bag, and its contents, which she’d half-slung over her shoulders, and the papers on the ground that had spilled from the arms of the person she’d hit.

“It’s OK,” the voice said. It sounded familiar. “Bella, right?”

She looked up, embarrassed to be so clumsy, and to be known on top of it.

“Oh, hey,” she said stupidly. “Um…”

“Jun,” the young man grinned. He seemed taller than she’d remembered. His black hair long enough that it flopped into his eyes a bit. He flicked his head to the side, to move it out of the way. “Still up for a team?” he asked, his tone friendly, soft.

“Yeah, for sure,” and seeing the papers he was holding, now wet, and some of them crumpled. “I’m so sorry—I’m a total klutz. Can I help you with those?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Actually, would you mind putting some up for me? In your dorm?”

“Sure,” she said, “least I can do.”

“Meant to do it yesterday,” he said, “but got busy with other stuff. That would be super helpful.”

They were flyers advertising the intramurals competition and signups.

“You coming to the team builder night on Friday?” he asked, giving her a stack.

“If you tell me where it is, yes,” she said, taking them, putting them in binder, and carefully tucking it back into her bag.
“Student union building,” he said, “six. Everything you need to know is on the flyer. Bring some friends,” he smiled. “I gotta run. Try not to mow anyone else down, hey?”

“Sure,” she grinned ruefully, “see you then.”

“It’s a date!” he called back, giving her a double thumbs up.

Her heart moved a bit too quickly, hearing the words.

He didn’t think—no, she told herself, he did not. Just an expression.

The morning passed by in a flurry of activity and classes, finding buildings, getting books, and figuring out how to acquire a student services card. She was late, getting to the restaurant, flustered and hot when she walked in the door. It wasn’t far from campus, but it became very clear it served a clientele well above the income level of a university student. Bella felt remarkably underdressed for the occasion, and wished she’d worn something different, or at least left more time to get there.

The greeter was impeccable with his manners, and politely asked her to follow him to a small alcove, tucked away at the back. He stopped, gesturing that she should go ahead of him, and he turned away, returning to his post, leaving her standing there, knowing Edward was just beyond this slight corner.

It took a deep breath and a stern reminder about her convictions before she could walk around it.

And there he was, standing as she entered.

He looked like a minor Greek deity. His simple slacks and white button down shirt, the top open at his neck, only accentuated the elegance of his frame.

“Hi,” he said. He wasn’t smiling, though. Everything he was feeling made it impossible to discard the weight of emotion pressed against his chest. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and momentarily divest her lungs of all their oxygen, and then repeat the process between her snatched breaths, so she would forget why she’d asked for them to be apart.

Instead, he asked, “you found the place OK?”

Bella stared, digging her fingernails into her palm, reminding herself to breathe with the sting on her skin. “Yeah,” she said, absentmindedly. “Sorry, bit more of a walk than I’d planned.”

“Heard about your truck,” he said. He’d heard about her suspicions too.

“Old age,” she smiled, but didn’t feel it, wondering again if he’d had something to do with Charlie’s distant cousin’s mysterious bequest.

Watching Bella set her bag down, Edward walked around the table, and pulled out the chair for her. The light tone didn’t fool him. Her heart was racing, and she looked like she was about to faint. It occurred to him that if she did, it might present the convenient necessity of him touching her.

She sat, instead, murmuring a quiet “thank you.”

He let his hand brush lightly over her shoulder as he turned. He could have avoided it—easily—but didn’t. She took a small, sharp breath in at the touch.

“How’s your room?” he asked, sitting down, nudging a glass of water towards her.

“Good,” she said, picking up the cup. “How’s yours?”
“Inconsequential.”

She gave a wry smile, and half a chuckle.

“It’s good to see you,” he said.

Either, Bella thought, he’s going for understatement of the year, or...he feels differently than before.

Her stomach clutched in on itself.

She smiled nervously.

Edward didn’t miss that she hadn’t returned the words, and wondered if her feelings had changed.

Humans did that, he reminded himself. He forced himself not to dwell on it, though, and asked his next question.

“What’re your thoughts on college life so far?”

College. All twenty four hours of it. “Bureaucratically confusing,” she answered honestly. There had been more paperwork than she’d ever encountered before in her long morning, and little of it had been educational in the way she’d been expecting.

The conversation thawed from there, and she had little opportunity to ask him what the time had held for him. He deftly wielded questions while she ate, evading the more substantial ones she tried to lob at him.

When one o’clock rolled around, Bella muttered, “shoot!” to herself, and was standing, fumbling for her wallet. “I’ve got to get to class,” she said, “sorry, lost track of the time.”

Edward hadn’t. He knew where his next class was, too.

He was nothing, if not well informed.

He reached over, tapping his fingers ever so lightly on hers, to get her attention. “Please,” he said softly, catching her eyes, “my treat. I picked, after all.”

Bella’s face looked as conflicted as she felt, but she managed a gracious “thank you.” After that, she said, “I’m sorry to run, but I’ll be late—”

“No car,” he said softly.

“No,” she answered, watching his face, trying to find some clue to her wondering. “Don’t need one.”

His eyebrows lifted. “I would’ve thought you’d find it convenient here,” he said, but then gave a non-chalant shrug. “Can I offer you a ride, then?” he asked. “Or Alice can, if you prefer. She’s not far.”

She chided herself for being suspicious. “No,” Bella said, “I’d appreciate a ride, if you don’t mind.”

“I never mind being with you,” he responded, trying to keep her eyes on his. She looked away, breathing too fast.

He very carefully avoided doing anything to make her think he would touch her, but held the door for her to get in the passenger side.
It was strange, having such courtesies observed. No one else in her life did things for her like that. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed them.

She had more stern words with herself about space, and distance. She wondered if seeing him once a week would be too much. His smell was etched into the car’s familiar upholstery. Emotions, so carefully compartmentalized in the last few months, were insisting on their substance being made known.

“Where to?” he asked, telling himself it was important to have the right location confirmed, even if he knew it. Even if he had her course schedule memorized.

When they pulled up to one of the large, nondescript arts lecture halls, Bella thanked him, and stepped out of the car, not wanting to wait for, or invite further courtesy. She feared it might lead to other things.

Things she very much wanted.

Right now.

“My class is just down there,” Edward said, pointing to a large edifice of stone and glass.

She was pretty sure that was where most of the premed classes were, and made a note to ask him exactly what he was taking. Next week.

“See you next week,” he said, and waved, and pulled away.

“Bye,” Bella called, watching him far longer than she should, and then turning to find her afternoon classes.

The realization hit her, about ten steps in towards the building: Edward hadn’t done anything to disrespect her wishes. He’d listened, and they’d talked. They’d laughed. They’d been...normal.

She almost burst into tears.

Several people looked oddly at her, paused, mid-sidewalk, clearly having a moment to herself.

It took a while to understand the feeling she was experiencing. She was happy. Not tortured by feelings, just happy.

It gave her hope. The summer had been an exercise in restraint and anxiety.

This could work.

They might work.

Then she stopped herself, before she could run ahead of the present, and took the next few physical steps into the building.

The rest of the week was a colourful blur, and when Friday arrived, she wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with a book that had nothing to do with anything she was studying, and fall asleep.

At six-thirty, she was woken from an unplanned nap, book squashed under her cheek, by a loud pounding at her door. “Bella! Come on!”

She knew the voice, but was completely confused by what it was doing here.
“Emmett?” she asked, eyebrows a quizzical v over eyes. “What’re you doing here?”

“It’s intramurals night,” he said, as if this explained things. “Let’s go!” He tapped at the door frame impatiently.

It was. She’d forgotten, but she hadn’t been expecting Emmett.

Edward’s comments floated back to her.

Had he put him up to this?

She twisted her lips together, thinking how she might tactfully ask.

“Um—” she started.

“Edward didn’t send me,” he said bluntly.

“Oh—” Bella responded articulately.

“But Alice told me you’d think he did.” Then he lifted his eyebrows up, and asked, “So, can we go yet? I don’t wanna miss the fun stuff.”

“Right,” Bella said, accepting that this was likely true, or the product of such a masterful deception that she had no hope of unravelling it. “Give me a minute, ‘K?”

“Sure,” he said, and leaned back against the door frame, grinning at people as they went by. They gave him a wide berth on either side.

After quickly changing her shirt, and ducking past Emmett to brush her teeth, Bella returned, feeling slightly more decent.

“You look nice,” he said, but with a dubious expression.

Bella stopped, looking at him, having just locked her door. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” he said, “but you do know these things tend to involve a lot of beer, and people who can’t handle said beer?”

No. “OK,” she said, waiting.

“And the after effects of people having too much beer?” His eyes went up meaningfully. “As in, be prepared to get puked on.”

“Eww,” Bella said, “OK, maybe I’ll just—”

“Oh, no, no, no, no—” Emmett said, pulling her keys from her hand. “Come on. College adventure awaits!”

“Emmett,” Bella said, “I’m not interested in getting drunk. Or puked on.”

“Then don’t,” he said, “I promise to keep you out of range of most pukers, but you’re coming.”

She relented, but reluctantly.

In the end, she was glad. Sam was there, her lean frame and tight, curly black hair visible from across the room. Mingled in with a group of people in purple t-shirts was another face she recognized: Jun.
“Bella!” Sam called, “who's the chunk?”

“The what?” Bella asked, raising her voice over the babble of voices.

“The chunk. You know, the cute hunk. Who is he?” She was looking in Emmett’s direction.

“Oh,” she said, grinning, “that’s Emmett. He’s um...a family friend, kinda like my....honorary big brother.”

“Awesome,” Sam said, eyeing him from a distance. He was balancing five cups of beer, walking them slowly back with a practised hand. “Your available honorary big brother?”

“Sorry,” Bella said, the grin stretching, “definitely taken. As in, not a shot in hell.”

“Dang,” Sam said, “too bad.”

“Mmm,” Bella added sympathetically.

“Don’t suppose he’s got a brother?”

Bella cleared her throat, looking away. “Just my ex.”

Sam raised a speculative eyebrow. “Really? Wait, how ex is this ex?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Well...um, it’s...complicated”

Her friend sighed dramatically. “Nevermind.” She shrugged, and then scanned the room.

Emmett had arrived back by this point, and handed Bella a beer, and Sam one too. “Cheers!” he called, and then, to Bella’s great surprise, chugged his own.

Sam had taken a more stately sip, and Bella did likewise, keeping her eyes on Emmett.

When Sam moved away to chat with another friend, Bella hissed at him, “what are you doing?”

“Fittin’ in.”

“Emmett, are you drunk?”

“No,” he scoffed. “Not possible.”

“Then why—?”

“Camaraderie,” he smiled, and patted her on the back, a bit harder than he should have.

Bella coughed and spluttered.

“Take it easy there kiddo.”

Jun had caught Bella’s eye by this point, waving, and navigating his way through the crowd.

“You made it!” he called, “And you brought people—even better!”

Bella blushed, and introduced Emmett, and then Sam.

“I brought myself,” Sam said. “You look like you’ve done this before.”
“Yeah,” Jun chuckled. “You lookin’ for a team?”

“Sure,” Sam said, “how ‘bout you pretty boy?” She looked at Emmett.

He grinned, showing most of his teeth. “Totally.” Everyone, including Bella, leaned back a bit.

“Uh, great,” Jun said, clearing his throat, “that makes a full roster, with Leo and Dave.” He waved to two tall boys a few groups away. They waved back. “Roommates,” he said by way of explanation.

They were interrupted at that point by a tap and squeal at the microphone. “OK people, time for the team building! If you’re not in one now, find one quick! Don’t worry, you can ditch them later if you want.”

There was a general scrambling, yelling, and hollering, as Bella, Sam, Emmett and Jun stood closer together. Leo and Dave, pushed through the crowd to reach them, with Jun making introductions.

“Alright!” The emcee called, a few minutes later, “couch potato races to start!”

Bella looked at Emmett for explanation. Her eyebrows went up when he gave it. Leo took on the run for this one.

“Anyone not much of a drinker?” Jun asked.

“Bella,” Emmett coughed.

“You’re not?” Jun asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. She was a half inch into her beer, and about as far she planned to go.

They did a quick round of strategy, Emmett volunteering for the beer pong, Sam taking on the rubber chicken round, and Bella and Jun being left with the newlywed round.

Jun peppered her with questions, starting with birthdate, and running down to everything he’d ever heard before during the last few years’ iterations.

“Intended major?”

“No idea,” she said, “general arts or English for now.”

“Parents’ occupations?”

“Dad: cop, Mom: teacher.”

“Really? Cool, my mom too,” he said. “My dad’s a massage therapist.”

“Nice,” she said.

“It is,” he grinned back, making quick notes on a pad of paper. “Taught me, too.”

“Favourite colour?”

“Brown,” she said, blushing.

“Really?” he asked, looking up.

“Yup,” she said, her cheeks reddening, hoping he’d move on.
By the time their turn came, the half inch of beer had left her relaxed enough to be able to remember everything. The other, more bleary eyed contestants around them proved far less capable. Sam clapped and bounced in delight. “We’re three for three!” she squealed.

Emmett won the beer pong so easily, it made Bella nervous.

She whispered, “couldn’t you mess up a little?” to him as he sauntered back.

He rolled his eyes, and elbowed her gently. “Lighten up, Swann. Everyone’s too drunk to notice.”

“I noticed,” she hissed.

“You don’t count,” he mouthed back, clapping as Sam won the card race.

Bella was a full inch down on her beer by the time the evening wrapped up, mildly euphoric.

“You have no alcohol tolerance, do you?” Sam said, frowning a little.

“Not really,” Bella confirmed, wobbling a little as she, Emmett and Sam walked towards the door.

“Night guys,” Jun called, trotting towards them. “First practise is Monday afternoon, main pool. ‘K?’ He looked at Bella, taking in the dilation of her eyes, and then looked directly at Sam. “You heading home together?”

Bella realised he was worried about her leaving with Emmett. This struck her as hilarious, and she giggled.

“Don’t worry,” Emmett said from behind her, “I won’t let anyone mess with Bella. Or her friend,” adding, to Sam, “not that I think anyone’s going to mess with you.”

Sam nodded back, acknowledging his respect.

Jun’s face and posture relaxed.

Bella let her well lubricated mind wander, and enjoyed the slow and precarious walk back to residence.

In the very far distance, safely downwind, an interested set of deep red eyes surveyed the people in play, and made their own plans.
Bella ran into Sam, halfway to the pool Monday afternoon. The rain had set in, and they hurried under their umbrellas, the water seeming to find its way in upside down, and sideways. She felt like she’d be dryer in her swimsuit, by the time they got there.

Jun was waiting in the foyer, and waved when he saw them come in.

“Here,” he said, handing them each a card.

“What’s this?” Sam asked.

“Gold card,” Jun smiled, and when he met confused expressions on their faces, explained, “pool passes for the year. I still have a little pull here from varsity.”

“You’re varsity?” Sam asked, suddenly incredulous.

“No,” Jun said, “I was. Quit last year.”

Sam made a low whistle.

“Yeah,” Jun said, “I know. Come on, quit gawkin’ and get in there. We don’t get a whole lotta time.”

Emmett was inside already, neck deep in the hot tub. He winked when he saw Bella walk in. She was wearing her own swimsuit, Alice’s tucked away in the bottom drawer of her bureau at home.

“Alright,” Jun said, “let’s start with a warm up lap, and then talk strategy for the pool race portion. Go!”

Everyone took off at their own pace, Emmett, Sam and Jun speeding off, Dave and Leo following not too far behind. Bella swam doggedly. Or, more like a dog paddle, making her slow way up, and then back down the pool.

Emmett was ready to howl with laughter, but Jun caught it and shushed him. “Don’t,” he said, his voice a hard warning, and Emmett looked at him, a whole new level of respect grown there. “She’s doing her best. We encourage each other, got it?”

Emmett put up his hands, and tilted his head in deferral. “Course coach,” he said quietly.

“Nice,” Jun said, when she got back, and then started proposing some strategic strokes for each person. Bella couldn’t help but notice her name was absent from this list. As soon as the rest of them were off, Jun quietly pulled her aside. “You swim much before?” he asked softly.

Bella supposed it was that obvious. “No, not really,” she said, feeling her cheeks redden. She was recalling Edward’s attempt to teach her.

“Hey,” he said, “that’s OK. We’re a team. We work together.” He smiled at her, and she was
surprised by how soft and genuine it was. In her experience, the “we’re a team” talk was usually followed by a disingenuous grin, and then abandonment. She’d learned long ago to eschew such activities.

“Can I show you a few pointers?” he asked, “I don’t have a lot to offer in the other areas, but swimming is my thing.”

Bella squirmed a bit, imagining what other help she’d need. Probably a lot.

Jun could see her discomfort. Her face was so easy to read. “You’re here and you’re willing,” he said, “don’t feel bad about what other people can do.”

She nodded, tucking away her lack of confidence.

They moved to the unroped section of the pool, which was quiet except for one parent and their small child, blowing bubbles into the water.

“You know how to do the crawl?”

She shook her head.

“OK,” he said, and handed her his goggles, “use these for now,” adjusting them expertly. He explained the stroke, and showed her the movement. “I’m going to get you to lay on your front, and then move your arms through it, OK? I’ll hold you up while you’re doing it, so we can focus on form, alright?”

Bella’s stomach fluttered with nerves.

His arm easily stretched under her, straddling her hip, while his other moved her arms through the motions, checking her form. “Good,” he said, “that’s great. OK, now try it on your own.”

She floundered through a few strokes, and he had her come back again, patiently repeating the movements until it was easier for her to coordinate them, finally, after a half hour, moving through a deliberate crawl across the pool length. She felt like her arms were about to fall off.

“OK,” Jun called, “lounge when we’re done, and then we can plan our next training session.”

The next training session? “As in, next week?” she asked.

“No,” Sam scoffed, towelling off her hair, “this is just the swimming portion. We have the relay run, and climbing sessions to do too.”

Jesus. What had she got herself into?

“Don’t worry Bells, you’ll be Bella the buff by the time we’re done with you,” Sam reassured her, elbowing her congenially.

Jun watched her face blanche nervously.

“You’re good,” he said, walking past her to the change room, “don’t let them razz you.”

She nodded, and went to get changed.

When she and Sam emerged a few minutes later, Sam still trying to wring the water from her thick hair, and Jun was screwing in the last support for a strange looking chair.
“And you massage people too?” Sam asked, eyebrows raised. “Best team ever!”


“Me!” Sam called, and sat down.

Emmett had arrived by this point, and Bella said loudly, “you’re next Emmett. I signed you up.”

He looked at her, but then caught her grin, and returned it, seeing Sam standing. “Ladies first, Swann.”

She snorted. “I’m good.”

Sam walked by, giving her upper back a good poke, “as if,” she snorted, watching Bella flinch.

“Yeah,” Jun said, his voice concerned, “didn’t you stretch?”

“No,” Bella said, “why?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Bella hated stretching.

“Have a seat,” he said, “if you’re feeling sore now, trust me, you need this. Sit.”

Bella had never had a massage before, not really. Edward had rubbed her shoulders and her back when she was tense, and the thought of recalling those memories didn’t sit well. She sat down reluctantly.

“Just lean forward a bit,” Jun said, and then put his hands on her back, very gently moving, touching far more lightly than she expected. Massage always seemed to look like it was about tenderizing someone, the way she took a meat mallet to cheap steak.

“So,” he said, “I’ll give you my standard disclaimer. I’m not qualified to do this therapeutically, but I know enough what to touch, and what to leave alone. If it hurts more than your standard bruise, tell me, ‘K?’

“Sure,” she mumbled into the face rest. “I thought massages were supposed to feel good—not hurt.”

“The useless ones do, but the ones that actually help always have a bit of an ouch to them. You can’t do any good without releasing things.”

“Jeez,” Jun muttered, “do you ever stretch?”

“No,” Bella replied, feeling things loosen.

He placed one finger at the base of her skull, and the other just under the jointure of her shoulder and arm.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed, feeling a pressure she hadn’t realized she’d carried, melting. “How did you —?”

“Magic hands,” Jun said. She could hear the grin. “A little bit of anatomical knowledge goes a long way. Pressure points,” he explained.

He didn’t work for long, but she felt lighter—looser—by the time he was done.
“Thank you,” she said, her voice grave with sincerity. “You’re amazing.”

“And you,” he said, “are strung like a piano. You should really stretch next time.”

She snorted out a small breath. Her coordination was poor enough that she figured tight muscles were about all that was keeping her from constantly falling over.

They hammered out the rest of their schedule. Practises were three times a week. One at the track, one in the pool, and one in the climbing gym. Sam was right. They would be buff by the time the year was done.

Sam headed off to meet friends for coffee.

“I’m off,” Emmett called, “see you for running,” he grinned at Bella, lips wicked, and wide.

Bella swallowed, imagining what Edward would see in his brother’s thoughts.

“Keep it to yourself,” she muttered to him, as he pulled her into a hug on his way out the door.

“Notice how I’m not hovering,” he said softly, “some of us know how to respect the people we love.”

She smiled, a true and genuine stretch across her face. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I appreciate it. Just...keep my humiliation private, OK?”

He grinned, asking “want a ride home?”

“No, thanks,” she said.

Emmett nodded, waving and walking away. He wasn’t one to ask twice.

“You got something against driving?” Jun asked, hearing this soft exchange, packing up his chair.

“No,” Bella said, “Library’s easier to walk to, than drive.”

“Ah, Main?”

“Of course,” she said. The building itself was stunning, a large and airy glass construction, its wings freshly stocked with things that wanted reading. She’d only had a little bit of time to explore it, and had promised herself some treats from its large collections of eighteenth century writers.

“You can’t have a paper due yet, can you?” Jun asked, tucking the heavy wooden chair under his arm. He made it look light.

Did everyone have to be so fit?

“No, not yet, but perusing the shelves is my reward for tonight.”

“Reading in the library is your reward?” Jun’s voice was incredulous.

“Not a reader?”

“Only when I have to be,” he smiled. “I’m actually heading there for a research project. Walk with you?”

“Sure,” Bella said, following him to his car, where he stowed the chair in the boot. “What research
“Anatomy class,” he said, not elaborating. “What’re you looking for?”

“Jane Austen and friends.”

He shook his head, eyebrows up, mouthing “wow.” He finished it with a friendly grin though.

As Bella sat and ran her fingers down the spines of the books on the shelves, Jun sat with her, flipping through the ones she placed on the floor for further consideration.

“Light reading,” he mumbled to himself, flipping through something called Pamela. He was wondering at her ability to make sense of it, let alone enjoy it. The next tome down was another unappealing set of pages that began with the name Tristam.

Bella was lost in the liquidity of words before her. The slow burn growing in her upper arms was becoming more insistent, fuelled by the weight of the book she was holding.

“That good?” Jun asked.

“Sorry,” she said, looking up, almost having forgotten that he was with her.

“No,” he said, “don’t apologize, I’m horning in on your reward time.” He slid the book from the now lowest portion of the pile out. “What’s this one about?”

“Oh, Pamela,” she said, blushing a bit, remembering the recommendation. “It’s about a servant girl who, er,...fends off her less than virtuous boss. He finally sees the error of his ways, and proposes marriage.”

“Fends off?” Jun asked.

“He tries to seduce her. Then he tries to...assault her—”

Jun’s eyebrows shot up. Bella’s blush deepend.

“It’s considered a classic,” Bella said. “Trust me, not reading it for relationship advice.”

“Good,” Jun said, eyeing the books suspiciously, and nodding. “Because...wow. That’s...something.”

“I know.” She said, picking them up.

Jun stood, stretching his arms up above him. Looking up from where she was sitting, he seemed more giant than human. “I should go grab a book,” he said, “but if you want company, or,” he looked at the pile beside her, suggesting practically, “an extra set of arms to carry those.” She was going to be sore for the next while. She just didn’t know it yet. Such an odd choice to make to go for intramurals. She clearly wasn’t athletic, not that he minded.

She was interesting.

Bella was shifting her shoulders back a bit. Help would be nice, feeling the growing discomfort at her back, and she didn’t want to put any of literary gems back. “Help carrying these would be great, actually,” she said, “I’m done collecting. I’ll come with you.”

Jun picked up the larger set of books. His own choice was quick, selecting a large, and well used book from the shelves.
"Figured you’d have a copy of that already," Bella said, watching him check it out, as she did hers.

"I do," he said, "somewhere, just haven’t found it from unpacking it yet. Wanted to double check a few things."

"What made you want to study kinesiology?" she asked, knowing the answer from their trivia game, but not why.

"Oh," he said, "that’s easy. Not teaching or massage therapy."

"Parents that pushy?" Bella asked lightly. Hers weren’t, but she’d seen it enough with friends.

He laughed. It was an easy sound. "You have no idea. I don’t just have Korean parents. I have hardcore Christian, Korean parents." He said this with a precise emphasis, as if she should know what this meant.

"Afraid you’re going to have to unpack that for me," she said, tripping over a lip in the concrete. She almost caught herself, but Jun’s reflexes saved her a nasty fall. He didn’t say anything, and she was grateful. They kept walking.

"Not a creature you’ve encountered?" he observed. "Well," he explained, "I’m sure you can imagine enough of what the hardcore Christian thing means, but the Korean ingredient. That’s special."

Bella’s eyebrows went up at this implied depreciation, but she listened.

"Planned career path. Arranged marriage. Living with your parents and grandparents. Whole nine yards."

"And you’re the rebel against it all?" Bella asked.

"No," he said. His voice dropped a bit. "I love them. I wouldn’t rebel against all of it." He turned to her and smiled, just a little slyly. "I’ll make my own career path, but I don’t think I can avoid the other things, not unless I want to completely break with my family. It’s also just part and parcel of being an eldest son."

"You an only child?"

"No," he said, "two totally annoying younger siblings. One brother. One sister. You?"

"Just me," she said. "Parents realized the whole marriage thing was not working. Split by the time I was one."

"Wow," Jun said, whistling, "talk about calling it early."

Bella blushed.

"No, no!" He said, "I think that’s a good thing. People shouldn’t stay together when things aren’t working. Too many people do." His face folded a bit at this point, the suggestion of a frown forming.

Bella wondered if his parents fell into this category, but didn’t ask.

They were almost back to the pool.

"OK," Jun said, "you want to sacrifice your working arms for the rest of the week and carry these back to your dorm by yourself, or can I offer you a ride in my chariot?" He had stopped by his car, a well loved and ancient volvo. "Bucket of rust that it is," he added.
“Oh,” Bella said, a stab of sympathy forming, “don’t. I love old cars. They have character.”

“You like old cars?”


She had climbed in by this point, and was noting its tidy appearance. Not pristine by any measure, but clean. He took care of things. He, she noted with pleasure, also drove at a nice, normal, human pace.

“Speaking of relationships, your boyfriend seems pretty low key.”

“My boyfriend?” Bella asked, eyebrows pushed together quizzically.

“Emmett,” he said, shoulder checking.

It was utter artifice. He knew Emmett wasn’t her boyfriend. Could read the body language clearly enough.

“No,” Bella said, shaking her head, stealing a glance at him. “He’s...more like a brother.”

“Oh,” Jun said. “Sorry, he’s just always around...I thought—”

“Yeah. He’s um, my...ex’s brother.”

“Ah.”

He didn’t press further, but let the conversation subside. It wasn’t uncomfortable, just quiet. He drove on smoothly, as if these discoveries meant nothing.

How different from so many of the other rides she’d experienced of late.

“Thanks,” she said when he pulled up in front of her dorm.

“Totally welcome,” he said, looking at her directly, as if he was contemplating something. Bella was starting to open the car door when he asked, “you busy tomorrow afternoon?”

Many, different reasons for this question flitted through her mind. Some were flattering. Some were less so.

She didn’t say anything, thinking about her afternoon.

“Just asking, because I think you have lots of potential, but you could use some pointers with your swimming.”

Ah. The non-flattering reasons.

She blushed, but smiled too. “No surprise there.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” he said, seeing her reaction. “I mean it. You need some pointers. Some practise. I see huge potential.”

His voice, and face matched in their sincerity, and she let her eyes linger on him. “Sure,” she said. “When were you thinking?”

“Lunch-time?”
“No go,” she said, “long-standing date.”

“Oh,” he said, his eyebrows moving up infinitesimally.

“No,” she said, “nothing like that. Just a...friend.” She blushed, feeling she’d over explained. And lied. All at the same time.

Jun ignored it. “How about four then?”

“That works, sure. Same place?”

“Yep,” he said, “see you then.”

She stepped out, books tucked against her chest, trying to shelter them from the fine mizzle that had started. Once inside, she set them down on her desk, along with her keys and phone. Shedding her jacket, she flopped into bed, wincing as her back met the mattress. She was sore.

A buzz from the desk made her get up again, and her heart skipped a beat, seeing who the message was from: Still on for tomorrow? Same time and place?

Yes, she typed back.

His reply was immediate: can I give you a ride there?

No, Bella thought. If she opened that door, the time would expand, and the event grow. No, she needed to keep her boundaries clear.

No thanks, she sent back as quickly as she could, and then put her phone away, exchanging it for one of her new books.

Jun had reached home himself, leaving his book in the car. He had no need of it, beyond the pretense it had already served.

“...gives me the creeps,” Leo was saying, shaking his head.

“What does?” Jun asked, tossing his keys in the bowl by the door.

“That Emmett dude,” Dave answered. “Built like a frickin’ tank, for sure—but when he smiles—yikes.”

Jun shrugged. Emmett seemed OK. Despite the creepy smile.

“Sam though,” Leo said, “wow.”

Jun pointed a finger at him. “Don’t mess with my team man. Remember Robin, last year? No repeats on that.”

“I learned,” Leo said innocently. “I’ll be good. Wait, unless—you aren’t—?”

“No,” Jun said, pulling a tub of leftovers out of the fridge, “just...don’t want any drama, ‘K?”

“You’re one to talk,” Dave said, almost under his breath.

“How so?” Jun asked, frowning, as he sniffed the tupperware’s contents. It seemed to smell OK. He spooned some of it into a bowl, and stuck it in the microwave, uncovered. It splattered, and popped as it heated, while Dave looked at him.
“You’re so into Bella, it isn’t funny.”

Jun gave him a full serving of arched eyebrow, and then rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

“Sure,” Dave said, walking away. “Whatever.”

Leo was packing his backpack, getting ready for his night class. “See you girls later,” he called, sashaying his hips, heading out the door.

Jun frowned. He wasn’t interested...she was pretty, sure. Interesting, sure. Not athletic, but willing to try...he stopped this train of thought. Fair enough. He was marginally interested. He still wasn’t going to let that interfere with winning the competition, though.

No way.
“No way,” Tory said in disbelief, “you quit too?”

“Thought it was a club of one,” Jun said, surprised, but pleased too. He’d found the community pool just far enough away from campus as a way to keep swimming, but avoid all the people who looked long down their noses at him now. There’d been a few memorable, and uncomfortable run-ins at early morning swim times at the campus pools.

“Didn’t want to give up the early morning swim time, huh?” she asked, scratching at her swim cap. It was one of those florally embossed rubber ones. The kind his grandma used to wear. It looked ridiculous on her.

“No,” he said, smiling. “You?”

“No,” she said, smiling also.

“That why you come so expertly disguised?” he asked, pointing to her swim cap. “I mean, you could totally blend in with the seniors’ group here.”

“Nice,” she said, but patted it appreciatively. “Unique. Like me.”

Jun smiled. There weren’t many former varsity swimmers around. Male, or female. She was petite, but lean, the pronounced musculature at her shoulders marking her as a swimmer, for those who knew.

“You’re not from WSU,” Jun said. He would have met her, surely.

“No,” she said softly, her voice heavier with sadness, “transferred in from Spokane. Wanted to be closer to a bigger city.”

He nodded, his smile but a curve of his lips. He’d thought of leaving, too.

It’d been hard, staying. It would have been so much easier just to go.

He prodded, gently, at this topic, seeing if her experience had matched up with his.

“They were such shit-heads,” she muttered, then looked at him, a little uncertain of his response. “Sorry. Salty tongue.”

Jun grinned, shaking his head. “Yup, virgin ears—bleeding,” he said, making a silly face.

She snorted. “Least you have a sense of humour. I had a team full of Mormons. My God. You’d think I’d threatened to drown puppies, anytime I said anything colourful.”

He had more empathy for her situation than she could possibly know. It was how he felt at home half the time.

They chatted more, the conversation easy, before the time crept up on them. Jun was sweating when Tory made her farewells. He’d been so engrossed in reminiscing, he’d lost track of the time. Not a smart thing to do in the hot tub, he reprimanded himself.

Bella was having a different start to her day. She was rubbing her eyes tiredly, trying to remember which leg went in which hole of her jeans. Her arms weren’t helping much. They were too sore from
The couple next door had had their own, loud workouts during the night. One of them, she presumed, was named John, because his partner yelled his name loudly. Several times.

Though it was tempting to wreak a small piece of revenge, Bella didn’t let her door slam. Better to take the high road. She hadn’t met her nextdoor neighbour yet, and didn’t want to do it with a nasty confrontation. She shifted her backpack, too heavy with books she might have time to read between classes, onto her back, and scrunched her face up at the sensation. Maybe she could just slouch it over to the side.

Marie and Sam waved to her from a far table in the dining hall. They were nestled up against the solidly grey windows, the day already threatening rain.

“So,” Sam asked, “how was your date?”

“Date?” Bella asked.

“Yeah, Marie said Jun dropped you off,” Sam said, eyeing a chunk of what passed for scrambled eggs. The kitchen staff served it as a solid yellow, jello-like mass, scooped out by the gastronomically intrepid. The substance wobbled on Sam’s fork, as if importuning mercy. She shrugged and popped it in her mouth, and then looked at Bella directly, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“No, I mean, Jun dropped you off. I mean, he picked you up from the library,” Bella said, “he gave me a ride home from the library.”

“You mean,” Marie said, “he went to the library with you, and then he gave you a ride home. Sounds date-like to me.” She was stirring her watery porridge rhythmically, watching Bella.

“It was fine,” Bella said, giving up on shifting their presuppositions.

“Going to see him again?” Sam asked, cutting a corner of egg off the slab on her plate.

Bella blushed.

“Oooh!” Marie said, “you are!”

When her circulation was behaving itself again, Bella tried to recover some of her dignity by saying, “he’s offered to help me with my swimming. I’m sure Sam can vouch for how necessary that is.”

“Oh, sure,” Sam said, waving her fork in the air, “but for a boy like that to make time for you—that means something.” She stabbed the fork in Bella’s direction. “I’m not wrong. Trust me.”

Bella chewed on this, along with her toast, as Marie and Sam squabbled about who had the worse term paper schedule.

“Alright,” she said, when there was a natural break in their conversation, “I’m off. See you for dinner.”

“What, you’re not coming back so we can razz you at lunch?” Marie winked.

Bella smiled, generally enjoying what passed for ‘razzing’, “no, meeting a friend for lunch.” She carefully avoided saying who. Or why.

She’d never thought she’d love school. Ever. But she was loving school. They learned things. Interesting things. Challenging things.
The other students listened. Sure, there were a few whiners, but they were easy enough to avoid. Tuesdays and Thursdays were her favourites for classes, with the rest of the week saved for the special torture of math and science.

She felt like she’d blinked when her second class wrapped up at eleven forty five. She was about to hurry, when she made herself stop, pull out her phone and message Edward: *sorry, running late. Be there in a bit.* She should have told him a later time.

She enjoyed the walk, seeing fall starting to paint the tips of some leaves, their colours warming against the growing coolness.

She was stopped, admiring one such tree, when his soft “boo!” startled her.

“Sorry,” Edward said, grinning, but enjoying her reaction nonetheless.

Bella smiled and shook her head. “Sorry,” she said.

“I frighten you, and you apologize?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“For being late, and making myself later,” she said, smiling.

He shrugged. “It’s not raining. I don’t blame you. Shall we?” he asked. He was personally delighted to be able to walk with her. Getting her message, he’d left the restaurant, catching sight of her in the thoughts of those nearby.

She was oblivious to the attention of the people passing. She looked happy. It made his own heart swell to see.

“Yes,” Bella said, sticking her hands in her pockets after she adjusted her bag.

“That,” Edward said, “looks heavy. Want me to take it?” He held out his hand tentatively. An offer. Not an expectation.

Bella wondered what he’d seen in Emmett’s thoughts. If he was trying to interfere.

*He’s just offering to take your bag*, she thought. *And your back really hurts. Don’t be stupid.*

“Thank you,” she made herself say, sliding it off. The movement dislodged the top zipper, and as she moved it, her books and binder came sliding out to her frustrated, “shoot!”

Edward bent down to help her assemble everything, shaking his head at her heavy books.

“*Pamela*?” he asked, frowning. “That’s more senior than freshman material.” He regretted saying it, as soon as it slipped from his lips.

“Voluntary reading,” Bella blushed.

Edward supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. If she liked the Brontë sisters, this would suit her well. He cocked an appreciative eyebrow at her, “good for you,” he said gently, hoping this made up for his earlier comment.

He asked her about her week, and praised her for going for the intramurals. “Emmett hasn’t said anything,” he assured her, grinning, “but he seems happy with his team.”

“Yeah,” Bella said, “it was fun on the first night. I have a feeling I’m going to be hurting for a while, though.”
Edward tried to stop his reaction, but he turned, face dark, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Nothing bad,” Bella said, shaking her head, giving a small laugh, “I’m just nowhere near the shape I need to be in. I’m told it’ll be easier in a few weeks.”

Edward had been envisioning some sort of horrific hazing ritual, and was ready to read Emmett the riot act for not taking his responsibilities more seriously. He relaxed, hearing this. They’d reached the restaurant by this point, and were sitting down, Bella asking him questions about what he was doing.

Edward didn’t like it.

He’d spent the months before their first lunch date assembling questions he wanted to ask, curating scenarios in his mind. He’d tried to still the process in the last week, but it persisted, and he wanted to evade hers and ask her about the minutiae of every new experience she’d had.

Maintaining the perspective he needed was harder than he’d expected. Being away from her still evoked the pain of their longer separation.

“I will tell her,” Alice had said, through clenched teeth, when she’d seen him wanting to watch from the small, treed quadrangle of her dorm. “Respect. Her. Wishes.”

He’d sighed, nodding. He couldn’t help it that he longed for her.

“Boundaries, Edward,” Alice had chimed at him, as she and Jasper left to hunt. She’d thrown back a menacing, “I’m watching!” from outside.

“I’m taking basic pre-med,” Edward said, “nothing new.”

“Why then? If it isn’t new?” Bella asked, a tentative fork-full of pasta poised at her mouth.

“It helps Carlisle requalify,” Edward said, “if one of us takes the courses for him. Transcripts are harder to fake these days.”

That made sense.

“What are you enjoying most?” he asked, leaning forward, taking advantage of her silent chewing. He was fiddling with the spoon at his place setting, quietly flipping it over in his hands.

“English,” she said, “and yes, even Pamela. I just started it last night. It’s so interesting, how you can get so much of the context, just from the way he structures—” and she was off, expounding on Richardson’s skill.

Edward listened, rapt by the sound of her voice, her joy in her studies.

Bella, however, became acutely self-conscious, when she realized how long she’d been talking. “Sorry,” she said, “this is old news to you. I know ant—”

“Antiquity doesn’t impress me?” he guessed, smiling, his hands still now. “No, but you do.”

This made Bella blush even more. She busied herself in looking at her watch. With a small sigh, she realized she had left her swimsuit, and towel in her room. She’d be late to meet Jun, if she ran back to her dorm after class.

Her small distress was as easy to read to Edward, as the books in her bag. “What?” he asked, worried he’d made her uncomfortable with his comment. His self-doubt cursed him roundly.
“I forgot something in my room,” she said, biting her lip. “Just trying to figure out my plan.”

“Easy,” Edward said, “why don’t we go there on the way to class? It’s on the way.”

Bella shook her head. “Sure,” she laughed, “if you drive in a u-shape, yes.”

“A very roundabout definition of on the way,” Edward said, enjoying her smile.

She looked uncomfortable saying it, but said, “yes, if you wouldn’t mind, please.” He wondered if it was difficult for her to maintain this distance too.

Marie was walking into the building when Bella came in, Edward at her side. He’d asked, very coyly if he was allowed to see her room. She figured he might as well. Perhaps it would keep him from doing so without asking. She reminded herself to ask Alice if he was behaving himself on that front.

Marie blinked at Edward, and then looked at Bella. “Hey...Bella,” she said, trying to figure out how she could get her to introduce this...deity...to her.

“Oh, hey Marie,” Bella said, and then remembering her manners, “this is Edward. Edward, Marie.”

Edward nodded once, and smiled politely, “pleased to meet you, Marie.”

Marie mumbled something utterly unintelligible, and watched them walk on, staring at Edward’s back. He could hear her thoughts, but paid them little attention. He didn’t bother to look back to challenge her gaze.

He was too busy watching Bella.

When she finally opened the door, fumbling with the lock, he sampled the wash of air that wafted out. Then he stiffened, ever so slightly, smelling what he did.

Bella missed it, and having her towel and swimsuit, paused, looking at him. “Uh, sorry, you want the...grand tour?”

He smiled, despite his visceral alarm. “You have class. Don’t want to keep you.”

No. He wanted to pick her up, and run away, hiding her in some safe cranny that he could protect. Instead, he drove her at the slowest possible, plausible pace, to her class.

He would investigate the smell later. When she wasn’t there. In the meantime, someone would have to be nearby, to watch her. Protect her.

“This is you,” he said softly, not wanting this precious time to end, keeping his hands to himself.

“Next week?” he asked, always hoping it might be sooner.

“Yes,” she said, and ducked out, her scent lingering in the car.

The afternoon moved swiftly for Bella, too, and she had little time to give thought to her lunch with Edward. Life’s busyness was taking preeminence, and she was realizing just how much of her attention had been centred on Edward, now that it was so thoroughly elsewhere.

Her feelings hadn’t changed.

Oh no.
But the time apart was giving space and sun to the other small sprouts in her life’s garden.

She let this metaphor roll around in her head as she walked to the pool.

Jun was already in the water, flying across the pool’s length, making it look easy.

Bella’s shoulders twitched. They were still sore, and would be more so after this, she speculated.

He stopped when he saw her, far into the deep end, raising an arm up high to wave.

Bella sighed. She’d be head half under the water, partially drowning if she tried that move.

She slipped tentatively into the pool, nervous about how much she might have forgotten, and...if she was honest with herself, about disappointing Jun.

“Ready?” he asked.

She wondered what else there was to do to be ready. She was in the pool. In a swimsuit. Was there more?

Her confusion must have shown on her face, because Jun asked, “you stretched yet?”

She shook her head, and he rolled his eyes, motioning her towards the shallow end. After he’d gotten her to move through some basic stretches with him, he said, “why don’t you show me what you remember?”

She swallowed, and then nodded, trying to maintain the right shape while she moved stiffly through the water.

“OK,” he called, stopping her at a half lap. “Let’s go over basic form again.”

She blushed deeply, and he felt badly immediately.

Then he checked himself. He was coaching someone. He never felt badly about correcting people. He gave his head a mental shake. Supporting her floating form with his arm, he felt a thoroughly unprofessional flutter touching her.

_Give it a rest_, he told himself. _This is teamwork. Coaching. Nothing else._

He kept telling himself that.

Bella did too.

Her feelings, though, had guilt clamped firmly to them.

She had no right to feel anything like this about anyone.

She knew who she loved.

_So why is your body getting all tingly and funny? Hmm?_ A small voice in her head asked.

She ignored it, trying to focus on the movements Jun was running her through.

It wasn’t the best swimming lesson.

The relief was mutual when they left the pool, meeting awkwardly afterwards for a brief goodbye in the foyer.
“Do you want a ride?” Jun asked, eyeing the sky. It always looked like it was going to rain, but it looked like it was really going to rain at this point.

“Um, no, thanks,” Bella said, “thank you, though, for your time. I know I’m a bit of a lost cause—”

“No, no,” Jun said, and he meant it. “You’re not. Don’t do yourself the disservice of thinking that. You’re going to be great. You just need some pointers and practise.”

Bella stopped the deprecating thoughts that were almost instinct. He was right, she told herself. Practise, and pointers. She could do this.

“You’re right,” she said, “I’ll work at it.”

“Thata girl. Next week, same time?”

“Please,” she said, bending over to do up her laces.

“Good,” he said, “see you tomorrow for climbing.”

She nodded, and they parted ways, Bella trying to make her quick walk look easy. It wasn’t. She was sore—sore beyond what she’d ever known muscles could make her feel. By the time she reached the residence, she went straight to the dining hall, not sure she would be able to get up again if she went to her room.

Sam and Marie were waiting to ambush her.

“OK, spill the beans. Who are these people that you know? Is there a model factory in Forks, or something?” Marie asked, the words all gushing out at once.

“No,” Bella smiled, sitting down gingerly, “just the Cullens.”

Sam looked on blithely, chewing absent mindedly. She was thinking about Leo. He was cute. She suspected the feeling might be mutual.

Marie made a disbelieving sound.

“Really,” Bella said, “they’re just all insanely good looking people.” She shrugged, wondering what Marie would make of the truth.

“And...Edward?” she asked, “He’s not attached, is he?”

“No,” Bella said a bit more uncomfortably, and Sam chuckled.

“No luck kid,” Sam finished for her. “Edward’s her ex.”


Bella looked at Sam, a silent thanks in her eyes. Sam raised an eyebrow and shrugged. Their conversation tottered to the more mundane details of their day, into which Bella was happy to slip, more a listener than a speaker.

Edward’s conversation with Emmett was much less civilized.

“You don’t seem to appreciate how serious this is, Emmett,” Edward growled.

“I get it,” he said civilly, just on the verge of a snarl.
“We all do,” Alice said softly, her hand on Edward’s shoulder. “And we’re all doing our part, while trying to respect Bella’s space.”

“THERE IS NO POINT IN RESPECTING HER SPACE IF IT LEAVES HER DEAD!” He roared at them.

“And she isn’t,” Jasper pointed out, uncrossing his arms. He was trying to get Edward to calm down, but he could feel his brother fighting it.

Edward had lurched away from all of them, pacing the long wall of the dining room.

“None of us know the smell, Edward,” Alice said, “and they didn’t hurt her. Perhaps it was just someone who smelled our scents near her, and was curious.”

Edward snorted at this ridiculous idea.

“It isn’t ridiculous,” she said. “And it’s just as likely as your theory.”

“Hardly,” he said, the word crisp and prejudiced.

“What do you expect us to do, really, Edward? Tail her all the time? Totally violate the trust she has in us?”

“If it keeps her alive, then yes,” he said.

Alice was shaking her head, and Emmett was silently agreeing. “She needs to agree, and she won’t.”

Edward could see this was conjecture. “Ask her, please,” he said, “as soon as possible.”

Alice sighed, but nodded.

Their group dispersed, Alice trying to follow him.

“No,” he said. “Don’t. I need to know. Be sure.”

“Your grave,” she muttered.
The lines we cross

"Alice," Bella said, hand stopen, partway to her eyes, about to rub them. She was standing in her pajamas, startled by Alice's sudden appearance at her door at seven in the morning.

"Hey," she replied. "Sorry to wake you."

Bella swallowed. She wondered what had brought her here. She didn't think it would be anything good.

"Everything's fine," Alice hurried out, seeing the look on her face. "Can I come in for a minute?"

Bella nodded, suddenly mute, but stepped aside. "What's going on?" she demanded, as soon as the door clicked shut.

"When Edward came yesterday," Alice said, "he smelled someone's scent in your room." Watching Bella's eyebrows shift together, she added, "not a human someone."

Bella nodded quickly, as if expecting this. Her nervous pacing betrayed calm gesture.

"He didn't recognize the smell, and neither do I." She didn't say that no one else had either. That they had come to check.

"Alright," Bella said, "thank you for letting me know."

Alice paused, before adding more. "There's...um, more. Edward isn't comfortable leaving you alone. I've reminded him of his promise. He's...having difficulty respecting the no-bubble-wrap rule," she finished awkwardly.

Bella huffed out an angry breath.

"OK," she said softly, acknowledging what Alice had said, but not agreeing with it. It was anything but OK, but cogent thoughts were not the dominant feature of her thinking.

"He wanted me to ask if it was OK if we were...around more. Not noticeably, but just to be sure."

Bella's "No," was loud, and immediate.

Alice nodded, not surprised.

She wasn't looking forward to telling Bella the rest of it. She cleared her throat a bit.

"Spit it out, Alice." Bella said. She had a feeling she knew what was coming.

"His course of action is the same, regardless of your answer," she said. "He won't leave you alone."

Bella's shoulders sagged a bit, and she closed her eyes. He'd agreed. She'd dared to hope with it.

And she'd been foolish to do so.

Alice squeezed her eyes together, trying not to look at what Bella's future held. "Don't suppose you're going to tell me what you're about to do?"

"No," Bella said, "I haven't decided yet." She sighed emphatically. "I should...get ready, for class,"
"Sure," Alice said, "we still on for something this weekend?"

Bella nodded absent-mindedly, lost in her angry thoughts.

Alice's cold hand on hers brought her back to herself. "Bella," she said quietly, "I can't say I don't worry. Please...you're my dearest friend. Just—," she stopped, her face twisting with anxiety. She didn't want to hover, to ask what Edward would, but—

"He has an easy solution, Alice," Bella whispered, the shake from anger, or fear, Alice wasn't sure. "If he wants me...if he wants me for it be forever. As his equal—" She couldn't finish, the emotion taking her throat. She shook her head, too fraught with it. The tears were springing.

She felt like an idiot.

A foolish, hopeful idiot.

What had she expected?

Alice was nodding slowly, swallowing nervously herself. "Alright, I'll go. Let you get ready."

Bella moved angrily through her morning, shoving her books angrily into her backpack, her feet angrily through the legs of her jeans, and to her great frustration, her hand, angrily through the stitches of her favorite shirt. The ripping sound brought her up short, and she made herself take several deep breaths before doing more damage to anything else.

By the time she left her second class, she was much calmer, the knowledge of Edward's flagrant disrespect slightly faded.

Anger, at least, hurt less than disappointment. And fear.

Seeing Edward, leaning casually against of the wall of the building directly opposite the one she was leaving, the anger flared easily up into her cheeks. He watched her approach, taking stock of her rapid gait. The deep curve of her eyes was forewarning enough.

"Is this you keeping your promise?" she said, voice low and tremulous.

"There is no point in keeping my promise if it leaves you dead, Bella," he said calmly.

She made a sound that resembled something between a laugh, and a bitter snort. "Do you even understand what the word respect means?"

"A stray vampire goes into your room, and you're worried about respect." He said the word like it was something dirty, squeezing his fingers into his palms.

Bella was shaking now. "Yes, I am. Because we've seen how you not respecting my wishes works."

"Leaving you unprotected is not realistic," Edward said, his voice low and serious. He was leaning forward, his figure curved almost over her.

She stepped back, avoiding even the shadow of his bodily protection. "Yes," she said, "it's the most realistic thing ever. If you don't like the frailty my existence entails, you have a way to change it."

Then she turned, and walked away, as if daring him to follow.
He didn't, not, at least, in a way she could see.

Marie and Sam gave Bella a wide berth at dinner, her deep scowl shoved into her book warning enough.

By Wednesday afternoon, Bella was ready to take her frustrations out onto something physical. The climbing practise at the gym seemed a suitable outlet.

"Ow!" Sam said, when Bella's launch up her friend's shoulder landed the wrong way.

"Sorry!" Bella called down, as she curled herself up, and onto the turett, leaning over to help Sam up.

"Sure," Sam mumbled, glowering a bit as she hoisted her leg over the last edge.

Emmett was awfully quiet, sitting, waiting for the others to join them.

"Three minutes, forty-seven seconds," Jun called. "Better than last week. Nice."

"And totally shitty," Leo said. "Winning times were under two minutes last year."

Jun frowned at him slightly, but recovered, relaxing his face, "practise," he said evenly. "We'll get there."

Bella was trying to keep her face even and calm, but the pull of her feelings was apparent to everyone there.

"Alright, we're done for tonight. I'll have the chair in the foyer if anyone needs some work, just give me a few minutes to get it." Catching Bella's eye, he called, "And don't forget to stretch!"

Bella rolled her eyes. She meant it to be humorous, but it just looked bitter.

Everyone else was hopping down from the platform easily, and Bella looked at the depth of the jump and sighed, when Emmett held his arms out. The others were walking away, their backs to them. "I'll catch you," he said quietly, and Bella nodded, half sliding, half stumbling off the ledge.

Emmett caught her perfectly, of course, but the touch of cold hands made her blush angrily. It only reminded her of Edward.

"I'm not the one disrespecting your wishes," he mumbled, letting go as soon as she was on the ground.

"No," she said, "you're not. Sorry." She knew she'd been in a sour mood since she'd seen Edward, but she'd tried to not inflict it on any irresponsible parties.

"Doesn't mean I'm not freaked out," Emmett added, walking slowly beside her towards the changing rooms, "but we're all trying to respect your need for space." He avoided mentioning the less than casual walks they took turns having in a circuitous pattern around her dorm, not all the time, but enough that it kept off the edge of their anxiety. They'd brought this danger to her. It was theirs to manage.

They'd reached the point where they parted ways. "I'm off," he said softly. "Before Mr. Hands makes any offers again." He looked in the direction of the foyer.

Bella snickered. "I'm sure that would give him something to think about."
Emmett grinned back, imagining this. Jun's face had gone a chalky white the first time Emmett had give him a hand up the climbing set. He enjoyed freaking people out more than he admitted.

"No dying," Emmett called, by way of farewell.

"Sure," Bella muttered, "do my best."

When Edward texted on Monday, asking about lunch on Tuesday, Bella's response was a simple no. And it was that the next week, and then the following week. He didn't stop asking, but the answer was the same.

It cemented the deadening fear in her heart, that they might never be able to make their relationship work.

Ever. Regardless of the circumstances.

She kept going to classes, moving through the motions of her life, but with this constant anxiety nibbling at her stomach.

When term papers, and then midterms arrived, they were a relief. It gave her more than enough to do, with practise on top of it all.

She felt like she'd blinked by the time late October had rolled around. As she and Jun finished their lesson in the pool, he sighed reluctantly.

"I hate to say this, but I think I've taught you everything you need to know for our race."

Bella stopped, staring at him. "And that's a bad thing?"

"No," he said, "it just means I don't get the pleasure of your company as often." The 'your' was emphasized in such a way that she understood he meant, alone, with her.

"Oh," she blushed.

She'd enjoyed the lessons too. He was funny, and kind, and he listened—didn't push her. Except in the water.

"Maybe we can go grab a celebratory bite of pizza?" he asked.


"No repayment needed," he grinned. "It's been fun."

He had driven, but they opted to walk over to the small pizza place in the student union building. Jun was surprised she hadn't been there before.

"Really? Not at all?"

"Nope," Bella said, "holder of an exclusive dining card membership. Remember?"

Jun made a good impression of a shudder. "If you're surviving on what they feed you there, you definitely need some pizza."

She chuckled. She didn't mind the dining hall food. She didn't have to cook it, and there was always the salad bar when the entrees looked dubious.
The pizza offerings were unique. "Butter chicken here, and baked potato there," the server said. "Chicken pesto coming up in a minute."

"Baked potato," Jun said, without hesitation.

Baked potato pizza? Bella thought, until she tasted it, having seconded Jun's order.

"Oh my god, that's amazing."

"I know, hey?" Jun said, mouth full of the stuff in question.

They eyed the remaining menu items, speculating as to the silent options available. "I'm sure they have a squid and pesto on there somewhere."

"Don't laugh," Jun said, "I think they actually do."

"Eww, gross!"

They were still laughing on their walk back to her dorm. "Oh, shoot, your car!" Bella said. They'd been so lost in conversation, she hadn't even thought of it when they started walking back.

"It's OK," Jun smiled. "I hear this rumour that walking is good for you."

Bella smiled.

"Besides," Jun said, when Bella turned to face him, "I've enjoyed the company. And working with you, in general."

"I have enjoyed learning how not to drown," she said, chuckling.

They were standing just outside the entranceway of her dorm. The small lobby shed its equally small bloom of light outward, and they stood in this shallow pool.

Then he leant down, and before she could put together what he was doing, kissed her.

His hands, fingers long and lean, slipped gently to her back, palms warm and light against her.

When he pulled back, unnerved by her stillness, the tears on her cheeks alarmed him more.

"Oh," he said, "that is not what usually happens."

"Sorry," Bella said, looking down.

"And now you're apologizing."

"No," Bella said, floundering around for words, "it's not you—"

"It's me. Even better." He was keeping his voice light, but there was a deep, and well hidden sting under it.

It was hard not to smile at his jokes. Even with this awkwardness between them.

"I—" she sighed, "can't. Can't make a commitment—"

"So don't," he said, suddenly serious. "I don't expect one. I can't give one either."

She looked at him, brow flexed into a deep downward curve.
"Let it be what it is," he said. "Please." He had put his hand back on her cheek, thumb brushing over it, rubbing away the tears that were there.

When he kissed her again, she leaned into it and raised her own hand to his face. Its smoothness was warm and soft.

His touch felt like it went far deeper than it did, and when she pulled away, startled by the scope of feeling he evoked, it was with surprise. She'd never been the one to pull away. Ever.

She didn't let herself continue the thought, but her brain took full advantage of the distraction to scream at her: what the hell are you doing?

"Don't," Jun said, "I can see it all over your face. Don't put pressure or expectation on it. Just...be open. Please."

Bella ignored the screaming in her mind. "OK," she said softly. The muted shrieking was insistent though, and she silenced it with a quiet "goodnight," turning and almost running back to her room.

Well screened by the trees, Edward watched Jun leave, curling and uncurling his fingers into his palms. He took a deep breath in, and then let it out, florid recriminations swirling in his mind. He only had himself to blame. He'd pushed her away with his insistence.

He wished, not for the first time, that Bella had a roommate. He caught a glimpse of her in a floor mate's eyes, as she unlocked her room, and then could only hear her breathing amongst the chorus of other lungs in the building. Her heartbeat was distinct, and this was a rapid flutter.

He tried to tell himself that he wasn't jealous. That he wanted her to be human. To live a life free of the touch of monsters. That it was good that she could be with someone human. That—

No, he told himself.

There wasn't any good in this.

Jun, meanwhile, sailed home on a wave of elation.

It buoyed him up into the next morning, his steps to, and strokes in the pool far more exuberant than usual.

"Those methamphetamines are really bad for you," Tory said, watching him bounce into the hot tub.

He chuckled. This too, was far too energetic for the hour at hand. "I think," he said, "I can say I've made the next step with Bella."

Tory put a finger to the corner of her mouth, squinted and looked up at the ceiling dramatically, pretending to stretch for a memory associated with this name.

"Jerk," he said, but good naturedly.

"Right, that girl. The one you talk about. All. The. Time."

"Sorry, shall we talk about your girl?"

"Ex," she grumbled.

"Sorry," he said, softening his voice. She'd been so blasé about it, but he could see the ache that smouldered underneath the veneer.
She shrugged. "So, give me the deets. What happened?"

Jun gave the most evasive description.

"Oh, come on!" Tory whined.

"I don't kiss and tell," he shrugged.

"So you kissed?"

"I suppose I walked into that one," he sighed. His cheeks seemed a deeper colour than the hot tub warranted.

"Glad for you," Tory said, wiping her the moisture beading on her forehead. "Much as I want to stay and press you for more, I'm roasting."

"See ya," Jun called, as she slipped out of the water, letting his thoughts return to their happy occupation: Bella.

A/N for 02/06/2018: A guest commentator wrote "Sorry, if this is E&B story, where is the romance between Bella and Edward?" [sic] - well, it's there, just kind of in the fraught and frustrated stage at the moment. I promise, the good and gooey shall return between Bella & Edward, but it will take some time.

Several of you have also commented on how utterly, currently unlikeable this Edward is. Can't help but agree. Again, things will get better. Just give it time. Or, come back in a few chapters, if the angst is driving you nuts.

And finally, the pizza: Pie R Squared at the UBC Sub (Point Grey campus, Vancouver, BC) really does make the most amazing baked potato pizza. Worth every overpriced penny.
"Come on," Marie said, "haven't you ever been to a protest before?"

"No," Bella said, considering the various reasons why: not having a reason to, and not wanting to anger Charlie.

"Well," Sam said, "I think a nice, safe, orderly 'take back the night' march is exactly what you need."

Bella sipped her tea, having given up on trying to read. Rare sunshine flooded the high windows of the dining hall, and she was enjoying the prospect of an unscheduled Saturday. She sighed. "When?"

"Six tonight. It'll be dark enough," Sam said, chugging back her coffee.

"OK," Bella said, hoping they'd forget, hoping they would leave her to her book.

"I'm holding you to this, Swann," Marie said, then whispered conspiratorially, "You'll love it!"

Loving a protest. Right. Marie clearly had very different ideas of what fun entailed.

As they walked away, she settled into her book, only looking up when her phone buzzed on the table. And then again. There were several messages. All of them from Edward.

She hadn't seen him, but considering what he'd said when they'd last talked, she expected he was lurking rather than leaving her to her own devices.

Her hand hovered over the phone, before picking it up to look more closely. The texts read: *I'm sorry. I've been respecting your wishes this last while. Alice can confirm. Can we meet to talk?*

She blinked, stunned.

He had?

She texted Alice immediately, misspelling several words.

The reply was instant: *And you want to be an English major. Tch. Yes, he has. There was a smiley face at the end.*

Bella's heart made a small leap, and then it tripped over itself and sunk into her stomach.

Had he seen what happened on Tuesday?

*Very likely*, the logical part of her mind answered. The snarkier part said, *well duh.*

Had that been what it took?

A wave of self-loathing and revulsion shivered up her. No, she told herself. No. You aren't being manipulative. It's his own fault for seeing something he shouldn't have. If he didn't want a relationship built on mutual respect, what did he expect to have happen?

The hurt that lingered, never too far from the surface, waved eagerly at her. Yes, she reminded herself, he wanted her human, and not because it meant they would be equals.

If she wanted to know what it meant to be with someone, to make that choice when the time came,
then she needed to know. And not just in theory.

She thought about Jun and how much she'd enjoyed their time together. He couldn't commit to anything, and neither could she. It was, in some ways, perfect. They could simply be.

It was startling in the extreme, when Jun's message that popped up next: Dinner, tonight?

She didn't hesitate: Sure, but later. Off to protest something.

She imagined the laugh that would elicit.

His response was quick: Protest "something." Sounds important. K. 8?

He sent along a location, too.

Yes, she typed back.

A protest, and then dinner. Just about the stretch of emotional extremes she was feeling.

Edward's text arrived next, interrupting this rumination. She laughed. Could this get any weirder? Lunch, Tuesday? It asked.

Sure, Bella wrote back. My treat. Pizza. Then she sent the address: where she and Jun had eaten last. Let him chew on that.

Wonderful, he replied. Looking forward to it.

Bella felt an uncomfortable squirm. She wasn't. She felt like him backing off required something of her.

No, she told herself firmly. It didn't. She'd been clear in the spring. A year. Then, and only then, would they consider anything else.

She spent the rest of the day trying to get lost in her book, but couldn't, too jittery. When Marie knocked at her door at five, she was dressed more for dinner than protesting.

Sam, strolling towards them, eyed her with a speculative eyebrow. "Don't get out much, hey Bella?"

"Thanks, friends," Bella said, with emphasis, "I have dinner plans afterwards."

"Ah, right. Well, OK." Marie and Sam looked at each other meaningfully.

"What?" Bella asked, narrowing her eyes.

"It's a protest, Bella," Marie said, as if she was explaining this to a young child. "You know, loud and disruptive, and sometimes messy."

"Messy?"

"Sometimes people are there protesting against protestors?"

"And?"

"They throw shit."

"They throw shit?" Bella asked, alarmed.
"Not literally, no, but stuff. Maybe pack a change of clothes?"

Bella was rapidly reconsidering these plans.

"No, no no! You are coming with us. Come on." Sam was pushing her towards her backpack, and then pointing towards her closet.

Bella sighed, but obligingly packed another outfit. Just in case.

Their worries were unfounded. While there were a few counter protestors, they were mostly loud, not projectile laden.

They marched together, the crowd large, but peaceful. There were families there, Bella noticed with interest.

As the crowd swarmed on, though, the mood shifted, and there were fewer families, and the chants louder, and more shrill. Bella had eyed the police presence, quiet, and observant at the edges, but it was more prominent now.

"Hey," she said to Marie, "they look awfully touchy," and lifted her chin towards the line of police hedging up the north side of the street.

"Don't worry about it," Marie said, dismissing her look, but Sam was eyeing them nervously. She didn't have the immunity Marie's and Bella's skin colour afforded them, and was hanging back in the crowd.

"I think she's right, Marie," Sam said, "this is starting to get less than pretty."

It was at that point that someone, somewhere in the crowd, threw an empty beer can at one of the police officers.

The response was instant. There were shrill whistles, and they were being yelled at through a megaphone to disperse. Some people in the crowd were, but others were pushing forward, and Bella and her friends were caught between them.

They found themselves being shoved up against a line of newly arrived police, each with a shield in front of them.

Bella caught Marie and Sam's hands, not wanting them to be seperated, and started to pull them to the side, trying to move diagonally against the tide of people. They were almost to the edge, when the surge pushed them up against the last few officers.

One of the uniformed men took offense at the brush, and yelled at Bella, "Get out of here!"

"We're trying!" she shot back, unimpressed by his rudeness.

The crowd's movement shoved them again. "I mean it!" he roared, his baton in hand.

Bella caught a good look at his face, florid with anger. She didn't respond, but kept her hold and Sam and Marie, finally pushing through to the edge, where they could move freely.

"Jackass!" Marie called back.

Sam moved away, angrily huffing, "come on," behind her.
"Pig!" Marie kept going.

Bella yanked at her arm, seeing the officer turned towards them, one foot poised to move after them.

Marie only hesitated a little when Bella pulled her into a quick jog.

When they were a safe few blocks away, Sam turned on Marie. "What the hell Marie? Do you have any idea how stupid that was? You don't taunt police officers!"

"What are they going to do, arrest me?"

"No, they'll beat the shit out of us, and call it fricking crowd control!"

This angry tirade continued, Bella watching anxiously, trying to stick words in between them, but only earning angry rebuffs.

She was so focused on them that she didn't hear the quiet "Hey," behind her.

It was the finger gently tapping on her shoulder that got her attention.

"Jun!" she said, turning around.

"Hey yourself," he smiled. "Thought it would be hard to find you, but uh, well, you're attracting a fair bit of attention."

Bella looked around. People were staring at Marie and Sam, still fighting. One had a camera, and was snapping pictures.

"Sam, Marie?" she said, this time very quietly. "Let's go."

Caught by the tone of her voice, they turned to look at her, still flushed and angry with each other.

"Oh, hey Jun," Sam said first, breathing heavily.

"Hey," he said. "You guys want a ride back to campus?" he asked, sweeping his gaze around the street.

Marie was beginning to look less tomato like, and more chagrined. "Maybe that'd be a good idea," she mumbled.

It was an awkward ride back to the dorm, but it lightened considerably when Marie and Sam climbed out with glum "thank you's."

Jun looked at her, sitting in the front seat of the car. "Protesting, huh?"

Bella laughed. "Sure. I guess so. Can tick that off my list."

"Ready for something more sedate?"

"Please, yes. Without angry police officers, too, if you don't mind," she said, feeling a stab of guilt, imagining Charlie in that situation. He wouldn't have yelled, or taken offense, she didn't think, but who knew for sure, until they were faced with something.

"Time to show you the shack, and make you dinner then," he said.

"The shack?"
"Our house," Jun said, "we rent it. It's definitely a bit of shack, but the kitchen works."

He cooks. Excellent, Bella thought.

He didn't just cook. He cooked well. She knew, and appreciated the fruit of his practised skills. "This is delicious," she said, "thank you."

"Nice to have someone who appreciates it," he responded, eyeing his roommates, who raised their forks in thanks, from the couch.

Leo set his plate down, and pulled out a lighter. Then he produced something that resembled a cigarette.

Really? Bella thought. Smoking inside? With dinner?

"Sweet!" Dave said, and put his plate down.

"Want some?" Jun asked, nodding towards the couch.

Bella looked at him, confused. He didn't smoke, she was sure of it.

"Weed?" he asked, clarifying.

Oh.

She blinked.

"Never tried it?" he asked more softly, so Dave and Leo wouldn't hear.

She shook her head.

"Would you like to?" he asked. His face was relaxed, and she could tell it didn't matter either way.

"What does it do?" she whispered.

He grinned. "It's fun. Makes food taste better."

"Definitely not required," Bella smiled.

"Relaxes you. Makes the world slow down. Lets you see things a different way."

Now that sounded interesting.

"Sure," she said. It seemed to be a night of firsts. Why not?

Jun smiled, while Leo cackled, watching her try to inhale. Dave was kinder, explaining what she had to do.

After two puffs, Jun pulled it away, saying, "trust me, you don't want to take too much the first time." He stopped himself there too, mildly affected, wanting to make sure he was sober enough, in case things didn't go well.

Jun had not been lying. Everything slowed down, and all the rapid and anxious thoughts of the last week slid into a slow progression that she could follow one at a time.

They finished their dinner, Bella wondering how it could taste better—because it did, somehow, talking about their days, and their weeks—to some degree. She didn't tell him about Edward's
continued presence. He was just a friend in Jun's eyes, after all, and she and Jun were...something fuzzily undefined.

Leo and Dave had disappeared, to where, Bella didn't know, or care. She and Jun had claimed the soft spaces on the couch, he strumming quietly on the guitar he'd picked up from a stand beside it.

"I seem to know a lot of people who do things incredibly well. Don't suppose you play piano too, do you?"

"Yes," he said, "but not all that well. Not Christian Korean boy well." He grinned. "The guitar was my rebellion."

She snickered. "The guitar was your rebellion?"

"Totally. You should meet my family sometime."

That made Bella swallow. Meeting family. It sounded serious.

He caught the shift, and didn't continue, setting the guitar aside. "What was your rebellion?" he asked.

"Didn't have one," she said, appreciating the pattern on the couch cushion. It was a subdued paisley, swirling pleasantly in deep mossy greens, golds, and burgundies. She traced it with her fingers. The fabric's texture was gratifying under her hand. "My mom said I was born middle-aged. All teenage issues largely avoided." She didn't mention practically running away from home, twice. Freaking Charlie out beyond himself.

"I guess that doesn't surprise me," he said, leaning his head into his hand, elbow propped up on the couch back, watching her.

She looked up at him, and recalled, instantly, the feeling of his kiss from the week before. The thought of it was alluring, straddling the edge of forbidden, and allowed. The thinking wasn't far beyond the action, and she pulled herself up, kneeling on the couch, hands a perfect mirror of where his had been, her lips pressed to his.

He responded in kind, and she found herself pulled on his lap, legs straddling his, Jun's hands exploring the curve of her back, her hips, and the comfortable resting place behind them. She took in a breath at his touch. It felt so...intense.

She only half-realized, thoughts blurry with the swirl of the drug, that his fingers were working, kneading at her. It only enhanced all the other feelings.

When her hands slipped under his shirt though, he stopped her.

A well known dread settled in her stomach.

"Bella," he said to her lips as he kissed her again, chuckling. "You're really stoned."

"Yes," she said, kissing him back.

He groaned, but pulled back. "I'm going to regret this when I'm sober, I'm sure, but—I think we should stop."

Bella groaned too.
"I just," he said, "I'd like to think its you wanting this, or anything more, rather than you stoned, wanting this."

Anything more?

"How about," she said, leaning in to kiss him again, "we just stick with this then."

He gave a low and deep chuckle. "I don't trust myself not to do more, when I'm stoned, and—" he sighed, "I really don't want to mess this up."

Bella cursed silently, but nodded. She was having a hard time getting a read on anything beyond wanting him. That was very clear.

And very nice.

He hopped up, before she could make any more moves. "Come on stoner, let's go find some ice cream."

She laughed, but joined him, walking close, hands together as they found their way to the campus creamery, and then back to her room.

"Think you can handle being on your own for the rest of the night?" he asked, as they reached her door.

"You offering to keep me company?" she asked hopefully.

"Are you OK?" he asked, most seriously.

"Yes," she said, sighing.

Then he leaned down and kissed her, catching her airless and wanting.

"Night," he said, turning and leaving.

"Night," she called, not sure it was the right word.

A/N for 2018-06-05:First things first: HUGE thanks to Elise de Sallier for pre-reading this chapter, and offering many suggestions and revisions. Secondly, many of you have come back with spirited commentary, some in favour, and others not, of Bella x Jun. Thank you for all your engagement, and questions. I've tried to respond to every comment, and will continue to, so please make sure you're logged in when you leave your words behind.

~ Erin

@ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
Edward pulled the air into his lungs as she approached. He was early, taking stock of the place, and the options for privacy it afforded, which were none. He recognized her smell, but it was tinged with something new.

Oh.

Really?

Well, he supposed, college was a place for experimentation.

He was speculating as to the source, when she reached him, standing to greet her, at the small table.

"Hi," she said, keeping her breathing carefully modulated. Her heart was not so easily controlled. It had been weeks, and the sight of him hit her with its full impact. She really hoped he didn't expect stimulating conversation today. She wasn't sure she could manage much beyond the monosyllabic at the moment.

When his arm brushed hers, pulling out a chair for her, she shook her head, worried she might not be able to think, let alone stand up again.

"Why don't we order first?" she suggested.

"If you'd like," Edward said, gesturing that she go ahead of him.

"What would you like?" she asked, looking at him with her eyebrows arched meaningfully.

He understood. She expected him to play along.

"Whatever you're having," he said.

"Two baked potatoes, please," Bella said, stomach rumbling in anticipation.

"Interesting," Edward murmured.

"Very," Bella agreed.

She wouldn't let him pay. "Nope, my choice. My treat. Besides, I doubt very much you're going to enjoy this."

He grinned.

It caught her completely off guard, and she had to put her hand on the counter to steady herself.

When they had sat down again, Edward picking expertly at his 'lunch,' he began with the most blasé of questions.

"Really?" Bella asked, after his fourth snoozer, "you're making small talk?"

He looked directly at her, resting his hands on the table. "Seemed wise to stay in safe territory. But if
you're ready for the hard questions…"

She said, very seriously, and quietly. "You're one of the few people I can be myself with. I don't
want that to change." Her face twisted at this, and he could see the worry there.

"It hasn't," he said, resisting the urge to take her hand, keeping them pressed to the table top. After a
moment, he said, "I never thought you'd be one to experiment with drugs." He met her eyes, waiting
for the response.

She blushed, the colour rich and high on her cheeks.

It was beautiful.

"Didn't think I would, either," she murmured.

"Sure you don't want to go back to small talk?" he asked, only a little playfully.

"I am," she sighed. "Can you tell what kind?"

"Cannabis?"

She nodded, almost infinitesimally, as if she was embarrassed, or worried that he knew this.

"I have no plans to tell anyone," he said, thinking to reassure her.

"Didn't think you would, just...not sure what your thoughts on it are." She'd been looking at the
table, not certain she wanted to meet his eyes again.

"I'm more concerned about its source and quality than anything else."

*Of course he was*, she thought. She didn't roll her eyes, but she wanted to.

"From a friend." She sounded almost petulant.

"And that you're safe while using it. With good people."

Her cheeks flamed again.

Jun, he guessed. His face remained largely calm, but Bella, so attuned to its expressions, didn't miss
the tightening at the corners of his mouth.

"I was," she said. She sounded almost disappointed, as if—

He was drawing conclusions he had no right to, and stopped himself.

So he asked, just to stop his miserable speculations. "Jun?"

She nodded, clearing her throat. "His roommate had some."

She'd tried drugs with a boy who liked her, and his roommate. His anxiety was only growing.
"And," he asked, very, very carefully, "was the experience...to your satisfaction?"

"It was alright," she said, her words maddeningly vague.

He told himself that she was alright. In general, she looked well. She was attending college. Eating.
Not losing weight like she had when they'd been apart before. She seemed happy.
In this moment, though, these silent reassurances were meaningless.

"Any plans to continue to dabble?" he asked softly, hoping this was not prodding too far.

She shook her head immediately. "Fun to try, but no. I think life presents enough natural highs for my...satisfaction."

Edward interpreted this statement far more broadly than he should have.

She was about to ask him how everyone was doing. She'd seen Emmett, and Alice a little, but wondered how Rose was keeping busy, and Jasper, too. How they were.

His next statement stopped those thoughts.

"Jun seems to be a big part of your life these days." He was trying to make it sound like an observation, but she knew better, watching the stretch of his fingers, taut over the formica. It was as direct a question as any.

She stared, the familiar, but surprising low boil of anger starting, and startling her.

He'd pushed her away in every way. Refused to even consider that they be more than emotionally involved. He would barely kiss her—Don't, she told herself. Thinking about that will not help.

The anger didn't recede, and Edward could read it so very easily on her face. The colour was everywhere: forehead, nose, cheeks. She was livid, in all senses of the word.

"Yes," she said, not quite through her teeth, but close enough.

He wanted to be able to say that it wasn't a judgement, but it would've been a lie.

His jealousy was so twined through him it was a challenge to simply let the boy exist, after seeing what he'd done, and hearing what he'd wanted to do.

He'd respected Bella's wishes...of late. He'd given her space, but he'd also followed Jun, heard his thoughts, and begrudgingly found him to be a generally decent person.

But still one with all the normal human appetites.

Bella's appetite for food had disappeared. She pushed her plate away, and Edward frowned, this time visibly. He'd upset her.

"Bella," he said, "I want to be part of your life in whatever way you'll...tolerate me. I don't want to patronize you with small talk, or pry, or upset you in anyway, but I also don't want to pretend that your life isn't happening."

This only made her angrier.

"My life—" she started, "yes, is happening now...because you wouldn't let it before." She was breathing heavily, face still fully flushed.

His innards turned inside out, the possibility of what had happened between her and Jun so much greater in scope.

"If...that's what you want, and it makes you happy, then I want that for you," he said, very softly, and very genuinely. If he couldn't make her happy as a human, then maybe someone else could. What he felt didn't matter, he told himself. His body rejected all these lofty notions, torso contorting
against his mind's wishes.

Bella stood abruptly, the tears that wobbled in her eyes were a shock to them both.

"Bella—"

"No," she said, "This was a mistake. I need to go."

She turned, not bothering to push in her chair, grabbing her bag and leaving as quickly as she could.

Edward stood too, still and horrified. He didn't know what to make of what had happened.

Bella kept walking. She had class, but she didn't care. Knew she couldn't focus on it even if she did go. She let the tears flow freely, keeping her head down, walking away from the building, heading north towards the large green space near the campus centre. There were some benches and trees there that offered some damp privacy. It would be easier to think there, she told herself, away from the sounds of people.

He said he wanted her to be happy, even if that meant being with Jun. Was she imagining things, or had he just shoved her into the arms of another man? Told her to be happy with him?

Did the idea of her being like him revolt Edward that much? He'd said he wanted her, but...the balance of his actions, of his words, spoke against this.

She sat down against a tall linden tree, one that still clung stubbornly to its late yellow leaves. If she curled her legs up against her stomach, things hurt less. Her insides weren't so pained.

She let the tears come, but silently, trying to make sense of the mess she found herself in.

There wasn't any doubt about her feelings for Edward. They hadn't changed.

His feelings and intentions remained an enigma. She gave up trying to wrangle them into sense, and turned her attention to Jun.

She felt things for him that went far beyond friendship. The attraction was mutual, as far as she could tell. There was no question there. And yet, neither of them could, as he put it, afford commitment. Obviously, Jun had no idea how true that was.

She would disappear from the human world soon enough. Despite what Edward wanted.

It would be so easy to tip over into what Jun wanted. To be simply...human, for a time. To have the experience she knew her next life would rob her of.

Edward's words felt like enough of a push to send her toppling over into this.

"Fine," she mumbled to herself, wiping her face, "if you want me to be human, then I will be."

"Bella?"

She looked up startled. She hadn't heard anyone approach.

It was Marie, out for a run, sneakers light over the dirt paths. "Hey, what's up?"

Bella stood, shaking her head, glancing at her watch. She'd been sitting there for almost an hour.

"That bad, huh?" Marie said,

"Something up with Jun?" Marie asked, bending over, stretching out her legs.

"No," Bella said, pulling her bag onto her back, dusting off the bottom. "I saw my ex."

"Oh," Marie said, standing. Understanding. Yes, he did have quite a pull. "Want some vapid distraction?"

Bella chuckled through her near tears. "Ssure, that I could use."

"Perfect, let me tell you about all the boys I never dated, but wanted to, and definitely, probably, should not have."

She launched into what felt like a well rehearsed soap opera that had Bella laughing and wiping her eyes for entirely different reasons. By the time they reached the dorm, her own problems had shrunk a little, and it was easier to stuff away the confusion and unhappiness that seemed to be her relationship with Edward.

It helped that Jun had messaged.

"Thanks Marie," she said softly, when her friend pulled her into a hug.

"You're welcome. Try to remember that some of us only dream of having such problems," she added, turning and waving airily.

Oh Marie, if only you knew, Bella thought, but didn't wish her ill for it.

*Movie tonight?* Jun's message read.

She didn't care what kind, but a distraction sounded perfect. No morbid ruminations over Pamela tonight. No.

*Great—when and where?* She typed back.

When the knock came at her door close to seven, she opened it, finding herself pulled into a very warm, and strong set of arms. Jun's lips found hers so easily, and she returned the pressure of his kiss.

"Whoa," he said, smiling. "Remind me to ask you out to movies more."

She laughed, and blushed too, not quite comfortable. This is normal, she told herself. She'd been so steeped in the supernatural, being perfectly human, perfectly...normal...seemed wrong.

Maybe this separation was more right than she'd imagined.

The squeeze of guilt didn't leave her for long, and as they drove the short way to a small theatre off campus, she made herself ask. "Jun, you know how you said you wanted this to be...what it is?"

"Yeah," he said, glancing over at her at a stoplight. He didn't look nervous, but she wondered if he was.

"Does that include things being...complicated. Emotionally. With my ex?"

Once the words were out, she sat, hands tense on the sides of her seat.
Jun pulled over, flipping off the ignition. "What's up?" he asked, pulling her hand into his.

"How much do you want to know?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Whatever you want me to know," he said softly, but his eyebrows were dipped together in worry.

He felt things for her. Far more than he had admitted to himself. He knew things were complicated for her, somehow. But how, or how much was uncertain.

"Edward and I agreed to be apart for a year, and to reevaluate our feelings then," Bella said.

Jun blew out a whistle.

"Really?" he said.

"Yes," Bella breathed out.

"OK," he said, "so you've got me on a timer." He looked at her, a playful curl in his lips.

"Not a joke."

"No," he agreed, "it isn't. I get that you have a timeline, though. So?"

"That doesn't bother you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Not at all."

She frowned a little, thinking about this.

"I meant it, Bella. Whatever this is...is. This beautiful...and potentially crazy thing." He hooked his fingers around the last words.

"Maybe beautiful and broken," she mumbled, more acerbically than she meant.

He laughed, a healthy whuff of sound. "Sure," he said, but then became more seriously. "We both have constraints we're operating under."

She looked at him. "Will you really...marry the person your parents pick for you?"

All his humour was gone. He nodded, angling his face away from her. "Yeah."

She nodded, just as solemn.

After a moment, Bella said, "You realize that we're buying present happiness with future pain, right?"

He raised an eyebrow at this, and said, "would you prefer we didn't?" He wouldn't show it, but his heart felt like it was stuttering, waiting for her answer.

She thought for a bit. "No, I want to."

"Carpe diem," Jun said, and leaned over to kiss her.

When it ended, Bella asked, "Carpe—?"

"Carpe diem. Latin. Means seize the day."
"You know Latin?"

"No," he said, his chuckle self-deprecatory. "It's a thing from one of my mom's favorite movies. Some teacher chick flick."

Bella snorted out a laugh at this description. The heaviness broken, Jun started the car, and they drove onto the movie theatre.

It was so much easier, at the end of the night, to tuck away the worry, hearing his soft whisper of "carpe diem," in her ear before they kissed.

Seize the day, she told herself. So long as we're the ones seizing it, why not?

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A/N for 2018-06-11: After the bonfire last week, I'd be lying to say I'm not cringing, waiting to see what comes in via comments on this chapter, but at the same time I'm kinda going: ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB & FlamingMaple on FanFiction.net
Emmett didn't normally walk her to practise, so Bella was momentarily dislocated, opening the door to his large presence.

"Oh," she said, "hey."

"Hey yourself, Bella, you ready?"

"Almost," she mumbled, tucking a few last things into her bag. "Wasn't expecting you." Then she looked at him, suddenly tense, hand paused midway between desk and bag. "Is something—?"

"No," he answered quickly. "Everything's fine," he said, more calmly. His shifting body language told her otherwise.

"Emmett?" Bella asked, eyebrows curved down meaningfully.

His mouth twisted. He sighed. "I have a note for you."

This only confused her more.

"A note?"

"From Edward."

"Seriously?"

"Said he would only do this once." He said, holding out a cream-coloured envelope in his hand.

She felt like she was back in grade school again, passing notes between….friends, but she took it. The paper felt thick, and smooth under her fingers.

Emmett was leaning against the jamb, holding the door open. "You need a minute, or something?"

"Sure," she said, feeling a flutter of nerves. She thought, for a moment, that perhaps it would be better to wait until later.

Curiosity got the better of her though, and she slipped the flap open. The letter was handwritten, beautifully, his writing curled over itself in a precise slant. It read:

Dear Bella,

I've offended you again, and for this, I'm sorry. I'm not sure what I might do to repair the hurt I've given, but I hope you'll tell me.

My only desire is for you to be happy. With, or without me. You know my heart in this matter, but I will respect your wishes.

I hope that we can resume seeing each other, as friends, when you're ready.

Edward.
She had so many feelings tumbling around her midsection, she jumped when Emmett rapped at the door.

"Ready?" he asked.

She cleared her throat. "Yeah." She wrenched the door open again. "Thanks."

Emmett's face scrunched up in confusion as his eyes swept the space. He walked past her, not asking to come in. Bella looked at him, uncertain of this strange behaviour.

"You have anything with a transmitter in it?" he asked softly.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I...uh, don't think so."

"You're sure?"

She shrugged, "why?"

"Because I thought I just heard one. Coming from your room."

He was looking around, sniffing inaudibly, when he stopped abruptly. Tucked behind the lip of the desk was a tiny box, about half the size of a dime. He didn't move it, but backed away, his finger to his lips.

"Oh," he said softly, "there it is. You got one of those fancy new RFI luggage tags."

He moved his hands towards her, mouthing "play along."

"Oh right. That one, um—"

"Edward bought for you," Emmett finished.

"Right," Bella said lamely, looking at him in confusion.

Emmett jerked his head towards the door, motioning for her to keep silent as they went.

When they were a good ten minutes away from the dorm, he pulled out his phone. His voice was so low, she could only see that he was talking, his muttering rapid and sibilant.

"Emmet?" she asked. "What was that all about?"

"There's a bug in your room," he said, hanging up the phone. "Jasper'll be over in a bit, check it out. Get rid of it. Make sure there aren't any others."

"A bug?"

"Yeah. A good one too."

"A bug, as in—"

"Yes, as in someone wanted to hear your conversations. Or anything else that's going on in your room."

He didn't comment when she blushed a vibrant red.

She felt sick to her stomach.
He waited for her to pace a bit around the path they were on.

"You OK?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Who would want to bug my room?"


Great.

Just great.

"Ohh," she groaned, "will Edward—?"

"Find and freak out? Yup," Emmett said, and shrugged. It wasn't like it could be helped around a mind reader. "Don't worry about it Bella."

"Sure," she said, utterly unconvincing, still pacing.

"Do you want to go to practise?"

No, she thought. I want to scream and beat something to a pulp.

"Right. Practise it is." She didn't want to go back to her room.

Their relay run on the indoor track was all work, and very little play, and when their time was up, the queasy and uncertain feeling remained.

She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised to find Alice waiting for her outside the change room. "So," she said. "Ready for our sleepover?"

"Sleepover," Bella said, turning this word over in her mind.

"Yes," Alice said, slipping her arm around Bella's shoulders, as Sam waved, approaching, "You forgot?"

"Must have," Bella said, trying to ask Alice a silent question with her perplexed features. Sam was too close for open ones.

"You walking back, Bella?" Sam asked, smiling politely at Alice.

"Sorry," Alice said. "Stealing her for the night. Can we give you a ride back?"

"No, no," Sam said, waving her hand, "I'm good."

"I'll walk you home, Sam," Leo called, grinning.

He had jogged ahead of Dave and Jun, who were trying to whip their towels at each other. When they caught up with him, Jun slipped Bella's hand into his.

To her very great credit, Alice did not react. At all.

"Wanna grab dinner tomorrow?" he asked Bella quietly, so, in theory, only she could hear.

"Yeah," Bella said. "Talk in the morning?"

"Sure," he said, then leaned down and kissed her goodbye, this gesture very public, and very clear.
When Bella, Alice and Emmett climbed into the car, Alice muttered an inaudible "don't" to Emmett, seeing him ruminating on what he'd seen between Bella and Jun. "It'll only make things miserable for the rest of us." She knew he loved to bug Edward when he could, but this was beyond the bounds of all fair play.

"Spill the beans, Alice," Bella said.

"Just the one bug," she said. "No idea where it's transmitting to. Jasper's checked the rest of the area as much as he can, and he'll sweep the other areas you go to tomorrow."

"I meant the hijacking," Bella clarified.

Alice just looked at her. "Do you want to spend the night there?"

Bella's stomach tipped sideways. No, not really. But…

"Will...Edward be there?" she asked quietly.

Emmett rolled his eyes.

"No," Alice said, refraining from adding "of course not." Sometimes, Bella was just obtuse.

"If we can stop by, though, I need to get some things—"

"Please," Alice said. "You think I'm unprepared?" She rolled her eyes melodramatically.

"Schemer," Bella said, but kindly.

"Totally," Alice agreed. "You're so resistant to wardrobe upgrades, I've had to bug your room to get you away from it, so I can slowly inoculate you against poor fashion. Awesome. My plan is working."

At least Alice could still make her laugh.

She hadn't been to their home yet, and she felt mildly nervous, pulling up to a surprisingly modest house on a quiet street near campus. It featured, as the others did around it, a large yard, the age of the neighbourhood predating the postage stamp lots of modern urban planning. Even in the wet dark of October, Bella could easily see the tall Douglas firs that dominated the front, and the large bare reach of the ancient Maple behind it.

It looked to be slightly newer than their house in Forks, though clearly still a centenarian. Its sturdy lines were capped with the distinct inverted triangles and cut-outs of the Edwardian era.

Bella snorted out a laugh.

"Something funny?" Alice asked, eyebrows pulled together as they headed up the stairs.

"No," Bella said quickly.

Alice frowned. "Sometimes, not looking at your future sucks."

Bella smiled, "Sorry, it's just...this house is Edwardian. Isn't it?"

Alice blinked, and then laughed, opening the front door.

The inside matched Bella's expectations. Dark wood framed the deep colours of the entranceway, the
high and bright lights illuminating the elegant staircase.

"So different," Bella murmured, thinking of the bright and open house in Forks.

"Didn't have time to renovate," Alice said. "But it's fairly quiet, and the houses around us aren't occupied." She pointed out the various rooms on the main floor. "Kitchen's stocked. Let me show you your room."

"My room?"

"Told you I was prepared. Figured you might need a space if you had a party animal living next door or something."

Or something. Like a vampire bugging her room.

Sure.

Alice, at least, hadn't gone overboard. It looked a lot like a dorm room. A bed, a desk, a dresser. The closet was small. Perhaps, Bella thought, that would have forced Alice to reign herself in.

But, no. It was packed.

"Here," Alice said, pointing to the dresser and moving her hand from the top to the bottom of it. "Should have everything you need."

Bella nodded, taking in the space, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"You're welcome," Alice answered, sitting down beside her. "You OK?"

Bella nodded again, "Where's...Edward?"

"Out," Alice answered, avoiding giving a precise location.

"Alice," Bella asked, "is he standing outside?"

Alice huffed out a breath. "And if he is?"

Bella blushed. "It's your house," she said softly, her hand gesturing widely, encompassing more than just Alice, "I'm sure there's enough space for us to be apart without him being...inconvenienced."

Alice rolled her eyes. Edward had been such a pain in the ass of late, she'd been thrilled that Bella's night here would be pretext for him not to be.

"Is that you giving my brother an inch?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

It was Bella's turn to smile. The confused and large feelings were never far beneath the surface, but it was good to be with Alice. To be able to be open about what was going on.

Bella shook her head a bit. "It just feels mean, not to," she said softly.

She felt mean in a lot of other ways too, but she shoved those feelings away.

"Alright," Alice said, standing. "Why don't you have a shower and determine what offends you least clothes-wise, while I go see about finding you something to eat?"
"Thanks," Bella said, and when Alice closed the door, leaned forward and pulled open a dresser drawer. She breathed out a sigh of relief. She'd imagined silk, or lace, or god-knows-what-else, but found only plain cotton jersey pajamas.

"I'm not an idiot!" Alice called from downstairs.

Bella laughed, and after pulling them out, walked to the bathroom.

Once she was showered, and dressed in clean clothes, Bella felt much more herself. She walked downstairs slowly, wanting to give Edward fair warning if he meant to keep his distance.

In the kitchen, Alice was flipping through a magazine, seated at a cozy kitchen table. At the space across from her was a dome-shaped metal cover, either side flanked by cutlery. The smell was enticing.

"Hungry?"

Bella's stomach growled appreciatively.

Alice tilted her head towards the open space, and Bella sat down. Taking the cover off, she found a plate of delicately prepared ravioli. Her first bite only confirmed what her nose knew. "Wow," she said, "I didn't know you cooked."

"Don't," Alice said, flipping a page. "Edward does, though."

Oh.

"I'll pass along the compliment." Alice smiled, and then looked over the pages at Bella, as if to say, I told you so.

Bella shrugged and ate.

"So," Alice finally said. "I'd be all for girl talk, but seeing as we're not alone, I'm kinda restricted."

Bella smirked. "What do you want to know?" she asked, and pulled out her phone from her robe pocket. She waved it at Alice.

Alice cocked an eyebrow at her, and pulled out her phone.

So, you and Jun?
she typed.

Bella blew out a breath, looking at her. Good, she wrote back.

More eye-rolling from Alice. And? was the response.

Bella couldn't help but think it would be so much easier to just talk about this.

But not with Edward listening outside.

Or hearing his sister's thoughts.

She tentatively typed in: we're seeing each other. Very casually.

People who are casually seeing each other aren't kissing the way Emmett described.

Bella felt her face flush a deep mauve.

It's not serious, she typed, hitting the send button with insistence.
Alice just looked at her incredulously, hands open and spread out from her shoulders.

*He knows I can't commit to anything serious. He can't either.*

*Why?* Alice tapped into her phone.

This should provoke a reaction, Bella thought, raising her eyebrows as she typed a reply. *Because his parents will arrange a marriage for him.*

Alice accepted this, shrugging. *Fair enough.*

It took Bella a minute to realize that Alice wasn't being droll, she'd just lived long enough to remember when it was commonplace, or had seen it elsewhere.

Alice's next question arrived. *I know you wanted more with Edward. Are you getting what you wanted?*

Sometimes Bella wondered if the Cullens just dropped all their filters when she was around. This felt like one of those times.

"No," she managed to say through her renewed blush. She wasn't ready for that.

And she was done talking about this.

"Want to play makeup or something with me Alice?" she asked lightly.

Alice sat up. "Really?" She was smiling brightly.

"Beats the third degree," Bella mumbled, lifting up her phone while smiling.

"Stay right there!" Alice squeaked.

She was gone and back in seconds. "Hands on the table," she said, pulling out a nail kit.

Bella obliged, noting Alice didn't ask what colour she'd like. She admired her skill, not for the first time, watching her apply the layers of dusty rose expertly.

"How's the tome going?" Alice asked, wanting to ease some of the tension she could still feel wafting her way.


"I don't know how you can stand it. It was reprehensible when it was published, but now—"

"Not a guide to dating and romance, Alice. Just a classic." What was everyone's problem with *Pamela*? "The way people have reacted to it, you'd think I was attracted—"

"To controlling men with potentially unhealthy motives?"

Bella looked at her darkly. "Or perhaps they see me in that role?" She kept her voice light, but there was a bitterness there. "Wouldn't want to corrupt anyone's virtue," she grumbled.

Alice let her gaze meet Bella's, still applying the polish with precision. She was about to say something, when Jasper's sudden presence in the room made Bella jump.

"Sorry," he said, seeing it. He sat down, moving more slowly than he needed to. "We found three
"more," he said, "two in your house in Forks, and one outside."

Dinner squirmed uneasily in her stomach.

"Any clues who left them?" Bella asked, fairly certain of the answer.

"Another vampire scent we don't know. An old trail." He lifted his shoulders in apology. He would have liked to give her more information.

It should have shocked her more, she knew, to know she was being listened to. Surveilled. That Charlie was as well.

"Do you think," she asked softly, "it's the Volturi, Alice?" She swallowed. Was her time up? Her opportunity...gone?

Alice shook her head. "If it is, it isn't coming from the top." She had finally put the polish away, her eyes taking on that glassy look that her family understood to take in more than the physical space in front of her.

"And Victoria?"

Alice shook her head again. "She's...indecisive. I see places, but I don't know where. Last minute decisions. Nothing firm. She must know I'm watching."

"And Charlie?" Bella asked. "Is he—?"

"He's safe. I don't see anything happening to him. Unless," she said, "you want to know—?"

"No," Bella said, shaking her head, "I don't." She reminded herself why she had set these parameters, and then looked at Jasper. "Did you see him? When you were there?"

"Just as he left," he said kindly. "He seemed happy."

Bella nodded, still worried, but trying to let it subside. Edward wanted her human. This is what humans did. They worried. Then they let it go. There was nothing to be gained by it.

She needed to just go on living her life.

While Vampires bugged her home, and listened to her and her father's intimate conversations.

Alice tapped her finger on Bella's now dry fingernails. "Done," she said, cocking her head to the side. "You look kinda tired."

"I am. Thank you, both, for...everything. I know my being in your lives complicates things. A lot."

She had stood, and Alice had too, pulling her into an abrupt hug. "You're family. Don't ever forget that. We take care of our own."

Bella nodded again, the lump in her throat keeping other words from coming out.

"I want you to have this time, Bella, and we'll make sure you do. To be human, and do all the things you want to."

Bella said quiet good nights, and then found her way back upstairs. The bed was softer than her one in residence, and the duvet heavy and warm. The smells of the house, and this room, were so familiar, so comforting, even in their newness to the Cullens, that she found herself missing, keenly,
Edward's presence, and more specifically, his touch.

She flopped over on the mattress, curling her legs up. Knowing he was close just made the wanting worse. All she would have to do was whisper his name.

She took the fresh memory of Alice's temperature, and reminded herself what it had felt like to kiss him, to touch his face, and to feel his hands on her.

It had felt like wanting.

Always wanting.

And often, not wanted, she reminded herself.

Then she remembered their trip last spring, and the utterly painful rejection she'd felt then.

"No," she told herself, as if this would dislodge this wanting, and tossed to her other side, mind tossing itself into a restless sleep.

A/N for 2018-06-18: Hope you're still enjoying this. A reminder, guest comments won't be posted, but I do read them. Tx!

~ Erin

@ErinAffleckTarbuck on FaceBook

@EAffleck on Twitter
“I swear you get more energetic every time I see you,” Tory said, while stretching her neck from one side to the other, her hand tilting her head to the angle she needed. Her movement was hindered by the brace on her right hand.

Jun grinned. He’d gotten there early. He was antzy, worked up, and excited to spend the evening with Bella. Without teammates . . . or roommates.

“Oh,” he said, still jittery even in the hot water.

“All that meth,” Tory grumbled good naturedly.

Jun gave her a shy, and sly grin, his knee still bouncing with energy.

“Let me guess,” she said. “Big date with the big B?”

He nodded. “And you? How’re things there?”

He wasn’t sure if it was just the pink dawn light creeping in, or if she was blushing. “Trying boys out for a change,” she said, almost sheepishly.

His eyebrows went straight up. “Really? I thought…” and he had, but he wasn’t sure how to put it politely.

“I only did girls?” she finished for him, face neutral, daring him to react.

He didn’t say anything, just kept looking, mute with uncertainty.

“There are two that I’m looking at,” she said matter of factly. “They both seem very nice and very interested.”

Most men, Jun was fairly certain, would find Tory their type. Not his, no, but she was beautiful, certainly, and her athleticism only enhanced her appeal.

“And?” he asked, finding his voice again.

“I’m keeping it casual,” she said. “Slow. I think we might work up to going for drinks in a couple of weeks.”

“Weeks?”

“These things take time,” Tory said, drumming her nails on the edge of the hot tub. “Speaking of which,” she glanced at the clock, “I gotta go. Class to get to. See ya.” She waved, hopping lightly out of the water. “Good...luck tonight.” Turning back, her head tilted slightly to the side, she added, “I’m assuming you’re looking for luck in one word form or another, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “No kissing and telling.”

“Sure.” She winked, waved goodnaturedly, and walked away.

She was right. He was hoping very much that things would progress beyond where they were, but he suspected they wouldn’t. That Bella needed more time.
He would wait.

Bella smiled, when she woke up, despite being momentarily dislocated in space. She’d picked up her phone, checking for the message she’d heard it buzz for.

*I’m cooking tonight. How spicy is OK?* - J

*Leave me some taste buds.* - B

*Done*, his reply read, *pick you up at six*.

*Looking forward to it.* - B

The Cullen’s house was eerily quiet, after the noise of her last months in residence. Not wanting to put her workout clothes from the night before back on, Bella tentatively slid open another one of the drawers. Again, relief washed through her. Simple clothes.

She went downstairs, entered the kitchen, then came to a stop. Sitting on the kitchen island was her backpack. She hadn’t brought it with her.

“Figured you’d want to go straight to class.” Alice appeared suddenly, leaning over and lifting something out of the oven. “And that you might need to eat first.”

“Thank you,” Bella said, looking at the beautifully prepared food.

“Not me you need to thank,” Alice said pertly. “But I’ll pass it along.”

“For everything, I meant,” Bella said, wrapping her arms around her.

“You’re welcome.” Alice sighed. “And I want it noted that I provided clothes I knew you would wear. Not the ones I actually want you to wear.” She pouted a bit. “See? Respect.”

“And your sacrifice is both noted and appreciated.”

“And enjoy it, while it lasts, cuz that’s all gone when you’re changed.”

“Fair enough,” Bella mumbled through an appreciative bite of food. They chatted more easily over breakfast, Bella making Alice laugh with her self deprecating tales about her team’s practises. She was almost reluctant to leave, when the time came, but her classes drew her into her day, and she happily sunk herself into the world of learning.

Jun’s rapid knock at her door pulled her from her math text, and she dropped it on her toe as she stood. Hissing in a breath, she hopped to the door, but not fast enough.

“OK little pig, gettin’ ready to huff and puff and blow your house down here,” he muttered. “You nappin’ on me Swan?”

“No,” she called, tryin to massage the painful feeling out of her toes. “Just being really uncoordinated,” she explained, hopping to the door and pulling it open..

“Trying to do yoga or something?” he asked, watching her standing on one leg, the other brought up in an awkward angle. “Cuz you got that pose all wrong.”

Bella chuckled. “No, I just dropped a textbook on my foot.”

Jun shook his head, his low, rumbly laugh joining hers. He slipped his arm under hers though, and
helped her stay up while she wiggled her toes and made sure nothing was broken. It wouldn’t be the first time.

When she had two feet on the ground, he leaned down and kissed her. “How was your sleepover?”

“Oh,” she said a little awkwardly. “Um, good.”

Just hanging out with a bunch of vampires.

“Any plans beyond dinner tonight?” he asked, a little tentatively.

“No. Why?”

Jun lifted his eyebrows at this question, but answered. “Just wondering if I get to keep you for the night.” He took her hands, now free, pulling her waist close to his. “Or if anyone else is kidnapping you.”

Oh, Bella thought.

“No,” she blushed, trying to avoid direct eye contact, realizing what he was asking. “No planned abductions tonight.”

“Good,” he said, and kissed her again.

Bella pulled away when one of her floormates walked by, giving several loud ‘whoots!’ as he went.

“Come on,” Jun said. “My place is yahoo free, unlike yours,” he added, loud enough for the rest of the hall to hear.

His place, was, as promised empty, save for them.

He had most of the dinner ready to go, and Bella sat, watching him work in the kitchen. While he cooked, they chatted about the pleasant, and untroubling details of their courses.

“Not sure,” he said, when she asked if he was going home for Thanksgiving. “You?”

“Definitely,” she said. “I miss my dad.”

“I bet,” he said, turning back to her, gesturing that she should move to the table. “First year is hard. Being away from home.”


When Bella took a bite of the bulgogi, her eyes went wide. “Wow, that’s really good.”

“Good . . . you should be. I called my mom for pointers.”

“I’m flattered. Did she suspect why?”

“If she did, she didn’t say anything.” He winked.

Bella didn’t frown exactly, but her face showed the shift in her thoughts. “Do they...know, that you’re seeing people?”

“People?” he asked, his eyebrows up.

“Not right now,” she blushed. “But I mean, you know, that you’ve dated—that you’re…” She
wasn’t sure how to put it.

“Sleeping with anything that breathes?” he asked casually.

Bella felt her blood drain out of her face.

“I’m joking!” he said, alarmed, and then relieved, watching the blood reverse direction. “Sorry,” he added, reaching over to take her hand. Then, very seriously, he answered her question. “No, I don’t talk to them about it. I’m sure they’re aware I’ve dated, been with people. I suspect they’ve avoided mentioning it because it makes it less real for them.” His expression became quizzical, and then concerned. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” Bella said quickly, the blush returning. “Not at all. I was just curious.” She wondered how many people he’d been with—in all the different meanings that the phrase supplied.

“It’s not because I don’t feel things for you, Bella,” he said softly. “If that’s what you were wondering about.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Not at all.”

“You told your dad? Or your mom?”

This made her blush again. “No,” she said, “I haven’t. I’m not sure what I would say. Figured I would just let it be.” She watched him, seeing if she could detect any unease on his face. If there was any there, it was well disguised. She raised her eyebrows, wondering at his response.

“I’m OK with us being what we are,” he said. “More than OK.”

They smiled at each other, and then turned their attention to their food again.

When dinner was finished, he pulled her over to the couch, tucking her into the easy curve of his arm. “So, you ready to find out where all my latin comes from?”

“Yes,” she said, watching his eyes sparkle.

He jumped up and pressed a button on the DVD player. “Oh!” Bella said. “I think I must’ve seen part of this.” When the title scrolled up the screen, she knew she had.

“Awesome title,” she whispered.

Jun snickered. He couldn’t help it. “Dead Poets Society?”

“Sure,” Bella said. “I’m partial to several dead writers. Poets included.”

He shrugged goodnaturedly. “Well,” he said, “you can keep me company down memory lane.” He’d sat back beside her, again tucking her into the curve of his body.

She was thinking about how comfortable it was there. Neither too warm, or too cold, but pleasantly cozy. She could feel his laughs through her own ribs, and loved the syncopated beat of their laughter together, shaking each other’s bodies.

It wasn’t normal for her to cry during movies, but this one tugged at her heart strings. The protagonist, so hopeful, so full of promise, and now dead. Worse yet, by his own hand, forced by what he saw as no meaningful choices.

She was thinking of Jun. And of herself. Of the powers that had far greater play over their lives than
what they each wanted.

When he turned, and saw her wiping at her eyes, he hugged her closer and then pulled her up onto his lap. It seemed only natural, being closer, that their lips should be too. These kisses were slow, and gentle, and utterly unhurried.

These kisses grew, at first tentative, and then flowered into bolder explorations by each others’ hands. She lost track of time, happily.

When his hand moved to slide her jeans downwards though, Bella stopped him with the firm grip of her fingers. “No,” she said softly.

Jun stopped, pulling his fingers back. “OK,” he whispered, kissing her still, “but how,” he breathed, returning his lips to hers, and then murmuring the next words into her neck, “can I worship your body with all these clothes on?”

She laughed, a little nervously. “You’ll just have to be creative, I guess.”

“Mm,” he said, feeling her hands on his neck. “I can do creative.” He slid her onto her side on the wide couch, not breaking the contact of their kiss.

The acquaintance of their lips continued, and where Bella had always been the one to pursue, and be pushed back, she was now reaching the edge of her known territory.

His hands moved under her shirt, admiring the curve of her back, her ribs, and then nearly brushed the softer arches of her breasts.

It felt amazing.

It still felt amazing when they travelled down the landscape of her body, Jun tucking one under the waistband of her jeans.

Then she started, pushing his hand away.

“Trust me,” he whispered. “I want to make you feel good.” This was said between the space of their lips, his body half over hers.

She couldn’t dispute what she felt—all the desire she’d held onto, that had been so repeatedly refuted. She still wanted it.

She still wanted it—but with Edward.

“No,” she said, pushing him back.

He held his ground. “Why?” he whispered.

She was embarrassed to feel tears slip onto her cheeks. “It’s not right,” she said, shaking her head.

“What isn’t?” Jun asked, voice still soft, but unwavering. He hadn’t moved yet.

“I want to—” she admitted, “but it’s not fair—”

“Oh no,” he said, shaking his head. “No expectations. We made a deal,” then he leaned down and kissed her again. “Trust me,” he said, and his hand resumed its prior path.

“No,” she said, and more firmly pushed him away.
He stopped, and shifting his weight, brought her to rest with her back against his stomach. “OK,” he said softly, brushing her neck with his lips.

While she accepted the acquiescence of his hands, she could feel that other parts of his body were not ready to be dismissed.

He didn’t like the small, worried v between her eyebrows.

“What’s up?” he asked.

She blushed in response.

This he loved, watching her feelings practically dance across her face.

“Sorry, I know you want...more.”

“No,” he said, brushing his hands over her hair. “I meant it. Whatever this is, I’m down with that.” Then he grinned broadly. “But yes, I would like more, if you want it.”

He was glad to see her body relax, shoulders melting back.

“Speaking of honest desire,” he said. “I’d love it if you spent the night.”

She tensed again, asking in a small voice, “To sleep?”

“What, no cuddling?” Jun asked, face full of mock horror.

She relaxed again.

“Literalist,” Bella muttered, giving his arm a playful punch.

It was sweet, later, her body coiled up in bed with him, his arm folded over her, breath in her hair, and the gentle rhythms of their hearts sweeping them into sleep.

Outside, a set of keen ears took in this natural conclusion to the day, and sped back their intelligence to their red-eyed mistress.
A/N for 2018-06-28 - I feel like I am dragging my butt to the finish line at school. One more day. Enjoy!

In the kitchen, Sue and Charlie were snickering over the turkey.

"No!" Bella heard Sue hiss. "How can you possibly do that?"

"Trust me, it works," he mumbled, and then she heard Sue's startled, "wow, it does!"

"Like an old married couple," Jacob hissed, near her ear. "Told'ya!"

"Sorry," she whispered back, "is that wolf talk for 'I-told-you-so'?"

Jacob chuckled, but raised his eyebrows towards the kitchen. "Weird huh?"

Bella smiled. It was sweet, is what it was.

Sue and Charlie.

She guessed she should have seen it coming. They'd spent more time than usual together over the summer, Charlie helping out where he could.

Seth and Leah were engrossed in some sort of competitive game that involved checkers, and a pack of cards. She hadn't puzzled out the rules yet, but it involved slaps and what sounded like a lot of swearing.

"Up for a walk?" Jacob asked. "I think we have some time before dinner."

Bella hesitated. She desperately wanted out of the house, but didn't want to offend anyone. It'd felt...crowded, since she got home. Today had felt especially so, and she'd been cooped up for most of the day, helping with getting things ready.

"Um, sure," she said, flicking her eyes at his face when he half-turned, wondering if he wanted to do more than go for a walk.

The cold air hit her like a shock, but Jacob walked out unperturbed into the frost November night. He was, she could tell, sniffing quietly, moving his head casually around, scenting for anything dangerous.

Bella kept walking, but carefully, suddenly nervous. "Something wrong?" she asked quietly.

"No," Jacob said, but caught a look at her face. "Sorry—just habit. There're a few...odours that are expected. Just want to make sure I don't miss anything that isn't."

Of course, she thought. She wondered if the Cullens had spoken to the pack at all, warned them about the others who had been by. Or, vice versa.

"Have there been any...unexpected odours?" she asked, borrowing his phrasing.
He snorted out a laugh. "Wouldn't that be fun," he said, a little bitterly. "No," he answered her. "On your end?" he asked. "Or do they not tell you?" This was most definitely bitter.

"There were," she said, not liking this side of Jacob, "but they don't know who."

"Fricking leeches," Jacob muttered.

Bella tensed, hearing it.

Jacob frowned, looking at her. "That bothers you," he said, "still."

She nodded. "They're...my friends, Jake," she said softly.

He didn't say anything, but let his eyebrows rise up, and then fall. He didn't want a fight. She was going back to school tomorrow, and he wasn't going to ruin their night together. They'd seen each other the day before, but it all felt so fleeting, so short.

He put his arm around her, hoping it was cold enough that this could just pass as friendliness.

She pulled away though, leaving a clear inch between them.

They hadn't had much time alone, and he hadn't asked if she was seeing anyone, but now he wondered.

Over the months, they'd e-mailed back and forth, she with newsy bits, and he with more jokes than anything. Nothing substantial, and nothing that ever mentioned the deep undercurrents that swirled beneath their public lives.

She was biting her lip.

Crap.

He'd upset her.

"Sorry," he said, "it's just...cold," he offered lamely.

Bella looked up at him from under half-lidded eyes. She knew better, but didn't call him on it. Instead, she said, "I'm...seeing someone."

There weren't words for the feelings that Jacob felt.

"Someone," he managed to repeat.

Oh no, he groaned internally, not—

"Someone I met at school," she said softly. "I haven't told Charlie yet. It's..." she searched for words. "Fairly new."

Jacob supposed he should say something. Polite. "Oh," he managed. What he really wanted to confirm, though, was that it was someone normal.

"He's, um..."

"American," Bella said, smirking a bit to herself, knowing exactly what he was wondering. "Human too."
Jacob closed his eyes in relief.

Then he wished it would be easier to simply be happy for her.

"Good for you," he made himself say.

A very vigorous, and new jealousy squiggled in his stomach, lashing about.

"Thanks, Jake," she said softly. She knew what that cost him.

They walked on a bit, their breath clouding in front of them. "How's your ex handling that?" he asked. He could only imagine.

Bella's shrug was less certain, as was her voice. "Haven't seen him much," she murmured.

"Really?" His surprise was genuine. He thought the Cullen creature wanted to keep her close with the pretense of friendship. He didn't doubt for a minute that he would give up on her. He knew, because he felt exactly the same way.

"He's...had trouble just being...friends," she said.

*A Jerk*, Jacob thought, conveniently ignoring his own conflicted feelings. Then he wondered what that 'trouble' might have entailed.

"He bothering you?" he asked, eyebrows furrowed.

"No," Bella said, shaking her head, "he wouldn't ever do that. It's just...complicated."

*Oh, like that then*, Jacob thought. His eyes stayed narrowed, as he thought about all of this.

They were far enough away from Charlie's that he was aware it was time to start walking back. He didn't like it, beginning to bring this private time with her to a close.

"We should turn around," he said, "unless you want to miss dinner?"

She nodded, reluctant too to go back to the more constrained conversation inside. Everyone but Charlie was in the know.

She wondered, seeing the way things were going with Sue, about how that might change, if ever. How much might he know one day?

She shook her head against this. It didn't matter. She would have to say her goodbyes likely long before that eventuality.

She knew she had until the end of next Summer, if Alice's last look was still accurate. She'd reminded Bella, the last time they'd seen each other, that there were no guarantees there either. People changed their minds. All the time. Even ancient vampires, like the Volturi. They could come tomorrow, and she would not be forewarned.

She would just be dead.

*No, she told herself, don't*. That road leads to asking Alice to look, and that just leads to all sorts of trouble, and right back into a skewed relationship.

There were still so many things she wanted to do, to know, to experience, all while she was human.
As they walked, her cheeks flamed in the dark between the well spaced street lamps, remembering her last night with Jun.

Or, morning, rather.

She'd woken, Jun beside her, and turned, facing him, admiring the way the diffuse light illuminated the curves of his chest, and the smooth imperfections of his skin. How novel, to wake beside someone who still slept, who didn't know she was awake. She didn't have long to enjoy the moment though, because he stirred, reaching out his arm to find her, pulling her to him.

His body's response left no room for ambiguity. She understood his desire, and the kiss at her neck, and his adventurous hands were vibrant with energy.

"Make love to me," he said, hands on her hips, bringing them to his.

She wanted to. Physically, it was so nearly instinctual.

But her brain, and her heart had other, very distinct ideas: and they were all loud "no's".

She pushed him back with a clear "no."

Jun took in a quick, and deep breath, and just as quickly, said "OK," pulling back. "Feel free to let me know if you change your mind." He grinned widely. He could see she was torn. He would wait.

She was worth waiting for.

Jacob's throat clearing interrupted this reverie. She'd gone silent for a bit.

"Has it...changed your mind?" Jacob asked, pulling her back to the present. "Finding someone...normal?"

She kept walking, but slowed her steps, looking at him with a small, and sad smile. Her words matched the tempo kept by her feet. "There's no...changing my mind, Jake. I can't."

It was Jacob's turn to slow his pace. But for very different reasons.

He fell back a step, breathing not as regular as it should be. A shake in his fists that spoke of feelings barely contained.

"There is always a choice," he said, through teeth almost clenched.

Bella didn't want to fight. Not tonight.

"If you say so, Jake." she offered quietly.

Jacob closed his eyes and swallowed. She was patronizing him. Fricking patronizing him.

He let it go. She wasn't going to be open to it now. He needed to try again another time.

Would there be another time? His worry asked him.

"When?" he asked.

They were facing each other, a block away from her house. "Next summer," she said softly.

"When?" he asked again.
"There isn't a date, yet," she replied, looking down, scuffing the toe of her boot through the grass.

His breath huffed out through his nose. The puff of vapour reminded her of an angry dragon.

Not in a funny way.

They were both feeling the weight of this sadness.

This loss.

"We should go in," Bella finally mumbled.

"Yeah," Jacob said, "you do that. I just need a few minutes." He was turning, walking towards the forest.

"Jake?" Bella called after him.

"Not now," he said. He kept walking.

When she opened the front door, the heat wrapped around her, smelling of turkey and cinnamon, and orange.

"Turkeys!" Charlie was saying goodnaturedly, shaking his head at Seth and Leah, "the lotta ya."

Seth's eyes flicked up, hearing her come in. He slid over towards her, asking where Jacob was with his eyes.

"He just needs a few minutes," she mumbled.

Seth nodded, returning to the kitchen.

Those minutes turned into a solid twenty. Then thirty.

They were about to eat without him, when he returned, a plastic bag of something in one hand.

"Whipping cream," he said, by way of explanation. "Thought the convenience store might have some."

"Thanks," Sue said, smoothing over this oddness.

Billy's eyes travelled between Bella and Jacob, and back again. His lips remained closed. Tightly.

Charlie avoided all of this, his empty stomach motivation enough to ignore the apparent awkwardness.

When the meal was done, and the last dishes away, Sue and Charlie made a prolonged goodbye at the door. Seth rolled his eyes behind his mother's back, blushing when Bella's look caught him at it. This made her smile, and not blush.

It was nice, watching someone else flush with discomfort she knew well.

Charlie didn't bother fussing over the last few things that needed doing. He figured there was time enough tomorrow. "Put your feet up," he said to Bella, when she went to tidy. "Come on," he said, waving her towards the couch.

They sank into its familiar, and springless depths.
"You and Jake OK?" He asked.

Her eyes darted to his face when he pretended to look away.

His cheeks were relaxed, eyes open enough, lacking the shrewdness she expected to find there.

"Yeah," she said, "I think so."

"Mmm," Charlie grunted. "He'd light the house on fire if the torch he was carrying for you was any bigger."

Bella's lips twisted, trying not to grin. She nodded. "We're OK, dad."

It wasn't anything approaching truth, but it would have to be. An honest explanation wasn't exactly available.

He grunted again, and the conversation lapsed, this time into the easier quiet of their togetherness.
"You're doing great," Jun said, holding out his hand to her, not pulling her up, but letting her use his arm as leverage.

The scramble up the awkward incline, slick with wet leaves and broken twigs, challenged her newfound fitness.

She remembered the last time she'd gone for a hike.

Then immediately wished she hadn't.

It had been cold then, too.

But it had been the far colder, and much deadlier creature encountered then, that made her shiver.

She wondered if she'd be just like that.

Red eyed. If she'd be able to hold her own. Not be a mortal menace.

"You OK?" Jun asked. The hue of her complexion, sliding down her face, couldn't be missed. "Maybe sit down for a bit." He patted a log, only moderately damp, and Bella did, mindful of the spreading seep in the seat of her jeans.

"Fine," she said, smiling weakly, "ready for a break though."

Silly, she told herself. There was nothing dangerous here. Just Jun.

And maybe Victoria, the little voice whispered. Or the Volturi. Come to check.

She silenced it. She'd made her choice. There was no pointing in second guessing it.

She looked at Jun, who was sitting down beside her, pulling a water bottle from his bag. He didn't want to fuss over her, knew well enough to see it had the opposite of the desired effect.

Bella pulled her own water bottle out, hiding the shiver of her memories in the busying of her fingers.

"Much farther?" she asked, still trying to occupy her thoughts with the present.

"About an hour," he said, watching her sideways, eyes on the flagrant moss at his feet, avoiding looking concerned.

She nodded, still paler than usual. "I'm ready."

"'K," he said, standing, taking her hand as she did. He held it for a moment, his fingers enjoying the subtle warmth of her palm, massaging it gently. Then, stepping closer, he leaned in to claim her lips in an equally soft kiss.

It took them the wider estimation of an hour to reach the crest. Neither minded the delay. Bella just wished she'd brought chapstick.
The view was, as Jun had promised, worth every slip and scrape.

He'd had to work to convince her to go.

"Hiking? In December?" she'd asked, more nervously than she liked.

"Pre-exam tradition," he'd assured her.

It was. He'd just never taken anyone with him.

"It's really beautiful there," he'd said softly. "Reminds me of you."

Her blush had, too. The Arbutus trees that clung to the rocky ridge also held their burnt and auburn bark, papery and thin. The colours matched the warmth of her cheeks, and the chestnut glints in her hair.

"Saturday's s'posed to be sunny," he'd assured her. "And if it's too much, we can turn back."

She hadn't wanted to disappoint him. Clearly, this meant something to him.

"You'll need to be patient," she told him. "I'm slow."

Now they were looking down at the emerald lake, its waters stilled by distance.

She said nothing. Jun's gaze and silence spoke of his own reverence for this place.

When he put his bag down, and began pulling crinkling packages from it, she allowed herself to sit beside him, comfortable with the absence of speech.

He offered her a sandwich, which she took with a smile and a quiet "thanks."

"You ready for exams?" he asked softly, shifting his leg a bit, sitting.

She nodded, taking a bite. "Think so." She'd started her study schedule in early November.

Jun chuckled. "The rest of us are in trouble if you're not," he said. "I've never seen anyone study like you."

"You mean," she said, grinning, "someone who actually studies. Regularly."

"Sure," he said, matching her expression, "some of us like having fun."

Bella rolled her eyes at him. He was just as studious as her. She'd seen it. He just liked to pretend he wasn't.

She didn't press the point, and scooted closer to him on the blanket. Now that they were sitting, it was cooler, the sun weak even at their increased elevation.

"Home was good?" he asked. They'd talked about their respective visits there, but only cursorily. School had been in its last throes of activity before the quiet of December, and exams.

Bella briefly considered lying. It would be easier, in some ways, to avoid talk of Jacob.

She opted for vague honesty instead.

"It was OK. Different. You?"

More silence.

He couldn't help himself. He wanted to know. Had been itching to ask all week.

"You tell your dad about us?" he finally asked.

She looked at him before asking. He was carefully staying focused on the view, tracing the snow line, and then the tree line, up and down the mountains' edges.

"No," she said, watching his reaction.

There.

She saw it, just. His eyebrows nudged together. A small sign of disappointment.

"You?" she asked, the light tone point enough.

"No," he said softly.

She hadn't expected any different.

She reached her hand out to take his. "I wanted to," she said, "I just wasn't...sure, how to explain it. My dad is...well, he operates in clearly defined things. This is—"

"Clearly undefined. Gotcha," Jun said, squeezing her fingers.

He stopped himself then. Because the words that wanted to slip, all new and raw were, I love you.

He swallowed them instead, letting his heart thump loudly in their place.

_I love you_, he heard his mind say.

_Stupid_, he told himself. _Stupid. Foolish._

_Dangerous._

Bella was taking in the curve of his eyes, so unguardedly squished at the corners, the thrum of his pulse a flutter in her hand.

A strong feeling, she could see. But what? That she had no clear answers for. Only speculation.

_Don't_, she told herself. Remember what you agreed to. _To let this just be._

To just let this be.

"We should head back," Jun said, breaking the spell of their wondering.

Bella nodded.

They descended, feelings dizzy with thin air, blood rushing. When they reached Jun's car, the normalcy that they had wrapped their expectations in had returned.

_We are just more than friends_, Jun told himself. _Just a bit more than friends._

Bella observed his coolness, and chastised herself when she allowed disappointment to wander
among her thoughts. Something, she was certain, had happened on the mountain. She just wasn't sure what.

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A/N for 2018-07-01

Happy Canada day!

For those of you who are enjoying this story, thank you for letting me know. Hearing that someone is enjoying what I write means a lot to me.

For those of you who are not, I appreciate the honest, and detailed feedback many of you have given about the holes in plausibility / description / character etc. However, now I'm left with a bit of a head scratcher, because we are twenty-one chapters in, and I. Will. Never. Leave. A. Story. Unfinished. Even if I think I'm birthing the narrative equivalent of a two-headed monster.

So, I write on as planned in my original plot outline - dreamed up in the sultry and caffeinated loveliness of Vietnam, and hope that some of you enjoy it - and possibly even find it plausible. For those of you don't, I appreciate the feedback. It's helpful in developing my understanding of this writing business.

Best wishes,

~ Erin

AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

AT EAffleck on Twitter
Bella blinked at her cell phone as she sat up in bed. Then she rubbed her eyes.

No, she told herself. She was not imagining things. That was Edward's name and number she was looking at. He'd texted her about an exhibit at the art gallery. For Eighteenth century British art.

She'd seen the ads. Drooled over them, if she was honest. So had Marie. The cost had been prohibitive. No student rates for the specialist gallery.

Another text arrived: *only if you're interested.*

Damn him.

He knew her well enough to know she'd want to go.

Keenly so.

They hadn't seen each other since that last, disastrous lunch. In so many ways, it was safer just staying away. But if she was honest with herself...she wanted to see him.

She still just wanted...him.

And she wanted him to want *her.*

Ugh, she thought, hands in her hair, a monstrous and exasperated sigh escaping her lips.

The desire to see that exhibit was pretty strong, too.

She paused, jaw pulled taut by indecision.

*Remember,* the little voice in her mind piped up, *remember how you wanted to be able to do things? See things? Experience things? This counts, right?*

With an impetuousness she hoped she didn't regret, she typed back: *I'd love to.*

Then she pressed send, before she could change her mind.

Edward texted back immediately: *Pick you up at six?*

Six.

The exhibit opened at seven thirty.

*And where would that hour and half be spent?* she wondered.

*If you don't mind me taking you to dinner?* The next message read.

She cocked an eyebrow. At least he'd asked. Not presumed.

*That would be lovely,* she wrote back.
At least, she hoped it would be.

She bit her lip nervously, remembering the last time she'd seen him.

The rest of the day passed as anything but, and she jittered through her weekend routine, unable to focus on her exam review. By one, she gave up, and grabbed her coat, heading out for a walk.

She didn't hear the feet attached to the set of arms that grabbed her. Jun felt her shocked surprise though, as she scrambled to get away, a frisson of horror and fear taking control.

"Sorry!" he said, letting go immediately, and then reaching for her hand, steadying her. "I thought you'd heard me."

Bella was leaning over, hands on her knees, trying to make her breathing come back into itself again.

"Hey," he said softly, this time snaking an arm around her back, "I really scared you, didn't I?"

She nodded, standing.

She'd imagined much colder arms, and much less playful purposes.

He pulled her into his arms. "Sorry," he said, "I wasn't trying to frighten you. Just being..." he trailed off. He was going to say "playful", but it sounded...silly, now.

"Just a bit of a freak show," she said, trying to smile.

She felt like it, for sure.

He shook his head. "Where were you heading, before I so effectively freaked the shit out of you?" There was a rueful smile on his lips.

"Library," she said, trying to grin. Her lips didn't quite stretch all the way.

"Want me to walk you?" he asked. He'd planned on joining his study group elsewhere on campus, and had only seen her by chance. Stupid was feeling like his middle name at this point, and he wanted to make sure she was OK.

"No, I'm fine," she said, "studying to do."

He nodded, but his eyebrows were pinched together. "OK," he said. "You free later?"

Her expression become a mirror of his own.

"Um...no."

"OK," he said, not thinking anything of this. He did wonder at her blush, but attributed it to the fright he'd given her. "How about bowling tomorrow night then?"

"Sure," she said uncertainly, eyebrows high.

"Don't look at me like that," Jun said, his grin wider. "It'll be fun, you'll see."

"Gonna take me to the soda shop first, too?" she smiled, "'fraid I left my best poodle skirt at home."

"Socs and greasers all the way, babe," he grinned at her. "I should run. Gotta get to study group."

She took the opportunity to stand on her tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek.
"Uh-oh," he said, "I've been demoted to cheek kisses." He didn't move to make it anything more intimate, but kissed the back of her hand. "See you tomorrow."

"See you," she said, continuing her walk towards the library.

In the stacks, she let her fingers trail over the spines of the books, admiring their different textures, and finding her way to one she whose cloth spine appealed. Milton. Ew. Maybe not. This time she used her eyes, picking at the texts like berries, some taut and resilient, others soft and ripe with age and wear. When she had an armful, she made her slow walk back to her room, gorging herself on their words as she went.

She was knee deep in Wakefield's commentary, when she realized the time. Opening the closet door, she tried to remember if she'd washed—and then stopped, staring at the garment bags hanging there.

She didn't own any garment bags.

Or dresses. Because that was what was inside of them.

Pinned to one of them was a note, from Alice: Merry early Christmas! Obviously, I can't tell with certainty which works for you, but you look nice in blue. The other, unmentioned garment was a simple, short black cocktail dress. The blue dress was long, featuring a modest, but suggestive neckline, and delicate cap sleeves.

Bella laughed, and pulled out her phone, texting Alice: Thank you. They're lovely.

The you're welcome was fast in returning.

After trying to fuss for a bit with her hair, she gave up, letting it hang loose, and then tried to settle back into her book, too nervous to really attach to any of the words.

Deciding she'd rather wait outside than fidget in her room, she grabbed her coat and purse, head down as she opened the door.

Edward stopped her gently with his hands, before she ran into him, but it didn't prevent the surprise from making her gasp.

Heart thudding, she leaned back against the door.

"Sorry," he said, "I was just about to knock."

She shook her head, trying to shake off the feeling, to tell him it was alright. "Just unexpected," she murmured.

It wasn't the way he'd wanted to start their evening, and he took a moment to look at her, catching the whiff of Alice's hand in the fabric of the dress she wore. "You look beautiful," he said, wanting to say more. Wanting to do much more, than stand, hands mute at his sides.

"Alice," she said, smiling a little, and letting her own eyes take him in. Impeccable, as always, this time in a suit that blessed every single line of his body with a appreciative curve and tuck. Blushing, she added, "you look really nice too."

"Also Alice," he smiled, gesturing the way to the exit.

Bella followed, letting herself keep a few steps behind, trying to manage her feelings, so caught off guard by encountering him so unexpectedly.
Edward forced his face into a neutral mask, hearing the flutter in her heart, wondering if she was nervous for the same reasons he was.

"Excited to see some antiquity—aside from me?" he asked, keeping his tone playful. Light.

It worked.

She smiled, the blush rising with it. "Very," she replied, letting her enthusiasm for the collection gush out in detail.

"Aren't you?" She asked, not that she believed he was interested in this for any other reason than taking her.

"There're a few I'm looking forward to seeing in person," he admitted. But mostly, his eyes were trained on the beauty in front of him.

Opening the car door, he asked, "finished your book yet?"

She busied herself with the buckle. "No," she answered, smiling at the notion. It was over a thousand pages long.

"So," she said, "where are we headed?"

"You said you wanted to experience new things, right?" he asked, an eyebrow up.

"How um, new?"

"Old, actually," he smiled, "more my vintage than yours."

He was right. The high Italianette ceilings, and crystal chandeliers were intimidating. The host, even more so. His tall and austere form looked more vampiric than human. His face showed nothing but a placid respect.

It made Bella wonder what kind of judgement simmered for a pair of teenagers who could afford to dine in such an establishment.

"Dare I ask, what he's thinking about us being here?" she asked.

Edward's bright eyes showed his surprise. She never asked. Knew he tried to protect people's privacy.

"Sorry," she said, noting the pause. "This just seems an unlikely place for two young people to go to."

He shook his head with his off-kilter grin. Bella felt skewered by its sudden appearance.

"Not even close," Edward said, "Kitchen and wait staff drama. We barely registered."

"Now that's new," she said, thinking of the reactions Edward normally collected in public.

"Well," Edward said, "he's incredibly myopic, and has misplaced his glasses."

Bella snorted into her water glass, and Edward chuckled with her.

"Poor man," she murmured after, feeling badly for laughing at him. It reminded her of Renee.
"Mm," Edward said, enjoying the dance of colour on her cheeks. Her laughter.

Bella eyed the other clientele present in the restaurant, and Edward said, "guess. I'll let you know if you're right."

She grinned widely. It was one of their rarely played, but favourite games.

"Lawyer," she said, nodding towards the table in the corner.

"Bingo," he said, smiling.

The next table was harder. "Judge?"

"Nope."

It went on, lightly and playfully, along with other avenues of conversation, until the waiter was clearing their plates. "Dessert?" Edward asked.

Bella shook her head. She wanted to get to the gallery for the opening.

At the coat check, the host handed her jacket to Edward, at which Bella raised both eyebrows over a smile, a little incredulous at the presumption.

Edward shrugged, but with a small smirk, letting his features mirror hers in inquiry, holding it out for her.

Jun was polite, but Edward was unfailingly courteous, in a way that spoke of his own era. Their time apart made such civilities fresh, and her responses to them almost uncertain.

He wished she were more fluent in his own language of courtesy, or that he could speak with the modern mannerisms she understood. The space between them made the meeting of these different customs stilted and awkward.

Their youth again distinguished them in the midst of the Art Gallery's more stately crowd, and they were the subject of small, approving smiles.

As they passed by the paintings, these little looks and stares became more pronounced, the aged crowd entertained, and then impressed by their more than casual interest.

"We're quite popular," Edward said unnecessarily, watching her blush under another couple's passing stare, trying to keep her eyes on the painting in front of her.

They wandered on, Edward happy to follow her lead as she discovered the gems in each room.

"Oh," she said, catching a glimpse of one of the canvases. "That's—"

"The wedding scene, from Pamela," Edward finished for her. He kept his disdain quiet. He really couldn't stand the novel, but didn't want to squash her enthusiasm.

She had to stop herself from reaching out to touch the canvas, admiring the acute lines presented there, each brushstroke careful and precise.

"He's really underappreciated," the woman beside her said, "I love Highmore's work." She went on to offer her own commentary on the detailing in the background. Catching Edward's look at Bella, though, she stopped, "pity people only have wedding photos these days, not portraits anymore," then winked at them both, walking away.
Bella's blush at this remark could not have been more pronounced.

Of course people would think such things, she reminded herself. It meant nothing, she told herself, but it was harder to make herself believe that.

It was harder, each time she was near him, to hold up as a shield, the stinging hurt his rejection had caused, and not be flattened by all the other feelings that were given shape in his presence.

*He. Doesn't. Want. You.*

*Not enough to change you.*

*Or to be with you.*

She these phrases silently, several times.

She was standing, staring at the painting she'd moved unthinkingly towards, brain focused on the emotional battle within. When this fog lifted, just a little, the title snagged at the deadline never far from her mind.

Edward was watching her, concern growing on his own face. The colours rippling over her features were rife with feeling, but he didn't know which ones. Her silence told him they likely weren't good ones, and noting where her gaze landed, he murmured "the summer house" aloud, wondering what it was that had gripped her so.

*Summer,* she was thinking. She had until next summer. Six months, maybe seven, at most.

And then, she would need to be changed.

Would he want her then?

Letting her eyes flick around the room, her face felt hot. How stupid could she be, being here with him? Thinking she could handle this—not be hurt by this thwarted wanting—this continual reminder of his rejection?

Her eyes dropped, arms folded around herself, an embarrassing swell of tears threatening. The ever present blush flamed in her cheeks, and she turned, a raspy "I need some air," escaping her lips.

She scanned the room for an exit. A balcony, something—anything. She spotted, at a distance, double-glass doors to the upper balustrade she'd seen from outside, and marched towards it, Edward following, confused and soft footsteps tapping after her own.

It was cold, but she stood, taking in several deep breaths, her hands all but planted on the railing, waiting for the confusing swirl of feeling to pass.

It didn't.

She could hear the whisper of Edward removing his jacket.

"I'm fine," she said, teeth clenched.

"If you're upset enough to feel warm at this temperature, I doubt it," he replied quietly.

She turned to face him.

If she was going to be humiliated, she might as well face it head on.
"Is it that you just don't...want me?" She pushed the words out, the rotten misery of tears tromping behind the words.

"You know that's not true. You know it's because I don't want to hurt you."

Her chest clenched at the words, remembering the easy way he'd lied to her. How he'd told her he didn't want her. That he'd leave to make her life easier.

He was still doing it—lying—trying to protect her feelings.

"You wouldn't," she whispered, voice cracking. She knew he wouldn't hurt her, but he either didn't believe her, or he just didn't want her—and one of those things was just so much more plausible than the other.

The conversation was so well worn, it was practically scripted.

Then he was in front of her, barely a book's space between them, whispering, almost hissing, "all I would have to do, Bella, is lose control for a fraction of second—a fraction."

She turned her face up to his, now a tilted inch away. So close. His smell was practically tugging at her, eliminating even the air between them. She felt his fingers sliding through her hair, curled at the low occiput of her skull. Words disappeared, and all she could do was breathe—tiny, raspy things that left her fuzzy and incoherent.

"Or kiss you, just a tiny bit too hard," he whispered on, the back of one hand brushing over her cheek. "Hold you with less than the perfect control." He swallowed. "Push too much...anywhere," he added, the vague description a pointed suggestion.

She was trembling now, but not from fear.

Then he did kiss her, his lips pressed harder to hers than she'd ever felt, his arm too tight on her back, so much so that along with the sparks of pleasure that rippled all over her body, was the suggestion of pain.

He didn't stop. His own face was contorted by a strained dance between the joy of simply touching her, and the knowledge that when he stopped, he didn't know when, or if, it would happen again.

So he kissed her, and let his hands caress her cheeks, her arms, the contours of her back, so lustrously outlined by her dress.

It was Bella who pulled away, her face wet with tears. She was breathing heavily, feeling utterly dislocated in her body, and heart.

Edward knew he'd stepped so far over the line there was no way he could excuse himself. He opened his mouth to apologize. "I'm—"

"WHAT?" she spat, "YOU'RE SORRY?" Inhaling, she gathered more fuel, "FOR WHAT? PRETENDING TOO WELL?"

"I do want you!" he said, more vociferous than was safe. People inside were turning to look.

"So you can refuse me?" She asked, dropping her voice, seeing the looks, almost hissing. "Tell me you love me, want me, but won't be with me?"

"You know that's not true," Edward said, matching her tone.
"No, I don't," she said, angry colours painting her cheeks. "You've refused. Even if we're married," she said. "You've been crystal clear." The last words were spat.

"Is that it?" he said, "sex?" He was angry now. Well beyond himself. The kiss had loosened all those well kept bonds, sending chunks of self-control flying.

She didn't answer verbally, but he could read the blush in her cheeks well enough.

"Is that what you think love is?" he demanded.

There were too many angry tears choking her throat, for words to be let out.

"Bella," he said, jaw clenched with a whispered rage, "I would rather see you sleep with someone else, than be the selfish monster to kill you doing it."

Then, before he could say or do anything else, as equally, or even more regrettable, he turned, and walked away, leaving her shivering on the porch, a startled group of onlookers watching his angry footsteps march out of the building.

Bella stood there, shocked beyond herself at his words, and actions. She waited until he'd had time to leave, and then, with as much dignity as she could, left the gallery.

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
"That was fun," Jun said, grinning, "going bowling," when they arrived at her door.

Bella blushed flordiy. She'd guttered almost every ball. He'd done nothing but encourage her, and the kindness was almost too much.

She'd been quiet most of the evening, and Jun hadn't pushed her to talk, but wondered what was on her mind. When she'd had a beer, he'd raised an eyebrow, but hadn't said anything. At the second, he'd known something was up, but waited on her to bring it up.

"Want to come in for a bit?" she asked, not wanting the evening to be over, or to be left alone in her thoughts. Or her mangled feelings.

"Please," he said, curling his arm around her, then leaning in and kissing her.

She almost pulled away, but her heart, so tender after the exchange of the night before, ached and throbbed like a newly formed wound, and she let his contact continue, the closeness soothing.

The kiss did not end when the door closed, and he walked her backwards to the bed, where he caught her before she tripped, laying her down on it.

"So," he murmured between kisses, "you stretch after our hike?"

"Hm-mm," she breathed, hands touching his cheeks.

"Mmm," he answered back, and then gripped her right knee, torquing it over to her left side. "Sure about that?"

It was painful, but his playfulness caught her off guard, and she found herself laughing, trying to breathe through her grimace. "Sadist!" she managed to huff out. He replied by repeating this procedure with her other knee, pulling a sharp groan from her.

He was grinning widely, but then leaned in, releasing her knee, letting it fall to the outside of his hip, as he kissed her.

She could feel his body's response to her. He began to pull back, knowing where her limits lay, but she stopped him, pulling at his arms. "No, don't," she whispered.

He groaned, wanting to indulge her, but not wanting to push her too. He blew out a breath. "It's hard...to stop, Bella," he said softly, kissing her, his eyebrows furrowed. "I don't want to—"

"Don't stop then," she said, pulling him back.

The pieces of Edward's rejection had splintered, lodging painfully in her chest, and now her throat, so that her words were whispers.

She pushed her hands up under his shirt, feeling him slip it off. She shivered nervously when he repeated the gesture with hers, her heart beating frantically.

He was ecstatic.
"And by don't stop," he breathed into her neck, "what exactly do you mean?"

"How explicit do you want me to be?" she asked, trying to suppress the crimson sweeping up her cheeks.

"Very," he grinned back, head up, looking at her. Seeing her so uncomfortable, he returned his attention to her neck, and then slid lower.

She gasped at the sensations he was pulling from her, his lips just under her collar bone.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "sky's the limit," and then closing her eyes.

"Awesome," he whispered, and then slid onto his side, bringing her leg over his, their bodies close together. Their hands and lips explored the angles this configuration presented for some time, before he spoke again.

"So," he asked, "I've never asked. What's your favourite position?"

He was watching her, wanting to see every bit of their conversation unfold. His stomach was a wad of butterflies, all competing for space. He'd wanted her so badly, but he hadn't dared pin a hope on anytime soon.

When she flushed an even deeper red in the low light of the room, his eyebrows brushed his hair line. "That kinky huh?"

She hid her uncertainty in another kiss, hoping he wouldn't press for more of an answer.

He didn't, and showed her, with the intimate press of his body, just how much he did want her, hands moving down the backs of her jeans, and then the front, maneuvering the zipper loose, and pulling them off. She was repeating the same gesture, less gracefully, and much more nervously with him.

His hands worked her back, unhooking her bra, as he kissed her, and then circled around her hips, loosening the flexors there. She could feel her legs slacken, and relax at his touch.

He chuckled, "you really do need to stretch."

"You should get a t-shirt with that on it," she muttered into his hair.

He chuckled. "I'll look for one under the tree, then," he mumbled, putting his lips to better use on the skin behind her ear.

She shivered in pleasure. And with nerves.

He was running his hands up and down her ribs, letting them establish their comfortable lines there. From this vantage, they ranged further, finding the softness of her breasts, and then moving south to the tuft of softness that bordered the fine skin between her hips.

Bella's hands moved more tentatively, light touches taking in the texture and creases of his skin.

He sensed her shyness, and took her hand in his own, placing it on himself. It would have made her blush, if her blood wasn't so well occupied elsewhere. Jun's fingers had found their tender mark, gently teasing her. The pleasure of his regular brush made her breathing irregular and raspy. Her featherlight touch did the same for him.

The sound of a crinkling package brought her nerves back to the forefront.
"Are you sure you want to?" he asked, stopping, feeling the shift in her body.

She nodded, shy, but curious too, watching him put the condom on, breathless when he returned his attention to her. Their bodies met again, and she could feel him pressed against her, and then moving closer. It felt good.

His fingers still played over her back, her hips, and her thighs. Then he made an elegant arch of them at appointed places, touching her lightly, the pressure just enough to make her gasp. When he went to move them, she breathed out a "don't stop!"

He chuckled, and continued, waiting for her kisses to relax into his. They didn't, though, and she pulled him towards her, showing him what she wanted. He obliged, but stopped immediately, feeling her hands grip him, and the sharp intake of breath as he met a distinct resistance.

It left him momentarily wordless.

His inner monologue was something else, though. Something like, OH. MY. GOD.

"Don't stop," Bella said again, though this time with a precise shake to it.

He cleared his throat. "Bella...are you a virgin?"

Was it so obvious? She thought, rueing her ignorance on this practical front.

She gave a minute nod, her cheeks flaming.

Jun kept a firm hand at her back, locking their bodies in place, making sure he didn't move inadvertently. His eyebrows were doing gymnastics, creasing and releasing in worry and uncertainty.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered, tracing his free hand over her cheek.

"Did I need to?" She looked at him, challenge and question all wrapped up in one.

He pursed his lips, thinking, "I just don't want to hurt you." He didn't add that he'd avoided virgins, precisely for this reason. Who wanted that to be part of sex?

It was completely the wrong choice of words for Bella.

"You won't," she said, voice shaking with an emotion and determination he could not possibly understand.

He could feel, most distinctly, that he would, and moved just a tiny bit, illustrating this.

She flinched under him, and he blew out a breath, pressing his forehead to hers. "OK," he said, "Fast, or slow?"

She understood what he was asking. "Fast," she answered, distracting herself with the texture of his hair, and neck in both her hands.

"Trust me?" he asked, meeting her eyes, watching them carefully.

"Absolutely."

"Good."

He picked her up, turning her back to be against the wall between her bed, and the desk. Hooking
her legs under his arms, he was in her, the movement abrupt and quick.

She couldn't quite remember what to do with the air in her lungs. It took her a moment, her mouth open, trying to decide if the oxygen needed to be in, or out. The pain had been sharp, leaving her feeling like she'd been sucker punched.

"You OK?" he asked, worried at the stricken look on her face.

"Yes," she managed, eyes watering, feeling him still inside her, trying to breathe through the pain that clutched inside.

He began to move, very gently, very slowly, and she hissed in a breath. "Just...just give me a minute, OK?"

He nodded, stopping, electric with her touch, trembling with restraint. It took more than he thought he had to comply. He managed, just.

When she felt like she could pull air in and out with predictability, she whispered, "I'm OK."

He let his own breath go in relief, and began moving, still slowly, and tenderly, letting her body acquaint itself with the mounting pleasures of this new experience.

It was pleasurable.

Their kisses resumed their satisfying rhythm, and they moved together.

But, scratching at the pleasure was a small and irritable sting inside, that Bella dismissed as expected. It persisted though, and as Jun became more comfortable with the curves and spaces of her body, it grew in proportion to his movement.

When it tipped the scales over the balance of pleasure, Bella's forehead creased, and she voiced a raspy, "stop."

He heard what he'd heard before: an imploring that he not stop. "I won't," he whispered back, kissing, and alarming her entirely.

Thinking she was almost done, he shifted his position and movement, more certain—faster.

He took the sound that escaped her throat as a sign of something utterly different from what it was, and lost himself in the production of his own release.

He was so absorbed in these tenacious sensations that he didn't realize what her hands were doing, trying to push him away. She had no leverage with her legs, and the pain was now a fiery and insistent knife. He didn't see her hand moving towards him, but turning his jaw, most certainly felt its impact. There were mutual exclamations of pain, and he let go, backing away, she falling awkwardly against and down the wall, the condom sliding out of her with a wet thuck to the floor.

"What the hell Bella!" Jun said, hand at his jaw. "What are you playing at?" He was breathing heavily, angry and confused, watching her slumped against the wall, arms curling around her legs. She pulled at the bedspread that had fallen, sliding it over herself. She was too shocked to say anything, breathing hard, her good hand cradling the one she'd hit him with.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he asked.

Bella hadn't moved, and was sitting, shaky and shocked by what had happened. She closed her eyes,
thinking it would help her collect herself.

Jun thought she was shutting him out.

When Bella didn't speak, he turned, and faster than she had time to coherently respond, grabbed his clothes, angrily pulling them on. He left, slamming the door behind him, taking her silence as a reproach against some unknown offense.

His didn't understand what had happened at all, and his feelings, and his pride, were hurting.

Bella sat there for a long time, trying to will herself to stop shaking. To stop crying.

It didn't work

When she'd contained all the feelings she could, and realized that her hand was beyond what a bag of ice could handle, she awkwardly pulled her own clothes back on, cursing as she fumbled through it one-handed. Dressed, she pulled out her phone.

Sam didn't answer, and neither did Marie.

When someone did, her voice was still shaky. "Emmett?" she asked, almost uncertainly.

"Bella!"

"Hey," she said, trying to make her voice steady. "You busy?"

"No, why?"

"I um...need a ride to the hospital," she said, watching the modulation of each word.

"Trippin' over even surfaces again, huh?"

"Something like that," she managed. "Um...I'll warn you, I'm bleeding."

"No problem," he said, "Gimme five. Be right there."

"Thanks," she whispered.

She was waiting outside, trying to mask her shivers with the pretense of cold.

Emmett frowned, seeing her. "That bad, huh?"

She lifted her hand by way of explanation, her face usefully expressionless.

When he asked what happened, she shook her head, allowing her blush to speak for her.

They didn't talk while they waited in the emergency room. When her name was called, she turned back to him, "can you wait for me? Please?" It was almost whispered, and the shake in her voice so apparent, Emmett only nodded, frowning as she walked away.

Her knuckles were fractured, and he winced imagining how painful that would be. The x-rays were done, and the cast on when the nurse asked, casually, how she'd broken it.

"Oh," Bella said, clearing her throat, "I, um, hit someone."

Emmett chuckled. He really needed to teach her how to throw a punch. He was surprised Charlie hadn't already.
"What led to that?" the nurse continued, voice still very calm, as if she were asking the time of day. Bella's answer was mumbled, but Emmett heard it clearly.

"I asked someone to stop, and they didn't."

He felt a chill his body had no right to run down his spine.

The nurse was taking stock of Bella's posture, the way she was shifting uncomfortably in her seat, and the shake that should have worn off by now.

"What did you want them to stop doing?" the nurse asked softly. Emmett knew the doctor wouldn't have heard it.

There was no answer.

Emmett could hear the doctor swish out of the room.

"Someone was hurting you?"

Still no answer, but the rustle of fabric told him Bella had moved.

Emmett realized, quite suddenly, that the few people in the waiting room were all looking at him. His hands were balled, his face set in an expression he knew was menacing. He forced himself to sit back, smile congenially, and fold his hands behind his head, looking as relaxed as he could.

"Do you have any other injuries?" the nurse asked, voice now soft. Careful.

"I'm not sure," Bella said, almost whispering. She was trying to keep something from him. Shit.

"OK," the nurse said, "I'll be right back." She left, the squeak of her shoes following her down the hall, where she knocked on a door. Her conversation with her colleague was muted to the human ears present, but not to Emmett's.

"I have a girl with a broken hand and what might be a sexual assault. You free?"

The room disappeared for Emmett. He perceived only the thumping pieces of flesh there, and it took all his control to stand, and walk outside, not stopping, but moving at what he hoped was a human enough pace until he reached the cover of the trees, and their private darkness. His phone call was curt, and he only waited until he had an affirmative answer before disappearing into the night.

Edward arrived within a minute, skirting the eyes of any potential witnesses. It was simple enough to locate Bella in the minds of the two women now in the room: a nurse, and a counsellor. Another doctor, waited just outside.

He understood, with horrified clarity, why Emmett had had to leave.

He followed his brother's scent to the privacy of the trees, where he mangled one of the fallen trees into sawdust. He would have destroyed it with his voice, if he hadn't worried about the attention it would attract.

It took him a solid twenty minutes before he was calm enough to walk back inside the building, berating himself the entire way.
His last words to her were swimming through his head, on a loud repeat that bludgeoned with each iteration.

They were trying to convince Bella to allow them to collect evidence during the exam.

"It wasn't—" she sighed, "I gave consent—"

"I understand," the counsellor said, "but then you revoked it."

"He didn't hear me—" Her voice shook. She was on the verge of tears.

"No," she said, "he might not have. Or he might've. Taking a few minutes to collect this now gives you the opportunity to revisit this later, if you want."

"I won't," Bella said, the rustle of her hair signalling her shaking head.

"And you don't have to, but you'll have the option to," the nurse said. "I see a lot of girls who wish they had."

They wore her down with repeated asking, and when she finally gave her reluctant consent, Edward sought other minds to bury his attention in. It was a more herculean task than he'd ever met before. He was so used to finding the minds that showed him her, it was almost instinctual to let his special sense flick back and forth between any that saw her. He didn't want to invade the little privacy she had here, but there were unintentional flickers of her face. She had that look, her jaw muscles strained, when she was holding back tears.

He carefully avoided thinking about who. It would be too easy to find him.

It would be so easy to pour all his own guilt into one human form.

It was why Emmett had left. He hadn't wanted to do anything...rash.

When a new doctor finally came to see Bella, her clinical approach was gentle. She reminded him of Carlisle, and he breathed a sigh of relief for her competence, and her bedside manner.

Bella was not doing well. She'd held up through most of the embarrassing questions. Blanched through the exam. It was the doctor quietly asking about emergency contraception that unstoppered the tears.

She felt like an idiot.

She'd known she was playing with fire. What had she been thinking?

Clearly, she hadn't.

"Take two now, and two in twelve hours. Now, forgive the redundancy, but I need you to tell me when you're going to take the next two."

Bella repeated the information woodenly, like a child who knew herself considered too stupid to be trusted with the most basic addition.

There were blood tests, and finally, paperwork, which the counsellor helped her walk through.

"This doesn't become a formal complaint until you sign it," she said. "Then it becomes a legal document, and the police will initiate charges. Do you have any questions about any of this?"
The familiar rustle meant a shake of her head: no.

Bella felt it was just a waste of everyone's time. An exhausting waste of time.

She'd said yes.

She just wanted to go home.

By the time the doctor handed her a prescription she had no plans on filling, she was swaying when she stood up. Exhausted. It was almost one in the morning.

"Do you have someone to take you home?" the nurse asked, holding Bella's elbow lightly as she walked her back out to the waiting room.

"Yes, thank you," Bella said, ready to be done with so much help.

The nurse nodded, smiled in farewell, and then turned back to her other duties.

When Bella walked into the reception area, she stopped, and her heart began to beat erratically.

Edward was standing in the waiting area, stance tense, staring at her.

Edward.

Then the room became fuzzy around the edges, grey, and finally black.

A/N for 2018-07-02: So, I'll just leave this here and hope we can all still be friends after this.

(Looks around nervously as she clicks on the 'post' button)

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
Edward walked towards her quickly, hearing the warning signs of her faint, when suddenly she did. Catching her in a one-armed hug, he moved her discreetly to a chair.

Fortunately, the waiting room was almost empty, its few occupants preoccupied with their own tiredness and hurts.

When she opened her eyes, her face was alarmingly pale.

He let go, and sat back in the chair adjacent to hers, his hand under her arm as a precaution.

"How long—?" she started, "how long have you been here?"

"Long enough," he answered quietly.

She looked down, not wanting to meet his eyes, a flare of shame washing up her cheeks.

"Of all the people to be here."

*Serves you right,* her personal voice of doubt said, *you're the one that wanted to be human. Here you go. How fucking human can it get?*

She nodded, looking down at her feet, trying to preoccupy herself with anything other than the horrified grief, guilt and shame she was feeling. "Where's Emmett?" she said, hoping that if she acted normal enough, everything would feel that way too.

Edward's answer was awkward. "He had to...leave. He was concerned he would do something...rash."

Bella didn't say anything for a bit, busy studying the pattern in the linoleum. "Oh."

Then she took a breath in too fast, horror and terror woven into it. "He wouldn't," she choked out, "Oh God, he wouldn't—"

"No," Edward said emphatically, shaking his head.

She nodded at his answer. Her head was moving too quickly though. Then she realized that Emmett wasn't the only one she needed to worry about. "He didn't hurt me, Edward—"

"I think," he said more icily than he wanted to, "that I have eyes enough to see what he did."

"It wasn't what they thought," she said, voice desperate for his belief.

"I understand," he said, more softly. He didn't want to frighten her anymore than she was.

Bella wasn't sure that he did. She looked at him, still trying to govern the many feelings on her face.

"Promise me you won't hurt him," she said.
"Bella—" he started, his voice a warning.

"Promise me," she said again.

It took him a moment, but he did, "I won't."

They sat there for a while, she trying to breathe with some regularity, he trying to stomach all the feelings that were warring within him.

"Do you want to go home?" Edward asked. He was fighting a fresh urge to pull her into his arms, and then not ever let go. That, or have Jasper and Emmett beat him for his own stupidity.

How could he have been so idiotic, to say what he did last night?

Bella was wondering something very similar about herself.

"Please," she answered him.

It was a short, and silent ride. She didn't object when he walked her to her door.

When she opened it though, the smell assailed him.

It must have her too, because her good hand clenched, keys in a tight fist.

He avoided the thought of the boy's name. He would know him, by smell, if he encountered him, and it wouldn't end well for the creature. He could smell her blood, its sweetness mixed with the boy's odour. There was a small smear on the wall, invisible to human eyes, but clear enough to his.

He felt the rage flare, swell, and recede, looking at her, seeing her vulnerable stance. Then the guilt settled, full and heavy.

Would she have done this, if he hadn't said what he did?

No, the little voice in his head told him, of course not.

Edward thought quickly. "Alice," he said, trying to keep his voice neutral, "will be home very soon. Perhaps you'd like to spend the night there?"

Bella was staring at her bed, and the comforter that was still sitting on the floor, feeling increasingly nauseated by either the emergency contraceptives, or the idea of being in her room. Or both.

"Maybe for tonight," she said, another shameful blush darkening her cheeks. "I should just...get my stuff," she mumbled.

Edward caught her hand, before she could go in her room, as if keeping her from it would prevent her further hurt. "I think we have everything you need."

"OK," she said, voice small, herself feeling smaller by the minute. She didn't deserve his caring.

Edward was freer with his touch than he knew he had the right to be. He helped her take off her coat in the entrance way, not taking his usual care to avoid that still sparking physical contact.

She didn't notice the paper that she'd shoved in her pocket, slip out, but Edward did, picking it up, handing it to her. Without looking closely, he could see it was a prescription. For pain medication.

"You'll need that," he said, watching her pocket it again.
She nodded, but he suspected she had no intention of getting it filled.

"You will," he said, watching her blush. "You broke your hand."

*Maybe the pain'll remind you not to do anything quite so stupid,* the voice hissed at her.

She was near tears again, realizing just how foolish and impulsive she'd been. She'd hurt both Jun, and Edward, with her choice, and a broken hand felt like a fraction of the pain she'd caused.

"I'm fine," she said.

They had walked up to what she knew was considered her room.

"You're not fine," he said, "you're hurting and you're upset—"

"Edward," she said quietly, "I think I can take pretty much anything from you right now, except your kindness and understanding."

"Why?" he said, looking at her in confusion.

She closed her eyes, muttering out a breath, "I just slept with someone else—"

He wouldn't let her finish, "What I said last night was inexcusable, Bella," he said, putting up his hand to stop her, "I've hurt you so much with what I've refused you. By asking you to be with me. To live a...half life. And to say what I did last night—"

"Doesn't make you responsible for my choices," Bella finished, sitting down on the edge of the bed, tired, exhausted. She kept her eyes down, barely able to look at him.

"I love you," he said, sitting beside her, taking her hands in his. "That won't ever change, no matter what."

She wanted to say that it should, that he deserved better.

She was too chicken to. Instead, she swallowed, just trying to breathe.

"Let me take care of you tonight," he said, "let me, please, try to undo the hurt I gave you yesterday."

She choked out a breath. "The hurt you did me?"

He nodded.

"Think I kinda upped you one there," she said, closing her eyes again.

"I love you," he said again.

*You just deserve much, much more,* Bella thought. *And you know it. Deep down. It's why you won't change me.*

This cut deeper than anything else.

She felt pathetic.

She still loved him too, and it ached, not being wanted in the same way.

With her eyes down, she felt the give of the bed as he sat beside her, and then his hand taking her
There were so many things he wanted to say. That he knew he'd hurt her by leaving, and only hurt her again with returning to offer something approximating a life—one spent running from the Volturi, without children, without the intimacy they both so clearly craved.

He didn't fault her for wanting this time—these few sparse months for her to be as human as she could, before she sacrificed it for the sake of others—him, his family, hers. Always giving too much.

Her guilt, at having this—yes, even this boy—things she should have, was radiating off of her.

"I want you to be happy, Bella. Even if it's without me." Catching her look, he went on. "Yes, I want to be with you. I know you don't believe it, but I do." He dared to put his hand to her cheek. "I have already stolen what I was never supposed to have. If I can give you even a fraction of a human life before you sacrifice it, then I want you to have it. I know I haven't been good at letting you even have this, but I'm trying."

She stared, wordless and wretched.

"But tonight, please, and just for tonight, let me take care of you. Please. Then I promise to give you space for what you want, not to rob you of even more." He looked down, saying it, not wanting to meet her eyes.

The burdens of their individual guilt wobbled together into one, singular bubble.

"OK," Bella practically winced, knowing just how much she didn't deserve this.

"Thank you," he whispered, pulling her into a careful embrace.

He was almost undone by her tears, hot against the coolness of his shirt.

When she pulled away, he tugged at the tip of paper protruding from her pocket. "I'm going to have this filled," he said, holding up his hand when she opened her mouth to protest. "Just for tonight," he reminded her.

"I don't want you spending money—"

"You would never leave anyone you cared about in pain, Bella. Please don't ask me to do that."

She bit her tongue, holding back the reply that would be so easy to make. "OK," she said instead, wrinkling her eyebrows together.

Standing, he watched her shift uncomfortably as she sat. The anger rippled around his feet. The boy had hurt her.

Intimately.

He closed off the feeling immediately, imagining what might have happened if it had been him.

Her hurt was small, he told himself. She'd feel fine in a few days.

None of this soothed him.

"I'll go call this in, give you some time to settle," he said softly. "Can I get you anything to eat, to drink?"
She shook her head, standing. "No, thank you. I'm going to get ready for bed."

"OK," he said, nodding. "I'll bring this as soon as it comes." He was mentally indexing the pharmacies available, trying to decide which would get it there fastest.

He could hear her in the shower, the soft hiss of the water interrupted by her form, and then the hiss of her breath pulled in as the water reached tender places.

When she got into bed, he frowned, knowing he'd have to wake her when the medication arrived.

He was wrong, though. She was restless. Her heart patted out an irregular tattoo, and when the knock from the pharmacy delivery came, it only made her flip over in the bed.

"Bella?" he called from the slit of the door. He knew she wasn't asleep, but he wasn't sure if she wanted him nearby.

"I'm awake," she called back, voice hoarse with weariness.

He let the rattle of the pills precede him.

Sitting up, she mouthed 'thanks', taking the bottle. The pain had settled into its unhappy places, and she was struggling to ignore it, or to settle herself into sleep.

She swallowed the pills, awkward with only the real use of her left hand.

He took back the bottle, putting it out of arm's reach. She frowned, watching him.

"If you can't get up to take one, you aren't ready for another dose," he explained.

She nodded, seeing the sense.

"Having trouble sleeping?"

"A little."

"Can I help?" he asked. He knew what had worked before.

So did she, and her face twisted painfully, knowing what he was offering. How selfish a person would she be for taking that?

"Just for tonight," he said again.

After a moment, she whispered, "please," all her vulnerability packed into the one word.

He waited for her to lay down, and he joined her, their forms separated by the contour of the blanket over her, and under him. His one arm made a cold pillow against a hot, and weary cheek, while the other soothed the ache in her broken hand.

She wanted to cry with relief, but the spasms of her chest refused the regular breathing rhythm her mind wanted to force on them.

Edward suspected the source of her distress, and said nothing, knowing it would only make it worse.

When exhaustion finally found her, she lapsed into silent dreams, aided by the fug of the pain medication.
Alice had seen enough of Edward's evening unfolding to make her eyebrows rise, and speed her return home.

*Um...she thought...do you really think this is wise?* She showed Edward what she'd seen, now unfolding in Bella's bed.

"Leave it, Alice," he growled, low enough for Bella not to hear.

She gave the equivalent of a mental shrug, trying to silence her worries for her brother, and Bella.

"It's just for tonight," Edward said more gently.

Alice's pained thoughts were too loud to be missed. Images of Edward's immediate future were slipping too quickly through her mind for him to catch them all. They didn't show him and Bella together.

He swallowed the venom pooling in his mouth, and then the disappointment that her visions left him with, accepting the tenuous moment together the night promised him.

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Broken glass

He'd had second thoughts about going to the pool. But he’d been awake, and knew sleep had abandoned him for the time, anyway.

The pool was sparsely populated, so early on a Sunday morning. The woman at the desk had yawned apologetically, waving him in as he showed his pass.

A few regulars were trickling in, dropping polite nods of acknowledgment to each other.

He struggled through the last laps. His arms were sore. Recalling why, a guilty thrill wound its way up his back, and then a flash of anger clambered over it, planting its flag at the summit of his body.

Jun gripped the rail, yanking himself up to the pool deck, then slapping his feet down, shaking off of the excess water.

A passing back-stroker glared up at him.

He only shook harder, as though trying to unseat his discomfort. The hot tub was empty, and he closed his eyes, making sure it stayed that way, at least for him.

"Hungover much?" A wry voice asked.

"Huh," Jun said, not opening them, lips tightening.

"Ooh," Tory went on, waggling her eyebrows. "Must be bad." She sighed in pleasure, slipping into the hot water. The pool had been chillier than usual that morning.

"Not hungover," he mumbled.

"Sure," she said, chuckling, "that naturally green hue really brings out the colour of your...blush," she added.

He was flushing, as much as the amber of his skin could.

Then she realized that it wasn't in humour.

She cleared her throat in quiet apology. "Trouble in paradise?" she offered softly.

"Tch," Jun said, but opened his eyes.

She didn't say anything else, figuring he'd talk if he wanted to.

He was clearly working up to it, the small pulls in his throat erratic and undecided.

"I don't know what happened," he started. "We were—," then he stopped, frowning.


"She hit me," he finished. He flicked his hands up in question. "Why?"
Tory decided this was not the time to make her usual jokes about straight guys. She was looking at him, though, trying to see where she'd hit him. Then his face turned. Of course, she thought. Not a shadow of a beard.

"Wait," she said, "when you were—?"

Jun nodded.

"Didn't you ask her?"

"Course I did," he said, "she just didn't...answer. I think she hurt her hand—"

"You mean, you didn't stay to find out?"

"No," he said, "I was—," he didn't finish. "I left. I was—"

"An idiot?" she supplied. "Seriously? You just left? How badly did she hurt her hand?"

Jun was beginning to regret this decision, a great deal more than he already had.

He swallowed, "yes," and then, "I don't know." He remembered guiltily how she'd been cradling it, the tautness in her face.

Tory swore under breath, glad she was free of all entanglements with such creatures. Men, she thought. Then she shook her head, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Jun cleared his throat, hoping he didn't regret this too. "Any advice?" he asked softly.

"Um, apologize? On your knees, while grovelling through a pool of broken glass?"

She resumed her head shaking.

But Jun was up and out of the pool, snapping his towel off the rack.

"Where're you going?"

"Off to break some glass," he called back.

It was early yet, though, and he went home first, startling a sleepy Leo in the kitchen. "Jesus," he muttered, Jun coming up out of the stairwell's dark. "You're like a fricking shark."

Jun snorted in amusement.

"Want some juice?" he asked, holding up a steaming ceramic mug. "Java flavoured." It sloshed invitingly. Leo did make decent coffee. All his other attributes as a roommate pulled against this one major benefit.

"Thanks," he said, inhaling its aroma. Probably not a bad idea, considering how little sleep he'd gotten.

"Surprised Bella's not here," Leo said, "didn't you two leave together last night?"

"We did," Jun said carefully. There was no way he was telling Leo anything.

But Leo was only half listening, waiting for an opportunity to mention that Sam was in his room. He was too late, though.
"Yeah, where is Bella?" she called, "I figured we could do the walk of shame together."

Sam sashayed into the kitchen wearing one of Leo's plaid shirts.

"Sorry, Sam," Jun said politely, and without any enthusiasm, "you're on your own there." He felt entirely bitter, seeing his roommate's easy comfort with Sam.

"No, no," Leo murmured, as Jun walked away, "I wouldn't let you do that alone, baby." Their kiss was gratingly audible.

- 0 -

Bella was still asleep, curled up against Edward, when her phone buzzed. The text was easy enough for him to read. It was from Jun: *Can we talk?*

He didn't need Alice's sudden prescient vision to tell him that destroying her phone in an enraged fit would not end well for anyone.

Nor would answering on her behalf.

He toyed with the idea of deleting it, though.

*Edward!* Alice's mind hissed.

He ignored her.

He wouldn't. No.

Still holding her, he inhaled deeply, kissing the top of her head so lightly as to barely make contact with the cloudy layer of hair there. He wouldn't jeopardize this.

Jun had already done incredibly well sabotaging his relationship with Bella.

Not that it wouldn't gratify him to watch him hurt for what he'd done to the woman he loved.

*If you keep growling, Edward, you'll wake her up,* Alice admonished him.

He stopped, immediately. Too late, though, to stop the change he could hear in Bella's body.

Her movements freshened the smell of her blood, and he automatically stopped breathing. Not because it tempted him, but from instinctual habit.

She was in that liminal stage, half awake, half asleep, restless and murmuring. His favourite one.

"I'm OK," she murmured. "Don't need to, Edward" she continued on.

Then he heard her stomach preparing to violently reject its most recent contents. Alice was there, with a large bowl in hand, and Edward picked Bella up, just in time.

When it was over, and Alice had disappeared with the offensive substance, she murmured "Sorry," as she stood.

He helped her stand up, and she blushed at his touch. It was different now, in the daylight.

He'd promised, just for the night, and now he needed to respect what she asked for.

"I'll go," he said. "If you need anything, Alice is here."
Bella's face, which she tried valiantly to control, folded a thousand different ways, stricken and then suddenly calm. "Of course," she said, "thank you."

And because he wanted her to know, with certainty, that he wouldn't keep anything from her, he added, "I think you have a message," lifting his chin towards the bedside table.

Then he was gone.

She stared at the space where he'd been for some time, before picking up her phone, staring at the text, swallowing.

*Not today*, she typed back, feeling the reasserting queasiness of her stomach. Side effects, she knew. They should be gone by the next day.

*Tomorrow afternoon*, she wrote, pressing send.

Then she sat down on the bed, suddenly too exhausted to go to the bathroom. Or to move. Or consider the rest of her day.

Alice rapped her knuckles on the door. "Tea?" she asked softly. She was holding a tray with a steaming cup of something fruitily fragrant. Something herbal.

It made Bella's stomach wobble. "Maybe not, but thank you."

"Trust me, you'll be way better after this." Alice tapped her head. "I can see my own future. No puke involved."

Bella let something that sounded like a chuckle or a snort, but took the tea, Alice sitting down beside her.

"Bad night, huh?"

Bella looked at her sharply, and Alice put her hands up. "He didn't say anything. I just figured it would have to be pretty bad to get you into bed with him."

Alice hadn't seen her turn quite that shade of purple before.

"I slept with Jun."

Alice didn't say anything for a bit. When she did, it was soft. "Guessing it didn't go so well?"

"No."

Alice took her good hand in hers. "Sorry," she said gently, "you deserve better than that."

Then Bella burst into tears.

She told Alice, in broken bits and pieces, about what had happened with Edward at the gallery, and in the most circumspect manner, what had happened with Jun.

Alice had to release her hand, afraid she would squeeze too tightly. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I really am."

"For what?" Bella sniffed, rubbing the cast against her face. "My stupidity?"

"Edward was...so much better than I deserved, last night."

"Edward," Alice countered, "is operating under the umbrella of several utterly ridiculous ideas, and —"

"He isn't responsible for my actions, Alice."

She grimaced a bit, before answering. "No," she said softly, "he isn't."

The conversation limped on from there, slinking away into the waning of the day, and Bella's return home.

A/N for 2018-07-04:

Still with me?

Some of my favourite plot twists are yet to come.

Hope you're enjoying this...or at least thrashing about in semi-enjoyable angst and frustration.

I've got the lyrics to Annie Lennox's "Broken Glass" running through my head. They seem soooo fitting for this story...

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
By the next morning, Bella felt like she was approximating some sort of physical normality. The nausea had passed, and the pain in her hand wasn't so excruciating. Functioning with it was another matter entirely.

She'd agreed to meet Jun at her dorm, just before dinner, so they could talk. She was running late though, slowed by her hand in so much of her day.

When she got there, he was waiting at her door, and he looked angrier than she'd ever seen him before.

"Hey," she said, not certain of his appearance.

"Hey?" he said, moving towards her purposefully. "That's all you have to say to me, after what you pulled?"

She stopped, stepping back a bit, as he came closer, confusion in the crinkles of her forehead. Then she blushed, thinking of their last interaction.

"I'm sorry—"

"The police show up at my door to charge me, and you're sorry?" he spat out.

"What?"

"You filed a sexual assault complaint against me!" He wasn't yelling, but it was loud enough that people walking by looked.

"I didn't!" she said, then more quietly, "I went to the hospital for my hand, and they jumped to conclusions. I didn't—"

"They showed me your complaint, Bella. Signed by you."

"I didn't sign it!" she protested.

He turned away, pacing, fists squeezing. They were still in the hall. "I get that it wasn't ideal," he said, in a barely controlled voice, "and I'm sorry about that, but this was just so low."

"Jun," she said, shaking with the shock of his accusation, "I didn't. I don't know what else to say."

He looked at her, nodding, but not agreeing. "You didn't strike me as someone who would do something spiteful." He didn't sound convinced, though.

"They took a statement, but I didn't sign it. I know what those mean. My Dad's a cop, Jun—"

"Don't," he said, voice breaking. "It's bad enough that you did it. Lying about it makes it just worse." Then his volume rose again, angry and hurt indignation colouring it. "I mean—how could you do that? What kind of person does that?" He didn't wait for an explanation, the sting of tears threatening. Instead, he turned and walked away, disgusted, angry, but most of all, hurt, by what she'd done.
"Jun!" she called, trying to follow after him, but he'd broken into a lope, out the door, and gone, faster than she knew she could match.

She went to her room, determined to at least calm herself down before she did anything else. She hadn't signed it. She hadn't been that out of it that she would forget, and it wasn't like the staff there would sign it, or anyone—

Here she stopped.

Yes, she could definitely think of someone else who would have signed it. Someone who could imitate her signature perfectly.

Someone who had promised her that he wouldn't hurt Jun, and that no one in his family would either.

After last fall, she didn't doubt his ability to lie to her too.

- 0 -

Jun had barely had the heart to swim his full set of laps. The police had advised that he seek legal counsel, and he'd gritted his teeth, phoning his parents after he'd seen Bella.

That they hadn't disowned him on the spot, shocked him. It was his mother's quiet tears in the background, handing the phone off to his father, that had made his heart spasm in on itself.

"How're the knees?" Tory's voice called, as she slid herself into the hot tub.

"Huh?" he asked, lost in unhappy thoughts.

"Broken glass?" she asked sympathetically.

"Oh," he said, remembering. He shrugged. "She filed a rape charge against me."

"Whoa, Bitch," she breathed out.

He looked like he wanted to protest, but his throat was contorting, clearly tight around a lump there. He said nothing.

Pulling off her swim cap, Tory shook out her red curls, and brought her icy hand to rest over his. "Why don't we go get a drink?"

A/N for 2018-07-05: Someone on FF.net commented that this story should be categorized as only angst. I find categorizing tricky. Would appreciate your thoughts.

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
Bella had gone straight to the hospital, but had been stymied by multiple levels of bureaucracy, finally being told that her file had been sent to the police, and that she would have to take it up with them.

She played telephone tag with the investigators assigned to her case for the next day. When someone did phone her back, it was an administrative assistant, telling her the officer in question had gone on holiday, and that she'd have to wait a few days before a temporary case manager could be assigned.

Jun had gone completely silent on the communication front. He hadn't responded to her phone calls, email, or texts, all of them telling him she was trying to have the complaint—that she hadn't made—retracted.

By the time she physically arrived at his place, she was wet and shivering from her walk in the rain.

"Oh, hey," Leo said, opening the door to her knock. He didn't invite her in.

"Is Jun here?" she asked, arms curled around herself, shivering.

"No. Hasn't been here for a while. Left a note saying he'd gone home early for the break."

Fear snaked up Bella's heart.

Edward had promised. Promised.

"Can I see it?" she asked.

Dave had arrived by this point with a friendlier greeting, looking sideways at his roommate, wondering why he was keeping her outside. "Come on in, Bella."

"Thanks," she murmured, grateful to feel a reduction in the shiver.

"Here," Dave said, fishing it out from under a pile of paper on the table.

She looked at it. Stared, really.

"That's not his writing."

Leo peered over her shoulder. "How can you tell?"

"He doesn't make loops like that with his letters." She knew who did. She put the paper back down on the table.

"Car's gone. He packed some stuff." Dave shrugged, as if this was explanation enough.

"Do you have his parents' contact info?"

"Yeah," Leo said, tapping the fridge.

Bella copied it down, sticking the paper back in her bag. "When was the last time you saw him?"
"Dunno," Dave said, looking at Leo.

"Tuesday morning?"

Four days ago.

"What're you, studying to be a cop?" Leo snorted.

Bella said nothing, seeing her thin welcome here was worn through. "Thanks," she mumbled, making her way out the door.

She called at the bus stop, trying not to alarm Jun's mother with her questions. It was awkward, and she could feel the woman's wariness. When she hung up, she knew that Jun wasn't home, and he hadn't called since a few days before, asking for help in getting a lawyer.

Then she took the next bus downtown, heading for the main police station.

The receptionist gestured for her to follow her to a small interview room, leaving her to wait.

A gravelly voice preceded the thick form moving into the room.

"Hi," the balding officer said, "Isabella Swan?"

"Bella," she said, standing to greet him. He didn't reach to take her hand.

She put her hand down, sitting again.

"You're reporting a missing person?"

"Yes."

"Jun Kim?"

"Yes."

"Who's...he?" he asked, looking up from the paperwork.

"Um, a friend."

"A friend?"

"Sort of a boyfriend, I guess."

"Oh?" he said, squinting at the ambiguity, narrowing his eyes at her.

Bella was trying to place him. He seemed familiar.

As he moved through his routine questions, the recognition clicked. He was the officer Marie had provoked.

The recognition, unfortunately, was mutual.

"Alright," he said, having collected the basic information. "Anything else I need to know?"

"No," Bella said.

He came back a few minutes later, slapping a new file onto the table.
"Sure there's nothing else you want to add?" he asked, annoyance clear in his voice.

"No," Bella said, squeezing her eyebrows together, confused by his tone.

"You like wasting police time?"

She was pretty sure this was a question that he didn't mean for her to answer.

"Any other fake complaints you feel like making?"

"This isn't fake."

"Then maybe this one is." He opened the folder. "Or maybe he dumped you, and you're just getting him good?"

"No!" Bella protested. "He's missing. This isn't like him—"

"You regularly go making missing persons claim on your sexual assailants?"

She blushed ferociously, saying quietly, trying to stay calm, "he didn't. They asked me to file a complaint at the hospital—"

"Which you signed. That's why the police pressed charges—"

"I didn't sign it." She said this louder, clearer than anything else. "I don't know who did. I've been trying to get in touch with the case officers—"

"So you knew it was signed?"

"Yes," she said in exasperation, "he told me when he came to see me—"

"And things blew up?"

"Yes, but—"

He swirled the file around for her to read, "that your signature?"

She stared at it. A perfect imitation of her writing, down to the slanted vowels and messy consonants.

"It looks like it," she admitted.

"Kid, let me give you some advice," the man growled, impatient, and annoyed, "we're not the way you play your games, and right now, you're playing some seriously stupid ones by wasting my time. I'm going to suggest you retract this complaint, and withdraw your missing persons paperwork."

"I didn't make that complaint, so I can't retract it, and he is missing."

The officer slapped the file closed. "You're a college kid, right?" he asked, eyebrows up.

"Yes," she said, wondering where this was going.

"Understand what a mischief charge is?"

"Yes."

"Good. You're about to have one laid against you. Want to change your mind?"
"I'd like to speak with your supervising officer." She knew he was on thin ice.

"My supervising officer?" He smiled, rolling his eyes. "Admits to making a false complaint—"

"I did not—"

He went on, unphased, "files a spurious missing persons report, participates in an illegal protest—"

"The complaint is legitimate, and that protest was legal!"

"Assaulting an officer is not legal!" he yelled at her, smacking the table. "And verbal assault counts kid!"

"I did not assault you, and being in the company of someone who does isn't a crime!"

He stood abruptly. "Stand up," he said.

There was a clench of panic in Bella's chest. He wasn't kidding, so she did.

"Turn around."

She swallowed, but stood her ground. "I want to speak with your supervising officer."

"I'm charging you with mischief, and making a false report." Then he went on to inform her of her rights. At the end of it, he said, "last time I ask nice. Turn around."

She was half-way through repeating her own request, when she found herself cheek first into the wall, broken hand yanked painfully up her back, as she felt handcuffs tightened around her wrists.

Then he sat her down again, starting to rummage through her bag, clearly looking for something more incriminating.

Rifling through the meager contents of her wallet, he set her driver's license aside, and then sifted through the other cards and bits of paper. He read Edward's note. "Two boyfriends, huh?" he mumbled, watching her blush, snorting.

Then he found her fake ID.

She wanted to close her eyes, put her head down on the table, and moan, but she made herself stare straight ahead, hoping to look as innocent as possible.

"And I think we can add a misdemeanor to your list of charges too." Then he peered at the licence again, and at her. "Where'd you get this?"

She said nothing, not wanting to make trouble for Jasper.

"And obstruction of justice, too." He was shaking his head, but he looked far too happy about this discovery for it to seem genuine.

The female police officer who processed her through the pictures and fingerprinting appeared bored, and Bella kept her emotions in check, right until she found herself alone in a cell.

Her tears were silent.

When a new officer arrived, he had a clipboard. "Swan?"
"Yes," she said, almost a whisper.

"You can make a phone call." He too seemed bored with this task, and yawned, explaining that one phone call meant just that—one. Even if no one picked up.

He produced her cell phone, asking her which number she wanted to look up.

The idea of phoning the Cullens, again, made her stomach churn.

She refused to even think of phoning Charlie.

Yet.

She muttered out Sam's name, hoping she'd pick up.

And hoping in vain.

She left a message explaining what had happened, and then, resigning herself to at least a night in jail, hung up the phone.

This officer was at least human enough to see her distress.

"First time in jail?"

It wasn't, not at least the first time she'd been in one, but it was the first time she'd been arrested.

"Yes."

He looked at the paperwork in front of him. "You'll have a court appearance in the morning, and then you'll likely be released to appear, unless you're a flight risk. You will need to post a bond though."

Money. That she didn't have much of, most of it already squared away for tuition.

"How much, usually?"

"Not much—maybe two grand for these charges?"

Two-thousand dollars.

"And if I can't afford it?"

He shrugged. "You stay until your appearance—a few days, or a week, maybe more. Come on," he said, gesturing for her to move ahead of him, back to the cell.

The space was cold, and bright, and noisy, and slipping her good hand onto the metal of the bench frame, she tried to keep herself calm, thinking about what she would do if Marie didn't come through. The coldness of the place only reminded her of Edward, and she curled inwards, grateful for the escape of sleep when it came.

At least, she told herself, as she was marched in a line towards the adjacent courthouse, she wasn't wearing a jumpsuit. Small mercies. And no one she knew would be here to witness her humiliation.

She held onto this little consolation until her name was called.

A harried public defender made his way over to her, muttering through the charges, saying, "Alright,
Isabella Swan? You're going to plead guilty, and they'll release you without bond, OK?"

A portly man tapped the lawyer on the shoulder. "Scuse me," his deep voice intoned, "that's my client."

The young man's eyes widened, seeing who it was. "Yours?"

The superior suit rustled expensively, as its owner nodded.

"Sure," he said, handing over the file.

"I'm Marlon Bisnar," he said, holding out his hand, which Bella shook awkwardly. "Mr. Cullen sent me," and here he gestured with his chin, directing Bella's gaze to the gallery, where Jasper was standing, and moving to the front row.

Bella closed her eyes, feeling a horrified shame sweep up her cheeks.

"I can't afford you," she whispered.

"No," he said, "I quite expect you can't. Mr. Cullen can. You can take it up with him."

"And I can't afford bail."

"Same answer," the lawyer said. "These charges..." and he raised his eyebrows, eyeing the name on the page. "Officer Bellaney. Not a surprise. You're pleading not guilty to all of them, except for the misdemeanour," and he looked at Jasper, eyebrows raised. Jasper shrugged.

Bella tried to pay attention during the proceedings, which were quick, but too fast for her to catch the substance of what had happened. The date, just a over a month later, was the only thing meaningful to her.

"Here's my card," Marlon said, "my office will be in touch to prepare you for the next court date, alright?"

Bella nodded, still too preoccupied to speak.

"No problem," Jasper said for her.

As soon as Marlon left, she made herself face him, swallowing her fear. Jasper still intimidated her, despite his many apologies, and attempts to put her at ease the prior Spring.

"How did you know?" she asked him.

"Your friend phoned Emmett, quite distraught. He assured her he would see you safe. So here I am."

She nodded, working up to her next question. "Did someone—what happened to Jun?" she blurted out.

Jasper looked at her, eyebrows pulled together in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"He's missing," she said, "hasn't been here since Tuesday. His roommates said he'd gone home, that he left a note, but the writing wasn't his." She made herself stare, trying to be unphased by Jasper's piercing look, and bright amber eyes.

"Not us," he said, "we would never do that to you Bella."
"Edward—"

"Would never hurt someone you cared about. Ever."

It was said with such conviction, she couldn't doubt his own belief in this.

Her own beliefs were another thing.

They were still smarting from the fall before.

She didn't bother asking about the complaint that someone had forged her name on. She couldn't stand the idea of being lied to by Jasper.

Or any of the other Cullens.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded, still trying to understand what was happening, and followed him out of the court house.

A/N for 2018-07-06 - Thanks for all the feedback on categorization - I've listed it under angst. For those of you who missed it last chapter, yes, Tory is Victoria. Your questions and comments are VERY helpful in planning out what needs to happen in coming chapters.

~ Erin
When Edward had left the year before, Bella had sunk deep into something the word depression only began to approach. Charlie watched her anxiously at Christmas, seeing too many of the same mannerisms reasserting themselves. She was faking it, and faking it well, but the dead weight of living made it hard for her to sustain.

A few days before she left to go back to school, he confronted her over breakfast.

"I'm fine," she mumbled. "School's just...you know,"

"Nope," he said, "I don't. Fill me in." He stared at her over his coffee, while she pushed food around on her plate.

She'd lost weight again, too.

"Boy stuff, Dad. Can we leave it there?"

"Which boy?" he asked, fearing the answer.

She'd shaken her head, and refused to talk more about it. When he saw her off at the bus station, he'd pressed her into a worried hug, and told her, "remember, I love you. You always have me and your mom. Don't forget that."

She'd felt badly, seeing him worry for her, and did her best to smile reassuringly, as she stepped up onto the bus.

That she wasn't riding with Alice also alarmed him. They'd been good friends, and her absence was worrisome.

She'd avoided all the Cullens since her last interaction with Jasper.

Edward might not have signed the complaint, but it could have just as easily have been one of his siblings. Maybe Emmett had done it, frustrated by his brother's promise on the family's behalf not to physically hurt Jun.

Or maybe they'd given up on keeping promises to her in general, and simply killed him.

Or frightened him so badly that he'd actually taken off, one of them writing the note.

Easy enough to do.

After the long bus ride back to Seattle, Bella was glad to wake up in her dorm room to a rainless day, unpacking her thoughts and things, and then heading for the dining hall.

Marie waved her over to the table where she and Sam had seated themselves.

As she joined them, Marie pulled her into a big hug, but Sam didn't mirror the gesture. Bella gave her a shy "hey," and a smile.

Sam looked at Marie angrily, and then at Bella.
"I'm just gonna come out and say it Bella, I can't believe what you did with Jun. That was disgusting." She stood up. "My dad had a fake charge laid against him, and it almost ruined our lives." She looked apologetically at Marie, and then back at Bella. "Your actions define you girl." Then she walked away.

Bella's face was as red as the soup in front of her.

"Um," Marie started, clearly uncertain how to proceed.

"It's OK," Bella said, "if you want to go after her. I get you guys have been friends for a while. I understand."

"No," Marie said. "We're not in second grade. I was just trying to find a polite way to express support and ask what the hell happened."

The red in Bella's cheeks deepened. She blew out a breath. "Jun and I were...together," she said softly. "It didn't go so well." She held up her hand.

Marie was trying to piece together the blush, the hand, and the vague wording, frowning as she went. "OK," she said, "and?"

"I asked him to stop, and he didn't hear me. And then I punched him, and broke my hand."

"What?" Marie said, far too loudly. Bella's look made her lower her voice. "That is NOT OK Bella! But you filed a report, right?"

Bella sighed. "They asked me to at the hospital. I explained it was consensual." Seeing Marie's look, she shook her head, knowing she wanted to argue. "Anyway, I filled in everything, but I didn't sign the form, which would've made it official. But someone did—forged my signature."

"Seriously? Wait, does this have something to do with how you wound up spending the night in jail?"

Bella nodded. "Remember the officer we had a run in with?"

Marie nodded.

"He was the one who took my complaint. He remembered me—thought I was just messing with the police. Wasting their time. It didn't help that he found my fake ID."

"I'm so sorry, Bella. I had no idea—"

"It's fine," Bella said, "the legal stuff is the least of my worries. Jun's missing. I still don't know if they took my missing person's report for him seriously."

Marie frowned. "Bella, if you told him to stop, and he didn't—"

"It doesn't matter," Bella said, not wanting to unpack the contents of that evening again. "I think he just didn't hear me."

Marie didn't argue, but asked instead, "can I tell Sam this? Please? I think she'd understand."

"If you want to, sure," she shrugged. Bella liked Sam, but the worry about Jun, and the sick feeling she had every time she thought about what the Cullens might have done, overrode everything else.

"Actually," Bella said, "Think I'm going to head for the hills. Get some air." If she hurried, she could
catch the bus to the Emerald lake trail head. It was where Jun had taken her. Fresh air and solitude seemed like good things to have at the moment.

"Where to?"

"Emerald Lake," Bella said, "see you around, OK?"

"Sure," Marie said, frowning, not sure time alone really was the best thing for her friend. She looked tired. Weary. She'd check on her later, let her know how things had gone with Sam.

The sky had cleared a little by the time Bella reached the trail's edge, and she sighed in pleasure. She was completely alone, and there were promises of sunshine.

At the halfway mark, she took a side trail, rewarded by the discovery of a small opening in the trees, where the sun was making faint attempts to be seen.

It'd been less wet in the last week, and she found a nearly dry log to sit on, opening up her backpack. She stopped, zipper halfway open, when she heard the voice behind her.

"Bella." It was breathed out with relief.

Standing, she turned slowly to face it.

Some thirty feet from her, was Jun.

Except, it wasn't quite Jun.

He was too perfect.

And when he stepped from the tree's shadows and into the light, her hand flew to her mouth, failing to stifle the sob that rose there.

His eyes were a crimson, and his skin, where the stray rays of sunlight met it, refracted the light.

"Oh God," she muttered, and went to step back.

She barely had a chance to trip, and he was in front of her, hands at her back.

"It's OK," he said.

But it wasn't OK.

She could barely speak for the pain of his fingers, gripping her flesh.

Her mouth opened in a silent 'O' of pain, and he immediately released his grip, leaving his palms flat to catch her if she fell.

Seeing her steady on her feet, he took a step back himself, swallowing, but not breathing.

She was shaking.

"I won't hurt you," he said.

Every single instinct in her was screaming at her to run. Now.

She stayed still, remembering what Edward had told her that day in the woods, now what seemed
like millions of years ago: to never run from his kind. Ever.

So she stood her ground, legs beginning to shake, back flaring with pain where he'd held her.

"Jun," she said, his name broken and choked on her lips.

"I'm fine," he said, "I'm better than fine. This is amazing. Everything is so...clear, Bella."

"You're—" she could barely talk.

"A vampire," he finished for her.

He watched her for a moment. "Your friends," he said, with an almost derisive tone, "the Cullens. You wanted to be like them. Like me."

She nodded slightly. The feelings on this front were so confused. "I did, yes."

Oh Jun, she thought, this is because of me. The grief and guilt made her stomach contort.

"Is this why things were so complicated for you?"

She nodded.

"I love you," he said suddenly. "And I'm so sorry about what I said. She explained what they did, how they—"

"She?"

"Tory, my friend. Victoria."

Her eyes widened.

"Victoria?"

"Yes." He was watching her anxiously.

"What happened?" she managed, making herself breathe in and out. But he was suddenly tensing, eyes flicking back and forth.

"We need to go, Bella. It's not safe."

"What?"

"Now," he said, holding out his hands. The gesture was so familiar from Edward, and yet so confusing coming from him.

She stepped further back.

"Where?" she asked. "And why?"

"I'm going to take you to Victoria," he said. "She'll change you, Bella."

She could feel the air being sucked into her lungs, and the terror rising.

She could barely make sense of what he was saying.
Then she didn't need to, because she was in his hands, snapped too quickly behind his back, head ringing with the movement.

He was protecting her, the snarling growl and hiss familiar.

Jasper, Emmett and Edward stood on the other side of the clearing, their own sounds joining his. Her bones were vibrating from it.

"Bella?" Edward called out to her.

"I'm fine," she shook out.

"Let her go," Edward said to Jun, his voice feral.

"Jun," Bella said, as calmly as she could, "you're hurting me." His grip on her forearm was tightening, and he released it, immediately.

And then they were on him.

Edward pulled her back, and her eyes widened in horror, seeing the lethal lock of Jasper's arms on Jun's head.

"NO!" she shrieked. "DON'T!"

Jasper stopped, looking at her, and then Edward, arms rigid, waiting.

Edward still had his hands on her.

"He's Victoria's creature, Bella."

"He's—this is because of me," she all but cried out. "Please don't—"

"He's not safe, Bella," Edward said. "He is Victoria's creature," he repeated. He emphasis alluded to all he'd heard in the creature's mind.

She wondered if who changed you mattered. Perhaps it did.

She'd never asked.

"Please don't," she whispered. "This is my fault. Don't make him pay for it."

She could hear Edward swallow, and then nod. Then suddenly, Jun was gone.

Her knees gave out, but she didn't fall. Edward held her gently, setting her on the log, running his hands lightly over her arms where he'd seen Jun touch her, assuring himself they were not broken.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked, watching her breathe too quickly, the shaking persisting. He pulled her water from her bag, handing it to her.

She shook her head, taking a careful sip, Edward encouraging her to have more.

Emmett and Jasper stood, backs to them, watching.

"We need to go," Jasper finally said, turning back to face Edward.

Edward didn't ask, but picked Bella up, and she startled, feeling the grip of another set of cold arms.
They were gone and running, Bella closing her eyes against the rising nausea of the movement, located too closely to the shock of what'd already happened.

When she opened them again, they were still in the woods, near the trailhead.

Edward set her down carefully, not letting go of her arm, clearly worried she'd fall over.

"How'd you know where I was?"

"Marie," Emmett said, "she was there when I went to see Sam about the team."

The team. It'd been the furthest thing from Bella's mind. Thinking of it now almost made her want to cry. It seemed so normal in comparison to what had just happened.

"She was worried about you, said you seemed upset. I came to check."

"We came to check," Edward corrected him. There was no point now in keeping it from her. The danger was clear to them all now. "Bella," he said, "you're not safe. Not with Victoria so clearly meddling. Come stay with us. Let us protect you."

She just wanted to cry.


At Victoria's hands.

Because of what she'd done.

"You didn't sign the complaint, did you?" she asked Edward. "Any of you."

"No," he said, "of course not."

"And you didn't have anything to do with his disappearance."

"As I told you," Jasper said.

She sat down before she fell down, the wet ground seeping into her jeans, hands folded over her face. "The bugs."

"Hers, likely. Other helpers," Edward said, crouching down beside her.

"Victoria—Tory. Jun met her at the beginning of the school year. Right after he met me," Bella said, closing her eyes. "She used him. They talked about us—oh God…" her voice morphed into a choked sob.

"This isn't your fault, Bella. It's mine," Edward said, taking her hands. "This is all her revenge on me. Trying to hurt you. Driving us apart."

She was trying to breathe normally, but the panic, and the realization of what her involvement with Jun had done was overwhelming.

"Please don't let her succeed," Edward whispered to her, coming closer, pulling her up off the ground, and into his arms. "I love you so much, Bella."

She didn't think she could feel more undeserving of anyone's love at the moment.
Edward didn't wait for a response, picking her up, whispering "let's go," and carrying to her to Alice, waiting in the car.

A/N for 2018-07-07: The next chapter holds some relief, and much more Edward. I won't spoil it by saying more.

On an unrelated topic, I'm dreaming up my next story - which I'm thinking will fall into the romance / supernatural / AH category. Now, clearly, as we've established with this story, I've had some serious misconceptions about what fits into that category. So, I would *love* to hear from you about what you consider to be the hallmarks of a good ExB romance via PM or comment.

Thanks in advance, and see you tomorrow with the next chapter!

~ Erin

@EAffleck on Twitter @ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB
"You don't think," Edward said, "that Victoria wanting us away from each other, trying to drive us apart using any means necessary, isn't reason enough for us to stay together? Even just for the sake of your safety? Ignoring all the other reasons?"

Other reasons.

How much those two small words inferred.

She'd recovered, mostly, from the distraught shock of what had happened earlier in the day. There was still a tremble in her arms, and he could see the beginning of bruises flowering up her forearms. She'd refused all offers of help, and had gone to shower and change alone.

Jasper had tried to calm her when she'd come back downstairs, but it had only made her more jittery, knowing what it hid. He and the others had finally gone outside, giving Edward and Bella some space to talk in relative private.

They were seated in the living room, awkwardly facing each other.

Edward reached out his own hand, silently asking for hers.

Tentatively and uncertainly, she placed hers in it. The familiar thrill stole up her arm, and his too.

"I love you, Bella."

She blinked rapidly, and he could smell the salt of her tears, feeling the backwards pull of her hand.

He didn't let go, squeezing her fingers gently. "I've been foolish, Bella, in the extreme. I've had months to realize that." He paused, trying to think how he could explain this. "I know you've felt unequal to me—and I've tried, and failed to show you that you're not." When she opened her mouth to interject, he held up his other hand, "let me finish, please."

She nodded, eyebrows working together.

"I've stubbornly held onto the idea of you remaining human—something which all of us," and his hand swept the house, metaphorically gathering his family, "prize, and would have back, at any cost. But I haven't listened to what you've wanted. And you've been so very clear about it. I'm sorry, that I've put you through that."

She was staring, shocked to an intent silence.

"I'll change you, Bella, if it's still what you want. Regardless of whether or not you want me."

Her eyes were wide now.

It was her turn to swallow, shaking her head in confusion. "How," she started. "How can you possibly want me?"

"How can I not want you? I love you Bella. That's never changed. I understand," he said, voice vibrating with feeling, "if your feelings have. If Jun—"
"No," she said vehemently. "I never intended—I was so stupid Edward. I thought—" She shook her head. "I love you." She went to say more, but he had closed the gap, lips pressed to hers, hands at her cheeks. His touch woke every inch of her flesh, sparks travelling upwards and inwards as her blood abandoned her extremities, and migrated towards where their bodies met.

"Edward, stop," she whispered.

He pulled back a bare inch.

"I can't," she sobbed. "I've been horrible to you. I—"

"No," he said. "I left you. I told you I didn't love you. Then I abandoned you in the woods, where you searched for me, getting lost and hurt. I left you with a vampire hunting for you. I left you with werewolves. I forced my family to abandon you, and to cut all ties. Yet, when Alice asked you, you walked into a nest of deathly creatures to save my life. The cost of that was the forfeit of your human life. You have nothing to apologise to me for."

"I slept with someone else."

He sighed, pressing his forehead to hers. "And I refused you repeatedly, rejected you, and left you feeling inadequate and wanting. I have hurt you so much Bella, and you ask me how I can stand to have you? The question here is how you can still want me?"

"I love you," she whispered. "I—"

"That is so much more than enough," he said, kissing her again.

She pulled back again, conflicted by her guilt, and the things his touch evoked in her. "Stop, please, just listen," she finally pushed out.

He nodded, putting his hands down on the couch.

"I get that you think you've hurt me, but I know you did that to protect me Edward. It makes a difference." Seeing him about to open his mouth, she said, "it does. What I did," she blew out her breath, "wasn't just less noble, it was despicable. I asked for this time so you could see that me staying human wouldn't work—"

"That's not ignoble, Bella. I accept the truth of it, and I've said as much."

She had to rush out the next words, before she was too afraid to say them. "I used someone, Edward. I used Jun as a substitute, because I wanted you. I told myself he was OK with it, and that made it alright. I could've ended our separation at any time, but I didn't." She'd kept her voice even until now. It was a broken octave of sound now. "What I did was beyond selfish, I'm not even sure if there's a word for it."

"Abandoned you, lied to you, endangered you, left you in mortal peril, denied you when I returned, and continued in my stupid obstinacy in the face of your repeated requests to the contrary." He swallowed, grimacing. "We all have sins Bella, and mine outweigh yours by far. It doesn't matter to me. Why do you want it to?"

"I've never been worth what you have to offer," she whispered. "I love you. I want you. I just—I don't understand how you could want me."

"I love you," he said, bringing his lips to hers. "And I want you. Forever. If you'll have me."
She could only nod wordlessly, now leaning forward to meet his kiss. But when his hands slipped around her back, pulling her closer, she hissed in a breath, and he released her, eyebrows wedged together in worry.

"I hurt you," he said, hands hovering at her side.

"No, my back's just sore," she said, shaking her head.

"May I?" he asked, alarmed. His touch had been light. It shouldn't have hurt. It meant something was wrong if it did.

"Sure," she said, shrugging.

Lifting the back of her shirt ever so slightly, he muffled the horror that wanted to erupt out of him. "I think," he said carefully, "that you should see a doctor." He swallowed, looking at the purple and red blotches spread over the curl of her back.

"It's just a bruise," she said, pulling her shirt down. "It'll get better in a few days."

She couldn't have seen the full scope of it, Edward realized, mentally running through his medical training.

"Are you feeling nauseous?"

She made a sound that was half snort, and half chuckle. "Was there something in that list about being overprotective?"

He was unphased. "Your kidneys could be bruised, Bella. That's serious." He'd seen enough to know that the bruises mapped the reach of Jun's hands. "Did he grab you anywhere else?"

She let out a breath of air in resignation. "Just my arms."

"Come on," he said standing, "I'll take you to the hosp—"

"No." Her jaw was clenched. "I'm fine."

He could well understand her reluctance to return there. "Please," he said, with such vulnerability, it made her face melt. "Or let Carlisle see you."

"He's in Forks, Edward."

He smiled. "Less than an hour away."

She paled, thinking he meant to take her there.

"He can come here," he said softly. "I think he'd be happy to see you anyway, and to hear our...good news?" He'd taken her fingers again, rubbing them between his own.

"OK," she sighed. It couldn't hurt. Then she smiled. *Their* good news.

Yes, good news.

Edward's estimate was accurate, and Carlisle was there soon after Edward's siblings returned, quiet and happy congratulations coming from all sides.

"Have you felt nauseous?" Carlisle asked, having finally shooed Edward away.
"A little," she admitted, "but that's not unusual for me. It was a shock."

"I can imagine," he said, face folded in a pained sympathy—not just for Bella, but for Jun too.

He ran through a battery of other questions, touching her back lightly, finally saying, "I suspect they're bruised, but not badly. Drink lots of fluids, and call me immediately if *anything* changes or worsens."

Edward arrived at this point with a cup of something liquid, handing it to her with raised eyebrows.

As she drank it, Emmett nudged Carlisle, "she's gonna be good in the next few weeks, right?"

Rosalie rolled her eyes.

"Hey," he said, turning back to look at her. "I respect your hobbies."

"Human competition," she mumbled.

"I'll leave that up to Bella," Carlisle said. "I'm off." As he turned, he mouthed, "welcome back," to Bella, smiling, and then disappearing.

Bella tried to stifle the yawn that crept up on her.

"It's late," Edward said quietly.

The room was suddenly empty, except for the two of them.

"Wow. I can clear a room." She grinned.

He chuckled, and slipped his arm around her, carrying her upstairs, each step slow and purposeful. Human-like. He didn't stop at what had been her room, though, walking down the hall to another bedroom, this one with a larger bed.

"Whose room is this?"

"Mine," he said, laying her on the bed. "Or ours, if you want."

Ours. "Oh."

"Is that OK?"

"Yes," she said, still feeling incredibly dislocated. "It's—"

"A lot to take in?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling shyly. Uncertainly.

"If it isn't, I'll—"

"It's OK Edward, it isn't like I'm moving in."

He stared at her in a way that made her eyebrows go up.

"It's much easier to protect you here, Bella—with more of us nearby."

She opened her mouth to say something, stunned by what he was saying.
He hated to say it, but she needed to understand.

"If Victoria is not adverse to using one person who cares about you Bella, she won't be averse to using others."

Her hand was at her mouth, tears fresh at her eyes. "I should leave," she started, stuttering, "tonight—"

"No," he said. "We shouldn't. She'll try to reach you again, and we have some advantage now, knowing what she intended."

"My friends—Sam, Marie. The people I live with," she shook her head. "If—"

"If you aren't living with them, they're in much less danger."

She blew out a breath. "You can't just draw an arbitrary line in the sand, Edward, and decide people are safe on one side. If they're close to me, she can use them."

"Then let me put it this way," he said, curling his hand to her cheek, "she can't use or hurt any of us."

She didn't say anything, simply exhaling and shaking her head. "OK."

He took her hand, kissing it.

"I'm going to have to tell Charlie something." She looked at him, fingers fiddling uncertainly with his.

"You can be Alice's housemate."

"And the fact that you live here?"

He looked at her, face a study in seriousness. "I don't have to," he said, "if it isn't what you want."

"No," she said quickly. "I do." Then she smiled, "I just never imagined you asking me to shack up with you."

His grin matched hers. "You make it sound so salacious."

The happy expression slid off of her face. She knew it would be anything but.

He understood, precisely, where her mind went, and said gently, "you must be tired."

"Very," she said, making her lips flicker up at the corners. Pushing down the bedcovers, she settled under them, Edward still sitting beside her.

"Do you want me to stay?" he asked, trying to keep the hopefulness from his voice.

She answered with a nod, and her good hand pulling him towards her.

They nestled together, two halves finding their wholeness, words and hands knitting a togetherness they had each long craved.

A/N for 2018-07-08 - Thanks for all the alert adds, folks, and the reviews and thoughts on the new story too. Much appreciated.

Hopefully this chapter has let you have a sigh of relief. If you think there's something missing, or that
needs happening in the next few chapters, I would love to hear.

~ Erin

AT EAffleck on Twitter, AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
For most of the night, Edward had been in heaven. Bella had slept peacefully beside him.

This was changing now, her form shifting, and not comfortably. He watched with far less satisfaction as this did not resolve itself, as it normally would have.

When she rolled onto her back, the breath caught in her throat, and her eyes opened in alarm, and pain. The sound she made only confirmed Edward's worries.

"What's hurting?" he asked, feeling the clench of her hand on his.

"My back," she breathed out. "Help me turn over?"

He did, gripping her hands, and watching her go white with the movement.

The colour returned to her cheeks slowly, and her breathing became normal again.

He wanted to go back in time and rip Jun's head off himself.

Mostly he wanted to make her feel better, but knew there was precious little he could do.

He picked up the bottle at the bedside, letting the sound of the shifting pills be their own question.

She nodded, swallowing the ones he presented.

After a while, he could see the set of her shoulders still holding the tension of pain, not yet relieved.

"May I?" he asked, holding out his hands in suggestion.

"Please," she whispered.

His hands were almost the same size as Jun's, but wielded with infinitely greater control. He laid his palms where Jun's had rested, and allowed his fingers to flutter down, precisely matching the shadows of violence.

She let out a small sigh, the coldness a welcome balm.

If he'd been human, it would have been awkward, and uncomfortable, but he wasn't. Their bodies curled together into a lopsided heart, heads together, her knees tucked into his stomach, his arms extended to her back.

The spell had been broken for Edward, and his mind returned to the uneasy territory it had traversed in Jun's mind.

He'd need to talk with her, and soon, about what he'd heard.

The confrontation had been so brief in spoken words, but rich in thought ones.

YOU! Jun had accused. Then he'd called him a slew of colourful names, throwing all the
incriminations he had, some real, and some clearly of Victoria's making.

Most were true—Images of Bella's face, snatches of conversation when Edward's spectre had been raised. Others were blatant lies. Fears for her life. Images of Edward, or Emmett or Jasper drinking her.

He shuddered.

There had been other images too. Fantasies.

Some not fantasies.

He'd come so close to telling Jasper to continue.

So close.

But it would have hurt her.

And he'd done enough of that.

When she woke in the morning, the pain was still there, but manageable enough to make her shake her head when he suggested not going to class.

He'd offered to make her breakfast too, but she'd blushed through her smile, saying, "I can manage, but thank you," pouring herself a bowl of cereal.

Her bag was sitting in the kitchen, Alice having stealthily retrieved it during the night.

Edward frowned at it, realizing she wouldn't be able to carry it. Then he smiled.

"What?" she asked, seeing the sudden transformation.

He shook his head. "Just remembering something, from a long time ago."

She raised her eyebrows, clearly wanting to know.

"Well," he said, "when I first went to school, if you wanted to ingratiate yourself with a young woman, you carried her books for her." Then he flicked his gaze to her bag.

She laughed, a hand to her mouth, trying to keep her granola from flying out of it. When she recovered, she wiped her face with a napkin, saying, "are you, um, attempting to ingratiate yourself with me?"

"Of course," he murmured, stealing her injured hand, kissing the fingertips. "I added something to your bag, too. I wouldn't expect you to carry any extra weight."

She pulled her bag over, looking inside, a florid blush riding up her cheeks.

"It's hard to write with an injured hand," he observed.

It had been. She'd managed her last exams with a borrowed laptop from student services, but had worried about how she would handle lectures.

"Thought you might borrow it for a bit, until your hand is better."

Borrow.
The unblemished, sleek silver casing, and the smell told her the laptop was brand new.

She felt, in her stomach, the weight of another thing, throwing them off balance.

Her uncertainty was written all over her face.

He studied her expression. "Just to borrow," he said again.

She let herself smile a little, nervously, murmuring a quiet "thank you." It felt like too much. Simply being with him felt like so much. Overwhelming. Amazing.

Emmett swung into view at this point, making one of the chairs shriek in protest as he sat down. "You up for practise today?" he asked, frowning at her stiff posture.

Edward growled—a low sound she couldn't hear.

"Not askin' you, Mr. Overprotective."

Bella shook her head. "Sorry Emmett, not today." The inexplicable urge to cry crept up on her, and she blinked quickly, trying to stop it before it became anything more than that. "Besides," she managed, "we don't have much of a team anymore." This was husked out, her eyebrows working together.

"Figured I could take the lead, and we could recruit someone," he shrugged, trying to make light of it, seeing her distress.

Edward's snarl was almost audible. His hissed "you're upsetting her!" was only for Emmett's ears.

"Not trying to upset you," he said to Bella, ignoring Edward. "It's just, people will notice, if we both quit. Be suspicious."

Bella nodded. Not something the Cullens could afford. That she would be able to afford.

Using a voice that Bella would hear, Edward said, "perhaps Alice can—"

"No," Bella's voice was firm. She looked at Edward. "Of all the things I've missed in the last months, that has not been one of them."

"But—"

"No," she said again. "Absolutely not."

He opened his mouth to speak again, but she interrupted him.

"I can't, Edward," she said, "I get that you want to protect me, and I've told you I'll move in, but having my future surveilled." She shuddered. "I have a few months left to be human, and I want them to be just that. Human. Normal."

Seeing Edward about to say more, Emmett kicked him under the table.

It worked, and Edward stayed silent, nodding to Bella, his eyebrows twisted together in a small, and disgruntled wedge.

Looking for a way to change the topic, Bella pushed back from the table. "I need to tell my friends I'm moving out, and pack." She grimaced a little at the thought. Today was one of her busier class days.
"Tell your friends," Edward said, "but we can take care of the packing and moving."

"You don't think that will look a little odd, all of you going and packing my room up?"

He smiled. "Not if you come and supervise."

She chuckled. She could well imagine that supervising would be all she would be allowed to do. Not that she would mind today. Her back ached threateningly everytime she moved.

"After class?" Edward asked standing up and joining her, finding one of her hands again.

"OK," she said, wondering how she would explain this to Marie and Sam. She wondered if Marie had had a chance to talk to Sam yet.

It was strange, but not unpleasantly so, going to class with Edward. He let her take the lead on the contact of their bodies. His open hand was an invitation she took at each opportunity.

By the time they reached her dorm room, Jasper and Alice were waiting for them, a stack of flat boxes ready.

"Whoa," Sam said, jogging up meet her. "You're moving out?" She was taking in the boxes, and the group of people with Bella. "I mean, I know I said some stuff I shouldn't have—"

"Oh no, Sam, it's nothing like that," Bella said. "Uh, did Marie get a chance to talk to you?"

Bella had stepped away from Edward and his siblings, leaving enough space that Sam would think their hushed conversation was private.

"Yeah," Sam said, "I'm so sorry, Bella. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I just—" she lowered her voice even more. "I was just so surprised. He didn't seem like that."

"It's OK," Bella, "I'm just glad we're...OK?"

"Of course we are," she said, smiling apologetically. "For sure. But, you're moving out?"

"I am," Bella smiled, looking at Alice. "You remember Alice?"

Alice waved at Sam.

"Uh-huh, but—"

"We've been talking about this for a while," Bella lied smoothly, "just kinda clicked yesterday."

Sam still looked concerned. Then she looked back at the Cullens. "Wait. Doesn't your ex live with his sister?" She eyed Edward, who turned away, hiding his smile.

The answering blush rode mercilessly up Bella's face.

"Not so much an ex, I guess? That was fast!"

"Very." Bella agreed, letting herself smile. "And very unexpected. Very happily so."

"I'll say." Sam's eyebrows brushed her hairline. "But, I get it. I do. Sometimes, it takes something else not working for something old to, huh?"

Bella nodded, grateful they could part on good terms. Not that Sam knew how much they were.
Packing up her room took barely any time at all, and Bella felt completely extraneous to their efforts after the initial instructions.

"Anyone else you want to see before we go?" Edward asked.

She nodded, "but on my own, OK?"

He looked at her, the gaze written with worry.

"I know you'll be close by," she murmured.

When she found Marie, Sam had already beaten her to sharing the news.

"Seriously, you're giving all this up?" Marie said dramatically. "The glorious food, the noisy nights, the nosy, loud neighbours?"

It was good to laugh with them, even if it was tinged with the bittersweetness of it being likely, the last time.

Everything ends, she told herself.

All human things.

She reminded herself why she was moving out, palms sweating as she did.

Her belongings seemed pithy, and small, packed into the car.

When they arrived back at the house, Emmett asked, "where to?" as he pulled out one of the boxes.

Bella froze, and sensing her indecision, Jasper said softly, "we'll just put them in your room then."

He looked at Emmett, his pointed expression telling him not to question the choice.

They took minutes to move and unpack everything.

It was so fast as to be disorienting.

"Thank you, everyone," she said, as they left, and stood there, staring at the space. Her hand went absentmindedly to her back, and then away, as her touch woke the angry flesh there. "I'm um, just going to do a bit of reading," she mumbled to Edward, hoping he understood she needed some space. They'd been together all day, and while it had felt so easy to slip back into, there was a building sense of claustrophobia that she couldn't explain, but could certainly feel.

The door shut, she sat gingerly on the bed, a closed book beside her. She was trying to process everything that had happened in the last twenty four hours.

It was a tenuous balance between the happiness of being with Edward, and the fresh worry Victoria's meddling had brought. No, she told herself, not a happiness with Edward, a rightness. As if the world was oriented the way it was meant to be. But the worry, normally pushed back to the edges of her mind, was present now, and she couldn't ignore it, just as she couldn't ignore what her involvement with Jun had done.

Guilt was a heavy thing.

And there was no privacy in a house of vampires.

She expected to hear Edward's arrival, but it was Emmett's voice that surprised her at the door.
"Hey you, can I come in?"

She wiped her eyes, calling out "sure, yeah."

"I figured you'd be feeling pretty shitty," he began, and then more loudly, "who wouldn't, having to kiss Edward."

She chuckled at his good natured ribbing, "thanks Emmett."

"It's not your fault, hey?"

She understood he wasn't talking about Edward anymore.

The grin that had begun, faded, and she looked up at him, wrinkling her forehead. "It is, Emmett" she whispered, "but I appreciate the effort—trying to make me feel better."

"No," he snorted. "Not lying kiddo. Really, not your fault. Vampires are a lot like people. Some of them are assholes. Clearly, Victoria falls into that camp. She would have taken anyone she thought she could use, Bella. It could've been anyone—Charlie, Sam, your mom, Sam. Anyone she thought could be manipulated."

"I know," Bella said. "And I made it really easy for her."

"No, you've been living your life, Bella. She'd be thrilled if you'd just curled up and tried to hide away. Most of her work would've been done for her then." He blew out a breath. "Speaking of which, I'm gonna ask you to come to practise tonight—no, no, not to practise yourself, but to watch. And to cheer us on." He made a small smile, lifting his eyebrows expectantly. "Morale needs keeping, hey? One of our teammates went missing." He hooked his words around the word.

Bella was nodding slowly. It made sense, and she didn't want to let the rest of the team down.

"I'll go too," Edward said, appearing, leaning against the doorframe.

It was more interesting than Bella thought it would be, watching, and cheering the relay practise. Edward kept his own commentary about his brother going, making her laugh, garnering a few well placed glares from Emmett.

At the break, Leo and Sam retreated to what they thought was a quiet corner to practise other activities, not realizing quite how visible they were from the Bella and Edward's vantage point in the stands.

Bella blushed seeing it, and turned her eyes in another direction.

But Edward had seen her look, and more importantly, her reaction.

He said nothing, letting the evening wear on, watching her tire, and encouraging her to go home, even though practice wasn't done yet. When she didn't resist the suggestion, he worried more. She was guarding her back as she moved, clearly in pain.

Ready for bed, she laid carefully down on her side, shaking her head when he picked up the bottle of pills.

With her book in front of her, she sighed, and from his vantage point, he could see her eyes were not trained on the page.

"What're you thinking?"
She shook her head. "Oh, just..." she sighed, shrugging.

He didn't miss her blush, and suspected the source of it.

"Does it have something to do with Sam and Leo?" he asked lightly.

The intensification of the blush told him he was right.

"Is that something that you still want?" he asked softly. "Before you're changed? With us?"

She swallowed the fear of yet more rejection. "Very much."

He nodded, and after a moment said, "I can't promise that, but I can promise that we can try."

Turning, Bella stared. "What?" She could not possibly have heard him correctly.

"If you want, we can try," he said, "but I can only promise that we try. I don't know—I'm not sure if it will work. I can't hurt you—"

"You—you're willing to try." She could barely believe it.

"Yes."

She tried to sit up, needing to be vertical to process what he was saying, but the movement jarred her back, and she hissed in a breath.

It reminded her, acutely, that she hadn't been able to empty her bladder.

"Bella?"

"I just need to use the bathroom."

The alarm in his face seemed in total disproportion to what she'd said. "Human, remember?"

"But you just went," he murmured.

"I couldn't," she said, standing carefully.

He pulled out his phone, pressing in a set of numbers.

She could guess who he was calling.

"I'm fine," she said, and then took a step forward. It never completed itself, and she was falling, sharp stabs running down both legs.

Edward's arms caught her before she could fall, picking her up. "Bella?"

She was breathing, trying to use it see the spasm of pain end. The air wasn't enough, and if anything, the pain was growing.

There was a peripheral awareness of movement, but the pain was sucking her inwards, all concentration pinned to surviving its tenacious heat.

She was clinging to her cogency by the time they reached the hospital, and the only thing she felt when the sting of a needle came was a welcome, and black relief.
A/N for 2018-07-10: Sometimes, the plot is so clear, and the writing just pours out of you like you're breathing it. Other times, you struggle for air. This was one of those gasping breaths - not sure if it was coming, or going, or meant to be at all. Your feedback is always most welcome.

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
"Good morning," Edward said, watching her open her eyes.

It took her a bit to blink, and make sense of the room.

A hospital one.

He took her hand in his. "I'm sorry, i know you didn't want to come here."

"You're here," she whispered.

"Of course I am."

Their togetherness still felt so unreal, that her subconscious mind hadn't quite accepted it yet. His absence was still its default.

Then he kissed her fingers. "How's your back?"

She was barely aware of it, and taking in the several liquidy bags hanging near the bed, suspected there was enough pain medication to make her forget about most of her bodily existence.

"Fine."

He closed his eyes, sighing a little. "Bella, please. Your kidneys were badly bruised. They've been trying to manage it, but—"

"Really, fine," she said again. She didn't tell him she felt stiff, but then realized it was probably from being in bed for a longer period of time than usual. "Um, when is it?"

"Wednesday morning."

She sucked in a panicked breath. "Edward, I have court today. This morning—if—"

"Jasper's taking care of it. Don't worry," he hurried out. "Judges understand people get sick. It's OK."

"But—"

"Trust me," he said, "everything will be fine. You just need to focus on being well. That's all."

She released the air in her lungs, frowning. She knew she could trust Jasper to smooth things over, and was sure the lawyer was competent, but the idea of leaving it to someone else made her stomach squirm uncomfortably.

He was frowning, watching her, and Bella could see the worry growing there.

She wouldn't be in a hospital bed if he wasn't afraid for her well being.

"I'm fine," she said,

"No," he said softly. "You're really not, and I'm sorry that I didn't realize just how bad it was."
She shook her head. "You can't, Edward. That's just...life." She shrugged. "Clearly, I didn't either."

He was half-perched on the bed, playing with the fingers of her hand.

"I can do better," he said. "Certainly better than I did."

She sighed, knowing this particular battle was already scripted and lost. Perhaps she could redirect his fretting to safer territory.

"You're sure about the court appearance? My dad says that some judges are really—"

"Absolutely. Easy to handle."

"Is that code for a bribe?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Certainly not." His face folded in disapproval, and then morphed into concern, seeing her bite her lip. "It's really bothering you, isn't it?"

"Yes," she sighed, and it was. She could just imagine the awkward conversation unfolding with Charlie, trying to explain what had happened and why.

"It's a simple thing for us to manage, Bella, and worrying about it isn't good for you." Then he smiled, that beautiful lopsided expression that usually made her worries become a confused muddle, "perhaps I can distract you, in some way?" Then he leaned over and kissed her.

She could only feel his lips, everything else becoming a murky and pleasant haze underneath it.

"Are you worried about court now?" he asked, pulling away.

"I won't be if you keep kissing me," she murmured.

He smiled. "More, I promise, later, after the nurse leaves."

Seeing the remote readout, the nurse knew that Bella was awake, and came in to check.

"The Doctor will be in a few minutes to talk to you, OK?" she said softly, admiring Edward's attentiveness out of the corner of her eye.

He was as good as his word, leaning over her, hands at her face, and hers snaking up to match his in position, but the shake in her treacherous fingers made him move back, stilling the tremor with his hands. "More, later," he promised her. "Rest now."

"Not controlling at all," she murmured.

"You'd be if our positions were reversed. You had me worried the other night." It was an understatement. He'd been terrified, watching her fall midstep, control taken by the pain.

Unhappily deprived of the distraction Edward provided, Bella shifted in the bed, becoming uncomfortably aware of something protruding from a most intimate place. Her hand fluttered at the realization, and then stopped.

Seeing the dance of her fingers, his eyebrows puckered. "They've catheterized you."

Her face was suddenly flaming. "Please tell me you weren't here for that."

"I was."
She closed her eyes, appalled by the notion.

"I respected your privacy, Bella, I assure you."

"OK," she said, voice small, wondering at the many levels of humiliation one's humanity could present, when held up against a vampire's comparatively simple bodily functions.

After a moment, she opened her eyes to see Edward pulling out his phone, standing and stepping away to listen and murmur softly into it. When he snapped it shut, he sat back down again. "Good news," he said, "all charges have been dismissed, including the misdemeanor." Then he grinned a little, "Jasper was sorry you weren't there to see the judge reprimand the officer."

"Oh thank God," she muttered. "Wait," she added, sitting up a bit more, "will there be a record?"

"No," Edward shook his head. "The lawyer's requested an expungement. Everything will be destroyed."

- 0 -

Officer Patrick Bellaney's reasons for charging Bella had been systematically demolished in court, leaving him unusually flustered, and ultimately humiliated under questioning. The commentary from the judge had led to some snickers in the gallery from counsel who'd run up against him before, and when Bellaney arrived back at his desk, he filled in the mandated order to destroy with an angry pen.

Before he put the file in the shredding bin, he let an ugly smile walk across his face, and took it first to the fax machine. It was standard procedure to notify home districts of such files. He hadn't yet. Most officers didn't do it until after the court date.

Standard procedure.

Easy enough to do, getting busy, forgetting the destruction order.

Who wouldn't understand the error?

And if they didn't...what more could the judge do, really?

He punched in the numbers, and sent off the contents of the file to the Forks, police department, attention to Charlie Swan, smiling the entire time.

- 0 -

"You'll be fine, Bella, but you really do need to rest in bed for the next few days. I'll send you home today, but no class until early next week, and only then if you're feeling well enough."

Bella's face was puckering with worry. She'd already missed two days of class, and midterms came up so fast—and the team—

"We'll make sure someone gets your notes," Edward said, seeing her fears wrinkle in the corners of her eyes.

She was soon at home, Edward holding her in the hallway. "Where to?" he asked.

She hated to admit it, but the ride home had exhausted her. "Bed, I think."

"I gathered as much," he grinned, leaning down and kissing her, "but which one?"
"Yours, if that's OK?" It was bigger, and would let her have space for books. And Edward.

"Absolutely," he said, moving towards his room, setting her down gently. Doing so, he used the position to let their lips meet, pulling a soft moan from Bella.

Cat-like, he slipped over her, bringing himself to lay beside her, not breaking the kiss.

This very pleasant activity continued, and Bella let her hands know his form again, slipping over his shirt as they faced each other, lying on their sides.

When she reached his waist, his hands matched hers in position, curled possessively at the crook of her hips. She was so lost to the sensations he was pulling from her, she didn't even realize her own fingers had infiltrated the armour of his clothing, sliding under his shirt. When he matched this development, breathing out in a shuddering frisson, she gasped at the coolness his touch brought to her ribs.

They were so close, she felt the hardening of flesh against her, and stopped, immediately, realizing what she'd done.

She was suddenly very nervous.

Her "sorry," was whispered, as she pulled away.

"Why?" he asked.

She wished it wasn't so easy to blush.

The flick of her gaze told him.

"I thought that was the reaction you'd found...wanting, before," he said.

"Sorry," she said, "old habits." She was breathing too fast.

Yes, it had been something she'd wanted.

And now...now she felt an anxious apprehension at the thought of being with him—for many different reasons.

Some more valid than others.

He'd been so careful before, keeping this particular physical reaction to her under tight control. It'd been the least he could do, so afraid of hurting her, not to taunt her with what he couldn't offer her.

But he'd realized that she'd been left feeling undesired, and undesirable. He wouldn't hurt her that way again.

He was so preoccupied with these thoughts that Alice's knock at the door caught them both unawares.

"Um, sorry to bother you," she said, smirking a little at Edward's utter inattention to her very purposeful thoughts. That hadn't happened for a very long time. It made her happy to see him so.

"Come in," Bella called, clearing her throat.

They both sat up in the bed, bodies now a circumspect few inches apart.
Alice's thoughts preceded her, and Edward grimaced slightly at what she'd seen.

"Don't," he whispered, low enough that Alice could hear, but not Bella.

_Are you sure?_ She asked silently. Incredulously.

She entered the room, giving Bella a quiet smile. "Heading out. Wanted to ask if you needed anything?"

"No, I'm good," Bella said, oblivious to the subtext between Edward and Alice.

"'K, back in a couple hours."

"Thanks, Alice," she murmured, finding it odd that she hadn't just thought this at Edward. She wondered if perhaps they wanted to avoid such unusual methods of communication for now. Let her feel...normal.

As she walked away, Alice was thinking rapidly at Edward. _She is not going to be happy about this, Edward. Are you sure you don't want to tell her?_

"You heard her the other day," he said sotto voce, turning to get a glass of water for Bella, "she doesn't want to know. I won't second guess her on this, and neither should you."

_But we know. How is that letting her have a normal life?_

"It isn't, but it's as close a thing as we can offer her."

_OK, Alice huffed out, leaving the house. Be ready this evening, then._

"I will," he sighed.

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_A/N for 2018-07-11: Thanks all, for your thoughts and comments on the last chapter - they help in forming the next part of the narrative!_

_Cheers,_

~ Erin
Fatherhood

Charlie had found the dorm, and the dorm room, but not his daughter.

"Uh, sorry dude," the bleary eyed, and distinctly male occupant told him. "I just moved in the other day."

He looked behind the boy, needing to eliminate the absurd possibility of her being somewhere in there.

She'd moved, and hadn't told him.

She'd spent the night in jail, and hadn't told him. Charged with multiple crimes.

Been assaulted. Sexually. And hadn't told him.

He took a careful breath in, trying to still the small flutter of panic that took shape in his stomach. That had been threatening all day long.

After her worrisome moping through—no, surviving—the Christmas break, he'd let her go with the feeling of grey hair beginning to sprout at his temples.

He was sure it was coming in white now.

"Any idea who might know where she is?" Maybe she'd switched rooms. She wouldn't have expected him to visit. A room change wasn't so odd.

Unlike all the other things that had been happening with her, it was a balm of normality.

"Maybe check with the residence coordinator?" The scruffy creature pointed to the door at the end of the hall.

The young woman there was much more helpful. She barely remembered Bella, but she remembered the Cullens all right.

"Yeah, she moved out the other day," she said, ponytail bobbing too chipperly.

When Charlie asked her to describe the people with her, he had a pretty good idea where she was.

"Hi Carlisle, Charlie Swan here...A little worried, actually...Bella's moved out...Really?...No, she didn't tell me." He made himself remember that Carlisle was a work colleague. That he'd have no reason to tell Charlie that Bella and Alice were living together. That they hadn't seen each other, after all, since before the holidays. But dang, would it have killed them to call, if they'd known? "Can you get me the address?...Thanks. And Carlisle?...Please don't tell her I'm coming...Thank you. 'Preciate it."

By the time Charlie pulled up at the house, tall and imposing for all its stately neighbours, he was good and worked up. Angry that Bella hadn't told him—anything—and that she was living with Alice.

And Edward.
Alice answered the door, the occupants having determined it would be best to put the friendliest face forward.

"Charlie!" she said, mastering a surprised expression. "Bella didn't say you were coming."

"She didn't know I was," he grumbled out. "Can you get her, please?"

"Um, maybe you should come up to see her. The doctor said she should stay in bed."

His thick eyebrows wedged together into one. "Doctor?"

"Yeah, she fell on her back hiking. Bruised kidneys. She just came home from the hospital today."

She turned aside, space and posture inviting him in.

Upstairs, Bella caught the distant strain of his voice, and looked at Edward, alarmed. "Is that—?"

"Your Dad, yes."

The way he said it told her it wasn't a surprise. "You knew."

"Yes."

"Alice," she breathed out. "Of course." She'd been watching Charlie. She could hear his footsteps on the stairs. They sounded fast. Angry.

When Alice showed him into the room, Edward had moved himself off the bed to a chair immediately beside it.

It wasn't lost on Charlie that another room he'd passed on his way in had most of Bella's things. And that this wasn't it.

This room held the distinct flavour of a masculine touch.

Edward's room.

If he hadn't been so worried, he would have been bordering on enraged indignation.

"Bella, sweetie," he said, coming over to her, not waiting to ask, but pulling her into a tight hug.

Edward flinched, but didn't move, seeing where Charlie's hands went.

Bella hissed in a breath, and Charlie let go. "What happened?"

"I fell, hiking," she said.

"Jesus, kid, you've got to be more careful." Looking around the room, now populated by himself, Edward, and Alice, he said, "can you all give us a minute?"

"Sure," Alice said, looking at Edward pointedly. He hadn't moved, and was watching Bella for his cue. When she smiled at him, he stood to leave, nodding at Charlie as he left.

As soon as the door was shut, Charlie took the spot Edward had vacated, keeping his hand on Bella's. "You want to tell me anything, Bella? That any parent would want to know?"

She stared at him, swallowing nervously, thinking: **Crap. What did he know?**

"Surprised you're here, Dad."
He snorted. "I bet you are." Seeing that she wasn't going to volunteer anything, he pulled out the well folded fax paper from his jacket pocket. "I got this today." He put it in front of her. "A report from the Seattle PD, telling me my daughter had been assaulted, and then arrested on a variety of charges." It was his turn to swallow, watching her grow pale. "I think I can understand why you'd be reluctant to tell me about part of this, but—" he could hardly speak the words. His throat had closed up every time he thought of it, on the long drive there.

"Dad, I'm sorry," she started. "There wasn't an assault—"

"Bella," he said, voice a warning. "I don't want to be lied to."

"I'm not lying," she said quietly. "At the hospital, they thought it was. It wasn't."

"You signed a complaint."

"I didn't." She shook her head. "Someone did. I don't know who. Maybe a nurse? Not me."

He looked at her, eyes narrowing. "Your hand?"

"I hit someone."

"I'm assuming it's related to this?"

She nodded, paling.

He'd been a cop long enough to know that punches got thrown both ways. Things were rarely black and white. "Do I want to ask who?"

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Can we talk about where you're living, for a minute?"

"What?"

"I just want to make sure you're safe, here."

Ah. "Yes, I am."

"It wasn't—"

"No."

He let out a breath. "OK. Then—"

"The man I reported missing," she said. "They still haven't found him."

He nodded, frowning, thinking.

After a moment, he said, "what the hell were you doing with fake ID, Bella?"

She rubbed her hands over her face.

Downstairs, Edward looked at Jasper, with a distinct I-told-you-so glare.

"A friend gave it to me," she said, "I didn't ask for it Dad. It seemed like a bit of a joke at the time. And no, I hadn't used it."
"It's a crime to have one, Bella. You do understand that. I mean—"

"Yes, Dad, I get it."

He huffed angrily. "We'll need to get you a lawyer, and—"

"No, Dad, you don't."

"Bella, you don't mess around with this sort of thing—"

"The court date was this morning. Everything was dismissed. Expunged. I'm trying to figure out how it wound up being sent to you."

"It's standard to get these reports when people are away from their home address," he said, shrugging. "Get the occasional one for people whose last fixed address was near us." He was working through things in his mind, taking in all that she had told him. "I have some questions for you."

"OK," she said, closing her eyes briefly.

"Why've you moved in here?"

"Um, well, Alice and I had been talking about it, and—"

"Bella, you and Alice haven't seen each other for weeks. Don't lie. You suck at it."

Well, if he wants the truth, she thought. "Edward and I are seeing each other again."

He said nothing for a bit, his mouth working over his teeth. "OK."

This was not the reaction she expected.

"You being careful?"

"What?"

"Are you using protection?"

"Oh my God, Dad," she choked out, blushing to a flamingo pink.

"Well?" His face was a complimentary aubergine.

"Yes, sure. Fine."

"Bella, honey, your Mom and I have been pretty clear about the reason why we got married. I'd really prefer—"

"It's not like that, Dad."

"It's not like what?"

_Could this be any more horrifying?_ She thought, then turned away from the idea. _Yes, yes it could._ She wasn't sure how, but had no desire to tempt fate.

"We're not—it's not like that, Dad. And if we do, we'll be careful." She breathed in quickly. "Can we talk about something else? Please?"
"Fine," he said. "Who got your the fake ID?"

Apparently, there could be harder questions. "A friend."

"Bella," he growled out. "I've spent most of my day worrying about you, and driving, a really long way. Then I couldn't find you, and had to hear from a work colleague that you'd moved in with his daughter...which really meant your ex, who apparently isn't your ex? I could really use some plain old honesty here."

There was a pause while she took a breath in, sighing it out. "Sorry Dad—"

She was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Pardon me," came Jasper's drawl. "I couldn't help but overhear some of your conversation."

Charlie's voice had been clearly raised for much of it.

He flushed, wondering just how much had been heard.

"I gave Bella the fake ID. I've already apologized to her. It really was a joke. I knew she wouldn't use it, but it was tactless, and foolish."

He looked so abashed, Charlie closed his mouth. He'd been primed and ready to verbally eviscerate the boy. He felt strangely calmer now, confused, and found himself saying, "I suppose, seeing as the charges were all dismissed, no harm's come of it. But I don't want to hear about any other trouble from your quarter. Understood?"

"Of course, sir," Jasper said, nodding. "Um, Bella, Edward wanted to remind you it was time to take your next round of pills."

Sneaky, Bella thought, sending Jasper up to say this in front of Charlie.

"What pills?" he asked, worry renewed.

"Just some anti inflammatories, Dad," Bella mumbled, "nothing big."

"And that you should eat something with them, too." Addressing Charlie, Jasper asked, "Alice was wondering if you'd like to join us for dinner?"

"Thank you," Charlie said, appreciating the gesture, "but I need to get going, find a place to stay for the night."

"You're welcome here," Jasper went on, "we have space."

"That's kind, but no, I won't intrude." He could barely stomach the idea of Bella and Edward being together. Knowing they would be sleeping in the same room—and bed, made his innards feel like they'd been glued together.

Jasper nodded, catching his mood, and leaving them alone again.

"So," Charlie said, "you and Edward." The way he said Edward's name, made Bella flinch. "Since when—?"

"A few days," she said softly.

He didn't say anything for a bit. Clearly, he wanted to, but with his lips opening and then shutting,
she was glad of his finally silent discretion.

"How're you doing?" he asked, taking in the pills by the bedside, her pale complexion.

"Sore, but OK."

"Hospital stays aren't usually the result of being OK."

"No," she said, "they sent me home, and made me promise I'd rest for a week. So I'm keeping my end of the bargain. The Cullens are going to get my notes from class, and I'll try and keep up as best I can."

"In Edward's room."

"He offered," she said, "because the bed is bigger. He's not sleeping here, Dad."

He was just here when she was sleeping. All the time.

She didn't mention this.

Charlie made a derisive, "tch" at the back of his throat.

Fine, she thought. If he was going to think badly of him, let him. "Besides, Dad, everyone knows the best place to make out is the back of a car." Then she burst into a fit of laughter, watching him redden.

After his vascular system relaxed, he rolled his eyes at her.

"Alright," he said, "I'm convinced you're OK, and not dying. Keep it that way, OK?"

"That's the plan, Dad."

Much more gruffly, and with an emotion that made his voice uncertain. "You seem happier."

Her own words wobbled in answer. "That's because I am."

Edward knocked at this point, a tray balanced on one arm, sidling into the room.

"Hey," he said softly to Bella, "you need to eat." Walking in, he smiled apologetically at Charlie, genuinely sorry to interrupt their time, but Bella was late in taking her medication, and there was no way he was going to delay what she so clearly needed.

Repeating what Jasper had already offered, Edward looked at Charlie, and said "There's a guest room downstairs that Carlisle and Esme use when they're here. All yours if you'd like it."

"Be nice to have you nearby, Dad," Bella said, "I know I was kinda miserable over the break. We could visit tomorrow, before you go back?"

He was thinking about it, watching the way Edward was watching his daughter, seeing the way he was carefully laying things out for her.

Maybe he wasn't all bad.

And if they weren't sleeping together.

Edward's face was perfectly attuned to Bella, studiously ignoring Charlie's thoughts.
"It is late," he said, "if it's not too much trouble."

"None at all. It's all ready for you."

"Alice?" Charlie asked.

"Put us to work as soon you as arrived," he smiled, making a mock salute in her supposed direction. "Not a bad housemate to have, I suppose."

"She's pretty awesome," Bella said.

After showing Charlie downstairs, and delivering him to Alice's capable hands, Edward returned.

"You OK?" he asked.

"Yes," Bella sighed, making a melodramatic swipe at her forehead. "Are you sure you don't want Alice to look? Or tell you?"

"I am," she said. "If I can handle that, I think I'll be good."

Edward smiled, his lips stretched widely. "I could hear you blushing from downstairs."

"I bet you could." Her smile matched his. The medication the doctor had prescribed had begun to work, and she was feeling distinctly relaxed.

He leaned down, hands on either side of her head, brushing his lips over hers, teasing the sensations from her. When he finally let them have full contact she brought her own hands to his cool cheeks in an almost uncoordinated slap.

"You are barely sober," he chuckled.

She giggled in response, not stopping her kiss, curling one leg over his calf, and then the other, drawing their centres closer together.

"Bella," he whispered, feeling her pressed against him. The sound made all her aches disappear.

Then her weakened grip gave way, and she slipped back that bare inch to the bed, a pained hiss pushed from her lips.

His hands were there, light and cold against the ache.

"All in good time," he whispered, a soft kiss on her forehead.

She used her last, purposeful attention to curl her fingers into the give of his shirt, turning herself into his cold form, finally letting sleep descend with its quiet balm.

A/N for 2018-07-12: Your reviews Crack. Me. Up. (And make writing this so much fun) Thank you.

IMPORTANT PSA! Want to support a worthy cause? Babies at the border is a group coordinating a fantastic compilation of multi-fandom fics to support a variety of charitable organizations helping families separated by the US's immigration system. Yours truly will be submitting a story to this
lovely collection. To receive a copy of these exclusive fics (40+ promised and counting), donate $10 to any of the following charities and email your receipt to babiesatthebordercomp@gmail.com

Approved charities:
- ACLU: ACLU.org
- Kids in Need of Defense: SupportKind.org
- Innovation Law Lab: InnovationLawLab.org
- The Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights: TheYoungCenter.org

You could literally change someone's life. How awesome is that?

So, while I have an idea for what I might write, if you have a BURNING request for an outtake from a particular story, or a one-shot, or whatever, let me know. I'm always happy to have your ideas.

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
Edward's lips were over hers, and his body too, the regular slide of it making her insides tremble.

When he moved his kisses to her cheek, and then her neck, she moaned, hands trying to dig into his ribs.

"I said we'd try," he breathed, "but you have to tell me if I hurt you."

"I will."

"Promise me." His hips hadn't stopped moving, and she arched her back, seeking the press of his body.

"I promise," she husked out.

Then he was in her, a flame of pleasure rippling up the centre of her body. Lips together again, they clung to each other, the rhythm of their movement building with the mounting sensations.

She closed her eyes, finding the beginning of the path their bodies sought. It was beautiful, and gentle, and intense, seducing every piece of her flesh.

And then suddenly, it wasn't, Edward's motion too much, the pain flaring in her back.

Opening her eyes, Jun's bloody irises were over her, and his mouth, open and violent, lunging at her.

The scream that started in her dream erupted from her waking mouth.

"Bella?"

She was half off the bed, hands outstretched, trying to move her back from the pain snarling in it. The movement was futile, and the hurt only travelled with her.

"It was just a dream. You're safe."

She nodded, wincing, her breathing not helping with the war erupting in her muscles.

"Come lean against me, it'll take the pressure off your back." His arms were open to her.

Struggling onto her knees, she curled against him, as he leaned against the headboard, resting his hands on the flames in her back. The relief was immediate.

After a moment, he asked, "better?"

Her breathing was still shaky. "Yes."

"Nightmare?"

She nodded, hoping he didn't ask her to explain it.

"It's almost time for more of your medication," he murmured. He was reaching for the food he'd set on the side table, offering her the plate.
When she went to move, he shook his head. "Just stay there, it's OK."

It was awkward, nibbling on crackers as she leaned over him. "I'm getting crumbs all over you."

"Not a problem. I can handle some crumbs," he chuckled.

She grinned a little, taking the pills he offered and the water.

"What happened in your dream?"

While he couldn't see her face, he could certainly hear her heartbeat tick faster.

"It's OK if you don't want to talk about it." This was soft and whispered.

"I'd rather not," she hushed back.

"OK." He let his own head rest against hers, their chins nestled the dips of each other's shoulders.

She went back to sleep that way.

He had a very good idea of what she'd dreamed about. Her movements, and the way she'd said his name were clear indicators.

Then she'd woken up screaming.

He thought, reluctantly, about Jun again, and what he'd heard at the hospital that night. Had it been more than she'd said? These wonderings, married with the murky flickers of memory he'd seen in Jun's mind, left him with a multitude of dark possibilities. None of them confirmed.

Perhaps she'd be willing to talk about it in the daylight.

Perhaps not.

But if they wanted to take that next step, he needed her to trust him. And he her.

At least, he thought, the sound hadn't woken Charlie. It would've been the last thing she needed, having him find his daughter in Edward's arms. In bed. Regardless of the circumstances.

No, the Forks' Chief of Police slept soundly downstairs, the rumble of his snores percolating up through the heating vents.

Charlie's departure in the morning was preceded by a quiet, and uneventful breakfast with Bella, eaten up in Edward's room. Convinced she was in good hands, he'd given her a soft hug, and told her to call him more often.

"Love you, Dad," she husked out, surprised by her emotionality.

"Love you too," he'd responded, and then left, before he could get any gushier.

The several Cullens disappeared to their various appointed charades, Edward staying with Bella.

"Don't you have class to attend?" she asked. She knew he did, just not when or where.

"Sure. Why?"

"Aren't you going to go to them?"
He shrugged. "Don't really need to. I've taken most of them before."

She chuckled. "OK."

"They were just there to fill time when we weren't together. Mission accomplished." 

"But I thought you needed them to help Carlisle?"

"Oh, I do, but I just need to submit the paper and show up for the exams."

She rolled her eyes. "Must be nice."

"No," he said, "being here with you is nice." Then he leaned over and kissed her.

She returned the pressure, feeling her stomach melt into a liquid pleasure that oozed outwards from her centre.

The kisses continued, bodies growing closer, hands loose and wild over shoulders and ribs and hips.

Laying on her back wasn't an option, so he flipped onto his own, lifting her onto his stomach. A solid presence kept her from slipping back onto his legs.

She couldn't help it, blushing, feeling it.

Without comment, Edward turned her onto her other side, tangling the two scissor shapes of their legs together.

The blush only intensified, every time the space between their hips brushed together.

Finally, he paused, head resting on his hand, elbow making the mattress dip beside her own.

"Did I misconstrue something?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Then what's wrong?"

Her breathing hitched up. "I'm nervous," she said. "We had such...limits before. I'm just...getting used to the idea. It's...intimidating."

"Intimidating?" His eyebrows were halfway to his hair.

She nodded. "You're a vampire," she said. "Perfect. I'm...human. Most definitely not perfect."

"You're my version of perfect, Bella."

"Flatterer."

"Not," he whispered, kissing her neck, making her gasp, "flattery." The movement pressed the aroused part of his body into her leg, and she started.

Backing away, he said, "What's really bothering you?"

She said nothing.

"Maybe you can start by telling me about your dream last night." He played with a strand of her hair, twirling it lightly around his finger. "I think it had something to do with something like what we were
just doing." He kept his voice soft.

She stiffened at the words, and then swallowed.

"I love you, Bella. Nothing is going to scare me away. Not leaving. Ever."

Her face had transformed, now pale and taut with worry.

She pushed it out, before fear made her swallow it again. "I'm afraid something bad will happen when we make love, and you will leave."

She hadn't said what she thought would happen.

He made himself be calm, still toying with that same strand of hair. "And what are you afraid will happen?"

Her forehead wrinkled.

"Please, Bella. I want to know. I'm not leaving, no matter what the answer. I promised we would try, but I need you to be honest. Please."

She sat up, picking up the glass of water by the bed, taking a long drink. When she set it back down, her hand trembled, and the base of the cup rattled against the wood surface.

"I'm afraid it will hurt, because it did before."

Her movement had forced Edward to let go of her. He was glad now, because his hands clenched. The force in them would have crushed her.

Now he made himself brush the back of his hand against her forearm. "You would tell me if you were uncomfortable, wouldn't you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"And I would stop if I thought I was going to hurt you, Bella."

Her breathing was easier.

Then he smiled. "Ready for some bad humour?" He squeezed her hand gently. "Once bitten, twice shy?"

It worked.

She squeezed her face shut with a pained groan, and leaned into him, chuckling. "Terrible. Awful vampire puns." But the laugh continued, rocking both their bodies together.

When she looked up at him, it was to find his own gaze waiting for her, their lips now exchanging more than words.

He'd held onto his desires for her for so long, the recent loosening had made it even slipperier, and he found his hands straying to the space just under her breasts, teasing the sensitive skin under the fabric there.

"Bella, I want you, if you still want me," he hushed out.

She nodded, too overcome to even speak it.
Buttons were too slow to be undone.

There was a quiet popping, as they were decapitated from the fabric of her shirt, and then his, trousers and pants shucked off like the husks of corn.

She was beautiful, and his hands, and then his lips, paid homage to each latitude of her body, trailing down the curved meridian at her centre. When he reached her lush tropics, his lips made introductions there, making her gasp and start, hands tight in his hair. Her sounds were wordless exclamations, his name the only recognizable one.

His tongue laboured there a while, drawing things from her she hadn't known to feel before. When she was perched on a delicate cliff of pleasure, he returned his mouth to her neck, finding the space behind her ear that made her groan in new ways.

She had only brushed her hand against him as their clothes had come off, and now, able to breathe again, let her hand find his intimate places.

It was his turn to take sharp breaths, hands safely away from her. He gripped the pillow, compressing the corner into a hard, fist-shaped nugget.

He fit, just, in the curve of her fingers, and she showed, with her grip, where she wanted him.

Poised at this soft place, he felt halfway off the earth, drawn into a pleasure he'd never imagined.

"I love you," he whispered.

Her hands were on his face now, and it transformed, as he entered her, stricken with awe. He made himself stop, and breathe, asking her, "you OK?"

"Amazing. You?"

He answered by kissing her, and pressing further.

The tight grip of her hands, digging into his shoulders, made him stop.

"Bella?"

"I'm OK." She was just startled by the sensation of him, hard, and cold, filling her. It was almost too much.

Almost.

"Don't stop."

He was happy not to, sliding further, watching her head fall back in pleasure as he moved.

He found the comfortable end of his movement when she twitched suddenly, and he backed away. It was torturous. His body screamed at him to ignore it, to keep going, to possess every warm inch of her. He clamped down on the urge, memorizing the precise point at which to stop, and then distracting himself with the tender buds at the culmination of her breasts, teasing them with his tongue. He trailed up and down these small hills, the rise coordinated with his movement elsewhere.

Already so aroused by his earlier work, she found herself pushed over that precipice, body spasming with a wave of sensation born around him, riding down her legs, making her toes curl in radiant pleasure.
He didn't think he could smile any wider, feeling her tremble beneath him, the beauty of her face, contorted in such joy. He let his own satisfaction be, loosening his hands from her hair, planting them in the bed covers, dismantling it just as their clothes had been.

The substance of this pleasure was fleeting. Watching her breathe heavily with her own release, smiling at him, and then feeling her kiss on his lips, he hardened again inside her.

He growled over her mouth.

"It's OK," she whispered, "I know you want to."

He moaned. It was too much. She was too much.

"Are you OK?" he made himself ask. He'd felt her stiffen, and not in pleasure, with the limits they'd found. He wanted her to say no, to tell him to stop, to make him stop. Force him to know boundaries. To not hurt her with his want.

"Yes, I'm in heaven."

He had her on her back before he could even stop himself, or think about the pain it would cause. The sound she made left him horrified, and suddenly limp.

"I'm OK," she tried to mouth, but it was half choked, half breathed out.

Carefully, he lifted her using his hands on her hips, resting her against his chest, draping the ripped bedspread over her.

"I'm so sorry," he said, feeling her irregular breathing against him. He'd have been white with his own mortification, if he could.

She pulled back a bit, smiling widely at him. "It's OK," she said, "you kinda made me forget I was on the earth too." Then she kissed him.

He blew out a breath, relieved she was able to smile, not quite over the horror of what he'd done.

"I really am OK," she said, hand on his cheek.

He forced himself to accept her words, nodding.

"That was amazing," she whispered, a little nervously, wondering if hadn't been for him.


Her sigh of relief made his innards clench with regret. His worry had made her question what she'd offered him. He kissed her, trying to show her just how much he'd enjoyed what they'd done.

And, like it had an obstinate mind of its own, he felt himself harden again, groaning under the pressure of her naked body.

"Again," she rasped, trying to move herself over him.

This time the growl was a feral snarl, and he kept his hands at her hips, driving her down over him with a force that made her twitch. He'd gone past the carefully appointed place, but the shift in position made it tolerable, and she lost herself in this wilder possession. He made sure this joining
was brief, some small part of his mind vibrantly frightened by the intensity it unleashed in his body. He loosened a hand, making his fingers tender and light at the tip of her opening.

She cried out this time, the air blown from her lungs by his own thrusts, and the emptying of herself in the tight grip of bodily gratification.

He wanted more.

Nothing could be enough of this, and he had a spasm of sudden empathy for Emmett and Rose, where he'd only known disdain before.

"Enough," he said kissing her, "or I will hurt you."

She was breathing harder now, shaking and pleasurably exhausted.

When she slid off of him, the sweet smell of her blood reached him. It was miniscule, but it made him freeze momentarily.

"Are you OK?" he made himself ask. He felt suddenly numb, the words wooden on his tongue.

"Stop asking," she said, curling at his side. "So happy." She wrapped her arms around him. "But a little worn out."

He swallowed. "You're bleeding."

She pulled back a little, blushing as she looked down. "I feel fine, and I don't see anything. Think we're good."

He made himself accept this. Whispering out an "OK," he kissed her, and focused on the warmth of her body, now tucked against his own.

Her eyelids were starting to droop against her will, and when he turned himself to give her more space, her hands panicked, grasping at him. "Don't go!"

"I'm not," he assured her with his lips, "just trying to give you more room."

"Less room," she mumbled, clawing closer, demanding the press of his body.

"Not going anywhere," he murmured, accepting the closeness, lost in the wonder of their togetherness, as she slipped into the temporary absence of sleep.

A/N for 2018-07-14: Still with me?

Theoretically, I could wrap this story up in a few more chapters. I wonder if I'm rushing it. Any particular requests for what comes between now and then?

Thank you all, for your subscriptions, reading, reacting, and then reviewing.

~ Erin

AT EAffleck on Twitter, AT ErinAffleckTarbuck on FB, FlamingMaple on Tumblr

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
As she slept, a curve of her hip remained exposed above the sea of blankets, a mottling iceberg, whiteness giving way to the curdling blood below.

He’d seen what his rejection had done, and now he was witnessing what his desire could do.

He didn’t dare move her, afraid of what else he’d find. The five pointed bruise at her hip bone was his, and his alone.

His hand hovered over it again, confirming what needed no confirmation.

She’d been happy when she’d slipped away from him into the sleep he was watching now.

“Edward,” she murmured, and then sighed, rolling over.

Her back was exposed now, and clear.

He sighed his own relief.

Thank God.

He could have hurt her badly. That moment of careless movement gripped his guts again.

He knew that he couldn’t risk rejecting her advances. She’d be too stung. It’d already been a delicate thing, he felt, unwrapping all the emotional hurts he’d caused her. She’d doubted even what they’d shared today. He’d heard it in her voice.

No.

He would have to swallow his fears. And be very, very careful. If he’d asked, or so much as looked at her with desire, she would have continued, and he could have—without pause—until she collapsed from exhaustion, or lack of food, or sleep. Or injury.

He wanted her even now.

Limits, he told himself, and wondered, how often a human body could be well, and engage in such activities.

He needed to do some research. Ask Carlisle.

He smiled at this last notion.

Carlisle would be happy to be asked such a question by him.

The patterns in Bella’s breathing were changing, and she moved again. She’d be awake soon.

When he heard her eyes flutter open, he couldn’t help but smile.
“Hey,” she said, turning over to face him, then smiled widely.

“How’re you feeling?”

She’d pulled the sheet up to cover herself. He’d dressed again, leaving clothes for her in reach.

“Pretty happy,” she said, trailing her finger down his cheek.

He caught it, planting a kiss there. “Good,” he said. “Physically?”

“Same,” she shrugged.

By sheer will, he held together the mask of his placid face, reaching out a hand to shuffle away the rumpled sheet, exposing her hip.

She stared at the bruise there, and his hand, held just above, demonstrating the origin of the imprint.

“I said we would try, and we have, but I need your complete honesty, Bella.” He swallowed, “you’ve minimized things before. Now is not the time for that.”

Her eyebrows disappeared into her hair.

“Looking for a head to toe inventory doctor?”

He ignored her levity.

“Yes,” he said, face utterly serious.

She sighed, closing her eyes. When she opened them again, she grinned, shifting closer, “how ‘bout you help me complete it?” Then she tried to move in to kiss him, but slipped, and he had to catch her and keep her from falling.

“Yep, spectacular sense of coordination is still there,” she mumbled, blushing. “I feel fine, Edward. Really.”

“Humour me,” he said. “Please.”

“OK,” she said, slipping on the robe by the bed, “help me stand up?”

On her feet, she took a moment to catch her balance, carrying her clothes with careful steps to the bathroom.

It felt interminable to wait for her to come back out.

When she emerged, dressed again, her movement looked normal.

“Well?”

“I’m fine.”

He frowned.

“And that disappoints you?”

“Are you sure?” he asked, her hands in his. “I smelled blood.”

The blush flared up her face.
“What?”

It took her a few times of opening her mouth, cheeks trying different pink shades on, before she could put words to it. Her voice was soft and low when she finally spoke. “That night, at the hospital, the doctor said that my cervix is, um low, and—” She was blushing intensely, clearly trying to ready herself to say something else.

“I understand,” he said, grasping her meaning, “I should have asked you.”

“Yeah, total conversation opener,” shaking her head, but smiling a little.

He bent down and kissed her, hands on her cheeks.

“Believe me when I say that I want to know everything about you. Is there anything else I need to know?”

She shrugged, “I don’t think so.”

“Before you answer this question, remember that you promised you would be completely honest with me.”

He hadn’t let go of her face, and she looked slightly dazed under his touch, his breath.

“Did anything I do hurt? At all?”

She sighed. “You would try and stun me first before asking.”

He knew his grin only intensified this effect, and it flared across his face.

“A teeny little bit,” she admitted, “but...in a really good way. If that makes sense?”

His eyebrows slipped upwards, seeking clarification.

“I can show you later, if you want,” she smiled coyly, playing with his shirt.

“I think there are limits to what the human body can endure.” He kissed her again, letting her lean into him. “And you’re still not well.”

“I feel sooo much better now, though.”

“Let’s keep that trend going then.”

She groaned as he pulled her away from the bedroom, towards the hall, and then the kitchen.

Suitably nourished, Bella headed back to bed, sighing as she looked at the stack of textbooks and neat lecture notes Alice had taken. Edward handed her the laptop, and she reluctantly began reading and typing, her occasional glances at him becoming fewer as the work enveloped her mind.

Her health improved as the days went by, and before the week’s end, Bella was beginning to feel some minor cabin fever. It didn’t help when her period began earlier than expected, forcing a fresh retreat to bed, armed with tea and a heating pad.

“Can I help?” he asked, holding out his hands towards her back.

She paused, and he remembered, from Emmett’s thoughts, that Jun used to do just this after their practises.
“Please,” she said, but there was a note of sadness to it.

“It’s OK to miss him, Bella,” Edward said. “You cared about him.”

She blinked back tears for a moment, and then let them slide down her cheeks.

She’d fallen asleep in his arms that way, the togetherness bittersweet.

Since that first time together, he’d gently deflected Bella’s attempts at intimacy, assuring her he would be completely willing, when her back was fully recovered, in a few days.

It was with mixed feelings then, that he heard Carlisle’s all clear to Bella, to head back to class, and a cautious OK for resuming practise. She seemed so much more fragile to Edward now, all her places known to him. The intimacy of their bodies making it easier for his to hurt hers.

He’d pulled Carlisle aside before he left, the questions making his father’s mind bubble with joy, hearing how their relationship had progressed.

Then he’d chuckled, when Edward had asked about frequency.

“That,” he’d said, “has more to do with communication and trust than anything else. Trust her, Edward, and give her a chance to learn to trust herself.” He looked at Edward, happiness and pride in his face. “You’ve found a way forward through something I know frightened you. That’s a good thing. Enjoy it. Be with your mate.”

The thought that Carlisle had so far kept from Edward, now flitted across his conscious mind.

Edward’s wince was just a wrinkle at the top of his nose. “I know,” he said. “And I would have. It just seemed like another...hurdle, for her.” Then, with more concern, “You know my commitment to her is unwavering?”

“Of course it is, and I apologise. I was just...surprised. Not unpleasantly so,” he reassured him. Then he tilted his head, watching Emmett and Bella laugh over a board game in the other room. “Will you?”

“Yes. Soon, just...”

“I understand, no explanations required,” Carlisle said. “We’re all just happy for you two.”

After a few days of attending classes going well, Bella insisted on going to practise too.

Wisely, Edward didn’t object, but went along to offer what he called ‘moral support.’

“That code for keepin’ me in line?” Emmett asked, putting on his sneakers.

“No, just being supportive,” Edward said, smiling at Bella as she slipped on a sweatshirt.

When they arrived at the gym, Sam and Leo were waiting there, Dave a happy third wheel.

“Hey you!” Sam said, “The walking dead is back!”

Bella stopped, paling a little, making herself open her mouth and say “Hey,” back at them.

Sam walked up and gave her a hug, but Leo hung back, Dave grinning and waving.

Bella waved back at Dave, but gave a small, and less certain, “hey, Leo.”
He pretended not to hear her.

Edward’s eyebrows pulled together, and Bella glanced nervously at him, clearly worried he might intervene.

But it was Emmett who spoke up. “She said hi to you, dude. Be polite.” His large form, punctuated with folded arms, was not to be ignored.

“Hey,” Leo mumbled, eyes down. Sam elbowed him.

“Have um, Jun’s parents been in touch? Found anything?” she asked softly, wondering what, if any kind of closure they might have.

“Police came by, asked questions,” he mumbled. “Told them what I told you. His parents are coming to pack up his stuff in a couple of weeks, if he doesn’t turn up.”

Bella nodded, biting her lip.

“It’s nice of you to pretend you care,” he muttered, turning and walking away towards the climbing floor.

Seeing Emmett’s glare, Bella put an arm on him. "He’s upset. It’s fine.”

The practise ran smoothly, unmarred by Dave’s surliness, but at the end of it, Bella felt as muscular as a jellyfish.

At home, Emmett clapped a hand on her shoulder, “don’t worry, we’ll get you back into shape. Sure Edward will keep up his end of the training.” Then he winked.

It was good they were outside, and it was dark, and there weren’t any neighbours, because a snarling ball of angry vampires exploded into the front yard’s generous space, making the ancient firs vibrate with contact.

Bella had barely had time to blush at the comment, and now she was just pale with fear, jellied muscles trembling even more.

Alice was there instantly. “It’s OK,” she said softly. “They’ll be fine. Just being stupid.”

Bella managed a pained, “please stop!”

They did, immediately, clothes muddied, heads spiky with needles.

“Can we just...go inside?” Bella asked, voice shaky with the shock.

Edward glared at Emmett, whispering something Bella wouldn’t hear.

Emmett snorted and rolled his eyes. “She ain’t made of glass, you know?”

“I’m sorry,” Edward murmured, coming to Bella, taking her hand, “it’s not alright for him to say such things.”

Bella swallowed, still shaken by their violence.

“Let’s go inside,” he said, taking her hand.

In their room, he kissed her forehead softly, “you’re cold. Why don’t you go have a shower, and I’ll
get some tea?”

“You could probably use a shower, too,” she murmured, picking a leaf off his shirt.

He grinned. “Yes, perhaps.”

Then she slid her hands down to his hips, and lower.

Suddenly, a shower sounded like an excellent idea.

They left a trail of clothes, pieces intact this time, on their way to the bathroom.

“Not here,” he murmured, feeling her slip her legs around him. He made quick work of cleaning himself off, and then her. This accomplished, he flicked off the tap, and carried her back to the bed, drying them both rapidly as he went.

What she hadn’t expected was for him to fish around in the bedside table.

“Um,” she said, seeing what he’d procured. “Did I miss something?”

“No,” he whispered, kissing her, and slipping the condom on, “but it was pointed out, that the presence of your blood, and what I exude, might initiate a change you’re aren’t ready for yet.”

He watched the blush steal up her cheeks.

“Did you want to be part of that conversation?” he asked, kissing her behind her ear.

“No,” she breathed out, shaking her head, and closing her eyes.

“I didn’t think so,” he said, smiling at her, making her eyes open again with the work of his lips.

He was very, very careful this time, his movement soft and gentle, watching her reaction to every inch he took.

She could feel him holding back, and pulled at his shoulders. “Don’t,” she whispered, “I want you.”

The long groan she made as he pushed deeper made him shiver all over. She arched her back into the press of him, and he growled into her neck, tasting the fresh salt there.

Then she murmured, “wait,” and scooted up on her hands, and turned her back to him, blushing as she did so, the pink of it present even at the nape of her neck.

She reached back, hands pulling lightly at his thighs.

He knelt too, lifting her onto him, soft legs astride his folded knees. Then it was his turn to moan, her body accepting all of him. One hand steadied her hip, and the other teased her breasts, and then the softness his own body stretched.

It was easy now, to help her find the pleasure he wanted her to have, to let his own come, as she rippled over him.

He was barely out of her, hardening again, flicking the condom away, wrapping her in the blanket.

She kissed him, pulling him close, not letting him slip away, as he was trying to.

“I can feel that you want to,” she murmured.
He chuckled. “Bella, I could do this all night long. You, however, can’t.”

“Try me,” she said, slipping her hand down his chest.

“Later,” he said, “I frightened you earlier. I’m sorry.”

“Let me show you how you can apologize.”

He chuckled, taking her hands and pinning them beside her. “I promised you tea, too, I believe. Then rest.”

“OK,” she sighed, wriggling her fingers. “I’ll behave.”

He let go.

“For now.”

He slipped away from the bed before she could do anything but, and they walked downstairs together to Emmett’s almost silent chuckle.

Over the promised tea, Edward could see her eyes blinking more heavily than she wanted them to. She was fighting it.

He slid his hands across the table, inviting her touch. “Soon enough, you won’t need to sleep.”

She picked up the smile before it slid too far from her face.

“I doubt I’ll be interested in much then,” she mumbled.

His own smile didn’t reassure as much as he wanted it to. “It’s only a year,” he reminded her, “and in the space of forever, that’s not long.”

She nodded, half-heartedly, and when they returned to bed, it was only for her to sleep.

A/N for 2018-07-16 - I write on. If there's anything more you want to see happen in this tale, before it wraps up, let me know. I'm most open to suggestions.

~ Erin

DISCLAIMER: S. Meyer owns Twilight. No copyright infringement intended.
The weeks slipped away, and the date of the competition was soon before them.

Emmett sulked.

Alice had told him, most unhappily, that there would be sunshine in the early afternoon. That he wouldn't be able to participate in the final part—climbing the castle.

He texted the rest of the group the morning of, alerting them to a case of possible food poisoning, making sure he had an alternate, in case he didn't feel well.

"No way!" he told Alice, when she said this might look fishy. "Not missing the first part—un-uh. No how. Besides, someone has to watch out for this one." He jerked his head in Bella's direction, who grinned good naturedly.

"Yep, can't possibly survive without you Emmett."

Their was excited, and went through the relay, and the swimming portions in record time.

Giving him a hug just before the change room, Bella whispered in his ear, "at least have fun faking the food poisoning."

"Don't worry," he grinned widely, "I prepared this morning."

She'd wondered where most of the orange juice and milk had gone.

"Glad I'm missing that part!" she said, and hurried away to get changed. She could imagine, already, too well, just how convincing Emmett's imitation of food poisoning would be.

As always, the weather threatened in Seattle, and a large crowd had gathered by a large window bank just inside the student union building, safely away from rain and sun. Edward, Alice, and Rosalie waited to see the last leg of the competition there, while Emmett finished up his less pleasant performance in the bathroom. He planned on joining them when the climb started. Alice assured him he'd miss the sunlight with this timing.

They performed beautifully, even without Emmett, just shy of their best time, securing a solid second place in the running. Bella only faltered once on the way up, and they all clambered down together, excited hugs shared all around. Even Leo offered good wishes, setting aside his resentment over Jun.

Bella had put on a brave face, but she was exhausted. Her back still twinged once in a while. Nothing serious, but it was enough to make her cautious. Now she was trying to regulate her breathing, sinking into the deep shade on the periphery of the platform, leaning against one of the stouter trunks, legs fully jellied, as she tried to recoup her air.

She thought it was Edward at first, but the grip of the cold hands was all wrong.

Then she was flying, the intermittent dazzle of Jun's face making her blink with disbelief. It was only seconds for her to register it all, but they were far from the plaza now, heading north towards the waterfront.
"Jun, stop!" she said, twitching in his arms. "Put me down, please!"

"Soon," he said, "it isn't safe yet."

She didn't think it would be safe, now or then, but she knew the futility of her physical struggle, and made herself be still, trying to think about where he would take her. And why. And what she could do about it.

There was a thump as they landed in a sturdy boat, and he handed her a life jacket. "Put it on," he said tersely, turning over the engine. She was thrown back in her seat by the acceleration. "Now!" he barked.

She did, adjusting the unfamiliar straps, trying still to think. To be calm.

She watched him, throat working, as he swallowed, and swallowed.

His eyes were as bright as they'd been in January.

But he hadn't killed her then, and he hadn't yet now.

She had some hope.

So she eyed the water.

The roar of the engine, and the water together, didn't leave much space for talk, but she caught his look, and the loud "don't," when he saw where her gaze went. "You'll just be cold and wet for it."

She took in the shape of the land, now distant and fading, hoping that Alice would be looking.

Surely, Alice would be looking?

Please be looking, Alice, she thought, and mated her gaze to the fuzzy shoreline.

Another shape grew in the direction they travelled, and in time, Bella realized it was a boat. A much larger one. A yacht was too small a term.

It'd been anchored, somehow, but deeply. Far deeper than any normal anchor would be set. Of course, she thought, not needing to breathe left one certain liberties in setting a mooring so far from shore.

She spotted the buoy that marked the tether line, and watched as Jun tied the speedboat there. Then, without asking, he turned and picked her up, leaping with one graceful motion onto the deck of the larger vessel.

It was silent except for the wind.

"Jun," Bella started, trying to keep the shake from her voice. "Why are we here?"

He said nothing, his face working, unclipping the lifejacket form her, and then pulling her into a hug. "You OK?" he asked breathily.

"Can't breathe," she managed.

He released his arms. "Sorry," he murmured. "Are you OK?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You've just—why am I here Jun?"
He looked at her, taking a deep breath in, swallowing audibly. "Because I'm going to change you."

~ 0 ~

Alice's vision had snagged Edward's attention.

In it, he and Victoria were standing, clearly facing off near the university waterfront, in broad daylight. The clothing he wore was what he stood in, and beside Victoria, were four vampires, two of whom were Jasper and Emmett's carbon copies. The other two were young men, faces plucked from the pages of the missing. Their names were inconsequential now. Their allegiance moreso to Edward.

The image had stunned him, and then his physical eyes caught Bella's disappearance behind the tree. It was too far to hear the range of thoughts, but he recognized the span of the hand that'd taken her.

Alice and Emmett's grips held him.

"Slowly," Alice said, "there're too many people around."

They turned, as one, and slipped through the crowd, running when it thinned, and then flying when the trees met them.

Alice phoned Jasper, explaining as much as she could, trying to tell them where their destination lay.

The line of vampires was ready for them, just as she'd seen.

Edward, whose thoughts were full of her machinations now, called her a name he'd never used before.

"You're outnumbered, Edward. Be polite," she cooed back, laughing. It was musical, and bubbled over the water, audible to the human ears nearby. "And we wouldn't want to draw any attention now, would we?"

She'd chosen her location well. Far enough away from any human line of sight, but close enough that their fight would need to be quiet. She was stalling for time.

Then she showed him exactly why she was, and his eyes widened in horror.

~ 0 ~

"Change me?" Bella said, swallowing herself.

"Come inside," Jun said, trying to gently press her forward with his arm, but making her eyes water with the force of it.

Inside, Bella blinked. They stood in the equivalent of a floating house. A living room spread before them, a fully equipped kitchen to one side, and doors on the other, presumably to other rooms.

"Why don't you go have a shower?" Jun suggested, "You're cold." He pointed to one of the doors.

Her mind was spinning. He wanted to change her. He could barely look at her without venom pooling in his mouth.

She was dead if he tried.

Taking a shower seemed like a sensible way to to delay this insanity.
Looking at the windows, she studied the skyline, trying to make their shape clear in her mind.

*Please be looking Alice,* she thought. *Please.*

Then she let her eyes trail over the space, hoping for something she could use to contact them. There was nothing, and even if there was, she couldn't think how she'd use it, without him noticing.

"Just there, Bella," Jun said again, pointing to a room. He chuckled. "Promise not to look."

She avoided having her eyes rest on him. It was too startling. Instead, she nodded, slipping into the room, closing the door behind her, letting the shake in her hands have its way with her, travelling up her arms, and becoming a muffled sound in her throat.

He must know, she thought, how terrified she was. She couldn't make it stop. When his tap came at the door, she startled. "You'll feel better after a shower," his voice called.

It couldn't hurt to have a shower.

She took her time, and when the water became lukewarm, turned it off, towelling herself off just as slowly. Finding a hair dryer, she used it on her hair, and then went looking for any sort of product that could extend her time in the bathroom.

When she opened the door the bathroom, her clothes were gone.

In their place was a large robe. The kind you found in hotels, or spas. It made her nervous, looking at it, but she put it on. Her clothing had been a barrier of sorts. And now it was gone.

"Your stuff's in the wash," Jun said, when she came out, making her jump a bit. "Sorry."

She nodded, wondering what was next.

Being bit. Likely. Then dying when he lost all control.

She didn't approach him.

He was fishing around in the fridge. "You want something to drink?" he called. Then he swore, as a wet dripping reached her ears. "Sorry, no orange soda. Wait, you like cola, right?"

The surreality of waiting for death, while being offered a soda made her laugh.

She wasn't sure if this was wise.

He poked his head out from behind the galley wall, smiling at the sound.

"That sounds more like you."

The laugh died abruptly on her lips, as his red eyes crinkled with his grin.

"Cola OK?" he asked, waving a can in front of her.

"Sure."

He gestured to the table by the window, and Bella moved to it slowly, like a mouse, hoping to avoid the predatory gaze or reach of some housecat.

His eyes followed her movements, and he swallowed twice before she reached her seat.
Sitting down opposite her, he pushed the can across the table. "You want a glass with that?"

"No thanks," Bella said, opening it without bloodying herself. Her fingers shook.

Jun got up again, and she started.

"Just getting some food," he murmured, a hand on her shoulder.

The physical gesture did nothing to reassure her. She twitched under it.

When he returned, it was with a bag of chips, which he also pushed towards her.

She realized that he was trying to make her feel at ease.

"Thank you," she said, opening the bag, and taking a bite of one of the chips. And then another, swallowing her drink.

"You're welcome. I'd go slow on that, if I were you," he said, eyeing the bag. "Not the best, for after a big workout."

"Guess not," Bella agreed, wondering what they'd have been eating if he wasn't what he was. It made her eyes water, knowing what she'd done.

"Hey," he said, "it's OK. I know you're scared. I'm going to make this as easy as I can. We'll...we'll go slow."

This last statement made her shake her head. "Don't think that's going to help, Jun."

"Sure it will," he said, eyebrows squishing together.

Her disbelief rode out on a forced breath out, "not much you can slow down about a bite. Not that I'd want to."

Jun swallowed again. From anxiety or bloodlust, she couldn't tell.

"I'm not talking about that part, Bella."

It was her turn to make furrows in her forehead. "Then what are you talking about? Being bitten is kinda it."

"It's not," he said, and almost to himself, he murmured, "I thought they'd have told you."

"Told me what?"

~ 0 ~

I know! Victoria cackled in her mind. And he believes it, oh so sincerely! Then she laughed aloud.

Edward's face was as good as theatre to her.

Their stalemate persisted, Edward's and Alice's gifts stymying an advance by the other line, twitching hands on either side, showing him that Victoria's control over these newborns was tenuous.

He loves her, she thought at him. So much, he's willing to try to change her. He's been practising! She cackled internally, showing him the futile efforts Jun had thought successes. And
what he went through—Lordy!—I've never seen the like of it. And it only made him want her more. Be willing to do anything to make this happen. He has NO idea what my game plan was. Oh, the fun my boys had. And then me.

She showed him what had happened.

Then she showed him what she thought was happening with Jun and Bella.

Edward roared, and spurred beyond all control, leapt forward to meet her answering jump, mid-air.

~ 0 ~

"How a vampire is made," Jun said. "They haven't told you."

Bella was breathing too fast again, the reality of this before her.

"Jun, I don't want to be changed," she pushed out.

She truly didn't. Not by him. Not now.

"But you do," he said. "Why else would you be with them, Bella. Be with him?" These last words made his face contort. It pained him, clearly, to say it

She avoided the confrontation his words invited.

"I don't want to, Jun. Please accept that."

"I don't believe you, Bella. She played me the recordings."

"Recordings?" Her voice hitched up.

"She bugged your room, your house, other places," he said. "You've wanted this for a long time."

Jasper had been right, she realized. It had been her.

"Jun," she said slowly, her voice trembling with the many emotions wanting play there. "I don't want to be changed. Not now."

"It's what, a few months ahead of schedule?"

She stared.

"Yeah," he said, "i know all about that plan. You have to. I get that you don't want to, Bella, but you're dead if you don't."

She wanted to shake her head against this, but couldn't.

"And they would have changed you already, if they wanted you."

She looked up at him. "They will." How she wanted to have no doubt about this, to not feel the wiggle of a wormy questioning wedge its way between her faith and skepticism.

"They won't," he said, more fiercely. "And that's why I'm here. Why Victoria wanted to change you."

She sputtered out the last bit of her drink. "You think she wants to help me? Jun, she wants me dead. Edward killed her mate. This is revenge, pure and simple."
"Edward stopped her mate from changing you, Bella."

There was such conviction in his voice, it stopped the next words in her throat.

"You asked," he said, seeing her mouth close again, "what it takes to be changed. He'd started that with you, Bella. Victoria told me about it."

"He tortured me, Jun, because he was a sick, sadistic, bastard!"

"Yeah," he said softly, "I get out how it could feel that way."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The bite, Bella. It's the...catalyst. But the body, needs to be...primed."

"And you think that's what that was?" Her eyebrows had flown up to her hairline, and she was half standing in angry disbelief.

"I know that's what it was, Bella. She," he sighed. "Your ex's brothers," and he snorted here, "he sent them to do his dirty work."

Her face folded inwards. No. He'd promised. Told her he had nothing to do—

"What do you mean, his dirty work?"

"Why do you think I went missing?"

"Victoria—"

"Saved me, Bella. She changed me after they'd left me to die. Slowly, I'll add. Made it look like a bad car accident." He waited for her to sit again. "She saved me because of her own past—because of her sister. They met a coven, much like you did, who took them under their wing, and promised to change them. Then they killed her sister, and it was only by pure luck that James found her in time, and saved her by changing her. I don't want the same for you, Bella. I'll change you."

He believed Victoria's story. Without doubt. Bella knew there was no way she could dissuade him. Not on the timeline she had available to her. Arguing would only entrench his beliefs further.

"So when Victoria came after me last spring—"

"It was to change you, Bella."

She nodded, pretending to accept this, and grasping at any knowledge she might use to worm her way out of this fate, asked, "so, how do you plan on changing me?"

"I'm going to break your radius—a bone in your arm. It should be the least painful."

Her heart began pounding.

"After I numb the area, and give you some pain medication."

Then her head began to spin.

His hand found hers. He made sure he had her eyes before he said the next words. "I'm sorry about...before. I'll be very careful when we make love, when I bite you."
Jasper’s arrival had turned the tide for the Cullens.

Victoria’s head, so full of the special tortures she’d set in motion for Edward, had not anticipated the full advantage of all the Cullen's gifts together, and her curls bounced along with her skull as it landed on the beach.

"Alice!" Edward roared. "Where is she?"

"On a boat," she said, showing him where.

"WHERE?"

"I need something to draw with," she said, flustered hands shaking.

Rose ran off and came back with paper and pen, Jasper and Emmett busy gathering body parts into a boat nearby.

Watching the lines unfold, he nodded, "I know where." They'd followed the coastline when they first went to draw James away from Bella.

Leaving Emmett and Rose to dispose of the bodies, he flew into the water, Jasper and Alice close behind. He just hoped they were in time.

A/N 2018-07-20 - It's one thing when you plot out a story, and then write it. It's another thing entirely to see other people's views on it. Very curious to hear what your reactions are on this one (aside from wanting to kill me for leaving you dangling on this cliff - next chapter is in the works).

~ Erin
"Make love?" Bella repeated. Everything in her stomach curdled, threatening reappearance.

"Yes," Jun nodded solemnly.

Victoria was so sick, Bella didn't even have words for what she'd done.

"Jun," she said, voice distorted with emotion, "she hates Edward. She wants him dead, or me, or both. Can you not see how this is—"

"Bella," Jun said, shaking his head. "They're the only vampires you've ever known. They could just as easily have twisted things for you. Don't you think, that I would know, having been changed, what's involved?"

Bella cringed, realizing what this would have meant. When she found her voice, she tried for as calm a tone as she could manage. "Jun, I trust them—"

"Why? They left you, Bella. And if they thought Victoria was a threat, what the hell kind of friends are they, leaving you with a vampire after you?"

"They thought—"

"They thought they'd screw with you nine ways to Sunday. Like how they signed that complaint."

"What do you mean?" She stared at him.

"They signed the complaint. She showed it to me."

"No, Jun, they—she must—"

"No."

She'd stood, backing away, head shaking, hands working over her upper arms, and then he was suddenly there, his icy palms holding her cheeks. She stopped, terrified by what any strong emotion might wring from his fingers.

"It's going to be OK," he said, and kissed her forehead.

God, Alice, please be watching.

She had to delay him. Somehow.

Give Edward time.

Then Jun leaned back and chuckled.

It threw her, hearing it. She knew newborn Vampires were unpredictable. Emotional. So she said nothing, watching carefully.

"I'm going to guess you didn't even stretch, did you?"
The minute head shake she gave seemed to amuse him.

"Why don't I rub your back?" he asked softly. "We have some time."

And she needed to make it stretch as far as she could.

"OK."

"Here," he said, pointing back to the bedroom she'd changed in. She tensed, and he said softly, "I'm just going to rub your back, Bella."

She followed him, and he pulled things out of the cupboards, setting a sheet down. "Put that over you and let me know when you're ready." He closed the door, and she slipped the robe down to her waist, laying down, sheet over her. She felt like a corpse.

And she might just be one soon.

"Ready?"

"Yes." It was whispered.

He'd warmed his hands somehow, and they felt slippery with some sort of oil. A familiar smell, but not one she could quite place.

"Still tense as anything," he said easily.

His hands, so powerful before, were deadly now, and when she gasped at the pressure, he backed off some. She knew, if she lived, that she would be purple by the next day, but said nothing, terrified it would only hasten what she needed delayed.

He worked for some time, silently, finally loosening the robe and shoving it out of the way as he moved down to her legs.

"It's OK," he said, feeling her nervousness. "Just a massage, Bella."

She understood, and tried to let her muscles relax into the brutal working of his fingers. His touch had lightened further, but not enough for her to let her guard down.

Finally, he set the sheet over her again, "I think you're good."

She felt loose, but not in the way she expected. Her hands were slow and uncoordinated, and her head spun. "Whoa," she mumbled, struggling to get the robe back on.

"Feeling it, hey?" he asked, watching.

"Feeling what?" she squinted at him. The air warbled around him. She must be more tired than she realized.

"The oil," he said, wiping his hands on a towel. "I thought you'd recognize the smell."

Her head shake made her brain feel like it was on a see-saw.

"You seemed to react to it well, that time," he murmured.

Her look was thoroughly confused, thoughts loose, flying away.
"Cannabis oil," he said softly. "To help you relax."

"You...drugged me?"

"I told you I'd make this as easy as possible."

She swallowed, throat feeling abruptly too dry.

"Please Jun," she whispered, "I don't want this. Please don't—"

"It's OK," he said, sitting down on the bed with her, pulling her close. "You'll be OK. We can be together, Bella. And it's so much better—clearer after."

He murmured on, his touch careful, but not gentle, as he smoothed her hair from her face, and tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

Her control and logic were so loosened, as to be mere, floating suggestions. Things to be snatched at, and missed with the loss of any meaningful focus.

When he pulled out a set of syringes though, she mustered enough panic to stand and move away, stumbling backwards out of the room.

He caught her easily, then letting her go, not wanting to frighten her any more than she was.

"We need to start, Bella, soon. She promised she would run interference, but we don't have forever."

Good, she thought.

"This'll make it so it doesn't hurt."

She kept backing away, but then felt the dizzying grip of his movement, and he had her back on the bed.

"No!" she pushed out, feeling his hand on her arm.

He ignored her, holding her arm steady as he slid the robe sleeve aside, wiping down the site with alcohol.

She was rigid with fear.

"Relax your arm, Bella. I don't want the needle to break."

"No!" she said, tensing it even more.

"Fine," he muttered, and then flipped her onto her side, jabbing the needle into the curve of her buttock.

She choked out a cry, knowing herself defeated, finally succumbing to the terror of what was coming.

"You're OK," he said, picking her up, stroking her hair. "I know you're scared. I'll be here, and make sure you're safe."

Then he leaned in and kissed her.

Hands at his head, she tried pushing him away, a muffled "no" lost between their lips.
Whatever he'd given her spread quickly, and her movements slowed, sluggish and then dulled to nothing.

After laying her back on the bed, he kept kissing her motionless form, and she felt the robe slide open, then be pulled entirely off.

Her last, cogent thought, was: Alice, please don't be watching.

~ 0 ~

"What do you mean?" Charlie said into the phone, the blood draining out of his face.

Jacob and Billy looked on, eyebrows furrowed in mirroring, worried expressions.

"Well, is she OK?"

Then Charlie swallowed, and sat down. "OK," he said, nodding, as if trying to accept something. His voice broke. "OK."

He hung up the phone, and whispered, like a man in shock might, "I gotta go."

"What is it?" Billy asked.

"Bella," Charlie said, "she's been in an accident."

The colour slid out of Jacob's face, and he closed his eyes.

Without any more explanation, Charlie picked up his keys, and walked out of his front door.

~ 0 ~

"Stop blaming yourself," Alice whispered to Edward. "She made her choice. This is not your fault."

Edward's doubting and derisive sound was made somewhere in his throat. It sounded half choked.

"You told me yourself, Edward."

"It doesn't exactly lessen this, Alice."

"I know," she whispered.

They looked at Bella's still form on the bed, and resigned themselves to waiting.

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A/N for 2018-07-21: I know. Another cliff. Working as faaaaast as I can...

~ Erin
Consciousness was air, and Bella most definitely a creature of the water, bobbling slowly in her jellied formlessness.

When things solidified into the regularity of breathing, and light, it was painful.

She opened her mouth before she did her eyes.

The voice that reached her was a beacon, though.

"Bella?"

_Edward._

She went to move her arm, and felt Edward's hand on her shoulder. "Don't," he said softly, "just stay still, as much as you can."

Everything was a muddled confusion. She tried to speak, but the words stuck in her dry throat.

He brought a cup of water to her, encouraging her to drink some, and the startling realization that she was still human hit her like a tidal wave.

She choked first on the water, and then on the fear for what had happened.

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"You're safe," Edward said. "I'm here, and _nothing_ is going to happen to you." His hands barely touched her, fingers light on her skin, as if he was afraid of doing more harm.

Her body screamed at her.

When the fit of coughing, and tears subsided, she tried again, husking out a croaked, "what happened?"

"Jun took you."

"Yes." She remembered that.

"What did he tell you?" Edward asked, not wanting to repeat what Victoria had tortured him with. Not without cause.

"That he was going to change me." Her look shifted, eyebrows flexing together.

Edward nodded. "What else?"

"That he had to hurt me, before he bit me." Her voice shook. She didn't want to say what else. Edward had gotten there, clearly in time to prevent the very last thing.

"He broke your arm," Edward said. Now it was his turn to speak tremulously.

She looked down, left arm casted wrist to elbow.
It struck her, oddly, that at least he'd been considerate enough to break her left arm. She'd had enough of being crippled on her dominant side.

"He drugged you," Edward went on. "The cannabis oil, we could figure out, but the other stuff," he shook his head. "Your heart stopped." The stricken look returned. "Once on our way back, and the second time in the hospital." He couldn't cry, but he would have been in pieces, she saw, if he was human. His hand gripped hers.

"Victoria—?" Bella started.

"Is dead. As are her helpers. All of them." He spoke with a grim and dark certainty.

She nodded, understanding.

Jun was dead too.

And she was glad.

She breathed out a long, shaky breath, and her face twisted, remembering those last conscious minutes with him. Her heart skittered faster at the memory.

Everything hurt. There was a sort of generalized fire flaming in the broader strokes of her body, and she tried flexing her limbs, shifting slightly. Testing its limits.

Yes, everything.

"Why am I here still?" she asked, taking in the room. It was most definitely a hospital one. A nicer one than she'd encountered before, but clinical for all its dressing.

A small smile flickered in the corners of Edward's mouth. "Aside from your heart stopping, from a drug overdose? Your kidneys aren't working right now. You have extensive bruising and inflammation all over your back, your arms, and your legs." He looked at her, as if wanting to ask something, but not wanting to.

So Bella asked it instead. "Did he rape me?"

He looked so pained, she almost took it as a yes, swallowing the sound her throat wanted to make.

"No," he said, shaking his head.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

After a moment, the regular series of clicks that had been filling the background morphed into a sustained beep.

"What is that?" Bella asked, moderately alarmed.

"The dialysis is done, that's all," Edward said softly. He was trying so hard to be calm, Bella could tell, and it terrified her.

"Edward—" Bella started, but he interrupted her.

"The nurse is coming. She's going to check you, and then give you something to sedate you again."

"I don't want to sleep again."
"You need to rest, Bella. I'll be here. You'll be safe."

"I don't—"

"Bella," he said, voice full of an emotion she hadn't known with him. "I need you to rest. To be well. Do you understand me?"

"OK," she whispered.

It wasn't fear.

What she felt, from Edward, was his anger.

~ 0 ~

The nurse had done as he'd predicted, and now he'd returned to his position as silent sentinel.

He'd been terrified as they'd swum, that they wouldn't reach her in time.

When Jun's thoughts had been close enough to hear, they horrified him even more.

The creature's focus had been so absolute, he didn't even realize what was happening until their hands were on him.

She'd been naked, laid out on the bed, arm broken, heart beginning to stutter unfaithfully. Jun had secured the split bones with a splint, ensuring their straight joining as she changed. It had been this small mercy to her that made his own end quicker.

Not quick.

"WHAT DID YOU GIVE HER?" Edward roared, as Alice and Jasper pinned Jun down.

He said nothing, growling as Edward knelt by Bella, wrapping her in the robe.

He thought Edward was going to hurt her. He also thought he'd given her morphine, but Victoria had procured the drugs. He'd accepted what she'd told him.

Jun's next, intended actions had been unmistakable to all of them, and Emmett had growled out a, "you need anything else from this?" to Edward.

"No," he said, all his energy focused on making sure Bella was safe.

Jun's screams had registered, as Emmett removed appendages. He'd begun with the smallest, and most offensive first, progressing to arms, then legs, and finally, the head.

"Go," Emmett had said, pulling out a lighter, "I'll take care of this."

When Bella's heart stopped on the boat, Edward began chest compressions, feeling like it was his own body he was trying to force into movement.

He'd held down the rage until they got to the hospital.

And then he'd left.

Walked away when her heart stopped again, finding a corner of the city not quiet enough, but far enough away from her to now know if she was living or dead.
He told himself that she didn't deserve any of his anger, but would then find this desire bodily evicted, himself enraged and wanting to scream at her for doing this to him.

Alice had found him, pulling him back, showing Edward Bella waking up.

He'd calmed some, in the waiting, but the visceral anger had threatened after she woke, and they talked.

She'd almost left him. Again.

Permanently.

*Just like you left her*, a little voice had whispered.

He told it to shut up.

There was no logic to what he felt. It was the pure trauma of abandonment and its resulting distress. No creature could reason with such forces.

"Don't leave me," he whispered to her now. "Please don't leave."

He hadn't wanted to show her how angry he'd been. He just couldn't help it.

He was done with Alice not looking. He couldn't stand the thought of any other danger—mortal, or otherwise, snapping at her again.

The distant, and worried conversation between Charlie and Carlisle, tugged him back to the present. Emmett had concocted a story about a celebratory party after the competition. Some pot, Charlie could probably excuse. The other narcotics the hospital had found in her system, they'd told him they weren't sure of. Someone must have given her something. Emmett was now explaining how she'd fallen off a table—which made Edward shake his head. She'd never do that, but Charlie didn't seem to be questioning this. It explained the bruising.

Then the surly thoughts of Jacob Black reached him, and he looked up.

Of all the added complications, *he* would have to be here. Checking to make sure she was still human, no doubt. Ready to try something stupid, too, if history was any indicator.

Edward smiled bitterly when Charlie told Jacob to wait outside the room.

"She wake up yet?" he asked, coming close to the bed.

"Yes," Edward said.

Charlie looked haggard. It was late, and he'd pushed every speed limit, trying to get there as quickly as possible. Jacob had insisted he come too, and he'd agreed, only because fighting it would take precious time.

"What the hell," he asked, looking at Edward, "is it, every time she's near you, that lands her in a fricking hospital bed?"

Edward wanted nothing more than to accept his responsibility in this mess. He'd let Jun live. This was his fault. And deep down, despite all his rage, he knew it.

But he had a part to play in this human play, and play it, he would.
"I know you're upset, but that's hardly fair, Charlie," Carlisle murmured. Edward could hear that he thought as much too.

He didn't blame Edward.

None of them did.

They blamed Victoria.

But he'd dragged Bella into his world, and that simple proximity had led to James, and Victoria, and then her creature in Jun.


"I wasn't there," he answered. It was truthful.

"Where's Emmett?" Charlie asked. He wanted somewhere to put his rage.

"I'm here," Emmett said, slipping into the room. "I'm sorry. I knew she'd had some pot, but I didn't know—I didn't know about the other stuff."

"But you let her get on a table, all drugged up?"

Emmett looked suitably ashamed, "I tried to get her down. I had no idea there'd been anything else —"

"Charlie," Carlisle said, "she's an adult. This isn't Emmett's fault, or Edward's. She's made her own choices."

The sternness of the rebuke surprised both Edward and Emmett.

Charlie rubbed his face in his hands. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "You're right. I'm—"

"Upset," Carlisle finished for him. "Any parent would be. They got her here. She'll be...OK."

OK, Hardly, Edward thought. Her kidney function was gone. She'd probably be on dialysis by all predictors, for the rest of her human life.

Her very short, human life.

Charlie just didn't know how little that life would be yet.

Edward had asked Alice to look at Bella's future, but she'd refused, telling him it had to be Bella's choice.

He'd almost exploded at her, again, but shoved it down, putting his hands on the hospital bed instead, looking at Bella.

It hadn't gone well when he'd made choices for her before, he told himself.

Not that her choices had gone much better.

They needed to make these decisions together.

~ 0 ~
When Charlie suggested Edward go home, the haunted look on his face made him come back with a mumbled "or get something to eat, or go for a walk, or something."

"I'll go for a walk."

Jacob Black was still lurking in the hall, and he met Edward with a dark look.

"Gotta say I agree with Charlie. You're not good for her health." He'd stood up from the position he was leaning in, arms folded, trying to appear as menacing as he could.

Edward had no patience left for the boy. Or anyone, really. Himself least of all.

"No," he agreed. "I'm not. I should leave her to you. Cliff jumping and almost drowning were so much better."

Jacob's face darkened.

"She makes her own choices, Jacob."

"What happened?" he asked, the words low and inaudible to the other occupants of the hallway.

"Victoria," Edward said. "She's dead now. And her helpers." He sighed. "Bella's friend—Jun. Victoria changed him. He took her, thinking he would change her, but Victoria, she'd told him," he sighed. How to explain? "Several lies, all designed to hurt, or kill Bella. We got there before he finished."

Jacob's eyebrows worked at some understanding. "But you're going to anyway, why did you—?"

"Stop him?" Edward asked. "Because he would have killed her in trying."

Jacob turned back to look in the direction of the room. "Is she OK?"

"No," Edward said. "Her kidneys," he said, trying to shrug, as if this display of indifference would make it better. "She might recover. But not likely. She'll be on dialysis until there's a kidney match, and even then." Bodies rejected donor organs all the time. No guarantees.

Jacob swallowed.

"Some people last twenty years on dialysis. Others five."

"She'll die." Jacob said, grasping what he was being told.

"Yes."

"Or you'll change her."

"Yes."

There was silence, as they both left their eyes on the door to her room.

"You'll break the treaty if you bite her." Jacob said.

"Yes."

"You could've said he did it. Saved yourself the trouble." Jacob eyed him shrewdly.

"She wasn't ready." Edward wanted to be able to say that he didn't want her changed, but it wasn't
true. Not anymore.

They both heard Bella's voice, mumbling to Charlie, who stepped to the door, opening it, surprised when he found Edward and Jacob together.

"She's asking for you," he said to Edward, stepping aside to let him in.

He wavered for half a second, and then turned to go into the room. Charlie waited outside.

The bed had been moved so she was sitting more upright. Her look, seeing him, was wary.

"How're you doing?" he asked her softly, moving to her side, taking her hand.

"OK," she said, still watching him cautiously.

"I can't—" Edward started, shaking his head, "I can't lose you again." He took a deep breath in, leaning over the bed rail, feeling her hand on his cheek.

"I'm not going anywhere, Edward," she whispered.

He shook his head. "Alice won't look, unless you ask you. And I need you to ask her to. Now." He stepped back, needing to see her face, to know what was transpiring on it.

"OK," she said, nodding. "Is she here?"

"No," he choked out, relief making his face twist in new ways. "I thought you were dead, Bella. I love you so much." He buried his face in her hair, hand too tight over hers.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm sorry...for so many things. Most because I've taken your human life from you. That I want to completely take it. That I'm so selfish—"

"You want me, like you?" She asked, not sure she'd heard right.

"I want you safe," he said, "for entirely selfish reasons."

She was fighting back tears. "I love you."

His face twisted, as he pulled her to him.

She winced a bit, but kept the pain to herself, happily exchanging it for his touch.

"Careful!" Charlie called from the door.

Edward gently set Bella down, worried at Charlie's tone.

"I'm fine," she said, fingers shaking in his.

"You're not," he murmured.

Charlie agreed. "You're white as a sheet."

He pressed the call button before she could say otherwise, watching her lay back, panting in clear distress.

Edward watched, alarmed.
So did Jacob.

When the nurse arrived, she didn't bother taking any vitals, but paged the doctor.

"Do me a favour," Bella said to Edward, "phone Alice?"

Pulling out his phone, he dialed, only saying, "Bella wants to talk to you." He held the phone to Bella's ear, as Charlie looked on in consternation.

"Hi Alice," Bella managed, a weak smile joining her words. "I'm OK. Think you might have to clear my social calendar for a while….yeah...maybe check what my next few weeks look like for me? Tell Edward what you see?...thanks. Yes. See you tomorrow." Then she sort of slid back even more into the pillow. "Tired," she murmured.

All three of the men in the room watched her slip into something like sleep, but deeper, and darker, and far more frightening.
“Is she...dying?” Charlie asked, swallowing.

“No,” the doctor said, shaking his head. Not yet, not necessarily, he thought.

An optimist, Edward realized, sighing. He didn’t begrudge him it. He was young.

*She has good chances*, the doctor was still thinking, wanting to offer Charlie some comfort. “She’s on the transplant list. She’s young. The dialysis is going well. She’s just been...traumatized.” Here he looked at Edward. He knew it was his brother who’d brought her in. The story about falling off the table just didn’t add up, though. And that fall hiking from before? He hadn’t seen many logs with hand shaped branches.

“You’re her next of kin?” he asked Charlie.

“Yeah.” Charlie was staring at her, dazed. Exhausted.

“Can I have a word with you in private?” The doctor asked.

Edward closed his eyes, groaning mentally. He’d expected this much earlier. After her last hospital visit. He didn’t wait to be asked to leave, but stepped outside the door, looking at Jacob, laid out on the hard plastic chairs there. His smell wasn't improving with time. Or a lack of showering.


“I don’t need fricking vampire charity.”

“It’s not mine,” he said, “it’s Bella’s.”

“Huh?” he asked, still waking up.

“Bella’s.” Edward wrote the address down for him on the corner of a take-out brochure, tacked up on the community board. “Here. I’ll call if anything changes.”

Jacob didn’t trust him, and his thoughts were clear on this front.

“If she dies, dog, you can remove me from the world as well.”

This, Jacob believed, and he nodded, snatching the scrap of paper from him.

Edward murmured other things to Jacob, quiet words that were meant for his ears only.

Finally, Jacob rubbed his face in his hands, chewing on what Edward had told him. “OK, you’ll call me if things get worse?”

“I promise.” Hearing the responding thoughts, he snorted out something like a chuckle, “No, I
suppose you wouldn't put much stock in that, would you?”

As Jacob walked away, Edward turned his mind back to the conversation in the room.

“Someone’s hurt her,” the doctor said. “Those aren’t injuries from falling. They required...significant force. More than you’d get from slipping. Is there any reason she’d say she fell?”

Charlie’s thought, always so muted, were a violent, and boiling rage.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding, “I can.” Edward’s face swum in his thoughts.

Edward’s mental moaning continued, and he cursed Victoria and Jun again.

“We’re tapering off the sedatives and painkillers,” the doctor said quietly. “She should be awake in a few hours, and we’ll reassess then.”

Charlie nodded silently. Angrily.

Then he sat, and waited.

Seeing the doctor leave, Edward knew he needed to maintain his innocent facade, and walked back in.

“What happened, really?” Charlie asked him. He didn’t turn to look at him, still watching Bella.

“You need to ask Bella that,” Edward said.

Charlie turned, not expecting this. Expecting excuses, more lies, Edward realized.

“Someone’s hurt her.”

Edward set his jaw. “You’ll need to ask her.”

“Who? You know, clearly.”

Edward shook his head. “You think it’s me, and I don’t blame you. Ask her yourself, when she wakes up.”

He stayed silent in the face of Charlie’s remaining, and increasingly frustrated questions.

They were both glad when she began to stir.

“I’ll be outside,” Edward said, slipping away.

After the nurse finished her checks, and left, Charlie pounced.

“Someone hurt you, Bella,” Charlie started. “I’d like to know who.”

Edward could hear her panicked breathing, forcing himself to remain where he was.

“I fell—”


She thought for a minute, breathing slowing. “You remember my friend, Jun?”

“Sure, you were seeing each other.”
“Yeah.”
“He did this?”

She nodded.

Edward had never doubted her intelligence, and he gave thanks for it now. The truth, even part of it, was always better, than a lie.

“What happened?” Charlie hushed out.

Edward heard the rustle of her hair, her head shaking.

“You can press charges, Bella.”

“He took off, Dad.”

“People can be found.”

She sighed. “He...left. I filed that missing persons report for a reason. But he came back. He wasn’t...right...in the head. He grabbed me at the party, and gave me a shot of something. I don’t know what happened after—” she started to cry.

Edward was at the door, hand paused on the handle, before he stopped himself.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said. “But you need to report this. If he hurt you, he’ll hurt someone else.”

“Sure,” Bella said.

Edward could practically hear the guilty squirm on her face. He backed away, hearing Charlie’s footsteps approaching.

“Edward?”

Edward entered, moving past Charlie, and to Bella, eyes full of silent reassurances. He kissed her, hands gentle over her face. “You OK?”

She nodded, and then looked at her father, face shadowed with a beard, clothes the same ones he’d come in.

“You need to sleep, Dad,” she reprimanded him. He lifted a chin towards the recliner in the room.

“In a bed. Eat something. I’ll be fine.”

Charlie closed his eyes momentarily, and then looked at the many machines around the room as his only comment.

She tried again. “I’ll feel better, knowing you’re comfortable.” She looked to Edward.

“Alice wanted you to know you’re welcome with us. She’s got the room ready.”

“I’ll talk to the police, after you’ve rested, Dad.” She tried to make her voice sound authoritative. The effect was weakened by the trailing off of her air, and the way she had to sink back into the bed.

“A couple hours,” Charlie agreed, coming to kiss her on top of her head.

When he left, she asked Edward, voice anxious again, “you heard?”
“Yes,” he said, “don’t worry. You did fine. Emmett’s story will still hold. I’m sure no one will doubt you fell off a table.”

She laughed a little, and then stopped, wincing.

He hated it, and his expression was a wavering line, not quite a frown, nor a smile. He wanted to keep his distress from her.

Instead, he leaned in and kissed her. “What can I do for you?”

“Be with me,” she said.

“I can do that.”

“Good.” Her words were getting harder to make.

“Bella,” Edward started. “If we’re going to change you, I want you to have as much closure to your human life as possible. How can I help you have that?”

She focused on breathing for a moment, then said, air restored. “Help my parents see I’m happy. That you love me.”

“Alright.” Sticking his hand in his pocket, he wrapped his fingers around the small box he’d put there the day of the competition. “I think,” he said, pulling it out, “that I have a question I need to ask you first, though.”

She didn’t waste air by asking, but looked at him, her eyebrows a dipped line.

“Will you marry me?” He slipped the small box into her open hand.

Her face became a picasso of shapes, all speaking at once, silent, loud and airless.

He waited, a thrill of panic starting to form. It wasn’t a question one repeated.

“Yes,” she finally managed, her other hand at her mouth, one reaching for him, trying to pull him to her.

When their lips met this time, he felt her hands cling tenaciously to his hair, all her energy spent in holding him. As it faded, her hands slipped away, and she could barely breathe out the words, “I love you.”

He was glad he knew how to work the oxygen, slipping the cannula over her face, watching her face, still full of joyful lines, pinken again.

Forcing himself to remain calm, he helped her open the box, and not wanting her to speak unnecessarily, said, “it was my mother’s.” He slipped it over her finger, and watched her catch its glint in the light.

When she did speak, she chuckled, “Charlie’s going to freak.”

Edward grinned in response. “I think we can handle that.” Then he heard Alice’s approaching thoughts. All restraints off, she was looking at everything in Bella’s future, and her mind was running at a high pitched whistle of excitement.

She didn’t bother with hello, skipping right to a loud, “I get to be the first to say congratulations!”
Bella waved, saving her strength for enduring Alice’s energetic self.

“And you’re going to be well enough for a wedding!”

Bella looked at her, face full of disbelief, and then pale with horror. “I am?”

“Oh yes! Early May. Right after exams are done.”

“I can go back to class?”

“In just a few weeks. You’ll still be on dialysis, but you’re going to be fine. For the wedding.”

Edward could see, in Alice’s thoughts, that she would be fine then. What came after was far more troubling.

“What?” Bella asked, knowing the face Edward was making.

“Your health won’t hold steady after that,” Alice said, far less happily. “Summer, sometime. I’m not sure exactly.”

“And the Volturi?” she whispered.

“Nothing new,” Alice said, voice serious. “They’ll check, but it isn’t clear when.”

Bella nodded. She’d expected as much.

“It gives you time,” Edward said, “to say goodbye.”

“Yes.” Her throat was tight. She wanted to be happy with their new life together, but it meant the ending of this one, and Charlie’s worried face was too fresh.

“We’ll need to start planning,” Edward murmured to Alice, below Bella’s hearing. “Carlisle will want to give notice at the hospital.”

Hearing the slap of rubber soles, Edward turned, and pulled the cannula off of Bella, “sorry,” he whispered, shutting off the oxygen. “She’ll put it back on in a sec.”

Bella understood, nodding, paling almost immediately at its removal.

The nurse noticed her colour right away, and as Edward had predicted, put the cannula right back on, only briefly wondering why it felt warm.

“Things hurting?” she asked Bella.

“A little,” she said, hating to confirm the suspicions she could see on Edward’s face.

Tapping numbers into the dispenser, she nodded, and then left.

Edward frowned. “You need to tell us,” he murmured.

“Soon I won’t have to,” she mumbled.

“And until then, humour me,” he said, kissing her forehead.

- 0 -

When Charlie returned the next morning, he wasn’t alone. Jacob trailed after him, looking like the
sad puppy he was, Edward thought.

“Sure,” Charlie said, “I have to leave, but he gets to stay,” jerking a thumb towards Edward. He said it lightly, though, happy to see Bella awake, and looking more herself. His hug was tentative, and she returned it with as much force as she could muster.

“He’s younger,” Bella quipped. “Crappy hospital chairs hurt him less.”

Jacob gave her a quiet “hey,” coming close. “You look like crap.”

“Thanks, Jake,” she said pertly.

“Just keepin’ it real. It’s what I do.”

She grinned. “You do it well.”

He leaned closer, his whisper covered by the purposeful small talk Edward made with Charlie. “Glad to see you’re still you.”

Her smile fluttered. “Not long, Jake,” she whispered back.

Charlie grunted, ending his interaction with Edward. “Well, I kept up my end of the deal, Bella. You ready to file a complaint?”

Bella nodded.

Jacob turned to Edward for an explanation, who only shook his head in the briefest of motions.

Pulling out his phone, Charlie stepped into the hall, worried about the phone interfering with the machinery.

She watched him go, leaning back, resting. Preparing herself.

“You see,” Edward said to Jacob. It was a statement. Not a question.

“Yes,” Jacob said.

“See what?” Bella asked, unnerved by this exchange.

“That you’re...not well,” Jacob said, swallowing, thinking, *that you’re dying* .

“Will you consider my request?”

Jacob nodded. “I’ll speak to Sam.”

“Want to fill me in?” Bella asked.

“If we change you, we break the treaty,” Edward said, playing with her fingers, pulling her left hand out from under the covers.

Bella’s eyes widened, knowing Jacob would see.

Charlie opened the door, walking directly to Bella, standing immediately beside Edward.

“They’re sending two officers over to take your statement. Should be here soon.”

“Sure,” Bella managed, Edward’s grip on her hand not letting her move it away.
Her stilted motion, in trying to move it, caught his eye, caught his attention.  

His eyes widened, and he looked first at Bella, and then at Edward.  

“Is that—?”

Edward pretended to follow his gaze.  

“An engagement ring. My mother’s.”

Charlie’s throat worked at something. Then his mind went over what the doctors had told him. He produced a challenged, “congratulations.”

Then all of them turned, in one fashion, or another, to look at Jacob, excluded from this small circle.  

His body was working at something too, but more at keeping himself together in the shape that world expected of him.  

“I’m—I’m gonna head home. Bye Bells.”

Then, abruptly, he turned and smacked out of the door, nearly interrupting the self-important form of Patrick Bellaney, and his junior officer, just coming down the hall.
Bella's eyes were saucer-sized as she saw Patrick Bellaney step into the room.

Edward, hand still in hers, took in her thumping heart-rate and mouthed "what?" to her.

"That's him," she whispered, looking at Bellaney, who was introducing himself to Charlie. "The cop I told you about."

Charlie, however, had already recognized the name. It was burned into his mind forever. Who forgot the name on that kind of report?

"How'd you get assigned?" he asked Bellaney, ignoring the silent, and clearly junior officer beside him.

"What?" Bellaney asked, confused by the question.

"How'd you get assigned. To this case." Charlie's intonation had no patience in it.

"I handled the missing person's case she filed."

"Thought so," Charlie said. "Now get out." He pointed to the door.

"I'm here on police business." Bellaney laughed a little uneasily, "Remember, you called us in to report an assault?"

"No," Charlie said, "you're an ass, shitting all over the uniform. Get out. Tell them to send a real cop."

Bellaney's face was the colour of a beet.

When he stood there still, Charlie moved closer, hissing through his clenched teeth. "I may be a small town cop, but I know my procedures, and I have the time stamp on that fax you sent me. I'll happily send it off to the judge. Watch him hand you your ass in court for fun."

Bellaney's voice shook with anger when he spoke, jabbing a pudgy finger at Bella. "You're nothing but a spoiled brat. They might not know it, but I see through you." Then, with his solid, and silent shadow trailing in his corpulent wake, he smacked the door open, and tromped down the hall.

Edward had been prepared to find a way to more subtly evict the man, but stood, happily surprised by Charlie's blunt handling of it.

He and Bella stared at her father, who suddenly looked abashed.

"Sorry," he mumbled, "about the swearing."

Bella nodded, adding a quiet, "Thank you, Dad."

"I'm just gonna call the station back," Charlie muttered, moving into the corridor again.

"Wow," Bella said to Edward.
"A suitable sentiment," he chuckled back.

Edward didn't say anything else, wanting her to rest before she had to speak again, so when Charlie entered the room next, they hadn't yet discussed the disclosure of their engagement.

"So," Charlie said, "you're...getting married." He paused before he added, "Congratulations. I'll, um. I'll let your mom know, when I call her later. She wanted to fly out, but I told her to hold off." He ran a hand through his hair, "you gotta date in mind?"

"We're thinking early May," Edward said softly, looking to Bella. She nodded, preserving her air.

"Very small," Bella whispered. This was important. Her eyes told Edward as much. "Just family."

"Of course," Edward said. He hadn't mentioned anything about Alice's desires to manage the wedding yet, and wouldn't mind her doing so, as long as it helped, rather than strained Bella.

"So, I've asked some other officers to come a bit later," Charlie said, letting a smile flicker on his lips. "I'm gonna make some more phone calls about the ja—Bellaney."

"Sure, Dad," Bella smirked. "You do angry well."

Edward smiled at this too.

Charlie gave a gruff harumph, and displaced Edward momentarily, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. "Love you, kiddo."

"Love you Dad."

Alone again, and foreseeably for a few hours, Bella pulled Edward to her, silently inviting him to sit beside her on the bed.

"Not enough room," he said, shaking his head, looking at the many leads and wires. Then the bridge of his nose wrinkled as he thought. "But we could have you moved home, if you want. I can get Carlisle to set everything up there."

"And Charlie?"

"I don't think he'll protest, you being under appropriately supervised medical care there. We can get a nurse, for appearances sake, if you like."

She raised her eyebrows in protest.

"From what the doctors have told him, Bella, Charlie is under the impression your life has been dramatically shortened, Bella. To years, at best. I think, on some level, he understands that it is months, not more. I doubt very much he'll object to anything you want to do."

Her eyebrows rode higher.

"Well," he smiled, "not anything, but most things within reason."

"Can you talk to him? And Carlisle, then?"

Edward nodded, the plans already sketching themselves out in his mind.

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Sam's axe made a thumping crack in the log.

"How's Bella?" he called out, watching Jacob approach. He'd heard from Billy, about Charlie, and then Jacob's sudden departure.

Jacob shook his head wordlessly, and Sam put the axe down. His forehead puckered. "Is she—?"

"She's alive. For now."

"I'm sorry, Jake." Sam hushed out, meaning it. For lack of better seating, he gestured to several large trunk pieces, awaiting their fate on the larger block.

"She's in the hospital," Jacob said. "On dialysis."

Sam said nothing, but nodded, listening intently.

"You remember that vampire that kept coming back here?"

"Sure."

"Went after her. Used another leech—one of Bella's friends, that she changed—to hurt her."

"Shitty."

Jacob nodded. "They killed him."

"Good."

The silence persisted a bit longer after that, as Jacob struggled for words.

"She's dying, Sam."

But Sam understood there was more than just grief walking about here. He looked at Jacob, eyes suddenly alert.

"They want to change her."

Sam closed his eyes, and blew his latest breath out through his mouth. "They asked you to talk to me?"

"No." Jacob shook his head. "I wanted to ask you." Then it was his turn to breath shakily out. "For me."

Sam stood, not able to sit and hear this. "You'd rather have her like them, than die?"

Jacob didn't answer, but rubbed his hands over his face. Finally, he said, "I'd rather have her not die."

"That isn't what you're asking for, Jake."

"She's so young, Sam."

"And young people die all the time, kid. All the time."

"But she doesn't have to."

"Oh, she'll be dead. She'll just be walking around potentially killing people."
"They—" Then he stopped. He wasn't the one to defend the Cullens.

"And she'll be dead to her father, one way or another."

"They wouldn't let her kill people, Sam."

"If you say so, Jake."

They waited in their uneasy silence, a while longer.

"You make the call, Jake. I'll abide by it," Sam finally said.

"What?"

"You make the choice," he said softly. "I'll stand by your decision. If I say it goes one way or another, you'll resent me no matter what. You decide. The elders will understand. The Cullens have never broken faith with us. They've helped keep our people safe. I believe that they'll still do that...with Bella."

Of all the outcomes, Jacob had not expected this one. Watching Sam pick up his axe, and walk away, Jacob didn't have a clue what to do, and sat in stunned silence, weighing, with dread, which death would be better for the woman he loved, and would never have.

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"That's the last of it," the paramedic said, setting down a small bag on the side table. He handed a chart to the nurse the Cullens had hired, who scanned it and nodded.

Carlisle was already eyeing the many things that had arrived home with Bella—bags and IV poles, and machines that squeaked and beeped periodically.

Bella was fighting to keep her eyes open, finally comfortable in the bed she'd started to think of as theirs. Edward was beside her, saying nothing, but a cool presence she was glad to finally feel so closely again.

When she woke up later, it was with a smile, knowing he was beside her, and that they were finally alone. "Missed this," she murmured, as he pulled her closer.

His "hmm," was an appreciative one.

"But I need to get up."

"Why don't I get you whatever you need?" he suggested.

She laughed. "Don't think you can walk the bathroom over here." She let him help her up, and helped her to the small ensuite. "I'm OK," she assured him, "you get your healthy woman back, right?" She cocked an eyebrow at him, and watched him smile wryly.

"Fine," he sighed melodramatically, "I suppose I'll take you in health as well as sickness."

She snorted a giggle as she closed the door behind her.

When she emerged, clean and dressed in something other than a hospital gown, she felt even better.

Seeing her move towards the bedroom door, Edward intercepted, "humour me. Another full day in bed, just like Carlisle suggested? Before moving around the house?"
Here she took in, and then slowly released a breath, considering this. "Promise to keep me entertained?"

"Absolutely."

Her idea as to what constituted entertainment did not encapsulate the notion of rest he'd imagined.

"You promised," she whispered into his ear, after kissing him there.

"I did," he mumbled back, returning her gesture and making her breathing became wildly erratic. "But maybe not so much entertainment."

"Noo," she moaned, as he pulled away. "I'm fine—you always have that effect on me."

"With far less dire consequences," he said softly, reaching for the oxygen cannula.

"No!" she growled emphatically.

"This isn't a 'no' from me, love," he said, setting it in place, and putting his lips to her clavicle, "just taking precautions."

He was showing her why he was taking precautions, and she was very much enjoying his efforts, when there was a loud rap at the door.

They both groaned in frustration.

"Sorry!" Alice muffled voice called.

Edward set his jaw in a hard line, and growled out an exasperated "I doubt that," as he got up to let his sister in.

Bella watched a silent exchange between the two of them, wondering what soundless conversation was transpiring out of the reach of her human ears—or mind.

When Edward returned to the bed with a whispered, "tomorrow," Bella had a good idea, and she tried very hard not to blush, realizing her future sister-in-law would have seen something she'd preferred to be private—and clearly, something else too.

"Please don't make me regret asking you to look," Bella mumbled, as Alice approached.

Alice didn't say anything for a bit, but let her lips twitch in a small smile that carried apology and regret all together.

"Sorry," Bella said, "I know you're looking out for me. I'm just," and she looked around the room at the equipment there, "frustrated."

"I know," Alice said more easily. "Maybe I can take your mind of that for a bit? I know you guys want to get married in May, right?"

"Sure," Bella said, looking worriedly at Edward. Thoughts of that horrific birthday party always swam up everytime Alice suggested the 'planning' of anything.

"Small, right?"

Both Edward and Bella nodded.
Alice had a small book with her. "Can I help put it together? Seeing as you're going to be busy with school?"

"Small," Bella said again. "Just family."

"OK," Alice said slowly. "We can talk about what 'just family' means in a bit. In the meantime, I thought I might show you some things—and not you," she amended, lifting an eyebrow at Edward. "No peeking at dress ideas. 'K?"

Edward smirked, but nodded.

Then Alice flipped open the first page of the book, and began showing Bella sketches of the many things apparently required by a wedding.

It was mind boggling.

By the end of the queue of items, Bella held up her hand. "No more!"

"But, you haven't decided anything!"

"Surprise me," Bella said, pushing the book back towards Alice. "You're right. I have school, and breathing, and eating to focus on."

Alice didn't ask for confirmation, but looked hopefully at Edward. He just shook his head and said, "her choice."

"You will not regret this!" Alice exclaimed, as she bounced from the room.

Bella thought she very likely might, but kept it to herself.

"Alice," Edward said, just to make sure she understood. "Planning our wedding. And you've given her carte blanche."

"We can veto things."

Edward's raised eyebrows illustrated his dubious opinion of this notion. Then he softened his expression, as he leaned in to kiss her lightly. "I leave you to your happy delusions."

"I think I've earned a few," she smiled back.

"No," he said, "you haven't. You simply deserve some happiness, at this point, and I am happy to provide as much of it as I can." He let his lips feather out a kiss over her neck, and she felt her heart flutter to its rhythm.

"Hmm...more," she purred.

"Tomorrow," he promised.

- 0 -

She wasn't sure if it was being home, or having the weight of worry lifted, but she felt noticeably better the next day, and even more so the day after. By the third, she was restless, and it was harder to stay put to rest.

"Surely I cannot suffer mortal endangerment in the backyard?" Bell asked Edward.
Rosalie saved him the difficulty of answering. "You," she said, "could find mortal injury in an ice cream sundae. Or anywhere. No backyard."

"And she has spoken," Edward said, nodding at this unexpected pronouncement from his sister.

She'd been kinder of late to Bella, and warmer too.

Bella had her suspicions as to why, but kept them to herself.

"Have some friends over, Bella. This is your home, too," Rose said more kindly, bringing her a phone.

This was true, Bella thought. It was her home too, and she hadn't seen her friends for a while. "It would be nice to see Sam, and Marie."

Edward nodded encouragingly at her. Barring the visit from Charlie and Sam in the hospital, she'd just had the company of the Cullens.

Marie and Sam were only too happy to visit, and arrived later that day, looking nervously up at the house from the front yard.

"Wow," Sam said, as they came inside. "Sweet digs, Bella. Crappy that you had to sell a kidney for it."

"Oh my God, Sam," Marie hissed, jabbing her in the ribs. "Filter, girl!"

Sam only snorted, waving a hand at her. "Bella's got a sense of humour, right?"

"That I do," Bella smiled, giving each of them a hug.

Emmett had assured Bella that Sam and Marie had been so well lubricated at the celebratory party, that they weren't surprised they didn't remember anything to do with Bella's 'accident', or the ambulance that attended. They did apologize profusely, but Bella waved it away, anxious to diffuse any unnecessary guilt.

"All good, trust me," she said to them.

"But it's not," Sam said, frowning. She paused for a bit, seeing Bella bite her lip. "I'm not good at pretending stuff like that, Bella. You know that."

"I do," Bella said, and with a wave of emotion she hadn't anticipated, struggled to keep the tears at bay. "I'm just going to enjoy the rest of my life, as much as I can."

Edward squeezed her hand.

After an acceptable silence had passed, and they'd all sequestered their various and strong feelings, Marie cocked her head to the side, looking at Bella's hand. "Is that—" and she peered closer, "what I think it is?"

"Yeah," Bella said. "It is."


"Thank you," Bella and Edward murmured together, smiling.

They let their talk drift to wedding things, Marie surprised that Bella had left it all to her future sister-
in-law. Sam was less so, asking pointedly. "You coming back in the fall?" Her voice was low and husky, as if she knew the answer.

Bella only shook her head.

Sam nodded, the corners of her lips lifting up momentarily. She knew the beginning of a farewell.

Towards the end of their visit, Sam said softly to Bella, as Edward showed Marie to the bathroom. "The police came by again, asking about Jun. You hear anything?"

"No," Bella said, shaking her head. "Dave and Leo?"

Sam shook her head now. "I'm sorry, I know you were close."

Bella wasn't sure what to say to this.

After they'd left, and the rest of the Cullens had drifted home, Bella found Jasper. He seemed best suited to the request she had to make.

"Jasper?" she asked softly. "I was wondering if you could help me."

"Certainly," he drawled. "How can I be of service?"

"I don't want Jun's parents to spend the rest of their lives...looking for something they can't find."

"Ah," he said. "I see."

"Would it be difficult to give them some closure?"

"No, not really. When do you want it done?"

"As soon as possible, really. They've waited so many months already."

Jasper thought for a moment. "Not that many," he said ruefully. "Not so many that they're ready yet, Bella, but in a few more, yes."

What struck Bella was the idea that there was a timeline. "How many—?"

"Five or six months before people really start to long for answers, Bella. Before that hope is strong. Especially for parents. Better it should be a relief when it comes."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I appreciate it."

"No trouble. Not for family."

As she brushed her teeth that night, she wondered what plans would be set in motion to fake her own death, not so long from now.

Not that it would be so fake. It would be an ending, she realized, more and more, and one she found more profound with each passing day.

She became aware of Edward leaning against the door, watching, as her toothbrush paused. She put it down, spitting into the sink, and wiping her face.

"When it's time, there can't be any questions for Charlie."

He looked at her, eyebrows rising at the statement, nodding. "Of course."
"And it needs to give him and Renee as much peace as possible."

He nodded again.

Then the tears started. They didn't stop, not even when Edward's arms found her, and his chest became the resting ground for her grief. She'd found, in the small space between an endangered life and something like death, a fragment of perfect happiness, whose fleeting self was already, necessarily, unravelling before her very eyes.
Sue stared at the little box Charlie had slid across the table with very few, but small, and significant words.

After a moment's silence on her part, he looked pale.

"Yes!" she blurted out, realizing she hadn't spoken aloud yet.

"Oh thank God," he said, taking a breath in.

Sue laughed, and then Charlie did too. A little nervously.

"I love you, Charlie," she said more softly.

He had no words for this. They were all choked behind the emotions lodged in his throat. He spoke them soundlessly, getting up and cradling her face with his hands, kissing her, letting the dampness on his cheeks be hers too.

After a moment, she took his hands into hers, drawing him to the chair beside her at the table. "Charlie," she began softly, "I need to ask the council. For permission."

"For what?"

She chuckled. "To marry you."

"Why?"

"I'm a council member," she shrugged, "it's our way. When we marry an outsider. It needs to be with the blessing of the elders. The chief." She didn't mention who that was. Or why, really, she needed to ask. That would become apparent enough when they approved, and she was sure of that approval.

Bella, and then Charlie had been the subject of the last council meeting's discussion, not so many days before.

The decision Sam had made—or rather, Jacob had, had briefly stunned them all.

"They'll do it anyway," Sam had said. "It's better we make our peace with it than have them think our treaty is lax."

That Bella wanted this outcome, was understood by all of them.

"She's dying," Jacob had said.

The nodding here was more solemn, and Sue had kept her own tears private until later. Her heart had broken for Charlie afresh. She'd known as soon as he had, but it had become more palpable somehow, off of Jacob's lips.

Now Charlie would be privy to the tribe's secrets, and she wondered, with a small kernel of hope, if he might not grasp that the supernatural extended beyond their little corner of the world, now swallowing his daughter whole.
"So Dad," Bella asked, as they sat at the kitchen table, dinner finished, "you guys have a date yet?"

"No," he said, smiling at her. "Didn't want to steal your thunder."

She made a non-committal "mm," in her throat, fishing around in the salad on her plate. She understood. She'd felt better in terms of energy, but her overall decline was so apparent, she could see him watching, just waiting.

Waiting for her to make that final descent.

"Don't wait too long, OK?"

He stopped moving, looking up at her, like she'd slapped him. This was as close as she'd come to talking about what they all knew was coming.

His movements were mechanical when they started again, stuffing more food into his mouth so he had a pretext not to talk.

When he spoke again, he murmured, "sure. Doubt Sue will let me."

"I hope not. Don't...stop, because of me."

"No, no," Charlie said, putting his cutlery down, "we are not having this conversation now—"

"When will we, Dad?"

His hands rested on the table, like he was going to stand up, or needed to hold himself upright. She wasn't sure. His breathing was just a bit too fast.

"You're getting married tomorrow. Can we just...have that? For now?"

She kept the emotion from her face by letting it twist a bit, and then making it straighten out. "OK," she whispered.

He nodded, and then stood to clear the dishes.

"I can—"

He snorted out a "tch," and waved her back to her seat.

She sighed, watching him set them in the sink, and come back with something he pulled from the fridge.

Here she had to turn and hide her grin. She recognized Esme's handiwork in the dessert he presented.

He didn't even bother trying to hide the source. "She dropped it off today, said you liked it."

"I do," she smiled. Who wouldn't like chocolate mousse? There were vibrant raspberries sitting atop delicate whorls of cream—the precise colour her eyes would soon be.

She hoped they would not be so because of dietary choices.

Her appetite suddenly fizzled.

"What?" Charlie asked, watching the blood slide down her face.
"Nothing," she lied, "just...appetite," she waved her hand in the air.

"More for me?" he asked hopefully.

"No way!" she said, putting a hand over her dish. She'd learned from experience not to leave desert undefended. This elicited a small smile from her lips. She loved this part of Charlie. She'd miss it.

And she was glad Sue would keep it for her.

- 0 -

"Best kiss yet," Bella whispered to Edward, as they turned to walk back down the small path Alice had made out of stones in the Cullens’ garden.

"First of many," he murmured, stealing another one, swishing her hair and veil aside. Emmett whooped in the background.

Alice had honoured Bella's request for family only, and family it was—the Cullens, the Denalis sans Irina, Charlie, Renee, Phil, Sue, Seth, Leah, Jacob, Billy, Jacob. The house felt crowded with all of them there, but comfortably so.

In deference to Bella's lower energy, they'd planned the ceremony for midday, which Edward had smiled at. "Very traditional," he'd murmured, "for 1915." Then he'd grinned at Alice, who'd winked at him.

Bella had added a coy, "mountain lion or bear for the vegetarians?"

"See?" Alice said, as she hugged Bella, "tasteful. Not crazy."

"Perfect as expected," Bella said pertly, and then more softly, "thank you."

"You're welcome. Mrs. Cullen." Then she grinned wickedly at Edward, and walked away, making space for others to congratulate them.

Edward grimaced a little before letting it go and leaning down to kiss Bella again. "I was rather hoping to be the first one to call you that."

"Ah," Bella grinned, "but you get to call me that for a long time yet."

"Yes," he smiled, "I do."

They separated only briefly, and when obligatory, to the very few dances and toasts their small affair entailed, so it was reluctantly that Edward released her to Jacob's company for a few minutes.

"Can we pretend we danced?" Bella asked, "you know, so I can spare your toes?"

"Sure," he smiled, the tips of it not quite reaching his eyes. They sat in a quiet corner of the living room, where open windows let him breathe a little more easily.

"That bad, huh?" she asked, watching his nose wrinkle.

"You have no idea."

"Showered today and everything," she quipped, rolling her eyes.

He snorted out his drink.
"Good," she smiled, "I haven't lost it."

"Nope," he said, reaching for a napkin, "you just keep getting better and better." This he meant. That was clear. "Gonna miss you."

There was an expression that was half a frown and half a smile that fought with itself on her face. "You too."

"When?" he asked, even more quietly.

"Couple of weeks."

He nodded, trying to look nonchalant.

"Thank you," she said.

His eyes were sharp and quick on hers. He hadn't said anything about his conversation. It'd been Sam who told Carlisle they'd allow this exception. Once.

"I know it was you, Jake. Thank you."

He looked positively miserable.

"This isn't goodbye, not yet."

"I know," he said, swallowing, that half-hearted smile flickering over his face. "I'm...trying to be happy, that you're happy."

Edward had been moving closer, watching the conversation unfold, and he'd had enough, his hand coming to rest on Bella's arm. "Not today, Jacob."

It was just for a moment, but a frisson of fear rippled over her back, that they would fight, or exchange words that would darken the day, but Jacob only stood with a stiff, "congratulations" tumbling from his mouth, walking away, and then outside.

"People are starting to make their farewells," he said. "You ready to change and go?"

Standing with his help, she made her way upstairs with Alice, and Renee in tow, no small number of tears from her mother showering their farewell.

It was Charlie who struggled most to leave, his hoarse, "love you," and tight hand over hers made her eyes wobble dangerously with brine.

It felt strangely monumental, slipping into the car, and driving away. This human ritual accomplished, the knowledge that it would likely be the last lingered bittersweetly for Bella. Her human life was coming to a close, a new one about to begin.

- 0 -

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Sue?" Sam had asked.

She'd levelled her gaze at him, and he'd wisely raised his hands with a quiet, "sorry, you know best."

"I do," she'd said, "when it comes to the man I love."

Emily had hidden her smirk well when Sam recounted this interaction with some incredulity.
Sue was feeling a lot less certain, though, as she waited for Charlie to arrive.

She'd invited him for a barbecue, or at least that's what she called it. It just so happened that all the pack members were present. Emily was there too.

"What's that?" Sue asked her, tapping her foot impatiently on the porch.

"Oh, just my kit," Emily said, waving a hand airily at her.

Sue looked over. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," she commented dryly.

Emily turned on her, face serious. "It isn't a small thing, Sue. We've had...time, to get used to this, but..." she looked around at the men present. "It's big. I'd prefer to be prepared if he has a heart attack."

"S'pose having a nurse handy isn't so bad." Sue thought they were all overreacting. She set her mouth in a grim line. Waiting.

The sound of Charlie's car, revving up the small hill, made her even more anxious.

It all melted when he appeared, though, and became something much warmer, and pleasant in his arms.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself," she smiled. "Father of the bride."

He grinned. "Yup."

She let Paul and Quill take over the barbecuing underway, sitting down in a corner of the yard with Charlie, Seth, Leah and Billy. Jacob had disappeared the day before, no one questioning his need to do so.

Everyone, barring Seth, was holding a beer, but none of them were drinking it, and Charlie was wondering why they were all so quiet.

And why Seth was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. In early May. It was warmer, but not that warm. Even for an overheated teenager.

It was Billy, looking at Sue, and seeing her green in the face, who finally spoke up. "You and I've always been like family, Charlie. Soon that'll be more true than ever." He smiled softly at Sue. "We think it's time you understood a bit more about us."

Charlie looked at him incredulously. "And just what, Billy, is it you think I don't know already?"

"Oh," Billy said, "I think this might surprise you." He raised his eyebrows and then let them fall. "We're protectors in our tribe, Charlie."

"Sure," Charlie said, his tone mildly dubious.

"You just don't understand what kind, and why." Then he took a swig of his beer, his courage more liquid than real. "Seth?"

Seth nodded, standing, and stepping far away from the small circle, into the wider space of the yard.

Charlie realized that everyone else present was utterly still, and watching.
Watching him.

Then Seth's human body seemed to unfold itself—violently—and in his place stood a bigger wolf than Charlie had ever seen.

"Oh my God!" he said, standing up abruptly, beer still in one hand, stepping back, knocking his chair over.

No one else moved.

"It's alright," Sue said, putting her hand on his. "It's still Seth."

Leah piped up at this point, munching casually on a handful of chips, "I'd demonstrate too, but I'm getting low on ginch." She shrugged.

Charlie's gaze swept the space around him. No one else was looking surprised. Just him. "You—"

"We all know. Yes. Most of the boys are wolves."

"Wolves," Charlie repeated in a whisper.

"Wolves," Billy confirmed, eyes following Charlie's every movement.

Charlie shook his head, looking at the beer in his hand.

"It's real," Billy assured him.

Charlie's gaze found Sue's. "How long—?"

Her forehead wrinkled with worry. "Couple of months before Harry went." Her anxiety had returned, a vibrant, spiked ball that was rolling around in her stomach. "I love you Charlie, I couldn't say—"

He gripped her hand tightly. "I understand. It's OK." His voice was all reassurance and love.

She exhaled in relief.

"I love you too," he whispered back.

Then, looking at the scattered group of people—and wolves—around him, he asked, "what exactly, do you protect people from?"
Their honeymoon had bled into the start of the new school year. It wasn't anything strange for them to not come back to Forks afterwards. Or for the other family members to disappear to college, too. For Esme and Carlisle to take a few weeks holiday out of town.

She'd never been to Alaska before. It was as beautiful as she'd imagined it, all the green of Forks, but deeper, more rugged.

"Is all of this really necessary?" she asked, her gaze sweeping the medical equipment in the room.

"Yes," Edward chuckled.

"I won't need it in a few days."

"No, but you need it now."

"It's—"

"Utterly necessary," he murmured, leaning down and effectively silencing any more disagreement with his lips.

Their 'cousins', as the Cullens referred to them, were welcoming, except for Irina, who kept to herself, making only the most cursory of greetings. The barely concealed anger she'd levelled at Bella had pulled quiet snarls from Edward and Jasper.

"This is a happy occasion," Tanya had said forcefully, testing the claim of her words. "We're glad to have you." Then she'd glared at her sister, watching Irina slink away.

"I don't want to wait to long," Bella said, letting her fingers dust over Edward's hair. "We've waited a long time, already."

"Then we won't."

"You're sure, still?"

"I meant what I promised," he said solemnly. "I will change you, Bella."

So it was, that not so many days after they arrived that they retreated to the room they'd called their own, not as crowded with machines now, to begin her last human moments.
They were sweet ones, their bodies gently tangled together in an act that would soon not require so much care on Edward's part, as Bella's.

When they were dressed again, he raised an eyebrow at her, glass of water in one hand, pills in the other. She'd refused, utterly, to have anything that required a syringe, to deal with the pain of her change. The idea of it made her twitch, the trauma of what Jun had done too fresh.

She palmed the small pills to her mouth, swallowing quickly.

Then he slid into the bed with her, pulling her onto him.

"How will you know they're working?" she asked.

He smiled. "You think I don't know you well enough?"

"No," she chuckled, "just—"

"Nervous?"

"Yes."

"Mmm." He squeezed her in a light hug. Then, listening to the thoughts of those around them, snorted.

"What?"

"Alice."

"What about Alice?"

"What do you want to wake up wearing? Heels and a dress, or your normal attire?"

"Do you seriously have to ask?" she sounded worried.

"Just making sure Alice hears the answer from your lips," he muttered.

It was her turn to laugh.

The other women in the family had taken Bella aside, politely explaining that her change would solidify her current state. Her hair would never grow, and it wouldn't be able to be cut, not easily, anyway. Her nails too. So, she'd made her permanent choices. Alice had filed her nails for her, telling Bella she'd be glad of the precision when she could see it for herself.

Edward had laughed, openly at Alice's priorities. "Of course, how could I stand to have a wife with," and here he'd gasped and put his hand to his forehead, "uneven nails."

Now she murmured, "cold," shivering a little in the bed.

Edward pulled another blanket over her. She wouldn't be soon. He was running his fingers over her hair and cheek, memorizing the texture of her soft skin, the feel of her blood under it. Holding onto, in his mind, the last blush he'd seen sweep up her face, when Emmett had made a raucous joke that morning.

Her eyes were having trouble focusing, but she was holding on, blinking rapidly. Fighting.

When they finally fluttered shut, he whispered, "I love you, Bella," and then called out to Carlisle.
"Be close now, please." He didn't want to risk not stopping at just a bite. It wasn't that he doubted himself, but he wouldn't proceed without every precaution possible.

With a final kiss to her still human neck, he bared his teeth and let them pierce the flesh there.

Her blood was the consuming sweetness he remembered, sucking him inside himself, the monster raging to continue.

It was nothing now, to swat it away. To bury it in a desire for an eternal spouse. One that couldn't be hurt.

He licked the wound closed, sealing in his venom, and then repeated his bite at her elbows, and her knees.

She remained unnaturally still.

"Carlisle," he said more urgently.

Appearing silently, Carlisle looked and then listened, glancing at Edward.

"Better than expected," he said, a hand on Edward's shoulder.

"Are you sure? She's not moving. Surely she should feel something."

Carlisle shook his head. "She isn't in pain, and she looks to be peaceful. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes, but—"

"You're used to worrying about her, Edward," Carlisle smiled, "it might take you some time to get used to not worrying. Probably good to start now."

Edward sighed, a small smile on agreement his lips. It was true.

"Thank you," he whispered, sitting down to watch, and to wait.
"Guess it's a good thing we didn't kill you off, afterall," Jasper murmured, as Bella stood up, chuckling at his own remark.

Edward turned a dark stare towards his brother, who, uncowed by the look, said, "well, it is." He looked meaningfully towards the front of the courtroom.

Edward's head swivelled there now, and watched the crowd repeat this gesture, most eyes trained on the perfected form of one Bella Cullen, walking towards the podium now waiting for her.

Edward smiled at the mental reactions, secure in his place as the happy object of all his wife's affections.

Jasper cocked an eyebrow at his brother, then rolled his eyes, and pretended to turn his attention back to the front of the courtroom.

Edward could hear, quite clearly, what Jasper's thoughts were focused on—far away with Alice.

"Do you have a prepared statement?" The judge asked Bella.

"I do, sir," she replied evenly.

"Please go ahead and read it then," he said, voice stretching for a professional tone, this clearly tested by the entrancing figure before him.

No notes were required for Bella's words. She had prepared, with very little outward guidance, the words required to impart her less than satisfactory human experience with one Patrick Bellaney.

"I had gone to the police station to report my friend missing…"

Edward tried to hide his small frown here, and Jasper eyed him again.

Her friend. Hardly. Edward had, when she'd rehearsed her small speech, tried to nudge her towards other wording. She'd refused.

"He was, Edward," she'd mumbled, eyebrows making a sharp v, "even if he wasn't after. Besides, it makes me appear less credible if I feed into the story Bellaney gave, that I was screwed up and not sure if Jun'd assaulted me. He didn't. Not then, anyway."
They'd paused their conversation there, Bella electing to test the forest floor with the strength of her new feet, rather than the planks of their cottage. Edward had not followed, leaving her the space he could see she needed.

"...he refused to believe my complaint was legitimate, and when I asked to speak with his supervisor, physically assaulted me, and accused me of resisting arrest…"

Edward's molars grumbled together. Charlie had called in all the favours he could think of, and then some more, digging into the ugly, whispered stories that staff and officers at other police departments had to tell about Patrick Bellaney. Edward had offered, quietly, to spare Charlie the paperwork, and anyone else, the worry of dealing with the odious man. Charlie had sort of swallowed, and said, "Maybe Bella wants to make that call."

She had.

So now they sat, the conviction already made, and the sentencing set for the afternoon. The judge had specifically set aside the morning session for victim impact statements. Bella's was one of several. Edward didn't like that she had to be here, to remember this, even from her fuzzy, human memory.

But, as with all things she wanted, he ultimately acquiesced.

She stood tall at the podium, speaking confidently and without even the suggestion of a stumble in her words, or feet.

So graceful, Edward thought, watching the near perfect approximation of human movement she made. It would be perfect enough soon.

Her walk into this new life had been almost flawless. It had astonished them all, Jasper not the least of which. His mind still arrested itself, watching her move with a fluency her immortal time should not have yet afforded her.

They'd travelled easily to Italy, Bella insistent they remove that axe from over their heads as soon as possible.

Aro had been as disturbingly delighted to meet her in this new form, as he had before, and was just as disappointed to find her mind a closed thing to his powers. He'd repeated his offer of a place with them, and she'd politely declined again. "Not now," she'd said. "I am too new to this life to settle, yet."

It was as bold a lie as anyone would ever tell him, and Bella the only creature who ever really could to Aro.

"Do come again," Aro had crooned, as they left.

Assured that the Volturi threat had been laid to rest, Bella had been fortified to deal with the greater one that had dogged them: Charlie.

Edward now had an acute understanding of where his wife's persistence came from.

The Quileutes hadn't told Charlie about the Cullens. They'd been very clear about the cold ones, but adhered to the treaty with a stubborn stickiness that left even Rosalie impressed.

When Bella and Edward hadn't returned for Christmas, Charlie had stomached it, growling into the phone in displeasure. When reading break came and went through, without a visit, he'd made his
own way north to Alaska to surprise Bella with a visit.

That he made the plans, wasn't a surprise. Alice had caught those by the time he was off the reservation. What was a surprise, was the tenacity with which he ferreted through the layers of their several ruses.

The weakest link was the building caretaker, one beer too willing to sit down with a seemingly frustrated Charlie, as consolation for missing his daughter on a week long camping trip. He'd sifted quietly through the poorly concealed stack of papers, and found what he needed to make a patchy trail to Denali.

Bella had been terrified. It had taken all of Jasper's gifts, Alice's persuasion, and Edward's reassurance to show her that all would be well.

Now he gave his head the most minute of shakes. Miraculous. She was miraculous.

She hadn't so much as even twitched when he'd arrived. Smiled nervously, and then happily, yes, but not even leaned in the direction her new nature dictated.

"Thank you for your statement, Ms. Cullen."

She nodded, and returned, all the rooms' eyes practically shucking towards her as she walked.

The clerk was announcing a recess, when Bella reached Edward and Jasper.

"You did beautifully," Jasper said, nodding his approval.

"Thank you. You'd think telling the truth was difficult to do." Her grin was playful.

Jasper's smile stretched wide as he tipped his head in acknowledgement. "As you say."

The rest of the crowd was rising, and Edward's mind registered the many admiring, covetous, and then jealous thoughts as Bella's hand came to rest in his.

They waited for the thick swell of people to thin, following their path to the courthouse's glassy exterior.

Alice joined them now, thoughts particular to the afternoon.

"Don't," Bella said, palm towards Alice in warning.

Alice only arched her eyebrows, and then leaned in to Jasper's kiss. "Wouldn't dream of spoiling it for you."

"Good."

"Charlie's going to be happy, though."

Bella rolled her eyes.

"To see you."

Edward grinned, watching Bella roll her eyes. His own hands, drew her closer, his chin brushing by the side of her head.

Jasper, ever the gentleman, didn't voice the feelings he'd identified, rolling off of the newlyweds. He
did smile and say, "see you back here for one." Then he and Alice tripped lightly down the stairs, his and Alice's own plans inspired by what Jasper had sensed.

"Want to head back to the house for a bit?" he asked Bella.

Her growl was something of a purr by the time it prowled out of her mouth. "You know I do."

"No," he grinned. "I have no idea," and he tapped his head in illustration, but chuckled all the same.

"Past behaviour is an excellent predictor of future behaviour," she whispered in his ear.

He wasn't sure, suddenly, if they'd make it back to the house.

So it was they spent a furtive, and exuberant intermission between court sessions, testing the resilience of one of the meeting room walls.

Sturdy, Edward determined.

Similarly refreshed, Alice and Jasper were waiting in the courtroom gallery for them. Silent greetings dispensed with, they sat, approximating the edgy human behaviour around them.

Once the preliminary court business was tended to, the judge moved efficiently to Bellaney's sentencing. By the end—for the convictions were several—Patrick Bellaney had amassed fourteen years of prison time.

"You OK?" Edward asked Bella, worried that the time was so short for what the man had done.

"Fine," she murmured, turning towards him. "Why?"

"It's not long."

"It's fourteen years, Edward." Her eyebrows rose.

Of course, it would seem long to her still. Even after almost a year in this new life.

"It may feel shorter, later."

"That's fine. It won't for him. And he won't be a police officer after."

No, he wouldn't. "Is there anything else you'd like him to experience?" he asked, just as quietly. "Perhaps what it's like to have a broken hand, while in handcuffs?"

It infuriated him still, that Bellaney had hurt her.

She turned her face to him, eyes half-lidded, smirking. "I suspect a former police officer will need both functioning hands in prison."

True.

"Let me know if you change your mind."

Now she snickered. "What, you going to go pull Jessica's hair for being mean to me too?"

He actually growled.

The man two seats over turned sharply to look at Edward. He covered this slip by pretending to cough, holding up a hand in apology. The man nodded, his mental attention slung back towards the
"You don't need to avenge me Edward, though I appreciate the sentiment."

"Mm," he mumbled, without any conviction.

They stood and left as soon as Bellaney was led away.

Outside again, Bella phoned Charlie.

"Fourteen years."

Edward could hear the sigh from the receiver to her ear.

"You happy with that?" Charlie asked next.

"Oh yes. Very satisfied. He won't bother anyone else."

They chatted a bit longer.

"And she's OK? Not feeling too sick still?" Bella asked.

"No, no, the vitamin B seems to be helping."

"Please give her a hug from me," Bella smiled.

Charlie chuckled. "Not sure how a real one would go down, but maybe that'll work."

"Love you Dad."

"Love you too, kiddo."

Slipping the phone in her pocket, Bella looked up at Edward, who was smiling at her. "Did Carlisle's referral work out?"

"I think so. A non-vampire midwife seemed acceptable."

He shook his head, chuckling.

Sue had been feeling unwell for a while, according to Charlie. It was only when they'd come into town to visit Bella and Edward that they'd found out why.

She'd hugged her dad, very, very carefully, and then blinked, looking at, and listening to the sounds of Sue's body.

"You um, feeling OK?" Bella had asked her step-mother.

"Oh, you know," she'd shrugged, "menopause."

Edward had kept his face neutral, observing this, wondering if Bella understood what she must be hearing. Surely it was obvious...but, what if it wasn't? He'd leaned over to say something when she'd beaten him to it.

"I hear early pregnancy isn't so much fun," Bella had shrugged.

And then Sue had fainted.
Now well into her sixth month, Sue had balked at seeking medical treatment from the hospital. Carlisle had discreetly suggested a few midwives to Bella, to pass onto Charlie.

Still leery of her vampire step-daughter, Sue kept a respectful physical distance whenever they visited. She was friendly, but there were lines, and Bella didn't try to cross them.

It made their inevitable leaving easier to accept, knowing Charlie would be busy with another child.

"Can you tell?" she asked Edward, looking at him. "If it's a boy, or a girl?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

Alice had been as surprised as they were, hearing the news. Charlie's life, lived amidst the wolves, was blanketed by their silent futures too.

"And now that today's business is dealt with, shall we head home?" Edward asked, their fingers playing together in a constantly shifting weave.

"Mm, sounds good," she said.

Pulling her towards him, he abandoned her hand for the warmth of her hair, one hand cradling the back of her head, and the other cupping her cheek as they kissed.

There were thoughts, and then there were a few scattered catcalls. He ignored them. Getting lost in this with her was an eternity he welcomed, and anticipated with ever growing pleasure.

They had happiness, and the winding stretches of forever to explore it in.

- The End -
Epilogue

A/N for 2018-10-01: I thought this would be soooo short, but clearly, this kinda got away from me. Happy reading all.

~ Erin

Epilogue

"Sue, please honey, stop pushing. OK?"

Charlie was white-faced, swallowing, the receiver in one hand, trying to train one eye on her, bent over into the wall, the other took in the deepening snow outside. There was simply too much of it on the ground to drive her...anywhere, let alone the hospital. He'd come to this conclusion already, but it bore repeating, as his desperation increased.

She'd blurted out, already, an hour ago, for him to call 911.

He'd known better than to laugh, and had sighed instead. There was no point. He was the 911 response.

Sue's midwife Kat had assured them she'd be fine. Four wheel drive, good snow tires, and lots of practise catching babies in foul weather.

But Kat had been anything but fine. She'd wound up in the ditch, phoning Charlie to check on Sue. Hearing where she'd gone off the road, he knew there was no way she could make it to them. He'd told her to hang up and get herself somewhere safe—to call if she could.

She'd phoned from a service station about twenty minutes later, and had been coaching Sue through a contraction when the call died. Probably a power outage, or her phone had run out of battery.

Charlie sighed again. It helped with his rising fear.

No one else was coming. They were it.

He'd presided at exactly one birth before, and he'd hoped never to have to do it again. Most women made it to the hospital, but every once in a while, someone got caught out on the road. He'd arrived to such a scene with nothing but his emergency medical kit, finding two panicked teenagers looking at him like he was God. The ambulance had arrived about five minutes after the baby had.

At Bella's birth, he'd been pointed in the direction of the waiting room, and told to stay there. He'd been grateful.

Sue was growling now.

Shit.

This was going to happen. Very quickly.

"Who're you calling?" Sue gritted out, watching him with the telephone.

"Sam."
"Why?"

"Maybe they can help," he mumbled.

Sue's words disappeared into boiling, roaring sound that seemed to explode out of her throat.

Sam answered on the first ring.

Charlie didn't waste time on any preliminaries. "Baby's coming Sam. Will you let Carlisle come?"

"No!" Sue yelled.

"What?" Sam asked.

"Baby's coming. Midwife can't make it. You coming to catch a baby, or letting Carlisle over the line?"

Sam didn't answer right away. There was the sound of mumbled conversation, or a hand over the receiver, as Sam explained what was being asked to someone else.

"Justa sec," Sam said hurriedly into the phone.

Then Charlie heard Emily's voice, in a tone and volume he hoped to never have raised against him: "YOU LET ANYTHING HAPPEN TO SUE AND I WILL STUFF YOUR BALLS DOWN YOUR THROAT!"

Charlie swallowed again.

After a moment of quieter mumbling, Sam came back on the line. "Sure. I'll call them."

Within a minute, Charlie's phone was ringing. It was Carlisle, asking to speak to Sue.

Holding the receiver to her ear, she grunted out answers.

The knock at the door was mere minutes later.

Standing on his porch was Carlisle, flanked by Edward and Bella.

Charlie had never been quite so happy to see his daughter and inlaws.

"C'mon," he said, jerking his head towards the living room.

They did, Carlisle moving quickly towards Sue, murmuring quietly, but not touching her.

Bella pulled Charlie into an icy hug. "I'm so excited for you, Dad!"

"Yeah," he said, nodding, feeling more and more permission to experience the shock that had wanted happening earlier.

He made himself turn his attention back to Sue. Carlisle was talking softly, and he caught the tail end of his words. "...talk Charlie through the delivery?"

Sue said 'yes', while Charlie let out a horrified, "NO!"

Then Sue turned to face her husband. "Please." It was whispered, and pushed through a strained face..
"Sorry," Charlie muttered, coming close, putting a tentative hand on her back. "Of course."

They'd planned for having the baby at home, so most of what they needed was there. Carlisle and Edward laid out several sets of tools.

"Just in case," Carlisle said, as Charlie's eyes wandered over them.

"Why so many of you?" he asked Carlisle, in a voice low enough that Sue wouldn't overhear.

"Just in case," Carlisle answered softly. "Someone for the baby, someone for mom, and someone for you too." He looked at Bella.

Charlie made a sound like a cough, and hoped that none of that help was needed.

"I doubt we'll need it. Sue' doing great. It won't be long."

Charlie could tell that all on his own. He suspected the shedding of clothes and modesty couldn't portend anything else at this point. At least, he hoped they didn't.

"Charlie!" Sue called.

"I'm here," he murmured, not sure where to touch her.

She solved this problem by crushing his fingers in her grip.

"It's OK," he said, watching her strain.

Her lips formed no words, but opened to allow an indescribable sound entrance to the world.

Carlisle handed Charlie a small cotton blanket.

"Can you get onto the bed, Sue?" Carlisle asked from two arm length's away.

She didn't budge.

"The baby will be slippery, Charlie, so use the blanket."

Oh God, Charlie thought.

"I won't let you drop it, OK?" Carlisle went on. "Baby's almost here."

Charlie saw he was right, and moved his hands to catch. Sue's went with his, and with another push, a small and squiggling form was in both their hands.

Carlisle was there very quickly—too quickly, and Charlie felt a moment of panic, thinking he'd drop the baby.

Touching her as little as possible, Carlisle got Sue to lay down on the little bed prepared, sliding a blanket over top of her.

Charlie was staring at a blood-smeared face that couldn't have looked more like Bella.

"A girl! We have a girl!" His words felt utterly incoherent.

But Sue's response wasn't what Charlie expected. Her legs were shaking and jerking, and while his daughter was opening her little eyes to take in the world, Sue's were closing.
"Sue?"

They flicked open again. "She OK?"

"She's fine," Charlie breathed, but he didn't like the colour Sue was, and he suspected Carlisle didn't either.

Edward and Bella had come closer, not touching, but looking at the little bundle in her arms. There was a subtle click of something, and the tug of the cord was gone.

"She's beautiful, Dad."

His throat closed up. "Looks like you."

Bella's returning smile was radiant.

"Can you hold her upright a bit, Charlie?" Edward asked, eyebrows furrowing. Charlie listened and could hear a wet sort of snuffle from his daughter.

He pulled the baby upright, his hand spanning her head. Now she was up against his chest. Remembering something the midwife had said, and watching Carlisle bent over Sue, he said, "can you unbutton my shirt Bella?"

Her face registered surprise at the request, but Edward smiled at her, nodding.

So done, he tucked the baby inside, wrapping the thin blanket between her legs, and up her back, nestling her against his own skin.

"She's happy," Edward murmured.

"What?" Charlie asked.

"Your youngest daughter, she's happy," he repeated.

Right, Charlie thought. Mind reader. So many things sat easily in his reality now, but sometimes, some of them were as strange as the day he learned them. That Edward could hear thoughts still boggled him.

"Just not yours. At least, not very well," his son-in-law had assured him. "And I can't hear Bella's at all."

Strange conversations.

He shook his head. "Just let me know if she's going to crap all over me, 'K?"

Edward chuckled, and so did Bella.

He moved closer to Sue. "You OK?"

Her teeth were clenched together, and she was breathing through something, while Carlisle massaged her abdomen.

"Grng," she responded.

"Doing great," Carlisle encouraged. "Those afterbirth contractions are pretty tough."
More indiscernible sounds.

"One last push," Carlisle crooned.

Sue obliged, and Charlie looked away. There were some things you just couldn't unsee.

It was Edward who whisked this latest production away, his back vibrating with a silent laugh.

"No," he called to Sue, taking it to the kitchen, "not in anyway appetizing, but I can prepare it for you, if you like. It's traditional for the mother to consume the placenta in many cultures."

Charlie's stomach lurched at the suggestion, but Sue just rolled her eyes, appearing to take this ribbing in stride.

"Maybe you want to let Sue take the baby, Dad?" Bella called. They were all keeping their distance, as they could, from Sue.

Still trying to mind that line, even now.

Sue held up her arms expectantly.

"Are you OK to take her?" Charlie asked.

Sue raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm fine. She got six toes or something?"

Charlie smiled. If her sense of humour was intact, she was OK. He bent over and kissed her, "I love you. You were amazing."

Her hand rested on his cheek. "Not so bad yourself."

They could've been alone, for all the wonder of that moment. But a small and demanding wail made Charlie return to Sue what was so recently parted from her.

"Hello beautiful," she cooed hoarsely.

Edward handed Charlie a glass of water, lifting his chin towards Sue.

He passed it on.

Sue looked at Edward, nodding her uncertain thanks, and taking a drink.

Then Carlisle, and Edward and Bella all seemed to become very, very still.

"What?" Charlie asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Carlisle smiled at him. "You have...visitors."

The door rattled with a hearty thumping.

"Everything OK?" Sam's voice came.

"Perhaps you should get the door, Charlie," Edward suggested.

Thinking that a mind reader was probably the best person to listen to, Charlie got up and moved towards it, casting a look back at Sue to make sure she was decent. Bella had obviously sensed his concern, because she grabbed another blanket, handing it to Carlisle to help settle over her step-mother.
Sam Uley stood at the door, Jacob at his side.

"Congrats!" Jacob called, with a grin. Sam's face was more sombre.

"Wanted to make sure you were OK," he said, peering over Charlie's head.

From their attire on his snowy porch, Charlie presumed they'd travelled in their other forms, changing when they got close. "Join the party."

They dusted the snow off themselves in the small entranceway.

"All good, Sam," Sue called. "Thank you."

He nodded, gaze taking in the room.

"It is," Charlie said in a commanding tone. "Let's keep it that way, 'K?"

Sam bristled at these words, but Charlie didn't care. This was his family, and there was no way he was going to let old feelings disrupt the magic that was blossoming here.

Bella and Edward had retreated to the edge of the room, standing in each other's arms, Bella watching Sue, and Edward more nervously watching Sam.

"Thank you," Sam said. "If everything's OK, perhaps it would be best if—"

"We won't be long," Carlisle said. "I'm just waiting for Sue to start nursing. I want to make sure all the bleeding's under control."

Sam whipped his head towards Bella.

"She's fine," Edward growled.

Charlie felt that prickling unease in his midsection again.

Where Sam had held back, Jacob had blown through all the invisible lines and anxiety littering the room. He held out a hand to Charlie. "Nice work, man, and here you were all worried about having the baby at home."

Charlie made a sound he wasn't sure how to describe, but it expressed all his anxiety, and relief, and worry in a most comprehensive way.

Jacob slapped him on the back, harder than was comforting, and moved on towards Bella and Edward.

"Hey," he said, "got the baby sister you always wanted, huh?"

Bella's laugh, so like hers, and yet, not, rang out. "Sure, Jake." They grinned at each other, and then, to the surprise of most creatures present, hugged each other.

Charlie wasn't sure if there was a sound that came from Edward. Maybe it was his own stomach. They'd missed dinner. Everything had happened so fast. Maybe he should—

"I'll go make some food," Edward announced, seeming happy to find a way out of what felt like a shrinking room.

"So it's a…?" Charlie heard Jacob ask.
"Girl," Bella smiled. "You guys have a name?" She looked at Charlie, and then at Sue.

Charlie grinned widely. "Yes."

Sue giggled.

"What?" Bella asked.

"I gave you a really nice name, Bella."

"Sure you did, Dad. And this one's name is…?" She raised her eyebrows, clearly waiting.

"And then you went and shortened it on me."

Bella rolled her eyes. "OK, OK. No nicknames, I get it."

"None possible," Charlie nodded. "Because her name's Ella."

Sam burst out into a laugh, as did Jacob.

Charlie was pretty sure, that if Bella could be beet red, she would be.

"Ella?"

"Bella, and Ella. Yep."

"That's just—" she started to say, but Edward had returned to her side, and she caught his look. He smiled at her, as only he could.

"It's beautiful," Edward said, stealing a kiss from Charlie's first born. "I, for one, approve." Then he laughed and headed back to the kitchen.

Bella looked at Charlie, face serious. "You knew, the last time we saw you, didn't you?"

Charlie chuckled, nodding.

Bella disappeared. Charlie was pretty sure it was to confront Edward.

Sam, obviously uncomfortable with the intimate scene before him, had retreated to the entranceway. Jacob, however, had moved closer, and seeing Ella done with her meal, said, "can I hold her Aunt Sue?"

Charlie caught Sue's look to him. "I can share," he said, smiling at her.

"Sure Jake," Sue said, and handed Ella to him.

Once he sat down by Sue, Jacob held out his arms to receive the newest Swan, carefully cradling Ella's tiny head.

Charlie wasn't sure who gasped first—Jacob, or Edward, but his son-in-law was suddenly beside him, the unexpected chill making him twitch.

"What?" he asked Edward "Something wrong?"

Edward shook his head, and then continued to stare. At Jacob.
Charlie's gaze followed, and he looked at Billy's boy, holding his youngest child. He didn't know how to describe it. Jacob was looking at Ella like a drowning man finding air.

"Uh, Jake? You alright?" he asked, moving closer, alarmed by the abrupt stillness.

Jacob didn't even blink, just kept on staring.

Edward's cold hand rested on Charlie's warm forearm. "He's fine," he said. "He's more than fine. He's just...shocked." Then he closed his mouth and added, "I can't say I blame him."

Sue was looking at Jacob now, eyes narrowing, and then at Sam. Now she looked at Charlie in alarm, holding out her arms for the baby.

Charlie scooped his daughter up, and Jacob's eyes followed Ella.

No one said anything for a moment.

It was Bella who whispered, "What's going on?" to Edward, loud enough that everyone could hear.

"Jacob...imprinted on Ella," Edward murmured.

"What?" Charlie asked. He'd heard the word before in reference to Sam and Emily—but on a baby? No...not his baby.

He looked at Jacob, a low and furiously boiling rage growing inside him. "Is he right? Did you just —"

"It's not like that," Edward rushed out. "Trust me. Not at all." He put two fingers to his head, reminding Charlie, unnecessarily, of his advantage.

Jacob only nodded in answer to Charlie's question.

There was a longer, and more awkward silence after this.

"Why doesn't everyone get something to eat?" Sam suggested, having heard this exchange. He looked worried.

Charlie, stunned by what had been revealed, only nodded dumbly as he tried to process everything.

Sam and Jacob wouldn't eat the food Edward had prepared, but Sue and Charlie did, famished from their ordeal.

Pulling Charlie aside, Sam explained, in no uncertain terms what imprinting was, and wasn't, and the relief was so palpable that he wondered if everyone in the house couldn't feel it wafting off of him.

Sue was shocked enough, either from the birth, or the imprinting, or both, that Carlisle stayed close by, rechecking her blood pressure, trying to get her to drink more fluids. His concern was such that he summoned Charlie, asking Sam to take Ella.

After three minutes of looking like he was holding an unpinned grenade, Sam was only too happy to hand Ella over to Jacob, who clucked his tongue, changed her diaper, and then had her up and burped on his shoulder. She was asleep in minutes.

"Sue needs to rest," Carlisle told Charlie sotto voce. "And I have a feeling she'll feel better about doing that with us gone."
Edward had packed up the rest of the medical equipment, and he and Bella were waiting by the door.

Charlie looked at them all, and nodded, accepting Bella's hug. "Thank you for coming. I don't what we would've done without you."

"Love you, Dad," Bella said, grinning. "And glad I have a sister. Even if—yeah." She left what they both knew unsaid. She wouldn't know this sister well, but she wanted to. They'd have to leave the area soon enough. That much had been clear for sometime.

The goodnights said, he watched the trio of Cullens lope through the snow, disappearing into the dark and snow heavy trees.

The excitement of the night gone, Charlie knew he should be calming down, but the wheels in his mind were turning. If Bella was any indication as to what kind of trouble his offspring tended to get themselves into, Ella could use a guardian angel.

And Jacob Black didn't make such a bad one.

He tried to assure Sue of this too, as they settled themselves in for their first night as this expanded family.

As the snow fell into the whitened darkness, Charlie mused that with a vampire for his firstborn, possibly a werewolf for his second, and an assembly of other werewolves there to guard this youngest, he could probably relax.

So he finally did, and when sleep eventually stole the last pieces of excitement of the day away, it was into happy dreams he let himself drift, secure in the knowledge that there was a bright, and magical future waiting for his children, and a blessedly humble and human one for him, and Sue.

And that this was enough for happiness.

More than enough.

~ FIN ~

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